



Janet with MASARD women staff



Big steps forward in women's development

During their visit in January, Janet and Murray were impressed with the rapid progress being made by all of our partner organisations in empowering women. Here Janet tells of her experiences.

"Respect" she said and smiled at me. Last year we had met her in a group of subdued women who were asking us for ideas about how they could earn money. We had no easy answers. Then, this Women's Self Help Group was fairly new and still finding their feet. Now, they have found an answer and received training in sticking glittery bits on a sari, which is fashionable and considerably improves the value of the sari. Ten of them sat round a spread out sari, dotting on glue and then glitter, talking and engaged in their work. So I asked them what difference doing this work had made to their lives and "Respect" was her answer.

Last year the staff had told us that in these very poor villages people were valued primarily by their financial contribution to the family. Now, she earned money, she had gained respect from herself, her family and her village and she had a new sense of independence.

For the women in our partner organisations, the WSHG encourages internal and external change. The internal change is in the growth of believing in yourself and that you are valuable as a person. The external change is a visible change in behaviour. We met women taking responsibility for the maintenance of their village wells and water pumps, challenging young men who had damaged them, and persisting in pressuring the authorities in carrying out the repairs and upkeep for which they are responsible. Some women have become expert in filling in government and bank forms which open the door to having your own bank

account, or applying for a disability pension. Some have been trained in First Aid and offer a very important service to those in their villages with fevers, diarrhoea, accidents and burns. When there are no local doctors, nurses, or hospitals this service is greatly valued. Some have learnt skills to produce something that they can get paid for, like making snacks or clay jewellery.

We had a lengthy negotiation with one woman from the clay jewellery making group about a wholesale price for jewellery we bought to sell on our stall. One volunteer stood up in a meeting and told us that up to ten years ago she had never left her house. Then she joined a WSHG and her life began to change. Now she runs her own business helping other women fill in forms, has her own bank account, she rides her own scooter and she has her own life.



Janet inspects medical records at a mobile clinic

We know that India has the largest number of illiterate women in the world. Learning how to write your own name is a central part of the new life changing women's literacy classes we fund, first in your mother tongue (Tamil, Kannada or Telugu) and then in English and the teachers said how much the women value being able to write their own names. Being able to read the name of the village a bus is going to has also given real independence to women who can now travel by themselves. Levels of literacy varied greatly from those who had never been to school to those who were literate and came to learn how to use a mobile phone. Using a mobile phone and being able to sign your own name enables women to have a bank account and use ATMs with all the independence this brings. They also send photos of injuries to the staff for advice on first aid treatment and arrange the date and place of the next women's meeting.

We saw services being taken out to the remote villages with no access to medical or nursing services. The doctors, at both MASARD and CRUSADE, now use jeeps funded by SOTE to reach isolated villages and run weekly clinics. A dental camp, offering one school dental care from staff and students of a dental college, took place in a village where the school students had never seen a dentist. We were welcomed at a number of schools by dancing and a play about no longer using plastics. A ban on single use plastics had just come in.

MASARD's recent survey of all the inhabitants in the ten new villages where they are starting to work showed every woman surveyed had experienced domestic violence. We are about to fund a short stay refuge for women to escape domestic violence. Some of the volunteer workers told us of desperate women turning to them to help sort things out. Quarrels can lead to violence and often the man has been drinking. We heard two stories of volunteers responding to women in need, looking after women and children overnight and helping to resolve difficulties.

CRUSADE's approach of training and working with locally elected representatives on the Panchyats (local government) means everybody locally benefits from improvements in local services. Political stagnation following the death of the previous state Chief Minister means there is currently no money from the State Government for local use.

CARE are working with the marginalized London community, who are not even recognized as citizens by the government. As a traditional begging community they are outside the caste system. It has taken the staff 9 years of building relationships, allowing trust to grow in the staff and setting up WSHGs for the women to want to earn money, rather than begging. Last year the WSHG wanted to earn but didn't know how to and were looking for ideas. Now, they are learning the



Women's literacy class

traditional craft of palm leaf weaving of mats and making knotted plastic bags. The women looked so different and were excited about selling the bags and earning money. Now they have experienced that things can change they have hope for the future.

As we thanked the senior workers for their work behind the changes we saw during our visit to CRUSADE, Sheela, an experienced Health Worker, stood up and said "We don't need thanks, this is not work for us, it is our service, our life and we do it wholeheartedly". The workers and volunteers at all three projects are clearly agents of change at many levels and although there are many difficulties in the way, people can see change and the possibility of life now having many more opportunities for their children.

I was delighted and inspired by all we saw this year, but I have no doubt that the change on some of these women's faces meant the most to me. There was an excited glow on so many women's faces that wasn't there last year and is now. We know, and all the research agrees, that change in the women powers sustainable rural development for everybody and here we were seeing it happening. What more could I want?

All the activities and services we saw were paid for by the money you give SOTE which is being used by the three NGOs to support these life changing activities.



Meet Lena, our new Development Officer

Hello Supporters, my name is Lena. I am Murray's Granddaughter and the newly appointed Development Officer for SOTE. I am delighted to be taking over the role from Emily and am excited to be in a position where I can support the running of the charity.

I have grown up watching the wonderful work of SOTE and its partner organisations in India. I visited Tamil Nadu in 2016, aged 18 and have forever been changed by my experiences. In a world that often appeared selfish and cruel, being welcomed by people who were kind-hearted reminded me of what it meant to be human. My trip to India changed the way I appreciated everyday things and solidified the importance of helping others. Having seen the huge changes being made, I feel it is important for me to take a more direct role in the charity my Grandfather started over 30 years ago.

Since visiting India, I have travelled, worked abroad and gained experience in administration, marketing and supporting vulnerable people. I have a passion for creative writing and am looking forward to writing a regular blog on our website: www.sote.org.uk. If you can spare a few minutes, please read the updates on our projects and share the posts, It's a huge help in spreading the word about the work SOTE is doing.

From seeing the amazing work SOTE and it's partners do and watching the charity grow to the success it is today, I can absolutely tell you that the donations you generously make directly support those in desperate need. During my visit, I felt at times overwhelmed at the success of the projects being implemented and was humbled to witness first-hand the impact your donations have had on some of India's most vulnerable communities.

I will be visiting India again in 2020 as not only a long term supporter, but as an official member of the SOTE team.



In light of promoting the tour, I asked husband and wife duo Billie and Paul, who've been running the tour for four years, a quick couple of questions about what to expect.

What can people expect from a SOTE tour?

"A unique insight into the charity, exciting adventures with city tours and story tellers and a warm welcome from our partners in the villages. This is a real view of India, a completely authentic experience. With inside knowledge of the areas we stay in and a personal connection to the charity, the tour is a fantastic way to see Southern India. It is a truly memorable experience, it's hard to sum up in a few words!"

For those who may be hesitant to visit India, what would you say to put their mind at ease?

"From the minute you step off the plane, you are in expert hands. You're driven everywhere by our wonderful drivers and are well and truly looked after. We take individuals' wellbeing's into account and tailor each tour to the needs and capabilities of the group. Paul can arrange a cold beer on the beach during downtime, or even a ayurvedic massage and we're always here as an approachable and friendly face, ready to guide you through a new and exciting experience."

2020 tour dates

29 Jan – 12 Feb 2020

For more information about the tour, please visit www.sote.org.uk/visit-india or email murray@sote.org.uk

Stories from India



CARE

International women's day

More than 60 women from the begging community participated in a 'Women's Day Celebration' organised by CARE. Four teachers, acting as 'Chief Guests', attended the event and encouraged women to take up self-employment as an alternative lifestyle to begging. The event focused on women's empowerment and allowed the attendees to share their problems, raise questions and receive clarification on the rights and laws that apply to them.

One woman explained that it was the first time she had ever had anything about herself celebrated and told CARE staff that she appreciated being informed about her rights as a woman. She went on to say that she enjoyed the new experience and had a wonderful time. The event was a first for the begging community and gave CARE the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the issues impacting some of Tamil Nadu's most vulnerable.

The celebration was published in two newspapers and featured on the local television.



CARE

Alternative livelihood projects

Women in the village of Ozhalur have begun to make eco-friendly bags using recycled plastic. The plastic acts as a wire and is woven to create strong and reusable items. Once sold, the women can generate an income alternative to begging. With SOTE's funding, CARE plan to embark upon the bag making as a part-time production, with the aim to develop it into a micro-enterprise full time operation.

Within the same begging community, CARE identified the skill of weaving and have been overseeing the production of handmade palm leaf yoga mats. As the women gather to create such items, a sense of community and belonging develops, with spirits being lifted and friendships being formed. Research into marketing strategies is under way to maximise profits on the products the women are creating.

Alternative Livelihood projects like these are reducing unemployment and improving the socio-economic conditions in Tamil Nadu's rural communities.



CRUSADE

Restoring vision

According to the World Health Organization 80% of visual impairment is either preventable or curable with treatment. CRUSADE have been conducting eye camps in our project villages, screening the elderly population for signs of cataract or uncorrected refractive errors. Preliminary vision tests are performed in the villages by optometrists using vision charts, in conjunction with renowned Agarwal Eye Hospital, Chennai.

Cataract removals are offered free of cost by the hospital and spectacles are provided at nominal cost by CRUSADE for patients with refractive errors. In the past year, nine eye camps were set up in the villages, screening 598 people. 71 patients underwent operation for the removal of cataracts and IOL implantation and 187 were provided with spectacles.

Surgeries such as these happen in the UK on a daily basis, but in India where many cannot afford a trip to the hospital or provide documents to become a patient, these surgeries are transforming the lives of hundreds.



CRUSADE

Sourcing water for communities

Water provided to villages by India's authorities is contaminated and unreliable. There are no continuous supplies of water and the electricity used to power the motors to each village often cuts out. Communities are regularly left without water for days at a time and populations suffer from dehydration.

In order to combat this crisis, CRUSADE have been digging bore wells in time for the rainy season. The hope is that the wells collect rainfall and provide villages with a cleaner source of water. With the support of SOTE's funding, a 90 foot bore well has been dug in the village of Thoppumanagar, supplying water to over sixty families and a 60 foot bore well has been dug in the village of Kulathumedu, benefiting a further 40 families living in the area.

The handpumps installed by CRUSADE make the source of water easily accessible and allow the villagers a sense of security in terms of their health and livelihoods.



MASARD

Rural school development

Pathkotte Primary and Middle School is a rural school in Kamandoddi that teaches children from very poor families. When SOTE first visited the school three years back, 93 students were enrolled. Now, due to various interventions funded by SOTE donations, the number of students has more than doubled to 250.

A new granite floor was laid, transforming the space into a fully functioning teaching facility and new equipment has been provided to enhance the students' educational experience. Inspired by the children's uplifted spirits, walls have been decorated with brightly coloured paintings and classrooms are filled with artwork and projects. The young people that attend the school have told teachers that they are more interested in their studies and have expressed that they now enjoy the environment they are working in.

The school has reported an increase in attendance and a decrease in drop-out rates and believe the renovations are the main reason for this. Children now enjoy coming to school and feel they have a sense of belonging.



MASARD

After-school support groups and day care centres

With SOTE's funding, MASARD have begun to implement after-school classes in the 15 villages they support. Experienced teachers are providing individualised attention to help children complete homework, as well as conducting extracurricular English classes. As well as supporting the children with their studies, classes highlight the awareness of health, hygiene, sanitation and safe drinking water.

This information is revolutionising the children's understanding of their own bodies and is providing fundamental knowledge to be passed on to the children's families, significantly impacting and changing the lives of rural communities. In addition to the children receiving educational support, school bags, clothing and stationery items are gifted to those who simply cannot afford it.

Day care centres with equipment, mats and toys have been set up in each of the 15 villages to accommodate the younger generations. These facilities not only improve the lives of the children, but also the communities they belong to.

Crusade health programme funded by SOTE



Murray and Janet with Jothi, CRUSADE's CEO and the medical officer Dr.Vasartharasan

Murray's report following his visit to CRUSADE in January

Janet and I were very impressed with what we saw and experienced during our recent visit to CRUSADE. This three year health project is the biggest single programme that we support and it takes place in a poor rural area some 50 kms north east of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. It covers over 100 villages with a population of several hundred thousand.

The reason that this project is needed is because local government health resources are inadequate. In India, life expectancy is low at 68 and the infant and maternity mortality rates are high. This is because only 5% of government expenditure is allocated to health. To add to the problem this money is not always well spent. Government Health Care Centres often lack equipment and medicines, have a poor infrastructure and suffer shortages of doctors and nurses.

In the rural areas that we support these Health Care Centres can be more than 20 miles away which may necessitate several bus journeys and the loss of a precious day's pay. If and when patients attend the centres a doctor might not be there or the necessary medicines are not available. In these circumstances, unless the illness is very serious, villagers either do not bother and suffer in silence or go to the "local quacks" sometimes with disastrous results.

The project concentrates on bringing medical services direct to the villages as well as providing extensive health awareness programmes via Women's Self Help Groups (WSHG) and secondary

school children. The health team who deliver these activities consists of the medical officer, six field staff and eleven health workers. The programme delivers exceptional value for money with an annual budget of just over £25,000.

We spent time with the medical officer and went out with him on one of his many village mobile clinic assignments. This was a very special occasion for us as this charity had supplied the vehicle that he was using to transport himself and the medical supplies. This rugged four wheel drive jeep was specially selected to withstand the rigours of the poor local roads and seasonal flooding. There was a long expectant queue awaiting us on arrival at the village and I was very impressed with the obvious professionalism of the doctor's consultations. We were able to observe this without eavesdropping because everything is conducted openly. Privacy is not sacred in this society!

The major part of the programme is the running of various screening camps in the villages throughout the year. At these occasions, organised by the CRUSADE part time health workers, local health care professionals join the medical officer for particular medical conditions. 141 hypertension (high blood pressure) and diabetes camps were held. As a result over 2,000 diagnoses were made - 1,497 blood pressure and 583 diabetes. Wherever possible herbal medicines and homeopathic remedies are prescribed. These treatments are cost effective, culturally acceptable to the villagers, are effective for many of the local illnesses and are given without charge.

Referrals are made for more serious cases.

CRUSADE has been continuing its programme of health awareness training to the many Women's Self Help Groups (WSHG) that they have set up over the years. They do this because they know that it is the village women who bring about effective and long lasting change to the communities and members of WSHGs are the most aware of the women in the villages.

The health team trained over 700 women in 30 villages in the last twelve months. This extensive training consists of six modules backed up with a comprehensive booklet which has been written and published by CRUSADE. The information in the booklet was previously unknown to the women and is proving to be a revelation to them. (See case study)

The modules are:

- Human anatomy and physiology
- Women's welfare
- Herbal medicine
- Communicable and non-communicable diseases
- Nutrition and its deficiency disorders
- Environmental sanitation

This training is creating much needed wide ranging health awareness amongst the women and their families and there is particular emphasis on the importance of early diagnosis and treatment.

The training of secondary school children in health awareness is part of a long term strategy for the rural population. The more the future parents of the rural communities are informed on health issues the healthier their communities will become. These young people can also have an immediate influence on their families. CRUSADE



Dr. Vasartharasan consults with a patient

have organised school health education programmes in 19 local secondary schools. This benefited 1,232 students in the last twelve months.

The students were given two training sessions, one on personal hygiene and the other on first aid. At the second session each school was presented with a first aid kit, which are proving very useful in treating playground accidents. The woman doctor also addressed female students separately, on menstrual hygiene. This is an important innovation as young women are not nearly as well prepared for puberty in this backward rural area as their counterparts in developed countries. Dustbins have also been provided for the disposal of pads.

Our last field visit took us to a secondary school at which a dental camp was being held. Dental care is difficult and expensive in these rural areas and a team of dentists and dental students were able to examine over 100 students and were even able to carry out some dental work in the mobile dental clinic they had with them. This much needed service is a new addition to the overall health project.

During our stay we met with all of the health care professionals led by Jothi,



Mobile dental clinic in action

the CRUSADE CEO, in meetings and in the field. Their sense of devotion and commitment to the villagers they worked with was very clear to us as was the motivation to do even more. A measure of this is the detailed health survey that they were in the process of carrying out in 20 villages. The resulting data on all the households in these villages will greatly aid future health initiatives. We left feeling very satisfied that not only was our money being well spent but with a sense of awe that so much could be achieved with it.

Case study - Devi, the health warrior



Devi was enrolled in a six-month health training course designed to help poor women learn about how their body functions, hygiene, nutrition, cleanliness, and treatment for minor ailments. Before starting the programme she had no idea how much it would ultimately impact her life.

“I enrolled in the health training because I’ve always liked to learn about how our body functions. Besides, I was also keen to learn about nutrition so that I could provide food with healthier options for my family. And believe me, I did learn a lot.

This experience has changed my eating habits and my approach to preparing healthy food. We eat lots of greens, fruit, and

other vegetables now. Washing vegetables before cooking, covering the food after cooking and keeping the kitchen clean are some of the crucial tips I gathered.

During my younger days, to talk about menstruation was a taboo. But, after the training, we openly discuss about menstruation and how cleanliness is a must with my daughter who is 11 years old. Keeping her body clean, washing hands after the use of washroom, wearing clean clothes, avoiding snacks are some of the advice I have given my daughter.

Most of the members have built toilets after the training. Otherwise, it was a risky affair to step out of the house in the night, especially during the raining season.

Another tip that I gathered during the training is of taking advantage of herbal plants and herbal medicines for curing simple ailments. The training has been very useful and I advise my neighbours to treat cold, cough and fever with available herbal plants.

The change has been remarkable – we all talk freely to our daughters; we all grow herbal plants. Previously I only knew that I could adorn my hair with hibiscus flower. However, now I know the advantages and why it is called the Queen of Herbal Plants,” Devi ends positively.

How you can help

Donations

By giving a single or regular donation to SOTE you allow us to offer support to the communities we work with in Tamil Nadu. Whether it is increasing access to healthcare, supporting adolescent girls, educating mothers on nutrition or advocating local government, you can be guaranteed that your donation is going a long way.

Child sponsorship

Sponsor a child for £15 a month - Our child sponsorship scheme aims to educate and enable children to break out from the existing cycle of poverty, ill health and underachievement. Your donations support the development of a child, their families and the wider village community. As a SOTE child sponsor, you will receive a welcome letter and photo of your child, along with two annual updates containing letters and drawings from the child themselves.

Village sponsorship

Sponsor a village for £1,500 a year - The aim of the scheme is to provide mid-to-long-term assistance to a deprived rural poor village with a population of 2,000 to 4,000. This will provide core assistance, as well as specialised support to the village.

Recycle your ink-jet cartridges

If you have a printer, please recycle your ink cartridges using the envelopes included with this newsletter. If you haven't received any envelopes, that's OK! We have plenty more to give out. SOTE receive £1 for every cartridge recycled, that's £1 given straight to the charity just by recycling your empty cartridges! We have plenty of envelopes to pass around to your friends and family and encourage you to recycle cartridges from the workplace wherever possible. Not only are you helping the environment, but helping to transform the lives of the rural poor in India as well.

Legacies

Would you like to continue to support our work with the rural poor in Tamil Nadu after you have gone? You can do this by naming the charity in your will and specifying a sum (pecuniary legacy) or a percentage of your estate (residuary). Any legacy to the charity will be free of inheritance tax and the amount will be subtracted from the net value of your estate before any tax liability is calculated. If you have already made a will but would like to add a legacy to this charity then this can be done by making a codicil to it. This is a simple process and your solicitor can help you with this if required.

Jewellery and other sale goods

Janet and Murray have a stock of jewellery and other goods purchased by them in India which are available for supporters to sell to their friends and at events. Contact Murray at murray@sote.org.uk



Tree planting

The simple act of planting trees offers a natural defence against drought and floods, enriches soil, provides fruits, safeguards natural habitats and ensures a safer future for local people. With your donations, SOTE implements the planting of trees within the villages of Tamil Nadu, where communities are in direct threat of climate change. Reduce your carbon footprint and enrich the livelihoods of the rural poor.

Ethical gifts

Ethical gifts offer a great alternative to shop bought items and provide lasting memories that count. We love hearing the stories behind our supporters buying a SOTE gift and feel proud to know that people are opting to spend their money on gifts that make an impact in India. Instead of spending money on flowers and chocolates for their wedding anniversary, SOTE supporters Chris and Fernanda put their funds together and purchased a Sawyer Water Kit, providing a family in Tamil Nadu with the facility to purify water. Another supporter purchased the gift of trees for her daughter's teacher, thanking them for their hard work and passion for the environment.

The teacher now has her certificate framed above her desk! Each purchase comes with a certificate addressed to the person receiving the gift, along with an information booklet about the cause being supported. For more information about ethical gifts please visit www.sote.org.uk/ethical-gifts

Give as you Live

If you shop online, please sign up to Give as you Live, another way to donate to SOTE without really donating. All you have to do is visit www.giveasyoulive.com, sign up and enter SOTE as your chosen charity. Then, every time you purchase something online, the big companies donate a small percentage of their profits to us. This is great for those who love amazon, asos and all things online!

Events

- Chef and Spice Curry Evening, Leicester, Tues 17 Sep
- Celia's SOTE Sale, Leicester, Sat 9 Nov
- Evening Vegetarian Meal with Jothi Ramalingham, CEO of CRUSADE open to all supporters, Leicester, Thurs 12 Sep

For further information on events, please visit www.sote.org.uk/visit-an-event