

# Kerala Crafts Newsletter



Thank you to everyone who has supported the work of Kerala Crafts over the years, especially to all who gave so generously to help flood-ravaged Kerala in 2018.

Kerala has picked itself up, brushed itself off and is back in action, although the after-effects of the floods meant that tourism – Kerala's main source of income and employment - was down by 80% last year, with serious consequences.

## ***News and features***

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**'Empowerment of women is the empowerment of the nation. No household, no society, no state, no country has ever moved forward without empowering its women'**

*Naveen Patnaik, Chief Minister of Odisha (East India)*

The State is proud of the fact that Cochin International Airport is now the first fully solar-powered airport in the world and has turned itself into a 'green airport'.

With 100% literacy, world-class healthcare systems, India's lowest infant mortality rate and highest life expectancy – it would seem that all is well, and to the uncritical eyes, women in Kerala have got the best deal.

With a Human Development Index (HDI) that is comparable to the developed West, and all social and healthcare indicators relating to women showing robust figures, Kerala is often touted as the model state, so far as women's development goes. **But their smiles often hide their sadness.**

Startling as it might seem, studies reveal that over 40% of women in Kerala are victims of emotional and physical violence at home. Many put up with it as they do not wish to break up their family, causing uncertainty to their children, but also because they have no way of funding themselves.

A study by the Centre for Development Studies at Trivandrum, Kerala's capital, shows that although the State has a low rate of murder and theft, crimes against women are shockingly high. Rates of cruelty (almost double the national average), rape (one and a half times) and assaults (three times) are higher than the rest of India.

So against this backdrop, **Kerala Crafts will continue to support** the places where women (with many problems other than the abuses listed above) find acceptance, love, understanding and to be valued; a place where they can be themselves.



### Vimala Welfare Centre

We continue to support the Vimala Welfare Centre, as and when need arises, and on this visit we were able to meet Sr. Sophy Paul, the new superior, who replaced Sr. Reetha. The sisters don't wear habits, but just a plain sari, as they want to blend in and not stand out as 'religious'. Recently we were able to send funds to help a widow and her teenage son, who needed help to pay for her urgent cancer treatment, and also we made a substantial contribution towards the weddings of two of the girls from Adelaide Bhavan, as well as gifts at Christmas for all the workers. One major development recently has been the refurbishment of the kitchen. This was much needed, as the staff previously struggled to cater for the 1,000 female students who attend the college there daily. Many of the girls live in the hostel at the Centre on subsidised rent.



*Newly refurbished kitchen with ladies preparing lunch*



*Ferry to Moolampilly*



*Trenches dug ready for foundations*

A recent extension to the work undertaken by the Centre is the establishment of an outreach centre at Moolampilly. Sr. Sophy accompanied us to the island, a half hour drive from the Vimala Welfare Centre, and then a short ferry ride costing Rs2 (just over 2p). Srs. Mary George, Aleyamma Thomas and Nisha met us and we walked to the elderly folks' lunch, which meets every week.

Approximately 120 senior citizens meet for a healthy lunch prepared and cooked by an elderly team of 5. Before lunch, three of the folk entertained us with dance, song and hand cymbal playing. We all sat down to a delicious lunch of fish, rice and vegetables. Three Sisters have moved to this small island, and at present are sharing a tiny house, with little privacy. Plans are in place to construct a building that will include a home for the Sisters, as well as a tailoring unit, where trained women on the island can earn a living. This is an important initiative, as many of the women there feel isolated from society with little or no support.



*Sr Aleyamma (front L) in temporary building for weekly lunches*



*Delicious Lunch!*

Courses offered in this new building, will be cutting, tailoring, cooking, baking, candle making and basic computer skills. It will provide a central place on the island, which has largely been forgotten, where women can meet and learn new skills. This new endeavour will benefit the whole village.

## Kudumbashree - Kerala's own poverty eradication scheme for women

Snehitha Gender Helpline is an offshoot of Kudumbashree, set up to provide support to victims of domestic abuse, initially by a 24-hour help desk. If the problem cannot be solved or no legal action is taken, the women and children are moved to a shelter, where they are helped to find employment, or for illiterate women, skill training is given.

Kudumbashree groups were at the forefront of helping in practical ways with the flooding crisis, and we are determined to carry on supporting them, albeit in a fairly small way. We continue to support this important group by purchasing fair-trade umbrellas, which have proved to be a best seller. They are extremely sturdy (made with the onslaught of monsoon rain in mind!). We have supplied them to various fair-trade shops throughout the UK, and are proud to be the suppliers of the first fair-trade umbrellas. All the shops in question have re-ordered.



Shyni (standing) with Sajitha, Vijaya & Seetha



Jalaja & her daughter outside their home

All the ladies enjoyed a thali meal with us and afterwards we visited Jalaja, who has not worked for over twelve months. Her 20 year old son committed suicide and she took time out to grieve. She has recently returned to work, a big step for her, as over the last year, she had become fearful of leaving her house alone.

Sadly another member of staff (the only male), who cut out all the patterns in the workshop, died suddenly from a heart attack. Ganesh has now taken on this job. A new lady called Jeeja, has joined the work force. Her husband died 6 months ago, and as she has no children she is now living with her mother. The ladies are in need of the work as local stitching is quiet at the moment, the same for all the businesses there at present.

## 'She's' - Ponnani, Kerala

A two hour drive from Cochin, finds us at Ponnani – 'the small Mecca' of India. During Tippu Sultan's regime, Ponnani became an important centre for Islamic studies, but in 1799 the British took the territory of Malabar under their control after defeating Tippu. From then on, the port was developed both for trade and security reasons. Today, with the same percentages of Hindus & Muslims, the religious tolerance existing here is an inspiration to us all.

Our visit to Ponnani was a special time again. Sales of undies in the UK made by the ladies at 'She's' have remained consistent during 2019. Shyni, who oversees the shop, manages well despite having to care for her seriously ill husband, whose health is deteriorating.



Outside 'She's' at Ponnani



Families of workers @ Lulu Mall

Shyni took the ladies and their children to Ernakulam (the central mainland portion of the city of Cochin) - a special outing to include the celebrated Lulu Mall, new Metro rail line and Marine Drive playground. They really enjoyed it, as many of them had never left their home town before.

"Kids were super happy and said that they were lucky that they got the chance to have a spin in Ernakulam as their Mums were working at 'She's'. How sweet is that". Shyni Our support to 'She's' with a welfare 'pot', is able to fund outings such as this, as well as helping with medical needs (recently Seetha's eye treatment), and helping Jalaja whilst still at home.

## Valsalya Bhavan orphanage



Valsalya Bhavan Annex with Sr Sophy (R)



Our trip to both orphanages brought much joy and love. There is always sadness too when we hear the girls' background stories. At the annex for the older girls, we met Sr. Mercy for the first time. She has taken over from Sr. Shirley, and all the girls clearly love her, and she has a good rapport with them. During their long school holiday (March to June), a number of events are organised including coaching classes in basket ball, roller skating and badminton, as well as summer camps and outings.

Sonia Thomas, who has been at the orphanage from a young girl, has now reached her final year at college. She is studying for a Diploma in General Nursing & Midwifery at the Medical Trust Hospital, Ernakulam, Cochin. She has passed all subjects in her recent exams with good grades, and is on course to getting a secure job as demand is high for good nurses. We are so proud of her especially given her background. This was made possible by her sponsorship from a lady in The Netherlands.

We were able to join in with the girls at the celebration of 'Children's Day', which was hosted by the boys' home at Palluruthy. This was a fun-filled day, with lots of singing, dancing, games and eating! It was fantastic to meet 'our girls' from the orphanage, joining together with 1,000 underprivileged children from south Cochin, and to see how much fun they were having.



Rosie, Maheswari, Vennila & Ambika from Adelaide Bhavan



Sasikala married Joseph on 28th Nov 2018. Lunch was served at Vimalalayam (above) for 26 guests. They now have a baby daughter



Sonia Thomas- far right in green dress

The event was organised by the District Legal Services and Childline Kochi, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Child Rights Commission. The aim was to highlight the prevention of all kinds of abuses against children and to develop a child-friendly society. The theme was 'My childhood: my responsibility' – making children aware of their responsibilities as well as their rights.

This is one of the most eagerly awaited events for children in south Cochin. 'This is especially meant for the children from the slums and poor families. It is a day for them to celebrate. To dance and have fun. There are no competitions but all the children who come here are given free food and free gift kits' said Fr. Varghese, executive director. The Child Rights Commission member, Mr M.P. Antony stressed the importance of the 3 V's: 'Vidhyabyasam, Visramam, Vinodham' which translates as education, rest and leisure respectively.



Sonia with her fellow nursing students



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Some of the 1,000 children @ Children's Day

One highlight was when a young lady came forward saying that she remembered us from many years ago at the orphanage. Her name is Selvi and in 1997 she was brought to Valsalya Bhavan by Childline at the age 5 having been found wandering the streets. She now has a husband and 2 sons. There are a lot of new girls who need sponsoring. If you would like to know more or are interested in sponsoring a child please go to:

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

This support makes such a difference in a practical way, to the day-to-day running of the orphanages, as well as funding extra programmes for their long school holiday (see above). Born into poverty, left by their parents to fend for themselves, these street children are not looking for pity. All they need is love and care, which can transform their lives. The girls all long to have sponsors, and on our annual visits, they always ask 'When is my aunty coming to India'? Most girls don't have any contact with their family. The two sisters that my husband and myself sponsor do have family but their father is in prison and their mother has gone off and has not made any contact with her daughters for 4 years. It is heartbreaking to think that these beautiful girls are not important to their family. Your sponsorship means a great deal to the girls, and they will never forget you.



Selvi (centre) in 2009 @ Adelaide Bhavan



...Now Mum to 2 boys

*'To educate girls is to remove poverty'*

*'There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women'*

both Kofi Annan

## 2018 Flooding

Kerala Crafts was able to send funds to provide help to the workers at the Vimala Welfare Centre who lost all their possessions during the disastrous floods, as well as the ladies at 'She's' who had damage to their homes. During our time in Kerala, we were also able to visit the islands called Pizhala and Kadamakudy – islands ravaged by the severe floods. It was way back in 1924 that Kerala last had floods as bad as this, so it really did shake the State. Other agencies gave help with rice, food and essential goods and we also helped to provide emergency kits, but the main help required was restoring the damaged houses. Kerala Crafts also sent funds to help with this (as a result of many generous donors), and it was good to be able to see how the money we sent was used. We also concentrated on helping these two islands; these remote areas have largely been forgotten and the financial help pledged by the Indian government has not yet materialised.

At first glance, the islands look idyllic with coconut palms and soft soil, easy to cultivate, but then you realise how vulnerable the place is because the islands lie only slightly above sea-level. They are home to impoverished villagers who struggle on very little money. Although the children attend school, many of their parents are illiterate. There is no work other than subsistence fishing and farming, although some women are able to earn a miserly £3 a day working as cleaners in Government offices some distance away



Ramesh & his family of 5 who live in a one-roomed house



Local residents



Previous damaged roof



New roof

### *'You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know'*

William Wilberforce

In August 2018 there were 3 days of continual torrential rain which led to the simultaneous opening of 13 critical dams, which caused a surge of water downstream all coming together in the backwaters. Talking to the local people whilst we were there, it certainly was a very traumatic time for them. The floods came at night, with power cuts which was very frightening and 6 people lost their lives. The school on the island is on 3 levels, and so people rushed to the top floor to wait until they could be rescued. Many people were forced to leave their homes and possessions. Of the original 2,000 families, only half have returned as their homes were destroyed. Villagers lost their livelihoods as fish stocks, crops, animals and poultry were wiped out. The cry of 'Motham poyi' (everything's gone), was heard echoing through the state.



Badly cracked walls



High water level mark



New rendering

The local people are used to hardships, and have coped with this disaster with remarkable resilience. However, the main help needed was to restore their homes, and sanitation has been the priority, since sewage was a big problem and therefore a considerable health risk. Work was prioritised for people who were most in need.



Septic tanks installed

Those people who already had toilets, found that sewage backed up. Chambers are being installed, but work is slow as there is a problem transporting materials from the mainland to the island. Wells were polluted and still cannot be used. However, 55 families have received direct help through the funding received. This has either been through the building of an outside toilet with lighting, a new roof or repaired ceilings or repairs to walls. The salt water has corroded the plasterwork on some of the walls of the homes; and it took a long time for the houses to dry out, especially with another monsoon taking place shortly after.

There is still a vast amount of need but, with funding, a higher standard of living is starting to emerge, especially for families having a toilet, septic tank and outflow installed for the first time.

We were greatly impressed to see how the work is proceeding, and Vincent, the surveyor in charge, explained that the work was done up to the same stage at each home rather than fully upgrading only one at a time, due to the problem of transporting goods to the islands. The structures are well built, and will last for many years to come. Despite its shortcomings, the islanders are close-knit and help each other. People survive on very little money, and it would be impossible for them to fund renovations and new installations by their own means.



..with outflow

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This has made such a difference to the folk who live there. Life is very primitive, most families do not have gas cylinders, and so they cook on open fires outside. There is hardly any street lighting.



Life is now looking up for the island folk. The upcoming introduction of a water taxi to Ernakulam, Kerala's commercial hub, will also improve access, and with the new structures in place, day-to-day living for all of them has certainly been improved for the better. A boat with medical supplies and a doctor comes to the island every Wednesday. Community spirit has therefore been enhanced.



Local Teashop



Having a new toilet block installed



Damage to this house made it beyond repair



New home being built



## Noor - The Tailor

We continue to support Noor by our regular orders of boxer shorts and kimono gowns. He is very appreciative of this work, as his local business is not consistent. He makes school uniforms for children at certain times of the year, but then he can have a quiet period. He is very skilled, having worked in Mauritius for many years, and can create something from just rough sketches. The gowns and boxer shorts have proved a successful addition to our existing range of products. One of my greatest pleasures when in Kerala, is spending hours sourcing fabrics in a huge building in Kochi!



Noor with his popular 'Chacko' boxers



Kanan kimono gown £36



Nilima kimono gown £36

*"Fair trade...so much more than just buying fair trade coffee"*



## Don Bosco Boys Home, Kollam (Quilon)

During our stay in Kerala, we wanted to visit Kollam to meet with Joe Fernandez again (the exExecutive Director of Valsalya Bhavan). He had left Palluruthy to take on a new role at the Don Bosco Boys' Home at Kollam. This was a long 4 hour drive each way. The home is for 25 boys from dysfunctional families. Only two of the boys are orphans. All the boys are referred from social services. Don Bosco Society at Kollam have secured various initiatives in the area, and now include, as well as the boys' home, FCDP (Fishermen Community Development Programme), a college and Childline. Childline started in Kollam five years ago; a 24-hour nationwide free phone outreach emergency helpline for children in need of care and protection.

A kind family in Bath, who tragically lost their grandson in November 2018, gave money in his memory, to help furnish the boys' bedrooms at the home. This will make a huge difference, as the staff seek to provide a healthy environment and give the boys opportunities to pursue their studies and develop their personalities, and is a wonderful way to celebrate Alex's life. Donations in memory of loved ones are deeply appreciated and their memory will live on in our work in India.



Fr Joe taking photograph  
- remembering Alexander Wright



Boys at Don Bosco Boys' Home,  
Mundackal, Kollam

Whilst waiting for the boys to get home from school, we went to the FCDP (Fishermen Community Development Programme), close by which is run by some of the Don Bosco staff. This was an impressive and inspirational place because of the variety of work undertaken to help the poor in the community. In Kerala, there is little work other than agriculture and fishing, but the fishing community is very poor, scraping a living. We visited the coastal area where many of these families live, and were able to see some of the houses that had new roofs, after much destruction from the 2018 flooding. Kerala Crafts had sent money to this badly affected area, and it was good to see how the money had been put to good use.

### ***Fishermen Community Development Programme FCDP***

#### ***- 'Empowering the fisher folk'***

FCDP is a voluntary organisation founded in 1979 for the benefit of all fisher folk families living in the coastal region of Kollam, becoming a registered charity in 1984.

Back in the 1980's more than half of the fisher folk were living in deplorable conditions. Education for the children living in the huts and make-shift houses along the coast, was almost impossible. Before electric lighting was installed, the children could only do their homework by kerosene lamps and candle light. Inevitably this triggered a steep fall in the academic achievement of children, followed by failures and drop outs. Male students ended up with no choice but to return to the traditional trade of fishing along with their fathers, in order to make a living. Girls stayed at home and gave up their studies.

#### ***'Educate a man and you educate an individual. Educate a woman and you educate a family'***

#### ***Sir Stafford Cripps***

This plight of the fisher folk came to light by an educational survey in 1985; an eye-opener for the FCDP. It lost no time in initiating a comprehensive educational programme to provide tuition classes for 75 under-privileged children. This grew to a total of 5 tuition centres in the high concentration of the slum areas. Failed students and drop outs were put back on track again for learning.



*Slum house on the beach at Kollam*



*Tea stall in the fishing community*

Though education (PRATHEEKSHA) was the priority in the beginning, the vision of FCDP has now developed in other areas, to include health, social status and economic growth, all to enable fisher folk families to have a better life. When we visited the FCDP building in Kollam during our November 2019 trip, we were overwhelmed with the number of projects undertaken namely:

-‘Let us say no to hunger’ (VISHAPPINU VIDA). Over one hundred nourishing meals are served to the needy and elderly in the community. Preparation begins at 5am. Volunteers distribute the food parcels between 11 and 1. Quality checks are carried out every week.

-Reaching out in empathy and care (SWANTHANAM). Supporting the struggling poor folk who are ill at home, unable to afford further treatment.

-Self-help groups & micro finance activities. There are over 150 self-help groups in the area, for social, economic and welfare activities for coastal men and women.

-Primary Health Centre – working towards better health conditions and facilities for the fishing community, including dental checks and counselling services.

-Youth Forum – nurturing the skills of youngsters in the coastal area.

-Women Empowerment Programme - striving for gender equality & human rights.

-KISMAT (Kerala Interstate Migrants Alliance for Transformation) – reaching out to the growing population of young migrants at risk in Kerala, giving this marginalised class a voice.

-Production Units. This includes a home care unit which makes cleaning products as well as offering a sari wash at a cheaper rate (what a brilliant idea!). No washing machines available in homes, and washing a saree of up to 8 metres is not easy! The handicraft unit involves workers making sea shell flowers and decorative ornaments. The textiles and garment unit makes basic clothing items including school uniforms. Finally, the Masala Production Unit – making healthy and unadulterated masalas (spices), including the making of pickles (popular & essential in Kerala), that contain no preservatives.

-Skill Training Programmes – providing skills & knowledge to start folk on income generating programmes, including auto-rickshaw training for women, home nursing & palliative care training, tailoring & fashion designing, computer training & fish/food processing.



*Sea shell flowers made by the handicraft unit of FCDP*



*Heroic fishermen during the floods*

During the devastating floods of 2018, it was the fishermen who became the local saviours of the day. In the Kerala coastal region, over 950 fishing boats and 4,500 fishermen, including those from Kollam, became coastal heroes as they brought the initial stocks of food, fuel and other essential relief materials to those in distress. With their boats, GPS (global positioning system) and experience in navigating strong undercurrents, their help proved invaluable during the crisis. ‘Such stories of valour and fortitude in the face of horrific national disasters enforces the fact that at the end of the day, humanity conquers all and not all superheroes wear capes’ stated online news. The well deserved fishermen of Kollam were honoured in a ‘Felicitations to Fishermen’ programme on 2nd September 2018 where distinguished guests and well-wishers wrapped a ‘ponnada’ (shawl) around the fishermen and presented them with a certificate.

*If you wish to donate to any of the projects outlined above, please visit our website page:*

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

♥ You can give securely through Paypal or Card (monthly donation option too) **or by:**

♥ BACS payment - Sort code 20-05-12, Account no: 40787159 (quoting your name in payment reference so we know who it is from!) **or by:**

♥ Cheque (payable to Kerala Crafts) - please post to 5 Ivy Place, Bath BA2 1AR.

♥ (To Gift Aid your donation, please complete form enclosed & return to 5 Ivy Place, Bath BA2 1AR)

♥ **UK Registered Charity No. 1138414**

**THANK YOU**

## **SOME OF THE GIRLS WHO WOULD LOVE A SPONSOR**



Sonali d.o.b 07.11.10



Arunima d.o.b 11.08.12



Erlin d.o.b 07.09.11



Aayushi d.o.b 14.05.14



Amritha d.o.b 30.05.11



Bhavani d.o.b 10.06.14



With grateful thanks to Computer Network Defence Ltd, Bath who have printed this newsletter. [www.CNDLtd.com](http://www.CNDLtd.com)