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How one Hindu-American woman set out to support a village school

By Keya Keita, Hawaii

Each day, in the gentle light of morning, women of Tamil Nadu, South India, use coarse, colored rice flour to create a geometric pattern of balance and beauty just outside their front doors. These temporary yantras, or mystical diagrams, are known as kolam, which means "beauty." They are a daily tribute to the Goddess Lakshmi, and serve to bless and protect the home and all who enter or leave.

Vaidehi Ganesan Herbert, now living in Kauai, Hawaii, named her Kolam Charitable Foundation (www.kolam.info) after this ancient ritual. Vaidehi grew up watching her artistic mother create an elaborate kolam every day. Having the beauty of the practice etched in her heart, she began the foundation under the same name--to honor its spiritual message of welcoming and protection. The Foundation is the main support for a middle and high school in the outskirts of Tuticorin in southern Tamil Nadu, near where Vaidehi was born and raised.

The Kolam Foundation's main objective is to create economic independence for the needy and underprivileged through grants and educational programs. For example, Kolam grants of two cows, forty goats and several sewing machines to local village women have opened new income sources to them.

Vaidehi attributes her sense of service to her upbringing: "I was always taught if you're lucky to have, you give. I come from four generations of a family that built schools, orphanages, colleges and other service charities. It is something that comes very naturally to me, but is certainly derived from my Hindu background."

The Foundation is partnered with the Imayam Sevalayam School, a day school providing academic, cultural and spiritual education to some 200 local students. Its founders and headmistresses are C. Ponrathi and R. Saraswathi, retired teachers who began the school using us$60,000 of their pension funds. In addition to teaching the students, the school is involved in community outreach to the village women, offering vocational training and counseling services. The school offers liaison services between the women and local banks, for microcredit to fund home-grown businesses.

Saraswathi looks to Swami Vivekananda for inspiration. "Swamiji's words, 'Service to humanity is service to God,' left an indelible mark in my mind. He said, 'Whatever you think, that you will be. Never say, "No." Never say, "I cannot," for you are infinite.' These words of the Swamiji are a magical mantra that made me overcome all challenges."

Imayam School is accredited by the government and follows India's national academic guidelines. It offers a primarily secular curriculum, but religion is emphasized as well. Classes and experiences are offered here that are not available in any other school nearby. Saraswati explains, "Students are taught Thevaram, Thiruvasagam, Arutpa and other devotional songs to help them understand the rich heritage of Hindu culture. They learn the reasons behind our celebrations and the significance of festivals such as Krishna Jayanti, Vinayaga Chaturthi, Navaratri, Sanda Shasti, Pongal and Ramnavami. Our students are now taking the lead in their villages, conducting special pujas in their village temples and initiating other religious observances." Ponrathi relates, "Physical exercises and yogasanas as well as pranayama are featured in our daily schedule. Training in Carnatic music is open to all students. Every Friday, they participate in bhajans. They learn devotional songs of our spiritual gurus and the biographies of Hindu sages with their valuable teachings."

If not for the free education offered by Imayam School, many of these young students would not be attending school at all; and others would have to accept scholarships from Christian mission schools in the area. "If it weren't for us, many of them would be at these schools and be forced to convert," warns Vaidehi.

Ponrathi explains, "No fees are taken from the students. All classes and

extra-curricular activities are provided free of charge. Students are all given a noon-time nutritious vegetarian meal and provided with books, supplies and uniforms. All this is funded by the Kolam Foundation. As their parents do not have to bear the expenses of their children's studies, they willingly and happily send them to school."

At the close of the last school year, in Imayam's first grade ten class, 27 out of 28 students achieved perfect scores on standardized tests. These results greatly impressed educators all over Tamil Nadu, as it is rare for lower-income students to achieve such uniformly high results. These students have now moved on to other schools, as Imayam has yet to add eleventh and twelfth grade--a gap they are trying to close with their current fund-raising drive. To provide a complete secondary education, they need two more classrooms, eight more teachers and labs for physics, chemistry and biology.

Support for the school from the Kolam Foundation is more than monetary; it also includes an active volunteer program. Teachers, massage therapists, mothers and college students are among the diverse volunteers that have spent time learning and teaching in this special cross-cultural environment. The volunteers are paid $25 a day and are given housing and vegetarian meals.

"Everyone has something to offer to these students," Vaidehi explains, "especially they need to practice conversational English."

One such volunteer was Anna Myers, a personal trainer on Kauai. She recounts fondly, "I had the privilege of teaching English to the children in November of 2006. These kids are wonderful. I find it difficult to describe in words how my experience in Tamil Nadu has affected my life. I could see that through this school these children have the chance to escape poverty."

Vaidehi has developed a simple fund-raising method suitable for her island life. Every first and second Saturday of the month, she invites local residents to her home. She prepares traditional South Indian vegetarian cuisine for a fabulous brunch that lasts for hours and includes sharing of recipes and cooking demonstrations. The $30 donations for the brunch go toward Imayam School's basic expenses.

Other organizations have also taken interest in the school. For example, Swami Sivananda's Sevalaya recently built a dormitory to house 50 girls, and a two-room clinic that will serve the school and greater community with a part-time doctor and nurse.

One of the school's teachers, Professor Selvaraj, came from a poor family and was sent to college by Vaidehi's family. He summarizes the impact of this school, "Education is really an instrument of social change. Good education has emancipated many of our Tamil families from poverty, ignorance and social backwardness. They are able to lead a decent life and enjoy a good social status only due to their education."

Kolam foundation, 6213-a Kahiliholo Road, Kilauea, HI 96754 USA phone 808-828-0540 e-mail vi _@_ kolam.info

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