

A group of women, likely members of a community organization, are participating in a procession. They are dressed in blue and purple sarees with pink scarves. Each woman is carrying a large, ornate pot or basket on her head, filled with yellow flowers and greenery. The pots are decorated with pink ribbons and have the organization's logo on them. The women are walking in a line, and the background shows a street with buildings and trees.

**Village  
Service  
Trust**

**Annual report 2022/2023**

## Letter from the Chair

This year I have been lucky enough to visit India twice with my day job and extend my trips a little to visit Theni district and spend time with our partners. I am always deeply impressed by their positive impact on so many people and across such a variety of issues, especially considering their relatively small budgets.

I was especially grateful to be able to visit as it has been a challenging time for our partner Vasandham. Earlier this year they lost their permission to receive money from abroad. An independent accountant has concluded this was due to a misunderstanding and Vasandham is appealing against the decision.

We have been working closely with the Vasandham trustees and with Gunasekaran, Vasandham's founder and leader, to provide support where we can. Gunasekaran has worked with VST for over four decades; first at Seva Nilayam, before going on to start Vasandham in the remote but beautiful Varasanadu valley.

Like our other partners, his efforts have focused on basic healthcare, women's rights, and Dalit rights. Guna also has a passion for sustainability, which is abundantly evident if you visit the Vasandham Environmental Research Centre where they

practise and teach sustainable agriculture, growing a variety of crops at a site surrounded by jungle and where you can glimpse the flash of spectacular birds and insects. With Vasandham's future uncertain and Guna ready to retire, we have been thinking about how we support not just the people our partner organisations work in service of, but also the people who dedicate their lives working *for* our partner organisations.

I heard about the psychological challenges from several leaders of our partner organisations. They expressed concern for staff morale, especially when engaging in work to fight for the rights of the most vulnerable, be that women, Arunthathiyars, children, tribal people, those affected by HIV, or members of the LGBT community.

Our partners are working for lasting societal and cultural change; the outcomes aren't quick and they suffer many setbacks along with their successes. I am constantly impressed by the perseverance and courage that our partners, their staff and volunteers, and the people they are working with, display in fighting for their rights and I am so glad we can continue to fund this work.

We're looking at more ways to help our partners. We're

**A moment of mirth for two tribal women is captured by our partner ARUDECS**

**Front page: women with a traditional display at a rally marking 25 years of self-help groups in Andipatty**



exploring appointing a local fundraiser to secure more Indian donors so partners become less dependent on foreign funding. We're looking at setting up a discretionary welfare fund for partners' long term staff. And we have an initiative to bring partners together to collaborate and learn from each other.

In the UK two longstanding trustees, Angela Russ and Gerti Wilford, have stepped down. Huge thanks to both of them for their years of support. We're keen to recruit new trustees who share our passion for this work and can bring new skills and experience to VST. We have another graduate volunteer due to head out to India, and we're hoping to find one or two part time volunteers to help with fundraising in the UK. If you're interested in becoming a trustee or volunteering please get in touch!

We've recently signed up to Global Giving, an online fundraising platform with which Arogya Agam has had

phenomenal success in raising money for their work with HIV positive children. The platform helps secure corporate donors and regularly runs match-funding campaigns where individual donations attract top-up funding of up to 100%.

We've been fortunate in benefitting from several legacies recently. We appreciate these so much, as we do all gifts from our supporters – your contributions make such a difference to so many in Tamil Nadu.

Lastly, I want to extend my thanks to all our partners in India, but especially to Guna. He has devoted his life to serving the most vulnerable and striving to leave the world a better place than he found it. VST couldn't operate without the dedication of our partners. Seeing it first hand brings home how remarkable an achievement this is.

**Sophie Walker,  
VST chair**

**"I am constantly impressed by the courage and perseverance of our partners"**

## Tribal Projects

VST's partner ARUDECS works through village volunteers.

Karupaiya is the volunteer in his village, Chellong Colony. He is 28 and is married with three children.

For 10 years he has lobbied government officials to build proper houses in his village to replace primitive thatched huts. He organised the villagers to approach the Collector, the chief local government officer, and present their petition. And eventually their efforts paid off. Now a site for 48 houses has been approved and 48 families have been selected.

Karupaiya finds it a slow process. He works with local officials but another official has yet to issue the deeds for the land. Meanwhile Karupaiya is working on getting government grants for the £3,250 cost of building each house.

Recently a woman cheated 30 tribal women, taking £10 from each, saying she would get them a bank loan. Karupaiya collected details of what happened and went with the women to lodge a complaint at the local police station and with the Collector. After this the police arrested the woman and recovered half the money.

Karupaiya has also taken steps to obtain land rights under the Forest Rights Act for 26 families.

Unfortunately the families live in Theni district, while the land lies in



**Some of the 40 tribal children who now easily reach school thanks to the auto**

neighbouring Dindigul district. The Theni district rural development officer has forwarded the proposal to the Dindigul district tribal welfare committee and is awaiting their response. No quick answer is



**Karupaiya: persistence has paid off**

expected, but Karupaiya can be relied on to persevere.

He also monitors children's school attendance, and with the support of ARUDECS, teachers and well-wishers arranged an auto-rickshaw to take children to school. This simple measure has taken off. A government agency gave a £1,400 subsidy and a bank made a loan of £2,600 enabling the purchase of an auto. ARUDECS helps with the monthly loan repayments. The outcome: 40 students can travel daily to school in the nearest town.

Now he has established good relationships with all the villagers his ambition has widened, with plans to bring tribal activists together in a district-wide tribal welfare association.

In the village of Thenamgodu, Babu, his wife, and child had been struggling to get enough to eat, and without a ration card they could not get government help.

Our partner NWTWS intervened with the authorities to secure them this essential document. They were eligible under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana food subsidy scheme, which targets the most disadvantaged households.

Babu's family gained a monthly quota of subsidised food and no longer face the burden of daily hunger and financial strain.

With the ration card they became eligible for housing assistance, and other government benefits. The transformation in Babu's family's quality of life serves as a testament to how accessing a simple document can uplift vulnerable families.



**Babu and his wife receive their ration card**

## Women's programme

The 3,600 strong women's federation linked to our partner Arogya Agam is called Then Sudar Pengal Iyyakkam. The name roughly translates as Honey-bee Shining Women's Federation. The name implies "energetic work to move from darkness to light".

That was certainly the case in March when the federation of women's self-help groups staged a huge silver jubilee celebration, and launched a booklet listing their achievements over the 25 years.

It was some celebration. More than 3,000 women joined a massive function. Guests included local government officials, NGO leaders, other federation leaders, members of the District Dalit Women Forum, journalists and the Arogya Agam team. A huge rally started from the centre of Andipatty ending at the TSPI office just outside the town. On the stage there was singing and

**"Each of our women works as thenni (honey-bee) and builds the huge honey cavern, serving the community" - TSPI first president, Panchavarnam**

dancing, and speeches by the federation leaders. Every one of the 260 self-help groups affiliated to the federation made a small donation towards the cost of the event, and along with donations collected from others raised so much money that they had a surplus of £1,400. That will be spent on tree planting and community needs.

The federation states its aims as "organising oppressed women, especially from the Arunthathiyar community, for empowerment and equality in social, educational, economic, health and political status in the Andipatty area".



**Thousands of self-help group members came together to celebrate 25 years of solidarity**



Arogya Agam director Dr Sabu Simon presents a jubilee award to Panchavarnam, the first president of TSPI, pictured with the current president, Saritha

**"In this function we felt as one family, as our own village festival, our unity has become much stronger. There is more work to do, so, together, let us bring gender equality and empowerment today for a more sustainable tomorrow" - TSPI President Saritha**

### Highlights from the list of achievements booklet (entitled "March towards change, firm in our beliefs")

- Greater role for women in decision-making in the family and in their village
- Economic empowerment through micro-enterprise. Self-help group savings of £800,000
- More women elected to local councils and active in public life
- Literacy programme for Dalit women
- Near elimination of illegal high interest money lending
- Reducing school drop-outs and confronting child exploitation

## Arunthathiyars

This is a story about caste discrimination, and about how community organisations can help stop it.

In the village of Solathevanpatty our partner Arogya Agam has formed a children's club among the Arunthathiyar population there.

Arunthathiyars are a highly marginalised Dalit community. They are seen as the ones to do unsavoury work such as burying the dead and working with leather. They are often farm labourers. All sanitation workers are Arunthathiyars.

The idea of the children's clubs is to encourage young Arunthathiyars to stay on at school, pass exams and go on to higher education, in the process lifting expectations both for themselves and their community.

One day some children's club members in Solathevanpatty received a visit from relations from the village of Govindanagaram. The cousins

**There are 178 Arunthathiyar and tribal children's clubs in 69 villages with more than 2,000 members. During the year more than 100 students entered higher education.**

**Now it is planned to reach out to Arunthathiyar children not yet in the clubs.**

were invited to sit in on the children's club meeting, and the story of what was happening in Govindanagaram unfolded.

There, the school teachers were making the Arunthathiyar children clean the toilets. None of the other children were being asked to do this.

One day, four of the Arunthathiyar children had felt sick because of the strong smell. The toilets had been particularly dirty and it had been hot that day, so they had gone home.

They had told their parents who got together and had summoned the courage to complain. The teacher had told them: "If the children come to school, they must do what we ask them to do. You can go ahead and complain about it anywhere you like, I am not afraid about it."

When the children's group heard this story, the news quickly went to the women's group, the women's federation and Arogya Agam. Staff and volunteers phoned the child helpline. When the helpline workers came to enquire, they accompanied them and collected evidence. They then made a formal complaint to the chief educational officer.

After the complaint was lodged, the school management approached the families and apologised. The management gave a written assurance that such incidents would never happen again, and the case was withdrawn.



**Women in Govindanagaram listen intently as Arogya Agam begins work there by holding a focus group discussion**

In the area currently covered by Arogya Agam, the women's federation and the children's groups, these kind of practices have almost entirely stopped. Most children of sanitation workers complete their

education and don't follow their parents into this type of work. Arogya Agam has now started to work in Govindanagaram under a new grant from Village Service Trust to form women's self-help groups in this area.

*John Dalton of Arogya Agam writes:*

There seemed to be an attitude that since the children were the children of 'sweepers' it was their job to sweep. Because Arunthathiyar children, like their parents, tend to avoid confrontation and are accustomed to being treated badly, the teachers got away with it.

This treatment in school has an adverse psychological effect and increases their feeling that they are inferior to the other children. The other children make it worse because they follow the attitude of their teachers. The parents don't want their children and grandchildren

to become sanitation workers and keep them well away from it. So these discriminated children were not used to the bad smells and uncleanness in the bathrooms and toilets. They were just given hand brushes made of bundles of twigs that are barely 50cm long so they had to bend over to sweep. Often there is not enough water. Sometimes these children complain that this puts them off their food.

It is illegal to require any children to clean toilets, let alone pick on one community to do it. Sadly these teachers who are well paid to oppose discrimination actively propagated it.

## Health

Tamilarasan has a barber's shop in Main Road, Andipatty. His shop plays its part in small town life, sharing news and gossip, match-making, and commenting on local events, politics and current affairs.

But Tamilarasan is also a peer educator. Trained by Arogya Agam, he tells his customers about the risks of HIV, how to practise safer sex, how to get tested, and that he supplies free condoms.

This is his story.

"I used to have multiple sexual partners and when I got married my friends advised me to have a blood test for HIV. I tested negative, and now I lead a happy family life. However I was in touch with Arogya Agam, and I understood the seriousness of this disease after attending their training sessions.

"Here in the barber shop, customers and my friends come to have their hair cut, which usually will take 20 to 30 minutes. During that time I talk to them about HIV, particularly to unmarried youths. I share my previous experience and tell them I have condoms available in my shop. They ask about their doubts which I clarify to them. Later on many customers will talk openly to me that I motivated them to have their blood checked and to adopt safer sexual practices.

"I referred many of my friends and customers to the nearby government



**Tamilarasan at work: a health message with every shave**

hospital, for blood screening. Three of my customers were found to be positive. I kept a close check on them, urging them to avoid sex or adopt safer practices, along with taking their ART (anti-retroviral treatment).

"In my job I use a razor blade and if I accidentally cut a customer's skin he may bleed and there would be a risk. Also I am practising safer sex due to my previous experience and luckily I escaped this disease, and I wanted to be a model person to my customers."

Tamilarasan recruited his business partner Perumal to help with HIV advice. Perumal says: "When I was cutting the hair of college boys I came to know that these boys, especially hostel boys, were engaged in unsafe sex with other boys. After my intervention, they now use condoms, and tell their friends to do the same."

## Financial report

Income	2022-2023	2021-2022
Donations	89,747	32,450
Legacies	128,325	-
Grants	3,000	2,000
Investment income	6,660	5,235
<b>Total</b>	<b>227,732</b>	<b>39,685</b>
Expenditure		
Partner support	3,424	2,608
Women's programme	11,670	18,674
HIV prevention	284	-
Tribal projects	52,765	10,773
Child rights	6,080	7,880
Health programmes	1,036	930
Community organisations	3,067	2,953
Fundraising and publicity	685	906
VST administration	786	411
<b>Total</b>	<b>79,797</b>	<b>45,135</b>

### An unusual year

These are not the kind of accounts we usually present. Our income was five times the normal level due to receipt of several legacies. Such gifts are rare and haphazard. We also received a number of exceptional donations, mainly for NWTWS following the death of its founder John Wilson. These donations were for the work with tribal communities by NWTWS. Our plan is to make use of the additional income by increasing the grants to our partners over the long term.

### Notes on spending

#### Partner support

Assistance with staff and establishment costs at Arogya Agam and Vasandham

#### 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. HIV prevention

#### Community organisations

Training and support for Arunthathiyar women's self-help groups

## Trustees

Sophie Walker, Chair  
Richard Garforth, Treasurer  
Tony Huckle, Secretary  
Murali Shanmugavelan  
Bryan Osbon  
Gerti Wilford  
David Mosse  
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The logo for Village Service Trust is a dark blue square containing the text "Village Service Trust" in a white, serif font. The text is arranged in three lines: "Village" on the top line, "Service" on the middle line, and "Trust" on the bottom line.

Village  
Service  
Trust

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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