Saravanan: A Child Who is Finding His Own Way

When Saravanan passed his 10th Standard public examination with distinction, scoring more than 80 per cent, it attracted considerable attention in his community. For a boy from a deeply disadvantaged family, it was certainly an achievement worth celebrating. But his examination result represents only a small aspect of who he is. The more important aspect is about a child gradually learning to take charge of his own life.

Saravanan, now fourteen, belongs to CEDAR's Children's Resource Centre (CRC) at Keelaeraal. He comes from the Arunthathathiyar community, one of the most socially excluded communities in Tamil Nadu, traditionally associated with sanitary work. His father died when Saravanan was barely nine. His three elder brothers had already dropped out of school.



Saravanan and his Mother Lakshmi: In Front of Their House

The family survived largely through the labour of his mother, Lakshmi. She rises before dawn and begins garbage collection at 6.00 a.m. After returning around 9.00 a.m., she leaves again for casual work in a ginning factory. Between the two jobs, she earns about Rs. 500–550 (less than £ 4) a day.

"After my husband's death, when I could not even feed my children properly, how could they remain in school?" she asks. "They had to go for work." Saravanan could easily have followed the path his brothers.

Finding a Joyful Place



Child Saravanan at CRC

His father's death affected him deeply. He began spending his time wandering around after school. His mother, however, was determined that her youngest son should continue his education. In 2022, she brought him to CEDAR's Children's Resource Centre.

There he experienced something different. Saravanan remembers himself then as a "scared and withdrawn child." School had not helped him overcome that fear. The classroom itself could be intimidating because mistakes sometimes invited humiliation or corporal punishment.
The CRC presented another kind of learning environment.

"Here the facilitators are friendly and helpful," he says. He describes the CRC in Tamil as a *mahilchiyaana idam*—**a joyful place**. The phrase is important. Before a child can exercise agency, the child needs a space in which fear does not dominate. Saravanan found such a space in his relationship with facilitators Selvi and Sangeetha.

His first achievement there appears quite modest. He learned to read Tamil and English aloud confidently. But that small accomplishment opened another door. Once he became comfortable reading before others, he volunteered to read pledges, oaths and reports during the school assembly. A child who had once been afraid of the classroom and trembled in fear before teachers was now standing before the school and making himself heard.

Voice had begun to replace withdrawal.

Discovering What He Can Do

The CRC as is the practice, did not restrict Saravanan's development to academic learning.

Senior Programme Manager Michael describes him as naturally artistic and eager to use every learning opportunity available to him. Saravanan sings and dances and particularly enjoys

performing Karakam, the Tamil folk dance. He paints. Mother Lakshmi speaks with pride how his son has painted the mud walls of his own home.

He also became an accomplished chess player and received recognition in district-level tournaments. These apparently different activities—reading, painting, singing, dancing and chess—had a common consequence. They enabled Saravanan to discover himself as a person capable of learning, creating and accomplishing things. Increasingly, he ceased to be merely a recipient of support.



Facilitator Sangeetha: Mentor

Sangeetha noticed another change: whenever Saravanan learned something, he wanted to teach it to other children. She now regards him as one of the best peer teachers in the centre.
This is an important transition in the growth of agency: from "I can learn" to "I can help another child learn." Peer teaching is one of CEDAR's strategy to strengthen not only agency but also empathy and trust in children.

The most significant transformation, however, became visible through Saravanan's participation in the Children's Collective, where children learn about child rights and civic participation. Every day, Saravanan depended upon a government bus to reach school. Although he possessed a valid student pass, boys were prevented from boarding a particular bus on the grounds that it was a "girls' special." This created considerable difficulty for boys trying to reach school on time. On one occasion, when Saravanan challenged the restriction, a conductor reportedly mocked him: "Come in a girl's uniform tomorrow, I will take you."

Saravanan could have accepted the humiliation as another inconvenience over which he had no control. He did not.

With guidance from his CRC facilitators, he used the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Helpline to lodge a complaint and demanded that boys also be permitted to travel in the bus. A reply came promising that the issue would be addressed within thirty days. Nothing happened. Saravanan complained again. This time the authorities responded including the local police officer, and boys were subsequently permitted to use the bus. Saravanan himself no longer travels on that route. Yet other boys continue to benefit from his intervention. "I feel I have done something," he says.

That simple statement marks perhaps the most important moment in his story. The frightened child who entered the CRC had discovered that an unjust situation need not simply be endured. It could be questioned. Institutions could be approached with confidence. A grievance could become a rightful demand. And that demand pursued persistently could produce change.
His agency had moved beyond the personal boundary into the civic.



Entrance to the Sanitary Workers Housing Colony: With Facilitator Selvi and Mother

Choosing His Own Future

The same quality became apparent when Saravanan completed the 10th Standard.
Because he had scored well, teachers and others encouraged him to choose the science stream in the 11th Standard. They believed it would offer better career prospects. Saravanan chose History. His decision was not accidental. He wants eventually to enter either the police service or the legal profession. Behind that aspiration lies a memory of his father. Before his death, his father had spoken to him about the condition of their community. If Saravanan could one day become a lawyer or a respected police officer, he told him, perhaps he could do something for his people. Saravanan says he was too young then to understand what his father meant. He understands it differently now.

His ambition is therefore no longer simply, **"What job can I get?"** It is increasingly connected with another question: **"What can I become that will enable me to act?"**

Agency is Embedded in Society

Saravanan is acutely conscious of the conditions in which his community lives. Families have erected fragile huts along the bank of a drainage pond. A nearby storm-water canal frequently carries sewage and floods into the houses during heavy rains. When flooding becomes severe, families have to leave their homes and take shelter elsewhere. The settlement does not even possess a community hall of its own. Saravanan is of the opinion that whatever resources allotted to improve infrastructure in their locality are invariably diverted elsewhere by the vested

Saravanan dreams of changing this situation when he reaches a position from which he can act.

“Our people have accepted subservience too much,” he says. “I want to get them out of it.” This makes his story larger than a story of an individual’s success. Education, in Saravanan’s imagination, is not simply an escape route through which one successful child leaves a poor community behind. His emerging aspiration connects **personal advancement with collective dignity**.

That distinction lies at the heart of what CEDAR understands by creating agency in children.

“One Must Find His Own Way”

Yet Saravanan’s circumstances have not magically changed. Poverty remains real. When he needs additional money for his studies, or when his mother is unable to work, he takes up evening or weekend jobs. Sometimes this includes cleaning marriage halls and managing waste disposal. He does not regard such work as humiliating. “It doesn’t embarrass me,” he says. “One must not shy away from hardship but find his own way.”

Perhaps no statement captures Saravanan better. Agency does not mean that structural inequalities have disappeared. His caste location, poverty, father’s death, insecure housing and continuing need to work remain part of his reality. Nor would it be right to suggest that a CRC alone can remove these inequalities.

What has changed is **Saravanan’s relationship with those circumstances**.

He has distinguished himself in academics. He has learned to read aloud and then to speak before others. He has discovered artistic and intellectual abilities. He has moved from learner to peer teacher. He has learned that rights can be claimed rather than merely discussed. He has challenged a public institution and secured a change that continues to benefit other children. He has made an educational choice despite pressure to choose differently. And increasingly, he imagines his own future in relation to the future of his community.

Saravanan’s distinction in the 10th Standard examination matters. But it is not the most important outcome.

The more significant outcome is the emergence of a young person who increasingly believes that he can **understand his circumstances, make choices, act upon those choices and influence the world immediately around him**. That is what agency looks like in the life of a child.

And Saravanan himself perhaps provides its simplest definition: **“One must find his own way.”**

Expressing his gratitude Saravanan says, “Cedar CRC should be here ever so that many more children like me can find their way.”

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Based on video documentation