

# INTEGRATED VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERMENT: The experiences of Agalankan Village



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# **INTEGRATED VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERMENT:**

**The experiences of Agalankan Village**



Jamsetji TATA National Virtual Academy (NVA)  
M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

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## Foreword

Integrated Village Development is the need of the hour in our country. Nearly seventy percent of our population still live in rural India. Gandhiji's statement that Gram Swaraj is the pathway to Purna Swaraj is ever relevant. In this context, the steps taken by the scientists of MSSRF headed by Mr S Senthilkumaran for bridging the urban-rural digital divide as well as the gender divide in technological empowerment are very timely and important. Both the Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) and the Village Resource Centre (VRC) have proved to be great blessings for rural women and men.

In this publication, Dr L Vedavalli has documented the impact of the VKC and VRCs as well as the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy. All these programmes have provided life changing experience to the participants and have helped to convert ordinary persons into extraordinary leaders of change. Modern information, communication technology belongs to the category of transformational agents, which completely transform the way in which we work and communicate. I hope this publication will help to understand the power of these new tools in ensuring not only the end of urban-rural digital divide but also the promotion of women's empowerment. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Dr Vedavalli for her meticulous chronicling of the important outcome of the Grameen Gyan Abhiyan Movement. I also wish to express my gratitude to Mr Senthilkumaran and all the staff of MSSRF who have helped in ensuring the success of the programme.



M S Swaminathan

## **Acknowledgement**

I am deeply obliged to our Chairman, Professor M S Swaminathan who has always been an immense source of support to me. My heartfelt thanks are due to Mr S Senthilkumaran for his valuable suggestions, support and encouragement. I sincerely appreciate the help and cooperation rendered to me by Ms S Velvizhi, the coordinator of Nagapattinam VRC during my field work at Agalankan. I thank her for being very patient with me and answering all my queries while I was writing the report as well as for going through the draft and providing vital inputs. My sincere thanks to colleagues at VRC, Mr P. Mugil Nilavan, Mr R Saravanan and P Maikandan, for extending necessary help and support unconditionally. I wish to express my gratitude to Mr Bala Mukundan, President of the Youth Club and also the boundary partner of the VRC/VKC programme in Agalankan. Interactions with him and also the VKCMC members provided significant insights about the VRC/VKC programme and also the development of the village since the inception of the programme. My heartfelt thanks are due to Ms Sasikala and Ms Akila, the Knowledge Workers of the VKC at Agalankan for their active support during the field work and also updating me with latest developments in the village which proved very useful while writing the report. I extend my thanks to Mr Kamaraj for his help. I am deeply indebted to my friend Dr R Rukmani for her unswerving support and encouragement throughout. In spite of her various commitments, she willingly went through the report meticulously and provided valuable suggestions and critical inputs. Dr V Arivudai Nambi has helped me a great deal and I thank him for his inputs. I am thankful to Mr M Selvaraj, Ms J Rojarani, Ms A. Uma, Mr A Sakthi Velan, Ms G. Anuradha, Ms M Manjula, Dr R. Rengalakshmi and Dr Smita Mishra, for their support. My sincere thanks are due to Ms S Punitha for helping me with the map and Mr Kolappadhas with the village sketch. I thank Dr Shubashree Desikan for editing the report. Very special thanks are due to Mr P Sivakumar for his help and support. I am thankful to AMM Prints for designing and printing this work. Last but not the least, I express my deep sense of gratitude to the women, men and children of Agalankan for sharing their experiences enthusiastically and answering all my queries patiently. It is their contribution which has made this study possible. I am grateful to each one of them.

L Vedavalli

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# **INTEGRATED VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERMENT: The experiences of Agalankan Village**

## **1. Introduction**

This study is an attempt at documenting significant developments in Agalankan village subsequent to the establishment of a Village Knowledge Centre (VKC). It elaborates how the involvement of a broad and varied spectrum of community stakeholders has been critical for the good reach and sustainability of the VKC programme. The case study discusses how several opportunities for infrastructural facilities were cashed in by the Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee (VKCMC) in Agalankan. In brief, this report focuses on documenting successful functioning of VKC leading to an integrated development of Agalankan, an agricultural hamlet in Karaikal district of Union Territory of Puducherry. It is one of the first few VKCs set up by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) under its Village Resource Centre (VRC)/Village Knowledge Centre programme in Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu. This programme was initiated as a post Tsunami intervention in the district and VKCs have been set up in the affected villages in and around Nagapattinam region. Though Agalankan village was not affected by the Tsunami, given the enthusiasm shown by strong and dynamic youth club members of the village and also because of the poor connectivity of the village, a VKC was set up here. The youth club, as well as the local partner or boundary partner of VKC programme in Agalankan takes a lead role in the activities of the VKC Management Committee. The VRC/VKC programme which primarily aims to promote socioeconomic development of rural communities through information/knowledge empowerment and skill development has been able to inspire and empower the community, particularly the VKCMC members, to take up a greater role in the VKC programme and also in the overall development of the village.

The report is organised into 11 sections including the introduction. Section 2 deals with a brief note on the VRC/VKC programme of MSSRF. Section 3 discusses the methodology adopted for this study. Section 4 discusses the profile of the village as well as the youth club which is integral to Agalankan's development. Section 5 describes in brief the launch of the VKC programme and its services in Agalankan. The other aspects covered briefly are as follows: improvements in the village in various spheres subsequent to the setting up of a VKC and formation of children's club. Section 6 describes the involvement of Knowledge Workers in the programme. Section 7 discusses the role of the youth club as a boundary partner of the VKC programme in the village and the members' motivation towards making efforts to improve the village infrastructure using VKC as a base, Section 8 recounts the formation of VKCMC and its role in the VKC programme; Section 9 describes the empowerment of the VKCMC and the initiatives taken by the members for village infrastructural development. It also touches upon their future plan of action and the impact the VRC/VKC programme has had on the VKCMC members. Section 10 deals with



launching of a new programme: the Village Development Programme (VDP) of National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) in Agalankar. Lastly, Section 11 provides the concluding remarks.

## **2. Catalyst of Rural Knowledge Revolution: Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA)**

The potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for promoting development is increasingly being recognised. The revolution triggered by ICT has also touched the rural life in the last few years. Information and knowledge empowerment is vital to improve the lives of rural population, particularly the poor. In this context, MSSRF under its Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres/ Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) programme has been striving to improve the socio-economic conditions of rural women and men using ICT tools. In 1992, MSSRF initiated the VRC and VKC/CTLC programme to promote and strengthen rural knowledge empowerment. In 2003, with the intention of scaling up the VKC programme, the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) was created. The mission of the NVA is, 'To promote sustainable rural livelihoods through digital empowerment based on a pro-poor and pro-women orientation to technology choice and dissemination, and human resource development.' This programme envisages bringing together experts and rural communities with the objective that knowledge should reach every home and hut in the country.

Normally, a VRC is located at the block level, the *commune* level or the *mandal* level or at the central point of a cluster of villages. Generally, VKCs are found among a cluster of villages or at the Panchayat level. Infrastructure facilities such as space and electricity for the VKCs are likely to be provided by a variety of partners (e.g., elected or traditional village administration, farmers and fishermen's associations, milk societies, youth clubs, non-governmental organisations, temples, churches, village development council, etc.).

### **Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy and ISRO-VRC programme**

In 2003, the VRC and VKC programmes were further strengthened with the creation of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) and ISRO-VRC programme. This programme involves collaboration with several international and national partners (IDRC, Tata Trusts, CIDA, ISRO, SDC, Microsoft, telecentre.org, Qualcomm, IFFCO and IKSL, etc.) for developing content and capacity building to embark on sustainable rural development.

Village Resource Centres are connected through Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) uplink and downlink satellite facilities. Users located at one node of this network can fully interact with others located at another node through video and audio links. Each node can further be expanded using different technologies such as notice boards, pamphlets, public address system (wired/wireless/GSM), community newspaper (vernacular), press releases, cable TV, audio/video conferencing through wireless, telephone, meetings, mobile

phone, SMS server, internet radio server, fixed wireless loop telephone closed user group, pen drives and CDs, KYAN-PC (it contains PC, projector, TV tuner card, DVD player, amplified speakers and modem) and intranet web site for dissemination of useful and necessary information. Also, MSSRF is maintaining help line and conducting phone-in-programme with appropriate experts.

### **Three main aspects of the programme**

The National Virtual Academy aims to provide need-based locale-specific, demand driven information content (both dynamic and static) based on collection of several secondary data and a well-planned need assessment, organise training and awareness programmes and build linkages with several leading institutions/organisations for translating the content into field-based applications.

### **Three-tier knowledge network**

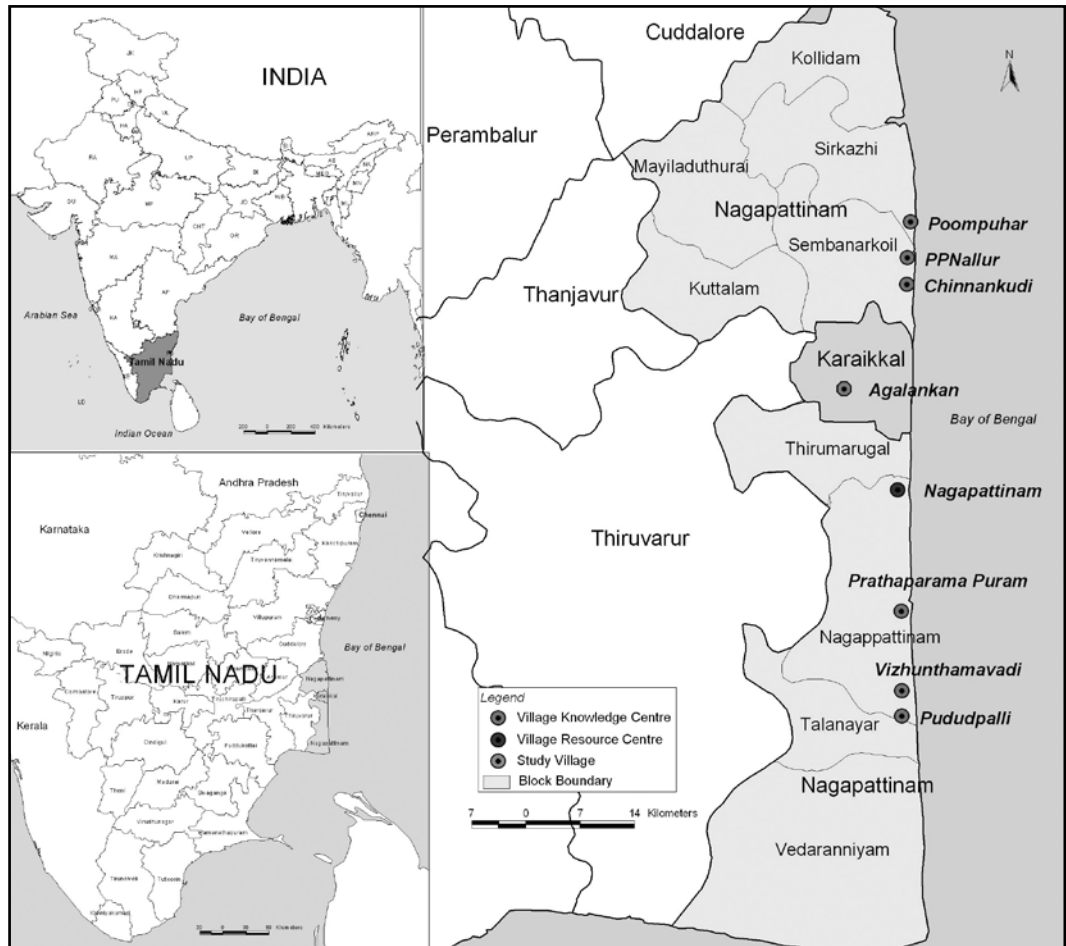
In order to strengthen the management among VRC, VKCs and strategic partners (data providers, generators, capacity building providers, etc.) the NVA developed a three-tier knowledge network. The first tier: MSSRF, Chennai has been connecting several data generators and data providers (universities, experts, financial institutions, corporate sector, technocrats, grassroots academicians, etc.) focusing primarily on content and capacity building. The second-tier or Village Resource Centre: The locale-specific, demand-driven information is disseminated from the VRCs through VKCs and vice-versa. The third-tier or Village Knowledge Centre: VKCs normally located among a cluster of villages or Panchayat level disseminate the information to the communities using various ICT and non-ICT tools.

### **ICT-based curricula**

NVA conducts three ICT-based curricula including (i) Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP), (ii) Computer-Aided Learning Programme (CALP) and (iii) Intel Learn Programme. These are programmes for rural children and youth (both female and male members) that cause them to improve their IT skills and knowledge about sustainable development through IT literacy.

### **VRC of Nagapattinam**

The VRC/VKC programme of MSSRF has been in operation since 1998. The programme which started in Union Territory of Pondicherry (now Puducherry) has expanded to various parts of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Odisha. It must be mentioned here that VRC of Nagapattinam has come into existence in response to the Tsunami that hit various parts of coastal Tamil Nadu and Puducherry in December, 2004. This programme thus initiated as post Tsunami intervention under the VRC of Nagapattinam has seven VKCs functioning in different villages (four are primarily agriculture based while two are fishing villages and one is engaged both in agriculture and fishing) catering to the needs of the



Map showing location of VRC of Nagapattinam and the VKCs

rural agricultural and fishing population. Agalankan in Karaikal is one of the seven VKC villages; as we have mentioned earlier, though this village was not affected by Tsunami it was decided to set up one here in response to the need expressed by the village youth club namely *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram*. The poor connectivity and backward condition of the village have also been other important factors for the VRC of Nagapattinam to set up a VKC here.

### 3. Methodology

Field work for the present study was initiated during September 2010. During this visit the author had extensive discussions with the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers. We also had interactions with few women and men of the village. Our interactions with the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers helped us to appreciate how the village has been able to get the VKC facility. It also provided useful insights about the activities

of the youth club and how the VRC/VKC programme has inspired them to take up a much larger role in the village's development. We could get an idea about the developments in Agalankan since the inception of the VKC programme.

Another visit to the village took place in March, 2011. The three days we spent in the village proved to be useful in terms of meeting people from different age groups including school going children. We were able to meet people individually in their houses or in groups. While going around the village we tried making conversations with people. We could talk to groups of women and men. The interactions with women, men and children of both sexes brought out effectively what people think about the VKC programme and in what way it has led to improvements in various spheres of the society. Lengthy interactions with VKCMC members helped us get insights into how they have been able to take up village level activities and also the central role played by the boundary partner in all their efforts in developing the village with the support and facilitation of the VRC. The impact of the programme on the VKCMC members, mainly, the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers can also be understood. Discussions with different stakeholders of the programme reveal how the VKCMC has come to occupy an important place in the village and how it is largely viewed by the people as a community organisation (*makkal amaippu*). The group discussions with women, men and children generated a lot of spontaneity among the informants to discuss among themselves the programme and its usefulness.

When the author was engaged in field work during March, 2011, she had an opportunity to observe a meeting organised by the VRC with the VKCMC members. It was primarily convened to discuss a particular programme (by a partner organisation, namely, NABARD) that was to be implemented soon in the village. Using this opportunity the coordinator had also invited the members (both boys and girls in the age group of 6–18 years) of newly formed children's club in Agalankan for a meeting. The former tried to find out their interests and what they are planning to do as a club. Attending the coordinator's meeting with the VKCMC members and also the children's club helped the author grasp the role of the VRC as a facilitator and witness the clarity of the elders and the children on their purpose for meeting and how to go about their expected roles.

In between the two periods when we made field visits to the village we have been in touch with the villagers, particularly, the boundary partner, the Knowledge Workers and the VRC staff at Nagapattinam. The contacts provided regular updates of the kind of work being done at the village through the VKC, mainly through the telephone. The telephone contacts with the former and interactions with the VRC staff over phone, email and whenever they visited the head quarters at Chennai kept us well informed about developments in the village. After the second field trip to the village, the author continued to have email and telephonic contacts with the VRC staff, Knowledge Workers and, boundary partner even

while writing the report. This kept us posted about significant developments in the village which enabled us to include them in this report.

A major portion of the data was collected during the six days of field work conducted in September, 2010, and March, 2011. The primary data were collected by the author through unstructured in-depth interviews and personal observation. Interviews were carried out in a casual manner so that people would be free to share their experiences and views. Monthly/annual reports of the VRC, the VKC and reports of monthly meetings of the VKCMC formed our main source of secondary data. These reports provided an overall understanding of the activities conducted and a backdrop for initiating activities and services in the village. The user register maintained at the VKC is another source of secondary data which gives us an idea about the kind of people who visited the centre and the purpose for their visit.

The essential data collecting methods employed were in-depth, unstructured interviews and personal observation with the subjects. An attempt was made to collect case studies wherever possible. The information thus generated was of great use in providing insights into the usefulness of the programme and the capacity building of the community to work for the development of the village using the VKC as a platform.

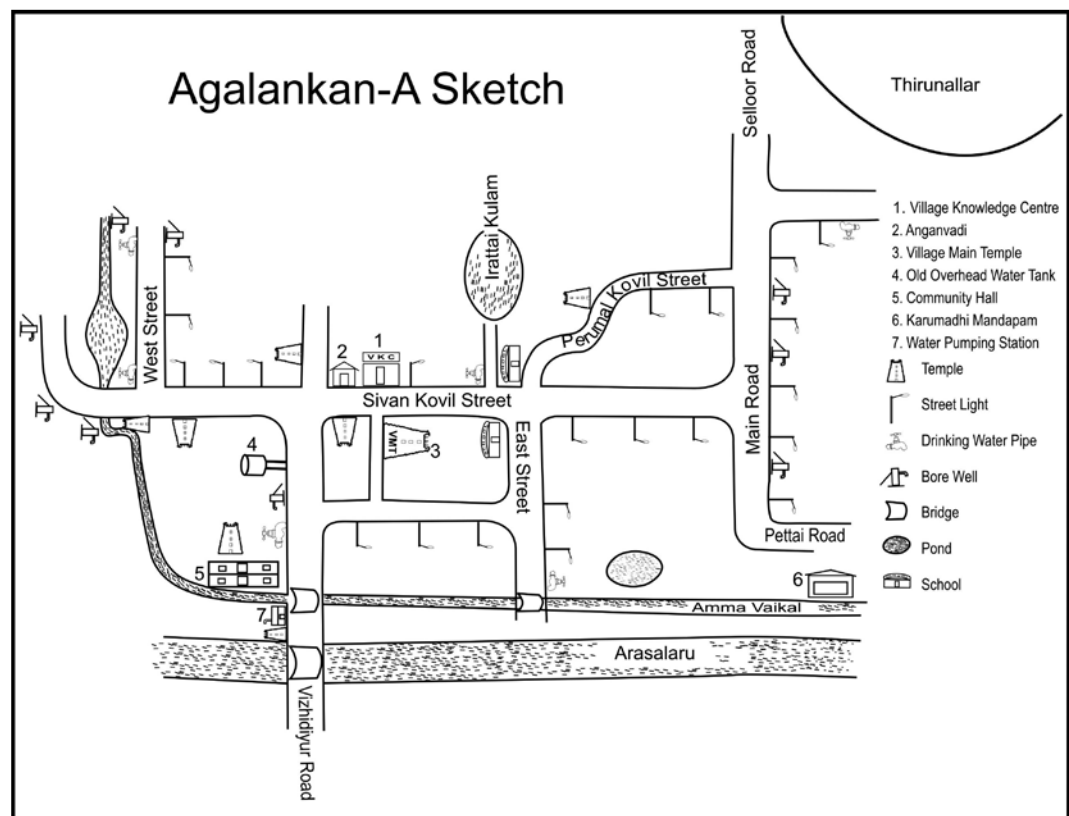
### **Rationale for the Study**

The idea to undertake a study on the VKC programme in Agalankan village of Karaikal district came to the author while she was engaged in field work (2009–10) related to one of the VKCs (set up in Akkaraipettai, a fishing village) as a post-Tsunami intervention by the VRC of Nagapattinam, MSSRF) in Nagapattinam district. On more than one occasion, the author had the opportunity to visit Agalankan during the course of her field work in Akkaraipettai, in Nagapattinam. The author was present in Agalankan when boundary partners and Knowledge Workers from different VKCs of Nagarkovil VRC had come on an exposure visit to the village during 2009. The boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers of Agalankan presented the activities of the VKC and how they are able to take the services of the programme to their village and surrounding area. The boundary partner also briefly explained how the VKCMC in Agalankan has been encouraged to take up certain initiatives for the village's development using the VKC as a base. The author was inspired to undertake a study on the VKC programme in Agalankan, chiefly focusing on the proactive role of the VKCMC, particularly, the boundary partner in the development of the village using VKC as the base with the facilitation of the VRC. It occurred to the author that a detailed documentation of such efforts by the VKCMC would be useful and inspire others /institutions involved in similar community-based programmes. Moreover, the experience of Agalankan would also be an important input for the larger VRC–VKC programme of MSSRF. When this idea was discussed with the Director, Informatics Division, he encouraged the author to take up the study.

## 4. Field Setting

Agalankan is a hamlet of Selloor Panchayat in Thirunallar Commune of Karaikal District, Puducherry Union Territory. The Selloor Panchayat consists of four hamlets namely Selloor, Thennankudi, Mupetrankudi and Agalankan. A river by name Arasalaru (a tributary of river Kaveri) runs from west to east through this village. Agalankan has a water pumping station from where the entire area of Karaikal gets water supply. A water tank (not in use) built during French time which supplied water to Karaikal area is seen in this village. A small water canal locally known as *amma kava* passes through the village. Agalankan is famous for its organically grown vegetables.

Agalankan village<sup>1</sup> is bounded on the East by a hamlet namely Patti, on the West by Mupetrankudi, on the North by Selloor and on the South by Vizhidiyur. Accessibility to this village is rather difficult. There is no transport facility and it is situated far off from the main road. Karaikal is the nearest town which is 10 kilometres from here. This village is situated 30 kilometres away from the VRC of Nagapattinam. In the year of the study,



<sup>1</sup> The readers may kindly note that in this context the word village mostly indicates Agalankan hamlet of Selloor Panchayat. Contextual reading of the term is suggested.



there were around 191 households in this hamlet; the total population was 817 persons of which males comprised 383 and females, 434. There were about 157 persons (Female 113 and male 44) who were illiterate. Thirty eight persons (Female 113 and male 44) have had education above graduation level. There were also 5 male members who had studied in professional course and 30 persons (Female 8 and male 22) had studied in technical institutions.



*A view of bridge on Arasalaru on the periphery of Agalankan*

Agalankan lacks proper transport facility; it is an interior village. The nearest Primary Health Centre to this village is found in Thenur village which is five kilometres away and a Health Sub-centre in Vizhidiyur, one kilometre from Agalankan. The village has a Government Elementary School and there is a Government High School in the neighbouring village of Vizhidiyur. For higher secondary school education, the students either have to go to Thirunallar or to another place called Neravi, both situated five kilometres away from Agalankan, and, for college, they have to go to Karaikal.

The residents of this hamlet are traditionally agriculturalists. Animal husbandry is another major livelihood option of Agalankan village. About 62 households are engaged in agriculture and they are owner cultivators; 65 households are owner cultivators and also engaged in allied activities; around 17 households are owner cultivators and also engage themselves as wage labourers in allied activities. About 10 households are engaged in small business/trade. Nearly 50 percent of adult males work as labourers in agriculture and other related activities. Most of the women are involved in livestock-care and management-related activities. A significant number of households are also engaged in non-farm activities; around 67 go for work for wages outside the village; there are around 26 households that have members working in the government sector while members from



*Water pumping station in Agalankan*



*Old overhead water tank*



*One of the village streets*



*Village main temple*

48 households work in private sector. A majority of the households belong to marginal farmers (owning less than one hectare of land) and there are only two households which come under the category of large farmers (owning more than 2 hectares of land) and small farmers comprise 10 households. There are 25 households that do not possess any land. Canal as well as tank irrigation is found in Selloor Panchayat. Dug wells/open wells and bore wells are also used for irrigating the fields.

Main agricultural seasons of this area are *Samba* and *Kuruvai*. The main crop cultivated is paddy during both the seasons. According to the villagers cultivation of crops normally during *Kuruvai* season is not profitable. Pulses like Bengal gram and red gram are grown as intercrop. Agalankan is famous for its organically grown vegetables. Vegetables (like brinjal, ladies finger, bottle-gourd, pumpkin, snake guard, ridge gourd etc) are normally cultivated during July–August and January–February. They grow vegetables on the fringes of the field bunds and some households have separate land for cultivation of vegetables. It may be pointed out here that vegetables grown in this village are in great demand in Karaikal vegetable market. Many small traders come to the village to buy vegetables.

### ***Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram: an integral part of the village***

*Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram*, primarily a youth-based community organisation is an integral part of the Agalankan village society. It is a youth club which is dynamic and takes keen interest in the development of the village. Naturally, it commands the respect of the community and thus occupies a central place in Agalankan village. It is because of this youth organisation or youth club, that the VRC of Nagapattinam was encouraged to set up a VKC in this village.

### **Role of Youth in the village**

It may come in useful to give a brief account of *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram* and its activities at the village level, as this youth club in later days has played a responsible role in the implementation of the VKC programme in Agalankan. It has been in operation in this small village for the last 36 years but was formally registered only in 1985. It started with a membership of 35 persons; at present it has a membership of 25. It does not have



any political affiliation nor does it function as a fan club of any movie personality. The club maintains its accounts in a proper manner; it is said that they keep accounts for expenses even as small as Rs 5. Receipts for all the items bought and details related to other expenses are recorded meticulously. This club has been functioning successfully for the past 36 years because of its structure and bylaw, mentioned one of the VRC staff. The members of the club (particularly, the president) are highly motivated and have always wanted to improve the village. As youngsters they took the initiative in promoting sports in their village and encouraging school-going students to perform well in their studies. The best performers in studies are recognised by giving small gifts. It is said that the club collects money or uses its savings to buy gifts for school children who score good marks, to celebrate national festivals, to conduct sports and for purchasing necessary sports items. The club members also volunteer their services during village temple festival and take up social work such as cleaning the village streets. It may be mentioned here that the village youth working abroad also show interest in the village development and offer their help whenever possible.

### ***Kothanar sangam: an association for construction workers***

The club also took initiatives in other spheres like forming an association for construction workers in Agalankan during 2005. Members of this association are eligible for certain benefits—a gift coupon for Rs500 to get grocery items for household consumption; scholarships for children of construction workers studying in 9th and 10th standard and accident insurance coverage of Rs50,000 for a member of the association. The youth club sincerely felt that the construction workers in their village should also get these benefits and took necessary steps in making it a reality. As a result of this initiative, school children of the construction workers in this village have been availing scholarship facility since last year. It is stated that at present five boys are getting this scholarship.

### **Office building for the youth club**

It is encouraging to find that the youth club has always had the support and encouragement of the villagers in any kind of work they undertake or initiate. This is because they have the confidence that the youth would take up only work such as would be useful to the village. The community volunteers its services to the club whenever a need arises. For instance, when the youth club thought it should have a permanent physical structure to serve as its office, the villagers unanimously agreed to allot a piece of village temple (common) land. For a long time, the club functioned without any proper structure. The club wanted a place of its own so that it can function more effectively. Having an office of its own would enhance its image and gain recognition for it within and outside the village, felt the youth club leader. Once the club got the land the youth explored the possible source of financial help to construct a small building from both within and outside the village. They approached a person known for his generosity in Thirunallar town who willingly provided some financial assistance. The club also got financial help from their village

youth working abroad. For their part, the villagers provided free labour in constructing the club office building. The youth club leader pointed out that this was the building that enabled them to get the VKC programme to Agalankan. A thatched roof would not have made it possible to house the VKC, he added.

### **Construction of Anganwadi**

As we have mentioned earlier, the youth club has always been concerned about the welfare of the villagers. The members wanted a child care centre—*Anganwadi*—in the village, as it would benefit the children and women. So with that intention they had built a small room with thatched roof in a portion of the land allotted to the club by the village community for the *anganwadi* to function, for which the club got a monthly rent of Rs25. A situation arose when the thatched roof had to be replaced with a non-inflammable material following a government order after a fire accident<sup>2</sup> during June 2004 in one of the schools in Kumbakonam district of Tamil Nadu. There was a risk of losing the *anganwadi* if the thatched roof was not replaced within the allotted period. The youth club leader pointed

out that he became anxious that *anganwadi* centre would be shifted to the neighbouring village if the thatched roof was not replaced. He did not want to lose it because it was through the *anganwadi* workers that schemes related to women's welfare got to be known to the village. As there were not sufficient financial resources available to replace the roof of the *anganwadi*, the youth approached women self-help group (SHG) members for help. Understanding the situation



*Anganwadi Centre*

and commitment of the youth club leader, the SHG members came forward to give the money as a loan from the group savings account. The thatched roof was replaced by an asbestos sheet. The village women and men provided the necessary free physical labour service, as in the case of construction of the youth club. The youth club which previously

<sup>2</sup> In one of the worst tragedies in the state about 90 school children were feared killed in a major fire accident that took place in July 2004 in a girl's elementary school at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. The fire is believed to have started from the kitchen, where the noon meal for nursery children was being prepared, and soon spread to a row of thatched roof classrooms where students from class one to class five were trapped in the flames and many children lost their lives in the fire accident. After this incident, the government authorities ordered that thatched roofs in all the schools in Tamil Nadu must be replaced by roofs of non-flammable material by that month end. (Tin sheets or AC sheets)

used to get a monthly rent of Rs25 for the *anganwadi* Centre now gets Rs450 with which the loan was repaid to the SHG. The SHG did not hesitate to help the youth club; such is the confidence they have in the latter.

### **District level recognition for sports and social work**

The youth club participated in sports and won prizes for the same and also for village level social service activities for 10 consecutive years (1996–2006) at the district level. The president is pleased to mention that at present the club has a savings of Rs15,000. He feels savings or some income for the club is necessary for sustaining its activities. However, he and a few of his friends, Mani Kandan, Kamaraj and others, in the village were not satisfied with winning prizes and the kind of work they have been doing. They wished to do something more to improve the lives of the people as they were concerned about the socio-economic backwardness of the village. The president of the club mentioned that since Agalankan is like an island, people did not have much opportunity to have access to information on government schemes. So, one of the main objectives of the members was that villagers should be benefitted by the schemes and entitlements from government and others. Not many had access to daily local newspapers also. The members did their best in providing help and assistance wherever possible. The youth club carried out some activities through Nehru *Yuva Kendra* operated at the district level and block development office (BDO) but felt something was lacking in them to go forward. They wished to improve the village but they were vague as to how to go about it; they lacked guidance and direction to take meaningful initiatives. They felt they were unable bring out their potential to perform better. They wanted a stronger base to have access and use various schemes for the benefit of the community. It was felt that they must have an organisational support or a base to work for the community.

### **Seeds sown for a VKC**

Fortunately, the youth club came to know about VKC programme during 2006 through Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swami (SLNSS) Trust, a NGO with whom the former has had good contacts. Observing the commitment of the youth club, SLNSS Trust suggested to the former that their aspirations to work for the development of the village could be best carried out through a VKC. Based on the advice of the SLNSS Trust, the youth club immediately approached VRC at Nagapattinam and gave a requisition letter to set up a Knowledge Centre in their village. The VRC responded to their request by setting up a VKC in Agalankan. The direction the youth were looking for has been made possible after the inception of the VKC and since then the youth club has been actively involving itself in all its activities. According to Mukundan, the leader of the *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram*, the launching of the VKC programme has really boosted the morale of the members and has given them a sense of direction. 'VKC provides a very good platform to work with clarity and more constructively for the village development', added Bala Mukundan.

## 5. The VKC Programme in Agalankan

In 2005, when the VRC programme was initiated in Nagapattinam district as a post-Tsunami intervention programme, some potential Tsunami-affected villagers were identified based on suggestions received from the district collector and resource persons closely working with MSSRF. One of the organisations which helped the VRC in identifying suitable villages for this purpose was SLNSS Trust with whom MSSRF has good relations; it had provided a list of villages which included Agalankan also. As already mentioned, Agalankan was not affected by the Tsunami; however, while the process of identifying villages suitable to set up VKCs was going on, a need for a Knowledge Centre for Agalankan village received the attention of the VRC. The presence of highly motivated local youth club and a strong recommendation from SLNSS encouraged the VRC staff to pay a visit to Agalankan village. Looking at the inaccessibility of the village and also the poor economic condition of the people, the VRC felt it would be worth establishing a VKC. 'Since reaching the unreached people is very important, a VKC has been set up here as a model VKC though this village did not come under the category of Tsunami affected village', stated the coordinator the VRC/VKC programme. This was the third VKC that came into operation under the VRC of Nagapattinam.

It may be pointed out here that VRC/VKC programme encourages community's participation in planning, implementing and decision-making. As part of the procedure adopted before setting up a VKC in a village, a meeting was held with the villagers. This meeting was followed by a series of meetings with the youth club and other stakeholders. The VRC had a separate meeting with the executive committee members of youth club; the VRC was briefed about club's village-level activities and in the sports field. It is learnt that the villagers and the members of youth club paid great attention during the concept introduction and project description meetings. The villagers were impressed with the concept of the VKC and its activities and services. The villagers particularly the youth club in Agalankan village was very receptive to community-based programmes. After a series of meetings between the VRC and different stakeholders in the village, the villagers came up with a resolution that *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram* would be the local partner (also known as boundary partner<sup>3</sup>) of the VKC programme in the village. As the boundary partner, youth club gave a portion of its premises rent free for VKC to function and it readily agreed to bear the electricity charges and offer other moral support for establishment of VKC in Agalankan. With the support of the villagers, the youth

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3. The local partner of the VRC/VKC programme in a village is referred to as boundary partner. It is the responsibility of local partner of the programme to provide a rent-free common public place (where everyone can access) with free electricity facility to house the VKC. The local partner also with the help of the village community identifies Knowledge Workers to take care of the VKC and also to facilitate the community to make use of the services and activities of the Centre. The local partner monitors the work of the Knowledge Workers and the overall functioning of the VKC. Effective involvement of the local partner and the role of Knowledge Workers are considered important for the successful implementation of the VRC/VKC programme and its sustainability in a given village

club president also identified two women to manage the VKC. The managers of the VKC are referred to as Knowledge Workers who are responsible not only of taking care of the day-to-day functioning of the Centre but also encourage the village community to make use of the services available in the Centre.

The VKC started functioning in the village from June, 2006 though it was officially inaugurated on 13 August, 2006, by Mr. P.R. Siva, Member of Legislative Assembly of Union Territory of Puducherry. The commissioner of Thirunallar Commune *Panchayat*, District Project Coordinator of *Nehru Yuva Kendra*, and a Professor from Karaikal Government Arts College participated in the programme. Ms. Velvizhi, project associate of MSSRF conducted a detailed orientation for the programme. The youth club assured the VRC that the VKC in Agalankan would fully function as a successful community-based model. True to their word, till today, the Agalankan VKC stands as an example for good model of community-based programme.



*Village Knowledge Centre*

### Services and activities of the VKC

In keeping with the objective of the VRC/VKC programme, the VKC at Agalankan provides a range of information for socioeconomic development of the community. It endeavours to reduce the knowledge gap that exists within the community and strengthen the capacity of village women and men. On the technical educational side, it encourages women and men to acquire computer skills and knowledge for their socioeconomic empowerment and development. Curriculum-based computer programmes like MUPP, Intel learn programme and CALP are conducted for school/college students and other interested



*Children at the VKC*

persons. Through local website, named *Valam*, local specific data on different aspects are made available to the people. This database is updated periodically. A local bi-monthly newsletter namely *Namma Ooru Seidhi* brought out by VRC is distributed to the households. This newsletter is an important source of information tool covering various aspects like agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, education, employment opportunities, entitlements from government and others. It also has a section for children.





Public address system



Notice board kept outside the VKC

Villagers consider this newsletter very valuable because it contains a range of local specific information that caters to the needs of different sections of the community. It may be mentioned here that since Agalankan belongs to Puducherry Union Territory, this VKC gets local newsletter brought out by VRC of Puducherry. This enables the community to become aware of government schemes, entitlements and other important information related to Puducherry. A notice board and public address system (PAS) are also used as information dissemination tools. Important information that requires immediate attention of the people is made available through these two channels. Other information details such as date and place of work related to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act<sup>4</sup> (MGNREGA) locally referred to as *nooru naal velai thittam* is disseminated from the VKC through PAS or personally by the Knowledge Workers. The villagers also get to interact with experts of specific subjects like pest control methods, seasonal diseases in livestock, health and so on through audio and video conference facilities. (For example, through video conferencing, with ophthalmologists from Sankara Nethralaya, an awareness programme on eye diseases, the preventive measures and treatment was conducted). Through video conference, a readers meeting of *Namma Ooru Seidhi* was also organised to get inputs of the readers of the newsletter to improve its content and incorporate other suggestions to improve the presentation. Villagers have access to local newspapers at the VKC.

Since May, 2010 the VRC has started disseminating information, particularly, season-based short message service (SMS) through mobile phones. Season- and local-specific information is largely related to weather, agriculture (like seed availability, pest and disease control, fertiliser management, weather-based cropping advisories), livestock (for instance, preventive measures for foot and mouth disease, fodder management), health tips and government schemes and entitlements, government department/research institution

4. As we know MGNREGA aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

training programmes and so on. Women and men who have a mobile phone get this service on daily basis. Though sometimes these SMS cannot be reached by the villagers due to lack of network coverage, the villagers find it useful. For further details, they get in touch with the VRC, which in turn gives necessary inputs depending on the query or doubt. The VRC also gets feedback from the recipients about the usefulness of such messages. Around 19 persons receive information through SMS.

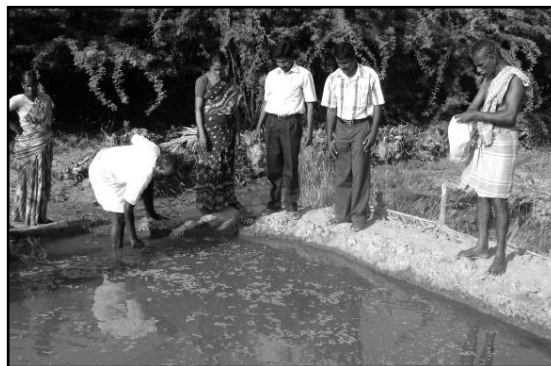


*Agro-advisories through mobile phone*

Training and awareness programmes related to agriculture, livestock, health, income generation and education are organised based on the needs of the community. For example, training on soil sample collection for soil testing has been conducted and after the analysis soil health card with advisories has also been distributed to women and men farmers in Agalankan. Similarly, training on azolla cultivation was also carried out for women and men of the village. Linkages/partnerships with government departments and other organisations have been created to address local-specific needs of the community. For example, linkage with *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (VKV) has been established which provides agricultural advisories and conducts training programmes for farm women and men. Similarly, linkage with the government veterinary clinic at Thennankudi is also established for advisories on cattle care and management.



*Soil health card distribution*



*Training on azolla cultivation*

### **Building partnership: an example**

It is important to point out here that VRC/VKC programme encourages VRCs/VKCs to build up partnerships with institutes/organisations which will be mutually beneficial and helpful in promoting socioeconomic development of the rural community. Partnerships facilitate sharing of knowledge and experiences. So, VRC facilitates and offers help to the VKCs in building partnerships with government departments, NGOs and civil society

organisations like Rotary Club. The VRC of Nagapattinam has built up a good rapport with the Rotary Clubs in the districts of Nagapattinam and Karaikal.

In order to build a partnership with the local Rotary Clubs, the VRC of Nagapattinam took efforts to present its work to the Governor of the Rotary Club of Thirunallar Temple City. The latter was very much impressed with the kind of work the VRC has been doing in the district and in Karaikal; he invited the former to participate in one of the self-employment programmes conducted in Karaikal district. He suggested that the VRC could conduct training on micro enterprises on that occasion. So, the VRC demonstrated the same with the National Virtual



*Training on phenol preparation in progress*

Academy (NVA) Fellows<sup>5</sup> from Puducherry and the Knowledge Workers of Agalankan. The Governor was very much impressed by the way the NVA Fellows and the Knowledge Workers explained and demonstrated the process of preparing pickles, making *agarbathi*, preparing phenol, soap oil, surf etc. He immediately stated that there is a great scope for working together as MSSRF and the Rotary Club adopt similar approaches in implementing their programmes. He felt both can share the knowledge, skills and experiences for mutual benefit. Interestingly, to the pleasant surprise of the VRC staff, that day itself, a person by name Mr Ramakrishnan, a Rotarian present during the Self Employment Programme, announced his personal contribution of Rs25,000 as revolving fund to the VKC in Agalankan village to be used for micro-enterprises. The VRC wanted to make use of this opportunity and decided to play a facilitator's role in this without getting involved. Rotary Club has asked the Knowledge Workers from the village to get a letter from the VRC so as to enable the club to make the revolving fund operational in the village. However, the women have not been able to decide on the kind of micro enterprise they should take up for income generation.

Another significant aspect is that through Rotary Club, 30 persons have enrolled for Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP) in the Agalankan VKC. It may be mentioned here that Agalankan was not new to Rotary Club of Thirunallar Temple City. One of the villagers has been a member of this Club; so the latter used to participate in school/education-related programmes. Its association with this village has been strengthened after the inception of the VKC. It has been a major source of support and

*5. National Virtual Academy for Food Security and Rural Prosperity endeavours to identify socially committed grassroots experts in different thematic areas such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, health, education, disaster management, natural resource management etc. and have contributed to the good of the community in their respective field through various institutions and experts and awarding the NVA Fellowship. This Fellowship does not carry any monetary benefits. This is only a social recognition. Fellows of the NVA are provided additional skills training so they contribute even more to the society. These grassroots academicians would be torch bearers of the knowledge revolution and could be developed into managers of Knowledge Centres.*





*Eye camp*

offers material support when a health camp or eye camp or educational programmes are conducted. Whenever there is any function in the village, Rotary members participate. Knowledge Workers are motivated to approach the Rotary Club on their own if any need arises. For instance, when the Knowledge Worker brought to the notice of VRC about a boy needing heart surgery they were guided to approach the Rotary Club for help. Rotary Club is invited for important programmes of VKC like INTEL showcase programme.

The coordinator is happy to say that the Rotary Club of Thirunallar Temple City offers its help and support not only to this village but also to other VKC villages. 'We have been getting continuous support from the Rotary Club and they have been supportive of all programmes. Whenever we need additional funds to conduct a training programme or health camp it [Rotary Club] always supports us' she stated. As already mentioned, the club provides material support for various programmes conducted at the village level. For example during an eye/health camp it takes the responsibility of organising the medical team, arranging transport for them and helping the villagers with financial assistance to buy the spectacles and with medicines. It offers support when micro-enterprise training is organised in the VKC villages. Recently, the VRC organised a career guidance programme at Nagapattinam with the help of Rotary Club. It was well appreciated by the student community as it really gave them clarity and a sense of direction.

It may be mentioned here that all the services and activities are structured in such a way that they serve the needs of the community. In order to identify the generally felt necessity of community-need assessment, programmes are conducted with different groups of the village community. Most of the programmes and activities carried out are essentially demand driven.

## **VKC and improvements in the village**

### ***Increase in awareness level***

It is encouraging to find that in general the community is aware of the VKC services and activities. The community appreciates the benefits and uses of the VKC. There is a view among the inhabitants of Agalankan that their village has improved a lot following the inception of the VKC. Awareness level of the



*VRC coordinator interacting with women of Agalankan*

villagers on education and employment opportunities, cattle management and agriculture-related aspects has increased. Access to information and knowledge has become much easier and simpler these days, mentioned women and men. They realise and appreciate value of access to information. It is encouraging to find that both women and men use the information and knowledge to improve their socio-economic conditions. Interestingly, information empowerment has also



*A young woman uses telephone facility at the VKC*

contributed to enhance their self-esteem. A few of them, particularly, women pointed out that earlier they had been unaware of various government schemes and even if a few people had come to know of these, they did not know where and how to approach the concerned government to get the benefits of a particular scheme. But, after 2006, the village has been able to gain contacts with government departments and other organisations like Rotary Club in Thirunallar temple city.

The general level of awareness among the villagers has increased on issues like health, education and so on. According to Bala Mukundan '...awareness level of the villagers has increased. That itself is something great and I feel proud about it. For example, by participating in the eye camp the villagers in general have come to realise the importance of eye-care. Earlier they never used to give attention to proper eye-care due to lack of awareness.'

VKC is located in a central place of the village. This seems to be an added advantage for the users to visit the Centre without any difficulty and access its services. One has to generally go past the VKC whether she/he goes to a provision store or temple or school. So, one need not go specifically to VKC to get a particular information or any other details; one can combine their work of going to the provision store, temple or even to a tea shop along with the going to the VKC, pointed out Chellaiyah, a middle-aged man.

### **Agriculture**

The youth club leader was happy to mention that there is great awareness of new cropping systems and technology among the villagers. Farmers have come to know about advantages of multiple-cropping and intercropping. They utilise the available land judiciously. We came to understand that of late *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK) at Karaikal plays a significant role in familiarising and motivating people towards improved agricultural practices. Due to the facilitation of VRC good linkages have been built between the villagers and KVK. Earlier the village did not have much contact with the latter. Encouraged

by the interest shown by the villagers, KVK extends help and assistance in all possible ways, mentioned one of the youth. Since 2007, KVK has conducted more than 20 meetings for the villagers. These days, KVK informs the villagers of any new scheme as soon as it comes into being and shows interest in conducting training programmes for farmers of Agalankan. They have come to know about rational usage of fertiliser application and pest management. Earlier, it was common to find farmers using fertilisers and pesticides indiscriminately.

We came across a 42-year-old man who said that at the village level there is greater awareness about various agricultural practices and how to cultivate crops with minimum expenditure. He mentioned that farmers get timely information on different aspects of agriculture through VRC/VKC. They create awareness on effective transplanting, right usage of chemical inputs to the field, pest control methods for specific pest attack and so on. In his words, 'Earlier, we used to apply lot of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. Now we are advised as to how and when to apply a particular fertiliser to the field which is economical and minimise expenses. They also stress on timely application of fertilisers/pesticides, and we share the information with others'. He and others present during the interaction also mentioned that they have come to learn about seed selection, seed treatment and importance of using certified/quality seeds from the department which has more germination capacity. 'All this has certainly contributed towards enhancing crop yield and thereby increasing the income of the household', mentioned Mukundan. It is also learnt that main agricultural season in this village is *samba* and a majority normally restrict cultivation of rice during *kuruvai* because it is not considered gainful due to various reasons. However, of late, some households are making use of this season to cultivate rice. It is primarily because they get season-based locality-specific agro advisories from the VKC and KVK. The farmers are also encouraged to increase the area under vegetable cultivation using the right inputs.

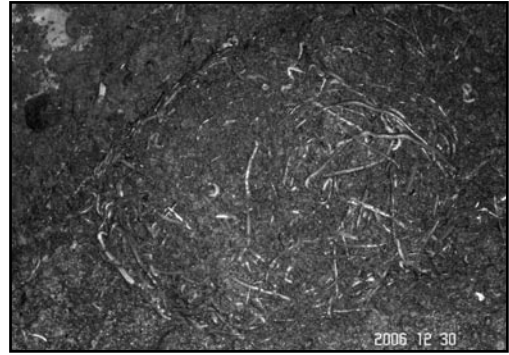
The farmers display an immense interest in adopting new technologies. Farmers, both women and men have undergone training in SRI (System of Rice Intensification) method of cultivation, vermicompost (The method of preparing compost with the help of earthworm as natural bioreactor is known as vermicomposting) preparation, biological growth promoters like *pancha kavya* and *amirtha karaisal*, organic farming and so on. One of the VRC staff mentioned that the farmers in this village are receptive to any new technology such as SRI method of rice cultivation and evince interest in preparing *pancha kavya* and *amirtha karaisal*, vermi compost and applying the same in their fields.



Training in SRI method



*A session in vermicompost training*



*Vermicompost*

As we have mentioned above, the farmers are motivated to learn and adopt new technologies. They consult and discuss with Agriculture Officer (AO), Extension. They also make use of the CD available at the VKC to know more about agriculture-related information. It may be interesting to mention here that a few farmers have been inspired to try direct sowing method in their fields when they saw their counterparts in Tamil Nadu area adopting it. The farmers who adopted on their land on trial basis were happy when they got a good yield with minimum expenditure. Since they find this method economical, profitable and less labour-intensive, they want to adopt it in future also. So, they have requested KVK to conduct training programmes for the farmers of Agalankan on this method.

Information regarding government schemes and subsidies reach people very fast now. So, the residents are able to get the benefits of schemes/subsidies. Mukundan was happy to mention that four entitled farmers have got drillers with 50 per cent subsidy (from agricultural department) which is likely to reduce expenses of other farmers in the village. He also mentioned a few other examples of eligible households getting things on subsidy like tarpaulin and chicken (through BDO). He mentioned that nearly 72 households could utilise the subsidy given for buying chicken. It is mainly because they have been able to get the information on time. 'The credit goes to the VKC', says Bala Mukundan. Just as the KVK informs them of any new schemes and training programmes, the AO, Extension also keeps the villagers informed of any subsidy scheme or availability of agricultural inputs. It is stated that previously AO used to visit the village but his contact with people was very less. The presence of a VKC has largely promoted building of a good rapport between the farmers and the AO, Extension. Whenever the AO makes a visit to Agalankan, he first calls on the Knowledge Workers of the VKC and informs them of new developments related to agriculture, if any. He uses the Knowledge Workers as a bridge between him and other villagers. He has also developed good rapport with marginal farmers and encourages them to do well in their farming. The author had an opportunity to observe an instance of the AO, after informing the Knowledge Workers about availability of vegetable seeds free of cost for the vegetable growers, telling other farmers involved in vegetables cultivation and requesting them to tell others also.

## **Livestock**

Rearing cattle has always been an important economic activity of this hamlet. But the hamlet lacked veterinary health facilities for cattle care and management. In case of an emergency or to treat a cow affected by some disease, the villagers had to take their cattle to a veterinary hospital in another village namely Thennankudi, which is three kilometers away from Agalankan. It used to take a lot of their time. Due to work load at home and fields and lack of time, they were not able to take the affected cattle to the clinic at Thennankudi on time for treatment. It was also physically exhausting and took lot of their time if they had to take the affected cattle. Because of these constraints, the households were discouraged from having more of livestock, particularly cows; this made even the land-holding households keep a minimum number of livestock.

On coming to know of a need from the boundary partner for veterinary help the VKC/VRC took immediate steps in this regard. Now, every Wednesday, a veterinary doctor visits the village; also, a mobile veterinary hospital comes to the village every week. Villagers do not have to spend their time and energy in taking their affected cattle to Thennankudi. Free medical facility is available for their livestock. They can clear their doubts with the veterinary doctor or get general advice for proper care and management. It is pointed out by one of the Knowledge Workers that people have been encouraged to rear greater number of cows/buffalos because of the veterinary services available within the village. According to a middle-aged man, now-a -days the cattle owners do not have to waste their time going to another village for medical help for their cattle. In case of emergencies, veterinary doctor from Government Veterinary Hospital, Karaikal comes immediately to attend on the sick animal. There is no tension of taking the animals to another village for treatment or getting medical advice from the veterinary doctor. It saves time; they can attend to their work without anxiety! One of the residents of this village stated that mortality rate of their livestock has come down significantly due to veterinary medical facility available to the villagers.



*Clean milk production training*

Cattle owners of this village also feel secure about raising cattle because a veterinary doctor visits the village once a week and he comes if there is any emergency even at midnight. The villagers speak high of the services of the latter. Timely information/ inputs and the necessary treatment for the livestock are considered a big boon by the villagers. It was interesting to learn when a woman, about 42 years old, pointed out with confidence that she is motivated to buy one or two more cows on loan now.



According to her, it is mainly because villagers get timely inputs regarding care and management of livestock from the VKV/VRC through SMS, notice board, *Namma Ooru Seidhi* and through the visiting veterinary doctor. As an example, she mentioned an SMS sent by the VRC just before the onset of monsoon where cattle owners were alerted about the possibility of mouth-and-foot disease attack on cows/bullocks. On coming to learn of it she consulted the veterinary doctor to know the kind of preventive measures to be taken for her cows against the disease; on his advice her cows were given injection.

Also livestock health camps conducted at the village level seemed to have created a great impact on the villagers' attitude towards cattle rearing. It was stated that during one of the camps the resource person spoke elaborately on the economic development of the households through cattle rearing. The participants have been made aware of various government subsidy schemes available for livestock rearing. For instance, the villagers were informed about a subsidy of Rs 3000 for constructing cattle sheds.

It is heartening to learn that women and men of this hamlet share their knowledge/information with others. It is learnt that that three women enthusiastically participated in a training programme on cattle rearing and fodder management in Puducherry. On their return after attending the training, they organised a meeting with village women and men where they shared their knowledge about various aspects such as cattle management, fodder and milk quality control measures etc with the villagers. They also shared related the printed material they got during the training programme. It is mentioned by a few women that as a result of the exposure the women have become aware of the quality aspects of the milk and demand a right price from the milk vendor.

Due to the increase in the awareness level, care and management of livestock receive special attention from the people these days. It is encouraging to hear from the villagers that they are using the knowledge they have gained in various ways such as by participating in veterinary health camps, learning from *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, local database, and timely alerts from the VKC and so on. According to the youth club leader and others, the households in Agalankan village have come to understand the importance of keeping their livestock and its shelters in hygienic conditions. They keep their cattle sheds clean and regularly bathe their cattle and take care to give them quality feed of the right quantity. They take necessary precautions to protect their livestock from getting infected with any disease/illness. The former was proud to mention that the village has won the appreciation of the Department of Animal Husbandry which conducted livestock fair in the village on more than one occasion. The department gave prizes to households taking proper care of their cattle and maintaining the cattle shed neat and clean. Agalankan is being recognised as a model village by the animal husbandry department. A few women and men mentioned that knowledge empowerment has motivated many non-agricultural households to raise cattle for their economic development. 'Earlier, generally only households having agriculture as their primary occupation owned cows

and bullocks', pointed out one young man. Rearing more cattle means more income to the household!

### **Health**

The people of Agalankan are happy to point out that they have better access to healthcare facilities these days. The VKC provides information related to common diseases/illness and preventive measures/treatment. Based on the need expressed by the community VRC/VKC took efforts to address health-related requirements. In order to help the community in their health-related aspects, a mobile van from a nearby government hospital makes a monthly visit to this hamlet. Earlier, the villagers had to go to Thenur, which is five kilometers from Agalankan, to check their blood pressure and to collect tablets for hypertension and diabetes. As there is no proper transport facility the village people mainly old persons found it difficult to go to Thenur. They, particularly women, requested the Knowledge Workers that the VKC help them in getting medical help and medicines in the village itself. When the Knowledge Workers took this to the attention of the boundary partner, he sought the VRC's help. The coordinator of the VRC suggested to the former to give a letter to the chief doctor at the Government Hospital at Karaikal explaining about the difficulty faced by the villagers (due to distance and lack of transport facility to Thenur) in getting the necessary essential medicine and medical advice. Accordingly, the boundary partner submitted a requisition letter. He also met the MLA to seek his help in this regard who also obliged by giving a letter to the government hospital at Karaikal to do the needful. As a result of the efforts taken by the boundary partner with the facilitation of the VRC, since 2009, a doctor from the government hospital visits the village once a month. The people, especially the women, are happy to mention that they are able to get medical advice and medicines in their village itself.



*Health camp*

We had an opportunity to interact with a group of women in their thirties; they appreciated the various activities of the VKC programme and the resultant improvements in various aspects of the villagers. They were really glad to talk about the benefits of medical person's visit to the village. The women mentioned that all their doubts regarding their health get clarified during the doctor's visit. Earlier they used to be anxious even if there was slight giddiness and used to imagine they had developed hypertension or some neurotic disease. 'An awareness programme on women's reproductive health care organised at the village has been very educative and useful in getting the people to take health precautions and getting treatment without any delay', stated one of the women.

It has also been stated by women and men that the eye camps organised by the VRC/VKC in association with Sankara Nethralaya have proved very useful to the villagers irrespective of age and sex. A majority of the villagers participated in the camp and benefited. They have been made aware of eye diseases and their corresponding preventive measures. Spectacles were provided at a low rate to persons diagnosed with defects in the vision. It was stated that more than 120 persons benefited through this camp. More than anyone else, this eye camp proved to be a great boon to a young boy who was studying in tenth standard at the time. This boy had been suffering from a unique eye problem since his childhood and his participation in the eye camp with his mother helped him to get his problem rectified in a few months time. He is very thankful to the VRC/VKC and Sankara Nethralaya for helping him get correct vision. A case study of this boy is given at the end of this section.

### ***Skill development in computers***

The VRC/VKC programme has significantly contributed to skill development in the field of computers. A majority of people in the Centre were seeing computers only for the first time. When the villagers saw computers for the first time they wondered what one is going to do with this box like object. However, gradually, they have come to know the advantages of computers.

Though the most of the elders do not use computers, they value the training provided by the VKC to the village girls and boys in computer skill development and its application. Parents feel proud that their children are able to work on computers. Earlier, one had to go to Karaikal to do a computer course. The children of Agalankan take great interest in participating in CALP and INTEL learn programme. These programmes play a significant role in improving and enhancing the knowledge and learning abilities of the school students. Participating in the CALP and Intel programmes has created a great impact on the children. Their level of general knowledge has improved a lot. It was heartening to listen to the Head of the Primary School in the village who commended the services of VKC to the village in general and children/students in particular. She mentioned that Agalankan students were bright generally and that the



*CALP students*



*Intel students with boundary partner*



VKC was playing a great role in bringing out their potential. She said that she was happy to see children developing interest in general knowledge which is primarily because of their participation in computer-based educated-related programmes. She added to say that because of the VKC, the job of the computer teacher in the school is made very simple; in fact, the other teachers in the school learn from these students. During our field work, we observed that school children of this village take interest in environment-related issues. Their concern for the environment can be seen from the project work which they undertook as part of INTEL learn programme. In their study, they highlighted the lack of toilet facility in their village and how it affects the health of the people and the environment. When the project work was showcased it received the appreciation of audience which included the local MLA, a Rotary Club representative, the *Panchayat* president, VRC staff and a few other important persons of the area besides the women and men from the village. The common impression of the villagers is that children going to the Centre would fare well in their studies other aspects.

College students were able to practice their computer lessons at the Centre. Moreover they were able to expand their knowledge in computers. They were of the view that knowledge in computers would certainly enhance their job opportunities. One of the Knowledge Workers mentioned that more than five persons including two women have got employment based on their computer knowledge.

### **Education**

It is learnt that parents have started taking keen interest in their children's education. They are giving attention to which school/college their children should be sent. Parents who have a weaker educational background are keen to see that their children select right subjects which have better job opportunities. Hitherto, they did not pay much attention to ones son/daughter's higher education.

There is enormous awareness among the students and others on the choice of courses available at the graduate level. Of late there is greater clarity about various courses and their potential in the job market. Earlier the students after completing their school joined whatever course they got in the college. They did not pay any particular attention to choice of courses as there was no awareness. They did not have any preference for a particular group. With the exposure they got through the VRC/VKC programme, the students felt encouraged to explore various possibilities and avenues available to improve their abilities and choose a group/branch that they felt suited them and at the same time would help them get jobs.

Rengarajan aged 42 said that students are able to plan their future well. They are able think better and plan their next step of action. The career guidance programme conducted by the VRC has been of great use to the student community. Consequent to attending this programme, some students (four boys and one girl) from Agalankan and neighbouring

villages opted for agricultural course. The youth club leader expressed a hope that these students after completing their education would contribute to the socio-economic development of the village. He believes at least one of them on completing their studies would help them with latest agricultural technology details to the village. He was glad to mention that few students have shown interest in nursing course.

### **Participation of women**

It is gratifying to know that some adult women have also acquired basic computer knowledge. Interestingly, women in the age group of 20–30 years show interest in learning to use computers. Gaining knowledge and skills has contributed to improvement in their self-confidence and enhanced their self-esteem. A few women participated in adult literacy programme and have become literate. Women go to the Centre not only for content but also to read newspapers and get details or information regarding ration card, to confirm veterinary doctor's visit and so on. Women have benefited by participating in microenterprise training (preparation of phenol, soap oil and *agarbathi/sambirani*) eye camp and health and livestock training/awareness programmes. Young women from this village have undergone training in tailoring conducted by KVK. This has given them hope that they can earn for themselves without depending on their parents/spouses.

Participation of women in livestock awareness programmes, training programmes on care and management of cattle and their association with the VKC has considerably empowered them to raise cattle with confidence. They have been able to contribute significantly to household income through proper care and management of cattle and other livestock. The boundary partner was happy to mention that these women can stand on their own feet now and do not have to depend on men.



*A woman passerby reads information on the notice board*



*Training on soap oil preparation in progress*



*A woman with her cattle*

As we have mentioned earlier, women are more conscious of health-related facts now due to their exposure and participation in health awareness programmes. Women show interest in updating themselves with new information. They actively participate in all the training and awareness programmes organised at the village level and share it with their relatives and friends. One young woman stated that the VKC has contributed significantly to the development of the village in various ways. 'For example', she said, 'conducting village level health camps is very useful. It has increased their awareness level'. Also, a doctor from the government hospital visits the village once a month, and once a week, a veterinary doctor come to the village; this has reduced their tension to a great level. She lauded the work done by the VKC in the field of agriculture. From time to time the Centre provides agro-advisories like right fertiliser application and pest control methods. She also mentioned that the VKC makes arrangement to interact with agricultural experts by bringing them to the village.

One of the youth was proud to mention that students from the agricultural college and other institutions have conducted nearly five-to-six project works in Agalankan. The general awareness level among the villagers has increased due to their exposure and interactions with the visiting students.



*College students interacting with boundary partner and villagers*

### **Impact of the VKC reflected in a few case studies of women and men**

It is interesting to find that the villagers look at the VKC not just a place for computer learning; it is also regarded as a Centre for getting vital information for their day-to-day life. It is encouraging to know that the people share the information with their relatives and friends. The programme has contributed towards socio-economic development of women and men. Following are few case studies of women and men of different age groups highlighting improvements in various aspects of their social and economic lives which they ascribe to the VKC programme in their village.

#### ***Chellaiyan, 46 years***

Chellaiyan aged 46 years talks about his participation in agriculture-related training programmes conducted by the VKC. In the following case study, he explains how he has been able to increase the yield of jasmine flowers after applying *Panchakavya* a biological growth promoter. He shared this knowledge



*Chellaya and his wife*

with one of his relatives who also benefited by using *Panchakavya* for his plants. He is very pleased to mention, 'The VKC is very useful to village folk like us as this helps us gather knowledge of great value and get benefited. I thank the VKC for providing useful information and training related to agriculture and other aspects'. In his own words:

*'I live in Agalankan village which is my native place. My primary occupation is Agriculture. We own a piece of vegetable garden. But I am also working as an Office Assistant (Mazdhur). In our land I grow jasmine plants and vegetables like ladies finger, cluster beans, snake gourd, plantain and green leafy vegetables. Our village is water-sufficient for agriculture.'*

*'In our village, a VKC is run jointly by MSSRF and Paavendhar Bharathidasan youth club. Through the VKC, training and information related to agriculture are provided to our villagers. Training on preparation of vermicompost, biological growth promoters like **Panchakavya** and **Amirthakaraisal, thirunthya nel saagupadi** (SRI method of cultivation) were given with the help of expert farmers. I took part in all the above-mentioned training programmes and I found them useful. I particularly took immense interest to know about preparation of **Panchakavya** and its methods of application. I learnt every step of it carefully. I took a small quantity of **Panchakavya** from the Knowledge Workers prepared for demonstration purpose at the VKC. I used it on my jasmine plants as instructed in the training. Since I did not have a spray I used a bunch of neem leaves to sprinkle **Panchakavya** on the jasmine plants once in 15 days. I have six plants in my garden. The plants grew very well as they would after the use of chemical fertilisers like urea and D.A.P.'*

*'After the application of **Panchakavya** the insects (white flies) that are normally found at the base of the jasmine plants have vanished. The plants grew to an extent of one meter height and yielded more flowers. When the leaves started turning yellow I sprayed **Panchakavya**. After a year each plant started yielding quarter kilo flowers every day. This helped me to get more income. As I found it very useful I shared this information with my brother-in-law who also benefitted from this. The VKC is very useful to village folk like us as this helps us gather knowledge of great value and get benefitted by it. . I thank the VKC for providing useful information and training related to agriculture and other aspects.'*

### **K.Senthil Kumar, 32 years**

Senthil Kumar, who is engaged in vegetable cultivation, is a regular visitor to the VKC and makes use of the information available at the Centre. He shows interest in organic farming and on his request, training on vermicompost was organised by the VRC/VKC. He feels happy that he is able to prepare organic manure for his use and he does not have to depend on



Senthil Kumar

chemical fertilisers. He thanks the VKC for organising training programmes for farming families and providing useful information to the villagers.

*He says: 'I am a resident of Agalankan village. I am married and I have a son. My family owns a vegetable garden, three cows and six goats. I was working in the seed farm of the agriculture department in Karaikal as a part-time farm hand. I started concentrating on my vegetable garden after I lost my job in the farm. We cultivate brinjal, snake gourd, cluster beans, lady's finger, bitter gourd and greens. As we have livestock we use cow and goat dung to manure our vegetable garden. In case of a pest attacks I get pesticides from the farmer kiosks and spray them.'*

*'One day when I passed through the Paavendar bharathidasan youth club I noticed some new computers in the building. I went to the Centre and met Sasikala and Jayalakshmi, the Knowledge Workers of the VKC who explained to me about the activities and they also briefed me about the wealth of information provided by the Centre. With the help of the Knowledge Workers I looked through the local database VALAM and I found information on farming useful particularly the methods of vegetable cultivation and pest control. Since then I have been inspired to visit the Centre regularly.'*

*'During one of my visits to the Centre I saw some booklets about organic farming in the VKC which had details about vermicompost and its benefits to crops/plants. So I asked the Knowledge Workers the details of the procedure involved in preparing vermicompost such as where I could get worms, if there was any training available in this regard and so on. On the basis of my enquiry, training on vermicompost was arranged by the Nagapattinam VRC on my farm on 29/12/2006; twenty farmers from our Agalankan village took part in the training programme. The training was conducted by two expert farmers (engaged in preparation of vermicompost) from Poompuhar and Prathaparamapuram along with the help of VRC staff.'*

*'I was happy to see that from the very second week, as the experts had explained in the training the worms started converting waste in to compost. I applied the compost in the garden. The plants began to grow well and I could get good yield of vegetables. The worms also started multiplying in numbers. So I gave a few excess worms to Mr. Poovaraghavan, a farmer from our village. He followed the method I suggested and started benefiting from it soon. Normally the process of converting waste to manure is a time-consuming process, but vermicomposting takes only little time and one can see the benefits immediately; the plants grow and yield well. These days I do not spend money to buy chemical fertilisers. The training has helped me to prepare manure for our use. Such useful training and information should be provided to the farmers often. I thank the VKC for organising training programmes for farming families and providing useful need-based information to the villagers.'*



### **C.P. Kannan, 35 years**

Kannan, 35-years old, tells us that his village gains by a wide range of services/activities provided through the VKC. He appreciates the local newsletter *Namma Ooru Seidhi* for the valuable and useful information it carries. He is happy to share with us that he could help his friend to get complete relief from cold and cough with a prescription using *arugampullu* (*Cynodon dactylon*) juice that appeared in one of the issues of the newsletter. His statement is the following:



*Kannan reading Namma Ooru Seidhi*

*'My name is C.P. Kannan and I have studied up to the tenth standard. I live in Agalankan Village. I am married and have a child. I live in a joint family with my parents and my two elder brothers. I work in a spinning mill in Oduthurai. Our village benefits a lot by the information disseminated through the VKC set up by MSSRF. We get useful information related to medicine, farming and job opportunities. As part of the VKC's programme, computer education is provided to school- and college-going children. Adult women and men are also encouraged to learn to use computers.'*

*'The VKC organises and conducts training on micro-enterprises for women and also training related to farming activities such as preparation of biological growth promoters (**Panchakavya, Amirthakaraisal**) to women and men farmers. A newsletter by name **Namma Ooru Seidhi** is distributed twice a month to the villagers. This newsletter carries information that is useful and necessary for us. Information on job opportunities, government schemes, agriculture, medicinal herbs and plants, news for fishermen and other important news are given in this newsletter. As my house is located next to the VKC, I go there every day to read newspapers. Since I work in the spinning mill in the nightshift, I am free in the mornings. So, I visit the VKC to read the papers and use this opportunity to read the newsletter also without fail. Our village people read this news letter and benefit a lot especially with information related to agriculture and job opportunities'*

*'Once, my friend at the factory was suffering from a severe cold. He complained of phlegm in his chest. I remembered reading about health benefits of **arugam pullu (Cynodon dactylon)** juice and its use in treating cold and phlegm in **Namma Ooru Seidhi**. I passed on this information to my friend. He drank the juice everyday on an empty stomach for about three days. He was very happy to tell me that he had completely got cured of cold. Thus the information provided in the newsletter is useful to everyone at some point or the other. I distribute this newsletter among friends in my workplace. They appreciate the newsletter and say it is very good. By reading this newsletter, we get to know a lot of valuable and useful information/news'*

### **G. Jayalakshmi, 38 years**

The following is an illustration as to how the villagers, particularly women, have been motivated to visit the VKC by the Knowledge Workers. Jayalakshmi who paid a casual visit to the VKC after coming to know of it through the Knowledge Worker has become one of the regular users now. She finds the information on agriculture very helpful. She is happy to see her lemon tree producing fruits after a gap of seven years; she could see this happening after she followed the instructions provided by the VKC in treating the tree. Her participation in the training on livestock management and clean milk production (held at Puducherry) has helped her get a lot of useful details regarding cattle rearing. She is glad that she could share this information with others in the village. She says:



Jayalakshmi

*'My name is G. Jayalakshmi. I live in Agalankan village. My husband works in PWD in Karaikal. I have a son and a daughter. We have a small vegetable garden near our house where we cultivate vegetables. We also do fish culture in a pond by adding fish seeds to the pond. We have three cows and five goats.'*

*'I came to know about the VKC in our village through the Knowledge Worker S. Jayalakshmi. She told me that a lot of information is available in the Centre and motivated me to pay a visit once. I went to the Centre and saw some computers there. The Knowledge Workers showed me the local data base (**Valam**) in the computer. I found Agriculture information and household tips interesting and useful. On going through Valam I was motivated to ask for some remedy for a lemon tree in our garden which had not been producing any fruit for seven years. I asked the Knowledge Workers at the VKC what could be done to make it produce fruits. They said they would enquire at the VRC and inform me. They later got back to me and said that lack of proper nutrition for the trees was the reason for the non-producing condition. As per the recommendation I received from the VKC I applied the necessary fertilisers and nutrient tonic in right quantity for the affected tree. I was happy to see the tree that had not borne even one fruit in seven years started yielding fruit. We had almost lost hope on that tree; we are very happy about this and I wish to thank the VKC and the VRC for their help and advice.'*

*'After this I have been inspired to visit the VKC often. I read newspapers and speak to the Knowledge Workers. The newsletter **Namma Ooru Seidhi** is very informative. I particularly find information related to animal husbandry very useful. When I came to know from the Knowledge Workers about exposure-cum-training on livestock management and clean milk production in Puducherry I told my husband about this. He encouraged me to participate in the training as we also have cows at home and that the training would be very useful to us.'*

*'I attended the two day training programme in Puducherry. They taught us how to tend the cattle and how to feed the calf with appropriate quantity of cattle feed and grass depending on the age, taking care of cows during pregnancy, injections to be administered during pregnancy and right feed for the cows. This training was extremely useful. They taught us many minute but important details such as the symptoms we need to observe on a cow during the pregnancy period so that necessary injection can be given. I thank the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation which is striving for the development of our village.'*

### **Vijaya, 42 years**

That the people of Agalankan have been motivated to towards cattle-rearing after the inception of the VKC is clearly seen from the case study of 42-year-old Vijaya, a SHG leader and also a member of the VKCMC. She appreciates the VKC for disseminating timely information to the community through its different information channels. She also praises the boundary partner for his role in passing useful information. She is able to see benefits of working as a team for the development of the village. Her testimony is the following:



*Vijaya with her husband and children*

*'My name is Vijaya and I am 42-years old. I have studied up to eighth standard. I am the mother of four children and my husband is a daily-wage labourer. I am a member of a SHG and also a member of VKCMC. We do not own any agricultural land. We own cows and I take care of them.'*

*'We have benefited quite a lot through the VKC set up in our village. Our awareness level about diverse things has improved due to various efforts taken by the VKC. This has helped many of us to develop economically and socially. The awareness level among the women and men regarding livestock management has enhanced. Before the inception of the VKC, we were not aware of udder disease and other illnesses that affect the cattle. Today, as a result of the activities carried out through the VKC, there is greater awareness of the cattle care and management practices. There is interest to buy milch animals. We feel encouraged to apply for cattle loan. This is mainly because we get regularly updated livestock advisories. A veterinary doctor visits the village regularly and also livestock camps are organised at regular intervals through the VKC. We need not go to other village for veterinary advice or help; it is available here. Our village women had an opportunity to participate in training programme on cattle health and milk production held at Puducherry. The participants shared the information with other villagers and also showed us the **kai pridhi** (handbook) which is very user friendly.'*

*'The VKC disseminates useful and need-based information on time. The notice board kept outside the VKC is an effective and useful medium through which we get to know information*



*on various aspects of our day-to-day lives. A sample of the useful information conveyed through the notice board are precautions to be adopted when crackers are burst (during festival times) and also message on safe drinking water, employment opportunities, NREGA work schedule in the village. The Knowledge Workers inform us about the doctor's visit to the village, change of place in NREGA work, wages for the work done and other important information through the PAS. The local newsletter carries information on health, agriculture, livestock, and employment opportunities. Mukundan (the youth club president) passes information related to important government schemes to the residents and encourages us to use them. We go to the Centre to get the address of a government department or colleges/schools. I must say it was a great moment of pride when our INTEL children showcased their project work in a gathering of important people.'*

*'I am a member of the VKCMC and I like to participate in the meetings and listen to the discussions. This helps to enlarge ones information base and outlook. I am convinced that any work can be carried out successfully if we work as a group.'*

### **T. Velmurugan, 16 years**

Velmurugan, a young boy, who had been suffering from lack of proper vision and severe pain in the eyes since his childhood due to defective eyelids is very happy and cheerful now. There were days when he used to cry due to poor vision and pain in the eyes. His parents had also been feeling very sad and helpless as their economic condition did not permit them to give their son the necessary treatment to correct the eyelids through a surgery. Fortunately, the eye camp organised in Agalankan by the VRC/VKC



*Velmurugan with his parents and brother*

in association with Sankara Nethralaya, a famous Chennai-based eye hospital, enabled young Velmurugan to get his eyes treated through a surgery in Sankara Nethralaya. The hospital gave him free treatment and did not charge for the stay at the hospital during the treatment. Now, Velmurugan is able to see like any other normal person and there is no pain in the eyes. He is very grateful to the VRC/VKC and Sankara Nethralaya for giving him his eyesight.

*'I am T. Velmurugan studying in twelfth standard. My native place is Agalankan. Though my father was born in an agricultural family, he works as a painter. I have a younger brother. Since my birth I have had poor eyesight as my eyelids covered three-fourths of my eyes resulting in my eyes being only slightly open. Whenever I saw an object or a person or while reading a book I could not see with my eyes wide open. Besides having pain, I used to have watery eyes. I suffered because of this disability till I was thirteen-and-a-half years old.'*

*'As I had been suffering with the eye problem my mother once took me to an ophthalmologist in Thirunallar for consultation. After examining my eyes, the doctor told us that only a surgery by a specialist could rectify the problem. He also said that the surgery would cost at least Rs.20,000 to Rs.40,000. Due to our poor financial condition, my mother kept postponing our visit to the hospital. I kept asking my mother to take me to a good doctor for treating my problem. Our relatives and our neighbours used to advice my mother to take a loan and get the surgery done. My mother used to weep and felt helpless as neither we nor my maternal grandparents had the resources. My mother did not have any jewel to pledge and take loan. I used to cry whenever she cried. Sometimes my father also used to get upset and feel guilty that he was unable to provide me the necessary treatment'.*

*'Fortunately, in 2006, the VKC was set up in our village. We used to visit this Centre to read newspapers, learn computers and read the newsletter Namma Ooru Seidhi and solve the puzzles in it. The VKC helped me in getting my proper sight. An eye camp was organised in our village by MSSRF in 2007 in association with Chennai-based Sankara Nethralaya eye hospital. I went with my mother for an eye checkup and advice. After examining my eyes, the doctors asked me to participate in the video conference with the specialists from Sankara Nethralaya which would be organised at the VRC in Nagapattinam the following day. The doctors examined my eyes through video conferencing and said that my problem could be fully rectified through a surgery. They also told us that this surgery would be performed at Sankara Nethralaya hospital in Chennai and the entire expense for the surgery, accommodation and food would be borne by the hospital. It was a great relief for me and for my family to know that the problem could be solved through a surgery without we have to spend anything'.*

*'On 15 October 2007, we went to the hospital in Chennai. The surgery was done on 16 October 2007. I recovered completely in two days. My eyebrows and eyelids are now normal like everyone else. Before the surgery I could not view things above the line of eyelids. But after the surgery I was delighted to know that I could also see things like any other normal person. I was happy that I could look up to see the clothes hanging on the clothesline and everything else. I was so excited that I told everyone who came to see me about this'.*

*'My family and my village along with me are ever so grateful and we wish to express our gratitude to MSSRF, the authorities and doctors of Sankara Nethralaya eye hospital for giving me eyesight. We sincerely pray to God that these two organisations keep growing and that they help more and more poor people. Thank you'.*

### **K. Bamavathy, Age 34**

Bamavathy a young widow with undergraduate degree in history was mentally upset and struggled to bring up her children due to lack of sufficient income after the death of her husband. Though she had stood first in computer subject while doing ITI course before the marriage she had forgotten almost everything. Fortunately, she made use of the free MUPP course offered at the VRC and now she is working as an office assistant for a LIC

agent. She is happy to say that her monthly salary helps her to some extent to bring up her children with out much of difficulty. She feels that participating in the MUPP course has increased her confidence level and self-esteem.

*'My name is Bamavathy. I am a graduate with a B.A (History) degree. I come from a family of eight children. Since our father had a tea shop he could educate all of us to a certain extent. After completing higher secondary school education I took up a one-year ITI course. When I was studying in ITI I stood first in the whole of Union Territory of Puducherry in computer science subject, but I could not get a job based on that qualification and eventually I lost touch with computers and forgot everything. I worked for a few years in a company called Regma Tiles. Later I also worked in a spinning mill where they paid me only Rs.28 per day. As I felt it was very low I stopped going to work. Then I joined the tiles company for a salary of Rs.2400. per month. During this period, my marriage was arranged and I got married. My husband was from Chennai and he was a tailor by profession. After my wedding I completed B.A.'*

*'About three-and-a-half years back my husband had died of a heart attack. My parents and my brothers brought me back to our native place Vizhidiyur itself. Now I live with my son and daughter in a small hut I built in my father's backyard. I used to confine myself to the house. I used to take tuitions for small school children and I also earned some money by tailoring clothes for neighbours and friends. The income from these was insufficient to bring up the children. Under these circumstances I came to know through one girl about the computer course conducted in Agalankan village. My brother enquired with Kamaraj sir – (MUPP animator) about the course and explained to him about my situation. Then Kamaraj sir told us about the activities undertaken by the VKC run by MSSRF in Agalankan village and encouraged my brother to send me for the MUPP course'*

*'Later I visited the VKC and met the Knowledge Workers there. They explained to me about the activities of the Centre and also about the details of MUPP course. Since this course was free of cost I agreed to do it and started going to the VKC from the next day to attend MUPP course. The exam was conducted in Nagapattinam VRC. I passed the exam and also received a certificate'*

*'I was upset that I had forgotten everything I had learnt about computers but thankfully the training I got at the VKC has provided me a good opportunity to gain skills in basic computer applications. Definitely, I would not have gone for a paid computer course outside the village. Earlier I had studied using old methods. There was no mouse facility. Whatever I learnt also I forgot. I did not have opportunity to work on the computers much earlier though I stood first in the exam when I did my ITI course. But now there are a lot of modules in the computer. I learnt everything easily because Kamaraj sir explained everything in detail and we were given a lot of time to practice our lessons on the computers. The Knowledge Workers were very supportive. The lessons were taught in Tamil so I could follow the lessons and learn with enthusiasm. Having learnt this now, I got a job through one of the Knowledge Workers at the VKC whose brother is a LIC agent in Karaikal. I am working as office assistant in his office. I*

*am happy to say that I do all the work in the computer. I am able to run my family with my monthly salary of Rs.2000 per month and with the little income I earn through tailoring. If I had not taken up this training I would have stayed at home struggling to meet my family expenses and my children's education expenses with some meagre income. Besides I would have immersed myself in sad memories when alone. I consider myself fortunate to undergo this MUPP training not only because I have got a job based on this computer knowledge but also because attending the course for six months helped me to divert myself from the past sad memories of the loss of my husband'.*

*'I am not confined to my house these days. As I go out now I feel very relaxed mentally also. The credit for current situation in my life goes to the Knowledge Workers of Agalankan VKC and the staff of the VRC at Nagapattinam. Not only do I have a better monthly income but I am also happy these days. My parents, brothers and sisters often say that taking up a job has brought about a change in me. They are also glad to see that I am not confined to the house. There were days I used to think that I should not study anymore and I should try to live within the meagre income I get from undertaking tailoring work and giving tuitions to the school children in our hamlet'.*

*'I am glad I could make use of the free MUPP course offered at the VKC. Going to the VKC and attending the course has really enhanced my self-confidence. Hence I am grateful to MSSRF. This institution should scale great heights'.*

### **M. Praveena**

Though Praveena could not join MUPP course in the VKC due to the prevailing household conditions, she was able to get herself trained in tailoring. She came to know of the free tailoring course offered by KVK in Madhur from Namma Ooru Seidhi and with the help of the Knowledge Worker, Sasikala she applied for the course and got selected. Praveena feels confident that she can earn something through her tailoring knowledge and skill.



*Praveena with her husband*

*'I live in Agalankan village. My father is a mason. My mother takes care of the household activities and looks after the six goats that we have. I have studied up to twelfth standard. I have one older brother who is physically handicapped and two younger brothers. Both my younger brothers are studying in school. My father is an alcoholic and he does not give money for household expenses. So, I had to discontinue my studies and take a job in Karaikal at a grocery shop for a monthly salary of Rs.1000. This income helped my mother to manage the household expenses to a certain extent'.*

*'My father once came to the shop where I worked in a drunken state and created trouble there. After that incident I stopped going to work. It was then Sasikala who lives in our street and*

who is a Knowledge Worker of Agalankan VKC visited our house and gave me the newsletter *Namma Ooru Seidhi*. She told me about the Village Knowledge Centre functioning in the building of the Paavendar Bharathidasan youth club and also said that training course on computers and other useful information are given at the Centre. I wanted to join the MUPP course but my mother refused to send me because of our family situation.

*I used to get the newsletter every fortnight from the VKC through Sasikala. It has information about job opportunities, general knowledge and cookery tips. I read every bit of the newsletter without fail. Through this newsletter, I came to know of a free tailor-training programme offered by KVK, Madhur. I was inspired to join the course as I felt that only if I get myself trained in something could I earn a living and help in running the home. So, I approached Sasikala and sought her guidance about applying for this training. She promised to get the details regarding the training programme and the procedure involved in applying for the course. She got back to me the next day with the information that the duration of the training was for six months and that the applications were available with Madhur KVK. I sent my brother to get me a form and I applied for the same. Fifteen days later, I received a letter asking me to come in person to Madhur KVK. I went there directly with my certificates. They checked the certificates and asked me to come the following week for training. In six months, I was trained to cut clothes, stitch them and to maintain the sewing machines. Due to this training, I have gained confidence that I could also make a living on my own. I thank the VKC and the newsletter **Namma Ooru Seidhi** for giving me the opportunity to learn a skill!*

### **Blossoming of M S Swaminathan Children Science Club**

We have seen earlier that the youth club has been playing a vital role in village-related activities. Recently, while the study was still in progress, school-going children in the age group of 10–15 years have been inspired to form themselves into a club.



VRC coordinator interacting with members of children club



It is worth mentioning here that VRC/VKC programme contributed to the emergence of this children's club in Agalankan. True to what the headmistress of the local Primary School said, these children are bright; they only need guidance and encouragement to bring out their potential. It is interesting to know that just a casual comment of the coordinator of VRC/VKC programme during one of the health camps held during November, 2010 in the village has influenced the children to form themselves into



*Discussion among VRC coordinator, VKCMC and members of children club*

a club. During that particular health camp, INTEL students served as volunteers and they were assigned the work of registration of the names of the participants. The coordinator mentioned that she gave that responsibility to the INTEL students as the youth were preoccupied with other things. She was surprised to observe the children carrying out their work efficiently. They showed a lot of interest in the camp activities and were of great help to the organisers and participants. Observing all this, the coordinator casually told other VRC staff present at that time that it would be nice if a children's club could be formed in this village. The thought came to her mind and she instantly shared it with her colleagues. The children were also present at that time when she made that remark, and immediately one of the boys took the phone number of the coordinator. Two days later, when she received a phone call from the children of Agalankan she was overwhelmed to learn that they had mobilised children of their village to form a club and they had thought of a name for the same. They mentioned that they wanted to name it after Professor M S Swaminathan. The coordinator did not expect the children to take seriously what she had said in the spur of a moment. She was really amazed the way the children got into action. Encouraged by the children's enthusiasm she immediately organised a discussion with the children through audio conference. Procedures for forming a children's club were shared with the children who were quick to grasp. They selected the leader, secretary and treasurer for the club. The major objective of the club is to work towards a green and clean Agalankan.

Like the youth club, the children also display a great interest in the village development. We had an opportunity to meet the members of the club. It was surprising to observe them voicing their concern about health and hygiene of the village. They are sensitive to common environmental issues and pointed out the harmful effects of indiscriminate use of plastic bags.

It was encouraging to see them talking about common problems related particularly to hygiene and how it could be handled. When one of them said that dust bins can be kept in every street to prevent residents disposing the household waste indiscriminately, the Coordinator of the VRC asked them how they would manage to get dust bins. It was

inspiring to observe a girl instantaneously answering that they can approach *Oorachi thalaivar* (Panchayat President) to arrange this facility. We can send a letter to the Panchayat office through our club letter. As we have mentioned earlier, they are environmentally conscious and expressed that steps should be taken to educate the villagers about garbage disposal.

They also expressed their wish to have a library in their village; they have to go to neighbouring villages of Vizhidiyur or Selloor for this purpose. They mentioned they need books on subjects like environment, national leaders, *vidukathaigal* (riddles) and general knowledge and so on. The coordinator of the VKC said she would try to get some sponsors to get the books for the children. She encourages the children to take initiative to write letters which can then be forwarded through the VRC to the concerned person/institute.

The interest shown by the children motivated the VRC to enroll them as partners in one of the important programmes (NABARD Village Development Programme) of the village, which was started recently, and involve them in tree planting and maintaining them. We will be dealing with this aspect later.

## **6. Knowledge Workers: Bridge between the VRC and VKC and between the VKC and the community**

The Knowledge Workers' role is considered very important and significant in the functioning of any VKC. Services and usefulness of VKC programme reaching the people largely depend on the Knowledge Workers. The coordinator often says that the latter are the *palam* (bridge) between the VRC and VKC and between the VKC and the community. The bridge should be a strong one. Two married women who have been managing the VKC in Agalankan since its inception truly act as a bridge between the VRC and VKC and between the VKC and the community. The Knowledge Workers as managers of the VKC carry out their work diligently. They work with enthusiasm. Clarity about their role and responsibilities makes them execute their duties and responsibilities quite well. They get the necessary encouragement and support from the VRC and the boundary partner/the youth club in carrying out their work.

### **Sense of duty of Knowledge Workers**

Being conscious of their responsibilities, the Knowledge Workers are very careful in making sure that information reaches the villagers on time either through oral communication or the notice board or through the Public Address System. Any useful and time-bound information is announced immediately using one of the information disseminating channels available at the Centre. In case there is a change in schedule of the doctor visiting the village, it is announced through the PAS. Announcement about festival bonus facility to members of *kothanar sangam* and scholarship facility for their children are announced or

reminded through PAS. They also inform or alert if there is any modification or change in place of work carried out under NREGA programme in the village. The Knowledge Workers work with enthusiasm whenever a programme is organised and take interest in mobilising the community to participate in the same. They motivate women and men of the village to participate in awareness/training programmes and benefit by it. They also motivate the children and adults to get trained in basic computer application skills and encourage MUPP dropouts to complete the course.



*Knowledge Workers with few of the VKCMC members*

The Knowledge Workers take several initiatives especially for liaising with different institutional services to the village through VKC with the guidance of VRC. As they show keen interest, they are contacted by the department officials and make VKC as the entry point for any development initiatives in this village. Officers/officials from Government departments such as agriculture, health and veterinary care pay a visit to the VKC first before contacting any others in the village. The Knowledge Workers are informed of any scheme/assistance, training and awareness programmes and others like health camps. It is stated that AO, Extension informs VKC of any new schemes/programmes for disseminating the same to the farmers; similarly, KVK brings its new training programmes and schemes to the notice of the Knowledge Workers. They have confidence that information will reach the right audience on right time once it is given to the Knowledge Workers. The latter not only disseminate information but also follow it up to check whether it has been used by the concerned person. They play a major role in implementing NREGA activities in Agalankan. They inform the villagers about the scheduled date of commencing NREGA work and the work site in the village. They also play a key role in implementing the recently started Village Development Programme (VDP) of NABARD in Agalankan village.

When any need is expressed from the village for any training/awareness programme they take necessary efforts to organise the same through the VRC. We also learnt through our interaction with the Knowledge Workers that the latter try to explore possibilities of help to conduct a programme in the village. To cite an example, they mentioned that they wish to organize tailoring classes for young women with the support of the Rotary Club of Thirunallar Temple city as some young women have expressed their desire to learn tailoring.

## Community appreciation of the Knowledge Workers' role

Our interactions with women and men of the village reveal that the Knowledge Workers carry out their work to the best of their abilities. Their services are recognised and well appreciated by the village community. In fact, their names have become synonymous with the VKC. The general attitude and opinion among the villagers is that one can approach the Knowledge Workers for any assistance.



*Knowledge Worker responding to a user's query*

If anyone is in need of any particular information or clarification, the villagers, both women and men, feel that they will get the necessary details—whether it is related to government entitlements, agriculture, education, employment opportunities or anything relevant to their day-to-day lives—if one contacts the Knowledge Workers. Such is the confidence the villagers have in the latter. One of the women we met said that for any clarification she and others would go to VKC. They would contact them (Knowledge Workers) for any assistance, be it filling up an application form or to know a phone number of any department/hospital, information on latest government schemes or availability of agricultural inputs in PASIC (*Puducherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation Limited*) and so on. The women and men also go to them to find out about NREGA work in the village and if there is any delay in getting their payment. If the Knowledge Workers are unable to provide any information/details sought by the village people they either take the help of the boundary partner or get in touch with the VRC to get it for the concerned person at the earliest possible.

In case anyone needs an auto rickshaw to go to a nearby town for any emergency or need 108 services<sup>6</sup> to take a person to the hospital (for a snake bite or any serious illness), he/she would approach VKC to contact them through the phone. The Knowledge Workers summon these services using the telephone available at the Centre or use their personal mobile phones. Also, the Knowledge Workers are accessible to the villagers even after the VKC working hours for any help as the two women reside close to the Centre. They do not consider it a disturbance or a burden. The Knowledge Workers are glad that they

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6. GVK EMRI (*Emergency Management and Research Institute*) is a pioneer in Emergency Management Services in India. As a not-for-profit professional organisation operating in the Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode, GVK EMRI is the only professional Emergency Service Provider in India today. GVK EMRI handles medical, police and fire emergencies through the '1-0-8 Emergency service'. This is a free service delivered through state-of-the-art emergency call response centres and has over 2600 ambulances across Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Assam, Meghalaya, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh.

are of some use to the village. If there is any emergency or need for a print-out of a letter or a report or in case a phone call has to be made, the Knowledge Workers oblige by opening the Centre even if it is 10 o'clock at night. It gives them a great sense of fulfillment whenever they pass on some useful information to the villagers or when they provide assistance regarding government schemes or benefits, stated the Knowledge Workers. An important aspect is that having women as managers of the VKC encourages other women in the village to access the Centre without any inhibition. During a discussion with a group of young women, it emerged that they feel comfortable to approach the Knowledge Workers for any information/clarification/suggestions/advice. It enables them to utilise the VKC services to the maximum extent possible.

As the activities of the VKC have been growing and gaining strength, naturally, the work of the Knowledge Workers have increased. Sometime it involves going to the VRC or visiting other VKCs outside Nagapattinam and Karaikal. They also participate in programmes conducted at the head office, Chennai. Sometimes they feel they are unable to strike a balance between household work and job at the VKC. However, they see to it that work at home-front does not suffer because of their tasks at the VKC as Knowledge Workers and vice versa. When asked whether they felt overloaded with work, Akila immediately said, 'we do not regard our work as a burden. We enjoy doing it. So there is no question of feeling overloaded with the VKC work'.

### **Methods adopted for the reach of the VKC programme**

If women and men are accessing the VKC without any hesitation, it is because of the consistent and sincere efforts taken by the Knowledge Workers to encourage the community to utilise the services of the VKC more meaningfully. It was not easy for them to draw the community to use the VKC facility; they had to put in lot of efforts and find different means to make the community feel comfortable to access the VKC. Initially, they made house visits to explain about the programme and to distribute the local newsletter *Namma Ooru Seidhi*. The



*Knowledge Workers and a user in the VKC*

Knowledge Workers would tell them about the *Valam* website and the wide range of information one can access through it. The Knowledge Workers also adopted another strategy to become closer to the community. They volunteered to help women to fill up pension forms; they offered their assistance in getting family ration card and inform the women and men about new government schemes/entitlements. Gradually, people began to get an idea about the VKC services and activities and to an extent became aware that



access to information is important. So much so, women and men on their own come to the VKC or approach the Knowledge Workers for any information requirement or any other assistance. The latter had to work hard; their perseverance yielded results. Gradually, the people, particularly, women began to feel comfortable visiting the VKC. The Knowledge Worker Sasikala was very glad to mention that '...earlier we use to go to them (community). Now they are coming to us (VKC)'.

### **Inspiration to their counterparts in other VKCs of MSSRF**

It may not be out of context to mention here that the author had an opportunity to be present with the Nagapattinam VRC staff when the boundary partners and Knowledge Workers of the VKCs of Nagarkovil had come on an exposure visit to the VKC at Agalankan. Towards the end of the interactions, the boundary partners and Knowledge Workers of the former admired their counterparts at Agalankan and openly admitted that they needed to change their approach



*Agalankan Knowledge Workers talking to the boundary partners and Knowledge Workers of Nagarkovil VRC*

to the VKC programme and that it was an eye opener for them to take consistent steps for the successful reach of the programme in their villages. The Knowledge Workers of Nagarkovil VKCs stated, 'We did not approach the households in our respective villages after the initial visit; now we realise how important it is to keep in regular touch with the community. It did not occur to us that the community had to be frequently contacted in order to encourage them to visit the VKC and participate in the programme'. The Knowledge Workers of Nagarkovil were pleased to mention that they could get several insights through the exposure visit to the VKC of Agalankan.

### **Knowledge Workers' role in the village**

Knowledge Workers have come to take up a larger role in the village. Their role can be seen in other spheres also. Knowledge Workers were proud to mention that they were invited to participate in a meeting related to organising an association for agriculture labourers. They extend help and assistance to government people or persons coming from other institutions in carrying out their work in the village. For example, they distributed the family health card created by the department of health, going door-to-door. An *anganwadi* worker who has known this village for past 18 years spoke about the assistance and help rendered by the Knowledge Workers in carrying out her work and sharing some of her work load in the village. She mentioned that prior to setting up of the VKC, the village youth club members used to help her. Now most of it is being carried out with the assistance

and help of the Knowledge Workers such as taking village census, distributing widow/ destitute-women pension, managing *anganwadi* children in her (*anganwadi* worker's) absence. Some of the government entitlements like old-age pension and pension for differentially able persons are distributed through the Knowledge Workers.

The Knowledge Workers have instilled great confidence in the villagers that they feel encouraged to go to the former for any help or assistance even if it is not directly related to their work. To cite an example, the Knowledge Workers mentioned the following incident which happened some time ago. One morning when some villagers saw a live wire fallen on the ground near the school premises they alerted the Knowledge Workers. The villagers did not know how to take precautions in removing the wire safely. The Knowledge Workers asked the villagers not to panic and informed the boundary partner, who in turn contacted the Electricity Board. In the meantime, since it was time for school to begin, the Knowledge Workers cautioned the Head Mistress and other teachers who were on their way to school. The children were not allowed to enter the school till everything was set right.

Villagers, particularly women, look for guidance and advice from the Knowledge Workers. They would request them to see whether tuitions are conducted properly for their children. They seek their advice if they want to change their children to a different school or in choosing the subjects for them to study in higher secondary school. The Knowledge Workers counsel their friends and relatives in handling their children. Both of them encourage other women to participate in awareness/training programmes organised for the villagers. This reflects a dimension of their social empowerment. (They also have acquired economic empowerment at least in a small way.)

### **Social commitment: take initiative to help the community**

Their role as a Knowledge Worker and the resultant exposure have created and developed a sense of social consciousness and social commitment in the Knowledge Workers. Knowledge Workers take the initiative in helping needy persons in the village. For instance, when a young boy required a heart surgery they sought the help of Rotary Club. When it did not work out, they approached the local MLA and requested him to arrange for financial assistance from the MLA fund for the boy's medical treatment. Fortunately, the MLA promised to help the boy. During our recent telephonic conversation in August 2011 with one of the Knowledge Workers, it was mentioned that the process is almost over and the boy would soon be undergoing the necessary surgery in Puducherry. They were also very happy to mention the boy who got proper eyesight after the surgery was conducted at Sankara Nethralaya at Chennai. They were moved when he thanked the Knowledge Centre for all the support and encouragement.

It is encouraging to observe that the Knowledge Workers want to expand their role and to take up other social issues in society. While these two women are happy to say that the village people have improved a lot in many aspects, they are sad about the prevalence

of alcoholism among men about which they are unable to do anything. They feel a social campaign against alcoholism is the need of the hour. Irrespective of age the male members have to be made aware of the ill effects of alcohol consumption and one must develop the will to resist it, mentioned Akila. She added, 'we do not know when and how to start this campaign; this needs the support and cooperation of the community'.

### **Enhancement of social status and self-esteem**

Association with the VRC/VKC programme has largely contributed to enhancing their self-esteem and confidence. They feel proud to be part of the VRC/VKC programme. They are happy to mention that their social status in the village has increased considerably. They are well recognised by the society. They pointed out they feel honoured because these days they are invited as guests for all the school functions in the village. They said they were once treated like any other ordinary women in the village. Now their social status has increased. It was heartening to know that though one of them comes



*Knowledge Workers, boundary partner and VKVMC members during a discussion*

from a very humble socio-economic background (hails from the lowest strata of social hierarchy in the village) her role as a Knowledge Worker has enhanced her social status in the village. She pointed out that she belongs to a community which has a low social status when compared with others in the village. Her community has traditionally been subservient to other high-caste people. Her mother-in-law would get up as a mark of respect (even if she were sitting in her own house) if she happens to see a person from higher caste. But as far as the former is concerned, things have changed for better now. She says coming from such a background today she sits along with other village men in the chair during the meetings where she shares her views and gives suggestions. Her social status has improved due to her association with the VKC as Knowledge Worker. She feels happy her social stature has grown to such a level to sit on a chair along with village elders whenever a meeting is held. Her position and role as a Knowledge Worker has enhanced her social status and along with it her self-esteem has also been enhanced, mentioned Sasikala. Akila is very happy that she is able to understand and speak a little bit of English. They take pride in saying that they are able to teach others the usage of computers when they themselves had never had an idea about it a few years ago.

It is heartening to point out here that one of the Knowledge Workers has been awarded Fellowship in the National Virtual Academy during the year 2009 for her meritorious services to the village through the VKC.

Knowledge Workers were proud to mention their role as resource persons during a self-employment training programme conducted by Rotary Club in Karaikal. They demonstrated preparation of phenol and soap oil to the participants. They were also pleased to mention that they were invited as resource persons for one more training programme on phenol preparation for the workers in a home run for mentally retarded persons in Karaikal. The Knowledge Workers mentioned that they were really happy that they got an opportunity to share their knowledge with the workers of the home. Though they were offered some money as honorarium they politely refused; they did not feel like taking even bus fare from the institution running the home. Looking at the condition of the children at the home they felt the least they could do was only sharing the knowledge with the workers who take care of them.

### **VRC and boundary partner are source of inspiration**

We come to understand that boundary partner is a source of inspiration to the Knowledge Workers. Whenever there is any difficulty or if they need any help, the Knowledge Workers approach the youth club president. The Knowledge Workers share their experiences and others information related to the VKC with the latter daily. The Knowledge Workers mentioned that if they are able to work for the community it is mainly because of the inspiration of the youth club and also the understanding and committed staff of the VRC. The Knowledge Workers mentioned that their work is monitored by the boundary partner and even by few village persons. If there were a delay in opening the Centre, the boundary partner would question them and would stress that VKC disseminates information on time. If there were a reduction in the number of VKC users, the boundary partner would ask for clarification. It is interesting to mention that one of the youth club members working abroad at present has also been a great source of inspiration to the Knowledge Workers. He calls the Knowledge Workers and the present youth club leader often over phone to find out the progress of the VKC programme.



*Knowledge Workers listening to a presentation of one of their counterparts during a Knowledge Workers meeting*

The Knowledge Workers prepare monthly work plan for the VKC, which is discussed in the monthly Knowledge Workers meeting held at the VRC, and the same is shared with the boundary partner; this has helped them to improve the quality of their work and has promoted the participation and involvement of the boundary partner in the day-to-day activities of the VKC. The VRC encourages the Knowledge Workers to participate in the strategic partners' meetings because it will enable them to get contacts. It is important they get to be familiar with these contacts because they are the ones who take the information to the villagers, mentioned the VRC coordinator. As already mentioned, the coordinator strongly believes that the Knowledge Workers are the bridge between the community and the VKC programme. So, she emphasises that the Knowledge Workers should take a lead role whenever a programme is held at the village and also encourages them to share their experiences with their counterparts in other VKCs and members involved in similar programmes.

It may be mentioned here that in order to improve Knowledge Workers' work efficiency and keep their morale high, the VRC periodically conducts capacity building programmes for them. One such programme is the general management of VKCs where the Knowledge Workers are trained in important aspects like VKC-user mobilisation, how to approach and communicate with the community, user register maintenance etc. Agalankan's Knowledge Workers have participated more than three times in the training programmes on general management organised by the VKC. They have also participated in training programmes related to need assessment of the community, content preparation, technical training in hardware/software maintenance and so on. All these have contributed immensely in developing the capacity of Knowledge Workers as managers of the VKC and also in handling other things in the village; they are able to discharge their duties with confidence and clarity primarily because they have been given various opportunities to improve themselves through the VRC, asserted one of the Knowledge Workers.

It is interesting to find that the Knowledge Workers have proper understanding between them. They recognise and value each one's strength and weakness. Sasikala praises Akila for her boldness while the latter complements her colleague for her patience and sharpness of mind. Between them there is understanding and coordination in carrying out their activities.



*Capacity building training programme for Knowledge Workers*



## 7. Proactive role of the Boundary Partner

We have seen earlier that setting up of a VKC in Agalankan has chiefly been facilitated by the presence of dynamic and committed youth club<sup>7</sup> in the village. Under its inspiring president, the youth club has been part and parcel of the programme since its inception. With the unanimous support of the villagers, the youth club has enthusiastically taken the role of boundary partner of the VKC programme. The present president of the club Bala Mukundan and others like Mani kandan were quick to grasp the importance of the concept of the boundary partner and the latter's role for effective functioning of the VKC as a community-based programme. The sense of ownership that makes them feel, 'the VKC is ours,' seems to have come to them spontaneously. The boundary partner's involvement has been complete right from the stage of planning, establishment and now in the functioning of the VKC. It is common to come across people in the village speaking highly of the services of the youth club to the society. One of the men said, 'it is the backbone of our village. It is because of the youth club the village has been able to get the facility of VKC.'

### Youth club as boundary partner

It has been mentioned earlier that the youth club, as the boundary partner of the VKC programme in the village, has provided free space for the VKC in the same building where it also has its office. It also meets the electricity charges of the Centre. The boundary partner stated that the rent collected from the *anganwadi* is used to pay the electricity bills and other sundry expenses of the Centre.

It is pointed out that as far as Agalankan VKC is concerned, the VRC's work is made much easier because of its dynamic boundary partner. The former does not seem to have any problem in organising programmes and conducting activities in this village. 'Normally, establishing contacts and building rapport alone would involve lot of efforts and time,' mentioned one of the VRC staff. Mobilisation of the community would generally require great efforts, but in this hamlet, the boundary partner has been of great help since the process of setting up of a VKC began. The youth club functions like an institution through which all the activities are conducted immediately and effectively. Even during the initial stages of the programme, the VRC could carry out need assessment (need assessment is done at various levels using various tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and focus group discussion. Need assessment and survey of the households are done to fine-tune the activities of the Centre) without much of a difficulty due to boundary partner's active involvement and support. It may be pointed out here that the interest and engagement of the boundary partner in the VRC/VKC programme has been increasing day by day. In fact, the youth club has taken a proactive role in promoting the activities of the VKC for the development of the villagers.

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7. Youth club and boundary partner are used interchangeably.

The concern of youth for village development in various important spheres can easily be gauged through their needs expressed during a need-assessment programme; it was a focus group meeting held after few months of the inception of VKC at Agalankan. The youth under the inspiring leader of the youth club spelt out their need to know specific information about the following:

- Higher studies: details after tenth class, higher secondary schooling, undergraduate degree
- Details about technical institutions and courses offered
- Education loan procedure for various nationalised banks
- Welfare schemes for youth from district administration
- Self-employment programme for youth
- Other computer course like Tally and DCA etc
- General health awareness programmes about Malaria, Dengue, and HIV-AIDS etc.
- Details about public toilet scheme from Thirunallar Commune
- Agricultural loan details from various banks
- Vegetable seeds and cultivation methods
- Soil test from agricultural department
- Common seasonal disease for animals and its prevention methods from animal husbandry department.

The VRC/VKC has been able to address not only the needs expressed above by the youth club but also the subsequent requirements of the community related to several aspects of their lives and livelihood. It may be pointed out here that through the boundary partner the community has been able to articulate their needs well.

### **Role of boundary partner**

Once the youth club got an organisational base in the form of a VKC, the leader and other active members believed that this facility should be used well. They are keen to improve and strengthen the services and other activities of the Centre. The youth club is conscious of the fact that information/knowledge empowerment of people is very essential for their socio-economic development. So, the youth club has been careful that the villagers should not look at VKC as an institution that offers training in computer application skills alone; it is also a place where everyone has access to information and knowledge related to agriculture, veterinary, education, job opportunities,



*Youth club leader*

health and so on. It is stated that the youth club motivates and directs people to go to VKC for any information need or other assistance. As the boundary partner makes necessary efforts, the services and activities of the VKC reach maximum number of persons in and around the village. The boundary partner makes the effort to carry the benefits of the VKC programme to neighbouring villages, such as Selloor and Vizhidiyur. The former through contacts with important persons from these villages students are encouraged to participate in MUPP and INTEL programme conducted in the VKC of Agalankan.

As the boundary partner, the youth club monitors the activities of the Centre and performance of the Knowledge Workers. The former keeps track of people visiting the Centre daily and the purpose for which they approached the VKC by regularly going through the user register kept in the VKC. The boundary partner is particular that Knowledge Workers should be available to provide information without any delay. It is insisted that if there is any difficulty in immediately providing the required information, it should be provided to the concerned individual within 24 hours.

### **Value linkages for village development**

It may be mentioned here that youth club members do not consider themselves as mere beneficiaries of the VKC programme but believe that they are partners. This attitude has helped them look for various opportunities to improve VKC's functioning and through it the entire village. The youth club which had already built up some contacts with the Block Development Office (BDO) and Nehru Yuva Kendra showed keen interest in building linkages. The boundary partner being aware of the potential benefits of the linkages/networks uses every opportunity to capitalise them well to the advantage of the community. It emerged clearly during our field work in the village that it is mainly due to the total involvement and engagement of the boundary partner in the VKC programme that the linkages created through the facilitation of VRC got further strengthened. For instance, as we have seen earlier, the KVK shows a lot interest and works very closely with Agalankan villagers. The boundary partner takes the initiative to approach any government department for any assistance for the village. For example, when he came to know about direct rice sowing method he requested the KVK to conduct a training programme on that aspect for his villagers. He wanted farmers in his village to know about this agricultural practice as it would prove economical during the summer (samba season) season when there is shortage of water. Similarly, animal husbandry department extends all necessary support to Agalankan; the veterinary doctor comes even at midnight if there is any emergency. The youth club president closely follows up all the activities carried out through linkages. If for some reason, the villagers are not able to get a particular assistance like medical help for the people or for the livestock, the boundary partner in consultation with the VRC immediately takes necessary steps to get it. For instance, when veterinary mobile clinic did not visit the village for three consecutive weeks, the boundary partner wrote a letter to the animal husbandry department. The department immediately

responded by sending the mobile clinic to the village. Since then the mobile veterinary clinic comes regularly to Agalankan. The boundary partner encourages the village people to invest money got through loans properly so that it will help them to give income.

He utilises every opportunity to take important officials from government departments, political leaders and other important persons to the VKC and explains to them the services and activities of the Centre. He uses this as a strategy to build and strengthen his contacts with them. The club members who had contacts with BDO and *Nehru Yuva Kendra* now proudly say that they have good links and excellent rapport with most of the government departments at Karaikal and even civil society organisations like Rotary Club in Karaikal, thanks to the VRC/VKC programme.

During our visit to this village in the month of March 2011, the boundary partner was wondering whether tuition can be held in the evenings for school children in the VKC building. There is a request for this from a known person. The farmer thinks it would help the village children. After consulting the VRC, he said he would take a decision on this.

### **Public Address System for the VKC**

The commitment of the boundary partner to the VKC programme has become evident in Agalankan village. Their drive to work for village development is something extraordinary. The boundary partner is very good at tapping the right resources for a help or any assistance. The Agalankan VKC did not have PAS facility in the beginning. Knowing the advantage of having one at the Centre, boundary partner and Knowledge Workers wished to install one and placed a request for the same to the VRC. The latter also said it would discuss about it with the head office. In the meantime a person by name Mr Murugaram (an alumni of Pondicherry Engineering College works with people of Karaikal in order to make the government sensitive, by making citizen sensitive to their duties and rights) interested in rural development and associated with *Pudia Bhoomi* (New Earth Welfare Association -Pondicherry Engineering College Alumnus body. It focuses on development activities on a small scale and helps the youth in higher education) happened to visit Agalankan VKC. Interestingly, this person has been aware of the VRC/VKC programme carried out in Puducherry. Because of his interest in rural development he worked as volunteer for three months in the VRC of Puducherry. So he showed great interest in the VKC programme of Agalankan. He was impressed with the kind of work being carried out in Agalankan. He appreciated the services and activities of the VKC and the interest of the Knowledge Workers in the programme. During the course of the interaction between the former and the boundary partner, the latter enquired whether the NGO with which the former was associated would sponsor the PAS facility to the VKC. To the pleasant surprise of the youth club president Bala Mukundan, the visitor responded positively and guided them to give a letter through the VRC requesting and explaining the need for PAS facility to the VKC. The boundary partner immediately took the initiative to send a letter to the concerned NGO and got PAS installed at the VKC. In most of the other villages, MSSRF has

provided this facility. It is the only this VKC which got it on its own initiative and efforts.

Velvizhi, the coordinator of the VRC, while talking about the Agalankan VKC appreciated the responsible role played by the boundary partner. She stated that even the staff of VRC did not realise that the boundary partners are partners of VKC. 'But here', she says, 'in this small hamlet it is heartening to observe that the youth club has a clear perspective of its role and functions



*Boundary partner discussing with Knowledge Workers*

with commitment as a partner of the programme. They have given the right meaning to the concept of boundary partner through their engagement in the everyday affairs of the Centre'. She said that the boundary partner monitors the Centre's activities closely and uses the VKC to improve information and knowledge base of the village and also to the development of the village. One of the Knowledge Workers was proud to mention that it is the only VKC which has a youth club as its boundary partner. Interestingly, the Knowledge Workers look up to the former as their mentor and feel it is their responsibility to take everything to their attention. As mentioned earlier, they discuss the VKC's monthly work plan (developed during Knowledge Workers meetings held at VRC) with the boundary partner. This has promoted the participation and involvement of the boundary partner in the day-to-day activities of the VKC. The coordinator is also glad to mention that VRC's efforts to integrate VRC, VKC and boundary partner's work is already happening in this hamlet. 'In this way sustainability aspect of the VKC can be easily handled', asserts Velvizhi.

### **Initiatives for infrastructural facilities**

From day one, the youth club members, mainly its president, looked at VKC as a great institutional asset for village development. It is regarded as a vital forum through which they can accomplish many useful things for the village. The conceptual clarity of the VKC programme and supportive staff of VRC inspire the boundary partner to use the VKC programme as base for the overall development of the village and building the capacities of the community.

The exposure that the boundary partner and others got through the programme empowered them to take up issues concerning the village as a whole and work on the solutions. The boundary partner mentioned that these days they are able to approach any issue/problem with clarity and confidence. He added that the Knowledge Centre in the village provided them with a good platform using which they could get certain



facilities for the village using government schemes and assistance available from different government departments. They do not let go of any facility/right that is due to the village. They are focused in their work and do not rest until an issue/problem is solved. The following instance explains how the youth club was steadfast in their demand in getting *karumadhi mandapam* (a place where obsequies for the departed soul can be performed by bereaved family members) constructed and the clarity with which they approached the issue.

### **Construction of *karumadhi mandapam***

It is stated that Agalankan was one of the areas identified for constructing *karumadhi mandapam* from the fund known as MLA's fund<sup>8</sup> by the *Commune Panchayat*. But, the Public Works Department (PWD) objected to it because it wanted to construct something else for its use in the very same place where the *karumadhi mandapam* building was proposed to come up. In order to stop *Commune Panchayat* from going ahead with the construction of the *karumadhi mandapam*, the PWD obtained a stay order from the court of law. When the president of the youth club came to know of this, he and the villagers were surprised at the attitude and action of the PWD. He did not want to let go and decided to get the *karumadhi mandapam* constructed where it was originally planned. The president of the club accompanied by few villagers met the Junior Engineer of the PWD and requested him not to obstruct the construction of the building which would be of great use to the villagers. When the PWD did not relent, the president of the youth club decided to take up the issue and fight for their right. This is because, it is in this place that the villagers traditionally have been performing obsequies for the dead. It is situated on the banks of the river and convenient to carry out the rites. He sent letters to the district collector, commune panchayat, commissioner and local representatives explaining them about everything. It was also stressed in the letter that the villagers' sentiments should be respected. He sent letters after letters to the concerned government departments/officers; his efforts did not go waste and the issue was resolved. The *Commune Panchayat* could build the *karumadhi mandapam* in 2007 using MLA's fund and the villagers are happy that they have a proper shelter to perform rites and rituals for the dead kin members.



*Karumadhi mandapam*

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8. The government of Puducherry under its rural development sector allocates a particular amount for the MLA's / Councillors' Local Area Development Scheme for the implementation of the works proposed by the MLAs / Councillors. Various projects identified by the MLAs will be executed using this fund viz. Improvement of roads, construction of school buildings, community hall, library blocks, improvement of markets would be done as suggested by the MLAs. These works are normally executed through respective commune Panchayat.

## Concrete road leading to the cremation ground

In another instance, the youth got a concrete road laid in the place of the mud path which led to the village graveyard. They got this road laid using the MLA's fund. They came to know that the funds sanctioned for rural development lying with the commune panchayat had not been utilised and that the unspent money would be surrendered soon. They were aware that the money could be used for infrastructural facilities, such as improvement of roads. As the condition of the road to the village cremation ground was extremely bad, the boundary partner believed that the mud road could be easily replaced with a concrete one using some amount of the unused fund. He sprang into action immediately and sent a letter to the commune panchayat pointing out the bad condition of the mud road leading to village graveyard, which caused inconvenience to the people, particularly during rainy season. The commune panchayat responded positively and laid a *pakka* road. The boundary partner mentioned that their work became somewhat easy because by then they had developed reasonably good contacts and access to government departments. Also, their request was a genuine one and it came well under that particular scheme of developing infrastructure facilities with the MLA's funds.

## Recognition and appreciation

As a tribute to his services for the development of the village, Bala Mukundan, the president of the youth club was awarded the NVA Fellowship in the year 2009. He says, as an NVA Fellow he is more motivated to work for the socio-economic development of the village and also feels that his responsibilities have increased.

The president of the youth club was also happy to mention that the youth club which had received district level prizes for their activities at the village level for 10 consecutive years, now got the state-level prize for the first time. They were able to get it mainly due to their association and participation in implementing the VRC/VKC programme in the village.

It may not be out of context to mention here that the youth club president has been invited to share his experiences with students working for their Master of Social Work degree, who come through the BDO. It seems he encourages the students by saying, '...if we (youth club) can do on a smaller scale you can do it on much a larger scale.'

The boundary partner recalled a few occasions where he and the Knowledge Workers were invited to share their experiences in running the VKC programme in Agalankan with other organisations/institutions having similar objectives as that of VRC/VKC programme. He considers it an honour that he and Knowledge Workers were invited to participate in the inauguration of a new VKC in Kalikuppam, a fishing village in Karaikal district, in January 2010. (This VKC has been set up by Kalikuppam people, the Panchayat and the Pondicherry Engineering College Alumnus body, named, New Earth Welfare Association, with the support of MSSRF and District administration.) During the function, the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers spoke to the gathering about the VKC programme

in Agalankan and their experiences related to it. Their work was greatly appreciated by the members present in the dais and in the audience. They (boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers) were pleased to mention that their names appeared both in vernacular and English newspapers that covered the inauguration of the Kalikuppam VKC. The boundary partner was happy to say that they were referred to as Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy Fellows in the newspaper report.

Just as the Knowledge Workers from the VKCs of Nagarkovil appreciated their counterparts in Agalankan, the boundary partner also received compliments from his counterparts in the VKCs of Nagarkovil. After listening to the role of the former in the functioning of the VKC, the latter humbly submitted that they had come to realise that the efforts they had put in were very less and that they required to work a lot more to make the programme more meaningful. The visitors were very glad to point out that they considered this exposure visit to Agalankan very useful as it enabled them to realise their shortcomings and at the same inspired them to make efforts for the successful functioning of the programme.

Involvement in the VKC activities has enhanced the reputation of the youth club not only within village but also outside the village. It was mentioned that people from neighbouring villages and Karaikal wondered how the youth club was able to get the facility of VKC. There were others who were curious to know how the village has been able to organize the eye-camps and other programmes.

### **Inspiration for youth in other villages**

It was learnt during our field work that the youth from Akkaraipettai in Nagapattinam district have been highly inspired when they visited Agalankan village; they have been encouraged to do their best to improve the socio-economic condition of their community. The former got introduced to *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram* in Agalankan through the VRC of Nagapattinam when some of the highly motivated young men from Akkaraipettai wanted to form a youth association in their village. Also, a youth club from one of the VKC villages, namely, Sundaramudayan, of VRC of Thangachimadam in Ramanathapuram district has been able to improve its activities after its members contacted and discussed with the youth club president from Agalankan through audio conference. This proved very useful, mentioned a NVA Fellow from Sundaramudayan. According to him, earlier, the youth club in his village was involved only in activities like organising village festivals and in few other village-level works. Their interaction with the youth club at Agalankan helped them to know about Nehru Yuva Kendra. They have started to work in association with Nehru Yuva Kendra now and they have also been motivated to take a more active role in the VKC programme.

### **Boundary partner gets new support**

We came to understand through our discussions and interactions with women and men of the community that though the villagers appreciated the use of the programme and the

key role played by the youth club in all its activities, there was not much direct involvement of the community in the first two years. Fortunately, the formation of Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee in Agalankan during October, 2008, brought about changes in the villagers' attitude. They soon felt that they were part of the programme and started involving themselves in the day-to-day activities of the VKC. A sense of community ownership of the programme became very evident after the VKCMC was constituted. According to Mukundan and a few others, the VKCMC has facilitated members to work together and decide collectively; most importantly, it has made boundary partner's work much easier. As a group, they are empowered to take up initiatives and work not only for proper implementation of the VKC programme but also for the development of the village using VKC as a base. We will be discussing later about some such initiatives undertaken by the boundary partner with the active support of the VKCMC.

## **8. Constitution of Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee (VKCMC)**

### **VKCMC: to promote community ownership and institutional sustainability**

Commitment and participation of the local population are fundamental to the success of any community-based programme. With this view, the Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee<sup>9</sup> is generally formed in all the VKC villages to review the programme periodically. The VKCMC comprises stakeholders from different walks of life, such as a few important persons from the village, a boundary partner and strategic partners and other key persons (outside the village) closely associated with Agalankan. The idea of including members other than the villagers is that they will be of great support in providing content in later days.

Formation of the VKCMC can also be seen as a means of capacity building of the community. Through the VKCMC, the programme aims to facilitate and enhance community responsibility and involvement in the day to day functioning of the VKC. In short, it is formed to promote and strengthen a sense of community ownership of the programme. It is generally believed that sense of ownership will ultimately take care of institutional sustainability. So, the VRC of Nagapattinam took earnest efforts to constitute a Village Management Committee of Village Knowledge Centre in Agalankan.

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*9. VRC/VKC programme believes that forming a VKCMC in all the VKC villages is important for the effective functioning of a VKC and its sustainability. Through the VKCMC, the programme aims to promote participation of the community in the programme. In order to ensure involvement of the members, the VKCMC is encouraged to meet once a month to discuss and review the activities of the VKC. The Committee prepares a monthly plan of action after a detailed discussion among the persons present. During the meetings, activities of the previous month are reviewed and discussed along with the follow up measures. In all the meetings the VRC representative plays a facilitator's role.*

It is important to mention here that it was a challenging task for the VRC to form a VKCMC in Agalankan. Normally, constituting a VKCMC in other VKC villages has not involved much effort on the part of the VRC. In contrast to the VRC experiences in other villages, it posed a great challenge to the former to form a VKCMC. The VRC which had so far believed that it could implement the VKC programme in this village with minimum efforts found itself in a difficult situation when it came to the question of constituting VKC Management Committee. The youth club viewed this initiative as redundant, since they believed that as boundary partner they have been doing their best to run the VKC for the benefit of the community. They were apprehensive that this committee might sideline the youth club's role in the VKC programme, or it would push it to a secondary position. Why should the VRC form another committee when youth club as *pagudhi pangalar* (boundary partner) carrying out its work, and what was the need for another committee, were the doubts in the minds of the youth club members. Even the community had this doubt; they were confused. So, the VRC staff had to spend a lot of time and energy in clearing the apprehensions of the youth club and other village members and convincing them about the necessity and utility of such a committee for the success and sustainability of the programme. The VRC had to conduct a number of meetings with different sections of the population to sensitise them about the VKCMC. It took nearly seven to eight months before a VKCMC could be constituted.

As we have mentioned above, prior to the formation of a VKCMC, the VRC had a discussion with youth club executive committee members, which was later followed by series of meetings with the rest of the village people, Panchayat board members, village health nurse, schoolteacher, *anganwadi* worker, Farmer group members and self-help group members. During these meetings, the VRC staff explained in detail the intention behind forming such a committee. In all the meetings, it was stressed that the village, through the VKCMC, should take responsibilities to get involved in the day-to-day activities of the VKC and act as a monitor to ensure proper functioning of the VKC in order to serve the villagers in a more constructive and meaningful way. It was also stressed that committee would play an advisory role in the functioning of the VKC. Fortunately, the efforts taken by the VRC yielded positive results, and the concept of the VKCMC was well understood by the youth club and other stakeholders in the village and they also felt that such a committee is vital for sustainability of the VKC; they extended their whole-hearted support for the formation of management committee in Agalankan. Interestingly, the villagers and the youth club members themselves expressed that only enthusiastic and interested persons should be included in the committee as members.

Thus, after several meetings with different stakeholders VKCMC has been formed during (month ) 2008 drawing members from different walks of life such as the headmistress of the local school, the *anganwadi* worker, and a member from Farmers' club, villagers working in different government departments (like Public Works Department, Electricity Board), a



SHG member, the boundary partner, the Knowledge Workers and a representative of VRC. It is encouraging to point out that the Knowledge Workers, the boundary partner and other VKCMC members are positive that the purpose for which the VKCMC is formed will definitely be served —promoting the participation of the community in the day-to-day activities of the Centre and ultimately owning it.

While talking about the formation of the VKCMC and the difficulties it had to encounter in the process, the coordinator of the VRC programme pointed out, '...it is worth the trouble. We are glad our efforts helped in strong institution building (forming the VKCMC). Today the VKCMC is doing remarkable work not only concerned with the VKC but also related to the overall village development'. The kind of work this VKCMC has been doing for promoting VKC activities and also the initiatives taken by it for village improvement since its formation is discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

### **Active role of the VKCMC**

It is heartening to know that the VKCMC members display a great sense of responsibility and ownership towards the VKC. The VKCMC members mobilise people for any VKC/VRC programme conducted within the village or outside the village. Bala Mukundan and few others spontaneously take the responsibility of monitoring the activities of VKC. They guide and encourage Knowledge Workers in their work. This inspires the Knowledge Workers to be committed to their work and carry out the expected tasks with right attitude. The former pointed out that the VKCMC members working in different government departments take interest in sharing information. They inform the Knowledge Workers if there is a new scheme/government programme, agriculture-related information, such as getting vegetable seeds, subsidies and so on. In case someone comes to know of any important news either through radio or television he/she would immediately inform the VKC so that the Knowledge Workers can convey the same to the villagers either by writing on the notice board kept outside the VKC or through the PAS. For instance, if a closure is declared for schools due to heavy rains, the VKCMC members immediately convey the message to the Knowledge Workers.

As expected by the VRC/VKC programme, the VKCMC closely monitors the functioning of the VKC. Knowledge Workers are expected to update them about VKC-related activities during the monthly meetings. As already mentioned, the boundary partner regularly checks the user register of the VKC to know how many people are visiting the Centre and for what purpose. The boundary partner also verifies with the Knowledge Workers



*VKCMC meeting in progress*

whether the users could get the details they required. Sometimes other members also check the user register kept in the VKC. The VKCMC does not hesitate to enquire the Knowledge Workers if they need any clarification on matters related to the functioning of VKC. The VKCMC is particular that the VKC should be kept open during the working hours. It is stated that during one of the VKCMC meetings, a member brought to the attention of the committee that he had noticed on one or two occasions the VKC not been opened at 9.30 AM and he sought explanation from the Knowledge Workers. The latter gave reasons for the same and explained that they had to go to organise workers for MGNREGA programme in the village and to measure area to allot to the workers. They also explained that they went for the above-mentioned work after getting permission from the boundary partner and the VRC to open the Centre around 11 AM. As the Knowledge Workers are ever willing to help people with information (or helping them to make phone calls to ambulance service or take a printout if it is urgent) even if it is 10 o'clock at night, the members were convinced with their explanation and they were encouraged to carry out their work effectively. During the VKCMC meeting, Knowledge Workers talk about important VKC-related activities and the monthly work plan of the VKC developed during Knowledge Workers monthly meeting held in VRC. In the subsequent meeting, committee members generally verify whether activities were conducted according to the plan. Knowledge Workers are expected to provide a reason if something is not being done as per the plan. As members in the VKCMC, the Knowledge Workers are free to express any difficulty they encounter while discharging VKC and other associated work

It is stated that the VKCMC functions with three main objectives—to discover the needs of the village, plan and get into action. The VKCMC looks into local needs/interests and takes necessary steps. The members try their best to meet once in two months to discuss issues related to the functioning of the VKC. Every subsequent meeting starts with a review of the previous month's meeting and whether decisions taken during the previous meeting have been carried out. They also use this opportunity to discuss general issues concerning the village. The VKCMC also chalks out yearly plan of action. It is interesting to point out here that the VKCMC sends its minutes of the meeting and yearly plan of action to the MSSRF head office at Chennai and to the VRC. The coordinator of the VRC programme at Nagapattinam stated that it is the only the VKCMC which sends minutes of the meeting and yearly plan of action to the head office at Chennai.

The members were proud to mention that the VKCMC is an apolitical body and the members do not have any selfish motive. One of the members said those who use the VKC will definitely be benefitted by it. He added, 'in case a farmer uses the information or agro advisories provided through the VKC, he gets a good yield and profit'. The members were pleased to share about improvements in the field of agriculture, livestock and education. A middle-aged man said that he felt proud that their village children were learning to use computers and were getting certificate after completing the course (MUPP). Also, they are happy that boys and girls from nearby villages getting benefits of computer education

and certificates due to the presence of VKC in Agalankan. The committee members wish that this programme should have a wider reach and it should not confine to their village. They also stated that people should know about MSSRF and what it stands for. 'Many more villages should be benefited by this', said Magali..

It was motivating to learn that the VKCMC has started seriously thinking about the sustainability of the VRC/VKC programme. They stated that they do not wish to bother the VRC for small things. One of the VKCMC members, namely, Chellaiyah mentioned that the VKC should be in a position to meet the cost of small repair works and the VRC should not be bothered for minor things. So, the VKCMC is planning to collect a nominal amount as a course fee from the students learning computer technology. But they will inform whatever they do in the village through the VKC and do everything with the VRC's guidance and support.

The coordinator of the VRC/VKC programme in Nagapattinam was happy to mention that their job is normally made easy in this hamlet. The only difficulty the VRC faces in this little village is in organising meetings with villagers. If any meeting has to be conducted, it is possible only after 7 p.m. A majority of households are involved in agriculture. We have seen that they grow cattle to supplement their household income. The villagers are generally free after seven in the evening; there were days when VRC staff had to leave the village late in the night. But the VRC staff did not mind this and they extend their support and assistance to development of village society.

## **9 VKCMC and the village development: initiatives for infrastructural facilities**

The VKCMC, which has essentially been constituted with an objective to promote community ownership of the programme, has been inspired to take a much larger role in matters related to the village as a whole. The VKCMC acts as a forum where local-level issues are discussed and solutions formulated. VKCMC and youth club plan together for common ideas and visions. Interestingly, the VKCMC has largely come to be looked upon as a *makkal amaippu* (community organisation) by the inhabitants of Agalankan village.

It is encouraging to learn from the Knowledge Workers and also from the boundary partner that constitution of VKCMC has further empowered the latter to take initiatives for village development with more confidence; the boundary partner's bargaining capacity has improved because he has a group of his village people to support him in his efforts. When we asked the Knowledge Workers and the boundary partner to elaborate as to how the VKCMC strengthened the hands of the boundary partner, the former stated that earlier, the youth club president had to do everything on his own—from thinking, planning and implementing any activity. The boundary partner had to handle everything almost single-handed—like going to a department office to get some details or to request for any assistance. One of the Knowledge Workers pointed out, 'It always makes a difference

when some one is with us however efficient one may be. Now the entire committee is with the boundary partner; that gives him great moral support. And whenever there is an issue to be handled it is done without much difficulty when taken up as a group representing the village'. Our interactions with the boundary partner also confirmed this view expressed by the Knowledge Workers.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the VKCMC has come to occupy a significant position in the society because of its role in the VKC and other matters related to the village. It is learnt that due to lack of enthusiasm and leadership qualities of the *naattamai* (the village traditional leader) the VKCMC has been motivated to take certain initiatives for the development of the village. According to the boundary partner, the *naattamai* was unable to use his position effectively for village improvement. So, it was felt that the VKCMC, as a community organization, should take the required initiative for the development of the village using the opportunities available. 'Ultimately people should be benefited, that is the primary idea', mentioned the youth club leader. It is stated that the members involve the *naattamai* and do not antagonise the latter.

The members of the VKCMC have started viewing the VKC as a great institutional or organisational support for village development. They use the VKC as a platform to carry out whatever work they undertake concerning the village development. Almost all the initiatives (apart from VKC activities) taken by the VKCMC have largely been centred on village development and improvement. They have come to learn to tap the right person or resource to put forward their need or demand and thereby get the work done. The boundary partner pointed out that whenever a letter has to be sent to any government department or other institution, it is sent in the name of the VKCMC, duly signed by all the members, to the concerned departments. 'Such is the strength of the letter when sent by the VKCMC of the VKC', says Bala Mukundan. 'that the letter receives immediate attention from the concerned department, and it takes action.' 'This is mainly because the letter is in the name of VKCMC and not sent by an individual', says the youth club president, proudly.

It has been amazing, the manner in which VKCMC has taken up certain issues concerning the village as whole and worked collectively in accomplishing a set task that is advantageous to the entire village. The boundary partner mentioned that all their activities are centered on village development and the VKCMC gets necessary encouragement and guidance from the VRC. The VKCMC, as a community-based organisation, has the credit of obtaining certain basic infrastructural facilities for the village, regarding which we will discuss in the following sections.

### **Community hall (samudaya koodam)**

Residents of Agalankan did not have a common place to conduct household social functions like a wedding ceremony, until 2008. They had to go to a nearby village, namely,

Vizhudhur. Going to another village involves a lot of time, energy and money. They had to pay a rent of Rs6, 500 per day. So the VKCMC approached the Block Development Office (BDO) and gave a letter explaining the hardships experienced by the villagers in going to another village for conducting weddings. The letter emphasised the need for a *samudaya koodam* for Agalankan village. Their request was well taken and under



Community hall

a Community Hall was built in the village during 2008. This facility has saved the concerned household's time, energy and money. A household wishing to use the Community Hall can use it by paying a rent of Rs650 per day. The household can save nearly Rs5000, now.

### **Construction of levees along the canal banks**

Organisational capacity of the VKCMC can be gauged from the manner it got the PWD to construct levees to prevent flooding of the village canal locally known as *amma vaika*, which flows on the periphery of the village. Mukundan and few others in the village narrated the background of this episode. The issue of constructing levees or strengthening the canal embankment did not form the agenda of the VKCMC; it was rather unexpected one. The need to demand the construction of levees along the canal banks came up after the canal embankment was badly breached when cyclone 'Nisha'<sup>10</sup> hit places in and around Karaikal and Nagapattinam in November, 2008. Consequent to heavy inflow of water into the canal and subsequent breach in the embankment, water flooded Agalankan village. Obviously, inhabitants experienced lot of inconvenience and were frightened as the flood water entered village. At the initiative of the boundary partner of the VKC, the VKCMC decided that immediate action should be taken to prevent recurrence of flooding in future so that people would feel secure in case of a heavy downpour or any other cyclone strikes the region again. As part of the relief package the government personnel came to flood affected Agalankan to distribute food packets. The boundary partner and the VKCMC used this opportunity to express their protest and resentment to the government. They gathered around 200 villagers to stage a protest and it was decided that the food packets should be refused by the villagers. The entire village acted accordingly. The district collector, MLA, Junior Engineer and Assistant Engineer from the PWD visited the

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10. When Cyclone 'Nisha', hit Tamil Nadu and Puducherry coasts during November 2008 it caused heavy rainfall and floods accompanied by strong wind. It had thrown normal life out of gear. Under its influence, heavy rainfall occurred in almost all places. People were evacuated from low lying areas in Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Tiruvarur districts. Trees were uprooted and power cables snapped in Thanjavur, Nagapattinam, Tiruvarur and Cuddalore districts, bearing the brunt of the rains. Many small rivers were in spate and a number of breaches have been reported in these areas.



village and persuaded them to take the food first and assured them that the issue could be looked into later. But the villagers under the guidance of the VKCMC were very firm and refused to take the food packets. They told the officers that if they did not take food for few days nothing would happen. They were firm in their demand because they feared that when there were heavy rains it might inundate the village. They wanted an assurance that the canal embankment



*Amma vaika*

would be constructed and strengthened so that they could reside in the village without anxiety. As there was no assurance forthcoming, the villagers did not give up their demand. Fortunately for the villagers, they had another strong weapon with them. As we have mentioned earlier, the water pumping station catering to the water requirement of 70 percent of Karaikal region is set up in this village. When a lorry carrying diesel to the pumping station came that way, the villagers blocked it from entering the village. The pumping station required diesel for its functioning, as providing water to Karaikal area would be difficult otherwise. The villagers were well aware of it and under the inspiration of the VKCMC stood strong in their demand to be provided with a safeguard against floods and overflowing water from the canal. According to the boundary partner, the VKCMC as a body pointed out that the villagers no longer felt safe in their village and insisted that immediate attention should be given to this. The efforts of the VKCMC along with the support of the villagers yielded positive results. The concerned government authorities, coming to realise the power of people's strength, were compelled to give an undertaking that they would immediately act and construct levees along the canal banks to help prevent flooding. Within few days, the PWD undertook the work of constructing levees extending up to one and a half kilo metre along the banks of *amma vaika*

### ***Old primary school building gives way for a new structure***

It was interesting to listen to another successful initiative of the VKCMC members. The following instance reveals how they were able to exert pressure in getting the necessary sanction to pull down a five-year-old school building and in the very same place got constructed a new building for the village children to have education up to primary level. Agalankan villagers were happy when a school was constructed under District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) (which implements the Rural Development Programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development in the U.T of Puducherry through the Block Development Offices) programme during 2004–2005. For the first five years, everything went on so smoothly. But later, it was found that the building developed cracks and it started leaking whenever there were rains. The crucial point was that the dampness in the walls easily allowed electricity to pass through them. Consequently, the school children felt

electric shocks whenever they came into contact with the affected walls. It happened often. So, when the parents of the children came to know of it they at once took it to the notice of the boundary partner. There was a risk of school children getting seriously affected in case of an electric shock. On realising the gravity of the matter, this was reported to the concerned authorities through a letter duly signed by all the members of VKCMC. In response to the letter sent by the VKCMC, the DCR and Chief Educational Officer came to Agalankan for spot inspection. After a thorough review, they recommended demolition of the structure. Their recommendations could not be carried out immediately due to some administrative and procedural difficulties. It was pointed out that according to the government rule, the building could be considered for demolition only if it were 20 years old or more. Here, the building in question was only five years old and the villagers were given to understand that the children had to continue their education in the same building and there was no other alternative available. The boundary partner wondered how one could expect the young children to keep themselves away from the walls prone to seepage of electricity. He strongly believed that they would get a solution to the problem if one dealt with it in sincere and intelligent manner. Fortunately, the village had the support of the local MLA. The boundary partner along with the members of the VKC determined to make the concerned authorities understand the anxiety of the villagers. They approached the DRDA and put forth a demand that the latter should get a letter from the District Collector to give an undertaking that he would give a guarantee for the lives of school children. For six months the process went on. An enquiry was conducted as to who all were involved in the construction of the school. Finally, to the delight of the villagers, the VKCMC members in particular, orders were issued for the demolition of the old structure and construction of a new one in the same place. When the author visited the village for her field work during October 2010 the new building was awaiting its



*The newly built school*

formal inauguration. During the subsequent visit in March 2011, we were told that the building was already inaugurated in the month of January, 2011.

It seems during the inauguration of the school, the boundary partner, while thanking the authorities for constructing the school, put forward another request. He brought to the attention of the people sitting in the dais the importance of having a compound wall around the school, as there is a water pond which might pose some risk to the children. He also stressed a need for a play ground for the students. To the joy of the villagers, these two points were well taken by the authorities and on the spot they agreed to build a compound wall and make space for a play ground by demolishing an unused tiled building near the school. It was heartening to learn from the Knowledge Workers during our telephonic conversation during July 2011 that construction of the compound wall has been completed and demolition work on the tiled building was going on.

### **Concrete steps for a village pond**

It is worth mentioning here that through the Village Development Programme (VDP) of NABARD (Details of this programme are discussed in the next section) in Agalankon concrete steps for a pond namely *Irattai kulam* has been built. The VKCMC has been quick to capitalise on one of the objectives of the VDP namely infrastructural facilities for the adopted village through participation of the community/local institutions. The construction was over within the stipulated time, that is, by August, 2011. (More detail on this is given in the following section) It may be mentioned here that when the author was engaged in field work in March, 2011, the process of initiating the VDP by NABARD in partnership with MSSRF had been going on. It took seven to eight months before it was formally launched in June, 2011. The villagers are happy that the pond can be used by the cattle for drinking water.

### **Handling tricky situations**

In general, the VKCMC members command the respect and have the support of the villagers. However, at times they do face resistance from few quarters while carrying out some work for the village. The members are cautious in dealing with people in those circumstances. They are aware they cannot antagonise them. Because of the strength of the VKCMC, such situations are normally handled well and conflicts are resolved. 'When they work as a group for a common cause, it yields results', mentioned one of the village men. When construction of levees along the banks of *amma vaika* commenced, a few households tried to create problems to obstruct the work. These households had encroached upon the land that lay along the river banks. So, they were reluctant to part with encroached land. But due to the efforts of the VKCMC, the encroachments were successfully cleared and the construction of levees could be carried out.

There was another incident connected with clearing a village common road from encroachment by the people residing in that road. The people living on either side of the path had been using more than half of the road space for penning their cattle, stack

hay etc. As a result, the wide road became very narrow and congested causing a lot of inconvenience for other people to walk freely through that path. During village temple festivals, the traditional ritual of taking the deities in a ceremonial manner in a decorated cart or sometimes being carried by the devotees became very difficult when the temple entourage had to go through this particular road. The VKCMC was looking for an opportunity to take up this issue, and fortunately, as part of the rural road development programme, the work of converting the existing village roads to cement roads was initiated two years ago through a government tender. When laying of the cement road had to be carried out in this particular road the residents did not cooperate with the private contractor engaged in this work through a government tender. The VKCMC wanted to restore the road to its original size so as to enable free movement of the village people. They were careful while they approached the concern persons. Initially, there was opposition, but the VKCMC members did not give up. Finally, the persistent efforts of the VKCMC members yielded positive results. The members made the residents realise how they were hindering free movement of people as the road was occupied for tying their cattle and pile hay/cattle feed. In a polite but at the same time very stern manner, the VKCMC members handled this issue. It was pointed out to the inhabitants of that road how they were indifferent to the problems encountered by the rest of the people. The narrow path has given way to a wider cement road and people are happy that they are able to use the road without any hassle.

It was learnt during our interaction with the boundary partner and the Knowledge Workers that the VKCMC also observes carefully any work being carried by any government departments such as PWD or Electricity Board. They see to it that no one in the village bribes or influence any department persons involved with some village work or a private contractor working through government tender (like in laying cement roads) for getting special favours. At the same time, they also extend support and assistance to persons coming to the village to carryout their respective assigned task.

It was stated that of late local level issues are sorted out with in the village itself. Disputes within or between households or individuals are settled by the VKCMC members by talking and negotiating with concerned persons. Bala Mukundan pointed out that now-a-days residents of this village rarely go to police station.

### **Plans for the future**

The VKCMC as a village-based organisation takes up any issue related to the village without antagonising the concerned people and government departments and tries to get the work done. The members have harmonious relationship with almost all the government departments. It was pointed out that the PWD which was not happy with the boundary partner over the issue of construction of *karumadhi mandapam* later became friendly; it even came forward to fulfill legitimate demands of the village wherever possible, like fixing of a focus light in the temple compound. Since the temple is situated in the main village

it is of great use to the inhabitants during nights. The boundary partner also mentioned that the PWD has assured that it would consider favourably his request about setting up a park in the space where the old water tank (built during colonial period) is located.

The VKCMC is alert to government announcement of schemes/programmes either related to village infrastructural development or other aspects like agriculture, animal husbandry etc. They are careful in not missing any opportunity to make use of the schemes/programmes wherever applicable. We have seen earlier that the members share any new information with each other and make it a point that the information reaches the Knowledge Workers so that the entire village benefits by it. As village representatives, the boundary partner and a few VKCMC members take interest in participating annual meetings conducted by the PWD on planning and research. They put forward their demands concerning the village during these meetings. The boundary partner is of the opinion that if five to six requests are placed during such meetings, at least one or two would be considered by the department people. The members also take it to the notice of the PWD if there is any repair to be carried out in the shutters set up across Arasalaru River. This in a way helps the PWD to attend to the repair work immediately, though the PWD periodically checks the condition of the shutters. The members pointed out that they started participating in such meetings since two years. One of the members, named Magali, 49 years old, pointed out '*...mundi moduvadarku vazhi theriya villai. Ippa therigiradhu*', meaning they have learnt to confront or handle various things in a competent manner than the earlier times. According to Rangarajan, a VKCMC member, 'The government takes action if there is any strong organisation! The VKCMC is useful to interact and discuss various issues. Some organisational base is essential for taking any good initiative at the village level'.

During our interaction with the VKCMC members, it was pointed out that next agenda of the committee is to convince the department to lay a concrete road from this hamlet to Thennankudi, a nearby village. Approach to this village from Agalankan poses a lot of difficulties as the path connecting these two villages has been covered by bushes and encroachment. According to the VKCMC members, the lack of proper approach road discourages households of Agalankan from taking to agriculture though they have farm lands around this area; it restrains people from using the agricultural lands for cultivation. It is stated that under the present conditions, it is difficult for people to cart agricultural inputs like farm yard manure to the field or bring harvested crop to the village. If a road is built, this will enable more than 100 households to use their land for cultivation. This will also facilitate easy commute of people and they can also reach the main road in a short time. At present, the villagers have to take a roundabout route if one has to go to the main road.

The VKCMC also mentioned another facility which the members are planning to get for the village. The community hall constructed recently in the village has only a big hall where weddings or other social functions or meetings can be held. It is felt it will be of



great use if there is a dining hall facility attached to the community hall. The members are contemplating approaching the BDO for this purpose.

The boundary partner who pays great attention to education of the villagers wishes to have a library which will cater to the needs of the students and also the elders. He says that in two years time the village should have the best library in the Karaikal area and he wants to discuss this in the VKCMC meeting. He says, 'library is a must for personal growth and educational development of a person'. He is of the view that it would help cultivate reading habit among the younger generation and it would benefit coming generations too. He wants to have a separate library building/room. According to him, the required space will not pose a problem as the youth club has a piece of land adjoining the youth club building where VKC operates. He is looking for possible source of financial help/sponsor either through government or other non-governmental institutions to construct a room and thereafter to buy books/journals. He encourages his friends to give books as gifts for birthdays of children and tree saplings for weddings.

Bala Mukundan aspires to make his village a *sezhumaiyana giramam* (prosperous village) and *madhiri giramam* (model village). His ambition is that his village to get a prize for best village from the President of India

### **VKCMC seen as a *makkal amaippu* or community organisation**

It is not surprising to know that the VKCMC has largely come to be looked upon as a *makkal amaippu* (community organisation) by the inhabitants of Agalankan village. The VKCMC, as a community organization, has come to occupy an important place in the day today affairs of the village. The strength of such a community organisation is being greatly felt by different sections of the community. One of them said, '*oru amaippu enru irundal arasangam vegamagavum nanragavum seyala padugirathu enbadhu therigirathu*'. According to one of the VKCMC members, 'It is good that the VKCMC is formed. It gives a lot of space for us (members) to talk and discuss about issues related to the hamlet; it helps to improve the village. We are strong'. He continued to say, 'After the formation of the VKCMC we came to understand the full concept of the VKC. Earlier, we were not aware of the importance of information. We started taking interest in the village level activities ever since the VKCMC has been constituted'. Another VKCMC member mentioned that formation of the VKCMC in Agalankan is something which instills a sense of ownership to the Centre and



*Author with anganwadi worker*

facilitates the members to see things in a proper and broader perspective. It has helped the members reflect better and act for a common purpose. We had an opportunity to talk to the *anganwadi* worker who is also one of the members of the VKCMC. She appreciated the VRC/VKC programme and also felt that through the VKCMC, members would be motivated to work together for village development. She also looks at the VKCMC as a *makkal amaippu*.

### **VKCMC: impact on the members**

Formation of the VKCMC of the Knowledge Centre in Agalankan village has brought about encouraging impact on the members concerned. Involvement in the VKCMC has helped the members open up to the outside world resulting in broadening their perspectives and greater understanding of local situations. They have come to realise that information empowerment has the potential to contribute to the overall socio-economic development of the village. It has enhanced the potential of the VKCMC to use information and approach the government departments to represent the needs of the village and to follow it up. It has given the members the scope to think as a team about other issues as well that affect the village as a whole and empowered them to take necessary initiatives for overall village development. During our interactions with some VKCMC members, it was pointed out that earlier, they had little opportunity to think collectively. By and large, they have confined themselves to their respective field of work without giving much thought to the larger issues of the society. However, as mentioned earlier, the villagers



*Author interacting with VKCMC members*

extended their support and assistance to the youth club activities in the village such as the construction of youth club building and *anganwadi* centre. Constitution of the VKCMC and later participating in the meetings boosted the morale of the members. It was pointed out by the members that they have been inspired by the VRC/VKC to work for the improvement of the village. Magali, a middle-aged farmer and an active VKCMC member mentioned that the village community is grateful to the VRC/VKC programme for bringing about a lot of improvements in the villagers' lives. He also mentioned that he would like to see other villages also getting the VKC facility.

On more than one occasion, we had opportunity to talk to some VKCMC members either in a group or individually. Persons like Magali, Natesan (48 years), Nedunchezhiyan (38 years) and Chellayya who were also present during our discussion felt that being members of the VKCMC has made a lot of difference to their everyday lives. They stated that they try to spend their time usefully and do not waste time by unnecessarily going out. They feel encouraged and inspired these days. They added to say that they have come to know of the advantages of information empowerment. Vijaya says she looks forward to the VKCMC meetings because she finds it interesting and useful to listen and participate in the discussion. One of them pointed out, 'We need to be continuously motivated and we seek your (VRC) support in this.'

The VKCMC has come to understand the power and strength of a group initiative. They see the advantage of collective action in finding solutions for a common cause. They appreciate the value of organisational support. They were proud to mention about the development they could bring to the village like construction of school, construction of levees on the river banks and so on. They stated, 'We work together for anything that concern the village as a whole. But it is only now we are approaching the government departments. *podu velai enral onraga seyal paduvom*—meaning when it comes to village level activities we work together. We have realised that if we function as a team our legitimate demands will definitely be met with. We have come to understand the significance of village-based organisation in the development of the village'. They mentioned that the only difficulty they face is in convening a meeting but added that they would complete the task on time. One of them said, 'We will somehow coordinate with each other and complete the work'. In this context, they mentioned that even if they were not able to meet together in a formal meeting convened by the VKCMC, the members met each other almost daily in the mornings in the village tea shop. They went there to have their morning tea. It is a meeting point which provides them the venue to share and discuss the issues discussed in the VKCMC meeting. In case someone could not participate in the VKCMC meeting, the details are shared with him by others. It is also a place where they also discuss about issues to be taken for future and the strategies to be adopted to address them.

It is interesting to mention that the VKCMC members are aware of their inability and limitations in handling certain things in the village. They are humble and admit that

there are certain things which they are not able to handle or find a solution. For example, preventing the residents from throwing household waste near the river banks and important places of the village seem to be an impossible task for the members. They think it is a sensitive issue and members of the concerned household might take offence and it may lead to inter- and intra-household quarrels. Fortunately, now that the children's club shows immense interest in environment-related issues they can create awareness with the facilitation of VRC/VKC. As they are also stakeholders in the NABARD sponsored VDP, their efforts may yield some good results in this matter.

It is worth mentioning here that the boundary partner plays a significant and lead role in the VKCMC. The youth club is a source of inspiration to other VKCMC members and they offer their support to the former in carrying out the VKC programme. The VKCMC taking into consideration the potential of the members, distributes work/responsibilities to various members. It is mentioned that each member is considered by another person as a leader; whoever takes up a specific task or is assigned a particular job is regarded as the leader of that activity. No particular individual is accorded prominence; all are equal, mentioned Bala Mukundan. There is a mutual respect for each other's contribution for the proper functioning of the VKCMC. For instance, the boundary partner values the services provided through the *anganwadi* worker to the village, like distribution of free rice and sari/dhoti, pension to elderly and handicapped persons. Cooperation and collaboration among the VKCMC members enables them to use the opportunity and available resources more effectively and thereby improve the capacity of the community.

### **VRC: a great source of support**

The VKCMC members are unanimous in their view that the VKC has been a guiding force and source of immense support in all their village-level activities. We gathered during our field work that the VRC as a facilitator has had played a very critical role in almost all the activities carried out by the VKCMC. The members pointed out that the VRC is ever ready to offer any assistance or guidance. The community through the VKCMC has the confidence to take up any issue or handle any situation. They are able to articulate their needs and demands. They are aware that having the information/knowledge alone is not going to help; it has to be used or applied in the right context. The members are pleased to share with us accounts of their improvement in terms of general awareness level and capacity building which enabled them to plan certain activities clearly and execute the same with confidence. The VKC management committee appreciates the untiring and sincere role played by the VRC in sensitising the village community about a need for the formation of VKC management committee. They mentioned that they could see the positive changes it has brought on them.

## 10. NABARD'S Village Development Programme: an offshoot of VRC/VKC programme

It is important and heartening to mention here that The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has recently started a village development programme<sup>11</sup> (VDP) for community-based capacity building at Agalankan village. It is motivating to know that the VRC of Nagapattinam was instrumental in facilitating the entire process of bringing Agalankan under VDP of NABARD; the coordinator of VRC of Nagapattinam played a major role in this. Inspired by the interest and commitment of the community, particularly, by the boundary partner and the VKCMC in the VRC/VKC programme, the coordinator took the initiative because she felt that this intervention would further boost the morale of the community to work with more enthusiasm for development of the village. She is of the view that villages like Agalankan deserve to get programmes like this because the people will earnestly work for its success. The bank people, enthused with the kind of work the community has been doing through the VRC/VKC programme selected Agalankan as one of its intervention villages of VDP in Karaikal district. It has also been agreed that MSSRF will implement the VDP through the VKC.

### Objectives of the VDP

The objective of this three-year programme is to develop the village in an integrated manner, which would include economic development, infrastructure development and other aspects of human development like education, health and drinking water supply, besides access to credit and creation of community assets. The programme stresses financial inclusion



NABARD VDP meeting

and capacity building of local community in terms of knowledge, skill and attitude to manage their local resources. The VDP offers activities oriented towards capacity building with the constitution of a VDP committee to gauge the needs of the community and provide technical and knowledge fillip through the VKC. A seven-member committee

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11. The Village Development Programme [VDP] launched in 2007 by NABARD as its development initiative aims at identifying villages and developing them in a holistic and integrated manner by involving local people, governmental agencies, banks, NGOs, etc. The program envisages developing one village in each district of DDM of NABARD and five villages in each of the PPID of tribal blocks. The programme requires identification of a village and its socio-economic and infrastructure needs, awareness creation among stakeholders, engaging the services of the implementing agency, conducting base line survey/PRA, and preparing and implementing the Village Development Plan by pooling together various available resources. A Village Development Committee comprising mainly of progressive villagers will take care of plan preparation, implementation and monitoring. The period of the VDP will be three years with scope for extension by another two years.



has been formed for the effective implementation and management of the VDP plan in Agalankan village. It should be pointed out here the VKCMC of the VKC has also taken the role of VDP committee to manage the VDP activities.

The major roles and responsibilities of the nodal agency would be:

- i. To create awareness in the village and play an effective leadership role in building People's Organisation /Groups for various developmental activities.
- ii. To facilitate convergence/integration of various programmes of NABARD, State/Central Government and other agencies in the village.
- iii. To help/conduct PRA and prepare a Village Development Plan to ensure socio-economic and livelihood advancement with enhanced credit support and financial inclusion of all families in the village.
- iv. To identify the capacity building needs of the villagers.
- v. To assist in infrastructure development in the village through participation of people/ local institutions.
- vi. To protect forests and preserve the village eco-system and conserve soil health and other natural resources.
- vii. To monitor progress of implementation of the plan.

Based on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (carried out as part of the VDP in Agalankan) and discussion with representatives some important needs were identified to develop action plan. An appropriate action plan for VDP programme for next three years in Agalankan village has been developed after a meeting with the stakeholders. Representatives from NABARD, Banks, KVK and BDO, Rotary clubs, Panchayat president, MSSRF, Knowledge Workers, NVA fellows, Youth group, farmers



*Villagers engaged in PRA exercise*

groups, self-help groups and villagers participated in the discussion. Participation of the villagers and the other stakeholders were very good. The following are some of the important needs, issues points emerged in the discussion:

- De-addiction camps and counselling, women reproductive health camp, eye screening test for children;
- Capacity building for farmers on livestock care and management;
- Exposure visit for Agalankan village people to ECOSAN Toilet Unit at Karikalampakkam village in Puducherry

- Promotion planting of 100 tree through Dr. M.S. Swaminathan Children Science Club at Agalankan
- Construction of stepping wall for village Pond (namely *Irattai kulam*)
- Deepening of village pond for human usage
- Demo plot for vermicompost for 10 farmers' fields
- Providing basic equipment for Schools and *Anganwadi*

It is encouraging to learn that at the end of the discussion, the NABARD AGM expressed that most of the needs and issues would be taken up by NABARD under VDP and implemented on yearly basis. He was also of the view that during the initial six months the focus could be more on social problems such as alcoholism, health camps, and other livelihood-related training programmes.

### Launch of VDP in Agalankan

The process of initiating this programme in Agalankan which started during October 2010 took nearly eight months before it was formally launched by the district Collector, in June, 2011. It is heartening to know that the programme was inaugurated by the district Collector, laying foundation stone for construction of concrete steps to the village pond. During the function, a weighing machine and a steel bureau were also given to *anganwadi* centre functioning in the hamlet. It may be mentioned here that these items were presented to the *anganwadi* based on the need expressed by the villagers during a discussion held with NABARD prior to the implementation of the programme

It is stated that the first year of the VDP proposes agriculture-based support systems such as soil test programmes accompanied by disbursement of soil health cards and advisory assistance; consultation with experts from PAJANCOA (Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru College of Agriculture) and *Krishi Vigyan Kendra*, Karaikal; livestock care and disease management; audio advisories for farmers on crop management; exposure visit to eco-sanitation unit; computer-aided learning programme for school children through MSSRF VKC and formation of NABARD farmers clubs.

The VDP also has provisions for audio and video conferencing on thematic need-based areas; career guidance for students of class X and class XII; medical camps for women and children; de-addiction camps and counselling; clearing of silt; and cleaning of village pond. As mentioned earlier, infrastructure in the form



Weighing machine and bureau sponsored by NABARD to Anganwadi centre

of community assets building, education, health and drinking water supply will be the key areas of focus under the VDP.

### Progress under VDP—construction of steps for water pond

It is heartening to know that implementation of the VDP has been going on well and construction of stepping wall for village pond has successfully been completed within two months as per stipulated period (by August end of 2011). One can see the commitment of the community for the village development when the question of constructing steps in the water pond came. Initially, it was difficult to commence construction work because the water pond was covered with *Echichornia* species and the pond bund was dominated



*A view of the pond*

by *Prosopis* and other shrubs. The pond and its bund had to be cleared of these plant species for the construction work to start. Since the money allotted for the construction of steps was just sufficient to meet the expenses related to it, the VDP committee had to find some other source. The latter discussed about it and decided to approach the Village Panchayat for clear-felling the *Echichornia*, *Prosopis* and other shrubs in and around the pond. Then, VKC boundary partner and Knowledge Workers accompanied by MSSRF staff approached and discussed with the Panchayat President the difficulty in starting the construction work. The former was very happy when the latter immediately allotted three days work under MGNREGA and sent 60 Male members for clear-felling the pond. The pond was cleared of unwanted shrubs prior to the date when the district collector laid the foundation stone during the VDP inauguration on 23 June 2011. Then the foot step construction was started by the VDP Committee with the facilitation of MSSRF. They



*Steps under construction in the village pond*



*Construction of steps nearing completion*

identified the local mason and got the work done. Since the entire amount sanctioned for each and every project activity is open to all the VDP committee members, they themselves took the initiative to plan and complete the task within the allocated budget. This facilitated participation among the community as well as the ownership towards the task. The VDP members appreciate MSSRF for facilitating the entire work. The members have also discussed how to create awareness among the villagers about the usage of pond and avoiding dumping waste into the pond. They are taking steps towards this end.

### **Eye screening**

We also understand that eye camp was conducted during the month of August. Since the allocated amount under VDP was only for conducting and facilitating the camp, the VRC took the responsibility of mobilising support from Rotary club of Thirunallar Temple City in Karaikal for organising doctors, medicinal support and equipments for eye screening worth Rs.10,000.

### **Other activities under VDP**

The VDP committee with facilitation of VRC has also identified farmers' fields for conducting vermicompost demonstration and the committee has decided to send five farmers for vegetable cultivation training in PAJANCO. Other things like formation of farmers club and opening of savings bank account have been carried out. The VDP committee members are optimistic about getting full benefits of this programme. The village in general, particularly, the village committee members of the VDP/VKC, appreciate sincerely the support and facilitation of VRC of Nagapattinam in all their development activities of the village. They pointed out that they could see the difference between VRC of Nagapattinam and other agencies involved in development activities.

It is encouraging to point out that implementing VDP in Agalankan has started on a good note. The VDP committee with active support and facilitation of MSSRF has been able to execute the activities as per the plan. It is heartening to learn that the VRC/VKC programme in Agalankan has not only contributed to knowledge empowerment and capacity building of the community it has also facilitated the integrated development of Agalankan village.

## **11. Concluding Remarks**

M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), with its major focus on sustainable development, strives to improve rural livelihoods through various programmes. One such programme is the establishment of Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs). This programme aims at improving the socio-economic conditions of rural population by empowering them with knowledge and information. Knowledge empowerment, along with skill and capacity building in various spheres, has the potential to contribute towards socio-economic development of rural women and

men. This programme uses conventional as well as modern ICT and non-ICT tools towards achieving the objectives.

The VRC-VKC programme of MSSRF that started in the Union Territory of Puducherry during 1998 has expanded to various districts across the States of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Odisha. In the post-Tsunami period, the VRC-VKC programme was initiated in some of the badly hit Tsunami villages in Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu. These villages were identified by MSSRF with the help of district administration and few non-governmental organisations working in the region. However, the reason that led to setting up of a VKC in Agalankan, an interior village that was not affected by the Tsunami was something unique. The VRC of Nagapattinam was encouraged to set up a VKC in Agalankan based on the need expressed by the socially committed youth club of that village. (A well known nonprofit organisation in the region also recommended Agalankan.) The interest of the youth club in the village development coupled with the lack of connectivity and backwardness of the village prompted the VRC to set up a VKC in Agalankan that later developed into a model VKC. So, in contrast to other VKCs set up during that period, the VKC at Agalankan was need based and the community was ready to work towards developing a model.

This case study of Agalankan VKC clearly suggests that community involvement, ably backed by the implementing agency, is fundamental for successful execution of a community-based development programme. Also, it brings out the efforts taken by the community in leveraging several opportunities for the benefit of the village. This study illustrates how the programme has paved way for the integrated development of the village by empowering the community, particularly the Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee (VKCMC) to take initiative in furthering their own development.

The VKC has been functioning in this village since 2006 with *Pavendar Bharathidasan Ilainjar Manram* (the local youth club) as the boundary partner of the programme. As boundary partner, the youth club has provided rent-free space for the VKC and takes care of the electricity charges. They have also identified two women as Knowledge Workers to manage the VKC. The boundary partner evinces interest in the Centre's activities and monitors the functioning of the VKC. The Knowledge Workers carry out the activities of the Centre with enthusiasm and commitment with the support and guidance of the VRC; the boundary partner also offers necessary help and encouragement to them to carry out their work efficiently.

The VKC at Agalankan caters to diverse information needs of the community. Local specific information related to weather, entitlements, schemes and training programmes of government and non-government agencies are provided. Information is shared through communication channels like notice board, announcement through Public Address System (PAS), local newsletter, newspaper and local database in the computer-*Valam*. People also receive messages in their mobile phones. Audio conferencing is yet another information

sharing channel that is being used very frequently. People also receive specialised information through videoconferencing facility available at the VRC. VKC encourages women and men to get trained in basic computer application skills. Programmes such as MUPP, CALP and Intel are conducted to improve skills and knowledge in computer applications of rural children and youth for their economic development. In order to serve the local community in a more effective way, the VRC/VKC conducts regular need assessment of the village people. Based on this, awareness/training programmes related to agriculture, health, animal husbandry, micro enterprises, education are conducted by networking with governmental and non-governmental organisations, individual resource persons and so on. The VRC creates several platforms and promotes local level linkages, partnership with government departments and other NGOs.

The VKC's role in various aspects of the village community is very much appreciated by the residents of Agalankan village. Different age groups of female and male members of the village visit the Centre to seek specific information or assistance. There is a general feeling that if anything needs to be sorted out or if they need to know about something they can approach the VKC. The VKC has created a positive impact on the livelihoods of people, be it agriculture, livestock care and management, education, health, or infrastructural development. There is discernable improvement and change in the attitude of people due to the VKC initiative.. Farmers show interest in organic farming and also in new agricultural technologies like SRI method of cultivation. Farmers have also received several training and awareness sessions on cultivation practices that have helped in minimising cost of cultivation and improving farm productivity. Increase in the awareness level of the village women and men about better cattle care and management practices and accessibility to veterinary healthcare facilities have motivated the families to take interest in rearing more cattle. Attention given to cattle care and management by the people has received the appreciation of the department of animal husbandry.

People's general level of awareness on health-related issues has increased to an extent. It was encouraging to note that women of this village participate in meetings, training/ awareness programmes. It has widened their knowledge base and contributed for their empowerment. Women and men share their knowledge and information with their relatives and friends living outside the village. The youth of the village feel that they are in a better position now as they are aware of the various courses available which is likely to provide better employment opportunities. Skill development in computers and other computer-related educational programmes have greatly helped to improve learning abilities and self confidence of girls and boys. Children from the village, both girls and boys, have been motivated to form a children's club whose main objective is to work towards a clean and green Agalankan.

The village community enthusiastically participates in all the programmes of the VKC. This has been possible to a great extent because of the excellent attitude of the Knowledge



Workers who are ever willing to help and the dynamic boundary partner. The VRC monitors and reviews progress of VKC regularly so as to help in future planning. In order to strengthen VKC activities, the VRC provides capacity building training to the Knowledge Workers. The VRC constantly keeps in touch with the Knowledge Workers and provides them necessary timely inputs/suggestions. The boundary partner is also a great source of inspiration to the Knowledge Workers.

The Knowledge Workers have come to occupy an important place in the village. They had to put in a lot of effort to motivate people to utilise the services of VKC meaningfully. Gradually, both women and men started visiting the Centre without any hesitation. Services of the Knowledge Workers to the society have been highly recognised by the people contributing to enhancement of their self-confidence and self-esteem. Whenever people approach them for any assistance or help, they are readily available to do the needful. In case of an immediate need for a printout of a letter or if a phone call is to be made the Knowledge Workers open the Centre even if it is 10 o'clock at night. They are actively involved in the MGNREGA programme. The Knowledge Workers share their knowledge (like preparing soap oil, phenol) with others outside the village also. Women approach them for suggestions or guidance regarding their children's education or for other purposes. Involvement in the VKC programme has motivated them to be socially conscious and committed. As an example, we can see this when the Knowledge Workers acted very responsibly and handled the situation deftly at a time a live electrical wire had fallen on the ground near the village school. They also show concern about social issues like the growing alcoholism among the village men and are trying to do their best to create awareness about the evils of alcoholism particularly among younger generation.

The youth club which is also the boundary partner complements VKC's activities. The youth club has emerged as a credible and valued partner that has contributed to the reach of the programme to the community. During an informal interaction with the VRC coordinator she said, '... the boundary partner uses the VKC to improve information and knowledge base of the village and also to the development of the village'. The boundary partner has been clear from the beginning that this facility should be utilised to the maximum extent possible for the welfare/development of the village. For example, when the community expressed a need for easy access to veterinary care and management and medical help for the health care of the people, the president of the youth club took great interest to meet the needs of the people through the VKC/VRC. A mobile veterinary clinic visits the village once a week and a medical doctor comes once a month now; these services are wholeheartedly appreciated by the community. Since the launch of the VKC programme, he valued the linkages provided through the programme and takes interest to use them to the benefit of the community. He is alert and does not generally miss any opportunity whether it is making use of a subsidy scheme or funds available for certain village development programme in Block Development Office or Agricultural department or any other government department. He has always believed that information is an

important resource for socio-economic development of the village. He and the Knowledge Workers encourage the women and men of the village to visit the Centre and make use of the information and other services available.

The youth club has always had the passion for developing their village but lacked proper guidance. While the potential for development was there, they were unable to use it effectively. Setting up of the VKC gave them the impetus to take initiatives with clarity and to effectively execute their work. It has created an environment of hope. From the beginning, the youth club members, particularly its president, regarded the VKC as a great institutional asset for village development. With the guidance from the VRC the boundary partner has been inspired to use the VKC as a base for the overall improvement of the village. The VKC has provided them the necessary direction; it has empowered them to access government departments and other organisations confidently and also empowered them to tap the right resource to get their task accomplished. They are able to demand and get what is entitled to the people. The boundary partner felt encouraged to take up certain initiatives concerning village infrastructural development. The former has been able to get *karumadhi mandapam* (a place where obsequies for the departed soul are performed by the concerned family members) constructed in the village. Similarly, they could persuade the concerned authorities to lay a concrete road to the village cremation ground using the funds (earmarked for rural development) available with *Commune Panchayat*.

The VKC programme and the role of boundary partner gained further momentum with the formation of the Village Knowledge Centre Management Committee (VKCMC) consisting of various stakeholders (including the Knowledge Workers, the boundary partner and a representative of the VRC) during October 2008. To ensure the sustainability of the VKC in the long run, the VKCMC is constituted with different stakeholders as its members. The idea is that the Knowledge Centre must eventually be owned by the community itself. Interestingly, while the process of establishing the VKC has rather been simple it was not so in the case of forming the VKCMC. The boundary partner and few others had apprehensions when the VRC discussed about the concept of VKCMC. They could not appreciate the need for such a committee. They felt it was redundant to have another committee to manage the activities of the VKC when youth club has already been playing its role as a boundary partner very well. Several meetings had to be held with different stakeholders. It took a lot of time and energy on the part of the VRC to sensitise the community and convince them before the VKCMC could be constituted.

In spite of the difficulties encountered by the VRC while forming the VKCMC today, the former is very happy to say that it is worth the trouble. Fortunately, once the VKCMC committee was formed it led to a lot of changes in the outlook and approach of the members concerned. Participating and discussing in the VKCMC meetings motivated the members to take active part in the VKC programme, and very soon the idea that they are

not mere beneficiaries but partners in this endeavour emerged. As a monitor of the VKC activities, the VKCMC carries out its responsibilities very well. Significantly, the VKCMC did not confine itself to the VKC activities but began to give attention to the development of the village with active participation of the active boundary partner and the guidance of the VRC.

The VRC coordinator was glad to mention that the VKCMC has come to play a significant role in the village; they have come to play a twin role—as a monitor of the VKC and as a village organisation working for the development of a village as a whole. The VKCMC develops an action plan and sends it to the VRC for its inputs and also to integrate in the VRC work plan. Three important objectives of VKCMC have been:

- *Thevaigalai Kandaridal* (need assessment),
- *Thittmidudal* (planning),
- *Seyal paduthudal* (implementation).

VKCMC sends the minutes of their meetings to the VRC

The VKCMC has been playing a proactive role in all the matters related to the VKC and village development. Internal monitoring by the boundary partner and the VKCMC has helped to promote their commitment to the VKC activities. The boundary partner plays a central role in all the activities of the VKCMC. The VRC is responsive to the youth/VKCMC and the latter is ever ready to make use of any new avenues or information for the benefit of village society. Several successful infrastructural facilities have been brought into this village, supported and enabled by the responsive management of the VKCMC with the facilitation of the VRC. As an institution, the VKCMC has been able to work effectively to bring some essential facilities to the village such as building of a Community Hall, construction of levees on the banks of the village canal to prevent flooding of the village in case of heavy rains, getting a new school building (by demolishing the previous one as the structure became weak and electricity passed through the walls when it rained) and so on. As village representatives, boundary partner and few VKCMC members have been motivated and empowered to participate in annual meetings conducted by Public Works Department on planning and research where they put forth requests for general requirements of the village like laying a new approach road from the village to the main road. The boundary partner is of the view that if five-six requests are placed during such meetings at least one or two may be considered by the concerned department. The former and few other VKCMC members were happy to mention that they have a good rapport with government departments and other partners of the VKC programme in Agalankan.

An interesting feature about this village is that the villagers exhibit greater cooperation and work together in work concerning the village as a whole. We have mentioned earlier how the villagers gave their time and free labour while constructing the youth club building

and later in changing the roof of *anganwadi* with asbestos sheet. Whenever the youth club came up with any proposal, the village community supported but never took any active role. However the constitution of VKCMC provided them a new avenue to think about village needs, discuss, decide and act accordingly as a community. Earlier, they have had little scope to think collectively, mentioned the VKCMC members.

The VKCMC has come to understand the power and strength of a group initiative. According to one of the VKCMC members, 'Now we are approaching the government departments. We have realised that if we function as a team our legitimate demands will definitely be met with. We have come to understand the significance of community effort in the development of the village'. They were proud to mention the development they could bring to the village like construction of school, construction of levees on the river banks and so on. The committee members wish that the VKC programme should have a wider reach and many more villages should be benefited by this programme.

Strength and potential of every member is greatly recognised by the VKCMC that gives due respect to each one's contribution. It is one of the reasons the VKCMC as a village body is able to function well to the extent possible. It may be mentioned here that often one or two individuals from the VKCMC are the driving force behind all the works done so far. These few active persons value other VKCMC members for their support and encouragement. The members, within their capacity, extend help and support wherever possible. It may be pointed out here that the members discuss the issues that are brought during the meetings when they meet in a common place like the village tea stall and share the details of the discussions and decision taken during the meetings with those who could not be present for the meeting. This has contributed significantly to work together for the development of the village. It has created in them a sense of responsibility towards the village development.

The role of VKCMC in the overall development deserves appreciation. The members are inspired to take up work that requires investment on time, attention and commitment. Members recognise each other's potential and strength and have come to experience the effectiveness of collective responsibility in achieving their goal. They have been able to assess their strengths and weaknesses. They value information as an important resource for development. They have been empowered to access information from various sources and use it for the benefit of the village community. The VKCMC not only has access to information but uses this appropriately for a right purpose at right time. So much so, the VKCMC has largely come to be seen as a *makkal amaippu* (community organisation/institution) by the villagers.

If we analyse the initiatives and work done at the village level we can understand the VKCMC's, particularly the youth club's, zeal for overall village development. They wanted a community hall in their village because it would ease the stress of the villagers going to

another village for performing a family function and also it would save their time, energy and money. Similarly, they were very firm in their demand for demolishing the old school building. The pressure they put on the government departments yielded results—the village got a new school building in the same premises where the old school stood. In the same way, they got levees constructed on either side of the river that runs from west to east of the village; the village is protected to a great extent from floods in case there is heavy rains in the region. All this goes to demonstrate that the VKCMC led by the youth club have been able to leverage strategically. They could take up local specific activities with community's support. It may not be out of context to mention here that the size of the village—less than 200 households—was just right for effective personal intervention by members of the VKCMC.

It may be pointed out here that construction of *karumadhi mandapam*, road to cremation ground, Community Hall and other works like clearing encroachment on one of the village main streets and widening it were done either with the funds allocated for a specific task or using the available resources with the government departments. Even while government funds are available, getting a particular facility for the village from the earmarked funds required certain ability and focused action, and this is evident from this study.

As a reward for the enthusiasm and the commitment of the VKCMC, Agalankan has been selected as one of the villages in Karaikal district by The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to implement its Village Development Programme (VDP). The VKCMC's (which is also the Village Development Committee of the VDP) commitment and enthusiasm in carrying out the tasks under VDP are clearly demonstrated in building the concrete steps to the village pond which was unused for a long time and planning other activities with the support and facilitation of the VRC. This demonstrates that the community is ready to capitalise any opening that comes their way to the advantage of the village development.

It is seen in this study that encouraging community participation and bringing out their potential results in local empowerment and leads to opportunities for local leadership, in particular that of women, to emerge. It is important that community engagement is an ongoing process and does not stop with one or two sporadic initiatives. It is important that in future, the VKCMC receives encouragement and support regularly to improve their performance further and to keep their motivation high. Highlights of their accomplishments may be shared among various VRCs and VKCs so that the work of this VKCMC may be a source of inspiration to others. As regards, Agalankan, the VKCMC members are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities, of thinking differently and using the VKC for the betterment of their village. There are positive indications for us to believe that this VKC would continue to serve the community even after MSSRF withdraws. They have been very clear from the beginning that the community should not depend on VRC for each and everything. They have been working with the policy that whatever

could be done (repairing a plug point, printing notices) within their means and capacity should be handled thus. While talking to one of the members, it was interesting to observe when he said, 'We should try to minimise our dependence on VRC. We should not trouble them for small, small things, like if there is any little repair work'. One of the Knowledge Workers mentioned, 'VRC is ever ready to offer their help and assistance. We are fortunate to have such good staff committed to their work', The VRC acts as a facilitator in all their endeavours. Through the VKCMC the VRC aims to increase the abilities of the community to solve its problems, make their own decisions and plan their future. This study certainly goes to prove that when people work together as a community aided with well meaning support and guidance a lot of meaningful development is assured. Most importantly, this case study clearly reveals the processes involved in developing a sustainable model of a VKC that shall function effectively even if MSSRF withdraws regular, tangible support.







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