

NEWSLETTER



JESUIT
CHENNAI PROVINCE

All Lives Matter

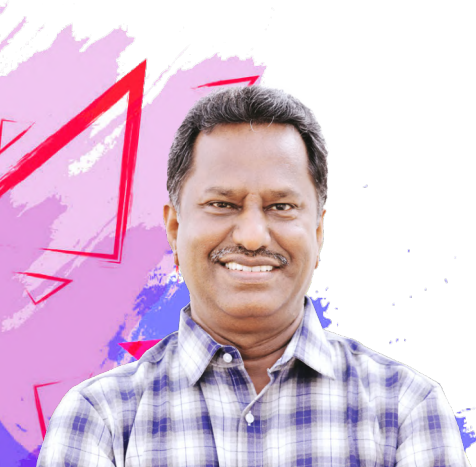
PROVINCE DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

VOL-3 / 2025



PALAVAI

ROOTED IN CHANGE, RISING IN STRENGTH



Fr Provincial Speaks ...

The Jesuit Chennai Province was established on **28 December, 2019**. The Province, comprising **21** civil districts, one union territory, and nine dioceses, exemplifies the enduring spirit of companionship and service. Now in its sixth year, the Jesuit Chennai Province, guided by the vision *“Companions of Jesus marching with the marginalised for a world of reconciliation and justice”*, proudly serves the most marginalised and vulnerable groups, including Dalits, Tribals (*Irulars and Urali*), migrants, and fisherfolk of northern Tamil Nadu through various ministries. Among these, the Social Action Ministry plays a vital role in serving our chosen people, fulfilling our commitment to their empowerment and sustainability. This Social Action Ministry, with its 14 dedicated centres, serves as the heartbeat of our apostolic works.

The Chennai Mission commenced in 2007 under the guidance of the mission superior. Rooted in the understanding of the immense hardships endured by Dalits, the mission aimed to expand its ministries and reach out to the most marginalised. In this process, we recognised the need for an inclusive approach to address a broader range of marginalised groups. In the northern landscape, the needs of the tribal communities had been largely unaddressed.

Our mission began expanding to enhance our apostolic effectiveness. In 2014, after conducting an extensive study, we, the Jesuits, recognised that Tribals and Migrants are among the most disadvantaged groups, suffering similarly to Dalits. We specifically acknowledged the urgent needs of tribals and established the Jesuit Tribal Ministry to focus on the Irular, Urali, and Solagar communities, who remain the

most deprived groups. To address these pressing issues, we established the PARAN Tribal Centre in Makkampalayam in **2013** and the PALAVAI Tribal Centre in Tindivanam in **2014**. Since its inception, the PALAVAI Tribal Centre originally known as JESIM (*Jesuit Irulars Mission*), has been a beacon of hope in Tindivanam & Gingee, tirelessly striving to empower the Irular tribals.

Under the leadership of Fr. Kennedy SJ (2014-2022), its first director, and Fr. Arockiasamy SJ (2022-Present) the mission aimed to prioritize education as the key to their empowerment. With a steadfast commitment to their liberation, we adopted a structured approach. We started by reaching out to small communities and collaborating with a few villages. Today, our initiative has expanded to encompass **80 villages** across three districts (*Villupuram, Chengalpet and Thiruvannamalai*). Ensuring their holistic development through strategic interventions, including community leadership and youth empowerment. Through our unwavering efforts, we now strengthen and empower the most affected Irulars by focusing on the fundamental pillars of education, livelihood, and rights-based advocacy. This initiative is steadily growing into a broader movement, reaching more villages and impacting more lives.

With profound gratitude, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated Jesuit friends and Staff of PALAVAI, the beneficiaries, like-minded people and our collaborators. Your steadfast commitment and partnership have been crucial to our achievements. This mission demonstrates what we can accomplish together in uplifting the marginalized, advocating for justice, and creating a future of dignity and hope.

- Fr Jebamalai Irudayaraj SJ

Fr Province Development Director Speaks ...



Jesuit Chennai Province reaches out passionately to empower Dalits, Tribals, Migrants, Fisherfolk and other marginalized communities. We commit to addressing various social needs, uplifting marginalized communities, promoting women empowerment, and upholding human values. In all our endeavours, we prioritise the promotion of environmental conservation, justice, peace, and social transformation.

This edition of '**ALL LIVES MATTER**', the biannual newsletter of the Province Development Office, is dedicated to PALAVAI - '**Rooted in Change, Rising in Strength**'. It reflects years of dedication, valuable insights, and significant achievements of the PALAVAI Tribal Centre in accompanying the Irular community. In all our endeavours, we prioritise the promotion of environmental conservation, justice, peace, and social transformation.

This publication stands as a testament to our ongoing journey of community transformation and empowerment, with a focus on education, environmental sustainability, and leadership development among marginalised groups. We are motivated to share this because we believe that true change begins with empowering individuals to uplift their communities. This belief has driven us to remain steadfast despite numerous challenges.

We have meticulously curated this collection to highlight the efforts, struggles, and triumphs experienced by the communities we serve, particularly through the initiatives led by the Jesuit Chennai Province. These initiatives encompass fostering educational opportunities for Irular community particularly girls, developing community leaders, and integrating environmental awareness into our programmes.

Each article in this newsletter reflects a critical aspect of our mission to empower the Irular community. This compilation not only underscores the strength and perseverance of the communities we engage with but also emphasises our dedication to uplifting the Irulars. As you engage with this publication, we hope it inspires you to appreciate the power of grassroots movements, sparks your curiosity, and ignites a desire to contribute.

Our journey is one of collaboration, and we welcome those who share our vision to join us in creating meaningful change. Whether through direct involvement, advocacy, or support, your participation can strengthen our mission and amplify its impact.

We invite you, our readers, to explore our initiatives and witness the effects of our collective efforts. Regardless of your background or motivation for reading this collection, we hope these stories inspire reflection, encourage action, and deepen your understanding of the far-reaching impact of community empowerment. Let us step forward together on this shared journey of transformation.

- Fr Vasanth SJ

**“In their struggles,
the province finds its mission;
With their upliftment,
we find our fulfilment”.**

Glimpses of PALAVAI



PALAVAI, formerly known as JESIM (*Jesuit Irulars Mission*), stands as a beacon of hope and empowerment for the Irular tribes in Tamil Nadu, India. Operating in the districts of Villupuram, Chengalpet and Thiruvannamalai, PALAVAI was established in June 2014 by the Jesuit Chennai Mission under the leadership of Fr Kennedy SJ with a steadfast commitment to improving the lives of marginalized Dalit and Tribal communities particularly the Irulars. These Indigenous people have long been excluded from mainstream society, facing systemic discrimination and denial of basic rights. PALAVAI aims to bridge this gap by addressing critical issues such as education, youth development, cultural preservation, livelihood generation, women's empowerment, and community development.

In the social hierarchy of our society Dalits and Tribal groups like the Irulars are often relegated to the lowest rungs, viewed as "*lesser human beings*" and their dignity is denied. Historically, the Irulars were skilled snake catchers who depended on trading snake skins for their livelihood. However, the government's ban on snake hunting left them with no alternative means of income, pushing the community further into poverty without rehabilitative support.

Although the Indian Constitution guarantees numerous provisions for the welfare and development of Tribal communities, these rights often remain inaccessible due to systemic barriers and a lack of enforcement. The Irulars continue to live on the margins of society, largely in remote forested areas. This physical and social isolation leaves their lives shrouded in darkness, symbolically and literally cut off from modern infrastructure and basic services.

Even today, the Irulars experience severe deprivation and violations of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Fundamental rights such as access to quality education, healthcare, and stable livelihoods are denied to them. Illiteracy is widespread due to the absence of educational opportunities, health services are inadequate or nonexistent, and employment remains scarce, leading to chronic unemployment and starvation. Without identity documents, many Irulars struggle to gain citizenship, leaving them voiceless and invisible in the eyes of the state.

The social exclusion continue to trap the Irular community in a relentless cycle of oppression, impacting their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. Generations of Irular families remain caught in the grip of poverty, denied access to the basic

rights and opportunities that could change their lives. In response to this dire reality, PALAVAI has emerged as a catalyst for change, dedicated to the holistic empowerment of the Irulars. Through targeted initiatives addressing children, youth, women, and the broader community, PALAVAI works collectively to break the chains of marginalization.

By promoting quality education, skill development, women empowerment, cultural preservation, and sustainable livelihoods, PALAVAI seeks to pave the way for their social liberation, fostering a future of dignity, justice, and self-reliance.

Empowering Children for a Brighter Tomorrow:

The child development initiatives extend a helping hand to the youngest members of this vulnerable community. Through evening study centres, winter and summer camps, and the establishment of Children's Parliaments, PALAVAI not only addresses educational gaps but nurtures leadership qualities and fosters a love for learning. This empowerment at an early age is the first step towards breaking the cycle of generational challenges.



Women Empowerment Initiatives (WEI) for Social Justice:

Empowering women is at the forefront of our impact. Through the formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and various training programs, WEI addresses gender disparities, reduces child and bonded labor among women, and fosters a more equitable and just society. PALAVAI recognizes that uplifting women leads to the upliftment of entire communities. This economic empowerment is a catalyst for breaking the chains of poverty, providing sustainable livelihoods, and contributing to the overall well-being.

Community Development Initiatives (CDI):

The community development initiatives focus on building strong and resilient communities. By establishing Village Federation (Sangam) groups, training leaders, and providing legal entitlements education, PALAVAI fosters collective responsibility and awareness within marginalized sectors. This approach ensures that communities are not only recipients of aid but active participants in their development.

Youth Development Initiatives (TYDI):

PALAVAI recognizes the potential within the youth particularly among the Irular tribes. Through tribal youth development initiatives, the organization focuses on mainstreaming dropouts, providing vocational training, education about government

reservations and creating pathways for higher education and placement. By investing in the skills and capabilities of young individuals, PALAVAI opens doors to employment opportunities, economic independence, and a pathway to a brighter future.



Cultural Revival and Preservation of Identity:

Preserving the cultural heritage of Irulars is one of the key works of PALAVAI. *The Cultural Development Initiatives (CDI)* actively work towards reviving the unique traditions of the Irular tribes. Through the formation of a Cultural Troupe and training in theatre skills, PALAVAI ensures that the rich cultural identity of these communities is not only preserved but celebrated, instilling a sense of pride among community members.

A Vision for the Future:

Our impact goes beyond immediate challenges, extending to the formation of Tribal Welfare Federations (*Sangam*). By organizing tribal communities into federations (*Sangam*), PALAVAI instils a sense of unity, advocacy, and a vision for a future where the marginalized sectors actively participate in shaping policies, decisions, and cultural narratives reflective of their unique identities. PALAVAI represents a holistic and transformative approach to community development among the Irular tribes. By addressing immediate challenges through education, youth empowerment, cultural preservation, job creation, and women's empowerment, PALAVAI has not only touched the lives of around **10,000** people but also fostered a vision for a future where they would stand proudly as architects of their destiny. The emphasis on unity and the organization of tribal communities into federations reflects our commitment to creating lasting positive change and ensuring the sustained empowerment of the Irular tribes.



ILLUMINATING MINDS THROUGH EDUCATION

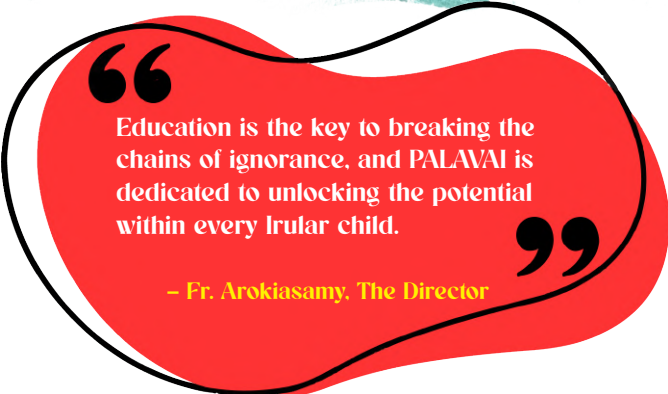


Our mission is rooted in empowering marginalized Irulars across Tamil Nadu, with a focus on education through Evening Study Centres in Villupuram, Chengalpattu and Tiruvannamalai districts.

Our child development initiatives aim to transform the lives of children from marginalized communities. Through evening study centres, educational support summer camps, sports days, children's parliaments, and skill development programs. We don't just address educational gaps we nurture leadership, build confidence, and inspire a lifelong love for learning. We believe that empowering children at an early age is the first step in breaking the cycle of generational challenges.

Addressing Learning gaps through a Holistic learning environment:

Evening Study Centers of PALAVAI serve as an after-school education program designed to address gaps in formal education and provide Irular children with a strong foundation for success. These centres offer a nurturing space where learning extends beyond textbooks, promoting holistic



education that prepares children not just for exams but for life itself. Alongside conventional subjects, we emphasize life skills, vocational training, and extracurricular activities to help shape well-rounded individuals.

Our primary goal is to bridge the educational disparities these children face. Many students struggle due to insufficient early education, and we work tirelessly to close those gaps. Through personalized attention, focused tutoring, financial assistance, and tailored resources, we ensure that each child receives the support they need to thrive academically.



We also identify students with potential from our Evening Study Centers and integrate them into our schools and hostels, where they receive comprehensive support, including access to quality education, extracurricular activities, and health care. By fostering a love for learning and equipping students with practical skills, we empower them to overcome challenges and seize opportunities for a brighter future.



Cultivating Children with Core Values and Diverse Opportunities:

At our Evening Study Centres, education transcends textbooks. We focus on character-building and experiential learning to create morally grounded and socially aware individuals. Summer camps provide children with hands-on activities, interactive workshops, and exposure to diverse fields like environmental education, arts, and leadership. These experiences ignite curiosity, build self-confidence, and transform learning into an exciting adventure.

We encourage children to take an active role in their education and community, developing decision-making skills and a sense of responsibility. Activities like yoga, sports, and leadership exercises prioritize physical and mental well-being, while Spoken English and environmental programs equip them with essential future-ready skills. We also work closely with parents through regular meetings and workshops to strengthen the support system and ensure the holistic growth of each child.

Educating girl children for educating the society:

Through Fr Ceyrac's Girls Hostel in Singanur, we ensure a safe shelter is offered and focus on the holistic development of girls through education, extracurricular activities, and health programs. We provide tailored academic support, spoken English classes, and preparation for competitive exams. Cultural activities, computer training, drawing, and tailoring enhance life skills and creativity, while leadership programs empower girls with confidence and awareness of their constitutional rights.

Since 2014, we have educated over 900 girls, with 150 pursuing higher education. Many of our alumni have become nurses, engineers, and teachers! Some even returning to teach in our Evening Study Centres. In 2024, 12 students achieved perfect scores, with one scoring 424 marks in the Higher vSecondary Exams. We celebrate these milestones as proof that our efforts are transforming lives.

Despite our achievements, we face challenges such as high dropout rates, family opposition, government interference, and limited infrastructure. We bridge the gap through parent-teacher meetings and continuous advocacy, ensuring education takes precedence over child marriage or labour.



Empowering Aspirants:

Our Evening Study Centres are nurturing grounds for Irular youth. Beyond financial aid for higher education, we offer personalized mentorship and continuous support. Animators monitor academic progress and provide guidance, while alumni serve as mentors, inspiring current students by sharing their journeys. These motivational sessions turn fear into determination and create a strong community where success becomes a shared triumph.

Through this network of support, our students develop resilience, paving the way for a new narrative of hope and empowerment within the Irular community. Every success story inspires others, encouraging more students to dream bigger and break generational barriers.

Cultivating Climate Consciousness:

We take immense pride in our Eco Club and environmental sustainability activities, which empower students to become proactive environmental leaders. From tree planting and waste segregation to afforestation and rainwater harvesting, our children are at the forefront of sustainability. They not only learn

but lead initiatives that promote green living and sustainable practices. By participating in these activities, our students develop a deep understanding of the real-world environmental challenges they face and the critical role they play in addressing them. Studies show that children educated about climate change are 40% more likely to adopt sustainable practices and influence their families' behaviour. This ripple effect creates greener, more conscious communities. As these children grow, we aim for sustainability to become second nature, guiding their choices and inspiring others. We believe that investing in young minds today is the key to securing a sustainable future for tomorrow.

Towards Holistic Development:

Our education initiatives at PALAVAI go beyond academics, aiming to shape confident, compassionate, and well-rounded individuals. By fostering holistic development, bridging learning gaps, and empowering children with leadership and life skills, we pave the way for a brighter future. Together with the community, we remain committed to nurturing young minds, transforming challenges into opportunities, and inspiring every child to realize their fullest potential.

**Evening Study Centers not only illuminate minds
but also ignite a collective flame of knowledge
that will continue to burn bright in the hearts of the Irular Children.**





Women are the most beautiful creations of God, embodying virtues such as elegance, wonder, wisdom, love, patience, persistence, and power. Women are intricately linked to the well-being of the community they live in and the nation as a whole. Ensuring that women receive education, dignity, love, and protection is essential for creating a better world thus PALAVAI is dedicated to providing women from Irular communities receive education, leadership, entrepreneurship training, financial independence and self-sustainability words tirelessly through income generation programmes, Awareness camps through self-help groups and women's federation.



Irulars are a vulnerable community especially the Irular tribal women who face a lot of physical, psychological, socio-economic and cultural disparities

throughout their lives. Surveys reveal that the Irular tribal women have been experiencing the denial of livelihood opportunities and finding unsustainable livelihood options that help them to become economically viable for themselves and their families. They are mostly engaged in domestic work, around 80% are unskilled labourers engaging in menial jobs and willing to undertake any kind of job that would feed their hunger namely work in brick-kilns and sugarcane fields.

Women Entrepreneurship: Building Business, Building Futures

Irular Women Entrepreneurship initiatives of PALAVAI empower Irular women to achieve financial independence by equipping them with essential skills and resources to establish small businesses. Through hands-on training and workshops, women are introduced to entrepreneurship opportunities like setting up street vending carts, running small stores, and engaging in cattle rearing. Each participant receives not only training but also tangible support, including initial supplies and livestock, to kick-start their ventures.

Success stories like that of Mrs. Vimala, who turned her petty shop into a thriving business despite early

ridicule from neighbouring communities, highlight the transformative power of these initiatives. Today, Mrs. Vimala is not only a successful entrepreneur but also a respected figure in her community, inspiring other women to pursue their dreams. The Entrepreneurship programs are focused on fostering long-term economic sustainability, enabling women to support their families and contribute to the overall development of their communities.

Self-Help Groups: Strength in Unity

Since 2017, PALAVAI has organized over 27 Self-Help Groups (SHGs), providing Irular women with a platform to pool resources, share experiences, and tackle social and economic challenges collectively. These SHGs are much more than financial cooperatives - they are spaces where women find solidarity and strength.

By pooling their savings, members gain access to low-interest loans from private money lenders for income-generating activities, house construction, and debt repayment. This system has enabled over 300 Irular women to secure financial independence. Today, more than 50 women have ventured into entrepreneurship, establishing businesses like petty shops and cattle rearing. The SHGs foster a spirit of mutual support and self-reliance, gradually transforming the lives of Irular women and their families.



Women's Federation:

To sustain and amplify the impact of our women empowerment initiatives, We established the Irular Women's Federation. This federation will act as a collective voice for Irular women, addressing community issues and advocating for their rights. Members of the SHGs will undergo specialized training in leadership and community engagement to prepare them for federation roles. The federation aims to build a self-sustainable network of women leaders who can support each other and engage with local governance structures to influence policy. By fostering a culture of shared leadership and accountability, with plans to expand the Women Federation into our operational districts, We ensure that women become key decision-makers within their communities ensuring equality and advocacy.

Women's Day: Celebrating Empowerment and Solidarity

Every year, PALAVAI organizes Women's Day celebration to unite and inspire Irular women engaged in various initiatives such as community leadership, self-help group members, federation leaders and entrepreneurial members. These events are an opportunity to acknowledge the achievements of our beneficiaries and reinforce the importance of community solidarity. Women participate in various cultural programs, leadership activities, and discussions on rights and empowerment.



These celebrations not only strengthen social bonds but also create a platform for women to share their stories, build confidence, and inspire one another. By bringing the community together, we help cultivate a shared sense of identity and purpose among Irular women.

Housing Assistance: Building Stability

Housing is a critical aspect of improving living conditions and stability. Especially in Irular communities, they lack the necessary housing. They still live without electricity and sanitation facilities. To address the underlying issues and eradicate this cycle of poverty we provide a small amount of no-interest loans to help women construct houses and apply for subsidies from the government. This initiative eliminates their dependence on high-interest loans from private lenders and promotes long-term security and growth. By offering housing assistance, PALAVAI addresses one of the most pressing needs of Irular women, ensuring they have a safe and stable home environment. This initiative has been instrumental in improving their quality of life, allowing them to focus on personal and economic growth.



Skill Development: Unlocking Potential

The skill development programs focus on building capacities of women in leadership, farming, and cattle rearing. Through a combination of workshops and hands-on



training, participants learn practical skills that enhance their employability and entrepreneurial potential. Leadership training helps women take on active roles in their communities while farming and cattle-rearing workshops provide them with sustainable livelihood options. These capacity-building efforts ensure that women have the tools they need to thrive economically and socially.

Awareness Campaigns: Knowledge is Power

PALAVAI regularly conducts awareness campaigns to educate Irular women about their rights and opportunities. These campaigns cover critical topics such as participation in gram sabhas, financial management, investments, savings, legal documentation (*Patta and Chitta*), kitchen gardening, cancer awareness, and voter education.

By raising awareness on these issues, PALAVAI empowers women to make informed decisions and advocate for themselves and their communities these efforts make them skills in areas of both professional and personal development. These initiatives not only build confidence but also strengthen the social circle of Irular villages.

Signature Campaigns:
Building Literacy and Confidence

Our “50 Signature a Day” initiative encourages women to develop basic literacy skills by learning how to sign their names and read basic signs and words. The goal is to collect 50 signatures a day, gradually transforming women from being dependent on thumb impressions to signing documents independently. This simple yet powerful activity has boosted self-confidence and enabled women to participate more actively in public and personal affairs. The campaign symbolizes the broader mission of PALAVAI: to empower women with the tools they need to assert their identities and claim their rights.

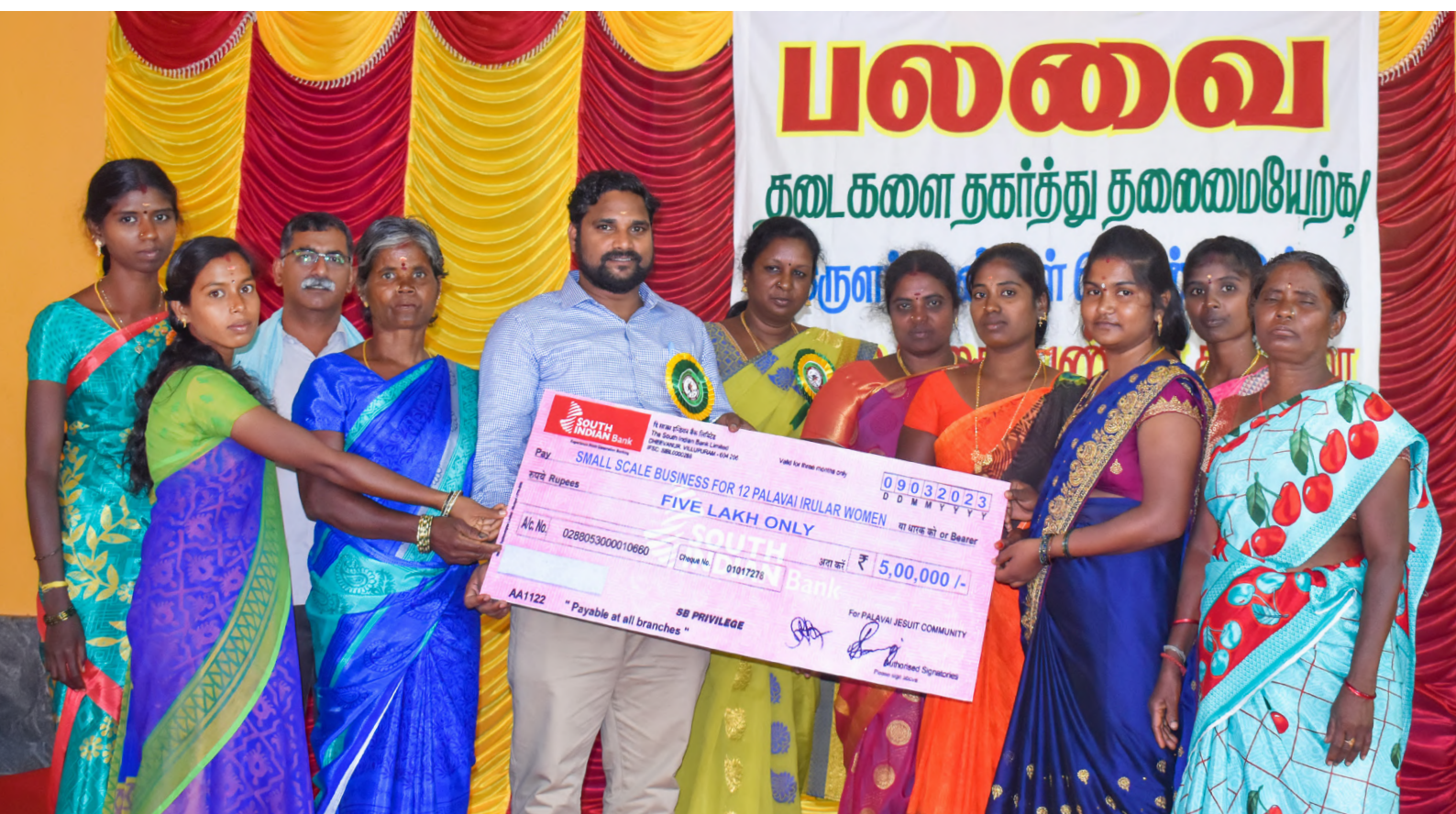


building a more inclusive and equitable society. Despite the challenges posed by cultural stereotypes and nomadic lifestyles, PALAVAI remains steadfast in its mission to empower women, foster leadership, and promote lasting change within the Irular communities.

A Journey of Transformation:

The comprehensive approach of PALAVAI to women empowerment is transforming the lives of Irular women. From entrepreneurship training and skill development to the formation of women’s federations and awareness campaigns, each initiative is a step toward

PALAVAI is laying the foundation for a future where women in the Irular tribes stand tall as empowered, resilient, and self reliant leaders within their communities.





Cultivating community leadership is crucial to increasing the participation of marginalized people in democracy. PALAVAI focuses on developing leadership skills among community members to progress towards liberation. We are proud to be a forerunner of community leadership program in the state of Tamil Nadu.

In 2014, The Jesuits introduced Lok Manch a Tribal Community Leadership Programme, which is spread across 18 states and union territories in India. Spanning across 18 Jesuit provinces and 100 organisations working towards the liberation of the marginalized. As we commemorate the eighth anniversary of this programme, we continue to transform everyday individuals into conscientious community leaders.

These community leaders, who often have no political background or formal qualifications, are driven by their courage and commitment to empower their community. With more than 60 such leaders across three districts advocating for individual and communal rights, we equip them with the necessary knowledge of current government schemes and legislation, enabling them to stand up for their rights confidently. Our focus remains on working closely with these communities to understand their needs

and identify potential leaders who can make a lasting impact.

Identifying Potential from Within:

Leadership at PALAVAI begins with the belief that true change must come from within the community rather than bringing in external leaders. PALAVAI carefully identifies potential leaders from among the Irular people ordinary men and women with no political background or formal leadership experience, but with an innate desire to serve and uplift their communities.



The selection process is inclusive, focusing on individuals with key traits that make them suitable for leadership roles. Priority is given to those with a genuine commitment to community welfare, driven by a desire

to improve the lives of others. Courage and determination are essential, as these leaders must often face challenges and navigate complex government systems. Integrity and trustworthiness are also crucial, ensuring that leaders are respected and trusted within their community. Effective communication and problem-solving skills are highly valued, as leaders must be able to listen, engage, and mediate in community matters. Special emphasis is placed on selecting women and youth, recognizing them as key agents of change. Once selected, these leaders undergo a comprehensive process of capacitation, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to effectively fulfill their roles and bring about meaningful change.



Equipping Leaders with Knowledge and Skills:

The selected leaders begin their journey with capacitation programs an intensive, ongoing training process designed to transform them into knowledgeable, confident, and accountable community advocates. These programs are not just one-time workshops; they are continuous and evolving, addressing the ever-changing needs of the community. The capacitation process is divided into three key phases:

✔ **Foundational Training:** The first phase focuses on building basic leadership skills and awareness of community needs. Key areas are, understanding the role and responsibilities of a community leader. Effective communication and public speaking. Building trust and

identifying and prioritizing community issues. At this stage, leaders are introduced to the basics of government schemes and services available to marginalized communities. For many, this is their first exposure to the concept of advocacy and public administration.

✔ **Advanced Advocacy and Legal Training:** In the second phase, leaders are equipped with advanced skills in advocacy and legal rights. The training includes, Government development programs and how to access them. Advocacy for legal rights and navigating government bureaucracy. Writing petitions and filling out government forms. Engaging with local authorities and government officials. Practical sessions and real-life case studies help leaders understand how to apply this knowledge effectively. They also learn how to mobilize their communities, ensuring collective action towards common goals.

✔ **Leadership Accountability and Community Mobilization:** In the final phase, leaders focus on deepening their leadership skills and ensuring accountability in their roles. This phase emphasizes transparent decision-making processes, conflict resolution and community mediation, mentoring future leaders to ensure sustainability, and building networks with other organizations for greater impact. This phase is crucial for a long-term vision of collective leadership. Leaders are encouraged to mentor and support the next generation, ensuring that the progress made is not dependent on a single individual but on a strong network of community leaders.



Capacitation in Action:

Through these capacitation programs, PALAVAI has helped leaders overcome initial hesitation and build the confidence needed to engage with authorities and demand justice for their communities. For instance: Mrs. Sasikala, who once lacked the skills to interact with government officials, now leads her community in securing essential civic documents like voter IDs and ration cards. Mr. Ganesh, who initially had no experience in public administration, successfully lobbied for infrastructure improvements in his village, securing a new road, bridge, and drainage system. These success stories are not isolated. Over the past eight years, PALAVAI has trained more than 60 leaders who continue to serve as powerful advocates for their communities.

Challenges in Leadership Development:

While capacitation has been largely successful, it is not without its challenges. Some leaders struggle to balance their leadership roles with their livelihoods. Others, after gaining recognition, may prioritize personal interests over community welfare. Absenteeism and the demands of daily life can also hinder

their participation in ongoing training. To address these challenges, PALAVAI has adopted a collective leadership approach, emphasizing shared responsibility and mentoring. By encouraging current leaders to mentor new ones, PALAVAI ensures that leadership development remains a continuous and sustainable process.

Vision of fostering collective leadership:

Leadership training and advocacy initiatives are transforming the Irular communities from within. By identifying potential leaders, providing continuous capacitation, and fostering a spirit of collective leadership, PALAVAI is building a strong foundation for sustainable community development. The success of this program lies not only in the achievements of individual leaders but in the creation of a network of empowered, community-driven changemakers. These leaders represent the future of the Irular tribes - a future where every individual has a voice, every community is heard, and no one is left behind. The journey is ongoing, and with each step, PALAVAI moves closer to its vision of a self-reliant, just, and dignified Irular community.



EMPOWERING THE YOUTH



PALAVAI places special focus on youth, recognizing them as the pivotal backbone of community and national development. With a large youth population spread across the three operational districts, our youth beneficiaries are categorized into two primary focus groups: Organized Youth and Unorganized Youth.

Our initiatives aim to nurture the Organized Youth, who are actively engaged with PALAVAI through programs like the Evening Study Centres (ESC), sports events, and children's parliament. Meanwhile, the Unorganized Youth often school dropouts or struggling with unemployment are guided towards stability and self-sustainability.

Organized Youth: ***Building Future Leaders***

The work of PALAVAI with organized youth revolves around continuous support and empowerment. These youth are those who have been actively engaged with PALAVAI through programs like Evening Study Centres (ESC) and Children's Parliament. They receive structured support to improve their education, enhance their skills, and develop leadership qualities. One of

the core services is career guidance and counselling. For students completing Class 12, we offer personalized guidance to help them choose the right career paths. We identify their skills and interests, aligning them with current job market demands. This guidance ensures that students have a clear understanding of available opportunities and can make informed decisions about their future. Additionally, once they graduate, they receive job preparation support, including training for interviews and tips for improving their employability.



To address the financial challenges many students face, PALAVAI provides Scholarship Support. These scholarships either partial or full enable students to continue their education without worrying about financial constraints. For higher education aspirants, we also conduct Post-Matric Scholarship Awareness

programs that help students and their families access government schemes and financial aid. This support has helped many first-generation learners stay in school and complete their studies.

Recognizing that education extends beyond academics, PALAVAI motivates students to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, cultural events, and Olympiads. These activities develop critical life skills like teamwork, time management, and creativity, enriching the student's learning experience.

PALAVAI also emphasizes Leadership and Capacity-Building. Every two months, youth meetings are organized, offering training in public speaking, event management, and social awareness. English Language Skills Training, both online and offline, equips youth with the communication skills needed in today's competitive job market. The sessions on SWOT Analysis help them reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, enabling better decision-making. For those preparing for government exams like TNPSC and UPSC, regular motivational sessions and coaching are conducted.

Since many Irular youth are first-generation learners, engaging with parents is essential. PALAVAI conducts Parent Meetings twice a year to encourage active parental support for education. These meetings also serve as a platform to discuss community challenges and connect with unorganized youth who may require additional support. This collaboration between youth and their parents strengthens community ties and creates a positive environment for change. The Alumni network of PALAVAI plays a crucial role in giving back to the community. Many Alumni return as volunteers and resource persons, helping with Evening Study Centres and mentoring current students. Seeing former students succeed and return to support their communities inspires younger generations and reinforces the power

of education. PALAVAI plans to establish an Alumni Association, which will help alumni stay connected, build networks, and collaborate on future community development initiatives.

Unorganized Youth: Addressing Challenges and Building Stability

Unorganized youth represent a significant challenge in Irular communities. These are young people who have dropped out of school or have not received a formal education. As a result, they face unemployment, underemployment, and unstable job situations. Many take up menial jobs in brick kilns, tree cutting, logistics, and supply chains in different cities. These jobs are often poorly paid, stressful, and temporary, forcing them to constantly move in search of better opportunities.



The lack of stable income and proper education not only affects their quality of life but also makes them vulnerable to exploitation. It creates a ripple effect on the community, as these youth can become negative role models for younger children. PALAVAI intervenes by offering awareness programs on critical issues like Drug Abuse, Social and Political Awareness, and Government Schemes and Constitutional

Values. These programs help unorganized youth make informed decisions, access welfare benefits, and become more socially responsible.

Skill Development is a crucial part of our intervention. Recognizing the importance of employable skills, we provide practical training in areas like obtaining a Driving License, which opens up better job opportunities in logistics and transportation. We also offer guidance on how to access and benefit from government schemes. As a result, some youths have successfully become entrepreneurs, using these schemes to start small businesses and achieve financial independence.

PALAVAI organizes Village-Level meetings and sports events like Volleyball Tournaments to foster a sense of community and belonging. These activities help build trust and offer a platform for dialogue. Through these events, we engage with unorganized youth, understand their needs, and develop programs that align with their goals.

Our long-term plan for unorganized youth includes the formation of a Youth Movement to encourage collective action and leadership. By promoting Skill Development and providing Employment Opportunities, we aim to transform these youth into local entrepreneurs and community leaders. Encouraging them to remain in their villages and contribute to local development not only improves their quality of life but also strengthens the community as a whole.

Success Stories: A Beacon of Hope

Several Irular youth have achieved remarkable success, breaking free from the

cycle of poverty and becoming role models in their communities. Ms Kanniga from Peraperi earned a gold medal in History from Annamalai University, becoming a source of pride and inspiration for her village. Adhilakshmi, a B.Sc. student, was elected as the Student Council Leader at Loyola College, Vettavalam, where she leads youth development campaigns and organizes extracurricular activities. Another shining example is Ms Gayathri from Chinnagaram, who completed her nursing degree and secured a position at MIOT International Hospital in Chennai. Her success demonstrates the transformative power of education and serves as a beacon of hope for other young people in her community.

A Brighter Future for the Youth:

The continuous engagement of PALAVAI with youth reaffirms our commitment to their empowerment. By focusing on education, skill development, and leadership, we help them transform their dreams into lasting achievements. The success of youth like Kanniga, Adhilakshmi, and Gayathri proves that with the right support, every dream is possible. PALAVAI remains dedicated to nurturing the next generation of leaders, entrepreneurs, and changemakers, ensuring a brighter future for the Irular community.



**With each visit, each motivational session,
PALAVAI reaffirms its dedication to empowering Irular youth,
turning aspirations into lasting achievements.**

VELICHAM CULTURAL TROUPE



The Velicham (Luminous) Cultural Troupe, founded in 2015, stands as a beacon of hope for the Irular tribal community, preserving their cultural identity while raising awareness about their rights and social issues. Spearheaded by Fr. Kennedy SJ and Fr. Manoj SJ, this initiative began as part of PALAVAI's mission to empower the Irulars by reconnecting them with their art, culture, and traditions. The heart of the training is dedicated to Irular folk art forms, including dance, music, and Koothu (*storytelling*). These performances were historically used by the Irular people to preserve their stories, rituals, and beliefs. Training in these art forms helps the youth connect with their ancestral knowledge and rebuild their cultural pride. The troupe's performances are now an important medium to keep these traditions alive. More than just a performance group, Velicham serves as a platform for advocacy, a bridge between generations, and a symbol of resilience for a community striving for recognition and justice.



Bringing together traditional artists, school and college students, and local youth, the troupe breathes new life into the dying art forms and customs of the Irulars. It has become a powerful medium for conveying social messages and promoting awareness of crucial issues such as education, child marriage, alcoholism, and government welfare schemes.

Training:

The Velicham Cultural Troupe provides comprehensive training every two to three months, where participants learn not only traditional Irular art forms but also engage in discussions on pressing social issues. The training provided to the Velicham Cultural Troupe is not just about learning traditional art forms; it is a journey of self-discovery, identity reclamation, and cultural pride. Each training session integrates artistic development with social awareness, empowering the youth to reclaim their cultural heritage while advocating for the rights and dignity of the Irular community. Training topics include:

- ☑ The importance of education and how it can transform their lives.
- ☑ Alcoholism and child marriage

prevention, focusing on protecting the younger generation from social evils.

✔ Securing basic rights and understanding how to access government welfare schemes.

✔ Reviving tribal art, culture, and medical practices, helping participants reconnect with their rich heritage.

✔ Unity and community building, emphasizing the power of collective action.

Advocacy and Identity Preservation:

The Velicham Cultural Troupe is not just about preserving traditions; it is about asserting the identity of Irular community and advocating for their rights. Through their performances, the troupe raises awareness of social justice, human rights, and government entitlements, helping the community become more informed and empowered.



The troupe's participation in prominent cultural and social events has been instrumental in amplifying the voice of the Irulars:

✔ At the Masimagam Festival in Mamallapuram (2024), the Velicham Cultural Troupe highlighted the Irular way of life and the importance of education through captivating performances. This event, organized by the government of Tamil Nadu, was a significant step in bringing Irular culture to a broader audience.

✔ During World Tribal Day 2024 at the Madras School of Social Work (MSSW),

Chennai, Velicham presented the unique customs, traditions, and lifestyle of the Irulars, fostering a deeper appreciation for their heritage.

✔ At the Manmanam Program held at Loyola College, Chennai, the troupe's performance left a lasting impression, emphasizing the need for cultural preservation and social inclusion.

✔ By showcasing their cultural heritage on various platforms, the Velicham troupe has not only restored a sense of pride within the community but also challenged stereotypes and misconceptions about tribal people. The performances serve as a living testament to the Irulars' resilience and dignity, proving that their traditions are not relics of the past but vibrant expressions of their identity.

Organizing Traditional Artists:

For decades, the culture and identity of Irular community have been suppressed or neglected. The Velicham Cultural Troupe provides a safe space for the youth to reclaim their voice and assert their identity with pride. It empowers them to not only preserve their culture but also to redefine it in the modern context a culture that speaks of resilience, strength, and unity. By reviving their heritage and combining it with a modern message of social justice, the troupe becomes a beacon of hope and transformation for the Irular people. It inspires the community to take pride in who they are while also challenging the structures that marginalize them.





Recognizing the need to preserve and promote traditional Irular art, PALAVAI has taken steps to organize traditional Irular artists into a union. This initiative aims to give these artists a collective voice, improve their economic opportunities, and advocate for their rights.

We have already conducted several programs to bring traditional artists together, fostering dialogue and exploring ways to protect and enhance their craft. These artists not only train the Velicham Cultural Troupe but also share their knowledge of traditional medicine, songs, dances, and storytelling, ensuring that the younger generation carries forward their legacy.

By organizing these artists into a formal network, PALAVAI is helping them secure recognition, resources, and opportunities, enabling them to thrive both culturally and economically.

Velicham : A Symbol of Hope

The Velicham Cultural Troupe has become a symbol of hope and transformation for the Irular community. It is much more than a performing group. It is a movement that blends tradition with advocacy,

empowering the Irulars to reclaim their cultural identity and fight for their rights.

Through training, performances, and advocacy, Velicham has successfully bridged the gap between tradition and modernity, inspiring a new generation to take pride in their heritage while working toward a better future. As PALAVAI continues its efforts to organize traditional artists and expand the troupe's reach, the dream of a more empowered, united, and culturally vibrant Irular community becomes ever closer to reality.

Together, through culture and advocacy, PALAVAI and the Velicham Cultural Troupe will keep illuminating the path from darkness to light for the Irulars.



**The training process is not merely an artistic exercise.
It is a movement towards cultural emancipation.**

Way Forward ...

PALAVAI is deeply committed to uplifting the Irular communities in Northern Tamil Nadu. Over the years, its initiatives have centred on creating sustainable opportunities through community leadership, economic empowerment, education, and youth development. These efforts aim to guide the community toward self-sustainability and long-term growth, restoring dignity and ensuring their rightful place in society.

The journey toward community empowerment is not without its challenges. The initiatives of PALAVAI have often faced resistance due to political situations, lack of cooperation from officials, and threats related to conversion issues. Implementing these programs and expanding their reach remains an ongoing struggle. Yet, despite these difficulties, the impact of the works of PALAVAI stand as a testament to the power of committed community service. By raising awareness, providing support, and advocating for the rights of the Irular people, PALAVAI continues to bridge the gap between the Irular community and the government. We strongly believe in remaining focused on our key initiatives to further empower the Irular community.

Illuminating Minds Through Education: Providing quality education and bridging learning gaps through evening study centres, scholarships, and mentorship programs.

Celebrating Womanhood: Empowering Irular women through self-help groups, financial independence programs, and leadership training, ensuring their role in community development.

Cultivating Community Leaders: Identifying and nurturing leaders from within the Irular community to advocate for their rights and actively participate in governance and decision-making.

Empowering the Youth: Encouraging skill development, career guidance, and higher education support to create future leaders and changemakers.

Velicham Cultural Troupe: Preserving and promoting Irular heritage while using cultural expression as a tool for awareness and advocacy.

Each of these initiatives contributes to the vision of PALAVAI of a self-sustaining and empowered Irular community. While challenges persist, the commitment to breaking barriers and fostering resilience remains unwavering. As we look ahead, PALAVAI continues to stand as a beacon of hope, ensuring that the Irular people reclaim their rightful space in society with dignity and strength.





FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Let's Collaborate, Cooperate & Celebrate
Every drop counts in making the ocean...

TO SUPPORT US

ACCOUNT DETAILS

Name of the Account : **The Society of Jesuit Chennai
Province-Donation Fund**

Name of the Bank : **South Indian Bank**

Branch : **Nungambakkam**

Account Number : **0110053000020844**

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