

V.O. Chidambaram College: a 75-Year Odyssey to Bring Off Educational Equality

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The festivities begin as a 75-year milestone draws near.

From a standing start, the purpose-built college was founded on the tenets of equal footing and anti-commercialisation in education.

In practice, the true objective of social service does not fit neatly into clearly defined categories. The phrases 'service' and 'service charge' often overlap with each other as educational institutions become lured, enticed, and engulfed in worldly success. There is a noble purpose in providing education that transcends merely equipping students with the information and skills necessary for obtaining a college degree for employment. Above all, it's about tilting the balance in favour of bringing social equality and justice to the table.

V.O. Chidambaram College (V.O.C.C.) was a tiny seed of a banyan tree nestled in the groves of academe. Since its establishment in 1951, the college has been at the forefront of social service initiatives aimed at addressing inter-regional imbalances in the field of education in this (Thoothukudi) neck of the woods.

Required love for one's country and profound respect for patriots serve as a testament to one's character, as exemplified by this eponymous college named after the great freedom fighter V.O. Chidambaram Pillai. He founded the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company with a whopping ₹10 lakhs, who, on his own, had taken on the monopoly of the British India Steam Navigation Company.

The college was first affiliated to then Madras University in 1951 before moving to Madurai University in 1966. It is currently affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

The foundational ideology of V.O.C.C. is a strong rejection of the notion that education is a privilege. From its inception to the present, V.O.C.C. has remained committed to its pull factor: 'Education for All.'

Thiru. Kulapathi. A.P.C. Veerabahu, the founder secretary of the college, was a distinguished scholar who bemoaned what he called 'societal decadence' when pupils were deprived of their fundamental right to education on the grounds of the economically disadvantaged, gender discrimination, and caste intolerance. In perpetuity, the college and its name will be legendarily revered for doing away with the push factors of caste, religion, creed, or language for those who are in pursuit of education and thereby opening the door for 'navbharat,' as he once remarked. For good measure, it will beckon students from all backgrounds who have also fallen victim to the compartmentalised system. He vehemently asserted that using merely an intellectual (cerebral) approach to teach the unreached students - who were impoverished and relegated to the bottom rungs of the caste hierarchy - was akin to chasing shadows. The clamouring for their attention can only be heard by showing more compassion in order for us to create a sense of fraternity. The key to effectively teaching them was also to use a visceral strategy, which, in turn, helped manage their limbic system. He was deeply religious and always followed his impeccable moral compass. He was a true-blue, and to him, service to humankind was a sacred calling.

The founder's deeds of greatness had passed into legend for Thiru A.P.C.V. Chockalingam, who took on the mantle of secretary from his father in 1982. Following the founder's departure for a divine realm, he had a hard row to hoe as he was a fledgling at the helm. Amidst numerous challenges on the horizon, he remained persistent in his central principle of 'anti-commercialism in education' - in for a penny, in for a pound - was a pearl of great price, notwithstanding that the college was a financial basket case. As the birds of a different feather from his own generation and successive generations jumped on the bandwagon, he obstinately jettisoned the unfair and unethical means of converting the college into a for-profit enterprise. Yet, his ethical acts leave no doubt that the apple never falls far from the tree. He embraced his father's never-throw-in-the-towel outlook, which kept him calm and collected and assisted him in pushing the envelope to help his fellow men who were in his charge. Not to mention, an array of fraught situations lurched him from one crisis to another, and on no account had it ever broken down his resiliency. Alongside like-minded cliques, he worked diligently and zeroed in on running the college on a shoestring budget to meet all the current expenses with fiscal rectitude. Consequently, he successfully navigated the situation and managed to keep his head above water. His avuncular demeanour and steely determination demonstrated remarkable fortitude to resist woes. Collectively, these traits had contributed to a narrative of him swallowing the humiliation of having to establish the brand V. O. C. C. Despite his recent octogenarian status, he remains a talismanic and an approachable leader with sprightliness and urbanity. He has the staff members' best interests at heart and always treats them as his equals. As for his employees, he is regarded as a true leader of the first water - honest, respectful, and with impeccable integrity. All's well that ends well these days: among other garners, the National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Management, Thanjavur, awarded him the prestigious "Lifetime Achievement Award" in recognition of his exceptional dedication to making a significant impact on the success of higher educational institutions. Self-effacingly, he attributes all the credit to the team and never allows himself to rest on his laurels.

Service to the nation through education is in their family's folklore.

Of that ilk, Dr. C. Veerabhu, began his teaching career in 1997 at his alma mater and has served as the principal since 2012. During his incumbency, he has proven to be equal to the challenges he faced. He has been the linchpin of a dynamic team, and under his leadership the college continued to gain stature and ascend to the national stage. The college gained an entrée to an elite A++ grade threshold accredited by NAAC in its fourth cycle, after maintaining an A grade in the three preceding cycles. Additionally, its 28th in the NIRF standings for 2024 further solidified its status as a premier learning institution. In 2023-24, V.O.C.C.'s foundational ideology hove into India Today magazine's nationwide survey. It gave the highest recognition for the college, ranking first for charging the 'Economical & Lowest Fee Structure' for the arts, science (5th rank in 2022-23), and the B.B.A. (2nd in 2022-23) streams, as well as the supra streams, won first place in the 2023-24 for the 'Best Value for Money category'. The previous year, the commerce stream also took first place in the category for economical and lowest fee structure. Into the bargain, in 2023-24, the college's initiatives and practices mirrored the opinions of the general public and stakeholders, as indicated by the surveys from various national magazines. According to 'Open' (40th rank for the science stream, 46th rank for arts, 65th rank for commerce, 49th rank for B.B.A.), 'Outlook-I care' (33rd rank for the science stream, 91st rank for arts, 94th rank for commerce, and 103rd rank for B.B.A.), and 'The Week Hansa' ranked the college 50th among all India arts colleges, 46th among all India science colleges, and 74th among all India Commerce Colleges. At the zenith of his achievement, he received the prestigious Best Principal Award given by the 'Institute of Scholars', Bangalore in 2019. By the same token, FAMA-ASIA-CC honoured him with the "Iconic Principal" award in 2022 for setting a launch pad for students in all of their pursuits. That year, he also received the coveted International Distinguished Principal Award, further enhancing his already impressive accomplishments in educational leadership.

The founding principal of the college, Prof. A. Srinivasa Raghavan (1951-1969), was a Sahitya Academy awardee. He was followed by Prof. V.M. Sridara Menon (1970-1974), Prof. A. Subbiah (1974-1981), Dr. C. Pakkiam (1981-1991), Prof. S. Duraisamy (1991-1997), Prof. R. Surianarayan (1997-2004), Dr. A. Francis (2004-2011), and Prof. S. Maragathasundaram (i/c : 2011-2012). All of these individuals were luminaries and stalwarts who had worked in the trenches. Along with them, the heads of departments and academics from previous years had contributed their intellectual prowess, which enabled the college to reach new heights of development for which it is always indebted.

A team of 138 (32 of whom work in the unaided college) academics comprised of a veritable feast of talent, show unwavering dedication and is counted as a safe pair of hands to keep the college at the top of its game. Every year, they elevate academic standards for 3,004 students (960 of whom attend the unaided college) by virtue of their erudite pedagogical expertise, empathic concern for students, and steadfast resolve. The historical brilliance of V.O.C.C. demonstrates the precision and sagacity of the leadership that have aroused the staff members' curiosity to have a field day to maximise their potential, and in a number of instances, the academics *manqué* have had a second bite at the cherry. For the academics, gratitude is the hallmark, and perseverance is the credo. A staff member once said, V.O.C.C. is a force to be reckoned with down south, and on his final day of retirement, he defined heaven: 'I aspired to be a great teacher, and I am proud to be one now'.

A team of 53 non-teaching staff members play an incredible role at the college. They foster a welcoming environment, safeguard everyone's well-being, and uphold order. Their tireless efforts support all the students and teaching staff, enabling a smooth academic-administrative experience. Their earnest efforts to support 772 SC/SC(A)/ST students (156 of whom are enrolled in the unaided institution), during the academic year 2023-2024 deserve special recognition.

Outside of working hours, the college remains open for two primary reasons: the library and offering add-on courses. Established in 1951, A.P.C. Veerabahu Memorial Library (commemorative of its name in 1993) has gazillions of books, and also has an InFLiBnet centre for postgraduates and researchers. The college leaves no stone unturned in offering a range of skill-based courses for the first- and second-year undergraduate (UG) students in tie-up with a renowned university, and value-added courses for the third-year UGs and postgraduates (PG), along with the courses that strengthen employment opportunities.

A total of 150 impoverished female students enjoy a wholesome breakfast on every working day as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scheme. The meat and potatoes of the breakfast scheme helps students to boost their vitality and concentration and to get the creative juices flowing while studying, thereby validating the founder secretary's sobriquet 'Kulapathi,' which means "a sage who feeds and teaches" in Sanskrit.

Last year, the selfsame scheme fosters computing skills in 627 Gen Zs from 28 government and government-aided schools in the Thoothukudi district. This year in, year out initiative bridges the digital divide and promotes digital equity across the school-going students' community.

The Kalvithanthal A.P.C. Veerabahu Memorial Scholarship offered me a chance to see eventually 'the only light at the end of the tunnel at that moment to keep riding on my educational journey,' stated one sophomore, echoing the sentiments of many peers. In honour of the college's 50th anniversary, this scholarship was established to brighten the future for hundreds of academically gifted yet financially strapped students, including those raised by single parents, individuals with physical disabilities, orphans, and children of farmers.

The Kulapathy A.P.C. Veerabahu Memorial Endowment Committee for Science & Technology was set up in 1999 by the college staff members with the aim of keeping students informed about the cutting-edge developments in the field of science and technology. The committee serves as an essential conduit between academia and innovation. It helps in bridging knowledge gaps by hosting science exhibitions, quiz competitions, seminars, and so on for the next generation of thinkers and creators. In addition, A.P.C.V. Chockalingam Manivizha Trust offers scholarships and books to students.

A sizeable portion of students also benefitted thanks to government scholarships.

The college offers a diverse array of degree programmes in various disciplines. These include, English (part II since 1951, UG & PG since 1966 & 1967 respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Tamil (part I since 1951), History (intermediate level in 1951, UG & PG since 1957 & 1986, respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Economics (UG & PG since 1957 & 1981 respectively & with an M.Phil introduced in 1988 and discontinued in 2019, along with a Ph.D.), Commerce (a two year degree programme from 1951-59, UG & PG 1959 & 1982 respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Business Administration (since 1971), Mathematics (UG & PG since 1957 & 1983 respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Physics (UG since 1951, along with a Ph.D.), Chemistry (intermediate level in 1951, UG & PG since 1957 & 1970 respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Botany (intermediate level in 1957 UG & PG since 1966 & 1987 respectively, along with a Ph.D.), Zoology (intermediate level in 1957, UG & PG since 1957 & 1985 respectively & with an M.Phil introduced in 1986 and discontinued in 2019, along with a Ph.D.) and Geology (UG & PG since 1964 & 1980, respectively, along with a Ph.D.). Additionally,

the programmes offered in unaided college are B.A. (Eng), B.Sc. & M.Sc. (Comp. Sci.), B.Com., M.Sc. (Che), & M.Sc. (Phy).

The NCC Army Wing unit (29 TN Indep. Coy NCC) was raised at the college in 1958 to inculcate national spirit, comradeship, secular outlook and discipline among undergraduate students (SD boys). Further, in the year 2006, the girls' (SW) wing of NCC was also introduced. Established in 1962, the N.C.C. Navy Wing (3-TN Naval Unit NCC) thrives at the college, enrolling a roster of 100 cadets annually. To date, more than 10,000 cadets have graduated from the NCC, with many got placed in uniformed services. One of the unit's greatest accomplishments is that an ex-cadet, S. Ponnambalam, who studied B.Com (1959-62), rose to the rank of Major-General in the ASC regiment. Recently, in the Republic Day Camp (RDC), a cadet from the college was part of the TN, P & AN directorate contingent and who had met with the Prime Minister of India and the Chief of the Armed force. The cadets actively engage in diverse intrastate and interstate programmes, honing their skills through rigorous camps and training exercises. Instilling selfless service and community upliftment, NCC embraces diverse development initiatives. These activities include tree plantation, cleanliness drives, leaders' statue cleaning, disaster management & relief efforts, blood donation drives, drug abuse awareness rallies, health & hygiene campaigns, safeguard the environment awareness rallies and so on. These experiences transform young minds by teaching them to prioritise the need of others over their own, while nurturing a deep-rooted commitment to societal betterment and the protection of the disadvantaged. The college also provides scholarships for the children of veterans.

Baking in a culture of women's empowerment elevated the college's standing and positioned it ahead of the curve in advancing social justice. The Women's Counselling Cell carries the torch of progressivism into addressing grievances related to women, providing vocational training, organising workshops on legal rights, creating hygienic environments, supporting career development, and tackling social issues to combat sexual harassment. In accordance with the founder's wishes, the college moved to coeducation and began admitting female students into UG programmes in 2004, while maintaining the existing status quo for PG programmes. A girl who is the only (single) child of her parents is eligible to receive a scholarship from the college.

The placement cell provides essential career services to students and bridges them with leading employers across various industries, paving the way for successful career paths. On-campus and pool campus drives enable students to expedite their journey toward landing their ideal careers, including opportunities overseas. Every year, the Youth Red Cross (YRC) organises free medical and blood donation camps in collaboration with the government hospital, Thoothukudi to support humanitarian services for the community. As part of the college's Unnat Bharat Abhiyan Programme, based on the findings and recommendations of its survey, 60% of SC/ST and minority residents in the hamlets of Ayyanadaippu, Athimarapatti, Sekkarakudi, Vadakkusilukkanpatti, and Keelathatparai benefitted from financial assistance from the Government of India to launch their own businesses and raise poultry. It is thanks to survey that significantly soared socio-economic landscape of the villagers', illuminating the path to equality and social advancement. In addition, the villagers received training on how to apply for TAHDCO loans and subsidies. The Youth Welfare and Sports Department (which has two colossal multipurpose indoor stadiums), gives a much-needed fillip to overall development for students. They have consistently been at the coalface; winning numerous accolades from various intercollegiate cultural and sports competitions both within the state and beyond. One of the college's three NSS units (68, 69, and 70) is designated for girls. Throughout the years, NSS volunteers who are in their formative stage of their lives, have invariably delivered various community services that are in a class of its own.

Under the STRIDE scheme, the college undertook exemplary efforts to improve the socio-economic conditions of the fishing community dwelling along the coast of the Thoothukudi district. Many-sided benefits received by the inhabitants, including an entrepreneurial skills development programme, training for alternative livelihoods such as smartphone repair and service, bakery and pastry training, awareness of the value of higher education in changing lives, self-employability training on aari work, and a free medical camp, amongst other things. To its stakeholders, the college's diverse and far-reaching programmes (schemes) were a reflective affirmation of humanity, and consistently dovetailed with its founding principles: inclusion, equity, and belonging.

As the college commemorated the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Indian Constitution (November 26, 2024), the 75-year journey of the V.O.C.C. chimed in and resonated with the observations of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the principal draftsman of the constitution. He pointedly observed that Indian society was devoid of two things: equality (treating everyone equally and preventing discrimination) and fraternity (a spirit of brotherhood). Throughout its journey, V.O.C.C. has successfully worked to advance equality and foster fraternity at a micro level through education, staying true to its motto, 'Love, Knowledge, and Virtue'. The college has been commended for its high degree of accountability and for continuously fulfilling its civic responsibility to ensure that everyone has the right to access education. Future generations will inherit a legacy of guaranteed education, irrespective of the social stigma associated with marginalised birth circumstances,

gender disparities, or the wherewithal (ability) to pay for their learning. The college management derives vicarious pleasure from educating unreached masses and improving their quality of life. They believe that this is the best way to give back to 'Mother Earth' for all that they have received here. Ultimately, the real raison d'être of the college is to provide a meaningful and value-based education that cultivates students to become responsible and ethical citizens for the world of tomorrow.

Jai Hind!