

Village Service Trust



Annual Report

2010/2011

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends and Supporters,

In April 1990 Village Service Trust received its first five year grant from the Department for International Development. It went on to secure a further four DFID grants, three National Lottery grants and one from the European Commission. Over the last two decades these grants have provided the bulk of our income and have enabled us to undertake exciting, challenging and pioneering work in the fields of community health, TB, HIV/Aids, women's development, village development, and Dalit rights. With these grants we've created people's movements – of women, Dalits, HIV positive people and others – many thousands strong that today pursue their rights to be free of poverty and injustice.

Much credit is due to our partners in India who work hard to identify the need, devise projects or liaise with existing projects that need funding in order to sustain their work. All grants are time limited with the intention that the projects will either have achieved their targets or will be able to be self-sufficient. This has been achieved in several instances but quite a number of the projects, especially those that work with those who are fighting desperately for their rights, their health, their basic human rights in small rural communities, will need further funding.

We are proud of our achievements. But we are also keenly aware that to continue that enviable record we have to change because those grants that have been our mainstay for so long are now not so easily available. DFID has closed its Civil Society Challenge Fund that provided most of our grants. The only new DFID fund available to us is much smaller whilst the competition for all such grants is now also much greater. The chances of winning them have consequently become rather small.

We need to look to develop other sources of income and to develop expertise in raising funds in India too. This is not easy with limited resources so we have to pick our strategy carefully. Fortunately we have a very loyal body of supporters whose donations provide a dependable and valuable income. Our task now is to recruit new supporters to our cause here and in India so that we can continue to create innovative and inventive projects that enable the people of Theni District in south India to build better lives for themselves.

This is my last letter to you as I am handing over the baton to Catriona Fox, who will take over the chairperson's role in January 2011.

With best wishes and thank you for all your support.

Gerti Wilford



A tribal woman and her children stand beside their grass hut. Now new houses are being built (above) after a campaign by VST's partner Arogya Agam. Front page: one of the tribal children

'Lost' tribal community finds its voice

Last year's VST annual report described the plight of Palliards – tribal people who traditionally lived in and off the forest – living in primitive huts in Katalamanparai. They were ignored by officialdom until a media campaign by Arogya Agam prompted a rapid response by the district authorities and promises of welfare benefits and new homes. But there were further problems.

A local landowner laid claim to the land given to the tribals including the housing plot. He tried to fence it off and made a false complaint to the police that he had

been assaulted by the tribal people. However a tribal activist contacted the police telling them: "Do you want this in six newspapers and TV channels like last last time? If you don't support us we know how to do that now and we are going to do it."

Later a police party came together with the official in charge of government land and supervised the taking down of the fence. The local police threatened the man who had given the false complaint that they would bring a case against him if he didn't back down.

Thanks

We would like to thank all our friends and supporters who helped us in 2010-11

Big Lottery Fund

Department for International Development

The Paget Trust

Souter Charitable Trust

Eleanor Rathbone Charitable Trust

Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation

And all those many individuals, groups and trusts who gave donations both large and small



LOTTERY FUNDED



Census shows success of efforts to save girl babies

India's national census has revealed a big improvement in the boy-girl ratio in Theni district - where VST and its partners have been waging a 10-year campaign against female infanticide and foeticide.

While surrounding districts have shown only tiny changes between 2001 and 2011, Theni district has seen a jump from 891 to 937 girls per thousand boys in the under five age group. And our own survey in the areas where we have campaigned most vigorously found a ratio of 1,006 girls to 1,000 boys.

A skewed sex ratio due to sex selective abortion or infanticide resulting from the cultural preference to have a boy child is a serious problem across India. This violence against women led to India recently being ranked the world's fourth worst country for its treatment of women.

During the year our women's programme:

- Staged special campaigns in 35 villages

VST works with a movement of many thousands of women to reduce poverty, violence against women and HIV/Aids. The women's movement provides loans to members to finance small businesses to increase family income and campaigns to reduce domestic violence.

with big domestic violence problems

- Trained more than 4,000 women's leaders in how to file cases with the police under the Domestic Violence Act
- Worked with Theni police to post information about domestic violence in police stations
- Identified the most successful types of micro-enterprise and encouraged new entrepreneurs to follow these more profitable activities
- Distributed 100,000 condoms in 154 villages to reduce the risk of HIV/Aids

Volunteers step in to curb domestic violence

The six women and two men of the Violence Against Women committee in the Dalit village of Nanthampuram gathered on the porch of a community hall to describe their work. They monitor, and sometimes intervene, in cases of domestic violence, alcohol abuse, girl school drop-outs or when they fear female infanticide or foeticide may occur. Since they were formed three years ago attitudes towards domestic violence have changed. Before no woman would talk about it. Now many women will approach

the VAW committee for help. Men's attitudes are changing too. "Men now say problems between husband and wife have to be discussed whereas before they said 'two beatings will keep her quiet'." The VAW committee takes a close interest when a couple have two girl children. There will be pressure to try for a son but not to add to the 'burden' of girls. The committee members speak with the parents, stressing the message of gender equality, and the government support available for families with girl children.



Rajammal serves a customer. She has a fine line in repartee as well as vegetables

Rajammal finds self-esteem as well as profit

Rajammal had always struggled in the vegetable trade until she visited VST's partner Arogya Agam. She had heard that this organisation helped women, especially Arunthathiyars, to start micro-enterprises, *writes Jill Pirdas*.

She knows what it is like to be a Dalit in a small village where everybody knows everyone else. One day a man scorned her vegetables saying: "Why would I want to touch your Sakkiliar (a caste-based insult) vegetables!"

But having gained self-esteem from her training at Arogya Agam Rajammal was bold enough to retaliate. "I know you," she retorted swiftly. "You don't hesitate touching our Arunthathiyar girls do you?" The man glanced nervously about, then quickly bought some vegetables from her barrow.

Rajammal wants to be a role model for the 13 other Arunthathiyar women in her self-help group.

"Arogya Agam encouraged me to branch out. I borrowed money and invested 5,000 rupees in vegetables and bananas. I buy the vegetables wholesale and bring them back in an auto rickshaw. Farmers round here only sell vegetables to the markets whereas I push my barrow six days a week round six villages starting at 6 o'clock in the morning."

Rajammal earns 500 rupees profit per day, six times the wage for farm work. She smiles confidently. "Without Arogya Agam's training and motivation I would still be struggling on my husband's low wages as a coolie and having no say in any family decisions."

A handbook for the hustings

Many candidates in this year's panchayat elections in Theni district will be armed with a 'secret weapon' - a 32-page manual written and distributed by our partners.

The manual shows candidates how to get the best out of the panchayat system. It covers the concepts of village government, democracy, participation, development, and women's empowerment. It explains how panchayats in some parts of India have been a real force for development - an experience we are trying to repeat in Tamil Nadu.

Our partners have issued the manual to 525 people trained as candidates.

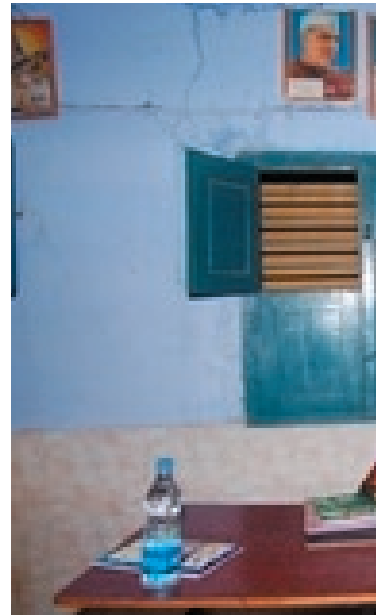
During the year we also:

- Trained 1,000 panchayat elected representatives and committee members
- Used open village meetings to highlight domestic violence, HIV/Aids, encroachment of common land, safe drinking water, appointment of women doctors at primary health centres, sex ratio awareness, and correct identification of people on the official Below Poverty

Line list and eligible for government benefits.

- Encouraged HIV positive people to speak at village meetings about HIV/Aids. Some 28 did so, and as a result 393 people joined the Theni district network of positive people. Many positive people were able to obtain government benefits such as loans, pensions and free rice.
- Panchayat activists took up issues such as correct measures at subsidised rice outlets, drinking water in Dalit areas, illegal alcohol sales, and old age pension malpractice.
- An association of panchayat presidents supported by VST lobbied the state minister for rural development for devolution of powers and more funding for panchayats.

VST works with village panchayats – India's local councils - with the aim of making them more effective agents for development and ensuring that Dalits, women, and the poorest get their share of benefits



Caste conflict clouds

Panchammal is the Arunthathiyar president of Jangalpatti panchayat (pictured above in her office). "I wanted to do something for my community so I got trained as a candidate." She won her post in a by-election two years ago in a seat reserved for Dalits.

She is also a member of the panchayat support group. Support groups have been formed in nearly 90 panchayats by our partners to agitate for proper functioning of panchayats.

Panchammal's panchayat contains five villages and 6,000 people – 1,500 of whom benefitted from



ouds bid for new health centre

the rural employment scheme. She is proud of her achievements – 40 new houses for Dalits, a borewell for clean water, old age pensions for 400 people, street lights, paved roads and toilets for 100 houses.

But there is much still to do. “Most people here are poor, they are all farm labourers. We need better education, a new school and a health centre. Pregnant women have a long way to travel to a health centre over rough roads and the buses are few.” Panchammal has given many petitions to the Collector to approve a site for a health centre. The panchayat has a

suitable site and funding is available. But the problem is caste people are not allowing this to materialise - because a Dalit president’s name would be written on the health centre’s name board.

The caste people are used to running the village and expect one of their own to be the president. It is only because the panchayat was reserved for a Dalit that Panchammal was able to win. She’s standing for election again in October, and many in the panchayat are backing her. But the reservation of seats for Dalits rotates, and this time Panchammal must fight an open election.

The ‘barefoot’ social workers go into action

The 20 men and women of the solidarity committee sit patiently in a circle as their leader, a retired headmaster, stands and explains their activities. Comprehensively trained by one of our partners, they work five days a month and receive a small stipend. They go round the villages listening, inspecting, checking benefits, writing petitions, monitoring school drop-outs, giving DOTS treatment to TB patients, and helping individuals to get identity cards for the rural employment scheme.

These are some of the issues they took up:

- Denial of burial ground for Dalits
- Lack of facilities that the panchayat should provide such as electricity, toilets, drainage, and housing
- Needy people missing out on benefits because the Below the Poverty Line list is out of date
- Monitoring the government ration shop which was giving short measures of kerosene
- Monitoring risk of female infanticide – one case taken up resulted in the parents being jailed for seven years

Once-cowed community defies its tormentors

VST works with village activist groups from the Arunthathiyar Dalit sub-group, sometimes called the Dalits of the Dalits. In the four years since we began this work life for this most oppressed community has been transformed.

Arunthathiyars, once a cowed, fearful community, have come together to form 1,125 mandrams – voluntary activist groups – that stand up for their right to be free of discrimination, violence and poverty. No longer do Arunthathiyars accept the old unjust ways.

This year:

- AMMI – the Theni district association of mandrams – put 5,000 protesters on the streets demanding redress after an Arunthathiyar man who dared to complain because he had not been paid for months was beaten up and subsequently found dead.
- Nearly 600 cases of violence against Arunthathiyars were taken up by

AMMI and another Arunthathiyar movement, Vizhudugal.

- Arunthathiyar activism has spread from three to 11 districts - more than a third of Tamil Nadu.
- Arunthathiyars have increased self-confidence, self-respect and ability to advocate effectively.
- Other castes increasingly realise that Arunthathiyars can no longer be abused and cheated with impunity.
- Many of the petty humiliations forced upon Arunthathiyars and other Dalits are diminishing.

But now perhaps they face their biggest challenge. As Arunthathiyars assert their right to a just and equal position in society caste groups that used to exploit them feel their dominant position is threatened. Already we have seen a backlash from some caste groups. Now the fear is that the most powerful castes may lend their weight to the backlash.



Digging for victory: the self-help group members

A women's self-help group was formed three years ago from among Arunthathiyars in the village of Bomianiackanpatti. They were taught to avoid moneylenders, start micro-enterprise, and about empowerment and strength through unity. They soon put that training to good use and began lobbying the panchayat for a new burial ground for Arunthathiyars as the existing one was prone to

flooding. Last December an Arunthathiyar man died but could not be buried because the burial ground was under water. So the self-help group members and 50 supporters began digging a grave outside the panchayat office. It was three feet deep by the time the police arrived. But the protesters had made their point and the panchayat president agreed to allocate land for a new burial site.



AMMI members in Muthurengapuram: battling over water and housing

Arunthathiyars demand fair treatment

Respect. That is what the 20 men and 20 women of the AMMI branch in Muthurengapuram expect from the rest of society. And they are doing their utmost to demand it.

Like Arunthathiyars everywhere, their needs are ignored. It's as though people think that because their community is seen as being at the bottom of the heap they don't matter. They are not considered worth educating, worth employing in anything but menial jobs, that it doesn't matter if public services fail to arrive in their village.

The members of AMMI are putting a stop

to those attitudes. They've had a lot of training on their human rights and how to achieve them. So when the government installed a new overhead tank for drinking water supply and the panchayat connected the supply to the caste areas but not the Arunthathiyar village they knew what to do.

First they petitioned the panchayat president. When that failed they threatened to go to the Collector (top district official) and to block the road in protest. At that the president agreed to provide the water connection.

Welfare is important to AMMI too. Many of the tiny houses in Muthurengapuram have three or four families crowded into them. So AMMI has identified some waste land suitable for building houses and is petitioning the Collector for land rights and the Dalit Welfare Board for funds.

VST and its partner Arogya Agam support two Arunthathiyar movements, AMMI in Theni district and Vizhudugal around Coimbatore. Their 31,000 members come together to fight poverty, atrocity and injustice

'My life changed when I joined a self-help group'

A women's federation leader tells Paula Nightingale how she found dignity, confidence, independence - and a decent standard of living

Thangam, a 41-year-old widow with a grown-up son, lives in Varasanadu village and works as a dhobi – washing and ironing people's clothes.

Thangam was married at 14, but after six years of marriage her husband died and she struggled to bring up her son alone. "Life was very difficult." She earned about 30 rupees a day washing clothes and also took on extra work cleaning the houses of two local families.

The house cleaning jobs did not pay much, only an extra 200 rupees a month, but in addition she and her son were often fed and at festival times given clothing. "It was hard to live on my earnings, it just about covered the rent, there was never anything to spare, so we needed these gifts to get by." The families Thangam relied on for food and clothing would often shout at her, humiliating her. "I thought – they don't own me, I just work for them – but I couldn't say anything." As a poor widow, dependent on their charity, Thangam had to put up with the abuse. At this time, Thangam's home was a

hut with a very bad roof, and during the rainy season it leaked so much that she and her son couldn't sleep on the floor. "We had to sit up throughout the night, we were really desperate to move." Thangam looked for new house, but all the landlords demanded a 1,000 rupee deposit - she didn't have the money. She asked everyone she knew for a loan



but they were reluctant as they knew she would have problems repaying it. Finally a relative pawned some jewellery in order to raise the money. "It was very hard to repay the loan plus the interest, we really struggled and it caused problems within the family."

In 1998 Thangam joined a women's self-help group facilitated by our partner Vasandham, and started saving regularly, at first just 10 rupees, later 50 rupees a month. "It was hard but it was worth it to save for the future." The next time

she needed to move house she borrowed 500 rupees from the self-help group.

In 2004, Thangam obtained a 3,000 rupee micro-enterprise loan from the group to buy a new iron and ironing trolley. Her old iron had broken and she was using an old door as an ironing bench. "It was really difficult to use – very unstable and hard to use in a small space like my home. The new ironing trolley made things much easier, I could move it around and work outside, it's much more convenient." Repaying the loan was manageable. "When business was good I could pay off more, when business was bad I would pay less, the group understood this and were flexible."

Thangam now works for one of the richer families in the village, doing all their laundry. She earns around 2,500 rupees a month and is much happier. "I have a much better house, I cook my own food and buy my own clothes, I am no longer dependent on others."

Thangam says life changed when she joined the self-help group. "When I was first married I didn't know anything, I was illiterate and I didn't think at all, I just did what my husband and family wanted." Much to her surprise, she was elected leader of her group, and when the groups joined together into a federation, she was elected president. "Initially I was very afraid and found it difficult to be a leader, but after training I have become much more confident – now I can even talk to the District Collector or the Superintendent of Police. I am proud of how much I have changed, I've gained skills and improved my status in the community – I feel I can do anything now."

Financial report

Income	2010/11	2009/10
Donations	47,769	48,232
Legacies	-	-
Big Lottery Fund	156,040	176,149
Dept for International Development	53,056	56,234
Trusts	7,500	35,883
Investment income	1,922	1,893
Total	266,287	318,391

Expenditure

Project partners	7,567	4,414
Panchayats	74,809	78,099
Federations	82,630	68,436
Arunthathiyars	55,738	51,964
TB control	-	32,037
Programme support	6,523	14,071
Governance	2,106	2,027
Fundraising and publicity	12,871	11,312
Total	242,244	262,360

Balance sheet

(at 31st March)	2011	2010
Tangible assets	911	1,049
Investments	42,292	40,768
Debtors	14,666	23,835
Cash at bank	106,785	70,073
Liabilities	(8,193)	(4,830)
Net assets	156,461	130,895

Notes

1. The TB control programme operated by our partners is now funded directly by Target Tuberculosis
2. A detailed description of our programmes and full audited annual accounts are available. Please ask if you would like a copy.

Trustees

Gerti Wilford, Chair
Richard Garforth, Treasurer
Tony Huckle, Programmes Manager
Bryan Osbon
Carol Chalmers
Kirat Randhawa
Catriona Fox

Patron

Sir Nicholas Fenn

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Registered charity 277111

VST supports organisations of poor rural women and Dalits seeking lives free of poverty, violence and injustice

VST works mostly in Theni district in south India, focusing its efforts where it has long experience and close local knowledge