EARLY SELF-DISCOVERY OF TALENT ARTICULATES 'AGENCY' AND GIVES A VISION FOR LIFE: POVERTY IS NO ROADBLOCK FOR ALAGAR

Alagar is in 9th standard. He is aged 14. He has two younger sisters, the older among them is 12 years of age, and the other 10 years. His father Paraman is aged about 45 and has studied only up to 5th standard. Mother Ayyammal is about 40. Like her husband, she too has studied only up to 5th standard. Paraman makes his living as a casual labourer in construction sites and earns about 600 rupees a day. Some four years back, Paraman fell from a scaffold in the construction site and got seriously injured. He continues to suffer infirmities that hamper him from attending to work regularly. This has set a limit to his monthly income. Mother works as a domestic hand attending to three urban households. She earns about 300 rupees a day on an average. This family is a classic example of an urban household living below poverty line, and without any insurance or social safety net to fall back. Unforeseen calamities permanently trap them in poverty. The family lives in a decrepit hovel, making their poverty very visible. This is in Jawaharlalpuram, an urban deprived area where CEDAR runs a Children's Resource Centre (CRC) or Children's Hub since June 2019.

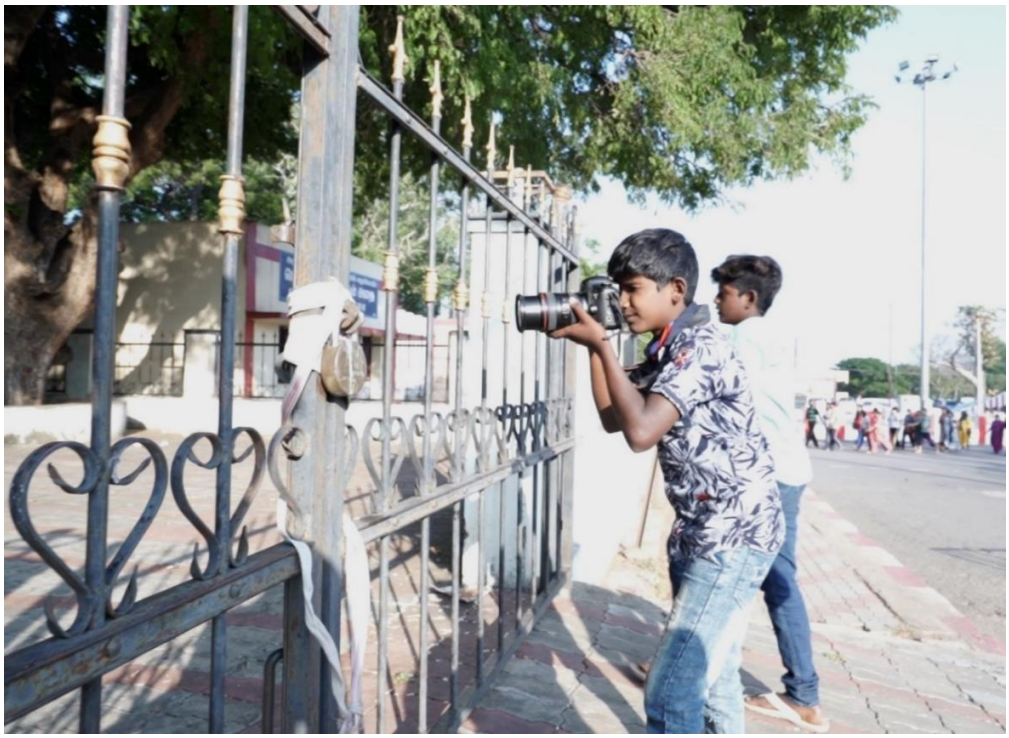


Alagar along with his two younger sisters and mother

Early malnutrition has left its marks on Alagar. He looks stunted. He is short of standard height for his age, and underweight. He had his primary education in a government school. Now he is studying at a government aided Muslim School. His mother Ayyammaal says, "For long, Alagar had been considered as a very average student. No one said anything distinct about this child. Neither did we see anything special. He was going around listless and disorderly. He never took anything we said with any seriousness. He never liked being instructed. We were unhappy about him. His father used to scold him a lot."

When CEDAR started the CRC, Alagar was one among the very few children who ignored its arrival. Even on persuasion, he did not join the hub. A few months later, there was an incident. CEDAR's Creative Lead for Photography, organised a field photography trip for children who showed serious interest. Alagar saw a few friends of his in the group preparing to leave with the Creative Lead. Something instantly inspired Alagar and he without any pretext approached the lead and said to him that he too would come. Some children said, he was not yet a member of the CRC. But the lead did not object. He in fact encouraged him to come along. They spent half-a-day in the field. Alagar at that point did not have any orientation to photography. But it worked out to be a turning point for

him. From that day onwards, Alagar started feverishly attending the CRC. Creative Lead Nagaraj says, “He was everywhere… in photography class, in drawing and painting sessions, doing origami and singing and dancing.” But nobody knows what seriously turned him on to drawing and how he got hooked to it at one point. “He drew and drew… even up to 10 ‘o’ clock in the night” Nagaraj says. After the CRC hours, he went to Nagaraj’s house (the creative lead who lives in the same settlement and is a neighbour) and pestered him to teach more.



Alagar during a photography field trip



One of the photographs taken by Alagar during photography field trip

Initially, the parents could not understand. Alagar says, “My father was on a scolding spree… one day he caught me drawing sitting in my home. He was in a teasing mood. He went searching for something and came back with a picture. He threw it at me and challenged me to draw that picture. He carefully watched me drawing. I completed the picture. He was very surprised. He became happy. He then took the picture I had drawn from me, and showed it to my mother. It was a big moment for me.” Alagar is right. It is now understood that Alagar’s parents used to send him for wage work (like assisting a vendor or even to the construction site) to earn that extra buck the family badly needed. After the ‘test-son-incident’ the practice of parents compelling the child to go for work, was instantly stopped. They probably realised something ‘more worthy’ in the child than the few rupees he brought home during weekends woking.



Alagar’s ‘still life drawing’ using oil pastels on paper



Alagar's portrayal of a bird on a tree using water color

Alagar's mother Ayyamma says that since then, Alagar's relations with the family members has vastly improved. He is assisting his mother in family chores now. One big task he undertakes every day is to carry eight to ten pots of water home, from the distant common tap. His mother says, "I am not able to do it anymore because of my poor health. The pot is heavy and he carries it on his head. He laughs it out joking, 'I am already short… carrying this waterpot on my head I am getting shorter and shorter every day.'" Ayyamma's biggest satisfaction is, Alagar giving up on his aimlessness and wandering attitude. She says, "Though he spends a lot of time on drawing, he now has a schedule to follow."

Another breakthrough for Alagar was, getting the attention of the charismatic art teacher of his school Mr. Shanmugasundaram. This was after he started participating in a few art competitions at school. Shanmugasundaram is keen to nurture talent in children. For this, he toils beyond school hours. He has his art studio set up at his home. He has thrown it open to children whom he has identified as having the potential. The children can come to his house in the evening and during weekends. Sometimes they are treated with a meal. Alagar is part of this 'art gang' now, and spends his weekends with Shanmugasundaram besides attending the hub. The goodwill for Alagar in school, has improved. This year, another teacher bought Alagar a pair of school uniform. Alagar is also fond of the peer group and he acts as its lead. When contacted over phone, Shanmugasundaram said, "You can't understand anything over phone… come and see what my kids are doing in my studio."

As I interacted with Alagar, I could pick something unique. He tries to combine photography with drawing and painting. He says "The camera helps me to choose my subject for drawing… I bring them within the frame and shoot. Then it becomes the reference for my drawing." I was a bit

amused about his aesthetic strategy and the kind of hybrid learning. He says, “I want to draw portraits… and also cartoons and caricatures.” Asked why cartoons and caricatures, he said, “It can entertain children.” What would however surprise anyone is, the determination Alagar demonstrates in expressing his dream to become an Art Teacher. This is definitely not a child’s prattle.

Once he came to CEDAR and met with Dr. Chinnaraj Joseph our CEO, in his office. Some of us were there with him. During his chat, Chinnaraj asked, “People say you want to become an art teacher Alagar… are you sure you want to become an art teacher or simply an artist?” Pat came the reply, “An art teacher… you know why? I can help other children… I know how difficult it is for poor children to learn art… at times I had gone out to work to earn that money to buy art material… I will be happy teaching.”

Then Chinnaraj asked, “How will you become an art teacher?”

“I will go to an art school.”

“Do you know where the art school is?”

“I don’t know… Nagaraj *annan* will help.”

After a while when we were having tea with him, he turned to Dr. Chinnaraj and said, “Will you allow me to say something about you sir?” He said, “yes.”

Without batting his eye lid Alagar said in a clear tone,” You are also like me … while you chat you seem to share with others what you know.” Chinnaraj said, “Yes… yes, certainly… I am a teacher.”



(Alagar with CEDAR’s CEO, Dr. Chinnaraj Joseph Jaikumar)

Alagar was one of the few children who intermittently went to work during the lockdown without anybody knowing before CEDAR intervened. Asked why he did that, he said, “This time my parents did not compel me. I went on my own and made two hundred to three hundred rupees a day. I wanted to give some money in my mother’s hand. I did give and she was happy.”

He made every one of us go quiet and become thoughtful. Here is a child very clever and too sure of his destination, and above all, the path leading to it. Poverty is no roadblock to Alagar.



Alagar on stage, dancing with his friends during ‘Pongal festival’ at Jawaharlalpuram

Ponkundram

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