



**Village
Service
Trust**

Annual report 2021/2022

Letter from the Chair

As a first time Chair I feel I am embarking on a journey, an analogy that seems fitting for this, my first letter as Chair.

I joined VST as a trustee in early 2020, though in many ways it has been with me all my life. I was born in Theni and lived in the area until we moved to the UK when I was six years old. It is a little daunting to be Chair of an organisation I hold so dear and whose work is of such importance to me. Especially at a time of such change; not just the changes forced by Covid but changes in Indian society and here in the UK. We, the trustees, have been considering carefully how best to navigate these changes and how to continue to best support our partners in India with their essential work as we continue into a future which will only become more unpredictable with climate change. Since the effects of climate change will be borne hardest by the most **vulnerable our partners'** work to overcome gender and caste discrimination, to **support children's**

education and tribal rights and their experience in tackling pandemics is more relevant than ever.

With Covid causing significant disruptions to schools, both Arogya Agam and NWTWS adapted to bring classes to villages to keep children connected to their education and minimise the negative impact caused by the **disruptions. Our partners'** work to support tribal **children's education was the** reason for Weston All Saints primary school in Bath choosing VST as one of their charities this year.

In June Year 5 and Year 6 pupils organised a 6-mile sponsored walk raising £2,100 for VST, which we are very grateful for.

Our Secretary, Tony Huckle, finally managed to undertake his twice-postponed sponsored walk covering the 268 miles of the Pennine Way. His efforts raised £7,000 for VST to fund the formation and support of new **Arunthathiyar women's self-help groups.** Well done Tony and thank you to all the sponsors!

Above: Tribal women at a memorial ceremony for John Wilson, a British nurse who worked in their communities for five decades

Front cover: Back to school for tribal girls in Nilgiris district as Covid restrictions ended



Cases of domestic violence sadly increased due to lockdowns and our partner Arogya Agam has secured significant funds from the Azim Premji Foundation to develop its domestic violence programme.

This builds upon work first funded by VST a decade ago and works through 143 violence against women committees with **an important role for the district women's movement**, also funded by VST.

We were grateful to receive a legacy of more than £100,000 from a long-standing supporter, which helps us to continue to fund core costs for our partners as well as supporting specific programmes and initiatives. We can only continue this work because of individual donors, both occasional and regular, like you. We

really appreciate your continued loyalty and support.

Earlier this year our partner NWTWS held a ceremony to say goodbye to their founder, John Wilson, who died in 2021. John devoted his life to helping tribal people, first with medical care, later extending the focus to education, welfare and tribal rights.

Finally, I wanted to extend thanks to Carol Chalmers who stepped down as a trustee this year after serving for more than 33 years and to Murali Shanmugavelan for his time as Chair.

We hope you continue on this journey with us and our partners and thank you once again for your support.

Sophie Walker

Domestic violence

TMPI stands at the apex of the **women's movement in Theni** district. Supported by VST since its beginnings more than a decade ago, it currently has eight member federations. Each federation represents 100-200 village self-help groups. In all, 27,000 women come under the TMPI umbrella.

From the start, domestic violence **was top of the women's agenda**. Last year its campaigning against domestic violence received a shot in the arm when our chief partner organisation, Arogya Agam, was awarded a substantial grant from an Indian philanthropic foundation.

The money is for a project to identify survivors of domestic violence and assist them to obtain redress. TMPI provides the footsoldiers for this campaign.

The programme works through 143 violence against women committees, **women's federations, staff and** volunteers. Leaders of more than

800 women's self-help groups were contacted seeking their support. Campaigns are used to identify women in need. Some 43 campaigns were conducted, extending across most of Theni district, and reaching an estimated 130,000 people.

The project works closely with the District Legal Service Authority (DLSA), whose new Secretary is very supportive, and the District Social Welfare Department through the Protection Officer. In addition it is **in close touch with 'One Stop Centre', a national scheme to** provide support to women affected by violence.)

Of the 129 cases filed under the Domestic Violence Act, 114 were filed through the DSLA.

Arogya Agam also works closely with an organisation called Crime Prevention and Victim Care of Chennai and the Institute of Development, Education, Action and Studies of Madurai.

Anti-violence campaign

143 violence against women committees in action

129 cases filed under the domestic violence act

1,288 survivors in contact with the project

856 cases addressed by counselling, mediation, court action, or the police



Mrs Kumari meeting survivors of domestic violence. Opposite her is the protection officer (with red hair band). The woman seated wearing a mask is the district social welfare officer

The main strategy in the domestic violence campaign is to take cases to the relevant authorities. Sometimes that is the police, but more often to an official known as the protection officer. Her role is to investigate cases, and take action in the courts when there is sufficient evidence to secure a result.

For years our efforts to achieve redress through the protection officer have been stymied by the reluctance of the officer to act, usually by claiming lack of evidence when the perpetrator fails to turn up for a hearing.

But not all officials are unhelpful. The state of Tamil Nadu has recently reinvigorated its Women's Commission, appointing a new chair with a background of championing

women's rights. Arogya Agam met the chair and asked her to visit Theni. She arranged a meeting with 30 survivors whose cases were long pending, along with the police, the protection officer, and the district social welfare officer.

Mrs Kumari ordered that the women's petitions be passed to the police for action, and openly at the meeting spoke firmly to the protection officer. Typically, the cases involve domestic violence, frequently fuelled by alcohol abuse, or infidelity or suspicion of infidelity.

Often the couple are living apart and the woman is trying to obtain maintenance payments or the return of her possessions. When the husband fails to attend a hearing, the case is left in limbo.

Tribal Projects

Village Service Trust supports work by three of its partners with tribal people who live in the forested hillsides of the Western Ghat mountain range. These communities are amongst the poorest and most vulnerable to exploitation in India.

Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society is based in north-west Tamil Nadu, on the border with Kerala.

All Rural Development and Construction Society is based in the town of Bodinayakkanur, closer to our other partners in Theni district.

Arogya Agam has a tribal project in the Palani hills in Dindigul district.

All three partners focus on overcoming cultural and transport issues that lead to many children dropping out of school. They also help tribal people secure rights to

land and forest produce; obtain documents needed for welfare benefits such as pensions and subsidised food; and lobby for facilities such as clean water supply and decent housing.

Covid has brought additional troubles, but our partners have been able to help out by distributing food kits to tribal hamlets and by arranging teaching sessions in the villages when schools were closed.

Covid restrictions are now easing and the NWTWS government funded residential school for tribal children was able to reopen in October 2021.

There was success too for the Arogya Agam tribal project as thanks to its efforts almost all children returned to their classes there when schools reopened early in 2022.



Leaders of four tribes comprise a 12-strong advisory group who guide NWTWS on the needs of tribal people, often in a different direction to the project's initial ideas.

Three tribal members of staff, back left, are also in the photo.



A little learning: Patchiyammal with her students

Patchiyammal is 26, the oldest of six children, and lives in the tribal village of Chellon, near the town of Periyakulam. She is the first from the tribal people of this area to study for a degree.

Her education is a story of struggle and determination. The community tried to discourage her from attending high school in Periyakulam, as usually tribal girls are not allowed out of the village. But her brother Karupaiya argued her case and brought about a change of heart in the community. Karupaiya is now a volunteer with **VST's partner, Arudecs.**

Patchiyammal excelled at maths, and

was asked by her teachers to coach the less able students in her class, helping them to pass their 10th standard public examinations.

Patchiyammal herself passed 12th standard and enrolled at a private college in Periyakulam, raising the Rs 18,000 (£180) fees from her family, friends and teachers.

In return Patchiyammal has made sure her younger siblings attend school regularly. She also gives evening tuition in her village to 17 students. Recently married, she is an enthusiastic empowered woman committed to educating younger generations in her community.

Women's self-help groups

Few rural women can get full time work on farms — the work is mostly seasonal and on a daily casual basis. And the government rural employment scheme only offers 150 days work a year at most. But all-year-round self-employment can be a path to higher incomes.

Women's self-help groups are a source of loans for financing micro-businesses such as keeping backyard cows or running a tiny shop. Loans come from members' savings and a government agency.

VST's partners have started hundreds of such groups, and provide support and training.



A tea shop started with a group loan means Sameema and her husband no longer see themselves as poor

Arogya Agam's SHGs

259 groups

4,098 members

70% from tribal and dalit communities

£150,000 in loans from government agency

Sameema Abbas is a member of **Indra women's group** formed by our partner Vasandham. In the 20 years she has been a member, Sameema has saved with and taken loans from the group.

Using a group loan she started a tea shop which she runs with her husband. Her involvement in a public space is quite unusual in her Muslim community.

They net a profit of Rs. 12,000 to Rs. 15,000 a month.

With a further loan from the federation Sameema has opened a room in which she serves meals.

She feels her family's food security has improved and no longer sees herself as poor. Her family has their own house and toilet. And she has her own bank account.



R. Veluthai is the leader of Tamarai women's group, above, formed around 15 years ago by the Society for Rural and Environmental Development, a partner of Village Service Trust.

All members of this self-help group are from the Dalit community, with a majority being labourers.

Veluthai walked out of a difficult marriage, and went back to live with her mother in the village where she was born.

Over the years, she has become a labour contractor, and mobilises women and men to provide labour for construction or agriculture. As a

contractor she needs to pay her workers on time, even if there is a delay in her receiving payment from her employer.

She has borrowed for this working capital from the women's group. Previously she had taken loans for family needs and to buy livestock.

With her mother passing away, and being landless, she states: "This group is my old age security. No member would leave me to starve. They will look after my health too."

The group has addressed cases of domestic violence, child marriage, and violence against women.

Health



Muthaiah, 70, pictured above, has been looked after by Arogya Agam for 25 years. His leprosy has been cured by modern drugs, but he needs lifelong monitoring.

He visits Arogya Agam regularly to get his monthly tablets. The staff check that he is taking care of his feet which are at risk of infection.

Muthaiah has a government old age pension of Rs. 1,000 (£10) a month. His nephew takes care of him.

Recently he had a bad cough and was tested for TB, but the result was negative. He is one of 63 people receiving care for the effects of leprosy.

The incidence of leprosy has fallen sharply in recent decades. Last year Arogya Agam found four new cases in their area. That was fewer than the

usual 15 to 30 cases as the work was hindered by Covid restrictions. The work included holding five prevention of disability camps alongside government staff. These camps assisted some 82 people with medical needs and welfare benefits.

Tuberculosis

Work was affected by Covid, with TB suspects reluctant to be tested because of fears of being confined alongside Covid patients. Some 45 new cases were detected and treated either at Arogya Agam or at government primary health centres. In all 141 TB patients are being monitored.

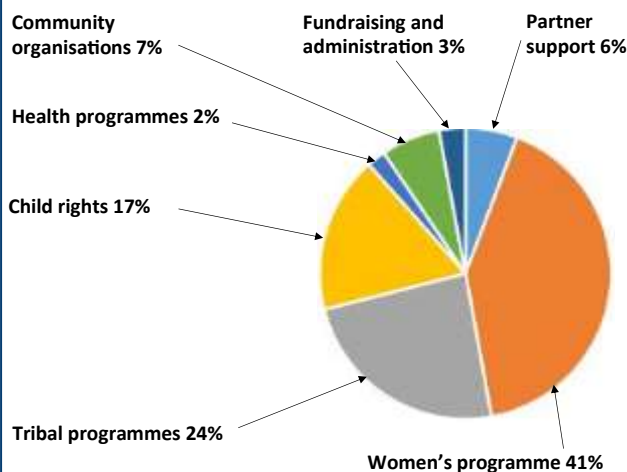
HIV

The health and drug adherence of 167 people living with HIV was monitored during the year.

Financial report

| Income | 2021-2022 | 2020-2021 |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Donations | 32,450 | 33,169 |
| Grants | 2,000 | 7,100 |
| Sales of calendars | - | 591 |
| Investment income | 5,235 | 4,927 |
| Total | 39,685 | 45,787 |

| Expenditure | 2021-2022 | 2020-2021 |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Partner support | 2,608 | 3,411 |
| Women's programme | 18,675 | 30,813 |
| Tribal projects | 10,773 | 9,462 |
| Child rights | 7,880 | 9,854 |
| Health programmes | 930 | 2,200 |
| Community organisations | 2,953 | 3,265 |
| Women's groups research | - | 2,760 |
| Fundraising and publicity | 906 | 1,239 |
| VST administration | 411 | 1,415 |
| Total | 45,136 | 64,419 |



Notes on spending

Partner support

Assistance with hard-to-fund staff and establishment costs at Arogya Agam

Women's programme

Training to women's self-help groups, their federation leaders and support for the district women's movement

Tribal projects

Programmes to promote school attendance and securing the rights and entitlements of indigenous communities

Child rights

Work with Arunthathiyar and HIV-affected children's groups

Health programmes

Detection, referral and monitoring of leprosy, HIV and tuberculosis

Community organisations

Training and support for Arunthathiyar village development committees

Trustees

Sophie Walker, Chair
Richard Garforth, Treasurer
Tony Huckle, Secretary
Murali Shanmugavelan
Bryan Osbon
Gerti Wilford
David Mosse
Angela Russ
Rosie Oakley



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VST supports organisations of disadvantaged rural women, children, Dalits and tribal communities 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.

Registered charity 277111