Unsung Beacons

Volume XV

Stories of people for whom humanity matters

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FOREWORD



The true catalysts for change are often those who work diligently behind the scenes, driven not by the desire for recognition but by an unwavering dedication to social and environmental transformation. Unsung Beacons pays tribute to these quiet revolutionaries—those whose efforts have quietly yet profoundly shaped a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world.

This book, curated from Conversations Today and published by CSIM, highlights the untold stories of grassroots leaders, environmental guardians, social entrepreneurs, and visionaries in natural farming—individuals who choose action over indifference. Through their persistence, they challenge the status quo, revive lost traditions, and create solutions that inspire collective action.

The environmental and social challenges we face today are interconnected: climate change threatens livelihoods, urbanization strains resources, and social inequalities continue to grow. However, in the face of these crises, there are powerful stories of hope—of individuals planting forests, rejuvenating water bodies, advocating for marginalized communities, and redefining what sustainability truly means.

This book also includes interviews with stalwarts in natural farming and social entrepreneurship, whose pioneering work has reshaped how we approach food security, ecological balance, and inclusive economic growth. Their journeys demonstrate the

power of sustainable practices and remind us that many of the solutions to our greatest challenges are rooted in nature's wisdom and community-driven solutions.

I extend my sincere appreciation to CSIM for producing this vital publication. Unsung Beacons not only documents the remarkable work of these changemakers but also serves as a beacon of inspiration for those looking to embark on their own paths in social entrepreneurship and natural farming. The stories shared here are more than just inspiring—they are blueprints for action, showing us that meaningful change begins with individual commitment and collective effort.

As you read these pages, you will encounter stories of resilience, courage, and innovation—each one a reminder that real transformation does not always come from grand gestures but from consistent, quiet efforts that ripple across communities and generations. Unsung Beacons is a testament to the extraordinary impact of ordinary people.

May these stories encourage us to listen, engage, and, most importantly, act.

Shanta Sheela Nair IAS (Retd.)
Former Secretary, Govt. of India

ACKNLOWLEDGEMENTS



It is with deep gratitude that I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has contributed to the creation of Unsung Beacons. This collection is a testament to the countless individuals whose efforts continue to inspire change and transformation across the globe, and it would not have been possible without the collective contributions of many.

First and foremost, I am immensely grateful to the changemakers featured in this book. Their willingness to share their stories, struggles, and triumphs has brought Unsung Beacons to life. These individuals, whose dedication to social, environmental, and economic justice often goes unnoticed, are the true architects of change. Their stories have served as a reminder that every effort, no matter how small it may seem, contributes to the larger movement for a better world.

A heartfelt thank you to the talented writers whose words have captured these powerful stories so beautifully. Their ability to weave these narratives with sensitivity and insight has been crucial in bringing the essence of each journey to the forefront. Your dedication to the craft and your passion for storytelling have made this book what it is.

I also wish to acknowledge Mr. P.N. Subramanian and Ms. Latha Suresh, whose support and vision made this publication possible. Their commitment to showcasing the work of unsung heroes and creating a platform for their voices has been integral to this project's success. The editorial team, designers, and everyone

behind the scenes have worked tirelessly to ensure that this book reflects the passion and importance of the work it celebrates.

A special thank you to Ms. Shanta Sheela Nair, IAS (Retd.), for her insightful foreword, which adds immense value to this compilation. Her leadership in sustainable practices and advocacy for community-driven solutions continues to inspire generations, and her support of this project is deeply appreciated.

To my parents and children, your unwavering encouragement, understanding, and love have been my pillar throughout this journey. You have been my constant source of strength, and I am deeply grateful for your support as I worked to bring this vision to life.

Lastly, I extend my sincere gratitude to all the readers who choose to engage with *Conversations Today.* May the stories within these pages inspire action, spark conversation, and encourage the ripple effects of change that we need to address the challenges facing our world today.

Thank you to everyone who has believed in and contributed to this project. This book is a reflection of your hard work, your dedication, and your belief in the power of individual actions to shape a more sustainable future.

Marie Banu Rodriguez
Director CSIM & SAN UK

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AGRIPRENEURS

Meet the unsung heroes of agriculture—agripreneurs. Their innovative spirit transforms farming, blending tradition with modernity for sustainable practices.

1. ARUN KUMAR

Harvesting Change



It's not uncommon for individuals from diverse backgrounds, to take interest in organic farming. The appeal of organic farming is multifaceted, encompassing environmental, health, ethical, economic, and lifestyle considerations. This diversity of motivations contributes to the growing interest in organic farming among individuals from various backgrounds and walks of life. But once that decision is made, there are a few sources of inspiration whose names echo across the country when we discuss stories of new age organic farmers. "Nammazhvar and Nel Jeyaraman are not just my inspiration. They personify quest for environmentally friendly and socially responsible farming practices. For new organic farmers, they serve as role models and guides, offering valuable insights on the path towards a more sustainable and resilient food system," says Mr. R. Arun Kumar, an electrician turned organic farmer from Dindivanam, Tamilnadu.

Raised by farmer parents, Arun's schooling was uninterrupted until class 10. Thereafter he lost interest in studies and chose to study ITI course to work as an electrician. "I somehow found that more attractive at that time," he giggles. After gaining seven years of experience as an electrician his parents decision to handover a share of their land got him thinking about the scope in farming. His parents suggested that he must try organic farming instead of giving in to quick results from chemical farming. So, he began to explore.

Arun's role models gave him more insights and guided him to make all farm decisions with one key concern in mind - that production quantity should not be the focus, rather efficient production must be the concern and that efficiency can very well be accomplished by adhering to natural, organic practices.

Since he began exploring organic methods itself, Arun Kumar feels that it was fairly easier for him to prepare the field and decide on the crops. He produced just two sacks of cow peas from an acre and then tried peanuts. With each crop experiment, he also learnt better methods to prepare and apply organic inputs. The yield also consistently improved and reached about seven sacks from less than half an acre of land.

"Consistency is the key. Shri. Nammazhvar and Shri. Nel Jeyaraman advices organic farmers to stay patient because our work is only facilitation. Nature knows its business and processes thoroughly. We cannot disturb the flow," he reflects.

After legumes and vegetables, Arun started cultivating traditional rice varieties. The first good yield was a surprise and convinced him to promote organic farming to other members in his community. He not only learnt about crops and cultivation methods, but also walked the extra mile to learn about the specific benefits of every traditional rice variety. "I believe farmers learn more about production but somehow lose interest or do not prefer

to learn the specific attributes and richness of traditional crops. This is also partially why they are unable to engage in effective marketing of their farm products and value added goods," he says. He goes on to explain about few rice varieties with their benefits - rathasaali which helps in blood secretion, kaatuyaanam which is good for bones and constipation, pungaaru which is good for female fertility and also the popular maapillai samba which is good for men's health.

His efforts and growth convinced his parents to give him 3 acres of land. This gave Arun Kumar confidence to cultivate more traditional crops. He attended a training on Organic Farming organised by CSIM and sensed a business opportunity in producing value added products. "The training was not just about methods and theory. CSIM gave me a holistic perspective on what I was contributing to and encouraged me to identify livelihood avenues so that my work and contribution can remain consistent and sustainable. I saw it as an extension of what my mentors would have told," he shares.

Arun Kumar engaged his wife in the new venture and both of them together came up with the famous 'idli podi' of Tamil Nadu. But their recipe was different – it was rich in nutrients from moringa leaves, curry leaves, thuthuvalai leaves (commonly known as climbing egg plant in English) and also vallarai leaves (popularly known as brahmi in Hindi and Indian Pennywort in English).

Then came the karuppukavuni chapathi mix – a roti base made from powdered black rice and broken wheat. Among the best sellers is their health mix powder that is bought for children – consisting 25 ingredients including traditional rice varieties, millets and nuts. It was soon improved and relaunched with 33 ingredients.

Sabari Natural Foods started on a simple note but the queries Arun Kumar receives these days indicate otherwise. Embracing

a commitment to sustainable and ethical practices, the company forged partnerships with local farmers and suppliers, fostering a sense of community and supporting rural economies. With two farmers trained by him, he is gradually expanding his in-group to drive an organic farming movement in his district.

Shanmuga Priya.T

2. BALAJI

Embracing Nature's Way



Balaji, a Computer Science graduate, is a Traditional Organic Farmer who revolutionised and changed the ways of stereotypical organic farming.

While he was taking care of his uncle during chemotherapy sessions, he came across children affected by cancer. The sight of suffering children and wailing parents is what drove him to delve deeper into the issue. He wondered why those who did not have smoking or drinking habits were affected by this disease.

He discussed it with Doctors and health specialists and understood that the adverse effects were caused by packaged food. His father encouraged him and thus he embarked upon this journey in organic farming.

Balaji was a beginner at farming despite his family's agricultural background. He learned through YouTube and experimented on his own. He launched Indiana Farms with the primary objective

of producing chemical-free food, and after five years of struggle became successful.

Indiana Farms is all about "God is the supreme leader and the ultimate farmer. If we disregard the farmer, we will be forgotten by agriculture," he says.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and demand for organic food produced through sustainable farming practices. Balaji started learning the do's and don'ts of Organic Farming in the first year and in the second year, started recreating the soil. He ended up recouping 50% of the soil in the third year. The crop production started to increase and during his fourth and fifth years, he started using organic fetilizers.

Balaji initiated sale of his crops at stalls in local markets. He cultivated rice and sold it to wholesale traders. Despite its quality, it did not fetch a good price. "The shopkeepers took 90% of my products and were given credit only for 10% of my products which was not what I wanted."

It was then, he decided to sell his product through Direct Marketing. He sourced local customers in his village and gained the trust of the local communities. He later expanding his reach and during the third year, he got acquainted with Shri. Ariyalur Jayachandran, who became his mentor.

Balaji's products started becoming popular and now he has a customer base of over 1500 families. He says "The shopkeepers who did not buy my products earlier are now procuring them at a better price. I proved that a product sold directly by a farmer is always a first quality product." Organic farming practices prioritises environmental protection by reducing soil erosion, conserving water resources, and minimising pollution. This contributes to biodiversity, healthy ecosystems, and overall well-being of our planet. "Embracing organic farming is not just a choice for

farmers; it's a decision that impacts our health, environment, and the future of agriculture," he says.

"Jeevamrutham, a liquid organic manure and Panchagavya serves as the best form of manure. By using these fertilizers, I reap good yields that are excellent in quality. The crops that I produce allows individuals to reduce their exposure to harmful chemicals, making it a healthier option," says Balaji.

When inquired about erratic change in climate he says "The last two years have been the most difficult times to cultivate as we have to check the soil's Ph level and other external factors. Climate change has caused shifts in traditional growing seasons. We harvest limited crops that will require less water and maintenance."

Farming is an extremely profitable business but one should be ready to persevere until he achieves success. He says "The overload of cultivation and bleach in the soil will make it weak and completely useless for cultivation. My aim is to alter the mindset of common people's idea. Despite the notion that organic farming is exclusively for high-class individuals, my goal is to make it accessible to all," he says. By supporting organic farmers and consuming organic products, we contribute to a more sustainable and resilient food system. Let's appreciate the power of organic farming and its potential to create a healthier and greener world for generations to come.

Bhavadharani.K & Iniyath Asmi

3. GOKULNATHA NATESAN

Embracing Sustainable Agriculture



In the heart of Chennai lies Kazhani Native Farms, a beacon of sustainable agriculture founded by Mr. Gokul. Raised in a rural village amidst a farming backdrop, Mr. Gokul brings four years of dedicated experience to his venture. Witnessing the rapid detachment of society from nature, Kazhani Native Farms stands firm on the principle of leaving behind a greener legacy for future generations, rekindling our innate bond with the natural world.

At the core to their mission is a return to simplicity, advocating for a minimalist lifestyle deeply rooted in nature. Through fostering a sense of community, Kazhani Native Farms transcends the mere role of a supplier, inviting people to participate actively in farm activities, be it weeding, watering the plants or harvesting crops. Their doors open as early as 7 am, welcoming visitors to embrace the serenity of morning while handpicking fresh produce for their households.

With a commitment to purity, the farm proudly offers a diverse array of chemical-free, GMO-free goods, from vegetables and greens to millets, cold-pressed oils, dairy products and even venturing into cosmetics. Yet, Kazhani Native Farms is more than just a business; it's a platform for societal enrichment. Collaborating with social entrepreneurs, self-help groups, and eco conscious educational institutions, they empower marginalized communities, including autistic children, nurturing a stronger bond with nature. Partnering with the NGOs, they also, offer tailored farm sessions for young adults aged 14 and above, promoting holistic learning and sustainable living.

Gokul has a vibrant social network, linking over 1000 families, encompassing 600+ consumers and 380+ farmers, ranging from individuals to small-scale farmers, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and groups committed to organic and biodynamic farming across Tamil Nadu. They ensure a smooth supply chain, even during the monsoon season. Additionally, value-added items such as pickles, *masalas,* snacks, and savouries are crafted with the help of individuals from self-help groups and homemakers, nurturing employment opportunities within the community

"Kazhani Native Farms has completely transformed my farming experience. Commitment to sustainable practices, diverse crop cultivation, and direct connections with consumers have revolutionized my livelihood. I'm grateful for the empowerment and sense of hope it brings to agriculture," expressed a farmer. Operating within the urban sprawl of Chennai poses unique challenges, including transportation costs, agricultural workers, and seasonal disruptions. To address these issues, plans are underway to establish a backup farm closer to the city, guaranteeing a continuous supply chain even during monsoon disruptions. Additionally, innovative farming techniques, such as multi-cropping and strategic tree plantations, maximize land

utilization while combating soil degradation prevalent in sandy terrains.

Gokul employs a diverse farming approach called multi-cropping, where multiple crops are cultivated simultaneously. For instance, radishes are grown alongside vegetables, acting as natural mulch to conserve soil nutrients and moisture. Strategically planted trees like papaya, drumstick, plantain provide partial shade, enabling essential sunlight to reach the crops. This creates an ideal microclimate for plant growth, alleviating the impact of Chennai's intense heat. Through thorough research and experimentation with alternative planting methods, they have customized the farm layout to flourish in varied environmental conditions.

Embracing sustainability, Kazhani Native Farms not only grows traditional crops but also ventures into creating value-added products like millet-based idli and dosa batter, meeting modern consumer preferences. However, the farm's commitment to freshness underscores the importance of local production, minimizing transit times from farm to table for perishable items."The importance lies in gradually adapting to these lifestyle changes, urging individuals to incorporate them slowly and consistently," he emphasizes.

Highlighting agriculture as India's backbone, Gokul laments the underutilization of fertile land due to a shortage of young or second-generation farmers. He explains, "Many farmers encourage their children to pursue alternative careers, leading to a decline in agricultural knowledge and expertise. Even those eager to re-enter farming encounter challenges like land scarcity or inadequate training."

Recognizing the potential for economic empowerment, he advocates for farmer education on value-added products. By transforming raw materials into finished goods, farmers can

demand higher prices, boosting their income. He proposes a direct farmer-consumer relationship, bypassing intermediaries to meet consumer demands more efficiently. This not only enhances farmers' revenue but also ensures consumers access healthier, locally sourced products they can trust.

Looking ahead to 2024, Kazhani Native Farms aims not only to expand its commercial footprint but also to educate the younger generation on living in harmony with nature. "My focus is on experiential learning and encouraging parents to expose children to the wonders of farming rather than the allure of urban consumerism," he says. At its core, Kazhani Native Farms epitomizes the resilience of Indian agriculture, connecting farmers and consumers while championing sustainable practices. As Mr. Gokul envisions, a future where farming isn't merely a profession but a cherished way of life, preserving the rich tapestry of India's agrarian heritage for generations to come.

Kezia . S

4. JAYALAKSHMI BALASUNDARAM

THE FUTURE OF FARMING: INTEGRATION AND SUSTAINABILITY



Integrated farming, or mixed farming, values the local biome by aligning agricultural practices with the natural environment. By combining crops, livestock, and aquaculture, it enhances ecosystem health and reduces reliance on chemicals. This method promotes soil health, conserves water, and supports biodiversity by utilizing native species and natural interactions. The result is a sustainable, productive farming system that respects and preserves the local ecosystem. "The more local we get to look into, the more diverse is the choice of crop and livestock species. As the daughter of an army personnel, I had the privilege of travelling to many places. I had lived in five cities including Baroda, Secunderabad and explored villages around them," shares Ms Jayalakshmi Balasundaram, an agriculturist who has worked on integrated farming and land development for more than two decades.

She got married to an air force officer soon after her post-graduation in agriculture and moved to Pathankot with him. So, the city hopping due to transfers was by now a very natural part of her life. She worked as a post graduate teacher to teach Biology but the farmer in her kept looking for an opportunity to initiate farming activities somewhere. The shift to Jodhpur after her second child in 1993 allowed the mother to immerse in new skills like painting and sculpting. Then came the opportunity to try landscaping in air force areas and soon after, husband's transfer to Ambala. Here she taught at Chamman Vatika and then became a residential teacher at Sri Ramachandra Mission (Heartfulness Institute, Hyderabad). With husband's new job at the National Aerospace Limited (NAL) in Bangalore, she was now back to the city where she was born. Transfers introduced her to different things but as a student, she had always wanted to be an entrepreneur. Back in Bangalore, the entrepreneur in her scouted for a variety of opportunities.

She started working in different companies for experience and also worked with ICICI Prudential for a year. "Suddenly, I studied life insurance very seriously," she laughs. With new friends in the quarters requesting me to teach, I went ahead and opened the Sahaj tuition academy with few other friends. During the day time, this space was used as a play school and Montessori for children from underprivileged families in the neighbourhood. Her chance visit to a farm in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh forced her to think about ways to divulge farmers from mono cropping as it leads to greater supply of the crop and hence, lower prices and loss. So, Jayalakshmi collaborated with Namdari Seeds in Bangalore and started seed production for five crops – tomato, bottle guard, bitter guard, Chinese pumpkin and long beans. "This was exciting to the farmer in me but didn't work because farmers expected us to invest. By now my mind was fully into farming so moved to Kanha Shantivanam Heartfulness Institute in 2016, as a volunteer to work in different departments like solid waste management, organic farming, etc" she shares.

She also worked on hydroponics, aquaponics, neem, moringa projects, took care of goshala ad cultivated 60 acre fodder for cattle feed. Jayalakshmi then explored production of cleaning solutions that could be used in the farm, like hand wash and floor cleaners. “These products were expensive so we had to learn and produce to reduce costs of farm management,” she adds. Then came her 83 acres project in Hyderabad where the land was left unattended for more than 15 years. But the challenge and task at hand excited her. She installed two percolation tanks, planted around one lakh trees including timber, fruit varieties, reared animals like goat, donkey and practically lived the idea integrated farming here. “Did you know that donkey’s dung is a potent cure for respiratory diseases?” she casually informs.

Further ahead from this campus was another piece of land covering 7.5 acres where she planted neem on a large scale. She used both native variety and Malabar neem, and simultaneously ventured into production of neem oil, castor oil, pongamia oil and organic pesticides. She combined all these ingredients and produced a neem tonic. Moringa was also harvested and its powder was used in cattle feed. Among the animals reared here was a unique variety of goat called the Black Bengal, whose meat has a very good taste but the pricing in market is not encouraging. “That’s the beauty in this concept. You get to use every part of the produce suiting market and environment needs. All you need is land and the freedom to try out all this in that land,” says Jayalakshmi, who was awarded the Global Neem Ratan Award by the state government of Uttar Pradesh in 2022. In the middle of all this, she also planted saplings in Horticulture University and RCI Campus in Hyderabad.

The experience with all these projects drove her to attend NABARD’s integrated course on chicken and goats. At 60 years of age, Jayalakshmi is still full of beans to invest in a low cost land with water supply. “The biggest challenge for my work is

the lack of agreement for land, so I cannot benefit from subsidies and have to leave when the owners decide to sell or use the land for some other purpose. I started all this to show a model for farmers who are not motivated to prepare land and give up mono-cropping. In fact, mono cropping has limited their aspirations in variety so much so that their cattle feed is regular farm grass. We do have cacti variety without thorns and tree varieties apart from grass that are a good source of feed for cattle. All we have to do is cut the branches and feed them. Medicinal plants are also not explored enough. I want to show that all this in one land can perform wonders and allow a multitude of businesses to flourish. One land and many channels of income, why is this not comprehensible?" she questions.

Who would know that a weed (Lantena) can give us furniture from its stem and pesticide from its leaves? Her conversations are so full of knowledge about plants, farm animals and their varied applications that must be delved into to make the most from them. We are so used to hearing that transition from chemical to organic farming takes time but Jayalakshmi assures that 1-2 years period is all we need and soon green manuring will be an integral part of every activity in the farm. "Integrated farming is very promising. It is high time farmers gave this a serious thought," she insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T

5. KAMALANATHAN

Dreams from Deep Roots



Entrepreneurship offers the freedom to create, innovate and directly witness the impact of one's efforts, which fosters a stronger emotional and intellectual engagement. The challenges and rewards of building something from the scratch cultivate a sense of ownership and fulfilment, giving entrepreneurs a purpose-driven path that resonates deeply with their sense of identity and contribution to the world.

Kamalanathan, a native of Pondicherry, has carved his unique path from engineering to entrepreneurship, driven by the desire to find meaning in his work. His father was a teacher and ensured that his son grew to be a natural learner. "One must learn enough to identify an opportunity when it comes. But one must unlearn and learn even more to be able to create opportunities for self and others. He always said this and I realised its deep meaning in my entrepreneurial journey," he reminisces.

After graduating in engineering and serving as an area manager for a corporate company in Chennai, Kamalanathan felt disconnected from his role. This inner discontent led him to pursue entrepreneurship, leading to his enrolment in the Entrepreneurship Development Program offered by the Department of Micro, Small and Medium Entreprises, Government of Tamil Nadu, in Guindy, Chennai. This experience exposed him to the vast opportunities in agriculture, especially in cultivating high-value crops like aromatic plants. He then underwent a training in Lucknow on the cultivation of aromatic plants.

He identified agriculture as his calling and started his journey cautiously, recognizing the potential in farming aromatic plants. He began with Moringa plantations and experienced success with the sale of moringa powder. Encouraged by this attempt, he diversified into indigo and palmgroves, with a focus on crop diversity, soil rejuvenation and market demands.

His most notable venture has been the large-scale cultivation of Vetiver, a crop with miracle like applications in bioengineering. Vetiver, with its deep roots and diverse applications, intrigued him. The plant was not only known for its soil-conserving properties but also for the essential oil extracted from its roots—a key ingredient in perfumes, cosmetics and traditional medicines. "Vetiver is the only native plant that is known across the world with its Tamil name. The demand for Vetiver oil in both domestic and international markets was promising. I saw an opportunity to create something impactful," he explains.

While Vetiver farming is gaining attention for its economic and environmental benefits, many aspiring entrepreneurs and farmers abandon their ventures due to the significant challenges involved in processing the crop. The labor-intensive nature of harvesting Vetiver roots, the lengthy distillation process for extracting essential oil, and the high initial investment in specialized equipment are formidable barriers. Additionally, the need for

consistent quality and adherence to market standards adds to the complexity. Recognizing these challenges in cultivating and processing Vetiver, Kamalanathan invested in extensive research for over two years. He analysed various Vetiver varieties, their oil yields and market demand, ultimately making a strategic decision to manage the entire production chain from his fields. "Vetiver's strength lies in its resilience and consistent demand," he explains. Despite the hurdles—such as the 48-hours harvesting process and 60 hours-long distillation, he views these as opportunities due to the reduced competition in the market. "It was important to get it right from the start. I wanted to create a model that not only generated profits but also empowered people," he says. His endeavour to develop good quality Vetiver seeds was also supported and rewarded by the National Medicinal Plants Board, Ministry of Ayush.

Kamalathan designed his own Vetiver distillation unit. The engineer turned entrepreneur believes that a self-made unit can be tailored to specific production needs, allowing experimentation with different Vetiver varieties and processing methods to optimize yield and quality. "To stand out in the market, my product has to meet different standards. Self-processing allows for precise monitoring of the distillation process, ensuring high-quality Vetiver oil. This consistency can enhance the product's reputation and marketability," he adds.

Recognizing Vetiver's role in preventing soil erosion, he distributes free saplings to areas prone to landslides. "This plant is a gift to the planet. It stabilizes soil and cleans water. I wanted more people to see its value. It has a potential role to play in combatting global warming. Our ancestors preserved immense knowledge about native plants. It's our duty to conserve and spread it," he says passionately. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kamalathan's efforts took on a new dimension. He supplied Vetiver roots to the Tamil Nadu government for producing

Kabasura Kudineer, a traditional herbal drink widely used to boost immunity.

Agriculture graduates from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry visit his farm and factory every year to learn all processes involved in cultivation, harvesting and processing of Vetiver. With his domestic operations thriving and a reputation for producing premium-quality Vetiver oil, Kamalanathan is now setting his sights on the international market. He envisions opening an office in Europe to directly manage sales and build a robust network with global clients. According to him, this move is not just about business growth but about showcasing the potential of Indian agriculture and traditional knowledge on a global stage. “I believe Vetiver can be a bridge connecting our heritage with the world. I’m ready to take this leap,” he promises.

Shanmuga Priya.T

6. MANIMARAN

Sowing Hope with Every Tree



Farming and plantation are two distinct sectors within agriculture, each with its own contribution to food security, economic development and environmental sustainability. While the choice can be governed by a plethora of factors, there are few incidents and interactions that help one make the final call towards one of them. Mr S. M. Manimaran, a metallurgist turned farmer from Ammaiyarkuppam in Thiruvallur District handles his interest in both with such clarity that nobody can distance him from the thought of environmental stewardship.

His father was a farmer and therefore farming was part of his life since childhood. But, he was not associated with it until he realised his true calling. He graduated in Metallurgy and worked in a foundry for about five years. During these years he was distraught by the level of pollution industries caused and felt helpless about being a part of it.

"There was a point where I wanted to contribute for the mitigation of pollution I had caused. I was so stressed that I wanted to measure my carbon footprint accurately. But then, it is the realisation and the path chosen thereafter that matters, damage is already caused. I began to think about what I could do to show the earth that I am concerned. With concern came the connect and things fell in place," recalls Manimaran.

In 2016, he happened to interact with Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam who inspired him to focus on planting and maintaining trees. "He acknowledged my realisation and my efforts to promote man's connection with nature. He also told me that planting often has takers and will always have so. It is the maintenance of trees planted that requires manpower, perseverance and commitment. These words of wisdom kept ringing in me," he recounts emotionally.

To prepare himself for this new journey and responsibility, he underwent a training in Tirupati organised by the Department of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh. He then founded the Thilakavathy Foundation in 2000 to spearhead plantation activities. Learning about a variety of trees also involves learning about the suitable soil, climatic conditions, water requirement path of roots, symbiotic relationship with other plants and also the ability to effect other plants nearby. Sandalwood, for example, is a tree that cannot survive alone because it takes from all roots. He also learnt about the species that suited the environmental conditions for every month in a year.

Manimaran has so far planted, maintained and taken care of over two lakh trees, all while working for the Department of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh. Banyan, peepul, neem, teak, sandalwood, redwood, etc have been planted in the forest areas without disturbing the existing flora and fauna. It all starts with identifying the places available, analysing the soil, ecosystem, choice of appropriate tree species, planting them, identifying

members from local community who can support in watering and maintenance and then the most crucial part – regular visits to monitor growth.

"I had been doing this very quietly, without any noise. In fact, I do not encourage Miyawaki technique of plantation for different reasons but its popularity has urged me to realise that there are many people out there who really want to fix the environment. My strength lies in my local networks who have provided consistent support to protect all trees planted," he says.

He takes all efforts to encourage community involvement in maintaining the trees planted. School children, for example, are gifted stationery/study items to aid in education. Apart from them, senior citizens, panchayat leaders and women's groups are also engaged. The support of local networks is important because these plants have commercial benefits.

After three years of care and maintenance there is not much these trees require. They only need protection from men intending to cut them. That is their only grave danger. "The rest, nature has taught them to protect themselves and that is why they are capable of standing long, steady and surviving different weather conditions," Manimaran reflects.

His association with CSIM dates back to 2007. He initially felt that there won't be much to take away as his work needs field presence. "I cannot focus on writing proposals because my work is all about field presence. CSIM taught me administrative work from a human perspective. It was taught in such a way that I will be able to apply it while starting any new work line," he adds.

During the Covid Pandemic, he grew organic vegetables like brinjal, ladies finger, split beans, spinach, raddish, etc. in his farm but never found it difficult to find buyers. The demand for consumption of organic vegetables was already high and

community members who knew about his farm came to buy what they needed. With over 10,000 buyers, his simple agri business is successful and promising.

Manimaran now wants to try integrated farming including poultry and encourage younger minds to consider this as a worthy opportunity. He also plans to try this model in at least five villages in the district and propose a plan for replication.

"No matter how much I do, the real change agent in these matters of long term sustainability is a collective action. With every seed I sow, I am hopeful that I will encourage new members to follow suit," he says assuredly.

Shanmuga Priya.T

7. P.N. SUBRAMANIAN

The Journey Towards Natural Farming



My path to embracing natural farming has been a transformative journey, deeply rooted in reflection and learning. It was not an overnight change but a gradual awakening influenced by decades of experience, observation, and a realization of the impact of modern agricultural practices.

The Green Revolution: A Necessary but Costly Change

In the 1960s, India was on the brink of crisis. Between 1964 and 1966, severe droughts and famines struck the nation, and food security became an urgent priority. The Green Revolution emerged as the solution, introducing high-yielding crop varieties, chemical pesticides, and fertilizers. It was a necessity of the time, ensuring survival and feeding a rapidly growing population.

As a child, I witnessed a different environment. The soil was fertile, water was pure, and the air was fresh. Farming was

harmonious with nature, and food production felt organic and untainted. However, the Green Revolution shifted focus to maximizing outputs. Chemical farming became the norm, and its adverse effects were not questioned. At the time, the excitement about increased yields and food security overshadowed any concern for environmental and health impacts.

Awakening to the Damage

By my 50s, the picture had changed dramatically. I began to see the consequences of indiscriminate chemical usage in agriculture—degraded soils, polluted water sources, and a rise in unknown health conditions. Many of the pesticides and fertilizers we used were banned in Western countries due to their harmful effects, yet they continued to be a staple in Indian farming.

The sight of farmers spraying toxic chemicals without proper protection stayed with me. Their faces covered with cloth masks, they would return exhausted and rationalize their exposure by gulping down alcohol to "counter the mess." The long-term health effects and unknown diseases this practice caused were alarming.

I started educating myself about these harmful chemicals and their impact. This quest for knowledge ignited my desire to explore natural farming methods.

The Influence of a Guru and the Start of Change

I owe much of my early learning to Dr. Gurumurthy, who served as my mentor during the initial phase of this journey. His insights and guidance were invaluable in helping me transition from conventional farming to natural and regenerative practices.

My chemical farming stint lasted less than two years, but it left a lasting impression. It made me realize that sustainable farming was not just a choice but an imperative for the future. For the

past eight years, I have been fully committed to practicing regenerative natural farming.

From Terrace to Farmlands: A Journey of Experimentation

My first steps were small. In Thorapakkam, I utilized 3000 square feet of terrace space to grow crops. Initially, I relied on chemicals, as I was still unacquainted with natural farming practices. Gradually, I shifted to sustainable methods and experimented with hydroponics and aquaponics. The joy of growing vegetables like tomatoes, okra, eggplants, and ridge gourds naturally was unmatched.

Encouraged by this success, I expanded to farmlands. Initially, I grew commercial crops like sugarcane, paddy, BT cotton, sesame, and groundnuts using chemicals, as the scale required it. I leased lands and aimed to cultivate up to 100 acres. The commercial farming system revealed its harsh realities—the exploitation of farmers by middlemen and mills. Most farmers are forced to sell immediately at low prices to repay debts, but I was fortunate to hold my produce until prices improved.

However, I felt increasingly uneasy. Chemical farming was stripping the soil of its vitality and eroding my sense of purpose.

The Philosophy Behind Natural Farming

What struck me most was the mindset of farmers in their 60s and 70s who encouraged the indiscriminate use of harmful chemicals. These were people who had witnessed the degradation yet continued the practice out of habit or necessity. Their philosophy contrasted sharply with my growing awareness.

The realization that we were not just feeding ourselves but also the soil, the ecosystem, and future generations shifted my perspective. Farming became more than a livelihood—it became a responsibility.

Rediscovering Traditional Wisdom

Walking through my farmhouse in Mudaliyar Kuppam one day, I was struck by the wisdom of our ancestors. The so-called "weeds" we often uproot and discard are, in fact, medicinal plants used in Ayurveda and Siddha practices. Using Google Lens, I identified several plants growing naturally, such as Kuppaimeni, Oodha Mulli, Kundu Mani, and Thazhuthazhai.

This exercise reinforced my belief in natural farming and the ancient wisdom of using nature's gifts for health and sustainability. These plants, which we label as weeds, are a reminder of the interconnectedness of life and the need to respect our environment.

A Commitment to Regenerative Farming

Today, I am proud to be practicing regenerative natural farming, which goes beyond avoiding chemicals. It focuses on replenishing the soil, restoring biodiversity, and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature.

The journey has been filled with challenges, but it has also brought immense satisfaction. Every crop I grow naturally is a step toward healing the land and leaving a better legacy for the next generation.

Natural farming is not just about techniques; it is about philosophy. It is about respecting the earth, understanding its rhythms, and embracing sustainable practices that benefit both humans and the planet. As I look back, I am grateful for the guidance of mentors like Dr. Gurumurthy and the lessons from my experiences. The journey toward natural farming is ongoing, but the path is clear. It is a path of hope, resilience, and reconnection with the roots of agriculture.

P.N. Subramanian

8. RAGHAVAN

Healing the Lakes and Lands



The evolution of agriculture from natural to chemical methods, and now back to organic practices, reflects the changing priorities and understanding of agricultural sustainability over time. Concepts like agro-ecology, permaculture and regenerative agriculture emerged, focusing on creating farming systems that are not only organic but also enhance soil health, conserve water, promote biodiversity and mitigate climate change. “I have lived some of these changes as I come from a farming family,” says Mr Ragavan A, an Electrical Technician turned natural farmer and permaculture practitioner.

He was born in Pallathur, Thanjavur and his childhood is full of memories about his father’s experience in the farm. After completing his Diploma in Electrical Engineering, he worked in Singapore as an Electrical Technician in a ship building company for six years. “The routine there just did not fit in me. I felt

exploited most of the days because the life cycle with machinery and the unchanging, mundane work culture that had no room for relaxation or creativity contradicted my personality. I finally gave up and decided to come back home," recalls Ragavan.

In all these six years, he kept his interest in literature alive. An avid reader of authors like Nammazhvar, Gandhiji, Masanobu Fukuoka, J C Kumarappa and E F Schumacher, he was easily driven towards the ideas of natural farming. "I realised I am a farmer at heart," he adds.

"Environmental sustainability is the fundamental, ultimate truth behind human well-being. All of them from different cultures and time periods advocated the same from their own bag of experiences. Masanobu Fukuoka, for example, is a Japanese farmer who advocated for minimal intervention in farming, relying on natural processes to maintain soil fertility and plant health. His approach was grounded in the idea that nature knows best and human intervention should be limited to avoid disrupting natural ecosystems," he explains. Strongly influenced by these principles and ideas, Ragavan wanted to come back home and practice natural farming.

His work in Rengamalai Organic Farm in Karur and the connection with interns from other cities, led him to pursue a course on permaculture in Aranya Permaculture Academy in Hyderabad. "This is the place where I found my calling. I connected all dots in my mind. Principles of my favourite authors, ideas I was hooked to, my learning and what I thought I must do, it all came together," reminisces Ragavan, who took up many land design and development projects after the course in different states like Kerala, Odisha, etc. Back in Pallathur, the harvest of Thanga Samba rice (a traditional rice variety) led him to observe issues in agriculture arising from water salinity.

The geographical structure of this town allows many lakes

and ponds that ultimately connect to the Bay of Bengal. While this could be of immense use to agriculture in this region, the practice of mono-cropping and three harvests every year led to the depletion of ground water reserves. The surface water that sustained agriculture for centuries was used unscrupulously and the use of borewells degraded ground water systems. Adding to all this, is the increasing salinity in water which affected yield significantly. "It became a loop which farmers failed to understand holistically. The pressure on yield forced them to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. This further affected yield and they got back to chemicals to sustain yield. Fresh water was the actual need of the hour. Thus was born the effort to restore Pallathur lake," elaborates Ragavan.

Spread across 142 acres in two divisions, Ragavan was concerned that restoration of this lake was the only way to restore fresh water supply for agriculture in the region. Without any maintenance or care in the last 25 years, the lake had completely lost its holding capacity. He got in touch with local farmers and active youngsters who understood the need for such an effort, together they all mobilised funds from all houses in the town. "Contribution was completely voluntary and we had to go door to door," he adds. The KAIFA farmers' group provided the machinery support required and the activities began to take shape. The weak bunds were strengthened and heightened, and all invasive species that grew on the lake boundary were removed. The bunds were then reconstructed to increase the holding of the lake. The western side of the lake had no shore, so Ragavan's team built it from scratch through a stretch of 1.7 kilometres. The complete circumference of the lake, 3.6 kilometres is now strengthened and secured. "We could come this far with the funds we were able to mobilise. With consistent work in the field, we also have witnessed new volunteers and contributions to take this forward," he says, clarifying that funds were raised from farmers, friends, relatives from abroad and permaculture friends' group. "Networking is an asset for

farmers. The transition to natural practices can start on a small scale, but networking is key to take this bigger, into a movement and then completely transform the system," he expounds.

Work has been completed in 70 acres and five dams, that were manually controlled are now repaired and will soon be supported by an on-off system. Ragavan and his team of enthusiastic farmer volunteers look forward to starting the plantation work in the next cycle of operations, specifically the cultivation of Vetiver. It not only adds to the intercropping pattern, but also ensures diversity in the land, pest management and above all, income generation. He has plans to use income from the sale of Vetiver tillers to set up a maintenance fund for Pallathur lake.

Other native tree species like fig, tamarind have been chosen for cultivation across the lake's island systems to also support livelihood of local farmers. More than 10,000 palm trees will also be planted around the lake's circumference to add to the overall benefits and lake management.

Alongside the restoration of Pallathur lake, Ragavan is also working towards building a model farm to demonstrate the principles of permaculture on the temple land in his town. Permaculture (permanent agriculture) promotes biodiversity and the integration of different elements (plants, animals, structures) within a system. This diversity helps to create more resilient and productive environments. "We basically observe the land, learn its sunlight, air, water and soil interactions, placement of ponds, rain water harvesting spots, type of crops, trees, the bunds and fencing. It all feed into structuring the land into a system that mimics natural ecosystems, much like the forests that manage themselves during summer and monsoons," he explains. He believes that farmers must see what is possible. Unless it is demonstrated on a piece of land, farmers will not gain the confidence to try good practices.

This temple land is completely barren and has not been leased in the last seven years because the circumstances led to the myth that leasing the land led to loss.

Ragavan is determined to break this myth and show that natural practices can restore soil health and lead to profitable yields. "I am actually living the dream and experience of my gurus. I have just started and these few months have given me significant lessons to go forward. There are eight lakes in the eastern side that connect to Bay of Bengal and I would like to work on restoring all of them. Its high time we realise the worth of surface, fresh water that has been easily available for centuries and fast disappearing due to our irresponsible practices," warns Ragavan.

Shanmuga Priya.T

9. SENDHURVELAN

Unveiling the Enigmatic Vetiver



In a world dominated by conventional career pursuits, there are individuals who dare to venture off the beaten path and embrace their passions with unwavering determination. Meet Sendhurvelan, a spirited BE student, whose story defies expectations and embodies the spirit of true entrepreneurship.

Shunning the allure of a typical corporate job, Sendhurvelan took a leap of faith into the world of farming, driven by a fervent desire to make a meaningful impact in the agricultural sector. The captivating tale of Sendhurvelan stands as an inspiration for those who dare to chase their dreams against all odds. Let's delve into his remarkable journey and uncover the motivations, challenges, and triumphs he encountered along the way.

Vetiver, a plant with widespread use in Tamil Nadu and beyond, is highly esteemed for its various properties. Recently, it has garnered significant attention across multiple industries, including

cosmetics, spas, and medicine. The plant's cultivation involves harvesting its seeds from the soil, replanting them, thereby imparting the plant its distinctive name. While traditionally used in religious rituals like *Homams*, Vetiver has now found extensive application in cosmetics, including oils and perfumes, as well as in spa treatments and medicinal products.

"Garlands, scrubbers, car mats, windows screens, and yoga mats are made using vetiver. Maintaining this crop isn't easy, and it takes 12-18 months to harvest 42,000 to 45,000 plants in one acre of land," he says.

When it comes to cultivating Vetiver, profitability is paramount for farmers. The loans the farmers avail for Vetiver cultivation need to be paid back, and they must earn a sustainable income to support themselves and their families. Fortunately, the vast range of economic uses Vetiver offers provides promising prospects for profitability.

As Sendhurvelan notes, soil aeration represents just one of its numerous applications that make it a highly sought-after plant worldwide.

When Sendhurvelan first ventured into Vetiver cultivation, he faced a daunting challenge – finding a market to sell his crop. It was the farmers in his village who took matters into their own hands and began to cultivate Vetiver themselves. However, the absence of a clear market connection posed a significant obstacle, leaving them unsure of how to sell their produce. He says "Amidst the uncertainty, a turning point arrived when Mr. C.K. Ashok Kumar, came forward and initiated a partnership with the farmers. This agreement provided a glimmer of hope and paved the way for the steady growth of Vetiver cultivation in the region".

The month of October 2023 brought an unexpected setback when Vetiver buyers suddenly stalled their purchases. This left

Sendhurvelan in a predicament, unsure of where to sell his crops. Later, the local Pharmacies, including those in Virudhunagar, Chennai, and Madurai, expressed their interest in purchasing the plant in substantial quantities. Encouraged by their response, he realised the untapped potential of Vetiver and decided to take it a step further.

However as demand continues to grow, he faced formidable obstacles. "The requirement for Vetiver oil surged, and the existing production capacity struggled to keep the pace. Despite the challenges, some companies managed to secure vast expanses of land dedicated solely to Vetiver cultivation, aiming to meet the ever-increasing demand for its oil," he says.

While various industries may drive the popularisation of Vetiver, its foundation lies with the farmers and their advocacy.Through their knowledge, experience, and passion for the plant, they can inspire others to explore its untapped potential

By championing the profitability, versatility, and ecological benefits of Vetiver, farmers can play an instrumental role in its widespread adoption," he adds.

With the exponential growth of Vetiver cultivation, the future looks promising for this once under-appreciated plant. Its medicinal benefits, combined with the increasing demand for its products, present a wealth of opportunities for farmers and entrepreneurs alike.

The journey of Sendhurvelan exemplifies the resilience and resourcefulness that lies within rural communities. His ability to adapt, explore innovative solutions, and overcome market hurdles showcases the indomitable spirit of Indian farmers. With Vetiver cultivation as a catalyst, he has taken control of their destiny, transforming their lives and cultivating a brighter future for themselves and generations to come.

Through their collective efforts and innovative solutions, Sendhurvelan and his fellow farmers have created a sustainable market for Vetiver, enhancing their livelihoods and cultivating a sense of hope and empowerment within their village. As their journey continues, the ripple effect of their success serves as a testament to the strength and potential of rural communities across the country.

Sendhurvelan's journey with Vetiver cultivation offers a glimpse into the immense economic potential of this remarkable plant. As he seeks profitability and advocates for its popularity, he embodies the spirit of resilience and innovation that lies at the heart of India's farming community.

With its numerous applications and global potential, Vetiver is poised to transform the agricultural landscape on a scale unparalleled in its history. However, its success hinges on the efforts of farmers, researchers, and entrepreneurs committed to exploring its untapped potential.

Bhavadharani & Iniyath Asmi

10. SHANKAR

Championing Organic Agriculture



Shankar, a distinguished chemical engineer, embarked on a remarkable journey of transformation in 1992. After spending years as a water treatment engineer, Shankar redirected his expertise towards a cause close to his heart – organic agriculture and soil health. This shift marked the beginning of a new chapter in Shankar's life, one dedicated to promoting sustainable farming practices and addressing the pressing issue of soil carbon depletion.

As Shankar reminisces about his early career, he recalls the pivotal moments that shaped his journey. "I began my career in 1972 as a chemical water treatment consultant, immersed in the world of conventional engineering practices," Shankar shares. "However, over time, I became increasingly aware of the environmental repercussions of chemical-intensive approaches, particularly in agriculture."

The ‘green revolution’ era, rioritizing by the widespread adoption of high-input agricultural practices, left a profound impact on Shankar. “The green revolution brought about significant increases in agricultural productivity but also led to detrimental effects on soil health,” he explains. “The excessive use of nitrogen-based fertilizers depleted soil carbon levels, posing long-term sustainability challenges.”

Driven by a desire to address these challenges, Shankar made a bold decision to transition from conventional engineering to the realm of organic agriculture. “In 1992, I took a complete U-turn and delved into the manufacturing of biologicals for organic farming and solid waste management,” Shankar recounts. “It was a leap of faith, but I was compelled by a sense of responsibility to contribute to a more sustainable future.”

For Shankar, the heart of organic agriculture lies in soil health and carbon restoration. “Soil carbon depletion is a critical issue that demands immediate attention,” Shankar rioritizi. “Without sufficient soil carbon, agricultural productivity and ecosystem resilience are compromised.”

Over the past 15 years, Shankar has been a vocal advocate for soil carbon restoration and organic farming practices. “Organic farming offers a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on regenerative practices that enhance soil health,” Shankar explains. “By rioritizing organic matter inputs, such as compost, green manure, and cover crops, we can replenish soil carbon and promote long-term sustainability.”

“While organic farming has gained traction in recent years, the restoration of soil carbon remains a largely overlooked aspect,” he observes. “We must bridge this gap by rioritizing soil health and implementing regenerative practices on a broader scale.”

Despite the growing interest in organic agriculture, Shankar highlights the need for greater awareness and action. The concept of profitability is highly subjective, he says. “For instance, if a farmer sells onions for 20 rupees per kilogram this year and the next year they sell for 18 rupees, they might perceive a loss of 2 rupees. However, if the cost of production remains at 10 rupees per kilogram, they still make a profit of 10 rupees per kilogram, compared to 8 rupees the following year. Despite this, the farmer may lament a loss, failing to acknowledge that profit is still being made.”

“In organic farming, the dynamics shift further,” he adds. “Organic practices often entail lower productivity due to cultural methods, necessitating rioritizing practices. While some countries like India have implemented such standards in certain regions, resistance to change persists. For example, substances like *Panchakavya*, considered an organic nutrient, may contain insufficient nitrogen (around 3-4%) for optimal plant growth. This inadequacy leads to stunted growth and reduced productivity. Despite this, organic produce is marketed at a premium, often with narratives about its purity and quality.

Honesty and truthfulness are crucial in agriculture. By focusing on soil health and carbon content, farmers can rioriti their yields and profitability in the long run. Government support plays a crucial role in facilitating the transition to organic agriculture. “Government initiatives, such as financial incentives for farmers transitioning to organic practices, are a step in the right direction,” he acknowledges. “However, sustained efforts are needed to address productivity challenges and market uncertainties associated with organic farming.”

Shankar rioritizi the importance of research and innovation in driving agricultural sustainability. “Investments in research and technology are essential to develop innovative solutions for soil carbon restoration and organic farming,” Shankar asserts. “We

need to harness the power of science and technology to overcome the challenges facing modern agriculture."

One of the key challenges in promoting organic agriculture is market acceptance and consumer trust. "Consumer awareness and demand for organic products are on the rise, but there is still a need for greater transparency and accountability," Shankar suggests. "Truthful labeling and certification schemes can help build consumer confidence and promote the adoption of organic practices."

Reflecting on his journey, Shankar remains optimistic about the future of organic agriculture. "As we confront the challenges of climate change and food security, organic farming offers a path towards resilience and sustainability," Shankar reflects. "By rioritizing soil health and carbon restoration, we can build a more resilient and regenerative agricultural system."

Shankar's story serves as an inspiration for aspiring farmers and environmental advocates alike. His unwavering commitment to organic agriculture and soil health exemplifies the transformative power of passion and purpose. As Shankar continues to champion sustainable farming practices, his legacy will endure as a beacon of hope for future generations.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

11. SREE KUMAR

PLANTING HOPE WITH EVERY TREE



Trees are a symbol of life, growth and continuity. They not only sustain ecosystems but also play a central role in maintaining biodiversity and regulating climate. Unfortunately, we have lost a significant number of trees that has led to profound consequences. And this loss of huge canopies is a crisis for all species including humans and the whole planet as such. Yet, we have individuals and their efforts that continue to increase green cover, who thoughtfully promote the planting of native, traditional species and inspire many others to follow suit. "We have lost way too many trees. Our efforts must be on a war footing. Each one of us must plant few trees and take care of them. This is the only essential way to sustain and support humanity," warns Mr Sree Kumar, Founder of Trust for Restoring Environment and Empowering Society (TREES), in Chennai.

Sree Kumar is a class ten dropout from Palakkad, Kerala who worked as a welder for survival. He worked in Mumbai also and

upon returning to Kerala, he started working as a driver. He came to Chennai at the age of 30 years in 2000 and continued to work as a driver till 2009 for an American company. "I was an ordinary driver who often slept under the shade of trees in many cities, villages. The connect one feels with nature and trees is inevitable as we are all part of the whole planet's symbiosis. Perhaps, this connection is not enough motivation to plant more trees. But being in the midst of personalities like Nammazhvar can change you fundamentally and compel you to think of nature from a functional perspective. I became humbled by what trees have been doing for us for eons," he recounts.

While working for an e-publishing company, Sree Kumar got involved in their 'one book-one tree' project. "It is here that I met Nammazhvar. His passion and love for natural farming, his deep ecological wisdom recognising trees as foundational to balance in nature touched me," he reminisces. His interest in these projects were noted and Sree Kumar got to travel with his inspiration all over the country. He learnt a lot in these trips and began to connect himself with the larger mission of afforestation. "It is not only about how trees helped natural farming or how they strengthen soil. Their presence is enough to help soil replenish itself with nutrients like nitrogen and potassium," he adds. Then the reach of Green Kalam project, that was initiated by Actor Vivek made him realise that only trees can arrest global warming. "Ten years with such personalities convinced me to work on planting more and more trees. I knew what I had to do," says Sree Kumar.

Sree Kumar founded TREES in 2019 in Padur, Chennai and engaged a lot of volunteers from schools, colleges and corporates to develop saplings in his nursery. But to plant them, Sree Kumar had a clear plan. He chose to plant his saplings on protected lands like defense areas, NSG, Navy campuses, universities, schools and colleges. He had seen that trees were easily evicted for metro rail, bridge construction and other development projects. Hence, chose

these places so that the trees could survive and grow to their full potential. He also ensured that damaged trees were replanted in a suitable place and taken care of. TREES focusses exclusively on planting native, traditional species for diverse reasons. Their extensive root systems, adaptation to local conditions, ability to withstand extreme weather conditions, resistance to pests and diseases and their survival strategies makes them vital to maintaining the balance of ecosystems, especially as climate change increases the frequency of natural disasters.

"All of us know that trees are important. We all want to plant more trees. But only a few of us know the value of every tree we plant. Nature has gifted every species with a specific trait, like talent in humans. And that trait governs their role in every eco system," explains Sree Kumar. Arjuna Tree for example, removes salt content from ground water and acts as a natural water purifier. Its bark is also found to have medicinal properties that can help in the treatment of cancer and blood pressure. The culturally revered Neem Tree is probably the only tree which gives Vitamin C along with oxygen. It is very well known that every part of this tree including seed, fruit and flower has medicinal values. Sree Kumar is even more engrossed while explaining about the Mahua Tree, locally known as the Ilupai Maram. It belongs to a rare species of trees that absorb both carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide from the atmosphere. The tree produces fragrant, nectar-rich flowers that attract bees and other pollinators, thus helps sustaining pollinator population. Oil from the Mahua seeds are a good remedy for joint pain. "Did you know that fifty years back this oil was used to make Diwali sweets? This is the task in hand, the next generation must be educated and sensitised about the values of our native trees. There are about 69 varieties whose wide presence on earth is extremely vital to strengthen soil," he adds, elaborating on TREES' awareness programs for school, college students, community associations and also NGOs, volunteer groups who want to plant as many trees and nurture them.

Having planted, nurtured over 12,64,000 trees and educated more than 30 lakh school/college students in the last fifteen years, Sree Kumar is a name that now resonates with trees and their values. TREES has partnered with various groups to promote plantation. Chennai Metro Rail's first plantation initiative and also Chennai Corporation's plantation initiative are some of the recent projects. His field observations and travel to different states has also made him aware of the strengths of these trees, which he continues to share in all awareness sessions. "All of us can plant and take care of few trees. But I find it rewarding that I am able to build groups who will follow suit and inspire many more to do so. The growth of this chain of planters is a dream that has transcended from many thoughtful leaders like Nammazhvar and APJ Abdul Kalam. I will continue to do my part," promises Sree Kumar.

Shanmuga Priya.T

12. YAMUNA DEVI

The Nature's Touch



A trailblazer who turns garbage into wellness develops in a society where environmental issues and the need for sustainable practices are major considerations. We explore the fascinating tale of a natural farm addition producer who is transforming goods that are widely seen as garbage into useful items that support sustainability and well-being.

Dr.Yamunadevi Sureshkumar is a visionary entrepreneur with a passion for harnessing the power of nature. Her venture focuses on re-purposing agricultural by-products into essential oils and herbal products, breathing life into what was once dismissed as waste. "Nature has provided us with abundant resources; it's our responsibility to use them wisely and sustainably," she remarks.

One of Yamunadevi's notable creations is the herbal tea drops crafted from lemongrass, a plant often discarded after essential oil extraction. Yamunadevi saw an opportunity to repurpose this

overlooked resource into a refreshing beverage with numerous health benefits. The herbal tea drops are not just a delightful infusion; they are a sustainable solution to reducing waste in the essential oil extraction process.

Yamunadevi's commitment to sustainability doesn't stop here. She introduces us to her innovative Aroma Tea, a concoction carefully curated to not only tantalise the taste buds but also to provide a holistic approach to health. Packed with herbs known for their immunity-boosting properties, digestive aids, and weight management benefits, Aroma Tea is a testament to Yamunadevi's dedication to promote well-being through natural means.

Yamunadevi shares her journey from recognising the untapped potential in agricultural by-products to creating products that contribute positively to both health and the environment. She wanted to make better use of her Science education as well as contribute to the society. By up-cycling agricultural waste into products that enhance health, she not only reduces environmental impact but also fosters a culture of mindful consumption. "It's about understanding the inter-connectedness of all things. I wanted to do something different instead of treading the traditional path of being a Professor," she explains.

Yamuna has transformed her passion for natural farm additions into a flourishing venture that not only produces unique products but also opens doors for learning and empowerment.

At the heart of Yamunadevi's garden is the enchanting '*Nakshatra Vanam*', a celestial space where plants are carefully curated based on the Navagraha (nine planets), the 12 Zodiac Signs, and the 27 stars. This botanical haven is not just a collection of plants; it's a sanctuary designed to emanate positive vibes and connect with the cosmic energies represented by these celestial bodies. "This garden was built not only to promote my products but to spread positivity to everyone" she remarks.

Yamunadevi's dedication to sustainable practices and holistic living extends beyond the garden. She has successfully introduced a range of natural farm additions that were once unknown to many but now boast a consistent and appreciative customer base. From essential oils to herbal products like tea blends, each creation reflects her passion for harnessing the gifts of nature in innovative ways.

The success of Yamuna's products is a testament to the power of word-of-mouth marketing. Her consumers, having experienced the benefits first-hand, have become enthusiastic advocates, referring her natural farm additions to friends and family.

This organic and authentic approach to spreading the word has not only established a loyal customer base but has also created a sense of community around Yamunadevi's sustainable vision. This grassroots approach to marketing speaks volumes about the authenticity and value of Yamunadevi's natural farm additions. It underscores the power of genuine connections and personal recommendations in building a thriving business rooted in trust and satisfaction. As Yamunadevi's customer base continues to grow organically, it reflects the resonance her products have with individuals seeking natural, sustainable solutions for their well-being. "Our customers are our best advocates" she proudly says.

Yamunadevi acknowledges the challenges of introducing unfamiliar products to the market. However, with resilience and a commitment to educating consumers about the benefits of her natural farm additions, she has overcome skepticism. "People are becoming more mindful of what they consume and its impact. It's about creating awareness and offering sustainable alternatives," she remarks.

Behind Yamunadevi's success lies a tale of unwavering support. Her family, especially her daughter and son, have stood by her side during challenging times. Witnessing them contribute to

the venture before heading off to school exemplifies a shared commitment to the vision of creating something unique and sustainable.

Yamunadevi's journey is not just about cultivating plants; it's about cultivating a sense of harmony, learning, and empowerment. Through her natural farm additions, she not only offers unique products but also nurtures a community of individuals eager to embrace the wonders of sustainable living. Her story is a reminder that with passion, knowledge, and a touch of celestial inspiration, we can create something extraordinary from the seemingly ordinary.

Bhavadharani & Iniyath Asmi

INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS

Embark on a journey with stalwarts in natural farming and social entrepreneurship, gaining insights from their experiences and visions.

1. PROF. CHANDAN GHOSH

"Embracing a culture of scientific inquiry and responsibility is essential for enhancing disaster resilience."



Prof. Chandan Ghosh is a seasoned professional with a diverse background spanning academia, research, and practical experience in civil engineering and disaster management.

With his Civil and Infrastructure Engineering background and having more than 20 yrs of professional services, teaching, research and various decision-making issues, Dr Ghosh joined NIDM as full professor in July 2006. He has been looking after various training, research, documentation and Disaster Management policy advocacy of India.

As professor & Head, Prof. Ghosh has made important contributions in strengthening training curriculum with field exposure and professional credence in the disaster database/ documentation in the institute. He has been serving as expert

member in various committees formed by DDA, MCD, NDMA,UPSC, DST, MoUD, MoES, to name a few.

Currently, Chandan holds the prestigious position of Director of Research & Innovation and CEO of Nishkam Technologies, a startup based in IIT Kanpur.

In an exclusive interview, Prof. Chandan Bose shares with Marie Banu the significance using Vetiver grass, in disaster management.

Your background in disaster management and how you apply that expertise in your current role at NIDM?

My background in Civil Engineering and expertise in disaster management have been invaluable while serving NIDM for about 17.5 years till December 2023, where I continue to leverage mathematical models, simulation tools, and interdisciplinary approaches to develop effective mitigation strategies for a wide range of natural and man-made disasters.

My experience in disaster management took a more hands-on approach when I joined Earthquake Risk Evaluation Center (EREC) as an advisor in 2005, a role that allowed me to apply my expertise in mitigating seismic risks. Eventually, I transitioned to the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) in 2006, where I served as a professor and later as the head until December 2023.

In my tenure at NIDM, my focus has been on mitigation strategies. While traditional disaster management involves responding to crises and aiding in rescue operations, my team and I are more inclined towards identifying the root causes of disasters and implementing measures to prevent or minimise their impact in the future. This involves a combination of research, innovation, and simulation techniques to understand and quantify various risk factors, from urban heat islands to air

pollution levels, infrastructure auditing, post disaster site visits and documentation and their health implications, etc.

Can you discuss the challenges and how you promoted disaster-resilient constructions in India?

Certainly. One of the primary challenges I encounter is the mindset of people. Despite having comprehensive Indian standard codes developed by the Bureau of Indian Standards, implementing disaster-resilient infrastructure, particularly in earthquake-prone areas, remains a challenge. Approximately 60% of India's landmass is vulnerable to earthquakes, including regions like the Himalayas, Gujarat's Kachchh area, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the entire north-eastern region.

While we have evolved our codes and practices over the years, incorporating advancements in materials and technology, the challenge lies in fostering a culture of adherence to these standards. With the increasing complexity and height of buildings, there's a constant need for innovation in structural engineering to ensure resilience. While we give usually more attentions to overground structure design & construction, the ignorance of the ground behaviours magnifies the vulnerability.

At NIDM, I focused extensively on training engineers, architects, and town planners, emphasising the importance of upgrading construction practices and learning from global examples, notably Japan. Japan's systematic approach to upgrading engineering practices and infrastructure over centuries serves as a benchmark for disaster resilience.

I often conducted training programs where I highlighted Japan's experiences with earthquakes, showcasing how they have continually improved their construction techniques and curriculum. By analysing historical earthquake events and their impact on structures, we devised experiments to recreate seismic

forces on buildings, demonstrating the importance of adhering to codes and standards derived from such experiences.

My approach involved making technical details accessible to a broader audience, using practical tools and examples to underscore the significance of following established codes. Ultimately, the challenge lies in fostering a culture of proactive disaster resilience among all stakeholders involved in construction and urban planning.

Tells us about importance of raising awareness and demonstrating retrofitting measures for disaster-resilient infrastructure, particularly focusing on earthquake preparedness.

Absolutely. Raising awareness and demonstrating retrofitting measures for disaster-resilient infrastructure are crucial aspects of disaster management, particularly in earthquake-prone regions. My role has become vital in not only educating people but also visiting sites to identify faults and neglected areas in infrastructure. Retrofitting, or upgrading existing structures to meet current safety standards, is an essential component of this effort.

During site visits, I often come across construction projects where fundamental safety measures are overlooked. Despite my passionate advocacy and extensive experience, there is still resistance to implementing necessary changes. This resistance is concerning, considering that earthquake preparedness is not solely about early warning systems. While early warnings provide crucial seconds for response, it is equally important to ensure that buildings and infrastructure can withstand seismic forces.

One of the challenges lies in conveying the importance of structural resilience to stakeholders, including contractors and

architects. I frequently conduct voluntary site assessments, emphasising the need for civil engineers to be actively involved in construction projects. However, there remains a gap between established engineering principles and their application in practice. This discrepancy highlights the need for continued advocacy and education within the industry.

In addition to structural considerations, non-structural elements play a significant role in disaster resilience. Simple measures, such as securing glassware in chemistry labs or reinforcing glass windows, can mitigate secondary hazards during earthquakes. I have incorporated these non-structural mitigation strategies into school safety programs, recognising the importance of safeguarding our future generations.

While early warning systems provide valuable information, their effectiveness relies on swift and decisive action. Japan's example of rapidly detecting earthquakes and disseminating information to the public is commendable. However, in India, there is a lack of urgency and coordination in implementing similar systems. Despite advancements in technology, our ability to respond effectively to earthquakes remains limited.

What is the significance of bioengineering, particularly using Vetiver grass, in disaster management?

Bioengineering, especially leveraging Vetiver grass, presents a sustainable solution for mitigating the impact of disasters, particularly in hilly areas prone to erosion and landslides. Traditional engineering approaches, such as RCC structures and dams, have limitations, especially in environmentally sensitive regions like hilly areas. Nature-based solutions like Vetiver grass offer a more holistic and resilient approach to disaster management.

Vetiver grass has remarkable properties that enable it to withstand extreme temperatures (-15 to +55 degrees Celsius) and effectively control erosion. Its extensive root system helps stabilise slopes, preventing landslides and soil erosion even in challenging terrain. By incorporating Vetiver grass into infrastructure projects, we can minimise the environmental impact of traditional engineering methods, such as concrete or brick covers. Vetiver grass naturally protects slopes, reduces soil erosion, and helps restore ecosystems, promoting sustainable development in disaster-prone areas.

It also offers a cost-effective, sustainable, and long-lasting solution compared to traditional methods. Once planted, Vetiver grass requires minimal maintenance and can endure various environmental conditions, making it a reliable choice for disaster management and environmental conservation.

2. DR. DIEDERIK DE BOER

"The symbiotic relationship between CSR, brand value, and shareholder capital underscores the pivotal role responsible business practices play in the modern market."



Dr. Diederik de Boer is Director of the International Projects and Consultancies Department and Associate Professor Sustainable Business Development at Maastricht School of Management.

He holds a PhD from the Erasmus University (the Netherlands), an MPA from Leiden/Rotterdam University (the Netherlands), an MBA from Bradford/Tilburg University (UK/ The Netherlands) and a Minor in Small and Micro Credit Schemes from Harvard University Boston (USA).

He worked for seven years for the United Nations and the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation in Cambodia, Mongolia, Korea and Palestine. As director he is in charge of more than 30 programs worldwide focusing on capacity building, research

and education. His research focuses on partnerships and cluster competitiveness in developing countries in Asia and Africa.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Diederik de Boer shares with Marie Banu Rodriguez his global CSR perspective.

About the Significance of Impact in Global CSR Transitions?

Global transitions in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are inherently entwined with the profound impact organizations and companies can have on society. It is imperative to demonstrate the nature of this impact, whether it be social, environmental, or ethical. As we delve into these issues, the critical challenge emerges: How do we measure these impacts effectively? The journey toward establishing a Theory of Change capable of measuring these impacts comprehensively is ongoing. Engaging in conversations with numerous companies, banks, investors, and local governments across Europe, there is a collective desire for a Theory of Change grounded in diverse impact indicators, allowing for meaningful comparisons. While this remains a challenging endeavour, our commitment is to develop systems that not only measure the impact of the organizations themselves but also evaluate the broader impact of interventions on society.

How do you perceive the enforcement of CSR, considering the interplay between frameworks and companies seeking loopholes?

The enforcement of CSR is a delicate balance between frameworks and the actions of companies. Often, companies seek loopholes within the framework, challenging the efficacy of enforcement. From my vantage point as a researcher, I advocate for a comprehensive framework that minimizes such loopholes, ensuring a sustainable path forward in both scientific and societal realms. While short-term gains may not always result in a win-win situation, the longer-term vision revolves around creating a

better world for the entire private sector community. The transition from voluntary standards, now acknowledged as insufficient, towards more compulsory and stringent measures is a positive shift. This evolution not only places greater responsibility on companies but also integrates CSR as a fundamental part of their strategy, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

Do you think CSR adds brand value and increases shareholder capital?

Yes, the integration of CSR undoubtedly contributes to the augmentation of brand value and the bolstering of shareholder capital. In a world where trust is paramount, the ability to showcase responsibility becomes a key differentiator. I observe that this phenomenon is indeed occurring, and it holds significant importance to transition from a "trust me" world to a "show me" world. What you express should be under constant monitoring, allowing for recalibration as needed.

Consumers, including myself, are more inclined to support companies that actively demonstrate their commitment to societal and environmental welfare. The positive perception of a responsible company translates into higher values, influencing not only consumer purchasing decisions but also shareholder investment choices. The symbiotic relationship between CSR, brand value, and shareholder capital underscores the pivotal role responsible business practices play in the modern market.

How do you see the extension of the relationship with companies that understand societal issues?

The depth of the relationship with companies extends beyond profit when they demonstrate a profound understanding of societal issues, particularly in areas like climate change. Companies that lack strategies to contribute to addressing climate change are likely to face consequences.

This shortfall not only affects their ability to attract and retain top-tier talent but also influences the investment landscape. The growing consciousness among investors regarding issues like climate change places a premium on companies with robust strategies in place. As a result, the integration of sustainable practices becomes not just a choice but a strategic imperative for companies aiming for long-term success

Does the Netherlands government have any mandate or priority areas of the SDGs to focus upon in the coming years?

Yes, the Netherlands government is actively involved in breaking down Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into mini-components, aligning with the United Nations' directive. This initiative, commenced in December 2023, aims to identify the skills and knowledge required for our society and students. For instance, in the textile sector, where water scarcities are not a significant concern, the government is channelling efforts into the promotion of circular economy thinking within the CSR landscape. This underscores a commitment to aligning national strategies with global sustainability goals.

What are your key learnings from CSR practices in other countries, and how does cultural context influence priorities?

From a European perspective, certain aspects such as public health, security, food security, and literacy are often taken for granted, given the active role of the government. However, in countries where governments may not be as affluent or equipped to provide all services, philanthropy in these critical areas becomes more significant. The essence of CSR extends beyond the establishment of indices and standards. It necessitates a focus on raising awareness, providing training, and fostering education on sustainability issues. Understanding the intricate balance between profitable, environmental, and social sustainability is essential for organizations and businesses to genuinely contribute to a better world.

3. MR. DHIRAJ CHOUDHARY

"My goal is to create a brand that connects farmers using organic methods with consumers looking for pure and authentic food."



Dhiraj Choudhary, an electronics engineer turned entrepreneur, is passionate about leveraging technology for social impact. With ventures spanning healthcare to agriculture, he co-founded a startup focused on soil health. Through innovations like the Soil Doctor kit, Dhiraj aims to empower farmers, promote sustainable agriculture, and restore India's soil ecosystem.

In an exclusive interview, Dhiraj Choudhary shares with Marie Banu his interest in soil conservation and organic farming.

Your journey as a social entrepreneur?

I am an electronics engineer by education, and I completed my degree in 2013. From the beginning, I wanted to create something meaningful in the social sector, combining technology with

real-world impact. I was passionate about using tech to solve problems, especially those that could improve people's lives. That's when I first ventured into building an artificial limb for upper-hand amputees.

The idea was to address the challenges faced by amputees. We built a myoelectric arm—this type of prosthetic uses muscle or neural signals to control the movement of the arm. The goal was to make the limb functional through these biological inputs, allowing users to control it naturally. We even successfully fitted the arm on one amputee. But at that point, it was more of a passion project rather than a viable business.

How did your management education help shape your entrepreneurial journey?

To better understand how to build a business around a problem statement, I decided to pursue a post-graduate program in management. I enrolled at XLRI and the experience gave me the tools I needed to create structured business models. Soon after, I co-founded a software startup offering a SaaS (Software as a Service) product. I spent around three and a half years building the company, and by the time I exited in 2021, we had reached an annual recurring revenue of 2.5 crore INR, with just a seven-member team.

Even though the software startup was doing well, I felt a strong calling to work in agriculture—something I had been interested in since childhood. The challenges of COVID-19 gave me time to reflect, and I realised I wanted to pursue that dream. I decided to exit the company and focus on agriculture. That's when I met Ms. Saumya Rawat, my co-founder, in Delhi. Soumya is from Uttarakhand and was already working on soil health and regeneration. Together, we decided to focus on the fundamental issue in agriculture: soil health.

Can you tell us about the soil health solution you've developed?

We realised that many of the issues farmers face—like declining crop yields, increased disease outbreaks, and dependence on chemical fertilizers—stem from poor soil health. Soil is a living ecosystem that contains microbes, earthworms, and nutrients, all of which work together in a symbiotic relationship. However, overuse of harmful fertilizers and chemicals has disrupted this balance, resulting in degraded soil and unsustainable farming practices. Once soil is damaged, it is incredibly difficult to restore, which makes soil health a crucial aspect of sustainable agriculture.

That's where we decided to start. We developed a portable soil-testing device called the Soil Doctor. It's a lightweight backpack, weighing around 6-7 kg, that can be carried to farms. The entire soil testing process is conducted on-site, right in front of the farmer. This builds trust by addressing the skepticism farmers often have toward traditional soil testing methods. Conventionally, soil samples are sent to labs, and farmers receive reports after 20-30 days. Often, these reports are generic and offer identical recommendations for neighbouring farms, which frustrates farmers. With our solution, they see the testing process in real-time, making it transparent and credible.

Each kit costs around 75,000 INR. The device is easy to use and doesn't require any special infrastructure. It allows farmers to get instant soil health reports, which helps them make timely decisions about fertilizers and crop management.

We're building a network of trained micro-entrepreneurs called "Soil Doctors." These are individuals who use our portable kit to offer soil testing services at farmers' doorsteps. The idea is not just to provide soil reports but also to give actionable advice to farmers. These soil doctors are equipped with the knowledge to

recommend appropriate fertilizers, crops, and organic practices. We've already completed a pilot project during the Kharif season in Uttar Pradesh, with five field officers and five soil doctors. We're now expanding into the Rabi season.

Can you share an example of a soil doctor making a difference?

One of the success stories from our pilot is a young woman who had completed her 12th-grade education. She joined the program, received training on the Soil Doctor device, and now provides testing and advice for crops like rice, wheat, and potatoes. In just one month, she earned around 15,000 INR by offering these services. This income helped her pay her admission fees and contribute to her family's finances. Stories like hers highlight how the Soil Doctor model not only benefits farmers but also empowers rural youth to become entrepreneurs.

What is your long-term vision for this project?

Our goal is to create a network of 10,000 soil doctors across India over the next 4-5 years. We want to bring soil testing services directly to farmers, helping them make informed decisions about their crops and fertilizers. We also aim to promote organic farming practices by reducing the use of harmful chemicals.

Ultimately, we want to build a sustainable agricultural ecosystem where farmers adopt organic practices, consumers get access to chemical-free food, and soil health improves over time.

How have mentors supported you in this journey?

I've been fortunate to have mentors like Mr. P.N. Subramaniam, who has a deep passion for sustainable and organic agriculture. He has been guiding us regularly and even invited us to visit his farm in Tamil Nadu. His insights on sustainable farming have inspired me to think beyond just soil testing and focus

on promoting organic practices as the foundation for healthy agriculture.

What challenges do you see in changing farmers' mindsets?

One of the biggest challenges is the deeply ingrained belief among farmers that they already know everything about farming. It's common to hear them say, "Don't teach me agriculture." However, with declining yields, increasing crop diseases, and rising costs, many farmers are starting to realise that traditional methods may no longer be sufficient.

Our goal is to earn their trust by demonstrating the benefits of soil testing and organic practices. Just like the healthcare sector has evolved with accessible pathology labs and online consultations, we want to create a similar ecosystem in agriculture. By bringing soil testing services directly to farmers, we can make agricultural advice more accessible and actionable.

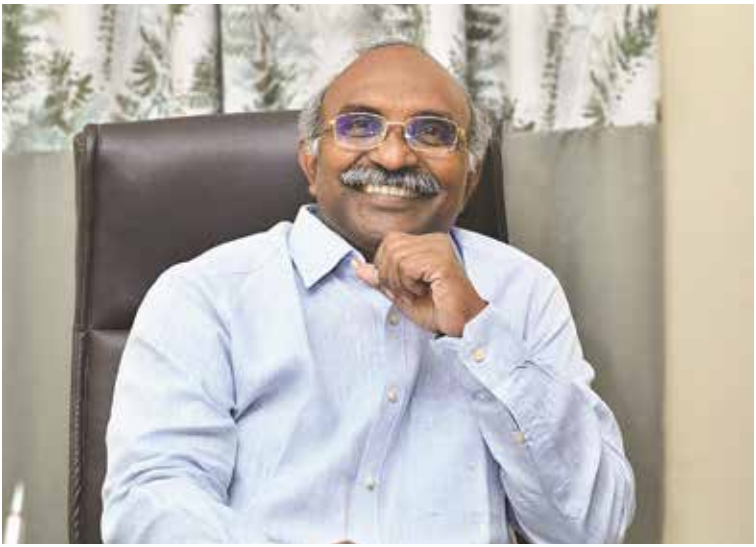
What role do you see for organic farming in the future?

Once farmers adopt organic practices and reduce the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the quality of food will improve significantly. Consumers will benefit from healthier, chemical-free produce. My goal is to create a brand that connects farmers using organic methods with consumers looking for pure and authentic food. Building this brand will ensure farmers have a reliable market for their produce, while consumers gain access to healthier options.

I believe the future of agriculture lies in building integrated services that connect soil health with crop management and market access. By empowering farmers with knowledge and tools, we can transform agriculture into a sustainable and profitable sector. The Soil Doctor is just the beginning—we plan to expand our efforts to cover every aspect of sustainable farming, from soil testing to organic food branding.

4. MR. J.A.C.S RAO

"Integrating organic farming into rural development programs is essential for effectively addressing food security, improving health outcomes, and tackling environmental issues."



Mr. J.A.C.S. Rao, IFS (R) is presently the CEO, State Medicinal Plants Board Chhattisgarh. A seasoned leader in sustainable development and forestry, he has dedicated their career to promoting community resilience and environmental stewardship through innovative initiatives.

With a background in biochemistry from Andhra University, his expertise spans strategic planning, operations management, and project execution, pivotal in spearheading initiatives like the Crop-based Cluster Approach under NHM and pioneering herbal garden developments at prestigious national sites. His leadership extends to previous roles as Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, where he championed R&D in forestry,

wildlife conservation, and climate resilience, and as Additional Managing Director at the Forest Development Corporation, driving sustainable forest management and commercial species cultivation.

Mr. Rao's career underscores a commitment to integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices for holistic rural development and environmental sustainability, making significant strides in organic farming, horticulture promotion, and agroforestry integration, thereby empowering rural communities and ensuring socio-economic progress.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. Rao shares with Marie Banu how organic farming concepts can be integrated into existing rural development programs.

How do you plan to integrate your experiences from forest management, rural development, and conservation into your current role?

I plan to integrate my experiences into my current role through a holistic approach that emphasises sustainable development and environmental stewardship. My background in forest management equips me with the knowledge of ecosystem dynamics and biodiversity conservation. I intend to leverage this expertise to advocate for integrated landscape management approaches that balance conservation with community development.

In rural development, my experience has taught me the importance of participatory approaches and community engagement. I plan to apply these principles to empower local communities in decision-making processes related to natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods. By fostering partnerships and collaborative efforts, I aim to enhance the resilience of rural communities and promote inclusive growth.

My background in conservation has instilled in me a commitment to environmental sustainability. I will advocate for policies and initiatives that promote conservation practices, biodiversity protection, and climate resilience. By integrating these principles into strategic planning and implementation, I seek to address complex environmental challenges while promoting socio-economic development.

Could you discuss the significance of developing Herbal Gardens at various levels, including Rashtrapati Bhavan and divisional levels, and their impact on promoting traditional health practices and biodiversity conservation?

Developing Herbal Gardens at locations like Rashtrapati Bhavan and divisional levels significantly promotes traditional health practices and biodiversity conservation. These gardens serve as living repositories of medicinal plants, preserving ancient knowledge and validating traditional remedies. By cultivating and showcasing these plants, they encourage scientific validation and bridge traditional and modern medicine.

They also play a crucial role in biodiversity conservation by providing sanctuaries for medicinal plant species at risk due to habitat loss and climate change, thus contributing to ecosystem health. Herbal Gardens serve as educational centers, where visitors learn about medicinal properties and conservation values through guided tours and workshops. Moreover, these initiatives support sustainable livelihoods by promoting cultivation and responsible use of medicinal plants, creating economic opportunities while safeguarding natural resources and promoting environmental stewardship.

What are the primary challenges tribal communities face in accessing traditional healthcare and preserving their

traditional knowledge of medicinal plants? How do you plan to address them?

Tribal communities face multifaceted challenges in accessing traditional healthcare and preserving medicinal plant knowledge. Limited healthcare infrastructure and sparse medical services in remote areas hinder the integration of traditional healing practices into mainstream healthcare. Additionally, the migration of younger generations to urban areas threatens the continuity of traditional medicinal knowledge within communities, impacting cultural heritage and well-being. Environmental degradation, including deforestation and climate change, further endangers medicinal plant resources vital to traditional medicine, risking biodiversity and ecological balance.

As CEO, addressing these challenges requires strategic interventions. Advocating for tailored healthcare solutions such as mobile clinics and telemedicine aims to integrate traditional healing into formal healthcare systems. Initiatives to document and digitise indigenous medicinal practices, alongside training in sustainable plant management, support the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge. Promoting sustainable cultivation practices and community-managed conservation areas ensures the long-term availability of medicinal resources. Advocating for policies that protect indigenous intellectual property rights and promote sustainable resource management is essential for holistic community empowerment and cultural preservation.

How do you intend to integrate organic farming concepts and practices into existing rural development programs?

Integrating organic farming into rural development programs is crucial for addressing food security, health, and environmental concerns effectively. Prioritising farmer training and capacity building through workshops on techniques like composting, crop

rotation, and natural pest management is essential for successful adoption of organic practices. Aligning these initiatives with existing agricultural schemes and subsidies amplifies their impact on livelihoods, food security, and sustainable agriculture.

Organic farming enhances food security by promoting diversified crop production and nutrient-rich crops, reducing dependence on monoculture and chemical inputs. It also improves health outcomes by minimising chemical residues in food, supported by awareness campaigns to stimulate demand for organically grown produce. Moreover, organic farming practices improve soil health and biodiversity conservation, fostering environmental sustainability. Developing local markets and supporting value addition through processing and branding will enhance farmers' income and create economic opportunities. Advocating for supportive policies and building partnerships across sectors will be crucial for scaling up organic farming sustainably.

How do you envision promoting horticulture as a catalyst for socio-economic development in rural areas?

My vision for promoting horticulture in rural areas aims to boost livelihoods, food security, and environmental sustainability. By encouraging rural households to adopt horticulture, we can diversify income sources and reduce reliance on volatile traditional agriculture. Promoting crop diversity will ensure a nutritious diet while supporting local food security. Emphasising sustainable practices like organic farming and agroforestry will enhance soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem resilience.

To ensure sustainability, I'll focus on training farmers, securing quality inputs, developing markets, fostering innovation, advocating supportive policies, and engaging communities. These efforts aim to create lasting socio-economic benefits and environmental stewardship in rural areas.

How do you intend to align his initiatives with the broader goals of the Chhattisgarh Tribal Local Health Traditions and Medicinal Plant Board?

Aligning policies and initiatives with the goals of the Chhattisgarh Tribal Local Health Traditions and Medicinal Plant Board involves integrating community development and environmental conservation into a cohesive strategy. My approach begins with a holistic framework that recognises the interconnectedness of community health, economic empowerment, and environmental sustainability.

By adopting this integrated approach, initiatives promote traditional health practices and medicinal plant conservation while enhancing overall community well-being and ecological resilience. Community-centric planning is foundational, ensuring policies address the specific needs and traditions of tribal communities. Engaging directly with tribal leaders and healers is crucial in co-designing culturally appropriate interventions that resonate with local contexts.

Efforts include documenting indigenous knowledge, establishing digital archives, and promoting sustainable practices like agroforestry and organic farming for biodiversity and soil health. Economic empowerment is facilitated through value addition, market linkages, and fair pricing.

Collaboration with research institutions supports evidence-based policies and protects community rights. Environmental education and awareness campaigns foster stewardship, integrated into education and outreach for sustainable living practices. Robust monitoring evaluates impacts on community development and conservation, ensuring adaptive interventions for long-term sustainability.

5. FR. JERRY THOMAS

"Through social entrepreneurship, we aim to empower young people to creatively address societal challenges while fostering innovation and sustainable solutions."



Fr Jerry Thomas is the director of Bosco in Jorhat (Assam) Institute affiliated with Dibrugarh University. The institute offers a Master's program in Social Work to prepare professionally sound and socially committed social workers in and around India's North East.

In an exclusive interview, Fr. Jerry Thomas shares with Marie Banu the social entrepreneurship initiatives of Bosco Institute.

How do you see your transition from traditional social work to social entrepreneurship, and what prompted this shift?

My journey into social work began with extensive involvement in youth-related issues within schools and colleges. After completing my MSW, my focus shifted towards understanding

the challenges faced by young people. Additionally, a close encounter with security forces during the height of the insurgency in Assam further fuelled my interest in social issues that pose challenges to youth, transforming them from intellectual concerns to personal challenges.

The journey from traditional social work to embracing social entrepreneurship has been transformative. We began introducing sessions on violence and conflict resolution and peace-building, recognising the need to address these issues proactively. My tenure at various youth development and social development offices deepened my understanding of the complexities young people face, particularly in regions marked by conflict like the Northeast. It became evident that merely advocating for peace was insufficient; we needed to create avenues for sustainable livelihoods. This realisation prompted our foray into entrepreneurship, initially with a romanticised vision but gradually evolving into a more structured approach.

We recognised that passion alone was not enough; sustainability was crucial. Thus, we integrated entrepreneurial elements into our programs, empowering young changemakers to not only address social issues but also sustain their initiatives financially. This journey has been characterised by experimentation and learning from failures, emphasising adaptability and resilience over rigid structures.

Pl tell us the impact Youth Involve initiative has had so far?

Our alumni have established approximately 17 social entrepreneur ventures, and they actively collaborate with each other, potentially involving over 20 alumni in various projects. Initially, our program was exclusive to our students, but we later expanded it to include others within certain limitations. Through this expansion, we have facilitated the initiation of around 31 entrepreneurial ventures under the umbrella of Youth Involve.

Our primary goal is to provide a platform where young dreams do not die young and/or need not fear failure. We believe in offering opportunities for individuals to pursue their dreams, even if they may not ultimately succeed. The journey itself helps them discover their true calling, even if some may decide to pursue other paths due to external pressures.

Currently, around 23 ventures remain active, while others have diversified into different endeavours. We are committed to building a robust network of these initiatives, although we are still deliberating on the optimal structure and approach. In our current cohort, comprising 13 ventures, we emphasise the importance of attendance at incubation and review meetings. These gatherings not only foster professional development but also cultivate personal connections through shared stories and experiences.

Managing an enterprise comes with its own set of challenges. How do you support your entrepreneurs in overcoming these challenges?

Throughout the two years of support we provide, we work closely with our participants to refine their focus and establish their vision and mission. Once their focus is clear, the path they take to achieve their goals can vary. Our assistance involves several components. We conduct regular review meetings, which are well attended by most participants. Additionally, we offer input sessions tailored to their specific needs.

Moreover, we provide coaching sessions that continue throughout their two-year journey, typically occurring every two to three weeks for about six months. During these sessions, which last for about an hour to an hour and a half, a coach accompanies them, addressing both professional and personal aspects. This holistic approach has proven beneficial for many.

Upon completion of the program, we facilitate connections with similar organisations and resource providers. We also keep them informed about potential grant opportunities. While not all ventures may succeed, participants develop valuable skills and may explore other training avenues. Occasionally, we offer financial support, but participants often find resources independently as well.

Another important aspect of our approach is delegating responsibilities to senior participants, including managing applications, screening, and interviews. This not only empowers them but also enriches their experience.

Could you share a success story from your program that highlights the transformative power of social entrepreneurship?

One notable individual is Jenpu from Dimapur, whose journey is quite inspiring. Despite not having completed higher secondary school due to difficult circumstances at home, including alcoholism, domestic violence and drug addiction in the family, Jenpu took it upon himself to make a change. He started an organisation with the aim of addressing these issues, facing scepticism from others who questioned his motives. However, he persisted, driven by a genuine desire to make a difference. His determination led him to apply for the Change Looms fellowship in Delhi, for which I conducted his interview.

During our conversation, I was deeply moved by his sincerity and commitment, and I told him, "I trust you", despite any doubts. This simple act of trust had a profound impact on Jenpu, boosting his confidence and resolve. Today, he is employing over 20 MSWs and has expanded his organisation's initiatives, collaborating with various stakeholders including government agencies, district administrations, and financial institutions. His efforts have garnered attention from the government, donors in India,

and on international platforms, like the BBC which interviewd him. He attended the recently concluded World Social Forum in Nepal. Despite facing personal challenges, Jenpu remains highly motivated, leading his team with enthusiasm and fearlessness. His story serves as a testament to the power of perseverance and the impact of trust and support in transforming lives.

What are your future plans for expanding your initiatives in social entrepreneurship?

We're planning to establish an alumni organisation and events that bring together young entrepreneurs in the region, thereby strengthening the ecosystem. Many young individuals are engaged in various activities but may not identify themselves as entrepreneurs. Our goal is to create a platform where they can converge, share ideas, and learn from each other. This is the driving force behind organising the upcoming confluence.

The idea is to expose young people to innovative ways of engaging with community issues and to harness the abundant resources of our region, rather than seeing all the wealth flow outward. We also aim to preserve their cultural heritage and traditional skills while leveraging technology to create this platform.

Evaluations and strategic planning are underway to chart the future path for our institution, which has evolved from being just a college. We have signed MoUs with nearby colleges, and our vision is to create a hub that fosters entrepreneurship through internships, volunteering, exposure, trainings, and word-of-mouth promotion.

Additionally, we have set up a makerspace in partnership with Turbit, a youth-led enterprise based in Shillong, where young minds can explore their creativity, learn to use tools, and innovate solutions for their communities. By channelling the media exposure that today's youth receive into focused entrepreneurial

thinking, we aim to instil confidence in them to solve problems creatively and make a positive impact in their surroundings. The concept revolves around offering opportunities for recreation, creation, and innovation, aligning with our vision for the future.

6. FR. LIJO THOMAS

"To inspire youth, we need to give them ownership and leadership opportunities."



Fr. Lijo Thomas is a visionary leader and community builder committed to empowering individuals through education and service. As the founder of the Let Us Dream initiative, he inspires changemakers worldwide by fostering collaboration and promoting impactful grassroots efforts. His work combines spiritual guidance with practical solutions, emphasising inclusivity and social responsibility.

Fr. Lijo's expertise in motivational theory led to the creation of the DREAMS framework, helping individuals achieve personal and community transformation. With a background in theology and a passion for nurturing youth leadership, he continues to inspire action and innovation, building a global network of compassionate doers.

In an exclusive interview Fr. Lijo Thomas shares with Marie Banu about Let Us Dream initiative.

What inspired you to initiate Let Us Dream?

Let Us Dream was inspired by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, whose vision of setting goals, working hard, and achieving dreams deeply resonated with me. Initially, as a shy and reserved person, I struggled with confidence. My journey took a transformative turn when I joined a college music band. Performing inspirational songs and speaking about aspirations combined purpose with fun. This phase was foundational in developing the project's core philosophy.

Over time, what began as music-based motivational sessions transitioned into more structured, theory-backed initiatives during my doctoral studies. With guidance from my professor, Dr. Pauline Leonard, we conceptualised the DREAMS framework: Desire, Readiness, Empowerment, Action, and Mastery. Each stage incorporates intrinsic and extrinsic motivational theories to help participants achieve lasting change.

The project matured into a community-driven effort, involving college students and volunteers to empower middle-school children. The evolution of this initiative has been a testament to the power of shared goals and collaboration.

How did the Let Us Dream conference come about, and why do you emphasise keeping it small and free?

The conference stemmed from the realisation that many individuals and organisations were engaged in impactful community service but lacked a platform to share their stories and connect with like-minded doers. The concept of the conference was simple: bring together people making a difference, not for accolades, but for mutual inspiration and learning.

We keep the conference small and free because intimate gatherings foster genuine connections. When we go bigger, it is expensive and complex. People cannot afford it. So I wanted it to be very, very small because small is very powerful.

Sitting in a circle, participants can engage more deeply than in a large auditorium setting. The lack of a fee ensures inclusivity, enabling anyone passionate about community service to participate without financial barriers. This format allows for meaningful interactions and creates a unique space where experiences and ideas are exchanged.

How did the conference expand from one location to multiple cities and countries? What challenges did you face?

The first Let Us Dream conference took place at Louisiana Tech University in 2017. Its success inspired interest from other institutions, leading to an invitation from Binghamton University in New York. However, logistical challenges such as travel and accommodation costs prompted a shift in the model. Instead of hosting the same conference in different locations, we encouraged local communities to create their versions, making each conference independent yet aligned with the shared vision.

The biggest challenge was ensuring consistency in purpose and quality across locations. To address this, we established core committees in each city, created detailed manuals, and aligned all events with common goals. This decentralised model empowered local communities while maintaining the integrity of the Let Us Dream ethos.

How many conferences have been conducted so far, and what is the scale of participation?

Since its inception, the Let Us Dream conference series has seen significant growth. In the U.S., each conference attracts around 150 participants on average, while in India, events draw 400–

500 attendees. Over six years, this translates to thousands of participants across multiple locations.

We deliberately rotate hosting duties among institutions to foster collaboration and mutual learning. Each institution brings its unique culture and practices to the event, enriching the experience for everyone involved. This dynamic approach not only broadens the reach but also nurtures best practices across institutions.

What role do universities play in the success of Let Us Dream conferences?

Universities are pivotal to the success of these conferences because they house the richest human resources—students and faculty. These institutions provide not only the venue but also a pool of enthusiastic and innovative individuals who drive the events.

By rotating hosting responsibilities, we encourage universities to collaborate, learn from each other, and implement best practices. This exchange fosters a culture of cooperation and continuous improvement, enriching both the conferences and the institutions involved.

How do you sustain volunteer interest and ensure long-term commitment?

Sustaining volunteer interest hinges on two key factors: the perceived impact of their work and the opportunities for networking and growth. When volunteers see tangible outcomes, such as participants sharing life-changing experiences, it fuels their passion and commitment. The conferences also provide a platform for volunteers to connect with like-minded individuals and organisations, broadening their horizons.

We make a conscious effort to give volunteers ownership of their roles, ensuring they feel valued and credited for their contributions. Testimonials, peer recognition, and opportunities to share their stories further reinforce their sense of purpose and belonging.

How can we inspire more youth to engage with initiatives like Let Us Dream?

To inspire youth, we need to give them ownership and leadership opportunities. Young people are more likely to commit when they feel their ideas and efforts are valued. Beyond events, continuous engagement through storytelling, peer-led initiatives, and showcasing real impact can keep their interest alive.

Social media plays a vital role in amplifying their contributions, allowing them to share their experiences and inspire others. Youth are naturally drawn to causes where they can see tangible results and feel part of a larger movement. By fostering a sense of community and shared purpose, we can motivate them to stay involved long-term.

7. MR. R. MANANATHAN

"Building a successful venture requires dedication, hard work, and a willingness to learn from failures."



Mr. R. Mananathan is an Innovator, Designer and R&D specialist in Industrial and automotive field. He has patented many products and been awarded as one among top 25 innovative companies in India by CII. He has also received an innovation award from Auto Mechanica, Germany for his development of a Multi Axle Wheel Aligner for Multi Axle Trucks.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. R. Mananathan shares with Marie Banu his journey as an entrepreneur.

Could you please share with us your journey as an entrepreneur?

My entrepreneurial journey is a blend of my upbringing in an agricultural family and my passion for technology and innovation. Born in a village Keezh Kumaramangalam, Cuddalore tauk,

and growing up and done my schooling in Kallakkudi (earlier Dalmiapuram), I was surrounded by the sights and sounds of agriculture, but my interests veered towards engineering. After completing my Diploma in Mechanical Engineering in Seshasayee Polytechnic, Tiruchirappalli and AMIE while working at Neyveli Lignite Corporation, Neyveli, I went to GASCO Abudhabi in 1980 where I gained valuable insights into high-speed rotating equipment like Gas Turbines.

Returning to India in 1987, I established my own company, Manatec, which marked the beginning of my entrepreneurial endeavour in developing a Shaft Alignment Computer for Rotating equipment in process industries. My journey eventually led me to diversify into the automotive sector, where I pioneered innovations in Wheel Alignment technology and other Garage Equipment.

What role did indigenous innovation play in your success?

My entrepreneurial journey aligned with the 'Make in India' initiative, although it wasn't initially a conscious decision. From the inception of Manatec, I was committed to leveraging indigenous resources and expertise to develop innovative solutions.

The mathematical formula I developed for alignment became the cornerstone for creating a product known as 'Shaft Alignment Computer'. This compact instrument proved valuable for various industries, particularly for process industries deploying rotating equipment. This product was developed in 1987 and was the first of its kind.

In 1990s many products like Wheel Alignment Computers, Wheel Balancing Machines, Pollution Checking Equipment for automobiles, AC recycling Equipment etc. were developed.

Also, our Project Division developed Projects for Automobile OEMs for Track Setting and Axle Alignment. Leading Companies like Ashok Leyland used our Projects. Over a period of time, our products and projects were exported and they are now available in more than 70 countries. All our products and projects are entirely indigenous, showcasing the capabilities of Indian R&D, engineering and manufacturing. By embracing indigenous innovation, we demonstrated the potential of Indian entrepreneurship to drive economic growth and self-reliance.

I have never actively sought collaboration or tie-ups throughout my entrepreneurial journey. While this approach may have posed challenges, it also led to a profound sense of achievement. Unlike many other companies, I relied solely on Indian resources for the development of my products. This commitment to indigenous innovation made every creation a true 'Make in India' product, crafted through extensive research and development using local resources.

Although there were certain items, such as chips, lithium cells, etc. that India hadn't yet begun manufacturing, I had to import these essential components. Apart from these exceptions, I ensured that every aspect of my products was sourced from Indian companies.

Can you elaborate on the societal and economic impact of your entrepreneurial endeavours?

My entrepreneurial endeavours have had a significant societal and economic impact, particularly in terms of establishing Wheel Alignment centres across the country. This eventually resulted in employment generation.

Our Pollution Checking equipment contributed for measuring the pollution of vehicles on the road considering the fact that "What cannot be measured cannot be controlled". This was a significant contribution towards checking pollution levels.

Even the Wheel Alignment computers and Wheel balancing machines reduced tyre wear, thus, reducing the emission of particulate matters into the atmosphere. Never the less the Retro fitment KIT developed by us to convert Petrol / Diesel Auto Rickshaws into electric can go a long way in reducing carbon footprint.

Over time, I began to take pride in my ability to succeed without relying on external collaboration or imported technology. I remained steadfast in my dedication in leveraging indigenous resources and expertise. This unwavering commitment to self-reliance has been a defining feature of my entrepreneurial journey.

How do you envision entrepreneurship contributing to rural development and empowerment?

Today, entrepreneurship holds immense potential for rural development and empowerment, particularly in India's vast agricultural landscape. By harnessing the inherent strengths of rural communities and leveraging technology and innovation, entrepreneurship can create opportunities for economic growth and self-reliance.

In rural areas, where agriculture is the predominant occupation, entrepreneurship can diversify livelihood options and enhance income generation. Moreover, by fostering innovation and skill development, entrepreneurship can empower rural youth and women, unlocking their potential to drive societal change and economic progress.

What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly those looking to embark on a journey rooted in innovation and entrepreneurship?

In contemporary times, it's not uncommon to witness individuals diving into entrepreneurship without adequate planning and this

is why 90% start ups fail. Whether fuelled by easy loans or family finances, many embark on this journey without a clear roadmap, often resulting in unforeseen challenges.Hence, it becomes imperative to emphasise the significance of meticulous market study and planning as the cornerstone for any successful entrepreneurial endeavour.

Understanding the product, the machinery required for its production, the optimal timing for market entry, the manufacturing process to be followed, and the suitable location for operations are all vital considerations in crafting a robust business plan.

My advice is to stay true to your passion and vision. Jobs without a passion lack great success. Innovation is the key to success in entrepreneurship, and it's essential to embrace creativity and originality in every endeavour.

Additionally, I would emphasise the importance of resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges and setbacks. Building a successful venture requires dedication, hard work, and a willingness to learn from failures.

There is nothing more valuable than choosing a knowledgeable partner. This principle underscores the significance of surrounding oneself with individuals who possess the requisite knowledge and experience in the chosen field. Whether it's through personal expertise or the partnership with someone who brings complementary skills to the table, having a knowledgeable ally can significantly enhance the prospects of success in business.

Moreover, the wisdom extends beyond partnership to the selection of right employees. Just as it is essential to choose a knowledgeable partner, it is equally crucial to hire employees who possess the requisite expertise and skills. By assembling a team of knowledgeable individuals, entrepreneurs can leverage their collective strengths to drive business growth and success.

8. DR. MUYEED AHMED S

"Recognizing Vetiver's deep roots in Indian agriculture—both figuratively and literally—I saw an opportunity to revitalize its cultivation in India."



Dr. Muyeed Ahmed S is the Founder of Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances LLP, Bangalore a start-up established in 2019 that specializes in R&D for fragrances and flavors. With a background in biotechnology, forestry, and project management, Muyeed has extensive experience in plant tissue culture, genetic improvement, and sandalwood cultivation. Under his leadership, the company has developed innovative low-temperature extraction technologies, filed patents, and collaborated with government bodies like DBT, BIRAC, as well as international organizations like United Nations and IFAD. Biotherm has gained recognition by winning NBEC 2022, G20 DIA Innovation program at national competitions and selected as 75 innovations by BIRAC during 75 years of Independence program held at Biotech Startup Expo 2022 and positioning

itself as a rising player in the global fragrance market. Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances LLP, Bangalore has been recognized as top 10 fragrance and flavour companies of year 2023 by Industry Outlook Magazine.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Muyeed shares with Marie Banu his interest in the fragrance and flavour sectors.

Pl tell us about your interest in the fragrance sector. What was the inspiration behind it?

My journey towards the fragrance industry began during my PhD at the Institute of Wood Science and Technology (IWST), which was originally a sandalwood research center established during the Mysore Wodeyars times. I joined a sandalwood conservation project around the time when the government relaxed restrictions, allowing farmers to cultivate sandalwood on their own land. This experience with sandalwood conservation and cultivation, combined with my work promoting these activities among farmers, sparked my interest in the fragrance industry, particularly in the extraction of oils.

Since starting in 2019, what have been some significant milestones for Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances LLP?

In the fragrance industry, I quickly realized that there was a lack of advanced technology and a shortage of raw materials. Initially, it seemed like it would be easy to establish a strong presence in the industry, but I soon encountered challenges with the existing steam-based extraction technology, which often leads to the degradation of essential oils. Leveraging my biotechnology background, I developed a new protocol for low-temperature extraction, which preserves the integrity of the oils. This innovation was supported by a significant project from the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, and also by KITS, Government of Karnataka marked a major milestone

for us. Additionally, we've worked on securing a continuous supply of raw materials by collaborating directly with farmers, offering them guaranteed buyback policies, technical support, and resources like solar water pump sets.

How have collaborations with government and international organizations influenced your growth and research?

Our work on new extraction technology led to filing a patent, particularly for a method that not only enhances the extraction process but also allows us to obtain secondary products with novel applications in the fragrance and cosmetic industries. These achievements have been supported and validated by top government research institutes, adding credibility to our work. We've also received backing from international organizations, including the IFAD from United Nations through Access Development Services, Delhi to further our collaborations with farmers. These partnerships have significantly contributed to our growth and the development of innovative products.

Can you tell us about the most innovative projects you've worked on, particularly in the fragrance and flavor sectors?

One of the most ground-breaking projects I've worked on has been in the development of a low-temperature extraction technology for essential oils, particularly in the fragrance sector. Traditional steam-based extraction methods, while widely used, have significant drawbacks, especially when dealing with heat-sensitive compounds. Essential oils, known for their delicate molecular structure, often degrade under high temperatures, losing their potency and fragrance. This issue prompted me to leverage my background in biotechnology, where we frequently deal with similarly sensitive biological materials like proteins and vaccines.

I adapted biotechnological techniques, typically used for handling temperature-sensitive substances, to develop a protocol

that enables the extraction of essential oils at much lower temperatures. This method preserves the oils' molecular integrity, resulting in a higher quality product with a richer, more authentic aroma profile. This innovation not only enhanced the extraction process but also opened the door to extracting secondary products that have novel applications in both the fragrance and cosmetic industries.

Another key project has been our work with Vetiver oil, a crucial base note in many high-end fragrances. Vetiver, traditionally grown in India, has seen its production shift globally, particularly to Haiti, due to various socio-political and economic factors. However, recognizing Vetiver's deep roots in Indian agriculture—both figuratively and literally—I saw an opportunity to revitalize its cultivation in India. We've worked closely with farmers, especially in regions with sandy, less fertile soils near the sea shores where Vetiver thrives, and to re-establish this crop as a major player in the global fragrance market. This not only converts the un-utilize land into use, but also provides livelihood for the marginal farmers and women folks from the fishermen community.

Through our initiatives, we've implemented a buyback policy with farmers, ensuring them a stable and sustainable income and motivating them to focus on quality cultivation. We've also helped them with replacing diesel based water pumping system with sustainable solar water pumps, to reduce their operational cost, supported them with fertilizers, and technical guidance, making the cultivation process more efficient, economical and sustainable. This not only secures a reliable supply chain for us but also empowers the farmers, creating a more resilient and integrated value chain.

In addition to these, our work has expanded into exploring the medicinal properties of essential oils, particularly Vetiver. There is growing scientific evidence that Vetiver oil can have therapeutic

effects, such as reducing stress and aiding in the treatment of conditions like ADHD and epilepsy. We are currently exploring these applications in collaboration with government institutes, with the aim of integrating these oils into broader health and wellness sectors.

How do you envision the future of the fragrance industry, and what strategies do you have in place to meet the sector's needs?

The fragrance industry, though small, is crucially supported by the agricultural sector. One major gap I've identified is the disconnection between farmers and the industry. There's a significant opportunity for entrepreneurs to bridge this gap by connecting farmers with the industry and addressing both technical and financial needs. Additionally, the medicinal and pharmaceutical applications of essential oils present a promising area for future exploration. For instance, many essential oil has shown potential as an alternative to antibiotics, which could open new avenues for research and development in the pharmaceutical sector.

How do you balance innovation and sustainability in light of global trends?

In today's rapidly changing world, embracing technology is essential for survival and success. We see advancements in the cannabis industry, where molecular-level research is leading to new formulations. Similarly, in the fragrance industry, technologies like in silico modeling allow us to predict and optimize molecular interactions before even beginning the physical process. This approach not only fosters innovation but also ensures sustainability. Large companies are already investing in these areas, and in the future, we can expect customized fragrances and other products tailored to individual preferences and needs.

Any final thoughts on encouraging more entrepreneurs to enter the fragrance sector?

The fragrance industry, while small, offers vast opportunities for innovation, particularly in connecting farmers with the market. Entrepreneurs can play a key role in bridging this gap, supporting both the industry and the agricultural sector. Moreover, the pharmaceutical applications of essential oils are an exciting frontier that requires further research but holds great potential. By focusing on these areas, entrepreneurs can contribute to the industry's growth while promoting sustainability and innovation.

9. MR. NAYAN

"Automating organic farming can make a huge difference for farmers."



Nayan is an entrepreneur focused on sustainable agricultural solutions. As part of the Stanford University's Seeds program, he is working on a solution that enables organic farmers to efficiently pass Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation systems, enhancing soil enrichment. His innovative approach aims to support organic farming by improving nutrient delivery to crops, thereby promoting healthier, more productive farms. With a passion for sustainability and a keen understanding of agricultural practices, Nayan is committed to advancing eco-friendly farming solutions that benefit both farmers and the environment.

In an exclusive interview, Nayan shares with Marie Banu his passion for organic farming.

Can you explain what inspired you to create a system that passes Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation?

The inspiration for this system came from a combination of practical needs and personal experience. My partners and I did not set out with a grand plan to innovate in agriculture. In fact, it all started when one of my partners, who was experimenting with organic farming, faced challenges applying Jeevamrutham manually. For those unfamiliar, Jeevamrutham is a nutrient-rich organic slurry made from cow dung, urine, jaggery, and water, used as a natural fertilizer. It's highly effective but labour-intensive to apply.

My partner noticed that the manual process of spreading Jeevamrutham was cumbersome, time-consuming, and sometimes inconsistent. Farmers would often struggle with how to apply it uniformly across large fields. The idea sparked from a simple question: "Can we automate this?" He realized that if the organic slurry could be passed through the existing drip irrigation systems that many farmers already had, it would save labour, time, and ensure more even application. This would not only reduce the farmer's workload but also enhance the efficiency of Jeevamrutham application, providing consistent nourishment to crops.

This practical need evolved into a prototype that was entered into a national innovation competition, where it received attention and encouragement. Although we didn't win the competition, the feedback and recognition fuelled our motivation to continue developing the system. Over time, as we worked on refining the product, it became clear that this idea had the potential to impact a large number of organic farmers by providing an easier, more effective way to enrich their soil naturally.

What role has mentorship, including your experience with StanFord University's Seeds program, played in your journey?

Mentorship has been instrumental in my journey, particularly

because of the unique challenges we've faced in scaling this agricultural innovation. When we started, we had a vision and a product, but we lacked the strategic insight and broader business acumen needed to take the venture to the next level. That's where mentorship, particularly through Stanford University's Seeds program, made a significant difference.

While my engagement with the program is recent, it has already had a profound impact. My mentor, Mr. P.N. Subramanian, has a wealth of knowledge and experience that he brings from other sectors. This has helped me look at our business in new ways and think beyond the day-to-day challenges. For example, early on, our focus was almost entirely on product development and R&D. We didn't give enough thought to aspects like scaling, distribution, and market penetration. My mentor has helped shift my perspective to consider these larger business strategies. Had I received this mentorship earlier, I believe we could have avoided some of the mistakes or slowdowns we experienced along the way.

Mentorship gives you a broader perspective, helping you make more informed decisions by understanding the ripple effects of each move. The Seeds program, specifically, is designed for entrepreneurs like us, who have a working product but need guidance to navigate the complexities of scaling and expanding. I've learned to approach problems more holistically and focus on building a sustainable business model, rather than just a product.

How does using Jeevamrutham through a drip system benefit soil health and crop yield compared to traditional methods?

The use of Jeevamrutham through a drip system offers several advantages over traditional methods, both in terms of soil health and crop yield. Traditionally, Jeevamrutham and other organic slurries are applied manually, which can be inefficient and inconsistent. This process also requires a significant amount of

labour, and it's difficult to ensure that the organic nutrients are spread evenly across large fields.

By automating the process through a drip irrigation system, farmers can apply Jeevamrutham in a much more controlled and consistent manner. Drip systems allow for a precise and continuous supply of nutrients directly to the root zone of the plants, ensuring that the soil receives the right amount of nourishment at regular intervals.

In terms of soil health, organic inputs like Jeevamrutham improve the structure and fertility of the soil over time. The regular application of Jeevamrutham helps to build up organic matter in the soil, which improves water retention and microbial activity. Healthier soil leads to stronger plant growth and better resilience to pests and diseases. Additionally, because this system makes it easier to apply organic nutrients consistently, farmers can reduce their reliance on expensive chemical fertilizers, which are known to degrade soil health over time.

The benefits to crop yield are also significant. When plants receive a steady supply of nutrients in an efficient manner, their growth is more vigorous, and yields tend to be higher. Farmers who have adopted this system report improved crop quality and quantity, as well as a reduction in overall input costs, making it a win-win solution.

What sets your product apart from other soil enrichment and organic farming solutions available in the market?

Our product is unique because it addresses a very specific problem: the labour-intensive nature of applying organic fertilizers like Jeevamrutham. While there are many products on the market that focus on soil enrichment, few have tackled the issue of automating the application process. Our solution is specifically designed to integrate with existing drip irrigation

systems, which many farmers already use for watering their crops. This makes it easier for farmers to adopt without requiring them to invest in an entirely new infrastructure.

Moreover, our system allows for a more hands-free approach to organic farming. In a sector where manual labour is often one of the biggest constraints, especially for small and medium-scale farmers, automating this process can make a huge difference. Unlike other products that focus solely on the input (i.e., the fertilizer itself), our innovation focuses on the process—how those inputs are delivered to the crops. This makes our product not only unique but also complementary to other organic farming practices.

How have organic farmers responded to your solution so far, and what feedback have you received?

The response from organic farmers has been generally positive, though the journey to widespread acceptance hasn't been without challenges. When we first introduced the concept, many farmers were sceptical. Using liquid slurries like Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation was a novel idea, and it wasn't something they had encountered before. Early on, we had to do a lot of convincing and provide free samples to get farmers to try the system. However, as early adopters began to see the benefits, word spread, and more farmers became interested.. Farmers have noted that they no longer need to spend hours applying Jeevamrutham manually, and the consistency of the application has led to better crop results.

What are your plans for scaling your solution, and how do you see it expanding across different regions and farming practices?

Scaling is a key focus for us moving forward. India's agricultural landscape is incredibly diverse, with different regions facing unique challenges. For example, farmers in arid regions like

Gujarat have very different needs compared to those in high-rainfall areas in the East. To address this, we're developing multiple variants of our product to suit different geographies and crop types. We're also experimenting with more flexible designs that can be adapted to a wider range of farming practices. Currently, our system requires a certain amount of water pressure and investment in infrastructure, which can be a barrier for smaller farms. By developing more cost-effective, flexible models, we hope to make the system accessible to a broader audience.

In terms of distribution, we're exploring partnerships with various government programs and local agricultural cooperatives to reach more farmers. We're also looking at ways to leverage technology, such as e-commerce platforms, to improve our go-to-market strategy. Right now, we've deployed our system in around 10,000 sites across India, but that's just the beginning. Our goal is to reach hundreds of thousands of farmers in the next few years, helping them transition to more sustainable and cost-effective farming practices.

10. MR.SARAVANAN

"I believe in fostering ideological bonds with farmers beyond just offering premium prices for their produce."



Saravanan is a multifaceted individual dedicated to driving positive change in his community and beyond. With a background in Chemical Engineering from Vellore Institute of Technology, Saravanan's journey is characterized by a relentless pursuit of social justice and sustainable development.

Originally hailing from Cheyyar in Thiruvannamalai district, Saravanan's early experiences and education laid the foundation for his future endeavors. Despite facing setbacks in his attempts at civil services exams, Saravanan's unwavering commitment to public service remained steadfast. During his time as a student reporter for Vikatan, Ananda Vikatan group, he honed his skills in communication and advocacy, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

Saravanan's passion for societal change led him to pursue a

one-year PG Diploma in Government at Pune, where he gained valuable insights into governance and policy. His subsequent internships with renowned organizations such as Tarun Bharat Sangh headed by Mr. Rajendra Singh, Water Man of India provided him with firsthand experience in grassroots activism and community development.

Later, he started working with Dr. Suresh, renowned human rights activist of PUCL and senior lawyer of Madras High Court. He focused on advocating for water rights, food rights, and conducting policy research. His work with People's Union for Civil Liberties initially as a volunteer and later as an office bearer underscores his dedication to addressing systemic injustices and promoting equitable access to resources. Saravanan also holds a PG Diploma in Facilitating Governance Reforms (Distance Learning) from TISS. He is the coordinator of Nammazhvar Iyarkai Sirudhaniya Uzhavar Urpathiyalar Kuzhu, a women farmers' collective based out of Veppur Block, Perambalur District.

In an exclusive interview, Saravanan shares with Marie Banu his efforts to address environment sustainability.

What led you to social activism or how was the transition?

My journey into social activism was influenced by my admiration for individuals like Dr. Irai Anbu IAS, a collector whose work I observed during my 11th standard. I was inspired to utilize my skills and knowledge for the common good, which led me to pursue civil services preparation. Additionally, during the final year of my UG year, I co-founded a voluntary organisation named Bharati Ilaignar Sangam (Bharathi Youth Association), where we engaged in various social activities like reclaiming premises for community use, organising blood donation campaigns, and offering counselling to students. This experience solidified my desire to work with people and contribute to societal welfare.

The transition into social activism was gradual yet purposeful. Over time, I started spending more time on issues related to farming and agriculture, driven by a passion for sustainability and addressing larger societal challenges. This transition was fuelled by my belief in the power of collective action and the importance of working towards positive change at the grassroots level.

How did your interest in environmental sustainability develop, and who were your influences in this area?

My interest in environmental sustainability was greatly shaped by individuals like Mr. Rajendra Singh, known for his work in community-based water conservation methods. His efforts, along with inspiring personalities like Mr. Nammazhwar in Tamil Nadu, sparked a realization of the critical need for sustainable practices. These experiences underscored the urgency of adopting accessible technologies and measures to preserve our environment.

Additionally, my work with Barefoot Academy of Governance and exposure to grassroots initiatives like Sittilingi Organic Farmers Association (SOFA) further reinforced the importance of sustainability as the only viable path forward for our planet.

Could you elaborate on your efforts to address environmental sustainability, particularly through initiatives like the Veppur Millet Mission ?

The Veppur Millet initiative stemmed from a deep-seated commitment to address the environmental and socio-economic challenges prevalent in agricultural practices, particularly in regions like the Veppur block, Perambalur District. Here, the predominant farming methods heavily relied on chemical-intensive crops like BT cotton and industrial maize, leading to environmental degradation and adverse health effects. Witnessing

the dire consequences, including instances of pesticide poisoning and farmer deaths, highlighted the urgency to transition towards sustainable agricultural practices.

In 2015, as part of Barefoot Academy's work, we embarked on the VeppurMillet Mission, aiming to revive millet cultivation as a sustainable alternative. However, this transition faced numerous challenges, especially in garnering farmer participation and changing ingrained agricultural practices. Despite initial setbacks, we persevered, leveraging community engagement strategies such as organising conferences, providing training programs, and documenting farming processes meticulously.

One of the primary challenges we encountered was marketing the millet produce, as we lacked established contacts within the market. However, through strategic collaborations and persistence, we managed to secure buyers like…Earth 360 Eco Ventures Pvt. Ltd.,who were willing to procure millets at fair prices, ensuring a sustainable income for the farmers involved.

Over the years, our efforts bore fruit, with increasing demand for organic millets and a growing network of supportive buyers, facilitating the transition towards sustainable agricultural practices and environmental stewardship.

How do you envision advocating for sustainable development with your human rights background in PUCL?

My engagement with PUCL provides a unique platform to intersect with issues of sustainable development, particularly in rural communities where agriculture plays a pivotal role.

Drawing from my experience, I believe in fostering ideological bonds with farmers beyond just offering premium prices for their produce. While financial incentives are important, they must be accompanied by trust-building initiatives, community mobilization, and ongoing dialogue to ensure long-term

engagement and sustainable practices. PUCL's advocacy efforts helped me to go beyond legal frameworks to encompass grassroots community development, addressing issues of environmental sustainability and socioeconomic empowerment.

Additionally, my involvement in initiatives, which mobilized farmers for the renovation of tank irrigation systems, highlights the importance of community participation and political understanding in effecting meaningful change. By engaging farmers in collective action, advocating for policy reforms, and facilitating capacity-building initiatives, we can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable agriculture practices and holistic development at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, our advocacy can extend beyond agriculture to encompass broader issues of environmental justice, advocating for policies that prioritize sustainability, equitable resource distribution, and protection of marginalized communities. By harnessing the expertise in human rights advocacy and leveraging my technical background, we can work towards a more sustainable and just future for all.

What are your thoughts on integrating technology into your work, especially in the field of agriculture?

Technology integration in my work, whether it's in agriculture or other areas, is certainly on the horizon. As a member of Thannatchi, an organisation dedicated to strengthening local democracies, I'm already witnessing the transformative potential of technology in empowering communities and enhancing governance processes. In the context of agriculture, technology can play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable farming practices, optimizing resource management, and improving market access for farmers.

What are your future plans?

Looking ahead, I see myself continuing to work at the intersection of local democracy and sustainable development. Strengthening local governance processes and systems and promoting community participation will remain central to my efforts, whether it's through leveraging technology for citizen engagement or advocating for policy reforms to enhance accountability and transparency.

Additionally, my commitment to human rights will continue to inform my work, ensuring that marginalized communities are empowered and their voices are heard in decision-making processes. As we navigate the complexities of the future, I am excited to explore innovative solutions and collaborate with like-minded individuals and organizations to create positive change at the grassroots level.

11.MR.G. SELVARAJ

"My dream is to ensure water conservation, promote bio-diversity and agricultural development in my panchayat."



Mr.G. Selvaraj shares with Marie Banu his initiatives as the Panchayat President aimed at uplifting and empowering his community Mr. G. Selvaraj is the Panchayat President of Kulur, Erode District. He has launched various green initiatives and has been recognised by the State Government with several awards.

In an exclusive interview, Mr.G. Selvaraj shares with Marie Banu his initiatives as the Panchayat President of Kulur, aimed at uplifting and empowering his community.

Tell us about yourself and your family.

I live with My wife Mrs. Satya and my children Isai Adani and Ilamvel Adiyan in Govindan Naicken Palayam. I studied at a Primary School in Modakkurichi and the Government Higher Secondary School until my Plus 2. Later, I pursued my BA in English literature at Chiikkaiah Naicker College, Erode.

After completing my degree, I tried my hand at various businesses. I first looked into the hotel industry in Modakkurichi, where I stayed in a hotel for some time. I later started a cone factory business related to the spinning mills.

My niece Ms. SS Nandashri works in the rocket launch sector in Sriharikota. My younger brother, after completing his MBA, decided to take up farming and has started a paper mill. He is now fully involved in agriculture.

What motivated you to get involved in the panchayat elections?

It was a combination of my personal interests and the need to contribute to my community. My family has always been supportive of my endeavours. My father's side was more focused on farming, but I always felt a responsibility towards the village. During an election for local leadership, my neighbours gathered and asked me to stand for the panchayat election. I hesitated at first, but I ultimately decided to contest. There were seven candidates in total, and I was fortunate enough to win the election. Once elected, my first initiative was to plant 500 trees in the village as a part of our environmental efforts.

I started my term on January 6, 2020, and the next elections are scheduled for December 2024. I was recognised by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister for Best Panchayat and received the "Green and Clean Village award". I also received appreciation from Hon'ble Governor on 26.9.23. We are preparing for the next round of leadership, and I hope to continue the work we've started.

How has your family supported your decision to enter politics and lead the panchayat?

My family had mixed feelings initially. While my father was hesitant about my decision to run for the panchayat, fearing it would disrupt our family life, my mother was very supportive.

After I won the election, I made sure to show my family the positive impact of my leadership on the village. Over time, they have come to understand the significance of my role, and now they fully support my efforts.

What are some of the key initiatives you have undertaken as the Panchayat President?

One of the first things I did was to focus on environmental sustainability. I spearheaded a tree-planting campaign in the village and we have planted over 8,000 trees so far. We targeted empty spaces for planting trees, and the local people have actively participated in this effort. It has transformed the landscape of our panchayat, which is now greener and cooler. Additionally, we identified the need for water conservation and have worked to build three new ponds to store water for irrigation. The ponds also help store wastewater from the lower channel of Bhavani river, which is then used to recharge nearby open wells and borewells. We've also built several check dams, which have been very beneficial for irrigation.

How effective is the plastic-free initiative in your panchayat?

We have worked hard to reduce plastic usage in the village. Initially, we distributed waste segregation boxes to every household to ensure that plastic waste is properly sorted. We also launched awareness campaigns to educate people on the harmful impact of plastic, and we made sure no plastic was used in public places or thrown into water bodies. We are gradually seeing a reduction in plastic use, and the community is becoming more conscious of its environmental responsibilities.

How do you manage the waste disposal system and the control of pests in your panchayat?

Managing waste and controlling pests is an ongoing challenge, but we've made significant strides. We took action against

pesticide misuse and have been actively promoting organic farming techniques. Over the past three years, our efforts have led to a reduction in the use of chemical pesticides. In fact, our village is now known for being pesticide-free. This shift has not only helped the environment but has also resulted in better agricultural yields. I believe our initiative can serve as a model for other villages.

What support do you receive from the district collector?

The district collector has been incredibly supportive of our initiatives. The previous collector, Mr. Krishnan Unni IAS and Mr. Madhusudhan IAS, was especially helpful in fostering the growth of rural areas. Thanks to the support from the district, we've been able to implement our ideas more effectively, such as creating better roads that connect villages to main roads in just a few minutes, reducing travel time significantly. Current district officials, including Mr. Rajagopal Sunkara IAS, continue to offer his support as well, which helps us push forward with our development plans.

As a panchayat leader, have you faced any challenges, particularly related to corruption or resistance?

Thankfully, I have not encountered major issues with corruption or resistance. The community and local leaders have been very supportive of my work. However, there have been some challenges in terms of support from certain sectors or individuals. For instance, there was an instance where people were dumping garbage in a vacant plot of land. We took quick action and filled the site with sand to prevent further misuse. Some of these issues, while small, do require constant vigilance.

What are the plans for your panchayat in the near future?

We have many ongoing projects. I am especially focused on environmental sustainability. We are working on expanding

the tree plantation program and creating more green spaces. Additionally, we plan to improve education in the village. We are offering special courses to students and encouraging them to pursue higher education. We are also exploring the possibility of setting up a soap production business and solar power plants to provide sustainable livelihoods for the community. We want to create an environment where people don't feel the need to leave the village to earn a living.

My dream is to ensure water conservation, promote bio-diversity and agricultural development in my panchayat. We are actively looking for funds to desilt ponds and promote tourism. I also plan to continue promoting the Vettiver method, which involves sustainable farming practices without harming the environment. We are already seeing positive results, and I am hopeful that this will bring about a lasting change.

Can you elaborate on how you plan to promote vetiver farming in your panchayat?

The use of vetiver grass, is one of the key sustainable practices we are promoting in our panchayat. Vetiver grass has numerous benefits, especially for soil conservation, water retention, and erosion control. It's an indigenous plant that requires minimal water and can thrive in poor soil conditions, which makes it perfect for our region. We are focusing on educating farmers about the benefits of vetiver, especially its ability to retain moisture in the soil and improve its fertility.

We have already planted vetiver along several roadsides and on the edges of our farms, and we've started to see significant improvements in soil quality and water conservation. Our plan is to expand this initiative by offering training programs for farmers, particularly on how to harvest and use vetiver for commercial purposes, such as making aromatic products or using the grass for building materials.

Additionally, we are working with agricultural universities and NGOs to provide more technical support, as well as financial incentives, for farmers who adopt vetiver farming. Our ultimate goal is to make vetiver farming a viable and profitable option for farmers in the panchayat, creating a model for others in the district to follow. We're also hoping to integrate it into our environmental sustainability programs to address both water conservation and soil health.

12. MR. SHYAM GOENKA

"Engaging communities in Vetiver cultivation can ensure local participation and ownership."



Mr. Shyam Goenka is a pioneering figure in Nepal's media landscape, known for his instrumental role in establishing Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post in 1993. His vision was driven by a commitment to institutionalize democratic values and social justice following the promulgation of Nepal's 1990 Constitution. Despite widespread skepticism about the viability of a private media house, Mr. Goenka's relentless dedication and belief in the transformative power of independent media led to unprecedented success. Kantipur, particularly, achieved historical prominence, becoming a leading daily with unparalleled readership. Mr. Goenka's impact extends beyond media; his efforts have created thousands of organised sector jobs and elevated Nepal's media sector

In an exclusive interview, Mr. Shyam Goenka shares with Marie Banu his efforts to promote vetiver through media.

What inspired you to start Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post despite the scepticism surrounding the viability of a private media house in Nepal?

The inspiration to start Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post in 1993 stemmed from Nepal's political and social transformation, marked by the 1990 Constitution which enshrined free press and freedom of expression. We, a team of 200 passionate individuals, were committed to institutionalizing democracy, social justice, civil liberties, human rights, rule of law, and good governance. Despite scepticism about the viability of a private media house in Nepal, we believed that a robust, independent media was crucial for the country's democratic and social development.

Our vision extended beyond reporting news; we aimed to build a strong foundation for social infrastructure, providing quality education, healthcare, shelter, livelihoods, and fostering sustainable, inclusive development. The initial journey was challenging, with limited resources and widespread doubt about our success. However, our dedication and belief in the cause drove us forward.

Kantipur, especially its vernacular version, defied naysayers, becoming an unofficial 'Ombudsman' and achieving unparalleled success with over 50 percent of the national market share. The success of Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post highlights the power of collective effort, solidarity, and commitment. Today, many of our colleagues lead the media spectrum in Nepal, bringing pride to the nation globally.

Can you elaborate on the significance of Vetiver grass in purifying contaminated water and its broader environmental benefits?

Vetiver grass (Chrysopogon zizanioides) is a remarkable plant known for its extensive root system and robust growth, making

it highly effective in environmental management and ecological restoration. Its significance in purifying contaminated water lies in its ability to absorb and break down pollutants, heavy metals, and toxins through its roots. This phytoremediation process helps clean water bodies and restore their ecological balance.

Vetiver grass offers broader environmental benefits beyond water purification. It plays a crucial role in soil erosion control and land stabilization. The dense root network of Vetiver can penetrate up to three meters deep, binding the soil and preventing erosion. This makes it an ideal solution for rehabilitating degraded lands, protecting riverbanks, and stabilizing slopes prone to landslides. Moreover, Vetiver grass enhances soil fertility by improving soil structure and increasing organic matter content. Its ability to thrive in harsh conditions, including drought and poor soil quality, makes it a resilient and sustainable option for land reclamation and agricultural productivity.

By promoting biodiversity and providing habitat for various organisms, Vetiver contributes to ecological balance and resilience. The broader environmental benefits of Vetiver grass underscore its potential as a natural solution for addressing some of the most pressing environmental challenges. Its ability to purify water, control soil erosion, and restore degraded ecosystems makes it a valuable asset in sustainable development and environmental conservation efforts.

How can the economic benefits of Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management be effectively communicated to farmers and local communities?

Effectively communicating the economic benefits of Vetiver to farmers and local communities requires a multi-faceted approach that includes practical demonstrations, education, and collaboration. Conducting on-ground demonstrations and training programs is essential to showcase the practical applications of

Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management. These programs can highlight the economic benefits such as increased crop yields, improved soil fertility, and reduced disaster risks.

Farmers can witness firsthand the positive impact of Vetiver on their land and livelihood. Sharing success stories and case studies through local media, community meetings, and agricultural extension services can build trust and awareness. By highlighting the experiences of fellow farmers who have benefited from using Vetiver, communities can better understand its economic advantages. Collaborating with local agricultural cooperatives and organizations can enhance outreach and support for Vetiver adoption. These cooperatives can act as intermediaries, providing information, resources, and technical assistance to farmers.

Utilizing digital platforms and mobile applications can facilitate information dissemination and real-time support for farmers. These platforms can offer instructional videos, best practices, and a forum for farmers to share their experiences and seek advice. Governments and local authorities can provide incentives and policy support to encourage the adoption of Vetiver. Subsidies, grants, and technical assistance can make it more accessible and appealing to farmers.

By employing these strategies, the economic benefits of Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management can be effectively communicated, leading to broader adoption and improved livelihoods for farmers and local communities.

What role do you envision for technological advancements in enhancing the efficiency and adoption of natural solutions like Vetiver?

Technological advancements are crucial in enhancing the efficiency and adoption of natural solutions like Vetiver. Remote sensing and GIS mapping can identify suitable areas for Vetiver

implementation and monitor its environmental impact, providing precise data on soil conditions, erosion patterns, and vegetation cover for targeted interventions. Data analytics can optimize Vetiver usage by analyzing environmental data and predicting outcomes, guiding decision-making and improving resource allocation. Mobile applications can facilitate knowledge sharing, training, and real-time support for farmers and communities adopting Vetiver by offering instructional videos, best practices, and platforms for experience sharing and advice.

IoT devices can monitor environmental conditions such as soil moisture, temperature, and nutrient levels, informing the management and maintenance of Vetiver plantations for optimal growth. Drones can conduct aerial surveys, plant Vetiver on difficult terrains, and monitor growth and health, saving time and labour. Online platforms and e-learning modules can provide comprehensive training and resources, including courses, webinars, and research repositories. These technological advancements enhance the efficiency and adoption of Vetiver by providing innovative tools for monitoring, managing, and optimizing its use, leading to more effective and scalable environmental conservation efforts.

How do you think media can play a role in raising awareness about sustainable practices like the use of Vetiver for soil erosion and water protection?

Media has a pivotal role in raising awareness about sustainable practices like the use of Vetiver for soil erosion and water protection. Investigative journalism can uncover the environmental challenges and highlight the success stories of Vetiver implementation. In-depth reports and documentaries can provide valuable insights and raise public awareness about the benefits of Vetiver. Newspapers, magazines, and online platforms can publish feature articles and opinion pieces from experts, farmers, and environmentalists. These pieces can educate the

public about Vetiver's role in soil erosion control and water protection.

Producing documentaries and short films that showcase the impact of Vetiver on communities and ecosystems can create a compelling narrative that engages viewers and motivates them to support sustainable practices.

Social media campaigns can amplify the message and reach a broader audience. Engaging visuals, stories, and interactive content can raise awareness and encourage participation in Vetiver projects.

Media can collaborate with environmental organizations to promote Vetiver and other sustainable practices. Joint campaigns, events, and educational programs can enhance outreach and impact. Including dedicated segments on sustainable practices in news programs can provide regular updates and information on Vetiver and its benefits. This can keep the public informed and engaged in environmental issues.

NGO PROFILE

Explore the missions and impacts of various NGOs, shedding light on their efforts to drive social change and community development.

1.AKANKSHA FOUNDATION

Empowering Dreams



In a nation facing learning crisis and educational disparities, the Akanksha Foundation emerges as a beacon of hope, dedicated to transform the lives of children and young adults hailing from disadvantaged backgrounds. Established with a visionary goal to equip all children with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for empowered lives, Akanksha's journey unfolds as a tale of innovation, impact, and commitment.

India, with its staggering number of schools and students, faces a severe learning crisis despite efforts to ensure universal access to education. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 exposed the significant learning losses exacerbated by the two-year pandemic-induced lockdown.

Inspired by the US charter school model, Akanksha pioneered the public-private partnership in Maharashtra's main cities. The Full School Adoption Model, operating in Public-Private Partnership

mode, involves collaboration between the government, corporate funding partners, and Akanksha. While local government bodies provide necessary infrastructure, Akanksha takes responsibility for hiring and training educators, implementing innovative curriculum and pedagogy, and working closely with parents.

The heart of Akanksha's mission lies in creating 'proof points' through its schools, students, and alumni. "Empowering children with knowledge, skills, and values is not just our mission; it's the cornerstone of transforming communities and breaking the chains of generational poverty. At Akanksha, we believe in creating 'proof points' that demonstrate the extraordinary potential within every child, showcasing the transformative power of education as a catalyst for change," says Shraddha Agarwal, Communications Manager at The Akanksha Foundation.

Educators and school principals are pivotal in Akanksha's model, serving as catalysts for change. Rigorous training and upskilling empower them to address challenges like bridging learning and nutrition gaps post-COVID-19. Akanksha aims to overcome these gaps within the next two years, recognising the importance of nurturing social consciousness among students, creating open-minded, secular, and socially aware individuals.

Akanksha Foundation places a strong emphasis on socio-emotional and 21st-century skills. The 4Cs of 21st-century learning—Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity—along with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills such as self-awareness, management, and compassion, form the foundation. These skills, integrated into classroom learning, enable students to build confidence, communicate effectively, and confront challenging ideas.

The impact of Akanksha's efforts is palpable in the lives of over 14,000 students benefiting from its formal school-education program and nearly 5,100 alumni across Mumbai, Pune, and

Nagpur. The 'Project Setu' initiative, launched in collaboration with Nagpur Municipal Corporation and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation, aims to extend these practices to nearly 200 public schools.

Success is measured not just in academic achievements but also in holistic development. Akanksha's sports program, with 33 different sports introduced, has seen students winning medals at various levels. The robust art program, Art for Akanksha (AFA), empowers children to express themselves through visual language, reaching global platforms like the United Nations General Assembly.

The Alumni Support and Engagement (ASE) team plays a crucial role in guiding alumni towards empowered lives. A comprehensive study conducted by research firm 4thWheel revealed that 84% of alumni have higher education levels than their parents, contributing over 40% of their income to household incomes. These outcomes underscore the transformative power of quality education.

Looking ahead, Akanksha envisions scaling its impact by starting more schools under public-private partnerships, strengthening existing schools, and deepening support for alumni. Bridging learning gaps, focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy, and fostering innovation in classrooms are their key priorities. Additionally, Akanksha aims to redesign schools to integrate new competencies, facilitate pathways for alumni, and strengthen government schools, ultimately building an agile organisation through knowledge management and technology.

"At Akanksha, we envision a future where every child, regardless of their background, not only dreams big but achieves those dreams. Our commitment extends beyond the classroom, aiming to build empowered individuals who not only break barriers but also redefine what's possible. Education is not just a pathway;

it's the key to unlocking a world of opportunities and shaping a future where every child's potential is realised," says Shraddha.

As Akanksha Foundation continues its journey, it stands as a testament to the transformative potential of education. In the pursuit of its vision, the foundation exemplifies the power of collaboration, innovation, and unwavering commitment to breaking the cycle of generational poverty and empowering generations to come.

PK Surya

2.ARAVANAIKUM KARANGAL TRUST

From Slum to Strength



Anybody can work for their community. The key aspects that distinguish someone who does so in an extraordinary way often include their level of commitment, the impact of their efforts, and their ability to inspire and lead others. With no prior background or association, it takes a lot of conviction to be able to speak up for issues that really matter, raising awareness on relevant subjects and advocating for changes.“I didn’t know any of this. I didn’t look into possibility, nor worried about how interventions may end up. I just continued to do what I could to improve the situation in my community,” says Ms Senbagam, Founding Director of Aravanaikum Karangal Trust in Chennai.

Coming from a slum community in Thondayarpettai, Chennai, Senbagam saw her parents struggle to make ends meet. “My father was a cook and my mother ran a small tiffin centre. I also helped them in the evenings after school. I had to discontinue

after class X due to financial crisis in the family but my mother ensured that I continued to learn some useful skills. For some reason she strongly believed that learning as many skills as possible is important for me," she recalls.

Senbagam learnt tailoring, nursing from a local health centre, basic computer skills, typing and also completed the beautician course. "Discontinuing my studies bothered my mother a lot. So she chose to expose me to skills that were affordable and could be useful at any point, no matter where life takes me. It was a wise decision," she appreciates.

Senbagam worked in an export company after school to support her family but her heart was in the evening tuitions she conducted to support slum children. She offered tuition without charging any fee as her aim was to ensure that these children never dropped out for lack of support to learn at home. This conviction soon forced her to look into dropouts in the community and she started readmitting them in government schools.

After marriage at the age of 21 years, she joined the NGO Karunalaya in 2007 and extensively worked in the slums. "That field presence could change the lives of slum children was an eye opener to me. It empowered me with complete knowledge about how systems within the slum worked and how people dealt with their concerns, both small and big," says Senbagam, who was always concerned about students in her community.

She continued to take tuitions for 50 children and in the process, also prepared them to present their issues in public forums like radio and television shows.Karunalaya appreciated her efforts with the 'Best Teacher' award.

Senbagam worked with HIV women, sex workers and their children. To be able to teach them protection and welfare measures, without being affected by pre-judged notions on their

work is usually a challenge for any social worker, but it was not so for Senbagam. Her focus was only to convey how they could take care of themselves and live independently as entrepreneurs.

Her efforts led more than 150 women to start entrepreneurial ventures like doll making, tailoring, making/selling idli dosa batter, basket weaving, fruit/vegetable shops, etc. She was also instrumental in helping women avail loans from banks for their ventures. Wherever possible she also linked them to government schemes to procure tailoring machines.

Senbagam left Karunalaya in 2011 and got back to working for the slum children. She was committed about readmitting dropouts and encouraging them with stationery supplies. In 2016, she registered a Trust Aravanaikum Karangal in Chennai and continued to work for the welfare of children. Her experience in her own slum and from Karunalaya's field work allowed her to understand how children and teenagers landed in beaches for begging, and also identify abused children. She started the Boys' Home in a rented space to rehabilitate all those rescued children.

"These children have been scarred multiple times by situations, family members and most of the times, strangers. Counselling had a big role to change their outlook at life. We did a lot of role play to help them develop a positive attitude towards life and growth. Today, including girls from the community, over 150 children have completed their schooling and are pursuing their higher education in city colleges," she says proudly.

Senbagam worked with adolescent girls to help them learn life skills and in all these efforts she was able to unravel the strength of her mother's thoughts. She believed that life skills were not just about navigating life's challenges rather it was about making empowered choices that build a better future for self and community.

When the girls hesitated to open up, Senbagam encouraged them to write letters. She soon reaslied the issues she had to focus was about early marriages and teenage pregnancies. Together with 50 self-help groups, over 500 adolescent girls have been able to re-establish themselves as productive individuals. Provision stores, fruit/vegetable shops, handicraft stalls, sweet shops, etc. were set up as entrepreneurial ventures and women began to reap the benefits of financial independence.

Senbagam also focussed on boys affected by substance abuse and took police help to counsel them. "They were violent but we cannot let them be so. I sought help from the police to get closer to them. More than 30 boys are now in rehabilitation centres engaged in learning sports like carom, football and boxing. All these girls and boys reminded me that working with families was equally important to ensure that they all realised holistic support and social capital at home itself," admits Senbagam.

This led her to engage in other interventions like family counselling services, registration of 7 POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) cases, awareness programs in schools, distribution of excess food from parties/marriages and also support for terminally ill patients. Senbagam never restricted herself and continues to explore all possible ways of improving the lives of people in her community. Her immersive, hands on approach to understand and address real issues has contributed to adaptive learning of the entire community.

Shanmuga Priya.T

3. AVTAR HUMAN CAPITAL TRUST

Empowering Career Choices



Re-entering the workforce after pregnancy presents unique challenges for women. This transitional phase often involves balancing new responsibilities as a mother with professional aspirations, requiring significant adjusttments in priorities, time management and workplace engagement. "As our founder, Dr Saundarya Rajesh experienced this phase herself, she realized that the situation for women from underprivileged families could be even more challenging. Limited access to childcare, financial resources and flexible work opportunities often exacerbate the difficulties these women face, making it harder for them to rebuild their careers. This realization pushed her to work on something to create pathways that empower underprivileged women," says Mr. Eswar Bala, Vice President, Outreach and Impact at Avtar Human Capital Trust (AHCT), Chennai.

She wanted to understand this social issue deeply and recognise all kinds of barriers that affected their success in career. Her years

long research led to an unanticipated finding. “The real issue was not lack of opportunities or the freedom to pursue, rather, it was lack of role models and mentors who can career guide the young girls from poor families. Where there were mentors or somebody from the family who could guide them, girls pursued higher education,” explains Eswar, iterating the strong need for a career intentionality program.

Project Puthri was started in 2017 as a first of its kind – it was country’s first career intentionality program focussed on underprivileged girls. Career guidance requires tailored approaches to effectively address the unique needs of different groups. For young girls from poor socio-economic backgrounds, the challenges are often amplified by the intersection of gender inequality and economic hardship. In their case, career guidance goes beyond merely building skills; it must focus on fostering self-confidence, shaping their identities and encouraging a mind-set of ambition and self-reliance.

These girls need to be inspired to envision a future where economic independence is attainable and integral to their sense of self-worth. “For example, when they learn time management, it must not just be limited to relating it to managing studies and chores, but also help them plan different milestones further ahead in life. Project Puthri’s approach with three pillars – mentoring, role modelling and career coaching – has played a pivotal role in breaking the barriers they face, enabling them to dream big and take actionable steps towards a brighter future,” he adds.

The project focusses upon girls in classes VIII to XII and hones their life skills to make them career ready. Backed by a strong team of volunteers, it is not only the girls who are benefitted but also the volunteers – comprised of interns from Social Work/ Sociology courses, women who have taken a break from work due to multiple reasons, corporate teams, etc - the project has offered a launch pad for all of them. With the help of teachers,

student beneficiaries are selected in the chosen schools. "We come down to about 20 girls per grade i.e. 100 girls in a school. All of them, during the course of our intervention, are guided to think and plan about future, in small doses. Keeping it completely activity based makes it easier to encourage the girls to open up and relate to future in a very subtle way," elaborates Eswar.

Puthri has reached out to more than 20,000 girls from Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Bangalore. Given the different locations these girls come from and the resultant differences in their personalities and attitudes, their reception of the program has also seen mixed responses. Implemented across four zones in Chennai, the team notes remarkable differences between girls from Velachery and those from Avadi. "Clearly, confidence is the sum of many unseen and unnoticed factors," he quips, talking about a girl from Madurai whose project was recently recognised by the Corporation of Madurai.

For most of these girls, career aspirations are often limited to just two options: becoming a teacher or a doctor. This reflects not only a lack of awareness about diverse opportunities but also an inability to envision themselves in other roles. "We have even come across a girl who wanted to become a nurse but ended up choosing Commerce in Class XI," shares Eswar Bala. This is where Puthri's Role Model and Career Coach components play a crucial role. By introducing the girls to a wide range of career possibilities, the program helps them make informed decisions about their high school subject choices. A key element of this process is the psychometric tests conducted in Class XII, which encourage the students to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and future aspirations. In class XII, they go through the Puthri Career Choice Assessment (PCCA) test to help them choose courses in tertiary education. These tests are complemented by expert-led sessions and the distribution of a comprehensive career handbook. Together, these tools equip the girls to define

their goals and explore alternative career paths closely aligned with their interests. “That is the level of counselling we try to reach. With 95% of our girls consciously choosing tertiary education, I would say we are being impactful,” he insists.

Gender equality remains incomplete without the active engagement of men. The other gender must be ready to handle women empowerment and support women in their journey. And with Puthri’s success, boys from the schools were also intrigued about a program for them. AHCT introduced the MITR – Men Impacting Trust and Respect project to sensitise boys on gender issues and encourage them to adopt attitudes and behaviours that foster mutual respect and understanding. The activity based graded course on gender sensitivity has reached 21 schools in three cities. Focusing on boys from classes IX to XII, the program is making a lasting impact on around 200 boys in each school. “When a boy came up and told me that he is no longer shy to buy sanitary napkins for his mother and sister, we were elated. He also wished to see his father think like him,” recalls Eswar Bala.

Besides these projects, AHCT also implements the Puthri Scholarship Program that has benefitted more than 250 Puthris in the last three years, in completing their tertiary education. It involves the screening, selection of scholars, identifying donors and funding after university enrolment, evaluation of academic progress of the scholars and continued mentoring until the set goal is achieved. As of 2024, the scholarship program has supported over 250 graduates in fulfilling their dream of finishing tertiary education.

Apart from this, they have begun this new initiative of creating certification and advanced life skill programs for undergraduate women in colleges, to shape their intentionality to career readiness. Aptly named the Nipuni Career Pathing program, launched by the Tamil Nadu State Minister for School Education, Thiru. Anbil Mahesh on November 16th 2024, the

program equips the selected cohort of deserving women students with possible industry relevant skills, thereby enabling them to be job ready by the end of their college. Every week, scholars participate in sessions where successful individuals share their journeys with them. These sessions are part of a 75-hour hybrid program conducted over one academic year, during which the girls complete two certificate courses on various skill sets and engage with experts in different fields.

By combining career coaching, mentorship, role modelling and life skills development, AHCT is breaking down the barriers these girls face and empowering them to take control of their careers and economic independence. The impact of these projects extends beyond the girls themselves, as they also inspire positive change in the communities around them, including the boys involved in the MITR project. Through its comprehensive approach, AHCT is not only transforming individual lives but also contributing to a more equitable society, where both genders can thrive together, supporting one another on the journey to empowerment and success.

Shanmuga Priya.T

4.AWARENESS CHARITABLE TRUST

Building Together



Nilgiris is known for its natural beauty and cultural diversity. The lush green canopies and the local tribe's lifestyle is so welcoming every time. However, despite this allure, these native tribes face a range of pressing social challenges that often go unnoticed. Whether it is access to education, health or malnutrition, gender inequality, tribal welfare, tribal rights, substance abuse, environmental degradation or the livelihood related challenges, they continue to be under represented even today. Domestic Violence is another social concern that has wrecked women and children very quietly. "

All this was not easy for my father. He was an army veteran turned advocate who had practiced in Mumbai High Court. All these issues concerned him and he wanted to do something for the locals here. The gaps in the delivery of public schemes and services disturbed him. Drawing from the experience of pro-bono

cases he took up in Mumbai, he began to help the underprivileged here, one case at a time," says Mr Rajesh Krishnan, Trustee of 4Socio, Coonoor, Nilgiris.

Founded as Awareness Charitable Trust (ACT) in 2016 by Advocate Krishnan, their work focussed on children, education, sanitation and environment. Their strong rapport with local officials has opened new avenues for intervention, and their on-the-ground presence has earned them the credibility needed to collaborate with government departments in implementing various schemes. "In 2018, when I had come here for a transition break, I got involved in the Swach Bharat Abhiyan project. The District Collector had asked my father's team to take up the construction of 600 toilets for the underprivileged identified from these communities. I initially got involved to support my father, but little did I realise that I would soon become the face of this organisation," smiles Rajesh.

Coming from a corporate background with extensive experience in business development and software sales for global companies, this was a phase. After completing the project successfully, he got back to his corporate life to explore entrepreneurship role in training businesses. But then, he chose to get back to the Trust as it was winding up. "It was good, rewarding work. I felt I could take it up and revive its operations because all work that happened there was immensely useful to the indigenous communities," he adds.

Given his experience, Rajesh brought on board new corporate partners whose support helped ACT implement new projects. One of the first projects was in collaboration with Tech Mahindra Foundation during the COVID Pandemic. Rajesh and team provided dry rations and cooked meals for the underprivileged in Chennai and the Nilgiris.

He realised that ACT could grow as an efficient project

implementing partner for different corporates, who faced challenges in identifying causes or organisations to work with. "It was a time when the CSR Amendment also allowed many corporates to explore collaborations with organisations like ours. We decided to build our expertise in learning about the community, its strengths, weaknesses and concerns that needed external intervention," says Rajesh, whose leadership prepared the team to study indigenous communities for what they are and how they lived.

Acknowledging the potential for bias to occur easily, he worked on a framework to ensure that basic, real problems were understood for what they just were. "We needed our facts right. We cannot overdo or exaggerate because that affects project planning and our credibility. We needed to learn the actual reality to be able to develop projects that suited them. That is how Project Parayavarna happened," he elaborates.

The Anaikatti belt is predominantly dry forest, lacking fruit-bearing trees that elephants and other animals could consume during their journeys. Additionally, the absence of water in the summer months compels these majestic creatures to migrate in search of more resourceful areas. As Rajesh notes, "Elephants are also like humans. We move to new places in search of water, jobs, etc. but for them, it is a matter of survival." This understanding of their migration patterns led Rajesh and his team to thoroughly investigate the pathways these elephants travel. They found that the elephants migrate from Kerala to Coimbatore and then to the Nilgiris before eventually returning to Kerala.

To support these migratory patterns, it was essential to provide water and food sources that would encourage the elephants to remain on their natural routes without encroaching on human habitats. Although forest officials had set up water troughs, many were in disrepair and went unused by the elephants. To address this, Rajesh and his team revived and, in some cases,

rebuilt these troughs to ensure passing animals could quench their thirst. To further attract the elephants to these areas, they also planted native fruit-bearing trees, creating an environment where the animals could access both food and water in the same location. The project led to the restoration of 200 hectares of forest land and protected several endangered species, with a 20 percent increase in local wildlife population.

With each project, the organisation also grew and is now recently rebranded as 4Socio to emphasise on its ability to partner with different stakeholders and implement projects suiting the beneficiary communities. In the education front, 4Socio's cyber smart initiative has reached out to more than two lakh school children in Coimbatore alone. Engaging college students as volunteers for short training sessions to teach local school children proved to be a highly effective strategy. Workshops in schools, colleges and corporate offices, led to a 30% decrease in reported cyber incidents among participants.

4Socio, as an organisation is now eight years old but it has undergone a lot of transformation from within. With each such phase, it has also grown in both functionality and in capability. Each phase of this evolution has not only strengthened the organisation's mission but has also enhanced its ability to adapt to changing community needs. As 4Socio looks to the future, it remains committed to its core values while embracing innovation and collaboration, ensuring that it continues to make a meaningful impact in the lives of those it serves.

Shanmuga Priya.T

5. AZAD INDIA FOUNDATION

At the Crossroads of Educational and Livelihood Reform



Kishanganj, Bihar is a culturally rich district located close to both the Nepali and Bangladeshi borders. Dismal literacy levels and economic disparities in this district pose a challenge that has taken on myriad forms over time. Yuman Hussain, Executive Director of Azad India Foundation, shares about the work that she and her team have been doing for over twenty two years now. Providing some context to how the organisation began, Yuman says, "Azad India Foundation was established in memory of my late father-in-law, Azad Mohammed Hussain. A visionary Muslim leader in Bihar, he was a six-time MLA who set up several schools and colleges in Kishanganj. He had also served as the Health Minister for Bihar. When he passed away in the 1990s, my mother-in-law wished to continue his legacy by establishing a non-profit organisation that would work along his progressive ideals".

Literacy levels in Kishanganj have been abysmal. The communities settled in the area have been especially averse to sending their girl children to school. In fact, some families did not even let their girls step out of the house.

Around 1998, armed with an M.Phil in Sociology from the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Yuman along with her mother in law, started Azad India Foundation. She says she was eager to use all the knowledge she had, to improve the conditions in the region. So, together they set up an education centre and a stitching centre. Today the organisation is supported by 115 project staff, with projects ranging from education to livelihoods and much more.

Gradually, Azad India Foundation began to work with schools across different blocks. "Foundational literacy and numeracy development are our main focus. We have been helping to send children from over a hundred villages into mainstream schools", says Yuman. Today, they operate several education centres spread across 20 villages in the Thakurganj and Pothia blocks under Girl Education Program. Keeping with their mission, last year, 600 girls were transitioned into mainstream schools, ranging from elementary school to high school. Innovative teaching and learning methodologies play a pivotal role in improving the learning outcomes of these children. Access to library books across all these educational centres is yet another factor that has contributed to this success.

The Badhte Kadam project focuses on early literacy which involves the use of workbooks and activity sheets. From 2016, the organisation has successfully transitioned over 7000 children into mainstream schools from Kindergarten to Class III. Currently 5000 children are directly studying in 120 learning centres in Thakurganj and Baisi Blocks.

"We work with school managements, training them on their roles and responsibilities, creating awareness on the different issues the communities face and try to get the managements to work with us", says Yuman.

When the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, the dropout rates skyrocketed. Access to school managements also diminished. Though the organisation kept in touch with the students through the internet and Whatsapp, something else happened. Fathers and brothers of families, who had been working as migrant labourers in the rest of the country, were forced to return home. With their regular incomes cut off indefinitely, children began to be used as labourers, or sent to work in the fields. Disinterest towards schools kept mounting. Says Yuman, "When schools finally reopened after the pandemic, while there was a 16% dropout among girls, there was a whopping 40% dropout among boys. We are now pivoting to focus on getting boys back into schools."

In order to keep the programs geared towards career-success, Azad India Foundation teams up with individual donors and organizational partners to provide technology access- computers in the learning centres, local Madrassas and schools; sponsorships to learn Tally; donating and/or shared sewing machines at the stitching centres. This helps improve to retain learners. Yuman explains, "There are no industries in Kishanganj. However, something as versatile as a sewing machine makes a world of a difference. Girls can now earn Rs. 4000-5000 per month through sewing"

In ten villages, Azad India Foundation run women literacy program and work with self-help groups linked with Jeevika program run by Govt of Bihar. AIF support women to buy goats, cows and set up shop. "Goats are quick to multiply. We get the SHGs trained by the Agricultural University on how to care for these animals", explains Yuman.

For the past three years, through a Community Entitlement Program, they have been helping locals get their government-issued IDs such as Aadhar Card, Voter ID, residency certificate, etc. This helps gains access to useful government schemes such as old age pension, widow pension, Kanyadaan/Kanya Samriddhi Yojana, and so on. Over 7000 people have already benefitted from this program. "Sometimes there are discrepancies from one ID to another. Unless someone points it out and helps rectify the errors, the locals will never know and continue to suffer. We keep a list of government schemes and the list of documents required to obtain them. Women who lost their husbands a few years ago, living on the sheer goodwill (or lack thereof) of their local community, have started receiving their widow-pensions. Even if the amounts are paltry, it's something they can put to good use", adds Yuman.

Kishanganj is home to a large Surjapuri community, and a smaller Shershahbadi community. The Shershahbadis, self-proclaimed descendants of the historical figure Sher Shah Suri, are a Bengali-speaking community that have settled in this region for at least 400 years now. They are a conservative group that limits its interaction with the outside world. Their traditional embroidery, called Kheta, is a unique craft that makes the embroidery blend right into the fabric.

Yuman, with the help of a friend who published papers about this unique craft outside of India, garnered enough support to make sure that the Shershahbadi community are recognized, trained in commercializing their craft and also get stipends from the government. In 2023, UNESCO included information about Kheta embroidery in their handbook. The women were organised into self-help groups and have since been invited to set up stalls at fairs and exhibitions, including at the central government's Atmanirbhar Bharat Mandapam.

When asked what her vision for the future is, Yuman says, "I would like every boy and girl to be sent to school. I'm worried about the alarming rate of dropouts among boys in recent years. Girls need the education because the men still control the purse in their families. In order for women to be major decision makers, they need to be financially independent and literacy is the route to get there!"

Archanaa Ramesh

6. CHILD HEART FOUNDATION

Heartbeats of Hope



The growth of healthcare in India has been marked by significant advancements and increased accessibility over the past few decades. The country has seen a substantial expansion in healthcare infrastructure, including the establishment of numerous hospitals, clinics, and specialised medical centres in urban and semi-urban areas. India has become a global hub for medical tourism, offering high-quality medical care at competitive prices. Technological innovations, improved medical education, and increased public health awareness have further contributed to the robust growth of the healthcare sector. However, this growth has not been uniform across all specialisations. Interventions in some areas has not been as successful as others. There are also fields that have not had the adequate support system to meet rising needs, like paediatric cardiology.

With the incidence of congenital heart disease (CHD) in the country estimated to be around 8-10 per 1,000 live births, India faces

a substantial burden of paediatric cardiac disorders, translating to approximately 200,000 to 250,000 new cases annually. This significant prevalence underscores the critical need for robust paediatric cardiology services. Despite advancements in medical technology and healthcare infrastructure in urban centres, paediatric cardiology in India encounters numerous challenges. These include a stark disparity in access to specialised care between urban and rural areas, a shortage of trained paediatric cardiologists and cardiac surgeons, and financial constraints that hinder families from affording expensive cardiac treatments.

"Only 3 government hospitals in North India have full-fledged paediatric cardiology department. Furthermore, the lack of widespread new-born screening programs for CHD often results in delayed diagnoses and interventions, adversely affecting outcomes," informs Dr Sunita Harkar Shalla, Chief Operations Officer at Child Heart Foundation (CHF), New Delhi.

Established in 2013 by a Pediatric Cardiologist, who after working in various hospitals abroad returned to India to make a change in the lives of poor children with heart disease, CHF was their answer to demonstrate the much needed multi-faceted approach that paediatric cardiology in India demanded. "They came with 6 parents whose children had heart conditions that needed treatment. In fact, all out trustees are parents of heart disease warriors," adds Sunita. The bigger problem, according to her, is the lack of awareness among parents and families that affects early diagnosis. CHF is addressing every challenge through its resourceful programs that engage health care professionals and hospitals across multiple cities.

CHF's community awareness programme SUGYAN focusses on training frontline health workers like ASHAs and Anganwadi workers to be able to assess early symptoms in infants and children. "It could be as common as excessive perspiration during feed time. Or the blue tinge in nails, lips, tongue that is caused by lack of

oxygen. Some babies do not gain weight at all but thriving is also misunderstood for nutrient deficiency. Inability to feed is not taken as seriously as it should be. Repeated episodes of pneumonia, cold, cough also indicate and underlying heart condition. There is huge lack of awareness even among general doctors who end up prescribing antibiotics and the cycle of ill health persists," she explains.

While all this could be helpful for children living with families, CHF chose to reach out to abandoned children as well. Medical Camps were organised in collaboration with other organisations to examine children living near railway stations, bus hubs, pavements, etc and the suspected cases were brought to their centre for confirmatory diagnosis. CHF's most significant contribution has been its Echo-cardiography Screening programme called PRADHAN, that is provided free of cost. Referrals for diagnosis come from across the country. In fact, all the 23 government hospitals in Delhi refer suspected cases to CHF. Post the diagnosis, due diligence documentation follows to assess patient's socio-economic background.

"The scale of need and gap in available services is terrific. Therefore, we want to make sure that we are reaching out to the needy. By focusing on the needy, we not only address immediate health concerns but also contribute to broader social, economic, and ethical goals, ultimately fostering a healthier and more equitable society," says Sunita.

Following diagnosis, CHF schedules treatment of the children by connecting with hospitals in its network. So far, 402 cases have been successfully treated. With out-patient services extended to Jalandar in Punjab and Siliguri in West Bengal, the reach is only increasing every year, in terms of number of cases and geography. But CHF has consciously decided not to restrict itself only to treatment related interventions.

Preventive Health Care is as much applicable in paediatric cardiology too and CHF is the first and only NGO to provide free fetal echo cardiography screening services under JEEVANSH program. This screening is done during the second trimester and parents are counselled accordingly. "We have screened over 7,000 pregnant women so far. If the condition is fatal or serious with no scope of recovery, parents are counselled for termination of pregnancy. In other cases that have a good prognosis, the unborn child is registered for treatment under our HRIDAAN programme," she adds.

While treatment is all about optimum utilisation of specialists and infrastructure already available, CHF strengthens this ecosystem by training doctors to do Echo-cardiography and also donating ECHO machines to government hospitals. In Delhi for example, ECHO machines have been donated to 8 hospitals and 2 doctors have been trained to use them for early diagnosis. "These tests are expensive and are definitely out of reach for poor families. This is our effort to reduce the time wasted in identifying the affordable diagnostic facility. We want to use that in treatment and most of all, we cannot lose lives due to unavailability of affordable, accessible, immediate diagnosis," comments Sunita.

Pulmonary Hypertension is a life threatening disease with no cure and needs expensive medication for survival. The blood vessels that carry blood from lungs to heart are narrow, increasing the pressure on lungs. In adverse cases, it results in heart failure or heart attack. CHF's PH Life Care programme is providing free medicines for 57 patients every month. Patients' location has not been an obstacle in any of their programmes. With 200,000 infants born with heart condition every year, only 20,000 are treated in government set ups while the rest either do not survive or remain part of the treatment wait list.

The average cost of treatment for heart conditions is around 2.5 lakhs which is outside the affordability of a normal salaried

person. Above all, heart conditions are not covered by insurance companies in India. Government of India's Ayushman Bharat scheme covers it but this is not accepted in all states. The relevance of CHF cannot be overstated in this context.

By leveraging its expertise and resources, CHF has tried to facilitate early diagnosis, expand access to treatment, and improve outcomes for infants with heart conditions. "Every child born with a heart condition should be able to thrive in India. This is our vision," commits Sunita.

Shanmuga Priya.T

7. GROW GREEN COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

Green Guardians from School



Love for nature is a sentiment deeply rooted in the human experience. One's ability to appreciate and actively engage with the natural world should never be judged based on age. In fact, each age group brings its own unique perspective and contributions to environmental stewardship, demonstrating that caring for the Earth knows no age limits. "Our age was never a challenge to us, rather it was the general perception that we will make some noise about environmental concerns and go silent," says G Abhijith, President, Grow Green Community Initiative in Coimbatore.

For a class 10 student in the city, Abhijith's priorities are rather unconventional yet remarkably steadfast. But when we learn that it all started when he was in class 6, it is definitely surprising. It all sparked from a web story on the declining population of sea turtles that are dying from consumption of plastics. "It was a

very disturbing image. I began to read up more and soon learnt that global warming has made the planet twice hotter than what it was for our grand-parents. Ice sheets are melting in Antartica," he narrates, with the same shock and despair that hit him when he read about all this for the first time.

He wondered what he could do about all this and further read about various organisations that are working for the environment. Given the vast variety of organisations that worked on different aspects of environment and climate change, including disaster resilience, Abhijith felt confident and resolved to do his part as a student. His interest group had new members on board and within a month Abhijith built a team of 30 members in 2020, which largely comprised of his friends, few college students who were interested in the cause, parents and teachers.

In fact, the group is popularly known as the 'greenish army' by the locals as they often see them planting saplings and maintaining them sincerely. "The pandemic is remembered for many reasons, but we will remember it for the stories of many individuals who were able to recognise themselves with nature. It is this sensitivity that drove us and to be able to realise that we were not alone was motivating to look ahead," he recalls.

With advice from different contacts, Abhijith and team decided to remain as a community action group instead of working on a formal registration. They lined up online awareness campaigns on different concerns and diligently worked on the content to make sure that readers connected with shocking realities about nature and environment. "Human civilisation has built many things that can devour the beauty and synchronisation in nature, it is high time we acknowledge this and commit ourselves to simple reparable actions to start with," raises Abhijith. In 2021, Grow Green launched an online plastic awareness campaign and reached out to neighbourhood, family, friends, relatives and school communities. "Some of them were shocked to learn that

animals died so easily because of the omnipresent plastics," he adds.

Pandemic's restrictions confined them to work online but this definitely had its advantages. It was a powerful and accessible means to educate, inspire action and drive positive change. The real-time nature of online communication facilitates immediate engagement and response, encouraging active participation and discussion surrounding plastic waste reduction strategies. The next message was on the ill effects of phone radiation on birds, but nature's health was not everybody's priority.

The quick expansion into a bigger team did exert pressure on their financial resources. With many members choosing to leave the team, it was a dull phase now where everybody became inactive. The revival took about eight months but this time, Abhijith and his co-founder Mr. Jeya Sudharsan thought strategically. They joined their school's Interact Club and also planned awareness campaigns with other schools. With their network reaching 100 members this week, this is a significant milestone that encourages them to stay focussed.

Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Discord have already crossed 100 members and the community is very active. With many school students and adults turning in alike, founders have lined up interesting projects with a long term perspective. Grow Green has supporters from five different states of India and four countries.

Gradually assembling a force of eco-conscious champions, they are keen to work with the city municipal body – Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation (CCMC), noted non-governmental organisations like Siruthuli and other like-minded initiatives.

Stepping into class 10, Abhijith and his friends are undeterred by the boards pressure. "We are a community and therefore the idea

is to make sure that activities continue irrespective of whether all members are active or not. We have planned few projects for 2025, but the Grow Green community will continue to grow and act," says a committed Abhijith.

Shanmuga Priya.T

8. KOVAI KULANGAL PADUGAPPU AMAIPU

The Quest to Revive Our Rivers



Water bodies around us are an integral part of human, environmental health, climate regulation, water supply and of course, disaster mitigation. With an omnipotent impact on everything about life on earth, neglecting their care has come at a huge cost on all aforementioned factors. Public health crisis due to unsafe drinking water, increased costs of water treatment to make it safe for consumption, loss of biodiversity, destruction of local ecosystems, increased occurrence of disasters are just the macro markers that have had a profound impact on this generation's notion of health and well-being. "Ask any localite, someone who recalls playing in the marshes or near the streams, canals about their relationship water bodies. It is not just beauty or recreation or the feeling of tranquility. It is an inherent sense of contentment and a strong sense of community. Their perspectives will tell us how urbanization took us far from these experiences," reminisces Mr R Manikandan, Founder of

Kovai Kulangal Padugappu Amaipu (KKPA) in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Clearly, he doesn't want to blame anybody or any phenomenon for lack of attention on our water bodies. "Caring for them should have come down from our ancestors. Where was the connect lost? How did we end up being careless about them? Its high time we introspected our attitudes and mended our ways to restore their lives," reflects Manikandan. A resident of South Coimbatore, he lived near a pond – Kurichikulam, which was the main source of water for his region.

However, rapid usage led to plummeting water tables and the pond went dry in less than a decade. "Ruthless usage by everybody alike, houses and industries," he points out. With its natural path flowing towards Kerala, Manikandan thought that building a check dam could ensure supply for the local land but soon learnt that an already built check dam was damaged, dysfunctional. He took it upon himself to get this reported at the Collector's Office for corrective action. In spite of being successful he was wrought in dismay that such concerns need to be raised to be addressed.

But the experience forced him to look further at Noyyal river and its distributaries. For the unversed, it is a river originating from the Vellingiri Hills in the Western Ghats, flowing through Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Karur, covering almost 175 kilometres, before joining Cauvery River in Kodumudi. He not only learnt the path of the river but saw every event in history that affected its existence. "I could clearly see that Noyyal's health was critical for the well-being of region's ecology, economy and society," emphasises Manikandan.

2017 was a year of stunning revelations in the region. Most of the ponds had dried up, there was no public participation in protecting ancient water bodies and there were invasive species like the Ipomoea Carnea, commonly known as the Pink Morning Glory

that affected local vegetation patterns. The drought in 2017 did not shock him but he used the circumstances to raise awareness on Noyyal and invite like-minded organisations to work on its revival. He brought together many NGOs in Coimbatore and led the work to revive tanks/ponds that had no public participation in its care. Once an integral part of traditional water management system in the region, the health of these ponds was extremely important for storing rain water and recharging ground water. Two consecutive failed monsoons by then convinced people to prepare themselves to save as much rain water as possible when nature decided to shower the lands.

Leveraging the force of social media, Manikandan and friends invited volunteers to join hands in their efforts to revive Kovai's ponds. Their first meeting in February 2017 was a success and many volunteers came in to support his efforts. Perur Periya Kulam, sprawling across 265 acres was their first project. They first cleared the pond of all invasive species and then cleared all the waste dumped there. Four hundred volunteers managed to clear all invasive plants and about two tons of plastic waste in a month's time. Manual work was also complemented by the use of machines like JCB, sponsored by few industrialists who had pledged support. The overwhelming response allowed Manikandan and team to plan regular work. "Volunteers took over during the weekends and machinery came in handy to keep the momentum on during the weekdays. Volunteers felt good that work continued consistently," he shares.

Since then, he has led such restoration efforts for the last 348 weeks. Another water body, Sengulam, that was used as a dump yard by local panchayat was cleaned and revived for storing rain water. The lake in Vellalore called in for more efforts. There was no water flowing since the last twelve years due to invasive species, piles of dumped plastic waste and encroachment. KKPA team petitioned to the Chief Minister's Cell to draw attention to

the water body's importance and deteriorating health. After all the steps taken, the lake was desilted and ten thousand trees were planted around the lake in February 2018, also marking the first year of KKPA's work. Today, there is visibly more biodiversity and the new species of flowers has led to the formation of a beautiful butterfly park.

After seven years, KKPA stands high with the support of over 35000 volunteers, 1.25 lakh volunteer work hours, 30,000 saplings planted and maintained, 15 water bodies rejuvenated and 1,155 lakh litres of additional water storage capacity created. This also means clearing more than 150 tons of plastic waste in the process and regular awareness programs in communities and educational institutions. Mr. Manikandan was awarded with "Best Water Warrior Award -2019" by Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India and KKPA received "Green Champion Award – 2021" from Government of Tamil Nadu. But he knows his work is far from over. "Our work can never be complete. There is no finishing line that I can see, for we have effortlessly drained water from mother earth leading to the disappearance of water bodies that survived centuries in just a matter of three decades. Reviving all of them to full capacity will take time. It is an enormous responsibility," admits Manikandan.

Shanmuga Priya.T

9 LARA ANIMAL RIGHTS

For the Love of Animals



In India, a complex relationship exists with stray animals, characterised by both compassion and aversion. While many individuals and communities demonstrate kindness and care towards these animals, providing food and shelter, there also exists a prevalent aversion rooted in concerns over public health and safety. Instances of stray animals roaming the streets, scavenging for food, and occasionally displaying aggressive behavior have fueled apprehension among some segments of society.

Additionally, the lack of effective management and control measures for stray animal populations contributes to these sentiments. Despite efforts by various organisations and authorities to address these issues through sterilisation programs and public awareness campaigns, the aversion towards stray animals remains a persistent challenge in India. Efforts to foster

empathy, promote responsible pet ownership, and implement sustainable solutions are essential to mitigate this aversion and create a more harmonious coexistence between humans and animals.

An organisation dedicated to championing the rights and welfare of animals, and with an unwavering commitment to compassion, LARA Animal Rights has tirelessly worked to raise awareness, enact change, and foster a world where every creature is treated with dignity and respect. Through education, outreach, and strategic campaigns, the organisation stands as guardians for those who cannot speak for themselves. Its mission transcends boundaries, as it stays united in a shared vision of a kinder future.

Amidst the collective efforts to forge the path toward a New India, LARA stands as a force to reckon with, spearheading transformative change by extending compassionate aid to animals in distress. The harrowing existence endured by these abandoned creatures on the streets, underscores the urgent need for intervention.

LARA, which stands for 'Love Animals Respect Animals', operates tirelessly, executing round-the-clock rescue missions, comprehensive treatment protocols, and tailored rehabilitation plans for the afflicted animals. With a commendable average of eight rescues per day, predominantly comprising canines, LARA's dedicated volunteers administer critical care, orchestrating seamless transitions into adoption programs or localised street reintegration efforts. Harnessing societal empathy, LARA has extended a call to collaborative action, inviting contributions to sustain its life-saving endeavors and facilitate vital animal population-control initiatives in communities where overpopulation is a factor.

In the course of its activism, LARA has embarked on a series of activities involving the society at large. Residents are

informed about their entitlement to pet ownership within flats or apartments, with penalties and potential imprisonment stipulated for violations by co-residents.

Today, caregivers of stray dogs often face harassment and discrimination from fellow residents, despite their noble efforts to provide food, shelter, and medical care to these vulnerable animals. Despite their compassionate actions, some individuals view stray dogs as nuisances or potential threats to their safety, leading to conflicts and mistreatment directed towards caregivers. Incidents of verbal abuse, threats, and even physical violence against these caregivers are not uncommon, creating a hostile environment for those who selflessly dedicate themselves to the welfare of stray animals.

This harassment not only undermines the caregivers' efforts but also exacerbates the challenges of managing stray animal populations effectively. Addressing this issue requires not only legal protection and support for caregivers but also broader community education and awareness campaigns to foster empathy and understanding towards the vital role they play in caring for stray animals.

LARA Animal Rights has cautioned gated communities against the removal of stray animals and the prevention of caregivers from feeding them, with similar consequences for non-compliance. Citizens are reminded to not engage in activities aimed at removing animals from streets or obstructing caregivers, under penalty of law.

LARA briefs police personnel on laws pertaining to the prevention of animal cruelty, including citizens' rights to intervene in cases of overloaded animal carts. Volunteers are trained to promptly secure and transport injured animals for medical treatment and provide educational sessions in schools and colleges on the importance of compassion towards animals.

The NGO also advocates for regular health check-ups of animals engaged in tasks by marginalised groups, such as load-bearing animals and those used for recreational purposes. Collaborative efforts with the administration are pursued to secure funding and allocate space for the treatment and housing of sick and abandoned animals.

In the recent past, the issue of animal rights in India has garnered increasing attention and advocacy, reflecting a growing societal consciousness about the welfare and ethical treatment of animals. India boasts a comprehensive legal framework aimed at protecting animals from cruelty, encompassing legislation such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. These laws outline provisions for the prevention of cruelty towards animals, the regulation of captive animals, and the conservation of wildlife habitats. Additionally, landmark judicial rulings have further reinforced the recognition of animals as sentient beings entitled to fundamental rights and protection from harm. While challenges persist, including enforcement gaps and cultural attitudes, India's commitment to animal rights is evident in the ongoing efforts to strengthen legal protections, promote ethical treatment, and foster a culture of compassion towards all living beings.

Acknowledging the widespread empathy towards animal welfare, LARA has issued an open invitation for individuals to engage and make a tangible difference. By joining this initiative, participants can directly influence and enact positive change in the lives of animals. Contributions from supporters hold the power to greatly enhance the financial resources required for rescuing and providing care to distressed animals. Additionally, these donations will fuel essential initiatives like animal birth control programs, particularly in areas where population control measures are critical.

Rahul Philip

10. NATURE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Striking a Balance, Mitigating Human-Elephant Conflict in Valparai



Spanning approximately 220 square kilometres, the Valparai plateau sustains the livelihoods of thousands while serving as a sanctuary for 120-140 elephants. Yet, the inevitable overlap of space and resources has led to frequent encounters, resulting in casualties, property damage, and crop destruction.

The Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) stands at the forefront of efforts to address this pressing issue. Through extensive research and collaboration with local communities and forest departments, NCF has implemented innovative, participative, and adaptive interventions aimed at mitigating human-elephant conflict.

The human-elephant conflict stems from habitat loss, human encroachment, and the convergence of space and resource utilisation. Elephants, compelled to traverse human-populated

areas due to dwindling forest cover, often encounter unsuspecting individuals, resulting in tragic outcomes for both parties. In Valparai, while crop damage remains relatively low, incidents of property destruction and human casualties loom large.

NCF's approach encompasses practical fieldwork and scientific analysis. Field teams track elephant movements, gather demographic data, and assess potential conflict scenarios, ensuring timely interventions to safeguard both humans and elephants.

The organisation's multifaceted work extends beyond practical interventions to encompass scientific research and analysis. "We systematically tracks elephant herds and demographic assessments to gain insights into long-term trends and behaviour patterns. This helps us to inform on-the-ground conservation efforts and policy formulation processes," says Ganesh.

NCF has embarked on a mission to mitigate conflict through innovative and participative measures. Collaborating closely with local communities and forest departments, NCF introduced mobile phone technology-based interventions aimed at providing real-time alerts about elephant movements. These initiatives, including bulk SMS texts, voice calls, and mobile-operated alert beacons, have empowered stakeholders to take proactive measures and avoid potential conflicts. Further, light sensors were placed to supplement traditional mitigation measures.

"Recognising that many conflicts stem from accidental encounters due to inadequate information about elephant movements, we have leveraged mobile phone technology to disseminate real-time alerts. Bulk SMS texts, voice calls, and mobile-operated alert beacons strategically placed across the landscape enable residents, plantation workers, and stakeholders to take precautionary measures and avoid potential conflicts," he says.

"By harnessing technological solutions like light sensors and GPS tracking, we monitor elephant movements and mitigate human-elephant conflicts proactively. Furthermore, close collaboration with the forest department ensures that our strategies align with scientific findings and complement existing conservation efforts," he adds.

NCF's research has illuminated the intricate dynamics underlying property damage incidents by elephants. Contrary to common assumptions, the frequency of such incidents is not solely correlated with the duration of elephant presence but influenced by factors such as structure proximity and food storage practices. Armed with this knowledge, NCF advocates for targeted interventions and emphasises the importance of understanding elephant behaviour patterns.

"Our long-term research efforts have uncovered critical insights into the dynamics of human-elephant conflict. Contrary to conventional wisdom, property damage incidents are not solely dictated by the duration of elephant presence but influenced by factors such as structure proximity and food storage practices. Such findings underscore the complexity of the issue and the need for nuanced interventions," he says.

Navigating the delicate balance between community needs, conservation imperatives, and tourism challenges remains a complex endeavour. While responsible tourism can contribute to local economies, it also heightens the risk of human-elephant conflicts, necessitating careful management and awareness initiatives.

The delicate balance between promoting responsible tourism and ensuring community safety remains a focal point for NCF. While tourism brings visibility and revenue, it also heightens the risk of human-elephant encounters. NCF emphasises the importance of minimising unnecessary visibility to tourists and promoting safety guidelines to mitigate potential conflicts.

"Throughout the day, we maintain communication with local networks and inform relevant individuals about elephant movements. Sometimes, our plans need to be adjusted, and routes changed based on emerging information. While our primary focus is on tracking specific elephant herds, we remain flexible and responsive to unforeseen events," he says.

"There are instances when we may need to divert our attention to address urgent situations, such as when a different herd attempts to cross a road. This dynamic nature of our work means that we must be prepared to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, even if it means deviating from our original plans," he adds.

Through concerted efforts and unwavering dedication, NCF strives to forge a path towards peaceful cohabitation between humans and elephants, ensuring the preservation of both livelihoods and wildlife for generations to come.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

11. RAYS – ASHA KI EK KIRAN

Hope and Beyond



Child care is not a straight forward process. It involves various factors, contexts and considerations. They have diverse needs and every child is unique with their own temperament. When someone outside the family, completely new but extremely caring comes by, children experience a wide range of emotions and dynamics. "For children who face abandonment, for reasons they don't even know, it is not easy to understand care. They have reservations, they create imaginary boundaries as a matter of caution, and above all, they take time to trust people.

Genuine care can be demonstrated in multiple ways. Combined with consistency and reliability, care goes a long way in making them feel secure and assured," shares Captain Gurinder Virk, Co-Founder of Rays – Asha Ki Ek Kiran, an organisation that provides care and support for HIV infected and affected children in Rajasthan.

With an intention to work for children, Gurinder and his friend Rashmi Kucchal visited many government homes and organisations that worked for children welfare to learn their needs and nuances in this space. "We wanted to see for ourselves and understand how we can make ourselves useful for children in need.

The moment we saw a child being refused in a home because she was HIV positive, we made our minds," recalls Gurinder. The first home was established in a rented space in 2010 with only three children in Jaipur. Working in the National Capital City of New Delhi, Gurinder travelled every weekend to spend time with the children. Soon, he decided to quit his job and permanently shift to Jaipur to work closely with HIV infected and affected children.Today, Rays – *Asha Ki Ek Kiran* runs two homes for boys and girls, accommodating 54 children.

Stigma is something Gurinder and team deal with on a daily basis, so much so that it has also become existential in many occasions. "We have shifted our homes eight times because not all landlords like HIV positive children and adults to live in their properties," he says. Supported by a strong team of House Mothers, who are HIV infected/affected widows with no livelihood, Gurinder has figured out a comprehensive care and support strategy for all of them. 11 House Mothers, 2 counsellors, doctors – all of them managed by a project coordinator in each home, come together as a complete team to make every decision regarding the welfare of these children.

The homes are managed with donations from family/friends and also funds from the government. Efficient management of resources is a very critical factor at Rays for they have to prioritise health at all times. As these are children with compromised immunity, their diet and medical needs are meticulously planned. "A simple cold can be a nightmare for them as they can easily contract infections," he adds.

Children are sent to schools and also taken to hospitals when needed. Not all schools and hospitals have been accommodative. In spite of all these challenges, Gurinder and team have managed to build the world around these children. "All our children, from day one, are prepared to understand integration and the obstacles it comes with. Our homes are here to guarantee that they traverse the first phase of their lives. As they grow older, they learn to be independent and confident to be themselves. It is in this process that we felt the need to work extensively on awareness," he introspects.

Acknowledging that we have come far from the days when adults refused to visit clinics for treatment fearing disclosure about their disease, his team also warns us that abandoning HIV positive children has been easier than taking care of them. Street plays, bike-a-thons and a variety of programs are planned regularly to educate communities about the diseases and demystify all the myths around it. "The best part is that our own children contribute to this process," he informs proudly.

After schooling, children are encouraged to decide about their pursuit. While some go to colleges for graduation there are also others who prefer to take up vocational courses. And all those who had left for jobs, often come back to Rays. "They like to remain associated. Rays is a part of their identity now. They gracefully embraced their lives with all its adversities and are hopeful to build integrating, supportive systems for their children," he shares.

According to Gurinder, the biggest challenge in this journey has been 'acceptability'. In the initial stages, there was a lot of effort from government and civil society to educate the public about HIV, AIDS, the anti retro viral therapy, modes of disease transmission, etc. He feels that all this education is still incomplete and did not continue, to morph into supportive systems. Yet, he appreciates the transformation he sees in his

immediate community. Donors who once left now come in and spend weekends with the children here. He also recalls about a school principal who decided to expel one of his teachers who tried to mobilise parents group against the admission of HIV positive children in the school. “Collectively, we have all started looking ahead,” says Gurinder hopefully.

Shanmuga Priya.T

12. RECOMPOSE PRIVATE LIMITED

Waste Warriors from Coimbatore



Waste management presents a promising industry with the potential to address environmental challenges, promote sustainable development, and generate economic value through resource recovery and innovation. It was not a lucrative job few years ago but had a lot of scope for entrepreneurship because the local bodies needed help. They could not manage the stream of waste that was so effortlessly generated. The exponential growth in the food industry with so many new businesses mushrooming has only added tonnage to the pile. What can two engineering students possibly do about this?

Door to door collection of waste is the responsibility of urban civic bodies and for bulk generators it has very clearly been postulated in the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 that they must handle their waste – they must segregate and dispose through authorised dealers. “In fact rules also prohibit use of

trash collection bins or drums on road sides. But who really cares about these rules. All they are concerned is about getting rid of their waste," lament Mr Saran Raj and Mr Prashanth, Founders of Recompose Private Limited.

Friends since childhood, Saran and Prashanth were inclined towards working for the environment. Volunteering with different organisations for cleaning water bodies, clearing plastic waster, etc was very much a part of their vacations. After graduating in Electrical and Mechanical Engineering respectively, they got into waste management. "This is what we wanted to do because it has a long term impact on both public and environmental health. Our families literally shunned us for choosing to do this," they laugh. Both of them interned with the Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation (CCMC) for more than six months and also worked with many non-profit organisations like RAAC (Resident Awareness Association of Coimbatore). "Waste Management is a complete industry that is yet to be fully explored. It is very promising in terms of its contribution to sustainable development goals. However, the same old challenges persist. In spite of new stories here and there, a consistent and reliable attitudinal change from the public side has been a big lacuna," they reflect.

They started their NGO No Dumping in the year 2016. With the CSR support from ACP Cements, they operationalised their service based waste management model in around thirty apartments in Coimbatore. The free service in the first year allowed them to work on all details and build all the nitty-gritties. Gradually their client base grew and what actually worked in their favour was that client could dispose of their segregated, collected waste any time by making a call request. "Our call centre is very active and we respond to calls within the promised time window. Clients are happy with our service. Unlike the city corporation where it is not service based, our model promised complete waste management. But segregation is their responsibility," they clarify.

Source segregation is something that can be easily done but not yet easily accepted. Civic bodies are struggling to mainstream this practice and public attitude has a big role to play. "Perhaps, people have gotten so used to convenience that they just don't seem to think about other humans who actually have to handle their waste with their bare hands. How many parents know that soiled diapers must be cleaned before disposal? Sanitary napkins are burnt in landfills because we are yet to find an effective way to handle them. Lets not turn a blind eye to the fact that diapers and napkins constitute about 1.5 tons of our everyday collection that reaches up to 45 tons, which is a small drop in the ocean of 1000 tons generated in Coimbatore every single day," says Prashanth, giving us the bigger picture which we often don't get to realise at all. A lot of this has also got to do with the fact that waste management is not yet a part of mainstream social discussion unless there is a catastrophe like floods.

Recompose was started as a private limited company in the year 2020 to be able to invest in research and development in the sector. Handling about 450 customers in the city that includes apartments, malls, hospitals, IT parks, etc, Recompose has carefully worked out three models to suit the needs of its clients – individual flats pay a monthly fee for collection and handling of waste; then there is the bin based model suitable for commercial places where bin is collected every time it is full. The third model is for the bulk generators – load based model where they are charged per load they create. These the ones who create about 2-3 tons on a daily basis. With a fleet capacity of 20 vehicles that run on compressed natural gas, Recompose's every operational decision has been trying to protect the environment in any which way possible.

All the waste collected is further segregated – organics go for dry composting and the compost is then given to farmers for free. Biomass briquettes are also produced and sold as a source of fuel. This project was supported by Bosch and Raac. The inorganic waste

is segregated into 14 categories – recyclables go for recycling (eg, plastic goes to local dealers, paper material is sent to ITC as they recycle paper) while the non recyclables go to cement factories. "It is basically a multitude of processes and a chain of local players all of whom work in sync to ensure that waste does not settle in the landfills. Coimbatore once had 4 dump yards and now we have only one. That explains the significance of our work," asserts Saran Raj.

Recompose looks forward to designing and making products from waste itself to be used in waste management. "That is how we can reduce our carbon emissions. Private enterprises like ours handle only 75-80 tons of everyday waste. Our growth can be a big support to civic bodies," they say, adding that they also work in few villages where user fee is provided by the Gram Panchayats.

Shanmuga Priya.T

13. SIRUTHULI

Healing the Waters



Coimbatore is known for its robust industrial sector, educational institutions, pleasant climate, and proximity to tourist attractions like Ooty and the Nilgiri Hills. With a population exceeding 1.6 million people, Coimbatore is one of the fastest-growing cities in India. But all this growth and rapid urbanisation comes at a heavy price. "A water surplus city started seeing water crisis and air quality declined. The city's climate began to change and hence, its identity," says Mr Chinnasamy, Chief Operating Officer at Siruthuli in Coimbatore.

Borewells evolved incredibly after the industrial revolution and allowed mankind to secure reliable water sources. Today, borewells play a crucial role in providing water for domestic, agricultural, and industrial use worldwide, highlighting the importance of sustainable groundwater management. As is the case with all critical resources, we took to exploitation first. Coimbatore

was no different. A global study from the 1980s warned against the rapid depletion of ground water reserves and a few eco conscious individuals heard the bell.

"It was all loud and clear. In 2002, there was no water even if we drilled up to 1200 feet below the ground. The famous Siruvani dam that supplied drinking water to all houses had water reserves capable of supporting water needs for only a week. If there were no rains, Siruvani reservoir would run dry. It was such a dangerous predicament. What if we ran out of all water?" recalls Chinnasamy with the same shock and concern from those years.

In 2003, few industrialists came together to resolve this situation and save Coimbatore from facing an imminent water crisis. Thus was born Siruthuli, which translates to 'small drop' to demonstrate the strength of small, significant steps that can be taken on a large scale.

Nestled in the foothills of the Western Ghats, the Waterman of India – Dr Rajendra Singh from Rajasthan convinced the team that Coimbatore had lot of catchment capacity. And so, they started working on the Krishnampathy lake that was desilted cautiously to be able to catch the incumbent rains. And it did! It was completely full in three rains, with an enhanced capacity of 220 million litres. The result was more than convincing for the team to extensively focus on desilting local water bodies. Then came Ukkulam, Kolarampathy, Ganganarayana Samudhram, Ayyankuttai, Valankulam, etc. The revival was not just about water but the complete ecology of the locality, inviting the lost migratory birds back to their local habitat. Creation of new ponds within the campus of educational institutions, check dams inside forest areas followed suit and Siruthuli's work expanded to neighbouring districts of Pudukottai, Sivagangai, Erode, Karur and Cuddalore.

More than 800 rain water harvesting structures were built across the city causing a remarkable change in the static ground water

levels and quality. Together, it is the work on 17 lakes, 20 ponds, 7 percolation ponds, 10 check dams and 903 rain water harvesting structures that have added a holding capacity of about 19,845 million litres. Today, one can access ground water by drilling just upto 150 feet. "But this is not our success. We have done all that we could to store as much water and save as much rain water as possible. We envisage this storage not to be exploited again," informs Chinnasamy with caution.

In 2005, Dr APJ Kalam's visit defined Siruthuli's next steps. Inspired by his words, Siruthuli began to focus upon improving air quality in the city. It was time to look into increasing the city's green cover that has been disappearing with each passing year. Afforestation efforts led to the plantation of more than 8 lakh trees and absorption of 12,053.5 tonnes of carbondioxide.

In the Anna University campus, planting one lakh trees using Miyawaki method led to the revival of 21 micro fauna including soil insects, butterflies, reptiles and amphibians. The average temperature within the campus is now 4 degrees lesser than the surroundings. "It is now the time to talk about all this work to the younger generation and prepare them for this responsibility. This is not just about awareness on environment but about mentally preparing them about the veracities of environment they may have to face if they do not consciously conserve critical resources like water and forests from now" he says.

"Right attitudes build right behaviours and that is what we are trying to do in our programs with school and college students in the city," he explains. Waste composting, roof top gardens and nature camps to encourage all these practices at household or community level are ongoing programs of Siruthuli that encourage budding eco warriors.

It has been 23 years since Siruthuli was born and the experienced team is doing all it can to revive the age old Noyyal River with the

support of Noyyal Research Institute that was established in 2005. Alongside, partnerships have also been built to work on treating water bodies for sewage pollution.

Industrial and sewage waste has not only polluted surface water resources but have also reached ground water aquifers, posing a serious threat to the health of mankind and crops. Water treatment is being experimented using various methods and technologies and Siruthuli has vowed to bring 'Nalla Thanni' in all of Coimbatore's water bodies by 2030.

With far reaching impact on environment, public health and economy, Siruthuli has shown the strength of vision in an experienced organisation.

Shanmuga Priya.T

14. SMALL DIFFERENCES

Small Differences and Big Impact



Many families indulge in community service or pro bono work as they find a deep sense of purpose in giving back to the society. It often becomes a legacy, shaping values across generations. Engaging in such work not only impacts the community but also enriches family bonds by fostering shared goals and empathy. "Social work has been an integral part of our lives. I have seen this empathy for more than three generations in my family and I got drawn to it, naturally," says Ms Shobhana Kumar, Founder and Managing Trustee of Small Differences in Coimbatore.

A poet, translator and chronicler, Shobhana has worn many hats. Yet, she prioritises her social activities in a way that seamlessly complements her diverse roles. "As a poet I was drawn to simple things. There is a tendency to explore darkness from new perspectives and that exploration in the mind ends in writing, which to me is the starting point of any action," she reminisces.

In 2012, Shobhana and her core volunteer team started buying food from hotels and distributing it to abandoned elderly people whom they found on the streets. “It all started with a discussion on a Facebook page between my husband, a friend and me,” she says with a smile, emphasizing that great things can begin from the most unexpected places. “We began to distribute food every Saturday. Two years later, another friend suggested that this activity can also benefit few transwomen who can be engaged in cooking the food. While it was the same effort from Small Differences, it has now benefitted two groups – the transwomen and the abandoned elderly. “One of them, Taslima Nasreen continues to cook for us even today,” she adds.

This opportunity allowed her team of volunteers to move closely with the transgender community and learn their lives from the inside. Attempts to secure employment opportunities for them were futile, but provoked the team to look into what the community actually expected from them. “We first thought of helping them with our own understanding and ideas. But the moment we sat down with them and asked how we could help them, the answers were simple and straight forward,” she says. Shobhana reminds us that transgender community cannot be seen as a homogenous community in every context.

From their experience, it was seen that while some were interested in education, some of them were wanting to learn new skills. Few wanted to be entrepreneurs and many wanted to manage their survival and enjoy their lives. Thus, Small Differences initiated the new vertical that focussed on funding the education of transgender persons. Very soon, it also introduced the support for formal skill training programs. “One of our students underwent the dry cleaning training program offered by Cooperative Weavers’ Society and established her own dry cleaning centre. Another student is about to graduate as an electrical engineer,” recalls Shobhana. Alongside education,

Small Differences also introduced sustenance and mentorship programs for the community.

Gradually, the network of volunteers also engaged transmen and transwomen who actively participated in all initiatives. They also began to manage the distribution of food every Saturday. “Today we have three of them enrolled in the ’Home Guards’. They are seen with respect and hope and are proud of themselves,” she says. The transformation of the ten bedded ortho ward in Coimbatore Government Hospital was a transcendent experience to all those who were involved. “With the intent to be useful, any individual can be the medium of change,” says Shobhana, acknowledging the committed engagement of all volunteers, especially the transpersons who managed the ward during the intervention.

In the last two years, Small Differences has also been running the education support program for orphan children across Chennai and Coimbatore. The program financially supports their education and has also mapped them with individual mentors online. Over 40 students have benefitted from this program, with most of them in class eleven. With their own network of volunteers and organisations, Small Differences has taken one leap at a time, reaching out to a vulnerable group.

Shobhana expresses her gratitude to the board members and dedicated volunteers, whom she considers the true driving force behind this impactful initiative. With every community they engage with, Small Differences ensures a deep understanding of local needs from an insider’s perspective. “It’s our metrics and networks, combined with the efforts of our volunteers, that have brought this vision to life. We are committed to continuing our efforts to the best of our abilities,” she affirms.

Shanmuga Priya.T

15. TRUST FOR RESTORING ENVIRONMENT AND EMPOWERING SOCIETY (TREES)

Planting Hope with Every Tree



Trees are a symbol of life, growth and continuity. They not only sustain ecosystems but also play a central role in maintaining biodiversity and regulating climate. Unfortunately, we have lost a significant number of trees that has led to profound consequences. And this loss of huge canopies is a crisis for all species including humans and the whole planet as such. Yet, we have individuals and their efforts that continue to increase green cover, who thoughtfully promote the planting of native, traditional species and inspire many others to follow suit. “We have lost way too many trees. Our efforts must be on a war footing. Each one of us must plant few trees and take care of them. This is the only essential way to sustain and support humanity,” warns Mr Sree Kumar, Founder of Trust for Restoring Environment and Empowering Society (TREES), in Chennai.

Sree Kumar is a class ten dropout from Palakkad, Kerala who worked as a welder for survival. He worked in Mumbai also and upon returning to Kerala, he started working as a driver. He came to Chennai at the age of 30 years in 2000 and continued to work as a driver till 2009 for an American company. "I was an ordinary driver who often slept under the shade of trees in many cities, villages. The connect one feels with nature and trees is inevitable as we are all part of the whole planet's symbiosis. Perhaps, this connection is not enough motivation to plant more trees. But being in the midst of personalities like Nammazhvar can change you fundamentally and compel you to think of nature from a functional perspective. I became humbled by what trees have been doing for us for eons," he recounts.

While working for an e-publishing company, Sree Kumar got involved in their 'one book-one tree' project. "It is here that I met Nammazhvar. His passion and love for natural farming, his deep ecological wisdom recognising trees as foundational to balance in nature touched me," he reminisces. His interest in these projects were noted and Sree Kumar got to travel with his inspiration all over the country. He learnt a lot in these trips and began to connect himself with the larger mission of afforestation.

"It is not only about how trees helped natural farming or how they strengthen soil. Their presence is enough to help soil replenish itself with nutrients like nitrogen and potassium," he adds. Then the reach of Green Kalam project, that was initiated by Actor Vivek made him realise that only trees can arrest global warming. "Ten years with such personalities convinced me to work on planting more and more trees. I knew what I had to do," says Sree Kumar.

Sree Kumar founded TREES in 2019 in Padur, Chennai and engaged a lot of volunteers from schools, colleges and corporates to develop saplings in his nursery. But to plant them, Sree Kumar had a clear plan. He chose to plant his saplings on protected lands like defense areas, NSG, Navy campuses, universities, schools and

colleges. He had seen that trees were easily evicted for metro rail, bridge construction and other development projects. Hence, chose these places so that the trees could survive and grow to their full potential. He also ensured that damaged trees were replanted in a suitable place and taken care of. TREES focusses exclusively on planting native, traditional species for diverse reasons. Their extensive root systems, adaptation to local conditions, ability to withstand extreme weather conditions, resistance to pests and diseases and their survival strategies makes them vital to maintaining the balance of ecosystems, especially as climate change increases the frequency of natural disasters.

"All of us know that trees are important. We all want to plant more trees. But only a few of us know the value of every tree we plant. Nature has gifted every species with a specific trait, like talent in humans. And that trait governs their role in every eco system," explains Sree Kumar. Arjuna Tree for example, removes salt content from ground water and acts as a natural water purifier. Its bark is also found to have medicinal properties that can help in the treatment of cancer and blood pressure. The culturally revered Neem Tree is probably the only tree which gives Vitamin C along with oxygen. It is very well known that every part of this tree including seed, fruit and flower has medicinal values. Sree Kumar is even more engrossed while explaining about the Mahua Tree, locally known as the Ilupai Maram.

It belongs to a rare species of trees that absorb both carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide from the atmosphere. The tree produces fragrant, nectar-rich flowers that attract bees and other pollinators, thus helps sustaining pollinator population. Oil from the Mahua seeds are a good remedy for joint pain. "Did you know that fifty years back this oil was used to make Diwali sweets? This is the task in hand, the next generation must be educated and sensitised about the values of our native trees. There are about 69 varieties whose wide presence on earth is extremely vital to strengthen

soil," he adds, elaborating on TREES' awareness programs for school, college students, community associations and also NGOs, volunteer groups who want to plant as many trees and nurture them.

Having planted, nurtured over 12,64,000 trees and educated more than 30 lakh school/college students in the last fifteen years, Sree Kumar is a name that now resonates with trees and their values. TREES has partnered with various groups to promote plantation. Chennai Metro Rail's first plantation initiative and also Chennai Corporation's plantation initiative are some of the recent projects. His field observations and travel to different states has also made him aware of the strengths of these trees, which he continues to share in all awareness sessions. "All of us can plant and take care of few trees. But I find it rewarding that I am able to build groups who will follow suit and inspire many more to do so. The growth of this chain of planters is a dream that has transcended from many thoughtful leaders like Nammazhvar and APJ Abdul Kalam. I will continue to do my part," promises Sree Kumar.

Shanmuga Priya.T

16. YASH CHARITABLE TRUST

Vision Inclusion Unveiled



Parenting a special child is a very unique experience that connects aspirations of both parents and the child. While parents aspire to see their special children able and independent, their children aspire to excel in activities that they enjoy doing. It not only calls for patience and perseverance, but also an ecosystem of support services that collectively focus upon mainstreaming these children. "How can these factors complement each other?" wondered Dr. Sushama Nagarkar, Psychologist and Managing Trustee, Yash Charitable Trust, Mumbai.

With an experience of over 15 years in The United States, Sushama returned to India in 2013. "I realised that children with intellectual challenges, Down Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy do not live the same quality of life as others. There were exclusionary spaces built for them. Programs tried to fit them into the system. As a practitioner, I have clearly seen why it

should be the other way round," she says with her experience as a practitioner and as a parent of an autistic child.

"My daughter lived a privileged life in the US as she had access to medical insurance, received stipend and also worked after college hours. She missed people around her. In India she connected with our families, fulfilling her social needs" she adds.

Yash Charitable Trust was founded in the year 2014 and the team decided to work with the challenged individual in focus. They were not only their primary clients but efforts were streamlined to build/create systems around them. "We follow a strength based framework because I sensed it was missing here. This is the need in this realm and YCT was shaped to fill this gap," explains Sushama.

YCT's work is planned across two main verticals – skilling and supported employment (SSEP) and adult support Kendra (ASK).

Beneficiaries, their family members, parents, supporters and well-wishers – all those who fit in the client's inner circle are offered training and support services that are customised to suit client specific needs. As intellectual and developmental disabilities are unique to every child and have a large spectrum of consequences, it becomes important to build programs that accommodate their interests appropriately. Having organised over 80 seminars, workshops, trainings and advocacy sessions through YCT, Sushama feels that information on intellectual and developmental disabilities are not provided holistically. "I have come across parents and care takers who could not understand that autism can have different manifestations in different individuals and what works for one may not work for another. Only when this is understood can they be open minded about exploring suitable therapy options," she insists.

Under the SSEP vertical, skill development centre trains them to engage in food/beverage sector and also imparts basic

employment readiness skills that can be useful in a variety of work environments. There are also beneficiaries who only approach YCT for employment support. They undergo this basic skills training program and are also offered opportunities at Arpan Food Services, which is a chain of outlets consisting of both differently abled and non-disabled adults. This model demonstrated the strength of both diversity and inclusion at work place. "We started with a small dabba service in 2015. The team's success not only gave visibility to the program but also new opportunities for growth. Our beneficiaries were out in the communities buying things, planning and delivering food, managing income, etc. Community was wary about this initiative but we did it!" shares Sushama.

With intellectually challenged adults prepared, engaged in the complete process chain, she not only saw their empowerment but also the community's acceptance. The change in their mindset and attitude towards these beneficiaries was the benchmark for YCT, prompting them to further the scope of their intervention.

"A person affected with cerebral palsy finds it difficult to coordinate tasks. But we have someone who can work on Microsoft excel with one hand. He is also very polite over phone and is good in accounts. He is the person who closes every day accounts and shuts our café every night. As our primary phase focusses on assessing their strengths it becomes possible to engage them in tasks they enjoy and are capable of carrying out," she adds.

In ASK vertical, all other ancillary services including therapeutic recreation are provided. Mental health support is a major component here and the team has also built a strong public awareness campaign. Besides workshops and seminars, parents are also mentored to prepare life plans for their children. Their public interest litigation against the lobby of doctors who promote the idea of research in stem cells to cure autism has

gained momentum due to increased awareness. YCT is all about acceptance, inclusion and empowerment but not rehabilitation. Sushama and team wants to see them live and work in the community of their choice. “We help them navigate systems but soon wish to see communities taking up this responsibility. It surely is a long, continuous process that needs consistent effort and commitment. YCT is at it,” she promises.

Shanmuga Priya.T

CHANGE MAKERS

Delve into the stories of individuals who are catalysts for change, leading initiatives that address pressing societal issues.

1. ANANTHA SAYANA

Creating a Ahimsa Economy



Anantha Sayana: The name evokes a serene image—a reclining figure—but Anantha is anything but still. He is a whirlwind of activity, tirelessly working across different fronts: advocating for safe, healthy food while passionately spearheading the revival of hand-dyed, handmade clothing, recreated in vibrant designs that seem to bloom anew with every collection. His clothes beckon with ravishing colors, innovative cuts, and an allure that makes you want to try them all.

I first met Brother Anantha Sayana in Madurai, though his two decades of impactful work had long preceded him. His speech at the Ahimsa Santhai in 2022 was nothing short of inspirational. He spoke with a rare combination of passion, knowledge, and authenticity—each word affirming a deeply held belief in sustainable living and community empowerment.

Our paths crossed again in Chennai, where Anantha and others were showcasing their work at a local fair. His venture, Tula, was on display, but what struck me was his commitment to uplifting others alongside himself. He wasn't merely a producer; he was a facilitator, opening doors for fellow artisans, farmers, and creators.

Curiosity led me to his headquarters at the Organic Market in Indiranagar, where I found Anantha—affectionately called Anathoo—seated cross-legged on the floor, working through supply lists as his phone buzzed constantly with inquiries. Despite his busy schedule, he was generous with his time, walking me through the market, where each product had a story. As we moved among organic vegetables, dry millets, oils, grains, and medicinal herbs, Anantha narrated a saga of fifteen years of relentless effort. His work has given rise to over fifteen such stores—havens of wholesome, organic produce in a market otherwise dominated by crowded supermarkets.

His growing network of customers and volunteers trusts that, from seed to plate, the products they buy are safe, fairly priced, and ecologically sustainable. Anantha told me how one senior IAS officer, deeply moved by his work, organised a talk that shifted government attitudes toward millets. No longer mere "bird feed," millets were being recognized for their potential to transform both agriculture and dietary habits. As the talk went on, senior officials were served multi-course millet-based meals, sparking both surprise and admiration.

As we continued our tour, Anantha shared samples—a millet muffin, groundnut sweets, specialty chocolates—crafted by customers and volunteers. This wasn't just a store; it was a movement. The products themselves spoke of their authenticity. Sharp-eyed customers knew when they were getting something fake, and quality always matched the price. Not fancy prices,

but fair ones. The trust came not from external certifications but from the integrity of the product itself.

Scaling up, as Anantha sees it, is not about mega-stores but rather small, well-managed shops run by different generations of people, each contributing to a sustainable future.

But what excites me even more is the story of handmade clothing and indigenous, sustainable dyes. Tula's range—filled with splendorous colors and innovative designs, crafted by design students and passionate supporters—is finding its footing in an industry otherwise ravaged by the negative impacts of fast fashion. Slowly but surely, Tula and its network are gaining traction. Engagement with stakeholders, consumers, schools, and producers is growing, and each item on the shelf carries a stunning backstory. Visit the store, and you'll feel it.

The organic movement is here, and it's thriving. We owe thanks to people like Anantha and his peers for their relentless efforts, for their refusal to give up in the face of exploitation, and for their steadfast belief in the power of sustainability. This two-decade journey is as complex as it is compelling, started by a handful of committed individuals who dared to challenge the system.

"I've never taken money from donors, trusts, or loans," Anantha said, "but tried a different path that works. Our scale, our certification, and our end users all know that this sustainable journey can be achieved—and must be—in this time of economic and ecological crisis."

A true champion of Ahimsa, I felt deeply humbled to meet and learn from him. When I asked if he would attend Kula 2024, he simply said, "There's no need for me to go. Others, who are looking for an investing path, might benefit. As for innovation," he added with a smile, "we've only revived what was always there."

For me, every step of his story is a path-breaking effort. In it, I see innovation, excellence, trust, confidence, and, most importantly, collectivity. It's the embodiment of a new Ahimsa economy, one that champions well-being.

In the coming days, I look forward to meeting some of the producers directly in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu.

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy

2. ANU KRITHIKA

Transforming Schools and Communities



Volunteering has been appealing and inspiring for many years. Social activities have always attracted interested volunteers, irrespective of their age, education and professional barriers. The education sector, in particular, has seen many players trying to address concerns, fix the issues in as many ways as possible. In fact, it is one sector with a vast spectrum of initiatives that attempt improve everything from access to quality. "Education is something all of us can easily relate to. It is something where all of us can imagine better outcomes from different initiatives. We have all been through its strengths and lacunae at some point in time. That experience counts and may be that brought our founders together," introspects Ms Anu Krithika, Manager at Aram Foundation Charitable Trust (AFCT) in Coimbatore.

Six friends who were actively engaged in the social sector came together in 2012 to do something for children studying

in government schools. The Trust was registered and they introduced two programs – one focusing on 'Safe Touch' and the other known as 'Happy Child' focused on life skills for primary class students. It was a package of ten skills that were imparted through activities. All the curriculum material was prepared by the internal team and the programs reached out to 80 corporation and government schools in 2012 itself. For a new organisation, this was a good record and gave them the confidence to introduce the third program on self-defense. Implemented in higher secondary schools in the city, government colleges and few private colleges in Coimbatore and its neighboring districts, this program gave a new identity to the trust's efforts.

"One of our Founder Trustees – Mr Gokul Raj himself handled the classes with his team. All basics of abuse was taught diligently – right from definition, types, identifying perpetrators, whom to contact for help and also cyber safety. Drawing from Martial Arts, this one-day program prepared young boys and girls to save themselves from any critical situation," Anu explains. While it was not a set agenda that the trust worked upon, it was robust societal observations that led to the planning of such contemporarily relevant programs. They also worked to promote awareness on plastic pollution in the schools they were already reaching out to. "The sense of urgency surrounding environmental issues is growing and we do recognise the importance of investing in environmental initiatives to create a more resilient and sustainable future," she adds.

With all this work speaking for their commitment, Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation's Commissioner invited AFCT to run their office from a corporation school campus. They focused more on education and introduced new programs like bridge courses, smart classes, mainstreaming slow learners and also teaching science experiments since 2015. As new CSR partners came forward to support their programs, AFCT carefully widened

its reach. "We prioritised the delivery of long-term impact in select schools over spreading our reach to a larger number of schools. We chose to promote the notion of holistic education in these schools and demonstrate the long term impacts of this perspective," says Anu, introducing AFCT's Holistic Education that is implemented in 21 schools in Coimbatore district.

The program focusses on skill development, recreation, teacher training, parents training on contemporary education/ choices, non formal course options and also training for the School Management Committees (body set up in every school, in adherence to the Right to Education Act). Health was also prioritised and camps were organised on specific days. Nutrition kits with fifteen products were distributed to the students. During the pandemic, it was a new course of efforts to ensure consistent support to the students. AFCT reached out to 112 schools and provided kits to enable the transition to online education. One kit consisted of a tripod stand, ring light, stand, mike, board, smart phone; a training program was also conducted to help teachers adapt to this transition. Even after schools resumed after the lockdowns, masks and sanitizers were provided to ensure protection. While painting and other infrastructure support for government and corporation schools were a regular feature at AFCT, activities like the above, tailored to attend to current challenges promise underprivileged students that they are definitely a priority and their education is as much important.

Apart from schools, AFCT also entered communities and established Students' Welfare and Development Centres (SWD) in R S Puram and Selvapuram. The mixed population here comprised of students who were poor, low in awareness, migrants and also from the slums. But all of them needed education support activities to benefit from their regular schooling – so regular tuitions, recreation, skill development classes were conducted in these centres. "Students here not only learnt their lessons but

realised themselves as a strong agency when they came together. At the centres, they were all exploring opportunities, keeping their guards down. Breaking the ice was a big challenge but their thirst for growth and prospects took us through," she recalls.

In order to bond with elder members in the community, awareness programs were also conducted to parents every month. Women were more active in these programs than men and their interest gave room for group work to indulge in health consciousness, alcoholism, etc. Within a year, it was seen that students who initially struggled to even pass in a single subject cleared all their exams. Those who could not read anything were now reading sentences and also forming them to strike a conversation or write an essay.

The impact was profound and the community saw it. AFCT now turned its focus upon menstrual hygiene, having witnessed the stigma around the very act of buying sanitary napkins. "The stigma has now reduced and women are better informed, prepared to handle their menopause. In fact, we at AFCT feel that our awareness on menstrual hygiene has had a deeper impact than that on general health," reflects Anu.

This success prompted them to venture into an income generation program for the women at Imayam Rehabilitation Centre by setting up resources to manufacture sanitary napkins. All the 20 destitute women here, who were initially very hesitant and skeptical about this business, are now active participants in the manufacturing activity. The women have managed to find many buyers in government colleges and the growth in business volume has encouraged AFCT to provide them with another machine with all raw material.

"We counselled them and gave them the resources. They made it all work. They handle all the revenue. It is their business," she smiles, looking forward to the upcoming impact assessment

studies in schools and communities. As it continues to grow and evolve, AFCT reminds that transformation can come only from consistent efforts. “We will try to take opportunities to where it is needed the most,” promises Anu.

Shanmuga Priya. T

3. ARUN KRISHNAMURTHY

Ripples from Reviving Water Bodies



Developing a concern for the environment often involves a fundamental shift in mindset. Individuals begin to see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem, understanding their inter-connectedness with nature. This shift can lead to greater empathy towards other living beings and a deeper appreciation for the natural world.

For Arun Krishnamurthy, Founder of Environmentalist Foundation of India, Chennai, rapid transformation of the lush green places around his home was impossible to ignore.

"Urban expansion comes at a cost – the shrinking water bodies and water scarcity in a matter of few years was a big shock. I sensed my generation's responsibility," he recalls. Even as a school student, Arun actively participated in conservation efforts. He was part of the local team in his hometown that came together to clear litter and clean a pond. He graduated in Microbiology

and did his Masters in Advertising and Public Relations from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in Delhi. To help understand conservation of water bodies better, he also studied a course at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in Netherlands. Amidst all this, he also worked for Google. "Working at Google for three years did not disconnect me from my concerns about conservation. In fact, I grew determined to take it full time. There was little anxiety, yes but I did not want to wait for somebody else to take the responsibility. I have always done things on my own," smiles Arun.

He founded the EFI in 2016 and today, they are present in 18 states across India. Under his leadership, EFI has restored 461 lakes and has created 91 afforestation sites. EFI's work is not only about lakes and tress, but also about beaches. The new project 'Samudra' intends to create awareness on the unique features of Indian coastal line and prevent its exploitation for commercial and recreation purposes. "All of this has a lot to do with how we teach children to see nature. The general boredom, disconnect and self-centred approach of present day has to be shaken and waded off. Environment Conservation has to become a lot more interesting for the younger generation," he remarks.

EFI' strength has been its volunteers – with a 20 members team working full time and an annual engagement of around 85,000 volunteers, EFI has emerged a clear winner in encouraging participation on a large scale, consistently.

How did EFI manage to sustain its volunteer base? Do volunteer based conservation efforts suffice the need and task at hand? "Mass public awareness and volunteering on field is crucial. It can be that the entire population pollutes and a handful of people have to correct it. Nature conservation should become national discipline and routine. EFI focuses on this and executes projects. We largely target institutions to achieve the numbers required to carry out the work. Cutting across age-gender-socio economic

classifications, nature enthusiasts from all walks of life are the reliable volunteers. Transforming a conventional human into an inspiring nature volunteer is the task at end," he sincerely responds.

Restoring a lake is a long process that is meticulously planned to sustain local flora and fauna. It starts with removal of garbage and debris that has accumulated in and around the lake. Then comes desilting to deepen the water body. This step not only restores storage capacity but also removes accumulated sediments to maintain healthy aquatic ecosystems.

The in-depth study of local habitat and dependants guides decision on trenches and plantation around to further support the revival process. After that, the embankments are strengthened with bunds to regulate flow of water in and out of the lake. Finally, hydrological and legal boundary to safeguard lake and its ecosystem are demarcated and notified to the local community.

"Involving them in the process in an inevitable effort because after all the hardships, they are the ones who will be immediately available to ensure that lakes are not polluted again. It is not simple stakeholder participation but that critical element contributing to long term sustainability and resilience of lake ecosystems," he informs.

Arun's work on the field is taken to the public through various means. One important channel is his documentaries and EFI's YouTube channel which not only speak of impact but inform all volunteers about the result of what they had been a part of. These videos narrate the stories of water bodies from birth to the current condition, evoking a sense of wonder about the ancient wisdom of water conservation planning.

"Step wells from 17th century, swastik wells from 18th century, they are all still there, surviving the expansion of population and urbanisation. Such thoughtful planning before centuries has

been an integral part of our civilisation. But how did we lose track of these marvellous structures that can support our water needs to this day? At least now, we must restore them to their full capacity," he says with determination.

Arun's work has been recognised by numerous awards including the Rolex Award for Enterprise in 2012, the British Council International Climate Champion Excellence Award in 2010. CNN named him as one of the Environmental Heroes in 2021 and Time Magazine named him 'Next Generation Leader' in 2022. But what is he looking forward to?

"EFI wants youngsters and the general population to understand that nature cannot be taken for granted. Its high time we think on how to sustain development with little damage to the environment. It is an empty, lonely battle which many are fighting, the only solution is peace, love and togetherness. We will not harm the planet when there is collective wisdom and love," he adds.

Shanmuga Priya.T

4. DAKSA S

Beyond the Desk



Visible environmental changes like the tangible effects of environmental degradation, extreme weather events, rising sea levels and loss of biodiversity have time and again underscored the need for addressing environmental issues. Global, national initiatives and partnerships have emphasized the importance of a unified approach to addressing environmental challenges, leading to more opportunities for study and career development in this field. Integrating knowledge from various disciplines such as biology, chemistry, geology and social sciences, this interdisciplinary approach attracts students with diverse academic interests and backgrounds. “In a way this also reflects a broader societal shift towards prioritizing environmental health and sustainability,” points Ms S Daksa, a postgraduate in the subject from Bangalore.

For her under graduation, she did a triple bachelor’s degree in chemistry, Botany and Environmental Science. The ensuing

projects and assignments made her realise that environment needs to be understood as a core subject and contextualised in the industrial sector. "Environment must be at the core, but industrial revolution and the story of exponential economic growth took us far from sharing concern for the environment. And that dream of perpetual, economic growth has depleted all our natural wealth in a matter of decades. Resources that took centuries to form and settle were just exploited. Global and national initiatives, protocols, landmark agreements, etc have attempted to anchor the right perspective and it is showing results with more youngsters coming forward to academically study and prepare themselves to work on these challenges," explains Daksa.

Her love for travelling further took her closer to thoughts about environment and its profound ability to affect every aspect of human life. Touched by her volunteering opportunities and internship experience, she wanted to correlate people and environment in every work. "I was somehow drawn into exploring unexplored horizons," she smiles. As a part of the college eco warriors' association she attended the workshop on eco-friendly Ganesha making workshop and over three years she has organised and helped create around 100 Ganesha idols. She also curated new ideas on making sanitary napkins from corn waste and production of cutlery from citrus waste.

In the last year of her post-graduation, Daksa worked on a project about challenges and opportunities towards a green aviation community, case study of Kempegowda international airport, Bengaluru. We all know that airports operate 24*7 and the emissions from airplanes go below the ground level atmosphere. "It all goes out, beyond our limit, so never really tried to learn its consequences," laughs Daksa. She studied various green initiatives of T2 at the airport as part of her internship which includes the concept of the terminal, technology, art, terminal in a garden and sustainability. The terminal was designed

and built using strategies aimed at improving performance across key areas such as energy savings, water efficiency, CO2 emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources. “It does sound technical to a lay person, but the basic fact is there is very little harm to the environment because of this project,” she adds.

The details can also help others plan their buildings responsibly – like shift to use of green materials like bamboo, reuse demolished parts of old buildings, utilise sun light to the optimum level, treat flushed water within the campus and reuse. Daksa appreciates the idea of global biodiversity in this terminal as conscious efforts were taken to nurture and transplant over one thousand species with the help of an in-house nursery set up for the purpose. She is now researching about the in-house carbon dioxide removal projects at this airport. She has also supported the team to prepare the GHG (green house gases) inventory which helped her understand sources and their emissions in depth. “Every such project wants to show that it is trying to offset the carbon emissions it made. However, fewer nature based solutions (NaBS) meant that investment is unable to flow freely. This has given rise to a market for carbon trading, which is a very lengthy process of offsetting for every ton. But I looked for faster delivering solutions,” elaborates Daksa.

Her mother’s chance reading of an article led her to research about bamboo plantation and all its pertinent features. She was elated to learn that bamboo grew faster than all other plants, and that too within a period of 3-5 years. Roads with a canopy of bamboo trees on either side reduced local temperature by almost 2-3 degrees further purified the air. Daksa was exited to learn more about this ‘miracle grass’ and the many products it can give birth to. “I was stunned when I saw the market for bamboo. I was learning more about this carbon negative material, which also regenerates every time you cut it and can also go back to soil as

biochar. I was visualising circular economy and went further to study about different species," she says.

Daksa also recalls about the magical abilities of Vetiver to remove impurities and its good carbon sequestrating capacity. It is more than evident that Daksa wants to explore nature based solutions with less sound technologies to all macro problems because she believes that the journey towards net zero is essential and totally worth it. She is currently pursuing her post graduate diploma in Environmental Law and simultaneously learning a variety of frameworks to prepare herself for studying the impact of chronic and acute climate risks. In the process, she also engaged in interaction with multiple companies to understand and delineate ideas. Recently, she conducted hazard analysis for a pharma company and proposed for installation of biogas plant based on her study of food waste generation at the campus.

She is very active on social media and often shares her reflections from travel and interaction with local cultures. "Sustainability was a way of life five decades back. Modernisation came with its perks and now we stand disconnected, in the middle of a big mess. It is now time to clear this mess. And more enthusiasts like me must come forward to do their job," appeals Daksa, who has already begun by designing carbon and environmental footprint games for the next generation to understand the impact of climate change.

Shanmuga Priya.T

5. KRISHNAN SUBRAMANIAN

Stitching Together a Brighter Future



In the heart of the bustling urban slums of Madhichiyam, Madurai, there exists a beacon of hope wrapped in the vibrant hue of yellow. This beacon is known as Yellow Bag, a small but impactful social enterprise that weaves tales of sustainability, empowerment, and community.

The story of Yellow Bag begins not with its colour, but with its purpose. Amidst a world drowning in the sea of plastic, Yellow Bag emerges as a champion of conscious consumerism. While tote bags have become a fashion statement, Yellow Bag goes beyond the trend, producing sustainable cotton bags that embody a commitment to the environment and social welfare.

But why yellow? It's not merely a colour choice; it's a symbol of the bright futures being woven within its threads. Yellow Bag's production process is as radiant as its hue, focusing on minimal

environmental impact and maximising rural employment, particularly for marginalised women.

Krishnan Subramanian, the founder of Yellow Bag, says, "Our mission is to weave together a brighter future for both people and the planet, one stitch at a time."

Sivakasi, famously known as the Fireworks Capital, relies heavily on the production of crackers, with around 6.5 lakh people depending on this industry. Yellow Bag sparked a different kind of revolution here. The organisation provided an alternative source of employment in collaboration with Credit Access, and successfully introduced an intervention. They trained 120 women in alternative careers such as tailoring and aari embroidery. Some women started their own tailoring businesses from home, while others found job opportunities in garment units thus igniting flames of entrepreneurship and job creation, offering a ray of hope amidst the shadows of traditional industries.

"My life changed when I started working at Yellow Bag. Not only do I have a steady job that supports my family, but I've also found a community of strong, supportive women who uplift each other every day." - Priya, Employee at Yellow Bag

The majority of the workforce comprises women from marginalised communities. Their employment not only enables them to provide better education for their children but also empowers them to achieve financial independence, thereby strengthening their resilience against domestic abuse.

"Through our women's tailoring network, we have successfully established a micro-enterprise that produces cloth bags using eco-friendly materials and processes. Our model ensures that producers receive approximately 25% of the value of each cloth bag, contributing to their economic empowerment. Moreover, our efforts have resulted in creating over 1410 months of

employment for women and have facilitated better education for over 500 students," says Krishnan.

Yellow Bag's impact transcends mere economic empowerment. Founded with a vision to transform society, Yellow Bag pioneers educational initiatives tailored to the needs of low-income children. Led by individuals deeply rooted in the community, these programs nurture confidence, creativity, and resilience, providing a lifeline to children vulnerable to abuse and violence.

As Kani Mohamad, the leader of education initiatives at Yellow Bag, emphasises, 'Our educational programs are tailored to the needs of low-income children, aiming to empower them to express themselves and believe in their potential. By providing guidance and fostering self-confidence, we help these children understand that they can achieve anything they set their minds to. Our interactive sessions, covering eight different fields of intelligence, are designed to engage and inspire. Our goal is not just academic; it's to provide holistic support, especially for those facing abuse and violence, ensuring their overall well-being.'"

Yellow Bag proudly belongs to Good Market, a special community uniting social enterprises, cooperatives, responsible businesses, civic organisations, networks, and changemakers. This curated community ensures that its members adhere to global standards and ethics, verified by the Social Enterprise World Forum (SEWF). SEWF's mission is to foster the growth of the global social enterprise movement, facilitating a shift towards a new impact-driven economy. Notably, Yellow Bag was chosen as one of nine social enterprises from India to participate in the prestigious Upaya-YSB accelerator program stands as a beacon of integrity and authenticity in an age of green washing.

Aligned with the government's efforts to promote cloth bags, Yellow Bag embodies the spirit of Meendum Manjappai

Iyakkam, reminding us of our elders' wisdom and the simple yet profound impact of conscious choices.

In a world where many claim to be sustainable for marketing purposes, Yellow Bag stands out as a true force for genuine impact. By supporting Yellow Bag, we not only protect the environment but also nurture the well-being of our communities, one vibrant tote at a time.

Kezia. S

6. PUSHPANATH

Pulicat: The Salt Lagoon, Palm Leaf Baskets, and Mangrove



My journey has been intertwined with the Ahimsa economy, a movement devoted to the ideals of a non-violent, sustainable economy. In September 2022, I embarked on a nearly 100-kilometre pilgrimage with men and women from across India and beyond. This odyssey led us to the heart of innovation, where stories were shared, and inspiration flowed freely among more than 180 artisans showcasing their handcrafted wares at a *Santhai* in Madurai.

For four days, we were cradled by the warmth of farmers and simple folk, who offered us shelter, food, and the comfort of sleeping on earthen floors. We were welcomed not just by individuals, but by the collective spirit of organic pioneers, housewives, students, and professionals. It was in this humble, yet profound gathering, at the first Ahimsa Santhai organised by CESI and others at the revered Gandhiji Museum in Madurai,

that we presented the concept of a historic Ahimsa path to then Finance Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. Palanivel Thiagarajan.

What emerged from those four days of intense interaction—sessions with experts, activists, and thought leaders from across the globe, as well as dialogues with children and adults alike—was a deep sense of possibility. A promise, if you will, to forge a robust non-violent economy: one that is sustainable, climate-resilient, and capable of generating income while spurring innovation. It is an economy that embraces the concept of well-being as its core.

After much reflection, it was decided that this scattered but shared enterprise needed to be moulded into a more coherent, vibrant, and promising economy. This vision required the establishment of a distinct brand—AHIMSA—underpinned by a cohesive code of ethics.

Central to this vision was the need for active communication, interaction with others on a similar journey, and the bringing together of enlightened innovators, design experts, and investors to elevate the craft and handmade products economy.

Fortune smiled upon us as we connected with the WEALL economy movement. Through these conversations, we linked up with the magnificent 200 Million Artisans initiative and the Kula Conclave 2. The 200 Million Artisans project is a ground-breaking effort that highlights the immense power, significance, and extraordinary impact of handcrafted products—especially those created by women who often receive so little, yet bear the brunt of climate change, suffering its impacts first, worst, and hardest.

As a long time supporter of fairtrade and craft- and a climate Justice walker-I find this initiative original and substantial as well as realistic and affirmative.

As always, my journey took me to the women who craft these products—to learn, understand, and narrate their stories.

60 kilometers from Chennai, in the village of Thiruvallur, lies Pulicat Lagoon, a place of breathtaking beauty and ecological wonder. Here, I met a handful of women on a blistering day, yet they toiled in a well-lit, airy, and congenial shelter under the auspices of the Pulicat Women Industrial Co-op, established in the 1960s.

The Palm Leaf Handicrafts produced here have earned a sterling reputation for their authenticity, creativity, and collective effort, reaching markets across the globe. There was a time when these products, with the support of institutions like the Commissioner for Handicrafts and associations such as South India Producers and Oxfam Bridge, found their niche. The women, who earned and learned much from this craft, saw it as a bonus to the main income derived from the lagoon's bounty—prawns, fish, and other natural products.

Pulicat Lagoon, the second-largest saltwater body, is a magical and biological marvel, its flora and fauna both incredible and overwhelming. Yet, the dual forces of human impact and climate change have dealt a devastating blow to the community that depends on this natural wealth. Life and livelihood are under significant threat.

Not long ago, a three-month harvest of prawns and fish would sustain a household for an entire year, with the earnings from Fair Trade baskets as an added bonus. But now, the economic decline is palpable. The scarcity of palm leaves—exacerbated by rampant deforestation, a shortage of climbers, and other factors—has driven up production costs.

Rita, Kokila, Zelka, Thaiba, Sakil, Safnia—women who collectively possess over 150 years of expertise, skill, and

ambition—though battered, have not given up hope. They told me simply, "We need markets. Let there be new investors. But more importantly, we need additional training in new designs and processes." The baskets, soap holders, and other products they showed me left me in awe. Their needs were straightforward and solid. They weren't asking for charity; they sought partnership, investment, skill development, and new pathways to sustainable production—and, therefore, critical income.

During my visit, I also spent time with the remarkable Meerasa S., the founding member and managing trustee of the Mangrove Foundation. His work on mangrove restoration is a beacon of hope, offering multiple benefits, including a robust response to the climate crisis.

This visit was profoundly significant for me—I learned so much, and felt deeply humbled by the courage and determination of the palm leaf basket-making women, alongside the pioneering efforts of Meerasa S., a child of the lagoon ecology and a champion of wetlands, recognized by the Government of India.

On August 15, a day after our meeting, I learned that Meerasa had been awarded the Green Hero Medal by the Government of Tamil Nadu. He works closely with the palm leaf basket-making women who craft magical bamboo baskets and other items. Such intersections and cooperation are vital—just as vital as an event like Kula 2024! I hope a few of these women can attend Kula, and with the unwavering support of mentor Panjaksharan from SIPA, showcase their stories and connect with everyone in Goa.

As I left Pulicat- late evening-I saw a single Pink Flaming – slightly away from its family forlorn and pensive-waiting!

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy

7. S.VASANTHI

Distinguished Identity



Inclusive and sustainable development for tribal populations has been facing many challenges owing to its complexity and the need to preserve traditional practices, wisdom, values. The very fact that they usually lived in remote, inaccessible parts made things far-fetched and prolonged. However, we have had leaders who demonstrated the potential of continuous attention and concerted efforts at the grassroots level.

This story is about Ms. S.Vasanthi who never visualised herself as a leader. With humility, dedication and quiet strength, she transformed her community from within and continues to do so, focusing on one concern at a time.

Vasanthi has not missed any opportunity to learn about the lives of tribals across India. Her lessons from every trip broadened her perspective and gave new insights and she began to see the

criticality of focusing on few basic rights like land pattas and caste certificates.

Drawing from her personal experience, her dedicated attention to these matters had a profound impact on people around her.

Born to farm labourers, facing poverty and livelihood challenges in a tribal family are something she was exposed to from birth. Brought up and educated by her maternal aunt, she was among the few from her village in Adigathur, Thiruvannamalai district, Tamilnadu whose school education was on track.

But this did not help her in college education as she did not have a caste certificate. "The lack of a caste certificate pushed me to experience all the demerits of not being officially granted an identity that I belonged to my community. We do have a big group of people who lament about the irony of caste certificates. They think these certificates underscore the persistence of caste-based identities and inequalities, which welfare programs seek to address. To us, it was a ticket ensuring access to a new opportunity," asserts Vasanthi.

Vasanthi obtained her caste certificate at the age of 17 and began to identify opportunities. After her first child, she started her career with the Irula Tribal Women Welfare Society (ITWWS) by teaching tribal children in the NLP schools as an tuition teacher. She then grew to the position of Village Development Officer (VDO) and took charge of 10 villages in Kanchipuram district.

Lack of caste certificates was a big concern here and people were clueless about how to handle this predicament. The fast protest by 60 families in Chengalpattu in the year 1996 helped 30 families receive their certificates. Vasanti took 30 women leaders from this group to Sirikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh to help them understand tribal lives and struggles in other states. A general need assessment survey in their villages revealed that

caste certificates and land pattas were major concerns. "Lack of certificates was omnipresent. I didn't know why it was so, but certainly knew that it must be addressed immediately," recalls Vasanthi.

Back in Kanchipuram, she handled issues of discrimination in schools and ensured that tribal children were not simply called as 'mountain dwellers' but as 'Irulars', reinforcing their identity.

She also felt the need for more anganwadis and got them sanctioned. However, the best aspect of these anganwadis was the community participation to add on to facilities like availability of plates, glasses, etc. Now that she was used to working with communities, village after village, she mobilised women into self-help groups and encouraged savings.

She also trained women on their rights, needs, welfare schemes and the strength of presenting their concerns as a collective force. All these efforts popularised the idea of land pattas with women names and reservation for women in gram panchayats.

By 2000, Vasanthi ensured that all Irular children in the district went to school. She worked as a community mobilisation officer till 2003 and then came out to work with women's groups exclusively.

The Vilvam Irular Women's SHG with 15 members was a humble beginning but soon she trained many such groups and in the process associated herself with Dalit and Irular welfare organisations in Chengalpattu district.

While working with marginalised groups, it is the reach that counts because every step changes the lives of the beneficiaries. "They learn what they must rightfully ask and get. Officers cannot speak on their behalf. Communities have to take the mantle," says Vasanthi. Her efforts were instrumental in building concrete houses for the first time in the tribal village of Onamanjeri.

In 2007, she joined the 'Tamilaga Adivasigal Kutamaipu' and worked in 18 districts in the Tamil Nadu. Here again, her focus was on caste certificates and land pattas.

Vasanthi contested the 2009 elections as an independent candidate. She did not win but got a new opportunity to learn the situation in 195 villages of Thiruvallur district. She organised a series of cultural programs to promote the idea of human rights and mobilised community to obtain caste certificates, land pattas, senior citizen petitions and aadhar cards.

"All these were simple steps to help them free from the shackles of inter-generational poverty and discrimination. The cycle has to stop at some point," she says. Her experience helped her join national advocacy groups and Vasanthi became a resource person to elucidate about tribal lives in different parts of the country.

Besides her countless awards, she was also invited by Tata Fellowship program to visit tribal villages in the eastern part of India. "All that experience strengthened my belief in equity. I thought all marginalised groups must understand this.

CSIM was a surprise to me. I saw people from all walks of life dreaming of development for different marginalised groups. I saw them taking unto themselves. More than inspiration, it reassured why equity was, and must be the priority," she reflects.

Her selection by the State Commission for Women to be a Non-official Member of the Widows and Destitute Women Welfare Board was a recognition of all that she stood for in her life. "In 2023, 20 years after my post-graduation in Sociology, this position is a testimony to the progress I have been able to drive in different communities," says a proud Vasanthi.

A renowned Women's Day speaker too, she is now focussed on promoting the idea of herbal nursery as a livelihood option for women in five villages of Thiruvallur District. "I have long

worked for tribal rights. I now want to focus on the economic development of tribal women because they must overcome double discrimination to be able to prove themselves. My CSIM days helped me realise that livelihood is a crucial part of equity," she insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T

8. VAISHALI JAMES

Sangatna - New Lifeline for Women Entrepreneurs



Balancing modern professional aspirations with a family's traditional values can be challenging, yet it often serves as a powerful catalyst for meaningful transformation. "I come from a joint family set up where elders have a strong say in the all decisions - personal and professional. I've grown accustomed to seeing boys receive preferential treatment, with their aspirations readily validated and encouraged. Fortunately, my father was a rebel who understood very early on that women need to be independent in all aspects of life, including financial. That fuelled my career and cause choices. I was not only charting less trodden paths for myself, but also felt the need to enable other women to do the same. The notion of women's treatment as second class citizens stayed with me," shares Ms Vaishali James, Co-Founder of Sangatna, a for profit private limited company in Chennai.

After graduating in Botany Vaishali completed her MBA from The Open University of London. After working for nineteen

years in the ITES sector, Vaishali continued to feel a sense of vacuum within. "It was like a treadmill run. I was going ahead vainly, but nowhere. At a point,I decided to step off. As I was evaluating my choices, I knew I had to do something in the impact sector. That's how my second job came about – in the FinTech industry, serving underserved, blue-collared workers to bring about financial inclusion," she says. Given the disparities she saw in her growing years and the disparities she continued to see, the need to work with women stayed with her and she found fulfilment in volunteering with two NGOs working exclusively with women. This is where she met her co-founders and very quickly saw that they shared common thinking and passion when it came to women in the workplace – employees and entrepreneurs alike. The trio (Gayatri, Maragathavalli and Vaishali) decided to join forces and set up an organisation to enable and empower women to stay in the workplace.

A break in job due to the COVID pandemic led her to do an extensive research on issues faced by women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs in India face unique challenges shaped by societal norms, systemic barriers and structural issues. Deep-rooted stereotypes often question women's leadership capabilities, making it harder to gain trust and respect in the business ecosystem. Women often faced challenges securing loans or investments, as financial institutions perceived them as high-risk borrowers. Women mostly lacked access to informal financial support systems or investor networks that are dominated by men.

Women entrepreneurs often found it difficult to access mentorship programs or business networks that can guide them in scaling their ventures. Limited representation of women in leadership roles within industries exacerbates this gap. "I strongly felt that whatever I initiated must somehow respond to these challenges. With like-minded friends on board, Sangatna finally became a

reality in April 2024," she says proudly.

Sangatna's primary objective is to demonstrate respect for women's efforts and with that, they identified different focus points to build a support system that can nurture women entrepreneurs, irrespective of their socio economic background. "We are a match making platform helping women entrepreneurs connect with angel investors. In the process, we have our slew of services to nurture women and mentor them," Vaishali adds. Alongside the access to investment, Sangatna has also built a mentor cohort of senior industry leaders across different realms like marketing, finance, human resources, product development, etc. who can be available as mentors for the women entrepreneurs. "We still have women from tier 2 and tier 3 cities who don't even know that they can approach investors with their ideas. Therefore, it is not just about their idea but a multitude of factors that determines their perseverance and success. Sangatna wants to be there in every step. That is the reason we have a group of mentors who can educate and prepare the women to survive in the competitive business environment," she justifies.

The investment and mentorship support played a pivotal role in fostering a community and peer group for women entrepreneurs. This space provides them with the opportunity to share their fears, anxieties, excitement and challenges, while also offering support and insights to one another. It is not only about learning and giving back, but the journey of growing together that can encourage more women to come forward. "As they grow bigger in number, their representation at the policy level will be a natural outcome of this process. We have a long path ahead of us, but we have begun with the right pulse," says Vaishali with determination.

Since inception, Sangatna is in active conversations with 12 women entrepreneurs and 5 of them are ready to discuss their projects with investors. All due diligence and idea validation has

been carried out by Sangatna. It is only after this initial thorough scrutiny and analysis of the potential for scaling, the projects are prepared for conversation with investors.

Sangatna's first investor connect event is coming up in December 2024 and Vaishali believes in the rationale and processes followed at Sangatna. "We are also prepared to launch new support services on a short/long term basis if women justify the need for them. Sangatna's success lies in the success of these women entrepreneurs. Their enterprises must be able to survive with the support systems we create for them. We are very excited to see this unfold," she adds.

Shanmuga Priya.T

9. VAISHNAVI NUDURUMATI

Sports for All



Sports play a vital role in promoting physical health, social inclusion, and personal development, yet access to these opportunities is often limited for underprivileged communities. Engaging in sports can foster teamwork, resilience and discipline, equipping individuals with essential life skills that extend beyond the playing field. For children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, sports can be a powerful tool for empowerment, providing a safe space for expression, creativity and social interaction. "By investing in sports for underprivileged individuals, we can create pathways to a brighter future, instilling hope and inspiring dreams of achievement that might otherwise seem unattainable," says Mr Vaishnavi Nudurumati, Founder of The India Sports Initiative in Pune, Maharashtra.

Having grown up in different cities, Vaishnavi's interest and talent in sports gave her the exposure to interact with different

teams. “I started attending Taekwondo classes from my school in Gujarat. My coach was very encouraging and he guided me to pursue further. Every time I was part of a new team, I saw new athletes from varied backgrounds. Sadly, team mates from low income communities who had also won in state and national level competitions gave up after a point. This was not a one-time occurrence. It spoke volumes about the lack of infrastructure and financial support for real talent, that could come from anywhere in the country,” laments Vaishnavi.

Now an established Taekwondo professional who has won four national level medals and 12 state gold medals, she wanted to work on building Indian talent for international sports. “There is so much talent out there but very few resources to support their growth and access the right avenue. I can see an Olympian in every lane. I wondered if I could take games to them,” she shares. Vaishnavi was attempting to build a model to take structured, competitive sports to underprivileged communities, who would otherwise give up pursuit or compromise. After her graduation in Political Science from University of Delhi, she enrolled in Teach for India Fellowship and soon after incubated The India Sports Initiative in 2022.

Vaishnavi notes that sports interventions tend to focus either on promoting social-emotional learning or on preparing athletes for elite events like the Olympics. “These represent two extremes in a pyramid, with very little intervention occurring in the middle levels where there’s significant potential to nurture talent. This is where I envision TISI making a difference in the near future,” she explains. Identifying talent was the first step to building India as a sports super power.

The initial level of intervention at TISI is the Starter Program, aimed at children aged 8 to 11. In this program, children from the community or schools are introduced to various sports activities and participate in games to gauge their interest in sports. Over

time, they are assessed for sport-specific requirements, such as shoulder strength for archery.

For the identified students, they have curated the core program where students undergo transformational training to cultivate athletic excellence and support their holistic development. This is usually implemented as an after school program till students reach the age of 16 years. There is more focus on competitive sports, professional training and mentorship under sport specific coaches. “This is the foundation they will need to plan for national and international competitions. We have planned it in such a way to give them a strong launch pad into competitions. Which is why we call this program ‘Rookies 2 Revere’,” she adds.

The third level is the Ignite Accelerator where exceptionally talented students in the 16-18 years age group are exposed to bridge programs to sustain their interest and learn latest techniques. “Our model is backed by the experience of all athletes on board and we really understand will work in the communities and schools. However, we are continuously learning and studying the sports ecosystem to keep the interventions relevant and innovative,” says Vaishnavi. Beginning with Taekwondo and Atheletics workshop in six Mumbai schools where she taught more than 350 students, to the Archery pilot program in Pune’s Avasara Academy, TISI has come a long way in understanding how sports interventions work in India.

“There is no prior experience to learn from. Any sports intervention in our country needs to be implemented to be tested. I can confidently say we are crossing this phase soon,” she smiles. TISI has designed the Archery pilot program with a vision to promote unconventional Olympic sports in the country.

Vaishnavi recognises that sports can be a powerful pathway for social mobility. She emphasises that achievements in any

sport, even at district and state levels, can unlock numerous opportunities. She shares that her own journey led her to the University of Delhi through the sports quota. “Who I am today is because of what sports has given me,” she stresses.

Shanmuga Priya.T

10. XAVIER BENEDICT

Mission Pulicat



Since 2007, AARDE has been an actively engaged not-for-profit registered trust dedicated to promoting and conserving the natural and built heritage of Pulicat Lagoon. Its mission finds support through a range of activities, such as training and the sale of Palm-Leaf Craft, organising workshops and architecture film festivals, as well as offering consultancy and research services.

The founder of AARDE, Xavier Benedict, also a member of ICOMOS-India and IUCN-CEM, holds degrees from prestigious institutions including the School of Architecture and Planning (SAP) in Chennai and Lancaster University Management School in the UK. As Founder-Trustee of the AARDE Foundation, he leads initiatives focused on conserving the Pulicat Lagoon, even as he has overseen design and construction of educational institutions, IT parks and infrastructure developments. The organisation's campaigns in Pulicat are spread across grassroot,

national and international levels. As a member of the United Nations Habitat (UN-H) and The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR), AARDE actively participates in forums to advocate for the preservation of the Pulicat Lagoon on an international platform.

The organisation also engages in continuous dialogue with state agencies, public, and the media to raise awareness and drive positive change for the lagoon. Since 2009, the foundation has organised exhibitions, workshops, and research initiatives across India to amplify its message.

Since it began in 2009, AARDE (Art & Architecture Research, Development and Education) Foundation has been committed to fostering a socially responsible and environmentally sustainable future through its not-for-profit architecture and design services.

Established by a consortium of distinguished professionals and registered under the Indian Trust Acts, the foundation has focused its work across both, rural and urban platforms. AARDE has actively engaged in the promotion and preservation of the Pulicat Lagoon, which is the second-largest brackish water lagoon in South Asia. The initiative is emblematic of the organisation's commitment to nurturing and conserving natural resources. AARDE has also facilitated dialogue between architecture and the public. Through workshops, architecture-themed film festivals, and lectures, AARDE has created a vibrant exchange of ideas and perspectives within the urban context.

However, at the heart of its efforts lies AARDE's grassroots campaign. Through holistic sensitization activities, including local camps, quizzes, and workshops, the organisation aims to garner support from inhabitants of the Pulicat Lagoon. The Pulicat Museum serves as a cornerstone of its ground-level actions, adding significant value to various endeavors.

Part of the work that AARDE does in Pulicat involves empowering over 120 female fisherfolk through palm-leaf craft. The traditional craft is known to improve the income of the women belonging to self-help groups and protect the environment. The birth anniversary of Chennai is generally celebrated at Pulicat through traditional catamaran races, quiz, drawing & kolam competitions. However, AARDE's efforts in Pulicat don't stand in isolation. Part of the work the AARDE Foundation does, is revival of the cotton route along the Coromandel Coast. The TN coastline, or the Coromandel Coast, was the largest export base of of cotton until the 19th century. Archival records prove that more than 4,500 ships visited Pulicat for over two centuries, with European and Japanese communities visiting India to trade in cotton.

Given that cotton cultivators have lost their economic foothold, AARDE Foundation's project aims at revival of indigenous cotton in order to secure the economy of the Pulicat community along the Coromandel Coast that cultivates the cotton crop. The locality's general hospital building, formerly the Dutch Governor's Office, dates back to the 1640s and stands in Pulicat. Damaged during the Thane cyclone in 2010, the historic structure was left in ruins. Efforts are now underway, in collaboration with TN-PWD and donors, to restore this significant edifice. The renovation of this building into a hospital holds the potential to benefit over 33 villages in and around Pulicat, revitalizing healthcare services for the community.

Today, Pulicat is in the midst of an environmental crisis. The erosion of sand barrier islands in the region poses a significant threat, as it would remove natural defenses against cyclones and adverse climate events. Experts warn that the proposed port expansion could exacerbate the issue by narrowing the mouth of the River Kosasthalaiyar, Chennai's largest natural drain, leading to overloaded floodplains and heightened flood risk for the city.

Moreover, the expansion could endanger the adjacent Pulicat Bird Sanctuary, which is a protected area.

Frequent development and infrastructure projects have impacted the delicate ecological balance of the Pulicat Lagoon and several thousands of fisherfolk in the region fear for their livelihoods. Experts estimate that efforts by multiple conservationists and NGOs will be required to bring more awareness and sensitization to the issues faced by the region, and how they impact the local community. AARDE's role in all this will be keenly watched even as the organisation has stood up for the local community before, spreading awareness about the region on national and international platforms. A grassroot intervention or greater awareness may well be the way forward in the attempt to save the Pulicat Lagoon and the community that dwells within.

Rahul Philip

TRENDSETTERS

Discover profiles of Bosco Institute, Jorhat, Alumni setting new trends in social sectors, influencing positive transformations in their communities.

1. ANITHA VANLALNUNMAWII

A Sanctuary for Creativity, Expression, and Mental Health



The name "In Lehkha" holds dual significance: "Your Book" and "Paper House." This duality captures its purpose of supporting writers.

In a world where storytelling and creativity often take a backseat amidst life's demands, In Lehkha stands as a beacon for aspiring writers and creatives, particularly in the Mizo community. Established in 2018 and opened to the public in 2022, this unique organisation bridges the gap between talent and opportunity by offering a platform for individuals to share their stories and ideas with the world. With its innovative approach to publishing, community-building, and education, In Lehkha has become more than just a literary initiative—it is a safe space for growth, belonging, and expression. The journey to establish the foundation was not without its hurdles. As the founder Anita recounts, financial constraints, lack of support, and scepticism

from the community were significant obstacles. Initially misunderstood as a religious or societal venture, the foundation struggled to gain traction. However, Anita's unwavering belief in her vision and support from close friends and well-wishers propelled the initiative forward.

The foundation has also faced logistical and operational challenges. From quitting a stable government job to dedicating herself entirely to this cause, Anita has navigated a delicate balance between personal and professional commitments. Today, with a full-time team and a strong sense of community, the foundation thrives, offering much-needed resources to aspiring writers and readers in the region. One of the foundation's standout features is its innovative approach. Its bookshop-cum-café is not only a repository of local and international literature but also a cozy space where people can connect over a cup of coffee and pastries. The concept emerged from years of dreaming and meticulous planning, blending her love for books and a desire to create a welcoming space for the community.

Participants often praise the foundation for its warm and inclusive environment. Many share stories of how the space encouraged them to step out of their comfort zones and embrace their creativity. From hosting cultural events to facilitating interactions between young writers and established professionals, the foundation has become a vibrant hub of activity. A core mission of the foundation is to promote local authors and provide them with opportunities to publish and share their work. "Many young writers are not taken seriously or face difficulties in publishing their books with established houses," she explains. The foundation addresses this gap by assisting with quality publishing and offering a platform to showcase their work.

Through workshops, book discussions, and collaborative events, the foundation fosters critical thinking and a love for literature. It also aims to expand its publishing arm across North-Eastern India,

supporting writers from underrepresented regions. Balancing the demands of running a foundation with personal life is no small feat. However, for Anita, this endeavour is more a labour of love than work. Surrounded by a supportive community of friends, writers, and artists, she finds joy in every aspect of her role. "I don't feel like it's work. It's something I love," she shares.

As the foundation continues to grow, she dreams of expanding its reach across India, particularly in the Northeast, to nurture more talent and create a robust literary community. With a vision deeply rooted in the love for books and the power of storytelling, this initiative is set to inspire countless others to embrace the written word and the freedom of expression it brings.

The name "In Lehkha" holds dual significance: "Your Book" and "Paper House." This duality captures its purpose of supporting aspiring writers by providing the resources, mentorship, and environment needed to bring their visions to life.

In Lehkha serves as a safe space for creative minds, fostering a sense of belonging and freedom. It encourages young people, especially those in the artistic and creative communities, to express themselves, embrace authenticity, and grow both as individuals and as contributors to society. They assist writers who face challenges such as limited financial resources, time constraints, or lack of knowledge about the publishing process. By offering guidance and prioritizing the author's ideas and vision, the organisation ensures the production of high-quality books that reflect each writer's unique voice.

They even host readings, discussions, and meetups to foster connections and mutual inspiration among participants. These events create an inclusive platform where individuals can share their passions, grow together, and develop a sense of belonging and empathy. They conduct seminars and workshops on various topics, including writing, mental health, life skills, and social

issues. These sessions, held at schools, cafés, and In Lehkha's own premises, aim to address subjects often overlooked in traditional settings, equipping young people with valuable insights and skills. Their ambitions extend beyond fostering creativity. As the organisation grows, it aims to generate employment opportunities while promoting values like hard work, sincerity, and perseverance. These principles inspire individuals to become dependable contributors to their communities.

By turning challenges into opportunities and fostering a culture of support and creativity, this foundation serves as a shining example of what can be achieved with passion, determination, and a love for community. With a focus on nurturing young Mizo talent, the organisation has successfully published 10 books, all written by emerging Mizo authors.

In Lehkha is not just a publishing house or a book café; it's a movement that champions storytelling and the power of shared experiences. By providing spaces for dialogue, connection, and growth, the organisation helps individuals discover their potential and make meaningful contributions to their communities. With its unwavering commitment to creativity and empowerment, In Lehkha is redefining the literary and cultural landscape of the Mizo community, leaving an indelible impact on the lives it touches.

Bhavadharani K

2. N. APONG

Empowering Communities



N. Apong, a passionate social entrepreneur, shares his inspiring journey of blending entrepreneurial ambition with the desire to create a positive social impact. From working in the corporate sector to running an initiative that uplifts local communities, Apong's story reflects resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to his community. Founded in 2024 Whumi Enterprise is dedicated to the social and economic empowerment of rural communities. Their mission is to uplift local communities in the Kiphire District through comprehensive training and sustainable business development in livestock farming, with a particular focus on reviving the traditional practice of Piggery. By combining modern techniques with indigenous knowledge, they aim to foster economic growth and preserve cultural heritage while creating lasting benefits for the community.

Apong's professional journey began in 2019 in the corporate sector. After spending three and a half years gaining valuable

experience, he returned to Delhi and later to his home state, Nagaland, to pursue a more meaningful path. His transition into the nonprofit sector marked a turning point, where he realized his passion for helping the community. While working for a nonprofit organisation, he discovered the concept of social entrepreneurship—a perfect confluence of his desire to address social issues and his ambition to build something of his own. This revelation inspired him to create a venture that contributes to his community while providing a sustainable livelihood.

One of the central goals of his organisation is to help farmers engaged in piggery to tackle challenges like the African Swine Flu (ASF) and improve the quality of meat available in the market. Apong emphasizes the importance of ensuring both healthy food production and sustainable farming practices. His organisation is also dedicated to empowering youth and local entrepreneurs, providing them with opportunities to grow and scale their businesses.

Piggery has been an integral part of the cultural and economic fabric of the state of Nagaland. Whumi Enterprise recognizes its significance and aims to modernize this traditional practice. Through their programs, they provide specialized training on improved pig farming techniques, including breed selection, housing, feeding, and health management., Educate farmers on disease prevention and veterinary care to ensure the well-being of livestock, Introduce sustainable practices that minimize environmental impact and optimize resources.

They support the development of livestock farming to enhance economic resilience. They facilitate training on livestocks,, to broaden income streams for rural families and promote integrated farming systems that combine livestock rearing with agriculture to improve productivity and sustainability, provide guidance on value addition, such as processing and marketing of livestock products.

"We want to give an opportunity to the youth and local people to reach the next level of entrepreneurship," Apong explains, highlighting the transformative vision behind his work. Apong's journey has been enriched by collaborations with various individuals and organizations. One of his most notable partnerships is with Royal Enfield, working on an agroforestry project aimed at promoting sustainable food farming in Khongka Village. Through this collaboration, he has gained insights into resource management and expanded his network across the North-east region.

For Apong, partnerships are invaluable learning opportunities that foster innovation and community impact. He credits these collaborations with enhancing his entrepreneurial capabilities and enabling him to address pressing local challenges.

As he reflects on his journey, Apong shares insights into how his work impacts the community in the long term, the challenges he has faced, and the lessons he has learned along the way. He believes that the key to sustainable community development lies in education and knowledge sharing. His organisation conducts training programs and provides information that local communities can apply in their practices. He emphasizes that learning is a continuous process that contributes to both individual growth and the collective sustainability of the community. "What we are doing is learning ourselves and sharing whatever we learn with the community. If you learn something and apply it in your life and practices, it helps you achieve long-term goals and sustain along the way," Apong explains.

For Apong, the journey of a social entrepreneur has been fraught with challenges, ranging from financial constraints to limited resources and government support. Hailing from a remote village near the Myanmar border, Apong faced significant hurdles due to lack of economic opportunities in the region. One of the most pressing challenges has been financial instability. Apong recalls,

"I come from a humble background, from one of the most remote places in the state. Our village has limited resources with little government assistance. Financial challenges have been my toughest hurdle."

Support from initiatives like the Youth Involve Fellowship provided Apong with the fund needed to develop his enterprise and address these challenges. This assistance became a turning point, enabling him to grow his organisation and extend its impact. He attributes much of his success to his optimistic outlook. Despite the obstacles, he believes that positivity and perseverance are essential for overcoming adversity. "I've always had this positivity in my mind that things will be okay if you just keep going. That mindset has kept me moving forward," he says. Apong's optimism fuels his determination to address the socio-economic issues faced by his community and inspire others to do the same.

When reflecting on failures, Apong views them as stepping stones rather than setbacks. While he acknowledges having experienced numerous failures, he sees them as opportunities for growth and improvement. "I don't recall any failure that devastated me. Small failures have built me, and I learn from them every day," he shares. This perspective highlights his resilience and ability to adapt, which have been instrumental in his journey as a social entrepreneur.

Apong's vision for the future revolves around creating opportunities for youth and local entrepreneurs, helping them scale their efforts, and fostering sustainable development. Through his work, he aims to impart knowledge, provide resources, and empower communities to thrive in the face of challenges. His story is a testament to how determination, optimism, and a commitment to learning can overcome even the most significant obstacles. By sharing his experiences, Apong

inspires others to embrace the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship and work toward a better future for all.

Reflecting on the qualities necessary for social entrepreneurship, Apong identifies leadership and information as the cornerstones. "Leadership and access to the right information are crucial for anyone aspiring to be an entrepreneur," he asserts. These qualities, combined with his passion for community service, have guided his work and helped him navigate challenges.

When asked about measuring the social impact of his work, Apong admits it is difficult to quantify. However, he gauges success through the enthusiasm and progress of the people he works with. Witnessing farmers adopting better practices and youth scaling up their entrepreneurial ventures gives him a sense of accomplishment. Apong's mission is clear: to create opportunities for others, support local entrepreneurship, and address community challenges with innovative solutions. Through his initiative, he hopes to foster a self-reliant, thriving community that inspires others to follow in his footsteps.

His journey as a social entrepreneur reflects his unwavering commitment to fostering growth and resilience in his community. A key aspect of his leadership lies in his approach to feedback—both positive and negative. For Apong, every critique is an opportunity to improve, refine, and address challenges constructively. "Negative feedback is a positive challenge that helps us grow," he explains. This mindset not only bolsters his personal growth but also strengthens the impact of his organisation on the community.

Looking toward the future, Apong envisions a legacy where local communities are empowered with knowledge, tools, and confidence to excel in entrepreneurship and business. "I want to ensure that they access the best information, scale their practices, and dominate the market as competitive entrepreneurs," he

states with conviction. His dream is to bridge the gap between traditional farming practices and modern market dynamics, allowing local farmers to thrive in an ever-evolving economic landscape.

Apong recognizes the transformative potential of technology in advancing farming practices and entrepreneurship. While he acknowledges that technology may pose challenges, he remains focused on leveraging its advantages to enhance productivity and scale operations. “If used effectively, technology can multiply our efforts and accelerate our journey,” he asserts.

When asked about advice for aspiring social entrepreneurs, Apong emphasizes two foundational principles: love for one’s community and optimism. “If you don’t love your community, social entrepreneurship will not be fruitful,” he advises. For him, genuine care for the community fuels resilience, helping one navigate failures and challenges. Coupled with a positive outlook, this love becomes the driving force that sustains efforts toward meaningful change.

Through his work, Apong exemplifies how love for community, innovation, and adaptability can spark transformative change. His legacy is one of empowerment—a testament to the potential of social entrepreneurship to uplift even the most remote and underserved regions. With visionaries like him leading the way, the future of grassroots development looks brighter than ever.

Bhavadharani K

3. HEJANG MISAO

Empowering Change through Vision, Leadership and Passion



In the tumultuous landscape of North East India, where conflict, poverty, and injustice often overshadow daily life, a beacon of hope and transformation shines through Integrated Social and Institutional Development for Empowerment - North East (InSIDE - North East). This non-profit organisation, registered under the Manipur Society Registration Act, is a testament to the power of collective action and visionary leadership. It was founded in 2013 by Hejang Misao, whose personal journey and deep-rooted values drive the organisation's mission to foster a just and peaceful society.

Hejang Misao's journey to founding InSIDE - North East is deeply personal. "I strongly believe in gender equality and empowerment because who I am today is all because of my mother," Misao reflects. Growing up in an environment marked by conflict and societal challenges, Misao's mother played

a pivotal role in shaping his values and vision. Her resilience and strength in the face of adversity left an indelible mark on him. "If you empower a boy, you empower an individual. If you empower a girl, you empower the whole family," Misao explains, highlighting his belief that women's empowerment is crucial for societal progress.

InSIDE - North East operates with a clear and compelling vision: to create a "just and peaceful society." This vision is reflected in the organisation's mission to empower the powerless by building their capacities and reinforcing traditional institutions of love, mutual understanding, communal harmony, and brotherhood. The organisation's goals are ambitious and multifaceted, addressing issues from gender imbalance to policy advocacy.

One of InSIDE - North East's primary objectives is to sensitize people to their rights and values, breaking the culture of silence that often suppresses voices. "Our aim is to enable people to fight for their own causes and engage policymakers to enact and implement laws that favor the poor," Misao notes. The organisation also focuses on fostering youth creativity and leadership, which Misao sees as essential for a better society. "Our future depends on the next generation. By empowering youth, we are investing in the future," he asserts.

InSIDE - North East employs a range of strategic interventions to achieve its goals. These include conducting residential and non-residential training programs, spreading awareness through various media, and engaging with policymakers.

The organisation's key thematic areas include education, gender equity, human and institutional development, youth development, conflict transformation, social security, health, and the environment. These areas are interlinked, reflecting a holistic approach to addressing the complex challenges of the region. Misao emphasizes that tackling these issues requires a

comprehensive strategy: "We need to address education, gender, and health in an integrated manner to create sustainable change."

Women's empowerment is one of the central focuses of InSIDE - North East, deeply influenced by Misao's personal experiences. "Our goal is to empower women leaders and challenge the patriarchal norms that restrict their choices," he says. This commitment is evident in the organisation's programs, such as the Football for Girls initiative.

Football for Girls is a groundbreaking program aimed at breaking stereotypes and encouraging girls to engage in sports traditionally dominated by boys. "In a society where sports like football are seen as masculine, we wanted to provide girls with the opportunity to play and excel," Misao explains. This initiative has not only given girls a platform to showcase their talents but has also challenged societal norms, empowering them to pursue their dreams.

The program's success is reflected in the growing number of women participating in football, with some even joining Indian football clubs. "We have seen many girls move beyond traditional roles, pursuing careers and leadership positions in sports," Misao adds. This initiative is a testament to the transformative power of sports in breaking gender barriers and fostering empowerment.

Despite its successes, InSIDE - North East faces numerous challenges. Misao candidly acknowledges the difficulties encountered on his journey. "I might get some jobs, but I might be a poor guy. I might be a safe man, but I won't be able to give people a sense of this life," he reflects. The challenges range from dealing with societal resistance to navigating the complexities of funding and resources.

Yet, Misao's resilience and unwavering belief in his mission keep him focused. "I don't have pain, so I don't have any. And apart

from that, I'm more and more mistreated now," he says. Despite these obstacles, Misao remains steadfast in his commitment to his dreams. "Deep within me, I always believe in myself and in the dreams that I have. The dreams that I have are something in the feelings that I have all the time," he asserts.

InSIDE - North East has made significant strides in empowering communities, particularly women and youth. The organisation's efforts have led to increased awareness, improved access to resources, and greater participation in various programs. Misao's focus on gender equality and empowerment has resulted in tangible changes in the lives of many individuals, challenging societal norms and creating new opportunities for growth.

InSIDE - North East's commitment to youth empowerment is a cornerstone of its mission. Recognizing that the future of the region hinges on its younger generation, the organisation implements programs designed to nurture creativity, leadership, and a sense of accountability among young people. "Our future depends on the next generation," Misao asserts. "By empowering youth, we are investing in the future of our society." The organisation's initiatives include leadership training, mentorship programs, and opportunities for youth to engage in community development projects. These efforts aim to equip young people with the skills and confidence needed to become proactive leaders and agents of change. By providing a platform for youth to voice their ideas and participate in meaningful activities, InSIDE - North East is fostering a new generation of leaders who are prepared to tackle the challenges of their communities

Bhavadharani K

4. JENPU RONGMEI

One Man's Mission to Eradicate Youth Depression



Jenpu Rongmei's journey is a powerful tale of resilience and hope. The story begins with his personal challenges that leads to transformation and renewal.

Jenpu founded "Can Youth," an organisation dedicated to uplifting young people facing depression and despair. Through compassionate outreach and community support, Jenpu's mission is to inspire change and foster hope, showing that even the darkest times can lead to a brighter future.

Growing up in Dimapur, Jenpu experienced the harsh realities of life, surrounded by alcohol abuse and family struggles. Despite these challenges, he recalls his early childhood as a time of happiness and love, especially when he was lived with his childless uncle and aunt. Reflecting on his past, Jenpu shares, "I had a very beautiful, and happy life also in my childhood days. My family faced many troubles and I lost all the smile, love, and

things I deserved as a person." Jenpu's life took a tragic turn when his uncle passed away when he was in class 8, followed by his aunt's death. This forced him to return to his parents' troubled home.

Jenpu's educational journey was cut short due to financial hardships, with him and his siblings unable to complete their schooling. He was further marred by his father's alcoholism and domestic violence faced by his mother. She worked tirelessly to provide for her five children. "My mother was selling alcohol, to feed us," he says.

Despite the difficulties, Jenpu's relationship with his father has evolved. "It's good because I did my best to be close to him. Now he is not among us, he passed away in the year 2021 but I forgave him. I always wanted him to be the best dad. so I tried got getting close to him and telling him to take the role of being the head of the family ."

Jenpu completed his class 10 through open schooling while working door-to-door selling perfumes. Open schooling provided him the flexibility to learn on his own terms, but his younger brother David struggled with frustration and depression, turning to drugs and ultimately succumbing to his addiction.

Nagaland faces severe issues with drug and alcohol abuse. Jenpu attributes this vulnerability to frustration and a lack of hope. "One reason people take drugs is because of frustration, and lack of hope. They don't know where to put the anger so they hurt themselves," he explains.

"I want to change my life," his brother had once said. "I've been struggling a lot, and I don't want to die." Despite Jenpu's promise to help, David passed away before he could fulfill his desire. This loss was a turning point for Jenpu. "Something was saying inside my heart that the promise to your brother was unfulfilled, must work for other young people. (do not give up).

Jenpu channelled his past experiences into positive action, determined to ensure that other children do not face the same deprivations. Through compassionate outreach and community support, Jenpu's took on the mission to inspire change and foster hope, showing that even the darkest times can lead to a brighter future. He launched "Can Youth," in Dimapur aimed at helping young people, children and school/college dropouts. Through his NGO, he offered support of education, skill & vocational training, Jobs in private sector, Leadership program, Mental health program and Nutrition for children. to youth The Foundation works with school dropouts to help them understand the value of their lives and find paths to continue their education or choose vocational training.

Starting with no money, Jenpu sought support from local leaders and wealthy families, by approaching them door-to-door to collect funds. His breakthrough came when he applied for a fellowship in Delhi and met Father Jerry of Bosco Institute, Jorhat. During the interview, Father Jerry's words had a profound impact on him: "Jenpu, it's okay. You know what, I trust you." This trust was a turning point for Jenpu, giving him the confidence and support he needed to move forward. "I received the fellowship from Youth Involve program at Bosco Institute. From there, I never turned back," he recalls. Father Jerry's belief in him was a crucial encouragement propelling Jenpu to continue his mission with renewed vigour.

With a mission in hand, the right ideas, essential funding and handholding support from Youth Involve Program, Jenpu embarked on the challenging journey of establishing CanYouth. Driven by his younger brother's memory, he set out to create a better future for young people in Nagaland, but the path was far from easy. Jenpu faced scepticism about NGOs, with many doubting their sincerity.

"People don't trust when we talk about NGOs," he reflects. "But I didn't give up because I know what I'm going to do." His perseverance was tested by moments of loneliness and despair, leading him to even contemplate giving up his own life. Yet, Jenpu's resolve was rekindled by a sense of purpose and his brother's memory, prompting him to move forward.

Through his relentless efforts, Jenpu got another fellowship program 'Acumen' which is also another strength for him to grow in the social sector and Can Youth began to gain traction, attracting volunteers and supporters. Jenpu's approach to motivation is rooted in his work rather than grand gestures. "Motivation is not something that we have to design. It's something that comes from the work," he explains. His team, now comprising of 11 board members including 3 legal advisors, 6 members in advisory board, and full time staff 9. . The team includes young people, mostly women, who share Jenpu's vision and passion. The beauty of Can Youth is all the members and staff are consist of different tribes, community and Religion.

CanYouth has made significant strides in changing perceptions about education and providing support for young people. "The most important goal is that none of the students discontinue their education and every children, Youth and women from marginalized community should live with dignity.," Jenpu asserts adding that, "we are now aiming to shift the community's perspective on education, emphasizing that it extends beyond job preparation to encompass personal growth and humanity."

Despite the challenges posed by limited corporate social responsibility (CSR) investments and governmental support in the Northeast, Jenpu remains undeterred. "CSR doesn't want to invest much money and the reason is best known to them" he notes, underscoring the region's frequent neglect.

Jenpu's journey is a profound reminder of the power of perseverance. His story defies conventional expectations, revealing that success is not solely about avoiding failure but about continuing to strive despite it. "Failure is not a problem. The problem is when you stop trying," Jenpu says, embodying a spirit that inspires others to embrace resilience and never give up.

Jenpu Rongmei's ultimate vision for CanYouth reflects a deep commitment to societal betterment. "To help young people and women for the society to function properly is my vision," he says, underscoring his belief that empowering these groups is essential for a thriving community. His dedication to overcoming adversity and transforming his challenges into opportunities for others highlights a profound aspiration: to create a society where every individual has the chance to contribute meaningfully and thrive.

Jenpu continues to inspire and lead through CanYouth, driven by a vision that seeks to uplift and support the most vulnerable, ensuring a better future for all. He remains committed to make a difference in the lives of youth. "I know that I'm doing this to reach out to young people who have lost hopes. And I know that I'm doing this for my brother ," he says.

Bhavadharani K

5. KRISHNA GOGOI

Fempreneurs Flourish: Unveiling the Pathikrit Foundation's Gastronomic Valor



Behind the resolute Pathikrit Foundation lies a profound inspiration rooted in empowering women on their entrepreneurial journey. Founded with a strong purpose, the Pathikrit Foundation is built on the belief that every woman has the potential to carve her path to success. Guided by this vision, the organisation endeavors to uplift women and provide unwavering support through its food processing services. With a mission to encourage and nurture women in entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation champions their dreams, fostering a landscape where their ambitions can flourish.

Drawing its name from the Assamese term meaning "creating one's own path," Pathikrit Foundation stands as a beacon of empowerment, paving the way for women to forge ahead and redefine their destinies.

Led by Krishna Gogoi, the inspiring force behind Pathikrit Foundation, the organisation embodies the essence of empowerment and transformation. Rooted in the belief that women possess innate entrepreneurial prowess, Krishna's unwavering dedication has propelled Pathikrit Foundation to new horizons. "The mission is to empower rural women and local farmers to achieve socio-economic independence through food processing" Krishna says delightedly. With a resolute commitment to supporting and encouraging women in entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation has become a catalyst for change within the industry.

Krishna Gogoi draws her motivation from her upbringing and personal experiences in rural communities. Having witnessed first-hand the challenges faced by local farmers and rural women, she embarked on a mission to bring about socio-economic independence through food processing services.

"Having been born and raised in a rural community, I had the innate desire to make a difference," she says. Guided by the passion to make a difference in the lives of those around her, her background in social work provided a deep understanding of the complexities of rural life, fueling her resolve to empower local communities. "The Youth Involve fellowship, an initiative of Bosco Institute, has given wings to my dreams of working in the community, particularly with women. This opportunity has significantly enhanced my organizational journey and commitment to community service," she says.

When asked about the main mission and reason behind the formation of the Pathikrit Foundation, Krishna Gogoi states: "I had these three primary goals in mind while initiating Pathikrit Foundation, to break stereotypes, utilise local resources, and promote Assamese traditional food items."

Breaking Stereotypes

In many rural areas, traditional stereotypes persist, particularly regarding gender roles. Women often stay at home, handling household chores and childcare, while being financially dependent on their husbands. This dependency lead to issues such as domestic violence. Despite their skills and potential, many women do not realise their capabilities. Pathikrit Foundation aims to empower these women, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones and utilise their inherent cooking skills to become economically independent and socially active.

Utilising Local Resources

Assam has a rich culinary heritage with a variety of nutritious and unique rice varieties and traditional food items. The Pathikrit Foundation is dedicated to reviving and promoting these traditional foods, both nationally and internationally. By doing so, it aims to give wider recognition to Assamese culture and provide economic opportunities for local women who produce these traditional items.

Further, the Northeastern states are rich in seasonal fruits and vegetables, yet many communities do not fully utilise these resources. The Foundation encourages local farmers to grow these local, seasonal produce, which the organisation then purchase. This not only supports the farmers by providing them with a steady income but also promotes sustainable agricultural practices.

Through these initiatives, Pathikrit Foundation strives to create a more equitable society, leveraging local resources and cultural heritage to foster economic independence and social engagement among women in rural communities.

The Foundation has implemented several initiatives to support women in the food processing sector. “Initially, I formed self-

help groups. That's how we started working. However, I soon realised that there were individuals who preferred working independently from home. We do have a production unit, hence gave the freedom for members to work from home," she says.

Training is a key component of their support strategy. "First, we give them training on food processing," she says, adding that she has been trained by Indian Institute of Food Processing Technology. "Now the group members have become experts, they also train other individuals," she added. The training programs are conducted frequently, and the Foundation is often invited to conduct food processing sessions by other organisations. Additionally, the Foundation organises exhibitions where women and farmers can bring their processed products and homegrown items to sell. "They have a good sales platform and there is a good demand for their products," she said, highlighting how this initiative helps in providing market access and sales opportunities.

Encouraging women to explore entrepreneurship and step out of their comfort zones was a significant challenge for Krishna Gogoi. She explains, "I am born and raised in this community with whom I work. They have seen me grow up, and initially had doubts on my vision. To start our empowering journey, I formed a self help group. 'Prarthana' Self Help Group was the first SHG we created. We began our journey with 15 women. Initially, we focused on making traditional Assamese food items. Later, we expanded to processing seasonal fruits and vegetables into products like pickles and jams. To give our women recognition and our local Assamese products an identity, we participated in the North East Festival in Delhi in 2018. This was our first major event and we received an overwhelmingly positive response. The appreciation from the attendees motivated our women and inspired other women to join Pathikrit Foundation. This set an example in our community. People began to value our work and

understand our vision. Since then, we have participated in major events in Assam, such as Momentum Northeast and the Majuli Music Festival, and we continue to participate in the North East Festival in Delhi every year. Most notably, last year, we had the opportunity to participate in the North East India Festival in Vietnam. This was a significant achievement as it allowed us to represent our work, our North East India on an international stage" she says.

"This success encouraged more women to join the initiative and today the Foundation works with more than 80 women," she says. Despite initial challenges, including balancing family responsibilities, community support grew as families saw their women gain confidence and engage in social events. "Women are coming out from their comfort zone, and their family members are supporting them," she says.

The key skills and qualities necessary for entering the food processing sector begins with genuine interest. Krishna emphasises the importance of assessing both the interest and skills of potential participants. "If they're interested, we always welcome them, and then we train them and make them a part of creating such products. Commitment is also crucial, as it ensures that individuals are dedicated to the initiative and their personal growth within the sector. If someone is not interested, whether it's food processing or any other sector, then there is no use in involving them," she says.

The Pathikrit Foundation has also engaged in various collaborations to enhance its impact. "We have a Youth Involve Social Entrepreneurship Program at Bosco Institute which offers trainings and support to young aspiring individuals who dream of creating a positive impact in the society," she noted, highlighting partnerships with youth-led organisations.

Notable collaborations include working with Bosco Institute, Jorhat, Thoughts to Action, Jorhat and Can Youth, Nagaland. At Can Youth, the Foundation facilitated a Skill Training program on Food Processing in Dimapur, Nagaland. With Thoughts to Action, the Foundation conducted many relief programs during COVID-19 and organised Constitutional Literacy programs in schools.

"Recently, we also organised an open mic event under a national level campaign called Chota Muh Khadi Baat by Pravah organisation. This event was held in Slogan Cafe, Jorhat. With collaboration with organisations and people, we promote women's entrepreneurship and work towards gender equity and inclusivity," she adds.

Promoting Gender Equity and Inclusivity:

In addition to promoting women's entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation also focuses on gender equity and inclusivity. "Lately, I have realised that there are many young people who have been facing a lot of challenges, barriers in their day-to-day life," she says.

These challenges often hinder them from achieving their aspirations. "Like many other parents, my parents were also fearful of allowing me to travel alone due to my frequent organizational work, workshops, and training programs. Neighbours and other family members often question why I travel so much. They express their concerns about the safety of a girl traveling alone. They suggest I pursue a secure job that offers permanent settlement, which sometimes becomes a hindrance to taking further steps. Such traditional gender roles, which often portray girls as weaker than boys, pressure boys to secure high paying jobs to support their families, and restrict girls from traveling alone, traveling during their periods, and focusing on household chores, are significant obstacles.

This societal pressure can demotivate young people from pursuing their dreams. To address this, the Foundation aim bring young people together, share their ideas and experiences and develop collective solutions to societal barriers that hinder them from achieving their dreams," she says adding that the initiative also includes educating young people about the importance of creating a welcoming and safe environment that empowers everyone, highlighting that their opinions matter regardless of their age.

Future and Collaborations:

Looking ahead, the Pathikrit Foundation plans to further engage with the younger generation by collaborating with schools and colleges. "We want to conduct workshops and sessions on Assamese traditional food crafting, educating young individuals belonging to the age of 14 to 18 years. The goal is to revive traditional recipes and promote healthier eating habits over fast food. We already started our sessions in two schools and plan to collaborate with more," she says.

The Foundation also organises events on gender equity and inclusivity in collaboration with youth-led organisations. "Although it's not part of our organisation, we do it alongside to create awareness," she notes. These initiatives reflect the Foundation's commitment to fostering a supportive community where everyone feels valued and empowered.

Bhavadharani K

6. LALMUANKIMI

INCLUSIVE WELLNESS



ZAMZO, an organisation founded by Lalmuankimi working in the area of education and environment. It stands out by prioritising both mental and physical well-being. Driven by a personal mission, Lalmuankimi launched Zamzo to provide opportunities that were once denied to her. She aims to uplift and support her community, the Mizo people—a minority group in Tripura—by ensuring they have access to education. Through this initiative, ZAMZO is not only addressing education related issues but also mental health challenges and promotes physical wellness, creating a space where every individual can thrive.

When asked about the reasoning behind this approach, Lalmuankimi shared, "We believe that health would be a balance between mental health and physical health." While many organisations centre on mental health workshops alone, ZAMZO stands apart by offering physical activities as well." We

are helping them and guiding them to do physical exercise," she explained, adding that the organisation also educates people on the importance of good food and overall health.

Additionally, they conduct games and was even in the process of organising a marathon to address mental health issues before it was disrupted by the COVID pandemic. In the spirit of community engagement, the organisation hosted a local football tournament. Lalmuankimi emphasised that the Mizo community faces unique challenges, stating, "We are the one who started this intervention in our community, in our area. "ZAMZO aims to work on every issue that affects the community, with a holistic approach to health that reaches people of all ages–from youth to the elderly.

Lalmuankimi reflected on the workshops and collaborations that have left a lasting impact on her. When asked if there were any specific moments that made her realise the importance of her work, she said, " I gained a lot from every workshop I attended. Earlier, I never attended a workshop, and moreover there is no other NGO working in our community." She emphasised how each workshop not only benefits the participants but also helps her to grow personally, boosting her confidence and believing in the organisation's mission. She shares, "I used to run every workshop with a mission to give a lot for the organisation as well as for myself."

Lalmuankimi also spoke about ZAMZO's collaborative efforts with other NGOs, both locally and beyond. She mentioned an upcoming collaboration with Adavasi Life Matters from Bhopal and Youth for Integration Trust from Agartala, in which they will conduct a workshop in November focusing on using social media as a professional tool for disabled youth. She explains: "We used to collaborate with local NGOs, NGOs from outside, and also with some government departments. This spirit of partnership underscores the organisation's commitment to broadening its

impact and addressing a range of community issues.

Building on their mission to improve education and environmental scenarios in the community, ZAMZO has implemented. several initiatives to engage with different segments of the community. Among these efforts is the "Overflow Room", a listening space where adolescents can come and talk about their concerns, providing them with a safe and supportive environment. The organiation also conducts special classes for school dropouts, particularly students from classes 10 and 12, helping them catch up on their syllabus. Additionally, ZAMZO offer an "Aspirants Meet" for civil service aspirants, where they provide focused classes to guide them through the challenging preparation process. For younger children, they organie a story-reading sessions to inspire and nurture creativity, while their career guidance programs help youth make informed decisions about their future. Moreover, the organiation priorities "life skills education", equipping individuals with the tools to navigate everyday challenges confidently and effectively. Through these initiatives, they continue to foster holistic development in the community.

Lalmuankimi sheds light on the mental health challenges her community faces and how they tackle these issues. She describes the initial hesitancy people exhibited when the organiation first opened its space for mental health support. "When we started opening our space for mental health and said that whoever wants to come and share, we're here to listen, people hesitated," she says. Many individuals, especially men, found it difficult to acknowledge or accept their mental health struggles. Lalmuankimi explains that the stigma surrounding mental health made it challenging for people to openly seek help, particularly young boys. "Boys believe they should not share their problems, and this happens in every society, especially in our tribe," she

adds.

To combat this, ZAMZO shifted their approach, focusing on engaging with children in schools and creating a safe space for them to connect. Gradually, the children and others in the community began reaching out through phone calls, establishing trust in the process.

When asked about how she maintains her own mental well-being, given her advocacy for others, emphasied self-care. “In order to help other people, I believe I must first take care of myself. I’m learning to accept whatever comes my way and be healthy,” she shares, highlighting the importance of personal well-being in her journey.

As for the future of ZAMZO, she expresses heßr vision for sustainability and community ownership. “I want my organiation to work even if I am not active. I want the youth in my community to become the owners of the organiation,” she states passionately.

She expresses her vision is for the youth to be fully integrated into the organiation, contributing to society and helping others avoid the struggles she faced. “I started this not to earn money or become an entrepreneur, but to solve problems and help the children and youth from my community,” she says. Through ZAMZO, Lalmuankimi hopes to build a legacy of empowerment, where the youth see themselves as part of something bigger that they are destined to be.

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7. MOMEE PEGU

Empowering Dreams and Communities



With over a decade of dedicated experience in Majuli, Momee has been instrumental in creating supportive environments and safe spaces for young people, children, and women to explore their potential and contribute to their community. In 2015, she founded RIGBO with a vision to empower youth, subsequently introducing innovative projects like the RIGBO Craft Bazar in 2016, aimed at training and showcasing bamboo crafts, and the 99 Street Cafe in 2018, providing a hangout space for all age groups attached to the RIGBO Youth Resource Centre.

In 2019, Momee expanded her vision to unite people through music, leading to the inception of the Majuli Music Festival Project. Beyond fostering youth unity, this initiative seeks to promote rural tourism, bolster the local economy, encourage entrepreneurship, and provide a platform for aspiring talents in Majuli. Through her multifaceted endeavours, Momee continues

to uplift her community, harnessing the power of creativity and collaboration to drive positive change. A visionary social worker, she has transformed her community by promoting sustainable development, fostering youth engagement, and championing local artisans and organic farming.

In 2010, after completing a Master's degree in social work from Bosco Institute, she had already planted the seeds of a dream that would later become the foundation of her life's work. During her time in school, she experienced a "safe space" that allowed her to grow and understand that individuals are capable of much more than societal or familial expectations suggest. Inspired by this, she sought to create a similar environment in her own community.

"I always wanted to create a safe space for young people," she said. This aspiration became the driving force behind the establishment of the RIGBO Foundation in 2015, with a mission to provide a platform for youth to explore their dreams and talents in a supportive environment.

Her journey into organic farming and the establishment of the craft bazaar in 2016 stemmed from her continuous work in youth development. These projects serve not only as economic support but also as an avenue to promote local artisans. "We train young people in these crafts to develop their skills," she explained.

The craft bazaar has evolved into a thriving space where local youth can exhibit their talents and create sustainable livelihoods. The organic farming initiative, meanwhile, supports her community's shift toward healthier, environmentally friendly living. The opening of the 99 Street Café in 2018 was an extension of her Youth Resource Center, an informal meeting place where individuals can gather, connect, and exchange ideas. The café, which also serves local cuisines, employs locals, contributing to the community's economic well-being. "It's an out space for

young people to engage, discuss issues, and just hang out," she noted, emphasizing the importance of building strong one-on-one relationships.

In 2019, the Majli Music Festival added another dimension to her mission: to unite and inspire through music. The idea originated from a community member, and it grew into an event that not only supports rural tourism and the local economy but also provides a platform for young musicians to pursue their dreams.

The festival offers more than just entertainment. It fosters entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, and professional growth, particularly for young people interested in making music a career. "A lot of young people want to take up music, but they don't have the support. The festival helps promote their talents," she shared.

When asked about the challenges she has faced, she highlighted the community's perception of NGOs as organizations that receive large sums of money and grants. "The reality is the opposite," she stated. Lack of access to resources, funding, and skilled personnel were significant obstacles, but she never let these deter her. "The idea is not to stop, even though we drag at times."

Working with youth presents unique challenges, especially when their issues are constantly evolving. But her dedication to creating a supportive environment keeps her grounded, despite the hurdles. She recognizes that societal and family expectations place immense pressure on young people, and she hopes to cultivate a space where they can balance those demands with their personal dreams and aspirations.

Her vision for the future is as innovative as she is, she expressed a desire to "systematize" the work that has already been done, aiming to impact even more individuals in a structured manner. By 2026, she hopes to witness a more proactive society—one

where young people are not lost in the process of realizing their dreams, but rather actively engaged in meaningful and fulfilling careers.

For those looking to embark on a similar journey, her advice is simple yet profound: "If you feel for something, go for it." She acknowledges that the path may not always be smooth, but she encourages others to hold onto their vision. Criticism, disagreements, and betrayals may come along the way, but focusing on the end goal is what matters most.

Her resilience and dedication to her community stand as a powerful example of how one person's vision can inspire and uplift countless others.

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8. NOYINGBENI T. ERUI

Crafting Brilliance



In the northeastern state of Nagaland, where unemployment rates are high and opportunities are limited, one entrepreneur is making a difference. She is Noyingbeni T. Erui, a visionary and passionate individual who has embarked on a mission to empower talented individuals, particularly women, by helping them monetise their skills. With a keen eye for design and a desire to preserve and revitalise traditional craftsmanship, she embarked on a journey to create contemporary pieces that pay homage to Nagaland's cultural heritage while appealing to modern tastes. Let us delve into the inspiring story of Noyingbeni and her venture to create employment opportunities through Erui Designs.

Noyingbeni's journey as a jewellery designer began during her time as an assistant Professor, where she witnessed a pool of talented students who struggled to find avenues for their skills. "In Nagaland, societal pressure often dictates that young individuals

pursue government jobs due to the scarcity of employment opportunities. However, the reality is that only a fraction of educated students manage to secure these positions, leaving many talented individuals with limited options for growth and financial independence," says Noyingben.

Motivated by this stark reality, Noyingbeni took it upon herself to create a platform for talented students to find employment and capitalise on their skills. Her focus on empowering women is particularly commendable, as she recognises the need to break societal norms and allow women to become financially independent. By establishing her jewelry and embroidery business, she creates opportunities for women to showcase their creativity and contribute to their household income.

One of the remarkable aspects of Noyingbeni's business is her commitment to preserving and reviving traditional crafts. In Nagaland, jewelry-making and embroidery have deep cultural significance and hold immense artistic value. Noyingbeni's venture not only provides employment but also brings attention to these age-old crafts, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

For this young designer, the seeds of her skill development were sowed at a young age. Her mother and grandmother were proficient embroiderers, and she picked up a few tricks along the way. However, this skill remained a simple hobby until later in life when she rediscovered her passion for it while teaching in college.

"My colleague introduced me to modern embroidery, and I started experimenting with the craft, adding my own creativity on it. As I experimented with modern embroidery techniques, people started taking notice, and my hobby gradually turned into a full-fledged business venture," she says.

Noyingben initially started designing earrings which were a big hit, and soon enough, she started incorporating embroidery into her designs creating unique and exquisite pieces that garnered attention from people around the world.

What began as an initiative to introduce jewelry making to students soon transformed into a personal journey of discovery and entrepreneurship. The combination of skill development classes and their own enthusiasm led them to embrace jewelry making as a viable career option. They turned their newfound passion into a business, creating unique and captivating jewelry pieces that resonated with customers both locally and beyond.

Discussing her marketing technique she unravels her journey she embarked on Instagram and The turning point in her journey .“Our primary marketing technique is utilising social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Although I wasn’t initially socially active on social media, I recognised the potential that Instagram offered in terms of reaching out to a wider audience. By showcasing our unique designs and captivating visuals, we were able to pique the curiosity of potential customers,” she says.

“People were intrigued by the shift in my profession and wanted to understand the reasoning behind it. The turning point for us came when we sponsored a beauty pageant called Dokuemon, which is celebrated by my tribe, the Lotha tribe in Nagaland. The sponsorship provided us with an opportunity to showcase our designs to a larger audience. The local TV channel documented the event, and our designs received significant media coverage. This exposure helped attract even more customers, as people saw our creations and were inspired to connect with us,” she adds.

Starting a business is not without its challenges, and when transitioning from a different career, it can be even more difficult. In the case of the person being discussed, who was originally an

assistant professor for English, there were specific hurdles they faced in the initial stages of their jewelry business.

"One significant challenge was the perception and expectation associated with being an academic. The transition into the business and arts industry meant breaking away from the typical path expected of someone in academia. This change in identity and departure from the conventional career trajectory was met with skepticism and resistance from others. People found it difficult to accept that someone with an established career as a professor would venture into a creative and entrepreneurial field like jewelry making," she says.

Noyingben shares her method to stay relevant in this competitive industry. "In the fast-paced world of business and fashion, staying relevant and creative is critical to success. One crucial aspect is keeping up with trends, and this is where research plays a significant role. It's essential to stay up to date with the latest algorithms and trends to stay ahead of the competition," she says.

However, merely following trends is not enough to stand out in the crowd. It's equally essential to hold on to one's values and bring value to the market. To achieve this, many businesses adopt a unique approach, combining trends and value to create something truly special. This is the mantra of Erui Designs to keep its designs relevant and valuable. "This approach serves as a reminder that staying relevant in business requires more than just following trends. It's important to find a way to hold on to values and create something that stands out in the market," she says.

By combining tradition, culture, and contemporary design trends, Erui Designs was able to create designs that are truly special and unique, gaining popularity and success in the process. It's a testament to the possibilities that exist when creativity, passion, and cultural heritage are combined in innovative ways in business.

The journey of starting a business is never easy, but by navigating through the initial challenges and staying focused on her craft, Noyingbeni was able to overcome them. Her story serves as an inspiration for others who may be contemplating a career change or embarking on a new entrepreneurial venture. It reminds us that with dedication and perseverance, one can overcome obstacles and find success in pursuing their true passions.

Bhavadharani. K

9. PURBALI TUNGKHUNGIA

Bridging the Inter-generational Gap



In the heart of a bustling community, Purbali Tungkhungia from Jorhat, Assam, a social entrepreneur has started an inspiring new project called Haatipoti, which means "The Milky Way" in Assamese. This playschool and daycare is more than just a childcare center – it is a beacon of inclusive and nurturing early childhood care. This article will delve into the innovative methods and cultural significance embedded in Haatipoti's philosophy, exploring how Purbali's vision is transforming the landscape of childcare, particularly for working women who seek a supportive environment for their little ones in Assam.

Purbali Tungkhungia embarked on a remarkable journey that led her to establish Haatipoti that embodies her passion for nurturing young minds. Purbali has a Master's degree in Social Work from Bosco Institute, Jorhat, affiliated with Dibrugarh University. Her journey started when she joined Thoughts to Action – an

organisation focused on social-emotional learning through art for children in the year 2020. She used to lead sessions in schools. In this role, she taught arts and crafts, which helped her connect with kids and gave her a better understanding of their needs.

Later, Purbali recognised her passion for working with children and wanted to explore early childhood education further. She aimed to create a space where children could explore, imagine, and receive a holistic education. "I recognised I love to spent time with children and engage them with colours. I wanted a school which would allow children to explore to their fullest potential," she says. This sparked an entrepreneurial spirit within her, and on November 15th, 2023, she took the bold step of launching her own play school and daycare center, Haatipoti.

Purbali's vision was clear: to create a space where children could receive holistic development, going beyond mere academic learning. With Haatipoti, Purbali aimed to provide a nurturing environment that would foster the overall growth of her young students, and in doing so, fulfill her dream of making a lasting difference in their lives. "My intention was where my children also get holistic development."

Purbali's Haatipoti is more than just a daycare and play school; it is a hub where innovative approaches to child development are put into practice. Recognising the lack of quality time children spend with their parents, Purbali introduced a unique platform that promotes intergenerational dialogue. She states, "I felt that there is no emotional bonding among them since they leave the children in my space". This initiative allows parents and elderly family members to engage with children through storytelling sessions, sharing tales of wisdom, values, and personal experiences from their childhoods. The aim is to create an emotional bond and foster learning through the timeless art of storytelling, a tradition deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Purbali's vision extends beyond the immediate interactions within the play school. She aspires to compile these shared stories into a book, preserving the wisdom passed down through generations. This project not only serves as a future reference but also highlights the importance of cultural heritage in early childhood education.

Haatipoti's educational philosophy is rooted in play-based learning, ensuring a safe and joyful environment where children are free to explore and learn at their own pace. Academic learning is integrated seamlessly with play, allowing children to develop holistically while fostering a love for learning.

Purbali's commitment to child development is evident in her continuous efforts to enhance daycare services and ensure that children feel safe and enjoy their time at Haatipoti. The play school's unique blend of play, learning, and storytelling creates a nurturing educational experience that honors India's rich cultural legacy.

As Purbali reflects on the challenges of starting Haatipoti, she acknowledges the difficulties faced in establishing a new venture. From navigating the complexities of setting up a daycare to fostering trust within the community, Purbali's perseverance and passion for child development have been instrumental in the success of Haatipoti. As a newcomer to the daycare industry, she faced considerable resource constraints, which made it difficult to get the center off the ground. Additionally, engaging the local community proved to be a major hurdle. Coming from a village and setting up her center in an urban area, Purbali initially struggled to connect with the local families. This lack of community engagement was a significant setback, as parents were not familiar with her or her daycare. However, over time, through persistent efforts and creating a welcoming environment, parents began visiting Haatipoti and gradually developed trust in her services.

Even now, Purbali faces the ongoing challenge of managing parents' expectations. Parents want their children to get good grades and be perfect. However, I think what parents often don't want is to allow their children to make mistakes. Balancing these demands while ensuring a nurturing and holistic environment for the children remains a continuous challenge for Purbali and her team at Haatipoti.

Haatipoti stands as a testament to the power of innovation, cultural preservation, and the transformative impact of storytelling on child development by having parents as storytellers. Haatipoti enriches the lives of children and families.

"Every woman has the potential to make a difference, whether it's within the confines of her home or in the broader scope of the professional world. It's about knowing your inner self and having the courage to let your voice be heard". One of the key philosophies underlying regardless of the challenges they face, they possess the resilience to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Despite facing initial challenges, including resource constraints and low community engagement, Purbali Tungkhungia remained steadfast in her mission to create a nurturing environment for children. Through collaborations with like-minded organisations, she expanded Haatipoti's reach by offering Sunday workshops for a wider age range of children and families. "I collaborate with them and conduct art and craft sessions open to anyone," she says.

Central to Purbali's approach is the empowerment of women, both within her recognising and in the broader community. According to her journey of entrepreneurship is not exclusive to any gender. It's about recognising one's capabilities and seizing opportunities to create positive change in society.

By providing employment opportunities to women, including single mothers, Purbali Tungkhungia not only supports their

livelihoods but also helps them gain confidence and a voice in society. She also adds, "By providing work to women I am helping other women to go work peacefully in their workplace". Through her leadership, Purbali demonstrates that women have the potential to excel in entrepreneurship and make a positive impact on their communities. As Haatipoti continues to grow and evolve, Purbali remains committed to her vision of creating a nurturing and inclusive environment for children and families.

Empowerment comes from within. When women believe in themselves and their abilities, they can break barriers and pave the way for others to follow. Her story serves as an inspiration to other women who aspire to start businesses in the field of childhood education, reminding them to embrace their inner potential, stand up for their rights, and make a difference in the lives of others. Boldness is key. "Women should be bold enough to confront challenges, pursue their dreams, and make their mark on the world, regardless of the obstacles they may encounter". Through education and community collaboration, Purbali Tungkhungia is paving the way for a brighter future for the children of Jorhat, Assam and beyond.

Iniyath Asmin

10. RAHUL BORA

Building Resilient and Creative Learners



Rahul Bora, the founder of Thoughts to Action, is on a mission to revolutionise education in low-income schools by integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) and arts education. Through his initiative, Rahul aims to create a holistic learning environment that nurtures emotional intelligence and creativity alongside academics. Here's how Rahul's personal journey and passion led to the birth of Thoughts to Action.

"I saw firsthand the lack of focus on social-emotional learning and creative development in low-income schools. It was clear that there was a need for a platform to integrate these aspects into education," he says.

While studying social work, he discovered his passion for teaching and the arts through voluntary work with an education NGO in Northeast India. Recognising the transformative power of SEL and the arts, Rahul founded Thoughts to Action in 2020 to

address these gaps and foster holistic education. “The inspiration for Thoughts to Action came during my time at Bosco Institute,” he shares.

Starting an initiative like Thoughts to Action was no easy feat. Rahul recounts the initial challenges he faced in gaining trust and acceptance from schools and communities. “Many were sceptical about integrating arts and SEL into their traditional curriculums,” he explains. To tackle this, Rahul collaborated closely with teachers and conducted free workshops to showcase the benefits of SEL. “Building relationships through consistent engagement was key to overcoming this hurdle,” he says.

Resource constraints also posed significant challenges. “We focused on low-cost, high-impact activities and sought external support to make things work,” he adds, emphasising the importance of creativity and adaptability in overcoming obstacles.

Rahul’s vision for Thoughts to Action is deeply rooted in his personal experiences. Reflecting on a pivotal moment in his life, he shares, “Losing my father during my 10th standard changed everything. I had to take on familial responsibilities and give up my dream of pursuing formal art education.”

However, his passion for the arts never faded. “During my postgraduate studies, I found a way to channel my creativity and emotions into understanding and empathising with others’ struggles,” he says. His voluntary work in Northeast India exposed him to the challenges faced by underprivileged students in government schools, solidifying his resolve to make a difference.

Through SEL and arts education, he aims to empower students to envision and pursue a brighter future. For Rahul, being a social entrepreneur goes beyond profit-driven motives. “My goal

is to break the cycle of limitations imposed by socio-economic factors. It's about creating meaningful change while ensuring sustainability," he says.

Rahul believes that social entrepreneurship is distinct from traditional entrepreneurial roles because of its focus on societal impact. "Empowering children and communities through education is at the heart of what I do. It's about building systems that address social inequities in the long term," he adds.

At its core, Thoughts to Action focuses on programs that integrate SEL with arts education. Rahul outlines the key initiatives offered by the organisation

"Our programs are designed to nurture emotional intelligence and creativity while addressing academic needs," Rahul says. He sheds light on the core focus areas of his organisation, its impact on students and communities, and the leadership philosophy that drives this youth-led initiative. "Interactive SEL workshops promote emotional awareness and self-expression. Art and craft activities are designed to build creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Storytelling sessions foster communication, empathy, and cultural understanding. Community events and festivals engage students in collaborative and community-focused learning," he explains.

With social-emotional learning (SEL) and art as its cornerstone, Thoughts to Action continues to empower students in low-income schools, fostering both personal and community growth.

"SEL and art are transformative tools that address the holistic needs of children. It builds resilience, empathy, and interpersonal skills, while art nurtures creativity and expression. These are critical for personal growth and community cohesion, yet often missing in underserved schools," he explains

By integrating SEL and art into education, the organisation creates emotionally intelligent, well-rounded learners who are better equipped to navigate life's challenges. "Our goal is to cultivate learners who can thrive both academically and emotionally, breaking barriers imposed by socio-economic disadvantages," he adds.

To ensure the effectiveness of its programs, Thoughts to Action employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. "We gather feedback from teachers, students, and parents to assess behavioural changes and emotional growth," Rahul shares. "Pre- and post-program surveys, along with anecdotal success stories, provide deeper insights into our impact." The results speak for themselves. Rahul points to improved classroom behaviour, greater participation, and stronger community ties as indicators of success. "It's about creating lasting change, not just in students, but in the broader community as well," he emphasises.

When asked about that one story that stands out as a testament to the power of Thoughts to Action's programs. Rahul recalls "In one government school, we worked with a student who was initially shy and reluctant to participate in class. She struggled to express her thoughts and feelings. Through the program, she discovered her love for painting. As she engaged in art, her confidence grew, and she began forming stronger connections with her peers and teachers. It was a remarkable transformation," he says.

This success didn't stop with the student. Inspired by her progress, the teachers started incorporating creative approaches into their lessons, realising the potential of art to make education more engaging. "It's a ripple effect. When one life changes, it inspires change in others," he says proudly.

As a youth-led organisation, Thoughts to Action thrives on the energy and creativity of its team. Rahul believes in empowering young people to take ownership of their projects and ideas. "We encourage brainstorming sessions, provide training opportunities, and foster an inclusive environment where every voice matters," he explains. "This builds confidence and leadership skills within the team, ensuring that they feel valued and inspired."

Managing a non-profit like Thoughts to Action requires a unique set of leadership qualities. Rahul highlights empathy, adaptability, and the ability to inspire as essential traits. "As a leader, it's crucial to stay connected to the community's needs while empowering the team to take initiative," he says. "Clear communication and resilience are also key in navigating challenges."

When conflicts arise, Rahul emphasises the importance of open dialogue and collaboration. "We create a safe space for team members to express their perspectives and work together to find solutions," he explains. "Mutual respect and focusing on shared goals are what help us resolve conflicts constructively."

Working in underprivileged schools comes with its own set of hurdles. "Challenges include limited resources, infrastructure issues, and resistance to change," Rahul explains. Many schools are narrowly focused on academic performance, leaving little room for innovative approaches like SEL and art-based education. Building trust with teachers and administrators requires persistence. "It takes time and patience, but once they see the impact, the resistance begins to fade," he says.

Cultural and societal barriers also pose challenges, but Thoughts to Action adopts a community-centric approach. "We respect local traditions and involve parents and stakeholders in the process. This helps us build stronger connections and ensures the community feels ownership of the programs," Rahul shares.

Looking ahead, Rahul sees significant opportunities for growth. "We aim to expand to more schools in Assam and develop a curriculum that integrates nature education with SEL," he says. By blending environmental awareness with social-emotional learning, Rahul hopes to create a holistic framework that prepares students to face future challenges with resilience and empathy.

As a non-profit, financial sustainability is a constant challenge. Thoughts to Action relies on grants, donations, and partnerships with like-minded organisations. "We also generate minimal revenue from private programs like summer camps and kids' festivals, which help sustain our initiatives for government schools," Rahul explains. Securing funding remains difficult, but the team approaches potential donors with detailed proposals that highlight the measurable impact of their work. "Building strong relationships with funders and showcasing our results through reports and testimonials have been effective strategies," he says.

Sustainability is at the heart of Thoughts to Action's programs. Rahul stresses the importance of continuous feedback and community ownership. "Partnering with local stakeholders ensures our programs stay relevant," he says. Training educators to independently sustain SEL initiatives is also a cornerstone of the organisation's long-term strategy.

Rahul's goals for Thoughts to Action are ambitious yet grounded. In the short term, the organisation plans to refine its curriculum and expand to more government schools in Jorhat. The long-term vision includes establishing a Youth Resource Centre to foster leadership and civic engagement among young people, while continuing to integrate SEL and environmental education into its programs.

Rahul's message to the youth in the communities he serves is simple yet powerful "You are capable of creating change, no matter where you come from. Believe in your strengths, nurture

your creativity, and don't let circumstances limit your dreams. The future belongs to those who dare to envision it differently." As Thoughts to Action grows, Rahul Bora's journey continues to inspire. His commitment to integrating SEL and art into education proves that holistic learning can break barriers, uplift communities, and create a generation of resilient, creative thinkers ready to shape the world.

Bhavadharani K

11. REBEK KHIANGTE

A Social Worker's Journey to Transform Her Community



In the heart of Lunglei, a dedicated social worker has transformed her passion for community service into a thriving organisation aimed at empowering youth. Founded in 2015 by herself and a fellow Master of Social Work graduate from Bosco Institute, their initiative began with a simple yet powerful mission: to provide young people with the support and resources they need to thrive. "We started our organisation to address the lack of spaces for young people to express themselves," she explains, reflecting on her own experiences growing up in the community.

The Founder of a Full Life Access Trust Rebek Khiangte shares her journey and vision, detailing the origins and motivations behind her work. "I have the passion to contribute and give back to my community," she says.

Reflecting on her motivation, she recounts a pivotal moment during her studies: "When you look at your society; when you

look at your community and if anything makes you angry, and moves you to tears, ask yourself –what do you want to do about that? How can you channel those frustrations, anger, into a positive act? These were the questions that ignited me to address societal issues."

"What made me angry, after becoming more self-aware, after doing my Social Work education, is when I often saw aimless youth without proper guidance and preparation for their future," she adds.

Drawing from personal experience, she mentions that there is a lack of support for young people. "As a young girl, living and growing up in my society, I witnessed very less spaces for young people to open up, to express themselves. Also, there is not a good physical space, like a hangout space for young people," she says mentioning that this understanding of her community's needs fueled her commitment to creating positive change through her organisation.

Reflecting on the challenges faced by young people, she says, "Where young people become frustrated and look for other means to express themselves, they get bottled up and look for other ways to satisfy themselves or to express themselves. This often leads to social problems such as drug addiction and mental health issues that are prevelant in the society."

Growing up amidst these issues, Rebek felt a strong desire to facilitate and mentor young people. "I aimed at making the youth discover their true self and to realise their life purpose to live their lives to the fullest. I can say that became my calling and commitment," she shares.

Rebek's conviction that personal growth can lead to societal change was reinforced by her experiences at the Bosco Institute at Jorhat, Assam during her MSW days. She states, "By discovering

one's self, skills ans strengths, we can change the society." With this belief, she, alongside her friend and co-founder Mapui, who also shares this vision, decided to create a safe space for young people through Full Life Access Trust.

The Trust offers various programs and activities, including a personal safety education program designed to combat the high rates of sexual abuse against children in their region. Since its inception, this program has reached 2,350 children in schools, churches, and other community spaces.

The organisation also focuses on life skills education to address the lack of self-awareness and other core skills among young people. "By providing young people with the tools they need to navigate their lives effectively, the we aim to create a more informed, empowered, and resilient generation," she says.

The Trust efforts extend across Aizawl City and Lunglei, making a significant impact on the communities they serve.

Rebek went on to describe several programs designed to support young people in their personal development and leadership. She explains, "We started life skills education to boost leadership and to facilitate them to be vibrant and responsible citizens. Since 2023, this program has reached 880 young people. Another initiative, called Talking Out Café, encourages open expression and healthy discussion. We adopted this concept from the World Café," she says, "to break the culture of silence, to encourage listening, and to encourage healthy discussion."

Talking Out Café has engaged around 580 participants across more than ten sessions, addressing topics ranging from suicide prevention to personal dreams and aspirations.

A major project of the organisation is the Visible Hangout Space, known as Ka Thiante In, which means "my friend's place." This space is open from Monday to Friday and serves as a free resource

center where young people from all backgrounds can gather. It provides a supportive environment for youth to connect, learn, and grow.

The resource centre has a reading room, a cafeteria, and a special Listening Room. “We call it the Listening Room as we tell the young people that we are here to listen to you,” she explains.

Highlighting the impact of the Listening Room, Rebek elaborates, “It works like a counseling center, but we don’t want to call it so due to the stigma attached. We prefer saying, come to us. We cannot guarantee that we will solve your problem or help you solve them, but we will listen to you.”

Since its inception in 2017, Ka Thiante In has welcomed over 7,000 visitors. The Trust also runs several other impactful programs, including ‘Messed Up Night’, inviting guest speakers to share their experiences on how to overcome mistakes and failures. “We want to tell our young people that it is okay to make mistakes. Failure is when you stop trying,” she emphasises.

The Trust also hosts ‘Messed Ip Night’, an Unlugged Night showcasing local artists, and an annual Mental Health Camp on World Mental Health Day, offering free mental health services. “We also have a language hub that offers spoken English and Hindi classes, and a career guidance services. Based on emerging issues and problems, or the need or demand of the community, we conduct relief programs, she signs off.

Bhavadharani K

12. RONGSENMONGLA JAMIR

The Inspirational Journey of a Nagaland Jewellery Artisan



Rongsenmongla Jamir, a former teacher turned entrepreneur, embarked on a remarkable journey that led to establishing a thriving business in traditional Nagaland jewellery. Her passion for jewellery design and her unwavering belief in herself propelled her to take risks and pursue her entrepreneurial dreams.

While initially balancing her teaching job and nascent business, Jamir felt the urge to dedicate more time and effort to her passion. Her journey as a jewellery designer and entrepreneur demanded a delicate balance between her studies and her burgeoning business. In 2020, an opportunity to open a physical store came knocking at her door, offering her a chance to showcase not only her creations but also the works of local artisans and budding entrepreneurs. She says “I grabbed this opportunity, as it woud also benefit the local entrepreneurs.”

In 2021, Rongsenmongla took the bold step of leaving her job as a teacher and putting her studies on hold in order to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams full-time. During her college years, she initially managed her business as a part-time venture. While attending college, she would dedicate time to creating and promoting her designs on social media platforms like Instagram. This minimal yet consistent effort laid the foundation for her online presence and gradually gained traction.

She discovered the power of Instagram and WhatsApp as e-commerce platforms, allowing her to take orders and interact with customers.

While managing her studies and jewellery business, Rongsenmongla also ventured into creating souvenir-based items. The unique design and quality of her products caught the attention of international conference attendees. Through this fortuitous exposure, her creations made their way to 15 different countries, further expanding her reach and recognition.

Within India, her business witnessed a steady growth, with orders flowing in from cities like Pune, Punjab, Haryana, and Bangalore. Despite the challenges of balancing her commitments, Rongsenmongla's dedication and passion for jewellery design enabled her to manage the orders efficiently. She collaborated with delivery agents, ensuring seamless dispatches and timely delivery.

Rongsenmongla's commitment to promoting local artisans and startups, in addition to her homemade jewellery, earned her store a reputation as a channel between buyers and producers. By featuring a wide array of locally crafted products, the store became a hub of creativity and a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Nagaland.

In addition to running a store, Rongsenmongla also provides training to aspiring individuals from all ages irrespective of

gender. Her goal is to nurture and empower young minds with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in the jewellery industry. Through her workshops and mentorship, she encourages entrepreneurship and self-belief, helping others realise their creative potential.

Rongsenmongla's unwavering dedication to traditional Nagaland jewellery, coupled with her entrepreneurial spirit, has enabled her success She proudly says "I have stopped my full-time work as a teacher; since 2022 I'm a full-time social entrepreneur and a jewellery designer"

Rosenmongla Jamir's jewellery designs are a perfect fusion of traditional Nagaland aesthetics and contemporary flair. Her collection encompasses both ethnic and contemporary pieces, allowing customers to embrace the rich cultural heritage while incorporating a touch of modernity.

In the realm of ethnic jewellery, Rongsenmongla and her sister work diligently to create designs that capture the essence of traditional Naga jewellery. They draw inspiration from the vibrant colours, intricate patterns, and authentic materials of Naga culture. She says "When we talk about our Naga culture, our traditional attires are heavy. So many times because of weather and many other perspectives, we are unable to carry our original ethnic wear. So my sister and I came up with some basic, simple designs."

However, they also understand the need for lighter, more wearable options. Thus, they craft simplified versions of traditional designs, making them suitable for everyday wear, formal occasions, and even casual outings.

Recognising that fashion is ever-evolving, Rongsenmongla also ventures into contemporary designs. She embraces the freedom of creativity, accepting custom orders from clients who seek

unique and personalised pieces. This approach allows her to cater to a diverse range of preferences, ensuring that everyone can find something that resonates with their style.

When it comes to targeting customers, Rongsenmongla initially established her business through Instagram, leveraging social media as an e-commerce platform. Through captivating visuals and engaging content, she created an online presence that attracted a loyal following. As her business expanded, she decided to open a physical store, welcoming customers from the local community and providing them with a tangible and immersive shopping experience.

Her dedication to preserving and re-imagining Nagaland jewellery is not only reflected in her designs but also her marketing strategies. Through a seamless integration of social media, a physical store, and personalised customer engagement, she has successfully built a strong brand that resonates with both traditional and contemporary jewellery enthusiasts.

The initial phase of her business, Mixpick Enterprise, was a result of trial and error. Rongsenmongla relied on her intuition, exploring uncharted territories and learning from her experiences. She metaphorically states her entrepreneurial journey “It was like wielding a machete in a dense jungle, I carved my path through persistence and resilience. I encountered obstacles along the way but always stood back up, using the setbacks as learning opportunities.”

One of the significant challenges she faced was the need to continuously monitor the industry landscape and identify emerging trends. Rongsenmongla had to keep a close eye on evolving customer demands, cultural shifts, and fashion preferences to ensure her designs remained relevant and appealing.

Adapting to ever-changing tastes and styles required a strong understanding of her target market and the ability to anticipate future trends. Being a literature student, she firmly refused to be labelled as an educated but unemployed individual. Determined to forge her path, she went on to acquire a B.Ed degree and embarked on a teaching career for a year. However, despite her dedication as an educator, Rongsenmongla couldn't shake off the nagging feeling that she was neglecting her true passion. With conflicting responsibilities, she found herself questioning the direction of her life. It was during a heartfelt conversation with the school principal that she finally made a bold decision - after she took a month to decide on fully commiting herself to her entrepreneurial aspirations. This courageous step allowed her to concentrate on shaping her career and turn her dreams into reality. She states "Not taking risks is the biggest risk as an entrepreneur, so I took up the opportunity and surrendered myself to the whole situation and started focusing full-time on my business."

When asked about mentor figures who guided her through her journey and have been a huge influence on her she talks about her parents' influence, "My parents, they are quite crafty. When we were young, they used to make a lot of art and craft items. My dad would be making some art out of stones or out of wood. My mom, on the other hand, would curate flowers and pots, vases and all those things. So, they were very much inclined towards these craft items. Little did I know that I'd end up being crafty like them." Rongsenmongla says her parents played a vital role in the development of the business and they will continue to do so.

Rongsenmongla products are all about client satisfaction. She creates her designs which are something of her own but also gives exactly what the client wants "We give liberty to the clients, it's all as per the client's wish." She says they come up with unique products to impress the clients, if they don't want to wear a thick necklace in the scorching hot sun she designs brooches for them.

Rosenmongla Jamir's story is a testament to the power of determination, resilience, and the pursuit of one's passion. Her journey serves as a beacon of inspiration, urging individuals to break free from societal expectations and nurture their entrepreneurial spirit.

With her business venture, she not only aims to achieve personal success but also uplifts the talented individuals of Nagaland, allowing them to create their own identities.

Rongsenmongla's unwavering dedication is a shining example of how one person can make a difference and pave the way for others to follow their dreams.

Bhavadharani K

13. VANLALTHANGZUALI (TEPUII)

The Journey and Vision of One Step Elder Care



In 2021, two social work students from Lunglei, Mizoram took a significant step toward addressing a pressing issue in their community¬, it was Elder Care. Driven by a desire to improve the lives of senior citizens, they embarked on a journey to create a recreational centre for the elderly. The founder of One Step Elder Care K.Vanlalthangzuali and co-founder LP Vanlalnghaka, were deeply connected to their community, recognized the need for a space where senior citizens could engage in recreational activities and socialize, combating the isolation they faced.

The southern part of Mizoram, specifically Lunglei, is the second largest district in the state. It was here that K. Vanlalthangzuali (Tepuii) first noticed various societal issues. Initially, she planned a project focused on helping youth involved in drug abuse. However, her first survey revealed that several established organizations were already addressing this issue. “I felt that I

would not be able to work properly because there are already some organizations addressing this issue in our society," says Tepuii. This realization prompted her to shift focus. The second survey highlighted a significant gap in services for senior citizens, apart from the (MUP) Mizo Upa Pawl Senior Citizens association, which primarily supported pensioners without emphasizing recreational activities.

Recognizing this gap, the duo identified a need for a senior citizens' centre in Lunglei. "We also found out that they needed an Senior Citizens care centre, like a recreational hall, where they can come and spend their leisure time meet up with their friends," Tepuii notes.

To better understand the needs of the elderly, they began communicating with senior Citizens through phone calls and home visits. This allowed them to develop a structured plan for the organisation. The centre catered to two age groups: 60 to 80 years and 80+ years. While the younger elderly visit the centre independently, those over 80 years require assistance.

The primary motivation behind this initiative was the isolation experienced by many senior citizens at home. Tepuii laborates, "We found out that there are many senior citizens who are being isolated at home. They need a place where they can talk about the things they had experienced during their childhood and youth with their friends. This initiative seeks to improve their quality of life, offering them a sense of community and connection that many lack."

"The elderly have lots of talents like drawing, weaving, and making traditional crafts," Tepuii notes. These activities not only provide a sense of purpose but also helped to bridge the gap between generations by educating the youth about traditional practices. The recreational centre provides a safe, engaging environment where seniors can socialize, participate

in activities, and receive the attention they need. The centre operates differently from traditional old age homes, offering a range of activities such as physical and mental exercises, and workshops on crafting, knitting, and other traditional skills.

Looking ahead, the organisation plans to introduce skill development training, allowing seniors to pass on their knowledge to younger generations. This initiative keeps elderly citizens mentally active and socially connected, while also contributing to the community's cultural heritage. "We are planning to expose them to exhibitions so that their products are valued and appreciated," Tepuii shares. Additionally, the organisation envisions publishing a book capturing the stories and wisdom of the seniors. "It will be a kind of souvenir for the younger generation," she adds.

Many seniors suffer from conditions like Alzheimer's and dementia, and there is a lack of adequate care for such persons in Mizoram. Families often keep these seniors confined at home, fearing they might get lost. "We found out that many Mizo citizens didn't have a proper knowledge of how to take care of their Senior Citizens," Tepuii remarks.

One Step Elder Care organizes free health camps, ensuring that Senior Citizens receive proper medical attention. They collaborate closely with government agencies to provide essential aids like wheelchairs and hearing aids, and charge a nominal fee to sustain their operations. Despite facing challenges such as transportation issues, the organisation has made significant strides. "Family members bring them to the centre," Tepuii mentions, emphasizing the community's trust in their services. The organisation now has 53 members and collaborates with 14 M.U.P (Mizo Upa Pawl) units in the Lunglei District.

Tepuii emphasizes the need to value the contributions of senior citizens in society. "We have to focus on their values to let

our state grow. We should promote a culture of respect and appreciation for the elderly, recognizing them as the "diamonds of our society," she asserts.

Future plans include expanding One Step Elder Care to other districts in Mizoram, ensuring more seniors benefit from their innovative approach. While there are challenges, particularly in meeting the high expectations of families, the organisation remains committed to its mission of providing comprehensive care and support for the elderly.

As One Step Elder Care continues to make strides, its founders draw inspiration from mentors and role models who have guided their journey. Notably, 'Ka Thante In' and FLAT Insights for 'Full Life Access Trust', led by a supportive female entrepreneur, has been a significant influence. Additionally, the fellowship offered for social entrepreneurs by Youth Involve project of Bosco Institute, Jorhat has provided invaluable mentorship.

For those aspiring to enter the elder care sector, Tepuii offers key advice highlighting the importance of preparation to navigate challenges effectively. "Deeply understand your target group. Learn about their mental as well as physical needs," she emphasizes.

Financial stability is another crucial factor. Identifying reliable funding sources and maintaining accurate records are essential steps. Tepuii stresses the importance of a methodical approach: "Focus on one step at a time, if we focus on the fifth step and miss the first, we will definitely not succeed."

Bhavadharani K

14. VEZITO TETSEO

A Deep Dive into the Art of Customized Leather Design



In Kohima, Nagaland, Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd has carved out a unique niche in the world of handcrafted leather goods. Founded in 2021 by Vezito Tetseo, this enterprise has quickly gained a reputation for producing high-quality, genuine leather products using only rudimentary tools and equipment.

Located in the heart of Kohima, Headhunter offers a wide range of products, including wallets, belts, laptop bags, purses, keychains, necklaces, and more. What sets Headhunter apart is not just the craftsmanship but also its pioneering spirit. On December 1, 2023, the company was officially registered under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India. Additionally, it received a pre-incubation certificate for being part of the first North Eastern Entrepreneurial Development Programme, a joint initiative aimed at fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in the region.

For Vezito Tetseo, the journey into leather crafting began with a deep appreciation for the material itself. “I’ve always been drawn to the texture and durability of leather,” he shares. “There’s something timeless about it.” This fascination led him to learn about leather crafting through YouTube videos and his own creativity. Whether influenced by classic designs, modern aesthetics, or cultural motifs, Vezito has developed a distinctive style that resonates with clients seeking something truly unique.

Every custom piece begins with a conversation. “Understanding the client’s vision is key,” Vezito explains. “I start by discussing their needs, preferences, and any specific ideas they have in mind.” From there, the design process unfolds in stages, beginning with sketches and material selection, and culminating in the careful crafting of the final product. “Each step is crucial,” he notes, “from choosing the right type of leather to ensuring that every stitch is perfectly placed.”

Customization is where Vezito Tetseo truly shines. Offering a wide range of options, from personalized engravings to bespoke color choices, he works closely with clients to create items that are as functional as they are beautiful. However, meeting the diverse expectations of clients can be challenging. “Communication is everything,” he says. “I make sure to set clear expectations and keep the client involved throughout the process.”

Despite the rewards, the life of a freelance leather designer isn’t without its challenges. From sourcing high-quality materials to navigating the occasional creative block, Vezito has faced and overcome numerous hurdles. “One of the biggest challenges is ensuring consistency, especially when working on complex designs,” he admits. Yet, these challenges are also what push him to innovate and refine his craft. “Every problem is an opportunity to learn and grow,” he adds.

Running a successful leather crafting business requires more than just creative talent—it demands strategic planning and efficient operations. Vezito manages everything from marketing to logistics, ensuring that each custom piece is delivered on time and in perfect condition. “Pricing is always tricky,” he reveals. “It’s a balance between covering costs, valuing my time, and staying competitive.” His approach to business is as thoughtful as his approach to design, emphasizing both quality and client satisfaction.

As for the future, Vezito Tetseo has big plans. “I’m always looking to explore new techniques and materials,” he shares. “There’s so much more I want to do.” Whether expanding his product line, experimenting with sustainable materials, or simply continuing to perfect his craft, Vezito is committed to evolving as a designer and artist.

One of the distinguishing features of Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is its commitment to customization. Whether it’s a personalized engraving on a wallet or a bespoke color choice for a belt, the company goes above and beyond to meet the unique preferences of its clients. This level of customization ensures that each piece is not just a product but a cherished possession that carries personal significance for its owner. “Our goal is to create items that people can connect with on a deeper level,” says Vezito Tetseo.

When it comes to guiding the younger generation of aspiring entrepreneurs and artisans, Vezito Tetseo places a strong emphasis on the importance of branding. “Branding isn’t just about a logo or a name—it’s about creating a distinct identity that resonates with your audience,” he explains.

For Vezito, branding has been a crucial element in the success of Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd. It has allowed the company to differentiate itself in a competitive market and build

a loyal customer base. He advises young entrepreneurs to focus on establishing a clear and consistent brand message, one that reflects the values and story behind their work. “In today’s world, it’s not enough to just make a great product. You need to tell a story that people can connect with and remember,” says Vezito. His guidance underscores the idea that successful branding can elevate a business from being just another name to becoming a recognized and trusted entity in the industry.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Vezito’s work is hearing back from satisfied clients. “It’s amazing to see how much people appreciate the time and effort that goes into each piece,” he says. Positive feedback not only fuels his passion but also informs his ongoing efforts to improve and innovate. “Every piece I create is a reflection of my commitment to quality and craftsmanship,” he concludes.

Beyond its business success, Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is also dedicated to making a positive impact on the local community. Additionally, Headhunter is committed to environmentally friendly practices, carefully selecting leather and other materials that minimize waste and reduce the environmental footprint of their production processes.

In a world where personalization is increasingly valued, artisans like Vezito Tetseo are keeping the tradition of handmade, customized goods alive. His work at Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is a testament to the enduring appeal of craftsmanship, and his story offers inspiration to anyone looking to combine creativity with entrepreneurship.

Whether you’re in the market for a custom leather piece or simply admire the skill that goes into such work, Vezito’s journey is a reminder that the best things in life are made by hand, with passion and care.

Bhavadharani K

15. VIANNEY BASIEWDOR NONGRUM

Bridging the Gap Between Tradition and Innovation in Meghalaya's Handloom Industry



Vianney Basiewdor Nongrum, a young entrepreneur from Meghalaya, embarked on her journey of starting her own business while still studying in 2012. The inspiration behind her entrepreneurial spirit came from the opportunities she received to showcase her collection in fashion shows featuring her state textiles.

During this time, Vianney encountered a significant challenge - finding a reliable source of high-quality. "It was during my studies in 2012 I got an opportunity to display my collection in the fashion shows on my state textiles. But, unfortunately, at that time, I found it very difficult to get the source of 100% organic fabric," she says adding that it was not only difficult to locate such materials, but they were also quite expensive.

Additionally, the variety of silk available in the local stores was limited, usually limited to white or yellow colours. These limitations sparked Vianney's desire to address this issue and provide a solution.

After completing her studies in fashion design in 2013, Vianney took the initiative to conduct a thorough research. She was determined to discover potential sources for these fabrics and expand the available options for artisans and fashion designers like herself. This set the foundation for her entrepreneurial journey.

According to Vianney most of the denim used in Meghalaya are sourced from people in the southern states of India and Assam, particularly Muga. However, there is a raw material called aerosol that is available in Meghalaya and is only used for personal consumption. Furthermore, local artisans are limited in their dyeing techniques, using two or three basic colors: black, gray, and yellow. Red and maroon dyes are also used but are less common.

Vianney's desire to empower local artisans began in 2014 when she worked on a project with the Department of Agriculture in Meghalaya. She noticed that while the artisans were highly skilled, they lacked certain knowledge and techniques that could improve their craft. This led her to pursue a degree in textile design from NIC.

With TYNGKAI, Vianney hopes to provide a platform for local artisans to showcase their talents and reach customers outside of Meghalaya. She also plans to organise workshops and training sessions to teach artisans new techniques and help them improve their craftmanship.

Vianney's journey led to discovery of natural and organic dyes. Experimenting with various techniques and materials, she

dedicated to perfecting the art of using natural her creations. Her commitment not only promoted eco-friendly practices but also added a unique touch to her products.

One notable aspect of TYNGKAI's collection is the "Jainsem," a traditional garment that sets Meghalaya apart. Unlike a saree, which is a single long piece, the Jainsem consists of two separate parts. Vianney takes pride in using the term "Jainsem" to honor the cultural significance of this distinct garment.

"The initial designs of Jainsem were characterised by simplicity, featuring a delicate pine motif. The pine tree holds great significance in Meghalaya, particularly in Shillong, where it flourishes abundantly. Building upon this connection to nature, I incorporated a plain stripe pattern along with the pine motif to create a visually appealing and elegant Jainsem, says Vianney.

Through TYNGKAI, Vianney aims to not only showcase the skills of local artisans but also to revive the traditional artistry of Meghalaya. By blending traditional techniques with contemporary designs, she has successfully created a unique and sought-after collection of handloom products that exemplify simplicity, elegance, and cultural pride.

Diving deeper into the rich cultural heritage of Meghalaya, Vianney embarked on a mission to explore the intricate designs and motifs worn by various sub-tribes in the region. What she discovered was a treasure trove of geometrical and floral patterns, each carrying its own unique story.

Inspired by the beauty and symbolism of these traditional patterns, Vianney made it her mission to revive and incorporate them into her designs. Through extensive research and surveys, she collected a remarkable range of patterns that had long been forgotten or overlooked.

"It was surprising to note that none of these patterns were being utilised or celebrated anymore. The traditional shawls commonly seen were adorned with simple stripes in yellow, red, white, and black," she says.

Motivated by her passion for preserving cultural heritage, Vianney set out to change that narrative. She began experimenting with different designs, starting with checks and gradually incorporating the mesmerising motifs she had discovered. With each creation, Vianney breathed new life into forgotten patterns, infusing them with contemporary charm and grace.

The transformation from plain shawls to intricate creations represents the passion and dedication of Vianney. By blending traditional motifs with modern designs, she has successfully created a collection that not only honours the heritage of Meghalaya's textile industry but also captivates the hearts of those who appreciate the beauty and meaning behind each fabric.

Driven by a deep desire to revive the traditional motifs worn by the sub-tribes of Kim Hoi district in Meghalaya, Vianney embarked on a journey of cultural exploration. "I consulted the elderly members of the community, listened to their stories and delved into the meanings behind each motif," she says.

"With a mission to preserve and celebrate this rich heritage, I assembled a team of skilled weavers, along with those eager to learn the art of weaving. Together, we embarked on the task of converting these ancient motifs into contemporary designs," she adds.

The market response was overwhelming, which motivated Vianney and her team to further refine and improvise upon the patterns. They together dedicated themselves to bring new life into ancient motifs, infusing them with creativity and modern sensibilities. Each design became a testament to the fusion of

tradition and innovation, striking a harmonious balance between the past and the present.

Recognising the challenges of affordability, Vianney initially focused its efforts on shawls and mufflers. Nevertheless, she encountered initial challenges in identifying the right market to target. However, she had her big breakthrough came when TYNGKAI showcased their Rindia collection at exhibitions. The response from outside buyers was overwhelmingly positive, affirming the beauty and quality of her work. This success was a testament to the fusion of tradition with innovation.

By leveraging Meghalaya's rich cultural heritage and combining it with modern aesthetics, Vianney has created a collection that is both timeless and contemporary.

"For young entrepreneurs who aspire to enter the world of entrepreneurship, particularly in the realm of preserving traditional art and culture, I would say: First and foremost, patience is essential. The process of reviving and sustaining traditional art forms is a long and time-consuming endeavor. It requires commitment, perseverance, and a deep understanding of the cultural heritage being preserved. There will undoubtedly be challenges along the way, but embracing patience as a virtue will allow for steady progress and growth," says Vianney.

Vianney's story exemplifies the determination and passion of young entrepreneurs who strive to address existing gaps in the market. Her efforts to provide a diverse range of organic fabrics and promote local artisanal work have made her a role model for aspiring entrepreneurs in Meghalaya and beyond.

Through TYNGKAI, she continues to inspire others to pursue their dreams and create innovative solutions that drive positive change in their communities.

Bhavadharani K

MEDIA LITERACY

Understand the importance of media literacy in today's digital age and how it empowers individuals to navigate information critically.

1. BEYOND THE GLITTERING FEEDS

Understanding Social Media, Fake News, and Critical Thinking



Social media platforms have become the pulse of our interconnected world. They provide a constant stream of connection, information, and entertainment, often presented in a visually appealing way. But beneath the glittering feeds and carefully curated profiles lies a complex reality. In the digital realm of social media, where information flows incessantly and attention spans are fleeting, the line between truth and fiction has become increasingly blurred. The glittering feeds that captivate our screens often conceal a murky underbelly of fake news and misinformation, posing a formidable challenge to the fabric of our society.

One of the key factors contributing to the proliferation of fake news is the ease with which information can be shared and disseminated on social media. With a few clicks, unverified and

misleading content can rapidly spread across networks, reaching a vast audience. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the tendency of individuals to engage in confirmation bias – the inclination to seek out and embrace information that aligns with their existing beliefs and world views while disregarding or dismissing contradictory evidence.

In the Indian context, where diverse cultures, religions, and political ideologies coexist, the potential for fake news to polarise communities and sow divisions is particularly concerning. Misinformation can fuel prejudices, perpetuate stereotypes, and even incite violence, posing a threat to social harmony, democracy and unity. Moreover, the prevalence of "leaning on the mud wall" – a metaphorical term describing the tendency to accept information without critical evaluation or fact-checking – compounds the issue.

In many cases, individuals may share or believe in fake news due to a lack of digital literacy, or a tendency to trust information that aligns with their personal biases or comes from perceived authoritative sources, without verifying its authenticity.

In this information age, it is more important than ever to cultivate a critical eye. Ever seen a post so crazy it seems like it came from another planet? Yeah, that might be fake news! Social media is awesome for connecting with friends and seeing short videos, but it also contains a lot of false information. Here's how to be a social media superhero and avoid getting confused:

1. Don't Trust Clickbait: Those super catchy headlines that make you feel amazing, are often designed to get you to click without actually reading the whole story. Take a deep breath, scroll down, and read the full article before you share it with everyone.

2. Source Check! Who uploaded this information? Look for credible sources, such as well-known and trusted news outlets. Real news is based on facts and evidence rather than someone's own opinion.

3. Fact-Check Like a Boss: Ever heard something that sounds fishy? There are awesome websites dedicated to debunking fake news! They check information and let you know if it's true or fake.

Be Skeptical (It's Cool!): Don't simply take everything you see online as true. Ask yourself,

"Does this make sense?" and "Is there any proof?" If something looks too extravagant or too good to be true, it most likely is.

Being a critical thinker online is like having a superpower. You can see through the fake stuff and share only the real deal. So next time you scroll through your feed, remember – think before you click and share! Social media is a powerful tool that can be used for good or bad. By understanding the purpose of social media and being critical of the information we consume, we can help to mitigate the spread of fake news and create a more informed and civil online environment. Let's move beyond the glitz and glamour of social media feeds and strive to be more discerning consumers of information.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

2. CHILDREN AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Shaping the Future Together



In the rapidly evolving landscape of technology, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping various aspects of our daily lives. Among the most intriguing and impactful intersections is that of AI and children. As digital natives, today's children are growing up with unprecedented access to technology, and AI is playing an increasingly prominent role in their education, entertainment, and overall development.

Personalised Learning Experiences

One of the most significant contributions of AI to children's lives is in the realm of education. AI-powered tools and platforms are enabling personalised learning experiences, catering to the unique needs and learning paces of individual students. Educational apps like DreamBox, Khan Academy, and Duolingo use AI algorithms to adapt lessons and exercises based on a

child's progress, providing tailored feedback and additional resources where needed.

This personalised approach not only enhances learning outcomes but also keeps children engaged and motivated. By identifying gaps in knowledge and offering targeted support, AI helps ensure that no child is left behind. Moreover, AI-driven educational robots, like ROYBI Robot, offer interactive learning experiences, making education more engaging and fun for young learners.

Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking

Beyond academics, AI is also fostering creativity and critical thinking among children. Tools like Google's AI Experiment Quick, Draw! and various coding platforms introduce children to the basics of AI and machine learning in an interactive and playful manner. By engaging with these tools, children learn to think logically, solve problems, and understand the underlying principles of technology that powers AI. Moreover, AI can assist in creative endeavours such as art and music. Applications like DoodleLens and AI Duet allow children to collaborate with AI to create drawings and music, sparking their imagination and encouraging them to explore new artistic frontiers. This symbiotic relationship between AI and creativity helps children develop a balanced skill set that combines technical proficiency with artistic expression.

Ethical Considerations and Digital Literacy

As children interact more with AI, it is crucial to address the ethical implications and foster digital literacy. Parents, educators, and policymakers must ensure that children understand the potential risks and responsibilities associated with AI. This includes issues related to privacy, data security, and the ethical use of technology.

Educational programs focusing on digital literacy should include discussions about the ethical use of AI, encouraging children to think critically about the technology they use. Understanding concepts such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the social impact of AI will equip children to navigate the digital world responsibly and thoughtfully.

AI in Entertainment and Social Interaction

AI's influence extends to the realm of entertainment and social interaction as well. AI-powered toys and games, like Cozmo and Anki, provide interactive and educational experiences that blend play with learning. These intelligent toys can recognise faces, understand emotions, and even learn from interactions, creating a dynamic play environment that evolves with the child.

Furthermore, virtual assistants like Google Assistant and Amazon's Alexa are becoming commonplace in households, offering children a new way to interact with technology. These AI assistants can help with homework, tell stories, and answer curious questions, making information readily accessible and learning continuous.

Preparing for the Future Workforce

As AI continues to shape various industries, preparing children for the future workforce becomes imperative. Introducing children to AI and related technologies early on can spark interest in STEM fields and equip them with skills that will be valuable in their future careers. Coding classes, robotics clubs, and AI-focused educational programs can provide the foundation for understanding and innovating in the AI-driven world.

The integration of AI into children's lives presents both opportunities and challenges. By leveraging AI for personalised education, fostering creativity, ensuring ethical understanding, and preparing for future careers, we can empower children to

become informed and responsible digital citizens. As we navigate this evolving landscape, it is crucial to maintain a balanced approach, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for enhancing human potential and enriching the lives of the next generation. In doing so, we can shape a future where children and AI grow and learn together, driving innovation and progress for a better tomorrow.

PK Surya

3. DIGITAL VIGILANTISM

The Evolution of Justice in the Information Age



Vigilantism, the act of individuals or groups taking the law into their own hands, has existed throughout history. In recent years, this concept has transformed into a new form: digital vigilantism. This phenomenon leverages the power of the internet and social media platforms to enforce perceived justice, often with far-reaching consequences. The rise of digital vigilantism is intrinsically linked to the proliferation of misinformation in the online sphere. As false or misleading content spreads rapidly across social networks, it can fuel misguided attempts at justice. The symbiotic relationship between misinformation and digital vigilantism creates a volatile environment where facts are often secondary to emotional responses.

Social media platforms serve as the primary battleground for digital vigilantes. These spaces provide the tools for rapid information dissemination, community formation, and collective

action. A single post can trigger a cascade of responses, transforming individual grievances into a community movement within hours. Recent examples illustrate the potency of this digital phenomenon. In 2023, a cryptocurrency investor faced severe online harassment after being falsely accused of fraud on Twitter. The accusation, based on misinterpreted blockchain data, led to doxxing (revealing personal information) and threats before experts could debunk the claims. This incident highlights how technical misunderstandings can fuel digital witch hunts.

Another case from 2024 involved a popular fitness influencer who became the target of digital vigilantism on Instagram. Manipulated images suggested the influencer was promoting harmful diet practices, resulting in a massive loss of followers and sponsorship deals before the truth emerged. This example demonstrates the real-world impact of digital vigilantism on individuals' livelihoods and reputations.

The evolution of digital vigilantism mirrors advancements in technology. Artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies now enable the creation of highly convincing false evidence, further blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Additionally, the rise of decentralised social media platforms has created new challenges in content moderation and accountability. The societal impact of digital vigilantism is profound. It erodes trust in institutions, as people increasingly rely on crowd-sourced "justice" rather than established legal processes.

Moreover, it can lead to the targeting of innocent individuals, causing irreparable harm to their personal and professional lives. The phenomenon also contributes to a culture of fear and self-censorship online, stifling free expression and debate. Tackling digital vigilantism requires a multifaceted approach. Education is key, as media literacy programs equip individuals with the skills to think critically, analyse and evaluate online information. For instance, Finland's successful integration of critical thinking

skills into its national curriculum has shown promising results in combating misinformation and its effects. Technological solutions are also emerging. Advanced AI-powered fact-checking tools can now detect and flag potential misinformation in real-time, reducing its spread. Social media platforms are implementing features that encourage users to read articles before sharing, slowing the viral spread of unverified content.

Legal frameworks are evolving to address digital vigilantism. In 2024, the European Union introduced regulations holding platforms accountable for prompt removal of content that incites vigilante actions. Similarly, some countries have expanded cyberbullying laws to encompass coordinated online harassment campaigns. Ultimately, combating digital vigilantism necessitates a collective effort. It requires collaboration between tech companies, governments, educational institutions, and civil society organisations. The challenge lies in harnessing the positive aspects of digital engagement while mitigating its potential for harm. By gaining knowledge on media literacy, responsible online behaviour, and fact-checking, we can collectively work to curb this dangerous trend and create a safer, more informed digital landscape. Together we can shape a digital future that upholds justice without sacrificing our humanity.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

4. MOBILE ADDICTION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

A Growing Concern Among Youth



In today's hyper-connected world, where a notification buzz feels like a lifeline, it's easy to believe that we're more connected than ever, especially in social media. But are we truly building meaningful relationships, or are we isolating ourselves behind screens?

In this digital era, children, teenagers and youngsters are becoming increasingly dependent on mobile devices, often leading to addiction and social isolation. The term "mobile addiction" refers to excessive and compulsive use of smartphones, resulting in behavioural, emotional, and social issues. Studies publishes in Pub Med Central (PMC),2023 mentioned that the addictive design of apps, including instant notifications, endless scrolling, and gamified rewards, traps young users in a cycle of dependency. This dependency, coupled with reduced offline interactions, fosters feelings of loneliness and detachment.

Mobile devices are engineered to keep users engaged. Features such as push notifications, algorithm-driven content, and immersive apps stimulate the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine—a chemical associated with pleasure. This phenomenon, described in studies from ScienceDirect (2021), highlights how frequent usage reinforces the habit, making it difficult for young users to disengage. Over time, this addiction interferes with daily routines, including school performance, sleep, and interpersonal relationships. This ends in isolating themselves from family, workplace and society. Here, Everyone should ask a question, Are we using technology as a bridge to connect, or as a wall to isolate?

Social isolation, defined as a lack of meaningful interactions, is a growing byproduct of mobile addiction. Teenagers increasingly prefer virtual connections over real-world relationships. They may spend hours engaging with social media yet feel emotionally unfulfilled. Zhang, R. et al. published their research in SpringerOpen (2024) points to a phenomenon known as the "illusion of connectivity," where online interactions appear fulfilling and even satisfying but fail to provide the depth and support of face-to-face communication.

This isolation is further complicated by the fear of missing out (FOMO), a common experience among social media users. Teenagers often feel pressure to stay updated with online trends or maintain an updated online image, which detached from meaningful offline engagement. Cyberbullying and online harassment increase their feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

The psychological effects of mobile addiction and isolation are deeply connected. Excessive screen time has been linked to anxiety, depression, and attention deficits. Studies cited in PMC (2023) reveal that constant exposure to digital content overstimulates the brain, impacting cognitive functions like decision-making and emotional regulation. Additionally,

disrupted sleep patterns caused by late-night screen use weaken resilience, making it harder for young people to cope with stress.

One alarming trend is the normalization of dependency on digital devices for emotional comfort. Instead of seeking support from family or peers, many youngsters turn to their phones for distraction or a relief, further damaging their real-world relationships.

On addressing this issue, a collective effort from families, schools, and communities are needed. Setting boundaries, such as device-free meals or limited screen time, encourages healthier habits. Schools can introduce digital literacy programs to educate students on the risks of overuse and promote offline activities like sports and group projects to rebuild social connections.

Therapeutic interventions like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) offer targeted support for severe cases, teaching adolescents to manage their emotions and develop healthier adopting mechanisms. Encouraging shared family activities and promoting open communication about online experiences can also help bridge the gap between the digital and real worlds.

By understanding the underlying mechanisms and addressing the issue with proactive measures, we can help young individuals find balance in their digital and social lives. The challenge lies not in eliminating technology but in teaching its mindful and purposeful use, ensuring that connections—both online and offline—are meaningful and enriching.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

5. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHARING

Understanding Why We Spread Fake News



In the digital landscape, the spread of fake news is not just an informational issue but a psychological phenomenon deeply rooted in human behavior. Understanding why people share fake news can help in devising strategies to counter its pervasive effects.

At the heart of why fake news spreads are cognitive biases. People have a natural tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, known as confirmation bias. This bias is enhanced on social media platforms by algorithms that selectively present content in line with users' existing views, deepening their convictions. According to a Pew Research Center study (2021), people are more inclined to share information that resonates with their perspectives, regardless of its accuracy, highlighting the critical need for fact-checking in our digital interactions.

Fake news often evokes strong emotional reactions, which significantly increases its shareability. A report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2018) found that false news stories are 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories, primarily because they often contain novel or emotionally charged information. For example, a misleading headline that provokes outrage or fear about a political issue can rapidly circulate among like-minded individuals, reinforcing group ideologies.

Social influence also plays a crucial role. Sharing news, especially sensational news, can enhance one's social standing as a source of valuable information. This social affirmation is a powerful motivator for sharing any content without verifying its authenticity. Sometimes, the urge to get thumbs-ups can make us share stories without checking if they are true. We end up chasing likes and shares instead of the truth and facts.

The effects of fake news are serious and far-reaching, especially when it comes to health. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of false tips and "cures" spread like wildfire on social media. Not only did this confuse people, but it also influenced their behavior during the crisis, making it more difficult to keep everyone safe. According to a 2020 report by the World Health Organisation, these myths had tangible impacts on public health actions and behaviors.

Addressing the spread of fake news involves enhancing digital literacy to empower users to identify and critically evaluate the sources of their information. Educational programs that focus on critical thinking and the assessment of information sources are essential in building a resilient public that can resist the lure of sensationalized fake news.

Furthermore, social media platforms are increasingly held accountable for mitigating the spread of misinformation. By improving algorithms to better identify and label misleading

content, and by promoting transparency about sources, these platforms can help curb the proliferation of fake news.

Understanding the psychology behind the sharing of fake news reveals that it is a complex interplay of cognitive biases, emotional engagement, and social influences. By educating the public and adjusting how information is presented and regulated on social media, society can better manage the flow of misinformation and its wide-ranging effects. To fight against the infodemic, everyone should practice one action whenever go online, "Think before you share!".

Arulselvi Azhagiri

6. UNMASKING INDIA'S VULNERABILITY

The Nexus of AI Deepfakes and Polarization



In recent years, India has found itself grappling with the twin challenges of AI deepfakes and polarisation, a phenomenon that threatens the fabric of its society and democratic principles. The convergence of advanced artificial intelligence technology and deep-rooted societal divisions has created fertile ground for the proliferation of manipulated media content and the exacerbation of existing tensions. This convergence poses multifaceted challenges to the nation's social fabric, political stability, and the integrity of its information ecosystem.

AI deepfakes, hyper-realistic manipulated media generated using machine learning algorithms, have become increasingly prevalent in India. The accessibility of AI tools and the widespread availability of online platforms have empowered individuals and groups to create and disseminate deceptive content at an unprecedented scale. From political propaganda to fake news

and malicious hoaxes, AI deepfakes have emerged as a potent weapon for those seeking to manipulate public opinion and sow discord. India's diverse social landscape, characterised by religious, linguistic, and caste-based identities, provides ample fodder for polarisation. Political actors and vested interests often exploit these fault lines to consolidate power and advance their agendas. Advancements in AI-generated Deepfake contents amplifies this polarisation by disseminating misinformation tailored to exploit communal sensitivities and deepen societal divisions.

The unchecked proliferation of AI deepfakes and polarisation poses significant threats to India's democratic framework and social cohesion. Manipulated media content can distort public discourse, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and incite violence. Furthermore, the erosion of trust in media sources impedes informed decision-making, hindering the functioning of a healthy democracy. If left unchecked, this trend could have far-reaching consequences for India's stability and democratic resilience. Addressing the challenges posed by AI deepfakes and polarisation requires a multifaceted approach involving technological innovations, regulatory interventions, and societal initiatives. Investments in the development of AI-powered detection tools to identify and mitigate deepfake content are much needed by society. Here are a few suggestions:

- Collaborate with tech companies and research institutions to enhance the resilience of online platforms against information manipulation.

- Enact comprehensive legislation to regulate the creation, dissemination, and use of deepfake technology.

- Expect Government and legislative bodies to take step forward in establishing clear guidelines for platforms to combat the spread of manipulated content while safeguarding freedom of expression.

- Promote media literacy programs to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills necessary to discern misinformation from factual content.

- Empower individuals to verify sources and cross-check information before sharing it online.

- Foster dialogue and mutual understanding across religious and cultural divides to mitigate the potency of identity-based narratives exploited by divisive actors.

- Promote inclusive narratives that celebrate India's diversity and foster empathy and solidarity among its citizens.

The proliferation of AI deepfakes and polarisation poses grave challenges to India's democratic ideals and social harmony. By adopting a proactive approach, India can effectively mitigate the threats posed by manipulated media content and divisive narratives. Only through concerted efforts from all stakeholders can India safeguard its democratic institutions and nurture a more inclusive and resilient society for future generations.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Engage with thought-provoking pieces that challenge conventional perspectives and inspire reflective thinking.

1. A TALE OF TWO FRIENDS



We're all just about recovering from the negative impacts of Cyclone Michang. While it was going on, my daughter and I had placed our sofas facing the windows, and sat side by side watching the sky. Through the unaccustomed hours that were free of phone calls and messages, we reminisced about earlier storms and cyclones that we had seen, especially ones that we had experienced at the multi-cropped organic farm that we sometimes work and stay. I'd like to share one such lived story with you today.

Once upon a time, two friends decided to settle down side by side on a piece of land near a jasmine farm. When the jasmine was in bloom, they would both enjoy the fragrance-laden breeze, and when the summer came, both would wait together through the hot nights for the precious morning dew. When the rains arrived, they would luxuriate in the life-giving showers, and when Margazhi came, both would watch the jasmine plants slowly prepare to flower. Thus a good many years went by, and soon both the friends were bigger and needed more space.

They started jostling each other for a place in the sun. Their tussles were slow, and somewhat chess-like. It was almost as if when one produced a new leaf, the other was watching, and it then produced it's next branch-bud and leaf with the next four leaf-positions of the opponent in mind. They continued to grow in this way, putting out leaves and branches, and then flowers and fruits, big juicy jackfruits, and sweet green mangoes. They expanded their girth till their trunks were only a foot apart. Somewhere across the years, they evaporated their differences, and their leaves grew close together, sharing cheerfully all the sun that there was. So close were they that people were often startled by what looked like mango leaves growing on a jackfruit tree!

Then came the second half of October 2012. The weather turned sulky and wet. The nightly rustle of the breeze in the coconut fronds acquired an ominous overtone. As the rough wind pushed their branches, the two friends seemed to huddle close together in apprehension, trying to reassure each other.

31st October. The whole day went murkily by, with dust, leaves and debris flying everywhere all the time. Towards evening, suddenly all went quiet. Only a cold still menace hung in the air. This wasn't a calm before the storm - there is nothing calm about a moment so full of dread that no sound or sight could penetrate it. Then Cyclone Nilam broke on us. The wrenching, tearing sound of the roof flying off the shed was drowned in the unbelievable roar of the wild wind. We could not hear each other over the sounds of destruction. The soil seemed to rise up in protest, and we were caught in a dark swirling war as the soil and the wind fought it out above the ground.

The two friends stood together, no longer apprehensive, but accepting, standing tall to support each other through this onslaught. Each bolt of lighting lit them up, still standing, still surviving. Thunder, and an undefined, undefinable roar that was

the voice of the Cyclone tried to browbeat them into submission, but still they stood, trunks straight, leaves flying above them in a brave halo, roots straining to hold them up. Hour upon hour they stood, as the long night passed. Wild gusts chased quieter moments, as the sounds rose and fell. Cracks appeared in both tree trunks. And slowly the cracks widened. Countless branches broke. After many hours of stormy waiting, the eastern skyline began to lighten. Its friendly warmth seemed to lull the cyclone to slumber, and there was quiet. The birds were silent.

The morning light showed an unfamiliar silhouette of tilted trees, branches at impossible angles and strange shapes that had been buildings. And then, with hardly a sound, the trunk of the mango tree broke about 7ft off the ground, and started to fall. Slowly, inexorably, it began what threatened to be its collapse to the ground. But it didn't fall - the jackfruit tree stepped in and held it up, taking on all its weight, halting its downward trajectory. The entire crown of the mango tree leaned deep into the jackfruit, amidst a shower of leaves and twigs of both trees. It looked as if every falling mango branch, large and small, had its own customized support ready in a perfectly angled, upright jackfruit one. As if this was the moment they had been preparing for through all their apparent rivalry in the past years. After many agonizing minutes, the downward movement stopped, and the mango crown stayed suspended sideways on the jackfruit. Leaves and twigs continued to spiral downwards, but the trunks seemed steady for the moment.

After we found the right machines and people, the mango tree was pulled upright again. A big poutice was tied around the crack, to help it heal. The jackfruit tree had multiple bruises too, and many broken branches. It got its own share of poultices. We did not know if they would heal, but we had hope - after all, they had made it thus far, and there were two of them. Neither was alone. Perhaps they could see each other through this.

For many days, leaves and twigs continued to fall. Soon both trees, those erstwhile kings of lushness, looked bare. The weeks and months went by in a steady stream. Then one sudden and glorious day, we noticed a new green tip on the end of a dead-looking mango branch. We all rushed to cluster around the trees, and found a few more new green tips on both. If I was reporting this in a medical text, I'd have to say that from this point on, their 'recovery was uneventful'. But since I'm not, I'll say that both trees grew valiantly, wonderfully and vibrantly, back to their old glory :-) I'm looking at them as I write this - these two friends who still stand side by side. They look as if they extend a protective, reminiscent arm around each other. As if Michaung had reminded them too of Nilam.

A. Ramashree

2. A BOLT, A PLATE, A HORSE'S CLEAT



There's a famous Telugu poet named Sri Sri who has said that it is the everyday ordinary object such as bolts, plates, cleats and such that are in fact pregnant with poetry, and it is up to the poet to divine what they are saying to him. When I look around a farm, I'm reminded of this because everything on and around a farm is equally generative - so many of these things not only inspire poetry, but can also generate cold, hard cash. This article is about (no, not about everything poetic on farms, that would become an endless treatise) the various activities that can potentially be engaged in by an organic farmer, in addition to farming, to generate income. As we'll see, it's a long and interesting list, and also one limited only by the farmers' creativity…

One of the major challenges organic farmers face is the unpredictability of Nature. This being the case, it becomes important to set up and operate multiple streams of income, so that even when there is some unexpected occurrence like unseasonal rain or locusts or a cyclone, there is still some income coming

in from somewhere. The first and foremost action to be taken of course, is to ensure that as a farmer, you are not dependent on a single crop such as paddy or groundnut or watermelon for your livelihood - multicropping, and also investing in trees rather than seasonal crops, is absolutely essential to survive the vagaries of organic farming. Once you have an organic multicropping farm going, here are some of the things you can do with it, over and above selling the food you produce. It goes without saying that in addition to selling your produce raw, you can also preserve it in various ways such as pickle it, dry and powder it, etc. Its ways other than selling your produce in some form that I want to focus on today.

Education: A working organic farm has so much to teach us that it almost defies categorisation. Dr.Montessori had in fact based one entire tier of her education system on farm life. This stage is called Erdkinder, and revolves around adolescents learning about, and in the midst of Nature. She envisaged youngsters working on self-sustaining farms, picking up crucial survival and organisational skills along the way, and emerging as conscious and independent adults at the end of the erdkinder years. In our current world, I'm not sure how feasible it is to start and sustain an erdkinder-style education system on organic farms, but even without going the whole way, I think organic farm visits have a lot to offer children, teens and adults by way of education.

They can all be involved in sowing, transplanting, harvesting, weighing, preserving and packaging farm produce. Being involved in the process goes a long way into giving people an appreciation of food, how it is grown, and how blasphemous it is to waste it. I've heard multitudes of parents marveling at the complete turnaround that their children have undergone with respect to being picky about food or wasting it on their plates, after a visit to our farm.

Another experience that visitors to the farm enjoy is the taste of food before it goes through the process-it-to-death cycle, and its body gets mummified in plastic. For instance, did you know that toor dal / pigeon pea (used in sambar) comes in green pods as soft, green spherical seeds, and is absolutely delicious to have raw? Or, that lemon just plucked and squeezed actually has a sweetish tinge (its a fruit after all) and is just so yum to have with plain water and no added sugar? Another fact people find surprising is that sweet-lime (mosambi) is actually hard on the outside! It just gets all soft and weak with all the travel from the tree to the market, and that's why it feels squishy when we buy it at the store.

Secondary school and high-school curricula now offer agriculture as a subject in the Xth and XIIth, and tying up with local schools to make this paper come alive, and actually mean something, is another way organic farms can offer education.

Eco-Entertainment: Farms are very happening places - there's never a dull moment. Spiders are spinning webs, insects are building cocoons, kittens are chasing each other up and down trees at an unbelievable speed, dogs are scheming and barking over territorial matters, calves are getting separated from their moms and making this known very very loudly, birds are hosting volume-oriented chirping competitions, the water is gushing, the wind is rushing and the sun wants to take it all in completely by getting into every nook and cranny without sparing a single one.

If you just sat and listened to it all, it feels like a thousand intricate stories being told simultaneously - if you so much as spoke a word, you would miss a crucial twist in all those plots. This is real entertainment - it's the panorama of life unfolding in front of your eyes. If people could experience this a few times, I bet they would find screen-games extraordinarily lame and limiting.

For those who can't take in the whole picture, you can still offer smaller slices of fun like bird watching, plant spotting, leaf naming, sunrise and sunset watches, and the like. Gathering all the ingredients available and cooking a meal with these ingredients is not only a challenge to culinary creativity but makes for a really fun activity too.

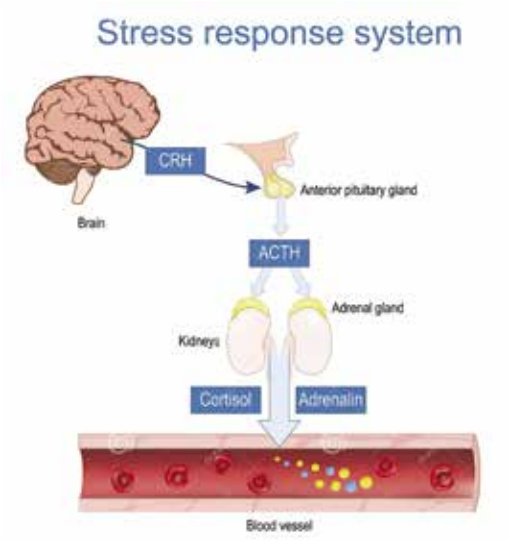
Walking and hiking, exploring the countryside around, climbing trees and hillocks, plucking fruits, vegetable and leaves correctly for the market, feeding the various creatures around, creating photographic masterpieces out of everything present, setting up a tea station and having a cuppa, are some of the other activities the organic farmer can offer visitors. (Please note that most of these are not possible on a chemical farm where everything is poisoned to death, and the crops are poisoned almost to death)

Leisure: Many farms have a special blessing - no cell signal. There is so much rest in not being in electronic contact with anyone at all. You can just be you. In fact, this is what 'being you' really means I think, to be one's self, happily oblivious of what anyone else is doing or thinking (or buying!)

Of course, for an organic farmer to set up the systems to make all these activities possible is a good bit of work. But we as the potential beneficiaries of these activities can start the ball rolling by asking to visit. And if the farmer asks us why we want to visit their place, the answer is simple - it's because everything everywhere around Nature is Poetry waiting to be seen, heard, read and written.

A. Ramashree

3. UNDERSTANDING STRESS



Every worthy human endeavor requires spirited action. But taking action is not the first step in the process that initiates or continues a change for the better. Before taking any action, we ideate. Once the idea becomes clear through a whole lot of thinking and brain-storming, we spend a lot of time planning how the idea can be implemented. Only after that can we take the right action towards a realization of the idea. Thus the seeds of worthy actions in this world first germinate in the mind, making mental wellness a crucially important factor in creating a society of worthy individuals.

But we cannot have mental health without physical health - there is a bidirectional link between the two, and this makes them inseparable. Let us look at just a few recent studies that discuss this. Cosgrove, Sargeant, and Griffin [2008] have shown that patients with Type II Diabetes Mellitus are twice as likely to experience depression as the general population. Up to 50% of cancer patients develop and suffer from a mental illness,

particularly depression and anxiety, according to Massie MJ [2004]. An Australian longitudinal study by Doan T, Ha V, Strazdins L, and Chateau D [2023] has found that physical health impacts mental health causally, with a 1 point improvement (or worsening) in physical health scores (1 - 100) resulting in a rise (or decline) of 0.43 points in mental health scores. (An aside: It is heartening to note that there is now more research being done in this avenue, which looks at physical health issues leading to mental health issues. This is a welcome departure both from general maxims that a 'positive attitude' will improve your health, and the research that looks at mental health as the fixed variable and from that standpoint tries to find unidirectional causal correlations between the two)

This is a miniscule sample from the growing body of research that shows how the mind depends on the body. But we need not really look up academic research to experience this connection - when we have a bad headache, is it even possible to think beatific thoughts? When our bodies are tired or sore, how likely is it that we will come up with an awesome idea to solve some problem? When we are feeling hungry or thirsty, would we be able to write a clear and concise academic paper or come up with a beautiful original tune? The point I'm trying to make is that our state of mind depends directly on the state of our body, and the way to maintain short-term as well as long-term mental health, is to work towards maintaining good physical health.

Physical health is tangible. And when something is tangible and somatic, it is easier to address. But sometimes, physical and tangible issues are either not properly understood, or not properly dealt with, creating a grievously incorrect narrative around them. Yes, I'm speaking about that much-misunderstood word - 'stress'. Stress is a purely physical phenomenon. Students of physics and engineering know this - they have to routinely calculate stress factors, assess the strength of materials by stressing them, or

figure out stress coefficients. But as soon as this word leaves the realm of the nonliving, and is used in the context of health, it becomes some mystical and undefinable entity that messes with any and all attempts to understand it correctly. This need not be so. So what is stress really in the context of health?

Stress is a bodily reaction that helps us to survive. Yes, stress responses enable all animals, including us, to protect ourselves from danger. Stress was designed as a good thing, an aid to survival. When a predator suddenly appears out of the tall grass, herbivores who see it experience stress. Their vessels dilate, their blood streams are inundated with glucose, their lung capacity increases, their muscles reach their full extent of contracting and relaxing. All these together enable them to sprint away at speeds way greater than their usual unstressed speeds, and this makes sure they get away from the predator and survive to live another day.

This is the exact same thing that happens in the human body too, when we perceive whoever or whatever our 'predator'-equivalent is. In response to adrenaline and cortisol among other secretions, our muscles tense up, our breath speed increases, heart rate increases, pressure shoots up, more sugar is released into the bloodstream. This is our fight or flight response - we know this. The only but extremely significant difference between the herbivores and us is that, for them, the stressor is a physical, environmental entity, but for us it has become an all-pervading, constant, miasmic social entity.

In other words, when the tiger is gone, the deers' stress goes too, but with us, it lingers. This lingering, low-level human stress, called chronic stress, is what causes a wider range of health problems than any other single disease.

The most important thing to note here is that human stress is not a mental construct, it is a physical, bodily construct. Just as

it is tied to the sighting of a tiger for a deer, it is tied to various identifiers of danger/death/failure for us. It doesn't originate in anyone's mind, it originates out there in the external world. Therefore - wait for it, this is big - stress cannot be eliminated by doing anything with the mind. It will not go away by 'thinking positive', by chanting 'calm down, calm down!', by making to-do lists. It will go away only when you deal with the exact physical, real entity out there that is causing it. If a thorn pricks you, you have to remove the thorn to make the pain go away - this is exactly like that. You have to come out of the ambit of your stressor. In a real, physical, tangible way.

There are many stressors all around us, and many ways of disengaging ourselves from these and leading a relatively stress-free - and therefore healthier and longer - life. In the subsequent articles of this feature 'Vital Wellness', we'll discuss some of these and how to understand them better. Till them, do ponder the fact of stress being a very measurable, physical response ….

Maybe you will also start noticing situations and sights that cause this physical response in you. If you do, please feel free to write about it to us at conversations@csim.in.

A. Ramashree

4. THE SLEEP STORY



All living beings have a survival instinct. This is an in-built evolutionary mechanism to protect themselves from death at all costs. When anything threatens survival, the stress response immediately kicks in, so that the being has a better chance of beating the threat and surviving. We saw in the last article how deers' stress helps them put in the extra effort needed to get away from threatening predators. So it follows that whatever threatens our survival makes us get stressed. When the source of the stress is gone, we are unstressed again, and settle back into our usual patterns.

Sadly, our current society presents us with too many sources of stress. This has come about because of the way we have evolved, the advances in technology, and also because of one other crucial reason - the fact that our brains have not changed along with our lifestyles. Anthropologists, biologists, physio-archeologists all agree that the brain we have today is exactly the same in structure and function as the brain we had 60,000 years ago. Yet

our lifestyles have changed a great deal over all these years. We are routinely doing things that go against evolution. And some of these are related to our sleep routines.

Imagine an early human happily curled up asleep in her cave. What would jolt her awake? The ominous sound of some wild creature scrabbling to get into her cave and eat her maybe. Or perhaps the sensation of something long, and thin, and cold, crawling over her skin. Or maybe it's the long-drawn scream of a cave-mate being bitten by a scorpion. These, and other stimuli like these will wake her up, and also have her body coursing with stress hormones, so that she can combat whatever threat is in front of her successfully - as we saw earlier, stress is a tool that helps us survive.

The sudden waking from sleep is a trigger for our brain to start the stress hormones flowing - the sudden waking could be caused by an alarm clock too, but since our brains are exactly the same as they were in ancient humans, they react in exactly the same way to the stimulus of a sudden rude jolt out of sleep, and turn on the stress hormone tap. This is one thing to keep in mind before we set an alarm to a time we will surely be fast asleep. A better idea is to set a soft alarm to a later time, when we are at least half-awake, and go to sleep a whole lot earlier. By doing this, we avoid waking up to a whole lot of liquid stress in our bodies.

Now let's think about what would keep our ancient human up throughout the night, tired and miserable but not able to sleep. An icy wind, or rain, or hail maybe, that makes her shake and shiver from the cold. Or the burning thirst of the desert, when water is too far to reach by night. Or maybe the fire has gone out, and sitting huddled in the dark straining their ears is all the tribe can do as a defense against the pack of hyenas roaming their land. Now these causes are unavoidable for the early human, but since we have the very same brain, staying up at night causes exactly the same reaction in our bodies as it did in theirs - a

cascade of stress hormones, and the dead, heavy feeling of their withdrawal the next morning.

This is the reason why alarm clocks, wake-up calls, all-nighters for work and pleasure - sleep deprivation in general is so insidiously dangerous. Our brain thinks we are actually dying - and tries to help us accordingly. But a continuation of this stressed state day after day is unsustainable - we then become victims of chronic, long-term stress, which is a potent killer. A way to avoid all this stress would be to sleep early, wake when our sleeping is done, and work all day with a fresh and active mind, unfettered by a body that has been told by its brain that it is dying.

But what about when you are ready and eager to sleep, but sleep just won't come to you? It's the same principle - you have to wonder what ancient mechanism is built into your brain that is preventing it from letting your body go to sleep. It is obviously not the cold rain falling on your head, or hyenas chasing you. So it is likely to be some other signal from the external world that sounds just as serious and dire to your brain. Of course, sometimes insomnia has physiological causes, but more often than not, it is the result of something that is going on in a person's life that the brain interprets as life-threatening.

A way around this is to figure out what this situation is - maybe it's as simple as a room that is too brightly lit at night, and which therefore gives the brain a confused signal and messes with its circadian rhythm. Or maybe it is a more complex reason. But whatever it is, removing the origin of the stress is the only way to remove the stress itself, and therefore its impacts.

Like sleep disturbances, hunger, pain and illness can all cause stress. How that happens is a story for the next article. Till then, sleep well!

A. Ramashree

5. STRESSING PREVENTION OVER CURE



Sleep is up there at the top, in the list of factors essential to our survival and our quality of life. Close to it are the dreaded trifecta of Hunger, Illness and Pain - which form the hip acronym HIP. All these have the potential to cause acute physical stress, resulting in all sorts of health issues for us. This is because all these are threats to survival, in the evolutionary sense of the word. In the ancient world, if anyone went hungry for too long, they ran the risk of death. If they fell terminally ill, or suffered from unbearable pain, then too, directly or indirectly, their survival was at risk.

We saw that stress is an evolutionary mechanism that helps us survive. So how does stress help the ancient human who's hungry? It sharpens his vision, increases his speed, and therefore increases his chances of success when he hunts. This success means he has food to eat, and his hunger is appeased. (We are speaking of course, of reasonable levels of hunger - not starvation, which would actually handicap him.) In this case, as soon as the

hunger is appeased, the hunger-induced stress disappears. But staying willfully hungry (as in fad 'diets'), over long periods of time causes something called decision fatigue. Decision fatigue is the tiredness you feel when you are constantly battling with the natural tendencies of your body. It saps your energy, makes you feel weak and is a quick route to chronic stress, which is again a trigger for overeating. (This is one of the major reasons why 'crash-diets' are unsustainable, and never work out in the long term.)

Short-term stress is also the natural response to injury and pain. Since in the natural world, an injury could jeopardize survival, the immediate response to an injury is a release of stress hormones that enable the creature to get away from a dangerous situation in spite of the pain of the injury. However, chronic pain causes chronic stress. Of the many obvious reasons to avoid chronic pain, this is one - that the chronic stress that follows chronic pain is extremely harmful to all the systems of the body, not only the part which is in pain. This fact adds a significant dimension to the adage 'prevention is better than cure'.

It is while we are healthy and pain-free, that we should take every measure we can to make sure we remain so. Addressing any pain as soon as it arises, is the way to prevent it from becoming chronic. Addressing such issues immediately helps us avoid serious chronic stress-induced complications at a later point. This is where a sattvic diet and a good yoga routine are of great help - they are powerful tools of prevention which can preclude the possibility of becoming a victim of chronic pain.

When we are stressed (with chronic stress), we get ill. We know this from the studies we discussed in earlier editions. But the reverse is true too - falling ill can cause stress too. Typically, when we are unwell, we are unable to follow a good diet or maintain a healthy lifestyle, and get enough exercise. These exacerbate the original illness by causing stress - anything that

the body interprets as a threat to survival causes stress. This is one of the reasons why falling sick is a bad idea, at two different levels - there is the direct and immediate discomfort of the illness, of course, but there is also the added factor of the illness itself causing stress, and this stress turning chronic to mess some more with the various systems of the body. It is a vicious cycle on its own. The only way out of it is, again, to focus on prevention. When we're healthy, all the factors that keep us that way need to be given their due focus. When we're sick, first we need to ensure we don't get sicker, and second, we need to do those actions that would lead us back to good health.

Come to think of it, hunger, pain or illness are the only issues that cause a little child to cry, have you noticed? The reaction to these is instantaneous in a child - there's no time-lag between the feeling of hunger/pain and the expression of discomfort in the form of crying or whimpering. This is probably the reason why we are all evolutionarily geared towards taking the crying of a child so very seriously - there's hardly any adult who won't react quickly to the sound of a child crying. Once an adult responds, the crying child is also reassured that the source of the stress is being attended to, and will be removed soon.

A very necessary digression here - there's a prevalent idea I've sometimes heard, that it's somehow 'good' for a baby to cry, and it somehow helps them. There doesn't seem to be any basis for this - in fact, leaving a crying child unattended only increases her stress, and we all know this is not good in the long term. If at all any child is crying out more frequently than normal (ie, more than 4-5 times a day over and above hunger times), the child is either in pain or is unwell, and every effort has to be made to figure out the source of these with a view to fixing them.

We are all more or less aware that prevention is better than cure. But there is a deeper significance to this. It is not only true because curing is more difficult, and painful and time-consuming

than preventing. It's also that prevention avoids a great deal of unnecessary stress. It avoids the stress of falling sick and also the stress involved in getting back on the road to wellness.

A. Ramashree

6. DECISION FATIGUE

What It Is and What It Does



Some amount of friction is required for us to walk. If there is no friction at all between our feet and the ground we are walking on, we'd immediately slip and fall. At the same time, too much friction would make it very difficult to walk. We would probably still be able to take a few steps, but each step would cost us a huge amount of effort, to overcome all the friction that is working against us. And if the friction is insurmountable, we would not be able to move forward, in spite of all the effort we put in. To an onlooker, it would appear as if we are standing still - but in reality, we would be straining to the maximum extent, but not moving forward at all; our effort is all wasted.

Making decisions is actually a lot like taking steps against friction. There is always more than one option in front of us in almost every sphere of life, and choosing one option and rejecting all the others takes up our time and mental energy. Even when

the choices are easy to pick, there is still some processing that goes on before each decision. This level of processing should be like an optimal level of friction that allows us to move forward smoothly and comfortably. This is where the significance of habits and routines arises from - if there is a set routine to follow, one that we have ourselves formulated with thought and care, a great deal of mental power is saved because we do not have to keep deciding what to do next. To some extent, the decision is already made, and we can expend only a minimal amount overcoming any inertia that we might feel. When we have good habits to follow, we reap their positive impacts relatively easily. But when we fall into unproductive habits too, the automaticity of the habit pulls us in its wake. This is why habits are so difficult to break, whether they are positive or negative.

But what is decision fatigue? Decision fatigue is the tiredness we feel from having to constantly make decisions. Naturally when the decisions are difficult ones, we get more tired, because we spend more energy making them. And why is the idea of decision fatigue relevant and important? It's because decision fatigue very often becomes an insidious hole in our store of energy - we think we haven't 'done' anything much strenuous, but we feel tired, and then wonder why. Very often, it's because our energy is being drained by invisible decision fatigue. Let's look at a few examples to clarify this idea.

Let's say you decide to do something you don't want to do. (Why you don't want to do it is another story - right now let's just take it as a given that there is such a task in front of you.) Every minute that you spend doing this disliked task, you are actually pushing against yourself. Every minute you are doing it, you are having to spend extra energy making your eyes or hands or feet or mind do something they don't want to do. When you finally get it done, you're twice as tired - or possibly many times as tired - as you would have been, if you hadn't had to push against yourself.

Everywhere around us, we see this kind of decision fatigue affecting lives negatively. Students studying subjects they don't want to, children going to schools they don't want to, people working in areas they don't really love or enjoy - in all these situations, chronic but intangible decision fatigue is taking its toll.

Now if you look at someone who loves what they do, you will see the opposite of a victim of decision fatigue - you will see people easily and joyfully achieving whatever they have set out to. Such people are not having to work against decision fatigue, so their energies are put to good use. More to the point, all their energy is engaged in getting the work done, and none of it is being wasted overcoming any opposing force within themselves. You might sometimes have looked at someone around you, and wondered how they have so much energy and stamina. Very often, you will find that these are people who are doing what they love, they are serving their own purpose and potential, and are not being subservient to any other person or situation. This is what listening to your inner voice actually means - it means that you are working in step with yourself, and not against yourself. Working against yourself is the greatest 'himsa' or harm that you can do.

The catch, of course, is that you must be sure its your own inner voice you are listening to, and not that of the crafty neighbor or a deluding ad in the TV, an evil manipulator, or even the voice of your own misguided taste-buds telling you to eat that chocolate loaded with white sugar and harmful chemicals. In the yogic tradition, there are prescriptions for this too - something that makes you straight and pure and clear-sighted, so that you can recognize which is which. These are called Yamas and Niyamas, and they form the first 2 'angas' or elements of Patanjali Muni's Ashtanga Yoga or the eightfold yogic path. Very briefly, Yamas tell you how to behave in society and the Niyamas tell you how to handle your own body and mind.

So what are the ways to avoid decision fatigue and use your energies productively? It is to build good habits and routines thus minimizing unnecessary options in daily life, having clarity about yourself and your work, and above all, not be in situations where you have to constantly battle with yourself. Here's wishing you an auspicious Deepavali that lights up your life, and your path ahead…

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A. Ramashree

7. HEALTH, HABITS AND HEALING



How to Harness the Positive Power of Habits for Good Health

'Little Drops of Water

Tiny Grains of Sand,

Make the Mighty Ocean,

And the Beauteous Land'

is how the saying goes.

This truth - that small and seemingly insignificant increments eventually add up to make a formidable impact - is what makes habits so powerful. Everyday, habitual, routine actions are the heroes of this edition of Vital Wellness - let's look at our habits, past, current and future, and see how they work, and how best we can tweak them to our advantage.

So here goes: what are some of the things we all do every single day? I guess the list would go something like this for most of us:

- Have some hot beverage in the morning
- Drive/Commute
- Charge our phones/tabs/laptops
- Spend some time texting
- Fall asleep at night

Each such habit has a deep cumulative impact upon our health, work and life. Take the morning coffee for instance. Those of us who have it everyday know not only the joys of that first cup of morning coffee but also how much power it has - if we don't have it for some reason, its not only a 10-minute allotted coffee-drinking time that gets impacted, but a whole chain of events after that! This is where the power of habits lies - each one has a three-fold impact - an immediate one, like the irritation we feel when we have to skip that cuppa, a short-term one (like the headache some people get if they don't have their tea/coffee on time) and a long-term one, like a full-blown caffeine addiction, possibly acidity, and all its associated problems.

But the advantage of habitual actions is that they tend to get repeated no matter what, so they act as anchor points scattered throughout our day. It is easier to build in some associated actions beneficial for our health around each of these anchor points, than it would be to start a brand new action without the help of this sort of association or anchor.

For instance, many of us tend to drink lesser water per day than is good for us. To get over this tendency, if you were to have a small water-dispenser or water-bottle near your phone charging point, then every time you charge your phone, it would be a visible reminder to you to drink water, and would definitely add a minimum of 1 glass of water per day to your intake. Often, that

1 glass of water will bring your hydration levels into balance, and you will reap all kinds of benefits from it.

You can work on similar add-on habits on to your existing ones and enjoy all the benefits of this piggy-backing. You could listen to whichever song you would like to learn while on the way to work, and if you play it on loop everyday, soon you will have every nuance of the song in your memory. If you suffer from back issues, just before going to sleep, in a lying position, you could do a few stretches everyday, even if it is a small number of repetitions. Since the stretches are going to be repeated every single day if you tie in this habit to the act of falling asleep, they will give you much better benefits than a full hour of exercises done randomly at irregular intervals. Of course, the prerequisite is that you must tightly bind the new habit to the old one, and never once let them come apart - you must make yourself not fall asleep, unless and until you have done your stretches.

This way of adding on a new habit to an established one has been called habit-stacking by James Clear, author of 'Atomic Habits', and is a good strategy to harness to promote good health and wellbeing. You could also bind a new habit to an established one in a way that makes it very difficult for you to not do it - supposing you decided that you wouldn't get on with your day and wouldn't get ready for work, until after you have had warm honey-lemon water. Then there's a high chance that you would quickly make yourself that glass of warm honey-lemon, just so that you could get on with your day on time. What you're doing, in effect, is that you're making it very unattractive for you to skip the new good-health habit.

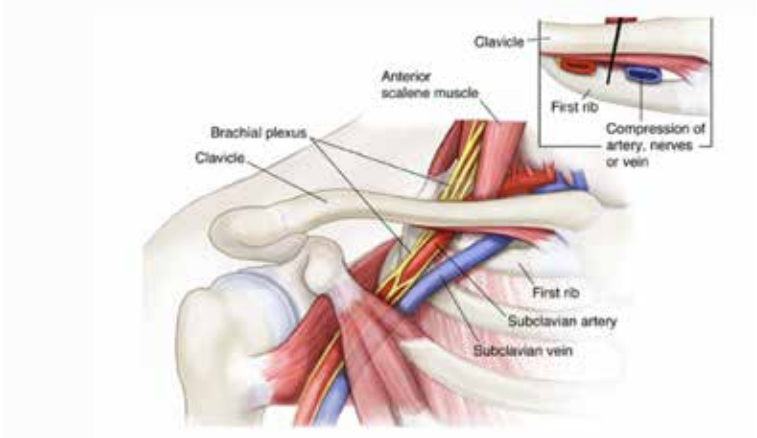
Our bodies are creatures of habit too - the circadian rhythm, the menstrual cycle, even digestion, all happen in a very beautifully smooth and routine way. The same internal actions like hormone secretion, enzyme production, repair and replacement of cells, keep repeating themselves at intervals. Much as if our cells are

habituated to work in a certain way, at certain times. This is why external as well as internal habits also hold the key to good health. Externally, you could add some healthy nuts and seeds to your diet, to be had at a certain time every single day. You could also sleep and rise at the same time each day. Both these habits, and indeed any regularly followed diet and exercise habits, pack a punch that seems unbelievably disproportionate to the 'size' of the action and the time it takes to perform….

So as the end of 2024 approaches, and you start thinking about the past year, and what you would like to achieve in the forthcoming one, do think in terms of including seemingly small but incredibly powerful habits into your day, rather than in terms of something that looks larger and flashier, but is likely to become unsustainable soon…. Like the small, beautiful and gentle light of the lamps of Karthigai Deepam, may each small but regular habit pave your path to good health and wellbeing!

A. Ramashree

8. LIFE, THY NAME IS MOVEMENT



When a baby is born, the first thing that the doctors and nurses check the baby for, is something called the APGAR score. This is an acronym for five parameters that help to define how the baby is doing, and the letters stand for:

- Activity
- Pulse
- Grimace
- Appearance
- Respiration

Some of these terms are self-explanatory - we know what 'Activity', 'Pulse' and 'Respiration' mean. 'Appearance' refers to the colour of the baby's skin - bluish or blue-tinged colour indicates that the circulation is not good enough, while all shades of pink/red show that the circulatory system is doing fine.

'Grimace' refers to sneezing/coughing and other vocal sounds and facial movements that the baby makes as the lungs and all the channels leading to them start working for the first time.

Whereas the origin as well as the implications of the APGAR score are interesting in their own right, the reason I mention them here is to draw attention to the fact that no less than 4 out of these 5 essential, life-defining parameters, have something to do with movement. Activity is another word for movement, pulse involves the moving of the heart muscles and all the related vessels, grimacing/coughing/sneezing involve a complex set of coordinated internal movements, and so does respiration. That is the extent to which movement and life are interconnected; one implies the other.

Yet as children grow up, we gradually forget the importance of movement. There are still schools which force students to sit still in class, because they mistakenly associate sitting still with paying attention, in spite of the growing evidence from modern research that almost all children learn better when they are allowed to move freely, fiddle with bits of thread or toys while listening to lessons, rock or twirl on their chairs, or doodle. As childhood passes (if children are unlucky, then in schools where an inordinate amount of time is spent sitting in classrooms, and an abysmally small amount moving, whether it is in art class or sports class or music class), and we enter adulthood, it becomes commonplace to spend the whole day at a desk. I sometimes think that desk-bound adults would probably score lesser on an APGAR test than newborns!

The deeply negative result that this overlooking of the need for movement has, is coming to the fore now. We are seeing an alarming rise in the number of people suffering from disorders like painfully stiff joints, chronic backache and neckache, lack of basic flexibility, migraines caused by bad neck posture, and also all the secondary diseases caused by lack of exercise such as

cardiovascular disorders, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression and even dementia. Lack of exercise also has a close causal relationship with immunity; let's see how.

We all know that not having a strong immune system is the reason for multiple ills - starting from a cold, to various tummy upsets, to sore throats and fevers, and even small wounds that won't heal quickly enough, a weak immune system leads to us falling sick all the time and interferes no end with our lives and life-goals. To know how this is related to movement, and what kind of movement exactly, we need to look at the structure of the immune system in the human body a little closer.

A crucial part of the immunity mechanism is the lymphatic system of the body, consisting broadly of the lymphatic vessel network, and the organs involved in the production and circulation of lymphatic fluid or lymph. The colourless fluid from blood that permeates into tissues from blood capillaries is called lymph. Among other functions, it collects waste products, bacteria and other microorganisms, and damaged cells, and then drains into lymphatic capillaries and lymphatic vessels. The lymphatic vessels carry this lymph through multiple lymph nodes found throughout the body.

It is the lymph nodes that first trap, and then recognise any invading organisms and disease-causing germs in the system. As soon as this recognition takes place, the different layers and systems of the immune system are activated, and the body starts fighting the invasion. Thus the lymphatic system acts initially as the sentinel that alerts the body to a breach, and then plays a most important role in producing and transporting the cells that fight for us, and keep us from falling sick.

So where are these lymph nodes located, and how does the lymph travel through the body? Lymph nodes are located throughout the body, but of the approximately 800 lymph nodes present, more

than 300 are clustered around the neck region . And big clusters are found in the axial and inguinal regions (the places where the arms and legs attach to the body) and in the abdominal region. The lymph travels throughout the body and drains into the right and left lymph ducts. These ducts empty into the subclavian vein, returning the lymph into the circulatory system where it once again starts its journey around the body, mixed with blood. Where is the subclavian vein located? In the neck region, close to the clavicle or the Collar Bone.

Now comes the important question - which movement deeply involves the neck region/collar bone, as well as the entire abdominal regions? Did you say 'deep breathing'? Yes, that's the correct answer! When we properly do all the movements involved in real deep breathing (full yogic breathing) we are powerfully stimulating the lymph ducts to pump lymph around the body in an efficient and brisk way. This is all the more significant because the human lymphatic system does not have a heart of its own to pump the lymph - it depends exclusively on the movement of the body to get around. This is the anatomically validated reason why we keep saying 'breathe deeply, breathe deeply' in our yoga classes - every time you do it, you are giving that extra support to your lymphatic system, which is the physical and anatomical complement of your immune system. Combine full-arm movements with neck movements, and you are simultaneously stimulating all the 300 lymph nodes around the neck areas, plus the large clusters around the axial regions, toning and bracing your immune system no end.

Yoga emphasises this one movement - deep breathing - over all others. And now we know why - it is because just this one movement, done every day, has the potential to keep you disease-free, because your immune system is in great shape. Not running, not bench-pressing, not push-ups, not some complex contortions. Just deep breathing, so deep that it involves the collar bone and

also the abdominal region. And you need not even sit down and do this exclusively. As you go about your daily work, just remember to breathe deeply. In addition to keeping your immune system in top gear, you will also see many other wonderful benefits, some of which we will discuss in more detail in the next article of this series.

We wish you a wonderful year ahead, full of deep breaths which serve to remind you every minute of the miracle that is life…

A. Ramashree

9. P N SUBRAMANIAN

Rediscovering the Medicinal Power of Weeds A Walk Through Ancient Wisdom



In the fast-paced world we live in today, it's easy to overlook the healing potential that nature offers in its most humble forms. The plants that we often dismiss as weeds, or "poondu" in Tamil, have been revered for centuries in traditional medicine. Yet, in modern times, we tend to uproot them without a second thought, assigning them derogatory names and dismissing their medicinal value. This is a shame, as many of these plants were once part of the rich tapestry of Ayurvedic and Siddha treatments.

In my younger days, I was fortunate enough to be raised with plant-based remedies. These weren't just for curing ailments but were primarily used as preventive measures to ensure health and well-being. We lived in a world where herbs and plants from our surroundings were seen as natural resources for good health, and many of these remedies were passed down through generations.

Today, however, we live in a different reality. We often rush to pharmaceutical solutions, swallowing pills made from synthetic chemicals produced by pharma companies, without ever considering the natural alternatives available in our own backyards. The wisdom of our ancestors has been largely forgotten, and we have lost the deep respect we once had for nature's healing gifts.

The "Weeds" We Ignore

One day, while walking around my farmhouse in Mudaliyar Kuppam, I had an epiphany. The so-called weeds that grow freely around me might hold untapped potential for healing, just like the plants my ancestors once revered. As I walked among these plants, I realised that many of them had been left to grow wild and untouched, often considered nuisances. But what if these "weeds" were not weeds at all, but rather medicinal plants, waiting to be rediscovered?

Armed with my phone and Google Lens, I decided to identify some of these plants that had been growing on their own without human intervention. I spent about 30 minutes exploring and cataloging the plants, and the results were both surprising and enlightening.

Here are some of the plants I discovered, all of which are known for their medicinal properties:

Kuppaimeni: This plant is known for its anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties. It is commonly used to treat wounds, skin infections, and even joint pain in traditional medicine.

Oodha Mulli: Known for its ability to treat respiratory issues and act as a natural detoxifier, this plant has long been used to clear the airways and reduce inflammation.

Kundu Mani: This plant has been used in Siddha medicine for its ability to treat digestive disorders and alleviate gastrointestinal discomfort.

Thazhuthazhai: Often used to treat skin conditions and wounds, Thazhuthazhai has powerful antibacterial and healing properties.

Asiatic Dayflower: Known for its ability to soothe the skin and treat various ailments such as fever and inflammation, this flower is also used to promote general wellness.

Kizhanelli: This plant is famous for its antiviral properties and is often used to treat jaundice and other liver-related issues.

Vazhukkai Pul: Commonly used to aid in digestion and improve appetite, this plant also has benefits for the skin.

Thotta Chinungi: A medicinal herb used for its ability to treat respiratory issues, Thotta Chinungi is known for its detoxifying qualities.

A Forgotten Tradition

The realisation that these plants were once an integral part of our medicinal knowledge left me both inspired and disheartened. How did we come to overlook the benefits of these simple, naturally growing plants? In our pursuit of modernity and convenience, we have abandoned the wisdom passed down by generations of healers and wise elders.

These plants, which grow on their own, have been forgotten or labeled as nuisances, when in fact they hold the key to many natural remedies. Whether it's a simple anti-inflammatory, a cure for digestive disorders, or a natural painkiller, these plants have been used for centuries in traditional healing practices, such as Ayurveda and Siddha medicine, to promote health and treat various conditions.

In just 30 minutes, I had rediscovered the power of nature's pharmacy. What a shame it is that we have neglected such valuable resources in favor of synthetic, often harmful, chemicals. By using Google Lens, I was able to reconnect with the ancient wisdom of my ancestors and see the plants around me in a new light.

Reconnecting with Nature's Medicine

This small exercise of identifying and learning about these plants was a humbling experience. It made me realise how far removed we have become from the simple, natural ways of healing. We no longer look to the earth for remedies, choosing instead to rely on chemicals and synthetic products. The irony is that, while pharmaceutical companies synthesise chemical solutions from plants, we continue to ignore the very plants that could provide us with the same or better results.

The wisdom of using plant-based medicines as a preventive measure is something that we need to reconnect with. In a world where health crises are becoming increasingly common, it is time we begin to value the healing potential that exists naturally all around us.

The Way Forward

If there's one takeaway from this experience, it's that we need to shift our mindset. Instead of blindly uprooting what we call weeds, we should pause and ask ourselves if there is more to these plants than meets the eye. Perhaps, by re-educating ourselves and embracing traditional healing methods, we can not only improve our health but also restore a deeper connection with nature.

Incorporating these plants into our daily lives—whether through teas, tinctures, or topical applications—could be a step towards returning to a more holistic and sustainable way of living. As we reintroduce plant-based remedies into our lives, we honor the

wisdom of our ancestors and protect the environment, creating a healthier, more balanced future for all.

The journey of rediscovering these medicinal plants has been eye-opening, and it serves as a reminder that true healing is often rooted in nature itself. It's time to remember the ancient wisdom that once guided us and to treat the plants that grow freely around us with the respect they deserve. By doing so, we might just find the path to better health—without the need for harmful pills and synthetic chemicals.

P N Subramanian

10. SANSKRIT SERENITY

Rediscovering Indian Heritage and Cultivating Cultural Roots



Step into the fascinating world of Indian culture and delve into its rich tapestry of knowledge systems. Discover the fascinating journey of Vanaja as she delves deep into the realms of Indian culture and its profound systems of knowledge. She dedicated herself to delving into the realms of yoga, Ayurveda, and Sanskrit. Her fascination with the Shastras, the Indian sciences encompassing a vast array of fields, unfolded a treasure trove of deep scientific principles.

Vanaja discovered that these Shastras extended far beyond religion, encompassing domains like Vastu Shastra, Shilpa Shastra, and Rasayana Shastra, revealing remarkable advancements in chemistry and mathematics. Uncovering the accuracy of ancient astrology, she unearthed the obstacles hindering this wealth of wisdom from reaching the majority of western-educated

Indians—limited awareness and poorly translated Sanskrit texts. Through this thought-provoking conversation, we gain insight into Ms. Vanaja's transformative journey and her mission to revive and disseminate ancient Indian knowledge for the modern world.

The challenge lies in the fact that most Indians are Western-educated and hence, unfamiliar with the rich knowledge contained within the Shastras. Furthermore, these ancient texts are primarily in Sanskrit, and the existing translations are often poor and sometimes inaccurate. This results in the Shastras being perceived as childish or irrelevant. Additionally, a significant amount of this invaluable knowledge has been taken abroad by colonisers and is now housed in countries like Germany, the US, and the UK.

Recognising this gap, Vanaja decided to delve into the Shastras, driven by the ecognizeg that they are not solely about religious matters, but encompass guidelines for good living, health, ethics, and sustainability. Coming from a corporate background, she noticed the unsustainable practices prevalent in the business world and saw a need for integrating the wisdom of the Shastras into modern education and practices.

"My goal is to create a curriculum that makes the Shastras accessible to English-educated Indians. This is crucial as many lack the time or resources to study these texts in depth. The content needs to be accurate and engaging to counteract the poor translations currently available," she says.

The government also supports this initiative, ecognizeg the value of incorporating traditional Indian knowledge into various fields of study. "Architecture students could benefit from understanding astrology, space researchers from Indian astronomy, and medical students from Ayurvedic principles," she says.

By integrating the Shastras into modern education, we can broaden horizons, inspire new ideas, and encourage innovative thinking. This endeavor involves extensive content development, and Vanaja is committed to making these profound insights accessible and relevant to today's context.

Vanaja shares her journey after she left her corporate job. Driven by a deep interest in sustainability, she purchased a small farm to experiment with soil rejuvenation techniques. She undertook a teacher training program in natural farming with the Art of Living Foundation and began creating a food forest on my farm using entirely natural methods. This included practices like geothermal, mulching, and particularly the use of vetiver grass. Vetiver is excellent for soil management as its deep roots enhance soil porosity and facilitate drainage, which helps prevent water stagnation and increasing water table levels.

Her experiments demonstrated the effectiveness of these sustainable farming techniques. While she has not yet started formally helping other farmers, her neighbours are observing her methods with curiosity. "Unlike their traditional practices, which involve heavy plowing, planting conventional crops like ragi and beans, and extensive use of urea leading to declining soil fertility and water table levels, my approach offers a promising alternative. By showcasing the success of these natural farming techniques on my farm, I hope to inspire and influence local farmers to adopt more sustainable practices, ultimately benefiting their soil health and reducing their farming costs."

Transitioning from a corporate career to a sustainable farming lifestyle was a significant challenge for her. In the corporate world, particularly in marketing, she enjoyed a well-recognised role and a lucrative income. Moving to a farming lifestyle meant stepping away from financial stability and entering a field where her work was not immediately understood or valued by others.

Teaching Sanskrit and Vedic Sciences at universities often met with skepticism, as many questioned the relevance of these ancient practices in modern times. Despite these challenges, she found immense personal satisfaction and interest in her new path, even though it was less rewarding in material terms.

Vanaja's corporate skills and knowledge influenced her farming practices, particularly in understanding the broader implications of sustainability. Although her vetiver farming remains experimental and not commercial, she plans to use her insights to educate others. She noticed a significant disconnect between urban dwellers and the fundamentals of soil, water, and air quality. Many people in corporate environments are unaware of how their actions impact these essential elements. By reconnecting herself with the basics of environmental health, she aims to eventually bridge this knowledge gap, helping urban individuals understand the importance of sustainable practices.

She believes that even those living in modern, urban settings need to grasp the significance of maintaining healthy soil, water, and air, as these are crucial for long-term sustainability and cannot be substituted by financial means.

Vanaja faced a unique challenge in transitioning from her corporate career to teaching Vedic sciences and Sanskrit. While she has not encountered direct criticism, many people who are uninterested in these subjects often dismiss her as eccentric. Interestingly, she notes a higher level of commitment to learning Sanskrit and Vedic sciences among foreigners and Indians living abroad, compared to middle-class Indians who view these studies as impractical for securing jobs. This cultural disconnect has made her mission more challenging, but it has not deterred her passion and dedication.

In her efforts to bridge this gap, she ecognize the scientific aspects of Indian traditions, which are often overlooked or

misunderstood. She points out that disciplines like Ayurveda and yoga offer valuable insights into health and well-being, which became particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, she says "ancient Indian sciences address contemporary issues such as stress and mental health, providing fundamental knowledge about the mind, intellect, and emotions. Unfortunately, these teachings are frequently mistaken for religious dogma, deterring many from exploring their practical applications." She believes that reintroducing these concepts into mainstream education could significantly benefit society by fostering a deeper understanding of personal and environmental sustainability.

To spark interest and encourage others to spread the word, Vanaja suggests that people take a step back and reassess their connection to traditional knowledge. She urges them to consider whether they feel in control of their lives and to explore the wisdom embedded in cultural practices and ancestral advice. "For instance, traditional agricultural methods sustained humanity for millennia before the advent of modern fertilizers and pesticides, which have since led to numerous ecological problems," she says ecognizeg the need to critically evaluate modern scientific claims and ecognize the enduring value of time-tested knowledge.

By fostering a mindset shift that questions the uncritical acceptance of Western science and acknowledges the profound insights of ancient Indian wisdom, she believes people can better navigate their lives and contribute to a more balanced, sustainable world.

Bhavadharani K