

Village Service Trust

Newsletter

Winter 2023



Raja in the field with local men Ayyappan, Eswaran, Madan, Vinoth and Sakthive

Tribal families secure their rights after 10-year battle

Like most of VST's partners, ARUDECS is driven by one person's determination to address injustice.

Raja took up social work in 1997 and since 2004 he has run ARUDECS, a tiny organisation working with tribal and other marginalised communities in the steep forested hills of the Western Ghats mountain range.

Raja saw that the benefits for tribal people under the then new Forest Rights Act were being poorly implemented; that many tribal women were abused; that the tribal people had no land, no proper houses, only primitive dwellings; that many were bonded labourers; and that few children went to school.

"Initially it was a struggle; we were short of money. The tribal villages can only be reached by walking. But the people helped us and we stayed in the villages.

"Our three priorities were housing, land, and the right to collect forest

produce. We started giving petitions to the government and even went to Delhi to ask the government to implement the Forest Rights Act properly."

ARUDECS' work came to the attention of VST's chief partner Arogya Agam. They supported with advice on planning their work, sharing their experience of community organisations such as women's self-help groups and village development committees.

Raja cites some achievements: "The village development committees we set up secured community rights to collect produce from the forest and individual rights to cultivate forest land. It took 10 years but now more than 350 families have benefitted."

ARUDECS works in 26 tribal hamlets,

People used to hide from strangers; now they stand in elections

and VST funds the work in eight of those settlements. As well as the development committees, the villages have children's clubs to promote school attendance and women's self-help groups. Volunteers are paid £3 a day to support these community organisations with training, advice and information.

Suresh is one such volunteer. He lives in Chokkanalai. "ARUDECS came and counselled us, and we started to think. I realised the truth of what they were saying and started to organise meetings and petitions.

"The villagers no longer fear outsiders. Now they can talk wherever they go. The people used to hide from strangers; now they stand in elections."

He recounts the difficulties they face. "Roads are poor or non-existent. It's a 7km walk to a town or Rs.200 for a jeep. In an emergency a jeep can cost Rs.2,000. We can't get health care in time because of the lack of transport. We give petitions to officials but get no answer. Then the official is transferred and we have to start again."

And the future: Raja plans a big focus on education. Dropping out remains a big problem but he would like to see many more passing public exams and going on to college.

He says the women's self-help groups can be strengthened by coming together as a federation and being registered as a legal body. Similarly the village committees can form a collective body with greater influence. But with the 26 hamlets scattered across the forest and few roads, arranging joint action is a challenge.

Another idea is to create a community resource centre that could host a community bank, seed bank, forest produce collection centre and provide training on marketing, management skills, and record keeping, and forge links with banks and government departments.

Already the national rural development agency NABARD has responded to ARUDECS efforts by helping with water supply improvements and providing free seeds and plants.

Years of struggle start to bring lasting change for tribal communities

Who are the Palliards?

Palliards and Muduhuvans are the native people of Theni and surrounding areas in the Western Ghats mountain range, close to the state of Kerala in the west.

The term 'Palliar' has been derived from the word 'Palaniyan', which in Tamil means someone from Palani.

They are distributed in the districts of Madurai, Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Tirunelveli and Coimbatore. They speak Tamil and use the Tamil script.

Unlike many people in south India, the Palliards are not vegetarians, but they do not eat beef or pork. Their staple food grains are rice and ragi (a coarse but nutritious grain). They consume all kinds of pulses and use groundnut oil and palm oil for cooking. They also eat tubers, vegetables, fruits and consume milk and milk products, and drink black tea and black coffee.

The men and women of this community drink alcoholic drinks regularly. They smoke beedis (tiny cigars) and cigarettes, and chew betel leaves and tobacco and use snuff.

The Palliards once lived in small groups without any formal organisation. In their tribal community, there was no elected or nominated leader.

In due course, one among the residents came to act as the headman of their community.

The Palliar tribes live in remote areas of the forest. Government schools are at a distance and show little interest in enrolling tribal children.

The Palliards have extensive knowledge of herbal medicine, using both fresh and dried plants. This knowledge has been passed from generation to generation and continues to be widely used today.

To watch our video about the Palliards search YouTube for "We are the Palliards". Made in 2009, the short film remains relevant today.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1m8lwz2ci4g



Villagers in Mudhavakudi plan the year's calendar for farm work on land obtained under the Forest Rights Act with support from ARUDECS

WOMEN'S GROUPS

There are 10 women's self-help groups in the eight villages supported by VST, with 150 members in total.

These self-help group members are selected by the women of the village.

A president, secretary and treasurer are elected by the group members along with four other committee members. Every two years they elect new office bearers. These members meet once a month and deal with issues related to women, children and family issues.

They keep five books of registers in order to communicate with the local banks, financial institutions and government offices. These groups have savings of Rs.150,000 (£1,500).

So far they have obtained Rs.133,000 in soft loans from local banks. They use these loans and savings for medical support, house repairs, children's needs and buying animals for milk.

Six groups have received grants of Rs.120,000 each from the Tribal Welfare Department.

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

All eight villages have Village Development Committees (VDCs).

Their main role is to engage with the panchayat (local council) and government departments to ensure that government services and tribal welfare schemes for the village are properly implemented, and without corruption or malpractice.

The VDCs make regular visits to the government ration shops that supply subsidised food, and health centres to maintain good rapport with the staff and encourage them to carry out their roles effectively. They make links with government departments such as revenue, animal husbandry units, Integrated Child Development Centres (creches), free midday meals services, and agriculture extension departments.

There are 72 members in the VDCs in the eight villages. ARUDECS arranges training sessions for the members and its volunteers assist with the functioning and activities of these committees.

CHILDREN'S CLUBS

There are five children's clubs in the eight villages with 151 members aged five to 12.

Their main objective is to have all five-year-old children enrolled in school and to discourage students at least up to the age of 12 from dropping out.

The clubs involve children in learning basic skills and information on leadership, health and hygiene, safe environment, life skills, and preventing child labour and child marriages. They also learn about child rights, and the value of education.

The clubs hold supplementary education classes for the most deserving children in the village.

Reports by Keba Dassan

What are the successes?

ARUDECS has mobilised tribal people to bring pressure to bear on the authorities. These are some of the results of its advocacy for proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act in Theni district, securing rights for both individuals and communities.

- A total of 107 tribal farmers received 280 hectares of land while another 255 farmers obtained 975 hectares.
- The government built 40 houses for tribal people who had been living in primitive huts.
- After 10 years of campaigning the government is planning to provide land deeds for 48 houses in Chellang Colony.
- The tribal welfare department has built 44 houses in Chokkanalai tribal village, while the Slum Clearance Board has completed 34 houses in Rasimalai village. A further 25 houses are being built in the villages of Solaiyur and Melaparavu.
- Volunteers helped 594 tribal people benefit under government welfare schemes by obtaining identity cards, ration cards, and tribal community certificates.
- Seven women's self-help groups have opened bank accounts. Ten groups can start small enterprises with support from the tribal welfare department of Theni District.
- ARUDECS is giving educational support to 242 children, and helping with school kit, evening tuition in the villages, transport to school in two villages and a summer camp.

A young man dedicated to education and his tribal village

Kannan is a 27-year-old Palliar tribe member working as a volunteer with ARUDECS.

He is a sincere, passionate person and has dedicated himself to educating children in his home village, Mundhal.

Kannan studied to 9th standard, but left school aged 15 and started to go for agriculture work as a daily wage labourer so that he could support his family.

At the same time, he encouraged his younger sister to continue her studies. She has now completed a degree in education and is teaching in a private school.

After work Kannan used to give evening tuition, training the students on child rights, the importance of education, and their culture, including folk dance.

When he joined the ARUDECS team he was 'innocent and not clear about what to do for his village development'. Slowly he has been trained to learn about the tribal welfare activities undertaken by ARUDECS. Now he is taking a lead role in his community development.

His young and vibrant personality shows a real interest. He dedicates himself to the development of his own village and to sustaining its Palliar tribal culture and lifestyle.

As a result of his involvement with the Vettri Paravaikal Children's club they have ensured no one has dropped out of school.

ARUDECS counts it a big success when a young man gains insights and offers himself to work for his own community.



Kannan: sustaining tribal culture



The last mile

Tony Huckle and walking companion in the Cheviot Hills on the final stretch of his 268-mile Pennine Way sponsored walk last July. The event raised £7,000.

Pupils raise £2,100 for VST

Some 190 pupils from Years Five and Six at Weston All Saints Primary School in Bath took part in a six-mile hike on the northern hills overlooking the city to raise money for VST.

Although this may not seem far, the walk was punctuated by two stops of an hour long each. The first was at the local parish church to learn something of its 800-year history and importance in the local community.

The second was at Beckford's Tower, a retreat built by the 19th century novelist, art collector and slave plantation owner William Thomas Beckford.

Part of the walk was along a section of the Cotswold Way, an ancient 102-mile footpath linking Bath to Chipping Camden, which follows the Cotswold Edge escarpment.

All pupils completed the walk and together raised £2,100 for VST.

Five ways to make a donation

VST has recently added new ways in which supporters can make a donation. We have joined the Wonderful.org giving platform and upgraded the donate button on villageservicetrust.org.uk.

To contribute using mobile or online banking go to Wonderful.org/charities/277111

To use a credit or debit card, or to set up a standing order, go to villageservicetrust.org.uk

Or just post a cheque to the address below.

Whatever means you like to use, please increase your donation with Gift Aid if you can.

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