

A photograph of a person spinning in a circular stone structure. The person is in the center, wearing a dark cap and clothing, with their arms outstretched. The structure is built from large, rectangular stone blocks, forming a circular wall. The ground is dirt and stone. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is historical and evocative.

Retelling, Reclaiming and Restoring

The Visthar Story

Edited by
David Selvaraj

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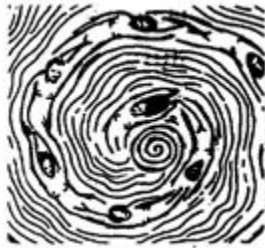
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With gratitude to
Oomen Modale Mani
in his birth centenary year



Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

– *T.S. Eliot*

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We must sleep with open eyes,
We must dream with our hands,
We must dream the dreams
Of a river seeking its course,
Of the sun dreaming its worlds.
We must dream backward,
Towards the source.
We must find the lost world,
Dream inwardly and also outwardly.

– *Octavio Paz*

Preface

In July 2020 Bangalore urban and rural districts braced itself for yet another lockdown. From being a State that was considered a model in managing the pandemic, Karnataka has been reduced to a 'hot spot' and the city has several 'containment areas'. The issue of governance, good and bad has been exposed.



We have seen heart wrenching scenes of the builders of our cities returning home leaving behind a trail of poverty, hunger and death. The month of June will forever remain a memory of the dreaded 'Emergency' (1978). But dare we speak of 'the undeclared Emergency' that Raj Mohan Gandhi highlighted in a lecture, couple of years ago, in Bangalore. Punitive actions against voices of dissent continue: be it individuals, families, institutions, even State Governments. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Theologian and Nazi dissident, assassinated for his stand was incisive in his observation; *Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. Not to speak is to speak and not to act is to act.*

In the recent past, it took the death of a George Floyd to expose the brutality of the police and the systemic evil in our societies. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been reignited and strengthened. The BLM has already had an impact in other parts of the world. Musicians, artists, civil society institutions and politicians have expressed angst and hope. Racism is back on the agenda of global politics and governance. While the 'gasping for breath' caught the imagination of many all over the world, similar cases raised their ugly head in India. None worse than the killing of Jayaraj and his son Bennicks by the police in Sathankulam in Thoothukudi (South Tamil Nadu). Police atrocities are not new to this part of the State. On the 22nd of May 2018, police opened fire on people protesting environmental pollution, caused by Sterlite (a company owned by the global mining firm, Vedanta) killing 13 people

and leaving 102 injured. These stories are not just of recent origin, nor is it restricted to Tamil Nadu alone. It has been a saga of injustices and spontaneous acts of resistance and resilience.

Over the last three decades, we have situated ourselves in a context of such stories. We have attempted to take sides with the survivors and human rights defenders on the one hand and in small measure initiated direct actions. This document is a retelling of history, a people's history. The debate as to whether or not we should record the history of Visthar dragged on for several months. It was a perspectival debate, resolved only with the conviction that our history is entwined with the history of communities who are survivors of exclusionary politics and programmes of the state and other social institutions, starting with the family. While writing this preface, I heard about the webinar on the theme of Radical Love with Kamla Bhasin as one of the speakers. It occurred to me that it was radical love that could succinctly articulate our motivation for social engagement. We understand radical love as a striving towards unconditional sharing of time and resources, an unflinching commitment to building relationships, particularly with the *Anawim* and a conviction that we do not hold the future but are called to subtle transformative actions in the present.



The year 2020 marks the centenary year of the Author of our Trust. An engineer by academic formation, who after a celebrated career in the army, continued to serve the Government as the first Chairman and Managing Director of Bharat Earth Movers Limited. Maj. Gen. O M Mani was a Gandhian and distinguished himself by example. In his unassuming way he has left his footprints on the foundation and early formation of the institution. We dedicate this book to his memory. I also remember and acknowledge the contribution of several others who shaped our politics and way of life. With great gratitude and affection I remember Hans Peter Finger the representative of HEKS in India, Desmond D'Abreo who in his characteristic, cryptic style said to me, enough of reading theology, time now to do theology, Sebastian Kappen who was *never there and yet always there*. It is a matter of joy and

pride that we continue to host the annual Kappen Memorial Lecture. This book project was thought of five years ago, when Visthar turned 25. A prime mover of the idea was M. Francis. After a distinguished career in Government, he joined us and served for over 12 years as a member of the Directorate and a Permanent Invitee to the Board of Trustees. His contribution cannot be restricted to financial analysis, management and audit. His was a sober presence at all times and a sage counsel whenever consulted. Finally it would be grievous if mention was not made of another colleague and friend, Ehtesham Khalil. After a longish stint in the commercial sector, Sham joined us and remained with us till his untimely end, when he succumbed to cancer. His charm and presence continues to be missed by friends and colleagues, within the country and overseas. Sham, let me return to you the greeting you taught me *Khuda Hafiz*, my friend. Members of the Board of Trustees have been a tower of support. Our Chairpersons, starting with K C Abraham, Theodore Baskaran and Kirtana Kumar have been particularly supportive. I thank them for their contribution over the last three decades.

This book has gone through several revisions and I do want to record a very special word of gratitude to Kalpana Chakravarthy, a friend of many years and a co traveller who conscientiously and meticulously undertook to facilitate interviews and copy-edited the chapters. Several were keen to contribute their reflections on journeying with Visthar over the last three decades. In the interest of brevity we had to restrict the contributions to a select few. My fellow contributors in this history telling are also friends and co-creators; Mercy Kappen and C F John. Alongside this volume, we have brought out a coffee-table book titled *Resistance and Hope* compiled and edited by Mercy Kappen. C F John has designed the Bodhi Vana, contributing significantly to the aesthetics of Visthar.

This book, titled *Retelling, Reclaiming and Restoring*, is brought out in a context of grief, anxiety, fear, illness and death. It should be remembered as an offering to all who yearn and work towards healing and restoration.

David Selvaraj

Founder and Executive Trustee



To love. To be loved.

To never forget your own insignificance.
To never get used to the unspeakable violence
and the vulgar disparity of life around you.
To seek joy in the saddest places.
To pursue beauty to its lair.
To never simplify what is complicated
or complicate what is simple.
To respect strength, never power.
Above all, to watch. To try and understand.
To never look away. And never, never to forget.

– *Arundhati Roy*

The Many Stories: Discerning, Responding and Retelling

The personal is political



The year 1947 marked our political independence. The struggles for freedom and dignity still continue. We at Visthar, wish to bear witness to these struggles for therein lies our life and mission. We the citizens of India must reclaim and solemnly swear “to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: justice, liberty, equality. Promoting fraternity ...”¹ Our forebears made this pledge. A legacy we must preserve and take forward. We must honour our past, recommitting ourselves to the present and to the generations to come. This process is already in the making. This is the story of civil disobedience, truth seeking and dying that others might live. The mega story comprises of many smaller ones. These are the stories of the younger generation, farmers, dalits, adivasis and women. The Visthar story is intertwined in their stories.

So how did it all start for us? I begin on a personal note as half my adult life is entwined with that of Visthar. The institution served as a platform for my socio-political engagement rooted in a journey of faith. My conviction is best reflected in the words of Oscar Romero;² “We are

1. Preamble to the Constitution of India.

2. An Archbishop of El Salvador, who was assassinated for his bold messages, speaking out against poverty, social injustice and torture in his country.

workers not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own”. Any and all engagement at Visthar is grounded in a spirituality of love reflected in justice and acts of solidarity. Even as Operation Blue Star³ was underway, I sat across the table in conversation with Hans Peter Finger, representative of Hilfswerk Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz (HEKS)⁴ in his home in Bangalore. The two of us had our own agendas at the start of the conversation. Trying to make sense of the context in India, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1984) and the anti-Sikh riots that followed, I was keen to secure a fellowship to study conflict and displacement in South India. Hans Peter Finger, on the other hand, was keen to recruit me as his successor, the first Indian to head up the HEKS operations in India. To cut a long story short, Hans Peter won that round but only after negotiations which lasted a year. A very important part of the negotiation was the formation of Visthar.⁵ The understanding was that Visthar, an independent Trust, with a secular character, be given a mandate to strengthen perspectives and skills for NGOs funded by HEKS. This was the start and I wore two hats; the first Indian to head operations of HEKS in India and the second as a Founder Trustee of Visthar. Right from the outset, Visthar ensured autonomy in governance and programming. I am ever grateful to the Author of the Trust, O M Mani and the fellow founding Trustees Gladys Sumitra, Gnanapragasam, and Anthonysamy. Fast forward, 2019: I continue to serve on the Board of Trustees, along with Gnanapragasam as a Permanent Invitee.

Given our mandate, perspective formation and skills development for NGOs was our primary task in the early years. However, with time, we undertook an adventure of faith and expanded the scope of our engagement. Our inner compulsions and a search came from listening to elders and organising debates and discussions in the public realm. Right from the outset, we were fortunate to have women and men committed to an alternative vision of India, counselling and mentoring us. We remember with gratitude: Justice Krishna Iyer, Prof Hasan

3. The codename for the Indian military action-1-8 June 1988, at the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.

4. HEKS is the development arm of the Swiss Protestant Church.

5. Visthar not an acronym. Translated from Sanskrit to mean expanse

Mansur and Dr. Sebastian Kappen S J. They helped frame the questions for our search which is reflected in the title of our first publication: *Challenges Facing Indian Democracy*. Responding to the context, we identified several ongoing struggles for social justice in the country. In these struggles and their leadership we discerned the seeds for social transformation. We aligned ourselves with them and shared their stories with a larger audience.

Our journey began by paying homage to Dr. B R Ambedkar, a prophet of social justice. In 1991, his centenary year, even as the Central and State governments sponsored monuments and buildings to commemorate the occasion, Visthar organised a seminar on the theme *Caste-Class debate and its implications for Dalit Liberation*. We began to intellectually grapple with the complexities of the issues of exclusion. We made a commitment to be part of the struggles that worked towards the liberation of dalits from the clutches of a casteist society and polity. We were inspired by the vision and call of Ambedkar “to educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality” (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 3rd ed. 1971, p: 351).

Our introduction to and accompaniment of social movements began with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and its challenge to the Sardar Sarovar Project. We are gratified that Medha Patkar remembers the campaign we initiated and recommends the same to be replicated. The Save Narmada Campaign in 15 schools covering about 16 thousand students was a huge success in informing and inspiring students and



their parents. This engagement opened up avenues to other social movements who looked to Visthar for facilitating similar campaigns. The Adivasi Self Rule (2000) comes to mind besides some others. In a context of NGOs being considered suspect for receiving overseas grants, the journey with social movements was a huge shot in the arm.

Design and development of programmes at Visthar has always been 'organic' in nature. C F John garnered inspiration from the experiences of grassroot communities and social movements. His art was an embodiment of the lament, aspiration and hopes of persons displaced by mega development projects. Mercy Kappen, on the prompting of her mentor, Sebastian Kappen S J, began to specialise in gender and diversity studies. Even in our very early years, she was involved in the processes towards the UN Women's Conference in Beijing, in 1995. Twenty five years later she is acknowledged as an internationally sought after trainer and consultant in Gender and Diversity Studies. Art for social transformation along with Gender and Diversity became strong pillars of the programme delivery at Visthar. In the year 2019, Mercy Kappen was conferred a Doctorate by The Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration for her credible and creative work in Mainstreaming Gender and Diversity in Ecumenical and Civil Society Institutions.

Politics of resistance



Besides enhancing imagination, engagement in theatre restored sanity in a world gone berserk. Few years ago at Jagriti, a theatre in Whitefield, Bangalore, I watched the Madras based theatre company *Crea Shakti* perform an 80-minute monologue, an adaptation of the play titled "*Snapshots of a Fervid Sunrise*" by Mahesh Dattani. The performance was theatrically captivating and a reflection of bold aesthetics. The play tells the story of two teenagers in love. Khudiram Bose and Thillayaadi Velliamma, independent of each other, were in love with their motherland. It is this love that led them to take on the might of the Empire. Their actions created tremors, shaking the foundations

of ‘occupiers’ who were imposing unjust laws to extract resources. In their acts of resistance, Bose chose a *bomb* and Velliamma *self-pride* and *elocution*. While Bose was killed by the State, Velliamma died in jail - both victims of the ‘empire’. The play was a retelling of their stories.

During the brief discussion that followed the performance, the audience were made aware of their collective ignorance. Barring a few, none had heard of Bose or Velliamma, who incidentally was a source of great inspiration to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, while the latter was in South Africa. Velliamma recognised Gandhi in South Africa and, as portrayed by the actor, was in awe of the man. This frail teenager, going beyond normal expectations, becomes the inspiration for M K Gandhi. A second observation was one of unsung heroes. It was this ‘framing’ of teenagers as unsung heroes that prompted my response. Bose and Velliamma were *primarily victims*. Victims of an extremely powerful and unjust structure. Being made conscious, at a very early age, the teenagers emboldened by a sense of dignity took risks. It is this that makes them heroes. The point is that true heroes are often victims who turn their vulnerabilities into acts of courage, faith and heroism. Their gasping for breath is not for survival but for the *birthing of a new humanity*.

As I continued recounting the many stories, the Supreme Court of India, represented by a five member panel of judges, has delivered an unanimous verdict on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi title dispute, the longest running civil dispute in the country. And even as essays



and articles are being published debating the merits and demerits, my mind races back in time, to December 1992. Huddled together in a shared office space in D’costa Square, Bangalore, the Visthar team, comprising Mercy Kappen, C F John and myself, fought an engulfing sense of fear and hopelessness. Hanging on to a sliver of hope, supporting each other, we explored meaningful ways of responding. This agonising

search resulted in one of our first public posters, with a text from Kabir. While John designed the poster, Mercy found the appropriate text. Subsequently she has donned the mantle of ‘finder’ and has excelled in this.

Vulnerable as we were, we went about pasting the posters on as many walls as possible. Months later a call from the police. No, not for desecrating walls but with a request for thousands of posters, to be printed in Kannada and distributed in Gulbarga in North Karnataka. Talking of Kabir, I am reminded that November 2019 marked the 650th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. When asked who is the greater of the two (Hindu or Musalman) the Guru replied: *“without good deeds, both will come to grief”*. In response to the question as to his own religious affiliation, he replied: *“my God, not of one denomination, race or colour, but of humankind”*. His reflection on caste is worth repeating *“meaningless is caste and meaningless are caste names, the same shadow protects all beings”*. We continue to draw wisdom from *our own wells*. Talking of wells, we have two open wells on campus. The larger one has taken on an iconic status. Its sheer physical beauty aside, it is in demand by artists and performers. The second well serves as the foreground to the *Bodhi Vana*- a space of spiritual awakening. Our desktop calendar 2019 serves as a tribute to these wells where dreams and imaginations mingle to inspire.

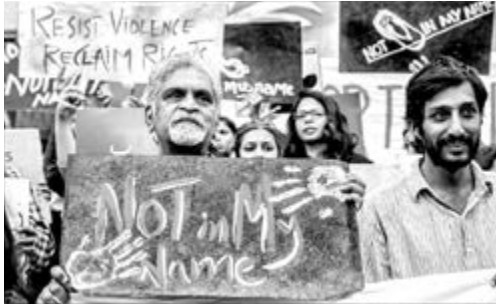
Returning to the story, our response to the desecration and destruction of the Babri Masjid by the L K Advani led Kar Sevaks in 1992 was a turning point. A turning point from being an NGO *support service organisation* to a civil society institution committed to *social justice* and *social change*, affirming the principles enshrined in the Constitution of India. Bonhoeffer’s⁶ words struck a chord in me; “We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself”. We decided to take the plunge and in small ways role model a new paradigm. Besides joining several campaigns, we organised seminars on the subject resulting in publications that was used extensively. Our publication titled,

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian and anti Nazi dissident.

Understanding Communalism carried three key contributions from eminent people in different walks of life - M Muralidharan (historian), P K Michael Tharakan (economist), and Sebastian Kappen (philosopher). Three decades ago this was a unique process, initiated by an NGO. The seminars provided a platform for activists, sensitive academics and public intellectuals to share information, analyse and explore possible responses to the growing and burning issues facing our country. Ten years later *Godhra*, Ahmedabad happened. Less than a month after the ghastly and pre-planned attack on Muslims, I was invited to be part of a team (representatives from different parts of the country) that was commissioned to study the situation of the displaced persons. Taking shelter in Dargahs, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad with very little water and at 42 degree centigrade, this experience of sheer vulnerability is etched in my memory.

Several similar stories could be recorded where one can discern a pattern but I limit myself to one, Kandhamal, 2008. This was the worst form of communal violence against Christians; killings and desecration of churches. Christian dalits and tribals brutalised and killed for their faith, falsely accused of killing a Swami. Representing Visthar, I visited and interviewed families of the traumatised. The visit, with a young researcher and playwright, resulted in preparing a script for a play which we have taken to seminaries and churches to raise public awareness and inspire public action. This, along with our support to K P Sasi the documentary film maker and Anto Akkara a journalist, was in sum our recent efforts to sustain our engagement in a growing cloud of fascism in the country. It is also a matter of pride and joy that the young researcher is currently completing his Ph.D thesis examining the nature of violence against Christians in India.

Over the last five years, we have been witness to numerous lynchings and not so sporadic religious persecutions. According to the Home Ministry, Government of India, a major communal incident is one that results in more than five deaths or leave over 10 people injured. As many as 2900 communal incidents were reported in India over the last four years in which 389 people were killed and 8890 people injured. It would be safe to say this is a gross underestimation. At the time of writing,



it is extremely gratifying to hear that the seven illegally detained adivasi Christians from Kandhamal, have been granted bail. A result of a seven year long struggle and campaigns for the release of the unfortunate adivasi

friends. As we end the year (2019), the protests are growing in numbers. A very broad array of Indians protesting the exclusionary politics reflected in the Citizen Amendment Act. This very prejudicial initiative of the BJP led Government has exposed the agenda of people in power and their underestimation of people's resistance. Though not initiators, we have been part of these struggles.

That there is a vibrant youth movement, in the making, is to be recognised. Events all over the country stand testimony to this. A mere coincidence perhaps, a quirk of sorts that Rohit Vemula was born on 30th January (Martyrs day)1989. While the latter was *assassinated*, the former died by suicide on 17th January, 14 days before his 27th birthday. This is a *fact*. What lies behind the suicide is the *Truth*. Unravelling the truth is the message. Rohit Vemula's story is a phenomenal tale of *defiance*, of *resilience*, of a life *lived with dignity and hope*. Born a dalit, he knew well the negative impact of growing up in a casteist India. That he enrolled in the University of Hyderabad as a PhD scholar, speaks volumes of his defiance and resilience. Rohit was no average candidate. He had purpose and he pursued it with firmness and a gentle spirit. An active member of the Ambedkar Student Association, Rohit at the early age of 25 was the author of '*Caste is not a Rumour*'. He made his positions clear and *spoke truth to authority*. The strong arm of the establishment came down on him like a ton of bricks. The university withdrew his fellowship of ₹25000/- per month and rendered him homeless. Joining and supporting students in Delhi, he condemned the protest of the ABVP to the film, *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai*, and the

death penalty of Yakub Memon. For articulating his right to dissent, Rohit was penalised further; death threats followed and he was branded an anti-national. In a note before he hung himself in his friend's room, Rohit wrote: *"The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a Vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust"*.

Rohit's death was a seed planted and already bearing harvest. Rohit was killed. His death exposed the vulgarity of caste and the untouchability practice in India, and the impunity with which the Indian state muffles dissent. That his memory continues to inspire youth and social movements is 'the resurrection' experience. Ironically, undemocratic acts inspire people's struggles for peace with justice. Those on the margins refuse to be snuffed



out, and deny death its last laugh. This is a story of a counter culture; a story that Visthar draws from and tries to emulate. The Visthar story is intertwined with many such stories. We are convinced that our work is well within the framework and principles of the Constitution of India. This anchor inspires us to continue our work of resistance, joining hands with others who yearn for truth and peace with justice on the one hand and on the other, exploring alternatives for a better world.

Thanks to our media partner, Studio 337, we launched a Podcast miniseries, titled *Freedom Struggles* which carries testimonies of women and men who embody a culture and politics of resistance and hope.

7. A film production company based in Bangalore.

Institutional learning



Over the last three decades, we have prided ourselves in being a *learning organisation*. A process of mental modeling: discerning root causes of problems and responding with efficiency. We have gained much from the writings of Paulo Freire and his pedagogy, the action-reflection-action process. Here are some crucial lessons learnt over the last three decades:

- » Our identity is that of a civil society institution; an independent secular body committed to peace with social justice. We are committed to values of social justice, as distinct from criminal justice. Our foci, in any engagement, are therefore guided by principles and practice of *restoration* and *redistribution* of resources and privileges.
- » Our claim to be secular does not negate the *sacred*. While affirming the liberative potential in all religions, we do not shy away from making a critique of the *politicisation of religion* and the *communalisation of politics*. Influenced by the life and writings of Sebastian Kappen, we continue to be on a journey towards a counter culture.
- » Social analysis should be a precursor to the launch of any social engagement. This is an on-going process. The contours of our analysis are expanding and nuanced given the complex and continuous changes that are taking place around us, affecting our lives and the lives of the peoples we represent. These changes are both national and international. To cite a few: the economic liberalisation instituted by the Government of India (1991), the demolition of the Babri Masjid (1992), the Sardar Sarovar project and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (1995), the Union Carbide (USA/India) 'engineered' gas tragedy in Bhopal (1984) and the solidarity movements representing its victims (1989), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and debates on socialism. Mention of these historic events is an indication of the social and cultural scourges that we encountered at the local level, be it untouchability practices, development induced displacement, corporate greed or poor governance. Social analysis basically enabled us to be *discerning* in complex and confusing times.

- >> The discernment continues to enable us determine constituency, content and methodology. Poverty, while vicious and abhorring needed to be dissected and expanded, going beyond economic poverty. We began to explore '*multiple poverties*'. This enabled us examine factors of caste and untouchability and gender and patriarchy. Exploring *intersectionalities* is where we are today.
- >> The path we pursued was one of resistance while simultaneously exploring alternatives. In hindsight, this ensured institutional visibility and support to social movements which in turn enabled us to connect grass root development with larger social processes in the country.

Partnerships



Ensuring autonomy, from the outset, has enabled the institution to make bold and creative decisions based on our reading of the context. With critical debates on the negative impact of a market-led globalisation, we began yet another phase of our programme development partnering with overseas Colleges and Universities offering *transformative learning* experiences. In 1998, Visthar launched a semester long, study abroad programme for undergraduate students from the US. Our intention was to find allies within the USA; young women and men who would *speak truth to authority*. This led to a long and creative educational partnership with Liberal Arts Colleges in Minnesota. Our educational goals seemed to be in sync. The administration of Gustavus Adolphus College and Concordia College, were committed to their students becoming '*Global Citizens*' and '*Servant Leaders*', Visthar was committed to a perspective formation of students and youth on issues of *peace with justice*. Learning from this experience, of close to two decades, deserves an independent paper. However for the moment, I wish to highlight two key learnings and record a note of gratitude. We discovered the scope of nurturing a prophetic culture and tradition among youth. It was a joy to see students explore an '*anger*' held in a *cradle of love*' and then to give themselves

a mission; '*comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable*'. It is in this framing that solidarity took shape. This is a *justice journey*; a *spiritual journey*. It would be impossible to list every faculty member and student who has touched us. A brief mention though is only proper. Thank you, Gerald and Janet Van Amburg, Doug Huff, Barbara Simpson, Per Anderson, Mark and Deb Covey and Phil Voight. You are fondly remembered along with so many others. We continue to value your friendship.

The narrative of our programme development would not be complete if space, time and mention are not given to our *community engagement* at the grassroots. This direct social engagement with the community of the poor dates back to 2007. We launched an action-research on *Violence against women*. It was this study that brought us into direct contact with the prevalence of the devadasi system in North Karnataka. To know that the practice continued in spite of it being banned in 1982 (Karnataka), challenged us to go beyond study to action. Thirteen years ago, Visthar launched a comprehensive Child Empowerment program which includes rescue, rehabilitation and advocacy. The programme called *Bandhavi*, broadly translated as *one who bonds with*. Over the last decade and a half, we have honed our skills and perspectives to enhance our engagement, advocating for the rights of children and women who come from the most vulnerable communities. We continue to be grateful to Kinder Not Hilfe (KNH), a development agency based in Germany. We especially remember, Guido Falkenberg and Sathish Samuel who have accompanied us in this journey and endeared themselves to the children in their very unassuming ways. A short video on our engagement can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

Over the years it has been difficult to answer the question by several, as to what does Visthar do? Interns have often asked, *so what defines Visthar?* Yes, ours is a multipronged response, one from which we are constantly learning from through a process of engaging with local communities, NGOs and social movements. Our task is one of reading contemporary realities and making contextual responses within the constitutional framework. It would not be wrong to say a defining feature is one of striving to live out our values and politics. Far from perfect.

Fortunately, we have never made perfection the goal. The process and the journey is itself the goal. Our endeavour and enterprise is lofty. It has never been easy to swim against the tide. But swim we must.

Resilience



Above all else, the value that we have lived out is one of resilience. Several instances flood my mind. Wading through layers, I bring a few worthy of documentation. In the early years of moving into our present campus at Dodda Gubbi, we had an unfortunate 'brush' with a 'collective' of European funding agencies. Without going into details, the representatives of the collective threatened to 'shut us down'. It was the carrots and stick all over again. If we complied and ensured changes on our Board of Trustees, we would have a feast of carrots. The stick of course was withdrawing of grants. Tense moments and anguishing days followed. We were faced with a hegemonic stand; a repeat of colonial politics. We rallied together: Trustees, staff and friends of Visthar, uncompromising on the principle of autonomy. *Did we lose funding?* YES. In the aftermath did we encounter *Job's sympathisers?* YES. Anything but triumphalistic but I am proud to say, Truth prevailed. We are still standing. Yet another threat to the institution was when we were faced with a threat of the land being confiscated by the State in the interest of Public Domain. Unruly 'surveyors' (outsourced private individuals) of the Government of Karnataka, rudely marched into the campus, obviously with no permission and marked the land to be set aside for "government use". Though the marking was made, Visthar stood its ground. Not only did we take a stand, we mobilised other victims of this vile, State sponsored, act of displacement. We continue to live on our campus.

At a personal level, it was a scary moment when several police departments (State and Central) descended on me in 1997 when I served as the honorary convenor of the Pakistan India Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD). Given our commitment to peace with justice and working through movements, I served as the Chair of an organising

committee. Our purpose was to organise an event to which over 105 guests from Pakistan were invited. It did not seem to matter to the police that it was the Government of India (the Ministry of External Affairs), who had issued visas for guests from Pakistan. In spite of ‘elements’ attempting to sabotage the proceedings through legal injunctions, the event was well attended and appreciated. Has it significantly changed relationships between the Governments? Certainly not. Have prejudices, among participants on both sides reduced? Certainly yes. For us, it was important to point to an alternative and create a platform for people from Pakistan and India to meet as fellow humans, lowering their guards and daring to look into the eyes of the other and recognise that this is neither enemy nor terrorist but ‘a neighbour’. To this end, we were successful.



It is with great affection and appreciation I recognise and acknowledge the life and contribution of Rev. E Deenadayalan, a pioneer in many struggles and a founding member of the Pakistan India People’s Forum for Peace and Democracy.

As a personal friend and colleague, it was Deena who encouraged me and Visthar to get involved in larger struggles for justice and peace. As I conclude this section, I receive news that ‘land surveyors’ have zeroed in on a part of our campus, claiming it to be ‘not on record’. This, after we have occupied and used the property for well over two decades.

Closer home, a story from within. Often they turn out to be the worst. It was certainly more than a ‘*storm in a tea cup*’. For some it was a gale. It was less than prudent on our part not to have read the signs, for it was obvious. For me, I saw afresh the *power of evil* embodied in a disgruntled former staff member who was willing to unleash the worst, in his arsenal, seeking revenge. We were rendered helpless when

faced with this fury: betrayals, instigations, accusations, frontal media attack and staff who were and are a liability. It called for a multipronged and strategic response, compassionate and yet forthright. This was a challenge and called for a drawing upon reserves of our energy: spiritual, emotional and intellectual. Did we avert a crisis? Yes. However, given the larger socio-political climate, the sea is far from being calm. Mischief mongers continue and our task as *stewards* includes dealing with vindictive politics. I vividly remember and with sincere gratitude our chairperson, Theodore Baskaran, going beyond the call of duty, spending hours, merely to calm our nerves. His presence had a sobering effect. While supporting the decision of the Board to refrain from retaliatory action, I am convinced that we should engage with the mischief mongers and find ways to deal with their politics. It is ironic to note that the very same journalists who were zealous in their conviction that we were ‘doing no good’ have made a 360° turnaround. Short of apologising, they report Visthar as a credible model agency. At the time of finishing my piece for the history document, I hear news that we have been recognized by UNICEF as the “Best Voluntary Organization” for playing a key role in preventing child marriage, child labor and child rights violations in Koppal district.

We are convinced that our strategy of resistance and truth seeking has given us the imagination to be resilient. So where did we learn this. For me, as Founder Trustee and a former Director it is a lesson from *the margins*. It is the resilience of dalits, dalit Christians, adivasis, women facing violence, devadasis, the displaced and persons with disability. Their resilience is inspiring. We are privileged to be in their company.

Looking to the future



Change is the only constant. Yes, we must be aware and always discerning. The digital era has brought about a sea change in the ways we look at ourselves and our relationships. One cannot turn the wheel back. Climate change is real and has already resulted in catastrophes, forcing change. Policies of governments influenced by the not so

invisible corporate interests are less than hospitable and destructive of all forms of life. Yes, change is real and we choose to examine these phenomena from the life experiences of those negatively impacted by this change.

Besides appropriate institutional and leadership change, we are working towards offering new programmes: a Course on Sustainability Studies in affiliation with a State University and a Centre for Counterculture Studies. This comes out of our anguish and reflections of the present. It is always the hope that Visthar, as an institution, will outlive its founders and be a tiny but relevant expression of Resistance and Hope.

David Selvaraj

Founder and Executive Trustee



I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigated pain. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain.

- Audre Lorde

Resistance and Hope

The Visthar Journey

The beginning



Visthar has journeyed from a small support service agency working out of a single room, rented space to a lively campus with arteries in nearly every area and level of social activism. From the beginning, Visthar recognised the need for perpetual introspection and evolution in response to India's varied social and political climate. The internal environment of Visthar was also of equal concern to us.

In 1987, HEKS, a relief and development agency of the Swiss Protestant Church, appointed David Selvaraj as a full-time coordinator to oversee the projects funded by them. After 30 years of Swiss representation, the organization planned to hand over its operations to an Indian. David, while agreeing, emphasized the need for autonomy and creativity in its mission to serve the marginalized in South India as well as ensure the continuity of programs already underway.

Visthar was founded and registered as a Trust in 1989. At the very inception itself, David invited me to join the team. While maintaining its role in capacity building for HEKS and others, Visthar stayed true to its name and spread its wings. We looked at the connections between the work and struggles of several small NGOs and recognized larger problems and power structures that impeded their work. We knew

that the only answer to these challenges was a broader, more holistic political and social transformation.

The early nineties was a significant moment in time to initiate a Civil Society Organization (CSO) in India. Internally, the rise of religious fundamentalism and development induced displacement, gave little voice and space to the poor and the marginalized. Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War and the pressures of a cold-blooded global market made civil society in the Global South feel like an afterthought to the forces of globalization. In India, this new world order ushered in a uni-dimensional vision of development and progress. The disenchantment with socialism also snuffed out much of the usual idealism found among young people. The dramatic changes brought about by globalization were viewed critically by those in civil society. The stage seemed to be set.

Visthar saw the links between socio-political and economic forces and sought to address these complexities with holistic perspectives and practices. In a context where the relationship between art and social action was tenuous, Visthar opened up the space for artists and activists to explore the role of art in social change. We began a cultural critique of development led by our colleague and well known artist C F John. We vigorously explored questions such as - Is our concept of development just a follow-through of the Western model? Is there an indigenous model that includes the people and their cultures? We felt that unless we looked at the connections between ecology, culture and spirituality, whatever development we talked of, would have no meaning.

In the first two years, we had our feet in nearly every level and type of engagement. It was apparent that our vision for a “humane, egalitarian, participatory and ecologically sustainable society” would take us through a complex web of related quests. What that journey would be like was still unimaginable for us. It was a time when dissenting voices were co-opted into the paradigm of the market as mass media sought to desensitize the public. **Resistance and Hope** became our catch phrase. Believing that unity of thought leads to unity of action, we brought together activists, academics and intellectuals for critical reflections on

various issues. We were committed to the process of connecting people, experiences and ideas. This became the key methodology for Visthar.

We were convinced about the need to bring together activists and academics for dialogue. ‘We had to challenge the economists in their citadels asking them to come to the ground! To sit on the ground!’. At the same time, we had to dialogue and convince activists that it was not enough to shout slogans and protest, that it was essential to enlighten ourselves with the existing volume of knowledge, challenge these knowledges and ensure that a new theory welded to the old emerges.

The Ambedkar Centenary in 1991 provided the appropriate opportunity to initiate discussions and debates on Dalit liberation. To remember Ambedkar’s contributions in this area and to develop perspectives on Dalit liberation, Visthar organized a 3-day national seminar with participants from all over the country. The deliberations urged us to recognize the inter-sectionality of caste, class and gender. From this seminar was born the Ambedkar Forum for Human Rights (AFHR). Irked by the identity politics that emerged in the forum which saw ‘non-Dalits’ only as a means to an end and not as allies, Visthar left the forum. But casteism, social exclusion, and issues and challenges faced by the Dalits remained our primary concern.

Future of socialism and socialism of the future



Despite the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of USSR we upheld socialism as our ideal. Most significantly this came at a time when the capitalist West celebrated what they termed as ‘the death of socialism’. While rejecting the Soviet model of socialism and its autocratic character, we had to convince both ourselves and civil society that socialism was not dead and was in fact all the more relevant. Visthar went through a process of critique and reflection enabled by the philosopher and scholar Sebastian Kappen.

The Future of Socialism and Socialism of the Future by Kappen, published by Visthar, was the outcome of this reflection. This monograph came at a time of disenchantment for Indian Marxists. The Communist catastrophe in the Soviet Union needed to be explained and honestly dealt with by committed intellectuals. Kappen described socialism as “the supreme realization of the individual” and a “utopia that can evoke unconditional loyalty and sacrifice without which a humane future cannot be created”. The monograph was widely disseminated through alternative and mainstream distributors.

May Day evoked strong feelings in us. I remember participating in a May Day celebration along with David in 1992. We marched in the scorching sun, shouting slogans with the thousands who had joined the celebration, organized by the Agricultural Workers Union in Chittoor district. Participation in such events gave us much inspiration and energy. One such rally inspired David to write a poem titled *Toil Rooted in Love*:

*The passion of lovers,
The commitment of workers
The fruit borne speaks volumes
For the tree rooted in love
Who will count the scores,
Nay hundreds of fruits
Plucked, tasted and savored?*

...

*Love, solidarity, joining hands
Believing only in the struggle
We gently, reverentially offer
The fruits of our love and toil
But will they last for eternity?
Guided by the unseen hand
The best we can do is offer our spirits
To be carried by the wind
This we do with workers the world over,
Today and each May Day.*

Campaigns against war

While recognizing the passion and vision which enabled the Visthar team to dream and carry forward their dreams, the journey has not been without its challenges. There were hurdles within and without. How will we live out our ideals of environmental and social justice in a decidedly unjust and top-heavy world order? This question continues to nag us. During the Iraq war in 2003, Visthar joined the anti-war campaigns in the city, produced posters with quotations from Mahatma Gandhi and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and hosted discussions on the economy of war. We realized that wars only benefitted the military industrial complex. Every dollar supporting such violent extravaganzas was pushing away progress from the developing world. This angered us but we were helpless. As a tiny organization, what could we do to be relevant?



“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality”. – Desmond Tutu

Communalism and religious fundamentalism



Another issue that has been of concern to us right from the inception of Visthar was the rise of religious fundamentalism and communalism in India. On December 6, 1992, the Hindu fundamentalist movement had arrived centre stage with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, brick by brick. The oppressive nature of the Hindutva movement was rapidly gaining momentum. Fear crept into the lives of religious minorities and in particular, the Muslims who were the worst affected.

This news cast a gloom over us as we gathered in our office thousands of miles away in Bangalore. We anguished. Our immediate response was to create a poster with the message “Let not religions separate us”. We dared to stick it in public spaces in the city. We also responded by organizing seminars and workshops and brought out publications that would help develop alternative perspectives. One such publication was titled *Understanding Communalism*.

Development, not destruction



As India began to drown in debt, it was forced to accept and adopt global capitalist monetary management programs. The new policies began to define the pattern of social spending within India. In order to understand how the decisions made at world headquarters were affecting large sections of marginalized Indians, Visthar organized a meeting of prominent economists and activists. They addressed issues such as the impact of New Economic Policy (NEP) and measures needed to sustain micro-enterprises and vulnerable livelihoods. Several groups were formed and educational campaigns on the NEP were planned. And we learnt that the privatization of healthcare, education and other social services meant that the underprivileged were denied of essential services. An export-oriented market also changed production habits. Where there had been bio-diversity and sustenance farming there was now development of cash crops. The massive injustice to the powerless was not part of the NEP’s cost-benefit analysis. Visthar took the initiative to sensitize the public, especially the rural poor, on the implications of these policies and strategies to collectively resist them. We chose the medium of theater and formed a ‘Therukoothu’ folk artists forum that conducted campaigns in the villages of Tamilnadu. While subscribing to and initiating community based action to resist policies which disadvantage masses, we were cynical about high profile seminars and conferences on the theme held at luxury hotels.

The starting point for sensitizing the public on the development paradigms in India began with our association with the Narmada Bachao

Andolan (NBA-the Save Narmada Movement). C F John and team from Visthar visited the Narmada valley, met with the NBA leader, Medha Patkar and the people in the valley. Inspired, we started a campaign in support of the struggle to stop the dam and ensure people's right to life, livelihood and identity. In 1994, Visthar organized thousands of students from over 15 schools. We had extensive interactions with these student groups, screened documentaries and initiated discussions that helped them to critically debate the idea of development, the costs involved and also to understand the struggles of the people of Narmada Valley from that point of view. This was a great moment in Visthar's history as the entire team got involved, fired by a passion beyond words.

“The Narmada Campaign initiated and facilitated by Visthar and supported by many individuals and organisations in Bangalore is an ideal effort to take the issues, questions, experiences and messages from the struggle for RIGHT TO LIFE to the children who will lead it in the future, to save the future. As one could see from the paintings, messages, songs, idioms...here in Bangalore far off from the Valley of Narmada, amidst stony walls and glittering markets, they



have visualized the bountiful nature and integrated communities, the feeling and cries of the struggling tribals - women and children against devastation. The so called innocent new generation has expressed through insuppressible, unco-optable freedom and frankness, their stance against the established, elitist development that damns and displaces. This gives us strength and hope. For, ultimate victory in the war is beyond Narmada”.

– Medha Patkar

Education for democracy



The Save Narmada Movement went beyond Narmada Valley. It reached out to revive public consciousness on issues of democracy and India's emerging identity. As we approached the golden jubilee of India's independence in 1997, the concern for the future of India's democracy absorbed our thoughts. Something needed to be

done to ensure that democratic processes would uphold people's interests through the changes in development. Inspired by Citizen's For Democracy founded by Jayaprakash Narayan, we initiated the campaign, Students for Democracy.

In conversation with young people, Visthar sought to reinvent the notion of 'development' so that students would be able to distinguish good development from destructive development. True development while recognizing differences affirms each person and community to be equally important and provides space for all to develop and develop differently. The success of the Save Narmada Campaign and Education for Democracy among young people gave a lot of encouragement to our team. We maintained the same activities with schools and colleges in Bangalore under the new title: Students for Democracy. The goal was to help students internalize the systems of democracy and respond to the realities in their own schools and neighborhoods.

The campaign, *Students for Democracy*, led to Manthana, a forum for college students. Manthana in Kannada means churning, and the wisdom that comes out of deep thinking, shaping and analyzing. The objective was to enable youth to 'read their reality and shape their own destiny'. In our understanding both the media and political structures had deprived students of the learnings that are rooted in their lived realities. Visthar team worked tirelessly to sensitize the students on secularism, gender and caste discrimination, and other social systems and processes. They also discussed how the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization were connected to their personal lives

and helped them explore alternatives. In addition to educating for political awareness, Manthana exposed students to art, theater, dance and music.

Cultural resources for social action



Right from the beginning, we felt the need to have deeper reflections on ‘the emancipatory and spiritual possibilities of culture’. ‘A culture that speaks of humanity and democracy; a culture that finds its echo in the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian constitution.

It is an appeal to think anew of a politics rooted in economic and social justice; ecological and environmental sustainability; plurality and diversity; decentralization and devolution of power; ethics, love, compassion, tolerance and the rule of law’ (Artists Unite).

Looking at the challenges and barriers we faced in our journey towards *just, democratic, equitable and sustainable communities*, we felt the need to revive our work in the area of culture and art. Art for Social Transformation was one of our primary foci during 1992 - 2003 when artist C F John was on our team. In February 2003, with the support from the India Foundation for Arts (IFA), C F John, choreographer/dancer Tripura Kashyap, and visual artist T M Azis presented *Walls of Memories*, an event around the well in Visthar. The event comprised of a series of 15 installations and a performance inside the well. There were several other installations and exhibitions on various themes held during this period. These were organized in response to issues and challenges raised by the times like the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Gujarat genocide, the Cargil war etc. We were deeply convinced of the power of art to inspire resistance and offer alternatives that are sustainable and inclusive. In this process we need to bring in and strengthen the folk art forms and nurture the talents and skills of youth from marginalized communities. Visthar Ranga Shale (VRS) is a small effort in this direction.

Social Justice, Peace and Development (SJPD)

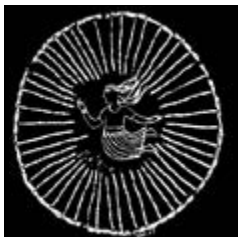


Visthar has run this study abroad programme for over 20 years now. Every fall, 15-20 students from two private Lutheran liberal arts colleges in Minnesota, come to Visthar for a four-month study-abroad course on Social Justice, Peace and Development. The course is designed to provoke analytical thought processes about justice, peace and development both in their home country and

India. The students come from all over the US and bring with them a range of experiences and interests to explore while in India. During this period they travel to 5 states visiting formal and non-formal centers of learning and participate in projects run by non-profit organizations. Through field visits, classroom work and study, they not only encounter Indian culture but also gain a first-hand understanding of the impact of globalization in countries such as India.

It was in 1997 that David was invited to take over this programme from Desmond D'Abreo, his mentor. In spite of initial resistance to spending so much of our time and energy for a group of American students, David managed to convince us and make it a Visthar programme. Though I saw its primary objective as fund raising for our work in India, I was taken up with the 'globalization of resistance' and 'global allies' argument. 'Because globalization is an unstoppable certainty, campaigns must also be on a larger scale and there must be unity of like-minded people all over the world'. This logic led Visthar to initiate other international academic programmes as well.

Beyond the binaries: Gender and diversity



We began our work in the field of gender and diversity in 1991 with an introductory workshop on Understanding Feminism facilitated by Kamla Bhasin and Vasanth Kannabiran. This enabled us to see things with new eyes. Visthar was extensively involved in the pre and post-Beijing efforts. By 1995, we were deeply convinced about

and committed to evolving gender perspectives in development and have facilitated regular gender workshops and trainings.

Visthar offered various fora for community leaders to delve deeper into themes and look at issues related to the economy, education, health, violence etc. from a gender perspective. Apart from this, we facilitated several gender training programmes in India and offered sustained perspective building programmes for Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) in south and south-east Asia. We were convinced that gender equality must be accompanied by changes in other fronts such as caste and class as they were all inter-connected. We felt that without minimizing the intensity of Dalit issue, we needed to see it in perspective by addressing the linkages between the struggles of women, Dalits and the working class. Over the years, social activists, students and various professionals have all benefited from these gender training workshops.

Since 2005, we have been offering a month long certificate course titled Gender, Diversity and Social Transformation (GDST). The course is accredited by Xavier Institute of Social Sciences (XISS), a premier institute for the study of social sciences in India. The programme has trained hundreds from over 20 countries on gender and social inclusion related topics. We also have several publications to our credit, including training manuals on Gender Equality and Sustainable Development Goals. I acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of Ranjani Krishnamurthy (Independent Researcher) for journeying with us ever since we began our work in gender. She has been a great source of support as resource person for our courses and co-author of the training manuals. I also place on record the contribution of Roshen Chandran who has been a facilitator in our educational programmes and a mentor, much loved and appreciated by our participants.

GDST was a very enriching experience, enabling me to see how patriarchy affects different peoples across the world. I learnt how to integrate theory and practice through participatory methods for social transformation. – Melina Bravo, Mexico.



The Pedagogy of the Oppressed that is followed which is a highly participatory learning process and which mostly happens building on the knowledge of the participants is what I think is unique about Visthar's training. It is something that stands out when compared to other trainings which is very top down.

I also think culture and the methodology used is very good. It provides the participants coming from various cultures a way in which they learn from each other. It has a good mix of people from managerial posts to policy makers to grass root workers ensuring learning across levels. Another thing that is very unique to Visthar's training is that there is a fair share of men participating because it is not a top down process. For me, each time I have come, it has been pleasure. And as a resource person, I have learnt so much from the participants and from Mercy, Roshan, Asha, Biju, David, Nazar and everyone in Visthar.

On the impact, I can affirm that wherever I go and meet one of the alumni of the gender training they not only have very fond memories of the programme but they speak of what they learnt from the course. So it is remembered. But what I am not clear is how they have applied it in their organization and what changes have occurred. But I do know examples of personal level change like for example, a woman standing up for her right to property. This is something she learnt from the Visthar programme.

Looking into the future, Visthar should focus on online courses with regard to gender. It should have webinars on different topics and organise it with a select few organisations who are interested, particularly in South Asia It would be good if it explores the idea of offering mentorships i.e to work with organizations to institutionalise gender and development.

– Ranjani K. Murthy
Independent Researcher and Consultant
Gender and Development

Towards alternatives in living and learning



We have been groping analytically, but never stopped exploring new avenues to make ourselves relevant. In the mid-nineties, Visthar acquired a 6-acre plot in the outskirts of Bangalore. This beautiful and rustic land soon became the epicentre of our work. It was our dream to set up a campus and a training centre that would facilitate our programmes. It became a reality as we started working on the land and designing the spaces with a rustic aesthetic sensibility. We wanted to keep our goal of empowering the marginalized in the forefront and hold ourselves responsible for our actions in both dialogue and lifestyle. In order to keep these priorities, we determined that the campus must be a manifestation of what the organization stood for ideologically. We worked hard to ensure that the issues of livelihood, gender discrimination, cultural domination and environmental degradation were not jeopardized for the sake of promoting Visthar as an institution. Our question of relevance in a constantly changing global environment hung in the air as a prayer for direction. ‘Resistance and Hope’ continued to be the theme during those years.

Visthar Eco Sanctuary: It all began with a walk during our retreat in 2014, through the Bio-diversity Sanctuary established by the Jesuits at Shembaganur near Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu. Our proposal to develop Visthar as a similar eco sanctuary was embraced with overwhelming support by both the team and the Board. Visthar Eco Sanctuary signified the need to turn around to a cosmo-centric way of life, one with earth wisdoms; and viewing Nature as much more than a backdrop to our lives. Here we see ourselves and the source of life as one with nature and in harmony with the universal rhythm of life.



We recognize the symbiotic relationship between earth and humans and our responsibility to nurture and restore ecological integrity. Our earth has been a native habitat for herbs and plants of healing, beauty and fragrance. In our intricate webbing with the world around us, they are influential and beautiful strands which we feel must be held together for a balanced living.

Visthar Eco Sanctuary is a conscious effort to nurture and protect all life on our campus. The Sanctuary transcends being a mere physical space to represent an enlightened programme reflecting inclusion and sustainability. It serves the dual purpose of being an earth-based learning centre and a development locus for traditional seed preservation and biodiversity conservation. The Sanctuary features an herbal garden and nursery, organic farming, water harvesting, a paper recycling unit and a butterfly garden. We believe that caring for the earth and nurturing biodiversity should become integral to all education. The Eco Sanctuary provides scope for children to enhance their imagination and commitment to earth and environment by getting a hands on experience working on the farm, making recycled handmade paper and paper products, taking nature walks, and learning about biodiversity and water recharging.

Bhoomi Habba - The Earth Festival: When we started Bhoomi Habba, the event was called Festival of *Justpeace* (to imply that peace is not possible without justice) and held around May Day. It was organized as part of an international programme, the School of Peace, a semester



long justice and peace education jointly offered by Visthar and Interfaith Cooperation Forum between the years 2007-2012. The School of Peace moved from our campus to Hong Kong in 2012. But we decided to continue celebrating the event under a new banner - *Bhoomi Habba*. We realized the need to broaden our concept of justice and peace to include eco justice and peace between humans and the earth. The date of the

event too shifted to June, closer to the Environment Day. Since the last five years we have been holding the festival in June, after the schools reopen. This helps to involve children in large numbers apart from serving as a site-specific environment campaign. Over the years Bhoomi Habba has become an event Bangaloreans look forward to.

Bhoomi Habba is the best Sustainability/Environment festival I have ever been to. This weekend, I had the honor to inaugurate it, while “My Earth Band” performed our music on Sustainability for Children. There was so much of passion, heart and soul in this festival. So many people working together to make this world a better place for generations. This visit to the Bhoomi Habba gave me so much of hope for our future.

– Ricky Kej, Grammy® Award Winner, 2018

Breaking barriers, building communities



“If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up.”
Adrienne Rich

It was in 1995 and against the backdrop of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, that we undertook a study on violence against women. The study was designed as part of a campaign for strengthening women’s rights, resisting violence against women and promoting their political participation. Bandhavi, a short stay home for women in distress was a result of this study. It was initially conceptualized to support and shelter the victims of domestic violence, a place where women could gather the strength to heal themselves and rebuild their lives. Bandhavi offered legal counsel, medical care, physiological and moral support as well as vocational training. These, we hoped, would empower women to move forward in life. Soon Bandhavi transitioned into a programme for ‘Girls at Risk’. This shift was a natural evolution of our commitment towards marginalized communities; the dalits and the most vulnerable, the Devadasi women and their girl children. Inaugurated on 10th December 2005, on International Human Rights

Day, Bandhavi initiated a small step towards restoring the rights of young girls from North Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh largely belonging to the Madiga Community. The program supports the girls build a positive sense of self, raises consciousness about multiple injustices, equips them to engage with society and develops their leadership skills. Currently there are 151 children directly benefitting from the project including the children in Samagara Shikshana Shale (SSS), the primary school on the campus which is a component of the project. Bandhavi is supported by Kindernothilfe (KNH), Germany.

Another major community initiative of Visthar has been the Child Rights Education and Advocacy (CREA) programme. This is a network of five NGOs in five districts of North Karnataka. Initiated in 2010, the program collectivizes children and raises their consciousness about child rights. The program also sensitizes multiple stakeholders who have a responsibility for upholding children's rights. CREA is supported by Kerk in Actie (KiA), Netherlands. Visthar Ranga Shaale (VRS), Rural Women's Collective and the Children's Movement for Climate Justice (CMCJ) have been some of our other community interventions. Creative and participative leadership of Nazar P S and Asha V has made our community advocacy programme a model to emulate.

The journey must continue



The growth and development of Visthar has been organic, responding to felt needs: external and internal. What began as a 'support service' organization from a shared office space has grown and diversified. Visthar currently has a campus in Bangalore and another in Koppal employing over 40 staff engaged in varied fields of work.

This includes educational programmes, community based development activities, conference and retreat centre and an eco sanctuary. Visthar was primarily a support service organization in the beginning years, providing a platform for conversations between activists and critical intellectuals. Our profile has changed over time, with the introduction of educational and community advocacy programmes.

The journey has not been without hurdles. There were times when we, as an organization, were faced with a crisis of confidence. At times we felt we no longer had a grasp of issues and their ramifications. Everything seemed to be complex and contextual. Our responses had to be space-time specific, and we often wondered if we had the depth, the competence and the commitment to respond relevantly and meaningfully to the challenges around.

Anchoring ourselves in the struggles and hopes of the marginalized, we continue groping, searching for relevance.

Mercy Kappen

Director and Member, Board of Trustees, Visthar.





Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

...

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

...

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise, I rise, I rise.

– *Maya Angelou*

Conversing with the Future

Reflections on our times and engagements at Visthar



Fifteen years of my time with Visthar (1991-2005) was a very important phase in my life. Prior to our joining Visthar, both Mercy and I were with Pipal Tree for four years which set the foundation for two kinds of engagement. Firstly and at a personal level, it gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with renowned personalities like Raimundo Panikkar, Swami Agnivesh, Nitya Chaitanya Yeti, Ramchandra Guha and others. Listening to them helped open up and connect to a world of profound thinking for the common good. Secondly, the cultural interventions and engagements at the local level. Both together formed the basis for our thinking. These thoughts and orientation became a matter of personal value and committed engagement for me because of the time I had with Fr. S Kappen during the last six years of his life.

I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to closely connect with Kappen. I am quite certain that he was a major driving force behind Visthar especially in the initial years. My close acquaintance with him deeply reassured me of my own perspectives on earth and life, an earth centered spirituality, culture, social equity, and politics. It helped in particular to see these thoughts not merely as perspectives but more importantly as a way of living. This opportunity to witness his life was a gift because what I seek are not ideas and perspectives but embodied visions. Kappen was one such. He continues to give me conviction, strength and courage.

The late 1980's and early 1990's were historically a churning time, both globally and nationally. The fall of the Berlin wall, the Collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gulf war, the New Economic Policy and the demolition of Babri Masjid had a major impact on our thinking and in the re-shaping of our perspectives. It was opening up a new world - politically, economically, culturally and spiritually. It was because of our interaction with Kappen that we were able to shape our engagement with these happenings. Otherwise, it would have taken me and others at Visthar to fanciful discourses flaunted in seminars and conferences, a trend at that time and which continues even to today.

Visthar was born amidst this changing world.

David Selvaraj was the India Consultant for HEKS and also the Executive Trustee of Visthar before he joined as its Director in 1997. And it was this experience which oriented Visthar towards forming linkages with a number of NGOs in South India. This was a very important step. Our perspectives gained value by engaging with ground realities. We encountered real concerns and lived experiences. As a natural extension of this engagement with NGOs, we also got connected to various people's movements in the country. Personally, I got involved with Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and National Fish workers Forum (NFF), and to a less extent with sectors like the tribal movement. These have helped ground us beyond the institutional structure of a typical NGO.

Number of people's movements in the country felt free to connect, relate to and work with Visthar. Partly, it was the way in which the core team of Visthar conducted itself. The non-competitive attitude of Visthar, without any compulsion to flaunt its name or drum its activities to the funding agencies or to the world, have also contributed towards this. While we understood the scope of an institution, we restrained from being institutionalized. By nature and perhaps because of our background, we were free from both the given packages of NGO activism, as well as the romantic mental construct of the 'converts'. We were finding meaningful ways to respond to and engage with the reality by supporting different communities and people's movements in their struggles towards life, livelihood and identity. Beyond this, we were

also actively engaged with the general public through consultations on perspective building and campaigns using posters, cards, calendars, publications and other mediums on socially relevant issues. We also curated art projects as a response to the mainstream discourses of the time. Through these multi layered approach, our engagement erased the dividing line between an NGO and a responsive and conscious citizen.

From the edges of wounds



The formation and functioning of Visthar at that time was very different from that of most institutions. They would have a clear mandate to act in terms of sectors they had to serve or concerns to address. But for Visthar it was multilayered. We had an overall perspective on what we need to foster, affirm, reclaim, support and resist. The nature and forms of interventions stemmed from the strength of the core team, rather than the members becoming a means to respond to the demands that came from outside. David, Mercy and myself were able to contribute from our own individual richness to specific concerns and sectors. It was a layered interaction between us, preserving and maintaining a level of mutual fecundation, towards bringing out the best meanings in our interventions.

The times were changing and it had its impact, subtle to gross, on all spheres of life and on people in villages and cities alike. The land and water that defined one's identity and consciousness became commodities. The emerging religious fundamentalism, changing life styles, taste and aspirations - all created immense churning in individuals and communities. Stories abounded of land acquisitions, development induced displacement, state control of resources, and fragmentation of communities. It was not the new market and its opportunities that we constantly met with, but rather the victims of it. These were seeping into us in ways more than we can speak. I am sure it must have been the same for any socially, ecologically, culturally and ethically conscious person of that time. Since Visthar's activities were not confined to any particular sector or community, we had a larger

overview of things happening in the country and the opportunities to engage with a cross section of it.

So as an artist, I was trying to find new forms, mediums, spaces and language to express layered meanings found in lived wisdom of communities. The posters, stickers, picture postcards, calendars, publications, and other campaign materials were used for lobbying to support people's movements and other communities. Working on art projects were part of a larger concern and preoccupation.

Collective spaces



I see Visthar as a collectively invested space; where individuals, collectives and communities work together, with each one's work contributing to the other. It was the individuals with their committed work that made up places like Visthar. And it was not just Visthar as there were several others who collectively invested themselves in causes they were committed to and in doing so they were trying to preserve the grace and dignity of Life.

Many artists collaborated with me in all the art projects and also in a number of other ways like designing posters, calendars, workshops etc. and made their immeasurable contribution to these causes. It was the spirit of the time that made all these possible. The questions of I, you, we, them etc., did not weigh anyone down. What drove us all was the desire to uphold something that permeated us.

For us, being connected to these communities and becoming part of their struggles was not just an act of support for them, but more importantly it was an unfolding of a response to our own fears of losing Earth, cultural pluralism, a spirituality that embraced every being and a vision of life that was rooted in earth. We realized that it was the tribals, traditional farmers, and fish worker's communities who were nurturing and preserving the Earth with its rich biodiversity and a vision aligned

with the speed and proportion of life. In their resistance, we found lights for our common future. So supporting them was a way of nurturing and preserving its grace.

Visthar campus: That is how it is commonly called now. Prior to buying the land, we had extensive discussion among ourselves as to what it meant in terms of perspectives, of moving to a land from the city office. Was it that we needed a larger space of our own to organize our programmes? Was it that we wanted to enjoy the ambience of a natural space free from the noise, pollution and other distractions of the city? Or was it to allow ourselves to be affected by the space and soil that would alter our own sensibilities, tastes, and ways of perceiving our discourses? These were some of the key questions.

From the time the land came to our care as a gift of earth, I was trying to see what meanings could evolve that would alter our perspectives and the forms we arrive at. There was a natural and effortless process in the way the land lent herself to us. To start with, the posters and the calendar that we produced in the beginning itself carried images that were created from soil, roots, trees, leaves and other natural motifs as against forms of imagination drawn or painted on paper or canvas. It was an opening up of a different visual sensibility and language wherein we restrained ourselves from our own imagination and instead, allowed the earth to speak herself.

Land: When anyone gets a piece of land in urban or semi urban places, the aesthetic principles on which it would be defined is predictable; it is an aesthetic of control and concealment, a manicured cosmetic beauty that borders on vulgarity. But when the land is maintained for its honest functioning, where the land is respected and cared for That It Is, brings healing. It is so also with people. If anything is controlled to make something other than what it is, it can only bring ill health. It is the same for humans too, who have been obsessed with the power of control.

Visthar has attempted to maintain the naturalness of the space and its ambience. Today when we use the word natural, it ignites in us an imagination of romantic wilderness. This too is a counter product of the obsession with control. Here when I use the word natural, it means

close to the ambience of the land, of what a simple traditional farmer would provide. It has the honesty of a mutual relationship between the farmer and the Earth and not something fanciful and exhibitionistic. It is an ambience that holds the taste and poetry of the ordinary. Most people even today are trying to make their life a performance, giving the reason that otherwise they cannot survive in this world. And deep within we all weep to be ourselves, just to be plain, honest and ordinary. It is this poetry of ordinariness that holds the power of healing.

Once we come to understand the real nature of materials and its real context, a refreshing world opens up for us where we find ourselves beginning to weave with it, bringing in a balance which we never knew before. Our body will start betraying our ego and the constructed world of convenience. And our attempt at Visthar was to trust this relationship with the materials of the land and its context. I have seen that it is not easy for any institution to hold on to trust like this as different people come and go, each with their own inner compulsions and baggage.

Architecture



The political and social perspectives of most sensitive and sensible people in the country have a common discourse. We speak what is politically correct but when it comes to taste and other aesthetic sensibilities that define our day to day

life, it remains controlled by the taste of the market and certain cosmetic sensibilities which is largely a product of urban sensibility. For instance, take modern architecture or just a plain unthinking functional space or even architecture that claims to have alternate earth sensibilities - all have a certain established formula. If you browse through books and magazines on architecture, it will give you interesting and attractive elements to shape a space. Exposed bricks, certain abstract composition of the space and interesting renderings on the wall edges etc. If one is not conscious of why each element is the way it is, we will slip into something that removes us from ourselves and proudly accept something that is defined by some or the other trend.

It was a certain chemistry at Visthar which allowed us to pursue some desirable orientations. As a first step, we decided to use compressed mud blocks for the constructions. Compressed block was conceived by Application of Science and Technology for Rural Areas (ASTRA) of Indian Institute of Science as a measure to address the energy concerns in the field of architecture. We chose it from the point of both ecological concerns and aesthetic interests. Once the material was decided, then the question was on the designs and its economic implications.

I would like to share some thoughts on three spaces that I have designed.

Office space: I felt the architectural space had to be more than a functional space. And so, I made an attempt to provide an experience of the expanse of the land outside even as one was entering the office. The idea was to envelop a space within a larger space by organizing and moulding solid elements of mass, making the architecture come into being. The interaction between the forms and space at different scales is made possible. At each level, I felt we should be concerned not only with the form of a building but also its impact on the space around it. The design was such that no form would stop at the edges, but in fluid ways, extend to the space around. As you move around these spaces, you will experience it without your own knowing. So as you enter, you only see an open space with different floor levels. It is almost theatrical with a central water body open to the sky, the sun streaming in, water lilies in bloom amongst weeds, bringing smiles to the faces of visitors. The rooms are tucked away into four corners



of the space giving sufficient privacy to the staff for their work. The space invokes a desire to gather and uphold the sense of community spirit. It makes you calm and helps to think constructively and work.

I feel any space should reflect or should inspire the inner space. It should help us to connect to the space within and also to the space outside. This will make you realize how the form and the space around bring together an inseparable reality, of architecture. The symbiotic relationship between the inner space and outer space is its soul for it has no pretensions and frills added to it. It is just a plain space that invites and makes you feel at home.



Dining space: When it came to the dining space, a suggestion was made to do away with tables and chairs which were agreed upon by the team. Then the next question was how do we go about it. It was during that time that I had an

opportunity to spend a day with a group of children at a small stream on the southern outskirts of Bangalore. The stream had a number of rocks with water flowing between the spaces and I closely observed those children who were engaging with the space, finding their spaces of comfort to sit and share their food. I made a working sketch on the spot attempting to translate that experience into an architectural possibility. By the end of the day and back in my own space, I further modified the design to suit a dining space and created a prototype in clay which was scaled up to create the present dining hall. It has been built for people to sit and share their food. This design offered different possibilities for people to sit according to their convenience and temperament, as we do in any given natural space like in a forest. Some like to sit at a higher level and some at a lower level. Some hold the plate in their hand and some others place it on something to eat. There are different possibilities for people to orient and sit to interact between themselves. Generally when we eat, at no point in time do we find it comfortable to interact with more than five or six persons and this space allows for the possibility of grouping in small numbers. It also gives space for one to be on their own and at the same time remain part of the community. The space was designed keeping in mind all such possibilities. However, when the design was completed, I was not sure if the space would be used as I imagined. But to my great joy, people found their own ways,

as it was purposed.

The floor of the dining space is in the form of a concave with seating arrangements at different heights giving it a theatrical feel which can also be used for small intimate performances. The entire space is in grey, giving it a neutral aesthetic appeal in terms of colour. In terms of temperature, it's the coolest spot in the campus. As we all know, people in our culture tend to talk considerably while they eat but the space is so designed that, even when 60 persons are talking at the same time, you hardly hear the noise.

Any given space and form, because of the material used and the way the space is organized, fits one particular class of people making some comfortable and some others uneasy. But in the case of Visthar's dining hall, it is class neutral. A farmer, a tribal or a student, an adult from a different class and stature, all would feel at ease with this place. But the ones, who are culturally conditioned to one particular kind of comfort or individuals with certain special needs, may find some difficulty.

The Mandala

The various peoples movements we were connected to, when engaged beyond the apparent issues of livelihood, made us recognize how their struggles were also struggles to preserve a relationship with earth which was spiritual, a kind of bodily holiness. Rooted in earth and life, their struggles affirmed and celebrated the interdependent connections not only between humans and other living forms but also with inanimate forms. For many in these communities, the animate and inanimate were part of the same reality. Every matter, be it soil, rocks, trees, water, decaying leaves, elements, seeds, sprouts, all part of one continuum came alive, pulsating and radiating life.



Theirs was a world of basic economy, pragmatic outlook and abundance of life and a sense of beauty grounded in it. If we are still surviving today in spite of the grave ill deeds and indulgences that humans have

committed on earth, it is only because of this innate force of Life at work. The foundational force of earth is love and reverence which is different from market or political opportunism. If you cut a branch, many new branches sprout; if you cut the tree, many roots sprout far away from its source. To sprout a few seeds, a tree produces tens of thousands of them. Beauty and joy is found in these simple and functional things, in preserving and not wasting.

The mandala is designed to initiate one into this world of bodily holiness and spirituality that embraces life. The mandala with the jackfruit tree and the well together holds and reveals a primal world, almost archetypal in nature. For a person who loves to sit and reflect, this space would take her beyond infancy and death.

A friend of mine, listening to our desire for such a space, offered to support it financially. I spent nearly two years for this space to unfold. There are already established architectural languages for places of prayer and reflection among all religious communities, but I did not want to rely on such principles. So I waited for something to evolve, trusting the paths I had walked with the tribals, drawing energy that was gifted from Visthar's own spaces like the well and jackfruit tree. I wanted this space to help us enter the realm of our own inner self.



I would like to thank Jeet Ipe and his team who helped to resolve certain technical issues and helped in constructing this space.

After the space was opened for visitors and seeing their responses recorded in the visitor's book, I felt it was worth trusting and relying on what the earth offered than to refer books. All the three architectural spaces evolved through a process that was specific to that place. Mandala is a sacred space for reflection on earth centered experiences which is symbolic, spiritual and transcending. The sacred space is elementary. It is not a consolidation of religious thought and

certainly not interreligious. It is a space where one can come and reflect on earth-centered experiences and initiate a process of deconstruction. It is a space to contemplate the fragments of our identity that are humanly engineered. It is a space that helps us transcend the tenets that rule our mind and to create a space within oneself, allowing for the birth and death of different seasons.

To read further on this space, [visit www.cfjohn.com](http://www.cfjohn.com)

Art Products



Once the land came to our care, we allowed ourselves to be deeply affected by the land and by each and everything that it held, to be guided fully by the context of the land. We started a handmade paper making unit and a pottery unit and ever since, every product we made became a product of human labour; a careful weave of the elements and materials available on the land. We did away with offset printing and instead opted for traditional screen printing. If we chose offset printing then the paper and its texture too had to be compatible with the machine, for which we have to depend on the same market. But when we opt to work with our hands, then it offers us the possibility of a different world. The elements of each world is interconnected and so if you choose one, then all the parts to fit that has to come from the same world.

Apart from such products, we initiated Art projects and held many art and other reflective workshops for people of all ages, different professions and communities, both from India and abroad. Those workshops were not founded on abstract perspectives but on reality which the body and inner senses could connect. The land served as the basis for reflection evolving thoughts and materials to create forms.

The trees, the well, the soil, water, the tree barks, the seeds, the anthill, the spaces in between forms, different kinds of leaves, twigs - all came alive, speaking to us and connecting that which was deep within us

and the world outside. Everything became objects of reflection and guiding motives, and to blossom with creativity, where everything that bites our being, be it politics, subjugation, healing touch, togetherness, spirituality... all found its expressions.

So for us, it was not an act of parachuting or super imposing ourselves on the land but rather was a process of allowing ourselves to be affected and nourished by the land and sprout and grow like any seed that would on its soil.

All these are the possibilities that land lends herself to. However, we have also seen people unwilling to dissolve and are striding to conquer, believing that is what life is meant for.

Art for activism



People generally use the terms like art for activism or cultural activism. But for me, it has been a continuous search, of trying to find the true meaning of art. And the times that we were in was compelling us to find new forms to express our concerns. I felt the conventional forms like paintings or sculptures would not be able to articulate the thoughts and sensibilities that I wished to bring forth. It was not to dismiss the power of conventional art forms as I truly feel moved by good paintings. But the time and circumstances that we were in, prompted me to explore differently. That is how I came up with such forms, working in collaboration, engaging with communities, by coming out of conventional gallery spaces to public spaces and by critically engaging with the public and public discourses. The contexts and our collaborations guided us towards those directions that would help change the way we saw Art.

From 1993 to 2003, I conceptualized and initiated eight art projects with installations, sound, photography and performances. While some were theme specific, the others were site specific. A total of 23 artists from

Bangalore have collaborated with me in one or more of these projects.

The practice of Installation Art in India began in the early 1990's and, Bangalore has been a major contributor to this field right from its early period. From the first installation, *Cultural Spiral – 1993*, and through all other Art Projects, our explorations resulted in discovering new materials, new forms, new languages, and public spaces for cultural interventions. In the true spirit of collaboration and through connecting with land, communities and public spaces we, with determination and restlessness responded to the call of the times. And our work found expression in installations, performances and sound art. Hence the projects that we did resulted in bringing together diverse sections of communities. Enigmatic thoughts and experiences, will to engage and intervene, and trust in the power of Art to make leaps into unexplored realms - all caused the emergence of these new forms. But these our interventions are not to be seen as crossing the threshold of existing artistic practices of the times, but as making a leap into new ways of interventions through Art.

Reflecting on the first installation, *Cultural Spiral*, 1993 the eminent cultural critique Rustom Bharucha wrote:

“This was a cultural spiral in plastic, which incorporated non-canonical texts from Buddhist, Bhakti, Sufi and Christian philosophies painted in black on its surface. Serving as an environment rather than as an art object, the spiral offered viewers the possibility of experiencing an inner journey, as they walked through the structure and encountered themselves at the vortex of the installation with an image of themselves, reflected in two long mirrors. Then, along another path, they would journey through the spiral to the world outside.

Tuning into the political dynamics of this secular space, Janaki Nair has rightly highlighted the ‘self’ as one of the most elusive, yet crucial components in shaping secular consciousness. The process of self-confrontation combats both the ‘regime of censorship’ instituted by the agents of the Hindu Right, as well

as the obligatory secular dependency on ‘cultural pluralism’, which can so often be trivialized within ‘the grab-bag of syncretistic traditions’ (Nair 1993; 39). Countering these forces, the construction of the ‘secular self’ can draw more meaningfully on the principles of specific cultural resources. In this regard, the choice of the mirrors in the spiral by the chief architect C F John, was directly inspired by the centrality of the mirror as an image in the ritual celebration of Vishu (New Year) in Kerala, when ‘family members are woken up to a bountiful sight of fruits, flowers, gold, and coconut – but, above all, of a mirror in which they see themselves’. The mirror is also one of the most complex emblems of transition between ‘everyday life’ and ‘performance’ as the auspicious moment when the actor is transformed into another being, another self.

Here again, one notes how an image drawn from a religio-cultural tradition can be effectively secularized with the necessary ideological intervention and the use of particular materials. Plastics, for instance, as Nair points out, was a deliberate choice for the spiral, partly because of its transparency, which enabled viewers to see the texts along with the bodies of other spectators. This heightened an awareness of collective participation in a visual act – a participation that was both countered and counterpoint by the moment of solitude in the vortex of the spiral. Another reason for the choice of plastic was its ‘synthetic’ challenges to the ‘organicity of vision’ offered by the upholders of a single, unified, eternal Hindu vision of India. It was also through the very contemporaneity of its material that the use of plastic could debunk the ethnicity of indigenous materials that are so often valorized in the national commodification of Indian culture in festivals at home and abroad.

I have dwelt at some length on this installation because it seems to me that the spiral offers one of the most potent visual signs of our emergent secular culture. In its form, one can discern movements that are reflexive and curvilinear, resistant to the certainties of straight lines, and yet directed in its search of the

unknown. Tellingly, the journey inwards can also be a shared experience”.

(Rustom Bharucha, In the Name of the Secular – Contemporary Cultural Activism in India, Oxford India Paperbacks)

This installation was in the form of a spiral maze. Two intertwined spirals over 100 feet each in length and 6 feet in height with 4 feet space between each layer was installed. The material used was plastic. The transparent surface of the plastic made it possible to weave together visuals and the viewers from different layers. Hence, contemporaneously the images, installed space, and viewers became integral components of the work.



Visuals and texts, both in English and in Kannada, were taken from various counter cultural/religious movements from history that countered the dogmatic religious positions of the time. These visuals were painted or drawn on the plastic surface of the spiral. Two parallel mirrors were placed facing each other in the center of the maze where the viewer could see him/herself. The spirals placed emphasis on self-realization that was rooted in fundamental human values in their relationship with the Earth.

All the forms that we created in our art projects were temporal in nature where we used natural materials, unlike the counter parts in other places in the country where the forms largely relied on photography and permanent structures that were movable and could be shown at other places. And because the forms we worked on were temporal in nature, its scope in exploring creative expressions knew no bound. And art was finding its meanings, freed as it were from any kind of personal interests.

By the turn of this millennium, the Art scenario the world around started changing. The new forms had already established its roots. The demands and questions from the non-practicing community changed.

For many, it became a form to pursue. Galleries started accepting it. The walls and floors of galleries that were kept pristine to display paintings and sculptures were thrown open for the artist to do anything that she/he desired to do - be it breaking down of walls, making holes on the floor, painting the walls, sticking, pasting, - all was accepted for the sake of Art. The International Biennale in various places opened up opportunities for the artist to take art outside of India to wider communities. Digital cameras and new forms of documentation became easily accessible. Funds coupled with imagination started giving Art new scale and sensibilities and in the process Art became a form of visual spectacle mesmerizing both artists and lay person alike. Multi mediums of expressions were woven together to create new forms and text, digital images, film, voice, materials etc. attempted to capture subjects that varied from the political to the subversive, the enchanting, the fantasy, the esoteric, just formal surprises, or expecting the unexpected and to the point of anything for its own sake. It surprised, created a sense of wow, or a form for cerebral excitements.

When I started doing installation art projects 27 years ago (1993), the context of art practices was very different. At that time, the subject and form itself became a means to intervene in the discourses of the time. But today the art market has its own interest. It uses Art to make a different kind of cultural discourse, one which uproots us from our own inner thoughts and living.

Art and Activism



For an NGO to engage with art seriously was not usual in the country, except in the form of street theatre, puppetry and posters that directly articulated the concerns that the groups were engaged with. Moreover, we were working on forms that were totally new with an aesthetic orientation that was unthinkable and unacceptable in the field of art itself at that point in time. Several debates have taken place scrutinizing the validity, intentions and many other aspects of these practices. The kind of questions that a practicing artist had were not the questions that many others who were not,

had. And even among the art fraternity, because these forms were not following any established and accepted forms, some were taken aback by the possibilities that it offered, some were confused, some were angry and hostile, some dismissed it, and some understood what was in store. Because these were not following any established and accepted forms. We were treading on unknown waters, but trusting the processes to guide us. Besides, the language we attempted to foster was not conforming to the growing discourses of the dissenting communities of the time. For example, many people who were the spokespersons of secularism took offence to the meaning and purpose of the Cultural *Spiral* as it laid emphasis on the spiritual quest. Needless to say that over the years, the very same people started finding meanings in such an orientation. The people who raised objections and were scrutinizing and judging the forms, later became the upholders of the same. But Visthar was made up of different streams and therein was its strength: trusting, accepting and holding the differences that made all these possible.

The last installation project that I did (1999 - 2003) was in and around the well at Visthar. The well compelled me to look at everything that once made it possible for the well to stay alive with clear water.

The well was without its soul – water. It was something that had lost its meaning. It had become a garbage bin of mythical proportion and was symbolic of our times, of the human mind filled with decadent thoughts. The well remained as a witness to the ill-effects of urban development, bringing forth memories of a civilization gazing at our world from the depths of silence. Azis T M, Tripura Kashyap, and myself engaged with this enigmatic form for over three years.

Our working with the well and the community that was once connected with it was a journey through what was lost, the anticipated loss and the negotiated life between the two. In the 30 feet gap from the ground into the depth of the earth every moment of our working oscillated between the gravity of bodies and the realization of the weightlessness of everything. Hence, working with every form was an attempt to explore the enigma of our relationship with what we are and that which was disappearing.

On the 7th and 8th of February 2003, we concluded the project with presentations of events through installations and performances. But there continued a growing compulsion and urgency within me to focus on things that had made possible the wells to stay alive through ages, pushing me towards affirmative and nurturing interventions that had seeds of Care and Trust in them.



I realized that it was the humble and the invisible that preserved the well with glowing waters and the land with an abundance of life. The labouring men and women who remain at the margin and not fitting into our mainstream discourses i.e., the farmers, the caring mothers - all were the custodians of a vision and a view of life that was founded on simplicity, caring, sharing, sacrifice, and non-dogmatic faith. That experience compelled me to look closely at how they resolved, forgave, tolerated, included, shared, transcended, let go, go dormant, and preserve sanity and grace. And it is in them that I saw the immense possibilities for survival, choices for living, and for holding peace. I realized that often what we discard is what continues to sustain our survival. Their unconditional work, like the work of earthworms and other innumerable beings on earth, gives me hope and trust: it brings back the springs to a well that have gone dry.

So the work that I do today stems from these realizations. The engagement with people's movements and other communities and the active engagement with the discourses of the times, all have helped me to arrive at these resolves.

I think only a true engagement with the soil and the ones who work with it can allow all other work that we do today to become whole and complete. A good farmer spends her/his time with the soil and Life. She/he works day and night to preserve Life and Health. What do they speak without speaking? A good farmer's work helps to keep the moisture of the frogs from going dry, the moisture of the ecosystem, and also that

of the community. So the last two years of my time at Visthar was spent looking into the soil, water and the life of that soil. It was to reflect on the possibilities of a life and practice that bear the spirit of regeneration.

The cultural practices that we engage with and present today often serve a discourse that stems from and address an abstract and floating reality. It may have to do with a line of thought from distant history or an abstract notion of identity, or even a notion of justice. But these preoccupations are held disregarding and defying stories of the immediate living, or the land-and-place-centered identity or the respect and justice that the neighbor deserves. Such abstract cultural forms lure our minds with curiosity and astonishment and also flame our head by making uneasy moments loom large. Preoccupation with abstracted thoughts and forms result in the loss of our own inner thinking. It uproots us from our capacity to discern because abstraction makes us lose sight of inter-connections.

Engaging with a spirit of regeneration will help open us up to the intelligence and inner workings of the small, insignificant, the formless, things at the edges and that are out of the vicinity. They will all come alive in our consciousness as fundamental life forces that can sustain Earth and Life. I feel it is time for our thoughts and anguish, and the purpose of art and poetry to serve Life that is rooted in the Soil and community. Only that which finds its bodily presence can breathe Life.

It is time for us to find our stories, art and poetry in seeds, soil, and in the open hands that dream with it. It is time to denounce the abstract and the floating, and start seeing, touching, nurturing and finding joy within the real.

Our thoughts should become flesh once again.

C F John

Senior Artist and Social Activist



Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

– *William Ernest Henley*

Walking with Visthar



Post retirement, I was heading an academic NGO in Chennai. It was a long shot from civil service to a Non-governmental organisation. But the experience enabled me to see the role of such organisations in areas where the government doesn't normally get involved.

After I moved to Bangalore I met David Selvaraj, at a lecture organised by Visthar. I had known him by proxy after reading his insightful paper on the kind of theological education we need in India. It had created in me a very positive image of the man. And so, when he asked me to join the Board of Trustees of Visthar I accepted his invitation. I learnt about Visthar and its concerns with issues related to justice and peace, and advocacy. Visthar as an NGO had already built an impressive reputation.

At that time when I joined Visthar, in 2009, NGOs all over the country were coming in for a lot of criticism in the press. After an intensive scrutiny the Council for the Advancement of Peoples Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) had blacklisted nearly a thousand organisations for malpractices, which included some big names, and this had damaged the image of NGOs. .

I soon found out that one of the strengths of Visthar is transparency in its operation and being very accountable. All the funds received were used for the stated purposes. In fact, Visthar conducts an annual course for other NGOs on Financial Management and Social Accountability. The minutes of the Board are meticulously recorded, without delay I must add. Even dissent and differences find a place in the records. They

maintain an unpretentious office and make it a point never to pamper the donors. I have travelled with some of the visiting donors and was able to observe this. And those who work for Visthar are modestly but adequately compensated. A telling sign is that the turnover of staff is minimal in this organisation. All the buildings and the campus itself is eco-friendly.

Visthar has been working in the areas of rights advocacy, child labour, children's education, women's empowerment and gender sensitisation. The project to educate girl children of Devadasi women is a commendable one and the residential school that Visthar has set up on its property in Koppal has transformed many a lives. The workshops and short courses that it plans and conducts have been received well. Many batches of students from abroad have been touched by these courses.

During the years I was associated with Visthar, there have been several important discourses and debates on the economic crisis, on nuclear energy, on food security, corruption in governance, gender issues, environmental problems, religious identities, on globalisation et al. Visthar has remained steadfastly secular. The country went through a major election that changed our priorities and concerns. Visthar has been living through these changes but it goes to its credit that it has not attracted the customary visit by Home ministry officials. Visthar, which has completed thirty years, serves as a model for medium level NGOs.

The question that often comes to my mind is: in the future, can NGOs make a difference in our country? The NGO sector in India, like in many other developing countries (Bangladesh is a prime example) is huge. I believe they can make a big difference and we can cite a few examples, Visthar being one of them in setting a standard.

S Theodore Baskaran

Writer, Film Historian and Wildlife Conservationist.
Former Chairperson of Visthar.



A Space of Possibility

An interview with Kirtana Kumar, artist and chairperson of Visthar



Interviewer: Why did you accept to be on the Board? As an artist how do you see your contribution to Visthar?. How do you see Visthar's future? As an artist what would you like to see as Visthar's future?

The first time I ever went to Visthar was all those many years ago when C F John and Tripura were doing an installation in the well. That was my first meeting with Visthar. And an aesthetic meeting is a lovely way to meet something, to get a sense of the space. That was my first meeting. Many years have passed and I have always been peripherally aware of Visthar through my work and whatever I do.

Mercy and I have interacted over the years in several public gatherings, several protests but never ever have we discussed Visthar.

Then one day, quite out of the blue, Mercy got in touch and David swiftly after asking if I would like to be on the Board of Trustees. This was already when I was in my mid career working with theatre and films all these many years. I have had my own series of introspections, disappointments, of feeling a lack of fulfillment – many things. Those are more concrete but what I had was more questions. How do you reach people? How do my ideas see fruition or how can I offer more. I feel very tied in with the community. I feel a huge debt to my immediate community and if I had something to offer, if I still have the energy, then why not?

So when it came up, I said I will be honoured in a heart beat, without thinking about it. I felt quite confident about the politics of the space and the intention of the space. I felt very easy as an actor and a filmmaker to segue into that.

Additionally, I was interested in reach and I was thinking, if I am interested in structural changes and if there is already an institution that is working towards structurally changing things through skills building, through changing consciousness and empowering, I would like to be in a position to ideate with them. So it was really the right time, the right institution. I felt this is the institution which is curious about the ideas I have and the ways we can all go forward together.

That is how I came on Board.

Int: Share a little of your experience as a Board member and currently the Chair.

I can say many things about the space and the people because that is integral to that as well. I have enormous respect for both Mercy and David and the way in which they are able to negotiate difficulties or challenges. This is very important because negotiating peace in good times is easier but to be able to negotiate and hang in there and try to build an institution with people, a second tier, a third tier and to offer dreams for the future, that is a wonderful thing.

It is not only one's politics but also a spiritual pursuit, of taking one's dreams of goodness, of justice to fruition, and how one does that. We can all have it but how do we treat each other in democratic ways, how do we respond to each other with generosity or with love and go forward. I really found that in them.

I would sit in Trustees meetings and listen to David. He talked through things, be it problems we would have or issues about budget or the losses we were facing or the colleges that pulled out last year, or say even the trifurcation. I found the thinking through very interesting. At first, I thought this is not what we should do; I was still thinking it is very

NGO in its thinking. But the logic and the social concern that supported the ideas for the trifurcation, they really made sense to me and I did not find myself opposed to it. Also it is an atmosphere where we can have different thoughts, ideas but still find common ground.

Yet another thing I found interesting was the way we would start the meeting with a reading or a poem or some kind of an invocation of sorts, not in the religious sense but in an inspirational sense. It is different for me than ten angry heads coming in and getting upset. It kind of roots you for a second and makes you think of the larger dream, and what can that larger dream be but for people to live in harmony with each other.

Int: I like the way you identify yourself with Visthar. You are not just speaking as a Board Member, or as a Chair in the meeting but taking the responsibility very seriously.

I am an all-in, all-out person. If I am all in, I am all in and so I look for every opportunity to bring Visthar on Board. I am keen that the public know more about the space. It saddens me that it is thought of as a Christian organization. I feel it is my role in a way to make it a space where people realize they can access the space, journey together in that space. That is also critical.

Int: What is it in terms of their politics, in the actualization of their politics that draws you to them? I am not talking about Utopias but in terms of their vision, their perspective, the philosophy that they have and are attempting to articulate. How do you see the values of democratic practices, issues of power, transparency, accountability operate?

One is my own politics. Personally, I have been a free radical, not answerable to an institution. I have been able to follow my own questions, my own trajectory in whatever I do. For example, gender and sexuality. This has been what I have been working with for the longest time through my theatre, through the kind of plays, through my films.

When I joined Visthar, I found their arms wide open and if you pare it all down, for me it is about social justice across the Board. It is really

about inter sectionalities as it is not saying our work is only with caste or Dalit politics or with gender. And even if the work is charitable, services delivery or skills building or whatever it maybe, there is something in Visthar that is willing to encompass all of it. It isn't one or the other.

I found their Theory of Change extremely reflective, extremely interesting because it would be great to consolidate and address what one has been doing all these years. But then I suddenly realized that the politics in the country has changed and therefore my constituencies also changes. It applies to my own self as well.

No more was I satisfied with my hundred odd audience in the know and I had my first breakthrough with the Wedding Party where suddenly one had a Kannada, Hindi, English speaking audience. It was really a crossover and there was no going back after that but the challenge became bigger. The challenge became to reach more people and in different ways.

Whether I am doing a film or I am at a protest, the language for me has been the language of theatre which extends to the Board as well. It is still the language of theatre. It is the ability to see the poetic in daily situations and raise to the challenge.

Int: And you feel Visthar gives you that space?

Yes. I was totally surprised because there are no closed doors – not on LGBTQ issues, not on sexuality issues, not on gender issues, not even on internal power structures. I wouldn't even call them power structures, the structures of hierarchy. I came on Board with the knowledge that David was going to move forward and so would Mercy. I already knew and so there was no such feeling that it was a personality centric institution. Francis and other Board Members had so much to say in Board Meetings. The Board had people coming from different perspectives, different levels and I found that really a good thing.

I think I joined Visthar soon after *Wedding Party* and all the work I have done since then, the Artists United have all been broad based and

very community driven and very drawing in of numbers. And I really enjoy that.

Again, my opinions on Devadasi are very different from the services driven one. I have a radically different idea of services. In fact I would say my politics are very radical compared to so many NGOs that are charity driven but even that has been encompassed in Visthar. When we talk about girl child or when we talk about accessing Government funds for girl child or for daughters of Devadasis, I am able to step in and say but why are we assuming things? Why is marital norm somehow better?

I find that there is a genuine openness, genuine curiosity, and a genuine sense of wonder. As to my own politics, it is to take myself lightly and not feel it like a heavy load. Something about me resists that because I think too much belief in oneself also comes a belief in power and I want to dismiss that. Of course it shows up in every human being but I want to recognize that it is a bad thing and not go in that direction.

Int: How do you see the exercise of the Theory of Change? If you can elaborate.

I found the whole exercise extremely interesting to rethink. Politically we are in a dangerous place in this country. Politically, Visthar has to rethink itself. You have an institution that is thirty years old, old enough for you to be set in your ways, your vision, your plan. So one has to take stock. There is a sense among the BoT that something has to radically change, that we need to stop short and reconfigure and rethink things like who is our constituency, what is the kind of work we ought to be doing, not want to be doing but ought to be doing, and how are we going about doing it. This is an important reckoning and I found that good.

At the meeting, it was interesting to hear everyone mention youth as the priority; democratic education and youth. In the last elections we lost our youth and we don't know who our constituency is. There is a growing dalit voice which if we are not aware of or understanding of and are not accompanying on this journey, we are going to lose something very valuable.

And personally for me, as artists we have to be emissaries, to be the maverick. We have to be the outsider voice. The moment we become the insider voice we are co-opted.

Int: Visthar had an artist like John who had the space and freedom to explore. What are your thoughts on it?

Very important. Visthar understands a maverick nature. It supports a maverick nature. Look at the Mandala. The Mandala is really symbolic of that. John conceived of it and when you walk inside you see your self. And so Visthar is not saying go and look at a God. The only God is you and the only one answerable is you. You conjure your world, you conjure your dreams, you conjure your journey.

Int: That's an interesting way of articulating it. Where would you as a theatre artist concerned about politics and what is happening to this world, what would you see as your own contribution to Visthar?

I would like to visibilise Visthar much more and to make it a space for youth; for youth to come to their own understandings of politics, of democracy through experimentation. I want to steer it in that direction.

Int: Would you be actively involved?

Very much so. Take the Artists United. People said Visthar is far away. That maybe so but Visthar gave the space for free. For twenty four hours we had every space in Visthar to occupy. No doubt it is not like a Freedom Park which connotes a negative politics. It is an oxymoron for me. What do you mean Freedom Park? There was a jail and you razed it and then you say Freedom Park. For me they are fake public spaces.

Whereas the politics of Visthar, the work of Visthar is a fantastic public space for youth and I see that geographically, things are going to change. It is my dream and a challenge to ourselves if we can have a gathering once a month.

Int: What is the experience of Visthar that you would really like to remember. It could be personal or vis-à-vis the organization or just an incident?

I took over from Theodore Baskaran as the chairperson. And one beautiful day that I remember, is the day this happened. Mercy requested me to speak about Theodore and I did not realize that Mercy was going to speak about me. And so, when she was speaking, it was like hearing about another person. It was really really moving, really touching.

I have been admiring of Theodore because I find in him a renaissance man and have followed him for so many years. I have such a huge admiration for this man who has been the chairperson of Visthar and who wears so many hats, the kind of intellect one doesn't see so much these days. Someone like that who has been the chairperson of Visthar, what beautiful shoes to step into. And I wanted to step into it with the same catholic vision.

We were sitting in the dining hall and I was going to introduce Mercy but just before that Mercy introduced me and she read out Maya Angelou's Phenomenal woman. That was very precious for me.

Another memory is the year Visthar asked me to open Bhoomi Habba. I was wearing a saree and had my hair in a bun with a cap on it. But it was such a thrill to be in the vicinity of all these children. The VRS children had come and were performing street theatre. There were so many people who had come there because of a festival that values ecology, the earth. What a simple idea. Everything was so simple and offered so many possibilities. Eventually the politics is not complex; are we eating food that is viable for everybody and not just for a few; do we speak to each other in respectful terms; are we kind to each other - it is so simple.



Thirty years in a field that could quite easily cause disillusion and breakage. Thirty years to have held on in such a reflective, introspective

and calm manner while still staying at the forefront of social justice and politics - we have to wonder how. I think Visthar is really a model worth looking at and thinking about what internal workings happened over the years.

One person whom I really want to mention is Sebastian Kappen and his liberation theology. I find myself talking about it often because it fascinates me. The idea that interests me is that your spiritual compulsion is something larger than just about Christ; it is towards justice.



Int: How do you see Visthar's future?

I would like to see Visthar as an FTII, a JNU, as a place where youth awakening happens. I would love us to be a TISS in the South. It's a possibility and I don't mean it in the sense of an academic institution but a space, a dream space; a space full of possibilities.

Kalpana Chakravarthy

Social Activist and Freelance Copy Editor



Art is not a mirror for reality,
but a hammer with which to shape it.

– Bertolt Brecht

When the Excluded Meet!



After my theological education in 2013, at United Theological College, Bangalore, I like many others, was at cross roads brooding over my career and future. It was a time when I was not only filled with Theological fervor and enthusiasm but also with deeper questions about my own childhood experiences of exclusion.

I was, as a young man, a Christian, a Dalit, a semi-urban, Tamilian - all that described me till then, on a quest to find some sort of solace in my life through spirituality, through action and through personal contemplations on life.

It was a defining moment in my life. I, who was engaged with theology, played western classical violin, involved in street theatre, penned poetry and loved playing football and cricket, had to put an end to these activities as it drove me away from my passion for justice. But the question was where do I go? How do I take this further? Whom do I approach?

Visthar was the only place I could think of. It was intriguing for me because of its association with Fr. Sebastian Kappen, based on whose readings, I had nurtured my theological insights. Fr. Kappen was one of those early liberation theologians in India who, in a profound way, impacted upon the theological imaginations in our country. Evidencing the divine among the excluded lot struggling for justice was not only a theological necessity but also a mission that enthused me. Visthar upheld these core values and I endorsed it.

I met David Selvaraj at a time when life seemed difficult. He soon introduced me to Mercy Kappen and it was the interactions with them that did it all for me. It was those encounters which assured me that I had met the right people and was in the right place. They asked me to be part of two of Visthar's programmes. One was to go to Koppal and teach football to young girls who were at **Bandhavi** and the second, to be with Mercy and David while they engaged themselves with the Tamil women war survivors from Sri Lanka. What more could I ask of life when everything seemed so bleak and fragile. Visthar ignited in me the spark I needed and ever since, the spark has remained in me. And I have remained part of Visthar.

Visthar is one of those inspiring places. Located far from the hustle and bustle of the Bangalore city, it is a place where creative politics meet mundane realities, earthly aesthetics is intertwined with several initiatives that matter today for our spiritual and political thinking. I also recognise Visthar as one of those collectives, among the many civil society organizations, which not only inspired me with its transformative goals, but also as a place which inspired progressive, plural, Christian and other theological dialoguing in the city. I remember my days as a volunteer in Visthar and **Bandhavi** in north Karnataka, a time where I personally underwent a transformation in my thinking. To have lived with children and to have journeyed with the Tamil women war survivors from Sri Lanka were the best days of my life.

Let me briefly tell you of two important experiences that continue to be a challenge for me. The first is my own story of exclusion which mystically drove me closer to the inner life of the daughters and few sons born of the Devadasis at **Bandhavi**, Koppal. Something happened deep within me and I was held by a new thirst for life. The personal stories of children and my own stories of abuse, violence and exclusion began to kindle in me new political thoughts. It was for me personally, a 'born again' experience. Stories of exclusions pushed me towards a world that I had never dared to traverse. Reciprocal love, leftist songs, and the pedagogy at Bandhavi - all gave birth to a new beginning in my life. And courage like never before flowed from me like an ever flowing stream.

The second life changing experience was when I came back from Koppal and stayed at Visthar till I completed my internship. Staying at Visthar meant being away from the mainstream urban life and it was then that I began to work with the Sri Lankan Tamil war survivors. I remember the 'River of Life' exercise where participants were asked to share their life stories using river as a symbol. When we were done with sharing our stories, the group had become one huge family related through the experience of war, terror, violence and exclusions. **Stories of exclusions navigated us to newer possibilities of life and changed the way we understood our lives collectively.**

While I stayed at Visthar, traversing the muddy paths, soaking in the green environs and absorbing the serenity, I realised that I was not only wandering around the campus in wonder but was also journeying deep inside myself. Picking up the pearls that I found from within, I slowly started to decorate my thinking and social engagements with it. As I bade farewell to the Sri Lankan friends, realised I was venturing into a new world of Church and society. And that realisation was transformative.

My time at Visthar was personal. It was also a time when I realized that the personal was *political* and *political* was *personal*. And from that realization grew a new stem in my tree of life where all the stories of exclusions I had heard, including my own, were part of the wider cosmic necessity for Justice and Peace. Visthar to me is deeply *personal*, as much as anything that I am part of. As my soul rests in the ideals of Visthar, so also does Visthar's soul reside in mine and I am sure it is the same for many.

In the history of humanity slavery has forged itself in different ways. Likewise, many initiatives and collectives too have forged and prevailed confronting it. I am very sure that Visthar in Bangalore confronts the world of slavery and other such practices that demean life.

E Immanuel Nehemiah

Pastor and an activist



The Journey is All Supreme

A mirage made real.
Paradise gained and regained
Life ebbing, nay, throbbing
Dreary and dry I trudged the desert sands
of alienation and ostracisation
Fearful of phantoms I hid in the darkness
of a soulless world.

Enveloped in anger, shrouded with suspicion
I subjected myself to a death by torture
Defying death I cried for life.
Observing the kite in the sky
blending its colours with the rainbow.
I reached out only to feel myself being grasped.
By the roots of my soul.

In wonder I yielded, for choice I had none
I yielded to a passion born of silence
I yielded to a compulsion conceived in love
I yielded to life which grasped me, reminding me
Of the Agony and the Ecstasy of the journey.

– *David Selvaraj*

A powerful Example of What is Possible



While studying abroad eight years ago, I met a child named Roja. Thanks to a 20-plus year partnership between Gustavus, Concordia-Moorhead, and a Non-Government Organization called Visthar, I got the chance to travel to Bangalore, India to hear her story, and many others. Born in a rural village to a mother in sex-slavery, Roja had just been granted entrance into an exceptional, though still developing program formed by Visthar, our host organization and a leader in community development. Roja and I didn't speak the same language—my mother tongue English, hers a regional language, *Kannada*—but we found ways to laugh and play together.

The story for many of these young women had a similar tune. Attending the *Bandhavi* program, as it's called, meant saying farewell to their families and communities for weeks or months at a time. It was a commitment of many years. It meant hard work, learning traditional farming, cooking, and art on top of their schoolwork. It meant seeking new possibilities, and pushing boundaries in society to show that another world is possible. All that on the plate of a young girl.

I left home in 2009 excited to travel and eat Indian food. Upon arrival, I was asked to undertake one of the most potent forms of education: to immerse myself with all my senses, heart, and mind in an experience that eats western comforts for breakfast (deep fried and served with coconut chutney). Through Visthar, studying abroad went beyond cultural immersion and into expanded consciousness, daring to believe

that it is possible to confront the world's deepest injustices.

In December of 2017, out of curiosity and a bit of nostalgia, I returned to Visthar with my wife for a six-week internship. I was curious to see if the experience was as powerful as I remembered. Nostalgic because learning the lessons was fun and impactful, but living up to them is hard.

What I encountered was an organization firmly rooted in its work for peace with justice for people at the furthest margins of Indian society. Visthar still stands with those who suffer at the hand of the most complex and confounding social and political phenomena the world knows. Political corruption, Gender based violence, religious fundamentalism, child slavery, and so-called untouchability in a caste system. These things were new to me eight years ago and have evolved a great deal since.

On a field visit to Visthar's newest campus, I was reintroduced to a young woman named Roja. Eight years older, now a leader among the girls in the *Bandhavi* program, her English is impressive (unlike my *Kannada*). The rural district surrounding Visthar's new campus is soon to be declared a *Child-Labor-Free Zone* thanks to the efforts of both the program and its staff.

A partner organization like Visthar gives us an opportunity to glimpse a future that works for everyone. Change won't happen because of the new foods you eat, though they will change your pallet. It won't happen because of the people you meet and the stories you hear, though they will move you. It won't happen because you gain a deeper understanding of a society's injustices. It will happen because the people who are changing their world are gracious enough to share it with those who are learning how.

Ben Batz

Student and Intern with Visthar

Former Instructor at Voyageur Outward Bound School.

A Visthar Memory



My first trip to Visthar was in 1998. It was late November, perhaps even early December when I arrived. Having left the snow and cold of Minnesota behind me, I felt as if I was landing in the Garden of Eden. Coconut and palm trees were everywhere it seemed, and it was warm, blissfully warm. My first thought was, I'm never ever going to leave this place. And in many ways, I never did.

I have spent my entire philosophical career teaching and writing on problems in metaphysics, epistemology, and theoretical ethics; problems such as skepticism, the problem of universals, and the fundamental importance of virtue to ethical theory. Applied philosophy, as it is sometimes called, played little or no role in my intellectual life.

So, it came as a surprise to me, really rather of a shock, to find myself in Visthar surrounded by people who had spent their lives assisting, aiding, and helping the poor, the estranged, and the marginalized in India and around the world. These people did not spend their entire lives sitting by themselves reading and writing. They were engaged in the world and walked with those who needed them most.

The creation of Visthar, in my mind, was an act of pure genius. I'm in no position to write a history of Visthar, of course. And I surely could not give credit where credit is due to everyone involved in the success of Visthar, but I can speak of some of the people I worked with during my seven visits to India. People who had a profound effect on me and my

American students, changing our view and understanding of the world and of human existence as it is actually exists outside of our own bubble back home.

I first met Rev. Dr. David Selvaraj, a legendary figure and one of the founders of Visthar, at Gustavus Adolphus College. This was a few months before my first visit to Visthar, and it was weeks if not days after a large tornado had torn through our campus and nearly destroyed the college. David listened carefully and gently commiserated with me over our loss, and then quietly shared with me a story of a recent hurricane that killed tens of thousands of people in India. I realized immediately that I was in the presence of a holy man and prophet. Furthermore, I realized, it would be advisable for me to listen carefully to this man, which I have attempted to do for over twenty years.

A second person that I must mention is Ms. Mercy Kappen, another founder of Visthar and its current director. Without reservation, I consider Mercy a secular saint. Her drive and passion to help those in need, especially women, has no limits. I'm especially thankful to her for serving as a model for my female students of what a strong, independent, and courageous woman of the world is really like.

There are many other people that have helped me and my students over the years. I can't name them all, but I must surely mention C F John, a brilliant artist and also an early founder, whose creativity had a profound effect on the beauty of the Visthar campus. And, of course, Sham, Sampath, and Nazar, who often travelled with me and my students around India and kept us informed and out of trouble. None of us will ever forget them. My students and I also loved and appreciated all the office and kitchen staff. To this day we all remember the wonderful Manjula in the central office.

Visthar was a life changing experience for me and for all my 45 or so students on the Gustavus/Concordia semester abroad program to India. On their return to the United States and after graduation, virtually all of them became involved in service to others, whether in the US. Peace Corps, The American Teaching Corps, or careers in social service,

teaching, the church, and in any number of NGO organizations. I don't think any of them, however, became metaphysical philosophers. But for the sake of all the people they are now serving in the world, I no longer consider their failure to become philosophers a tragedy

Douglas Huff, PhD

Professor of Philosophy Emeritus

Playwright



The Song of the Trees

We are old and our roots curl deep
Our bark is marked with age
Wars, storms and kings have passed us by
But we stand firm, our arms stretched high
Before every things could creep or fly
Before the struggle to walk head high
We have been

Searching downwards, reaching upwards
Before fires were kindled, lamps filled,
Or hands shaped tools, or land was tilled
We have been

Searching downwards, reaching upwards.
Before sound was couched in meaning
Our leaves whispered of inner dreamings.

– *Jane & Jyoti Sahi*



Where there is humanizing action
- creative, subversive, or celebrative -
there is a utopia at work, not as a blueprint for action,
nor as a state of affairs to be realised once and for all,
but as a receding horizon of hope and promise.

- *S. Kappen*

The School of Peace



In response to the 9/11 attacks, faith groups and social activists from around Asia became very concerned that the “War on Terror” initiated by US President George Bush, was going to increase conflict and violence in the region especially intensify tensions between different religious groups. At a meeting in 2003, they agreed to form a movement called the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) and I was asked to help coordinate it.

A variety of actions were suggested but a training program for young people in Asia to help them build strategies for interfaith justpeace emerged as the priority. As I was brainstorming ideas for this, I recalled that David Selvaraj, whom I had met briefly in 2001, had a similar program at Visthar in Bangalore, India. I thought it would be extremely helpful to learn from him and the Visthar staff as to how to develop a training curriculum that could be most effective at building the regional interfaith justpeace movement that we were envisioning.

In 2005, along with a working committee of five people representing different religious faiths and Asian countries, we made a trip to India and spent almost a week at Visthar. David and the Visthar staff sat with us patiently and discussed various possibilities. We had many ideas, but finally settled on a major theme: “Moving from Tolerance to acceptance to engagement.” A three-month curriculum began to emerge built on our years of experience as well the expertise of the Visthar programme.

In 2006, we held our first three-month School of Peace (SOP) on the Visthar campus. Visthar was the perfect place for this first SOP. It was spacious with plenty of area for activities. The food was excellent and all of the staff ready to assist us with any needs.



However, the most valuable part of this first SOP experience was being able to learn from Visthar how to conduct a program that was inclusive, participatory and visionary.

Once a month Visthar organized a week-long exposure experience so that the participants could link what they were learning in class with the direct experiences of marginalized communities. These experiences were a highlight of the three months and helped shape participant's passion and commitment to social transformation for justice.

One of the strengths of Visthar is their skill at making sessions participatory and active with the use of games, films, debates and other hands-on activities. SOP has continued this tradition and we have found it the most effective way to keep participants engaged through the three intensive months they live and learn together. Visthar's expertise in drama was instrumental in helping the young people explore their own positive and negative life experiences by describing them through role-playing and story-telling.

Visthar and staff must be credited with providing the guidance needed to make SOP a productive and effective program. The curriculum first developed with them in 2005 has remained in use with constant updating and tweaking. We owe a great thanks to all friends at Visthar for helping this program find its footing and mature. It is my hope that this positive relationship can continue into the future. Together we can provide an alternative to the conflicts and violence which constantly

erupt around us. It is cooperation like this that offers hope for interfaith justice in our very troubled world. My thanks to Visthar and all the staff there for their contribution to the work of SOP.

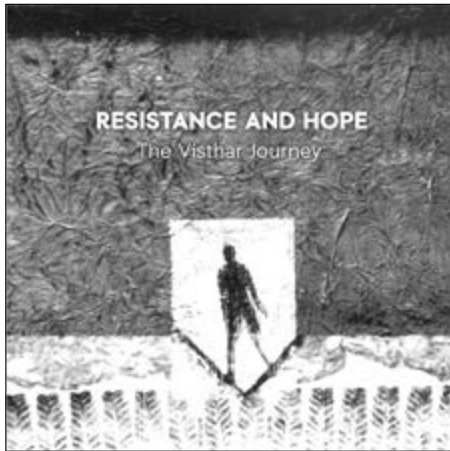
Max Ediger

Peace activist /trainer from the Mennonite Central Committee.
Coordinator of Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF)

I will not dance to your war drum.
I will not lend my soul nor my bones to your war drum....
I will not lend my name nor my rhythm to your beat.
I will dance and resist and dance and persist and dance.

– *Suheir Hammad*





Resistance and Hope : The Visthar Journey.

Compiled and Edited by Mercy Kappen, Visthar 2020

This Coffee Table Book traces the journey of Visthar and presents visuals and verses which represent our aesthetics, our passion and our inspiration.

Spaces, plants, trees, birds, butterflies - all find their place in the book as they do in our lives at Visthar. Our lives are intertwined with theirs.

The contents of the book symbolize change, creativity, freedom, joy, beauty and struggles we have experienced in our journey of 30 years.

Visthar: Ahead of Its Time and for Our Time



For thirty years, Visthar has been a purposeful, prophetic, and productive community of thinkers, artists, and activists. Anniversary celebration provides occasion to gain perspective on past effort and thereby become aware of capacities for the future. For over twenty-five years, Concordia College and Gustavus Adolphus College, two liberal arts colleges in the United States, have been privileged to partner with Visthar in a semester-long development studies program throughout India for 16 students and a faculty leader. The program has been called “Social Justice, Peace and Development (SJPD) for most of these years, a name that captured its identity well. Looking back, SJPD has always been ahead of its time offering the education that our at-risk global commons needs. It has practiced what current thought leaders argue must become universal in the collegiate experience.

As a person who led this program in 2000 and 2006 and who administered it at Concordia for the next 12 years, I must observe that the transformative power of SJPD upon students was not well understood through most of its history—even as the program was consistently lauded and known to “rock the face off” students as a participant named Elizabeth once testified.

The mission of Visthar to be in solidarity with marginalized human and non-human communities (holistically, the Earth) and to cultivate

alternatives to the dominant beliefs, norms and practices of Indian and other cultural systems has meant that Visthar and the colleges have always been “the other” to one another. Still, for a quarter century, these communities have been engaged in a good faith conversation and quest for shared purpose. This quest has been forming students through transformative experiences in India to be agents of change within their own American communities—as well as actors for the common good across the planet.

In short, Visthar has always undertaken global citizenship education in step with the Earth Charter, which calls humans to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying themselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities, at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Launched nearly twenty years ago, the Earth Charter shows that the moral vision and agenda of Visthar and the SJPD program have always been right for our time.

Yet here I must say more about the difference, the othering that students have experienced and that has played a decisive role in the transformative learning of students. For SJPD participants, the encounter with the other has always occurred through hospitality and inclusion in intentional and alternative communities seeking to change their worlds. The transformative learning, the learning that they cannot forget because it becomes part of their identities, has always been experiential as well. The classrooms where “faces have been rocked off” have been community spaces of real people addressing difficult problems together, often in resistance to dominant and oppressive orders of society and beyond. Students have encountered individuals and communities who have helped them to realize first-hand that another world is needed and possible—and how to get there.

The role of experiential pedagogy in SJPD and the resulting transformations cannot be overstated. The opportunities that Visthar has afforded to students to meet and accompany change-making individuals and communities outside their own life contexts and comfort zones have been immense and powerful. Having led the program twice,

I know and have been changed myself by the extraordinary access to difference and possibility that Visthar has provided to students, year after year.

The faithfulness of Visthar to its mission over these many years has been enormous and consequential. More than ever, our world of unscripted problems needs Visthar to be an agent of experiential transformation.

Per Markus Anderson

Concordia College

Moorhead, Minnesota, USA



We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

- Preamble to the Earth Charter

Our recent publications





**Retelling, Reclaiming and Restoring
The Visthar Story**

Our history is entwined with that of communities and survivors of exclusionary politics and culture. This book is brought out in a context of grief, anxiety, fear, illness and death. We offer it to all who yearn and work towards healing and restoration.



Visthar

www.visthar.org