

Vanya Orr, a Quaker, trained nurse, botanist, market gardener and healer was in the 1980's, running a residential home and organic farming enterprise in Wales (The Carningli Trust), for disabled people with severe learning difficulties. In 1994, she took her mother to Cinchona in Southern India, 50 miles south of Mysore – (where Vanya now works). They went to see where her mother (one of 12 children) and grandmother had been brought up, in fact Vanya's great grandparents had lived there from 1824, and are buried there. Cinchona was once a very prosperous area where quinine was produced for use by the British Forces as an effective remedy against malaria. This remedy was also available for the poorest Indians for 3 paise a packet. (100 paises to 1 Rupee, now 77 rupees to £1). However, over the years the area had reverted to severe economic decline.

On arrival in Cinchona in 1994, the villagers knew who Vanya and her mother were. Vanya was horrified by the poverty and desperation of a declining people, once proud, and now 'broken' – with their sense of purpose gone. The village people were deeply in dispute with the Forest Commission over land rights, the 'strength' of the women, normally holding their families together, was in disarray and unacceptable abuse - even by Indian standards - was the norm.

The villagers asked Vanya for her assistance and somewhat shaken by the sight of such emotional and economic desolation, Vanya agreed to help after the District Forestry Office confirmed the villager's plight and offered their full cooperation. Vanya returned to UK, settled her affairs, returning to India in 1995 where she still is...

Within 5 years Vanya turned Cinchona around. Principally with the help of the 'Miriam Dean Fund', a UK Charitable Trust and Vanya's supporters (total income then - approx £ 4,000) – houses were repaired and a building for Meetings was reconstructed... a place where community spirit could be rekindled and decisions made.

Through the economic success of self help groups and with a little help from local government funding, wages could be paid to the villagers working in the nursery. Using much forgotten local expertise, an Organic Herb Garden was established with 30 women and 4 men using only natural fertilizers. A collection of 400 Medicinal Herbs and Plants were grown – all with economic and nutritional potential. A thriving business distilling essential oils was set up and Markets found which involved recognition and cooperation with the Indian Spices Board. 400,000 Geranium and Rosemary cuttings were sold in 1999.

Women's Health and Village Support Groups were formed to offer advice and support on matters of health, nutrition, childcare, hygiene and importantly, empowerment issues to counter abuse. The Indian women began celebrating their return to their traditional ways – and consequently community spirit returned!

In 2000, Vanya moved a short distance away from Cinchona to allow it to become independent of her. When she left Cinchona she lived in accommodation over a cow shed in the middle of nowhere, with wild bees in the rafters, and wild animals outside as neighbours but she had proved the beginning of her dream - the Programme, which worked in Cinchona, could now be reproduced elsewhere!

Over the last eight years, Vanya has established a proven Model Organic Nursery. This year the value of her work was secured by the purchase of land at Kollimalai for a new model nursery and recognition of the value of her work came from The FAO, United Nations in

October 2007 via a grant for a sustainable livelihoods programme on an adjacent rented two-acre piece of land where mainly herbal and medicinal plants will be grown and used to provide the source of plants for village self help groups, and from the Bhutanese. Vanya is running 'Farming Seminar Days', offering advice, selling seeds, cuttings and plants at affordable prices at the Nursery - all run with local Indian people. She has now taken this model Programme into 58 villages so far, and taking the Outreach Health Programme, and developing Support Groups, into 20 villages over an area of 30-40 sq. miles. Thus far Vanya's transport has been by local bus and a dilapidated car which keeps breaking down and has dents in each front wing caused by charging bison - second hand transport would greatly improve her and her team's efficiency!

The local Government 'Horticultural Advisory Board' now accepts that Vanya has demonstrated that her **Organic Farming Project** returns registered 'dead' land to fertility and economic production. There is no 'fast fix'. It takes time and commitment. Farmers need to convert their land gradually to ensure a living is maintained whilst 'conversion' takes place. They are finding that the rewards are amazing!

Conclusion

Vanya's work – her vocation – is far beyond what we have detailed. She does, importantly, work to be dispensable and work within the local culture. She is dearly loved, has no hesitation in facing any challenge particularly when she sees injustice. Intentionally she owns nothing (by Western standards!) besides her clothes. In this way any village she visits sees her as someone who is not 'offering charity' but as someone who visits and gives of 'herself'. She is thus treated with great respect.

Vanya is an extraordinary woman undertaking her life's work. Please can/will you support her?