

VAANI Nonprofit Visit Report by S. “Raj” Rajagopalan

I visited VAANI on June 11, 2025. Mr. V. “Ram” Ramaswamy, Chair of the Board of Trustees and Mrs. Sumedha Joglekar, Executive Director, hosted my visit and accompanied me to Tumkur (which is about 70 km from Bangalore) where we visited the Sadhan Resource Centre where the children have educational sessions (one-on-one or in small groups), Tumkur General Hospital to learn about new-born screening for hearing, and finally the Red Cross Centre that runs a residential school for deaf children with the help of VAANI. The report below (with pictures and videos) is based on my discussions with Mrs. Joglekar and Mr. Ramaswamy as well as my observations during the visit.

Organizational Background and History

VAANI was founded 20 years ago in Kolkata, West Bengal by Brinda Krishna. The current Executive Director, Mrs. Joglekar joined them in 2019. The organization's core philosophy centers on working with parents of deaf children, recognizing that most hearing-impaired children (estimated at 1.5 million in India based on 2011 census data) are born to hearing families who lack knowledge of how to communicate with their deaf children.

The organization began with a small group of 10 children and has since expanded to serve 850 children across five states. VAANI's approach emphasizes that while deaf children are at the center of their work, addressing the communication gap between deaf children and their parents is crucial for success.

Geographic Presence and Operations

VAANI operates across five states in India: Karnataka, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, and Maharashtra and maintains approximately 100 staff members across all locations. The organization's head office is in Bangalore, and it has established operations in several districts within Karnataka.

The organization's vision includes expanding into South India, particularly Tamil Nadu, and other underserved states such as Bihar and Jharkhand where significant work remains to be done with deaf populations. Each location is strategically chosen to serve marginalized populations in both urban and rural areas.

Population Served and Challenges

VAANI addresses a significant gap in services for deaf children in India. Statistics indicate that one in every 1,000 children is born deaf, with some estimates suggesting three per 1,000. However, only approximately 10% of deaf children have access to special schools, leaving the vast majority without appropriate educational support.

Most deaf children in regular schools face significant challenges, with dropout rates increasing after 5th standard when subjects become more complex. Teachers in mainstream schools often lack training in working with deaf students, and many schools fail to provide necessary accommodations such as front-row seating for lip reading.

The organization has identified three categories of parent involvement: low, middle, and high involvement. Educated parents typically show higher involvement, while low-involvement parents may not attend sessions or complete homework assignments. This variation significantly impacts children's progress and development.

Geographic and economic factors compound these challenges, as many families live in remote rural areas and work as daily wage laborers. Their busy lives make it difficult to devote the extra time and support needed by these children. Cultural sensitivities around disability also create barriers, with some families reluctant to acknowledge their child's hearing loss due to community stigma.

Program Verticals

1. Health Program: Newborn Hearing Screening

VAANI's health program focuses on early identification through newborn hearing screening, which began in 2019. The organization collaborates exclusively with government hospitals to ensure services reach marginalized populations free of cost. The screening process involves bedside testing within 48 hours of birth, after amniotic fluid has dried up, using ABR (Autoacoustic Brainstem Evoked Response) audiometry devices.

VAANI collaborates with Sohum Innovation Lab to access indigenous ABR audiometry machines. This partnership provides training, certification, and technical support for hearing screening equipment. The organization employs medical technicians (pathology lab technicians or nursing background) rather than audiologists for initial screening, using telemedicine for expert consultation.

The organization has screened approximately 37,000 babies in Karnataka alone, identifying 50 babies with potential hearing issues. Of these, 18 have been confirmed with hearing loss, and five are currently receiving educational therapy at VAANI's Sadhan Resource Centers. The screening follows the Universal Newborn Hearing Screening flagship program of the government, with VAANI serving as a support system.

VAANI works with multiple hospitals including Tumkur District Hospital, Bangalore hospitals (Gosha Hospital), and facilities in Assam, West Bengal, and Maharashtra. The organization uses telemedicine approaches, sending test results to audiologists for confirmation before providing final reports. Community mobilizers conduct follow-up visits to ensure families return for confirmatory testing, though this remains challenging as many families live in remote villages and work as daily wage laborers.



Newborn Screening at Tumkur Government Hospital

2. Education Program: Sadhan Resource Centers

The education program represents VAANI's core offering through Sadhan Resource Centers, which serve as support systems rather than schools or tuition centers. These centers provide one-to-one therapy for hearing-impaired children while fostering social-emotional bonding among parents. The program serves children typically starting from age 3-4 years, identified through door-to-door community mobilization.

Each center develops Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for children, including case studies, medical reports, and assessments of foundational literacy, numerical literacy, language readiness, and writing readiness. Long-term and short-term goals are established quarterly, with specific activities and teaching materials identified for each child. The centers also provide nutrition supplements and computer education.

The organization employs special educators trained in teaching hearing-impaired children and focuses on creating parent leaders who can serve as amplifiers in rural communities. Some mothers have become community leaders and established their own centers, representing an empowerment journey for families.

VAANI's educational approach uses total communication methodology, incorporating sign language, auditory-visual communication, and gestures. Teachers are RCI (Rehabilitation Council of India) certified and skilled in sign language, with the ability to communicate in local languages. The sessions are both one-on-one as well as small group (as seen in pictures/videos below). VAANI

insists that the parents accompany the child to the sessions so that they also learn how to communicate with the child.



[Small Group session \(click to see video\)](#)



[One-on-one session \(click to see video\)](#)

Children attend Sadhan Resource Centers for 1-2 days per week, spending 1-1.5 hours per session, while also attending special schools or mainstream schools. The organization provides shadow teachers for mainstream school integration and conducts home visits for children unable to attend centers.



With VAANI team, children and their parents/caregivers (Executive Director. Mrs. Sumedha Joglekar and Chair of Board of Trustees. Mr. V. Ramaswamy are to my left)

3. Red Cross Centre – Residential School



This is a residential school for deaf children that was established by the Red Cross with funding from the Government of India and State Government of Karnataka. There are about 110 children in the school in various grades. The school has very good boarding and lodging facilities for the children (see picture for lodging facility for children). VAANI provides the school with expertise in how to teach deaf children effectively. VAANI trains the teachers and conducts extracurricular activities such as karate with their staff. Working with the government has its challenges. We learned that the current headmaster and assistant headmaster are both retiring in a month or two and no replacement has been found for them. Similarly, there is a room full of computers provided by INFOSYS but there is no teacher. The same is true for tailoring.



Karate class at Red Cross Centre

4. Skill Building and Higher Education Programs

VAANI recently expanded its educational scope beyond the initial 14-year age limit to include secondary and higher education. The organization now works with students through 10th standard, with 16 students recently appearing for 10th standard examinations and 13 passing. Alumni groups have been formed to support continued engagement.

The organization is developing a Higher Academy program featuring a six-year curriculum: one year of basic English followed by five years of 11th, 12th, and graduation in Commerce. This program will collaborate with established educational organizations and is planned to begin in 2026-27.

Skill building programs include digital literacy and tailoring training for 200-300 hearing-impaired children. The organization collaborates with local NGOs to avoid duplicating existing services and maintains a lean operational structure.

STEM education programs use Lego blocks for younger children and drone technology for older students. The organization has collaborated with Science Ashram to develop physics concepts and other educational materials. Programs are designed in two levels: Level 1 for ages 4+ and Level 2 for older children through 9th-10th standards.

Funding and Financial Structure

VAANI's annual budget of Rs. 50,000,000 (\$581,000) in 2025-26 represents significant growth from Rs. 1,500,000 (\$17,400) five years ago, thanks to the leadership of Mrs. Joglekar who joined as Executive Director in 2019 and the Board of Trustees. Funding sources include:

- **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Over 60% of funding comes from CSR initiatives
- **Individual Donors:** Categorized into small, middle, and major donors
- **International Funding:** Limited international support through organizations like CVI

Major CSR supporters include Bajaj (2.5-3 year commitment), ANC (multi-year support), Thomson Reuters (third year), Intel (third year), and ExxonMobil. The organization has obtained FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) certification, enabling international funding acceptance.

CSR funding typically requires annual applications with specific budget utilization requirements within financial years. Some donors provide multi-year commitments, offering greater operational stability. The organization maintains strict compliance with government regulations and works with experienced auditors to ensure proper financial management.

Approximately 80% of the budget covers program costs, including teacher salaries, while 20% supports organizational overhead. Setting up a new Sadhan Resource Center costs approximately 10 lakhs, requiring at least two teachers and serving 15-20 children initially.

Government Relations and Advocacy

VAANI works closely with government institutions and programs, positioning itself as a support system rather than a replacement for government services. The organization collaborates with the National Institute for research and curriculum development, recently completing a project to develop textbooks for hearing-impaired students with the National Open University.

Government engagement includes data sharing with the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Deafness (NPPCD) for research on cochlear implants and other interventions. VAANI's systematic data collection and monitoring systems have attracted government attention and collaboration requests.

The organization maintains MOUs with government hospitals and follows government protocols for newborn hearing screening programs. This approach ensures alignment with national health initiatives while providing specialized expertise and support services.

Impact and Success Stories

VAANI has demonstrated significant impact through various success stories and achievements:

- **Educational Achievement:** Recent success with 13 out of 16 students passing 10th standard examinations
- **Long-term Engagement:** Some students have remained with VAANI for 10+ years, with one student who started as a baby recently passing 10th standard

- **Community Leadership:** Mothers have become community leaders and established independent centers
- **Professional Success:** Alumni have achieved success in various fields, documented in a book titled "Unstoppable" featuring stories of deaf women who have succeeded professionally. A copy of this book was presented to me.

The organization has created a network of parent leaders and community advocates who extend VAANI's reach beyond direct service provision. Success stories include deaf individuals working as engineers, artists, and in other professional roles.

Challenges and Future Directions

VAANI faces several ongoing challenges:

- **Funding Sustainability:** Dependence on annual CSR commitments creates uncertainty for long-term program planning
- **Scale vs. Resources:** Serving only 850 children out of an estimated 1.5 million deaf children in India highlights the resource constraints
- **Geographic Reach:** Limited presence in major cities like Bangalore, focusing primarily on rural and semi-urban areas
- **Follow-up and Retention:** Difficulty maintaining contact with families after initial screening or assessment
- **Cultural Barriers:** Overcoming stigma and resistance to acknowledging hearing loss in certain communities

Future expansion plans include establishing the Higher Academy program, expanding into Tamil Nadu and other southern states, and developing more comprehensive skill-building programs tailored to regional job markets.

Organizational Structure and Leadership

VAANI operates under a governance structure including trustees and a board, with the Executive Director reporting to chairpersons. The senior management team includes finance managers, program managers, teachers, technicians, and community organizers. The organization maintains a deliberately lean structure to maximize impact while minimizing administrative overhead.

The current Executive Director, Mrs. Joglekar, brings a unique combination of expertise in hearing impairment education (B.Ed. in teaching hearing-impaired children, Masters with thesis on IEPs and auditory verbal therapy) and fundraising experience (10 years with Greenpeace, fundraising director experience with Change.org). This background enables integrated program and fundraising leadership.

Conclusion

VAANI represents a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of deaf and hearing-impaired children in India, combining early identification, educational support, and skill development. The organization's growth trajectory and impact demonstrate the potential for scaling effective interventions for this underserved population. However, the vast scale of need compared to current capacity highlights the ongoing requirement for increased funding and support to achieve the organization's vision of ensuring no deaf child lacks access to appropriate support and education.