

Village Service Trust

Newsletter

Winter 2024

Going global: A new way to support VST

Village Service Trust has joined Global Giving, the US based international donation platform.

A big attraction of Global Giving is its incentive schemes, when it tops up donations from supporters. For example it will add to donations between April 8th and 12th. Global Giving is a registered charity in the UK and donors can claim Gift Aid too.

VST now has a presence on www.globalgiving.org where we make our case for support.

We decided to appeal for funds for our programme with the Arunthathiyar community.

Arunthathiyars are a Dalit sub group with a significant population in south India. They are pushed to the margins of society, denied opportunities and experience discrimination at the hands of other communities. They used to be known as Sakkiliars, but the S-word is now only used in unpleasant contexts, rather like the N-word in the US.

Our partner Arogya Agam has worked with Arunthathiyars for years. That has not always been an easy experience, but time has shown that two kinds of organisations work well:

Self-help groups are a tried and tested formula for raising incomes and advancing women's rights.

Children's clubs encourage young Arunthathiyars to be confident and pursue their education.

Last year Arogya Agam launched a programme to expand its work with Arunthathiyar communities into new areas, where there is little in the way of social work with Arunthathiyars.

To help fund this programme, VST has contributed the £7,000 raised from its Pennine Way sponsored walk in 2022.



Arunthathiyar self-help group members meeting in the village of A. Vadapatti

The Global Giving campaign will help fund the work over five years.

The work is taking place in villages around the towns of Bodi, Theni, Kadamalaikundu, and Periyakulam. These are just beyond Arogya Agam's traditional area of operation near the town of Andipatti.

The programme will function in 50 villages, aiming to benefit around 750 families. So far, 26 women's self-groups and 12 children's clubs have been formed in 17 villages.

Self-help groups are similar to credit unions. They open the door to affordable credit for their members instead of the debt trap of high interest loans from door-step lenders. Without regular income, families in this community live on a financial cliff edge and need loans to cover emergencies or large expenses.

Self-help groups can also access cheap

bank finance for micro-enterprises that can provide a regular income.

From our experience and research, we know that success with credit schemes for Arunthathiyar communities needs time and effort. There are cultural factors to address in building a climate where finance is used constructively and stable enterprises are consolidated. Our partner is committed to putting in the effort for this programme to succeed.

Community organisations like self-help groups can also fight for their rights to village facilities. Government resources often end up with those who shout the loudest, or have the right connections. Collective action can succeed in ensuring the community gets facilities such as clean water supplies, street lights, proper drainage, paved roads, health visitors and burial grounds.

Arunthathiyar children's clubs aim to break the culture of a marginalised excluded community. Children are shown their rights - to education, to freedom from discrimination, to a chance of a better life. Instead of acceptance of a life of dead-end work, or dropping out of school to work to pay off family debt, they are encouraged to work hard at school, pass exams, and aspire to the decent jobs that qualifications will bring.

Visit:

[https://globalgiving.org/
projects/free-indian-families-
from-debt-and-deprivation](https://globalgiving.org/projects/free-indian-families-from-debt-and-deprivation)

Thrown out of their village, the people of Badraklipuram are fighting for their rights

Ned Tinne reports from a hamlet seeking a fair share of resources while fending off loan sharks

Badraklipuram is, in many ways, typical of the Arunthathiyar self-help groups that our new programme is reaching. It is located 30km west of Arogya Agam headquarters near the town of Bodiyanakur. The main village of Badrakalipuram has been dominated by a caste group known as the Thevars, who come under the “most-backward caste” category. Over the past few decades, the Arunthathiyars were pushed out to form a separate colony. There are now 65 families living in 55 households. Living conditions are very tough for this community, who are the most marginalised caste in Tamil Nadu. We set up a self-help group to empower the women to take control of their lives and deal with their problems. All villages are entitled to basic infrastructure including safe drinking water, communal toilets, burial grounds, community halls, temples and a bus stop. They also are entitled to obtain a patta, a title deed, which grants them official ownership of their homes. These are basic rights that all villages should expect and yet, as in many villages we work in, there are serious deficiencies on many of these fronts. Villages can petition the local government administration, known as the panchayat, for resources that are allocated for rural development. The main issue for Badrakalipuram is that another colony of ten Thevar families has been set up down the road and conflict over resource access has caused repeated problems. The Thevars siphon off most of the good water, they have co-opted the public toilets and they have had a new road and bus stop provided in their colony using

panchayat funds. The far more populous Arunthathiyar colony meanwhile still doesn't have a bus stop, their drinking water is often salty and the majority of them have not yet obtained pattas. We frequently encounter the problem that the panchayat ward clerk tends to be from the "backward caste" community and so they often give favourable treatment to their own caste and neglect the needs of the Dalits.

One of the main tasks we are helping these groups on is in registering with the government for village infrastructure, patta registration and a range of government benefits such as health and education. These rural women have not been educated in such matters and otherwise lack the organisation to go and push the local administrators to achieve access to these rights that they are entitled too. They are also naturally sceptical of public schemes given that their community has been ruthlessly marginalised for centuries. In rural India either you persistently pressure the local government or else you will just be swept away in the bureaucracy and forgotten about. Since we last visited the group before Christmas they have conducted a “participatory rural



Women and children in Badrakalipuram now have the community organisations that bring empowerment and the prospect of improving their lives

appraisal” in which they have conducted a full survey of the houses and families in the colony. They have documented their needs for better infrastructure for their water supply and toilets. We have helped them petition the department of transport which is coming to survey how to provide them with a bus stop. Over time, as the group strengthens, they will get better at securing the resources they are entitled to and be in control of developing their colony.

Another important part of our work is supporting these women to realise sustainable forms of income generation. Many of the Arunthathiyar women in

Badrakalipuram have very temperamental means for income generation. Some of them used to have animal husbandry in the old village but have not managed to get it going in the colony. Most get part time work earning a pittance as agricultural labourers.

A big problem resulting from this and, we see time and again in the groups we work with, is exploitation by money lenders. Moneylenders come in and prey on these women, giving them loans with 10-15% a month interest rates, which they have little hope of paying off. The solution to this problem is self-help groups that provide affordable

credit by pooling members savings into a shared fund and accessing bank and other loans. These low cost loans can be used to start microenterprises or to pay off the predatory moneylender debts. This change in behaviour takes time to be adopted. Older and more experienced SHGs have been successful in fending off the money lenders. We provide seed money to contribute to the group's fund and train them in sustainable income generation. We have asked the groups what kinds of income generation activities they want. We are looking into whether we can help these women form a business by making candles. We provide the raw materials and manufacturing training and help with distribution. Starting small, they will slowly gather some funds.

Ultimately these new Arunthathiyar self-help groups will join a federation of 290 women's groups. The federation has its own rotating funds that it lends to member groups. Many of the groups are self-sufficient and get loans from development banks instead of relying on donations. But, for the time being, there are still many Arunthathiyar groups who need support from organisations like our partners to help them get going and regain control of their village resources, get ownership of their homes, attain sustainable incomes and fend off the moneylenders.

The moneylenders shout abuse at women in front of the whole colony

The people of Badrakalipuram have plenty to tell about the dubious practices of moneylenders.

One woman took a loan to pay for medicine for her daughter. She is still in debt, with mounting interest. The lenders come and verbally abuse her each morning in front of the whole colony and her children.

They shout caste slurs at her like "sakkiliar" and jeer at her to prostitute herself in order to earn money to pay off the loan.

Her husband simply retreats from the problem, hiding from the money lenders and letting his wife take the abuse. He also earns a pittance from labouring work.

Eradicating money lenders is a

top priority for group leader Tamil Selvi. She said: "We know that only leads to more problems but literally don't see any other way to access money because of the lack of income opportunities and access to microfinance."

Many of the older self-help groups have been successful in eradicating money lenders from their village.



Tamil Selvi: debt only leads to more problems

The problems

The people of Badrakalipuram are in dispute with caste people nearby over drainage and bus stops.

They are not enrolled in government welfare schemes

They experience discrimination in the government's guaranteed rural employment scheme

Caste prejudice restricts their options for microenterprises. Candle-making is a possibility

Few have patta - deeds to the land on which their homes stand

With 65 families and 55 houses there is overcrowding

They lost their hall, toilets, and a good water supply when they were forced out of their old village

Moneylenders shout caste-based abuse at people trapped by high-interest debt

A moving and joyous ritual that I doubt I'll ever forget

Six years ago VST's newsletter reported on Samu, a young man with HIV. Recently our volunteer in India, Ned Tinne, was invited to a special ceremony in Samu's life.

In December I was privileged to attend Samu and his wife Kallashvari's valaikappu. The valaikappu is a tradition practised across India, usually in the seventh month of pregnancy, indicating that the mother and baby have successfully entered the safest phase of pregnancy. In Tamil Nadu, it is performed on an auspicious day and the loved ones of the prospective parents are all invited to share in this sacred ritual.

We met Samu in Theni where he took us to his home, which was bustling with exquisitely dressed and lively young children and women attending to his young wife. We then met more of the extended family in another house before making our way to the function room.

At the front of the room, fruits and flowers were laid on blankets on the floor before the two seats arranged for the couple. First, they performed the ritual to one another: turmeric paste is daubed on the cheeks of the husband and wife, followed by vermilion powder on their forehead, a sprinkling of rice over their heads and a bangle placed on the mother's wrist. Guests are then invited in turn to perform the sequence



Honoured: Samu and Kallashvari with family members

and may also give some money wrapped in a betel leaf. They honour the couple and, with deep sincerity, wish them well in their journey of becoming parents.

The experience was one of high emotion as John Dalton (founder of VST's partner Arogya Agam) had filled me in on Samu's history on the journey to Theni.

Samu first came to Arogya Agam 12 years ago, aged eight. He came because he was HIV positive, contracting it from his parents in childhood. His mother's HIV had weakened her immune system such that she died from a TB infection.

Arogya Agam helped to arrange for Samu to stay in youth hostels after he became estranged from his father, who remarried. However, like any strong-minded adolescent, he resisted being institutionalised and was often in trouble. He was also refusing to take his antiretroviral drugs and would throw them down the loo. He resented having this stigmatised disease and suffered for it, ending up back in our clinic.

After some time, we managed to help him mature. We paid for him to get his driving licence and he now has a stable

job working for an oil processing and distributing company.

He understood the need to take this vital medication, especially once he had found his bride to be. He took the medication, and after a few months his blood test showed that it was safe to start trying for children. They finally conceived after two years of trying.

After the formal ritual was completed, we set out tables in the hall for a great feast. The atmosphere was joyous with everyone chatting and taking photos.

As I took in the scene, it was deeply moving to consider that in other circumstances, life may well have gone very differently for Samu and what I was witnessing might easily have never come to be. This work, decentralised and grassroots, of community-led support networks is not only vital to human dignity but vital to development and breaking free from poverty.

This was my first outing in my time here in Tamil Nadu and I doubt I will ever forget it.

Read more of Ned's blogs at

https://substack.com/@villageservicetrust?utm_source=user-menu

Another happy outcome . . .

In our annual report last year we reported on a long campaign by our partner ARUDECS to obtain housing land rights for tribal people.

Last October their efforts finally met with success. ARUDECS director, Raja, said 55 families in Chellong Colony and Nehru Nagar had been awarded land.

"This is a great victory and we are

happily celebrating it," he added.

"We consider this as our biggest success and it will be greatly favourable for us to carry out all our activities in an effective manner.

"We also sincerely thank VST for supporting us in every phase of our project in uplifting the tribal community."

People awarded housing land hold up their title deeds

