



Letter from the Chair

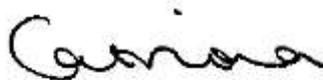
India continues to change apace. Aspects of modern India are now part of life in Theni and the surrounding districts in which we work. Many of these developments are welcome: improved sanitation, mobile technology, and **increased employment**. However, India's development is also bringing new challenges. Tribal communities are seeing their way of life disappear, alcohol is becoming an increasingly disruptive force, and there is a growing frustration that the opportunities modern India offers are out of reach. And there is no doubt that many of the old issues in India remain: caste discrimination, gender-based violence and entrenched poverty are still daily realities for the families with whom we work.

As life changes for the families we work with, **we need to ensure VST and our partners' work** remains relevant and effective. Projects that support communities to overcome caste and gender discrimination remain core to our programme. But, this year has seen a refocus of some of our projects. A long-standing innovator around HIV and AIDS, Arogya Agam's recent priority has been preventing mother-to-child transmission. Arogya Agam has played a considerable role in the significant achievement of bringing transmission rates down to almost 0% in Tamil Nadu. A new challenge has emerged and we are now focusing on supporting young people living

with HIV and AIDS who face very specific issues. Our work with tribal communities is **moving away from healthcare to children's education**. We believe this is the most effective way of supporting tribal communities to make the difficult transition as they see their traditional way of life disappear.

This changing context also provides a challenge for VST in the UK. As Trustees we want to ensure the work is a beacon of good practice and build networks of concern, and action, around caste and gender issues. Building on the outcomes of our co-hosted *Caste out of the shadows* conference, we have taken an active role in UK-based networks and advocacy. In the coming year, we plan to delve deeper into self-help groups, the bedrock of much of our work, by commissioning research to understand the factors at play in their success and failures.

Changing times but important times to be in solidarity with the Dalit, tribal and women communities. Of course, we could not do any of this work without your support. On behalf of all the Trustees of VST, thank you for your generosity and concern.



Front page: Boys at Arogya Agam play a mobile phone game that helps reveal what they know about HIV . This is useful when it comes to persuading guardians of the need to talk about HIV .

Below: Self-help group members promote traditional millet seedlings at an event by Vaigai women's federation and our partner Vasandham for International Rural Women's Day in the village of Valiparai.



The Women's Movement

Manimegalai was only just 17 and hoping to train as a teacher when her family proposed marriage to a rich relative. The marriage would be illegal - **women can't marry in India until they are 18. But the women's group** in her village got wind of the plans and the marriage was stopped until she was older.

This was just one of a number of **under-age marriages that the women's movement in** Theni district has prevented. So-called "**child marriages**" are a **big concern for the** movement. Often there is a significant age difference, a lack of equality in the marriage and a risk of domestic violence. And almost **invariably the woman's career hopes** are extinguished. More than 40 per cent of girls in the area marry before they are 18, and among poorer communities the percentage is even higher.

TMPI (Tamil Nadu Women's Movement) campaigns locally with pamphlets and posters and joins with other organisations to lobby the state government in Chennai to enforce the law. The pressures contributing to child marriage are poverty, family debt, and the death of parents. Often families are eager to relieve themselves of the expense of bringing up girls.

TMPI is an association of nine federations, and each federation has dozens of small **women's self-help groups as members. VST's**

partners provide training and support. Altogether there are 2,016 groups with a total membership of 28,683 women. In the villages, self-help groups intervene when families appear to be planning to marry off an underage girl. They talk with family members and encourage the issue to be reported to Child Line, a national free-phone service for children at risk. If the marriage goes ahead, they report the family to the district social welfare officer, who may then involve the police.

But these interventions only scratch the surface of the problem. TMPI and our partner organisations are now seeking to develop a more comprehensive strategy.

TMPI's other concern is alcohol abuse, seen as a big factor in domestic violence and a drain on family income. Some 700 women marched to deliver a petition calling for prohibition of alcohol and implementation of the Domestic Violence Act.

The thrust locally is mainly against illegally placed alcohol outlets, while at state level TMPI was a founder member and now plays a leading role in a anti-liquor forum, TAFALIM. There are 31 member organisations pressing for prohibition of alcohol, implementation of the Domestic Violence Act and for alcohol rehabilitation centres.



Leaders of the TMPI movement stage a signature campaign against under-age marriage

'I wanted to continue my education but I was too afraid to tell anyone'

When Manimegalai had just turned 17, her maternal uncle proposed that she marry his son, and her parents agreed. **"I didn't want to marry, I wanted to continue my education,"**

Manimegalai explains, "but I was too afraid to tell anyone."

Her mother, Murugammal, said: **"Our family struggles financially, we can't afford good quality food, never mind education, and my brother's family is well off. They approached us, and it sounded like a good match."**

Murugammal herself was married at the age of 12. **"There were five girls in our house, so I was married very young to a relative who was an only son – his family looked after me."**

The uncle arranged a "Vasantha Vizha" - a family function to raise money, which is often held before a wedding. Murugammal said: "We had only just started the discussions about marriage, we weren't planning the wedding until Manimegalai was 18 – I know the law!" But members of the local women's self-help group disagreed. "It was obvious the family were planning to marry

her off under-age, and so we called Child Line to report the case."

Child Line responded quickly – removing Manimegalai from school and sending her to a child welfare centre for two days. The self-help group members spoke with her family and came to an agreement that Manimegalai would return to school and any plans for marriage would be postponed until she had completed her education.

Murugammal admitted: "Before my brother was putting pressure on us to arrange the marriage quickly, but now we have agreed to wait."

The self-help group members said: **"Parents often deny that they are planning to marry a girl under-age – but we can recognise the signs and intervene to stop it happening. It's better for everyone if they wait."**

In the end Manimegalai did marry her cousin – when she was 19. **She didn't go to college, but she was able to undertake a computer course at a technical institute before the wedding.**

Tribal Projects

Nilgiris Wyanaad Tribal Welfare Society has worked with tribal communities in the hilly north-west corner of Tamil Nadu for many years. But only relatively recently have they switched from primarily health work to **focusing on children's education**. They believe it is the best approach to supporting communities making the difficult transition to mainstream society as their traditional way of life in the remote forests disappears.

NWTWS seeks to promote education, skills, self-confidence and pride in tribal culture.

The tribal hamlets are scattered, in remote areas with few roads and fewer buses. Part of the answer is residential education.

NWTWS runs a government-funded residential school for younger children and a hostel where older children stay while attending state schools. VST assists by funding wardens at the school and at the hostel (with a grant from the Marr-Munning Trust) and field workers who encourage school attendance and help tribal families claim their welfare entitlements.

The two field workers are from the two main tribal groups that NWTWS works with, Karthunaicker and Pannia, and are acceptable to the third, Betta Kurumba.

They have surveyed 50 villages, finding that more than a quarter of children were not in school and that most families lacked

documents needed to obtain welfare benefits. Poor housing and lack of health services were big problems too.

Much of the field workers' time is spent following up dropouts and unravelling the factors behind not attending school.

The hostel aims to provide nutritious food, a good environment for study, encouragement, mentoring, evening tuition, homework classes and a variety of sports, recreational and extra-curricular activities.

All four wardens – at the school and the hostel – describe their roles as:

- Health monitoring, caring for those who are not well, and hygiene.
- Out of school activities, encouraging children during their leisure hours and at weekends, sports and games. New activities are scouts and guides, karate, and environmental cleanliness.
- Counselling for any personal concerns, discussion on career and aspirations.
- Meeting parents and guardians at home and in the field.
- Assisting the school management and teachers, routine stand-in and for special events.
- Liaising with officials to obtain identity cards and documents.

Securing the rights of indigenous communities

Village Service Trust funds a small project run by its partner, Arudecs, working with tribal people in 11 hamlets in Theni District. **There is a focus on children's education** together with efforts to secure rights under the Forest Rights Act.

The project has formed village development committees and provided training on accessing welfare schemes, housing schemes, village development schemes and

documents for individuals needed to obtain benefits.

Arudecs has been very active in obtaining benefits under the Forest Rights Act. After petitioning officials land rights were granted, enabling 102 families to collect minor forest produce.

Efforts are under way to obtain housing for 64 families who are living in roadside huts and working as bonded labourers.



Sports Day at the school for tribal children with watching parents



HIV and Aids

VST's partner Arogya Agam has been an innovator in HIV and Aids work for more than 25 years. Over time the focus of the work has changed as a result of medical advances and improved services from government and other agencies. This year has seen another refocus as Arogya Agam takes on a new challenge: work with HIV adolescents, and winds down an existing one: with HIV positive mothers.

Programmes to reduce mother to child HIV transmission have been run for a number of years covering one quarter of the state of Tamil Nadu and a population of 18 million. The transmission rate has been brought down almost to zero and government HIV and Aids services are now well developed, with pregnant women put on anti-retroviral treatment, children tested and very few children born with HIV infection.

Associations of HIV positive women have been established, and while limited in finance and campaigning capacity, they will continue efforts to ensure HIV positive mothers and their children take the drugs that prevent transmission.

The new, otherwise unaddressed, challenge is the problems of HIV positive adolescents – the generation born with HIV and surviving thanks to anti-retroviral treatment. Many have lost one or both parents to Aids and are looked after by grandparents or aunts and uncles with little support in coping with the disease medically, socially or psychologically.

For older boys and young men counselling is needed to avoid spreading infection when (or before) they get married.

For girls there are conflicts at home (many concerning romance and marriage), worries about menstruation, loneliness, isolation, depression and feelings of no hope or loss.

Almost half the girls born with HIV marry HIV negative spouses without guidance on

disclosure. Most pregnant positive women were infected through marriage – and then face discrimination and denial of their rights.

Yet people living with HIV can marry and have safe sex by using condoms, and with proper medical monitoring to ensure the virus is adequately suppressed by anti-retrovirals, can have a family.

In general, 50 per cent of adolescents needed individual counselling and 30 per cent are either confused, doubt their HIV status or do not rate their life chances.

Less than 30 per cent of guardians feel able to tell the children they are responsible for that they have HIV, often claiming that the drugs the children are taking are for another disease. Yet 80 per cent of these children are aware of their HIV status. International studies show this leads to confusion and to poor treatment adherence later.

Adolescents now make up four-fifths of children with HIV.

Arogya Agam has begun training young HIV positive adults as peer educators to assist in sessions with adolescents and their guardians.

- Arogya Agam has expanded its programme in Theni district with men who have sex with men – at high risk of HIV and Aids and ignored by government services and most NGOs. The existence of gay sex is barely acknowledged in Indian society. The programme involves recruiting and training men who have sex with men as “peer educators” to promote safe sex practices among their peers. Some 62 peer educators were trained. Each one will pass on the safe sex message and aim to change the behaviour of at least 10 others. Arogya Agam also monitors people living with HIV in the Andipatty area to ensure adherence to anti-retroviral treatment and provides palliative care in its hospital ward.



Guardians of HIV positive youngsters in discussion at Arogya Agam

Arunthathiyars

VST has long supported efforts by our partner Arogya Agam to support community organisations of the disadvantaged Arunthathiyar community, a Dalit sub-group.

This work encompasses Arunthathiyar children's groups, women's self-help groups and village development committees.

There are now Arunthathiyar children's groups in 50 villages with more than 3,500 members. Membership of the groups has had a big impact on their school performance with a high percentage entering higher education. Some 89 out of 92 children passed 12th standard (final school examination). All have gone for higher education - nine in engineering, 41 in degree courses, 13 nursing, five diploma, eight technical and 13 in teacher training. Five HIV-affected children were assisted financially to continue their higher education.

The work was extended to a number of new villages where 45 dropouts and 11 bonded labourers were identified. Of the 45 dropouts, 35 were returned to school or technical courses. Out of 11 bonded

labourers, eight were rescued with the support of Child Line so far, and four child marriages were stopped.

Many challenges remain: solvent use by young people is widespread - campaigns directed at the public and shops are planned. Child marriages are often stopped only on paper, and the women's federations are taking this up. While these problems are worst in the new area, special efforts are on in two other villages where dropping-out and child labour are common.

The children's groups planted and maintained 100 trees and 26 kitchen gardens. A few are collecting plastic for recycling and are campaigning against open defecation. They submitted 319 toilet petitions, and 235 homes received latrines.

For adults, village development committees exist in 30 villages. The committees campaign to secure village infrastructure and welfare benefits for individuals, and take up issues of Dalit discrimination and the rights of sanitation workers. A campaign over failure to pay Arunthathiyar sanitation workers properly achieved some success in recovering some arrears and bonuses due.

Any attempt to address economic, social and political inequalities in rural India must consider the ways in which caste permeates these issues. The members of **women's self-help** groups are usually drawn from only one community. The different social experience of non-Dalits, Dalits, and the Arunthathiyar Dalit subgroup is mirrored in the self-help

groups. Arunthathiyar self-help groups have tended to be less stable and their members less successful economically than groups drawn from other communities. Attempts to remedy this situation have not worked particularly well until **this year**. **The women's** federation associated with Arogya Agam in the Andipatty area decided to

make Arunthathiyar self-help groups a priority for support. They softened the rules for members taking group loans so that the benefits of membership became evident sooner; and they stepped up monitoring so there was a better chance of nipping any problems in the bud. The upshot has been that the Arunthathiyar groups are now much more of a success.

Financial report

| Income | 2017-2018 | 2016-2017 |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Donations | 42,597 | 53,583 |
| Legacies | 5,000 | 1,456 |
| Trusts | 10,500 | 4,000 |
| Investments | 7,128 | 7,471 |
| Total | 65,225 | 66,510 |
| Expenditure | | |
| Project partners | 11,704 | 2,257 |
| Women's federations | 42,254 | 60,728 |
| Tribal projects | 22,324 | 13,648 |
| HIV prevention | 4,447 | 2,882 |
| Child rights | 6,670 | 5,492 |
| Health programmes | 2,811 | 1,971 |
| Community organisations | 7,257 | 7,221 |
| Positive women's network | 12,297 | 12,674 |
| Dalit Solidarity Network UK | 100 | - |
| ICWO | - | 5,468 |
| Programme support | 161 | 172 |
| Governance | 1,767 | 1,610 |
| Fundraising and publicity | 1,605 | 1,876 |
| Total | 113,397 | 115,999 |
| Balance sheet | | |
| <i>At March 31st</i> | 2018 | 2017 |
| Tangible assets | 191 | 239 |
| Investments | 118,845 | 116,487 |
| Debtors | 19,196 | 90,074 |
| Cash at bank | 218,363 | 196,676 |
| Liabilities | (1,968) | (1,377) |
| Net assets | 354,627 | 402,099 |

Notes on spending

Project partners

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

Women's federations

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

Work with men who have sex with men to promote safer sex practices

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

Positive Women's Network

Programme to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV and support to HIV-affected children

Dalit Solidarity Network UK

A donation in support of international efforts to reduce discrimination against Dalits

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

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