

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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EDITOR: MARIE BANU

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"Nature has the last word, always. If we do not respect her, she will reclaim it in her own way."

An exclusive interview with
Dr. Francis A Roy
Founder Trustee of Nellai Nature Club

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In today's fast-paced world, we often forget that the earth is not a storehouse of resources to be exploited but a living system that sustains us. Forests, rivers, mountains, and the very air we breathe are our lifelines. Yet, human activity continues to consume more than it gives back. Respecting nature is therefore not just an ethical choice but a survival imperative.

To respect nature is to acknowledge its intrinsic worth. A tree is more than timber—it provides oxygen, nurtures biodiversity, and balances ecosystems. A river is more than a channel for irrigation or hydropower—it carries culture, history, and life itself. When reduced to mere economic value, we risk losing sight of the invisible services that sustain humanity.

The consequences of neglect are already visible. Extreme floods, recurring droughts, toxic air, and the steady disappearance of species are stark reminders that imbalance comes at a heavy cost. These crises are not natural inevitabilities; they are the results of reckless choices—deforestation, overconsumption, and unsustainable development.

Humility is central to respect. Indigenous communities have long understood this truth, living in harmony with nature and practicing gratitude for what they take. Their wisdom reminds us that humans are not masters of the earth but participants in a shared cycle. Modern progress must therefore be tempered with restraint, ensuring that soil, water, and air are not stretched beyond their capacity.

Respect starts with everyday action—reducing waste, conserving water, choosing sustainable alternatives, and holding institutions accountable. At a larger level, it means adopting policies that value preservation as much as growth and seeing ourselves as custodians rather than owners of the planet.

Ultimately, respecting nature is about respecting ourselves and future generations. A degraded earth threatens health, livelihoods, and dignity, while a thriving planet secures them.

At *Conversations Today*, we highlight and honor changemakers who embody this respect. Their efforts—whether in protecting forests, reviving rivers, or inspiring communities—show us that safeguarding nature is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality. By sharing their journeys, we hope to inspire many more to walk gently on this planet and leave it richer, not poorer, for those yet to come.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

SEEING THE DIVINE IN THE NATURAL WORLD

For the sage of Arunachala, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, nature was not something to be conquered or studied from a distance—it was an ever-present expression of the Self. Though he seldom preached about environmentalism in the modern sense, his way of life and words reflected a deep reverence for the natural world, born from his profound realization of unity in all existence.

Silence and the Sacredness of Arunachala

Ramana Maharshi's life at the foot of Arunachala hill—considered by him the embodiment of Lord Shiva—was itself a declaration of nature's sanctity. He referred to Arunachala as "the stillness that speaks" and called it the guru in the form of a mountain. In *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, he often encouraged devotees to surrender to Arunachala and allow its grace to lead them inward. The mountain was not just landscape; it was living presence.

For Ramana, nature was not separate from the Self. The trees, animals, rivers, and mountains were all equally divine. His natural compassion extended to every being—he would pick up ants drowning in water, scold devotees for mistreating monkeys, and make sure animals were fed even when food was scarce. His empathy was spontaneous, not born of doctrine, but from inner clarity that saw no division between 'self' and 'other.'

Living in Harmony with Simplicity

Ramana Maharshi's life was one of natural simplicity. He did not advocate renunciation for its own sake but lived a life free from excess. The Ashram routines followed the rhythms of nature—waking at sunrise, eating fresh, plant-based food, and bathing in the sacred tank. His insistence on sharing food equally with all—humans, cows, birds, and monkeys—reflected a seamless unity with the ecosystem around him.

In one instance, when someone wanted to kill the scorpions in the ashram, Ramana gently replied: "They have as much right to live here as we do." This was not sentimentality—it was the result of deep realization that all forms are transient appearances of the one consciousness.

Nature as a Mirror to the Self

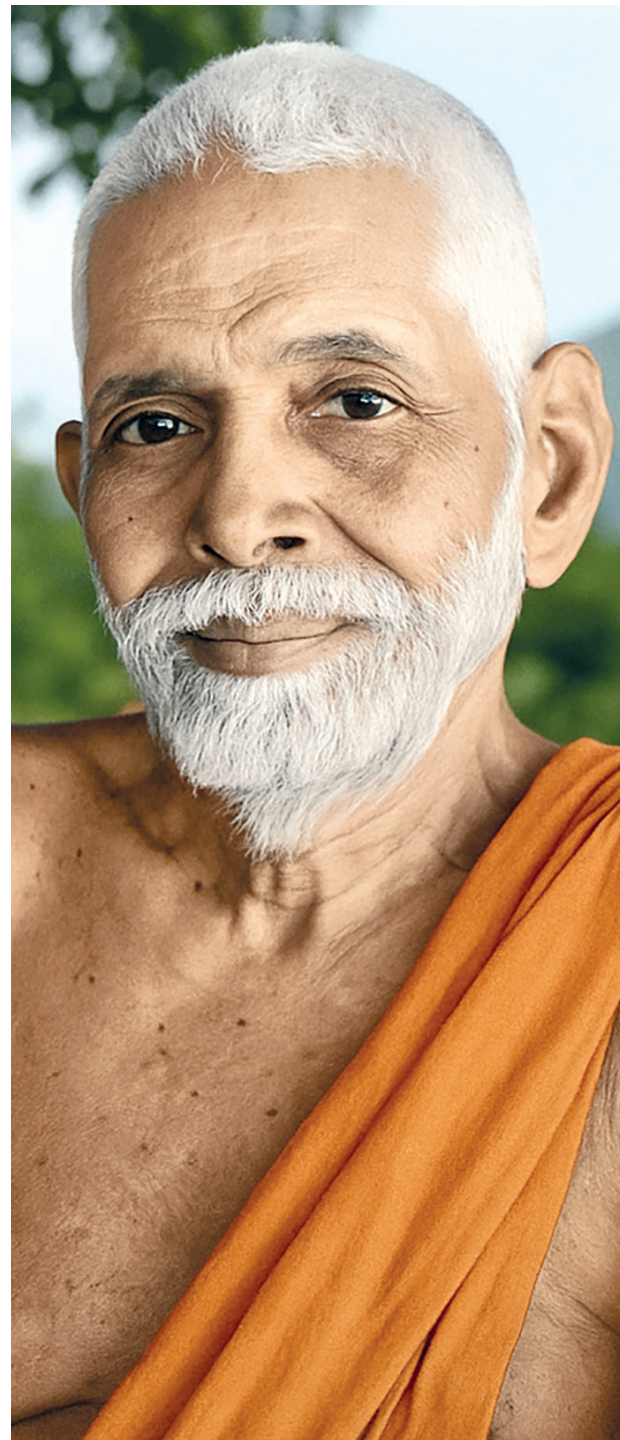
Ramana Maharshi often used metaphors drawn from nature to convey spiritual truths. He spoke of the mind as a monkey, constantly jumping from thought to thought; of the ego as a shadow, unreal yet appearing real; of stillness like a calm lake reflecting truth. He saw nature as a perfect teacher for the one who was willing to observe it in silence.

In one famous saying, he noted: "The Self alone is real. All else is illusion." Yet, paradoxically, this realization led to a greater compassion for the world, not detachment from it. To live with awareness of the Self is to live with respect for all of life—including nature.

The Ecological Wisdom of Non-Duality

In today's time of ecological crisis, Ramana Maharshi's teachings offer a subtle but radical solution: rediscover our true nature, and we will naturally care for the world. His Advaitic (non-dual) philosophy does not divide the universe into sacred and profane, human and non-human, but sees all as expressions of the one reality.

When we truly see the Self in all, there is no



exploitation, no domination—only harmony, humility, and gratitude. In his silent presence, the birds, squirrels, and trees thrived. His was a life in which spirituality and nature were not separate pursuits, but one seamless experience.

Ramana Maharshi did not start a movement to save the environment. But he lived a life that was in complete resonance with it. His silence echoed through the rocks of Arunachala, his gaze calmed animals, and his teachings—rooted in the question "Who am I?"—guide us not just inward, but also toward a more compassionate and conscious relationship with the Earth.

In the words of the sage himself:

"Be still. The world will take care of itself."

That stillness, when found, becomes the deepest ecology.

Source: *Talks from Sri Ramana Maharishi*

A VILLAGE'S FIGHT FOR NATURE

Strong communities are often built when people come together to share knowledge, resources, and care. Across the world, grassroots initiatives prove that collective effort can transform lives, turning challenges into opportunities and dreams into realities. One such inspiring example is the Youth of Kodaganallur Endeavour (YOKE) Society, based in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu.

Founded by Chitra, Vasudevan, and a group of committed natives, YOKE works with focus and heart across education, employment, health, and the environment. Its mission is simple yet profound: to improve living standards while bridging the rural-urban divide. Today, YOKE touches the lives of nearly 1,000 people every year, nurturing both individuals and the community as a whole.

"The village gave me my ancestry. Coming back was not just about staying connected, it was about taking responsibility," reflects Chitra, Founder and Chairperson of YOKE.

The very name "YOKE" signifies unity and energy. Its members, young in both age and spirit, are driven to build a self-reliant, vibrant community. While partnerships with individual well-wishers and corporate donors sustain its activities, the real strength of YOKE lies in deep local participation.

Education: Unlocking Opportunities

Education has been YOKE's anchor from the beginning. Its NEET coaching programme for government school students has already enabled seven young aspirants to enter medical colleges—a life-changing milestone for their families and villages.

The efforts extend far beyond exam preparation. YOKE organizes guest lectures, excursions, English-language workshops, and much-needed infrastructure improvements in schools, including water supply, sanitation, and classrooms. "Education is not just about textbooks—it is about confidence, exposure, and the ability to dream bigger," Chitra emphasizes.

Employment: Pathways to Self-Reliance

YOKE has also invested in creating livelihood opportunities. Classes for job seekers prepare young people for competitive exams, with several achieving state-level success. Soft-skills workshops and self-help initiatives further encourage entrepreneurship and financial independence.

One inspiring story is of a young mother who, after attending YOKE's classes, cleared a government exam and secured employment. This single achievement dramatically reshaped her family's future, proving how empowerment can ripple across generations.

Health: Caring for the Community

Healthcare in rural areas often struggles with accessibility and awareness. YOKE



addresses this by partnering with the Indian Medical Association to conduct health camps covering diabetes, geriatrics, dentistry, and eye care. The Society also promotes holistic wellness through yoga, sports, and fitness events, reinforcing the message that health is both prevention and care.

Environment: Protecting Roots

The natural environment of Kodaganallur remains central to YOKE's vision. Through its annual Vanamahotsava tree-planting festival, the organisation increases greenery along riverbanks and village roads. Volunteers regularly clean water bodies, monitor river quality, and

engage school NSS units in awareness drives.

"A clean environment is not a luxury—it is the very basis of a healthy community," Chitra reminds us.

The Spirit of YOKE

Among YOKE's most beloved initiatives is the Karam Yokathon, an annual marathon that celebrates resilience and unity. Chitra recalls the story of a young man who joined the event doubting his own stamina. Not only did he finish, but he came third—and later shared that the race gave him the courage to join the army. "That's what YOKE is about," says Chitra, "helping people discover their own strength."

Rooted and Forward-Looking

From classrooms to riversides, YOKE is shaping Kodaganallur and its neighbouring areas into a community that is deeply rooted yet future-ready. Its mission is not charity, but empowerment: giving people the tools to take charge of their own lives.

As Chitra puts it, "We are here to give people the tools to stand taller, dream bigger, and build stronger roots. Because when the community grows, we all grow."

Aatika Kundalam

SLEEP: THE GREAT RESTORER



Sleep is important. We all know this. Some of us wrestle with our schedules and work so that we can get enough sleep, some of us have (sadly) given up the fight and somehow try to manage with whatever sleep we can get. But both these categories of people still do know the endless benefits of sufficient and good quality sleep, and the huge and dramatic problems that arise when we don't get enough sleep. So this article is not about the general benefits of good sleep, which are many and varied and

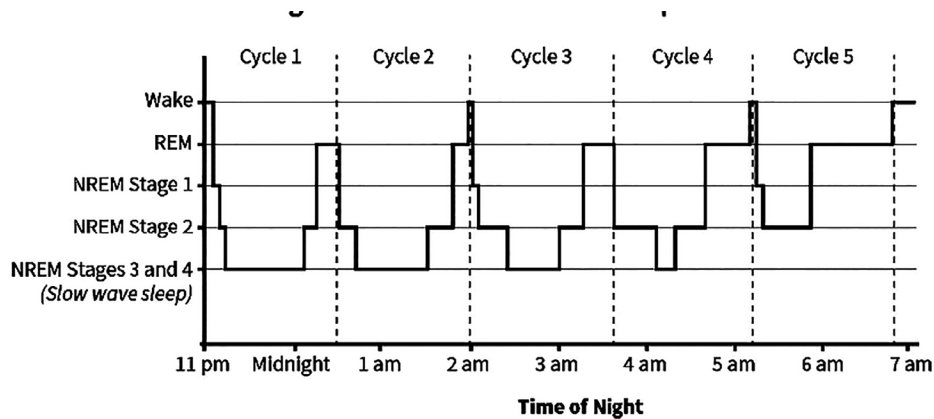
NREM sleep has very different and distinctive brain activity patterns from both waking patterns and REM patterns. Every night, our sleep goes through distinct cycles of REM and NREM sleep.

remarkably important for good health - it is about some new research that has brought to light another crucial benefit. Read on to find out more.

Sleep has many sub-stages, but to simplify it for our discussion, let's only define REM and NREM sleep. Both these terms are based on the way the eyes move (ocular movements) during this time, and stand for Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, and Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) sleep. The strange part is that brain activity during REM sleep is almost exactly the same as brain activity while we are awake! I found this fact quite surprising because I would have expected that brain activity would be markedly different between sleeping and waking, but apparently that is not so. REM sleep is almost like an awake state brain-activity-wise, and we can guess why - that's right, we dream in REM sleep. In fact, we dream only while we are in REM sleep. (Why this is so important we shall discuss in just a few moments.) REM sleep is also characterised by an absence of the chemical noradrenaline. This is a stress-triggering chemical and its absence is significant - it means that we can experience emotions in dreams (since the amygdala, the emotion-related regions of the cortex and the

hippocampus show awake-like activity) without experiencing painful stress.

NREM sleep on the other hand has very different and distinctive brain activity patterns from both waking patterns and REM patterns. Every night, our sleep goes through distinct cycles of REM and NREM sleep. Evolution has taken a great deal of trouble to bring our brains to a stage where there are complex mechanisms in place to ensure the shifts between REM and NREM sleep each night. Before we wonder why, here's a graph showing the cyclical movements between REM and NREM sleep each night, and I'm sure you'll agree all these complex and cycling movements cannot be without some very significant evolutionary objective:



**Graph reproduced for reference purposes from P47, 'Why We Sleep' by Matthew Walker*

So what is the purpose of all these peaks and troughs, and maintaining them night after night? What is the purpose of REM sleep specifically?

To answer this question, we will draw upon the research of Dr. Yukiyasu Kamitani, Dr. Matthew Walker, Dr. Rosalind Cartwright, and Dr. Murray Raskind. All these researchers, working in different countries, have given us a large body of independent research all of which is eminently worth studying, but for the purposes of this article, we'll be drawing on small segments of their research that point towards the reasons why we have REM sleep at all.

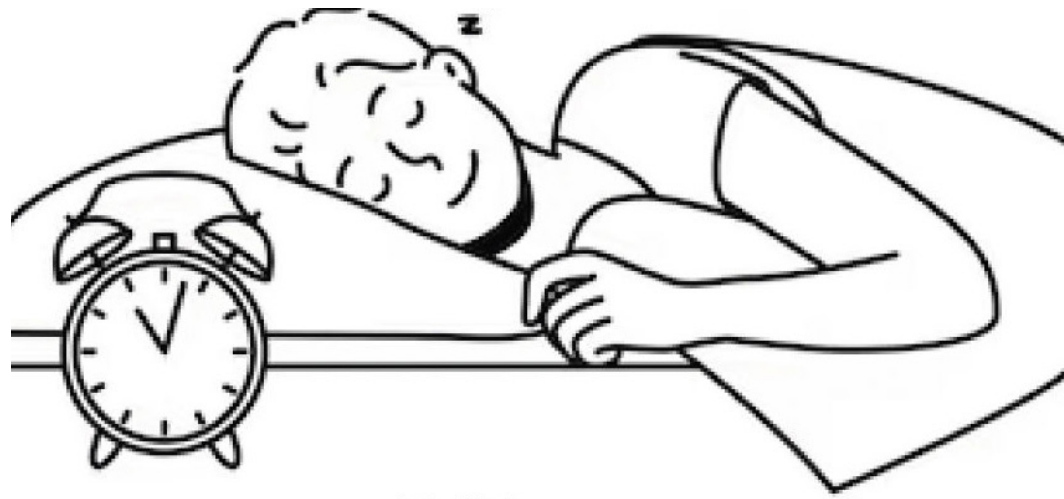
We all experience stressful situations in life. We sometimes dream of them too. But usually and normally, after a few days, weeks or months of the event, depending on its intensity, we are able to look back on the situation without getting all upset about it, and can sometimes even see the funny or positive side of the experience. This is a sign of emotional wellness, versus a situation where negative events keep haunting an individual with the same stressful intensity as when they occurred. This latter is in fact one of the most debilitating symptoms of PTSD, which is also blighted by the allied symptom of sleeplessness.

From an aggregation of all the research of the researchers mentioned, and a bringing together of findings from them all, it has now become clear that:

- People who have experienced less REM sleep between the point of testing and the traumatic experience in their past, are not able to get over negative experiences (ie, be able to look back on the traumatic event along with the emotions generated, but without experiencing the same amount of stress) as effectively as those who have experienced sufficient REM sleep

- People deficient in REM sleep experienced lowered ability to distinguish between friendly and unfriendly facial cues in their surroundings, uniformly and unanimously mistaking friendly facial cues for unfriendly ones. This is completely reversible - when the same subjects are tested after having experienced enough REM sleep, their ability to accurately recognise facial expressions is back to the same level as pre-REM deprivation.
- These results are corroborated by brain imaging too, and are not based only on the self-reporting of the participants

The implications of these findings are deep and far-reaching. From single sporadic flare-ups with co-workers because of low REM, to spiralling into clinical depression because of the same cause, an understanding of the significance of REM sleep



7-9 hours,
the ideal
for adults

seems to hold the key to unlocking a whole new source of pleasantness and wellbeing - just sleep early, and get your full 8 hours of sleep, so that your REM quota is fully optimised.

Thus we see that REM sleep equals emotional healing. This also raises questions about general sleeplessness and its impacts, and the importance of sleep towards maintaining good mental health. Too many of us allow our night sleep to be disrupted by bathroom visits, by sleeping pills, by willfully staying awake for other reasons. This seems most unwise, especially in the light of the dire fact that every major mental illness including depression, anxiety, PTSD, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder co-occur with abnormal sleep.

Given the great importance of sleep, and given that we are yet to look at the significance of NREM in addition to that of REM, it would be a good idea to discuss ways of getting better sleep in the next article. Till then, wishing you your full quota of sleep each night!



The author Ramashree Paranandi is a teacher, and a partner in The Organic Farm, Nedumaram, TN. She consults on applications of yoga, natural therapies and music for good health, and often stays over at the farm to recharge herself with pollution free days spent amidst natural surroundings. An MA in Yogashastra enables her to apply the knowledge of the ancient texts to contemporary situations.



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises

– for profits and non profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

Ms. Marie Banu Rodrigues
Director, Chennai
@ 9884700029

Dr. Madhuri. R
Head, Coimbatore,
@ 91 9840222559

Dr. Agyea Tripathi
Head North & NE India
@ 91 8058662444

Mr. Sandeep Mehto,
Head – Hosangabad,
@ 91 96696 77054

Accounting and Audit for social enterprises, CSR projects, and NGOs through Social Audit Network, India (SAN India). For further information, please contact: Ms. Latha Suresh
Director, SAN, India
@ 92822 05123.
www.sanindia.org

CSIM also facilitates Social

REIMAGINING



NG FUTURES



In the narrow lanes of Delhi's underserved communities, where opportunities can often feel out of reach, a quiet transformation has been taking place. Classrooms filled with colors, creativity, and the laughter of young girls are redefining what it means to learn, to heal, and to aspire. At the center of this transformation is Protsahan India Foundation, an organization that has, for more than a decade, been building safe and empowering spaces where girls can flourish with dignity, education, and confidence.

"Every child deserves to grow up with a sense of safety, belonging, and the confidence to chase her dreams," reflects Sonal Kapoor, Founder and CEO of Protsahan. "Our effort has always been to nurture that confidence, to make sure girls know that their voices matter and their futures are limitless."

Sonal's own journey is as inspiring as the work she leads. A graduate in Microbiology with an MBA, she once believed she would make her career in the pharmaceutical sector, inspired by leaders like Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw. "I was fascinated with the Science in pharma and the creativity of FMCG advertising as a student," she recalls. "Who would have thought all that training was quietly preparing me to build a grassroots institution in child care, rooted in the neuroscience of childhood trauma and the healing power of arts and creativity - from India for the world!"

Like many young professionals, Sonal began with corporate stints in finance and communications. But an encounter during a film shoot shifted her path completely. "That moment changed me," she says. "I realized I wanted to create a space where children could feel nourished, where creativity could light up their lives. Within weeks, Protsahan was born."

From its beginnings in a single room in Delhi, Protsahan has now grown into a movement that has reached over 96,000 girls facing adversity, since 2010. Thousands of girls have been supported into mainstream schools, and the organization has strengthened state systems to impact millions more through capacity building trainings and anchoring state entitlements for the poorest of poor.

At the core of Protsahan's work is the H.E.A.R.T model—Health, Education, Art, Rights, and Technology. In practice, this means communities where art becomes a tool for expression, photography and cinema turn into platforms for local storytelling, and mindfulness practices help girls facing severe adversity discover calm. Technology adds a powerful dimension, equipping girls with education and employability skills that prepare them for the future.

"Sometimes the simplest things can spark the greatest change," Sonal explains. "We once did coffee art with

children, and the aroma and colors opened up their imaginations in a way I had never seen before. Creativity is universal—it speaks to everyone. Our work has been tested by third party researchers and evaluators where they have documented how beautifully the girls have healed and grown into empowered women contributing to the country's progress."

This spirit of innovation shines through Protsahan's Girl Champions Program, where participants are supported over many years to become leaders in their own right. "Earlier I was too shy to speak, abuse had broken me," says Pooja, a student at Protsahan. "Now I have not only finished my education, I also help younger girls stay in school and not go for begging and child labor. It feels good to share what I have learned."

The emphasis on future skills is equally important. Through initiatives like Trauma Informed Livelihoods initiative that's run as a fellowship program, young participants learn about workplace communication, civic problem-solving, reproductive health, digital literacy, and financial literacy. With support from a



robust team of proximate social workers and resource persons, many girls have been introduced to advanced technology and AI for the first time. "The first time I touched a computer, my hands were trembling," says Anita, 15, a migrant girl from Bihar. "Now I design posters on civic issues, edit videos, and even teach my friends. Every time they learn something new from me, I feel proud—like I've opened a small window to understanding the world."

Protsahan also breaks barriers around shifting gender norms through STEM. Protsahan works at the intersection of gender equity and empowering girls who have faced adverse childhood experiences. Girls in impoverished slums are encouraged to experiment with robotics kits, science experiments, and design challenges. "Why should curiosity have limits of privilege?" Sonal asks with a smile. "Our girls can be innovators, scientists, or entrepreneurs - whatever they choose to be. They only need the space and encouragement to explore."

The organization has also reimagined advocacy. Instead of focusing only on

policies and bulky reports, Protsahan uses the stories and creativity of its girl champions to inspire larger change. "At one time our girls painted an entire community with Madhubani and Warli art," Sonal recounts. "The children themselves chose to speak about important issues like child abuse through traditional art forms. It was their way of turning pain into purpose, and the walls came alive with hope. What once was silence, shame and stigma became colour, expression and voices."

Her candor about the challenges of building Protsahan adds authenticity to the story. "A lot of people think you need venture capital or big money to start something," she says. "When we began, all we had was firm belief and creativity. We sold handmade diyas to raise our first funds, and that taught us innovation doesn't always come from apps or technology—it sometimes also starts with using what you already have. What resource crunches and failures can teach you, no MBA can." She adds, "Scarcity has a way of stripping the noise away. When resources run dry, you finally see which roots feed the system and which are only decoration."

As she often tells young changemakers, the journey will rarely be easy—but it will always be worth it. "When you begin, it can feel lonely," she says. "But if you hold your idea gently yet firmly, and keep documenting everyday evidence of its impact, the world will begin to notice. For us, it was the belief that creativity could heal and empower children with fractured childhoods. That belief carried us from makeshift classrooms in slums to speaking on global stages like the World Bank—places we never imagined, but where our girls' voices belonged all along."

Looking ahead, Protsahan has set itself an ambitious goal: to reach one million girls facing adversity by 2030. This vision is not just about numbers but about nourishing existing ecosystems where every vulnerable child feels safe, supported, and celebrated. "Our dream is simple," says Sonal. "We want every child to laugh, to learn, to lead, and to live with dignity. If even one girl finds her voice, she can inspire hundreds more."

From its humble beginnings to its present impact, Protsahan India Foundation stands as a testament to what empathy, innovation, and determination can achieve. The journey has never been about rescuing children from difficulty alone; it has always been about celebrating their strengths, nurturing their talents, and giving them wings to soar.

As one young participant summed it up beautifully: "Here, I learned to dream. And now I believe my dreams can come true - because I've seen that healing is possible."

Marie Banu Rodriguez

WISDOM AT EVERY TURN

When I look back at my life, I realise that I have been shaped at every stage by teachers, professors, and guides who entered my path at just the right time. Each one left a mark—sometimes through a word of encouragement, sometimes through discipline, sometimes simply by showing me what was possible. If I stand where I am today, it is because of the many teachers who walked with me on this journey.

My school years, from the 6th to the 12th Standard, were spent at Ramakrishna Mission School, T. Nagar. Admission to the English medium section was through a rigorous test, and only forty students made it each year. Those were my formative years, when our class teacher, Mr. M.S., instilled values in us that would last a lifetime. He taught us that education was not just about marks but about building character. Even today, I can hear her voice reminding us to be truthful, humble, and kind.

At 14, while volunteering with ABVP, I had my first taste of responsibility. Sri Gopalan, who oversaw operations, guided me to coordinate evening classes for poor and needy students at T. Nagar High School. I was still a teenager, but he trusted me to lead. “You can do this,” he would say, and that confidence shaped me. Managing those classes gave me leadership lessons long before I entered the corporate world.

My own father, Sri P.S. Narayanasamy, was another great teacher. A school teacher and later a headmaster, he taught me righteousness and values—lessons not from a textbook, but from life. “Be good to others. Don’t chase money. Love and respect nature.” These were his mantras, simple yet profound. He spoke of the philosophy of “detached attachment” to close family, and the inescapable impact of karma. These teachings became the moral compass I carry even today.

My elder brother, PNR, whose story I shared in the previous issue, was a teacher in his own way. Through his grit and persistence, he showed me what it meant to keep learning, to keep striving, no matter what. My eldest brother, PND, my Manaseega Guru, deserves a chapter of his own, which I will write in detail in the next issue.

The next great milestone in my journey was joining Regional Engineering College. There I came under the influence of our principal, Prof. P.S. Manisundaram. He was an outstanding teacher and guide. Strict, but at the same time giving us all the flexibility we needed to grow. He moulded us into professionals without ever letting us lose our human side. We adored him, respected him, and remained connected long after graduation. When he retired as Vice Chancellor of Bharathidasan University, we invited him for one of our reunions in Chennai, and he joined us without hesitation. Such was the depth of our connection with this unparalleled Guru.

When I began my career at Godrej, I was fortunate again. My branch manager, K.S.G. Murthy, became my first teacher in sales and business development. Under his

I realise that my life has been blessed with teachers in every stage—school, college, corporate life, agriculture, natural building, and heritage conservation

guidance, I consistently exceeded my targets. Later, when I received admission to IIM Bangalore and XLRI, I decided on XLRI and submitted my resignation. He refused to accept it. “Why resign?” he asked. “The company will sponsor your costs. Accept the offer—you were prepared to pay yourself anyway.” His advice was sound, practical, and far-sighted. It changed my path and showed me what it means when a boss becomes a teacher.

At XLRI, I had the privilege of studying under three giants who left an indelible impact.

Fr. McGrath, our Director and Professor of Organisational Behaviour, taught us managerial effectiveness in a way that no book could capture. His own book became a Bible for us. Simple, approachable, and deeply human, he shaped how I approached people and organisations. Even 25 years after graduation, when I visited the Institute, he remembered me and recalled incidents from our classroom. He is no more, but his lessons live on in me.

Fr. Mascarenhas, who taught Marketing Research and Social Research Methods, pushed us harder than anyone. His classes were demanding, quantitative, and analytical. He would visit our hostels late at night to check on our progress. “Burn the midnight oil,” he used to say, “because insights don’t come easy.” But behind that strictness was a heart of gold. I will never forget the kindness he showed me even before I joined XLRI. Having first paid my fees at IIM Bangalore, I later sent a money order to XLRI, which never arrived on time. My admission was cancelled, and I thought I had lost both opportunities. In despair, I called him. He simply said, “Don’t worry. The moment one student drops out, I will reinstate your admission.” And he kept his word. I owe him my XLRI journey.

Prof. Sharad Sarin was another



extraordinary teacher. His focus on critical thinking shaped my professional life. Whenever we presented case studies, he would lean forward and say, “I want something more.” That prodding forced us to think deeper, analyse better, and justify every recommendation. As Secretary of MAXI, the Marketing Association of XLRI, I had the privilege of working closely with him. From designing games for the Marketing Fair to analysing data and presenting solutions, he taught me how marketing, branding, and business development were not just concepts but living processes. Years later, he would introduce me to others as his “younger brother.” That bond is something I cherish.

My corporate journey also introduced me to teachers outside the classroom. Mr. Anand Singh Chauhan of JCB taught me the importance of standing firm when ethics are at stake. Tony Stammers, Director of Al-Futtaim, appreciated the power of granular analysis and pushed me to sharpen my thinking. A company MD where I was CEO once told me, after a tough negotiation, “Elegance matters. Don’t get back at a colleague—win him over.” My auditor, Mr. Krishnan, showed me how to treat senior professionals respectfully while still achieving objectives.

As I moved into agriculture, I met another set of teachers. Dr. Gurumurthy became my “Agri Guru,” training me in evaluating farmland and cultivation practices. Organic farming opened doors to others: Mamandoor Murugappan, gave me Kuchali samba paddy nathu when I embarked on my first Organic paddy cultivation; Partha, a young farmer from Avadi, who taught me how to prepare organic pesticides and fertilisers and calmed me when pests threatened my crop; Britto Raj, a senior government official, who gave practical solutions at every step.

Above all, I read and absorbed the writings of Nammazhwar, the organic pioneer, whom I never met but who became a spiritual guide.

In my natural building journey, too, I found teachers everywhere. Karen Shetty, living in her mud house in Tenkasi, patiently answered my questions, reminding me that such homes are “living, breathing structures” that need regular care, unlike dead concrete. A down-to-earth lumber shop owner, John from Mahabalipuram, taught me about different woods and their strengths. Thannal from Tiruvannamalai shared online lessons that became invaluable.

And as a Trustee of Reach Foundation, working in heritage monument conservation, I had the privilege of learning from stalwarts. Dr. Satyamurthy, a retired Superintendent of the ASI and a walking encyclopedia on temples and ancient construction, opened my eyes to the intricacies of restoration. Vakula Varadarajan, who passed away recently, was a powerhouse of information, sharing his knowledge generously. Mr. Ramachandran, my epigraphy teacher, brought to life the stories of the Chozhas, Pallavas, and Chalukyas.

Looking back, I realise that my life has been blessed with teachers in every stage—school, college, corporate life, agriculture, natural building, and heritage conservation. Some taught in classrooms, some in offices, some in fields, some on temple grounds. Each one left me richer.

The best teachers are those who, as the saying goes, “show you where to look but do not tell you what to see.” I have been lucky to have many such teachers, and my journey is really a tapestry woven from their wisdom.

P.N. Subramanian

GUARDIANS OF GREEN



In today's fast-changing world, where urbanization and consumerism often dominate the narrative, the quiet but powerful work of grassroots environmental organizations is easy to overlook. Yet these are the very movements that keep rivers alive, forests intact, and communities healthier. One such initiative is Ever Green Globe (EGG), founded in 2016 in Gopolasamudram, Tirunelveli, with a vision to protect air, water, land, and biodiversity for generations to come.

EGG's journey is proof of what happens when ordinary citizens, bound by extraordinary determination, come together for a shared purpose. From tree planting and river restoration to waste management and the revival of heritage structures, the organisation's message is simple and urgent—safeguarding nature is not optional, it is essential for survival.

At the heart of this movement is Nivek, Founder and Managing Trustee of EGG. A lifelong nature enthusiast, his career began as a soldier with the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), followed by a stint as a corporate HR Manager after completing a Master's in Social Work. Yet, his passion for the environment pulled him back to his roots. "Money can buy comfort, but it cannot buy a river, a tree, or clean air," he reflects. "I wanted my earnings to flow back into the soil that raised me. My wife stood by me, and that gave me the courage to give everything I could to nature."

Nivek's personal efforts began with planting native saplings and removing invasive species, a mission he continues to this day. To date, he has planted more than 6,500 saplings across his village. In 2018, he launched an ambitious project to restore



the once-abundant palm trees in the region, setting himself the target of planting five crore palm seeds. Already, over five lakh have been planted, each with the potential to recharge groundwater and stand for centuries. His persistence has also seen five acres of encroached land reclaimed at Nambineri Kulam and the removal of a permanent structure at Palapalaoodai, achieved without resistance. In addition, he has collected and safely disposed of 3.2 tonnes of plastic bottles from local water bodies, ensuring cleaner, safer ecosystems.

What makes EGG thrive, however, is not one man's vision alone. Over 50 volunteers, supported by the town panchayat and community members, have joined hands with Nivek to make environmental protection a shared responsibility. Together they plant trees after careful classification of residential and non-residential areas, ensuring that native varieties thrive where they belong. Each planting drive is followed up for three years, showing a long-term commitment to care. They have worked tirelessly to remove the invasive *Prosopis Juliflora*, a species that chokes out native biodiversity

and conceals cultural landmarks. By clearing it, they restore not just the ecology but also the visibility of heritage spaces.

EGG has also made water body restoration a priority, recognizing that rivers and ponds are lifelines for communities. Through clean-up drives, sand restoration, and action against encroachments, they ensure that water sources remain accessible and vibrant for future generations. Alongside this, they run waste management initiatives—removing discarded bottles and plastics from water bodies, spreading awareness about responsible disposal, and carrying the message of sustainability into schools and homes. For EGG, cultural preservation is inseparable from ecological preservation. Neglected temples and bridges have been restored, blending heritage with environmental stewardship in a way that reminds communities of their shared history.

These initiatives highlight how citizen-led action can resist deforestation, pollution, and ecological neglect. When students take part in river-cleaning drives, when volunteers prevent illegal tree

cutting, or when families nurture saplings, they are not just protecting green cover—they are shaping a legacy for the future. In recognition of this tireless work, EGG received the Tamil Nadu Green Champion Award in 2023 and was honoured again in 2025 in partnership with the TMB Foundation for its environmental contributions. For Nivek, these milestones are a reminder of responsibility rather than recognition. "The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth," he says. "If we forget this, we risk leaving behind nothing but concrete for our children. If we remember it, we leave behind life."

Whether it is reducing plastic use, planting a tree, participating in a clean-up drive, or simply supporting local eco-initiatives, every small step matters. Nature sustains us—our air, water, food, and even our culture flow from it. Protecting it is not a choice; it is our collective responsibility. Or, as Nivek puts it, "Wherever nature calls, we'll be there. This is not our duty alone—it belongs to everyone who breathes the air, drinks the water, and walks this earth."

Aatika Kundalam



MEANINGLESS TO MEANINGFUL

How a Shift in Perspective Creates New Possibilities in Life

I recently facilitated a training, and as a trainer, I often encounter participants who interrupt frequently, both when we are speaking and when their co-participants are sharing something. And most of the time, it's the old people who tend to show this behaviour. However, because I tend to see most of the time old people doing it this way, do I assume that old people have this behaviour? If I do so, I am stereotyping. Similarly, I placed an order on an online food delivery app – the expected delivery time was 7 minutes, but the person took more than 15 minutes to deliver. Do I again stereotype that deliveries are always late by this service provider? Most of us create these kinds of meanings in our heads every moment of our lives. Together, those meanings from different experiences we have had in our lives are one of the key components that make us what we are, that give us our identity.

This is a profound learning I had when I attended the Landmark Forum recently in Hyderabad. So, life is a conglomeration of various events. Every event, including the small things like how people behave at a traffic junction or how executives receive you in a shopping mall, or in what way your apartment watchman or municipal worker is cleaning an area, how a driver is driving an auto before you, or how the shopkeeper responded to you during your interaction with him, or how your spouse/mother/mother-in-law is behaving today can also shape your identity. The possibilities or the potential you can have are limited only by your identity. The possibilities and potential are limitless. It's only your own identity that restricts you towards those potential / possibilities.

And, essentially, the fact that life itself is meaningless. Life is shaped by the meaning we give to the different experiences we encounter.

For everything we come across in life, there are two aspects: 1 FACT that has actually happened, and 2 INTERPRETATION, the meaning you ascribe to that experience.

What if recognising this could give us freedom, power, and the ability to create new possibilities?

This was one of the key learning from the Forum. Once we make ourselves aware of all the meanings, we have created in the past that have restricted our identity, we have the power to act on them.

I will take two very common examples:

1. If we take a few people randomly around us and ask them if they drive and how they learn to drive. There is a sequence of steps that must have happened in their life that either have made them learn it or stopped them from teaching it. Often, we see that some common events happen to many people, e.g., they fall from a cycle, a bike, or a car, or have an accident while learning. Although the severity of the accidents may differ, even considering the same event, not everyone responds in the same way. Some continue to fall again and again, eventually learning from their mistakes, while others fall repeatedly and leave learning to chance, and still others never learn again after their first accident. If you see that the event is more or less the same for all, it is only how they respond to that event, or rather the meaning they give to that event, that defines what is going to happen in the future with respect to that aspect.
2. The same thing happens with marriages. It may happen that, for whatever reason, a difference of opinion arises between two people, and they may even get separated. Some people accept it, move on, and marry someone again, whereas others do



not marry again. It's not actually what has happened to them (the events) that are making the difference, it's actually the meaning that has been assigned or given to those experiences that defines in which direction they will go.

We don't just experience events - we experience our interpretation of them. We humans are "Meaning-Making Machines". We make meaning of everything that happens to us in our lives. We don't even realise that we do.

How These Meanings Define Our Life

The more often we repeat the meanings, the more they become our firm beliefs, and eventually, we also pick some of our values from them. So, beliefs then shape decisions, behaviours, and the opportunities we pursue (or avoid). Over time, we end up living inside a story, not reality itself, without even realising it. This is the state in which most of us are in – 24/7.

How to Identify the Meanings We Gave

Identifying what meaning you have assigned to events from the past requires a conscious thought process.

Pause and ask: What happened? What did I make it mean?

Notice the gap between facts and interpretations. Once you start doing this for significant events or experiences in your life, you will see that it's only the meaning you gave to the event in the past that has either disempowered/empowered you, and not the actual event.

Write down a recent upsetting event, then separate the raw facts from the story you added. This also applies to how you interact with people. Every time we interact with people, we tend to already assign a meaning to what is going to happen or what the other person is going to say. We assign a specific meaning to the person, and we assign a personality to the other person. Once you start looking at the world and at the person using this fixed meaning, or sometimes also called a filter, you tend to limit your possibilities. This is where most of people get trapped in life – both in their relationships and in their life as a whole.

Recognition itself is freeing - once you see it as a story, it loses its grip. Once you see that the stories you are creating or the meanings you are ascribing are what have actually resulted in things that you don't want, you have the power to change them. Realisation is the first step of change. Without realisation, there is nothing to change.

How Identification Empowers You

Awareness creates choice - you're no longer trapped inside the automatic reaction. Once you realise that you are assigning unnecessary meanings to the events in your life, you will see that the meaning no longer holds power; you have the power then. Now that you know you can change the possibilities by changing the meaning you give to any past event or whatever events you encounter, you can hence have the scope to embrace new, better possibilities for everything that is happening in life.

This created the freedom for you to define how events in your life shape your life – by changing the meanings in such a way that they empower you instead of disempowering you. By the way, no matter what, you cannot stay without ascribing meaning, as we are a meaning-making machine, so why not assign something that empowers us?

Here is a list of contexts, including disempowering and empowering meanings, to you let you know of some possibilities.

Business, "I failed," "This didn't work - what's next?"

Relationships, "They don't care about me," "They forgot - it happens. I'll remind them."

Career, "I'm stuck in this job forever," "I haven't yet created my next opportunity."

Health, "Oh no, I missed my work out again." "I missed today's workout. Right now, I recommit to my health - I'll walk 2 km right now."

Self, "I am a loser, I missed it again," "I missed it this time, it's ok. I won't let it happen ever again."

Changing the Meanings and Creating More Possibilities

Once you see meanings as your creation, you can recreate them. You can also choose no meaning - freeing yourself from the drama and moving on. This is particularly important for highly traumatic events. More powerfully, you can create new meanings on purpose: "This challenge is the beginning of a breakthrough."

This is how leaders, entrepreneurs, and creators shape the world - by giving empowering meanings to neutral events. The more you do it, the more you start to enjoy the things around you.

Conclusion

Life is empty and meaningless - and that's not a problem; it's freedom. Meaning is not "out there" - it's in our hands. Each moment is a chance to either live in old, limiting meanings or create new, empowering ones. So, start your journey from moving from meaningless to meaningful.

What meaning will you choose to give today? As you read this article, you may also assign meanings to yourself, me, CISM, or whoever shared this document or link with you, or the device on which you are reading it. Start digging deeper, and you will discover the power of this.

Although my journey to understand "Why we do what we do" has been ongoing for nearly 15 years, the Forum has clarified things like nothing else. I would urge everyone to attend their training to experience its power. You can check their schedules and register for the event here: <https://srkr.pro/landmarkevents> or contact me directly at connect@srkrvizag.com.

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REVIVING TRADITIONS

In a time when globalized culture often threatens to overshadow local traditions, Native Krea has positioned itself as a unique platform to bring native artistry into the spotlight. Founded by entrepreneur and cultural researcher Mr. Shaan Raj, Native Krea is not just an art gallery but a movement that seeks to revive, redefine, and revolutionize India's artistic heritage for the modern world.

The inspiration for Native Krea dates back to Shaan's school days in Madurai. Surrounded by temple sculptures and intricate native crafts, he developed a deep fascination for the stories embedded in stone and canvas. "Art is my passion, it describes who I am," Shaan often says, emphasizing how inseparable his identity is from creative expression. His journey as an illustrator, multimedia specialist, and storyteller laid the foundation for what would become Native Krea, a platform where native artists are celebrated and their work recognized on a global scale.

With the encouragement of the Nativelad Foundation, an angel investment platform, and support from the early backer Sivakumar Sadayappan, CEO of iSource ITEs Pvt Ltd, Shaan's vision found practical shape. What began as the dream of an artist soon evolved into a structured enterprise, supported by his wife Ms. Thalitha, who heads operations, and co-founder Vaishnavi, based in Singapore.

Native Krea operates with a guiding principle, which Shaan refers to as the 3Cs: Consent, Credit, Compensation. This framework ensures that collaborations with artists remain ethical, with proper recognition and fair pay. "We just wanted to bring native artists, who are often unknown to society, into the public eye and showcase their work," explains the operations head. Every piece is treated not just as an artwork but as a cultural narrative whether rooted in folklore, mythology, or the rhythms of everyday life.

Much of Native Krea's work celebrates Tamil Nadu's traditions. From paintings of Jallikattu to depictions of Mahabalipuram and Chola temples, the gallery emphasizes themes close to its cultural roots. At the same time, it has ambitions to expand across India's diverse traditions, including Mughal and northern schools of art. This balance of local grounding with national outreach reflects Shaan's belief that art is a universal language with deeply regional accents.

While Shaan drives the creative and philosophical vision, the practical execution rests largely with his wife Ms. Thalitha, who manages finances, logistics, and organizational strategy. "I liaise with the auditors and accounts team, oversee a staff of 15, and ensure that every project is executed smoothly," she explains. Her role provides the structural backbone that allows Native Krea's artistic vision to flourish.

She is also responsible for organizing monthly workshops with master artists. Recently, the gallery hosted a session with

Aparajithan Adimoolam, the son of renowned artist KM Adimoolan. "These workshops allow us to not only preserve traditional practices but also inspire younger audiences and art enthusiasts," she says. Through these events, Native Krea is creating a community around art, bridging established artists with emerging talent.



In addition to workshops, the operations head ensures the gallery's presence in exhibitions across Bangalore, Pondicherry, and beyond, strengthening its profile and building relationships with new audiences. "Audience building is one of the biggest challenges in Chennai," she admits. "It's not easy to get people to engage deeply with native art, which is why reaching global markets is so important."

Scaling an art gallery with global aspirations is no small feat. While Chennai provides a cultural base, local purchasing power is limited. On the international stage, high commissions' demands from galleries in Singapore and Dubai create barriers to entry. "Once we display our artworks abroad, galleries often ask for a year-long commission fee in advance.



That's a challenge we are still negotiating," Thalitha notes.

Another significant hurdle lies in audience education. "Making people understand what the art communicates and why it deserves their investment is a challenge," she says. "Only true art lovers grasp the identity of the artist and the story behind the piece. Selling to the wrong audience is not sustainable. We need to reach those who value the cultural depth of what we showcase."

Despite these challenges, Native Krea continues to innovate. One of its experimental approaches is collective ownership of art, where multiple patrons can co-invest in a piece, sharing both ownership and eventual returns from resale or auction. This model could democratize art investment while ensuring artists receive fair compensation.

Native Krea's impact extends beyond its gallery walls. The team secured government projects under StartupTN, designing entrepreneurial hubs in Madurai, Erode, and Tirunelveli. These space design projects not only provided financial sustainability but also allowed the gallery to merge art with functional public spaces. "Working on the StartupTN hubs was one of our proudest achievements," the operations head remarks. "It gave us credibility and the stability to keep growing our artistic endeavors."

The gallery also collaborates with institutions such as Gallery 7 in Mumbai, creating opportunities for auctions and expanded markets. By partnering with architectural firms and other cultural organizations, Native Krea broadens the reach of its artists while reinforcing its own position as a credible cultural brand.

For the future, Native Krea has clear goals: expanding into education, empowerment, and youth engagement. Plans are underway to launch internship programs for art students, as well as summer workshops for schoolchildren.

"We want to bring children out of social media distractions and into creative thinking," says Thalitha. "Colors, textures, and storytelling can nurture imagination in ways digital screens cannot."

Another key focus is empowering women artists. By offering fair commissions and platforms to showcase their work, Native Krea seeks to create more equitable opportunities in an industry where recognition often skews male. "If a woman artist wants to showcase her work, we ensure she gets proper credit and good commissions," she adds.

Ultimately, Native Krea's ambition is to be recognized not just as a gallery but as a movement that reshapes how art is valued. Shaan frames his mission through the lens of Ikigai, the Japanese concept of purpose. "My Ikigai is to explore, recognize, and bring out the identity and talent of native artists and take them to the global arena," he says.

For the operations head, the motivation is equally personal. Coming from a family of artists whose works never left the walls of their home, she sees Native Krea as a chance to give visibility to countless others. "We want to enlighten lives by taking these artworks out of private spaces and into the world," she reflects.

Three years into its journey, Native Krea is still in its developing stage, learning through challenges and steadily building momentum. With a combination of artistic vision, operational discipline, and community-driven initiatives, it is proving that when art meets purpose, the result is not just commerce, but cultural renewal.

As Native Krea continues to expand, it embodies the harmony of vision and execution. Where Shaan provides the soul, and Thalitha ensures the structure. Together, they demonstrate that art, when nurtured with passion and professionalism, can transcend borders and inspire generations to come.

Bhavadharani. K

"Nature has the last word, always. If we do not respect her, she will reclaim it in her own way."

Dr. Francis Roy shares with Marie Banu his insights into his life's work, and his commitment to ethics both in nature and medicine

Environmental stewardship is often seen as the responsibility of governments or large institutions, but history shows us that many impactful movements begin with individuals and communities who care deeply for their surroundings. Dr. Francis Roy, a doctor by profession and environmentalist by passion, is one such individual. His journey—from founding the Nellai Nature Club to spearheading initiatives that blend conservation, children's education, and ethical healthcare—offers powerful lessons in responsibility and resilience.

In this conversation with Marie Banu, Dr. Francis Roy shares insights into his life's work, and his commitment to ethics both in nature and medicine.

Could you tell us how the Nellai Nature Club came into being?

I happened to be the founder trustee of the Nellai Nature Club almost by accident. We started very small, but once we began, it took off in ways I could never have imagined. Over time, many wings branched out of the club. For example, Ayan Dinai, a dedicated wing, organizes weekly tree plantation drives every Tuesday. They have already planted over 20,000 trees across the region. They also work on solid waste management and have partnered with the corporation's waste disposal plant.

Another initiative that spun out of the club was the local SPCA, which focused on Animal Birth Control (ABC). We worked tirelessly to manage stray populations. Unfortunately, new government regulations now require air-conditioned theatres for ABC surgeries. As smaller corporations cannot afford these facilities, these programmes have come to a standstill. This has led to an alarming rise in the stray dog population. It is a classic example of how well-meaning laws, when detached from ground realities, can disrupt positive community action.

The Club also works with children, doesn't it?

Yes, children have always been at the heart of our activities. We conduct awareness sessions in schools, including Tambaraparani water audits with students. These activities not only create scientific awareness but also instil a sense of ownership among the young. We conduct nature quizzes, take them for jungle camps, and involve them in hands-on projects. The influence has been remarkable.

Even in my own family, the impact is

visible. My father once told me: "If you become a doctor, you can do anything. But if you don't, you can never do what a doctor does." So I became a doctor. But I never forced the same on my son. He was clear about his path, and I respected that. My son, who grew up surrounded by our work, chose to study environmental science and sustainability. He now works at Azeem Premji University. It makes me very happy to see the continuity of passion.

My daughter too chose her own direction—management. She jokes that managers are neater than doctors, and I must admit, she has a point! With the organization expanding, I feel we now need capable managers as much as, if not more than, doctors.

About your association with ATREE?

It began in 2011 with the wetland bird census. I attended the first training session, and from then on Nellai Nature Club became deeply involved. This is our 16th year now. Every year since then, we have organized and supported the census in the Thamirabarani wetlands.

What changes have you noticed in bird populations over these years?

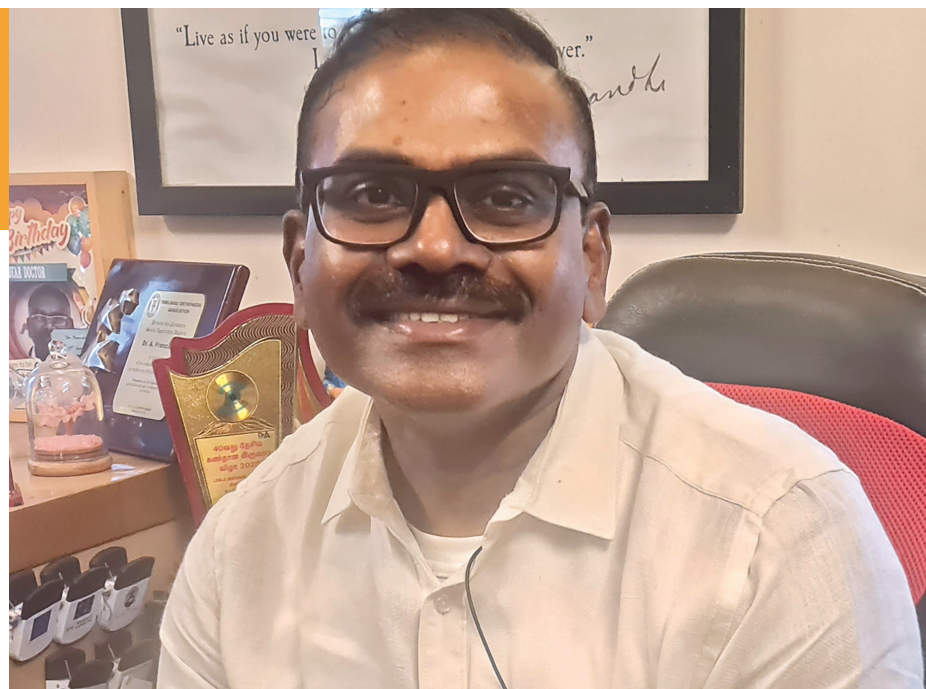
The patterns are tied to rainfall. When only a few tanks have water, the bird sightings are dense and varied. During years of good rain, when all ponds are filled, birds disperse, making them harder to count. There was a period when numbers declined, but recently, the populations seem to be increasing again. Migratory birds like the teal ducks still fly all the way from Siberia, and local communities have begun to take pride in protecting their habitats.

Do you think that community leadership should be formed at the grassroots level?

Absolutely. In many villages, youngsters take on leadership roles by monitoring tanks, equipped with binoculars, guiding groups of children, and creating awareness. Tanks that once served as garbage dumps are now being preserved. This kind of community ownership is perhaps the most important outcome of our efforts.

Was working with the government challenging?

Very much so. To clean a single tank, we now need permissions from three different authorities—the Public Works Department, the mining department, and the local panchayat. Even after all approvals, implementation often



becomes a photo-op for officials rather than a genuine effort. In villages, we manage to sustain awareness and action, but in urban areas, sewage inflow and bureaucratic hurdles make it almost impossible.

What are your concerns about urban development?

The "smart city" projects have been disastrous. Fertile paddy fields have been converted to commercial land in the name of development. I once told the Collector: you shouldn't call this Thirunelveli anymore, but Nonelveli—because there is no nel (paddy) left. With every decision taken faraway local ecology suffers. These policies ignore the reality of perennial rivers and rice-yielding lands.

This reckless urbanization is the root cause of flooding. When natural water channels are blocked and agricultural land is paved over, nature retaliates. Every five or six years, the Thamirabarani floods, washing away our illusions of control. Nature has her own way of restoring balance.

Where do you think change is possible?

Awareness among people, especially children, has grown. But for real impact, policy must change. Meetings with officials often achieve little more than documentation and photographs. What we need are leaders who act with foresight, who place nature alongside development rather than behind it.

How do you integrate your environmental values in your hospital?

We were the first hospital in Tirunelveli to install a sewage treatment plant. We properly segregate biomedical waste and treat wastewater before release. We strictly follow NABH and ISO standards. Inside the hospital, we

use energy-efficient systems, sensors for lights and air-conditioning, and next-generation refrigerants. Solar energy is on our radar, though it requires heavy investment.

Do you also create awareness among patients?

Not yet, but it is something I am seriously considering. Posters, pamphlets, and even small awareness sessions could make patients more conscious about waste disposal, especially for items like sanitary pads. Right now, we focus on electricity and water conservation inside the premises.

What challenges do you see in healthcare today?

Unfortunately, medicine is becoming heartless. I see stage-four cancer patients spend lakhs on unnecessary procedures, only to die within months, leaving their families destitute. Ethical practice is disappearing as hospitals expand with loans to repay. In contrast, we prefer to retain our dignity and ethics, even in an older building, rather than chase corporate models. My father often reminded me: a person who can afford a Rs. 500 room will still come to you even if a Rs. 10,000 hotel exists. Care matters more than luxury.

That's a refreshing perspective. Any final thoughts?

We must remember that both nature and ethics are non-negotiable. In conservation, as in medicine, once values are compromised, everything else crumbles. Development that ignores nature leads to disaster; healthcare that ignores dignity leads to suffering. My life's work—whether through Nellai Nature Club or my hospital—has been about balancing responsibility with passion. Nature has the last word, always. If we do not respect her, she will reclaim it in her own way.