

Bridging communities through translation

K. JANARTHANAN

Ms Vandhana Jeyaram (right) believes that translations can serve as bridges of understanding between communities.

The 23-year-old visual art enthusiast began collaborating with the Migrant Writers of Singapore Facebook group in 2019 when she noticed a language barrier between migrant workers and the local population in Singapore.

Since then, she has made consistent efforts to empower migrant workers and make their voices heard. She translates Covid-19 health-related surveys for their benefit and their works of poetry and prose from Tamil to English.

Ms Vandhana, a first class honours graduate in sociology from the National University of Singapore (NUS), received the Izzuddin Taherally Prize this year along with Sara Loo for her service to the community and excellent academic grades.

The prize was established in 2019 by Dr Mustafa Izzuddin, an adjunct lecturer with NUS' University Scholars Programme (USP), who donated \$15,000 to honour his father, Mr Izzuddin Taherally, for his strong belief in interfaith dialogue and intercultural communication and his dedication to the community.

"I started out by helping my friend Zakir Hossain Khokhon, an accomplished Bangladeshi poet, in 2019," said Ms Vandhana, who is also a USP graduate. She has taken part in several migrant worker events, including the Migrant Workers Photography Festival and the Carnival of Poetry Session with Migrant Poets, organised by Mr Zakir.

Ms Vandhana also helped Mr Zakir translate the daily writing prompts to migrant workers – an initiative by Mr Zakir and his team that give them a platform to express creatively. "This initiative was especially useful last year when the migrant worker



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community was very badly affected by the pandemic,” said Ms Vandhana. “This is actually something we all should continually do to keep our mental and emotional health in check.

“There are various ongoing events organised by the Migrant Writers of Singapore. They regularly organise poetry recitals which feature Singaporean and migrant poets together,” said Ms Vandhana. “There have also been quite a few books and poetry collections that have been recently published.” Ms Vandhana is also engaged in organising a visual arts festival for migrant workers later this year.

“Vandhana not only achieved academic excellence but has also meaningfully given back to society through her contributions in promoting

Tamil culture and poetry and improving the plight of migrant workers in Singapore,” said Dr Mustafa, a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies-Yusof Ishak Institute. “As a thought leader, Vandhana serves as an inspiration to younger Indian Singaporeans who want to make a difference to society.”

Ms Vandhana feels youths in Singapore should make the effort to learn more about the challenges migrant workers face. “For translation work and to be involved more, youths can reach out to established NGOs like TWC2, ItsRainingRaincoats and HOME or ground-up platforms like Migrant Writers of Singapore,” she said. “There is a huge need for translation in languages like Tamil and Bengali.”

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