

What can one seed do? It can give way to an entire forest. So can a man with a vision and determination. One can give way to a better society. This article outlines an incredible contribution of an individual – Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam, Founder & President of Depressed People's Welfare Association, which has lifted up the lives of around a million people in and around the districts of Tiruchirapalli, Ariyalur, Perambalur, Tanjore, Pudukottai, Dindugul, Nilgiris and Nagapattinam.

A short summary of the areas in which he has worked:

1. Rehabilitation of Physically challenged children
2. Formation of cooperative societies for milk in rural areas
3. Construction of free houses to the poor
4. Formation of women self help groups
5. Awareness programmes
6. Free Eye camps
7. Old age home and monthly Old age pension programmes
8. Free medical camps
9. Provision of Water bore wells
10. Education
11. Scholarship for poor students attending college
12. Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Home
13. 135 Special needs children rehabilitation
14. Homes for the Visually impaired
15. Provision of micro loans
16. Provision of milch animals and goats

A Case study:

To understand the contribution of Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam's 35 years long service, I would like to take you through a small case study:

Year 1987

Village: Mullal

People: Poor, Scheduled Caste, Hindus

Occupation: Daily wage, unskilled, landless agricultural labourers

Family studied (a typical model): Mr. Duraisamy, his wife Mrs. Kalammal, sons Suresh, Thyagu and daughter Divya

Duraisamy and his family members belong to SC hindu division of the society. They are considered untouchables and are oppressed. They live in the far end of the village which they call "colony" where all SC people are made to occupy. Education, in 1980s was a dream for the kids of SC/ST families as the upper caste people objected that their kids should not learn at the same class room where SC kids also learned. This led to many SC families giving up on education.

Duraisamy is a daily wage labourer. Kalammal is a stay at home wife as she had to look after the 3 children. Duraisamy earned a very minimal income that could barely feed the 5 of them. To make things worse, he was an alcoholic. He spent half of his earnings on alcohol and this led to his family having just 2 meals a day and sometimes 1.

This is the typical background of 90% dalit families in rural TN in the 1980s.

An Individual's contribution: Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam's contribution:

Through DPWA, Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam has made a profound positive impact on the family of Duraisamy and thousands of families like his.

Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam understood that to lift a family up, the woman had to be empowered. In families like Duraisamy's, the man has proved to be ineffective in building up the family due to his drinking habit. In such cases, women empowerment had to be a key for progress.

DPWA formed women self help groups bringing together many women like Kalammal. They were educated on various methods of income generation. They were also taught crafts like sewing, knitting etc. DPWA provided Kalammal with free goats. Kalammal took care of the goats and as they multiplied, she sold them and earned a decent income, which she saved. She was also given a small scale loan of Rs. 5000 by DPWA with which she was able to set up a small petty shop in front of her home. This shop gave her an additional Rs. 1000 monthly income, of which she repaid Rs. 500 to DPWA for the next 10 months. On completion of repayment, DPWA gave her a cattle loan, with which she bought

a cow and earned more money through selling the milk to cooperative societies formed by DPWA.

With months passing, Kalammal started to become self reliant.

She was also allotted a free house through housing scheme by DPWA. Her kids (both boys) turned 5 and 6 years old, and it was time for them to get into school. But the caste discrimination stopped her from getting into the government school. That is when; DPWA started its first school – Infant Jesus Higher Secondary School, in nearby Sembarai Vinayapuram village in 1989. It was started with a vision of educating poor, oppressed, socially and economically backward children.

Both her sons got admitted to 1st grade. Kalammal now had a steady income, a house to live in, a community of women to support and share, and education for her boys.

All the 3 kids were educated free of cost in our school and graduated 12th grade. They proceeded to college, the fee of which was paid by DPWA through scholarship scheme.

Year: 2017

Suresh, is now a Diploma holder in Electrical Engineering, and is working as a senior technician in an Automobile manufacturing company in Chennai.

Thyagu is a UG teacher, placed in a Panchayat union Government school, in a government posting.

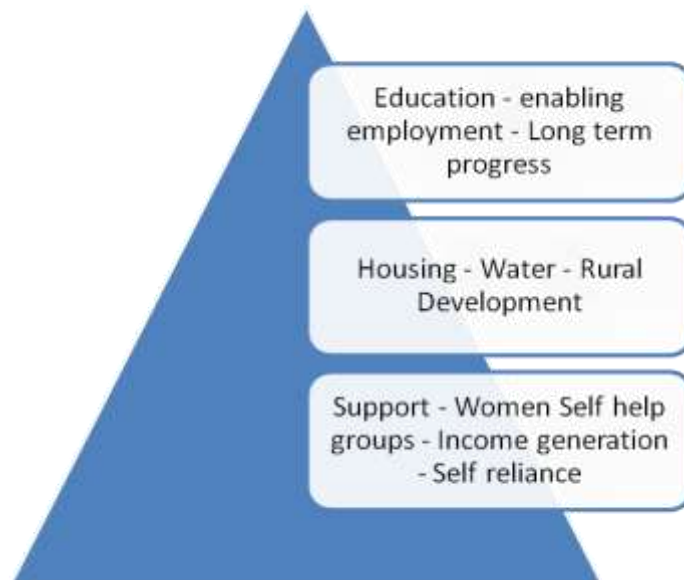
Divya is a nursing graduate, working in a hospital in Trichy.

Duraisamy is too old to do daily wage physical work. Kalammal still has 4 cows and 15 goats that gives her income. Her 3 children contribute to the family, taking care of their medical expenses, household expenses and are saving money for their marriages.

If not for the intervention of Dr. Fr. S. Dhanapragasam, Duraisamy would have been an alcoholic with a stranded family, starving and kids without education and without a future.

Duraisamy and Kalammal family is just one such example. There are lakhs of such families that have been touched by DPWA.

A Pyramid showing DPWA's contribution in Kaliammal's life:



The faith and determination of one man who believed he can make the lives of thousands of families better has made him touch a million people in 35 years. This is an example for everyone of us that we are all seeds, and there is a forest of a potential within each one of us, if we *believe, act and persevere!*