

SAKTHIVIDIYAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

*Social work is as old as society in existence. The social work either by an individual or a group was common in ancient times. The term voluntary service as what we know today was known in those days as 'Thondu' (service).¹ There are ample evidences to prove that services were rendered voluntarily in those days. Sangam, Saiva, vaishnava, Buddhist and Jain literatures mention such services. The advent of Buddhism in India was a beacon light to the rest of society in India as also to the world. The Buddhist order showed a new way in doing service in an organized manner. In fact, educational development at the early period in Tamil Nadu was mainly due to the work of religious institutions. Hence as historical background to this study, briefly analysing the evolution of social work and the concept of service since ancient times down to this day is the desideratum for understanding the role VO's in society in a proper perspective. An attempt has been made to study the works and activities of the Voluntary Organisation 'SakthiVidiyal' for social development. SAKTHI VIDYAL was started by Jim Jesudoss in 1996 in Madurai located at 21, kennet Nagar Muthuppatti, Madurai-625003. VIDYAL has been working for children and women welfare. 'Vidiyal' means a new dawn or new beginning and new hope.² It has been organizing meetings, lectures, seminars, workshop and training programmes for children and women and makes them aware of their rights and involves them in social, economic and political activities. It serves as a non-religious centre. It was registered under societies- registration act 27 of 1975 old s.no5 of 1993, new S. No. 185 of 2006. **Keywords:** social work, Thondu, SAKTHI VIDYAL, Vidiyal, child's welfare, high-risk children*

Introduction

Vidiyal, which means 'Dawn' is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting and bettering child's rights. It deals mainly with children from slum communities, most of who come from Dalit backgrounds. It is notably proactive; staffs actively seek out children in places such as bus stands and railway stations, where children who come from deprived areas tend to congregate. There they talk to them, gain their confidence, and eventually invite them to one of their drop-in centres, which collectively serve seven slums. Children are encouraged to go to school, given study help, encouraged to participate in theatre, art and music, and taught about their rights. The organisation also has a shelter where children are fed, clothed and looked after. Runaways are reunited with their families and cases are followed through to ensure the child's welfare.

Aims and Objectives

VIDIYAL reaches out to high-risk children and their families through street and community-based programmes.³ Through VIDYAL, children gain education, skills and self-

confidence within a caring and supportive environment. VIDİYAL believes in a world with child rights. They emphasize child rights awareness, training and activism. Its aims and objectives are to promote the overall development of children, youth and women in rural and urban areas in India, who are socially and economically deprived; to provide family centred home based intensive services to children, youth and women in dysfunctional families in slums and backward areas in India; to sensitise rural and urban children and women on various environmental issues and concerns through education, training and communication; to create public awareness on the rights of the child and women and to work for the promotion, protection and defence of children's and women's rights.

The Vidiyal Street Children Project

The largest part of the Vidiyal Project is the work with the street children.⁴ Over 300 children come daily to the Vidiyal drop-in centres, where they receive unconditional love, medical care and their emotional and material needs are met. While still living at home with their families in the slums, the children are placed in appropriate schools and colleges depending on their needs and aspirations. The drop-ins provide opportunities to complete homework and to learn new skills such as dance, drama and karate. There is a special emphasis on projects for children, healthcare, education and training.

Child Sponsorship

New Dawn India operates a sponsorship scheme⁵ and many of the children who live in the slum are sponsored, enabling them to receive a well-rounded education. The support and encouragement that the children receive through sponsorship is invaluable to them as they battle the caste system and work to achieve academic or vocational qualifications.

The Vidiyal School

Housed in the Vidiyal centre is the nursery and kindergarten school. Parents of the slum and street children are very keen for their youngsters to have an education and demand for places is high. The support of Vidiyal and NewDawn India extends into the slum itself, offering love, care and practical help to elderly people and the families of the Vidiyal children. A tailoring centre has been set up for young women who would previously have earned their living panning in the sewers. On completion of the course they are presented with their own sewing machine so that they can provide for their families. Meetings with mothers are held to educate them about healthcare and to allow them to discuss any concerns. More recently the meetings for fathers have been introduced, as well as father and child camps, aimed at improving family bonds. Vidiyal is made up of many projects, including five different drop-in centres in the various slums of Madurai.⁶ Children attending these centres are encouraged and provided with the necessary equipment to go to school. At the end of the school day they go to the centres to play, do their homework

and get involved in a variety of activities, including martial arts, Thappu, dance, drama and public speaking. The children attending the Vidiyal drop-ins also learn skills for life, such as health and hygiene, computer technology and communication skills. These activities help the children to develop self esteem and confidence, something very lacking in the life of an untouchable street child.

Child Rights

There is a big emphasis on Children's Rights and many of the young people are involved in speaking at national and international conferences. Vidiyal is fighting for equality for every child regardless of caste, background or gender. Vidiyal operates a Reception Home which is used to house and care for rescued children until a solution can be found to their situation.⁷ While at the Reception Home there are opportunities for play, study and life skills, while the love and acceptance they receive often has the biggest impact on their troubled lives.

The work of Vidiyal is recognised by the Indian government, the police and agencies such as UNICEF for its work on the rights of children.⁸ Due to the experience of working within the slum communities, Vidiyal is operating "Childline" Madurai, which rescues children from forced marriages, child labour, trafficking and violence.

Juvenile Justice

Sakthi - Vidiyal has been involved in strengthening the Juvenile Justice system in Tamilnadu. Its active engagement in campaigns to bring reforms in the Juvenile Justice resulted in the amendment of the Juvenile Justice Act 1986 as Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000. This brought a big shift in the approach towards the children in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection.

Sakthi - Vidiyal was given the 'fit institution' status in 2003 which enabled its operation with a legal mandate.⁹ The children in need of care and protection in Madurai and Theni districts are brought to the Reception Unit of Sakthi - Vidiyal for care and protection and further actions.

We got actively involved in training the police personals, members of Child Welfare Committees and personal of various homes run by the Government. In 2009 Mr..JimJesudoss served in the evaluation team constituted by the Department of Social Defence and evaluated the Reception Units in four districts of Tamilnadu including Salem, Erode, Dharmapuri and Coimbatore.¹⁰

In 1999, the National Movement of Working Children - India (NMWC) was founded, with VidiyalVaanavil one of the founding members. Since then, VidiyalVaanavil has actively organized groups of children into clubs, forums and sangas. In 2000, the various groups of children collectively formed the Vidiyal Children's Council, electing representatives annually.¹¹ One member of the council travelled to Geneva, as a representative of the

NMWC, to present an alternate report to the committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2004, the executive body of the Children's Council voted to rename the collective Vidiyal Child Rights Movement. Members can be identified by their blue headbands, bearing the movement's logo. The movement also has its own flag, designed by the children. The Vidiyal Child Rights Movement holds consultative status within Sakthi-Vidiyal, and influences its policy and decision-making process. The children use the movement as a vehicle to campaign for recognition and rights for themselves and for other marginalized groups within Madurai as well as at the state level.¹²

Conclusion

Each drop-in centre has its own forum and, under supervision, the children are encouraged to discuss and plan the activities of the centres for themselves. Young people who themselves have come up through Vidiyal and are now studying for degrees act as volunteers at these centres. They say they want to give something back to Vidiyal, which has made such a huge change in their lives. These volunteers are invaluable to the life of Vidiyal. Vidiyal now has many graduates and the alumni are always ready to assist in any way they can, running workshops and activities for the children. They are also important role models, helping the children to have higher aspirations.

End Notes

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- ¹ Shankar Pathak, *Social Welfare*, New Delhi, 1981, p.30.
 - ² Madurai Messenger, August 2009.
 - ³ Interview with Mr. JESU, SakthiVidiya, dt. On Oct.3rd 2014.
 - ⁴ Pamphlet, SakthiVidiyal, Madurai.
 - ⁵ Madurai Messenger, August 2009.
 - ⁶ Annual Report of SakthiVidiyal for the year 2008-2009, Madurai, 2009, p.3.
 - ⁷ Ibid., p.7.
 - ⁸ The Hindu, Madurai, 17th June 2009.
 - ⁹ Dinamalar, Madurai, Jan.5th 2003.
 - ¹⁰ Interview with Mr. JIM JESUDOSS on Oct. 4, 2014.
 - ¹¹ Annual Report of SakthiVidiyal for the year 2010, Madurai, 2011, p.21.
 - ¹² Interview with Mr. JIM JESUDOSS. On Nov, 1, 2014.