

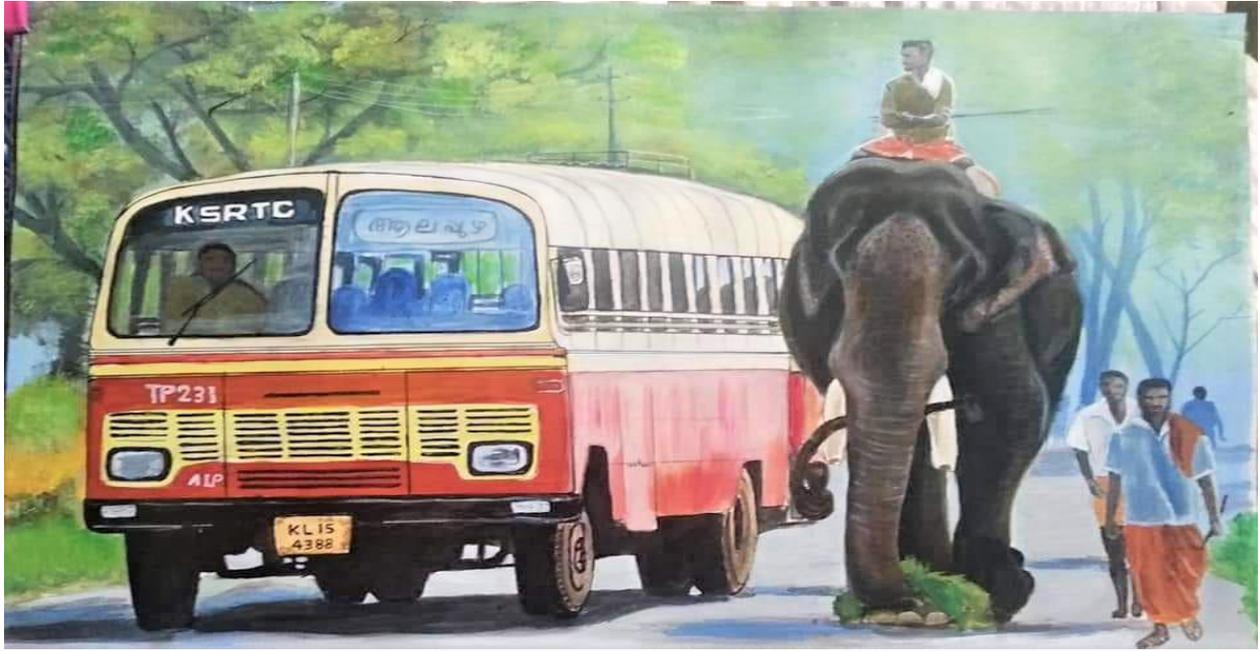
Kerala Crafts

Supporting marginalised women & girls in south India



Newsletter Summer 2021

Kerala Crafts Update Summer 2021



Painting by Ganesh K. Purushotham - Two undisputed symbols of Kerala

Whilst the covid situation now is very much better here in the UK, things in India at present are grim (more later). But I do not want to focus on that for the moment – but to concentrate on some of the positives of the last year. We all need some good news!

In March 2021, Kerala Crafts had its 20th birthday. Because of the restrictions, there was no real celebration, but just a quiet reflection on all the wonderful, warm, friendly and kind people we have met there over 20 years, who have enhanced our lives so much. This New Year message came from one of them:

A very demanding year has just passed, leaving behind most of the challenges it has hurled on our way. Let's stay united, courageous and supportive to one another. I wish all of us to grow into better and more responsible human beings with more understanding of ourselves, of our fellow beings and deep gratitude to Nature for this life and its bounties.

There are so many people to thank who have supported Kerala Crafts over the years – just too many to mention – but you know who you are! The ongoing sponsorship of the orphans has made a tremendous difference to the lives of many girls, and the many generous donations given by so many. Your readiness to give support has helped in desperate situations such as the 2018 flooding, as well as the ongoing support of all the projects. Whilst it is always amazing to receive a large donation for which we are so grateful, the smaller but meaningful gifts really touch our hearts. One lady in a small business, donates 10% of her Christmas card sales, whilst another regularly saves up her 50p's and passes them on to us.

It has been a fairly quiet year, and there is not so much to write about this time, as we have not been able to visit, but there is some news to share.

Vimala Welfare Centre

Due to covid, the Centre closed its doors to the artisans on 19th March 2020. By November the artisans were going back to the Centre twice a week, and thereafter, intermittently, but in March 2021 it closed again both to students and to artisans. Some ladies took raw materials home to work with and the students at the Vimalalayam college had online lessons, and public events were postponed.



Christmas gifts distributed but no parties this year!



Some of the artisans receiving their Christmas gifts

In November, Sr Irez, the Centre's secretary for many years, was due to move on to Chennai, but due to covid, she went closer to home, to Gothuruth (small island near Ernakulam). She shares a house with other sisters, and she has set up a dressmaking facility there for 7 local ladies to make dresses for newborn babies. Irez is hoping to expand this project so that more women can find work there. Irez's successor is Sr Irize Gomez, who has been at Vimalalayam for many years as the accountant of the hostel and college.

Sadly one of the artisans, Usha passed away on 12th October 2020 – not due to covid though. She had worked at the Centre for more than 45 years, and was the creator of the Sunflower and Anita bags that we stocked for many years. She was married to Mukesh, and had one son who married in December 2019 and another son still living at home. Usha's family was a happy one, and she is greatly missed by them, as well as the Centre losing a cheerful and hardworking artisan.



Usha passed away 12.10.20 RIP



New skill training course – gifts given out to girls at the start of the course

On 21st January 2021, a skill training course for differently abled girls started. There were 6 girls to start with, and the work was challenging but very satisfying the sisters told me. Sadly, this has now been put on hold as the Centre has closed.



In the last newsletter, the Centre's outreach extension at Moolampilly was just at the planning stage. The small building has now been completed and on 2nd February 2021 a blessing of the new build took place, and as well as providing a home for the sisters, it will also include a tailoring facility and basic computer skill classes. This is a very impressive and worthy project.

On 11th February 2021, the Vimala Welfare Centre celebrated its Diamond Jubilee. This celebration was a low-key one, compared to the Golden Jubilee ten years ago, which we were fortunate to be able to attend, but the Centre was open to some guests to join in this special occasion. Over its 60 years, Vimalalayam has seen over 6,000 underprivileged women come through its doors, thereby experiencing the love and concern from the sisters who have the ability to come alongside them in their struggles in life. It is much more than just a workplace – but a sense of family, and the women and sisters continue to share a close bond.



Students, sisters, artisans celebrating Diamond Jubilee



11 February 1961 – 11 February 2021 – 60 years of grace indeed

One sister, Gracy Xavier, celebrated her 60 years in service with Daughters of the Heart of Mary, and although she has been in Kerala for some time now, previously she had worked in Kenya for many years. Her eyesight is failing now, and she is not in the best of health, but was able to enjoy the celebrations.



Sr Gracy (centre) with Sr Sophy (L) & Sr Philomena D'Sa (Provincial)



Geena Lopez with her only Son who studies at 11th Standard

In our last newsletter we mentioned that Kerala Crafts had sent a donation for a lady known to Vimalalayam who needed urgent cancer treatment. Geena, a single lady, has a son who is studying at college, and since her chemotherapy, her health is now much improved, and her life is much more back on course. There was no way she could have afforded the expensive and vital treatment.

I never cease to be overwhelmed by the great love from the sisters at Vimalalayam, and admire the selfless service they do in the community. They work with compassionate love and dedication and are much appreciated by those

She's

Covid has meant that the opening of the shop 'She's' was intermittent last year. Things were very quiet for the ladies, and there were very few local stitching jobs, so the orders from Kerala Crafts were vital. The ladies were able to take work home to enable them to fulfil our orders, and although the shop reopened for a short time at the end of last year, in March '21, it closed again.



The women who work there are from poor families where the men are daily wage workers. Some women are the only breadwinner. With no work, the families are really struggling, and it has been good that we have been able to send some extra money to tide them over until things improve.

Younger girls @ orphanage



Valsalya Bhavan

Life has been very different for the girls since April 2020 – when covid restrictions impacted on their daily routine. They were not allowed out – with staff buying in essentials to last them for a month, aided by deliveries of fresh food from local markets. The girls were all told how best to protect themselves by the use of sanitiser, masks and frequent handwashing.



The older girls at the annex spent a lot of time stitching masks which were given out freely at various centres and public places. To bring variety to their day, apart from home studies, the girls did some jogging, zumba, josh talks

Fr Varghese left as Executive Director of Don Bosco (who oversees the orphanages), at the end of May 2020. He is now based at a technical school and college near the annex. Fr P.D. Thomas has taken over, and was previously at Don Bosco in Palluruthy, Cochin for 9 years, from 2003 to 2012 as director of Childline and Don Bosco Nivas, so he knows the place well. Childline Kochi, in collaboration with other services has started a community kitchen and is distributing nearly 1500 meal parcels daily to the destitute.



Meals being made up for distribution



Vennila (L) and Maheswari with their good luck poster

In the autumn of last year, Caroline Quentin took part in Strictly Come Dancing. Caroline has long been a supporter of Kerala Crafts, and I wrote to the girl she sponsors at the orphanage (Vennila), to ask if she might like to send a message for Caroline in the competition. She did indeed along with her friend, Maheswari and Caroline was very touched by their message, which said:

When you are genuine in your approach everything will go well for you in life –
you will reach your destination.

You won't have to strive, keep your will strong, and focus on every deed and,
touch wood, you will be where you want to be (wise words!)



Aparna and her husband at their wedding ceremony



Ambika & her husband

Aparna, one of girls who had been at the orphanage since a young girl, got married on 19th November '20. She has completed her MBA and was working locally, and helping out at the orphanage after work. She has now married an engineer who is working in the Gulf, and will be joining him there at some point.

Ambika, another girl at the orphanage, also got married to Muvatupuzha in August '20 in Chennai. She married an auto rickshaw driver. Ambika was sponsored by the late Dame Diana Rigg for many years.

On 1st January 2021, Sr Mercy who was looking after the older girls at the annex, moved back to the Vimala Welfare Centre, to be in charge of the college. Sr Shirley has now gone back to the annex to take over Mercy's role. Sr Shiny continues to look after the younger girls.

Sonia Thomas, who has been studying for a Diploma in General Nursing & Midwifery passed her final exams with 80%, and until securing a job when things return to normal, is helping out at the orphanage with the younger girls.

Older girls at the annex



Island of Kadamakudy

This island which has an above-average representation of elderly people, has now had 12 deaths to date. Life is very difficult for the folk there, and access to the mainland is by ferry; there is one small road leading out of the island, but no-one has a car. Younger people and families fled the island at the time of the flooding, and have yet (if ever) to return.

One family that we mentioned in the last newsletter, was Ramesh, a coconut-picker, who lives in a ramshackle hut along with his wife, two teenage daughters and mother. He earns very little and lost most of his (few) possessions in the floods. There is a small hard bed (with no mattress) for the married couple, their 2 daughters sleep on the floor of the hut which is so small, that granny has to sleep on the ground outside. The girls or indeed the family, would love a sponsor, to help lift them out of extreme poverty.



Ramesh - The face of despair

We would like to be able to help Ramesh with an extension for his house. With our funding raised to help out with the flood devastation, he does have an outside toilet, but it is still a very humble one-roomed dwelling.

With the funding we sent previously to help with building of toilets for some, this has been a great blessing especially during the pandemic. Those residents with private toilets were least affected by the virus, as they were able to isolate successfully, but unfortunately those residents who have to share toilets, have more cases of the corona virus.

Fishing community FCDP) in Kollam

The virus has rapidly spread amongst the fisher folk causing continued hardship and suffering for this poor community. Last year we were able to help the Swanthanam project which supports people at home, who are seriously ill, but unable to afford further treatment.



To conclude:

By May 2020 Kerala state officials seemed to have controlled the spread of the virus through its stringent contact, trace & isolate efforts, with the success being attributed to Health Minister K.K. Shailaja's swift action and forward planning, so that her nickname was 'coronavirus slayer' and 'rockstar health minister'. However, month by month, with its guard taken down too soon, numbers rapidly multiplied via large gatherings during Onam, Christmas and New Year celebrations. Coupled with travel restrictions being lifted, the return of half a million workers from the Gulf to their family home in Kerala, as well as from other parts of India, it became impossible to curb the re-entry of infected cases.

At the beginning of this year, there was a sense of people now just accepting that they are going to be living alongside covid for a long time, and they all got on with their lives – with everything open, and only masks being worn but no social distancing (almost impossible in India anyway).

However, currently (end May '21), with no precautions being taken in advance by the Indian government for this second wave, the situation has become grim. Cochin (Kochi) is currently under triple lockdown, all roads are closed, all shops closed except food shops, which are only open for 3 days a week between 6am and 2pm. Hospitals are overflowing and there is a shortage of oxygen. In the Ernakulam district of Cochin (where the Vimala Centre is) the virus has been spreading rapidly, but many people could not go to hospital because they could not afford the huge bills when they are discharged.

Kerala has one of the highest rates of communicable diseases in India. A large number of people also suffer from diabetes, heart diseases, respiratory and liver disease. The summer monsoon rains, which have already begun, usually trigger a spike in diseases such as 'flu, dengue and scrub typhus. With fever being a common symptom in many of these diseases, this could further complicate a covid diagnosis.

When we know of people who have been infected, this makes it personal. We know that many of the workers known to us are having to quarantine, and therefore are unable to work and earn money. Some are able to take work home, but this isn't always possible or practical, and no financial help is forthcoming from the government.

Many people are suffering in silence.

We have been able to help with funding some of our projects, but the last 12 months for Kerala Crafts has been a bad year for sales. In the last 15 months with many of the UK's fair-trade shops closed, we received very few orders for goods with the knock-on effect that we are unable to sustain the level of giving we would like

The situation is desperate for many, and now they also have had to contend with Cyclone Tauktae which hit Kerala in its devastating wake, and has made life more difficult than it already is.

Over Kerala Crafts' 20 years the projects that we have supported have grown and therefore the need has grown with it. We are only a small charity but we have personal contacts with all those we help and no expenses are taken out, so that you can give with confidence, knowing that 100% of what you give, goes to those in need.

If you are you able to help with a contribution to ease the suffering of our folk in Kerala – please see our website, going to our 'About Us' page (How can I help?), our Meaningful Gifts page and News Page or just get in touch.

Finally, we were so very sad that one of our patrons, Dame Diana Rigg, passed away on 10th September 2020. Diana was a genuine supporter of Kerala Crafts, was always interested in what was going on in Kerala, and her kindness and generosity is greatly missed.

www.keralacrafts.co.uk

Reg. Charity No: 1138414

Tel: 01225 319642 or email christine.snow@blueyonder.co.uk

5 Ivy Place, Bath BA2 1AR



Help us to help them keep their smiles! Many girls still need sponsors - <http://www.keralacrafts.co.uk/sponsorship.html> - The girls with Sr Shirley

