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## SARVA SEVA SCHOOLS: VASANTHA'S LIFELONG PROJECT

My first encounter with Miss Vasantha dates back to September 2008 when I travelled to Madurai with other friends from ASSEFA Genova Group on the occasion of the celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ASSEFA.

It was not my first time in India, but it was my first time in Tamil Nadu and most of all it was the first time I was visiting the "real" India: No one can say to have visited India without having had the opportunity to go out the crowded cities and enter the rural areas.

Gandhi was quoted to say: "The real India lives in her villages". It is true that the living conditions in the rural areas of fifteen years ago were not even comparable to those of Mahatma's time (almost a century ago), but the villages in Tamil Nadu where ASSEFA has been working since 1968 are in very remote areas and are still experiencing an economic-cultural gap when compared to the urban zones.

It was in this difficult, rural environment – made of poverty, illiteracy, underdevelopment, lack of opportunities, male chauvinism, etc. – in the late '70s of the last century that a visionary, incredible woman decided to give up her social position and professional expectations to follow her dream.

She wanted to serve her poor, needy fellow citizens by giving the children of illiterate coolies the chance of a different life through school education.

Over the years that dream has become a lifelong project: Starting from scratch in the small village of Vadugapatty, from a crowded, small "school" whose building was made of four wooden poles and a canopy roof, Vasantha has worked hard to make her dream come true.

Thanks to her "simple" vision coupled with enough stubbornness and supported by a big heart and a clear mind, she promoted the building of hundreds of schools in all corners of rural Tamil Nadu, stretching from primary to post-graduate schools, changing for good the lives of the Sarva Seva Schools' students.

Since the beginning of her educational project, Vasantha has been implementing the government curricula adding both subjects serving the school community – i.e., the *Kutty Doctors* – and vocational activities following Gandhi's philosophy recommending teaching students handwork as well.

Vasantha's discretion and gentle voice could be misunderstood: She is the living example of a strong, resolute woman shelled in a short, delicate body. Nonetheless, she is sweet and witty with both young people and adults. She is our *Akka*.

She is a modern woman and a custodian of traditions at the same time: The perfect companion and guide to discover and appreciate the secrets of the rich Southern Indian Culture.

She is a teacher and a learner. Among her many qualities, Vasantha's wisdom and good eye for discovering and taking advantage of few, right collaborators – her committed staff – have turned her early "dream" of the Sarva Seva Schools into a successful reality.

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