

The Torch Bearers of the Rural Knowledge Revolution

Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity (NVA) Fellows
A Few Case Studies, Tamil Nadu

Series - I



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Towards Faster and More Inclusive Growth

“The knowledge deficit that exists at present in villages explains much of the difference between yields realised in experiments and what farmers actually get”. The Village Knowledge Centre can help to bridge this gap.

*-Approach to the Eleventh
Five Year Plan (2006)*



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

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**M S Swaminathan
Research Foundation**

3rd Cross Street, Institutional Area
Taramani, Chennai - 600 113, INDIA
Tel: +91-44-2254 1229, 2254 1698
Fax: +91-44-2254 1319
nva-coordinators@mssrf.res.in
chairman@mssrf.res.in
www.mssrf.org

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**The Torch Bearers of the
Rural Knowledge Revolution**

Case Studies:

L Vedavalli

Editing:

Asha Ramani

Executive Support:

A Ananth

V Arivudai Nambi

M Muthukumar

R Nirmala

R Rengalakshmi

R Rukmani

S Senthilkumaran

P Sivakumar

Sylvia Snehalatha

A Uma

S Velvizhi

Preface

The Village Knowledge Centre Project was initiated in 1998 in the Union Territory of Pondicherry (now Puducherry) by the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) with a view to disseminate appropriate modes of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve the livelihoods of rural women and men. This project was the outcome of the Interdisciplinary Dialogue: Reaching the Unreached, held at MSSRF in 1992. The field experiences during 1998-2003 showed that rural women and men are not only hard working, but are innovative, with a capacity to absorb and adopt new technologies. Many of them showed an aptitude for mastering ICT for their skill empowerment. A consultation was organised by MSSRF on 8 May 2003 to discuss methods of recognising such rural ICT entrepreneurs. During the consultation, it was decided that a

National Virtual Academy (NVA) would be established, bearing the name of Jamsetji Tata, India's greatest pioneer entrepreneur, visionary and humanist.

The Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity (NVA) was launched in August 2003 with the generous support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and Tata Education Trust. The main aim of the programme is to empower vulnerable people among the rural poor with a view to enhance livelihood opportunities. The state level hub located at MSSRF, Chennai is linked with block level or equivalent hubs or Village Resource Centres (VRC) in the state. These Centres are in turn connected with the Village Knowledge Centres (VKC) in the state. The VRCs and VKCs are already geared toward making every home and hut the target for positive changes that will take rural India towards technology, innovation

and development. Such a rural transformation requires a large number of grassroots workers. Rural women and men have been able to adapt themselves to fast paced changes and technological advances and shall contribute immensely as grassroots workers for the development of their community. Whatever the level of literacy or education, the strength of the rural family/community rests in the resilience and capacity of the women and men who are the mainstay of the household and the community.

To locate and recognise their powerful influences in the rural areas, steps have been taken to identify such remarkable women and men who are the torch bearing pioneers of the rural knowledge revolution, serving as trainers for capacity building among villagers, and function as channels to carry the benefits of science and technology into the remote areas of rural India.

The process of identifying these valuable resource persons was through nominations by a large number of institutions and organisations, working in close association with farmers and villagers, partners of NVA, Alliance of Mission 2007, academic and scientific institutions, government agencies, private sector companies, as well as NGOs working in the field of sustainable development, who participated in a nation wide search for such grassroots

academicians. The selection was based on a process of peer review and discerning choices.

Based on this concept, 369 Fellows (176 women and 193 men) have been inducted (till august 2006) from twenty states - Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Puducheri, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal and West Bengal.

NVA has so far organised three convocations, with H E the President of India, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam as the Chief Guest in the first two convocations. It is proposed to make this an ongoing process, with continued commitment and renewed efforts by all those involved. It will foster a constant flow of communication with the NVA Fellows in order to monitor the changes that have come about in their areas, and to strengthen their capacities, and in turn enhance their service skills, ambit and performance in the community.

It is planned to implement competent follow up action, since it is important to identify specific capabilities, skills and experiences of NVA Fellows, and to group them, based on common fields of expertise. One such endeavor in this regard is to collect and document individual in-depth case studies of NVA

Fellows. As a preliminary effort, twelve such case studies are now brought out, which throw light on various aspects of a Fellow - what motivated him/her to serve the community; whether it is the inherent nature, social circumstances, or being inspired by a mentor; whether through gaining clarity on the concept of service to the society or whether the spirit and commitment were reinforced only after becoming NVA Fellow and by interacting with other Fellows from different States of India. For some, like Ms Parasakthi, it was the innate desire to serve the community. To some, like Mr Arun, the imprint was gained when he was very young. The case studies, documented during 2006 form myriad patterns that are woven together into the common framework of community service and dedicated action. They also reveal the widening vision and wealth of experience gained through the interaction, commitment and community service.

The Fellows projected in this document comprise six women and six men in the age group 25-50 years and with educational levels ranging from middle school to post graduation. All the Fellows, with one exception are from families with an agricultural background, and involved in community based activities such as organizing self help groups, providing training and conducting camps on health/ environmental issues, focusing on

conservation and promotion of medicinal plants, native breeds of cattle and sheep (like *Umbalacherry* cattle and *Vembur* sheep), disseminating information on education, employment opportunities, working with mentally retarded children, physically handicapped and a range of other activities.

Some of the Fellows are involved in more than one activity. For instance, Ms Kasturi Chandrasekar aged 45 years, is involved in multifarious activities such as formation of self-help groups, providing training in micro enterprises, organic method of cultivation, conservation and promotion of medicinal plants. Similarly, Mr. J. Senthil Kumaran, 25 years, is helping school and college students rural by disseminating information on higher studies, education institutions (in and around Madurai) and employment opportunities. He has developed education modules for mentally retarded children and is active in raising awareness on health and environment. Presently, he is engaged in developing a documentary on river Vaigai covering the period from late 19th century till date. Similarly, Mr. E. Altrin, hailing from a fishing community, besides managing fish/prawn trade, is committed to assist physically handicapped through an organisation, called *Nesakarangal* in Thangachimadam of Ramanathapuram district. He is sympathetic to poor and needy people and reaches out to them by

sourcing funds and other material support to meet their medical or educational expenses. He creates awareness among his friends and relatives engaged in fishing activity on the importance of conserving sea turtles and other marine living forms. It is heartening to mention that 47 years old Ms. Parasakthi, an agricultural labourer from a village near Rajapalayam, Virudunagar district has been sensitive to women's issues since her early twenties. Her bitter experiences of a short lived married life has motivated her to take keen interest particularly, in helping girls and women abandoned by their spouses or sexually exploited by other men. For a long time she worked among the community almost single-handed. She has also been instrumental in stopping illicit arrack brewing in her village.

Because of the community-based work and high motivation, the Fellows are in contact with several NGOs and voluntary organizations. They use these contacts to help their community irrespective of caste/class and gender in different ways. All Fellows including married women have support of their family members. They mentioned that it was because of their support that they are able to work for the community without much difficulty. The Fellows are proud that they have been inducted as NVA Fellow, but mentioned that it is a reminder that they should continue their work with lot more vigour. They are also

of the view that it has increased their sense of responsibility and are happy about it. They also expressed their gratitude to Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for their service to the community.

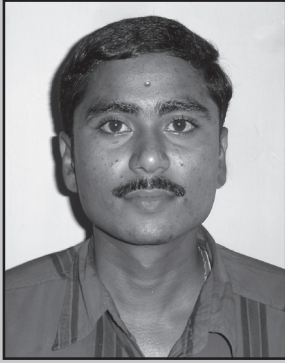
Twelve case studies of NVA Fellows from different parts of Tamil Nadu, India, are presented in this preliminary report. This will be followed by the next series of case studies of NVA Fellows. MSSRF has also been organising and conducting region wise interactive meetings/workshops to document their core competencies and provide opportunities to demonstrate their skills as trainers - especially where hands-on training or field level experience are required. This will have far reaching effects on reinforcing their capacities to become veritable agents of change and usher rural India into the mainstream of progress and development.

MSSRF gratefully acknowledges the contributions that are being made by the NVA fellows to the community.

L Vedavalli
NVA

Fellows

1. **Mr. E Altrin,**
Ramanathapuram District 9
2. **MR. N Arun,**
Pudukottai District 15
3. **Mr. V Dheenadayalan,**
Nagapattinam District 18
4. **Ms. R Gnanasundari,**
Thuthukudi District 22
5. **Ms. Kalaivani Rajendran,**
Thanjavur District 28
6. **Ms. Kasthuri Chandrasekar,**
Madurai District 31
7. **Mr. R Maniyan,**
Thanjavur District 37
8. **Ms. Parasakthi,**
Virudunagar District 41
9. **Ms. S Ramuthai,**
Madurai District 46
10. **Mr. Ravi Kumar,**
Thiruvallur District 50
11. **Mr. J Senthil Kumar,**
Madurai District 54
12. **Ms. V Tamil Selvi,**
Virudunagar District 59



Mr. E Altrin

Victoria Nagar
Thangachi Madam
Ramanathapuram District
Tamil Nadu

Quiet and unassuming, 26-year old Altrin is physically handicapped. Born in a family of four children, he has a sister and a brother older to him, and a younger brother. Altrin belongs to a fishing community of Victoria Nagar in Ramanathapuram District. His father, who is 56 years old, has studied up to the pre-university level. He owns a lathe workshop where fishing boats are repaired. His mother, aged 52, had middle school education. His sister, a graduate, is married; and his elder brother, who is a post graduate, is working in a finance company in Ramnad, while his younger brother, who has M. C. A degree is now looking for a suitable job. Altrin mentioned that whereas both his brothers have decided to take up employment in other fields, he has opted to follow the family's traditional occupation in the fishing trade. After completing his polytechnic course, he has chosen to engage himself in fish and prawn business. While supporting the family financially, he is also helping the society both in a personal capacity, and also as the secretary of *Nesakarangal*, a welfare

association for the handicapped persons in Rameswaram Island, Ramanathapuram district. It is noteworthy that Altrin played a significant role in setting up this association.

It was interesting to learn from Altrin that the idea to form the association came from a stranger he met at Madurai railway station. It so happens that Mandapam Block, Ramanathapuram district has a number of handicapped persons (as a result of a polio epidemic) but the idea of forming an association never occurred to anyone until the time Altrin met the stranger (who was himself was physically handicapped). According to Altrin, when he was studying in the polytechnic course, he met this man, who was with five blind persons, while waiting to board a train. Altrin was surprised when the stranger beckoned him to his side, and talked to him about setting up an organisation for the handicapped in Rameswaram Island, which would make it easy to obtain benefits and assistance for the disabled. Altrin soon learnt that his new acquaintance was in

fact the President of the All India Handicapped Association. As there was nobody to look after the activities in Ramanathapuram District, he guided Altrin to meet the collector of Ramanathapuram for this purpose, and get in touch with a few others who worked among the disabled people. Altrin remarks, "I never had any idea of starting an Association for the handicapped. But it happened through that thoughtful person".

Together with two of his friends, Altrin took some initiative in this regard. They called for a *Panchayat* level meeting to discuss the formation of an association for the handicapped. The response was positive, and Altrin and his friends took the necessary efforts. Soon the association came into existence in 1997. The association was registered in 1999, and was named *Nesakarangal* (meaning compassionate hands). Altrin says his friend David (also an NVA Fellow) who also played a major role in building the association chose the name for it.

Altrin has been Secretary of the Ramanathapuram District Handicapped Association for the last 10 years. Initially, Altrin and his friends had to struggle for space and funds. They sought help from the church, individuals and a few organisations working for the welfare of the people. Initially the centre functioned in a local church; later it was shifted to a rented building. In order to meet transport expenses of the handicapped children, approached a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent (then based in Rameswaram) and explained to

him their difficulty in managing the transport expenses. The BBC correspondent came forward to help in this regard. Altrin mentioned that as the association was working from the church, many thought that it was meant only for the Christians. On the advice of the BBC correspondent it was then decided to shift the centre from the church premises to another place, so as to reach out to more people. When they could not pay the rent for the building, the BBC correspondent came forward with money from a fund called PAAPA Fund (which was created by the same person to help the needy persons). After the demise of the BBC correspondent, another organisation called PULSE Trust, based at Rameswaram Island, willingly took over that responsibility. Fortunately, *Nesakarangal* soon had its own new building, with the kind assistance of Mr K Vijaya Kumar, then the Collector of Ramnad. Mr Vijay Kumar took a keen interest in the construction of a new building under District Mental Health Project, 2004. Altrin is full of praise for the Collector, and recalled with immense gratitude his compassion for the mentally retarded and physically handicapped persons, and his humane approach in dealing with sensitive issues. He also fondly remembers the BBC correspondent who had recently passed way. "It was because of the correspondent that *Nesakarangal* exists today. Without his help it would not have been possible," says Altrin.

Today the Association has 400 members, and 35 persons are presently working in the age group of 17-29 years, and it includes six women and three men (including Altrin) who have been working

with *Nesakarangal* since its inception. *Nesakarangal* makes great efforts to help the handicapped persons improve their economic welfare. They are involved in various activities of the centre, like tailoring, book binding, and prawn and lemon pickle preparation, etc. At the centre, in the initial stages, there were only six women, who had not even completed primary school education. All six women are still working at the centre. The Association arranged for the handicapped persons to have physiotherapy treatment. This helped to improve their physical condition. Altrin himself benefited a lot by undergoing the physiotherapy. Earlier, he could not balance himself; now he is much better, he says. Since David and Altrin felt that these persons should get some regular income, they arranged for income generating activities. To begin with, training was organised to teach shell craft - to make decorative/ornamental items with seashells. As this did not fetch much profit, they tried other micro enterprises like book binding, pillow stitching, making paper cups and tailoring. However, none of these provided a regular income to the handicapped persons. But there is a demand for book binding during the beginning of the academic year, and also for stitching of uniforms for the schools. *Nesakarangal* also gets orders for stitching school uniforms through Pulse Trust, which distributes free uniforms to some school children every year. This way the centre is able to help the physically disabled to get some income.

Recently, with the help of the Village Resource Centre (VRC) of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

(MSSRF), Thangachimadam training was organised for the preparation of prawn pickles. Sales of pickles were quite satisfactory, but soon they realised that the shelf life of the pickles was not as good as they expected, and they were also not satisfied with the packing material. They felt that they must take heed of these two aspects if they had to boost the sales of prawn pickles. Altrin approached the VRC for help in this regard, and the staff arranged for a video conference with a food technology expert from Chennai. All the 35 persons from *Nesakarangal* participated in this session, and this helped to improve the quality of the pickles. Following the suggestion of the food technologist, they began to use preservatives and also follow other hygienic practices like wearing of gloves and using scrupulously clean containers. Altrin is proud that they have now acquired regular customers from Chennai also. They regularly supply to shops in Madurai, Trichy, Chennai and Bangalore. There is a demand for 100 bottles every week from Chennai, which they are sometimes unable to supply. Altrin has a plan to build a separate room within the compound of the *Nesakarangal* building, but presently there are no funds available.

Through the Association, Altrin arranges for train travel concessions, medical certificates for physically handicapped persons, hearing aids and tricycle from the government departments. Using government schemes and Lions Club, he has so far helped 15 persons get tricycles for their use.

Altrin's association with the VRC at Thangachimadam has made him aware of environmental issues - particularly those

that affect the fishermen's livelihood. He says that his participation in awareness programmes and his regular visits to the VRC and Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) in M.G. R Nagar have enriched his knowledge about the importance of conserving sea turtles and coral reefs. He is also aware of the depletion of marine and fish resources. He is concerned about this, and makes an effort to educate his fellow fishermen on such issues. He has also put up a poster related to prohibited sea items in his company building. He says he has given up eating sea turtles ever since he attended the awareness programme conducted by the VRC, and is also requesting others to abstain from eating the same. In this context, he told us about a fisherman who had caught about 25 turtles in the net, a few weeks before, but threw them back into the sea when he remembered Altrin's advice. It was indeed a financial loss for the fisherman, who had invested that day a capital of Rs 4000, and his fish catch was only Rs 400. Altrin said that he was touched when the person told him about the turtles but had no regrets about his loss of the day's investment.

Altrin also learnt about the importance of the *thai iral* (gravid prawn) and that it should not be caught as it is capable of hatching thousands of eggs at one time. In order to remind people of the value of *thai iral*, he has put up a separate poster on the same. Though he does not miss an opportunity to talk to the fishermen about conservation issues, he feels that this is not enough.

Altrin has some suggestions to conserve and promote fish and other marine resources by protecting the livelihood of

the fishing community. He is of the opinion that his community should be educated through various training and awareness programmes. He mentioned about an awareness programme given to trawl net owners. The same programme could be conducted for people who use the *vallam* for fishing. An individual's voice may not be heard, and it would not be effective, he feels. It may influence merely one or two people -like the fisherman who returned the turtles to the sea. But an organisational base is important if a message has to be effectively communicated on a large scale. He firmly holds that only a concerted effort would bring about a great change in the attitude of fishermen. In this regard, he feels that the VRC can play a major role by organising awareness programmes with the help of government departments and non governmental organisations (NGO) interested in these issues, for all sections of fishing population. He thinks that if he were to approach any organisation or department in his individual capacity, there will not be any response

Altrin is very compassionate, and within his means, he extends his help to people in many ways. He offers his services and assistance to those who approach him for help - to obtain identity card for the handicapped, hearing aids, ration cards, medical help and so on. There are instances where he himself had taken initiatives to help others. For example, he took a personal interest in getting medical help for an 11- year -old boy with a heart problem. The boy's father is a daily wage labourer. The boy had been diagnosed at the age of three, and was going for

periodical check up to a hospital at Madurai (a city situated 170 kilo meters from Rameswaram Island). At one stage, the doctors said that the boy had to be operated upon with no further delay. A large sum of money was required for this, and it was beyond the capacity of the parents. When Altrin came to know about it, he wrote letters to the local M.L.A (Member of Legislative Assembly), the Prime Minister of India and the President of India, requesting help for the boy. Altrin was pleasantly surprised when he received a reply from President's office within a week, with all the details of the hospital (CARE hospital in Hyderabad), persons to be contacted, etc. Altrin said that they had to arrange only for travel expense. Their stay was to be taken care of by the hospital. PULSE Trust came forward to bear travel and other expenses. Altrin and Joseph, the secretary of PULSE Trust, accompanied the boy and his father. The boy was given the necessary treatment in January 2005, and had been asked come for review after six months. Altrin is grateful to PULSE Trust for taking care of the transport expenses, and to Joseph for accompanying the boy and his father to Hyderabad. According to Altrin his own contribution was nothing in this – except for his physical presence. He is motivated by his sense of service and compassion.

In another instance Altrin took personal interest in getting an artificial limb for a man whose leg was amputated some years ago. Altrin mentioned that the man was once rich, but now in difficult times. He was not in a position to start any enterprise. As Altrin was moved by his condition, he took efforts to arrange for an artificial leg,

which would cost Rs 20000. This time too, the PULSE Trust came forward to help by offering Rs 17000 for the same. The concerned person now had to mobilize only Rs 3000. An advance of Rs 10000 has already been given for this. Altrin was happy to mention that the artificial limb has since been fixed.

With the help of Hindustan Lever Limited, Altrin organised a Thyroid Health Camp, which had never been held in Ramanathapuram district before. Out of 58 participants, 38 were diagnosed with thyroid problems, and they are now undergoing treatment and given free medicines. He mentioned that *Nesakarangal* also helps fishermen to avail government schemes like Tsunami Relief Fund from Collectors Office at Ramnad. He also serves his people in his capacity as Treasurer of Self-Help Group, and President of Fishermen Educational Environment Development (FEED) Trust. Members of FEED Trust contribute in several ways to buy school note books and conveying useful information to people of the area. Altrin had been a member of this Trust for three years before he was made President. Altrin said that the members were impressed with his work, and therefore he was made the President last year. As he is concerned with environmental issues, he wants to do something useful to the community at large.

Altrin has dedicated himself to serve the needy. He readily extends a helping hand to students who require financial help for education. He provides new dresses for school children who cannot afford them.

Recently he donated Rs 1000 to an orphanage school at Thuthukudi. When there were financial difficulties in the prawn pickles unit at *Nesakarangal*, Altrin willingly came forward to pay around Rs 1400.

When we asked him about his views on the criteria for the NVA Fellow Award, he said that a person should have been involved in grassroots level activities, for a minimum of three years at least. "A person may end up getting frustrated after one or two years of work amongst the people. The minimum age may be 18 years. Emotional and mental maturity is of great importance. Levels of education are irrelevant when it comes to social service. Commitment and clarity are important; she/he should be service oriented," added Altrin.

When the news spread that Altrin received the Award from the Honourable President of India, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, reporters from a few television channels came to interview him. But he politely refused as he felt that service should not be publicized as it would lose its sanctity. "Getting the NVA Fellow Award, from an eminent man of that stature, is a very great achievement", says Altrin. It was even more a moment of pride to receive such an award from a person hailing from Rameswaram island, he remarked. He feels happy because the award is given in recognition of his services to handicapped persons through *Nesakarangal*.

Taking part in the Participatory Knowledge Management Workshop proved to be very useful, mentioned Altrin. He was able to get greater clarity about the concept of NVA Fellow and all that is expected of a Fellow. It has really widened his vision, and helped him to know of various activities of other NVA Fellows from different states of India. Not only that, he has realised that his own work seemed insignificant when compared with the work of many others who had assembled there. This has motivated and strengthened his conviction to continue his work for people with greater effort and dedication, he added. It has increased his work load, but he is happy that he could do it. Now he is not confined himself to activities of *Nesakarangal*. Since the Village Knowledge Centre is functioning in a portion of *Nesakarangal* building, he is able to serve the community by providing information on various aspects, getting school/college application forms, guiding people to obtain various government welfare schemes and so on. It has provided opportunities to approach and interact with different people and to develop more contacts. He often visits the VRC at Thangachimadam, and takes its help to assist the people in various activities. When people express their desire for training programmes, he says, "I act as their representative and request the VRC staff if they could organise such programmes," Altrin wishes to continue his services to the community and the people in a more effective manner.



MR. N Arun

Melapatti
Pudukottai District
Tamil Nadu

N. Arun, who is 27 years old, is a committed social worker. He was born in a poor agricultural family of Melapatti village, Pudukottai District, in Tamil Nadu. He has a younger sister. He has a diploma in Electrical and Electronics Engineering. He is a leader of a youth organization called *Subhash Illaingyar Narpani Mandram*. He has motivated the members of the youth organization to carry on dedicated social work. The District Administration selected this organization from among ten others for an Award for meritorious service to the society, particularly in the field of sports, and tree planting in public places.

Arun was inspired to take up social work even as a schoolboy. He had often seen people helping handicapped school children by providing prosthetics, special shoes, books and stationery, etc. This had a great impact on him. After completing his tenth standard, he strongly felt that he should be of help to the needy. He says, "When I saw others helping people, I thought why couldn't I take up some useful work for the benefit of the community."

But he did not know how or where to begin. He felt that with some organizational base, he would be in a better position to work for the community. Though there were many associations functioning under the names of film actors in and around his village, he was not very impressed by their activities. He wanted to start something different. Then the idea emerged to form an association with like-minded youth, and others interested in village welfare. Thus in January 2002 the youth organization, *Subhash Illaingyar Narpani Mandram*, was formed.

It is his regret that the youth organization could not take up work on a large scale. He did not have any monetary backing, as he comes from lower social strata of the society. But his urge to serve the needy kept growing deep inside.

His aim has been "*Iyandradai Seivom Illadhavarakku*" meaning *let me help the people to the best of my capacity*. It has been functioning for the past seven years. According to Arun, the idea behind the choice of the name Subhash was to inspire

the members to serve the country and work with a larger vision.

Arun is environmentally conscious, and his awareness about the importance of trees prompted him to plant saplings of neem and pungam (*Pongamia glabra*) trees in schools, hospitals and temples. The seedlings were collected from the Horticulture Department, and a few from the backyard of his house. Arun, along with his team, take up voluntary work during the temple festivals to regulate crowds and maintain cleanliness in and around the temple premises.

From its inception, the youth organization has been trying to serve the village in many ways, with the available resources. They encourage school children to participate in sports activities, and organize sports competition every year. To motivate the children further, the winners are given prizes on school Annual Day. The concept of Annual Day celebration was new in the village, and was initiated by the youth organization. Their idea is that the school children should not be confined to textbook education alone; they should also have some extra curricular activities. The best thing they could do was to encourage sports among school children. Arun and his friends also advise children against labouring in local gem cutting units, and encourage them to attend school regularly.

The village often faces the problem of water shortage, and Arun is very conscious about about wasting water. He constantly educates people to use water prudently. He feels sad that in spite of his entreaties, the people continued to waste water, without giving a thought about the future. Arun,

however, never misses an opportunity to caution them about excessive use of water. He says that he never tires of repeating his advice. Sometimes he even reprimands the fellow villagers.

Arun has initiated efforts to revive the traditional methods of rainwater harvesting in the village. He has also educated the villagers on the benefits of such procedures. He and his friends took the assistance of the Government scheme to build effective rainwater harvesting structures. Arun has been the prime mover in this endeavor. They helped the villagers dig pits and also took care of various stages of the construction. Arun goes personally to inspect and ensure that rainwater harvesting structures are well maintained. He and his team members are concerned that the villagers should realize the importance of such methods, and also understand the resulting benefits.

At the village level, the youth organization, under the leadership of Arun, impressed upon the *Panchayat* Union leader to de-silt the village tanks. Arun says he was motivated to do this after reading the commandments of Honorable President of India Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

Another area of concern for Arun is the education of the village children - particularly the school dropouts. He extended his full support when the Child Labour School was set up in his village to prevent children from seeking work in gem cutting units. He has personally taken the initiative to enroll the children in schools. He was a great support to the Child Labour School in promoting awareness about the importance of education to school

dropouts and in convincing their parents to continue their education. He has motivated the parents of child labourers to send their children to schools.

Arun encountered problems when some caste-conscious villagers protested when he formed the youth organization. They were against the idea of someone belonging to the so-called 'lower strata of society' being instrumental in establishing the organization. But Arun bravely withstood the criticism and unwarranted comments and moved ahead with the full support of his friends, some of whom belonged to the 'higher strata' of society. However, today, Arun is lauded for his efforts in working for the welfare of the village through the youth organization.

Another significant contribution is the formation of Milk Society, four years ago, in Illupur, near his village. Arun accomplished this for the benefit of the community, with the help of ten members of his youth organization. Now it has become a Government undertaking, and he is a Secretary to the Milk Co-operative Union.

Arun has a service centre, which is his source of income. By virtue of his diploma, he does repair work for various electrical

items. Four other members of the youth organisation work in his service centre. The service centre also undertakes electrical contracts.

Arun supports the activities of Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) of M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation. He mobilizes people for training and awareness programmes. Arun has himself undergone training at the VKC. He mentioned that during his free time, he would like to serve as a Knowledge Worker at the VKC. He encourages the students and adults to use the facilities available at the VKC to improve their knowledge and quality of life.

Arun graciously concedes that the NVA Fellow Award (2006) was not for his individual contribution to the society, but was for the collective work done by all the members of the youth organization. He mentioned that the award was for the youth organization, and that he received it only as a representative. It was an even prouder moment for his fellow members and friends when it proves a testimonial to their dedication and hard work. The award has given him a new surge of energy, as well as credibility, to continue and expand his activities for the benefit of his people.



Mr. V Dheenadayalan

Umbalacherry
Nagapattinam District
Tamil Nadu

V.Dheenadayalan, aged 43, comes from a traditional agricultural village called Umbalacherry in Nagapattinam District of Tamil Nadu. A special feature about this village is its indigenous Umbalacherry breed of cattle. Dheenadayalan has been working tirelessly to conserve and promote Umbalacherry cattle.

Dheenadayalan, who has studied up to 10th standard, is married and has two daughters. He owns few acres of agricultural land. He also has milch animals and oxen. Although he may appear timid, he is self-assured and confident. It was quite surprising when he told us that even as a young boy of 14 or 15, he was interested in matters concerning his village - like damaged roads, irregular transport service.etc. He used to go with elders to give representation to the concerned department. He used to take up some voluntary work such as assisting the poor and illiterate people to avail the government welfare schemes. Today, he continues to involve himself with such community responsibilities and activities.

After completing his 10th standard, he mobilized a group of like-minded men, and formed the *Tharasu Makkal Mandraam* to work for the development of society. Due to his active participation in *Tharasu Mandram*, he is known as *Tharasu Dheenadayalan*. The members are particular that the benefits from Government schemes reach the right people. They do not hesitate to point out any lacuna in the implementation of the schemes. Through this *Mandram*, the members appealed to the Government about the lack of proper roads, badly maintained transport services, so on. The group sometimes joins other voluntary groups (*Narpani Mandrams*) to fight for a common cause. One such joint protest was against the badly maintained buses (with broken window panes) and the vehicles not conforming to proper emission standards, thus polluting the environment. This protest yielded good results. Now Dheenadayalan says his village has a good bus service, with minimum pollution.

As Dheenadayalan was involved in such activities with the support of *Tharasu*

Makkal Mandram, his attention was drawn to the declining Umbalacherry cattle population in his village. This disturbed him, as he knew the importance of conserving the special breed of cattle. From then on, conserving and promoting Umbalacherry cattle became his major focus of activity, and he continues his efforts, till date.

Since then major focus of concern was to save and conserve the breed and promote the same, Dheenadayalan began to investigate the causes for the decline in cattle population. He discovered that the villagers had encroached upon the ten acres traditional grazing land, thereby depriving the cattle of their sustenance. The grazing lands were converted into agricultural fields. Evicting the people from the grazing land was not an easy task. Dheenadayalan, together with five of his relatives, filed a public interest case in the court against the Government. They said that the Government had failed to protect the land. For the first two years, there was no progress at all in this matter. At this juncture, Dheenadayalan came in contact with an NGO, Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Voluntary Action (SEVA), working on conservation of biodiversity and its related aspects.

With the support and encouragement of SEVA, an organization called Umbalacherry Cattle Herders Association, was formed. The members of the Association were cattle owners, and their objective was the conservation of this traditional breed by enhancing the collective capacity of the cattle herders in Tamil Nadu. They also aimed to increase

the awareness of the importance of cattle among members.

When the Association or *Sangam* took up the legal action, things started moving fast, and judgment was declared in their favour. But it was not easy to stop the cultivation in the traditional grazing land. So in 2002, they resorted to a one-day protest fast before the Taluk office. Immediately the Government issued strict orders to vacate the land, but some cultivation still goes on. Dheenadayalan says it is a delicate task to reprimand the encroachers, since most of the members of the *Sangam* belong to village households, and more importantly, they are from socially deprived class. He is confident that with the members' support he would be able to retrieve the grazing land from the encroachers. He faced stiff resistance and opposition from the encroachers when steps were taken to implement the court verdict.

Umbalacherry cattle are spread throughout the area - predominantly found in Thiruvarur, Nagapattinam and Thanjavur Districts. This particular breed has a white mark on the forehead, curved horns, short tails, white hooves and a large stomach.

The animal requires minimal maintenance, and can survive on paddy straw alone. It does not require specific or rich combination of concentrate feed/fodder grass. Moreover it is a hardy, drought and disease resistant animal. The bullocks are sturdy and have stamina. They are used for ploughing and transport of materials. The animals are allowed to graze

the stubbles in harvested fields. This indirectly helps to control the hidden insects. During the off-season the animals are herded in open pasture and penned at night to gather manure for fields. Hence, in this way this breed has multiple uses, and has a good selling price too. Even a three-month old calf can be sold for a minimum of Rs 3000/-. Hence it is a very good profit-earning source of livelihood.

After the *Sangam* came into existence, several measures have been taken to promote the Umbalacherry cattle. One such initiative has been the formation of Self- Help Groups (SHG) with cattle herders/livestock owners, and cattle-related names are given to the women SHGs. Young Umbalacherry calves are provided to the groups as incentives for income generating programmes.

Dheenadayalan said that they were exploring avenues for marketing of milk and value added products. He played a major role in all such activities, and led the groups. About 150 persons have been given loan facilities to purchase bulls. Impressed by the activities of the *Sangam*, the cattle-breeding farm presented young bulls/calves worth Rs 4200, to 40 members. With the help of the NGO, de-silted ponds where animals came to drink water. People contributed money to meet the de-silting expenses. Along with the members of the *Sangam*, Dheenadayalan took efforts to set up a Veterinary Hospital in his village. He was proud to say that since the Government was so impressed with the *Sangam* activities, it had immediately sanctioned the plan. Lland has been identified for the same, and soon work would begin, he added.

Dheenadayalan was very happy to note that people were now more aware of the value of Umbalacherry breed of cattle. The small landholders are increasingly using these bulls to plough the land. The traditional practice of manuring by retaining cattle overnight in the agricultural fields - which had not been practiced for quite sometime - has been revived to a certain extent, in his village.

Dheenadayalan humbly says that the credit goes to SEVA for creating awareness and promoting the local cattle breed among the villagers. Though he was concerned about the declining cattle population, and wanted to work to conserve the breed, he could not actualize it till he came into contact with SEVA, he says.

Dheenadayalan also extends support to these villagers in other ways. He settles disputes between households, or within a family. Being an agricultural village, there are constant fights over irrigation channels and bunds. He always tries to solve the problem between the landholders. People also approach him for general problems that affect the village, as a whole. For instance, he came to know that few persons had encroached upon a village graveyard and had converted the same into agricultural fields. When he verified with the VAO records, he called for the concerned persons and suggested that the problem should be settled amicably, failing which legal actions would be taken against them. Finally, it was decided that a portion of land would be used as a threshing yard for the villagers.

Dheenadayalan's association with SEVA has given him the opportunity to undergo

training in traditional herbal treatment. His companion villagers have also undergone this training. Knowledge about this herbal treatment is useful, particularly when they are unable to contact a veterinary doctor. He has also participated in seminars and training programmes related to livestock in other states like Karnataka and Rajasthan. He says he is familiar with the difficulties faced by herders, and knows about fodder and so on. It gives opportunity for people to exchange information, says Dheenadayalan.

Through SEVA he visited the Tsunami affected coastal villages in Nagapattinam District. He and others helped to construct a road in one of the villages (Thiruthuraiipoondi), distributed food, and put up temporary shelters. Around ten Umbalacherry cows have been distributed to households affected by the Tsunami. He says that the yield per cow is 2-3 liters, and the milk is rich and tasty. Those who own agricultural lands have requested for bulls of this breed for ploughing.

The NVA Award has enhanced his social status among the villagers. It has motivated him to gear up his activities with renewed strength and confidence. He attended the Participatory Knowledge Workshop conducted in New Delhi, and also the Regional Workshop for NVA Fellows in Pondicherry in 2006. The experience has increased his awareness of the importance of 'Thagaval Thodarbu' (Information and Communication). He wishes to set up a Village Knowledge Centre for improving the quality of life of the community.

Encouraged by the Honourable President's Commandments for Rural Development, Dheenadayalan took a bold initiative to dig a pond in the traditional grazing land for the livestock. The occupants did not expect him to undertake such a task. He hopes that during the coming monsoon, the pond will be filled with water. He has planted coconut trees in his backyard, and has encouraged others to plant trees around their houses, and in public places also.



Ms. R Gnanasundari

Chennamareddipatti
Thuthukudi District
Tamil Nadu

Gnanasundari has been working with shepherders in the villages of Thuthukudi District, Tamil Nadu, for the past five years. She is a zealous worker, committed to her work. However, in a traditional village society, a young woman working alone is often the target of remarks and criticism. Yet, in spite of encountering problems and severe criticism, Gnanasundari realises that she must learn to ignore detracting comments and carry on her work, relying on encouragement from well wishers. Her mother has been of great support to Gnanasundari, especially during difficult times. She particularly recalls that there were moments of despair when she would wish she had been born a man. Her mother would then instill courage and confidence by reiterating that they would consider her as their son, and not as a daughter. Such soothing and encouraging words have had a great impact and motivated Gnanasundari in her dedicated work.

Gnanasundari is the youngest of four children. She had a brief married life. Her husband deserted her during her

pregnancy. She has a six-year-old daughter. Gnanasundari and her daughter stay with her parents. She has two elder sisters and one brother. Her father owns a few acres of agricultural land and some sheep. He knows and practices traditional methods of treatment, such as relieving pain caused by sprains. He also treats fractures of the limbs by using egg and *uradr dhal* (*Vigna sp*) which he learnt from a traditional medicine man who visited the local hospital where he was hospitalized. She mentioned that FRLHT (Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions) also tested the efficacy of the treatment.

After completing her 12th Standard, she worked in a Convent for three months, where she helped care for the aged. At the Convent, she was inspired by the dedication and service of the Sisters. Though she liked the work, the attitude of the people at the Convent was not very encouraging, so she left the job. She tutored school children for some time. Soon she qualified herself to be a computer operator and learnt Higher Grade typing. She was a

good student in the school and used to help her classmates in mathematics. She used to guide them in their studies. She always stood first in class, and remembers that her teachers would praise her and commend her performance. She had intended to stay at home after her marriage and undertake some social service activities. But this did not happen. Her marriage ended abruptly and she decided to earn for herself and her daughter. She did not want to be a burden on anyone.

Her skill in computer applications gave Gnanasundari an opportunity to work for Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Voluntary Action (SEVA) in the year 2000. She came into contact with SEVA when the organisation began documentation of innovative practices in her village. Since then she has been working for SEVA. For one year she worked as a computer operator at the Head Office at Madurai, Tamil Nadu. After this she opted to work in the rural areas as a Project Officer. When she was based at the Head Office, she used to visit the villages once a month to conduct survey. As she had always had a liking for village life she realised that she would love to work with the local people. Fortunately for her, two such projects came up in succession, relating to the traditional sheep breed called *Vembur raga semmari aadu*, and were implemented in her District. Gnanasundari immediately used the opportunity and opted to work in the villages. SEVA has promoted breeders groups by involving a population of 250 in Vembur village. It plans to promote such groups in other villages where this breed is found. The breeders are facing drinking water problem, lack of pucca shed for

animals, and lack of veterinary facilities.

The Vembur breed is known for its good body weight, around 45 to 50 kg, and is found in 22 villages around Vembur, in V.Pudur Block, in dry black cotton soil tracts of Thuthukudi District. The body of the animal has brown/red patches with a white background. They are a hardy breed, and can survive on dry grass and shrubs found in the semi arid zones of Thuthukudi and Virudhunagar Districts. This breed is prevalent in Melakaranthai, Keelakaranthai, Patty Devanpatty, Mettilpatty, Alagapuri, Kodangipatty, Soorappanayakanpatty, Perumal Koilpatty, Supplapuram, Sevalarpatty, Melapatty, Sengottai, Ramasampuram areas.

The projects on the traditional sheep conservation and promotion covered nine villages in Thuthukudi District. Her work involved collecting information on level of interest or difficulty among rural people to rear this sheep variety, availability of water resources and veterinary hospitals. This involved interacting with men and women of different age groups. She organised shepherd groups in all nine villages of Thuthukudi District. She did not confine herself to the project activities alone but extended her services to the shepherders' families in various ways, like going to the post office, getting application forms for school and college going students, buying notebooks and pencils, informing people about various government schemes and welfare measures. Her priority is to help ignorant and illiterate parents.

Since the cattle herders can be contacted during morning hours from 5 to 9, and in

the evening from 7 to 10, she finds time to assist the staff of various government departments in their activities and projects, and also in other villages. Her familiarity with the local people and the area brings her into contact with NGOs and other government functionaries whenever they initiate fresh projects or programmes. She helps mobilise people to attend camps organised by Block Development Office (BDO) to benefit handicapped persons. These camps are usually held every three months, and veterinary camps held once in two months. During the veterinary camps she assists the veterinary doctors record the number of animals that are brought for treatment and details of the prevalent diseases.

Gnanasundari involves herself by helping with projects implemented by the government, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGO) in her project villages. Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), a five-year Programme, has been going on for more than three years in the villages where SEVA also concentrates its activities. This gave an opportunity for team work in activities such as digging canals and watershed management. Mobilising people is important in implementing these activities; Gnanasundari's contribution is significant here. When veterinary camps and training on growing *azolla* (which is emerging as an alternative cow feed in the absence of fodder) were conducted in these villages through DPAP, she helped to mobilise people to attend the programmes. Besides this, she shared her expertise in conducting a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercise. She also took personal care in

raising 300 *azolla* saplings. She said that working with them has given her a lot of exposure and experience in soil testing, drought prone plant species, cost benefit ratio of cultivating a crop and so on. Through her association with DPAP she feels that her awareness has also increased. She has learnt about medicinal plants like *sarkarai kolli* (*Gymnema sylvestris*) and *kaatamanakku* (*Jatropha curcas*) that can be cultivated in drought prone area.

A priority for Gnanasundari would always to help the shepherders in the best possible way through these projects. She had managed to get fodder grass seeds supplied free of cost to a few shepherds, and pots to raise *azolla* grass. She however feels that since all these activities are done under the supervision of the *Panchayat* leader, the benefits normally reach only those whom he favours. According to her, a majority of the herders are illiterate, and only few own land. She says they are ignorant that they cannot even voice their grievances and needs. So she thinks that her association with project activities should benefit the shepherders one way or the other.

Gnanasundari has been involved in documentation of indigenous herbal practices, traditional healing methods and grassroots technologies innovations. SEVA has developed a database covering such aspects, for which she has made substantial contribution. The documentation work has enabled her to develop skills in generating information from rural and tribal people. She says one really requires patience and the skill to communicate and obtain information from communities like **Kani**

tribe in Tirunelveli District, who, according to her, are very secretive and possessive about their knowledge of healing practices and medicinal plants. She enjoys documentation work and interacting with different types of people living in various places. It involves traveling to various places in Tamil Nadu. She normally spends several days with rural and tribal communities to document their herbal knowledge and practices, healing methods and technologies innovation at the grassroots level. She had gone to Udthagamandalam, Nilgiris District, in 2002, to guide a woman in documentation work among the tribal community of **Todas**. Documentation work involves a lot of travel. Being a woman, there are many constraints. She finds it a little difficult to stay alone. She has to be away from home for several days. Though there is a sense of fulfillment when work is completed to her satisfaction, at times she feels miserable when she has to face criticism. As already mentioned, her parents have been a great source of support to her. Their consoling words heal the wounds and encourage her to regain her enthusiasm to work among the people.

Through SEVA, Gnanasundari has conducted training programmes in veterinary herbal medicine, and participated in awareness programmes in project villages and in other places from different districts in Tamil Nadu, and one in the Union Territory of Puducherry. During the training programmes and awareness camps, she highlights and demonstrates various herbal healing practices for animals, including the preparation of “*Masala urundai*” (prepared out of herbs and condiments like pepper,

jeera and few other ingredients). She was a resource person in a one-day training programme during 2003 on Herbal Healing and First Aid practices for animals, organised for 30 Barefoot Community Animal Health Workers (couples) in association with Kasthuribhai Mahila Mandal, an NGO based at Pudur (one of the project villages of SEVA). She has also organised more than ten health camps in association with Government Veterinary Department in the project villages.

Through the project she has helped the herders obtain loans to purchase sheep and build sheep sheds. In a few villages, existing canals were repaired; two common drinking water troughs were provided. Hand pumps have been installed in six villages. Part of the expenses was borne by the shepherds. SEVA also facilitated renovation of supply channels in one village for collecting rainwater for the existing tank. All these activities are done in cooperation of the local shepherders. Gnanasundari said that she could manage to carry out the above-mentioned activities almost single-handed. According to her, if a person gets an opportunity to work in a SEVA project she or he is sure gain competence to do any kind of work.

When SEVA organised a ten-day tour by foot called ‘*parambariya arivaithedum nadai payanam*’, (a walk in search of traditional knowledge) she participated in that. The objective of the tour was to highlight the importance of traditional knowledge and practices related to food, herbal plants, agricultural crops and practices. The tour covered districts like Dindugul, Madurai, and Karur in Tamil Nadu. Around 90

persons participated. This tour gave her an opportunity to meet many people. She realised that language is not a barrier for communication and gained the confidence that one can communicate through sign language. Prior to the '*parambariya arivaitthedum nadai payanam*', Gnanasundari had an opportunity to visit Ahmedabad and Bangalore in connection with correction of work typed in Tamil.

In her individual capacity, Gnanasundari has helped the shepherd households. For instance, when the daughter of a shepherd couple did not know what to do after completing 12th Standard, she guided the girl to apply for a course in nursing. From her personal savings, Gnanasundari gave Rs. 3000 as a loan to pay the fees. To meet the hostel expenses, she helped the parents by getting financial loan from Herders Association. In another instance, she helped a girl in the Teachers Training course. By taking help from others, she used to assist the girl in preparing teaching aids and modules. She has helped a boy to get employment in DHAN Foundation. Within her means, she tries to provide some financial assistance to school going children of her village.

As the project has come to an end during June-July, 2006, Gnanasundari is very concerned about the shepherders. She wonders whether it would be possible to work for the people without the organisational backing of a project or scheme. She feels sad to leave mid way. If nothing works out, she has decided to work on a voluntary basis for the welfare of the people. Gnanasundari says "I have the ability and confidence to lead a life without depending on anyone. I can easily earn for

the family by cultivating my two acres of land which my father had given me, and I can definitely earn more by buying ten sheep and rearing them".

Gnanasundari does not like anyone pitying her or sympathising with her. She says it is discouraging. In some of the villages where she works, she does not reveal her marital status. To all appearances, she is an unmarried woman. She feels that this helps avoid a lot of unwanted talk. She says it is hurtful when people for whom she works make undesirable remarks and comments about her. During such times, her mother is a great support as always. Gnanasundari tries to regain her composure quickly since she is careful that it should not affect her daughter. She wants to bring up her daughter to be a bold and courageous person.

At home, Gnanasundari's parents are very encouraging and helpful. Outside of her home, her classmates and friends from the school are of great help to her. She considers herself fortunate to have such a group of friends. Since she studied in a coeducation school, her group of friends includes males also. They extend their help in carrying out her field activities like in laying pipes. On few occasions she entrusts her work to her friends if it becomes too late to get back home. Her friends always oblige her. It was with their guidance and encouragement that she first took up the job with SEVA. During the late working hours, the boys escort her home. They boost up her morale when she is in low spirits.

According to Gnanasundari, receiving the NVA Fellow Award (January 2005) has

given her social recognition. Those who used to scoff at her now respect her for her achievement. She says she did not give much importance when she was informed about the Award or the ceremony. Only when she entered the hall did she realise the real significance. She now thinks of this as an encouragement, and has decided to work even harder. She appreciates the efforts of organising Participatory Knowledge Management Workshop for the Fellows, which provided the opportunity to know about various field situations, difficulties in the society and more importantly, to meet and interact with several Fellows who have been doing yeomen service in various capacities. She is glad and proud to be a Fellow, as she thinks it is a recognition given to her for her services to the community.

Gnanasundari feels that the Fellows should be kept constantly motivated and inspired, by organising regular interactive meetings to keep the spirit of service alive in them. Otherwise there is likelihood that it might lose its momentum. She also suggests that the Fellows could be formed

into Federations, thematic-wise, based on their skills and expertise. She was happy to have had the opportunity to meet some of the Fellows during a training programme on Web-creation and developing data base, at the Village Resource Centre of MSSRF, Puducherry, and at Gandhigram, Dindugul District, to take part in the Participatory Knowledge Management Workshop organised by MSSRF. As she is good in documentation work, she is prepared to share her knowledge and give training (on ways to approach people, and methods of data collection) for those who require the same. Gender concerns is her other area of interest, and she wants to improve herself and help others. She is of the view that this Award should be given only to those who are really working at the grassroots level. She believes in mentoring the youngsters, and encouraging them toward welfare work. To work among the rural people, middle or secondary school levels of education are sufficient. "It only requires commitment to work among the rural population, and not a university degree," says Gnanasundari.



Ms. Kalaivani Rajendran

Kallar Pasupathikovil
Thanjavur District
Tamil Nadu

Kalaivani Rajendran, is a 45-year-old innovative farmer. She was born, brought up and married in Kallar Pasupathikovil village in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. She was born in a traditional agricultural family, and her husband is also from a similar background. She has studied up to 10th standard. She is a mother of three children.

Like any other woman of a small farmer category, she has been of great help to her husband in farming activities without knowing much about the latest developments in the agricultural sector. The family had been farming mostly using traditional methods till 1992. It was during this year that Kalaivani attended a training programme conducted by Tamil Nadu Women in Agriculture (TANWA), a project funded by DANIDA for the benefit of small and marginal farmwomen. Since then, a gradual but steady change took place in her outlook about agriculture. She learnt about seed treatment and other low/no cost technologies, which she later adopted in her farm. She has since been attending

various training programmes conducted by the Department of Agriculture, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and NGOs.

Kalaivani's association with **Chutru Suzhal Iyal Ayvu Maiyam** (Centre for Ecology and Research, a Non Governmental Organization) and her participation in various training programmes has given her the motivation and encouragement to follow innovative practices in her field. She experiments with what she learns through the training programmes. She first looks into the economic viability, and evaluates the benefits, before adopting any new crops or practices.

Kalaivani has practiced the concept of 'lab to land' in her field, and has demonstrated its value and importance. With support from her husband, she introduced new varieties of rice like Aduthurai 43, I.R 50, Ponni, Vellai Ponni and ADTRH1 in their field. She pioneered the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) in her village. She demonstrated to her

villagers the remunerative and economical aspects of the system. She says SRI system involves more work than the usual methods, but the benefits and profits are much more. It is economical in terms of seed, water, labour inputs, applications, and there is increase in yield. She feels that the only drawback is that it is not flood resistant - particularly during the early stages of growth.

Kalaivani believes in organic farming. She was motivated to go in for organic method of cultivation gradually since 1994, when **Chutru Suzhal Iyal Ayvu Maiyam** gave Farmers Field School training. She is aware that there should not be a sudden shift from inorganic to organic farming - it should be a gradual process. She uses vermicompost, coir pith and green leaf manure. She also applies biofertilizers such as *Phosphobacteria*, *Azospirillum* and *Pseudomonas* (a biofungicide). She also uses **Amirtha Karaisal** (prepared with cow dung, cow urine and jaggery), a plant growth stimulator. The household however continues to use a little urea and DAP as basal application, but she intends to give them up gradually.

Kalaivani shares her knowledge with others during SHG meetings. When she goes for any training programme, she takes her group members and other women from her village. During the meetings she reiterates that if they learn about 10 new methods, they must experiment and adopt at least one of them.

Kalaivani has been the convener of the Farmers Discussion Group of the Farmers Training Centre. She is a Contact Farmer.

She is the leader of All Women's Farmers Club and TANWA Self Help Group (SHG). She is the recipient of the Best Discussion Group Award of the Government of Tamil Nadu. She became a qualified Trainer to the Farmers Field School in Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Kalaivani has the rare distinction of receiving the L.M Patel National Award (which also included a cash award of Rs 100000) for Best Woman Rice Farmer in the International Year of Rice (2004). She mentioned that she is one of the five selected out of a total 74 nominees for the Award.

Kalaivani has become a role model for some of the women and men in her village. About five households have been encouraged to adopt SRI method. Many have been inspired to take up seed treatment using biofertilizers. She produces organic products such as pseudomonas, **Amirdha Karaisal** (a local preparation used a plant growth stimulator) and herbal pesticides, which she uses in her field. She sells Pseudomonas to the villagers. There is a demand for it in the neighbouring villages and shops, and she is able meet the demand. The other two, which she learnt in a training programme two years ago, are for her household consumption only.

Kalaivani's ambition is that more and more households should adopt innovative agricultural practices. She feels that this is the only way we will know the value of its total impact. Otherwise it would be like 'clapping with one hand' - to use a local idiom. Whenever she gets the opportunity to talk to other women, during meetings, or in the temple or the fields, she creates awareness about various issues. Through

the Farmers Club she is making arrangements to conduct a training on Livestock Management and the SRI method.

Kalaivani mentioned that initially the skeptical villagers ridiculed her when she went for trainings and meetings. They have gradually come to realize the purpose of attending such trainings and the value of information and knowledge. Today the village women take part in the training programmes or camps in large numbers. Even the men seek her advice if they have any doubts regarding the crops. They bring the affected plant to show her, and ask her to suggest the right treatment. She helps them by providing agro advisories or suggestions whenever she is confident. Otherwise she consults with the Assistant Agricultural Officer or Agricultural Development Officer, and helps the farmer with proper details. When she realized that people do not make the effort to purchase *Azospirillum* and *Rhizobium* from the market, she made it a point to procure them on their behalf. She feels that such

gestures go a long way in motivating them to adopt innovative practices.

Kalaivani says that being an ordinary village woman, she did not expect to receive an award (L.M Patel National Award) from a scientist. She is very happy to have achieved this distinction. When NVA Fellow Award followed, it she was really proud to receive it from the Honourable President of India. It was an unforgettable moment for her.

Having been inspired by the 10 points given by the President of India for the development of the society, she advises youngsters and also the elders who indulge in gambling and consuming arrack, to desist from such harmful habits. Along with a friend in the same village, who is also a NVA Fellow, Kalaivani tries to help the village children in the field of education. They feel that by setting up a Village Knowledge Centre, they will be able to make greater progress in child education. Now they are taking the initiative to establish a VKC very soon.



Ms. Kasthuri Chandrasekar

Perugudi
Madurai District
Tamil Nadu

Kasthuri Chandrasekar, who had seldom stepped out of her house till 1993, is today the President of *Mahakalagam*, a federation of 120 self-help groups (SHG). She is Community Leader of Covenant Centre for Development (CCD) and President Community Enterprise Forum International.

Kasthuri, who is 45 years old, was born in an agricultural family. She was the youngest of five daughters. She has studied up to eighth standard. She was married at 19, and settled down with her husband in Perungudi - situated outside Madurai city limits. Her husband owned a small press, which had to be shut down due to losses. He presently owns an auto rickshaw, which is the source of income for the household.

Sometime during 1993-94, Kasthuri became a leader of *Pengal Munnera Sangam* - or Women's Welfare Society. This was the first time she had taken any work outside of her home. Sister Mary, from a nearby convent, who was concerned about the women in the village, was instrumental in forming this society. Kasthuri recalls

how Sister Mary managed to mobilize 32 women from her village to form this society, and taught them the concept of savings. She encouraged them to save at least Rs 5 per month.. Sister Mary had the practice of sharing information with the women to improve their day-to-day life.

In the meantime, Sister Mary happened to meet Muthu Velayutham of CCD, who has a herbal and medicinal farm in Sevaioor in Virudhunagar District, Tamil Nadu. CCD has been involved in forming self-help groups - locally known as *kalagam* - since 1991. Sister Mary enquired whether it would be possible for him to help her group of 32 women. When the response was positive, efforts were made to include the 32 women as members of CCD self-help group. Kasthuri took active part in the meetings that were conducted before formalizing the process. She did not mind spending money from her pocket to travel to Sevaioor from Madurai to take part in the meetings.

Kasthuri mentioned that since Virudhunagar District is a drought prone

area, the CCD was concerned about people migrating to other places in search of livelihood. So the organization mobilized landless agricultural women into *kalasams* or SHGs for micro finance and community enterprise activity. The 32 women from Perugudi were divided into two *kalasams*. Kasthuri became president of one such *kalasam*, namely Angaiyarkanni *kalasam*, in 1995. Since then she has taken active part in all the activities of the *kalasam* and the CCD. For example, she began to involve herself in a big way in revitalizing local health traditions, and conserving medicinal plants, which is the major focus of, the CCD.

Kasthuri understood the concept of savings, and wanted to promote it among the women in the villages, by making them members of the *kalasam*. As the Virudhunagar District is drought prone, many women evaded Kasthuri, and few others joined her in promoting the savings habit. Initially, it was a difficult job for Kasthuri and others to convince women to save at least one rupee, or a handful of rice, every day. Her determination and hard work yielded good results. Soon she could mobilize more than 1500 rural women to become members of *kalasam* groups. Her activities also extended to other areas where she contributed a lot to establish three *Mahakalasams*.

There were no bank linkages for the *kalasam* micro finance groups till 2000. So the members approached the CCD to request for help in this regard. Then they had an idea to start a People's Bank - known as *Mahakalasam Makkal Vangi* - with the financial contribution of Rs 2000 from each *kalasam* group. The idea was

translated into reality when the bank was registered as a trust in 1996, with an elected board of 10 trustees. CCD and other institutions like NEERA Network, were generous in giving financial assistance in the initial stages to the *Mahakalasam* bank. In order to instill confidence in the women, they were taken for an exposure visit to DHAN Foundation where a similar bank was functioning well.

Kasthuri, who was initially a representative, is its president for the past seven years. Through the *Mahakalasam*, the groups' financial needs to enhance their viable livelihood options, are met to a greater extent. Loan facilities are offered for livestock, agriculture, palm crafting and charcoal preparation. Looking at the efficient functioning of the *Mahakalasam* bank, some mainstream banks came forward to help the people. Kasthuri felt proud that a group, which had a paltry savings of Rs 20 in 1991, today has Rs 200000.

Kitchen herbal garden concept was introduced in the villages when it was found that a great amount of loan money was utilized for medical expenses in the household. As already mentioned, Kasthuri played a major role in popularising and promoting the kitchen herbal gardens, not only in Virudhunagar District, but also in the other areas. The kitchen garden is valuable as the herbs could be used to treat common ailments,

Kasthuri was instrumental in forming an Association for the women involved in herb collection, with the support and guidance from CCD. It was later registered as a Cooperative Company called *Grama*

Mooligai Company Ltd (GMCL), in the year 2000. She is one of the four community representatives in its Board of seven Directors. The members include both the herbal cultivators, and also the collectors. The members are also shareholders of the company. The idea to form an Association came when she came across people (during her visits to the various villages to monitor the activities of *kalasams*, and help them with accounts, or to form new groups) gathering herbs and selling it to the traders. She learnt that the people were not aware of the utility of the herbs they gathered, nor did they know where the plants are being marketed. By interacting with the gatherers, she understood that the people had difficulty in transporting the herbs to the market, so they had to depend on the trader who comes to the villages. They were accepting whatever amount of money that was offered. Kasthuri took the initiative to mobilize the growers. With the help of OXFAM, training was given to them in procedures for plant collection.

For the first two years the company was marketing medicinal plants as raw material. In order to enhance the profit, a semi process unit has also been set up to market Value Added Medicinal Products, after signing an agreement between *Mahakalasam*, GMCL and CCD. Kasthuri signed the agreement on behalf of *Mahakalasam*. She takes keen interest in all the activities of GMCL. The semi process unit is involved in preparing 10 different herbal medicines for common ailments.

Kasthuri also involves the *kalasam* members in selling the herbal medicines through groups and a commission of Rs

30 is paid for every hundred sold. She is happy to see the company financially progressing well. The company supplies its products to the leading drug companies in Tamil Nadu, and lately it has extended to other States also. Kasthuri clearly understands that the company has to maintain the quality if it has to sustain profitably. So, she often stresses this point among the members.

She says by sharing her experiences with her friends, she could motivate women and encourage them to have a *Makkal Amaippu* (Community Organization) in places where there are no such groups functioning. She strongly feels that only through *Makkal Amaippu* one can actually help develop the society. She offers her services to spread the message of such work for the progress of women and the society.

Kasthuri played a very significant and leading role in Green Health Package of the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) implemented by CCD. It was felt that the programme would be successful if it goes through the people, so the CCD decided to involve *kalasam* members. Under this programme, it was decided that every household would cultivate 20 medicinal plant species. The programme at first targeted the families of *kalasam* members. When there was a good response for the Green Health Package programme, they later decided to include other families also. From thereon, it was extended to four other districts in southern Tamil Nadu, with great success.

Through the CCD, around 8000 KHG have been planted by involving the members of community organizations or

Mahakalasam. They were the fore runners in adopting and spreading this concept among rural households. When FRLHT was to introduce this programme in Karnataka, Kasthuri was asked to share her experiences with the local people. She understands the value of adopting organic farming, and natural resource management and development.

Kasthuri mentioned that when first she and her teammates tried to propagate the concept of KHG, they encountered people with a hostile attitude. She cited an incident that happened in her neighbourhood. She wanted to take start programme in a colony inhabited by the staff of a Transport Department, where there were about 225 houses. The residents refused to open their doors, and they were willing to listen to what the CCD staff was trying to say. They said that they attained self-sufficiency, and there was no need for external support to take care of their health. But Kasthuri was determined that somehow the scheme should be implemented in that place. She decided to carry out the planting of plants without the residents support. She took two staff members from CCD to help dig pits and plant the seedlings. She planted 20 medicinal plants in each house. But today the hostile residents have become friends of CCD, and in case they need any plant cuttings they collect from this colony. The residents have understood the value of the plants, and the benefits of herbal medicines.

Kasthuri was proud to mention that the KHG programme has also been implemented in Maharashtra. With the

support of a local community based organization, 5000 gardens have been set up. Efforts were also taken to replicate the programme in other States in Northern India through a People's Movement - namely *Ekta parishad*

Kasthuri's commitment and interest in promoting the Green Health Package programme among the rural people gave her an opportunity to be a member of a task group to study the impact of Kitchen Herbal Garden (KHG). The study was commissioned by FRLHT in 1998, to review and evaluate the functioning of KHG programme carried out through 18 other institutions. Since it was felt that it would be better to involve persons from *makkal amaippu* (Community Organization), Kasthuri and other woman joined the study team as the representatives of *Mahakalasm-Federation of Self-Help Groups*. The study was well appreciated as it brought out many useful and fresh insights into both positive and negative aspects of the programme. Kasthuri and her friend were lauded for the work that proved to be as good as any study conducted by research students. . They were given a cash award of Rs 25000 for it, which they deposited with the *Mahakalasam*, as they wanted to strengthen it.

The role of *Mahakalasam* in the KHG programme, and the subsequent study were recognized at the Social Summit in South Africa. Kasthuri had the opportunity to attend the conference at Johannesburg, where she received the prestigious Equator Prize, with four other partners, in the Summit event. Fodham, the Jesuit University of New York, also honoured her

in 2005, for her excellent work and achievements.

Kasthuri has attended many training programmes, workshops and seminars. She is often invited by non-Governmental organizations and other institutions to give lectures. She has had an opportunity to go to Ahmedabad for a programme conducted by the National Innovation Foundation in documentation of traditional knowledge and innovative practices. She was one of the 16 members from CCD who attended the training. She found this very useful because she was able to learn about innovative practices and the methodology to be adopted for generating information even from those who are unable to express themselves, and document the same. Since four years she and others have been documenting indigenous knowledge and grass roots level innovations in the field of traditional medicine, food practices and livelihoods, and they send the data to National Innovation Foundation. Before she attended the training, she thought it was related to documentation work. But her participation has given her exposure to learn about simple innovations. Her visit to Ahmedabad inspired her to take an interest in conservation and promotion of traditional crops. She collects seeds of traditional crops such as **samai** (*Panicum sumatrense*), **thinai** (*Setaria italica*), **varagu** (*Paspalum scrobiculatum*) **kudiraivali** (*Echinochloa colona*) and traditional vegetable seeds like **neela peerkangai** (*Luffa acutangula*) and **neela surakkai** (*Lagenaria siceraria*) from her areas of work, and she deposits them in the seed bank maintained by CCD. She has been concentrating in this field for the past three years. She is also

engaged in another project that focuses on reviving traditional vegetables based on KHG model. She creates awareness about it among the others. She is happy that she is able to share her knowledge with the villagers. When people are in need of traditional seeds, she guides them by advising where to find the same.

In the Tsunami affected areas, Kasthuri helped to form women's SHGs. She and her colleagues identified those who were really affected by the disaster, and helped them by giving essential items to meet their day to day requirements. Through the CCD, they helped build temporary shelters, and also distributed salt tolerant vegetables and cottonseeds.

Kasthuri has conceptual clarity in whatever work she involves herself. She believes in sharing and exchanging of information. She does not miss any opportunity to take part in the meetings of *kalasam*, CCD or in other institutions. She does not mind spending her personal money for this, as she thinks that such participation offers a forum to share and exchange information and experiences. Kasthuri's husband is a great source of support to her. He is very proud of his wife, and encourages her in all her activities. Her children are also motivated to do social work. Kasthuri gives credit to her family, CCD and other partner organisations - who have all been instrumental to her growth and success.

Kasthuri has become a role model for women through her achievements in SHG formation, and in federating them, and for popularising the importance of herbal kitchen gardens, motivating people to get

involved in various income generating activities as alternative livelihood options, establishing a herbal company with people's representatives, and so on.

Yet Kasthuri does not rest on her laurels. She is not satisfied with her work. She feels there is much more to be done for improving the social and economic conditions of the rural people - particularly the women. According to her, there is certainly an improvement among women. Those who once refused to come out of the houses are now willing to participate in all the meetings. They are keen on increasing their awareness about different things. Kasthuri thinks that even this is not enough. She is sad that the women, in their individual capacity, are still not ready to try any new enterprises.

The NVA Fellow Award is one of several awards and citations (which include

International and National Awards), which Kasthuri has received. She feels that NVA is special because it is a recognition within the country from the First Citizen, which makes it most valuable. Kasthuri likes to strengthen her activities in capacity building of micro finance groups, promotion of local resource based enterprises for generating livelihood options, and promotion of community centred development model in medicinal plants and herbal products. She likes to focus more on traditional crops and medicinal plants. She says she is eager to offer her services to improve the livelihood of rural people by using local resources and also by imparting awareness and training. She would like to organize large scale efforts to conserve and promote traditional crops as well as medicinal plants and home kitchen gardens in the rural areas.



Mr. R Maniyan

Keela Punavasal
Thanjavur District
Tamil Nadu

Maniyan, 46 years old, hails from Keela Punavasal in Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu. He is an innovative farmer and a committed social worker who believes in hard work.. The population in and around the village consists mainly of agriculturists. Maniyan has been playing a significant role in promoting innovative agricultural practices among the farmers in this area. He motivates them to go in for alternative crops, advising them on it, depending on the soil characteristics and water availability. While constantly updating himself with latest agricultural developments he shares this information with others as well. He believes that one should integrate the latest technology with the traditional practices of the field to ensure optimum results.

Constrained by his family's economic background, Maniyan could not continue his education beyond middle school. His father was a small farmer with 3-4 acres of land, and a few cattle. The lands were sold during his father's lifetime. Maniyan is married and has two children. He is well

known in his own village and in the neighbourhood. He is an excellent Contact Farmer, who is able to disseminate information effectively. What is remarkable about him is that even though he does not own land, he takes intense interest in farming . and has a vast repertoire of knowledge on agriculture. He has taken 35 cents of agricultural land on lease, and has been working for a landowner for nearly 34 years, maintaining 15 acres of the latter's land. He works very hard on this land.

Maniyan's interest in agriculture attracted the attention of the officers from the Agricultural Department, Agricultural Extension Workers and others from related fields. The officials from the Agricultural Department always approached him and sought his help whenever new technology or crops were introduced, since he had the capacity to popularize innovation among the farmers.

Maniyan has attended more than seven Farm Schools on Air conducted by All India Radio, and was awarded

certificates for the same. He has participated in a number of training programmes conducted by Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and the Agricultural Department. Recently, in March 2006, he participated in a training programme organized by NABARD, where topics like organic farming, water management, vermicompost and herbal medicine were taught. He has also volunteered to be a coordinator of Farmers Field School programme conducted by Department of Agriculture.

Maniyan has been a convener of Farmers Discussion Group of the Farmers Training Centre since 1984, and this has been a major source of support to him. He was able to gain exposure to new ideas. He fondly remembers the then Dean of Agriculture Paddy Research Station, who joined him in the Farmers Discussion Group. He is proud to have had the opportunity to meet and talk to four Vice Chancellors of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University so far. He has now become a member of the Farmers Club, organized and run by NABARD. This way he has increased his prospects of meeting more people, and widening his scope and horizon.

During 1989, the Oil Seeds Department identified Maniyan, and motivated him to grow soya bean in his land. He says that the Department was confident that he would adopt it. When the Department officials explained that the crop required less water, and being a pulse crop, it would enhance the soil fertility, Maniyan was convinced about the positive aspects of cultivating such a crop in his land. He was

the first one to cultivate the soya crop in his area. Encouraged by Maniyan, about 10 other farmers adopted it in the following year, and many more followed in the subsequent years. Farmers were encouraged to cultivate soya for also its increasing market value. He mentioned that the farmers realized that the Soya bean would fetch an income equivalent to the rice crop. Maniyan remarked that this was a great success for the Department. Similarly, he motivated the farmers in his village and neighbourhood to grow sunflower and gingelly as alternative crops. Likewise, during 1989-90, the District Joint Director (Thanjavur), Agriculture, selected him to try out application of weedicide. The Department was confident that he would comply with their request. Moreover, they entrusted him with the task of selling the weedicide to the farmers. Maniyan was able to market the weedicide, and convey the money to the concerned official from the Department. Maniyan has, on his own, taken the initiative to introduce new crop varieties in his village. During 1995-96, he brought in the ASD-19 rice variety from Ambasamudram, and distributed it to two farmers in his village.

Maniyan reads a lot on agriculture and related subjects. He buys books related to cultivation practices, organic farming, herbal medicine and so on. As he does not believe in exclusively keeping the information to himself, he shares his knowledge with others in and around his village.. He lends his books to others. Since he is aware of the common problems in agriculture, and the remedies, villagers often approach him to clarify their doubts. For instance, in the case of any pest attack

or disease, people consult him to suggest remedies for them. Maniyan derives immense satisfaction and fulfillment by helping everyone. Nowadays he keeps all the related paperwork of the training programmes and training modules in the Village Resource Center (VRC) of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Thiruvaiyaru. This way, other farmers who visit the Centre, would have access to the material, and benefit through them.

Maniyan is also a frequent visitor at the VRC in Thiruvaiyaru. He helps the staff of MSSRF meet the different farmers and organize programmes in the villages. He has voluntarily taken up the responsibility of distributing *Namma Oorun Seidhi* (a Tamil Newsletter of the VRC) because information on employment opportunities, herbal medicine and Government schemes can reach more people through this newsletter.

Maniyan, the innovative farmer, has set a new dimension in thinking. He says it is good for the farmer to change according to the situation and cultivation practices. He feels that farmers should work profitably, and that it is important to adopt organic methods of cultivation to the extent possible, and to minimize pest and disease problems and also endeavour to protect the environment. He pertinently observes that 40 or 50 years ago, there was a need to adopt high yield varieties that demanded application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This was because the country's food security was at stake. There was also the great danger of widespread starvation in the country. The

continued use of chemicals has depleted the soil health and the environment. But the position today is totally different. Today we can gradually eliminate the use of chemical fertilizers and avoid the dangers of rapid depletion of soil nutrition and gradually change over to organic farming methods.

Maniyan's reading habits and his friendly nature have helped him get more clarity on various aspects of agriculture and also on the social problems of people. According to him, the lack of education and knowledge are major hurdles in the way of development. As a result of this, people tend to fall prey to cheating and exploitation. Maniyan feels that he was able to expand his knowledge base by listening to the radio ever since his childhood. He was a keen listener of programmes that focused on farming and social issues. He had the opportunity to relate to agricultural activities all over the country. His knowledge base is a combination of theory and practice. In his own words, he says, "*Enn arivu valartchikku karanam Vanoli*" - (the radio was responsible for the increase of my knowledge).

It is interesting to mention here about Maniyan's views on providing subsidies. He strongly feels that subsidies should be discouraged, and self-reliance ought to be the goal. It was his opinion that generally subsidies tend to slacken people's attitude towards work by encouraging laziness and increasing their expectations from outside sources - including the Government. He however realizes that most people will not share his views on subsidies, but he is

steadfast in his convictions. He has interesting ideas about storing floodwaters of river Kaveri as well, but feels that he will rarely find someone who will appreciate his innovative ideas and put them into action. Similar ideas were put into practices in the state of Karnataka, says Maniyan.

When asked about the NVA Fellow Award (2005) and how he felt when he received it, Maniyan replied that it was a great honour for him to get such an award from our country's first citizen. This has not only improved his self-image, but has also given him the impetus to rededicate to the service of the society

Although he is well respected and recognized in the community for his valuable activities, the award has enhanced his status among friends and villagers. Maniyan says he was quite aware of the 'ten commandments' of the Honourable President of India even before he received the NVA Fellow Award. He has made great efforts to convince others to donate for the cause of education of poor children. His own campaign has also helped his son, who is now pursuing higher studies in a college through the sponsorship of a well-wisher. He has also been inspired to be magnanimous in withdrawing a legal case against his brother.



Ms. Parasakthi

Sundara Rajapuram
Virudunagar District
Tami Nadu

Parasakthi is a 48-year-old woman, who looks frail, but possesses a strong personality. She was born in a traditional agriculture family. As the only daughter, with six older brothers, she grew up with special care and attention. She was the first young woman to ride a two-wheeler, which was uncommon in those days, particularly in rural areas. She says that even though her parents were not rich, they had a comfortable life. She has studied up to the 12th standard, and was married to a police constable as a second wife. Her marriage however did not last more than three years. She was not happy with her husband's behaviour and attitude, and was shocked and upset when she discovered that he had pledged her jewellery without her permission. With a seven month old girl child, she left her husband to stay near her parents and brothers permanently. Her brothers were fully supportive, and brought her back from her husband's house to their native place.

Parasakthi remained strong and unshattered by this separation. On the

contrary, it gave her strength and motivated her to help women who suffer ill-treatment and exploitation in the hands of their spouses or other men. Parasakthi did not opt for a divorce since she felt that the men in her village might try to exploit her sexually if she remained alone. She was also concerned that she should not set an example for other women in the village to try to seek divorce without proper reason. According to her most of the men in the village were addicted to arrack, and also a majority of the households were involved in illicit arrack brewing.

After Parasakthi's separation from her husband, she has not looked back with regrets. She marched forward in her mission to save and help needy and exploited women in her village. She was instrumental in arranging nearly ten inter-caste marriages. Whenever she heard any instance of betrayal of a girl by a man, she would see to it that they were married. She was not afraid of facing the *Panchayat* meetings, or going to the police station or countering threats from her opponents .

Parasakthi is a bold and courageous woman, and an ardent social worker. She articulates well and is caring and conscious of the problems of women and the needy in her village. She says that ever since her school days, she has had the habit of reading the newspapers and Tamil magazines. As a young girl, she became aware of various problems people face in day-to-day life, and also the social evils that affect society as a whole. She was greatly disturbed by all this. Such introspection influenced her to think about the situation in the village. She became aware of many problems and difficulties of people in general. She was determined that her village should be free of social evils and the exploitation of women.

Parasakthi's concern for women and society in general, did not stop at the emotional and mental level; she began to act. Whenever opportunities arose, she took the initiative to work for the welfare of the society. What work she began two decades ago, still continues. The formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in her village in 2001 under TANVA programme, gave her a foundation to strengthen her work in the villages. Working through an organizational base gave her the scope to widen her activities. She played a major role in forming SHGs, and became a leader of one such group. It must be mentioned here that since these groups were not functioning well, they were combined with SEVA, a non-Governmental organization, since 2004.

The SHG members showed interest in the proper functioning of the schools, TINP and *Panchayat* in the village. This is because they wanted the benefits of the

Government schemes and facilities to reach the right people. The SHG members insisted that the *Panchayat* leaders should show accounts for the expenditures. When this was refused, they did not hesitate to take the matter to the Union Office. The members would conduct surprise visits to the TINP Centre in order ensure that nutritious food items and vitamin tablets were given to the expectant mothers and the children.

When some schoolteachers faced problems in handling some students, Parasakthi, along with another woman leader of a SHG, took the initiative to set things right. The students had become unruly, and started to tease the teachers. To avoid further disturbances, and in order to bring a healthy atmosphere in the school, a Parents Association was formed, which included some important persons of the village.. When schoolteachers were late for work, they were also reprimanded. Parasakthi and her friend monitored the students' behaviour, and ensured that the teachers came on time and taught the lessons properly.

Parasakthi says that the teachers should set an example to the students. If the teachers were at fault, complaints would be made to the Head Master. The two women also monitored the noon meal service at school to make sure that this is properly provided to the children. Parasakthi is happy that there is supervision and good control over the children, and that the school is functioning well.

As already mentioned, the formation of SHGs in the village gave Parasakthi

renewed strength to serve the society. She has been of great help to the destitute and widows. During the last three years, she has helped some 40 women obtain old age pensions. She says that prior to the formation of the SHGs, she could get assistance for only three elderly women.

Parasakthi lends a helping hand to women during the distribution of sarees, rice and other free benefits by the government. She also said that she assists widows and destitute to apply for monetary aid from through Government schemes.

Parasakthi takes on a great deal of civic responsibility. She ensures that street lights and water supply are functional, and in case of any failure, she personally approaches the concerned authority to rectify the problem. She is held in high esteem by the people at the *Panachayat* Union Office. She and the other SHG members also assist the Health Department during immunization programmes and in distributing medicines to the villagers.

Parasakthi was instrumental in converting a part-time library into a full-time one, in 2003. The Panchayat, sadly, did not support her in this effort. She took the opportunity to meet the authorities during a meeting held in Rajapalayam in connection with National Library Festival. On behalf of the SHG, she donated Rs. 1000, and submitted a representation requesting for a full time library in her village. She was successful in this endeavor.

One of the significant contributions of Parasakthi is her efforts to stop illegal liquor production by many people in

Sundara Rajapuram. In this village, a majority of the households were involved in the brewing of illicit liquor.

She had to fight almost single-handedly against all odds to put an end to this harmful trade. She was determined in her efforts, and faced the strong opposition and resistance. She even faced death threats, but Parasakthi was not deterred. She did not give up the struggle till the people abandoned the practice. Finally she achieved her goal in 2005. She says she was appreciated for her daring role in stopping the brewing of illicit liquor.

The courage and the boldness with which she fought against this evil attracted the attention of political leaders at high levels. She was asked to take a responsible post in the local party office. However, Parasakthi politely declined this offer. When asked the reason for her refusal, she remarked, "Whatever one does as a member of a political party will be viewed as corruption. I feel it is always better to work independently or I might lose our people's support for my work. Another important reason for not involving myself in politics is that I will not be able to question the political leaders."

As Parasakthi felt that she must have someone to support and assist her in the activities, she identified a young widow whom she herself had inspired and motivated into action. The young woman, who is 27 years old, with three children, now assists Parasakthi in her social work. According to Parasakthi there should be someone to continue her work among the people. Both of them go together to all the places - whether it is to a police station or

to meet someone at the *Panchayat* Union Office. Parasakthi thinks that her partner in service should associate with different kinds of people, from various walks of lives. Now the women help the community through the Adult Education Programme, and also by obtaining donor assistance for educating orphan children.

Parasakthi and her assistant are very keen to ensure that benefits of government welfare schemes and other programmes should reach the people - particularly women, children and the handicapped.

Parasakthi is a woman with immense mental strength. She is not intimidated by police officers or the *Panchayat* leaders. In her fight against injustice to women, or to men, she is not afraid to face the challenges and threats from the *panchayat* leaders or the police officials. She does not spare the man who deceives a woman after exploiting her sexually, or the man who breaks the promise to marry. If the *panchayat* fails to give a fair solution, she takes the matter to the Police Station.

Parasakthi has till now conducted more than nine inter-caste marriages. In one instance she even challenged a lawyer who tried to support a boy who was not willing to accept the girl whom he promised to marry. The girl was an orphan, and was reluctant to divulge the fact that she had an affair with the boy. She was unable to conceal the truth after she found herself pregnant. Parasakthi identified the boy, and approached his parents. When they refused to discuss the issue, she informed the *Panchayat*. The *Panchayat* also did not support the orphan girl because she was older to the boy, but Parasakthi was

determined to resolve the case justly and amicably. She refused to relent when a sum of Rs. 20000 /- was offered to the girl as reparation. She finally succeeded in getting them married.

In another incident she came to know of a policeman who ill-treated his good-looking wife by locking her up, and burning her with cigarette butts. On hearing this, Parasakthi met him and threatened to take up the matter with higher officials. The policeman stopped this evil torture, and he now behaves normally.

Parasakthi is not biased towards women alone, but has as a fair sense on gender issues. There is an incident, involving a couple in a love marriage that highlights her keen sense of understanding gender. A few days after the marriage, the woman instigated a canard against the boy that he was demanding a huge dowry, and filed a case in the court. When the boy and his parents did not know what to do, the *Panchayat* leader suggested that they meet Parasakthi. When she studied the case, she realized that the woman was a cheat, as she was already married twice, and she had filed the case merely to extract money from the boy's family. Parasakthi brought the facts before the woman, and the parents of the boy. The case was withdrawn. There are more cases like the one narrated above, all of which prove Parasakthi's total commitment to social issues.

She is a regular visitor at the All Women Police Station. She tries to talk to people to get to know their problems. Whenever she can, she helps them either by providing guidance or by personal participation.

Using her experience under the TANWA training programme, she trains others. As she had attended SEVA training on herbal medicine, she has also conducted similar programmes in a few areas. She volunteered to work in the Tsunami affected areas of Nagapattinam District. In Kesavan Palayam, she helped to form four SHGs. Through SEVA, some financial assistance was given to the group. She is keen on being more involved in the activities of SEVA.

Parasakthi's brothers provide moral support, and they are proud of her. She lives in her parents' house. She was given an acre of land by her parents, which she has leased. She works as a daily wage labourer. She commands respect from the villagers, who are in awe of her. But there is also some opposition to her work. She believes that if a society has to function well and be valued by others, the people should conduct themselves with propriety and dignity.

As a mother, Parasakthi has a family responsibility. She must find a suitable groom for her 21-year-old daughter. She is sad that her daughter is not willing to pursue her studies after the 10th standard. Yet her enthusiasm for service does not wane, as she is looking forward to complete involvement in her work after her daughter's marriage. There is nothing to stop her after that!

After becoming a NVA Fellow (2005), she wishes to create awareness among women in other parts of Tamil Nadu, if provided the opportunity to highlight the status of the woman, and the need to overcome social barriers. She would like women to think for themselves, and act for their own benefit and welfare. She is of the view that the NVA is a source of recognition for her work in this sensitive area. She has the will to continue her mission. That is the reason why she is also grooming the young widow, as already mentioned.



Ms. S Ramuthai

Sanka Kaundanpatti
Madurai District
Tamil Nadu

Ramuthai, a 33 years old woman, is credited with introducing the concept of savings among women at a time when the village was not exposed to the concept of self-help group (SHG). She helped to form informal credit groups (locally known as chittu pidippadu) in her native village of Sanka Koundanpatti in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu.

Ramuthai comes from a family of six children. She has a brother and four sisters. Her father is a retired person from defense service. After completing her 10th standard she got married at the age of 18 and went to live with her husband in Theni district, Tamil Nadu. She had two sons but recently she lost her 13-year-old son who suffered from cancer. Her husband's family owned agricultural lands and they led a comfortable life. But the family lost everything and fell into debts.

Ramuthai and her husband went to live in Namakkal district with their two children. Her husband took up a job as a lorry driver. The family stayed there for five

years after which Ramuthai with her children moved to her father's village. Because of the nature of his job and his interest in politics her husband never used to stay at home. Therefore, her father decided to bring them to their native place. Presently, she and her son stay near her father's house. Her husband has become a fulltime party worker in his native village.

Though she had the moral support of her parents, Ramuthai had to struggle hard to meet the day-to-day requirements of her household. She started working as an agricultural labourer in a neighbouring village. She bought a cow on loan and she reared few goats. She used the income earned as wages to meet the household expenses and repaid the loan with the earnings from selling milk. Within two years Ramuthai's economic position got stabilized. Her attention was drawn towards women and she wanted to inculcate the habit of savings among them mainly because they suffered a lot by borrowing from local moneylenders who charged exorbitant interest rate. Many

could not clear their debts and as a result some of them as a family left the village so as to save themselves from the moneylenders. This motivated her to start informal thrift groups (these can be called as informal small chit funds) consisting of her village women in order to save them from the clutches of the moneylenders. There were many such groups run by men. Ramuthai could bring women together and formed three groups. Using the groups' savings she gave loans to women at a low rate of interest. It was of great help to the village women. These groups functioned well under the leadership of Ramuthai for two years. It was during this time she was exposed to the concept of self-help groups (SHG) through her friend from a neighbouring village.

Ramuthai took the initiative to start SHGs in her village and she formed few groups. She came into contact with Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Voluntary Action (SEVA), a non-governmental organisation involved in forming SHGs in the neighbouring village. And later these groups were merged with SEVA SHGS.

For three years, Ramuthai worked as an animator and later in May 2002 she became a staff of SEVA. As an animator she was very active and SEVA was impressed with her efficiency in maintaining accounts and her daring personality. She has been working as a Cluster Coordinator for the past four years.

Ramuthai is primarily involved in promoting SHGs in and around her villages. When SEVA came to the village there were only five groups and with in one

and half a years she could increase it to 40 (in and around her village). As already mentioned, Ramuthai's aim is to free women from the clutches of moneylenders. So, she showed keen interest in arranging for micro credit through banks. She had to struggle a lot to get bank linkages. Though the groups had account with one of the nationalised banks it refused to give loan. The group members became restless because they could not get any loan. It was during this time that SEVA helped the groups with some funds and it also helped in mobilizing some funds from DHAN Foundation during 2004. Ramuthai played a major role in getting these funds. Seeing this the bank also came forward to provide loan to the women. She could get direct bank linkages only last year. She has helped in extending bank credits to 20 groups. She mobilized more than Rs.12 lakhs as micro credit to provide for resource poor farmers to help them buy dairy animals, sheep and goats.

The SHGs have been formed into a Federation. In order to manage the affairs of the Federation she underwent a two-day training. She says she found it useful as it helps to deal with individuals, conduct meetings and other group activities better. Presently, she is looking after 37 SHGs activities.

Ramuthai has taken initiatives to bring certain basic facilities to her village. She and few other women from SHGs have been encouraged by SEVA to approach the *Panchayat* President to get civic amenities to the village. In association with the *Panchayat*, Ramuthai was instrumental in bringing a community hall, cement road,

street lights, toilet and drainage facilities to the village. The women insist that the SHGs should be informed whenever *Panchayat* meetings are held. The women are taking efforts to get electricity connection to their SHG building.

Ramuthai mentioned that she confronts various problems but has the will to face them. She has earned the enmity of the moneylenders. She says, "In fact they (money lenders) are quite angry with me as they feel I am blocking their income". A majority of the women have stopped borrowing from them because the SHGs are self-reliant now. Ramuthai gives loan to the non- members and also those who have left the groups because her primary aim is to get rid of the habit of borrowing from moneylenders. She helps poor women when they are unable to pay their interest. She pays from her savings and later collects it from them when they get money.

Ramuthai is concerned about lack of job opportunities for men as well as women in her village. She mentioned that for the past 10 years villagers have been facing losses because agricultural production suffered due to drought. So it has forced many households to migrate to other places in search of livelihood. Women go to Tiruppur for work where they get physically exploited by men, which has led to disharmony and ruining of the family relations. She mentioned that there are many instances of women committing suicide because of this. Men going to Coimbatore and Kerala do not take their families with them. She feels sad about it and thinks that something should be done to prevent families from migrating to other

places. But how to stop this is a question mark for Ramuthai. She said that during Participatory Knowledge Management Workshop for the NVA Fellows she highlighted this issue thinking that it would help to find a way out for this problem. She also realizes that it cannot be solved overnight.

As Ramuthai is concerned about lack of job opportunities in the village she tries to find employment in agricultural fields or mills in the neighboring villages. This will help them to earn income and they can also come back home the same day.

Through SEVA Ramuthai organized an Employment Development programme (EDP) for one week for the benefit of village women. She feels sad, as many could not utilize the training to generate income due to difficulty in marketing the products. She arranges loan for women (whose spouses have gone to other places for employment) to buy milch animals and also helps them to insure the same. With the help of SEVA she has organized a veterinary camp for the villagers. The villagers were exposed to the traditional herbal treatment to the cattle and many are adopting the treatment to the livestock. SEVA's association has inspired Ramuthai to raise a herbal garden and many households make use of these herbs to treat minor ailments. She also sells herbal products of SEVA to the villagers.

Ramuthai had an opportunity to participate in five day awareness programmes on AIDS conducted by the Tamil Nadu Women's Welfare Department. She shares the information with others and she has given printed

material to her friends and neighbors. She says her villagers are in a vulnerable situation as they migrate to other places in search of employment.

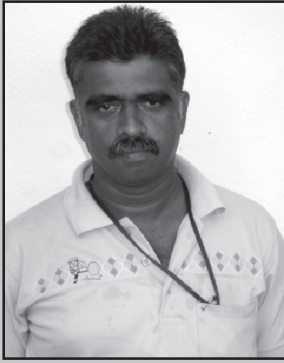
The villagers approach Ramuthai to settle family disputes and she has settled many such disputes and those arising out of caste. She mentioned that she introspects daily before going to bed about her day's work and tries to correct herself.

The NVA Award (2005) has boosted up her morale. The SHG members felt happy when she got the Award. It has enhanced her status among members and her friends. She wishes that needy and poor people should be benefited by the Government welfare schemes. Her participation in the Participatory Knowledge Workshop held at New Delhi for the NVA Fellows inspired her to think in a broader perspective. She realized one could be of help to the community just by communicating the information on Government schemes and programmes. She says that her exposure to the workshop has motivated her to keep herself updated with latest schemes and programmes. When she goes to the Panchayat Union Office she enquires about

the schemes. Through Panchayat Union she took efforts to organize a programmes for the Social Welfare Board in her village to high light the welfare schemes available for women and children. She mentioned that she has gained confidence and courage to approach the concerned department if necessary regarding the above or any other issues concerning the community. As she lost her son few months ago she wants to help people in the area of health using the Government schemes.

In this context, Ramuthai suggested that an identity card for the Fellows would give them recognition among the Government officials and in other places. The identity card might help the Fellows (as a representative of the society) while working for the community.

Ramauthai is upset with the functioning of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in her village. She and few other SGH group members are planning to take efforts to regularize it. The person in charge of PDS in the village has not heeded to repeated requests and warnings. As people are not able to avail of the of the PDS Ramuthai is determined to set things right.



Mr. Ravi Kumar

Ekkadu
Thiruvallur District
Tamil Nadu

Ravi Kumar, a 50 year old from Ekkadu, Thiruvallur District in Tamil Nadu, is handicapped. He is a postgraduate in commerce, and married, with two sons. He comes from a traditional agricultural family. The family sold the agricultural lands when he was in college. After completing his M.Com degree, he took up the real estate business, and later opened a provision store. He has been running a kiosk in his village since August 2003.

When the District Administration was identifying self-help group members to set up kiosks, Ravikumar, in his individual capacity, approached N. logue for setting up a kiosk in his village. Since there were no SHGs in Ekkadu, N. logue allocated a kiosk to him. After completing his training in computer applications, he set up the kiosk in his village. Since then the Centre has been functioning very efficiently and effectively under his care. His kiosk is one of the most active Centres in Thiruvallur District.

Ravi Kumar updates and renews the net regularly, and because of this, he is able to

offer better service to the villagers, and his monetary benefits are also satisfactory. Though he is a postgraduate, Ravikumar admits that he was illiterate as far as computer applications were concerned. He did not know how to operate the mouse. But today he is very proficient in the computer applications, and efficiently teaches both young and old. He says that during the weekends, the Centre is always full of students. More than 30 children, including six girls, have studied in the online tutorial, and 60% of the students have passed their 10th examinations. A majority of them belong to socially deprived section of society. Chiraag supports online educational services, and promotes Internet kiosks to help the poor.

Ravi Kumar observes that the kiosks are not set up merely with an economic motive alone, but also to provide the services to the needy. He recalls that the Local Service Provider of N. logue/Chiraag always reiterated that we owe a responsibility to help the poor. Ravi Kumar says he always tries to work with this goal in mind.

Ravi Kumar is able to earn through the courses he organizes for school and college students, and employed persons. He charges a fee Rs 300 to teach MS Office (for which elsewhere they usually charge Rs 1000). The course is conducted for about 35 to 40 days. Income also comes from charges for net browsing, typing, print outs and astrology computing services. He also provides printouts of application forms related to government benefits for the handicapped, the widowed, for pensioners, and for birth and death certificates. Ravi Kumar charges the rates according to the individual affordability of his customers. Widows and pensioners are not charged any money.

Ravi Kumar was earlier handling services connected with the Ramachandra Medical hospital (iSee to Ramachandra) , and this was of great help to the villagers. He had a good link with the hospital, and patients with the kiosk reference were given good care. This gave him happiness and fulfillment because he was able to serve the people. But sadly, this service has been stopped. Through this link he had helped many people. He helped a drug addict to overcome his drug dependence through the iSee Consultation with Ramachandra Medical Hospital. Chiraag had a tie up Aravind Eye Hospita also, but due to its distance, people could not utilize the services.

[iSee - The software is a multiparty video conferencing application developed by the collaborative efforts of TeNet group and Oops Pvt. Ltd. The software was developed specifically keeping in mind the requirements and communication needs of rural areas. It enables users to do real-time

sessions in different locations at the same time, irrespective of time and distance. The software is only ½ MB in size, takes less than two minutes to download, and works reliably on low bandwidth networks with speeds as low as 12 kbps. iSee has been used to allow doctors to remotely consult with patients, government officials to interact with their constituents, and villagers to chat online with popular TV stars]

Education of children is a priority for Ravi Kumar. He purchases educational CDs like dictionary and maths/science related lessons. He also conducted Adult Literacy programmes. Out of the 11 people who attended this programme, seven were females. He was able to do this since Chriaag had an affiliation with Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). He helps a few persons in his village with email service and sends the messages on their behalf, as they have provided him with their mail ID and passwords. Ravi Kumar charges a nominal charge for such services, and he is well appreciated in the community.

Ravi Kumar says that his service to the people in the community is only very minimal. He was motivated in this direction only after his contact with Chiraag, and the subsequent association with all its efforts. He admits that being awarded NVA Fellow in 2005, somewhat strengthened his resolve to serve the community in his small way.

Ravi Kumar says, “I did not do anything great to receive the Award. But it has created a deep urge in me to serve the society”. His trip to Delhi (to receive the Award) provided an opportunity to interact with other NVA Fellows. He was deeply

impressed with the work accomplished by the others. He realized that even those with minimum education have been working hard for the welfare of the people. He considers his contribution very negligible in comparison, and wishes to accomplish some meaningful work for the development of his village community.

As an extension of this, he has taken initiative to organize a Health Camp for the villagers. Shankara Nethralaya, Chennai has offered to conduct free vision check-up, and also to provide free treatment for those with defective vision. The hospital charges would also be borne by them. Meanwhile, Ravi Kumar is trying to arrange funding and sponsorship from some philanthropic organizations to meet the transport expenses.

Ravi Kumar aims to concentrate on the educational aspect, and plans to revive the Adult Literacy programme. The Award has encouraged Ravi Kumar to initiate efforts for various causes. On coming to know that 56 persons had not been included in the electoral list in spite of repeated official representations, he decided to try to include their names through online enrollment. None of them had personal email ID; he succeeded in getting them enrolled by using his personal email ID for all the 56 persons. They were extremely happy with his efforts, and very thankful to him.

After this incident, the villagers became more informed about the Internet Centre. Before this, many were not aware of its existence or about the facilities available. Now they feel confident to approach the

internet kiosk whenever they need any assistance or clarifications.

With the help of other residents of Teachers Colony, where he lives, Ravi Kumar is making an effort to install street lights. Many appeals to the Village Administrative Officer and the President of the *Panchayat* have not yielded any result. He is very earnest in his endeavour, and plans to take up the issue with higher authorities - for which Ravi Kumar has the full support of the residents.

Ravi Kumar could also manage to find solutions through email for some of his personal problems. He hopes that this will be possible at the village level also. He says that nowadays he uses the email to send electronic appeals or complaints regarding the lapses and lacunae in Government departments.

The NVA Fellow Award has motivated Ravi Kumar to associate with welfare organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, to widen his perspective, and to serve the people better. He is plans to become a member of Exnora. He feels that the Award has helped to broaden his outlook. It has motivated him to think collectively for the village and community. His areas of concern are education, and agriculture.

Though he comes from a village that is predominantly agricultural, it never occurred to him that he should help the farmers and develop agriculture. His interest in agriculture was kindled during his trip to Delhi when he went receive the NVA Fellow Award, and later when he participated in Regional Workshop for NVA

Fellows at Pondicherry, in March 2006.

Ravi Kumar feels that he requires more organizational support, besides Chiraag. Insofar as education is concerned, Chiraag is of great support. His objective is to concentrate on eradicating illiteracy - particularly among young girls and boys. He is happy that he is able to impart computer knowledge to the villagers. He has also been able to help to many students from socially backward communities to complete their secondary school education through online tutorials. However he seeks to strengthen this service with far-reaching plans.

As already been mentioned, the other area of concern is agriculture. Ravi Kumar feels motivated to help the farmers and develop agriculture in the village. But in order to actualize this, he requires organizational support besides Chiraag. Being impressed with the concept of the Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) he feels that this could serve the purpose not only in matters related to agriculture, but also in other aspects such as traditional medicine, education, Government schemes and so on. Ravi Kumar has already initiated the process to set up a VKC in his village.



Mr. J Senthil Kumar

T Vadipatty
Madurai District
Tamil Nadu

Senthil Kumar is the eldest of three children. His sister is married and his brother is still in school. His father inherited ancestral property of more than 50 acres of agricultural land, and two houses, but today there is nothing left. His mother also inherited some property from her mother's side. His grand father had worked to provide service to the villagers, and his parents have also involved themselves in community service activities. His family has contributed generously to temple activities, and for charity. When Senthil was in the 9th Standard, his family went through difficult times, and lost most of their wealth and savings. His mother runs a small *idli* shop, and she still tries to help people who are in worse economical condition. His 67-year-old father works at the ticket counter of a cinema theatre in Madurai. Senthil Kumar, who is 25 years old, takes care of the major expenses of the household.

After completing his 12th standard, Senthil Kumar was forced to take up a job in a mill at the early age of 17. As he could

not afford higher education, he had to give up his desire to qualify in Information Technology. He completed his under graduation in B.B.A through correspondence.

Senthil Kumar has always been inclined to work in the development sector. As a young boy he had observed people around him who were struggling hard to lead their day to day lives. Their situation was so bad that they could not even afford to educate their children. School children and the youngsters were not aware of educational opportunities or job prospects. The elders were also ignorant of many things that were happening around.

Senthil Kumar, at an early age, understood the concept of information empowerment. He decided to help the households - particularly the students and those have completed their schooling - by providing information for their development. So he started to work in this direction. He gathered information related to educational opportunities and job

prospects in and around Madurai, and disseminated the same to the boys and girls. He believes that lack of information is one of the main hurdles on the path to progress and development.

Senthil Kumar says that he got an opportunity to extend his services to people outside his area in 1991, when he started to work for the Society for Environmental Research and Value Education (SERVE) a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Madurai. SERVE's focus is on environment and conservation of biodiversity, and the programmes are basically implemented through school children and the local community. As he was also interested in environmental issues, he was impressed with SERVE's activities and so joined the organisation. He got this contact in one of the meetings of World Wild life Fund (WWF) that he attended as a member of WWF. He worked as a programme coordinator for Environmental Programmes.

As a programme coordinator of SERVE, he visited many villages, particularly in and around Sholavandan, Madurai District. In order to raise awareness among the villagers, he used to share his knowledge and other relevant information with them. During his visits, he realized that people lacked knowledge about higher studies, their scope for employment and other related aspects. Although he came across many students who had scored good marks, they would sadly be lacking information and details regarding various courses for higher education and other job prospects.

Senthil Kumar found an easy way to reach out to students with information.

With the help of his friends, he collected details about courses, vocational institutions and addresses of colleges in and around Madurai District, and disseminated all the information through a simple booklet which he would distribute among the students. With the permission of the school Headmaster he would share the information. He explained to them about various courses offered in different colleges and technical institutions, the scope of such courses and its employment prospects. He would also guide them to reach a particular institution like Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) coaching centre and Railway recruitment Board (RRB). He would generally go to the schools after the half yearly exams, as he felt that this would be the right time to prepare the students to take a judicious decision regarding their future course of action. He has helped several students to bring out their potential. He used to guide them about extra curricular activities, and guide them to training centres in Madurai. Through online services, he used to check out the examination results, marks, status of passport details and so on. In all these activities he had the support of SERVE. While working with SERVE, Senthil was very much impressed with the concept of a people's participatory programme. He was involved in documentation of medicinal plants, and a database was created. Awareness programmes were conducted once in three months, in and around Sholavandan village, to create awareness about medicinal plants, their value and properties, and their use in treating a disease.

Senthil Kumar worked with SERVE till

2001, after which he chose to work as a volunteer for M. S. Chellamuthu Trust and Research Foundation in Madurai. This Trust works for the mentally retarded children. Senthil is deeply concerned about mentally retarded children and is committed to their cause also. He was involved in developing teaching aids for the mentally retarded children, and finding sponsorships for such work. Along with his friends, he developed a teaching aid in the form of a story telling animation, with audio and video effects. It is an entertainment for the children when it is shown in the computer monitor. Based on the syllabus, he and his friends have developed three CDs for the mentally retarded children. He derives a sense of satisfaction working for such children.

In 2001, Senthil Kumar and his friends formed a Volunteer Forum with an objective to serve the needy. The Forum started with 17 members, and now has 12 and it functions well. The members carry out voluntary work such as organizing free health camps, escorting the mentally retarded children to their houses and so on. He and his friends collect notebooks, pencils and pens to distribute among the rural poor through the school. His friends are of great support to him. Three of his friends in the Forum are pharmacists. They give medicines and assist in the Rural and Mental Health Campaigns. He mentioned that he and his friends always discuss the ways in which they can help the students. The idea to prepare a booklet regarding educational opportunities emerged during one such discussion. His friends helped in collecting information for the booklet.

Senthil Kumar got an opportunity to work in health related issues when he joined the Centre for Rural Education Development (CRED) in 2003. He worked here till recently. Now he is working with Vaigai Trust on an honorary basis, and is also a resource person to other NGOs. He has opted for this kind of work because there is a scope for flexibility, and he can concentrate on the other areas that interest him. As a staff of CRED he has attended several training programmes and workshops. He was a programme coordinator, and has organized Reproductive and Child Health Campaigns, and Environmental Campaigns in villages, along with other village development work, with the help of the Panchayats. Through his activities with CRED he understood that a sound mind in a healthy body is very essential to accomplish productive activities. He always uses to stress this among the villagers by quoting the Tamil proverb *suvar irundal thane chithiram varaiyamudiyum* meaning that where there is no wall, nobody can draw a portrait. He joined CRED as a volunteer, and later started working for a salary. As a Project Officer he was involved in training self-help group women, focusing on reproductive child health.

Working with rural women he came to understand the rural-urban disparity. He says that the women, in general, knew nothing of pre-natal or post-natal care, were unaware of their expected date of delivery and the precautionary methods which they have to follow. Since Primary Health Centres are not equipped to deal

with complicated cases, these are referred to hospitals in Madurai. But by the time one reaches the city, anything can happen. So he used to organize meetings to create awareness on these issues. He tells the rural women that it is important to bring up the new generation in a good atmosphere, and for this it is essential to ensure good health for both the mother and the child.

Senthil Kumar's work involved collecting information related to sponsorships, proposal writing and communicating with other NGOs having contacts with CRED. He has published a book in Tamil namely *Perusar Kuzhandai Nalam-A Payirchi Nool* (A Resource Material on Reproductive Child Health). CRED also runs a functional literacy programme for child labourers. He has developed a teaching aid (identifying numbers and counting) in Tamil for them. CRED provided a great opportunity for him to develop contacts with many voluntary organisations. It has been useful to disseminate whatever he knows. According to him it served as a platform to disseminate valuable and relevant information and knowledge.

Senthil Kumar's work was not merely confined to the areas of the organizations' work. Sometimes, in his individual capacity, he goes to other districts in Tamil Nadu to conduct awareness programmes for school children on environment issues. He takes this opportunity to share the details about higher education. CRED and other organizations support his activities.

As it has already been mentioned, Senthil Kumar is committed to environmental concerns. This is one of the

reasons he chose to work for the Vaigai Trust. Currently he is in the process of developing a documentary, with the support of his friend, on the river Vaigai. The documentary will span the period from late 19th century, till date. He says that he has been inspired to take up this work when he came to know that the Vaigai River is under UNESCO's list of threatened rivers. He proposes to involve school Headmasters and school children from areas near the Vaigai riverbed in order to help raise awareness on this issue.

Senthil Kumar realizes that knowledge is important because it endows great power. He feels that information is wealth. He has gained a lot of experience by working in different sectors. This has contributed a lot toward his development. He says, "My development has been on a progressive path. Collection of data and recognizing information have broadened my outlook. It has widened or increased my interest, and I was able to show a great output in my work. There is a sense of satisfaction in whatever work I do- in any kind of field." He is happy to mention that whatever he was doing in his individual capacity to help the students and others, now he has several opportunities to serve the society through the NGOs. He wants to continue his services.

Senthil Kumar believes that his work experiences with three organizations have greatly benefited him. He could improve himself both personally and professionally. He has gained experience in project formulating, implementing, and executing and documentation analysis. He is good in computer applications, and prepares his

daily reports in the office computer. Most importantly, it has given him great exposure to the realities of life. This has helped him a lot while working among the people, with commitment and clarity. He could understand their day to day problems. His contacts with NGOs and voluntary organisation help him to work with the community in a better way, irrespective of caste/class and gender.

According to Senthil Kumar, receiving NVA Award from as great a persona as the Honourable President of India, Sri Abdul Kalam, is something, which he will cherish forever. He mentioned that it has geared up his voluntary work and he considers this as a recognition for his work, which he did with out expecting anything in return. It

has motivated him to develop an attitude to serve the society as a committed volunteer.

As he believes that knowledge is power, he wishes to continue gathering information on various aspects, and reach the same to the relevant sections of population and other NGOs. He says that information and data are time bound; so they have to be communicated effectively and in time, without much delay. He volunteered to collect information on traditional and herbal pest management from Sholavandan area, and give it to the Village Resource Centre of M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation at Sembatti, Madurai District.



Ms. V Tamil Selvi

N Nedungulam
Virudunagar District
Tamil Nadu

Tamil Selvi, a 38 year old graduate in history, belongs to N.Nedungulam village of Kariapatti Block, Virudhunagar District of Tamil Nadu and has been working in the area of women and health for the past 18 years in the villages of Kariapatti Block. During these years, she has had the opportunity to work with organizations such as The Association of Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA) during 1989-2000, Aravind Hospital for the next three years, and since 2003, with Family Health and Development Research Service Foundation (FH&DRSF). Interestingly, she has been associated primarily with women and health related projects. For such a multi-faceted personality with many achievements to her credit, Tamil Selvi is a very unassuming person, committed to her work.

Tamil Selvi belongs to a large farmer family, which commands great respect among the villagers. The family plays a major role in all village activities. Her grand father, a philanthropist in his own way, donated lands for the *Bhoodan* movement.

The villagers often used to approach him to solve disputes or to find solutions to any of their other problems, personal or otherwise. Tamil Selvi married her maternal uncle, who works with a non-governmental organization in Virudhunagar District. He continues his father's work, and the family is held in high esteem among the villagers. .

Tamil Selvi never imagined she would take up a job after her graduation. Fresh from college, quite unexpectedly, she became a primary school teacher in a school run by ASSEFA, in 1987, where she worked for a year. She then got married and later in 1989, she joined the same organization as a coordinator for a womens' development project. Her field of activity shifted from one of closed room to grassroots level. Since then her core activities have been field based, with focus on mother and child related aspects such as their health, sanitation, education and economic development of the household.

According to Tamil Selvi, though she liked working with children, working at

grassroots' level has given her a lot of exposure, and she has become sensitive to the villagers' problems and difficulties. This encouraged her to work with commitment. Although the work involves a lot of travel, she enjoys working and interacting with people. She mentioned that it gives a sense of fulfillment when people benefit from the project activities. She has come to understand that a personal touch is important in people-oriented projects. As she comes from the same Block, it was easy for her to create a rapport with the villagers, both women and men alike.

Having come from a family that enjoys a high social status, the villagers could not get accustomed to her role as a field worker. There was resistance, mostly out of affection and concern, from the people during her initial period of work in her Block. But later looking at Tamil Selvi, other women felt encouraged to come out of their houses, and cooperate in implementing the project activities. Initially it was difficult for Tamil Selvi and another woman, who was her relative, to mobilize the women who were shy and hesitant. One could observe that there was also a positive change among men folk, who understood that there was nothing wrong if women take part in project activities. They have realized that they were working for their own development. In fact, the fact that both Tamil Selvi and her relative were well known in the village, actually helped break the initial resistance.

According to Tamil Selvi, "It gives a sense of satisfaction if we are of some help when they (people) approach us with some problems. People recognize our work so I feel good, and inspired to work harder."

Had she been confined to her house, she would have been preoccupied with home affairs, and would not have got the kind of exposure she is getting now. Her involvement with various projects has enabled her to understand the various things that affect the society". I am glad and satisfied that I am able to offer my services, though I am paid for it", says Tamil Selvi.

What is commendable about Tamil Selvi is that she uses the expertise gained through the three organizations, while working among the people. She has attended various workshops, training programs and seminars within and outside the State, relating to the self help groups, women's empowerment, health, sanitation, education, livelihood training, raising herbal gardens and gender issues. She found the gender workshop helpful in improving her perceptions about gender relations. This helped her relate better with both the sexes in the village, office and at home. In a casual manner, she discusses and explains to people the gender concerns. She offers family counseling for men and women. While participating in a training program in Sivaganga on Field Office Evaluation System, she learnt about the 'need to know' guidelines for the requirements of people, and that one should not impose anything on them. While working with ASSEFA in the project funded by PLAN International, she learnt how to use funds efficiently and judiciously, to meet the needs of the local people.

Since Tamil Selvi and her husband are working with an NGO, it proved useful to

establish contacts with villages. Though her husband is not able to serve the people in the ways her grandfather did, he is happy that he is able to help the community through the NGO.

With PLAN International funds, ASSEFA undertook the task of forming self-help groups (SHG) in Kariapatti Block where Tamil Selvi played a significant role. This funding agency gave loans for housing, economic development, for purchase of cattle and for education. Tamil Selvi, as a coordinator of women's development project of ASSEFA, was actively involved in mobilizing women to form SHGs, and raising awareness among them about the concept of saving, their role in the society, education and health. She was active in implementing schemes that involved health, sanitation, livelihood and education with the participation of local people. When women began to join SHGs, they gradually realized the importance of education. Earlier, they used to think that it was sufficient if one knows to read and write. This attitude has changed to a great extent, says Tamil Selvi.

While she was involved in forming women groups, Tamil Selvi learnt how to interact with people, and to identify their problems and assess their needs. She was impressed with the way the funds (under the PLAN project) were divided and used in consultation with the local people, by forming committees like health committee, animal husbandry, education, housing and economic activities. She feels sad that the funds in a few villages could not be utilized properly because of lack of cooperation among the people.

After working as the coordinator of women development project for seven years, Tamil Selvi was asked to take additional charge as a Health Organizer. ASSEFA's primary objective is to promote health and sanitation. Tamil Selvi was in charge of the health committee. It helped her focus on women and child health. She underwent training to identify problems, and organized health camps. Through such camps, it became evident that women suffer from reproductive health problems. Around 1200 women from 12 villages participated in a camp where women with problems were identified, and arrangements were made for hospital care and surgery. About 80 were diagnosed with serious problems, and nearly 800 with minor problems. It was during this time that she came into contact with Dr. Lakshmi Rahmuthullah (with whom Tamil Selvi is presently working) who was Health Consultant to the project, and who imparted training to the Health Committee.

ASSEFA conducted a nutrition programme for children during 1998-99 in which Tamil Selvi also participated. Because of this intervention, there was a decrease in the number of malnourished children. It was 62 % during 1998, which has now come down to 32 %. The Government also cooperated by setting up TINP Centres in the villages. Though this project ended during 2000, a similar project came to this area through Aravind Eye Hospital.

Through ASSEFA, Tamil Selvi got a lot of exposure to health and sanitation programmes, environmental programmes

(like smokeless *choolas*, low cost toilets and choke pit).

When the PLAN funding ended, she was asked to look after the accounts of ASSEFA. But Tamil Selvi's interest was in Health. Fortunately for Tamil Selvi, the Aravind Eye Hospital started a Health Education project (2000-2003) in Kariapatti Block, with similar objectives of improving healthcare for women and children. The objectives of the project were to increase the weight of the baby at birth; to bring down the number of malnourished children and infant mortality. She joined the project as a coordinator. Through this project, clusters of pregnant women were formed, and awareness about the importance of health of the expectant mother and child was created among them in the project villages. Ante natal care and postnatal care - notably the first three years of child growth- was emphasized. Camps were conducted by involving doctors from Primary Health Centre and General Hospital.

This project was implemented by involving important people in the village, parents and elders. It was explained to them that 90 % of brain development takes place during the first three years in a child. It was pointed out that the husband's care is important for a pregnant woman; so also the parents' love and affection are vital to the growth of a child. It was stressed repeatedly that a healthy society is possible only if the women and children are healthy. If women and children are neglected, it might lead to depression, particularly for children. This becomes a problem to the family and the society as well. Such

children would only be a liability to the parents. They would not be of any support and security to the parents.

As a part of the project, iron tablets were distributed to adolescent girls. Hemoglobin levels was monitored, and it was explained to the young girls and women how iron deficiencies affect the growth of the children. Births and deaths were recorded, and weekly reports submitted to the office, giving details of women who went to the hospital, and the reasons for it. Morbidity assessment was done based on these records, and this gives an idea as to how the clusters were functioning. If there was a change, or if more cases were found, a study was made to avoid further losses.

The Health Education Project of Aravind Eye Hospital ended in 2003. It was during this time Dr. Lakshmi Rahmuthullah started the Foundation (FH&DRSF) as she felt that work in the area of Health in Kariapatti Block should be continued. The focus of the Foundation is on Family Health. Since they already had contacts with the villagers, a Health Intervention programme was initiated. The concept of Family Health is promoted by adopting a holistic approach. It is believed that in order to improve the family health it is important to address other problems like education of children, cattle health and welfare issues.

Presently, the project is functioning in two villages through the link worker concept. The link workers are local girls educated up to 8th or 10th standard. They are formed into SHGs. For every 25 households, one link worker is identified,

who has to maintain a file of the general details of the household, such as land holding, crop, cattle, agricultural inputs used, and so on,. The link workers also maintain a separate file for health related issues: birth and death details are marked, and most importantly, the details regarding the age group of 0-3 - like the weight, and common health problems, and details of treatment. In case of any health problem, the link workers guide the mothers or the elders at home to consult a medical practitioner working in a Government hospital or in private clinics. When a reference letter from the link worker or staff of (FH&DRSF) is given, the doctors charge a lower fee. The doctors suggest follow up measures. Mentally retarded children are sent to M.S. Chellamuthu Trust in Madurai. Two link workers, with 10th standard education, have been given training in First Aid. A First Aid kit is given to the villages.

The link workers help the households in health related matters. But they also help them indirectly through Government schemes. The link workers are in close touch with their allotted households. Tamil Selvi monitors the activities of the link workers. She visits the households to check on their welfare. Her visits help her to assess the proper functioning of the link workers in the village.

Tamil Selvi said that there is a plan to extend the project activities to cover five more villages in the same Block. Here they want to appoint SHG members to implement the project. It is important for the group members to realize that savings alone is not sufficient; they should also

contribute to the development of the community. The project trained both women and men in preparing a balanced, nutritious supplement.

Tamil Selvi has great admiration and respect for Dr. Lakshmi Rahmuthullah, whom she has known for the past 15 years. She says that Dr. Lakshmi Rahmuthullah has always inspired others to keep updating their knowledge by reading, and by learning from others. There is so much to learn from the villagers. Dr Lakshmi also insists that the staff should plan and implement the activities in a proper, meticulous manner. She does not believe in imposing on other people. Tamil Selvi mentioned that her Director emphasises that one should always work with a purpose. There is no meaning in going around the village aimlessly. One has to excel in ones work, and constantly aim at excellence. Tamil Selvi fondly recalls Dr Lakshmi's favourite line, "Even if you are sweeper, you have to be the best sweeper," and says that this was what has made her aspire to do her best at all times.

When Tamil Selvi heard that she had got the NVA Fellow Award, she felt happy because it was in recognition of her contribution to society. Being in Delhi in 2006 to receive the award, she says it struck her that her own contribution seemed insignificant when compared to the enormous voluntary work done by the others who had no proper organizational support and yet had achieved such great things in their individual capacities .

According to Tamil Selvi, her exposure to the Knowledge Management Workshop

helped her get deep insights into her own work. She realized that there were many individuals who play significant roles by working for the welfare of the society without any organizational base or support. Her own work, which has a lot of organizational support, seemed insignificant compared to those who fight against the current, overcoming all odds. Such introspection has made her more determined to do better with the support of the organization. Her ambition is to create more NVA Fellows in her area. She was impressed with the commandments of the Honourable President of India, and she has a plan to provide financial assistance to three poor students in her village. She has also undertaken the work of de-silting the village ponds, and planting trees with the help of the students from the National Service Scheme, and her organization.

Tamil Selvi is very competent in the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method, and conducting focus group discussions. She expressed her willingness to share her PRA expertise and focus group discussion methods with others. She says it would be happy to train those who work at community level, and considers this a most fulfilling contribution. She is also interested in conducting Awareness Programmes on Health Care for Mother and Child. She can educate people through training programmes related to nutrition, ante natal and postnatal care, adapted to different age groups of men and women, at the community level. Tamil Selvi also proposes to seek the advice and guidance of a qualified gynecologist in this regard. Her active contribution, based on the concepts of service and sharing, is one worth emulating.



**M.S. Swaminathan
Research Foundation**

3rd Cross Street, Institutional Area
Taramani, Chennai - 600 113, INDIA
Tel: +91-44-2254 1229, 2254 1698
Fax: +91-44-2254 1319
chairman@mssrf.res.in
nva-coordinators@mssrf.res.in
www.mssrf.org