



CHILD PARTICIPATION- AN EMPOWERING PROCESS

STORIES OF IMPACT OF CHILD PARTICIPATION



A COMPILATION OF 20 INSPIRATIONAL STORIES ON THE 20th ANNIVERSARY OF CONFEDERATION OF ARUNODHAYA CHILDREN SANGAM

Supported By





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Child Participation- An Empowering Process Stories Of Impact Of Child Participation

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PREFACE

Arunodhaya centre for street and working children started in 1992 with a vision 'Create a just society in which every child enjoys childhood assured of his/her rights with dignity and happiness' has been implementing programmes towards eradication of child labour and promotion of child rights. Discourse with children on their rights to survival, development, protection and participation led to the formation of Confederation of Arunodhaya Children Sangam (CACS) as the platform for children to exercise their right to participation. Initiated in 2001, CACS emerged as a child led organisation by children, for children and with children. Imbibing a democratic structure CACS creates space for children to form their opinion on issues concerning them, express their views and opinion before adults/policy makers, make their voices heard and taken into consideration at the level of family, school, community and governance. School children council and Children nagara sabai are the initiatives to ensure child participation in school and local governance. Gaining information, skill, and knowledge transformed children into agents of change.

Arunodhaya has been playing the role of a facilitator in providing information, building the capacity of children, creating spaces for children to participate, training adults to appreciate child participation, listen to children and take their views and opinion into consideration in taking decisions concerning them.

The year 2021 marks 20 years of CACS and we are happy to present stories of boys and girls who were part of CACS and now have gone out and established themselves in different fields. Their stories are an inspiration and shows how the chance or opportunity to participate has moulded their lives and made them to move towards their goal in life.

The Right to participation is indeed a link to all other rights. These stories go to prove that when children gain the right to participate, they can accede other rights not only for themselves but for others also.

**Chennai
November 2021**

**Dr. Virgil D Sami
Executive Director
Arunodhaya centre for street and working children**



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This document aims at capturing the transformative power of child participation and how it has empowered the former members of Confederation of Arunodhaya Children Sangam. This called for assistance from people who had the willingness and interest to interview the members and prepare their stories. Dr. Karen Coelho, Associate Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies volunteered her services and formed a team of volunteers who willingly contributed their time, energy and expertise in documenting the life stories of the members. We acknowledge with gratitude the support extended by the following volunteers

Ms. Chandni Shyam, Research Associate, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Mr. Venkatesh M, Research Assistant, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Ms. Manasa, Freelancer, Journalist.

Ms. Sajusha Ashok, Intern, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Mr. R Balasubramaniam, Founder, Empathy works.

Mr. Vijay Ravikumar.

Ms. Sushmita Venugopalan.

All of them spent a full day in interviewing and later transcribed and prepared the stories. Inspite of many hardships the team did a wonderful job of capturing the transformative power of child participation. We deeply appreciate the interest they showed in talking to the children and the effort put in compiling the stories.

We place on record our thanks to Ms. Aarti Madhusudan, I Volunteer and Ms. Revathi Krishna from Australia who rendered their support in editing the document.

Our thanks to all the members who shared their stories of success, of empowerment with joy and happiness.

The staff of Arunodhaya played a major role in producing the document led by Ms. K. Priya and Ms. S. Selvi.



UPHOLDING CITIZENSHIP

Name	R. Sandhya
Age	29 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.B.A., Law
Present Status	Advocate

Sandhya is an advocate in Chennai and is from Korukkupet. Both her parents are not well educated. Her mother is a housewife and father, an electrician who had fallen down once while at work; their family was in dire straits at the time. It was her mother, who was a member of the women's self-help group, who introduced Sandhya to Arunodhaya.

Sandhya's association with Children Sangam taught her several lessons. She attended the programmes and sessions organised by Arunodhaya, such as the ones on menstruation, gender sensitisation, career options, how one must conduct oneself in society, and so on. "The sessions and programmes I attended taught me how to be a good citizen, focus on one's career, handle any challenge that comes one's way, and the importance of safety, among many others. I did my schooling in Tamil but my college degree was in English medium. Because of the confidence I gained, I was able to pass my exams with flying colours." She further added that she had recently gone for a moot court competition in Ramaiah University, Bangalore and it was her exposure to Arunodhaya that gave her the aplomb required for the competition.

“The sessions and programmes I attended taught me how to be a good citizen, focus on one's career, handle any challenge that comes one's way, and the importance of safety, among many others”

Arunodhaya and the Children Sangam - played a very significant role in Sandhya's life after her class 12. Upon completing her schooling, she wanted to study law but did not know how to apply and pursue the course. Sandhya recalls being very lost at the time as to what her next steps were going to be. "I had no one to provide guidance and so I reached out to Arunodhaya. I was encouraged to study law in the School of Excellence to become an advocate. I was inspired to choose a career that would enable me to help the people around me. I was then able to successfully secure a seat at the college. Today, I am a proud advocate in Korukkupet".

Sandhya was a rather a quiet child who was scared of talking to people and hardly stepped out of her house. But after joining Children Sangam, she came out of her shell and became bolder. She is now an independent, self-sufficient woman for which she credits her experience at the Children Sangam. She wishes to become a civil judge one day for which she plans to commence coaching classes soon.

"My message to children is do not fear anything. Seek and achieve what you want to."



BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE

Name	V. Rajendran
Age	34 Years
Gender	Male
Education	Diploma in A/C Mechanic
Present Status	Salesman in Civil Supplies Corporation

Rajendran grew up in Korukkupet and had to quit school at the age of 9 to work in a steel polishing workshop. He earned Rs.20/- a day working from 7 am to 8 or 9 pm. His father was an alcoholic and his mother worked as a domestic worker.

After he had been working in the steel polishing unit for about 2 years, he was introduced to Arunodhaya. "At that age I did not know that I was a child labourer. One day when I was at work, I heard a play being performed on the street outside. It was about how child labour was illegal and punishable. It was by the Arunodhaya team. The workshop owner tried to keep me inside but I pushed past him and went out to watch. I told the Arunodhaya staff that I wanted to study. Sandhanamary mam from Arunodhaya immediately enrolled me in the child labour centre, and after a few days helped me get into a regular school. I joined in 3rd standard, and have studied there until 10th standard. In 10th standard I failed two subjects. Many give up, going to extreme lengths such as harming themselves at that stage, but I didn't give up; I wrote the exam again and passed."

Rajendran then took a diploma course in air-conditioning mechanics, and a course in forklift-operating. He worked for a while as an AC mechanic in Taj Coromandel hotel.

But he soon found an opportunity to apply for a government job in the civil supplies department. He has worked there since then, moving from an initial basic salary of Rs.3000, to Rs.10,000. He considers himself extremely fortunate to have obtained a government job, and is now contented with his life.

"I have lived through very difficult and painful times. In my childhood I was beaten by the steel workshop owner. All through my school years, I worked during the holidays -- as a hotel dishwasher, in book-binding, fast food shops, rice shops, anything -- to buy my school uniform, shoes, books, and some decent clothes. I supported myself completely throughout my schooling.

Arunodhaya played a major role in my life and my family's life. My elder brother was also a child labourer, but Arunodhaya put him in school. He studied only till 5th standard, and now he drives his own auto. My younger brother works as a sanitation worker with the Chennai Corporation. I have a white-collar job, I am in charge of a ration shop with 1200 ration cards. Arunodhaya gave us all a hand and pulled us up. Not just my family – they helped lots of youngsters in the area, who are now all in good positions, in government jobs, or in cinema or working as artists

I was the first President of the Confederation of Arunodhaya Children Sangam. I made sure that a lot of others also took up leadership in the Sangams. I helped bring out the newsletter *Chitterumbu Pesuthu*. As Children Sangam members, we stopped many child marriages in the Korrukupet area by reporting the incidents to Arunodhaya. We also found out about child labourers working in our areas and told Arunodhaya staff, who then enrolled them in schools. I was also a member of the cultural team, the video audio documentary team and the Young Facilitators team.

We learned a lot about our rights as children, that our views and opinions had to be taken seriously by adults when they made decisions about our lives. Today many parents are more willing to let their children decide what they want to do, to wear. But our main rights or demands are simple. We don't want big wealth from our parents, we are just asking for three things: good, healthy food, the opportunity to study, and decent clothes. Because appearance is a very important thing in life. With these three things, we can take care of our futures. Participating in the Children Sangam made children want to study. Second, they won a lot of respect in society. Everyone was familiar with Arunodhaya and respected us because we were part of their Sangams. I changed things in my school too. There were no trees in the compound so students had to play in the sun. I suggested to the headmaster that trees could be planted, and he asked me to take this up. So, I planted saplings all around the school compound.

The school walls were very dirty, so with the headmaster's encouragement, we painted the walls and made our surroundings much more attractive. I participated in lots of activities at the school – dance events and competitions, *Tappatam*, *Karagattam*, etc. All this gave me a lot of pleasure. Once you get on stage with your dance team, with anklets strapped on and a *Parai* in your hand, and when you see the enjoyment of the audience, all your troubles are wiped away.

I was also the leader of the Arunodhaya Youth Committee in my area. Arunodhaya organized many leadership camps, and I would go talk to the parents of youth in my area and persuade them to send their children to these camps. They would agree because I had gained a good name. It takes years of effort to earn a good name.

Arunodhaya also reached out to help our families financially so that they did not have to depend on children's labour. They started women's Self-Help Groups that built up women's savings and income, they got them opportunities to start small enterprises such as tailoring. Now there are no child laborers in our area at all. Arunodhaya has been like a family to us. When we came to the centre for meetings, it was like coming home to our family. Even today, if they call, I come rushing. I will never forget what they have done for us. I am the only person in my family who works in a government job, and this is because of Arunodhaya.

Growing up, we had very little to eat and were always hungry, however, I always put on a cheerful face when I left the house.

Since my father was an alcoholic, none of our relatives had any regard for us. We shifted homes frequently, we moved around like gypsies. When it rained, water would pour into our house while we were sleeping, and my mother would try somehow to shield us. But today I have my own house. The three of us brothers have built a 3-storey building in Korukkupet where we grew up, and we each have a flat. Our parents also live with us. We are very content. My parents respect me now and consult me on all family decisions. This makes me very proud. I help my wife a lot at home. If she is unwell, I cook and do the housework.

My goal in life is to help the very poor. Even now I try to help anyone in need. I assist three families financially, and I am helping a friend to pay his college fees. I am trying to support others the way I was supported as I grew up. I also volunteer regularly at St.Joseph's hospice in Chengalpet, which takes care of destitute or disabled elders from the streets. I go there once a week and take care of the elders – shave them or feed them or cut their hair.

If I were to advice children today, I would say: love your parents and take care of them till the end. To the extent you can, help others, poor people, do something for the poor every day. The most important thing is anbu (love). Give anbu to everyone. Without love we have nothing. Things will come and go, but anbu will never be forgotten".



“ We learned a lot about our rights as children, that our views and opinions had to be taken seriously by adults when they made decisions about our life ”



BEING ABLE TO DREAM BIG DREAMS

Name	S. Keerthika
Age	24 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.Com
Present Status	Sales Support, Southern Finserve (P)Ltd

I am a resident of Serkhan Thottam, Kodambakkam. Dad, grandmother, elder brother and myself - this is my small family. I lost my mother when I was in 5th std. I was brought up by my grandparents. With no mother and without proper job for my father, my grandparents were supporting us through a snack shop. I used to help them in the shop and also went to school.

When I was studying in 7th std. on my return from school, I saw a group of children sitting together and having a meeting. I went and asked them what they were doing and they told me about Arunodhaya children sangam. I asked them if I can also join them. They said yes and I consider that moment as the start of my growth. I started attending the meetings, trainings, summer camp and I got many new friends.

In our area, parents did not show interest in educating girl children. They will marry them off at a young age. In some cases, the girls also got into infatuation and eloped. At that time, I participated in a training on child marriage at Arunodhaya children sangam. After attending the training, I said to myself that I should study well. Though I faced many hurdles – poverty, hunger etc. I was strong and continued my studies. Since young age I was interested in accounts and completed B.Com. I felt so happy and proud to be the first graduate in our family. Through the guidance of Arunodhaya I joined Southern Finserve (P) LTD. Now, I am drawing a salary of Rs. 20,000/- p.m.

I am planning to pursue MBA through correspondence course. I take pride in saying that participation in Arunodhaya children sangam developed self confidence and the strength to face any kind of hurdles in life.

I wish to share one of green memory in Arunodhaya children sangam. When I was studying in 9th std. I got the opportunity to participate in “young scientist” programme. Our team cleared many rounds and I recall participating in the finals at Coimbatore. It was a memorable trip for me. This was my first trip outside Chennai. Through the children sangam I had the opportunity to visit many places and learn new things. Participation in the young scientist programme enkindled in me the interest to learn.

I was instructed by the animators about age appropriate behaviours. I first learnt about “Good touch, Bad touch”. Each activity will be like a game. It allowed active participation of the team. The feedback from my team members would add more clarity to a given topic. I recall Isaac Newton and others, we are in touch even today.

It was Arunodhaya which guided me through out. I in turn started guiding children once I was little more experienced.

“ I take pride in saying that participation in Arunodhaya children sangam developed self confidence and the strength to face any kind of hurdles in life ”



BECOMING GENDER SENSITIVE

Name	M. Noor Mohammed
Age	26 Years
Gender	Male
Education	B.Sc - Physics
Present Status	Sr.Supervisor-Allcargo Logistics LTD

Noor Mohammed sat down leaving his phone on silent mode. He was eager to share his story of growing up. Noor joined the Children Sangam when he was ten years old.

Noor was often restricted from playing freely as his strict parents wouldn't allow it. He also wanted to get away from his school often. Some of his area friends brought him to the Arunodhaya Children Sangam, thinking it may be a change for him. The shy boy started attending area meetings with other boys and girls as, he slowly learnt to take lead for a group of children. He realised how to productively interact with children who had different interests and personalities. He found his circle of friends increase in numbers. Very soon, he started attending local, other zone meetings and yearly conventions at the Children Sangam. It made him realise that a world existed beyond his parents, his home and community. Noor set and achieved his goals - such as scoring well in 10th Std exam, and attending a summer course diploma in computer application course conducted by Arunodhaya. He then completed his Bachelor of Physics degree at Loyola College, Chennai.

Noor reflected on his time at the Children Sangam during a crucial time of his life, between the age of 10 and 16. He reiterated the positive and important role his participation at the Children Sangam played in shaping his outlook in life. He fondly remembered his trip to Pondicherry for a camp, the unforgettable mini-van Periapalayam trip with Korukkupet zone annas (elders boys of sangam of Sherif, Rajan and Deepan).

Noor recalls more than anything, the gender sensitivity training he participated for the children of adolescent age group, how it has helped in respecting his wife and daughter now. The lessons on how to interact with women/girls, how to be helpful, good touch and bad touch have remained with him as an adult. This has strengthened his relationship with his wife as he has grown into a sensitive and an aware adult. He also shares how the interactions in the Children Sangam helped him overcome his complexes about his body image, colour of his skin. His confidence played a critical role in helping him choose his partner for life. He currently focuses on empowering his young daughter Zainab to speak out, helping her distinguish between fear and respect.

Noor finds his experience of leading a group of children in the Youth forum invaluable. Teaching them discipline, team building, group behaviour, how to organise continue to help in honing his leadership skills. His leadership experience in Children Sangam enabled him to become NSS organiser at Loyola college and he led around 200 boys on a week long camp at Thiruvallur. His early experiences directly enabled him to lead a group of seventy truck drivers in his present logistics job, who look up to him.

It was fascinating to see his confidence surge as the conversation progressed to ambition, goals setting and preparation for the same. The children Sangam played a critical role in building these capabilities.

“ The lessons on how to interact with women/girls, how to be helpful, good touch and bad touch have remained with him as an adult. This has strengthened his relationship with his wife as he has grown into a sensitive and an aware adult ”



Samsung Dual Camera
Shot with my Galaxy A30

He also shared how he learnt to deal with setbacks and failures and that they did not deter him from being persistent. Disappointments help growth, he added. When he did not get selected for the Community College Initiative programme by the US Consulate to study further, instead of brooding he decided to focus his attention to what he could do next. He felt responsible for his parents and younger brother, taking on a job to contribute to the family's resources.

Hussain's boys as he and his brother are referred to are the role models for the community making his father a proud man. Today his brother, mother, grandmother is part of Arunodhaya.



GAINING CONFIDENCE AND COURAGE TO FIGHT INJUSTICE

Name	S. Padmapriya
Age	29 Years
Gender	Female
Education	M.A.M.Ed
Present Status	Teacher

Padmapriya was rather reserved as a child. She had not more than two to three friends; her world was limited to her family and few friends. She joined Arunodhaya Children Sangam (the Korukkupet unit) while studying in class 8, in the year 2005. “I was initially not aware of the Children Sangam. I had a beautiful family - mother, father, and a sister and brother. My mother was a part of the women self-help group. She would attend training sessions regularly. One day, she came to know about the Children Sangam and insisted that I join.” she said.

After joining the Sangam, Padmapriya made several friends and was amazed at how so many people were willing to support her. She became aware of children's rights and realised the importance of the right to participation. It was when she actively participated in Sangam activities that she was able to identify her talent for public speaking.

“Arunodhaya Children Sangam helped identify and develop my capacity to participate, guide and lead. These skills help me to this day.” Padmapriya was an elected member of the Executive committee and was a member of *Chitterumbu Pesuthu* (Children's newsletter) editorial board, and cultural team where she learnt *Oyilaatam*.

She said that the children themselves were responsible for planning and implementing action as part of these groups.

They led every conference and program themselves while the staff just guided. As part of the creativity training camp, the children would write their own lyrics to film tunes. Ramya ma'am, one of the resource people had organised a 3-day workshop where they learnt to make tunes for their lyrics. At the end of it, they composed 10 songs which were released as a cassette *Mottugalin mettukkal*. One of the songs *Puthaga Sumai* was sung by her.

She fondly recalls an incident that took place when she travelled to Dindigul as part of an Arunodhaya initiative to collaborate with other Children groups to share one another's ideas. While returning to Chennai her mother had come to the railway station, to pick her up. She came without a platform ticket and was caught by the officials.

Even as Padmapriya tried to explain that her mother really had no knowledge of getting platform tickets, this is the first time she is coming to the railway station and in the eagerness to receive her daughter she directly entered the platform without taking the platform ticket.

But the officials refused to believe her. She then wrote a formal letter explaining the situation. One of the officers saw the letter and asked which organisation she was a part of. On hearing that it was Arunodhaya, he let them go saying that people part of voluntary organisations would not lie. "I recollect this incident often. It made me happy that day because I don't like when people lie. The same officer encouraged me to be bold no matter what the situation is, which I have followed to this day. After this incident, I developed courage to face problems head-on," she says.

She was a part of the Sangam until class 12 after which she became a member of the Central Committee (Thiruvotriyur zone). The Committee was started for former members of the Children Sangam to share their experiences with the current children at the Children Sangam. She completed an MA in Tamil and an M.Ed. Currently, Padmapriya is a Tamil teacher in a school in Tondiarpet.

“ Children themselves were responsible for planning and implementing action as part of these groups. They led every conference and program themselves while the staff just guided. As part of the creativity training camp, the children would write their own lyrics to film tunes ”

"I learned several things from my time at the Children Sangam. I am still in touch with the friends I made at the time. Participation in Children Sangam cultivated in me the courage I have today to raise my voice against injustice happening in society. We were treated equally regardless of our gender and this promoted equality in my family as well. My father, sister, and uncle consult me before taking important decisions because they trust my judgement. What I learnt at the Children Sangam is useful not only to me but also to others. Today, I can proudly and confidently say that I am a good teacher. In a class of 50, at least 30 students like me." she adds proudly





BIG GOALS AND DETERMINATION TO ATTAIN THEM

Name	P. Manickam
Age	27 Years
Gender	Male
Education	B.A. Economics
Present Status	Shift Supervisor, SANCO Trans Ltd

Manickam, born and brought up in Korukkupet. I have studied BA Economics. I joined Arunodhaya Children Sangam during my 9th standard. The leadership skills which I gained from Arunodhaya are incredibly useful in my current role. I joined as an employee in Sanco trans ltd, based on my leadership skills I have been promoted as Supervisor.

We used to play and roam around before joining Children Sangam. I lived in a slum area where most of the people including my parents were uneducated. I am the first graduate in my home. Through the Children Sangam meetings, I came to know about the rights of the children. It was unusual, different and I liked the good things and rights taught in that meeting. I started attending the meeting regularly. Lot of camps were conducted including leadership training skills.

Art skill training and cultural camps conducted by Arunodhaya were very joyful to learn. I learned how to play *Parai*. Now I am a member of *Nanbargal Gramiya Kalaikulzhu*. Deepan who was also a member of Arunodhaya Children Sangam is the leader of the team. We are able to make an earning out of this Art. The foundation for this is laid by Arunodhaya. Now, it is an extra income to my family.

We have also performed in a show called *Mathiyamnamassu* And while learning these skills, I didn't see it as work or training. It is completely enjoyable with friends. If we do what we like, it won't feel hard to us. We are like a family now with a good bonding.

I had a good experience of participating in young scientist programme conducted by Tamil Nadu Science forum. I led a team of five members and we did a project on solar energy. I felt happy to present our project along with participants from other schools in Chennai. We were selected at the district level. I learned to communicate effectively with the people to get the work done. Managerial skills, behavioural skills were developed. I participated in an interaction with Chennai's Mayor and discussed with him about Children *Nagara Sabai*. It is a rare opportunity to get a chance like this. Initially I would not ask any questions, but later I gained the confidence to raise questions. I shared my learnings with other children during area level meetings. I personally guided many children, we also conducted survey in the community to identify children who are drop outs or child labourers and motivated them to join school. We as children have also organized and conducted many programs.

When I was studying 11th standard my father passed away due to excessive drinking and my mother was unemployed. The responsibilities of the family had to be borne by me. I wished to study but to take care of the family, I worked in a local shop with Rs. 100 as a salary. Even during my college time, I worked in Star bazaar and Spencer Plaza. I worked in many places but only as a part time along with my studies. Arunodhaya and the Children Sangam continued to support me, arranged for scholarships and helped with my studies.

I fell in love with a girl and within one year we got married. I want to buy a house and should educate my children. Human beings aspire to get more. I am planning to start a business on my own. It's easy to choose a wrong path in life. My father died because of alcohol. I have self-control keeping my family in my mind. It is a lesson for every child. Life will have different plans for us and we should use every experience to cope better

“ I learned to communicate effectively with the people to get the work done. Managerial skills, behavioural skills were developed ”





INSPIRED TO WORK FOR GIRLS RIGHTS

Name	G. Lalithambigai
Age	24 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.A.(English) PG Diploma in Montessori Training
Present Status	Supervisor Cum Team Leader in J PAL Research Organisation

Lalithambigai, aged 24 living in Thiruvottiyur. I have completed BA English, a PG Diploma in Montessori Training. Currently working as supervisor in JAYPAL Research Organization. My mother worked as Field Staff and Organizer in Arunodhaya, I came to Arunodhaya through her. I started attending Arunodhaya Children Sangam when I was 10 years old.

Before coming to Children Sangam, I didn't have any idea about child rights and the Indian Constitution. But after joining Children Sangam, I understood that we as children deserve and are assured basic rights. Generally, girls have very few opportunities to open up and talk in public. Children Sangam has given that space and opportunity to me. Arunodhaya has helped me overcome barriers and motivated me to participate in many things such as public speaking. Even my family members felt amazed on seeing me talking on stage.

I haven't been in any kind of leadership role before joining Children Sangam. After joining, I have held many leadership positions and also made many opportunities to express myself. I gathered confidence and volunteered for public speaking when I was in Arunodhaya. I had talked with area councillors and ward leaders even when I was very young.

It is a difficult thing for children going and speaking with public representatives, but talking with them as a member of Arunodhaya Children Sangam has given us good response and respect from them. It was a different experience to talk with such leaders when I was just 12 years old. We used to explain the problems commonly prevalent in our area such as poor conditions of roads, water issues to those councillors. Thiruvottiyur was very under developed back then. Because of our complaints and grievances to the councillors, they have repaired the roadways and made enough water supplies to people. I felt very empowered after making these changes. I have advised many parents against forcing their children to work.

I have been the Zonal Leader of Thiruvottiyur as well as the President of Confederation of Arunodhaya Children Sangam when I was 14 years old. Arunodhaya has given me a lot of training in leadership and conducted camps about child rights. It was educational and made us aware about our own rights. Attending those camps have helped us extend our limitations as a child. I realised that I am not any less compared to anyone just because I am a child. We got many exposures and a chance to interact with outside people during the camp. I am very grateful to Arunodhaya for giving me such wonderful and empowering experiences.

Arunodhaya trained us in the Arts such as folk dance, bharathanatyam, maan kombu attam, paraiyattam. We used to perform these dances in the streets as flash mobs, before having awareness sessions regarding Child Rights, as it gathers the people's attention. After completing 18 years, we joined the Maiyakuzhu (core team), we used to teach and train the new coming children in art skills and other extracurricular activities. My participation in Children Sangam has helped me in having holistic empowerment along with freedom. I got freedom within and outside the family, ranging from what I want to eat, where I want to go. My mother cooks what I ask for, she allows me to attend meetings happening outside. My parents came to understand my choices and desires.

Generally, girls are not allowed to go out and be treated equally in our society, but I could get that freedom and liberation out of the knowledge I learned in Arunodhaya children sangam. I always have that push to create awareness to the people about the importance of education. In that way, I used to talk with a lot of parents and friends to send their children to school. I take it as a collective responsibility. In that way, I have encouraged three children to join in school with only my efforts. I have also been involved in rescuing the homeless people and linking them with Arunodhaya.

Girls are bound with a lot of familial pressures and restrictions without any considerations. For instance, girls are not encouraged to dance on the streets. Even my relatives were not encouraging me and blamed me for dancing on the streets.



Since my mother works in Arunodhaya, my parents were very supportive. One of the most memorable events is composing a set of songs titled *Mottukalin Mettuka'*, we wrote lyrics on our own and composed 10 songs. Luckily, I was chosen to sing those songs. I felt very proud singing those songs. I have acted in the short films by Arunodhaya, and also given few voice overs to short films. I would always cherish those experiences for my lifetime.



After completing my college, I thought of working as a teacher since I love interacting with Children. For a period of time, I worked as a teacher in a government school. As the schools got closed during the lockdown, I got an opportunity to work in Arunodhaya where I had the opportunity to supervise the Covid-19 support team. Interestingly, which was a very proud moment for me to supervise my mother's colleagues, I felt so overwhelmed. Those experiences and leadership qualities have helped me in getting my current job in JAYPAL. I have a long-term desire to start up a free school for children, especially for girl children. Because girls are very vulnerable, I sense my responsibility to ensure to speak loudly for the values of freedom to other girl children as well. If I want to say something to the upcoming generations of children, I would advise them to make use of smartphones in a constructive way, rather than misusing it for harmful activities. Children should read books as it would help to have many ideas and thoughts to promote their lives.

After joining Children Sangam, I understood that we as children deserve basic rights. Generally, girls have very few opportunities to open up and talk in public. Children Sangam has given that space and opportunity to me in the early age itself



BREATHING MUSIC INTO LIFE

Name	P. Thangapandian
Age	34 Years
Gender	Male
Education	10th Std
Present Status	Nadhaswaram Artist

Thangapandian, 35 years old, is a professional Nadhaswaram player. He single-handedly supports his family - wife, son, daughter, and an ailing father. His children are studying in 2nd and 7th standards respectively. He is a calm, confident and articulate man who remains optimistic despite struggling to earn enough to support the family. His life's goal is to see other children from difficult circumstances rise up and improve their lives as he has been able to do.

Thangapandian was forced to drop out of school after the 5th standard as his parents were poor, lacked education, and, as he recalls, had no plans or ideas for how their children could better their lives. "I cannot blame them; this was a common condition. But, I have greatly benefited from Arunodhaya's vision of every child's right to education regardless of their situation".

The youngest of four children, he had three older sisters who also did not study and had been sent to work. At the age of 11 he began working in a cycle shop, earning Rs.5 a day. Here he was found by Arunodhaya's area animators who were carrying out a street-to-street survey looking for child laborers who wanted to go to school. He was enrolled for a couple of months in one of Arunodhaya's child labour centre which prepared him to enter the formal schooling system, and then joined a school.

Arunodhaya supplied him with uniforms, books, school bags, and even clothes to wear at home. "As I went through my schooling years, they provided me with any help I needed."

He quit his studies after failing the 10th standard. The grinding poverty in his home made it difficult for him to focus on studies. "As a teenager, I used to be embarrassed – everyone around had decent meals and new clothes, I could not afford good meal, and had only one or two sets of clothes to wear. I fell into a sort of depression". But coming to the Children Sangam comforted and cheered him. Here all were friends, there were no differences of caste and status. "Most of all, they treated us with respect, they hardly ever got angry with us and never beat us. Despite all the mistakes we made, to them we were just children."

The Children Sangam was full of activity and learning. They met twice a month on Tuesdays, and there was always some discussion or training focused on children's rights and how to go about campaigning for them. Camps were organized. They also reached out to speak to other children on these issues. "We celebrated Independence Day, Republic Day, other festivals. We would collect Rs.2 from all the houses around, and invite area leaders, hoist flags, dance and theatre. We developed a lot of skills – public speaking, singing, acting. We would perform street plays in our areas on themes like family conflicts and the impacts on children, and the adults watching would be amazed that children could present on issues like this.

At Children Sangam, all were respected. We were all friends, equals. No matter who you were, or what you could do, everyone got opportunities, nobody was rejected or left on the side-lines.

We were well respected by people in the area, including the police and local leaders. When I was 17 or 18 I went with some friends to train the staff of Brother Siga Animation centre, another local NGO on children's issues. 'I will never forget that experience – an 18-year old, teaching 30-year old teachers'. When he got older, he joined the youth sangams, where they discussed issues ranging from love to suicide, and played plenty of sports – cricket, caroms.

“Being part of Children Sangam has changed me in very profound ways. For instance, in my home relationships, my wife has a lot of freedom, and we are 50-50 in everything. My children can ask me for anything. I very rarely beat them, and when I do, I feel really bad and apologise to them, remembering how we were never beaten at Arunodhaya. My children have the freedom to talk to me about anything, they acknowledge their mistakes, they apologise, but they also question us. I have a close and friendly relationship with my 70-year old father.

After 10th standard, I did nothing for 2-3 years. I did not want to work or take on responsibilities of supporting my family; I had had an accident and broke my leg in 2004 (when he was 17).



But I kept going to Arunodhaya. Then I began to take computer classes, supported by Arunodhaya, and slowly began working again. I first worked at Arunodhaya for a year as logistics assistant, and then moved on to a string of other jobs, at MRF, the harbour, and other places. All the while, I continued playing the Nadaswaram. I am third-generation player – my grandfather played Nadaswaram, my father played the Thavil, I play both Nadaswaram and Thavil.” From 2015 he began to focus more on playing Nadaswaram. However, since this does not offer consistent employment, and since he carries the sole responsibility of supporting his family, he supplements this with other work like painting or carpentry that his disability allows him to do.

“Arunodhaya supported me at all times, through the years. Even last year, during the COVID lockdown, I told them we were struggling, and we were promptly assisted with relief material for about 20 people around us. The thing that has influenced me most is the kindness, commitment and generosity of the organisation, the culture that it created through the Children Sangam and taught all of us the same values. When I see the Children Sangams today I am hopeful for a wonderful future like I have, for the children there. The staff of Arunodhaya continue to carry on the same principles in their work. I foresee my children joining the children sangams in a few years.”

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WATCH OUT FOR THIS JUDGE

Name	G. Sathiapriya
Age	26 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.Com., L.L.B.
Present Status	Advocate, Madras High Court

The children of Arunodhaya Children Sangam grow up into altruistic and role model. They also have an extraordinary sense of community and family that plays a huge role in the development of their character. At 26, Satyapriya is a practicing lawyer at Madras High Court who intends to give back as much as possible to the community that has made her who she is. As the child of a domestic worker from Medavakkam, she has been a part of Arunodhaya for twenty years. Her mother was part of the self-help group and her elder sisters had also grown up with Arunodhaya.

As children, they used to help their mother out in the houses she worked in. Arunodhaya conducted education activity centre and training which effectively broke the cycle of child labour. For Satyapriya, Arunodhaya also provided timely intervention that persuaded her mother against expecting her daughter to work with her. Most importantly, the Children Sangam provided Satyapriya the space to learn how to talk and interact with people because she felt safe there. She developed the courage to express herself openly and then, to dream. Her closest friends are from the Sangam and later the conferences and training sessions brought her closer to many others. She believes that the bond they share is no less than that with siblings.

Satyapriya served as the Vice President of Confederation of Arunodhaya Children Sangam in 2010. They were introduced to many cultural folk arts. Satyapriya describes herself as 'a painfully shy kid who had bad stage fright'. It was the Sangam that gave her the courage to fight against her stage fear. 'Sometimes you just need someone else to believe in you to push you past the starting point'. She is today known for her boldness. Satyapriya also believes that the many training sessions she received as one of the leaders have taught her what is needed to be a true leader. It has also equipped her with the skills to help other children in need. She is counting on being able to use these skills further in her life.

The training provided was not just broad and uniform. Not only did it make the arts accessible, it also succeeded in encouraging individual interests and talents. For example, Satyapriya was enthralled with makeup as a child. Arunodhaya provided her with classes and an apprenticeship at a beauty parlour. Later on, this helped her to earn money during her college days.

Her participation in the Children Sangam encouraged her to study further. Satyapriya had a solid support system through the Sangam and was always sure that the community had her back. This made it possible for her to stick to her education regardless of many adversities.

As a school-going student, Arunodhaya's tuition was a necessary addition to her regular school education. Later on, when she cleared the entrance examinations to a law college away from Chennai, it was Arunodhaya that pushed her to take up the offer. The trust in the intentions of Arunodhaya gave her mother the confidence to send her daughter away

Satyapriya is set on serving in the judicial services. There have been more adversities recently with her mother falling ill and her own ambition having to take a temporary backseat. She has decided to try becoming a judge sooner or later. Her biggest takeaway from her experience at the Children Sangam is courage and self confidence. She is confident of her capabilities and is sure that regardless of what life throws her way, she will make it across. Her silent strength to stand up to wrongs and dream bigger is one of her greatest achievements.

“ Most importantly, the Children Sangam provided the space wherein she learned how to talk and interact with people because she felt safe there. She got the courage to express herself openly and then to dream ”





THE MAKING OF AN ENTREPRENEUR

Name	M. Karunakaran
Age	27 Years
Gender	Male
Education	B.E., MBA.
Present Status	CEO - Sunspot Renewable Engineering

Coming from a poor community, my childhood was filled with a lot of social anxieties. My father has been working in Stanley government hospital as a sweeper for the past 10 years, my mother is a home-maker, and my siblings have completed graduation. I live in Royapuram. I came to know about Arunodhaya through their computer course. I used to be an introvert and reserved kind of person before joining Arunodhaya Children Sangam. I used to be very hesitant and nervous to talk in public. The Children Sangam has helped me to overcome my limitations and made me a confident individual.

I am the first engineering graduate in my locality. I had a strong desire to join the Indian Army after completing my degree in Mechanical Engineering. Though I couldn't attain that dream, now I am a successful social entrepreneur.

I had many learnings and realizations when I was the President of Children Sangam in our zone. The main objective of the Sangam is to provide education, because I believe that education is a tool for upliftment. I have actively organized many school level competitions during my tenure. I got an opportunity to represent Arunodhaya in the National Integration Camp hosted in Kashmir.

Arunodhaya has given me many such spaces to explore, thereby increasing self-confidence to a great extent. I have also been a part of the cultural team where we practice Silambattam, Oyillatam. Though I was very young then, I had bigger responsibilities of coordinating the teams and organizing many events. Those experiences have groomed me as a person in terms of leadership and having a disciplined lifestyle. I have learnt the importance of having a goal and purpose in life. My experience at Children Sangam taught me the values of being assertive and expressive over raising concerns. I participated in the *Jallikattu* protest, for which I had to deal with police cases. But I have always been very affirmative in upholding justice. I would always stand beside people seeking justice.

Most beautifully, I found my life partner in Arunodhaya. I have started my own business in the field of renewable energy resources. Sunspot Renewable Engineering, my wife is the MD of our company and I'm the CEO of the company. I was very determined in starting up this company, I just got Rs.50000/- as an initial investment from my parents and raised it to a self-sustainable company, now. I had a drastic change in myself which was very visible. Most of the projects are from Taiwan and Japan. I have also planned to start my new branch in Tiruvallur.

I fondly remember and think of the wonderful experiences that Children Sangam has given to me. I admit my responsibility of spreading the knowledge and values which I have learnt out of Arunodhaya. I have been educating youngsters around my place, so that they could also spread out their wings and have a prosperous life.

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Though I was very young then, I had bigger responsibilities of coordinating the teams and organizing many events. Those experiences have groomed me as a person in terms of leadership and having a disciplined lifestyle. I have learnt the importance of having a goal and purpose in life

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BLOSSOMING AMIDST ALL ODDS

Name	P. Valli
Age	35 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.A.B.L
Present Status	Community Organisor in Tamilnadu Women Development Corporation

Valli came to Chennai at age five. Her family had worked in agriculture. But she suddenly found herself migrating with her mother and siblings when her father was cheated out of his land. Her mother had to take up domestic work in Chennai to support their family. “As a child, I wanted to do well, to protect my mother. Every morning before I went to school, I helped her in some of the houses where she worked. I felt bad that my mother suffered and I kept thinking how to keep her safe. When Arunodhaya started offering free tuitions in our community, it was wonderful! My mother didn't have to spend, and I could go there and learn!” recalled Valli.

“My self-confidence grew from being in Arunodhaya Children Sangam. Arunodhaya took us outside our community. We saw kids in other communities who were doing better, which inspired me to do better. In the slum area we lived in, they never allowed girls to go out anywhere. We couldn't even dress as we wished -- we were viewed suspiciously. I like to dress well. At the Children Sangam I was encouraged to present myself well, to talk respectfully, to not use bad words. 'Shut your ear when you hear bad words', they would say, and I would do that! They taught us good moral values -- we performed small dramas. We performed fearlessly on stage.

The teachers smiled and encouraged us. The teachers inspired me, I wanted to be like them. I wanted to help people. Now I have started the Kalam Foundation for counselling youth, with that aim.”

As part of the Children Sangam, Valli did surveys in her community to find out if there were children who were not going to school. The children held meetings to see what issues their peer groups were facing. According to Valli, Arunodhaya helped them in “(1) seeing the importance of education, (2) developing ourselves in various ways, and (3) teaching us about the outside world and how we should conduct ourselves.” As an adult, Valli taught evening classes in Arunodhaya, working with slum kids in her community. “Thus, I even got an employment opportunity here!” she said.

Through Arunodhaya, Valli even participated in a protest by domestic workers. These workers had organized a protest demanding to be recognized as workers by the government, so that they got a weekly holiday, minimum wage and other benefits. “Why are domestic workers not respected in a way that office workers are respected? That really bothered me as a kid,” she explained. “In Arunodhaya we were respected.

We were asked, 'Can we schedule the meeting at this time?', as if we are VIPs! When they took us on a trip, it was planned meticulously, not carelessly as if they were just taking out the children of domestic workers."

"After graduating school, I was not allowed to go to college. In my extended family, education was not valued. I married the person chosen by my parents. After my second daughter was born, I studied and got a degree in Law. Arunodhaya encouraged me at that time too," she recalled.

“In Arunodhaya we were respected. We were asked, 'Can we schedule the meeting at this time?', as if we are VIPs! When they took us on a trip, it was planned meticulously, not carelessly as if they were just taking out the children of domestic workers”

"Now I work in Tamilnadu Women Development Corporation in Guindy. We provide training for women's employment, create jobs under government projects, run vocational courses in computers, tailoring, food production and marketing. This job involves serving people and helping them improve their lives. I am able to do well in such a job because of my experience in Arunodhaya Children Sangam."





LIGHTS, CAMERA , ACTION

Name	G. Sheriff
Age	31 Years
Gender	Male
Education	Diploma in Maya and Graphics
Present Status	Film Director (Tamil Film Industry) Founder of Pugazh kalai kuzhu

Sherif, who has been passionate about films and film making since class 8, has just successfully directed his first movie. The second movie is about to begin soon. Sherif endured a harsh childhood. His father was not an involved parent due to his incarceration. Sherif was often mocked by his classmates for this, due to which he dropped out of school after class 5. It was then that he started working part-time, sticking movie posters on walls. “I used to wake up at 3:00 a.m. for this. My first salary was Rs. 15/-. I used to give some amount to my family and with the remaining amount, I would go and watch movies.” Sherif then re-joined school at standard six although he simultaneously worked part-time at a binding company. “When I was working, Dhana madam, Selvi madam and Chitra madam from Arunodhaya motivated me to join school again and assisted me through the process. Their persistence, their monthly meetings, and yearly camps on the importance of education motivated me and got me back into school. I saw children who lost their parents and abandoned children studying, I took inspiration from them.”

Sherif was a highly involved member of the Children Sangam. He took part in the CACS elections and became the area leader first and then the zonal leader. “In 2009 when I was in class 12, I was elected as the President of CACS.

We organised a Convention where Member of Parliament Ms. Kanimozhi honoured me. I have those pictures to this day. That was the most unforgettable moment of my life.”

Sherif further said that the trainings he received through Children Sangam on how one must conduct oneself, interact with authorities, demand rights and so on gave him incredible exposure. He also went on to become a trainer of the folk arts himself. The lessons he learnt and knowledge he acquired as a leader, trainee and trainer have significantly impacted his career and life and continue to do so to this day.

Arunodhaya equally helped Sherif realise his film making aspirations. “Arunodhaya organised a camp on documentation where I learnt about documentaries, short films, direction etc. Director Gautham Menon also conducted a training camp from which I learnt a lot.” Although he wanted to become an editor, Mr. Menon suggested that he give scriptwriting a try given his clarity of ideas and writing skills. Sherif then shot his first documentary on child labour and street children in class 11, which was received with great appreciation. He asked for Mr. Menon’s number but was refused. “You keep doing the work. Go make movies and come and meet me after you finish your first movie, I will remember you,” Mr. Menon had said.



Two years later, while in first year of college, he directed his second documentary, this time for Arunodhaya. "I made a documentary film with a song on a budget of Rs. 42,000. Arunodhaya had changed my life and I wanted to do what I could. When my name appeared on the screen as Director, that was a defining moment of my life". Now, besides being a director, Sherif runs an NGO which he established with the support of Arunodhaya. The organisation focuses on disseminating knowledge and awareness on social issues like child abuse and rights.

"Whatever I am today and the knowledge that I carry is only because of Arunodhaya's intervention and the opportunities I had through Children Sangam. My advice to the present Children Sangam members is, 'keep learning and keep yourself open to all kinds of experiences. Arunodhaya gives everyone an equal and fair share. You keep trying to get what you want."

“ The lessons he learnt and knowledge he acquired as a leader, trainee and trainer have significantly impacted his career and life and continue to do so to this day ”



OVECOMING BARRIERS AND ACHIEVING THE GOAL IN LIFE

Name	P. Divya
Age	26 Years
Gender	Female
Education	Bachelor in Physiotherapy
Present Status	Physiotherapist

Divya is a physiotherapist and a Bharatnatyam dancer who has performed an *Anrangetram* (a first stage performance). Her mother did domestic work and her father drove an auto. Arunodhaya has shaped the lives of both Divya and her mother, Sumathi. Sumathi joined Arunodhaya a year after her marriage. She was timid who didn't go out anywhere alone. She was recruited into the domestic workers' union by a community level campaign. Her husband thought it wasn't good for her to spend time with 'those sangam people', but she became much more confident by being part of the union. Arunodhaya made domestic workers aware of their rights, and intervened whenever a worker faced issues at work. Sumathi was also part of the Magalirkuzhu (women sangam).

By the time Divya was twelve Sumathi was convinced that her daughter should be part of the Children Sangam. Divya recalls how the Children Sangam in their neighbourhood intervened and prevented a child marriage. "They knew about the marriage being planned because the girl was my mother's friend's daughter. Arunodhaya looks at children as children, not as a source of labour or subjects of exploitation," Divya explained. "I am what I am because of Arunodhaya.

I was a very quiet child. I talk in public because of their encouragement. In the Children Sangam, it is not just the teacher who talks. We are all encouraged to talk and learn about our rights", said Divya.

Arunodhaya organized many events, where women and children participated in public speaking, danced, sang, prepared and performed dramas, and participated in sports. When Divya was 12, she choreographed a dance which her mother performed at such an event. Divya had been interested in dancing since childhood. A little after the choreographed performance, Divya's mother Sumathi found a Bharatnatyam teacher for her. The teacher was one of the customers to whom Sumathi delivered milk. Divya learnt fast, and in three years gave her first stage performance. "Virgil mam came to my performance and was very encouraging," Divya recalled.

My ambition in life was to enter into medical field. My neighbours and relatives laughed at the idea saying how a girl from a poor family can study medicine.

'But in Children Sangam I got the motivation, support and guidance to pursue my goal and now I am a successful Physiotherapist in a well-known centre in Chennai'. Divya shares her expertise in physiotherapy with the senior citizens in her area providing support to them. She feels happy that she is able to help people in need through her profession.

“ In the Children Sangam, it is not just the teacher who talks. We are all encouraged to talk and learn about our rights ”





DRUMMING THE BEAT FOR CHILDREN'S EMPOWERMENT

Name	N.Rajan Gramiya Kalaimani
Age	28 Years
Gender	Male
Education	M.A. (Economics) Diploma in Folk Arts
Present Status	Traditional Folk Arts Teacher and Trainer

Rajan shines on the stage. His smile makes the strenuous dance routine look effortless. Rajan's steps are sure and he is comfortable with the rhythm of the Parai. After all, his relationship with it has been long and steady. And like many others, he owes Arundhaya the introduction to the art form. Arundhaya has opened up doors for many like him in their efforts towards child participation over the past twenty years. For Rajan, who is now an Economics Graduate and a *Gramiya Kalaimani*, Arundhaya was his conduit to *Paraiyattam* and the rest of the arts that make up a huge part of whom he has grown into. During the pandemic, he has also been functioning with the Chennai Corporation in the fight against Covid-19. His early memories about the Sangams he was a part of, are rooted in the many songs that were used to teach the kids lessons. During the interview, he sings one of these songs on the need to study. The clarity in his voice is a testimony to the deep impact of Arundhaya's lessons.

Arunodhaya was a steady presence in his childhood and family. Rajan is from Ambedkar Nagar in Korukkupet and has been part of the children Sangam since 2002. Initially, the Sangam was a place to gather together to play. There was not much space otherwise for girls and boys to play so the Children Sangam started as a place for enjoying themselves. Arundhaya conveyed difficult messages on child rights and child labour through fun games.

The children of the Sangam learned these and were able to spread these messages to those around them.

Child labor, in particular, was rampant in these areas. Any amount of money helps, so parents often felt like they had no choice but to send their children to work. The children who were part of the Sangam were able to talk to the victims and their parents about the larger issues in place. Coming from their own localities made it easier for parents to relate to these children as opposed to the teachers or other elders. Rajan has gone on to work in other areas where child labor and child marriage are common. With the tools from the Children sangam, he learned to listen and empathetically seek solutions that work.

Rajan was not always this way. Before joining Children Sangam, he never questioned or spoke up in school. The encouragement for child participation provided by Arundhaya taught him how to express his views and later to plan and make decisions on them. He remembers his favourite Tamil teacher being an encouraging force and an excellent role model. After Arundhaya, Rajan broke out of his shell and pushed himself to study harder. He became a leader in NSS and improved his grades. When *Sama Seer Kalvi* was introduced, he was one of the spokes people and remembers this as an opportunity that was hard to come by.

Child participation was further inculcated by providing children opportunities to write songs and publish magazines. Rajan remembers *Mettukalin Mottukal* (Audio cassette by children) and *Sitterumbu pesudhu* (Children's newsletter) fondly. Summer camps and various training programs by Arunodhaya introduced him to the wide reservoir of cultural arts available today. Today, Rajan is part of the *Gramiya Kalai Kuzhu* and his team is proud to practice both the art and education on equal footing. The pandemic reinforced their commitment to maintaining both aspects of their lives. The team tears apart any misconception of folk artists being illiterate and instead proudly establish their credentials after each performance.

Regardless of whether it is his work with the team for performances or with the Chennai Corporation, Rajan is committed to giving it his all. Rajan was part of the Children Sangam annual convention against Corporal punishment in schools. The work the children did in the convention was further fruitful through their meetings with the respective government officials. This led to the ban on Corporal punishment in schools. This gives Rajan the strength to push for change. As he worked for another NGO working on rights, Rajan had to facilitate the renovation of toilets in the area. While that was successful, his biggest pride was the success with which the children there learned to take initiative and solve problems. It was not about being the problem solver but empowering people to solve their problems.



“
The encouragement for child participation provided by Arunodhaya taught him how to express his views and later to plan and make decisions on them”





JOURNEY TO INSPIRATION

Name	A. Premalatha
Age	26 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.Sc., B.Ed
Present Status	Teacher

I live in Royapuram. I have finished BSc in Botany and B.Ed. in Queen Mary's and Meston College. I got married three years ago.

I was 14 years old when I joined the Children Sangam that was established in Pichandi Street, Royapuram. My mother Daisy was working as a facilitator with Arunodhaya Centre for Street and Working Children. She also used to take evening tuitions for rescued child labourers. As a child, I used to tag along and watch her interactions and all the programs that were conducted with great interest. I wanted one for the children in my area and that's how we set up our Children Sangam.

Everybody thinks children are too young to be involved in local governance. The adults at the Arunodhaya Children Sangam thought otherwise. They helped us muster courage to speak to ministers and mayor. We were trained to identify and speak about the problems in our locality to the concerned officials. From issues such as fixing damaged street lights to timely collection of garbage, we addressed all of them by ourselves. Arunodhaya was our backbone through it all.

I was an ordinary kid – I went to school, played and that was all I knew. The camps organised for Children sangam members is where I first learnt how to set a goal.

Earlier, I was terrified of mingling with others and public speaking. I attended one camp and all my nerves disappeared. Since then, I attended all the camps with enthusiasm and gusto.

Once, there was a Children Sangam meeting in our area and a Ward Councillor attended it. He listened to me talk about all the problems we faced in our street and locality. He praised me for speaking confidently and clearly. He also made sure that some of our requests got fulfilled. For instance, we had told him that the sanitation workers were not segregating waste that was being collected. Within a few days, they started segregating waste when they came for collection. I can never forget this incident.

Another special memory of mine from my Children Sangam days was the Young scientists competition we participated in. We had to prepare a full-fledged report on a topic and then present it at IIT-Madras. For a month, we went to the field, researched, spoke to people, did interviews.

Our topic was plant species in public parks. Working on it helped me discover my love for botany and I later majored in the subject in college. We made a comprehensive report filled with drawings, sketches, field notes and more. I could showcase my artistic talents in it. That's how I knew I have a talent for drawing. We were one of the three teams who were selected to present our work.

I enjoyed this opportunity. The next time this competition happened, I was on the central committee and I helped guide a team of kids go up to the national level. This was a matter of great pride for me.

My time at the camps were the happiest days of my life. I have never enjoyed myself so much. We used to even dance on the streets. I couldn't learn *Paraiattam* but I could pick up *Periyakuchiattam*. We even incorporated these traditional art forms in our street plays. Even though I could not master *parai*, my friends at the camps didn't let me feel dejected. Thanks to them, I learnt to play another instrument called *giligilippu* and I was enrolled in their troupe and we performed at big events in five-star hotels.

The leadership camps at Arunodhaya provided me with important life skills. They are the reason I am a teacher today. I learnt to stand in front of everyone at the camps and speak confidently. Andrew Sir, Ramya Miss, and Virgil Ma'am taught me so much about leadership. I cannot forget all that they imparted to us – how to behave in a camp with other children, the importance of discipline, the need to wash our own plates, and more. Later, I joined a small team of older children and we used to conduct to one-day camps to other children in our locality. That's how the desire to teach grew inside me.

After I left the Children Sangam, I was part of a central committee consisting of former Sangam members for two years. I used to bring children from our locality to the centre and encourage them to participate actively.

“ Planning and evaluation – I learnt these two terms at Arunodhaya children sangam. They came in handy during my Bachelors of Education training ”

I am currently working as a teacher in Anand Nursery and Primary School for the past six years. I handle all subjects for students from Class 1 to 5.

Planning and evaluation – I learnt these two terms at Arunodhaya Children Sangam. They came in handy during my Bachelors of Education training. I had to draw, make lesson plans, teach, etc, and I was overjoyed thinking, “Oh, I did all of this at the Children Sangam too!” I passed my B.Ed in First Class.

Today, I make sure my school kids receive the same amount of opportunities that I got. I encourage them to participate in sports and cultural activities. I spot and nurture talents. I have received positive feedback like “Premalatha Miss knows to handle children very well” from my peers and seniors at the school. I also counsel children if they are distressed or have any trouble at home. I picked up all of this during my Children Sangam years.

At home, if there are any problems or conflicts, I make sure every person gets to speak and share their opinion. I insist on that. Even my husband and in-laws praise me for that. It is all thanks to the leadership and problem-solving skills I picked up at Arunodhaya.

My mother's decision to join Arunodhaya uplifted our entire family. Without her or Arunodhaya, I wouldn't be where I am now.



THE MAKING OF DREAMS

Name	D. Gunasekar
Age	29 Years
Gender	Male
Education	10th Std
Present Status	Transport Supervisor, DP World

In 2006, I was a 15 years old teenager living in Ennore. One day, Rajendran, a volunteer from Arunodhaya Centre for Street and Working Children, brought care packages for all us children belonging to tsunami-affected families and neighbourhoods. That's how we were introduced to the organization.

I was forced to drop out of school while I was in Class 5 as I had to work as a child labourer. My father, a fisherman, couldn't handle the workload on his own and so I had to assist him while my two siblings were sent to school. I used to feel extremely sad whenever I saw other children going to school. I loved studying. Until Class 5, I topped all my classes. I always got the first rank.

The all-round training I received at Arunodhaya via their camps and classes is what I consider as my education. They arranged for classes at a private tutorial centre to make up for the years of schooling I missed. A few years after I dropped out, I started going to these classes once or twice a week while still going fishing every day. I couldn't attend classes regularly so we managed to work out a routine. I got a 10th Class certificate which proved helpful in getting a job.

I was an active participant in Arunodhaya Children Sangam, then I joined the *Ilanthalir* group (adolescents group) for teenagers aged 15 to 18. I was also part of the Youth Sangam. I used to help bring other children from the neighborhoods of Ennore to the programs, meetings, and camps they conducted.

The kids were not interested initially thinking it would be boring. They preferred to play by themselves over attending meetings. I used to explain that it would be fun and that it would benefit them. That's how I managed to bring them over to all the events. I also helped organize several programs and camp activities, especially cultural activities.

I was a cultural minister and I took charge of organising and facilitating cultural programs. We used to train the kids first and provide practice sessions. Then we showcased our skills in all the traditional art forms (*gramiya kalai*). I am very skilled in all these art forms like *paraiattam*, *periyakuchi*, and more.

My family never dissuaded me from attending and participating in these programs and camps. They could see how happy I was with all the other children. My first job was with Arunodhaya's child helpline where we aided and rescued several children in distress who needed care and protection.

I grew up in a violent neighborhood myself and I could see myself in the children and youth we have helped on behalf of Arunodhaya's counseling centre. We didn't play any sport and knew only goli and other traditional games. As a volunteer with Arunodhaya, I have trained kids in volleyball (I'm a volleyball player), carrom, chess, and other sports.

An experience that I vividly remember from my Children Sangam years is of my *Parai* learning journey. Initially, I couldn't master it, and that made me very upset. During a three-day cultural camp, I was trying to learn to beat the *Parai* drum but I just couldn't get it right. I was extremely interested in learning but it wasn't working out. I have a heavy build so I found it hard to handle the *Parai*. Then a senior who was part of a *gramiya kalai* troupe advised me to start with the *Thammur* drum instead. The *Thammur* is a heavy instrument and it suited my body type better. Once during a camp in Andhra Pradesh, I learnt to beat the *thammur*. I beat it till I bled and that practice helped me master *Parai* later. I can never forget that experience..

Today, I work as a supervisor in the transport department in a multinational logistics company. I take care of the maintenance of the vessels. I also supervise all of this: the revenue collection from the daily imports/exports, the preparation of daily reports for each vessel, the day-to-day activities of the drivers, and more. I am also currently taking classes for *Slambam* and *paraiattam* in Ennore. For the last five years, I have been conducting regular weekly classes for these art forms alongside my regular job.

“ Through the training I received, I have learnt how to be a family man, how to save, and today I have managed to build a house for my family ”

I was a shy and an under-confident child. My life was about my fishing boat and my neighborhood. I did not know about the world outside. Thanks to the training I received in Arunodhaya children sangam. Through these trainings I could see the world. I used to have anger issues and would get into fights often. Thanks to the trainings, I learnt that anger isn't a solution. I would have ended up in jail had it not been for their intervention. At my work place my colleagues are all degree holders but I am regularly praised for my quality of work. Today I'm happy and well-settled with a good job and a loving family. Through the training I received, I have learnt how to be a family man, how to save, and today I have managed to build a house for my family.

As a child I used to love watching the chief guest being asked to sit on the dais and speak at the podium. I wished to be a chief guest at such programs and listen to my achievements being spoken about. Recently this dream of mine got fulfilled. At an event, I was invited as a chief guest and I got to sit next to Virgil Ma'am on the stage. I felt so happy and honoured. I cannot articulate what all that meant to me. This motivates me to do more volunteer work, facilitate more programs, help more children like me, and be of help in every way I can. I would like to keep conveying my gratitude in all ways possible.

In the future, I would like to save up and start a centre dedicated to traditional art forms. I want to train children in *silambam*, *parai*, everything. That is my dream...



HOPE IS THE ONLY WAY FOR THE FUTURE

Name	Vanitha Kosalaraman
Age	34 Years
Gender	Female
Education	B.Sc.(BioTechnology) Associate degree in Information Technology from Community College, Whatcomm University, USA
Present Status	Entrepreneur - Net Centre

My name is Vanitha, I come from Bharathi Nagar in Korukkupet area. When I was studying 9th std in 2002, I came to know about Arunodhaya Children Sangam. My teacher told me that there is a meeting conducted by Arunodhaya. Girls and boys of my age participated, there were many staff from Arunodhaya to lead us in the meeting, it was a meeting where they gave us snacks, told us stories and we played games.

My father was a coolie worker and addicted to alcohol. My mother was deaf in both the ears. It was difficult for her to step out of house without my support. My mother was worried about me and would advise me to be very careful and avoid meetings. I understood my family circumstances very early. I have an elder sister who was married and who lived a little away from us.

I experienced gender equality at Children Sangam. Boys and girls were treated equally. We used to have the space to be us, we participated in many camps, through that, I got to know many people across genders. Some camps were skill development in nature such as pathways, journalism, how to turn a word into poetry. Today, if I am asked to write about an issue, I can write pages in a short period of time. I am confident and articulate today. I know it is important to be heard, even if I may have a dissenting point of view.

In my travel with Arunodhaya Children Sangam, apart from my study, I learnt courage, I saw things around me which my father and mother could not see, I understood and experienced life differently. In my 10th exam I got 445 marks, it was hard for me to continue as I could not afford the fees. With the support of my social science teacher, I joined maths-biology group, she even paid my fees for both the years, she bought me the study guides.

I completed Plus 2, I scored 883 marks, I realised I was in the same situation again as I was when I completed my 10th std, I was wondering if I should start work in an export company nearby. I was encouraged by Arunodhaya and my peers at the Children Sangam that I should continue my studies. My fees were taken care of and I enrolled for Plant bio technology program at Queen Mary's college, Chennai. I am the first-degree holder in my family.

I got the opportunity to take tuition classes for younger children after college hours. My friend Rani and I started a tuition centre for younger children at Arunodhaya office. I was talking tuition classes for 1st Std to 8th std children for about a year's time. After that we started taking tuition for 9th and 10th std children, it progressed to higher classes too as I was progressing at college. I took tuition for about five years. The remuneration from this was helpful in photo copying expenses for subject books. Without realising it I was becoming economically independent.

6 I experienced gender equality at Children Sangam. Boys and girls were treated equally. We used to have the space to be us

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I conducted reading classes to help students from corporation school to enhance their learning ability. It was helpful to children in reading and word formation. We were allowed to conduct these reading classes in govt schools. Next, we participated in retrieving children who were forced into child labour, we would visit the areas and reach out such children, prepare relevant documentation so that the drop out children would be able to re-enter school.

My life took a turn when I attended a camp conducted by HCL and TN govt, it was a diploma course for hardware and networking. I attended this training for a year. That diploma certificate served as a qualifier to the Community College Initiative programme sponsored by US consulate, Chennai. The courses choices were tourism, economics and business studies, and IT. I chose IT because of my earlier diploma. It took me three connecting flights to reach Seattle. I used to write down “How” “Can” “I want to go “in a piece of paper to get directions.

I studied for fourteen months for Associate degree in Information technology at Whatcom Community college, Bellingham, WA. Also completed English 101 exam. I wrote an article about Virgil madam as I consider her as a role model. I had many obstacles-language barrier problem, I could not understand the American dialect, accent and I felt home sick. As I came from a joint family, It was hard for me to overcome home sickness, it was compounded by the news of the death of my sister's child back home. I overcame all of them. I used to speak to my friends at Arunodhaya daily from there.

I carried a dictionary along with me. Daily, I used to learn about hundred words and their meaning from my dictionary. I lived among locals and I met some Telugu speaking and Bengali speaking people and did not meet any Tamil speaking people at all during my stay. I consider it a plus point as I was able to manage well.

Everything needed for my stay at Seattle such as warm clothes were provided by Arunodhaya. It motivated me to complete my course as I felt lot of people believed in me. I returned to Chennai and joined a company in Ambattur as a System Admin. I continued up to my child birth. I had to quit that job. I started taking data entry job so that I can work from home. My second child is about a year and two months old. I have ventured to start a Net service at home. I understand many women take a compulsory gap during child birth. But I plan to pursue my career.

Actually, it is important to have economic freedom, especially for women. I realise how it helped me during my studies, when I conducted tuition classes. I am happy that I saved money for my marriage, I am happy that I was able to fund my own wedding including jewellery and clothes. It was my savings right though out that helped me. I had a reception for friends and family in the evening following my marriage. I am happy I did without any loan money. I don't want to be a burden on my parents. My husband is very supportive. He has always encouraged me to make my own decisions. As a parent of two children, I find that the times have changed, now. I observe that male child is as vulnerable than the girl child. I hear news about robbery, drug use and abuse. I wish many spaces like Arunodhaya and the Children Sangams are available to all children.



PAYING IT FORWARD

Name	K. Suresh
Age	33 Years
Gender	Male
Education	M.A. Social Work
Present Status	Centre Head, Pratham Education Foundation

Suresh works with Pratham Education Foundation and is an integral part of their skill development program. He has a BA in Tamil Literature and a Master in Social Work. It would be difficult to guess that he spent a significant part of his childhood working in metal factory. Arunodhaya rescued him from the harsh metal factories and ensured that he had a purpose. Suresh found his life partner from the organization and they have ensured that the life they build is on the foundations of respect that Arunodhaya has inculcated in them.

Suresh is from MGR Nagar in Korukkupet and was one of the first children of the Children Sangam. For children who were already working as child laborers, it was difficult to go back to school because of the learning gap. Arunodhaya started child Labour Centres which aimed to help children bridge the gap in learning. Suresh remembers every one of his teachers who motivated him to get back to school. Later on, they ensured that school fees were paid, in addition to supporting them academically.

Arunodhaya was formed to prevent child labour, reduce the dropout rates and promote education of children. Guided learning centres assisted children enrolled in schools to perform well academically. But instead of teaching only subjects, children gained information on child rights.

And this is more effective when children from similar backgrounds come together. Thus, the Childrens' club was formed. The meaning of club was irrelevant to the purpose of the group and thus the name was later changed to Arunodhaya Children Sangam. Suresh owes his people skills and courage to his involvement in the Children Sangam and later the youth forum.

In the beginning, two sangams were formed in Korukkupet zone and T Nagar – Kodambakkam. There were about 18 students and one-day leadership camps were conducted to select 3 leaders from each area. The details for the administration of the Sangam along with the criteria for membership was framed in Chengalpattu camp. Meetings were conducted twice a month in each area and a meeting was organized for all the zones, once in three months. Four major rights were emphasized – right to live, right to develop, right to participate, and right to protection. A major focus was given to the right to participation. The Sangam was guided by the adults but the decision-making authority remained firmly with the children. Every year, for the convention, a topic/title was chosen from suggestions given by the children in different zones. Suresh was one of the early leaders of the Sangam. His group approached Hon. Thangam Thennarasu – the then education minister to insist on the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools.

The children's efforts left a lasting impact and corporal punishment was banned. In 2001, children Sangam also approached their MLA, Mr. Sekar Babu, and requested for a school in MGR Nagar. After that, they requested for a bridge, a river wall, and a park. All of these were constructed and the people in these areas have benefitted greatly since.

Suresh believes that Arunodhaya Children Sangam has given him everything he holds dear today. "Without the Sangam, I am nothing in my life. They encouraged the talents we had and played a major role in motivating the children. Now I am in a good position/ status and have some people working under my supervision – Arunodhaya is the backbone for all my achievements".

Arunodhaya invested in identifying and developing individual talents in their children. Suresh remembers these training and camps fondly. *Sitterumbu Pesuthu* is the children's magazine to which he contributed for many years. He remembers working with an artist friend for many of the poetic pieces in the magazine. One important moment in Suresh's life was during the first Convention of the Sangam that was held in the Loyola auditorium where he was the event comperer. It was the first time he addressed a crowd like that from the stage. Who would have thought that many years later, he would go back to the same college for his bachelor's degree?



“ A major focus was given to the right to participation. The Sangam was guided by the adults but the decision-making authority remained firmly with the children. Every year, for the convention, a topic/title was chosen from suggestions given by the children in different zones ”



UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN

Name	M. Durga Devi
Age	31 Years
Gender	Female
Education	M.A. Social Work
Present Status	Freelance Trainer -IT Companies and private Sector

I joined Arunodhaya Children Sangam in 2005, shortly after the Indian Ocean tsunami. My family and I used to live in a hut in Ennore. We were then resettled by the government. Earlier, we lived in a hut then we were allotted a one-room house in the tsunami rehabilitation tenements in Ernavoor locality near Ennore. I still remember the day the tsunami struck. I had gone to school to attend a Sunday special class. When I returned home, my house had disappeared into the waves. I met my father who had been rescued only after few days.

My father is a fisherman. My mother is a fish vendor but she has completed high school. I have a younger brother. I never studied well, and I used to be a sickly child but my family never scolded me. We had a lot of financial challenges and were living in a house with very little basic amenities but we were very loving and happy.

Usually in our community, girls are married off immediately after puberty. My mother made sure that didn't happen with me. She sent my brother and me to an English medium school. My parents somehow managed to pay our school fees. I am also the first college-goer in my family. Post the tsunami, many NGOs and organisations had visited us. That's when Arunodhaya too came to conduct surveys. First, they set up a tuition centre for us.

I was used to gender segregation but here, we were seated next to boys and that's when I understood the importance of gender equality. Our names would be noted down. We were given a great deal of a sense of responsibility. There was a *Muppezbumuizha* which was an amazing opportunity for us young girls. I didn't know we had so much talent inside us.

We did dances, songs, skits, and more. The teachers would facilitate everything but we organised every part of the programs. We were encouraged to be active participants in local governance. We wrote down our issues and prepared reports. We learnt to do documentation and problem solving at a young age.

Once during a big meeting on coastal rights with several officials in attendance, we spoke of our needs, our locality's problems, our education, scholarships, and more. A fisheries official who was present told me I spoke very well. They listened to us patiently and even fulfilled some requests. That is an unforgettable memory of mine.

I used to have a lot of points to speak about on all issues but I used to feel intimidated. I learnt through the various camps conducted for children that we must speak up. Even if we are wrong about something, it was alright. I loved listening to career guidance counselors. How do they speak so confidently and clearly? I was so fascinated.

When students from the Social Work program at Stella Maris college visited us as part of their field work, I remember being taken in with them. I had until then never met people who spoke so kindly and softly with me. They asked me questions and I enjoyed the time, attention, and empathy they gave me. Nobody listened to me talk about all that my heart desired so patiently. I wanted to be just like those akkas and go on field expeditions and speak to other children and win their affection the same way. Social work was all I knew and all that I have wanted to do since then.

Today I work as a freelance trainer for IT companies and at garment companies where I conduct skill development sessions. I also educate employees of companies about the POSH Act ((Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013). I conduct motivational speeches, sessions on soft skills training, leadership skills development, etc. I prefer to work with women employees who are at the bottom-most rung of the ladder at workplaces. Unlike their more privileged counterparts, these women are the ones who can really benefit from such motivational talks.

I like to help them understand themselves better, learn to be bold, to speak up, and to develop their self-esteem. They are doing jobs only to earn a livelihood and amidst that drudgery, I would like them to have a smile on their faces during the two-three hours of training that I impart. It makes me overjoyed when they leave my sessions smiling. Sometimes they even hug me.

I used to be a project coordinator and counselor at a child helpline. Child rights, child labour, child protection... I absolutely love working for and with children. It's like an addiction for me. I did my BA and MA in Social Work at Stella Maris College along with an additional course in counselling psychology. Looking at my own childhood and journey so far, I wanted to do the same for other children. I have also worked at a shelter for homeless people but I didn't get the satisfaction that I got while working for children.

The lessons I learnt at the Arunodhaya Children Sangam and Youth Sangam helped me in my personal life as well. For instance, my relationship with my father was not always the easiest because he had different views, and used to believe that women needed to be married off early.

I used to be very scared to even tell him that I was going to attend an Arunodhaya meeting. I learnt at Arunodhaya how to handle conflicts in interpersonal communication. Not even once did any trainer at the camps rebuke or scold us. They never showed anger on their faces. I learnt from them on how to speak with affection and politeness even in the middle of a difficult conversation. Instead of asking,

“Daddy, why are you not letting me attend this event?”, I started saying, “May I please attend this event? I really want to.” When I used to return from field work late in the night, I used to be surprised to see my father waiting to pick me up. Even while handling cases during my time with the child helpline, one of my parents would always accompany me.

My father was proud to see me handle these cases at all kinds of hours. “Is this the same Durga who used to fall ill often?” he wondered. Slowly, he started transforming his views and opinions and grew even more supportive.

“Nee neeyairu” (you be yourself) was what we heard at the Children Sangam constantly. Even in my marital life, I have ensured that I am my unabashed self. I have discussed everything about myself with my husband. “I want to work, this is how I am, these are my strengths and weaknesses, this is my personality, I talk a lot, I walk fast, I’m independent, I am very straightforward...” – I made sure to communicate all of this with my husband and my in-laws right from the beginning in order for them to understand me truly well. They are very proud of the training sessions I do. I’m the first person who gets a call whenever there is a conflict in the family because they greatly appreciate my problem-solving skills. My older son who is in class 1 knows the difference between good touch and bad touch. All the training I impart at work I impart to my children too.

In the future, I would like to be part of the government’s child welfare committee. I have also been on both sides, as a child whose life was transformed through the interventions of NGOs and as someone who has worked with the same organisations for children like me. Hence, I feel that being in a policy-making position will truly help me impact change on a bigger level and help uplift the lives of millions of children.



“ Nee Neeyairu” (you be yourself) was what we heard at the Children’s Sangam constantly. Even in my marital life, I have ensured that I am my unabashed self ,”



PAINTING A PRETTY PICTURE OF LIFE

Name	K. Surendaran
Age	30 Years
Gender	Male
Education	B.F.A. (Visual Communication and Design)
Present Status	Artist

Surendran is from Meenambal Nagar, Korukkupet. His father worked in a metal factory and mother was a seamstress. Surendran joined Arunodhaya Children Sangam when he was 12 years old. Right from the outset, children were encouraged to think and work on their own, which meant figuring out which local issue they wanted to address on their own and coming up with what steps to take were part of their normal routine. The first issue they addressed was getting the street lights fixed in their neighborhood. They wrote a letter to the Corporation, and began following up the issue until it was resolved. In the process, they formed bonds with the local authorities, who were impressed that a group of children doing 'adult work'.

The sense of contributing to their community and making their own decisions also helped them think about their own life differently. In Surendran's neighborhood, young people were frequently using foul language, getting into fights, and doing drugs. Most families were struggling financially, and often a child's biggest dream was to 'wear a nice shirt' or 'eat biryani'. Being in Arunodhaya Children Sangam helped Surendran think differently, and he started aiming to improve his position in life.

At one point their Children Sangam helped get a local boy into their school whose family was poor. The young boy worked in a metal factory and did not attend school.

The Children Sangam tried talking to his parents about sending him to school, and when they didn't listen, they made them aware of the consequences. The Children Sangam members learned rules and policies against child labour in a camp organised by Arunodhaya. Although the parents relented eventually, the lack of his birth certificate posed a challenge. Again, the Children Sangam dealt with the issue by talking to the head master. Ramesh, who was old enough to be in class 8, hadn't had any prior schooling. He was sent to a transition program organized by Arunodhaya for one year. The Children Sangam then followed up with him regularly making sure he attended his classes.

The Children Sangam meetings were held on the school premises, and the school authorities viewed them positively. After the meetings, students cleaned the school, and left it in a better state than they found it. Even as a child, Surendran showed great artistic talent. In one of his early memories, Surendran won a prize for a picture of an elephant he drew. Being called to the stage and receiving this prize meant a lot to him. After this achievement, the school art teacher encouraged him further by gifting him a sketchbook. Surendran filled the pages of the sketchbook with drawings: a picture of his father sleeping, a picture of actor Vijaykanth, a picture of actress Sindhu, and many more. In his school life, Surendran began winning many more prizes for drawing. He even participated four times in district level drawing competitions.

“ Being in Arunodhaya Children Sangam helped Surendran think differently, and he started aiming to improve his position in life ”

Although he felt he was not good at studies, he felt more and more confident about his artistic abilities, and decided he wanted to become a drawing teacher.

Surendran's uncle appreciated his drawings. This portrait looks exactly like Vijaykant!" he would say. His mother also encouraged him, buying him notebooks and paints. But his father was not so encouraging, "Where will this get you; you can only become a signboard artist for a political party, and be stuck in their fights!" he would say. Early on, Surendran was in charge of illustrating *Chitterumbu Pesudhu*, Children's newsletter. Soon, he began drawing all the posters and banners for events organized by Arunodhaya. As Surendran put it, "the work of an illustrator consists of taking ideas and converting them into pictures -- and I've been doing that since childhood!"

At some point, Surendran met a person named Nagaraj in his neighborhood who was working as an assistant director. "I spent time with him, and he started giving me tasks related to storyboarding for a film, such as drawing reference portraits. Working with him, I realized that film is a platform for art." Nagaraj also told Surendran about the Government Fine Arts College in Egmore.

Getting into the college proved difficult. "I had to pass class 12, which I did, with a lot of support from my school teachers. Then, to pass the college entrance exam, I had to draw real life portraits, which I had never done before. I was stuck!" It was recommended Surendran train under Natarajan, a guest lecturer at the college.

At that time, Arunodhaya was organizing a conference on child abuse for which Surendran had drawn all the posters. Ramya mam came up with the idea to invite Natarajan as the chief guest for the conference. After some difficulty, Surendran convinced him to come. When Natarajan came to the conference and saw Surendran's art work, he was very impressed. He said in his speech that he would make sure Surendran got into the college. That was a turning point for Surendran. He practiced live drawing with Natarajan, and eventually he earned 15th place in the merit list for the college entrance.

As a college student, Surendran faced a difficult time at home, and could not focus on his work. "In my neighborhood, you will always hear a child crying, or some boys fighting outside. My father would be coming home drunk, my brother would be sleeping where I wanted to do work. In a small space like ours it was impossible to focus on art," said Surendran. In order to focus on his work, Surendran stayed in a space connected to the Arunodhaya office for one year.

Surendran faced many difficulties in his career, but he has also found mentors. He has realized his goal of achieving success in the film world, as the assistant art director for 'Attai kathi' in 2008, and as art director for 'Care of Kadhal' released recently. He has done a variety of jobs in advertising, set building, mural painting, and sculpture, to name a few.

Surendran has a strong desire to help children who start out like him. These days he takes free drawing classes in the Arunodhaya shelter home. He wants to help children from poor families, and especially advise them about what avenues are available for their advancement.



Parai and prejudice

Friends Kalaikuzhu wants to remove the stigma around the art form that has given them an identity and





ARUNODHAYA

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