



Letter from the Chair

No one has had it easy since Covid arrived. But in rural India where you may well need a daily wage to secure the next meal, it can be particularly hard.

In the spring of 2020 Covid reached the towns and villages in Theni district, where most of our partner organisations operate. There was a lockdown and no buses ran, preventing people from getting to work. After some weeks the lockdown was lifted and although the virus spread, it was not yet calamitous.

That all changed from late 2020 when the Delta variant struck India, peaking in the spring of 2021. At one point Theni was the third worst affected district in the state of Tamil Nadu. A second, strictly enforced, lockdown was imposed. Our partners' staff were unable to visit the villages. Instead they worked from home and used their phones to maintain contact.

The women's groups suspended their monthly meetings and credit could not be disbursed. Commercial lenders avoided the villages, and traditional moneylenders took their place. There was more domestic violence, and economic stress. Schools closed, and although there were some online and TV

classes, not everyone could get to see those. TB testing was affected because of fears the test was for Covid and that those tested would be forced to go to hospital. TB detection dropped by 75%, and more people died from disruption to TB work than from Covid.

In the UK, we had to postpone various fundraising plans, including a sponsored walk on the Pennine Way which is now scheduled for 2022. We did however manage one initiative, by producing a calendar which proved popular with our supporters and made a useful contribution to our funds.

Like organisations everywhere VST's trustees held their meetings online, some of them with the welcome addition of participation from partners in India.

Our partners responded as best they could to the Covid crisis. Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society sent its mobile health unit to give medical treatment to those unable to travel during lockdowns. It also developed an audio facility in tribal dialect to give advice on Covid risk reduction and counselling on vaccine hesitancy, as well as assisting government nurses in vaccination drives in tribal villages.

Another partner, Vasandham,



Tribal people outside a bank branch having opened accounts to receive old age pensions. Our partner NWTWS helped them obtain the documentation needed

Front cover: an image from our 2021 calendar showing Palliar tribal children at an informal school in the Palani hills

conducted Covid information campaigns and distributed masks while Arogya Agam provided extra food and ensured supply of medication for people living with HIV.

The disruption and additional work caused by Covid has meant a delay to developing plans to enhance our women's self-help group programme following research into some of the difficulties the groups face. Our researcher Ranjani Krishnamurthy completed her study and presented her recommendations. These focus on improving opportunities for women from the disadvantaged Arunthathiyar communities and countering the damaging effects of the growth of commercial doorstep lending to village women. VST trustees have been able to hold several discussions on the report with Arogya Agam. Further work is needed when circumstances allow.

Thanks are due to Catriona Fox, the chair of trustees for many years whose

commitment, knowledge of the development charity sector and calm good sense has been invaluable. She has stepped back from VST to focus on her young family.

Thanks too to Caroline Walker who published her book on the life of Dora Scarlett, the woman who planted the seed from which VST and its partners Arogya Agam and Vasandham grew. Some of the book is based on Dora's own unpublished writing about the first part of her life, and publication has fulfilled a 30-year ambition to bring this to a wider audience. The book is available from Amazon where it was self-published. Dora's writings can be downloaded from our website.

Finally, we are most grateful to our supporters who generously maintained their support during this difficult year.

Dr Murali Shanmugavelan

Women's Programme



Ranjani Krishnamurthy is an academic based in Chennai who specialises in gender and development. She spent six months meeting members of women's groups supported by VST in a bid to find out about the influence of caste and the growing impact of commercial doorstep lenders.

It has been a humbling experience, says Ranjani, who has now produced a report with recommendations and has written an academic article about her findings.

In Dharmathupatty (pictured above) the women's group members told her about their circumstances. No one admits to taking loans from moneylenders or commercial lenders; some have bank loans through the group and are making a good living from their enterprises. Some keep cows, and several have leased land to farm. Others are not so fortunate. A single mother caring for a disabled child is unable to work. Another has spent everything on medical treatment for a son with heart disease.

Ranjani's work has produced many ideas for strengthening the women's self-help groups and in particular those whose members are from the Arunthathiyar community. These focus on creating more opportunities for micro-enterprise and countering the impact of doorstep lenders. Our partners are discussing a practical programme for implementation in the future. Unfortunately the Covid pandemic has delayed this work.

Women in rural India have few opportunities: casual farm work is poorly paid and the government's job scheme pays even less. But women enrolled in self-help groups can

get loans to start small businesses. We've helped many thousands to take up simple enterprises like keeping backyard cows or running a teashop. Self-help group loans can also pay for

children's education, medical needs, housing, and to help families through a difficult patch. They are an affordable alternative to doorstep lenders that often lead to over-indebtedness.

- This year the work of self-help groups was disrupted by Covid, with meetings suspended for four months and lending reduced. Loans from a government agency for groups linked to our partner Arogya Agam amounted to Rs. 8.4 million compared to Rs. 30m planned.
- VST contributed to a domestic violence project begun in August 2020 by Arogya Agam with funding from Azim Premji Foundation. The project works through village anti-violence committees which identified 651 survivors of violence.
- Self-help groups linked to another partner, Vasandham, were able to pay a five-yearly dividend of Rs.14m to their members.



Self-help groups make loans to their women members, but often husbands can help put the loans to good use. Anuratha (above) was fortunate that she and her husband had both worked in the construction trade. With a loan from her woman's group they bought the materials and built their own house.

Then Anuratha opened part of the house as a village shop, and used the building as collateral for a loan to buy stock. She sells sweets, snacks, soft drinks, spices in sachets, fancy goods, bangles and

personal care items in her shop in Boominayakanpatti. Now all the loans are repaid out of the profit from the shop. Her business brings her Rs. 1,500 (£15) a day profit. She has plans to develop the enterprise by bringing in higher value goods such as clothing and stationery.

And with the security of the family business behind her, Anuratha's two daughters were able to stay in school until 18, and then go to college, one to study maths and the other nursing.

Tribal Projects

VST supports three projects in the forested hills of the Western Ghats where tribal communities live.

Bodi

In the hills around the town of Bodi, our partner Arudecs works in 26 villages with tribal people of the Palliar and Muduvar communities. Arudecs is a tiny NGO, most of its staff are volunteers, and our chief partner Arogya Agam lends its support with training. We fund one part time staff member and eight volunteers.

Arudecs works on forest rights such as the right to land, and to collect produce. It helps villagers to petition officials for village facilities especially housing, and community certificates that enable tribal people to access welfare and other benefits, and house patta (ownership of the land their house is built on).

Arudecs forms village development committees and women's self-help groups and children's clubs that promote school attendance. It arranges some transport by auto rickshaw to schools and tries to get children into hostels so they can easily attend school.

This year Arudecs has started a tribal development scheme through the government agency Nabard promoting many farming activities.

Ambalamoola

Our partner Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society is based in north-west Tamil Nadu right on the border with Kerala near the town of Ambalamoola.

NWTWS has worked with tribal communities for more than 40 years. Initially focused on health, it has embraced community work with the aim of securing rights and benefits for tribal people and keeping tribal children in school. VST helps fund the latter work.

Its achievements during the year included obtaining ration cards for subsidised food for 149 families; inviting government officers to a special event so that they could issue identity cards needed to obtain benefits; helping individuals secure old age and disability pensions; and providing food and other essentials to 2,000 families during Covid lockdown.

NWTWS operates a hostel and residential school so that children from

Our partner organisations work with tribal communities in remote hamlets by forming village development committees and women's self-help groups. They focus on:

- Overcoming cultural and transport issues that lead to many children

dropping out of school.

- Obtaining tribal people's rights to land and forest produce; obtaining documents needed for welfare benefits such as pensions and subsidised food; lobbying for facilities such as clean water supply and decent housing.



Vishnu Kethan (left) belongs to a Bettakurumba tribal community. He lives 5kms from the NWTWS campus. Both his parents are daily wage workers. His father is a chronic alcoholic which troubled Vishnu so much that he left home and now stays at the NWTWS hostel. During his studies he developed an interest in football. Last year coaches from Chennai came to the hostel, and, spotting his skills, encouraged him to join a sports hostel but as he lacked a birth certificate he could not be considered for selection. He is good academically, especially in mathematics. This year he completed his 10th standard and has taken commerce as his higher secondary education. During lockdown he worked in a vehicle repair shop, saving his wages for future education expenses and buying a smart phone to attend online classes.

remote villages can attend school. Both had to close because of the pandemic, but the project organised online classes and put on teaching sessions in the villages.

Although the numbers were small, students making use of the hostel all passed the final school examinations at age 18 and went on to higher education. Students are now taking up subjects such as commerce, science and maths whereas as formerly tribal children were regarded as only able to study agriculture.

Our partner encourages students to work with them as volunteers. This year they took part in street theatre and an awareness programme to encourage tribal people to use the government and NGO health facilities available.

Palani Hills

The Palani Hills are some way north of Aundipatti, where Arogya Agam is based. But local volunteers help implement the programme there in 25 villages of the Palliar community.

In the tiny settlement of Boodamalai the 37 families have started a woman's group, a children's group and a village development committee. The last has obtained land and forest rights for 13 families, and is petitioning for a proper water supply and a road to the village.

Other needs are for the community certificates and identity cards needed to obtain welfare benefits, but it's an uphill struggle to draw a helpful response from local officials.

Arunthathiyars



In the Arunthathiyar hamlet of Kottaluthu members of the Ambedkar Children's Club have gathered in a circle and are bursting to practise their words of English and tell of their activities.

The list is impressive. The achievements come tumbling out in no particular order. They discuss big issues: climate change, sexual abuse, child marriage. They've persuaded two drop-outs to resume school. From their two rupees a month subs they've bought gifts for children on Ambedkar day. (Dr Ambedkar was an Indian independence leader who championed the rights of Dalits.)

The club members have planted 45 trees and collect waste plastic which they sell for recycling. They joined a local campaign on child marriage. They petitioned officials and got five toilets for the village. Another petition to the panchayat president resulted in a new floor for the communal building

where they do their homework.

They won't tolerate discrimination. A teacher who handed out snacks only to caste children and not the Arunthathiyars was suspended after the children submitted a complaint.

The club members are focused on passing exams. It is their path to a better future. They hope to be doctors, lawyers, teachers or join the army or police, rather than the labouring jobs that was the only work their parents could expect. Our partner Arogya Agam helps with training on how to get the most out of higher education and college opportunities, and how to obtain scholarships. One former member of the group is studying medicine and two others are at engineering college.

The club is for having fun too: they arrange excursions to nearby Vaigai Dam, and on festival days play games and sing their song about children's rights.

VST supports children's groups in 68 villages whose members are drawn from the Arunthathiyar community. Membership of the groups has had a big impact on their school performance with a high percentage entering higher education.

This year the children's lives have been disrupted by the closure of schools because of the Covid pandemic. It is estimated that only half of children attended online or television classes. Children from 30 families reported incidents of domestic violence during lockdown.

Training and support for the children's groups was hampered by Covid restrictions. Eight cases of child labour were addressed, with five of the children resuming education. A total of 14 under-age marriages were prevented and 11 instances of drug abuse were resolved.

VST also funds work by its partner Arogya Agam to provide support and training to 40 village development committees for the marginalised Arunthathiyar community. The committees take action to secure village infrastructure and welfare benefits for individuals, and take up issues of Dalit discrimination and the rights of sanitation workers. Special efforts are made to support Arunthathiyar women's self-help groups.

During the year legal action was pursued in a number of cases of discrimination. Some of these resulted in compensation for those affected; others are pending.

There has been a focus on securing higher education scholarships and reserved college places for Arunthathiyars. Other issues taken up were segregation in balwadis (creches), encroachment of burial grounds and underpayment of sanitation workers.

Arunthathiyars are a disadvantaged community sometimes called the Dalits of the Dalits.

VST helps fund work by its partner Arogya Agam to create and support children's clubs in Arunthathiyar communities with the aim of raising self-confidence and educational achievement among young Arunthathiyars.

It also helps sanitation workers claim their rights and promotes village development committees in Arunthathiyar communities that lobby for:

- village improvements such as street lighting and proper drains
- benefits for individuals such as pensions and subsidised food
- take-up of government jobs and college places reserved for Arunthathiyars

Health

This year of the Covid pandemic has had a big impact on efforts to reduce other serious infectious diseases.

In work to control tuberculosis, the programme for testing for TB from sputum samples was badly affected. There was widespread apprehension that the testing was for Covid rather than TB and a fear of being required to attend hospital. Consequently from March to September 2020 very few TB suspects were tested. However 522 people did provide samples in the Aundipatti area, and 38 were positive. These cases are monitored to ensure treatment is taken.

In addition 115 people with leprosy were monitored for complications along with treatment or referral for long term consequences of leprosy.

HIV programmes have long been supported by VST. This year alternative funding became available enabling our funds to be used elsewhere. The HIV work continued, with 358 HIV positive children supplied with extra food and



Perumayee, from Samathavapuram, a leprosy patient for 25 years monitored and cared for at Arogya Agam

other essentials during lockdown, and special arrangements made to ensure supplies of medication. Our partner's work with counselling HIV positive adolescents, with monitoring, and with high risk men goes on.

While India's public health service has grown markedly in recent decades, three infectious but treatable diseases, tuberculosis, leprosy and HIV/Aids, remain troublesome. Detection and treatment reduces the spread of these diseases. Our partners run

programmes to:

- find people with symptoms of these diseases
- undertake testing themselves or referral to government testing centres
- monitor and support people under treatment

- treat complications from leprosy, TB and HIV in cooperation with government hospitals

Covid is a new complication. While our partners can address preventative measures and the social impact, they are not equipped for medical interventions.

Financial report

Income	2020-2021	2019-2020
Donations	33,169	34,116
Grants	7,100	4,100
Sales of calendars	591	-
Investment income	4,927	5,833
Total	45,787	44,049

Expenditure	2020-2021	2019-2020
Partner support	3,411	9,556
Women's programme	30,813	40,377
Tribal projects	9,462	14,983
HIV and Aids	-	6,863
Child rights	9,854	7,272
Health programmes	2,200	4,013
Community organisations	3,265	7,355
Women's groups research	2,760	5,711
Fundraising and publicity	1,239	1,073
VST administration	1,415	2,404
Total	64,419	99,607

Category	Percentage
Women's programme	52%
Tribal programmes	15%
Child rights	15%
Community organisations	5%
Partner support	5%
Health programmes	4%
Fundraising and administration	4%

Notes on spending

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

Women's programme
Training to women's self-help groups and their federation bodies

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

HIV prevention & counselling
This work is now funded from other sources so VST resources are devoted elsewhere

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

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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