

Message from our Patron

Sir Nicholas Fenn, former UK high commissioner to India, has become a patron of VST. Here, Sir Nicholas writes about his time in India and his interest in VST.

'I am honoured to accept the invitation of Village Service Trust to become its Patron (Summer Newsletter 2009) - honoured and humbled. Many small charities do excellent work in India. VST is special.

My wife and I lived in India for five years (1991-96). We were struck by the size of the country and its diversity. From the Himalayan ramparts to the palm fringed shores of Kerala, from the mountains and jungles of the neglected north-east to the salt flat desert of the Rann of Kutch, the Indianness of India is easy to recognise but difficult to define. It has problems built to scale - poverty, population, illiteracy, disease; casteism, communalism, criminalisation and corruption. Above all we were impressed by the vitality of Indian democracy and the determination of its people to help themselves. The special skill of VST is to recognise this, to listen and respond to the enthusiasm of those who will benefit.

We first encountered the redoubtable figure of Dora Scarlett, working amongst the really poor in Tamil Nadu on issues that directly affected them: leprosy, TB, basic health care for mothers and children. The work has moved on and expanded now. In addition to the control of TB, leprosy, HIV/AIDS, and community health care, VST works with women's self-help groups, developing credit unions for micro-enterprise, resisting



Sir Nicholas: VST listens and responds

violence against women and encouraging them to band together into federations. And it works to make a reality of the Panchayati Raj, so that village councils become agents for the development of their villages, and to eradicate human rights abuses and discrimination against Dalits - not telling them how to do it but encouraging their own determination.

So why do I support Village Service Trust?

- because, in a nation which is no stranger to poverty, it works among the poorest;
- because its purpose is the empowerment of disadvantaged people;
- because it works alongside these people, engaging their enthusiasm;
- because expenditure on administration is minimal: the money we give goes to India.

Such a charity deserves support. Let's make it happen!

Sir Nicholas Fenn

VST launches new website

Take a fresh look at Village Service Trust through our new website. Easy to use and with an eye-catching design, it is full of updated and new information.

The refurbished website enables us to make regular updates as our programmes develop and to supply news from India. In future, resources to download such as videos, case studies and fundraising information packs will be added. Supporters can also make donations via the website.

Dominic Munro-McCarthy, Programmes Fundraising Manager, explained: 'We have planned this website to be of interest to both existing and future potential supporters alike. We want information to be literally at people's fingertips.

'We know that donors such as charitable trusts and foundations as well as individuals often do their own research to find charities they wish to support. Naturally, we want to give VST the best presence possible and we know that the internet is an important way of achieving this.'



The home page of our new website: www.villageservicetrust.org.uk



Left: the marchers make their way through Theni

Above: the police superintendent addresses the convention

Right: Vanajaa, DACT programmes director, speaking to the women's movement audience

Women of Theni district turn out in big numbers for anti-violence convention

The voice of women in India has long been muted, particularly when it comes to violence against women. But last November, more than 900 women took a big step towards changing that. Theni District Women's Movement held a day of events on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and around the town of Theni the action certainly didn't go unnoticed.

Each year, 25th November is designated International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Many international organisations and NGOs organise activities to raise public awareness. Women's activists have marked 25th November as a day against violence since 1981, remembering the brutal assassination in 1960 of the three Mirabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic. Violence against women and girls is a problem of pandemic proportions. Some 70 per cent of women experience physical or sexual violence from men in their lifetime — the majority

from husbands, intimate partners or someone they know. It takes many forms and occurs in many places — domestic violence in the home, sexual abuse of girls in schools, sexual harassment at work, rape by husbands or strangers, in refugee camps or as a tactic of war. Theni Mavatta Pengal Iyakkam (Theni district woman's movement) represents about 40,000 women who belong to the women's federations that VST and its partners work with. TMPI aims to address all forms of violence against women in the district and to bring equality in social, economic, political & cultural life. Concerns include child marriage, sexual abuse, child labour, dowry, untouchability, female infanticide & foeticide, school dropouts, and Dalit issues. In local government elections, women and Dalits were motivated by TMPI to contest the election and many won office.

Our partner, Development Action Consortium Trust, organised many events and activities on the day

to create awareness on domestic violence. These included:

- A workshop for women police officers on the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. We believe making greater use of this legislation instead of conciliatory measures by police can overturn public attitudes that tolerate domestic violence.
- A poster exhibition in a busy part of town opened by Mr Sivananda Jothi, District Session Judge. A song about women's empowerment was played through an audio system.
- A three-metre high balloon was

'We should use the law to protect women from violence'

flown near the central bus stand in the centre of Theni with the slogan, Stop Violence against women. The message reached 5,000 people.

- About 900 women from federations in the districts and 50 girl children joined a rally flagged off by V Balakrishnan, the local police superintendent, who urged women to come together to fight for their rights. The women held up placards with messages on domestic violence and dowry harassment, while the schoolchildren's placards addressed education of girl children, prevention of child marriage, child labour elimination, and prevention of child sexual abuse. The marchers handed out leaflets, played songs and read out awareness messages.
- The main convention heard speeches from Ms Vanajaa, programme director of Development Action Consortium Trust, from V, Purushothaman, DACT trustee, V. Balakrishnan, the

police superintendent, Ms Salma, chair, Tamilnadu State Social Welfare Board, Ms Hebsi Bai, family court advocate, Madurai, and Ms Raja Rajeswari, district social welfare officer, Theni. Ms. Salma said there were 81 laws in the Indian constitution to protect women from violence. 'We should use those laws and get benefit from them,' she said. All women should take an oath: 'I won't give my rights to anyone, will fight to protect women from domestic violence and will protect my sisters and my neighbourhood from violence.'

The events were widely reported in both English and Tamil newspapers and on local television, which covered the entire day's programme. Ms Vanajaa, who organised the day, was pleased with the result. The police and government officials showed real interest and commitment to the issues, she said, and as a result there is more interest from NGOs in the district in the Theni women's movement.

Tribal people fight for rights

For centuries the Palliars, indigenous tribal people, have lived an ancient existence in the hills of south India, gathering all they needed from the forest. In recent years their way of life has merged with that of the agrarian plains, often leaving them with the worst of both worlds: the old life gone but marginalised from mainstream society.

Our partner Arogya Agam has been working with the Palliars, and helping them resist exploitation by powerful figures keen to develop lucrative cash crops such as coffee. In one mountain area, Palliar families had to flee their homes after intimidation. Arogya Agam helped the victims file a complaint to the police and after a good deal of effort the police registered a case under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The case was highlighted at a march and public meeting attended by the biggest group of tribal people ever seen in the town of Kodaikanal, but to no avail.

The Palliars have few friends and the forces ranged against them are influential. Events such as these are frustrating, with a satisfactory result from the criminal justice system unlikely. Arogya Agam continues to monitor the situation and offers support to the Palliar people where it can. But those who would push the Palliars off their land have seen tribal people fighting back for the first time. In future they may think twice before taking such action.

'We are the Palliars' film

As part of Arogya Agam's work in identifying the issues marginalised groups such as the Palliars face, a film has been produced to tell their story. It tells of their traditions and way of life in the hills and the challenges they now encounter. Please contact VST if you would like a DVD of the film.

Fundraising news

Farm shop raises funds for VST

Tim Jones's farm shop in Cornwall is a lively place where people come to buy organic food from his selection of meat, dairy, vegetable, fruit, preserves and baked items. However, as customers have a look around they are likely to come across something a little different. This is the information display dedicated to VST which proves to be a point of interest and talking point among his visitors to the shop.

For the past four years Tim has kindly dedicated part of his shop space to raising funds and awareness for VST through a fabulous visual information display and collecting box.

Tim began fundraising for VST after a customer told him about the charity. He said: 'What started as a passing conversation about VST inspired me to think about what the shop could do to support this work. I made contact with VST and they sent me photos and information materials with which I was able to put up a display.'

Inspired by the work, Tim matches pound for pound the donations his customers give which doubles the benefit to VST.

Tim went on to say: 'As a result of the display one of my customers is helping out as well - he donates his own surplus home-grown organic produce for the shop to sell - with proceeds also being given to VST. It's amazing to think how that chance mention of VST all that time ago has continued in solid support ever since.'



Gunasekaran, Vasandham director, celebrates the purchase of the land with John Dalton and colleagues

VST supporters make 'carbon-offset' donation to environmental project

Having read about the development of an Environmental Resource Centre at VST's partner NGO 'Vasandham', supporters John and Susan from Oxfordshire had an environmentally good reason of their own in making their recent donation. While on holiday to France in which they made more use of their (low CO₂ emission) car than they felt should be acceptable, they decided that a donation to VST to help the re-planting trees in recovered soil would go some way to offsetting the environmental impact of their journey.

The project aims to bring practical knowledge of environmentally sustainable agricultural and agro-forestry techniques to a remote rural area of South India blighted by deforestation, soil erosion and desertification.

Fundraising ideas made easy

Have you ever thought about organising an event or adding a charitable dimension to something you already do?

Perhaps you know of a company, community group or association that supports a different charity each year and do not yet know about the work of VST?

Old favourites like a coffee morning or afternoon tea never go out of fashion and dinner party events such as a curry evening for family and friends is an increasingly popular way to raise funds whilst having a good time.

Throughout the year there are opportunities to organise events such as a quiz nights, barn dances and much more.

For people with a particular hobby or interest, an artist could hold an 'open studio' day and a keen gardener could organise a garden party or 'open garden' day.

If you would like more information about organising an event VST will send you an A-Z list of fundraising ideas (pictured below) together with tips and advice on getting the best out of an event or initiative.

Whatever you choose as your fundraising event, VST will offer support, advice and help along the way.



**Thank you for
fundraising for
The Village
Service Trust**



Share your fundraising stories

If you would be interested in sharing your fundraising experiences please contact us at the address below.

Village Service Trust

68 High Street
Hail Weston, St Neots
PE19 5JW

Phone 01480 473437 or 07814 334980

Email info@villageservicetrust.org.uk

Website www.villageservicetrust.org.uk

Charity no. 277111