



# The Light That Lives On

20 years of change by  
Cognizant Foundation

A collection of stories from lives touched,  
futures brightened, and hope rekindled



**F**or twenty years, Cognizant Foundation has worked to create pathways to equity — in education, healthcare, and livelihoods.

In a country as vast and complex as India — where decades of growth have often left behind those furthest from its center — these pathways matter. They are reminders that development is not just a matter of policy or numbers, but of people. And progress begins when the right support reaches the right people at the right time.

From the hills of the Northeast to the coasts of the South, these stories reflect how change takes root — not through spectacle, but through sustained care, trust, and possibility. In lives that were once overlooked, something quiet begins to shift.

Because some light doesn't fade — it becomes part of the way forward.



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## A message that manifests

**Vinita Bali**

Chairperson  
Cognizant Foundation

**T**wenty years ago, in a moment of quiet faith, Cognizant Foundation planted its first seed. It was born of a simple but radical belief that meaningful change evolves slowly and patiently, in the hands of communities who have their own strength. We began small: partnerships with grassroots NGOs, placing our trust in voices long excluded from the promise of progress. Today, as we mark two decades of impact, *The Light That Lives On* serves both as a reflection and a reaffirmation – of what we’ve learned, and what we must carry forward.

Since 2005, we have partnered with over 300 grassroots organizations, reinforced more than 600 projects, and supported millions of lives

across India. In the past year alone, we backed 101 projects with 40 non-profit partners – spanning maternal health, early childhood care, digital skilling, inclusive education, and disability inclusion.

Yet, numbers tell only a fraction of the story. Our true impact lives in the fleeting moments of transformation. In the confident fingers of visually impaired students as they type answers to their exams for the very first time. In the first breath of a tribal newborn whose sight was saved by technology. In the moment a deaf person breaks years of silence, their voice returning to the village.

We celebrate our 20-year-milestone at a moment when India itself is in a profound transition – from a service economy to a knowledge economy. With a median age of 28.8 years, and approximately 67% of people between 15 and 64 years – we carry the weight and wonder of demographic destiny. This dividend is expected to peak around 2041, but only if we choose to match growth with grace, dignity, innovation, and access. At Cognizant Foundation, we believe that true progress isn’t just measured in problems solved, but in dignity

“ The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.

— Nelson Henderson

restored, potential awakened, and systems that ensure justice for all.

This book honors the people who have done just that. Not policymakers or celebrities, but everyday heroes. Women who chose differently. Teachers who stayed curious. Children who refused invisibility. Each of the twenty stories in these pages are portraits painted in courage, proof that when we invest in people – truly invest, with patience and faith – the returns ripple outward like light touching water, infinite and eternal. And like light, it spreads.

To our partners, mentors, caregivers, volunteers,

and field staff – we offer our profound gratitude for being the keepers of the flame. Thank you for every hour, every insight, every shared tear and triumph. To our Cognizant associates – thank you for your conviction and for walking alongside us, thoughtfully and compassionately, for 20 years.

And to you, dear reader, may these stories do more than move you – may they move *through* you and inspire you to act. Because what we choose to do today will echo in the India we help build – not in headlines or reports, but in lives transformed quietly, and forever.







## Interventions in **Healthcare**



To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always – this is the work of medicine. In the quiet of a ward at night, I have seen a touch do what the most powerful drugs could not: remind someone they are not alone.

– Drawn from the writings of **Hippocrates**, often called the 'father of medicine'



## Aishwarya Lives On

One heartbreak, thousands of heartbeats

Chitra Viswanathan's world was once full of art – a soft world, in many ways. She painted, sang, did yoga. Raised

her daughters with endless care. Her second child, Aishwarya, was born with a congenital heart defect, but Chitra made sure their days still had room for songs and colors, even when punctuated by hospital trips. The family had long searched for answers. Sought the best doctors. Prayed hard. Held on.

But some questions don't have answers. Aishwarya died after her second surgery.

There is no word for a parent

who loses a child. Language does not stretch far enough to hold that kind of grief. "I was just... existing," Chitra says. "Until one day, the phone rang."

### A Question. A Chance. A Calling.

It was Dr. K R Balakrishnan, a renowned pediatric cardiac surgeon. He spoke of thousands of children like Aishwarya who needed help. Could they start something together? A small fund, maybe. A trust to help those who couldn't afford a second chance?

Chitra didn't pause. "In that moment," she says, "I knew why this had to happen. Maybe I couldn't save my child – but I can save many others." That same day, she told her father what she wanted to do. He said yes without hesitation.

So, on March 12, 2008, with ₹11,001 from her art business, Chitra registered Aishwarya Trust. No staff. No roadmap. No medical background.

But the name "Aishwarya" began to travel.

It travelled with nurses who whispered it in neonatal wards. With mothers who cried in

“Her name lives on. Every single day. In every single heartbeat.

— Chitra Viswanathan

hospital corridors. With outreach workers scanning newborns in remote districts. It travelled through gratitude, through paperwork, laughter, exhaustion and hope. It became a name that meant life again.

### Not Just Funds. Faith.

In 2012, Chitra approached Cognizant Foundation with a bold ask – a color Doppler ultrasound machine in Pondicherry to screen newborns for heart defects. The project was outside Tamil Nadu. And besides, she wasn't a big player yet.

But the Foundation didn't hesitate.

They showed up – for the inauguration, the delays, the licenses. When grant writing was new, they guided her. When logistics failed, they intervened. When the path wasn't clear, they

walked it with her. "They stood by me," Chitra recalls. "Not just with funding. But also, more importantly, with belief."

Today, Aishwarya Trust has screened over 2,12,000 children for congenital heart defects, performed over 7,300 life-saving surgeries, and supported over 223 heart transplants for infants. Chitra Vishwanathan's dream has grown into a ₹12 crore annual operation.

But the number Chitra holds dearest is: 101. "The 101<sup>st</sup> child we operated on," she says, "was named Aishwarya." She doesn't tell this story often. But when she does, she pauses there – the full circle too loud to ignore.

### Aishwarya, Again and Again

Chitra still speaks of her daughter in the present tense. "I hear her name every day," she says. "From doctors, from mothers I may never meet."

Grief never leaves. But sometimes, it becomes something else. A Doppler machine in a rural hospital. A healed child. A mother resting easier. A name spoken daily – not in mourning, but in hope. That's what Aishwarya Trust is.





# Revathy Balaji: The Distance She Walked

How far is too far when you're walking toward purpose?



For years, Revathy Balaji's world rarely stretched beyond the fields of Koramangalam, in Tamil Nadu's Tiruttani block. She was, by her own admission, "just a homemaker" – raising children, working the land, picking up shifts under the 100-day employment scheme when she could. The money was never enough. Her husband worked odd jobs. Her children were getting older, and so were her worries. Her dreams, if any, stayed tucked away under daily survival.

But when Ekam Foundation began work in the

region, they asked local Anganwadi workers and community groups who they relied on most: who steps up when something goes wrong?

"Revathy's name kept coming up," recalls Subhashree R, Vice President – Partnerships at Ekam. "She had no formal health background. But she was always there – whether it was a village issue, a family crisis, or a child needing medical help."

That's who Revathy was. But what she was about to become would surprise even her.

## Resistance. Confidence.

Ekam offered Revathy a job as a Community Health Worker – part of the organization's broader maternal and child health project aided by the Cognizant Foundation. Her first training was 55 kilometers away from home, at Tiruvallur Government Medical College. Just getting permission to go felt like a milestone. Her days began at 6 AM and ended well after sunset. She travelled alone, entered sterile hallways for the first time, and walked among nurses with 20 years of experience.

She kept showing up. "She saw vulnerability up



“Very few village women even dream of BPNI. But Revathy got it. And she earned it.

– Subhashree R, Ekam Foundation

close – babies seconds after birth, mothers in distress. And she didn't flinch," says Subhashree. "She learned fast – not just from us, but from instinct."

Ekam gave her a badge, a bag, and above all, belief. Revathy began walking taller. Speaking clearer. Slowly, the resistance – both at home and

outside – began to fade.

## The Village's First Call

Today, Revathy leads maternal and newborn outreach across Tiruttani and Thiruvallur. Tracks high-risk pregnancies. Visits newborns discharged from SNCUs. Coordinates with hospitals, PHCs, and panchayats.

When there's a medical issue in the village, people call Revathy first, even before the nurse or the local Anganwadi worker. She revived the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC), resolved a monkey menace by working with the Forest Department, and now chairs local health meetings with calm authority.

And she isn't done yet.

Revathy has applied for the Anganwadi Teacher post and also earned a place in the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI)'s Infant and Young Child Feeding certification – a course with only 25 national seats, usually reserved for MSc Nutritionists or MBBS doctors. She raised part of the fee herself. Ekam backed her for the rest.

"Very few village women even dream of BPNI," says Subhashree. "But Revathy got it. And she earned it."

## What a Program Can Plant

The Cognizant Foundation–Ekam partnership has reached over 14,000 pregnant women and 4,500 vulnerable newborns in Thiruvallur. But its true impact isn't just in numbers. It's in people like Revathy – women once on the margins, now leading from the front. Women who had traded survival for ambition, but found they had enough strength for both.

The fields of Koramangalam are still there. But Revathy's world no longer ends at their borders. She's walked further than she ever imagined possible – not just in distance, but in purpose.



## The Hills That Raised Her

A mother's hope, carved into stone

For the first few years of her life, little Rithvi moved only when the wind stirred her blanket. She didn't lift her head. Didn't smile when called. Didn't grab at toys like other toddlers. Her limbs stayed limp, her eyes unsure. Her mother, who had adopted her into a modest farming family in Karnataka's Hoskote village, watched in quiet grief as milestones passed her daughter by – each one like a door that didn't open. "She never even called me Amma," says Rithvi's mother, her voice soft but steady. "I used to wonder if she ever would."

In their tiny hamlet tucked deep in Uttara Kannada's hills, resources were scarce. Transport was unreliable. Specialists were unheard of. Rithvi's condition, a developmental delay caused by neurological challenges, had no name in the village, only whispers. People told the family to accept what was. To stop hoping for too much.

But Rithvi's mother didn't listen. She kept asking, kept hoping – "Will she ever walk?"

### When the Mountains Begin to Move

Everything began to change when a community health worker arrived. She noticed the signs – the stiffness in Rithvi's limbs, the delayed response, the absence of speech. She didn't flinch. She listened. Explained that there was help – real, tangible help – available not in big cities, but within reach.

Soon after, Rithvi was referred to the Prem Ashram Early Intervention Centre, supported by The Association of People with Disability (APD) and Cognizant Foundation. What followed was a thorough assessment, a customized care plan, and most of all – a renewed sense of possibility. First came physiotherapy – gentle exercises to strengthen her neck, then her trunk. Oro-motor

therapy followed to help reduce her drooling. Simple tools, steady hands, and persistent care began to shift what once felt immovable. "She started sitting without support," her mother says. "She even began smiling."

### The Path Is Never Easy

Reaching the therapy centre was no small task. The terrain was unforgiving. Transport was expensive. And Rithvi, fragile as she was, couldn't always make the trip comfortably. "It was hard," her mother says simply. "Hard to carry her. Hard to get there. But I did it – because she has to walk. That's all I ask of the world."

For families like hers, the Early Intervention initiative by Cognizant Foundation and APD does more than just provide therapy. It reaches children between 0–8 years across rural Karnataka, bringing with it not just diagnosis, but action

“It was hard. But I did it - because she has to walk. That's all I ask of the world.”

– Rithvi's mother

– through trained community health workers, parent-led care techniques, nutritional kits, and government linkages like UDID cards. In Rithvi's case, the program extended home-based therapy when travel became difficult. Her mother, once unsure and overwhelmed, was now an active part of her recovery. They still live in the same hills. But something's shifted. Not the land. Not the child. The belief.

### A Mother's Promise

Today, Rithvi is no longer the child others pitied or ignored. She sits tall. She reacts. She tries. Her smile arrives before her mother's stories do.

But it's her mother who has changed just as much in the process.

"I shouldn't feel ashamed for adopting her," she says. "I shouldn't be belittled by others. I've struggled – but I've never given up on her."

Her voice grows quieter, but firmer.

"This one good thing should happen for her," she says. "She

should walk."

And she just might. Because in a village where few dared hope for more, one mother now walks tall – carrying not just her child, but a future neither of them were willing to leave behind.





# Kayati Can See the Moon Now

When sight returns, so does hope

By the time Kayati turned eight, her world had already begun to dim. She wasn't born quiet. As a baby, she babbled endlessly, eyes full of curiosity. But by the time she turned four, the squint in her eyes grew more visible. And with it came the stares. The whispers. The unwitting mockery that only children can deliver with unfiltered cruelty.

Her father passed away when she was barely one. Her mother – left alone to raise two daughters – worked long, back-breaking hours as a domestic help, cleaning homes she could never afford to live in. They scraped by. Treatment for Kayati's eyes felt like a distant dream.

And so, Kayati stayed indoors.

## A Knock of Hope

It was just another morning. Kayati sat inside, listlessly flipping through a torn book. Suddenly, there was a knock. A door-to-door screening team from Dr. Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital – part of a pediatric eye care program supported by Cognizant Foundation – had begun surveying underserved children in South Delhi's Tughlakabad slums.

They looked at Kayati's eyes. Asked a few questions. Made some notes. And then, said: her condition was treatable. And the surgery? Free. Her mother was stunned. "I didn't even know what to say," she later admitted. "I just folded my hands and started crying."

Kayati had never been to a hospital before – at least not one where people spoke to her kindly. But the team at Shroff's didn't just check her eyes – they saw her. They explained everything with patience. Showed her photos of other children who had been through it too. Slowly, the fear began to melt.

When the moment came, she lay down, she squeezed her mother's hand once – tightly – then let go. The procedure was swift. When the



bandage came off, for the first time in her life, Kayati's eyes aligned. Her world aligned.

The changes came quickly. She began looking up again – at people, at birds, at the sun dipping behind rooftops. She asked to go outside. To play. To be photographed.



Her mother, watching quietly, began crying again – this time for a different reason.

## The Moon Is Back in the Sky

Cognizant Foundation's partnership with Dr. Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital is part of a larger

“She used to cry when other kids looked at her. Now she looks at the moon and tells me it's beautiful.

– Kayati's mother

effort: to screen over 2 lakh children in Delhi's poorest neighborhoods, and provide the treatment they deserve – with dignity, care, and zero cost.

Kayati is one of them. One of hundreds of children who no longer feel broken. But to her mother, Kayati is the only one that matters. "Kayati used to cry when other kids looked at her," she says. "Now she looks at the moon and tells me it's beautiful. She had never noticed it before."

In that moment, Kayati was seen. Bright. Whole. And the world – finally – looked back.



# Niranjan: Meant To Be Seen

Heard before he was seen



In Baripada, nestled deep within Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, the morning belongs to the forest. Tigers leave soft trails by the river. Monkeys chatter across Sal trees. And at daybreak, the sun cuts through the mist in golden shards.

On most days, Rajbir stepped into the forest before the first tea was even poured. A herbalist by habit and instinct, he believed the best medicinal roots revealed themselves just after dawn – when the dew had lifted, and the trees hadn't yet grown impatient with heat.

He had walked these jungle trails since boyhood. The forest, in its own way, had learned his footsteps. But that morning, something made him stop. Not a rustle in the underbrush. Not a shadow in the trees. It was a cry. Small, sharp, but unmistakably human.

Rajbir paused, listening. The sound came again – thinner now, almost swallowed by the trees. He followed it, past hanging vines and half-remembered turns, until he reached a clearing where even the morning light seemed uncertain. There, lying on a bed of damp leaves, was a newborn baby. Alone. Barely breathing. Wrapped in nothing but cloth and chance.



Rajbir rushed the infant to the District Headquarter Hospital in Mayurbhanj. There, at the Special Neonatal Care Unit (SNCU), the pediatric team fought through the night – stabilising vitals, feeding through tubes, warming a body that barely held on.

Slowly, the child returned.

## A Race the Baby Couldn't Run

Even as he recovered, a second threat crept in: Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP), a silent, time-sensitive condition that strikes premature babies and can lead to irreversible blindness within weeks.

Thankfully, Mayurbhanj was part of a newly established ROP telescreening network run by LV Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), with support from Cognizant Foundation's SIGHT4All program in Odisha. Through real-time imaging and remote diagnosis, retinal images were captured by



trained technicians and transmitted live to specialists in Bhubaneswar.

The diagnosis was urgent: Aggressive ROP in both eyes. There was no legal guardian to authorize with hospital transfer. So the LVPEI team packed a mobile surgery kit and travelled over 250 km to treat him right there – at the SNCU bedside. Two critical intravitreal injections. Two eyes. One fragile chance.

## Before He Was Niranjan

Weeks passed. The child steadied into life. A local adoption agency stepped in, and a loving couple from Odisha brought him home, naming him Niranjan. The LVPEI-CF team stayed closely involved, counselling the new parents and ensuring they understood the baby's medical history.

But the work wasn't done. A year later, during a scheduled check-up, early signs of retinopathy

It began with a cry – and opened into a life worth seeing.

returned. But thanks to the close monitoring, the team acted fast again – this time with laser photocoagulation. The threat was contained. His vision held.

Behind Niranjan's recovery lies an ecosystem of quiet urgency – doctors who travelled overnight, nurses who stayed long past their shifts, and a vision for healthcare that reaches even the most hidden corners. Through its partnership with LVPEI, Cognizant Foundation has supported ROP screening and treatment in over 15 districts across Odisha, ensuring that children like Niranjan don't lose their future before they've even had a chance to see it.

In the forests of Baripada, this story could have ended before it began.

Instead, it began with a cry – and opened into a life worth seeing.



## The Matriarch Who Listened

Some changes take generations,  
others take one brave voice



In the narrow lanes of Bhiwandi, where cement houses lean into each other and water lines stake like veins along the walls, Afshana Ansari sat in the center of her world – a matriarch whose voice has never been second-guessed. She had raised six sons, four of whom still lived under her roof with their wives and children. She had seen thirteen grandchildren come into this world.

None in hospitals.

Each delivered on worn bed sheets, at home, by a dai (the village midwife), whose hands Afshana trusted more than any doctor's degree. For her, health – especially maternal health – had always been managed at home. It was how her sons had been born. How her daughter-in-law would give birth to.

That's how it had always been. How it was meant to be. Or so she thought.

### Patience Outlasts Tradition

When Project Suraksha's outreach worker came, mobile tablet in hand and smile on her face, Afshana barely glanced up. She had heard these people before – the ones who spoke of



"institutional delivery," "antenatal care," and "immunization schedules." Not for her. Not for her family.

But they came again. And again. They sat beside her, not across. They brought data, yes – but also patience. Stories of babies lost. Mothers saved. Photographs. Gentle questions. No judgments. They came like rain – quiet, persistent, impossible to ignore.

They explained the difference between a dai and an actual doctor, not to shame her, but to show her what was now possible. They spoke of hygiene, of emergency response. They met her with respect. And slowly, Afshana began to listen.

In Malegaon and Bhiwandi's tightly held

“I never realized how much the world had changed – until I chose to change too.”

– Afshana Ansari

traditions, change does not begin with lectures – it begins with trust. Project Suraksha had learned that well. So they met with the maulanas and the imams. They gave them hospital tours. Showed them protocols. Demystified the process. Then came a moment no one could have predicted: the imam's voice cracked through the loudspeaker, echoing through alleys across the slums after the evening Azan – but this time speaking of hospital care, vaccines, and safe deliveries. It reached every home. Including Afshana's. Something shifted.

### The First Hospital Birth

The turning point came quietly – one of her daughters-in-law was due to deliver. For the first time in family history, Afshana said something no one expected: “Take her to the hospital.”

A moment years in the making. But it changed everything. The baby was born healthy. The mother safe. The delivery – without any complications. And Afshana, for the first time, saw what care could look like when done differently.

### The Ripple Effect

Now, Afshana helps Project Suraksha spread the message. She speaks to other women. Shares her own story. She does what few leaders can: she admits that change can be good.

Through its partnership with CCDT, Cognizant Foundation has reached over 92,912 pregnant and lactating women across some of Maharashtra's most underprivileged urban settlements – including Bhiwandi and Malegaon – offering maternal counselling, newborn care, immunization, and nutrition support. Frontline workers are trained. They carry tablets, record data, and track high-risk pregnancies. Religious leaders are engaged.

But the real measure of success? It's when a woman like Afshana – the kind whose word is law – makes the difficult but different choice.

That's when it works best.



## Jamini Kalita: A Second Look at Life

At 69, she saw the world for the first time in years



By the time Jamini Kalita turned 69, she had stopped trying to count her years. In Makali, a small, quiet village in Assam's Kamrup district, her days folded into each other – selling vegetables at Boko market, like she had for the past four decades.

In recent years, though, the outlines of her world had started to blur. Not all at once. But slowly, like dusk that overstays its welcome. The faces she once recognized became shadows. Counting notes grew harder. She no longer saw her grandchildren clearly. Their laughter rang in her ears, but their faces had become strangers. Still, she never said a word. Cataracts, like poverty, were something many in her village learned to live with. Medical treatment felt too far – in cost, in distance, in understanding. Jamini had long made peace with the idea that this, too, was just how things ended.

One day, there was a knock. Two Community Health Volunteers showed up at Jamini's door. They were from a new vision care initiative supported by Cognizant Foundation – going door-to-door checking on eye health.

When Jamini opened the door, they saw it



right away – the milky clouding in her eyes, the hesitance in her steps. She was gently encouraged to visit the Boko Vision Centre, a facility set up as part of the Foundation's collaboration with Operation Eyesight India (OEI) and Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya. Jamini was hesitant, but something in their voices – the calm, the insistence – made her say yes.

### Sixty Kilometers and a Thousand Steps

Jamini had never stepped outside her block in years. Guwahati felt like a foreign country. But the team from the Boko Vision Centre arranged everything – travel, registration, consultation, hospital stay – all coordinated without her having to make a single phone call. At Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya, she underwent surgery on her left eye. As the bandage was removed post-operation, Jamini sat up and gasped. The room – once a blur – flooded with color. The walls,

“They told me I would see again. But I didn't believe it until I saw their eyes.

– Jamini Kalita

the window light, the nurses' faces – everything returned.

Today, Jamini is back at Boko market. She counts change without help. She smiles more. She's waiting for her second surgery – but this time, not with fear.

Since her return, at least six other elderly women from Makali have visited the same Vision Centre. Some came for consultations. Some booked



surgeries. “Jamini baidew did it,” they say. “Why not us?” A single door knock in Makali has begun to ripple across villages that had learned to live without sight.

### The Light That Keeps Spreading

Through its Vision Centre project, Cognizant Foundation and OEI have established access to eye care in some of the most underserved corners of India, including remote regions in Assam, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. In Assam alone, two centers now serve thousands – conducting door-to-door surveys, training community health workers, and reconnecting people to the world they had lost sight of.

Places where the world had dimmed without protest.

For Jamini Kalita, sight didn't just return. So did confidence. Community. Colour.





## Interventions in **Education**



Free the child's potential, and you will transform him into the world. The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind. Education must be aimed not at preparing him for school, but for life – for all that he will meet in the world.

– Maria Montessori



# Kshama Vastrad: A Class Apart

A good teacher meets a great question

Kshama Vastrad had always taken pride in her work. A teacher at Halligudi Government High School in Gadag, she was diligent, disciplined, and deeply respected. She showed up every day, prepared her lessons, and tried her best with the limited tools at hand. Her students respected her. Her peers admired her commitment. In her eyes, she was doing everything she could.

But there was a quiet digital ceiling she hadn't yet noticed – until it cracked. When the American India Foundation (AIF)'s Digital Equalizer (DE) program arrived at her school, it opened a door she didn't even know existed. For the first time ever, she was introduced to a wider community of educators across the state – teachers facing

the same digital challenges, but solving them differently. Smarter. More creatively. With the aid of digital tools she had never used. Kshama wasn't defensive. She was determined.

## Learning to Teach Again

The DE platform, AIF's flagship non-profit program that leverages technology to bridge the educational and digital divide in India, was a space of collaboration. Kshama began collecting digital resources, joining peer discussions, and attending training sessions. Slowly, she shifted from textbook content to interactive experiences. She downloaded short videos and Kannada audio poems. Began integrating multimedia into daily lessons.

Her classroom changed. And so did she. What used to be a quiet, often hesitant class began to buzz with engagement. "We hear recorded poems in the Kannada class, watch short documentaries on Independence Day... school days are very fun now," says Chaitra, a Class 10 student.

For students who had rarely seen visuals or heard their language spoken on screen, the new lessons felt like windows opening. For Kshama, it felt like

“I used to think I was doing enough. Now, I see how much more I can give.”

– Kshama Vastrad

a connection – finally, her students were not just listening, they were understanding.

## A Teacher's Second Wind

As Kshama's confidence grew, so did her influence. What began as cautious experimentation turned into quiet leadership. Kshama became a point of contact for other teachers looking to bring digital tools into their lessons. She guided them on the DE platform, helped with content curation, and even led school-level sharing sessions.

She no longer felt confined to her school – she was now part of a movement.

The DE lab at Halligudi was made possible through the support of the Cognizant Foundation, whose vision for inclusive education goes beyond infrastructure. By partnering with the American India Foundation, Cognizant Foundation democratized access to digital learning. But what

they really delivered wasn't just computers – it was courage. Courage to adapt, to question old ways, to connect beyond walls.

In Kshama's case, they didn't just modernize a teacher's toolkit. They reignited her sense of purpose.

"I used to think I was doing enough," she reflects. "Now, I see how much more I can give."





# Suchetha and the Geometry of Change

The classroom that became a movement

For years, Suchetha SS taught high school math the only way she knew how – with formulas on a blackboard, a piece of chalk in hand, and hundred pairs of tired eyes staring back at her. Her school, Government High School Thyamagondlu, was desired by students and families across the Dobbaspeth block.

Suchetha was determined to keep their faith strong and alive. She wanted her students to learn Mathematics in the best possible manner – not algorithms to memorize, but thinking that had to

be ‘mathematized’. She believed numbers weren’t just to be written – they were to be seen, felt, understood. And when the Teachers’ Community of Learning (TCOL) program, implemented by IT for Change NGO and supported by Cognizant Foundation, reached her school, she finally had the tools – and the community – to bring that belief to life.

## When Teacher Becomes Student

Through hands-on workshops and peer-led communities of practice, TCOL introduced Suchetha to a different way of teaching – purposeful digital tools, not just technology for show.

She learned GeoGebra, a free, open-source software that brings mathematical concepts to life. Instead of just explaining formulas, she could now use GeoGebra applets as pedagogy and design interactive lessons where students actually saw how numbers behaved, where geometry moved and shifted before their eyes.

Her students followed her into this ‘Mathemagical’ world with wide eyes. Together, they watched arithmetic unfold on a virtual number line, geometric shapes revealing themselves in myriad



shapes, and discovered that algebra wasn’t as abstract as they’d once thought. “I always knew I wanted to do more,” Suchetha says. “But TCOL made me understand how I could.”

What started as one teacher’s experiment soon became a movement. Suchetha’s work didn’t just transform her school – it inspired others across the district. And in 2014, her efforts were recognized with the National ICT Award for Best Teacher. Her school in Thyamagondlu became a model ICT resource centre, with two large ICT labs. Visitors came from across other districts to learn how she taught.

One day, a boy who sold newspapers in the morning and studied math in her class in the afternoon came up to her after school. He’d been inspired by a field trip to a bank that she had

arranged, to understand banking. “I want to be an engineer,” he said shyly. “Not a delivery boy.” That’s when she knew: she wasn’t just teaching math anymore. This work meant reshaping futures.

## The Ripple That Became A Wave

Suchetha’s story encouraged others. Teachers like Gulzar Dambal and Rajesh YN – also part of the TCOL program – went on to win national ICT awards and present their teaching models to the Ministry of Education. Rajesh now contributes to shaping the National Curriculum Framework. Thyamagondlu itself was featured in The Hindu as one of the six “Islands of Excellence” in India.

And the movement is still growing. Today, teachers across Bengaluru meet regularly, learn

“My students don’t just learn anymore. They ask why. And that smile – that’s everything.”

– Suchetha

from each other, and share lesson plans digitally. The TCOL approach – community-based, teacher-led, and technology-supported – has created a shift not just in how children learn, but how teachers lead.

Suchetha doesn’t talk about awards much. What she treasures most are the moments when a student who once sat quietly in the back now asks a question no one else thought of. That, to her, is progress. “My students don’t just learn anymore,” she says. “They ask why. They challenge me. They smile when they understand something. And that smile – that’s everything.”

In Thyamagondlu, formulas are still taught. But now, they come alive in the curve of a bridge, the layout of a house, or the rhythm of the day.



# The Magic of Montessori: From Chalk to Touch

Dignity to early learning



In 2013, three minds met in Chennai with one shared concern – the state of foundational education in government schools. Mr. Madhavan, the then CEO of Cognizant Foundation, Mr. Venkatesan, IAS, and Mrs. Padmini Gopalan, founder of the Sri Ramacharan Charitable Trust (SRCT), found themselves asking the same question: What would it take to truly give underprivileged children a chance at quality learning?

The answer was radical in its simplicity – Montessori. Over a century ago, Italian physician Maria Montessori had discovered that children learned best when they could move freely, choose their own activities, and work with materials designed for their hands, not just their minds. Her method had transformed education in privileged schools worldwide, but rarely reached government classrooms.

Here was a pedagogy that valued independence, hands-on exploration, and quiet dignity in learning – exactly what these children deserved. Together, Cognizant Foundation and SRCT partnered to bring Montessori classrooms to 6 government schools in Chennai. By 2016, 12 such environments had bloomed – transforming chalk-and-talk into touch-and-feel.

What began as a few classrooms is now a quiet revolution – where education grows whole.

## Pandemic. A Pivot. A Possibility.

When COVID-19 shut down schools, SRCT faced a dilemma – how do you continue tactile, play-based learning without physical classrooms?

Enter “Take-Home Montessori” – a project born from necessity and nurtured by sheer creativity. Teachers recorded simple yet powerful learning activities using household objects – lentils, bottles, scarves – and sent them as videos to parents via WhatsApp. The children learned to sort, count, observe, and speak – not through screens, but by co-learning with their caregivers at home.

Some parents, inspired by these videos, began replicating the activities for other children in their neighborhoods. One teacher, Jamuna, recalls: “My neighbor saw me preparing a video and asked to share it. She later told me she wants to enroll her own child in a Montessori classroom now. That



moment reminded me why we do this.”

Over 720 children benefited regularly – not just with education, but with consistency, comfort, and connection.

## From Learning to Leading

In 2023, the partnership evolved again – this time not just for children, but for teachers.

Cognizant Foundation supported a certificate training program for 44 teachers from Chennai Corporation schools in Montessori methodology. Not just a course, it was a transformation session geared with bilingual, simulated classrooms, hands-on modules, and a deep focus on empowering educators from within the pre-existing public education system.

Teachers who once stuck to rigid syllabi began exploring new ways to let children lead their learning. Classrooms slowly turned into collaborative spaces – where mistakes were welcome and curiosity was rewarded. Twelve years on, the Cognizant–SRCT partnership has survived budget cycles, leadership changes, and even a global pandemic.

And yet, its real strength lies not in numbers, but in names – like Aarthi, who learned to count beads at home during lockdown. Or Ramesh, who taught his younger sister how to pour water, the Montessori way. What began as a few classrooms is now a quiet revolution – where the children of daily-wage laborers learn with the same care and dignity as those in elite preschools. Where education isn’t just about getting ahead, but growing whole.



## Science That Came to Them

A road, a van, a different kind of lesson



In the hill districts of Karnataka, science class used to mean two things: a textbook and a blackboard. For thousands of children in government schools, there were no labs. No experiments. No tubes to pour or prisms to split light. Just abstract concepts and rote diagrams that floated far above their everyday realities.

Until one morning, a brightly colored van pulled into the schoolyard. Inside were two ignitors (facilitators) and a trunk full of surprises – prisms and magnets, microscopes and globes. For the first time, science didn't just speak in long English words. It was something you could touch. Tilt. Drop. Watch. Wonder.

It all made sense.

### A New Model for Curiosity

Agastya International Foundation had long believed that learning isn't something you sit and receive – it's something you do. With this vision to reframe education from a passive to an active function, they designed the 'Science-on-Wheels' program: a mobile laboratory that travels to government schools in remote villages, bringing with it hands-on experiments and ignitors trained to spark inquiry. The goal was simple – to replace

For the first time, the word “science” doesn't feel distant. It feels fun.

rote memorization with real curiosity. To let students touch, build, question, and imagine.

In 2011, Cognizant Foundation partnered with Agastya to take this idea further, expanding the program to the Kodagu district in Karnataka. From then on, one van became many. One village became many. One idea became a movement.

Today, the program reaches over 3,000 students and 200 teachers every single month, replacing passive chalk-and-talk with active discovery. Each mobile lab carries a rotating set of experiments – tailored to the age and level of the children – in physics, chemistry, biology, and earth sciences.

Children gather in circles. Ignitors explain with stories and everyday analogies. And for the first time, the word “science” doesn't feel distant. It feels fun. Teachers, too, often stay back after class – not just to supervise, but to learn. Some even start adapting these methods into their own lessons.



### More Than Science

The vans aren't alone in this effort. Each project is anchored by a Science Centre – a dedicated space that acts as a depot, training centre, and experimental lab. Here, new tools are tested. Teachers are trained. And local schools can access materials even when the van is away.

It's a model built not just for reach, but for longevity. What the children remember isn't just what they learned – it's how they felt. They

remember the way a magnet snapped to metal in their palm. The time the skeleton's arm popped out and everyone laughed. The day they looked at pond water through a microscope and saw life dancing inside.

But most of all, they remember what it meant to ask questions, not just give answers.

And that's what Cognizant Foundation and Agastya built together, not just a program, but a path to possibility. One kilometer at a time.



# Manisha Sharma: The Fire She Survived

From ashes to excellence

Manisha Sharma was only eight when she lost her mother in a fire. It was one of those moments that divides life into two halves – before and after. Her father, a man who once dreamt of being an engineer, shelved his ambitions to raise two children alone. With just a small patch of wheat field in Nalagarh, Himachal Pradesh, he became the family's only support, managing an annual income of just ₹65,000.

For Manisha, there were no tuitions. No laptops.

No English-speaking schools. But there was resolve. And in her case – brilliance.

## 'The Spark That Refused To Dim

Manisha aced every milestone. 95% in her Class 10 boards. 92.4% in Class 12. When she cracked JEE Advanced with a rank of 6,510 and earned admission to IIT Kanpur for Civil Engineering, it should've been a celebration. Instead, it was a pause.

The tuition was waived – IIT's policy took care

of that for families earning under ₹1 lakh. But everything else? The hostel room, daily meals, textbooks, even the train ticket to get there – these costs still felt overwhelming for a family surviving on ₹65,000 a year. That acceptance letter might as well have been a closed door, and just when the dream was about to fade into impossibility, a college senior told her about a scholarship supported by Cognizant Foundation and facilitated by the Foundation for Excellence (FFE).

She applied. Got in. And the door swung open.

## A Scholarship That Freed Her

The FFE–Cognizant Foundation scholarship changed everything. It didn't just fund her education – it lifted the burden of debt, the daily worry, the quiet guilt of being “too ambitious.” Manisha could now study without second-guessing herself. Her father, too, could sleep a little better at night.

But more than the money, what stayed with her was the belief – from strangers who saw her potential. It made her want to succeed not just for herself, but for every girl who didn't think they could. Manisha became a changed person.

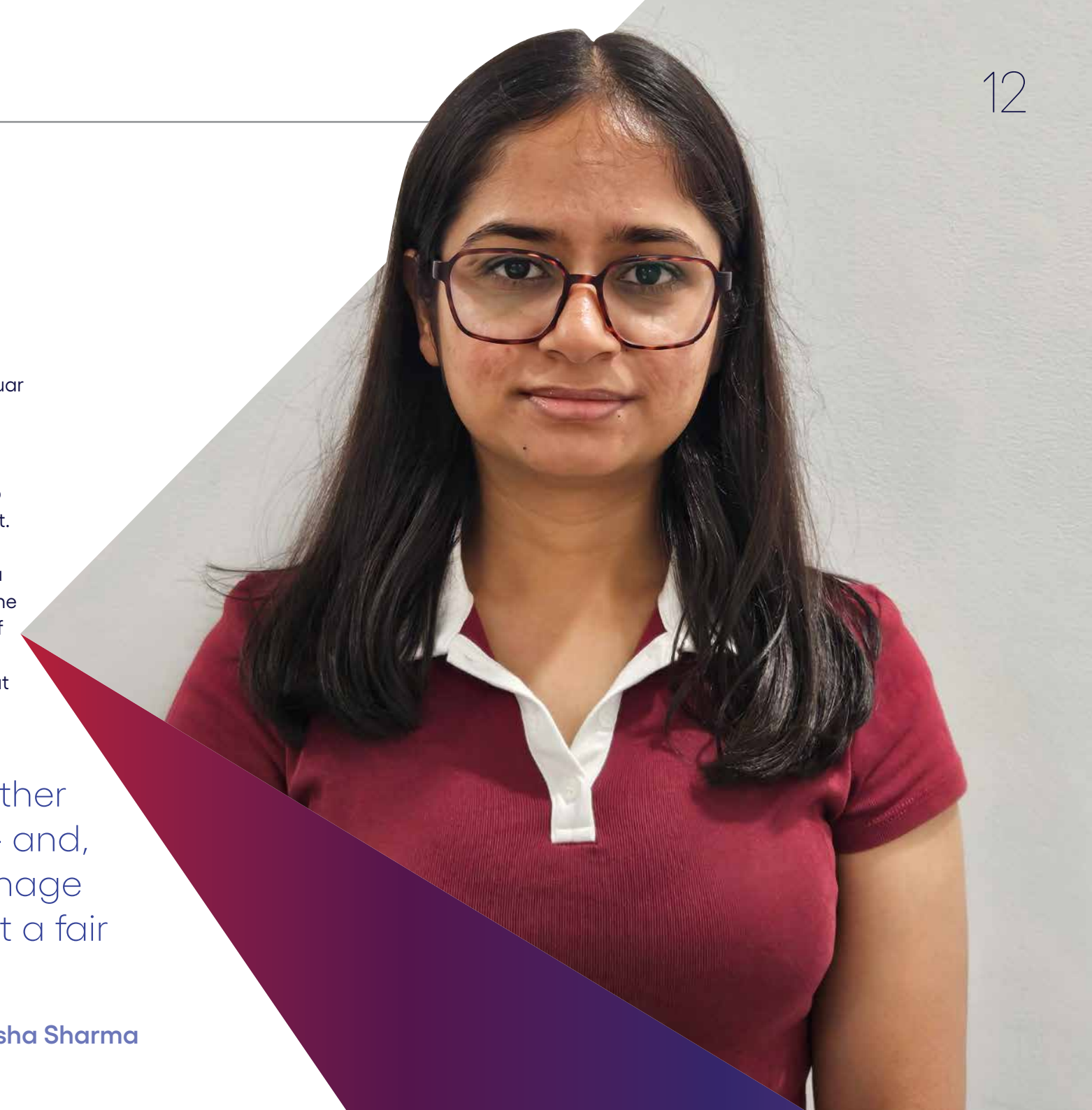
She became a mentor to juniors. Spoke to girls from small towns about choosing engineering. Stayed grounded. Driven. Grateful.

In her final year, Manisha was recruited by Jaguar Land Rover as a Graduate Software Engineer Trainee – with a ₹21 lakhs per annum offer. She will soon move to Bengaluru and start a new chapter. But in her heart, she's still that girl who studied on borrowed textbooks and candlelight.

Her journey from a wheat field in Nalagarh to a global tech firm isn't just a story of talent. It's one of resilience. Of a father who never gave up. Of a foundation that showed up. And of a young woman who burned through the odds – without letting it burn her out.

“I want to support other students like me — and, one day, open an orphanage for children who don't get a fair start in life.

— Manisha Sharma





# Degree, Debt, and a Door Left Open

From a small village, a big dream

In the small, sunbaked village of Andhra Pradesh where Adapureddy Nagesh Babu grew up, futures were often predetermined, not dreamed of. Most children followed their parents into farming or daily-wage work – and few dared to question it.

But Nagesh always did.

His father, though never formally educated, was a man who held knowledge in high regard. He couldn't offer his son much in terms of material things – but he gave him values, encouragement, and the belief that education could break even the oldest patterns. Nagesh was the first in his family to ever dream of higher education – not as a luxury, but as a tool of transformation. In 2018, when he got into the prestigious Tata Institute

of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai to pursue a Master's in Development Studies, it felt like he had cracked open a door that had always been bolted shut.

## Grief, Doubt, and a Letter

But just as his new chapter was about to begin, life collapsed. Nagesh's father passed away suddenly in February – only months before the semester began.

The grief was raw. The timing, cruel. The financial strain nearly broke him. In the chaos that followed, everything felt uncertain. How would he afford the fees? How could he abandon his grieving family for a city like Mumbai? The guilt gnawed at him. "In those early days," he says. "I quietly struggled with doubt about whether I could or should go on."

That's when a professor told him about the Cognizant Foundation – Direct Implementation Scholarship. He applied, not expecting much. But when the selection letter came through, he called his mother and brother. "We didn't say much," he recalls. "We just felt relieved and emotional."

The ₹1 lakh scholarship from Cognizant

“I just want to give back what I received. That support set everything in motion.”

— Adapureddy Nagesh Babu

Foundation covered nearly half his academic expenses. But more than the money, it gave Nagesh space – to gather himself, study, and move forward. "I could focus on my classes and fieldwork without constantly worrying about money," he says. "It didn't just mean support for me. It was belief in my potential." At TISS, Nagesh didn't just learn development theory. He lived it. He saw up close how education policy, rural livelihoods, and public systems shaped the lives of people like his family. And he knew exactly what kind of professional he wanted to become.

## A Full Circle, Paid Forward

Today, Nagesh leads the National Initiative for Skill-Integrated Higher Education (NISHE) as Project Lead at the Centre for Research in

Schemes and Policies (CRISP) – working to build a model that integrates practical skill training to sit alongside academics in Indian conventional colleges.

It's a system-changing initiative, and Nagesh, once nearly forced to drop out, is now playing a key role in shaping how higher education can better serve future generations. He has also become a quiet mentor to dozens of first-generation learners, helping them fill application forms, write statements of purpose, and believe, for the first time, that institutions like TISS and Azim Premji University are not beyond reach.

But perhaps the most personal act of all: he created a scholarship in his father's name. For the past three years, he has set aside ₹50,000 a year from his own income to support students from underserved backgrounds pursuing social sciences. "Thank you, Cognizant Foundation, for believing in me when I needed it the most," he says simply. "That support set everything in motion."

For Nagesh, education was never just about marks or degrees. It was about dignity. About breaking a generational silence. And so he did. Now, he makes sure others do too.







## Anand's Way: No Scribe, No Limits

The revolution shall be typed, one word at a time

In a quiet corner of Poonamallee near Chennai, a teenager sat hunched over his heavy Braille books, his fingers tracing raised dots and his mind dreaming of a future where he could study independently on a computer. His new laptop – bought with money that his father, a daily wage worker, had collected from employers and neighbors who believed in the boy's potential – sat beside him like a doorway to possibility.

His fingers fumbled, typed, deleted, and tried again. At first, he could barely type five words a minute, with half of them being mistakes.

But Anand wasn't just learning to type. He was preparing to take on a system that had never made space for someone like him.

Anand was born visually impaired. Until recently, the only way for students like him to write exams was with a scribe, someone else who read out questions and wrote down the answers. It was a method full of risk, pressure, and dependence. You couldn't go back and change the answer. You couldn't be sure your thoughts were understood. And most of all, you never felt fully in control.

But Anand wanted something different. He wanted to write his own exam. Literally.

### The Battle for Independence

Before joining the STEAM4ALL Early Intervention Program – implemented in his school by Help the Blind Foundation (HTBF) and supported by Cognizant Foundation – Anand had already started practising on a computer. But he was still a beginner.

Once in the program, Anand's confidence began to grow. With regular training in spelling, grammar, and typing, he gradually built the skills he needed. His typing speed steadily improved to 25–27 words per minute, with 95% accuracy. His teachers were amazed to see his consistency and commitment. No student had shown such focused determination. And no one had dared to imagine that a visually impaired child from a government school could one day appear for the state board exams... without a scribe.

Anand decided he would be the first.

### The Exam That Made History

Convincing the school was hard. Convincing the education board was harder.

But something about Anand's determination

For Anand, this wasn't about marks. It was about agency.

moved everyone involved. The Department for the Welfare of the Differently Abled granted him special permission – and a quiet revolution began. In 2025, Anand became the first visually impaired boy from a Tamil Nadu government school to write the Class 12 state board exams entirely on a computer. While a few students from CBSE schools had taken exams online before, Anand was the first to do so from the government school system.

When the results came, there was silence. Then cheers. Anand had scored 486 out of 600 – the highest in his school, and the third-highest among visually impaired students in Tamil Nadu's government schools. He had shattered not just a record, but a mindset. The previous highest score with a scribe in his school was 429.

Though the Government of Tamil Nadu had already provided the option of writing exams online, most students hadn't opted for it – largely due to the lack of infrastructure in government

schools. Anand's courage showed what was possible. For him, this wasn't about marks. It was about agency. For the first time in his life, he didn't need someone else to "read" his answers. He had written them himself. Word by word.

### A Legacy Typed In Courage

Help The Blind Foundation's Early Intervention Program boosted Anand's confidence, while the consistent training in spelling, grammar, and typing gave him the foundation to make the bold decision to attend his board exams without a scribe. A dedicated team of trainers and teachers, and one determined student, made this historic event possible.

Inspired by Anand's success, the Tamil Nadu government revised its rules. Visually impaired students from government schools across the state can now choose to write their board exams on a computer – without a scribe. What started as a boy's quiet rebellion has become a gateway for thousands.

Anand dreams of studying English literature and becoming a professor. But his legacy is already written. He didn't just pass his exam. He passed the baton.



# Blimey, If You Ask Cornelius

The boy who turned blindness into brilliance



Cornelius was five when the fever came. It arrived like any other childhood illness – but left with something far more precious. In the cramped ward of a rural hospital in Meghalaya, measles stole his sight. There was no family history. No warning. Just a little boy waking into a world that would never look the same again.

In his village, blindness was a sentence. Outside the safety of his school campus, neighbors mocked him. “People didn’t understand,” he says. “They didn’t want to.” Stepping outside meant bracing for the sting of words that knew exactly where to land.

In 2006, Cornelius became one of the first visually impaired students from his village to pass Class X. His name was in the local newspaper. That day, people wanted to talk about him. The boy once whispered about became someone to point to with pride.

He went on to graduate from St. Edmund’s College. But even then, jobs stayed out of reach. “Felt like I was waiting endlessly for the world to open a door,” he recalls.



## A Flicker, Then a Flame

Everything changed when Cornelius’ teacher suggested something new: computer skills. It led him to Enable India – a place built around accessibility, dignity, and digital empowerment.

In 2011, Cornelius enrolled in their foundational training course. It landed him a job at Rediff. com, in charge of analyzing spam operations, suspicious IPs, and safeguarding inboxes.

But it was more than just a job. It was proof that a person with visual disability could carve out a dignified space in a digital world that increasingly relies on speed and precision. Still, the work came

with friction. Navigating interfaces. Toggling checkboxes. Managing with a screen reader. Everything took time.

## Project Blimey: A New Way of Seeing

In 2020, Cornelius found a new ally: Project Blimey. A digital literacy platform developed by Enable India and supported by Cognizant Foundation, Blimey was built by and for the visually impaired as part of the Foundation’s ongoing work in advancing inclusive tools and dignified access.

It changed everything.

Tasks that once took double the time were now streamlined. Blimey’s screen-reader-friendly

“They didn’t just give us tools. They gave us a chance to lead.

— Cornelius

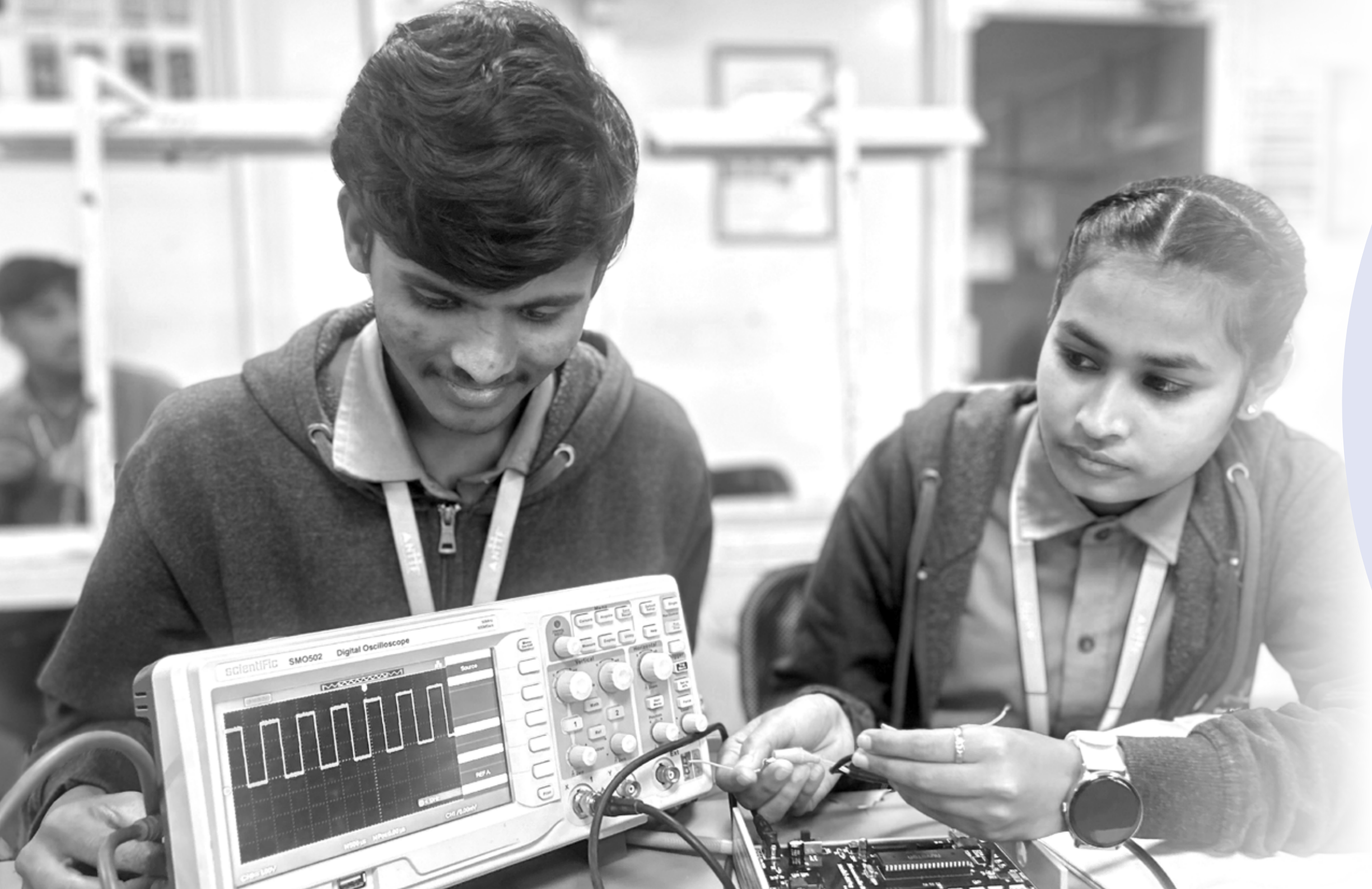
design and simulations helped Cornelius move faster and smarter. He learned shortcut keys, navigational logic, and confidence. “They didn’t just give us tools,” he says. “They gave us a chance to lead.”

## Now, He Builds The Bridge

Today, Cornelius is an Associate Manager at Enable India, leading Blimey – the very platform that reshaped his life. He mentors others, refines the technology, and helps more people cross the same digital divide he once faced.

Outside work, Cornelius plays the harmonica, flute, and guitar. He sings, walks long distances, plays chess, and follows the news. His life now moves to a rhythm he has chosen. In 2023, Project Blimey won the CSR Impact Award. But Cornelius had already arrived –quietly, with purpose, and entirely on his own terms.





## Interventions in **Skilling**



If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and issue orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the endless immensity of the sea."

— **Antoine de Saint Exupéry**,  
cited from his writings and speeches



# Shanthi: The Double Shift

When one path isn't enough, build two

In a quiet pocket of Chennai, in the year 2016, a woman stepped out of her home not knowing what lay ahead – only that she had to try. Y. Shanthi, a single mother of two, had no degree, no job security, and no time to waste. Her son was in the second standard. Her daughter just started LKG. And she – recently separated and entirely on her own – carried the full weight of their future.

Every rupee mattered. Every decision weighed a lot. But what she had in abundance was will.

Shanthi began asking around: neighbors, schoolteachers, anyone who might know of a way forward. She wasn't looking for any miracles, just a way in. Something steady. Something safe.

And that's when she heard about ANEW – the Association for Non-Traditional Employment for Women – an organization offering practical skills training, support, and a chance, built for women like her. She applied for their Auxiliary Nursing Care program, supported by Cognizant Foundation.

## Hands That Heal. Work That Holds.

The course was short – but it opened a door. Shanthi learned the fundamentals of caregiving: hygiene, patient care, palliative support, post-surgical assistance. It wasn't glamorous. It wasn't easy. But it was work – work that mattered.

After graduating, she began earning ₹350 per



shift as a home nurse. The money was just enough to cover basic groceries, bus fare, and school fees. But more than the income, the job gave her something she hadn't felt in years: a sense of control.

Still, the shifts weren't always regular. The savings were slim. So, Shanthi looked for more. A nearby textile shop was hiring. In between shifts, she began working part-time at the shop – first as a store assistant, then, as her confidence grew, at the accounts desk. She picked up bookkeeping, learned how to manage ledgers, and understood customer flows.

Soon, Shanthi was managing bills by the day and checking blood pressure readings by the night. In every sense of the word, she was effectively building two careers – one with her hands, one with her mind.



For Shanthi, there are still long days, but fewer uncertain ones.

## The Math of Dignity

Today, Shanthi earns ₹20,000 per month from her work as a home nurse, and an additional ₹17,000 as an office accountant.

There are still long days, but fewer uncertain ones. She no longer worries whether the school fees will be paid on time. Her kitchen never goes quiet. Her son is now pursuing a B. Com degree from a reputed college in Chennai, and her daughter is now in the 10th standard, just as curious and ambitious as the woman who raised her.

Shanthi's pride is quiet. She doesn't celebrate loudly. She simply keeps going.

Care Work. Career Work.  
Change Work.

Shanthi's story is just one among thousands made possible by Cognizant Foundation's partnership with ANEW. The program has trained over 3,000 women in Home Nursing, and thousands more in IT, accounting, and advanced tally – transforming care work into career work.

These are not just wage stories. They are stories of inheritance – of strength passed down from generation to generation, of futures re-authored with grit and determination. Shanthi's son studies commerce because he watched his mother master accounting. Her daughter dreams of her own career because she's seen what's possible when you refuse to stay stuck.

These are stories of what happens when people are finally given a reason to believe they can stand.

And when they do – the entire house stands a little taller.



# Mohini Sharma: Cleared for Duty

She knew the words, she fought for the voice

For most of her life, Mohini Sharma walked through the world without sight – but never without vision. Growing up in Delhi, Mohini learned early what it meant to pay closer attention: to sound, to silence, to what was said and what wasn't. Born visually impaired, she quickly learned to listen deeper, study longer, and carry herself with a calm that often went unnoticed.

She soon discovered her love for language, which led her to study master's in English literature at Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi. Books weren't always accessible. Exams weren't always fair. Technology wasn't always on her side. Yet, Mohini stayed in the fight. She graduated with honours.

Not one to stop at a single language, she enrolled for a certificate course in Spanish at Mata Sundri College.

## A Program. A Chance to Be Seen.

In 2023, Mohini became part of the first batch of the Tech4All program – a skilling initiative supported by Cognizant Foundation and implemented by Cheshire Disability Trust (CDT), aided by Help the Blind Foundation (HTBF), Visually Impaired Bank Employees Welfare Association (VIBEWA), and Christ University.

Unlike most courses designed for persons with disabilities, this one didn't stop at computer basics or soft skills. It aimed higher – offering structured, industry-aligned training.

But more than anything, it offered belief, in the ambitions of persons with disabilities, in their place within systems that had so often failed to see them.

Mohini joined a banking workshop under the Office Management Banking Insurance Finance and Accounts (OMBIFA) program led by VIBEWA, and that very month, attempted the State Bank of India Probationary Officer exam. One of the most

competitive exams in the country – procedurally complex, rarely designed for someone like her.

She cleared it.

## The System, Slowly Rewritten

Today, Mohini Sharma walks into her branch at the State Bank of India as a Probationary Officer, earning ₹ 56,400 per month. Not as a favor. Not as a headline. But as an honest, qualified officer who earned her seat all the way through.

Mohini's is not a one-off story. She's part of a growing shift – a proof point of what becomes possible when training meets dignity, and when persons with disabilities are offered the same preparation the rest of the world takes for granted.

Through its collaboration with CDT, Cognizant Foundation has supported over 1400 youth with

disabilities across Tirupati, Kakinada, Mysore, and Devenhalli – in fields ranging from IT and finance to architecture and design.

What they walk away with isn't just a job offer. It's conviction. It's confidence. It's the ability to finally be seen.

She walks in not as a favor. Not as a headline. But as someone who earned her seat all the way through.





# Shanthamma: The Sound of Progress

In a house full of silence, hope had a voice



In Molakalmuru, a small village in Karnataka's Chitradurga district, noise fills the air by habit – the bleating of goats, the clang of steel vessels, the murmur of neighbors exchanging news. But inside the home of Shanthamma KM, silence often lingered longer.

Born with a hearing impairment, Shanthamma shared that quiet with her two younger brothers, both also hearing impaired. Her father farmed their land. Her mother cared for their home. Between them were six children, rising costs, and no guarantee of a way forward.

From a young age, Shanthamma felt the urgency to help. Not because anyone asked her to, but because she wanted to stand beside her parents not just as a daughter, but as someone who could carry the weight too.

## The Space That Didn't Make Her Shrink

In 2019, she got that chance. With guidance from her teachers, Shanthamma enrolled in the Electronics Mechanic ITI course at Nettur Technical Training Foundation (NTTF) – a program supported by Cognizant Foundation.

A free hostel stay meant her parents could breathe a little easier. She received her books, uniforms, and shoes at no cost.

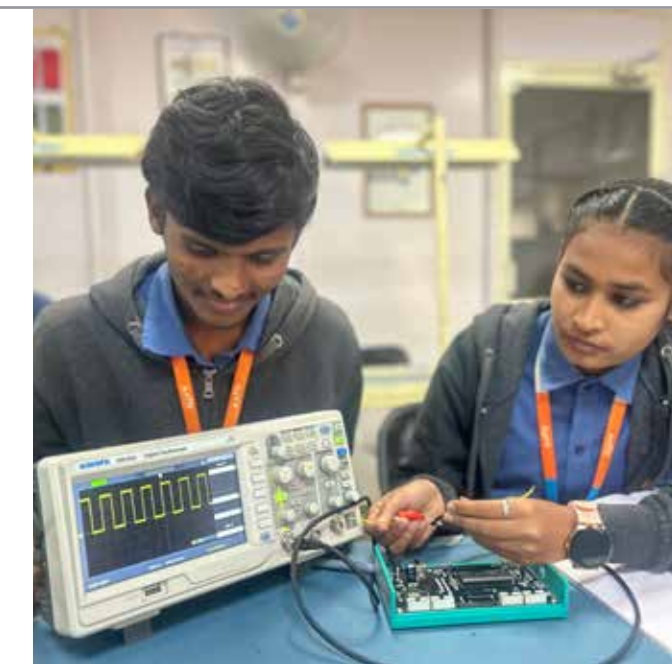
The campus wasn't built as an afterthought, it was designed with students like her in mind.

At NTTF, she wasn't told to "catch up." She was simply given space to keep pace. The mornings began with assemblies. The days included practical training, physical education, and even cultural programs. Slowly, Shanthamma started to feel not just included, but expected. The kind of quiet pride that comes when you're no longer a question mark in someone else's plan.

"For the first time," she says, "I felt like I could stay – not just visit – in a world that moved."

## Work That Stands for Something

Shanthamma completed her training in 2021 and soon after got her first job, earning ₹12,000 a month at a private firm. A year later, she was hired by TVS, one of India's most respected companies. Today, she earns ₹20,000 per month and holds a stable career with pride – something her family once didn't know how to imagine.



“For the first time, I felt like I could stay — not just visit — in a world that moved.”

— Shanthamma

Her brothers, too, now see possibilities where they once saw limits. Shanthamma's home, once filled with uncertainty, now has structure, plans, and movement.

Through its work with NTTF, Cognizant Foundation has brought technical training to young people with disabilities across rural Karnataka, reaching not just those who apply but also those who are often excluded even before the form arrives. These programs have helped students like Shanthamma shift not just income levels, but family legacies. They've opened doors that never existed before, and kept them open long enough for someone to walk through.

For many students, it's a chance to build a career. For Shanthamma, it was the permission to become herself.



## Login: Sona Sanal

From asking questions to building answers

In Kalakkad, a small town nestled in the foothills of southern Kerala, Sona Sanal grew up in a house where dreams came second to survival. Her mother, Jyothi, worked as a peon, balancing the weight of five lives on a single pair of hands. Sona's father had passed away when she was still a little girl, so his absence shaped her childhood, the same way a missing wall shapes a home – you build around it, but never forget.

In that absence, Sona built quiet ambitions. She asked big questions about how machines work and what makes systems run – even if no one around her had ever met a software engineer.

She studied in a government school, then went on to pursue a BTech in Computer Science from the Vidya Academy of Science and Technology. But a degree wasn't enough to open doors. In the job market, what greeted her was another kind of silence.

### When the System Finally Responds

That's when Sona heard about Tech4All – a skilling initiative run by Cognizant Foundation in partnership with ICT Academy. The program offered deep, structured learning: networking concepts, virtualization tools, industry frameworks, and the kind of exposure most college curriculums skip.

More importantly, it offered access – to tools, to mentors, and to a belief that girls like her belong in tech.

There were no fees. No gates. Just a room full of young women, all logging in with the same hope.

Sona soaked it in. She pushed herself to ask more, code better, stay longer. And somewhere between modules and mock interviews, something clicked.

For Sona, it felt like the first time the system responded.

In sitting through labs, in asking the hard questions, in pushing through when things didn't compile, slowly, Sona saw the world she had imagined for so long starting to materialize before her. One clean block of code at a time.

“This dream was never mine alone. It's my mother's. My father's memory. My family's belief in me.”

— Sona Sanal

Today, she's working at Sutherland, applying the tools, language, and confidence the program gave her. Her voice, when she speaks of it, holds both pride and gratitude.

“This dream was never mine alone,” she says. “It's my mother's. My father's memory. My entire family's belief in me – they carried me here.”

### 5,000 Dreams, One Login at a Time

Cognizant Foundation's Tech4All initiative, in collaboration with ICT Academy, has trained over 5,000 young women across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Telangana – women from underrepresented communities, armed not just with technical know-how but with belief.

It is a quiet movement. One that doesn't speak in headlines, but in outcomes.

In girls like Sona.







## Rebuilding communities



You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution.

— **Maya Angelou**  
Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now (1993)



## Geetha: Stitched With Strength

She picked up a needle, and held her family together



Before the shop, before the sewing machine, before anyone called her “Geetha akka”, she was just Geetha. A quiet woman in a small Chennai home, folding clothes, packing lunchboxes, watching her children grow, and stretching her husband’s modest grocery shop income to cover another month’s rent.

Geetha rarely stepped beyond her doorstep in Adambakkam, but inside her was a peculiar restlessness she couldn’t name. Not ambition per se, but just as urgent. The need to ease her husband’s load. The desire to stand a little taller.

In 2019, Geetha joined 13 other women in her neighborhood to form the Bhavani Amman

Kalanjiam Self-Help Group (SHG). At first, it was just a small savings circle, ₹100 set aside each month. Modest, almost forgettable. But for Geetha, it was the first stitch in something larger.

Soon, ₹100 increased to ₹300 and then ₹500. For the first time in years, she had something of her own. Encouraged by the group, Geetha took her first small loan of ₹20,000 – just enough to buy a manual sewing machine. She cleared a corner in her home, set up the machine, and began taking tiny steps: a blouse here, a child’s frock there, simple alterations for neighbors. Her hands trembled in the beginning – what if it didn’t work?

But the soft hum under her fingers slowly rewrote that fear. Each garment she stitched had something extra: pride. Finally, Geetha was earning – not much, but enough to buy groceries without asking.

### When Crisis Became Calling

With a ₹75,000 loan, Geetha upgraded to a motorized machine and opened her tailoring unit with three sewing stations. Soon, she was buying fabric from Erode and Paris Corner. Her clientele grew, and so did her confidence.

Then came 2020. Geetha’s husband lost his job during the COVID lockdown. His company shut down, and the family’s only income now came from her. Without panic, she stepped up, helping her husband set up a grocery shop; running the house, the shop, and the tailoring unit – all at the same time.

When asked later how she managed, she simply said, “You don’t pause when people are depending on you.”

### The Boutique of Tomorrow

Today, Geetha earns ₹20,000–₹25,000 per month. But that’s not the full story. She has become a node in a growing network of entrepreneurial women, training homemakers and helping them start their own ventures.

Two other SHG women now stitch with her, earning ₹200–₹250 per day. Geetha’s daughter recently cracked NEET and awaits counselling for medicine studies. Her son is in Class 11.

With ₹13,357 in current savings and ₹1.84 lakh received in loans over the years, Geetha



dreams of turning her tailoring unit into a boutique with bridal blouses, Aari embroidery, and a team of women who stitch not just fabric, but dignity. Her shop is no longer just a place of work. It’s a space for laughter, advice, and shared strength. She’s no longer the woman who waited. She is the woman others wait for.

### Rebuilding, One Life at a Time

After the 2015 floods and Cyclone Vardah in 2016 left deep scars across coastal Tamil Nadu, entire neighborhoods in the St. Thomas Mount Block of Kanchipuram District were left rebuilding from the ground up. In these nine panchayats, where most families survived on daily wages, small shops, or construction work, the disasters didn’t just wash



away homes – they washed away livelihoods, and their footing in the world.

It was here, in 2016, that Cognizant Foundation, in partnership with DHAN Foundation, began the Rebuilding Communities Program – a long-haul effort to help people stand steady again. Over the next four years, women’s collectives found new ways to earn, skills were built, and homes were repaired. Children went back to school, health services were strengthened, and the people found dignity again.

By the program’s close in 2020, the landscape had changed. The community had not only rebuilt; it had learned to stand taller than the waters ever rose.



## With heartfelt thanks

What a privilege it is to end a book feeling more hopeful than when you began it.

The people you've just met may never know your name, but they've given you something to believe in: proof that change, even if quiet, slow, or invisible at first, is always possible.

If even one of these pages stayed with you, then this book has done its job. Thank you for reading with empathy, for meeting these stories not as case studies, but as lives lived.

Why does the light live on? Because change doesn't stop when a program ends or stories conclude. It multiples – from teacher to student, mother to child, neighbor to neighbor. A young

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.

— Mother Teresa

woman who was once mentored now upskills others. A child who received treatment grows up to advocate for healthcare in his community. Change doesn't happen once; it echoes forward, a chain reaction of hope.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to sit with families in small towns, speak with teachers in under-resourced schools, and spend time with field teams on the ground. What I carry from these visits is not just a sense of purpose, but also perspective. Impactful societal change, I've realized, doesn't actually look like a headline at all. Instead, it looks like someone doing the right

thing, even when no one is watching.

Twenty years ago, when Cognizant Foundation began, we asked ourselves: “What does it really take to make inclusion work – not as a statement, but in the everyday reality of people's lives?”

Spent two decades chasing answers. What we found, again and again, is the simple fact that real impact, always, is rooted in trust, in proximity, and in letting communities lead the way.

That is the light we've tried to honor in these pages – not the one we created, but the one we've been fortunate enough to witness.

To the people featured in this book – thank you for showing us what's possible. To our partners and field teams – thank you for showing up, every day, in places where it matters most. You've turned challenges into milestones, and stories into legacies. To our colleagues and Cognizant associates – thank you for believing in work that sometimes moves slower, but always moves

deeper.

And to you, dear reader – thank you for carrying these stories with you.

May this light stay with you. Because even the smallest spark, when protected, can light the way home.

**Deepak Prabhu Matti**

Chief Executive Officer  
Cognizant Foundation



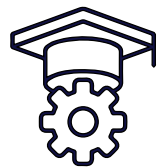


# Where we intervene

ur work begins where systems fall short and potential goes unrecognized. In neonatal units lacking the equipment to save sight. In classrooms where outdated methods haven't kept pace with

possibility. In communities where economic opportunity feels impossibly distant. We intervene not because problems are complex, but because solutions often aren't – they simply require reaching the right people at the right time.

## Education



**Tech-enabled learning in schools and colleges**

Fostering curiosity, creativity and bridging the digital divide through technology enabled inclusive learning methods



**Career Counselling**

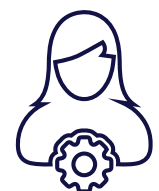
Empowering young minds to make informed career choices



**Scholarships**

Enabling higher education needs for students from diverse studies

## Skilling



**Skilling of Women**

Enhancing income opportunities for women through industry-relevant skilling



**Skilling of Persons with Disabilities**

Creating inclusive pathways to employment through accessible training

## Healthcare



**Retinopathy of Prematurity**

Saving babies from a lifetime of blindness



**Congenital Heart Disease**

Healing little hearts with timely screening and intervention



**Eye Screening Of Children**

School & community-based screenings across multiple states



**Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs**

Unlocking potential through therapy, learning and rehabilitation



**Addressing Issue Of Mental Health**

Breaking silence and building strength through mental health

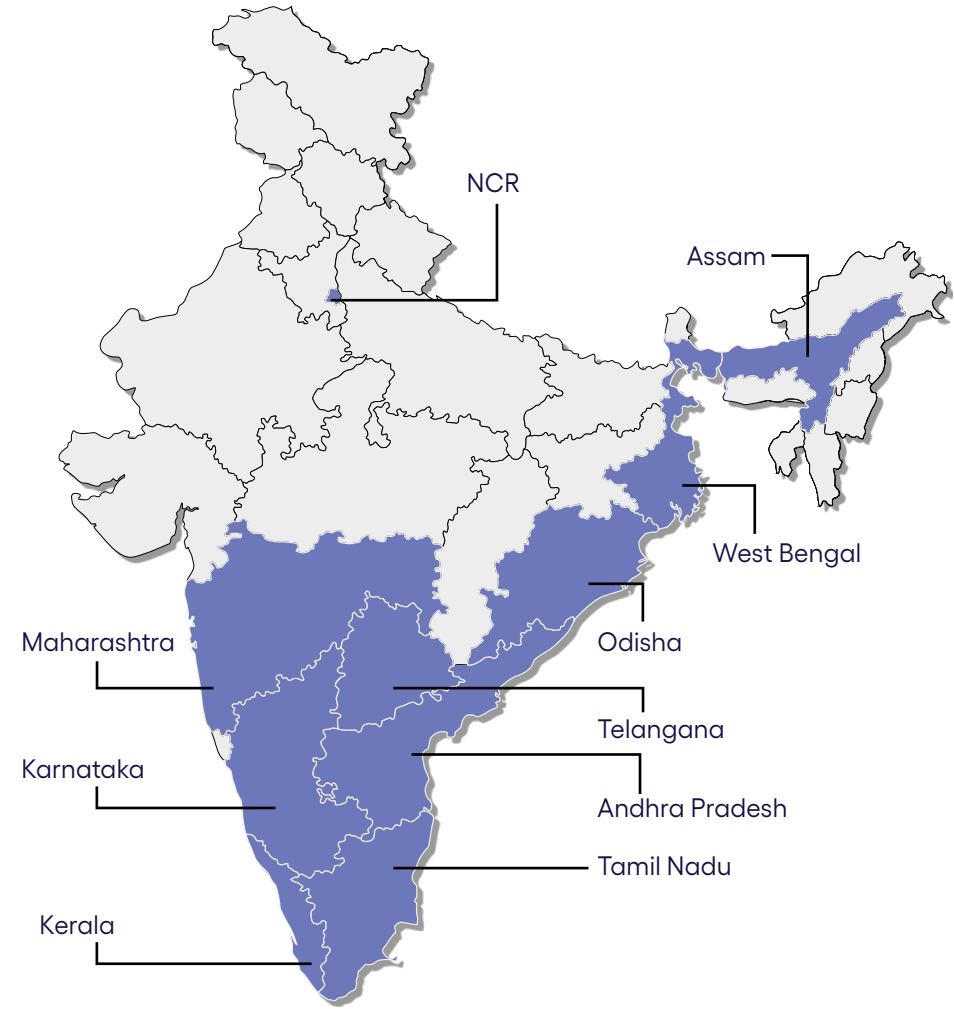


**Maternal And Child Healthcare**

Nurturing futures through timely care of high risk mothers and babies

## Trust travels far

Twenty years of work has taught us that geography is just the beginning. What matters isn't the breadth of our reach, but the depth of our roots. In each state, we've built ecosystems of change – networks of partners who know their communities intimately, systems that function long after programs officially end, relationships that survive transitions in leadership and funding. This map represents not coverage, but our community.



10  
States

300+  
NGO Partners

600+  
Projects

100+  
Districts Covered



## Acronyms used in this book

What the letters stand for — and the lives behind them

Acronym	Full form & explanation
CF	Cognizant Foundation – The philanthropic arm of Cognizant, supporting equity in health, education, and livelihood across India.
APD	The Association of People with Disability – Works to enable children and adults with disabilities to lead independent lives.
ANEW	Association for Non-Traditional Employment for Women – Provides vocational training to women from underserved communities.
AIF	American India Foundation – A nonprofit organization working to catalyze social and economic change in India.
CCE/CFSI	Comprehensive Child Eye Care / Child-Friendly Screening Initiative – Vision screening programs focused on school-age children.
CDT	Cheshire Disability Trust – Supports livelihood access for persons with disabilities through skill development and training.

Acronym	Full form & explanation
CCDT	Committed Communities Development Trust – Focuses on community-based maternal and child health programs.
DE	Digital Equalizer – AIF’s program enabling government schoolteachers to use digital tools to improve learning outcomes.
FFE	Foundation for Excellence – Provides scholarships and mentoring to academically gifted but financially challenged students.
ICT Academy	Information and Communication Technology Academy – A platform for industry-academia collaboration, especially in tech skilling.
LVPEI	LV Prasad Eye Institute – A leading eye care and research institution based in Hyderabad.
NTTF	Nettur Technical Training Foundation – Provides industry-aligned vocational education and training.

Acronym	Full form & explanation
OEI	Operation Eyesight India – An international development organization focused on preventing avoidable blindness.
PHC	Primary Health Centre – A state-run rural health facility that provides basic medical care.
ROP	Retinopathy of Prematurity – A potentially blinding eye disorder that primarily affects premature infants.
SHG	Self-Help Group – A village-based financial intermediary group usually composed of women from similar social and economic backgrounds.
SNCU	Special Newborn Care Unit – A hospital-based intensive care unit for newborns in critical condition.
SRCT	Sri Ramcharan Charitable Trust – A Chennai-based nonprofit working to improve early childhood education.
TCOL	Teachers’ Community of Learning – A peer-learning initiative that empowers government schoolteachers through collaboration.

Acronym	Full form & explanation
TISS	Tata Institute of Social Sciences – A premier institution for social work and development studies.
VIBEWA	Visually Impaired Bank Employees Welfare Association – Offers training and support for visually impaired individuals entering the banking sector.
BPNI	Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India – A national network of organizations and individuals dedicated to promote mother and child health through protection, promotion, and support of breastfeeding.



The book 'The Light That Lives On' is a labor of love from Cognizant Foundation. But as much as the Foundation owns this book, it belongs to everyone who has been a part of this journey and continues to turn every darkness into light.

**Disclaimer:**

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy and dignity of the individuals featured in this book. All stories have been shared with consent and in collaboration with our partner organizations.

# The Light That Lives On



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