

Kerala Crafts

Supporting marginalised women & girls in south India



Newsletter Spring 2024

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Vimala Welfare Centre (Vimalalayam)

Vimalalayam is a second home for women from all walks of life whether it is impoverished women who are looking for an income or women who seek a safe stay in the city of Ernakulam, or the specially abled girls and women who are in need of training programmes to integrate into the main stream of life.

On our recent visit in November '23, we were able to see some radical and necessary reforms that have taken place in the layout of the building at the Centre. This has been done to make the best possible use of the property and to generate some much-needed income.



Basket making



Sewing machine training



Sales room

The top floor has been converted into new affordable accommodation for college girls, whilst the first floor is rented out to the Federal Bank for both training their employees and sponsored sewing machine training. The revitalised original workshops with both trainees and long-established workers have now moved to the ground floor, alongside the sales room and office. This makes sense, and enables customers to witness their goods being made without having to climb two flights of stairs!

These internal changes have been made under the leadership of Sr. Sophy, who has a clear vision for the future of the Centre as new and exciting requirements arise and to 'future proof' the structure.

The Federal Bank has provided a 3 months' tailoring course for poor women, to give them financial independence and self-employment. There were 30 students in total, mainly housewives. Two of the 30 were Pallavom students, Ansa Anna and Jenny Jimmy, who both completed the course. On completion the women are given the machines to keep – a great bonus for them.

Solar panels have also been installed in order to reduce electricity bills. A further training unit was started at Thammanam – with 30 ladies attending, all enthusiastic to learn this skill. Mary (a long time member at Vimalalayam and a real gem), who has much practical experience was sent there as a trainer. Mary not only works at the centre during the day, but also helps out at the orphanage before and after school, to help look after the girls.

In the year 2022-2023 there were 108 artisans at the Centre. 73 of the women worked in the fibre section and 35 in the stitching unit. All the women are given the necessary facilities to work at home and then come to the centre to deliver their completed articles. At the Centre the ladies are encouraged by having refreshments provided for them and some are financially supported to meet their medical expenses. Educational support is given to their children through the assistance of benefactors. Each member is given a gift at Christmas, and the ladies are regularly treated to outings and picnics.

Vimalalayam

Vimalalayam is now celebrating 62 years of trust and love – a significant milestone that reflects a long history of dedication and commitment to making a positive impact in the community. In August '23, Srs. Elsy and Thresiamma celebrated their Golden Jubilee, alongside Sr. Mejo who celebrated her Silver Jubilee. We never cease to be inspired, humbled and amazed at the selfless care and compassion that floods this place – it was and still is a bright light shining out to those in darkness.



Srs. Thresiamma, Elsy & Mejo celebrate



Artisans from the Centre



College girls having a picnic

Vimalalayam has grown and extended over the years to provide educational variety, offering short term courses as well as the established Bachelor of Commerce and Master of Commerce courses affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. These popular courses also include:

- Certificate Course in Cooking & Baking (2 weeks)
- Certificate Course in Sewing, Cutting & Tailoring (2 months)
- Certificate Course in Spoken English (3 months)
- Certified Course in Geriatric Care Assistant (5 months)
- Certificate Course in Counselling Psychology (6 months) certified by college of social work Mangalore

The Vimalalayam College is one of the traditional women colleges in Cochin and is highly respected for its quality education which has been achieved not only through its excellent courses, but also through personality development and training skills which help in building confidence as the young women prepare to pursue a career of their choice, or to be a homemaker. Vimalalayam's vision is 'to establish a society of equality, where women become partakers in building up a just society through economic independence'.

Kerala Crafts is delighted to be the Centre's main supporter and on our last visit, it was so encouraging to see the changes made as the Centre looks to the future to keep up with the fast-changing needs of society.

Pallavom

Another initiative at Vimalalayam is Pallavom (tender shoots) – a place for specially-abled young women who need special care and protection. They receive training in skills suited to their abilities as well as having educational, physical and emotional support, to help bring out the best in these talented young ladies.

We were welcomed with a song, and the girls were eager to show us their paintings and crafts as well as their singing and dancing. A slogan on some of their craftwork read 'Make each day a celebration of life' and it certainly felt like this was happening with the amount of joy in the room!



Rice from Pallavom



Pallavom group



Pallavom at Christmas

On our visit we could see how much these young women enjoyed their day at the Centre. Previously, left at home with no incentive to leave, the girls have embraced a new quality to their lives. With their previously untapped creative potential they are now able to develop their artistic abilities, equipping them with valuable skills that can be translated into sustainable livelihoods, albeit in a small way.

One of their crafts is jewellery making and some of it is of a high enough standard to be sold in the Vimalalayam sales room alongside the baskets etc. I wear my little bracelet they made every day as a reminder of what to me was the highlight of our visit.

A day for the young ladies sees them practising yoga, learning English language, exploring their craft skills, song and dance as well as having their lunch there. They go home happy, and there is no doubt that their time spent at the Centre leaves a lasting positive impact on their lives, nurturing their overall well-being and holistic development.

Moolampilly

On our 7 mile trip from Cochin to Moolampilly recently we were pleased to see the 3 Sisters working at Vimala Welfare Centre's outreach there – Mejo, Lizzy & Shiny. We were also able to see 'in the flesh' the new Neha Centre. The building is now well used for a variety of events by all ages.

The government helped to provide sewing machines at half the market price to the Vimala Welfare Centre – 35 sewing machines and 5 industrial machines; some of these were distributed for use at Moolampilly.

These machines are being used by local ladies there to stitch cloth bags for supermarkets, giving them a small but vital wage, as well as contributing to helping the planet by cutting out wasteful plastic bags. They are also learning the skill of tailoring.



Stitching at the Neha Centre



After-school club



Collecting motor scooter from garage

The after-school clubs held there are led by Lizzy & Shiny (both qualified teachers), and the children are taught English and Science. Word of mouth means that numbers are increasing day by day – and they all arrive happily keen to learn. It was refreshing to see their enthusiasm, especially as they had already put in a long day at school, but are still willing to come to the Centre to learn further academic subjects.

The Sisters are also involved in helping families in difficult situations, listening and caring and giving practical support where needed. Financial assistance is sometimes available for needy students.

With the majority of the islanders being elderly - as younger folk are forced to leave to find work - the weekly lunch club is a well established event. 85 elderly folk gather together from 9.30am – 1.30pm and enjoy socialising – the Sisters animate the group and provide them with recreation and social rehabilitation. Medical camps and picnics are organised, with snacks and lunch provided. This much-needed event does a lot to stem the loneliness that many of the elderly experience, and they look forward to this weekly event. Candle making and basic computer training is also available.

A motor scooter has kindly been donated by Computer Network Defence for Sr Sophy to whizz around the island!!! It was encouraging to see this multi-purpose building being well used by young and old and becoming a focal point for this remote island.

Kadamakudy

We love to visit this place with its tranquil charm and vibrant birdlife. Kadamakudy islands (9 miles from Cochin), are a group of 14 islands (Moolampilly also being one of them), though only seven are inhabited. Kadamakudy is nestled amidst the serene waters of the Vembanad Lake and has impressive sunrises and sunsets, and with more than 70 species of birds around these islands, it is an ideal haven for birdwatchers.



New terminal under construction at Kadamakudy

New water metro at Ernakulam

Toilet block at teashop

Brahminy Kite

We met with Fr. Merton who is the priest at St Joseph's Church, right on the edge of the water. We had connections with this island when we helped them fund an ambulance during covid. The island is home for 110 families, and 17 people were lost from covid. Fr. Merton assured us that the ambulance is still well used, and we were able to leave a donation with him towards the upkeep of the vehicle. We called into the little teashop, where we saw the completed toilet block that Kerala Crafts helped fund after the 2018 floods.

The Kerala backwaters are an entwined patchwork of intricate waterways. Though these islands are a relatively short distance from Cochin, transport by land is limited and time consuming. The recent introduction of the Kochi Water Metro will be a great asset in connecting Cochin's island communities, as well as reducing traffic congestion and promoting an eco-friendly form of transport. We were impressed when we experienced the fast smooth trip from Fort Cochin to Ernakulam, and can see the advantages for the 33,000 islanders who are expected to benefit. A terminal at Kadamakudy and Moolampilly was under construction while we were there. This will certainly open up further tourism opportunities, translating into favourable prospects for employment to these isolated but densely populated islands. It is the first water metro system in India, with award winning electric hybrid boats being manufactured in nearby Cochin Shipyard. When completed, there will be a fleet of 78 vessels, with 38 jetties connecting 10 islands.

Gothuruth

Another outpost from Vimalalayam where Sisters are now firmly established is the village of Gothuruth. We met the three Sisters who live there, Reeta, Irez and Agnes; we have known them for many years.



Srs. Reeta, Irez & Agnes



Vimala outreach at Moolampilly



Famous Gothuruth Snake Boat Race

200 families live on this island with 65% of the women being widows. Previously many of their husbands had died from alcoholism through drinking arrack (a distilled alcoholic drink made from mainly fermented sap of coconut flowers or sugar cane). The government banned the making of the drink in 1996.

The widows have engaged in a stitching project, run by the Sisters, and make baby dresses and handkerchiefs which are passed to the Vimala Welfare Centre in Cochin, to sell. They earn a little from this, and important as this is, they are able to also gain confidence and self esteem and enjoy fellowship.

With access from a new road, life has improved and opened up prospects, as folk are now able to catch a bus into the city. Gothuruth is classed as an island, with its narrow river channels, but it is accessible by road. Around 8% of India's water ways are found in Kerala – including its 44 rivers with the Periyar being Kerala's biggest river.

Across the river from the Holy Cross Church, Kadalvathuruth lies Moothakunnam with its Shiva Temple. Sr. Irez told us that they are working together to promote harmony between the two faiths.

Though a small village, Gothuruth (26 miles from Cochin) is well known for its annual Snake Boat race (Vallam Kali) which takes place during Onam in September. It is one of the major popular boat races held at various locations across Kerala during this period. The snake-like canoes hold up to 100 people and races have been taking place in Gothuruth, one of the tributaries of the river Periyar, since 1938.

Valsalya Bhavan

'There is no other bomb more deadly than a lost childhood' – from 'The Lost Childhood....Found again' film by Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan

Valsalya Bhavan was established in 1997 as a joint venture of Cochin Corporation and Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan to rehabilitate daughters of sex workers, girls who were abandoned on the streets, girls of HIV positive patients, run aways, rescued girls from bonded labour and other similar situations. Over the last 25 years, the centre has provided shelter, education, holistic growth and rehabilitation to more than 3,000 orphaned, destitute and abandoned girls. Don Bosco is now one of India's leading child protection related charities.

Having experienced the bitterness of life at a young age, these children have never known the safe confines of a home. However, Valsalya Bhavan has a large heart filled with love and compassion for the poor, and sees each child as sacred, special and unique. Through the dedication, commitment and sincerity of purpose of the staff, each child is able to be helped to reach her full potential. Sr. Rose now works with the younger girls, whilst Sr. Mary Francis is at the annex.

As well as their formal education, the girls' lives are enhanced with special days out and numerous celebrations, all of which gives them excitement and adventure, and cherished memories. It enables the girls to escape from routine, a chance to discover new places and forge new friendships – all of which have a lasting impact on their lives.



Opening gifts from the U.K.



Santhiya & Kareena in their shower hats!



At Tripunithara Hill Palace

One such occasion was in July when both the younger and older girls visited the Sameeksha Spiritual Centre in Kalady. Various programmes and activities contributed to the children's personal growth, cultural awareness, social skills and spiritual development. The children returned with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Children's Day is another opportunity for celebration. Fr. Thomas (executive director) led an enlightening session on fundamental child rights, emphasising survival, development, protection and participation. The younger girls held a vibrant talent night which highlighted the unique abilities of each child, whilst the annex girls emphasised a child's rights through diverse activities. A speech competition provided a platform for children to express their perspectives, deepening their understanding of these crucial rights. A cake cutting ceremony celebrated their individual talents, fostering a sense of community and support. Thoughtful gifts ensured a lasting impression of care and appreciation for every child.

Teachers Day saw the annex girls giving speeches about their beloved teachers. A poetry writing competition was held, showcasing the deep respect and appreciation the children hold for their mentors.

In November six students who shone brightly as best performers of the month were treated to a day out to Tripunithara Hill Palace. This was a reward for their hard work, exceptional efforts and achievements. Valsalya Bhavan annex continues to celebrate the achievements of its students, recognising the importance of encouragement and positive reinforcement in nurturing their growth.

There are many special occasions that take place in the daily life of Valsalya Bhavan and we continue to be overwhelmed by the sacrificial love and nurturing that goes into the girls' lives by all who care for them. It was wonderful to be welcomed back by the girls and to see how much they had all changed since 2019.

The Indian government is clamping down on non-governmental charities, making aid from abroad more difficult. The support being given from Kerala Crafts is now more vital than ever, and we are the only major funding received outside India. Any help with donations is gratefully received, so that the excellent care given to the girls continues. The sponsorship scheme, for which we are so grateful, works towards breaking the poverty cycle by providing girls with quality education and rehabilitation. When you sponsor a child you can witness the amazing changes you're making in their lives and future as you follow their journey of life.



Zara age 7



Polly d.o.b. 13/12/15



Vaika d.o.b. 11/09/12



Tanuja d.o.b. 10/03/11



Siya 20/06/16



Vijayalakshmi S d.o.b. 19/01/15



Daya d.o.b. 20/10/11



Kareena d.o.b. 06/02/11



Nandana d.o.b. 05/06/12



Banaja d.o.b. 25/01/07



Santhiya d.o.b. 23/04/11



Sreepriya d.o.b. 20/07/12



Anjali d.o.b. 03/07/07

'Tomorrow's goodness is today's caution and yesterday's pain'

All these girls are in need of a sponsor - could you help them keep their smiles? Maybe their date of births might be meaningful to you personally. Our Meaningful Gifts is another way of fundraising; or for a one-off gift please go to our 'About Us' page and click on 'How can I help?'

<http://www.keralacrafts.co.uk/sponsorship.html>

Sara Antony

Sara had been referred to us through Fr. Merton at Kadamakudy and Kerala Crafts had helped with her final fees for her college course before being able to be considered for employment by IndiGo airlines. We met Sara with her family, and she was still waiting to hear news. However, at the beginning of this year, she was offered a job at Trivandrum Airport. She travelled to Bangalore for training, and has now begun her new job. She is so happy – and we are delighted that we have enabled her to fulfil her dream.



Sara at Trivandrum Airport



Sara with some of her family



Inside the aircraft



With Sara and her mum

As a little charity, we can only help in relatively small ways, but for the recipient, it does have a big impact on their lives. Kerala Crafts is all about helping people in a modest but consistent way, and I am reminded so much of the 'starfish story'. It goes like this. At the water's edge on a beach, a whole load of starfish had been washed up. A small boy, walking towards the shore line to take a closer look, was distraught at the sheer numbers of jellyfish just left on the beach, to die in the hot sun.

The little boy felt he had to do something, and started to pick the starfish up and throw them back into the sea. An older gentleman passed by and noticed what the boy was doing, and said 'You're wasting your time there sonny – there's hundreds of them'. To which the little boy replied, as he picked up one and threw it into the sea – 'Well it makes a difference to this one'.

We have been able to give a helping hand in life to a number of individuals, who, like the starfish, have been given a life line to being able to find their own way in life, and support their families.



Trustees Shyju, Anusree & family



Kannan

Another personal contact we have, is Kannan, the son of Shyni who headed up 'She's' until last year. Sadly, Shyni's husband is now in hospital, seriously ill, with Shyni at his bedside. The workshop had to close as Shyni's circumstances changed, whilst at the same time Kerala Crafts ceased trading due to poor sales, covid etc. We support this family as much as we can. Kannan is in his third and final year at SRM Medical College in Chennai. After this he will have one more internship year to do and he will then graduate in mid-2025 with a B.Sc. in Medical Imaging Technology.

We rely heavily on our trustees in Kerala to carry out necessary actions for us, and are so pleased that Anu has joined her husband Shyju, as a member of our team.

Finally, this year is the Golden Jubilee of Don Bosco Sneha Bhavan (boys section) in Palluruthy. The 26th January 2024, saw the start of reflections on 50 years of service, compassion and unwavering dedication to the underprivileged. The girls joined in too as they recalled the accomplishments over the last 5 decades.



'The greatest gift you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence'



With help from the Souter Charitable Trust Sneha Bhavan has started a new initiative specifically aimed for boys who are struggling academically but have a keen interest and aptitude for arts and crafts. The funding will provide the necessary training and natural materials for the boys to master their chosen craft, unlocking their full potential and turn their artistic endeavours into an income.



Recently Surya Kumar (left) was honoured to be selected to attend the National Cadet Corps rally in New Delhi representing the south zone of the country in the parade, with Prime Minister Modi in attendance on Republic Day.

For more information on the fantastic work of Sneha Bhavan, please take a look at their website:

<https://dbsnehabhavan.org/> and their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/snehabhavankochi>

THANKS TO EVERYONE FOR SUPPORTING US !



www.keralacrafts.co.uk

UK Registered Charity No. 1138414