

A PLATFORM TO EXPERIMENT AND CREATIVELY ENGAGE: NOTHING DETERS MEENA GOING FORWARD

Meena lives in Ambedkar Colony an exclusive *dalit* colony and an urban deprived area. She joined our Children's Resource Centre (Children's Hub) in December 2019. At that time; she was just 14 years old, studying in 9th standard. Her father Kalidass, was a talented painter but could eke out a living only as a signboard artist on a daily-wage basis. Sadly, Kalidass died of Corona on 13th June 2021 at the age of 45. Mother Malar, who is 40 now, never stepped into a school and is a total illiterate. Kalidass when alive used to encourage Meena to study well. He wanted her to become an IAS officer which means joining the prestigious career civil service in India which even now by and large remains as an exclusive purview of the elite class of India.

Meena says, "I was one among the many in my class before I joined CEDAR's Children's hub. I was shy and never mingled with other children easily but joining the hub was the beginning of a new journey." The first thing she got attracted was origami. Then 'painting of bottles' taught at the hub by Creative Lead Nagaraj, became a passion and a hobby for her. As Meena recollects, her late father seeing her art work would say, "This daughter of mine would certainly become a better artist than me." This very humble experience became the first turning point in her life, says Meena. Shortly after this, she plucked courage to participate in a painting competition organised by her school. Later, without anybody advising her, she tried some border-crossing too, trying her luck with creative writing.

It was 16th Feb 2020. The Facilitators were looking for a child from any one of the hubs who could do the compering for a public function. The occasion was the release of the children's magazine *Engalkural* which would be attended by 250 children, district child protection officials and parent invitees. Seeing the new-found energy in Meena, the facilitator of her hub recommended her name. First, she refused. With some encouragement she finally agreed. The creative leads trained her for a few days in voice control, speech delivery, stage manners and body language. Meena says, "I walked to the stage with such nervousness but when I finished, the gripping fear was absolutely gone." The illiterate mother who attended the event with a few other mothers from the community, seeing her daughter performing on the stage, broke down and wept. The father loathed his inability to attend. New family dynamics set in. Now the mother said, "I have not gone to school but I will see my daughter achieves what she dreams about."



First time on stage

Then came the community annual fare. The festival committee wanted children to speak on social reformers. Meena chose to speak on *Savithri Bhai Phule*, poet, reformer and the first woman teacher of India, who campaigned for girl children's education in the early part of 19th century. Meena prepared herself for the occasion on her own, using resources available in the net. But when the actual event came, Meena overshot the theme. She abruptly changed her course and came down heavily on the child marriage practice which sporadically occurred in the community. This left the audience shellshocked. But some women were touched. When asked about that sudden outburst, Meena says, "I see things happening around me. Some children get married very early and they lose the vision for a good life... I don't want to stop with the child marriage issue. Anything I find as a matter of social concern I will learn more about that subject, and then would go public."



With Mother Malar

Meena likes to talk proudly about another incident. It was another public function organised by CEDAR. That was the launching of the Digital Platform in the Hub in 26th September 2020. The second senior most civil servant of the District, a Deputy Collector, was the special guest. Meena was doing the compering. When the meeting was over, she went straight to him on her own, and talked to him about her dream of becoming one like him.” The senior bureaucrat Mr. Rajasekaran was immensely happy and wished her well. Meena recalls, “Had I not come to the children’s hub I would not have had the opportunity to speak to such a senior civil servant in the first place. Even if by chance had I had such an opportunity to see someone like Rajasekar, I would not have had the courage to go near him and speak. I learnt that all here.” Meena says that that meeting certainly strengthened her conviction.



Sharing the stage with Deputy Collector Rajashekar

Then it was the second wave of the pandemic. Meena's father Kalidass showed symptoms of COVID in May 2021. CEDAR's Covid Help Desk intervened. After initial treatment by the help desk doctor, he was advised hospital admission. He was treated as an inpatient by the COVID special care unit of the Madurai Government Head Quarters Hospital for 2 weeks. Very unfortunately, he did not respond. He breathed his last on 13th June 2021. The only breadwinner of the family was gone. It was a devastating blow for the tiny family and the remaining three.

Meena has a brother by name Subash Pandiyan aged 20. He is in the second year under graduate class. As the college was closed at the time of his father's death, he could take up for a while some exacting casual work in the construction sites on a daily wage. Otherwise, the family depended on and continues to depend on the free ration from the government, and some other subsidies. Subsequent to her father's death; I met Meena after about two months in her house in the company of her mother. I was chatting with them for a while. I did not want to remind her of the passing away of her father. But whenever Meena referred to her father, she was moved to tears. One big regret both mother and daughter expressed. Meena's father when alive yearned to see her daughter performing on the stage at least once. Unfortunately, that never ever happened. But for heaven's sake Meena wittingly or unwittingly uttered a single word of self-pity during the entire conversation. I could see a fresh resolve in her. I found her civil service dream intact. The mother wrapped up the conversation saying, "Whatever be the adversity that awaits me, I will stand by my daughter and do everything possible to her for realising her civil service dream."

The latest I met her was a few days back, on 31st of August 2021. That was the occasion of the public release of the Art Manual. Meena by now had come a long way in compering. She sounded very professional that day. The Madurai District Collector #Dr. Aneesh Sekar was the Chief Guest, and he was quite impressed by the participation and the performance of the children on the occasion. Meena certainly added that extra colour. During the informal interactions that followed the book release, Meena told Dr.Vijaya Saravanan, Chair Person of Madurai CWC*, that she wanted to become a Collector one day. Coming to know of the loss of her father, Dr.Saravanan on his own volition promised to take up her case with the government for a solatium of Rs. 300,000/-. He asked her to apply through CEDAR.



During the Book release on 31st August 2021

What stands out singularly in my opinion is Meena's resilience. This has come through her perfect understanding of the experimental learning space made available to her in the first place. But more importantly her willingness to creatively engage with life as a whole. She has developed that capacity to convert every adversity into positive energy.

PONKUNDRAM, Creative Lead, CEDAR

02-09-2021

District Collector is the Chief Administrative Officer of the District. This powerful office is occupied only by the elite cadre of career bureaucrats who are recruited through a very demanding national competitive examination managed by a constitutional apparatus. The elite cadre is called the Indian Administrative Service (IAS).

*CWC means Child Welfare Committee a legal apparatus created by the Juvenile Justice Act. The chairperson is vested with magisterial powers under the act in order to deliver effective juvenile justice.

Express permission obtained from Meena and her mother Malar to present the case.