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WOMAN OF THE WEEK

Facing challenges head-on

Rural healthcare and development is high on her agenda. Meet Bhooma Parthasarathy, Director, Thirumalai Trust, which has been a pioneer in the setting up of SHGs in Vellore



PATH-BREAKING PURSUITS Bhooma Parthasarathy Photo: K. V. SRINIVASAN

Bhooma Parthasarathy could be sitting in a junior classroom. Eyes sparkling, voice hitting high decibels, as she describes her path-breaking work in villages, you see a bubbly schoolgirl telling the teacher about her latest adventure. It's more like "What Katy Did" than what the Director of a decades-old trust has done for rural healthcare, education and empowerment. "Enthu" a teacher would have branded her instantly.

She found hi-jinks in field work in her Stella Maris PG course. Curricula turned extra-curricular when she found herself twiddling fingers in Ranipet after marriage. Feeling lost in the small town life, she "had to do something" and an astute husband dropped the Thirumalai Trust files on her lap.

Great opportunity, she thought, let me go and change this part of the world. Bag in hand she skipped into her new "class". But she was the classic "odd-woman-out" — the women quickly moved out of *periya veetu amma's* way when she approached. Test I: 0 /100. Lesson: Image is a hindrance.

Charity is actual work. Bhooma came to Chennai, studied "rural needs" again. In 1983, took a doctor and a compounder back to start a Rural Healthcare programme. Five years later, the programme folded. Test II: 0/100. Lesson: Reverse the method.

She did "group study". She consulted friends in NGOs. Scoured 25 villages and found four women volunteers. Trained them in basic healthcare. In 1991, only 2 remained. Test III: 2/100 Lesson: Every challenge is an opportunity.

She opened the first Community Health Centre (CHC). Villagers allotted space, picked volunteers, spread the info. Soon she had 18 volunteers. Test IV: Pass marks.

A class II-pass woman Soundari signed up reluctantly, but topped the 45-day training in basic medicine. (She later kept accounts for her self-help group (SHG) and became the village heroine). In a few years, nine CHCs sprang up in Vellore district. Test V: 60/100. Lesson: Go beyond stand-alone units.

Integrated approach

So on to an integrated approach — livelihood, income, family, education — everything, with the focus on women. "Women and child health are linked to all activities," says Bhooma. "Community health is something I knew about. The best investment is what one has." Her first big success was getting a qualified vet to train villagers in cattle care. "He established a vet-work of cadres around Ranipet." Soon planning and implementing programmes became "part of me". Her presence was recognised and women came to her with welfare shopping lists. Other NGOs began to see TCT as a platform for delivery.

She opted for a new subject — alcoholism. While TTK Hospital treated the "patients" free, Bhooma and her volunteers identified them, found accommodation for the camps, recruited local doctors for post-camp monitoring and motivated family to be at the camp. The first two camps were daymares. "That was the challenging but fun part," she grins. She canvassed for support. In the last five years, the streamlined annual camps have been trouble-free.

Bhooma was now class monitor. TCT's expertise brought in camp followers. Her volunteers helped Worth Trust establish a disability network to disseminate information and supply application forms for concessions; the Rotary Club to organise post-polio corrective surgery; Mukti to fit pre-fab calipers for the disabled. "We run 300 single-window clearance outlets," she says happily. TCT also works with Vidya Sagar and ADD (Tiruchi) on rehabilitation programmes.

In 1994, her Women's Savings and Credit Programme took off long before "micro finance" became a buzz phrase. "We evolved strategies and trained leaders in micro credit. We were one of the pioneers in SHGs in Vellore. From 13 with 160 women it has grown to 1230 groups with a participation of 20,000 women." Her credit-disciplined SHGs are supported by banks. She then

went back to school. Only this time she built one (husband's dream!) with help from her former teacher. Her Vedavalli Vidyalaya Higher Secondary School stands at Wallajahpet with 850 students and stepped-up facilities.

Bhooma has been a regular user of the Chennai-Vellore Road. A head-on and a difficult recovery, however, have put an end to night driving. "With a management information system in place, I have access to what's going on. When people need my presence, I drive down to visit them." She is putting her experience together for a doctoral thesis.

Family of entrepreneurs

In a family of entrepreneurs — father R. K. Swamy, sister in Hansa Vision — Bhooma has chosen to be offbeat. "This is not some spiritual satisfaction," she flinches at the thought. "I run all my work on business lines. The Thirumalai Group allots funds. If I need their support, I better do right." Without a trace of contradiction, she adds, "This is where my heart is. I built it all from scratch."

"Each day is different for me," she shrugs, talking of tsunami relief. "Everything has been a learning experience." Her annual report lists 95 health volunteers and 75 schoolteachers dispensing drugs from a kit she provides. The women in the SHGs have replaced graduates and PGs as accountants and managers. "For the family, it is a matter of pride. When Soundari was asked by a visitor, 'Why bother with SHGs? You could get loans from a bank,' she replied, 'This sangam is not just a place where I get loans. This has given me freedom, an identity.'"

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