

Vichitra Senthil Kumar (centre)
with two breast milk donors at
Tiruppur's Government
Medical College Hospital

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DISPENSING



EVERYDAY HEROES

A Drop Of Life

Moved by the plight of undernourished newborns, she spared no effort to give them a chance at life

BY Chaitali Patel

It was 2019 when 40-year-old Vichitra Senthil Kumar began to feel a sense of restlessness, an absence she could not quite name. Life in Tiruppur with her husband and teenage son was generally content. She worked at her husband's plastic recycling business, looking after buyer communications and accounts, earning well and without complaints, but still grappled with dissatisfaction. "I constantly had a sense that something was lacking," recounts Kumar, who was a former school and college football player, and skilled enough to be chosen to play at the national level when marriage and family interrupted that path.

But a turning point came when she joined the Rotary Club in 2019 at her maternal uncle's behest. Every day,

Kumar would finish work and attend a variety of Rotary social work programmes. "My husband noticed that when I go out to help others I came back happy and cheerful. He suggested that maybe this was my calling," she recalls. Kumar took to community outreach like a fish to water and her enthusiastic efforts led to her being elected President of her club in 2021.

That same year, Tiruppur's Government Medical College Hospital (GMCH) started its breast-milk bank and contacted Kumar and her team for help with basic equipment such as tables and banners. The breast milk collected was given to premature and newborn babies who were abandoned or whose mothers were unable to feed them because of illness.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VICHITRA SENTHIL KUMAR

"Many migrant workers abandon their babies because they are not able to take care of them," says Kumar. Migrant workers account for half of the roughly 6,00,000 workers employed across Tiruppur's textile industry, and several barely make ends meet.

"Initially, I had no idea about these babies or their plight. All I knew was the milk we collected would be used to feed them. One day I asked the doctor on duty if I could go see the babies in the neonatal intensive care unit. I saw a tiny baby placed inside a box with its eyes covered to protect it from the light.

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Its weight was only around 600 grams. Seeing that baby changed something in me. I decided to participate in collecting breast milk from however far and do whatever it takes to help," she adds.

According to data shared by the hospital, nearly 25 per cent of the babies admitted to the newborn care unit benefit from the donated milk and a small amount also goes to the post-natal ward and high-dependency unit.

Staying true to her resolve, Kumar leverages her Rotary network, friends and family to collect milk from across the region, even as far as Bangalore,

300 km away. Besides creating awareness, Kumar supports mothers by providing pumps and pouches too expensive for the women to procure.

Convincing women to donate their unused breast milk was not easy. In some cases, while women are open to donating milk, their families are against it. In such cases, Kumar doesn't push the women so as to not create problems for them. However, there have been instances when women have donated milk despite their family's disapproval.

"Some women pump milk and store it in the refrigerator without their in-law's knowledge. They then call secretly and ask me to come at a particular time to take the pouch from outside the gate," she says. Once it was a man who got in touch with her to find out about the process of donation. He then put his wife in touch with Kumar and she went on to donate 117 litres of milk over nine months.

Dr Priya, Nodal Officer at the special newborn care unit at GMCH, Tiruppur, gives Kumar's contribution a big thumbs-up and says, "She is a good leader and is always willing to help. She was instrumental in helping us get a donation of an additional ice lined refrigerator for our milk bank."

Says Kumar, "If there's even one thought to help people or save lives, anything can be done. If you have the intention to help, that's enough to initiate action and can even motivate others to follow suit." **R**