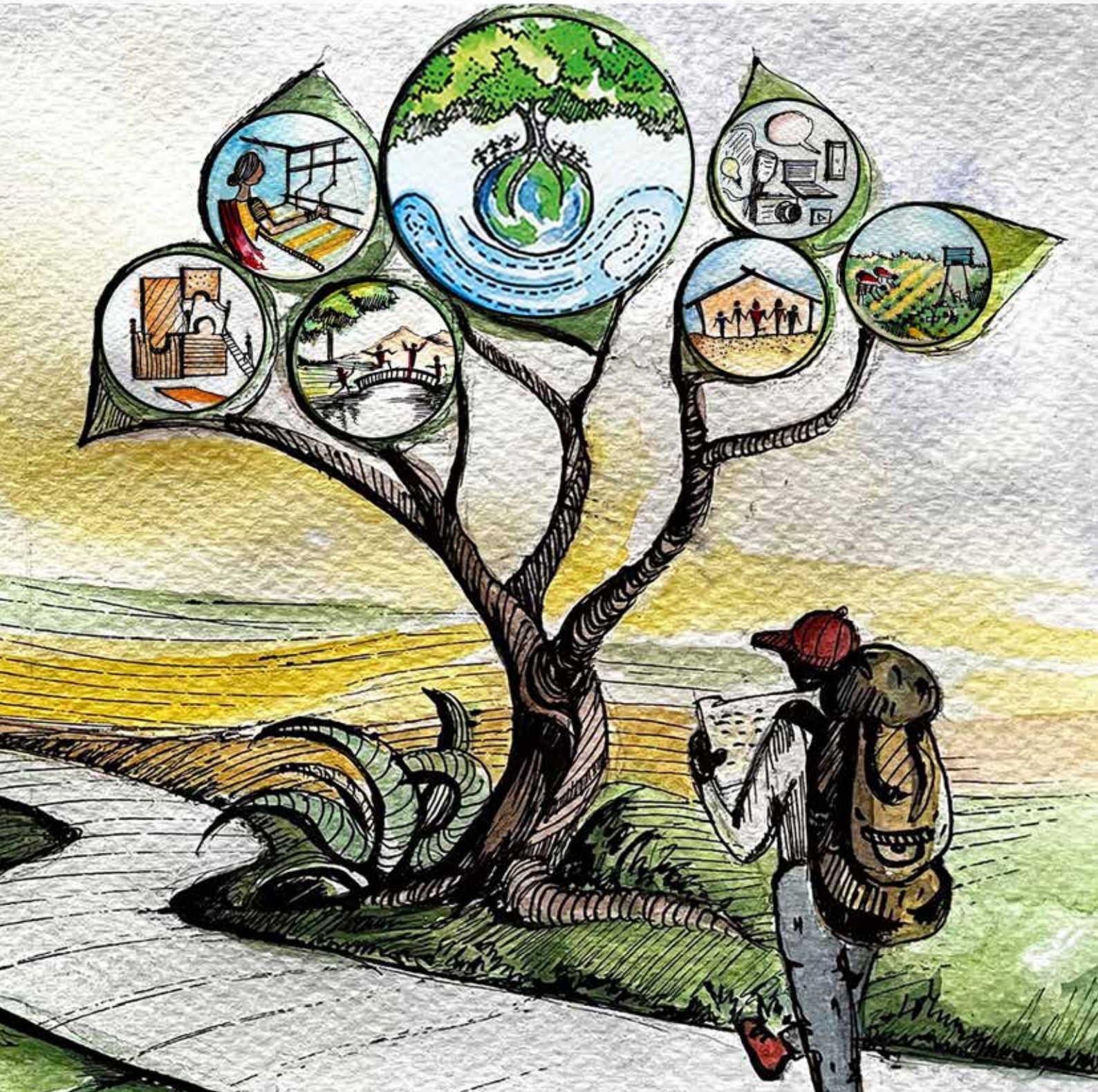


TRAVELLERS' UNIVERSITY

52

PARINDEY
FELLOWSHIP

COHORT1 | 2021-22



JOURNEYS TOWARD LIVELIHOODS OF INTENTIONAL LIVING AND
LIFELONG LEARNING FOR A SUSTAINABLE, EQUITABLE, AND JUST WORLD

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Acknowledgement

Offering this book to the world has not been an easy journey for us. Travellers' University, 52 Parindey Fellowship, this book, none of this would have been possible without the immense support we have received from various people.

We sincerely thank Osama Manzar and Digital Empowerment Foundation for believing in the vision of the 52 Parindey Fellowship.

We would like to thank Nitin Pangam for the unconditional support offered, and for holding our hands when we needed it most.

The work we do needs constant sources of motivation, especially when the path ahead seems blurry. Our love to Adil Basha for motivating us in our darkest times.

To heal the world, we need people who inspire people to see an alternative vision from the current reality. Thank you Ashish Kothari for being a source of constant inspiration.

There is a saying "to raise a child you need a community". This fellowship is a child for us and we could not have been able to raise it without the support we received from the Vikalp Sangam and Keeday communities. Thank you for providing a nurturing ecosystem for the fellowship.

As Albert Einstein once said, "Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it." We are grateful to Vibhuti Aggarwal, Shashank Kalra, Shrishtee Bajpai, Tautik Das, Rahul Hasija, Sonika Gupta, Punita Maheshwari and Arvind Shivakumar for sharing their wisdom with the fellows in their journeys of exploration and learning.

Our love to SwaCardz for designing the Fellow Journal which helped our fellows articulate and express their thoughts, feelings, observations and more during the fellowship journey.

We are grateful to Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad, and Bhoomi College, Bangalore, for hosting us for the orientation and reflection workshops respectively and for creating spaces that inspire and care.

A very special thanks to Sujatha Padmanabhan who has been of immense support throughout, who closely worked with us and guided us in bringing out this book and made it possible to offer this gift to the world.

We are immensely grateful to all the fellows for taking a leap of faith and trusting us in their journeys of inner transformation. Your courageous journey is a stepping stone for many, who strive to lead and design their own life. It is an inspiration to many young people to break the shackles of their comfort zone and challenge the norms.

We would love to thank all the Parindeys who shared their lives and spaces with us and journeyed with our fellows. We are thankful for the abundance you offered and the solidarity you showcased for the work we aspire to do. Your gifts and work nourishing the society and ecology are cutting pathways for more people. Thank you for being an inspiration to future disruptors.

Finally, our love to all the amazing individuals who contributed to and supported the 52 Parindey Fellowship programme, and continue to, in very many different ways.

- Team Travellers' University

Introduction

How alive do we feel in our current pursuit of livelihoods and life? Running on the needles of the clock, many of us are on a relentless quest for a meaningful life and for contentment. We strive to accomplish our intellectual, financial and spiritual growth amidst the prevailing economic, social and ecological injustices. How do we negotiate this push and pull and design our lives in a way that makes us feel alive?

In the quest to understand this deeply, we designed the 52 Parindey Fellowship programme that explores meaningful and regenerative livelihoods that makes one feel alive i.e., 'Alivelihoods'. As part of the programme, a group of individuals, all youth, travel across the country in search of Alivelihood practitioners or Parindeys (free birds who designed their own paths). The Parindeys were identified and finalised collectively by our team and the fellows. They lived with them and documented their life journeys to understand how they earn their livelihoods in a socially and ecologically conscious manner.

Individuals on this journey are from diverse backgrounds, but share a similar value system in life, and have a relentless thirst to learn and a passion to travel. As a part of the 52 Parindey Fellowship, these individuals, who are fellows on the programme and who have authored the pieces in this book, set out on a journey to explore and understand the Alivelihood practitioners within their chosen domain of inquiry. They travelled extensively in the most responsible and sustainable manner to venture into remote areas across the country. They lived with their Parindeys and experienced first-hand the work they do and the associated joys and challenges. In doing so, they built their worldview by closely studying the impact one's livelihood can have on society and the planet.

The orientation workshop for the first cohort of the fellowship was hosted at Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad, in September 2021, followed by the travel exploration by the fellows. Subsequently, a reflection workshop was hosted at Bhoomi College, Bangalore, in January 2021.

This book offers a collection of stories of the Parindeys and their Alivelihoods written by the fellows. These Parindeys have found their Alivelihoods through their planet-centric approach, creating an enriching world around them. Through this book, we celebrate their journeys and their effort into bringing their eco-conscious livelihoods, and their emerging importance in today's world, to the forefront.

In addition to the stories, the book is a compilation of enriching experiences and reflections of the fellows who have undertaken this brave journey and explored distinct domains in different parts of the country. The anecdotes of the Parindeys and the fellows shows the underlying emotions, attachments and efforts their negotiations have demanded from them. We believe sharing these stories will make Alivelihoods more visible to the youth at large and may catalyse acceptance among them.

We hope this offering of fellows and Parindeys journey will inspire more youth, to pursue the Alivelihoods of their choice.

- Team Travellers' University

The Road Less Taken

'Livelihoods' is a word that I had honestly been a little uncomfortable with. Does it create the impression that only some kinds of work keep us 'alive'? Could it, though unwittingly, appear judgmental of certain kinds of work? Does it allow for diversity in preferences, aptitudes, skills and capacities in human beings? And moreover, how do we explain some seemingly dull or repetitive 'work' whose outcome or fruits we enjoy?

Yet, I do see the importance of breaking free of societal expectations, of having the courage to pursue one's dreams, or of recognising burnout or feelings of purposelessness that are often experienced by some people in relation to their work. I realise that this may not be possible for everyone. Some of us are privileged to be able to follow our dreams and passions, and privilege can come in many forms: supportive family and friends, economic security, courage or the guts to go against the tide and so on.

The work of Traveller's University (TU) and the 52 Parindey Fellowship programme that they run is supremely important in facilitating those who want to take the "road less travelled by" (Robert Frost's poem, 'The Road Not Taken') or those who need maybe the little nudge or reassurance to make the shift, to change paths.

And they do it, being very mindful of many principles and values like caring, slow travel, forming friendships and relationships and community, empathy, networking, dialogue, working with one's hands, and so on ... all very important elements towards a just and ecologically sustainable world.

In my journey with this book, the work of my young friends at TU has helped dispel some of my questioning of the term 'Livelihoods'. I realise that supporting people to take paths that have a kinder and smaller footprint on our planet will in the long run play a role in effecting the transformations that we so desperately need today.

Sujatha Padmanabhan

Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group & Vikalp Sangam

Integral Learning through Experiential Travel

“Jobs fill your pockets, adventures fill your soul.”

“Remember that happiness is a way of travel, not a destination.”

“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.”

“Travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer.”

“Travel is my therapy.”

“Not all those who wander are lost.”

“Travel is an investment in yourself.”

“The goal is to die with memories not dreams.”

“Travel. Your money will return. Your time won't.”

“Some beautiful paths can't be discovered without getting lost.”

“Collect moments, not things.”

“Live life with no excuses, travel with no regret.”

“Adventures are the best way to learn.”

“Of all the books in the world. The best stories are found between the pages of a passport.”

“Work, Travel, Save, Repeat.”

“Travel opens your heart, broadens your mind, and fills your life with stories to tell.”

“I love places that make you realise how tiny you and your problems are.”

“Have stories to tell not stuff to show.”

“I travel because I become uncomfortable being too comfortable.”

These are not my quotes but they all fit my thought process. Because even though I was at a university for 8 years, I could not gather my system in place to pass even a single exam properly. I graduated with a PG diploma in Journalism in eight years. I just did not know how to study and read and memorise to pass exams that could get me a degree to get a good job.

Fast forward, the next 30 years I travelled; and travelled far and wide, and ended up learning life skills, human behaviour, social good, empathy, compassion, knowledge, ethnography, geography, history, culture, heritage, people, languages, food, habits, class, caste, love, care and wisdom. Almost none of them are taught in classrooms in the manner that one can learn by experiencing.

That is why I admire Travellers' University. TU was not even formed when I had the privilege to meet and know Rahul. He came with a wild idea of travelling every day for a year by frugal means and documenting changemakers every week, people involved in eco-conscious careers. I may not be able to do that then I must travel through Rahul, I thought to myself. And the 52 Parindey gap year project thus happened in 2015-16. Gradually in a couple of years, his act became a full-on initiative in the form of Travellers' University. I feel every knowledge and learning space should be a TU and every person must be a student of TU.

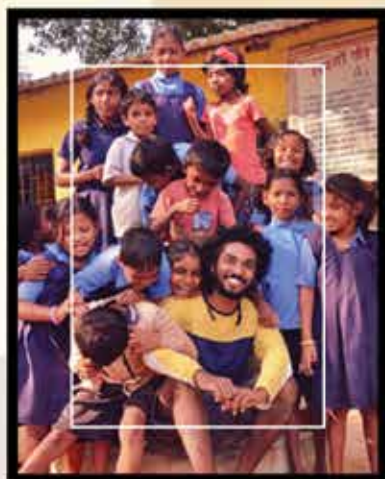
This year, at TU, we have been able to document another set of 51 great changemakers and their inspirational stories through the 52 Parindey fellows. These acts and stories of transformations are great documents with the power to make ripple effects.

At Digital Empowerment Foundation, who supports TU holistically, we wish to express that we have been privileged with this association and we learn a lot from all acts of TU and the actors of 52 Parindey Fellowship through their selfless work.

- Osama Manzer
Digital Empowerment Foundation

Fellow Journeys &

Parindey Stories



Amal Dev M

Alappuzha, Kerala

Alternative Learning Systems & Place-Based Education

Amal Dev M is a passionate social worker and an enthusiastic traveller. He is a resident of Alappuzha in Kerala and has completed his Master's in Social Work from Bharata Mata College, Kochi. He explores his passion for social work through his travelling.

As a part of the 52 Parindey Fellowship, he has explored learning and education in different parts of India. Amal believes he learned and unlearned more things during this fellowship journey than in his 25 years of life.



“ The 52 Parindey Fellowship journey was an expedition of my inner self. It helped me to get a deeper connection with myself and it shattered many of the misconceptions that had been within me. I strongly believe that I learned and unlearned more things during this fellowship journey than in my 25 years of life. Exploring the Alivelihood paths of my Parindeys makes me feel alive all the time and inspires me to choose the same path.

”

Prologue

I was not mentally adjusted to the idea of getting a job after my PG. I was constantly questioning myself about the next step after MSW when I came to know about the fellowship. It still sounds like a fairy tale to me. During the last hurdles of research in PG, I frantically googled for fellowships that would allow me to travel and learn at the same time. Many caught my eye, but none aroused my passion. So, that attempt was abandoned and I went back to my routine life. But, the very next day when I opened the college WhatsApp group, I saw the brochure of the 52 Parindey Fellowship shared by our professor. I still can't describe in words what I felt at that moment. When I got the call about the fellowship, I felt my insatiable desires storm down as torrential rain inside me. The search for places to combine study, travel, and meeting other people ended up at Travellers' University, but it was born out of my educational experiences.

Only after school, did the thought arise: this is not the way to study. And I had no antidote to this slow realisation. Most of my school days were spent sitting in some corner of different classroom rooms. The main reason was that I did not know my own likes and interests. This continued to my Bachelor's. Later, solo trips became a part of life. And I started swimming against the current. After three years of BCom, the main reason behind the firm decision to do MSW was rooted in the travelling experiences.

But it was voluntary work in Adishakthi that overwrote the purpose of later trips. It showed me glimpses of the struggles experienced by the tribal community that I had only seen in textbooks. It was the burning questions that arose from that point onward that led me to the journey of the 52 Parindey Fellowship.

Map of Amal's Journey



| | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Nazar Bandhu | Social Work | Chakla, West Bengal |
| C | Rajaraman Sundaresan | Freelance Journalist | Muniguda, Odisha |
| D | Mini M. R. & Sudhi S. | Education | Wayanad, Kerala |
| E | Madhav Raj | Education | Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu |
| F | Pranith Simha Moolam Reddy | Education | Dantewada, Chattisgarh |
| G | Gourav Jaiswal, Navendu Mishra | Education | Seoni, Madhya Pradesh |
| H | Isha Sheth | Education | Dediapada, Gujarat |
| I | Shaji Oorali | Education | Palakkad, Kerala |
| J | Mary Lydia | Education | Kochi, Kerala |
| K | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

The man who speaks with his heart

Parindey: Nazar Bandhu

Alivelihood: Social Work

Region: Chakla, Parganas District, West Bengal



My main objective is not community development; it is my happiness. Social work is its by-product.

- Nazar Bandhu



Bandhu Tea Shop (a file image)

Different people find their happiness in life in different ways. Abdul Nazar, a young man from Muvattupuzha, finds his happiness in living as the Bandhu of Chakla, a small village in West Bengal. In Bengali, 'Bandhu' means a friend. Nazar resides

near the Loknath Baba Temple, which is considered as the heart of Chakla. Whoever goes to Chakla and asks, will be shown the way to Bandhu's house with a smile on their face and even more joy. Everyone in the village, regardless of their age, calls him

“Bandhu”. Nazar hails from Muvattupuzha in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. He spent his school life at different places in Ernakulam. He then graduated with a degree in Sociology from Islamia College, Thalikulam. He later pursued his postgraduate studies in Social Work from Sri Sankaracharya University.

The beginning of a revolution at Chakla was marked when the metamorphosis of Abdul Nazar to Nazar Bandhu took place. We could even classify the Chakla as before and after Bandhu. Nazar first came to Chakla in 2011 as a project coordinator for the Human Care Foundation. He later remained there as part of the work for five long years. It was during this period that Nazar began to learn more about the village. Chakla is a village located in North-24 Parganas, the most populous district in India. The nearest government hospital is 18 km from the village. There are eight doctor’s clinics in Chakla. Most of them are quack doctors with educational qualifications below SSLC. Government schools that run badly or hardly function, students dropping out halfway through their studies, financial exploitation by landlords against farmers...these are a few of many problems that are being faced by the villagers of Chakla. Despite the closure of his project, Nazar decided not to leave Chakla as he witnessed and endured all these problems for those five years.

In 2016, Nazar founded his own venture, the Zero Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organisation in Chakla. In the beginning, he faced many crises like financial hardship. He would carry out the organisation’s activities by borrowing money on

interest, with the help of friends, and spending his life’s savings. Most of the villagers made their living by farming and Nazar chose the same path. Chakla’s landscape is rich with jute, mustard fields and paddy cultivation. In addition to these, nurseries are another form of farming in which people are engaged. Nazar started a nursery on a leased plot of land and also provided employment to a few farmers. Although he was relieved of his financial difficulties, he found it very difficult to understand the problems they were facing. In order to overcome that, Nazar settled in Chakla. To learn more about the villagers, he first started a tea shop there. The perception of tea shops as a place where people talk about the village and the local issues gave rise to this idea. He named his tea shop “Bandhu. The tea shop later played a significant role in making him a Bandhu of the entire people of that village.

“During my time with Daya Bai I learnt that when working in a community, only by being a part of that community can one understand and recognise their problems,” Nazar adds. Travelling was a major part of Bandhu’s life. His time with Daya Bai, a social activist from Kerala working among the tribals of central India, pertaining to his internship at Masters in Social Work and his stay with Buddhist monks in Himachal Pradesh as part of the Dalai Lama Fellowship gave immense strength to his life’s journey.

Through Zero Foundation, Nazar Bandhu aims at rural development by means of decentralisation. Rural development is being pursued through the areas of women empowerment, education,



A farmer taking jute to other cities for export
(Photo: Amal Dev)



A woman taking tuition for children at her home as the schools were closed due to the Covid-19 outbreak (Photo: Amal Dev)

agriculture, housing plans and health. The first project implemented by Nazar with the help of Human Care Foundation was to build and furnish toilets. The project was completed successfully, but the toilets were not kept clean and caused further health complications. The first thing Nazar then did to learn about the village was to conduct a detailed survey. Each of the projects were later implemented based on that survey. With reference to the data received from the survey, houses worth rupees 1.5 lakhs were constructed for the 25 poorest families in the village. Nazar sought to implement women's empowerment in Chakla by linking education, agriculture and self-help groups. He was able to succeed to some extent, but it wasn't easy at all in the beginning. Nazar was mistaken as one of the scammers by the victims of the money laundering scams that took place in the village earlier. Yet he was not ready to give up. Due to his constant interaction with the villagers, individual self-help groups began to form. After its formation, Nazar's first aim was to provide primary education for all the women in these groups. Later, the women of these groups took loans from the co-operative banks and started farming. Today, there are 43 SHGs operating under the Zero Foundation. Currently, at least one new self-help group is formed every week in Chakla. Nazar and the women often meet on the veranda of the Chakla Mandir to form a group.

Government schools in and around Chakla were operational only in name. In addition to that, the standard of education is below average. It was also common for children to drop out of school and go for paid jobs. Nazar then began to take tuition in the evenings for a few children, thinking he could do something regarding the same.

"The current Ideal Learning Centre is not a school; it is a space for lovingly reminding students of school subjects, giving them pens, pencils, books and bags with games and laughter. It started in a small room, and gradually more children joined the classes. Then a new building was built. Building in the sense, it is a shed. As the number of children increased, so did the number of teachers. Started with one, then two, three, four and now it has reached five," says Nazar Bandhu.

'Bengal Yatra' has been a part of Zero Foundation since 2017. It is held in the month of December every year. It is a 10-day trip through the villages of Bengal. Only 25 people are provided the opportunity to be part of the travel. "If asked why, the true answer is that the purpose of the travel is to travel. To see, to experience and so on..." Nazar adds. The impact of the Bengal Yatra on its participants was not small. Anuradha Sarang, an IT worker who took part in the Yatra the previous year, is currently



Nazar Bandhu while forming the 42nd Self Help Group (Photo: Amal Dev)

working with Nazar on a new educational project in Chakla. Muneer Hussain, a young man who travelled to Bengal in 2019, wrote and published the book 'Bengal Diary Kurippukal' (Bengal Diary Notes). These



Learning Centre under Zero Foundation (a file image)

are among the finest examples of how huge changes are created in human thinking through travelling.

Nazar has no worries, dreams or complaints about the Zero Foundation's future projects or prospects. Nazar believes that everything happened as part of his happiness. While many young people find happiness in making money and gaining fame, Nazar finds his happiness in the smiles that come from the hearts of the people of Chakla. The life he created for himself, as a Bandhu to an entire village and its people, and the joy he experiences by being a part of their lives is beyond words.

Nazar Bandhu can be reached at:

 contact@zerofoundation.in

 <https://www.zerofoundation.in>

Nazar Bandhu was the first Parindey I met before being accepted into the fellowship. I too became Chakla's friend when I looked for Nazar's house from the rickshaw. Even today, when I think of Bengal, the first thing that comes to my mind is, "O Bandhu...". Decentralisation and education are the engines that propel any rural development project forward. Through the self-help group gatherings held on the temple veranda, a young man named Abdul Nazar demonstrated to me that no matter how deeply entrenched casteism and bigotry are, they can be dissolved in the embrace of humanity.

For me, there wasn't a clear answer to the question of what to do after studying social work. And when Bandhu stated that his main objective was not community development but his own happiness, and social work was its by-product, I saw more than just the endless possibilities of social work. It was also a window for me into the concept of 'Livelihood'.



Interviewing Bandhu

Raja of Stances

Parindey: Rajaraman Sundaresan

Alivelihood: Freelance journalist

Region: Muniguda, Rayagada District, Odisha



Why should the tribal people remain silent when they are being brought to their knees in the dark room of helplessness, and their legacy is being uprooted?

- Rajaraman Sundaresan



Raja capturing the excavations at Magadh CCL in Jharkhand (Photo: Amal Dev)

Rajaraman Sundaresan, a 29-year-old freelance journalist, is driven by the sharp-edged questions that he puts forward. While most of the mainstream media, being puppets to the corporates, remain silent on the issues in the tribal regions, Raja takes the voice of tribal people to the outside world, conveying the stories of survival and annihilation which has become a part of their lives. “Every human being has a guise. I sometimes wear a journalist’s mask and sometimes an activist’s,” says Raja. Moreover, he sees all tribal movements as learning centres. Raja believes that a child from a tribal area can gain more knowledge from the movements than they can from school. “I too am learning from every tribal act of dissent.” Raja adds.

Raja resides in the tribal village of Muniguda in

Odisha. Although a Tamilian by birth, he spent most of his life in Bhubaneswar. It was during Raja’s college life that he was drawn towards working for the justice of Adivasi people. His life journey from an engineering student to being part of the lives of tribal people of Muniguda was also in search of answers to many of his questions. Raja’s study and life was always driven by questioning the status quo around him.

In 2012, Raja graduated from the ‘Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology’ with a degree in Telecommunications. It was during this period of study from 2008 to 2012 that Raja began to learn more about Adivasis. The ‘Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences’ (KISS) was located near the college where Raja studied. It is considered as the largest



Raja in a discussion with people about the consequences of mining (Photo: Amal Dev)

educational institution in the world for indigenous students. There were some tribal students in his class as well. No matter how many times Raja tried to interact with them, he could not establish a friendship with anyone. In 2009, Raja co-created a voluntary service group, 'Rhythm of Nation', in the college with the main objective of creating political awareness among the students and supporting the poor. During this time, Raja tried to learn more about the Adivasis from the students in his class as well as from the school.

After completing engineering in 2012 he got a job at an IT company. But within a short time of working, Raja realised that his purpose in life was far from what he was doing then. It did not take long for him to realise that he had to stand up for the Adivasi people. The same year, he resigned from his job and joined KISS as an Executive Officer. Within a short span of time, Raja started noticing a fear in the eyes of the children. He began to observe them keenly. In order to know more about them, he deliberately befriended the hostel warden and security guard. That is how Raja came to know about the shocking incidents that took place in the hostel. Children are not supposed to use phones in hostels. If at all they find someone using a phone, they would seize and destroy them by throwing it on the wall in front of the students. This instilled a huge fear in the minds of the children. Later, Raja began to pay attention to every change and practice made by the school authorities. Cutting children's hair, setting up Hanuman temple at school, organising only Hindu festivals, etc.

So, after working for two years, Raja joined Jindal University in Haryana for a postgraduate degree in Public Policy. The struggle for justice was also a major part of his educational journey. Jindal had similar views to that of KISS. Raja figured that Jindal had financial dealings with several mining companies and later organised students to protest strongly against it. Even today, Raja is ashamed of the fact that he was also a part of the educational institutions which were built by eradicating the Adivasis in the name of development. As part of his postgraduate research, Raja chose to study the factory schooling model at KISS, which revealed to him the agenda of the institute. Most of the country's mineral reserves are in Odisha and in areas mostly inhabited by tribal people. There are 62 different tribal communities in Odisha. If one wants to mine the minerals from those areas, the Adivasis have to be evicted. This residential education thus becomes a perfect plan to do so. Students spend most of their lives at school and only occasionally visit their homes. When they come home for vacation, the children would have forgotten even their own tribal language. Reforms and regulations to eradicate their tribal identity are being implemented in all of these private residential schools. In addition to it, these schools are financially supported by the biggest mining companies in the country.

Raja mostly conveys his protest against the exploitation of the Adivasis through his writing. He has published numerous articles in various mainstream online news portals regarding the same.

When Raja learns about a problem, he reaches out to the most affected people and engages directly with them to understand the roots of the issue which makes him unique in what he does.

Although Raja says it is his duty to convey the struggles faced by the Adivasis to the world and make them heard in the socio-political context, the repercussions are also immense. When it was decided to select KISS to host the World Anthropology Conference, Raja was one of the few people who wrote strongly against it from the very beginning and reached out to other people. As a result, more than 200 tribal leaders, academicians, activists, student union representatives and others related to tribal rights movements signed the petition against the selection of KISS. Later, some prominent social activists from around the world, like Boaventura

de Sousa Santos, Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, Virginius Xaxa, Ruby Hembrom, Walter Fernandez, Aninhalli Vasavi, Ashish Kothari and Nandini Sundar were among those who supported the appeal to exclude KISS from co-hosting the World Anthropology Conference in 2023. As a result, KISS as the venue was revoked.

Through his writings, Raja exposes the arrogance and insensitiveness of the State towards Adivasis as well as the hidden agendas of the corporates. Raja asserts that the freedom struggle that took place ahead of 1947 was not the only one, but when Adivasis dissent against the State and the corporates for their land and their rights, that in itself is another freedom struggle.

“Only indigenous (Adivasi) justice can lead us to social justice.”

- Rajaraman Sundaresan



A tribal woman talking about the issues they face due to mining (Photo: Amal Dev)

Raja believes that social justice is not just about providing basic amenities, health and education to all. It also embodies the tribal vision of restoring the dignity of all life forms and the land we live in.

Rajaraman Sundaresan can be reached at:

✉ osr.usocial@gmail.com



Earlier, a tribal hamlet. Today, a coal mining field (Photo: Amal Dev)

It was Raja who taught me to constantly ask questions to myself. I realised that every tribal struggle, every movement, is a learning space. I learned the most from my travel to the tribal region of Jharkhand with Raja. Most of the owners of mining companies that prey on the tribal communities in Odisha and Jharkhand top India's rich list. When those employed at higher posts of extractive companies are graduates from the leading colleges and universities in India, the relevance of the prestigious education they receive must be questioned.

While the main problem faced by the tribal student community in Kerala is the lack of timely and adequate educational benefits, the situation is reversed in the mineral-rich eastern states. There, the roots of the existence of Adivasis are being cut and changed by imparting education. A visit to Kalinga Institute of Social Science, an all-tribal school in Bhubaneswar, made me realise that. All of Raja's sharp protest struggles with his pen inspired me to step into the world of writing.



Checking the photos captured in Jharkhand with Raja

Kanavu: The Home of Scintillating Butterflies

Parindey: Mini M. R. & Sudhi S.

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Wayanad, Kerala



It was life at Kanavu that inspired me to start Gothrathalam. Without Kanavu, today I would be living as a drop-out student. I pass on to the children what I had learnt from Kanavu.

- Mini



Kanavu (Photo: Amal Dev)

Each being is a butterfly in their own garden. 'Kanavu', an alternative educational institute, situated in the Wayanad district of Kerala, was one such garden. A garden of little butterflies with magnificently large wings and dreams. Kanavu means 'dream' in Malayalam. Kanavu is one of the oldest alternative educational institutes in India. Set up in 1994, they have stitched the dreams of

many till 2016 when the institute was forced to shut down due to a financial crisis. Now, Mini and Sudhi have come to restore Kanavu back to life. Mini is an alumnus of the same institute. After graduating from Kanavu, Mini established another alternative educational institute called 'Gothrathalam' for underprivileged students from Dalit-Adivasi backgrounds.

The journey of an exceptional change started when Mini and Sudhi got married in 2011. Along with Sudhi, Mini shifted to Ravi Nagar Colony near Kanjiramkulam. There are 58 families in Ravi Nagar that belong to the sub-caste (gothram) called Vedar and most of them survive on daily wages. The colony majorly faced problems like alcohol abuse, substance abuse and domestic abuse. Mini also started noticing that the children had to face huge difficulties when it comes to their academic progression. Mini started thinking about bringing all that she learnt from 'Kanavu' to the children of Ravi Nagar colony. This thought led to the establishment of 'Gothrathalam', an institute for alternative education, in 2012. Before its establishment as an educational space, it was a space for folk music which was set near their house. Initially, the main objective of Gothrathalam was to reduce the drop-out rate of Dalit-Adivasi students by reinforcing confidence in them as well as their skills. The classes were majorly focused on spoken English, personality development, socio-political awareness through skits and role-plays, and were scheduled for every Saturday and Sunday.

Moreover, they organised numerous camps at various places to help the students with socially relevant subjects like sex education and gender equality. Gothrathalam, as an educational institute, gave equal importance to these subjects, which goes hand in hand with the concept of Kanavu. 'Bhranthu Kali', a play directed by Shyam Raji and performed by the students of Gothrathalam received huge recognition. It was a satirical play based on the fable of a fox who took advantage of internal conflicts among goats to feast on them, which reflected upon the contemporary socio-political context.



Mini and Sudhi at Gothrathalam (File photo)

After one year of Gothrathalam's establishment, Mini was selected for a scholarship-based leadership training by 'Kanthari' (<https://www.kanthari.org>), an organisation committed to empowering social visionaries. A year of vigorous training became the core strength of the institutional progression at Gothrathalam. By 2015, Gothrathalam started gaining the attention of mainstream media. Articles were written and published, the focus of most of them being a girl who grew up under 'Kanavu' setting up another alternative education institution.

However, the constraints of space and money following the construction of their house forced Mini and Sudhi to shut down the initiative in 2018. The helping hands of their friends and loved ones had an immense impact on the working of Gothrathalam, as they were not receiving any income from the work. Additionally, Mini took Kalari classes in private schools and Sudhi provided treatment at houses and in private hospitals using an indigenous system of medicine in order to meet the expenses of the organisation as well as their domestic expenses. Travelling was a major tool for learning at Gothrathalam. Every student had a piggy-bank in which they collected money, which was used for the travel expenses. These were ways by which Mini and Sudhi tried to manage their financial crises.

Sudhi and Mini met in 2003 at 'Mitraniketan' (<https://www.mitraniketan.org>), an organisation based out of Thiruvananthapuram, which imparts development education to marginalised sections of the society. A friendship and love of eight long years paved the way to their wedding. Sudhi was involved in various tribal protests from the period of his academia. In addition to that, travel to tribal areas and understanding and engaging with the obstacles they faced were part of Sudhi's life. At present, Sudhi focuses on sharing his knowledge of indigenous medicine to the next generation for the safe preservation of the native medicine culture. Sudhi and Mini live a life that is very close to the rest of nature, and the leaves of edible plants from their surroundings are a part of their food.

"I have travelled a lot. Even though I have visited many schools during those journeys, I could never find something like Kanavu."

- Mini

The origin of Kanavu is an interesting story in itself. Renowned playwright and film director K. J. Baby and his wife Sherly Joseph are the founders of this

organisation. The present space of Kanavu was once a drama training academy. The hiding spot for Mini and her friends when they skipped school was the home where Kanavu came to life. Even though K. J. Baby tried several times to send the kids to school, but they ended up as failed missions. Pondering over their refusal to attend school was the wings to the dream called Kanavu.

Mini was born in a Paniya tribal community in Wayanad and studied in a government school nearby. Mini stopped her studies when she was in fourth standard due to the constant harassment from her classmates and teachers. The continued harassment and avoidance from them due to her tribal identity was part of her everyday school life. “Even now, the sight of that school makes me anxious,” Mini adds. At home, they spoke ‘Paniya’, their native language, and Mini got her exposure to Malayalam from the houses where her parents worked. However, that language was filled with hostility and oppression. “I have only heard Malayalam in a way which established communal dominance,” Mini said. This created a fear in her whenever she heard Malayalam in her school. Lack of pens, books and uniform added to the reasons for Mini to quit school. “Today, the situation has changed. If a student does not attend school, the ST (Scheduled Tribe) Promoter of the area visits their house and investigates the situation. In earlier days, this wasn’t the case,” she added.

Later, Mini came to Kanavu. “Kanavu, the word itself means dream and this was indeed a dream. Handcrafts, dance and songs attracted me to Kanavu. Those are the things in our blood, right?” says Mini. Mini was just one of the many at Kanavu, who left school for similar reasons. Kanavu was an idea



Volunteers Amal, Ali, and James assist Sudhi in repairing the barn



Children at Kanavu from their music class (File photo)

that evolved from such minds which gave a lot of importance to art in academic spaces. The art-based learning at Kanavu comprised of Kalaripayattu, one of Kerala's traditional martial arts, indigenous and folk art forms, Bharatanatyam, Hindustani dance and music forms, pursuing musical instruments and many more.

Kanavu stood different due to their unique approach towards teaching subjects. They did not allow learning to be constrained by the four walls of a classroom; instead, encouraged learning through experiences. As part of this, they travelled to various alternative learning spaces with their children. Kanavu had a unique way of categorising their students using the level of perception as the criterion regardless of their age or educational history. The children resided together at Kanavu as a family, and they used self-cultivated vegetables and grains for cooking. Even the visitors to Kanavu would become facilitators by sharing their experiences and knowledge with the children.

Kanavu has created the vastness of a sky for their children to dream. Even though Kanavu is no longer functional, Mini and Sudhi are sincerely trying to revive it from its dormant state to its original glory. At present, they have restarted teaching Kalaripayattu at Kanavu after reviving the Kalaripura (training space) which stopped its services yeras back. They have also started providing training in

indigenous medicine systems. The income generated from this is used for the educational purpose of the children who used to go to Gothrathalam.

The story of Mini's life that began from Kanavu and her return to the same place for its revival is inspirational. Sudhi and their five-year old daughter, Ekthara, are her pillars in this journey. "We are not concerned about her education as she is learning a lot of new things along with us," says Sudhi. Life and education are not two different things and that is the concept they live with and are trying to show to the world through Ekthara.

Mini and Sudhi can be reached at:

✉ ekthara123@gmail.com



Sudhi, Ekthara and student Aneesh preparing a massage kit (Photo: Amal Dev)



Sudhi, Ekthara and Mini (Photo: Amal Dev)

Dropping out of school is a major problem faced by various tribal communities even today. Kanavu, an alternative school that started with an accurate understanding of that problem, is a great example of providing education to tribal children. Why no such efforts are taking place in Kerala is a very worrying question. Two alumni: Mini, the founder of Gothrathalam, and Leela, Kerala's first Adivasi film director, are enough to mark the scope of Kanavu. Mini's recollections of the educational methods used in Kanavu made me feel as if my schooling was a dark chapter in my life.

Kanavu is a place I travel to again and again. It was there that the beauty of the life of the tribal people touched my heart. Roasting mud cakes with Kanavu's butterfly Ektara, eating medicinal plants growing in the forest, catching crabs in the rainy evenings, and coating walls of the Kalari shack with dung are all fond memories of Kanavu. It is these memories that make Kanavu the most beloved place.



With Ekthara, Sudhi, Mini and the volunteers at Kanavu

Puvidham: A University for Sustainable Living

Parindey: Madhav Raj

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu



This journey of my life started from Puvidham. I met my life partner here and our children study here.

- Madhav Raj



Madhav Raj and Meenakshi meeting teachers (Photo: Amal Dev)

Puvidham is an alternative school or learning centre that provides a humane and child-centred educational environment. Puvidham means love for the earth. Madhavaraj is not just the correspondent of Puvidham, but also a role model for children. He has been learning and growing with Puvidham for 22 years now.

Madhavaraj was born and raised in a small village called Balajangamanahalli in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, and belonged to an impoverished family.

His father had two acres of land and farming was their only means of livelihood. After the completion of his 12th grade schooling, he was doing odd jobs in construction sites and wondering about what to do next. That was when he got to know about a vacancy for a teacher at an alternative school called Puvidham in Nagarkoodal village, just 4 km from his farm further away from the town of Nallampalli. He thought that while teaching he could also take care of the education of his sister's 3-year-old child. The academic ideas of Meenakshi and Umesh, the



Madhav Raj presents drawing books and crayons to children as part of Diwali celebrations (Photo: Amal Dev)

founding duo of Puvudham, felt unbelievably new and refreshing for Madhav Raj.

At the same time Madhav Raj was also ashamed of the academic environment that he studied in. “I have put down the same essay that I learnt in 10th standard for 12th as well and I’m still embarrassed about the same,” says Madhav Raj. He concluded from the discussions with Meenakshi and Umesh that they want to set a path that is different from the traditional learning system. That is how Madhav Raj joined as a teacher at Puvudham in 2000.

Meenakshi and her life partner Umesh came to Nagarkoodal village in 1992 to live a simple life

and grow their own food organically and hoping to research about Meenakshi’s educational ideas. The present greenery of Puvudham is due to the transformation of the 12-acre barren land which they bought in 1992. Dharmapuri had a dry arid climate and always faced acute scarcity of water. In 1992, when Meenakshi and Umesh moved into this place, there were no water sources. Initially, they used to bring water for drinking on a cycle from a borewell in the neighbouring hamlet of Avvainagar which was located at a distance of 1 km. or their animals and other household uses, Meenakshi used to carry water pots by headloads from a spring around 300 meters away. Later in 2003, they bought a place with a source of water, which was the location of the hostel (Old Hostel) till 2013, from where they started transporting water by tankers for the school and house. In addition to this, the lifestyle and the agricultural methods that are implemented in Puvudham help them immensely in managing the above-mentioned scarcity of water. Dry-toilets and the urine-water mixture used for cultivation are two of the best examples of the same.

Meenakshi did not want her children to study in the mainstream educational system due to her own experiences. “Highly competitive minds as well as a destructive mentality towards nature with a manifestation of dual behaviour is what the mainstream education cultivates and I had no intention to send my children to these schools. Therefore, I decided to home-school my children,” added Meenakshi. Meenakshi was from Uttar Pradesh and she wanted her children to learn in the language of the place where they lived, that was the reason why she appointed Madhav Raj, to teach herself and her children Tamil.



Children helping in the garden along with their teacher. (Photo: Amal Dev)

Sustainable living is the major goal of Puvidtham as a learning centre. Madhav Raj initially doubted how parents would send their children to a school without exams, ranks or blackboards. However, today, including his son, around eighty children study in this space. The students indulge themselves in everything from agriculture to cooking, which is necessary for a person's day-to-day sustainable living.

The syllabus for a sustainable living at Puvidtham is divided into five categories: Sun, Earth, Water, Air and Atmosphere. The syllabus for each class is prepared after considering the NCERT guidelines as well as the age of the learners. Each module consists of four stories in two languages. Whatever they learn in Tamil during the morning session is taught in English during the afternoon session. Children are introduced to new concepts through activities and games. Soap manufacturing, agriculture, cooking, woodwork, arts and crafts are essential aspects of their syllabus.

“It took me more than three years to comprehend the ideas that are put forward through the education provided at Puvidtham,” adds Madhav Raj. Meenakshi sent Madhav Raj to Vikasana, situated at Bangalore for further training only after three months of him joining Puvidtham. He considers that one month's training period at Vikasana, under the guidance of Malathi akka, as the next stage of his life. There he learnt how to interact with children and how to teach them. After returning from Bangalore, his perspective towards education started to change. Along with Meenakshi, Madhav Raj prepared a new syllabus

incorporating the academic needs of the children, in 2009. It was the beginning of a beautiful change. It paved the way for the children to learn more from and along with the rest of nature.

Madhav Raj is still learning from his journey at Puvidtham. There were many obstacles that he had to face during this journey. One such obstacle was his short-tempered nature as a teacher. “I was a teacher



Students fetching water for gardening at Puvidtham. (Photo: Amal Dev)



Meenakshi caring for the cows at Puvidtham. (Photo: Amal Dev)

who used to get angry even for small mistakes committed by the students. Even though Meenakshi akka had warned me numerous times for beating the children, my anger used to get the better of me. However, a student I taught changed my perspective,” said Madhav Raj. When physical punishment was a part of his teaching method, one day a child came in without doing her homework. The answer he got for why the child did not do the homework made him laugh. “I had written it on this page, but now it is not there,” was the child’s answer. After which the child showed her hand in advance with a numbness expecting to receive the punishment. After this incident, Madhav Raj stopped getting angry with children and learnt to trust them and laugh with them.

“One thing that has surprised me about Madhav Raj is his sincerity. His learning instincts are still in place and very active as well. Children love to spend their time with him as he tells them stories from his life experiences as well as his travel journeys. I made sure he travelled all the way to the Himalayas to see

the country. Every year the 7th and 8th class children and Madhavaraj travel to far-off places and spend at least a month away from home!” says Meenakshi.

In the last 22 years from its foundation, Madhav Raj has been there as a part of the ups and downs of Puvidham. Madhav Raj has not only succeeded in spreading the philosophy of sustainable living to children but has also succeeded in embracing it to his heart. He still aspires to spread these concepts to numerous children in future.

Madhav Raj can be reached at:

✉ puvidham@gmail.com

📷 https://www.instagram.com/puvidham_

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/Puvidham-728634441164157>

🌐 <http://www.puvidham.in>



Madhav Raj along with the residential students of Puvidham during an online class for students staying at home due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo: Amal Dev)

I felt the place was exactly the same as its description: A university for sustainable living. Puvudham is a place where you learn to live. I thought about when it was that I started to independently deal with situations that affected me, and I did not have to go beyond my twenties. But the small and big men of this university are experts of the highest degree in this regard. Agriculture, cooking, and other sustainable living lessons need to be given the same importance (or more) than lessons about evolution, LCM, and the human body in mainstream education. Part of the education was a brilliant 10-year-old boy zealously stopping me from dumping my leftovers into the garbage bin and then punishing me by making me do sit-ups.



Engaged in farm work at Puvudham

School of Dreams

Parindey: Pranith Simha Moolam Reddy

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Dantewada District, Chhattisgarh



There are numerous lesser known regions across India for the youth to explore. A platform if established for the same would benefit the youth and the regions alike. That is how we, in 2012, started a volunteer organisation. We named it Bachpan Banao.

- Pranith



Pranith Simha (Photo: Amal Dev)

Pranith Simha Moolam Reddy is the founder of the NGO 'Bachpan Banao'. The NGO is located in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. The primary objective of Bachpan Banao is to improve the education system in rural-tribal regions. Pranith hails from the Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. The life journey of Pranith, liberating the children of sidelined families from Dantewada through education, is quite a beautiful one.

At first, Pranith arrived in Dantewada to volunteer with a doctor couple serving the rural communities there. His primary assignment was to assist them

in conducting medical camps. Fond of spending time with children, Pranith used to conduct science workshops for school students. The reflections of these life experiences inspired him to start Bachpan Banao.

Bachpan Banao took its shape as an organisation through a group of young volunteers. Pranith started Bachpan Banao with the aim of bringing together youth from different parts of India and sharing their knowledge with the children of Dantewada and at the same time creating an opportunity for the youth to develop a deeper understanding of the region.

Pranith openly admits that he had a poor understanding of the education system during the initial stages of Bachpan Banao. It was only a year later, the above-mentioned volunteering activities became a one-year-long fellowship programme. Even though the fellowship became a success, the goal of building a team was not achieved as one year was too short a time. After that, with further efforts, it became Bachpan Banao, the organisation we see today. Bachpan Banao now works towards the empowerment of the public education system. There are two model schools- 'Samata' and 'Sapnon Ki Shala' operating under the NGO. Samata school is located in Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh and Sapnon Ki Shala is in Dantewada district of Chattisgarh. With the two schools, Pranith aims to set examples for how government schools can operate utilising limited resources. Bachpan Banao also trains the teachers for transforming government schools.

Pranith's engagement in social action goes back to his parents' influence. He grew up with around 30 other children in an orphanage run by his parents. After completing his schooling, Pranith joined IISER (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research), Pune, to pursue his five years integrated engineering degree.

Even in Pune, what attracted Pranith was social work. There were numerous slums around the college. Pranith, along with a friend, started a tuition centre to provide better learning opportunities for the children there. The duo ran the tuition centre in the first year, and their classmates joined them in the second year. Gradually they became a volunteer group of around 40 students working in four slums. The initiative later came to be known

by the name 'Disha' (<https://www3.iiserpune.ac.in/outreach/socialoutreach/disha>). Pranith used to spend more time at these study centres than in his own classrooms. He received numerous accolades and appreciation from his college and outside.

From his life experiences, Pranith understood that people would easily recognise and appreciate even if one engages in small social activities in urban settings. Activities of 'Disha' offered him similar experiences. These appreciations and felicitations made him think, "Why am I doing this? Are people really getting benefitted from my work? Or am I doing it because of the happiness I derive from the appreciation for doing this work? I started asking these kinds of questions to myself. That's where my journey began," says Pranith.



Pranith with students of Sapnon ki shala (File photo)



Students and teachers at Bachpan Banao discuss topics that won the science Nobel prize. (Photo: Amal Dev)

Dropping out of college in the fifth year instead of choosing a research topic, and travelling to Dantewada was the answer to these questions. It was from this journey, the NGO Bachpan Banao and the school Sapnon Ki Shala took shape.

“After having worked with government schools, we strongly felt that there had to be a model school so that the teachers understood the ideas we were putting forward,” says Pranith.

Pranith worked in government schools of Dantewada for 6 years before starting the model school, Sapnon Ki Shala, in 2018. The aim of the school was to provide teachers with a reflection of the ideas put forward by Bachpan Banao. To bring about the transformation of government schools, Pranith used to arrange trips for the teachers to well-functioning private schools across India. Even though the teachers were able to appreciate the functioning of these schools they were reluctant to get used to such systems. The difference in the socio-economic backgrounds of the schools was a major reason. Government schools functioned with limited resources, while private schools had highly qualified teachers and deeper pockets. Pranith realised that it was crucial that they have a school set in the socio-cultural backdrop of Dantewada, and this was the start of Sapnon Ki Shala.

“96-98% of the tribal children in Dantewada get enrolled in 1st grade. Providing education to these many children is a big win for the government. However, the reservations guaranteed by the constitution can only be availed after the completion of the 12th standard. The real question is how

many children complete their 12th. Only 33% of the children complete schooling. 60-65% of them drop out of school between 1st grade and 12th. This means that 60-65% of children cannot avail of the reservation guaranteed by the constitution for uplifting the social status of the tribal communities,” says Pranith.

Another reason behind starting Sapnon Ki Shala, according to Pranith, is the lack of importance tribal cultures are given in the current mainstream education system. Pranith has been working for the past 10 years for the educational upliftment of tribal children. He questions the injustice and non-representation in the varied issues he has seen through these times. The most significant of these is the Brahminism reflected in the syllabus.

“A for apple, B for ball, is how the English alphabet is usually taught in schools. But the children from the tribal region of Dantewada would have never



Paintings made on stone by students at Sapnon Ki Shala (File photo)



Sapnon Ki Shala (Photo: Amal Dev)

seen an apple before coming to school,” says Pranith. Children are to be initiated into education by introducing them to objects and events of daily life. Pranith points out that it is mostly people belonging to the upper caste who prepare the education syllabus in the mainstream education system. The reflections of these can be seen even in the examples mentioned in these textbooks. Pranith added that one major reason for children dropping out of school is that there is nothing the tribal students can relate to in this kind of education system.

Another problem similar to the above-mentioned one is that of an unrelatable academic calendar. “Children are given holidays on occasions like Diwali, Holi, Ramzan, Christmas, etc. But tribals do not even celebrate any of these festivals,” adds Pranith. Inscriptions in golden letters speak volumes of how India is a land of diversities, however, these diversities often only reflect the interests of the mainstream population. Pranith proves the practicality of a point through Sapnon Ki Shala-

students must have their weekly holidays on their market day and not weekends. On Wednesdays, teachers and students will not be seen in the classrooms of Sapnon Ki Shala. They would be busy with the activities of their weekly market. On the following day, they share their experiences and observations in their tribal languages.

‘Sapnon Ki Shala’ means ‘school of dreams’. One feeling that ripples onto all the visitors of Sapnon Ki Shala is how huge the role of freedom in schools is. One would see students rising up to the teachers and teachers humbling down to the students. Starting with what language to communicate, when to study, and what to study, all are decided by the students. Yardsticks of freedom of conventional schools turn invalid here.

“I do not consider Sapnon Ki Shala as an alternative school. I do not even agree with the term alternative education. This is how education should be given,” says Pranith. Pranith puts forward the idea of how government schools can operate within limited resources. He has been successful in making this idea a reality. He hopes there will be more such model schools in the future. Pranith is tinkering with his dreams of taking knowledge and values, derived from experiments carried out to fulfil socio-economic-cultural needs, and applying them in the mainstream education domain.



Amal with students of Sapnon Ki Shala

Pranith can be reached at:

 bachpanbanao@gmail.com

 <https://www.facebook.com/bachpanbanao>

 <https://bachpanbanao.com>



Teacher engaging a class of students at Sapnon Ki Shala (Photo: Amal Dev)

What is the most desirable element in a school? It is not classrooms, uniforms or computer systems. What makes a learning centre perfect is the freedom children possess. Sapnon Ki Shala is a place where Adivasi students weave a dream etched in freedom.

What would children feel other than sheer boredom when they are force-fed capsules of knowledge while being crammed inside four walls for seven or eight hours a day? This was one of the questions that raged inside me the most during the last few days of my stay at Sapnon Ki Shaala.



With Pranith at Dantewada

Agrini: A Space for Endeavour and Creation

Parindey: Gourav Jaiswal, Navendu Mishra

Alivelihood: Education

Place: Seoni, Madhya Pradesh



I used to actively engage in various community services throughout my school and engineering days. I think the seed of what I do today sprouted through these early engagements. It was while studying in college that I became part of Museum School (<http://www.parvarish.weebly.com>) which worked in the area of community services as a part of education. Later, after completing my studies and took up a job, those experiences helped me realise my true calling was in community services as compared to what I was doing as part of the job.

– Gourav Jaiswal



I always considered myself to be marginalised since I was denied a scholarship as I belonged to the General Category. However, it was only after I worked with people from much worse environments did I realise I was privileged. It was then that I realised that due to a lack of basic knowledge, people were deprived of their opportunities and rights. From that realisation, I decided to do something that helps people and also gives me a source of income. Later, I actively started participating in local protests and community campaigns. It was in one of such programs I met my current co-founder, Gourav.

– Navendu Mishra



Agrini (File image)



Students of Agrini (Photo: Amal Dev)

Gourav and Navendu are the founders of Agrini Public School. The experimental model school, Agrini, started in 2014 with the vision to improve public education and make education accessible to all. The school is situated in the Pench Tiger Reserve area in Seoni, Madhya Pradesh. Similar political outlooks, philosophies and life experiences were what drew them to work together. It was while participating in a protest for the Seoni-Nagpur four lane road in 2008-09 that Gourav and Navendu met each other. Later, they got the chance to understand each other more through various other protests and campaigns and strengthen their friendship.

The current Agrini Public School was born from the non-profit organisation, Agrini Kalyan Samaj Society. One of its first initiatives was Neev (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=4168060954781>), in 2012. The project Neev started from Gourav questioning the lack of play schools in villages like the ones in cities. That was how anganwadis were converted into a play school model using local resources. Teachers of the anganwadi were given computer training and students were given the opportunity to learn multimedia. This was the first time such a project was successfully launched in India. Further, the project was undertaken by the Madhya Pradesh government and implemented in around 15000 anganwadis as a pilot project.

“Shikshalaya has an important role in most of the things we do today. I think the greatest thing I learned from Shikshalaya was self-confidence – I realised the impossible could be possible.”

– Gourav

Shikshalaya, the centre for resources, had a great role in the emergence of Agrini. In 2012, Gourav started Shikshalaya (<https://youtu.be/l-yomhdHocY>)

as a place for children to get together and do activities of their liking. Shikshalaya was situated in a godown on the premises of a panchayat in Kurai. In the beginning, workshops on photography, painting and filmmaking were conducted for children to imbibe their interest in these fields. But later it transformed into a community space. Workshops on agriculture and farming were conducted for the parents of the students. In addition to it, self-help groups were formed for women and unemployed youth.

“One of our realisations while working in Shikshalaya was the limitations in implementing our ideas in government schools.”

– Gourav

Improving the public education system was a major focus of all their initiatives. Through Shikshalaya, they organised workshops for the students and teachers of government schools. It was then Gourav noticed that the teachers in Kurai government school regularly arrived late. He presented this issue in a panchayat meeting. Consequently, the panchayat informed the tribal department of Kurai of the same and a fingerprint-punching machine was installed as a solution. Though initially, the teachers did not fully agree with this, eventually they started reaching the school on time. Navendu focused largely on imparting awareness of the constitutional values in children and elders. He firmly believes that the existing education system should be reformed and an amicable society cannot be formed without proper human values. The strong principles upheld by Navendu are clearly reflected in his work. To educate students on the functioning of a panchayat, he engages them in collecting



Navendu taking class for his students (File Image)



Gourav spending time with the students of Agrini
(Photo: Amal Dev)



Navendu facilitating a workshop on Constitution literacy (File photo)

information on different projects done by the panchayat. Navendu has received many fellowships such as Changelooms Learning Fellowship, Plus Trust fellowship, IIM Lucknow Prerna Fellowship, and Wipro Seed Fellowship. He shares all the knowledge acquired through these fellowships to the teachers and students of Agrini.

“I grew up in Kurai village located close to Pench Tiger reserve. Most of the inhabitants were farmers, government employers and teachers. The government schools had teachers who rarely showed up. Parents who were well off could send their children to Seoni. Others eventually left their education,” says Gourav.

The Agrini Public School was founded keeping in mind their experiences with government schools through the Shikshalaya project and the needs of Kurai village. It was in the same village where Gourav was born and grew up. Agrini puts forward the idea of learning through experience. The residents of the village have a major say in most of the decisions taken at the school. They have been given the freedom to even decide the fees for children studying in the school. Another uniqueness of Agrini is the importance given to co-curricular activities. A netball camp was organised in the school as part of promoting gender equality and the students participated in the ‘One Nation Netball Championship’ (<https://www.facebook.com/OneNationNetball>) with a mix of both boys and girls in a team.

“Along with conducting the school, we also participate in local elections and protests and help the candidates to make their election manifesto,” says Navendu. Both Gourav and Navendu have a very clear political stand. They participate in the political processes through ‘Nagrik Morcha’ (<https://www.facebook.com/WeNagrikMorcha>), a political party in the Seoni district, founded by

Gourav. Nagrik Morcha has contested several times in elections conducted in Seoni and has won twice in the Municipal elections. The ‘Unmanifesto’ campaign is another golden feather in their political career. Through Unmanifesto they collect opinions from the youth, help in creating a people’s manifesto and present it to the candidates. In addition to this, they are also part of the national organisation ‘Shiksha Satyagrah’ (<https://www.facebook.com/shikshasatyagrah>) which aims to make quality education accessible to all.



Gourav Jaiswal (Photo: Amal Dev)

“In our opinion, school is a social organisation. Because, school is part of society, and it works for the development of the same society later. You can never separate a school from the fabric of society. To make this possible, it is important that one trusts the society.”

– Gourav



Navendu Mishra (Photo: Amal Dev)

“We would shut down the school the day we feel that Agrini has become a huge success. Because we believe in the model of public education.”

- Navendu

Anyone visiting Agrini can clearly see the ideas and values put forward by Gourav and Navendu being reflected through their teachers and the students. Even while calling it an experimental school, Agrini still becomes a role model to other private and government schools through its way of functioning. Navendu’s opinion that the school would be shut down when it becomes a huge success is also based on the practical success of the above-mentioned model. As they believe that children should receive education through the public education system, they also work on changing the government school system through Agrini by making necessary interventions. While Agrini is openly presented to the world as an experimental school, we can see the battle for a revolution in the education system and new creations born through these experiments.

Gourav and Navendu can be reached at:

 contact@agrini.org

 <https://www.instagram.com/agrini.society>

 <https://www.facebook.com/agrini.org>

 <https://www.agrini.org>

Why are there so many alternative schools in India? Why are there so many tests in the curriculum and methodology? These types of tests are playing no small role in the changing face of mainstream education. It was from Agrini, an experimental model school that I realised that behind any transformation there is struggle and creation. I understand that if we want to bring about a change in education, it is possible through the above two factors. One, the existing obsolete teaching methods should be dismantled and two, the formation of model alternative schools with innovative curricula and teaching methods should be mandated by the government. Life experiences at Agrini have taught me to embrace new ideas that arise within me with confidence.



Selfie with Navendu on the last day at Soeni



Listening to Gourav sharing his life journey

Aaranyak: Where Child Rights Awaken Inner Strength

Parindey: Isha Sheth

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Dediapada, Gujarat



I was a member of Balsena since childhood. I learned a lot from there. I understood my rights as a child, how to practically use them, and to make decisions on my own.

- Isha Sheth



Isha Sheth (Photo: Amal Dev)

Through her project Aaranyak, Isha Sheth uses the concept of self-learning to work with students of tribal communities. It was her parents' organisation, Shaishav, that inspired Isha to spearhead such a big project at the age of 21. Isha's life journey from Shaishav to Aaranyak bore witness to the transformation of her worldview.

Isha is a resident of Gujarat. She spent most of her childhood at Shaishav, the organisation founded by her parents, Falgun and Parul. The organisation champions the cause of empowering children through child rights. Their work in the slums of

the Bhavnagar district of Gujarat aims to help children overcome slum life challenges such as child labour, child marriage, gender discrimination, and rampant drug abuse. Balsena, an independent children's group, is one of the most important projects of Shaishav. The transformations that the Balsena community created within the children were tremendous. Balsena has played a major role in enrolling 14,000 children in schools over the past 25 years. At that time, child labour was pervasive in the slums of Bhavnagar. But over these years, it has declined by 85%, according to Shaishav's records. Shaishav's wealth of experience is proving vital to



Learning materials of Shaishav (Photo: Amal Dev)

many NGOs working for children in Gujarat. Another important factor that differentiates Shaishav is the tools that are used to empower children. Lots of fun games and songs, as well as extensive, fun learning materials, are a boon to Shaishav's resource centre. All the tools mentioned above are reflected in project Aaranyak, as all the experiences of Shaishav are so deeply ingrained in Isha. "Life in Balsena has taught me to pursue my dreams," Isha added.

"After going to Swaraj, I fell in love with that place. The greatest gift I got from there in two years was to learn more about myself - what my values are, what my beliefs are, and how I like to learn."

- Isha



Isha coaching facilitators (Photo: Amal Dev)

After completing her schooling, Isha was worried about her future direction when she chanced upon Swaraj University in Udaipur, Rajasthan. Swaraj University (<https://www.swarajuniversity.org>) is an alternative university that promotes self-designed learning. The two years of life and study there gave birth to varied life experiences of self-realisation in Isha. She believes that Swaraj has been able to weave perspectives on things around her and strengthen her inner beliefs and values. She also gained valuable friendships at Swaraj. "There were very few people in the batch. But during my time in Swaraj as well as now, they are with me. I got friends from Swaraj whom I could call at three o'clock at night and talk to them without any trouble," Isha said.

After two years of study in Swaraj, Isha went from Udaipur to Dediapada in Gujarat to design and implement the 'Aaranyak' project. Aaranyak means 'those who live in the forest', a fitting name for a project which works with tribal children. Aaranyak was the result of a confluence of Isha's self-designed learning from Swaraj and her childhood experiences in Shaishav. Aaranyak currently operates in 14 villages and eight residential schools. There are two learning centres- Vanshala operating in 3 villages out of these 14 villages. The children decide everything - what to learn, how to learn and so on. 240 children are now part of the three learning centres. Although



Aaranyak's facilitator taking classes for students at a government school in Dediapada (Photo: Amal Dev)

the children did not fully understand the process of self-designed learning, Isha was able to quickly nudge them in the right direction. Facilitators in Aaranyak play a key role in this. The 12-member strong Aaranyak team is passionate about working with children. Most of them are youth from tribal areas. They make even the smallest of events extremely effective. Additionally, teenagers in residential schools are being educated about gender equality and sex education.

“When we first arrived, the children did not talk much or ask questions, but the most important change we can see now is the increase in their confidence. Now, when they have a question, they ask the facilitator and request a change in the activities that do not interest them. The children have grown to make decisions on what they need to learn.”

- Isha

Along with self-designed learning, Aaranyak also embraces the concept of a child-friendly village. The concept of a child-friendly village is mainly aimed at forming a collective of children similar to Balsena, and raising awareness about their rights in these 14 villages. Furthermore, Aaranyak seeks to create awareness among parents, teachers and the elderly about child rights. Looking back on Aaranyak's beginning three years ago, Isha believes that many positive changes have become apparent in the children. These changes are visible when one interacts with the children.

“Whether it is mainstream education or alternative education, I've felt that children should be free, accepted and loved as they learn. A learning centre must provide space for that. And most importantly, children should enjoy the process of learning.”

- Isha

Isha aims to build her own learning centre in the future to enable self-designed learning. The Panchayat has given their community halls to run the learning centre with the children. She aims to build a learning centre based on the model of a semi-residential school that provides shelter for orphans and children of single parents. This is in addition to the plans of creating children's collectives and numerous child-friendly villages. Isha is able to generate deep insights into education systems at a young age due to her life experiences. The ardent support of her parents inspires her to move forward in life. Meanwhile, their worldview and beliefs are also strongly reflected in her. Isha is driven by the roots of Shaishav and the rays of hope she inherited from Swaraj.

Isha can be reached at:

 isha.shaishav@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/shaishavchildrights>

 <https://www.facebook.com/ShashavChildRights>

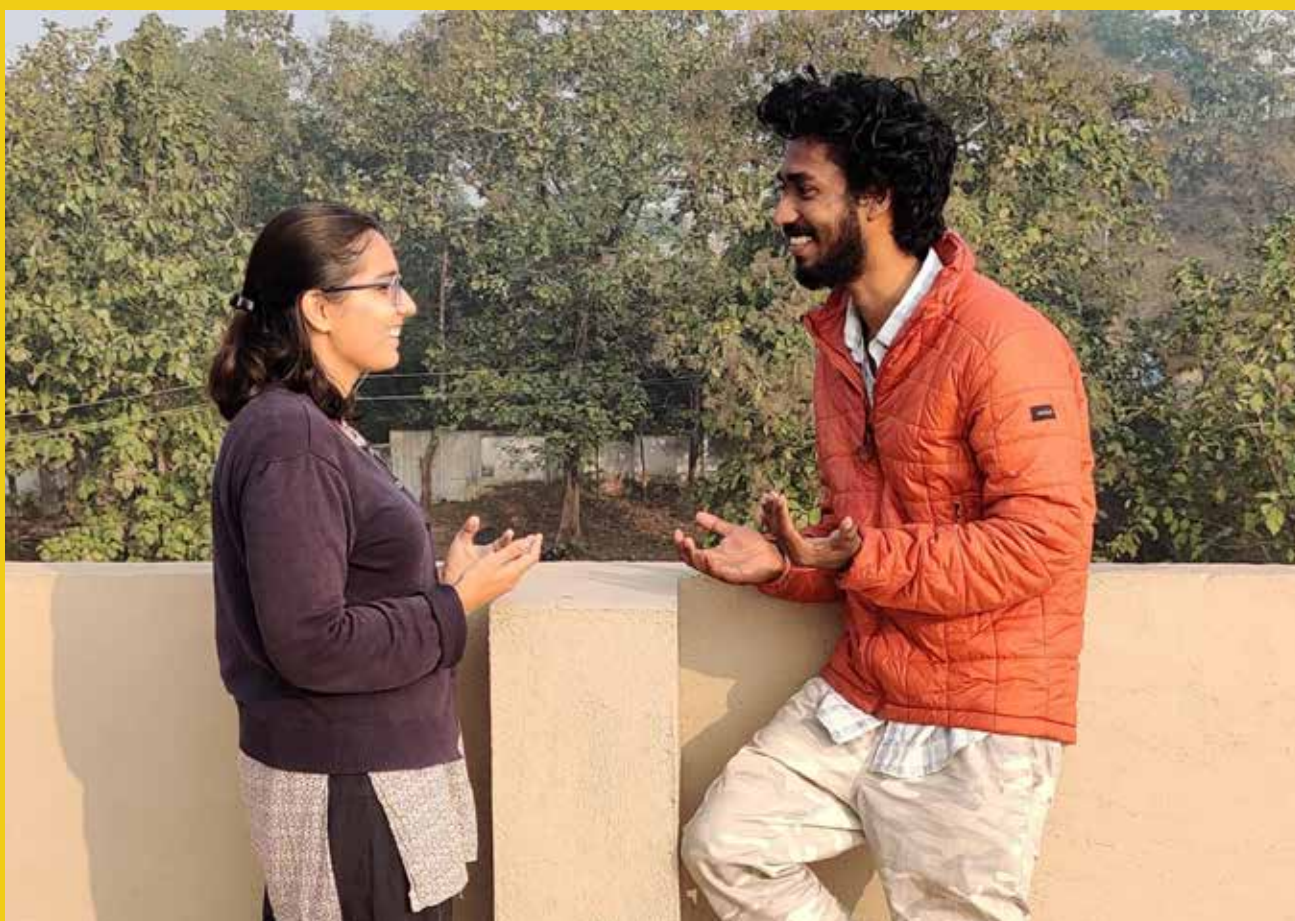
 <https://www.shaishavchildrights.org>



Raising awareness on children's rights among slum children and their parents in Bhavnagar (Photo: Amal Dev)

With my narrow political mindset, Gujarat was not a state I was interested in travelling to. But the journey there put those thoughts to rest. Child rights are the main weapon of child empowerment. Many of the apolitical citizens we see today have emerged as a result of the suppression of opinions and views put forward by children in the community and at home. In our country, where issues like child labour and domestic abuse are still rampant, it is very necessary to convey child rights to children. Self-designed learning methods wipe out the barriers that have affected children's thinking through the spoon-feeding system. Only when we ourselves find answers to the things we need to learn, do the windows of learning fill with excitement and joy.

As part of Aaranyak, I visited a residential school in Gujarat where tribal students study. I saw there that in one section all the children were being given a class on gender equity and in the other section I saw just the girls of another class rolling chapatis while the boys played. The answer to my question, "Why is it like this?", came in the form of a sheepish smile from the teacher. In many rural schools, progress is being made on the one hand, while on the other hand, they are travelling along a highly narrow-minded path.



Sharing my traveling stories from fellowship with Isha

Gramani: A Place Filled with Art and Humanity

Parindey: Shaji Oorali

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Palakkad, Kerala



Gramani is the house we live in. The house where Simitha, Abhinu and I live is primarily a living space, as well as a cultural space.

- Shaji Oorali



Shaji and Simitha (Photo: Amal Dev)

Shaji Oorali is a great man of small stature with manifold attributes. In addition to being the founder of the community Gramani, he is also a unique artist. Shaji's life journey has led to his home, named Gramani, becoming a cultural hub where people can gather. Shaji's activities that combine art, education and rural life add to the nuances of the community.

Gramani means that which leads a village forward. Gramani is located in Naduvattam, a small village in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It is difficult to describe Gramani in a single sentence. In Shaji's

words, Gramani is a group of people who would love to stand together. In 2006, Shaji and his wife Simitha moved to Naduvattam with their son Abhinu. "Naduvattam is a typical rural area with many shrines and vast paddy fields. It is home to the Thuthapuzha river and Rairanalloor hill, once climbed by the mad man of Naranam [a Malayalam folk character]." Shaji added. Kerala's unique rural lushness stands out in the Palakkad district, lending to its beauty. Naduvattam is one such village. It is also a place of legends and historical remnants.

Shaji graduated with a degree in Drama from the

School of Drama (<https://drama.uoc.ac.in>) in Thrissur District. Many friends of his who worked in the theatre scene used to visit Shaji's house. Shaji's close companion and classmate Martin's friends from Latin America also started visiting there. Songs, dances and plays were performed there since the people who came had an artistic background. At the same time, the house became a cultural hub when Poothan Thira, the folk-art form of Palakkad, was displayed to the public. From thereon, Gramani's roots took hold in Shaji's mind.

Later, the above-mentioned events started happening there every year. During the events, the locals would gather outside the walls but no one was interested enough to go inside. Since Abhinu grew up in this environment, he became interested in drama and various arts. Although Shaji did not want to make Abhinu a part of mainstream education, he was compelled by his life circumstances and the existing education system. When Abhinu was in fourth class, he used to come home with his friends and listen to Shaji's plays and try to do short plays. Later, as this continued, the parents began to respond positively to the changes that were taking place in the children. Hence, Gramani became a place where children have imparted knowledge through drama. "There are a lot of people standing with us. Pramod is there, and Biji Chechi is there. Pramod is a theatre artist. Biji Chechi is a sculptor. Then there is Aneesh, there is Kaakku and so on. We all realised that if we all stood

together, we could achieve a lot of things," says Simita.

"The drama of life is different from that on the stage. We choose drama as a medium because we see endless possibilities in it to prepare for life."

- Shaji

Gramani's activities combine the three elements of art, education and rural life. Gramani began by using the art of drama as a tool for education. The play 'Pothu Kinar' [Public Well] is a good example of this. It was a play prepared by the children themselves to understand the general system that exists in society. As part of the preparation for the play, the children travelled by public transport and visited the panchayat office. The play discusses the etiquette that a citizen should follow in society and the function of traditions. Many of the props used in the play are made by the children themselves. Along with plays, various art camps are also organised at Gramani. In addition to drawing, photography, pottery and origami, children are also trained in martial arts. Children's activities are not limited to Gramani. The play 'Vellapokkathil' [In the flood] directed by Aneesh V. P. was performed by the children and they were appreciated at the 'Karshakarkku Kalaasalaam'



Children training to make clay sculptures at the Gramani Art Training Camp (file photo)



Children of Gramani performing the play 'Vellapokkathil' at Thrissur Sangeetha Nataka Academy (file photo)



Clay Statue of Beevathu sculpted by Biji Kongorpilli
(Photo: Amal Dev)

also a reminder of the relationship between humans and other living beings and animals. "It is a village house. A house where people get together with family, friends and locals. Here, the sky is the same for humans, animals, birds, trees and plants," Shaji adds.

"Oorali life inspires us immensely. Personally, I gain strength and courage from the Oorali experience. Because the foundation of Oorali is the relationship between the people who stand by it."

- Shaji

program held at the Thrissur Sangeetha Nataka Academy to mark the 100th day of the farmers' protests. The play tells the story of a pet dog abandoned in a flood. The commemoration of Beevathu was another notable event of Gramani. The 'Beevathu Ororma' commemoration program was held to commemorate the death of Beevathu, a street dog from Naduvattam. Beevathu was considered one among the villagers. The news about the villagers gathering to pay homage to a street dog named Beevathu was featured in all the newspapers the next day. Renowned wildlife photographer N. A. Nazir was the chief guest at the memorial service. For this event as well, the children performed the play 'Vellapokkathil'. The day of commemoration was

Oorali (<https://www.oorali.in/>) is a popular music band in Kerala. Shaji writes songs (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdDsPbKjoxA0ucBFZ1R18lg/videos>) for Oorali. There are several factors that set Oorali apart from other bands. It is a mixture of music, drama, poetry, art and song that differentiates the songs of Oorali and fills people with a certain feeling. The band derives its name from the character 'Oorali' who talks about contemporary issues in the folk art form of Padayani. The songs of Oorali have the same characteristics. In all the songs, Oorali puts forward a political theme. At the same time, Oorali takes part in the protests for humans and the rest of nature. Shaji plays a big role here as these songs of struggle and protest fill the minds of



Oorali Band (file photo)

the people. “Art can be part of the protest. Struggle can be turned into a festival as long as Oorali is part of the struggle. Oorali has nothing to do when the police jeep is smashed and set on fire. What Oorali can do is tell people to refrain from that,” asserts Shaji.

Gramani faced many crises as the spread of COVID-19 intensified. But even at that time, the children, albeit with limitations, were engaged in several artistic activities. An example of this is the short film *Mittayi* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZf2xk7vyQw>) made by children. Shaji and his colleagues are now in the process of starting a new batch for the children. Gramani is not a planned project. It is a place that has melted into the flow of Shaji’s life journey. While Gramani means leading the village forward, the ideas put forward by Shaji and friends are breaking down many boundaries and spreading to a lot of people. Gramani is also shedding light on the identities of humanity that art creates in human beings.



Children sharing their experiences at Gramani
(Photo: Amal Dev)

Shaji can be reached at:

✉ shajisurendranadh@gmail.com

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/Gramani-1645632952410024>

📺 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCygQpQCvZNX4U-uSlx1hT8Q>

When does humanity germinate within a human being? I have previously learned that a child's experiences and observations up until the age of three form the foundation of a child's character. But through art, the seeds of humanity can be sown at any age. Gramani is such a place where humanity is filled through art. In the past, I used to watch theatre only as a way to pass the time during the night hours at festivals. Though these notions went through many changes over time, it was the days at Gramani that brought the realisation that drama teaches not only to act but also to live.

Art is also a weapon of protest. It is a sharp weapon to protest by accurately pointing out the ideas, attitudes, and injustices reflected in society. Education is a necessity for one to study a problem in some depth. But no other human process is as varied as art to convey the magnitude of that problem to the masses and to fight together as one.



A pic after the Christmas celebrations with Gramini team

Adishakthi: Where Education is Woven through Rights

Parindey: Mary Lydia

Alivelihood: Education

Region: Kochi, Kerala



Every community is different. Not all the problems of the Adivasi people can be solved or understood through a single worldview.

- Mary Lydia



Mary Lydia

Lydia Mary is a volunteer at Adishakthi Summer School. Lydia joined Adishakthi, a group of Dalit-Adivasi children, which started functioning in 2014, as part of several voluntary activities in her life. From being a volunteer to being a state coordinator, Lydia has been instrumental in providing many educational opportunities to Adivasi and Dalit students through Adishakthi. Above all, Mary Lydia's strong volunteer work over the past six years is also a life story of survival.

Since the time of her studies, Lydia has been involved in various volunteer activities related to

the environment. In 2015, as part of one such volunteering activity, Lydia met M. Geethanandan, a social activist and founder of Adishakthi Summer School. "I got to know more about the Kerala Adivasi community in depth from the discussion on the day Adishakthi was established at Aralam Farm," shares Lydia.

Lydia entered Adishakthi with many questions, but through later life experiences, answers to the questions were echoing inside her. Lydia recognised the diversity of the Adivasi population in Kerala through her work with Adishakthi students. Born into

a Christian background, Lydia believes that it was her travels that prompted her to take a different path. Challenges and crises were important milestones in Lydia's volunteer life. Lydia's constant efforts to break out of the religious framework were also part of her life journey. Lydia is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Kerala. While the meagre stipend from it is comforting, the psychological and financial support from Lydia's circle of friends lights up the path ahead.

Lydia's birthplace, Thuthiyoor, was one of seven sites named for the rehabilitation of displaced people as part of the Vallarpadam development project. Lydia was an eyewitness to the fact that the rehabilitation that was said to be part of the project did not occur, and the evicted people were left stranded. It was then that Lydia began to pay more attention to the problems of evictions caused by development. For a deeper understanding of these issues, she selected 'Eviction due to Development' as her M.Phil research topic. At the same time, Lydia was actively involved in the protests against pollution in Periyar. Lydia's resistance and struggle against environmental pollution brought her closer to the Adivasi who protected the rest of nature. Later, Lydia travelled to various Adivasi areas of India to learn more about them. Lydia believes that the knowledge and friendships gained through this journey provide inner strength for her life. Lydia sees her three years of M.Phil studies at the University of Hyderabad as the most important chapter in her life. Lydia spent most of her time with children in a slum near the university. That was the reason behind extending the two-year M.Phil course to the third year. Many children living in slums were engaged in begging and other activities. In the early days, she was involved in charitable activities to meet the temporary needs

of children. It was through subsequent constant interventions and observations that Lydia came to realise that the children have to work for their rights. It was that realisation that gave her the courage to move forward.

“When the Adivasi identity is eliminated by providing education through factory schools outside Kerala, their fundamental right to land and even freedom in using forest resources is being denied within Kerala.”

- Mary Lydia

Lydia sees the relevance of Adishakthi Summer School because of the problems faced by the Adivasi people within Kerala. Lydia points out that education is essential to empower landless Adivasis to fight for their own rights.



Rahul Buski, a BA Fine Arts student, paints on the wall of Adishakthi's hostel (Photo: Amal Dev)



Manikandan, Rajani, Geethanandan and Lydia (left to right) attending Adishakthi's press conference in Wayanad (File photo)

“I came to know about Adishakthi Summer School when I was studying for the second year of my degree. Even after getting my degree, I had no idea where to apply for higher studies and which courses to choose. It was only when we reached Adishakthi that we started getting accurate guidelines. I am passionate about the teaching profession. Adishakthi Summer School has given precise guidelines on how to get there. “

-Rajani (Student of Adishakthi)

Adishakthi is located in Thammanam, Ernakulam district in the state of Kerala, India. Adishakthi works under the slogan of ‘Education is our birthright’. Adishakthi Summer School is an educational project of the NGO Indigenous Peoples Collective. The three concepts of agriculture, education and self-sufficiency are the most important. Adishakthi Summer School is not an alternative school, but a community of Adivasi and Dalit students in Kerala. Adishakthi is formed under the leadership of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/adivasi-gothra-mahasabha-to-launch-agitation/article65059479.ece>). Adishakthi aims to help Adivasi-Dalit students facing educational challenges such as dropping out, the inadequacy of guidance, shortage of reserved seats and lack of learning media such as the internet. The most important area of activity of Adishakthi is to facilitate students’ access to higher

education. One such help desk was launched in 2017. The help desk is staffed by around 300 social work and NSS students from various colleges. With each passing year, there is a huge increase in the number of students entering the arena of education through Adishakthi. Adishakthi does not admit students to any college just for the sake of it. Instead, they start the admission process after understanding the aptitude and interests of each child and making them aware of each course. Jijin, a graduate student in Sound Engineering, and Atulya, a postgraduate student in Film Studies, are good examples of the above. At the same time, two hostels function as part of Adishakthi to accommodate students who do not have access to college hostel facilities in Ernakulam. Protests are also one of the important learning tools emphasised by Adishakthi. Adishakthi’s agitation in 2020 to find a solution to the issue of



Aksa Balan, MA Sociology student sharing her experiences during the Muthanga agitation on Muthanga Remembrance Day (Photo: Amal Dev)



Adishakthi students dancing as part of ‘Opera’, an art and cultural camp at Bharat Mata College, Kochi (file photo)

Adivasi students dropping out upon being denied admission to the 11th standard had garnered attention at the state level. In addition to the students declaring that “education is my birthright”, we can also see students in Adishakthi fighting hard for their rights through education.

What sets Adishakthi apart from other organisations is the concerted effort of a group of young people working and studying in different fields. Adishakthi Summer School is an example of an alternate way of visionary thinking for the youth who are confined to their activities within the framework of their own community and religious beliefs. Rather than bringing the light of education to the Adivasi people, Adishakthi is able to create self-esteem in the Adivasi personality and convey the idea of Adivasi politics to them. Child-led movements and the art and cultural camp ‘Opera’ at Bharat Mata College in Kochi are good examples of this.

An experimental multilingual learning centre has been set up at Kalloor in Wayanad district to address the language barrier which is a primary problem faced by Adivasi students in education. In addition, students from the Wayanad district cultivate ginger every year on agricultural land located at Meppadi. During the Covid period, a committee called ‘Namontai’ (We Together) was formed to provide relief packages to the Covid-affected Adivasi villages.

Adishakthi Summer School’s triumphant journey continues in the face of many crises. There is no one in Adishakthi who is paid a monthly salary or works for wages. Although it poses a challenge to regular

activities, it is possible to overcome that crisis to some extent through the sincere efforts of Lydia and other volunteers. Currently, more than 30 students are staying at Adishakthi’s hostel. The daily expenses of the hostel are also very difficult to manage. At the same time, a large amount of financial assistance is required to run the Admission Help Desk. The current funding comes from a network of volunteers working with Adishakthi and from the online fundraising. Apart from that, Adishakthi earns a small income by selling honey and other forest products under the brand Adi in the urban areas of Kochi.

Adishakthi is pushing for revolutionary changes. There was a time in Kerala when most of the tribes were enslaved. That is not the case anymore, but the remnant roots of this oppression are still rotting inside some casteist minds. One by one, those roots are being uprooted through the strong protests and interventions of Adishakthi. Last year alone, about 250 students were admitted to various colleges across Kerala through Adishakthi. It was not an easy task. They had to protest against some of the privately aided colleges that tried to convert the SC/ST seats to management seats.

“Lydia plays a vital role in bringing together MSW and NSS students from various colleges as part of the Adishakthi Help Desk. That process is still going on.”

– M. Geethanandan (Founder, Adishakthi Summer School)



Adishakthi students and volunteers collecting essentials in Covid-affected Adivasi villages as part of the ‘Namontai’ project (file photo)

Lydia has been instrumental in coordinating all the major activities of Adishakthi over the last six years. Beyond being a volunteer, Lydia is able to guide children and support them to reach leadership positions. Lydia, who wanted to work in the field of environment, was brought to Adishakthi by the Adivasi people’s diverse lifestyle that is rooted in nature. Lydia’s life journey continues, as the ideas propagated by Adishakthi are reflected in the children.

Lydia can be reached at:

[@ marylydia88@gmail.com](mailto:marylydia88@gmail.com)

<https://www.instagram.com/adishakthisummerschool>

<https://www.facebook.com/adishakthisummerschool>

It was from Adishakthi that the journey to find answers to the many questions that arose within me began. It is where I am still learning a lot. For me, Adishakthi is a battleground, a centre of learning, and above all a place where students weave their education through their rights. As seen in many Adivasi struggles, they are led by social workers and leaders. But the first slogans in the small and big struggles of Adishakthi came from the heart of Adivasi students.

It is after living with the children in the hostel that changes occurred in the way I viewed people Adivasi communities.

Adishakthi is a large community of people who are not similar in their work but who work together with the ideas they believe in. I have been growing as a part of that community as a volunteer, fellow, and eventually project coordinator.



Conducting an ice breaking game for the new students who joined Adishakthi

Epilogue

Learning to unlearn and relearn

The fellowship journey was one which shattered many of my illusions. The most I learned and realised in my twenty-five years of life was from this journey that lasted for more than a hundred days. It was at Sapnno Ki Shala, an alternative school in Chhattisgarh that I realised that what makes a school perfect is not books, classrooms, or uniforms, but freedom for children. Every time I travel to a new place, I have many questions and doubts, and when I find the answers to them through the journey itself, it becomes a realisation that I keep close to my heart. It's the people who live there that make me want to travel again to all eleven states I've been to. People who speak many languages, have many professions and have diverse cultures and beliefs.

Most of the social workers I have met as part of the fellowship have left behind many comforts to imagine and work towards a better, easier, world for all. All of them have a life journey that weaves together survival, failure, success, and determination. It goes without saying in everyone's stories that life starts from self-realisation. I am also preparing to go on such a journey.

What is education?

It was the answer to this question that I searched for and learned throughout my journey. Education is everything that teaches a human to live. But if your education consists of post-graduations from a so-called prestigious university, and enslaving yourself to corporates who devour human beings and the rest of nature in the name of development, it is never an education. It is a cancer that eats away at you and the creatures around you!

Photo Gallery



Engaged in cleaning works at Kanavu



Exploring local street food in Ranchi, Jharkhand, with Raja



Celebrating Navendu's wedding anniversary with his family



With the teachers and students of Sapnon Ki Shala



Packing the food grains marketed by Adishakthi along with the volunteers



Facilitating a session on passion with the Aranyak team members



Participating in the meeting to plan Gramini's future activities

Anil Uppalapati

Ongole, Andhra Pradesh
Food Systems & Natural
ways of Growing

Anil Uppalapati is from Ongole, Andhra Pradesh. He is a zealous explorer of the less trodden paths. Anil is on a quest to build regenerative living of his choices and prefers dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery. He holds an Integrated Master's in Economics and Post Graduate diploma in Human Rights, and has served as a Gandhi Fellow in Bihar.

As a 52 Parindey Fellow, Anil has explored Food Systems and natural ways of growing. He intends to continue exploring food systems, as he believes there is a lot more to learn, unlearn and relearn. He dreams of creating healthy food systems and resilient local communities and intends to pursue growing his own food.



The 52 Parindey Fellowship has been an extremely rewarding and unforgettable experience. I have explored natural ways of growing food. It was extremely humbling to live and work on the farm. For the first time ever, I got involved with growing and cooking the food that I was eating. My brief stay on the farms and in various communities offered me the opportunity to witness firsthand how learning simply emerges and life thrives when we are tuned in to what is most meaningful and authentic to us. Throughout the fellowship, a 'learning exchange' was taking place as the boundaries of age, culture, and socio-economic background simply vanished in the process of our mutual friendship. The Fellowship also provided a candid view of Alivelhoods. When both profession and conscious living merge together, it creates a beautiful synergy. This is what Alivelhood is. The idea of each person taking complete control of their own learning and life intrigues me. Alivelhoods are needed at this hour to recreate a healthy way of living. Throughout the journey, I have been blessed with so much inspiration and an abundance of love along the way that I feel compelled to pass it forward.

Prologue

After completing my Master's in Economics, my urge to explore the various facets of society in the areas impacted by unhealthy socio-economic conditions made me choose Gandhi Fellowship. I was a Gandhi Fellow in Sitamarhi, Bihar. The Gandhi Fellowship programme is aimed at supporting and motivating the youth of India so that they discover and build a leader within themselves and drive a transformation for the betterment of the nation. My two-year comprehensive journey in Bihar improved my understanding of how our social institutions contribute to disconnection and disfranchisement within society.

I was in a phase of suffocation since I returned back home from Bihar in May 2021. Having a master's degree, the experience working for a renowned non-profit and the promise of lucrative opportunities around, I should have been all set to "start a good career"! Instead, committing to follow my heart, I chose the 52 Parindey Fellowship.

Chalam, one of the greatest writers of Telugu literature asks a question to those who can understand, loosely translated into English below.

“సూర్యోదయాలు, సూర్యస్తమాయలు రోజు నెత్తి మీద జరుగుతుంటే... కళ్ళుమూసుకుని

సినిమాలో సూర్యోదయం చూపిస్తుంటే అరనిమిషం ఊపిరి బిగబట్టి ఆనందిస్తున్నవా... చలం”

When the sunrise and sunset are happening right on your scalp, you act blind...

But you hold your breath to admire the sunrise when it appears in a movie..?

This question reminds me not just to survive, but to live my life to the fullest. I don't want to be in the theatre watching the rising sun not feeling the light and warmth of the sun.

If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.

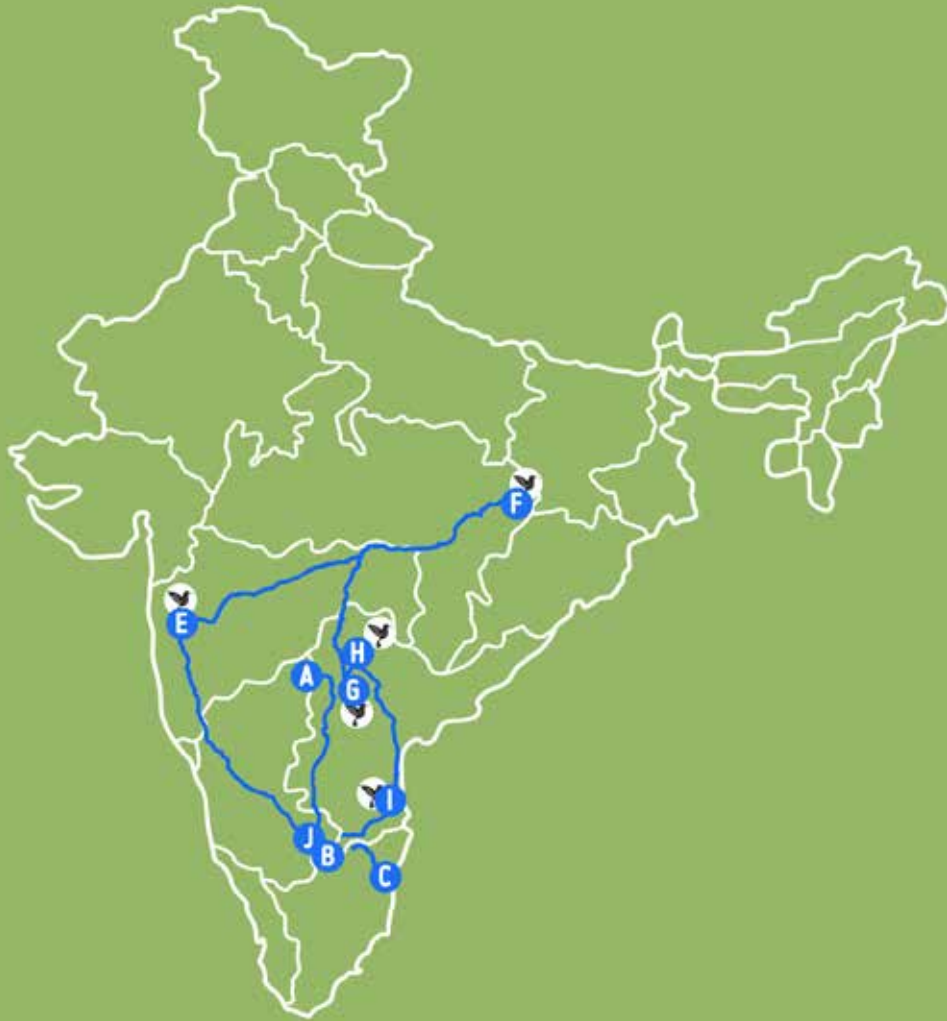
- Maya Angelou.

My choice took me to the world which I have been longing to be part of, introduced me to the beautiful people nurturing the community around them, and allowed me to express as real as I could think inside me. These travel and learning experiences have brought about a change of world within myself.



Carrying a home with me

Map of Anil's Journey



| | | | |
|---|----------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Caxton Christdhas | Natural Farming | Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu |
| C | Ksr Dinesh | Organic Farming and Organic Store | Reddiarpalayam, Puducherry |
| D | John Fennesy | Agroforestry | Bengaluru, Karnataka |
| E | Afrin Kale | Natural farming and Entrepreneurship | Pimplegaon Ghode, Maharashtra |
| F | Rajnish Kumar | Permaculture & Organic Farming | Kudumkela, Chhattisgarh |
| G | Amarnath | Restaurant and Food Catering | Hyderabad, Telangana |
| H | Sama Yella Reddy | Dairy and Organic Farming | Marri Mustyala, Telangana |
| I | Radha Krishna Reddy | Vruksha Ayurveda Farming | Chennuru, Andhra Pradesh |
| J | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

Decentralisation and Food Democracy

Parindey: Caxton Christdhas

Livelihood: Natural Farming

Region: S. Thatanapalli Village, Krishnagiri District, Tamil Nadu



The process is more important than the person doing it. I didn't grow up in a farming community doing physical work. Being on a farm means being in the present. I don't have a solid plan in mind, but I strongly believe there will be a time when I will understand the soil, the flow of wind and water, and what the plants need. I feel my life is more relevant right now and happier than ever. This satisfaction is more important than anything else. Whether I achieve something or make nothing is up to Nature.

– Caxton Christdhas



The religious routine of planting hope (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

Early life

Caxton Christdhas grew up in a middle-class family in Azhagappapuram village near Kanyakumari. Like most kids of his age, he thought the village was backward and longed to move to a city to experience urban life. He moved to Chennai in search of urban life and college education. He pursued Electronics

and Communication engineering as he was curious about how the internet communicates with planes and rockets and wanted to work in that domain. During this time, he discovered that college was more like a school running in a monotonous fashion. Since there were limited possibilities for practical learning, engineering seemed difficult for him. Despite having attended college for four years, he eventually decided

not to pursue a degree and instead began working. He began his career in a BPO, then got into training and later moved to a photography company.

The Beginning

After working in the corporate sector for a decade, a variety of questions related to centralised systems of finance, governance, politics, and food kept daunting him. He held a senior managerial position and received a huge salary which he believed he did not merit. He tried to get better wages for grassroots workers as he felt they truly deserved it for their contributions, but he failed. He became certain that he did not belong to the corporate world and found nothing meaningful in his way of living. He quit his job in 2015 in search of a new direction. To understand his purpose and execute it in a practical sense, he travelled across Tamil Nadu to meet interesting people around him who were doing things differently. In this process, he got associated with a group of youngsters who were working to address civic issues around them, such as restoring water bodies, running signature campaigns for public sanitary infrastructure, planting native trees, conducting children’s camps, workshops, farmer’s markets, book readings, etc.

Later some of them created a space in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, to host activities such as storytelling,

puppet shows, and workshops exclusively for children. During this time, he also collaborated with his friend Perumal to launch “Patham” in 2017 in Tambaram. Patham was probably the first of its kind, a store that sold sweets made only of karupatti (palm jaggery). They attended a number of events attempting to raise awareness about food and its association with water and electricity. Patham now has a store in Madurai and continues selling healthy sweets and snacks made from native millets and palm jaggery.

Even though he was indulging in more meaningful endeavours, he was still looking out for things that would make him happy. He felt compelled to do something in tune with the rest of nature. Through his experience with diverse groups and spaces, he eventually realised that humanity’s current existence is not a harmonious one. He realised that there are, undoubtedly, easier ways to live than the way humans are living today. This prompted him to envisage a conscious space where people on their exploratory journeys could come together to perceive things from a different perspective.

The Problem of Centralisation

The system determines what one should produce and consume. Caxton is concerned that the food system has gone horribly wrong, from production to



Caxton at work (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

supply chain to consumption. The Green Revolution shattered our food diversity and thereby affected food sustainability, in the name of food security. It forced farmers to use land-abusive methods to produce food in larger quantities, leaving behind its quality and nutritional value. To add to this, trade has also become centralised and often the best of the produce is not available locally, making people reliant on distant markets for their nutritional needs. And then, there's the logistics and delivery methodologies, which amongst themselves account for 30% of the food wasted globally. Also there is consumption, where mindless indulgence has led to serious health crises and their fair share of food wastage. He does not want to be completely reliant on markets for food, and he hopes everyone would be more conscious of what they eat. He believes that decentralisation of food systems is essential for the long-term viability of any community, where most of the needs are satisfied locally. Growing one's food is the beginning of the idea of decentralising food. If people choose to grow whatever they can in their surroundings, it will reduce their dependency. He also believes that there should be a shift from viewing food as a major source of income to food as the primary source of human sustenance. He is not looking for a well-defined model, but hopes

to identify a sensible model for communities to be self-sufficient in their food and financial needs. Caxton believes in the democracy of food, where food systems are managed and run by the people, for the people.

"I have aspirations, desires, and wishes. More than that, there is a natural force that moves me."

The Journey

He wanted to do more than just be conscious of what he was eating. The desire to enjoy healthy and guilt-free food made him join hands with a few friends to start growing food on their own, on a small patch of land, based on the principles of natural farming. They consider it unnatural to not allow crops to grow on their own, based on the natural cycle. The farm is a practical learning space where different seeds are simply broadcasted on raised and flatbeds to understand the course of the plants. Tomatoes and manathakalli (miracle fruit) grow on a raised bed three metres long. Leftover onions from the kitchen turn into fresh onion seedlings. Potatoes await



Ranks of raised beds for growing vegetables. (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

their second harvest. Fenugreek seeds that fall to the ground germinate to grow tall. Perennials that consume water, such as sugar cane and bananas, can be seen near the peripheral wash area. Greens grow lush and happy in a corner and one can find diverse varieties of spinach ensconced by walls of brinjal, horse gram, and native corn. Soon there will be patches of rain-fed rice and millets. They are also building earthen shelters to host conscious learners and seekers. Along with that, they have started the preparation of compost with dry leaves and grass available on the farm. They are acting in the belief that crops grow themselves if they are allowed to take their natural course. This way of living, in their opinion, is truer than any other form of living. One should get what nature gives and be happy with it. They are striving to shift from the current abusive form of living and farming, to a more sustainable one.

“Change should begin with me. I cannot just go to

people and talk about what I want changed. I should do what I must be doing to bring about the change I want. I believe that actions manifest the change rather than words. All I know is to experiment. The beauty of an experiment is that it teaches either how to do something or how not to do something.

As a species, we don't know anything for sure, and yet we behave as if we know everything. We may know the what and how of most things, but definitely not the why of anything that matters. This thought may seem absurd, but if I may put it into words, I can only describe it in this way,” Caxton adds.

Caxton can be reached at:

✉ caxton.christ@protonmail.com

📷 https://www.instagram.com/fluttering_float



Anil with Caxton and the other humans of the farm

Probably, for the first time, I asked a stranger to host me and allow me to document his life journey! I was nervous to ask. What if the other person doesn't agree? It seems a useless fear. But at that time, I took it seriously. After speaking for five minutes with not much clarity on what I will be going to do at his place, Caxton told me to come over to his place, so that both of us can figure out how to get things done. That was a seed of HOPE and a partial end of my fear to ask for things I need.

Life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. I felt Caxton carries this line in his heart, his actions, and his understanding towards fellow living beings and it is reflected in the community he is part of. I could read this every time I looked into his eyes. When I listened to his story, I wondered how he could be so happy after leaving all his possessions and comforts. But it took no time to understand why. By the time I happened to leave his place, I had understood that "happiness must happen, and the same holds for success; you have to let it happen by not caring about it".



"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." - Desmond Tutu

Samarpanam: Offerings for a Resilient Community

Parindey: Ksr Dinesh

Alivelihood: Organic Farming & Organic store

Region: Reddiarpalayam, Puducherry



My family could not accept my decision to pursue farming. They had moved to the city and hoped for over 20 years that their child would fly out of the country and earn a fortune in the corporate world. It took years for me to experience moral support from the community in what I do.

When it comes to farming and making quality produce available to people, the challenges are varied. The way mainstream markets operate and function is unfavourable to those who work towards sustainability. There are so many differences in the practices we engage in. I see growing food for myself and those around me as a fundamental community activity. I am involved in an activity that is considered non-mainstream, but I believe that the most mainstream activity anyone can do is grow nutritious food and take it to people. Because, everyone has to eat.

-Ksr Dinesh



Dinesh at his farm (Courtesy Samarpanam)

Dinesh was born in a village 25 kms away from Puducherry. His parents moved to the city, hoping to provide a good education for their children. They did not want their children to be involved in the same agricultural activities they had been

doing for generations. Like most of the middle-class youngsters in his region, Dinesh also ended up studying engineering after school. He found the course to be incoherent with his being, and stepped out of college with a bag full of questions. “How can

we have a wholesome approach to education?” “What does it take to build a resilient world and create value for everyone around?” In a quest to understand these better, he extensively travelled and met people from different areas of work. He started travelling to various places exploring organic farming, alternative education, alternative medicine, sustainable community living, and so on. During that period, he found himself more drawn towards working with food and creating sustainable communities.

Having understood the challenges regarding access to healthy and nutritious food, and how unsustainable farming practices were toxic to the environment and the human body, he decided to focus on food and communities. After all, nutritious food is one of the most essential needs for human existence. Dinesh grew up as a small-town kid watching his father travel 50 kms each day to take care of their farms in the village. He believes farming provided them with a decent life and helped his father earn respect in the community. Thereby he decided farming and working on food distribution systems was essential to start with. Belonging to an agricultural household and owning land helped him to move ahead with his pursuit of farming. In 2016, he started practicing organic farming on one acre of land growing moong dal and urad dal. As his father was involved in inorganic farming, Dinesh met with different organic farmers to learn the techniques for shifting to organic farming. Since agriculture is the only income-generating activity for the family, they have expanded their farming practices to four acres of land. Dinesh believes healthy food nurtures the body and ensures a sound mind. When one is healthy, they can nurture the people around them, thus creating a robust community.

The Samarpanam Farmer’s Market evolved as a response to the challenge of nutritious food produce available to people. Marketing organic produce involves a lot of dynamism. What it takes is constant networking, awareness, and patience. When he approached experienced organic farmers in the area, they suggested that he take on the responsibility of marketing the produce for the entire community. It made sense to him as well. If he had to grow more organic produce in the future, he would need to find a market for it. He reasoned that this would also help the other farmers around him. Thus, Samarpanam started as a simple store in a small room in his house, sourcing produce from a few farmers near Puducherry. He sees it as a community activity, and believes carrying out such an activity to be a social responsibility.

Currently, the store serves fresh fruits and vegetables twice a week on a pre-order basis. Other groceries are available throughout the week. They are attempting to source locally, as much as possible, to reduce the food miles and keep prices under control. Products that cannot be grown locally are brought from the closest growing areas. His store has



Locally produced vegetables and fruits (Courtesy Samarpanam)



Dinesh along with his fellow organic farmers (Courtesy Samarpanam)

expanded from one room to the entire ground floor. They remain committed to the values and reasons that motivated them to begin this activity. They are focusing on growing the business by keeping the core values of transparency, traceability and fair price intact. Dinesh is confident about expanding this activity to the larger population over the next few years.

Dinesh believes that buying locally produced goods improves a community's socioeconomic conditions. This practice would foster a positive relationship between producers and customers. Producers will be able to produce more with less capital investment, while consumers will be able to make more informed decisions about what they consume. He envisions a sustainable local community where the majority of needs are met locally. To accomplish this, production and manufacturing must be done locally as far as possible. The first step is to consume locally grown products. Consuming locally grown products increases demand and helps improve local sustainability. The next step would be to build a local infrastructure, such as food processing plants and value-added industries, to further support these activities.

Even though he was brought up in the city, he is more connected to his village and his community there. Dinesh has a dream of forming a resilient community in the village. He wants the people in his village to be more aware of the issues affecting them: nutritious food, better education and healthy space for people who want to explore different domains. Currently, he is engaging with the youth as well as the children in the village, and wants the true potential of the youngsters to be channelized in the most productive way. He is also supporting them to explore their interests in education through career counselling sessions.

Keeping aside the insecurities, fears, economic and emotional challenges, Dinesh is motivated by what he foresees for his community in the future. Expressing his mission for the coming years, he envisions building a larger team to run the activities and delegating responsibilities of Samarpanam to the team. The focus on creating better access of nutritious food to the larger population would continue. His approach is to make the best of the resources he has access to. Dinesh sums up by sharing his profound thought, "the soil is healthy and so are the people".



Grains and millets procured from the farmers around (Courtesy Samarpanam)

Dinesh can be reached at:

✉ ksrdinesh15@gmail.com

📷 https://www.instagram.com/dinesh_ksr

📷 https://www.instagram.com/samarpanam_organic_farm

📷 https://www.instagram.com/samarpanam_farmers_market

🌐 <https://www.samarpanam.org>



Dinesh along with his fellow organic farmers (Courtesy Samarpanam)

Pondicherry has been home for a long period of time. It was going back to a place which played a significant role in shaping my worldviews. A place where I started to unlearn my most unhealthy practices. Dinesh is like a friend who has already started doing things I wish to do. Since his journey also started in a similar fashion as mine, we both connected on various topics, but maybe with slightly different perspectives. My stay here helped me to narrow down the area of work I should start, and at the same time, I observed there are continuous challenges in this pursuit which aims for a greater cause. I received a lot of love from people I already knew in Pondicherry. A friend hosted me during that period as Dinesh's place was already occupied. I had known the same people in a completely different phase of life earlier, during college. My conversations with them made me realise that my current journey was a conscious choice of mine. I started actively listening to everyone I met. Asking for help and support was now no more a foreign thing to me. My dream of building a conscious commune made sense to me even further. This part of my journey helped to understand the importance of interconnectedness. I could see a lot of opportunities and resources that are existing around me. This also made me realise that there is always a natural force that I'm in tune with. Dinesh's experience showed the beauty of doing one's work religiously without a rigid profit motive that pays you more returns.



Ocean is the natural force that I am always in tune with.

Five Acres of Hope: Sustainable Living at Hamsah Organic Farm

Parindey: John Fennessy

Alivelihood: Agroforestry

Region: Sulikunte village, Bengaluru, Karnataka



I did not choose farming; farming chose me. That is just how my path unfolded. I came to Auroville and loved everything about it: the farmers, the food, and the farming. I was an environmentalist who wanted to do something environmentally responsible to change people's approach to living—running in a rat race to earn more money and buy more cars. I wanted to change my way of life as well. It took me a while to accept that enabling people to consider getting their food from the ground rather than from a store, can aid in changing their minds.

- John Fennessy



John at Hamsah Organic Farm (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

John Fennessy's orchard-farm, Hamsah Organic Farm, is located within the city limits of Bengaluru, near Sulikunte village. Six cement-manufacturing industries surround this five-acre agroforest. This piece of land is a world apart from the rest of the place, which is one of the hotspots of cement production in Bengaluru.

A mixed natural orchard comprising mainly mango and chikoo (sapota), along with a few other species,

occupies about two acres of the farm. In addition, vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, and different types of leafy vegetables are cultivated in different plots. Further, a distinct plot houses a nursery for raising saplings. Moreover, since 2019, John has been experimenting with syntropic agroforestry on a separate patch with the intention of transforming the farm into a healthy, regenerative agroforest at minimal cost and with almost no external inputs. Syntropic agroforestry combines food production with

forest regeneration in a synergistic manner. This approach enables the restoration of degraded soil biodiversity, and the water requirement is less than that in conventional approaches.

John was born in New York, USA, and lived the first 18 years of his life within the country. In 2001, he visited Nepal and Tibet for four weeks via a Tibetan monk's summer programme. He found it to be an insightful experience and felt encouraged to visit India to experience its rich heritage and culture. Subsequently, he, along with 13 other students, visited Auroville (<https://www.auroville.org>), India—a spiritual community devoted to humanity, unity, and ecological harmony—in the spring of 2003 as part of a university study programme. He fell in love with the place and the work being carried out there. After university, he returned to India and began living in Auroville. He lived in and worked at Krishna McKenzie's Solitude Farm (<https://www.solitude.farm>) for about five months. That is where an interest in farming was sown in his heart. He found it to be a beautiful way of life. Furthermore, it was at this farm that he met and fell in love with his wife, Swetha. After their marriage, they moved to California and took up jobs. They lived in the USA for two years and gained financial stability. However, the wish to move to India always remained at the back of John's mind; they eventually relocated to India in 2008 without a rigid plan. Swetha engaged herself in architectural projects, while John considered moving to Auroville to take up farming. That was when John's brother-in-law offered him a five-acre plot in Bengaluru, which was slowly transformed into the Hamsah Organic Farm we see today.

From the beginning, John had carried out the majority of the work on the farm with the assistance

of occasional workers, volunteers, and visitors. Each visitor had pitched in to help John with whatever he was working on. "It has been an amazing 13 years here, and I am quite happy with how things have progressed," says John, discussing his journey. "Now, I am farming full time, preparing new beds, growing more vegetables and fruits, and producing food for myself and the visitors," he explains.

Hamsah is a pleasant space for casual visitors and families to spend their weekends at. While staying at the farm, visitors enjoy eating naturally grown food and fire-cooked pizzas and go on farm walks with John. "It is a place to calm ourselves down after a hectic week in the noisy world," says one of the visitors, with a smile.

Water scarcity during the summer is a major challenge in the farm, which is further aggravated by the presence of cement-manufacturing factories that consume large amounts of water. Further, fly ash from these factories is carried to the farm by winds, forming a layer on top of the soil and polluting it. When John began experimenting with syntropic agroforestry in 2019 on one patch of the farm, he found that this approach served as a solution



John preparing the soil (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Hamsah Organic Farm—The gate to five acres of breathing fresh air (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

to these issues as well. This type of agroforestry involves extensive mulching and the co-cultivation of fruit trees and vegetable and grain crops. John uses organic residual material (e.g., coconut shells, dry leaves, and sticks) and green manure plants (e.g., Gliricidia) as mulch. This mulch decomposes to form manure, thereby enriching the soil and benefiting food production. Further, this layer of mulch retains water for long durations, thereby compensating for the water scarcity. Additionally, the fruit trees act as barriers to the fly ash from the factories and protect the soil from pollution. John feels that practising syntropic agroforestry teaches farmers to stop fighting nature and learn to embrace it instead. In between fast-growing trees such as mango, litchi and chikoo, John's expanding agroforest has vegetables, flowering plants, and grains. For instance, Mexican sunflower, pineapple, and papaya are grown in the same row. Further, the yield and quality of the potatoes and carrots grown in the farm this year have been the best so far, and John is very pleased with this accomplishment. Hence, he has prepared more beds and intends to grow okra, corn, basil, tomato, cauliflower, chilli, and brinjal together in these patches. "This is going to be incredible!" feels John.

Several of John's farming friends have suggested that hosting and facilitating workshops is the best way to increase revenue while enabling the initiation of more people into farming to create a stronger community around him. However, John is yet to facilitate one even with 13 years of farming experience. He does not think of himself as a good orator or someone who can handhold and teach people. "I am leaning toward offering workshops, but I also like how I am living my life. I do not aspire to save the world through farming; it is primarily for my children: the next generation. To me, the

world appears to be doomed but we can make a good corner in it. That is exactly what I am doing. I made a nice corner. I am just trying to improve the beauty of these five acres," explains John.

John claims that as a foreigner living in India, he does not understand the politics and other such nuances here, which limits his ability to interact with more people in the community. However, despite the challenges he has faced, John feels that it has been a rewarding experience. "The most rewarding aspect is having land of unlimited potential and deriving an income with almost no investment," says John. There are two cows, two swans, and chickens on the farm. The cows produce milk, and their urine and dung are used as manure for the farm.

Although John began farming on this land in 2008, he travelled to the USA several times in between to take up other jobs. However, he found himself returning to his farm each time, saying, "I am doing this because there is nothing else my heart would be happy with." Now, John believes that he is truly here in a syntropic agroforestry sense. He does not wish to just be an instructor who employs a large number of people to farm. "I want to be a leader by being present on the ground," asserts John.

Hamsah instils both hope and inspiration, with one person doing what he can to make a difference.

John can be reached at:

✉ hamsahorganic@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/hamsahorganic>

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/hamsahorganic>



Spreading organic mulch (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

Reaching Hamsah Organic Farm was a thrilling experience in itself, as there was no regular public transport facility to the farm. I ended up trying to hitchhike. It wasn't easy, but later felt like the simplest thing I did.

There is a first time for everything you do in your life. During my stay at the Hamsah, I involved myself in the process of plastering a wall with cow dung-mud mixture. And I learned, it is a finely honed skill. Mulching was another practice I got exposed to. Mulching is a process of covering the open surface of the ground with a layer of shredded plant material. Staying in a farm hut and sleeping under a tent was a long-term dream fulfilled. But it was not as cool as I thought it would be. It was an opportunity for being with my own self, an opportunity that rarely comes my way. Though it was not very comfortable, it was a catalyst to realise the importance of being alone. It made me realise the importance of living in the present, not worrying about the future. In the process of thinking about what is next, I must not ignore the beauty of being in the present.



I must not ignore the beauty of being in the present.

SAAD Agronics: Toxin-free Produce and Trade

Parindey: Afrin Kale

Alivelihood: Natural farming and Entrepreneurship

Region: Pimplegaon Ghode, Maharashtra



Afrin at her farm (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

For the first 20 years of her life, Afrin Kale was unaware of the intricacies of farming. Her parents were not involved in any farming-related activity either. Following her marriage, Afrin decided to learn farming to build a connection with her husband's family, who were farmers. Further, she recognised farming to be a necessity for survival. Afrin's father-in-law taught her the basics of farming on the family's land and mentored her. However, since the land was jointly owned by the family and a major source of income, Afrin was not allowed to continue her exploration there.

Afrin and her husband subsequently purchased a piece of land in 2001 on the advice of her father-in-law. This land had been fertile until a few decades ago. However, it had transformed into a marshland by the time they acquired it, and the groundwater level was quite low. "There was uncontrollable flooding during the monsoon as the runoff from the hills would come gushing down and run through this land. Consequently, the soil was too hard and the land was completely barren. All the landholders in the area were facing the same problem and were helpless because of insufficient knowledge," recounts Afrin.

“When you invest in something, you are eager to gain returns as quickly as possible. Back then, I was an immature young person who felt this way too. In the first year, we could not grow anything. Though we sowed chickpeas (chana) and groundnuts, we got only one-tenth of what we used to get at the former land. Although we were ready for that, we did not know how to proceed further. My father-in-law also had never restored marshy land. We decided to follow our instinct and started removing excess water from the field. It seemed like the right thing to do. We read some informative books and articles and trained ourselves. Methods to restore cultivable land from a marshy state were unknown to us and to everybody we knew; so, we taught ourselves everything and set off on this mission to become self-sustaining,” explains Afrin.

Farm engineering

Afrin had previously studied civil engineering. With the guidance of a few mentors, she designed and dug trenches around the land to channel the excess water without damaging the crops or soil. During the subsequent monsoons, the water that flowed down the hills began to take this meandering path they had created for it, which slowed it down before reaching the farm. This allowed the soil to absorb the water before it reached the water canal beyond the farm.

Afrin changed the landscape of her plot via practices that she had developed by herself. Further, she and her family increased the area of their farm by purchasing some land from their neighbours when they could. Now, the farm is a five-acre expanse with a water well that satisfies the water requirement of the entire farm for six to eight months. With water conservation via digging a well and channelling excess water to a pond, the water quality has been improving. Furthermore, the ecosystem is becoming visibly healthier each year with the return of several

species of birds and insects that formerly inhabited these parts.

Growing her own food

When Afrin began learning to farm, chemical farming was expensive and unconventional. They used to have cows, and cow dung and urine were the only supplements they used. Though she knew about chemical farming and many people around them transitioned to practising it, she did not make the shift. She did not feel the need to shift because the yield obtained organically was sufficient for their joint family of close to 50 members. Furthermore, she recalls her mentor having explained that since their land was on top of a hill, their use of chemical substances would damage the lands below, thereby damaging the entire jungle. His words strengthened Afrin’s resolve to continue organic farming. In 2000, Afrin was working as a computer instructor alongside farming. However, when her first son was born, she quit her job. She had read a few articles on the harmful effects of chemical farming on human health, which had spurred her into action. Afrin decided that it was her responsibility to grow healthy food for her child and family and started growing food to meet their needs.



A mini truck carrying toxin-free food (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Farmhands harvesting ragi (finger millet) (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

Now, Afrin grows six varieties of rice, and each variety has its own characteristics and nutritional value. Additionally, flax seed, chickpea (chana), and millets such as ragi and little millet are grown every year. She has recently designed a mixed fruit orchard comprising mango, guava, custard apple, figs, and papaya and hopes to get fruits throughout the year.

Selling toxin-free food

Afrin initially sold surplus produce to a few of her friends. As she kept growing more food, Afrin set up SAAD Agronics in 2015 to sell her produce. SAAD Agronics was named after the initials of her family. As the demand for organic produce grew further, she collaborated with a few farmers nearby who were producing toxin-free food and experiencing difficulties with marketing the produce. She collects vegetables and fruits from these farmers and sells them from her home in Pune. She considers this her responsibility because it is helping the farmers receive a fair rate while the consumers pay a fair amount too (trade justice). Afrin is happy that she is in a position to help the people around her. She believes that toxin-free food can only be made available if these farming communities can sustain themselves. They are presently an informal collective of six farmers with similar ideologies on farming, and they intend to register formally as a collective.

The aesthetic of regeneration

In Afrin's farm, the topsoil is mulched with leaves and surplus straw. In addition, there are animals such as cows and goats trampling over this mulch and mixing their dung and urine with it. Owing to this, the soil quality has improved significantly over time. Water seeps into the mulched soil and finds its way to the canals through the soil, leaving clear

filtered water behind.

Afrin's innovative practices have increased crop productivity. Productivity is not just measured by the output of a farm; it is the ratio of the outputs to the inputs. She discovered that they required fewer inputs with time, whereas the output continuously increased.

Different trees on the farm provide shelter for several species of birds, and the farm has become a bird watcher's delight; one can spot peacocks here too. As one walks through this farm, observing the biodiversity, including the bees, birds, and butterflies that thrive in this ecosystem, one experiences bliss.

"I have been learning to farm for the past 24 years and practising it for 15. Farming taught me patience; the urge to react impulsively has long gone. I never considered farming as a career during my years of formal education. Now, I don't imagine myself doing anything other than farming. From then to now, the journey has been a rollercoaster ride and full of learning. Farming is a regenerative way of living. Every time a grain from the farm is sown, the resultant crop has been healthier than the previous one. I wish to continue working on my own farm and support other small farmers to recreate small communities of their own to live their own sustainable lives. I'm sure that the soil will be there forever; regeneration is a never-ending process. I will do it until I can," says Afrin Kale.

Afrin Kale can be reached at:

 afrin.kale@gmail.com

 <https://www.facebook.com/saadagrionics>



A healthy rice field just before harvesting
(Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Harvesting happiness. Anil at Afrin's farm.

“Learning is a lifelong process, there is always something worth learning.”

Afrin drove 42 km to pick me up to go to the farm. The vehicle was full of saplings, farm tools etc. When I sat beside Afrin, she enquired whether I had food or not. And before I answered, she offered me some fruits to eat. Afrin is a humanitarian with a warm heart and a generous spirit! That was my first impression and I was never wrong.

After reaching the farm, she introduced me to each and every corner of the farm and the story behind it. I lived on the farm with two beautiful families, who are helping Afrin in farm activities. They became my family. We would cook together, work together, play Ludo and watch movies before we go to bed. They taught me to operate a tiller, and harvest paddy and ragi. That five-acre farm carries that inclusive learning environment. I saw Afrin continuously learning something new, experimenting and teaching the same to the people around her. She started growing food for their children and family, then she collaborated with others to help more people to access toxin-free food. She also started a store where she not only sells her produce but also connects people with other producers as well. When I asked her how she did all these, she replied, “I consider myself a student every moment of life. I will keep on learning till I can. Because that is the only way I can keep myself fully alive.”



To truly learn something, there is no better way than immersing yourself in it.

A Nomad for whom the World is a Home

Parindey: Rajnish Kumar

Alivelihood: Permaculture & Organic Farming

Region: Kudumkela, Chhattisgarh



I was born into a large farming family in Bihar. I was made to stay and work in our fields as a punishment. My family used to tell me that only losers do farming in the current generation.

- Rajnish Kumar



Rajnish aka Raja at Majhi Tikara, Chattishgarh (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

Rajnish was never really interested in school. He was only 10 when he ran away from his home to escape the pressure from school and his parents. He was brought back after four years and put back in school. When he was in class 9, he went to Uttar Pradesh and started working in a textile company. For almost four years, he worked in different jobs, completed his intermediate education without attending school and took admission in social work. By then Rajnish had begun to be known by the name “Raja” and that’s how the larger world knows him now.

As Raja was not so fond of mainstream education, he

joined Shikshantar (<https://www.shikshantar.org>), an alternative educational institute in Udaipur, Rajasthan, to pursue different ways of learning. He explored various interesting topics which weren’t touched by most traditional education institutes. Raja’s curiosity for photography and filmmaking drove his initial focus on learning, but organic farming was also a burgeoning question in his mind. Taking the suggestion from Manish Jain, the founder of Shikshantar, Raja focused on sustainable living. As he explored this area, Raja’s world began to expand, he was exposed to the largely untapped potential

of ecologically and environmentally conscious living, which aligned with his way of thinking. During his free time in Udaipur, Raja used to work with his friends Nirmal, Manoj and Sunny, from whom he learnt cooking.

Raja loved his way of life and enjoyed travelling and learning on his own. "When one is actively involved in a process, real learning occurs. Travelling is the best school because it teaches you how to live," says Raja.

After travelling around the country for nearly a year in search of sustainable communities to visit and learn from, he learned about Sadhana Forest (<https://www.sadhanaforest.org>), a community in Auroville, near Puducherry that has a longstanding experience of reforestation and water conservation. Raja instantly knew that Sadhana Forest was where he would spend his time. He came all the way from Bihar, without even knowing English and Tamil.

He volunteered in the kitchen at Sadhana and, within no time, he became the kitchen manager and actively participated in their Environmental Leadership Programme. Raja, being Raja, enjoyed all the opportunities to learn new things. In his spare time, he began to volunteer on an organic farm to learn land restoration techniques and seed selection firsthand.

As he progressed, he volunteered his time on many organic farms, taking his learning further to permaculture and then completing a Permaculture Design Course, and also learnt techniques of eco-building constructions. Having lived and worked on

different farms, Raja is proficient in organic farming and aware of its importance. But he had previously never thought of practising it on his own farm. But, his visit to a farm in Kodaikanal in 2011 changed his life and outlook forever. During his stay on the farm, he experienced the food there to be highly tasty. He had eaten the same items and dishes several times



Raja sowing bottle gourd seeds (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Raja at work (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

before but he found it different and more delicious there. He decided at that moment that he would start his own farm, where he could practice organic, permaculture principles and encourage others to come to learn, work, and enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the environment. His vision had been conceived.

Raja became a farm manager in Krishnagiri district, Tamil Nadu, and started helping farmers in developing lands and farms. He facilitates farmers on how to formulate, and use bio-inputs, such as microbial composts, manures, and several preparations like amrut jal, panchagavya, fish amino acid, etc., which are vital for a cleaner, safer and economically viable regenerative agriculture.

Aranya Eco-Village

Raja developed more than 50 kitchen gardens, farms and food forests before he started building his own farm. In 2013, he created Aranya Eco Village, an organic farm in Thattanapalli village of Tamil Nadu, in a land which belonged to one of his friends. Aranya Eco Village began as a small plot of land that had previously been utilised by a flower farmer and was considerably destroyed and exhausted. Because flower growing had depleted the soil's nutrients and jeopardised the general soil structure, Raja's efforts largely concentrated on rebuilding the land. The adoption of organic-permaculture principles and techniques has been crucial to the land's transformation. Since the inception of the transition, the farm has evolved in recognition, resources, wildlife, opportunities, and most significantly, the farm circumstances have allowed for the production of a diverse range of fruits, vegetables, and staple grains. The yields were initially low, but have

increased thereafter. The delightful side effect is that the local ecology has been restored, giving a healthy environment for a range of living entities.

By 2016, Raja had preserved a huge number of organic seeds of diverse vegetables and grains and began to distribute them among the neighbouring farmers, hoping to convince them to shift to organic farming. He also collaborated with farmers and created a farmers' market to ease the marketing of the produce. Raja also approached friends and resource persons, particularly those interested in developing regenerative forms of rural ecosystems. Since then, the community has been steadily growing.



Youth of Majhi Tikara involved in farm activities
(Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Farmhands harvesting ragi (finger millet) (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

According to Raja, organic is what is produced and consumed locally using the resources around. He feels solutions to environmentally and socially damaging human practices today require re-establishing connection with agriculture and other earth caring practices. Agriculture is not just a technical activity of applying a few techniques for food production, rather a socio-cultural practice, rich with deep-rooted meaning for the people involved. It is soil, seed, moisture, warmth, air, vulnerability, and it is also pests, weeds, and infestation. It is observation and staying alert, it is people and relationships. Industrial agriculture is the antonym of it.

Majhi Tikara

Raja is currently based out of Majhi Tikara, a community land of the Majhi Tribe near Kudumkela village, Chhattisgarh. The Majhi community is one of the most neglected tribes in India despite having a significant population. Raja is living with the Majhi community to restore the mining affected land and develop a self-sustained food forest. He collaborated with Environics Trust (<http://www.environicsindia.in>) and encouraged the youth to learn Natural Farming and work towards enabling them to create livelihoods in the village itself. There are close to twenty students who are learning the trade from him. These students now can manage their own farm. Besides this, Raja taught them eco-building construction techniques: constructing a living place using the surrounding resources.

This place is a hub for cashews and mahua (a tree with high medicinal benefits), chironji and is desirable for growing mushrooms. Raja is looking forward to establishing a value addition unit and selling directly to the consumers. He wishes this place would emerge as conscious territory. It should be spearheaded by the youth of the Majhi community, not any outsider, says Raja.

Mission Possible

Agriculture is a socio-cultural activity with great meaning for those involved. A universe of care, attention, resistance, survival, custodianship, unity, and sacredness is nourished and sustained on this soil by farmers. According to Raja, that is what a conscious community requires.

“I have been working on building a network based on collective learning. There is a need for moving our efforts from individual to collective, exclusive to inclusive. This effort is essential for creating more compassionate, sustainable and just food systems, thus also contributing to robust local communities. Local is a novelty these days, as everything local has a modern makeover and is readily available in supermarkets. We must concentrate our efforts on dismantling corporate influence in food systems and promoting long-term systemic improvements,” he explains.

Raja feels that the myth that farming is not a livelihood has to change. He wants to see organic farming as a livelihood, a serious profession.

“I have been travelling for more than a decade now. Whatever I’m doing today is what keeps me alive. This soil has given me life. It is my obligation to give something back. Organic farming plays a major role in restoring biodiversity and food diversity. By helping people to practise organic farming, I am helping restore the environment as well. I want to create an ecosystem where all living beings: plants, birds, insects, animals and humans live in harmony.” - Raja

Rajnish can be reached at:

 rr5694689@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/rajnishsadhana>

Raja's journey reinforced for me the idea of "home is where the heart is". He has no concept of permanent settlement in his life so far. Wherever he goes he creates a shelter along with a healthy environment to keep his heart intact. That reminded me of my journey as well.

Since childhood, I have lived in hostels, different places, with different people. The concept of my home is where my people are. My home is where I want to live my life at that moment in time. It is not always tangible, it is a feeling. With the people I love by my side, anywhere may feel like home. Because the people I am with, not the location, is where I call home. This journey further strengthened my belief that I will have a home where I can find comfort, no matter where I live.

When your existence starts to feel fragile and out of your control, it may be quite difficult to feel like you have a place in this world. Our sense of home can be distorted as we are trying to run back to a place we can rely on, but is not always there. A place can change. It is a place to stay, not somewhere you belong. For me, home is more of a comfortable, welcoming, atmosphere than it is a physical structure.



Home is whatever you make it to be, it is completely up to you.

Rekindling Traditional Food: NAYA The Millet Hotel

Parindey: Amarnath

Alivelihood: Restaurant and Food Catering

Region: Vanasthalipuram, Hyderabad, Telangana

Korra dosa, ragi idli, arikel pongal—one can cook up a storm with a variety of coarse grains: millets. 'NAYA - The Millet Hotel', which opened in 2017 at Nallakunta, serves 60 varieties of millet-only tiffins from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. Everything here, from upma to biryani to noodles, is made of millets and they are sold at an affordable rate. The grains are sourced from traditional farmers in Telangana, the Rayalaseema region in Andhra Pradesh, and some parts of Karnataka. For Amarnath, this is not just business. He aims to create awareness about the importance of making healthy food choices. He believes in the idea of "Aharama Aushadham", which translates to "food is the best medicine." "Many individuals today do not eat the food; rather, the food eats them. If one continues eating polished white rice and wheat, they will become dependent on medications at an early age," he explains. Amarnath says he included the word 'millets' in the restaurant's name as he wants people to know that they are

eating millets when they step into their food court. He also wishes to raise awareness on avoiding disease by eating healthy. The primary aim behind starting this venture was to give something worthwhile back to society.

Amarnath aka Amar was born in the village of Kolkunda in the Vikarabad district of Telangana. He aspired to be a doctor when he was younger, but he ended up pursuing Business Administration instead.



The entrance to the restaurant (Photo- Anil Uppalapati)



Amarnath at the reception counter in his restaurant (Photo- Anil Uppalapati)

He moved to Hyderabad to pursue his degree. During his time there, he developed an interest in diverse foods and cooking techniques. His favourite pastime was experimenting with cooking. Everyone who tried Amar's food wanted to come back for more. Amar established a food catering business for celebrations and events after graduating from college. He studied the benefits of food as medication, learning from his experience in the food industry. In 2007, he came up with the idea of using millets to make traditional dishes. He travelled for a decade, investigating the health benefits of millets as well as different ways to cook them. As he gained a better understanding of millets and their relevance in the human diet, his desire to take millets to the people who wished to eat them but had trouble cooking them, also grew stronger.

Why Millets?

"Millets have a low carbohydrate content, are rich in fibre, protein, vitamins and minerals, and take longer to digest," explains Amar. "As a result, glucose breakdown is slower. Because glucose takes longer to enter the system, blood sugar levels remain stable. This is beneficial for diabetics who must control the rapid fall and rise of blood glucose levels. Furthermore, as millets are rich in fibre, they immediately satisfy hunger and reduce overeating." Millets are the humble superfood of the Indian diet. They have been part of our ancestors' diet for generations, but their consumption has decreased in recent decades. For those who are health conscious

and wary about what they eat, experts suggest that millets should be a part of the daily regular diet. Millets are nutritious, non-glutinous (non-sticky) and are not acid-forming foods, thus making them easy to digest. Millets are both cost-effective and environmentally friendly. They do not require chemical fertilisers to grow, and their water requirement is less compared to that for rice cultivation. "Many people have discovered the benefits of millets. After COVID-19, there is a conscious shift taking place," he observes.

The restaurant was hosting approximately 150 customers every day before the imposition of the pandemic-related lockdown in 2020. Its mission is to serve healthy food without using artificial colours, additives or sugar and without compromising on quantity or/and taste. Each dish on their menu has a distinct taste and the flavour of it makes one lick the plate clean. Most of the food is cooked in copper pots and only with alkaline water, which is said to help blood flow more efficiently and increase oxygen delivery throughout the body. Despite incurring financial losses initially, Amar says he kept the restaurant afloat with the help of customers turned friends. He plans to expand his chain to the rest of Hyderabad. This restaurant is a crowd-puller amidst the sea of fast-food chains and burger joints. They sell fast food as well; however, it is also made from millets.

The restaurant offers breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Their concept is that every dish that can be made



Customers for the millet breakfast (Photo- Anil Uppalapati)

with rice and wheat can also be prepared with millets. For breakfast, they offer a “Healthy Unlimited Millet Buffet” which includes korra dosa, ragi idli, arikela pongal, udala upma, sama khichdi, avise podi along with cow ghee, groundnut chutney, sambar, tomato chutney for ₹60 only. Popular dishes during lunch are jonna rotte, ragi sangati, and millet mutton biryani. Amar says there is no special process to cook millets. “It is similar to cooking rice, no one ever gets it right the first time.” Amar wishes to reintroduce traditional eating habits. A few customers have aided Amar in reviving the restaurant after COVID-19. “My customers are pushing me to do more and more,” says Amar. The restaurant is already catering millet-based food for events and functions. He is looking forward to setting up cloud kitchens for preparing millet-based snacks and selling them across the city.

Amar says that his family’s health improved significantly once they switched to a millet-based diet. His mother, who used to be diabetic, no longer needs to take insulin. After incorporating millets in their regular diet, many regular customers have been able to lower their medicine intake for various health disorders. Doctors and medicines become necessary when people create and continue to be part of a sickly environment.

“We have come a long way from whole foods to fat-filled burgers and pastas. There was a time when we used to eat food grown in our backyards. There is a reason why certain foods grow in certain regions. The idea of local is a novelty these days, as everything

local is given a stamp of modernity and available right in the supermarkets. Millets are native staple food grains, and I want to reintroduce those healthy eating traditions.” Amar dreams of a healthy India, where there is a minimal requirement for hospitals and medicine. “Because health is the greatest wealth that anyone can possess,” he adds.

Amarnath can be reached at:

✉ nayamillets@gmail.com



Unlimited Millet Buffet platter (Courtesy- NAYA - The Millet Hotel)



Open lawn seating for parties and family gatherings (Courtesy- NAYA - The Millet Hotel)

The inner fire is the most important thing that one should possess.

Hyderabad used to be my go-to place since childhood. I was now travelling for more than two months, outside the land I was born and brought up in. To meet Amarnath I again reached the city of love. This place has always offered me joy and smiles. This time it was the joy of learning in the form of understanding Amarnath's journey.

"Love towards one thing will help you expand your limitations."

Amar loves cooking, he also loves business. He wishes to contribute to a healthy India, where food should not be the reason for diseases. Upon completing his studies, he started his own food catering business. Simultaneously he was exploring different recipes with traditional grains and millets. He did not want to be one among the thousands who cook food that fills the stomach, he wanted to focus on health as well. For more than a decade he researched millets and learnt different recipes and created a few more on his own. Now his restaurant serves all the popular dishes from idli to Hyderabadi biryani out of millets. His love towards cooking along with his mission towards contributing towards a healthy country made him push his limitations to invest his time and energy in starting his restaurant.



The inner fire is the most important thing that one should possess.

Ahaara Yoga: Bringing Harmony between Healthy Growing and Consuming

Parindey: Sama Yella Reddy

Alivelihood: Dairy and Organic Farming

Region: Marri Mustyala, Telangana



I have seen farmers leaving farming and migrating to the cities to do menial jobs for survival. Coming from an agricultural family, I know the difficulties of farming. For the same reason, my father did not want me to do farming and sent me abroad for higher studies. I lived in different places, earning money and learning skills. But it felt irrelevant because I wasn't helping my people. I was also tired of living away from home. I have come back to India forever.

- Yella Reddy



Yella Reddy caressing one of his cows (File photo)

Sama Yella Reddy is from Lingampally in the Rajanna Sircilla district of Telangana. Yella Reddy took up farming while most farmers in his village were giving up on it because it was not profitable for them. He has shown that farming can provide a sufficient

income and has served as a role model for young people who want to continue farming. Yella Reddy has been reaping good harvests while conserving the health of the soils by using sustainable and natural agricultural methods and avoiding chemical use. He

firmly believes that a person who is reliant on and respectful of the soil will never fail. His story bears witness to this.

The story begins in 2012, when Yella Reddy, a SAP Consultant in Spain, quit his cushy job and returned to India. He had been moving places and changing his way of living for a decade as a part of his professional journey. Yella Reddy had no emotional attachment to any of the countries or cultures where he lived and did not experience a sense of belonging anywhere. Physical, mental, and environmental concerns were prevalent everywhere he lived. He also dealt with regular health issues, and he discovered that his way of living was the source of the problem. He then decided to go back to India and live in harmony with the rest of nature.

From Artificial to Natural Polyhouse

Yellanna, as he is popularly known, returned to his village in Lingampally and started living there. He then bought a piece of land in Marri Mustyala village and started farming. In 2013, intending to introduce advanced technology to the farmers in the village, he set up a polyhouse and started growing gerbera flowers. He took to marketing them right at the beginning stages and sold value-added products like

garlands and bouquets to the market, earning more than his colleagues in the trade. However, after one year, the soil was dead and there was no life for other microorganisms in the soil. Subsequently, the plants were diagnosed with soil-borne diseases. He realised that the polyhouse was only for corporate business purposes. It is neither affordable for all the farmers nor sustainable. Even though the artificially developed biodiversity maintains all the favourable conditions for growing crops, it leaves the soil infertile.

Yellanna returned to working on the land, not to make money, but to seek a healthy life and to grow healthy food. A meeting with Subhash Palekar, fondly known as 'Krishi ka Rishi' in the natural farming communities across India, was a turning point. Yellanna immediately stopped using chemicals and pesticides and shifted to Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF). Palekar devised the self-sustaining approach after seeing how chemical fertilisers and pesticides degraded soil fertility, eventually resulting in health problems for those who consumed the food produced. Yellanna adopted a five-layered farming model, similar to a polyhouse, which creates favourable conditions for the plants to grow naturally. It requires minimal financial investment and boosts the farmer's earnings. Cows are an important part of the growing process since



Yellanna's five-layered farm (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

they assist by grazing, and their waste (urine and dung) is used to coat the seeds: a process called beejamrutham. Meanwhile, the jeevamrutham method, which involves mixing cow dung and urine with jaggery and flour, boosts soil microorganisms and keeps pests at bay. In this model, five types of crops of varying heights and rooting patterns are cultivated together at the same time. Multilayer cultivation enables the optimal use of space both horizontally and vertically. From long and medium-height trees to bushes, creepers, and grass, Yellanna grew them all. This is his multi-cropping model:

1. Coconut trees were planted as the tallest layer.
2. Either orange or mosambi (sweet lime) are grown on a rotational basis as the second layer.
3. Banana trees form the third layer.
4. The fourth layer is planted on a rotational basis like the second layer.
5. Ginger and turmeric constitute the final layer.

Yellanna also grows other plants such as drumstick, spinach, bottle gourd, brinjal, lemon, and pulses. He brought in his envisioned style and system of farming by first bringing a native cow for its dung and urine, which are good natural supplements to

the soil. Owing to the widespread demand for healthy milk, Yellanna, along with his wife Sunita, bought more cows and started a dairy along with farming. Now, they have 40 cows and sell 100 litres of A2 milk (which is mineral rich and provides sufficient nourishment to human beings) every day. They also sell value-added products like ghee and curd. “Dairy products and farming take care of each other mutually,” says Yellanna.

He says ZBNF has enhanced crop yield and soil fertility significantly. Having adopted diversified cropping, he no longer depends on a single crop for income. Further, the water use is only one-tenth of that in chemical farming due to cropping practices. His health has also improved as a result of the shift to ZBNF.

“Forests thrive on their own without chemicals or constant watering. On my farm, I’ve created a similar ecosystem. So, my team and I just do one thing: harvest the plants. I have drastically reduced my expenses, and I now just spend money on getting fresh seeds and paying workers,” he says.

Yellanna is convinced that implementing the ZBNF model will reduce agriculture-related concerns such as excessive credit, pesticides, and monetary loss, as well as farmer suicides.



Yella Reddy receiving the Rythu Nestham Award (File photo)

Ahaara Yoga: an Organic Store

In 2016, the techie-turned-farmer and his wife also opened an organic store in Siddipet, where they sell the produce of other natural farmers as well. He explains, “Organic farming sustains the environment. Small farmers have to start small to sustain the farming and their livelihoods too.” They believe every Indian deserves the opportunity to continually improve their life—a process that often begins at home. As part of their mission to help consumers make healthier and better choices, they offer a wide range of high-quality grocery and household products that are accessible and affordable right at their doorsteps. Many friends and relatives who chided his decision to quit his job and move back to the village are now appreciating his success. “It feels good to reap the benefits of hard work and innovation,” says Sunita.

In the eight years of his journey, with a well-designed structure and marketing strategy, he started a Farmer Producer Company in collaboration with Grama Bharathi, an NGO that works to create self-sustaining villages. This company facilitates a

platform for the farmers of the village to sell their produce at a fair rate.

“At my previous job, I only earned money. There was no sense of community. But now, earning through working in the village and living harmoniously with the rest of nature helps me to find sound health, and I experience a sense of belonging. The work I’m doing has to continue. This generates employment in the local community. I have built my home here to live eco-consciously.” He is passionate about educating other farmers about the dangers of using chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Yellaanna claims that money is not the only thing that matters to him. He seeks fulfilment and is able to find it in farming.

Yella Reddy can be reached at:

✉ samareddy@gmail.com

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/AhaaraYoga>

🌐 <http://www.ahaarayoga.in>



Yella Reddy selling ghee to consumers in his store (File photo)

“Happiness and satisfaction play a vital role in one’s life journey.”

How happy are people today? Were people happier in the past? How satisfied with their lives are people in different societies? And how do our living conditions affect all of this? These are challenging questions to address, but they are questions that undoubtedly matter for each of us personally.

Yella Reddy’s return to India forever was following the lack of satisfaction he experienced in his life. He was working abroad with a fancy income. But there was no feeling of society or community. He was unable to feel any connection with the land he is living in. Which made him socially and emotionally less active than he used to be when he was in his village. And hence he decided to come back to his village in Telangana and started farming. That is what made him sane. He enjoys his way of living here, doing what gives him satisfaction. He says being a farmer and sharing space with the rest of nature makes him the happiest person in the world. It shows how important happiness and satisfaction are in everyone’s life.



The Pursuit of Happiness

Vruksha Ayurveda Farming: Developing Healthy Plants that Produce Healthy Food

Parindey: Radha Krishna Reddy

Alivelihood: Vruksha Ayurveda Farming

Region: Chennuru, Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh



My Family has been involved in agriculture for generations. Until a few decades ago, in our country, most of the families were doing farming or were connected to farming. Now, this connection is lost and its impact on our community, culture, food and ecology are grave. There is an urgent need to re-establish the connection between agriculture and the people. When people were connected with land and agriculture, it had a healthy bearing on our cultural sensibilities. I was taught that the food we ate was not to be valued in terms of money, but as a gift from Mother Nature.

- Radha Krishna



Radha Krishna preparing Jeevamrutham on his field (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

The story of Radha Krishna's Vruksha Ayurveda Farming began in 2014, when he, a Marine Engineering graduate and ONGC employee, quit his well-paying job. It was not an overnight decision. His long-held dream of becoming an entrepreneur and providing employment to people made him a water pipeline contractor. His family and friends did not welcome his decision to quit ONGC to start a construction firm. He proved all of them wrong by expanding his firm to work in five states and employing hundreds of people. His journey as a contractor earned him name and fame. But he felt tired of what he was doing. It felt like he was running hard in a race, which he realised he did not want to win. He decided to go back to his village and take care of his farm.

Radha Krishna had a good network in cities and hospitals, and most relatives and friends used to stay with his family during hospital visits, he would accompany them sometimes. Hospitals were always full of patients, even infants are affected with cancer and neurological problems and hormonal imbalances. In his life, he has seen many of his friends and their families suffer from these chronic diseases and who lost their people even after spending huge amounts of money. Despite a wait for many years, Radha Krishna and his wife Gayatri Reddy could not have children because of infertility issues that persisted.. They had visited every doctor, every temple, and tried many treatments for years. In this process, they both became anaemic, and exhausted both mentally and physically. The moment they found Gayatri's health

was deteriorating, they decided enough was enough and told themselves it's okay not to have kids. He learned about the toxicity of harmful chemicals in food and milk on human health. It alarmed him to see how humans pollute themselves and the environment. He wished to provide his people with safe food.

Radha Krishna Reddy is from Chennuru village of Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh. After he decided to go back and settle in his village and grow healthy food, he started exploring healthy ways of growing food. Radha Krishna approached his guru Bharaatinanda Saraswatiee from Maharashtra, who was his go-to person and mentor for all his major life decisions. Radha visited and learned Vruksha Ayurveda from different ashrams in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. He volunteered in different places and trained himself to be able to practice on his own farm.

Vruksha Ayurveda is an Indian traditional science of plant life that focuses on producing high-quality yields from healthy plants for use as food and medicine. The physiology and pathology of plant life, identical to that of animal and human life, are clearly defined based on the philosophy of the ancient Indian system of panchamahabhuta and its products. This study of plant life has also visualised various parameters for nutrition, disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment based on the Tridosha (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) philosophy. It is a part of ancient Indian health sciences' health framework (combining



Radha Krishna and team after work. (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

plant, animal, and human health) that was created many centuries ago. This method was inspired by the ancient knowledge of saints and rishis. Applying the same sort of nurturing to the plants is the main motto of the Vruksha Ayurvedic method of farming.

A huge farm

When he returned to his village, he was welcomed by a 65-acre farm: 22 acres of mango orchard, 20 acres of eucalyptus, and the rest was used to grow rice for their consumption and fodder for the cows. Though farming was not a novel thing to him, it felt too big to start with. Radha Krishna started with detoxing the soil from chemicals used all these years, by using natural supplements and bio-inputs. For the first three years, he grew various herbal plants in the field and left them in the soil to strengthen the soil. In 2017, he began his own farm by cultivating rice using Vruksha Ayurveda method. Native cows play a major role in this way of farming. His family had owned a Goshala for generations, and he added other native varieties of red, black and white cows. Dung, urine, curd and milk from these cows are mixed with herbs to make bio inputs.

He brought native, rare varieties of rice seeds from authentic sources. This rice is rich in antioxidants, zinc, iron and low in glycemic index. He developed more seeds and grew them on his farm and named this rice Swetha Sanjivani. He has had close to a hundred customers using this rice for the last four years and there is a huge positive shift in their health. Now they have converted the entire farm

to Vruksha Ayurveda method, where black gram has replaced the eucalyptus. They are also growing fruits like Sapota and Guava. Lakadong Turmeric, a unique turmeric variety grown in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya is also grown here. It is well-known for



Farm worker showing freshly harvested Lakadong turmeric. (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)



Ravi spraying panchagavya on a sesame farm. (Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

its medicinal properties. They are looking forward to growing all the basic food that a family needs (oils, grains, spices, milk and vegetables) on their farm and sell at affordable prices.

Radha Krishna envisions a nation with healthy communities not depending on pharmacies and hospitals. He wishes to recreate the healthy pattern of growing and consuming food in the world. As the first step to his vision, he wants all farmers to produce food using natural methods and make their families healthier and expand the same to the larger world.

“My journey as a farmer differs totally from my earlier life. I have bought rare and costliest types

of seeds and developed them here and sold them to local farmers for affordable prices. The idea is to make all the healthy seeds available across the places. My experiments have positive results on the people who are consuming food grown on our farm. That itself is an immense satisfaction in my life. Now I am happier and more satisfied.”

- Radha Krishna

Radha Krishna can be reached at:

✉ reddyark2727@gmail.com



Bio inputs storage place.(Photo: Anil Uppalapati)

In the journey called life, one single turn has the capacity to make all the difference. You will end up on some other road which you never consciously thought of. And the beauty is you do not regret being there, rather you enjoy and strive to inspire the world around you. A man who used to be a contractor, all of sudden chose to leave his business and started farming. Although Radha Krishna had limited knowledge in farming, he learnt the basics and started experimenting and converted his 60 acres of land to chemical-free farming. He did not stop there, he also started encouraging the people in terms of offering food he grows, inviting them to visit his farm and experience the transition taking place and helping them to grow their own healthy food. Radha is a modern-day saint in his outlook, who is on a mission to provide healthy food to the world. It shows how a willful individual can initially acquire the power of knowledge and then increase and expand on that power. That's a lesson for me to carry forward.



There is no one path. There is not even the right path. There is only your path.

Epilogue



Life is part thorny as well. All that matters is how well you deal with it!

The Road I chose to Travel

The 52 Parindey Fellowship journey took me to varied places and allowed me the opportunity to experience many worlds that co-exist and thrive at the same time. A 'learning exchange' was taking place all the time as the boundaries of age, culture and socio-economic backgrounds vanished in the process of our mutual friendships. While life itself is an endless learning journey, when both learning and conscious living merge together, it creates a beautiful synergy, which is what the journey so far has convinced me of. I was fascinated with the idea of each one taking complete charge of their own learning and living.

My brief stint on the farms and with different communities offered me the opportunity to experience how learning emerges in a simple manner and life blossoms when we are attuned to something most meaningful and authentic to us. I envision for myself a farm life that could beautifully turn into a community learning space, combining many of the sustainable and holistic living ideals. Maybe it is a long and perhaps difficult transition back to the roots and the soil. However, I am willing to walk this path. I know this road is made for the journey, not for the destination.

Another important transformation has been underway for me. It is my growing sense of respect for a simple, self-reliant lifestyle and dignity of labour. In a way, it is liberating myself from thoughts of having a luxurious life; my idea of luxury has changed.

Rewards

This journey also rewarded me with the following understandings:-

- **Understanding the self is most important to understand the rest.**

Sometimes I feel, in search of understanding the world around me, I have completely neglected my own self. What makes? What drives me? What does my body want and is capable of? I had been asked all these questions by different people, but for the first time, I asked these to myself. That is when things around me started making complete sense. I started listening to people to understand what they are saying, why they are saying what they are saying, instead of reacting. This boosted my confidence and offered me a natural strength to maintain healthy relationships with people and the rest of nature.

- **Slow is the fastest way to get to where you want to be.**

Many times, in a rush to complete the tasks I had to spend more time than I wanted it to take. Later I realised that everything has its own pace and process. It might be travelling, writing, documenting, or cooking. Anyone capable of acknowledging this truth would understand the importance of patience and will yield healthy results in their journey.

My calling is to contribute to the way forward to the building of a new paradigm that personally incorporates the connection between the body, mind, and heart. Throughout the journey, I have been blessed with so much inspiration and an abundance of love along the way that I feel compelled to pass it forward.

Moving a step closer to what I dream, in April 2022, I started working with Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN) as a project coordinator. WASSAN works towards bringing prosperity with ecological security to rainfed areas with a focus on poorer communities.

ఏదీ తనంత తానే నీ దరికి రాదు...శోధించి సాధించాలి...అదే ధీరగుణం. - శ్రీ శ్రీ

Nothing will come to you on its own... You have to explore and achieve... That's courage.

There are wild beasts everywhere in the silent darkness.
I am walking with determination, courage and inspiration
that all walks have gifted me in these years.
As they say, for some humans nothing is written
unless they write it.
Here I started writing my own...

Activity for the reader

Call to take a mental note about the last meal that you consumed.

How many different ingredients went into it?

How did they get to your plate?

Where and how were they grown?

Food systems refer to how we organise the production, distribution and consumption of food, and they are hugely important parts of our societies. While some food systems have a negative influence on the environment, others have a smaller impact.

No.of Participants: 10-15

Duration: 60+ minutes

Objective: To build an understanding of the concept of Food Systems.

Materials Required: Charts papers, Sketch pens

Process:

1. Divide the group of participants into equal teams. Separate each team into different areas of the room, and have group members sit together. Provide one chart paper for each team.
2. Once the teams are ready, ask them to think of the ingredients used for breakfast or lunch that day. Ask them to divide ingredients in terms of grains, oils, vegetables, fruits, spices, etc. (15 Minutes)
3. Ask every team to present the list of ingredients they could list out. (15 minutes)
4. Then ask the teams to think of different activities and processes that might have been involved in getting the food on their plate? (15 minutes)
5. Once the teams present the activities and processes they could think of, group them as 'Production', 'Distribution' and 'Consumption' and any other categories as may come up. (15 minutes)
6. Discuss how well we organise these components in the Food Systems.
7. Have a few rounds of sharing reflections from the activity.

Photo Gallery

Ocean is my home. I don't belong anywhere else than I belong here

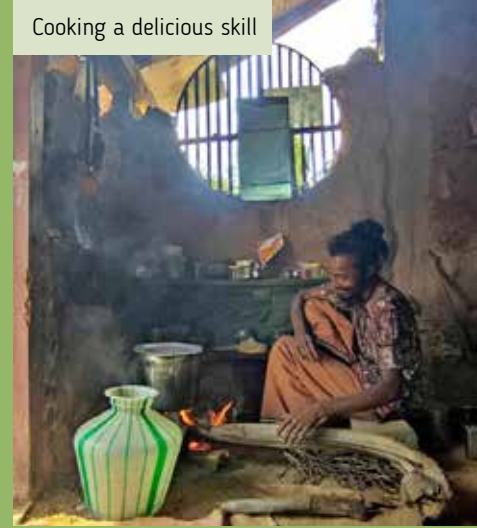


You learn better through teaching

The night sky is my comrade with whom I share a whirlpool of emotions before I end my beautiful day

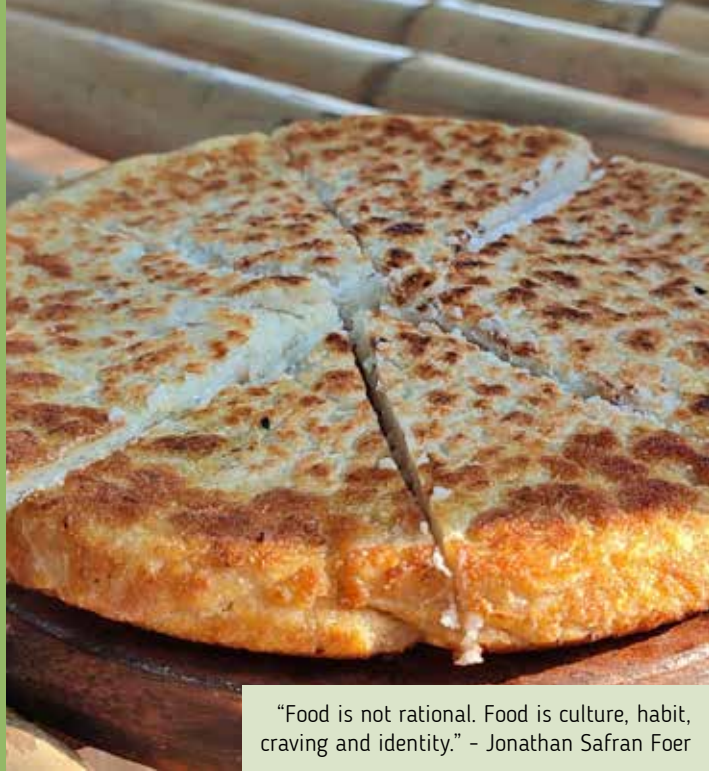


Cooking a delicious skill



సూర్యోదయాలు, సూర్యాస్తమయాల నడుమున ఒక అరుణోదయం తారసపడింది!!!





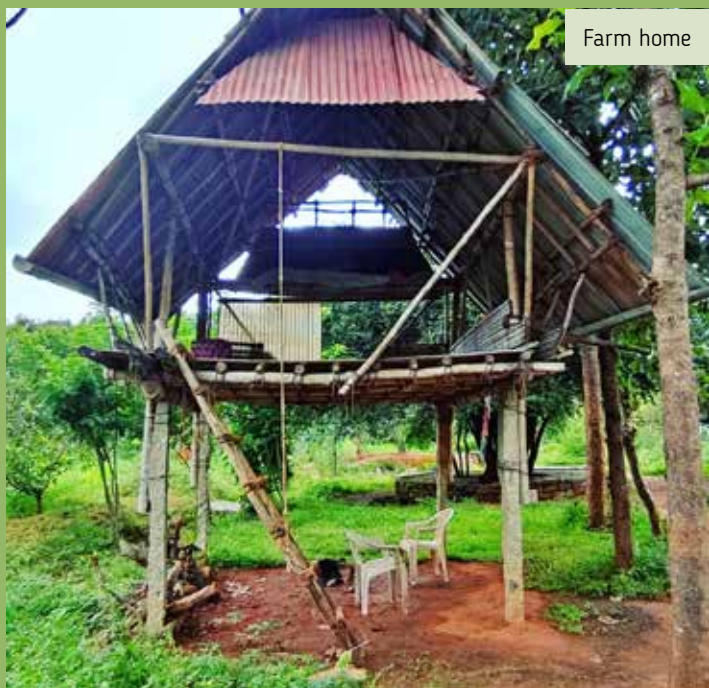
"Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity." - Jonathan Safran Foer



How can I stand on the ground every day and not feel its power_



Pondy is love!



Farm home



How inappropriate to call this planet Earth when it is clearly Ocean." - Arthur C. Clarke

Gayatri Pardeshi

Nashik, Maharashtra

Inclusive Learning & Facilitation Practices for Children

Gayatri Pardeshi was born and brought up in Nashik. She facilitates Community Games, Kids Theatre, Dance Movement and Garba. Her interest lies in exploring Dance Movement, Kabir Philosophy and Mental Health awareness.

As a 52 Parindey Fellow, she explored the different possibilities to facilitate learning. Through her travels, Gayatri has come to understand that co-creation in education creates a magically powerful tool for learning. She also thinks that art as a medium helps make the process so much easier. On a more personal note, her passion for travelling solo has played a role in her own learning and encouraging travelling as a pedagogy for enriching the experience.



The 52 Parindey Fellowship supported me to see the importance of ARTS in facilitation, education, learning process and daily life routine. This helped me to reflect on myself as well as to redefine the meaning of receiving, giving, family, travel challenges, safe spaces and Alivelihoods. After 4 months of exploring and meeting with Alivelihood practitioners, I can now say the meaning of Alivelihoods is what makes you alive and it is within each and everyone of us.

Prologue

I realised at a very young age that I was different. School and the formal education system never appealed to me. I was always on the lookout for my passion when I started dancing. I tried different dance forms from Bollywood to Garba since the traditional dance forms again did not seem to attract me much. I was looking for inner emotional connection in art and I came across Contact Improvisation (CI). I learnt about CI at the Learning Societies unConference (LSuC) hosted by Shikshantar Sansthan at Bhoomi College, Bangalore, in 2017. The philosophy of Shikshantar touched me as it talked about alternative education. Learning about CI was a life changing experience for me because the dance form was intense and enabled me to express deep emotions and connect with not just individuals but also with the rest of nature, and most importantly, my own self. I started exploring dance with a brand new perspective I gained there.

LSuC was the place where I also learnt about non-competitive community games. The spirit of community games was attractive to me. The games which bring people together for sheer joy and not placing them against each other for winning. I volunteered with people to learn community games. I continued to devote time voluntarily until I became the facilitator myself. I started facilitating community games with different groups but I loved being with children the most. This is where I came across theatre for children and I applied my understanding of CI and community games to improvise theatre activities. I went on to conduct several workshops with different schools, theatre groups and children's homes.

Along with this, travelling turned out to be an essential part of my life. Even community games and my dance allowed me to travel a lot. Mountaineering and trekking are like medicines for me that I must take regularly. While exploring these activities, I came in contact with people from varied backgrounds of music, dance and performing arts. I realised a common thread of peace and connecting with inner self in all the activities I was involved in. I have also participated in Rajasthan Kabir yatra where I got to be with people like Shabnam Virmani, Vedant Bharadwaj, Himanshu Bajpai, and the Kabir Cafe band. All these people and Kabir advocated peace and equality which fascinated me. I also worked in digital Mental health festival organised by The MoveVent Project. I understood my passion was not related to mainstream performance arts. I kept on trying new things like working as an RJ, working with NGOs on research related projects, learning ukulele, theatre lights, etc. But dance was something which always stayed with me and I applied it in everything I did. I realised that dance can help to work on ourselves. It can work as therapy and help us understand ourselves better. I was finding connections of dance with human psychology because that is how dance made me understand myself better.

And I decided to choose dance as a medium to heal people and I got to know about "Dance Movement Therapy". It resonated with me and I felt like I have finally found what I want to go with!

My professional journey can't be separated from my personal life. I was 17 years old when I left school. I have been travelling since then and trying challenging and different things in my life. I met inspiring people, made amazing connections and understood the meaning of honest relationships. I have friends from a variety of backgrounds... musicians, dancers, travellers, social workers and many people who have adopted alternative lifestyles.

Opting to do such things made me look like a rebel. I wasn't a great person to my relatives and the society that I live in, but now people look up to me, and appreciate the kind of life I am living and the maturity that I have gained from my choices. Standing up for myself and what is right has become my thing.

Before the 52 Parindey Fellowship, I was exploring different art forms in an unstructured way. I applied for the 52 Parindey Fellowship with the intention to travel, connect with people, understand different individuals' perspectives and be open to exploring new cities. I chose this fellowship to be more confident about my travel learnings, be more aware of my environment and experiences, and implement the new learnings into daily practice. I planned to explore the role of art in the process of learning and education and how it impacts a student's life. I wanted to explore this because the schooling pattern had not worked for me. I feel using art as a tool can create a beautiful impact on everyone, especially school students.

Map of Gayatri's Journey



| | | | |
|---|---------------------------|--|---------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Reshma Arya & Anurag Hoon | Music for Social Change | Delhi |
| C | Vijil Gopalan | Arts for Social Change | Rabale, Maharashtra |
| D | Nima Parekh | Theatre for Learning | Gandhinagar, Gujrat |
| E | Meenakshi Arya | Dance for Social Change | Delhi |
| F | Smriti Raj | Mentor, Facilitator, & Theatre of Relevance Practitioner | Delhi |
| G | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

Mystic Bus on the Road of Revolution

Parindey: Reshma Arya & Anurag Hoon

Alivelihood: Music for Social Change

Region: Delhi, India



We want to create more accessibility and usability of music and create more happy spaces!

- Reshma and Anurag



Manzil Mystics Band (Courtesy Manzil Mystics)

Reshma Arya and Anurag Hoon are among the six co-founders of Manzil Mystics Foundation, a Delhi-based not-for-profit organisation that has been working with the low income family sections of society since 2017 using music as their instrument for social change. They work with low-income background schools and communities to create change in the fields of education, music and social development. They conduct interactive and experiential music workshops to explore topics such

as gender education, menstrual hygiene, reproductive health, spoken English, and life skills through music. They also partner with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporates to produce socially conscientious music for them.

There are around 42 lakh students studying in Delhi and most of them do not have access to music. Despite music being a part of the curriculum in Delhi's government schools, only 20% of schools

have music teachers. Manzil Mystics Foundation took this issue up as their team members had studied in government schools and could connect with the cause. “There was no music in my school as well as in my home. Learning music outside was expensive. I was passionate about learning it but it was not accessible. I started feeling a certain uneasiness and wondered why this was happening,” says Anurag.

Anurag’s childhood was cluttered yet beautiful. His calling and passion for music took root from the age of 14 when he started writing and exploring music. This inspired Anurag to learn music, despite the many resistances from his family. In May 2010, Anurag joined an NGO called Manzil (an after-school alternative learning space run by an IIM graduate, Ravi Gulati) to learn music, where he met Reshma and Sant Prakash. After seven months of learning music together, they registered a foundation under the name ‘Manzil Mystics.’ Around the same time, he had his first performance as a member of their band. Through his efforts, he secured a full scholarship for one year and with this support, he gathered the courage to set out on a self-exploratory journey to America for a year to study Marketing and Sales.

Reshma, on the other hand, comes from a very similar low-income family background. Reshma’s turning point in life too was joining Manzil. She used to learn music there while studying Nursing (mother and health) at the age of 17. In 2013, she left for Gadsden State Community College in Alabama, USA, to pursue her Majors in Nursing and Phlebotomy and

that experience helped Reshma grow as a person. Upon returning to India, Anurag pursued Masters in Social Work. After Reshma’s return, she along with Anurag started Manzil Mystics Band and later registered Manzil Mystics Foundation as an NGO in 2017.



Reshma conducting a session on menstrual hygiene (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



Anurag working at Manzil Mystics (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

Manzil Mystics Band is a Delhi-based choir, which performs self-written and composed music inspired by saint Kabir, in Indian classical and folk fusion form. Manzil Mystics Band has been in the music sector since 2011 and they have performed in over 50 schools, 20 colleges, and 200 organisations, with over 1000 stage performances. They have performed at music festivals, college festivals, corporate shows, community events and theme-based events for organisations throughout India.

Now the CEO of Manzil Mystics, Anurag, raps, sings and contributes to creating social impact through music. Reshma, a core band member of the Manzil Mystic Foundation, is working as a program director. Her years of experience in nursing helped and inspired her to create the WeBhor project. 'We' means together and 'Bhor' means morning, compounding to 'We Rise Together'. WeBhor works for women's empowerment through music. They conduct workshops in nonprofit centres and schools for adolescent girls and young women. They use music as a creative tool to engage the participants and convey powerful messages on gender sensitisation, reproductive health, menstrual hygiene, career orientation, and equality at the workplace and home.

Reshma and Anurag's motivation is the same when it comes to their life and work: To bring more music

to the world and to increase the usability and accessibility of music. To create safe spaces to learn music. They meet a lot of people on their journey and people's stories motivate them. They feel everyone has a responsibility towards the advancement of society and people should contribute in any way that they can.

The biggest challenge they experience is finding funding and co-creating sessions with government schools as it is a long process to get entry into these schools. Another major roadblock is to influence society's prejudices in a way that they become more open towards viewing music as a viable career option. Some of these challenges are being worked upon with the support of mentors, family, friends and teamwork. "Challenges are a part of life and now we are not scared of these challenges. Because of the support that we get and the cause which we are working on, these challenges don't feel like challenges," says Reshma.

One of the most significant impacts they've had is that the children are getting a comfortable space to learn and increase their understanding around and beyond music. They are currently reaching more than 5,000 children directly and have reached out to 3 lakh children indirectly. They are getting more shows as a band and getting more acceptance in different sectors like education, development and



Mental health through music! (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

music. SBI Cards became the first CSR (corporate social responsibility) donor for Manzil Mystics. Manzil Mystics launched India's first Mobile Music Classroom and Recording Studio to assist government schools and low-income community children in Delhi to pursue their passion for music.

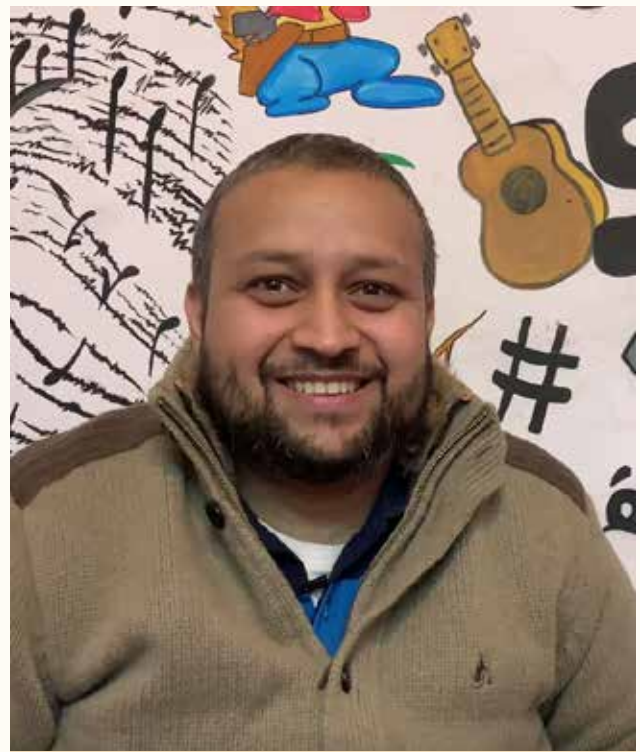
Reshma and Anurag want to break the notion of music just being a hobby because it is much more than that. They want to see more children get access to music and be able to further pursue it as a career; be it songwriting, singing, song composition, vocals or playback singing. They want to create more happy and safe spaces for people!

Manzil Mystics can be reached at:

✉ reshmamystics@gmail.com,
anurag@manzilmystics.org

📷 <https://instagram.com/manzilmysticsfoundation>

🌐 www.manzilmystics.org



Anurag Hoon (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



Music session at school

I come from a Maharashtrian background and I always had a stereotypical opinion about Delhi and its locals. My opinion changed after meeting some beautiful people. I got a chance to stay with some talented people. We cooked together, had lovely late night talks, walks, and shared ideas. I also had a new experience of travelling by metro rail.

Visiting Manzil Mystics made me realise the importance of doing what you love and the power of arts in education. Meeting Manzil Mystics family was a great experience. Everyone was highly welcoming, resourceful, and helpful. It was stunning to see all the founders working collectively as a team towards achieving their goals. The founders also managed to balance both Manzil Mystics Band (for-profit) and Manzil Mystics NGO (not-for-profit). Manzil Mystics had just launched India's first mobile music classroom and recording studio (mental health through music). Due to the pandemic, the scope for children to learn music and record in studios has become limited but the music bus provided easy access by reaching the schools and localities to learn and record music.

After meeting Anurag and Reshma di, I realised openness and acceptance are very important parts of life. To be open towards changes, opportunities, people and ideas is important. The best thing about Reshma di and Anurag is that they do what they love, what makes them feel alive.

I had an unforgettable experience at my parindey's house. I got close to Anurag's wife Sakshi di and their son Nirgun. They showered me with love and affection. When I was leaving, Nirgun became emotional and started to cry. While travelling I place my trust in the universe and the universe always returns it by providing me with such lifelong connections!



Outing in Delhi with Reshma di

Dancing into Consciousness

Parindey: Vijil Gopalan

Alivelihood: Arts for Social Change

Region: Rabale, Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra



Childhood is the most crucial period that shapes an individual's personality. I believe it is the basis for all behavioural patterns that a person continues to follow for the rest of their life. I want to support children in enhancing their skills so they are better equipped in processing their thoughts and understanding mental health which will further develop their personality positively. Understanding their psychology and mental health is important and that is what I do through my interventions.

- Vijil Gopalan



Vijil Gopalan (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

Sacredworx Foundation is a growing social sector organisation in Maharashtra working for underprivileged kids to make a better society. Their work is based in Rabale, a slum settlement of Navi Mumbai. Founded by two youngsters Vijil and Saikiran in 2019, the objective of the organisation is to work on the thought processes of children and develop their worldview, with a focus on their personality development, communication skills and hygiene. The foundation has been working with 50

to 60 children in the age group of 5 to 15 years, and holds classes every Sunday as per the need of the group. These classes include English speaking, basic discipline, hygiene, reading, drawing, diya (oil lamp) painting, paper craft and introducing new art forms. All the classes are facilitated by the founders and volunteers.

Vijil completed his graduation from SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce in Sion, Mumbai,

in 2014. But his journey as an artist began much earlier in the year 2009 with Hip-Hop. His first crew was called Break Down Elementaz. He later joined SlumGods crew, where he also managed the crew along with being a performer. The SlumGods crew was the pioneer in the old Hip-Hop scene in India. They participated in various cyphers (competitions) and taught B-boying, Beatboxing, Rapping and Graffiti to the kids in Dharavi.

Along with SlumGods, he was also a part of a body shadow act called Silhouette Squad. With this ever-alive passion, he performed in various reality shows including India's Got Talent. The most interesting part of this form of art according to Vijil is that it is creative and requires the performer to be more conscious.

"Performing in front of an audience is one thing, but performing behind the curtain as a shadow and yet keeping the audience engaged is a completely different ball game," says Vijil. Currently, he plays Didgeridoo with The Rais Khan Project (Rajasthani folk band) and manages other artists and groups like Afilia (Music Band), The Moment (Music Band), Jango (Hip-Hop artist), Jmanshouts (RJ, Emcee, Rapper).

Vijil's journey of inner and outer transformation began when he realised the privilege he holds and the stark difference between various sections of people. He lived in Vashi and travelled 30 km every day to his workplace in Thane. On his way to Thane, he observed a very peculiar divide. On one side of the railway tracks was a hustling developed urban space, busy in its corporate world; on the other, Rabale, a slum settlement which was home to many street vendors who struggled to make daily ends meet. This class difference prompted Vijil to do something for the underprivileged communities.

His attention was drawn towards the children of these slums, and the realities of their life which is marked by lack of good education and health. This subjugation on varied socio-economic levels unsettled Vijil. He wanted to do something for them. Being an artist himself, he knew he could use art as a medium to engage with them. He decided to bring these children together to build consciousness around various topics through artistic means like dancing, music, Hip-Hop and so on. This captivated the attention of the children and slowly a community was being formed.

While he was using art to teach the kids, Vijil also disrupted the class and caste hierarchies inherent in various forms of art. As art is plagued by these prejudiced notions of class hierarchies, many artforms still remain restricted to the elite classes and upper caste sections. Vijil was determined to break this hierarchy and make various artforms accessible to these children. These motivations led him to eventually begin his own collective. Thus began the journey of Sacredworx Foundation.

Working with children required openness from



From one of the sessions of SacredWorx Foundation (Photo: Gayatri)



Vijil near the graffiti of SlumGods crew. (Photo: Gayatri)

their parents and caretakers. The biggest challenge was to create a safe space for people as they were sceptical of outsiders providing any form of support. We carry the weight of caste and class divide in multiple layers within us. It takes several years to unlearn these beliefs and become flexible. "I will always remember my first visit, when Saikiran and I went to Rabale. We got a chance to communicate with the local community. The first few questions asked were: What is your caste? Why are you here? Who do you work for? All these questions reflected the domination of the caste and class system," says Vijil. The journey of crossing these huge barriers and creating a safe space was one of the challenges they faced. They experienced a reduction in the number of volunteers following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the number sessions and workshops they had planned to host. These sessions and workshops include the ones designed to support the children to make conscious and aware choices, on topics such as Gender, Sexuality, Career Guidance, etc. Another challenge faced by Vijil is the lack of financial independence in relation to the time he invests in the work.

After years of struggles, Vijil has received the support of the elders and parents in the community for his endeavours and he has been provided with a space where he can carry out these activities with their children. This was possible because the parents were able to see the difference that he had made to the lives of their children. Earlier, the children played in dirt, were unhygienic, communicated poorly, didn't have interest in studying and had no exposure to arts. Children are now more consistent with the awareness of arts and maintaining basic hygiene. Currently, Vijil is trying to gain more funding for the cause which he is working on and trying to reach out to more kids in the slums to strengthen his quest of making various art forms reach a larger population of underprivileged kids. Sacredworx Foundation is also funding the education of two girls from the community as their parents were facing financial crisis and the girls



Vijil during a session with the children at Rabale (Photo: Gayatri)

were on the verge of quitting their education. After three years of hard work by Sacredworx Foundation, the community has become conscious of their inner talents and capabilities.

Through his life and work, Vijil envisions a world where discrimination does not limit one's humanness, where people can live with dignity and express themselves. Since Vijil's own freedom to express himself was what gave birth to a cause he is dedicated towards, he believes that everybody has an artist in them and this becomes the medium through which the children learn to express themselves.

Vijil can be reached at:

 vijilgopalan777@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/sacredworxfoundation>



Vijil and the children at Rabale (Photo: Gayatri)



One of the children with her drawing (Photo: Vijil Gopalan)

In the fellowship journey, I realised I found different new perspectives and connections with the cities. I discovered a new Mumbai this time, while documenting. I was staying with Nikita who is a volunteer at Sacredworx foundation. I connected not only with Nikita but with her parents as well. They welcomed me into their life with open arms and treated me like a daughter which never made me feel homesick.

I received the same respect while working with Vijil. I always had a soft corner for Hip-Hop in my heart and wanted to explore the old Hip-Hop scene. Vijil came from a Hip Hop background and he was a part of pioneer Hip Hop crew called SlumGod from Dharavi. One day he took me on a Dharavi tour. I got a chance to meet all the old Hip-Hop pioneers. We talked for hours and the crew shared their Hip-Hop stories. While talking to all these amazing people about their journey, lyrics from the song "It's bigger than Hip-Hop" written by Dead Prez (rapper) kept repeating in my mind. I also had the opportunity to explore the local businesses and neighbourhoods of Dharavi.

I related to Scaredwarx on an emotional level as the idea behind the foundation mirrors what I want to do in the future. I was able to relate to Vijil's journey because he took different paths to discover his passion instead of running the rat race. Vijil understands the choices made by individuals and respects them. He isn't judgmental and is very accepting of people the way they are.

The Community was welcoming and supportive. The parents also participated in the interactions along with their children and they were happy about the positive development in their children. Working with Vijil changed my perspective about arts and Mumbai. I was showered with love by everyone around me.



Nikita and Vijil during a session in Rabale

Life is your Stage

Parindey: Nima Parekh

Avelihood: Theatre for Learning

Region: Gandhinagar, Gujarat



I have a different kind of definition for ART; art means Act, Reflect and Transform!

- Nima Parekh



Nima at the school assembly (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

Nima is a school principal at Lavad Primary School in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. It is a government school that follows Mahatma Gandhi's ideology known as Nai Taleem. There is no cleaning staff, clerk, janitor or watchman in the school. All the work required to run the school is the responsibility of the students, teachers and villagers. This practice generates a healthy relationship between the students and the staff members.

Nima's journey inspires her to create a space for the arts in government schools. She uses theatre as a tool to keep the school environment open for new

thoughts, opportunities and space for introspection. It is her response to the old patterns of our traditional education system and she is dedicated to creating a safe environment for the students to study. Her practice reflects her belief in the role of art in the education and mental health of school students.

Nima facilitates sessions for students as per their needs. For every 8th standard batch, Nima facilitates a session called 'Bridging the Gap' to prepare students for their upcoming life challenges. In the session, she explores: "How to respect the opposite gender? How to deal with bullying? What is the importance

of the female body? What is sex education? What is menstrual hygiene? How to make sanitary pads? What is the importance of the male body? How are they different? How are they similar? How can they take responsibility for each other? And how to deal with attraction towards the opposite gender?" Nima works on these questions with the students to create a safe space to explore themselves. She believes that everyone is a learner and should always seek to learn more. She is constantly creating opportunities to innovate for students and teachers as well. For teachers, she invites different facilitators from various backgrounds to experiment with new tools for teaching.

In early 2004, Nima wanted to pursue computer science for her study, but her parents wished her to get a government job. She later got into a job at Lavad Primary School as a teacher. It was challenging for her to do the job because of various reasons. The first one was a language barrier as the students spoke a dialect peculiar to that village. Other reasons included commuting to the school and the government system of schooling. Despite these, she didn't give up as she believed in making decisions that were based on overall experiences. After working for a year at the school, her perspective on teaching changed completely. She created an amazing bond with the students and the students also welcomed her wholeheartedly. The love given by the students changed her mind and she decided to continue her job at the school.

Yet, despite the love Nima received, she did not enjoy her work as a teacher because there was no correlation between the students' life and their curriculum. During that period, the government of Gujarat decided to involve teachers in preparing the school curriculum. This helped her understand the

education system and its process in depth. Even after making several changes in the curriculum, there was no visible effect on the students and Nima felt that there was still something lacking in the curriculum.

In 2008, her journey took a positive turn when she attended a workshop conducted by Swarup Rawal called 'Life Skills through Drama' and it changed her entire perspective towards arts in students' education. "Working for students' mental health is not a part of teaching but it is a part of practising it," says Nima. Later, she came back to school and practised using theatre as a tool in the learning process and that's when she realised that she had found the missing piece of the puzzle. Theatre brings people together to help each other, participate in mutual development and foster teamwork. It gives the opportunity for them to witness the intermingling of children from different classes, religions, and genders and move beyond those divisions to let newer insights come through. For children, especially, this method improves their ability to grasp concepts owing to real-life examples and situations and hence, promotes a creative mindset. This gave Nima confidence in her own role as a teacher.



During a theatre session at school (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



Nima facilitating a theatre session (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

There was no turning back for her with this brand-new vision for teaching. She didn't want to teach using the old style of teaching. She modified the method of teaching where a teacher teaches How to learn, How to reflect, How to plan and How to think. From that day, she became a learner and started to enjoy being a teacher.

In 2014, Nima decided to take a small break from her job for self-enquiry as a learner and joined Swaraj University (<https://www.swarajuniversity.org>) in Udaipur. There she got exposed to homeschooling, unschooling and various alternative ways of education.

She decided to come back to her old job at Lavad Primary School and teach those students within the system. "I decided to return because the students in rural areas do not have access to alternate ways of learning and also, they do not have the option. The parents do not have time to give to their children, nor do they have much money to afford homeschooling," says Nima.

The school environment, students' love, their development, and bonding with the staff motivate her to work further.

Nima faces challenges like working in the government school system, managing a large staff, creating a safe space for teachers to explore new opportunities in alternative learning processes and striking a work-life balance. Now, these challenges are becoming easy to overcome with the help of mentors, friends and dedication to the cause.

Nima started her journey with uncertain intentions but now she is responsible for the positive impact

on many students' lives and education. Nima never gave up as a learner. She also started playing Frisbee at the age of 30 and now she is a national frisbee player. Her exploration of frisbee opened doors for school students to learn a sport. Owing to her labour of love, the school students now enjoy the freedom to create in a safe environment, experience healthy teacher-student relationships and practise skill-based learning.

"Every child has the freedom to feel that the world is their own and they have to take care of it by taking its ownership. If this is added to their education we can easily connect to our roots and make the world a better place for the next generations. This will be a possibility of educating every child and using co-creation to work. This is my dream future that I envision for the world!" says Nima.

Nima can be reached at:

parekhnama@gmail.com, lavadschool@gmail.com



Nima interacting with the students during lunch time
(Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



Gayatri with the Lavad School staff

After visiting Nima I realised my love towards theatre and school students. I was able to connect with most of the students. Visiting Lavad primary school and Nima, I was able to see myself and respect myself. Nima helped me to accept myself as well as my choices. Lavad primary school added their place in my journey. Meeting school teachers and interacting with them helped me to be more aware of students' needs. I was able to see how the government school system works, which helped me understand and apply new perspectives towards my facilitation.

I feel grateful towards Lavad Primary school for opening up perspectives on how to work in the mainstream school structure but also how to add different perspectives for learning opportunities.



Interviewing Neema

Dance your way to Growth

Parindey: Meenakshi Arya

Alivelihood: Dance for Social Change

Region: Delhi, India



I want to see every child dance and make a healthy and comfortable connection with their bodies.

- Meenakshi



Meenakshi Arya

A passionate dancer, Meenakshi dons multiple hats at the Samarpan Foundation where she has been working since 2015. Samarpan Foundation is a not-for-profit charitable organisation that was started in 2006 in New Delhi. They provide global support and assistance for humanitarian, ecological, environment and animal welfare issues. Their community of volunteers are guided by the principle of doing what needs to be done to achieve the greater good of the society. Samarpan foundation's vision is to shed light even in the darkest corners and their mission is to change universal consciousness by opening minds and hearts.

The children at the Samarpan schools don't have access to dance and other art forms because they live in remote areas. Beginning her journey as a volunteer with Samarpan Foundation in 2014, Meenakshi is now an academic support coordinator, event organiser and kids' dance facilitator, with a vision to bring dance into every child's life.

Meenakshi feels that dancing is not bound by age. Therefore, she conducts dance classes for all age groups. She uses dance as a tool that can help people connect with their bodies and feel comfortable in their own skin. This was her challenge when it came

to her body and emotions, which she overcame through dance. She also suggests to her students that they employ dancing after studying as a method to retain what they have learnt. This ensures that the kids have a healthier mind-body relationship and are able to perform well academically.

Meenakshi grew up in a joint family that gave her the skills needed to make and maintain connections with people. She studied in a government school where she always looked forward to theatre and dance activities. After finishing school, she joined a correspondence college and started working in order to support her family. Her busy work schedule left her with no time to pursue dance and theatre. Despite all the difficulties, she never lost the hope of becoming a dancer and at the age of 25, she gave dancing another shot. First, she tried western style of dancing but was not able to feel a connection with it. She then moved to classical dancing, and there she found herself again. During that period, she got an opportunity to work with kids with special needs for two years. That experience helped Meenakshi reflect on the role of patience in her life.

She also conducts dance classes separately to sustain and create more space for dance in this world. Her own journey motivates her to do well and provides the opportunity to other children that she herself never had. She is determined to create a space for everyone to learn and grow.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the children was transport. It was inconvenient for them to travel to the school in the city on a daily basis. The parents were concerned about the safety and well-being of their children. Samarpan Foundation aided in overcoming this challenge by opening multiple schools in the local community. This made it easier for the students to continue studying. Another challenge faced by the foundation was that the children did not receive admission in mainstream government schools because they couldn't present a valid address proof. Meenakshi, on the other hand, faced her own set of problems raising funds. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, she could not conduct her dance classes which impacted her income. With her entrepreneurial spirit, she tackled this issue by taking these classes online. Over the years, Meenakshi



Samarpan students in an impromptu dance session
(Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



Samarpan classroom (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

has transformed from a self-sacrificing person to someone who is committed to her journey of self-love and self-care. She is not only creating space within herself but also for others to grow and dance.

Meenakshi's work has created a positive impact on the lives of many children. Now, more than 80% of students have received admission in government schools. Samarpan Foundation Schools have contributed to the overall growth of the children's development by providing them with basic necessities like breakfast, lunch, stationery items, seasonal requirements like sweaters, caps, shoes, blankets and basic hygiene products.

Meenakshi's vision and dream for the future is to

open a dance studio where everyone will be welcomed with open arms. It will be a safe space to form a comfortable connection with dance as well as themselves.

Meenakshi can be reached at:

 meenakshi@samarpanfoundation.org

 <https://www.instagram.com/samarpanfoundation18>

 <https://www.samarpanfoundation.org>



Happy smiles after a dance session (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)



A photo with Samarpan school teachers and Meenakshi



Christmas celebration on 25th December 2021 at Samarpan school (Courtesy Samarpan team)

My love for dance was ever continuing, and meeting Meenakshi helped me to connect with dance even more. Meenakshi encouraged me to see Delhi in a different perspective. Visiting Meenakshi and Samarpan Foundation I was able to see my strengths as well as my love for facilitation. I visited five schools run by Samarpan Foundation, and each school offered me multiple perspectives towards my facilitation, connection with different communities and a bird's eye view of Delhi. In that journey, I was able to be more aware of all the privileges I have. Visiting Meenakshi inspired me to see dance as a powerful tool in the learning and education journey.



With Meenakshi and the Samarpan team

Journey from an Explorer to a Visionary Creator

Parindey: Smriti Raj

Alivehood: Mentor, Facilitator, & Theatre of Relevance Practitioner

Region: Delhi, India

“ Living life by dividing it into professional, personal, and private categories is an illusion that deceives oneself. Living “One Life” that embodies my liberated dreams is being honest to my own existence. And life throbs in constructive, artistic, and creative dimensions each moment. Life is the eternal truth, the core or “Mool” (as we call it in Hindi), that we translate through every action inspired with our intuitive conscience.

- Smriti Raj



Smriti painting her prayer. (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

Smriti has been thriving as a Theatre of Relevance (TOR) initiator and practitioner since 2004, with the intent to consistently initiate process-oriented interactions, where the participants act as a resource. She is currently writing, conceptualising and initiating theatre-based modules for individuals and institutions while addressing the need to be humane and connect with life.

She has been creating animation content and short films and has been performing in various socially

revolutionising plays like ‘Hum Sab Kamla Hain’ (Wandering Mentally ill) at the National Film Archive, Pune in 2003, ‘Laadli’ (Population First campaign against sex-selective abortion) at National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai in 2005. She also co-created ‘Soulify’ in the year 2017 with the vision of creating a platform to support self-discovery for all ages.

Soulify means Jeevan or Life. The co-creators of Soulify consider themselves philosophers-storytellers-

travellers set on a mission to share the creative process to explore, discover, transform, motivate and guide oneself through the layers of conditioning and chaos to experience the creator within. They believe many of us over the years have learnt to ignore, and be indifferent to our soulful expressions due to our conditioning to be in survival mode in a society divided on the basis of class, caste, gender, abilities, etc. A shift from such a conditioning is possible when one sees abundance in oneself, in one's consciousness, and in our collective strength to function intuitively with conscience. Soulify envisions to advocate the art of storytelling as the key element to raise cultural consciousness and revolutionise education. Their programmes are designed to inspire the process of envisioning, to encourage artistic skill with purpose and to constantly create a platform for creative, constructive and artistic expression.

They are nurturing humane and creative beings who shall contribute towards a compassionate and collaborative society driven by dreams, joy, aspirations and inspirations. The process facilitates one to lead oneself from individual to collective and from collective to self.

In the past 4 years, they have travelled across 17 states, more than 25000 kilometres, facilitated more than 250 interactions both online and offline and reached out to more than 5000 participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds: homeschoolers, unschoolers, jail inmates, animation institutes, corporates, cyclone survivors, mothers of children with special needs, wives of army officers, village and urban school teachers and students, parents and farmers.

Smriti was born and brought up in Patna, Bihar. "Bihar is an abode of enlightenment and countless

progressive movements; Bihar's spirit is the spirit of Revolution; Bihar is the land of wisdom and knowledge, the land of Buddha, yet where is Bihar now? Where is India standing now?" questions Smriti. This thought made her reflect on aspects that are functional or rather malfunctioning in the way the majority of the educated parents practise parenting. Smriti sees four walls—admission in the most popular school, marriage, safety, and financial security that a high paying job would ensure—that confine the possibility of an integrated, liberated and intuitive parenting, especially for the girl child. She received support from her strong mother in every phase of her life to realise her dreams. Her experiences of a patriarchal setup, domestic violence, and her mothers' grit and wisdom to rise and rebuild herself economically gave her the courage to journey towards what she is today. "In my early youth, my dreams were shaped as per the survival formula of the system and society. Our dreams are not ours, many times these dreams are sold to us through the media and our people to maintain the stagnant order," says Smriti.

Growing up had touched her with numerous societal challenges revolving around inferiorities and power



Smriti hosting a session for youth in Leh, Ladakh (Courtesy Soulify)



Smriti facilitating a session for youth (Courtesy Soulify)

play. Favouritism, comparison, competition, class and caste divide, office politics, family and relationship issues, etc. These are the common terms we hear which are an impression of the inferiorities of the human mind and actions initiated through it, leading to exploitative and extractive systems. These experiences became the truth of her life and whether a life beyond this existed was unknown to her. This unknown became a latent dream aching to fly.

After completing her schooling and college in Patna, Bihar, she went to Mumbai in the year 2003. She pursued graphic designing and fine arts going ahead. Working in a highly competitive environment in Mumbai made her ponder where her education had led her to. “My health was deteriorating, I was worried about fitting in and behaving in a way so that new colleagues and friends would not reject me, I was constantly in the dilemma of keeping my employer happy with the fear of losing my job to someone who would agree for less salary and more time commitment. I managed to make boyfriends and it felt like leading me to the same rut of marriage and following the societal formula as opposed to the liberated life of my dreams. Is it possible to find a companion who is a co-dreamer of the world that I imagine? What is education if I could not live my life on my own terms?” she asked herself.

The year 2004 was a turning point in Smriti’s life. The TOR philosophy manifested her true being and her quest blossomed to be on the path of truth, thereon started a whole new chapter of her life. Smriti became the practitioner of life that she calls ‘Jeevankarmi’ and her tools to create were ‘Ehasas’ (feeling), ‘Samvedna’ (sensation), ‘Vishleshan’ (analysis) and ‘Prayog’ (experiment). These tools became her companions and friends in her journey of learning, unlearning and shaping the compassionate, conscious and creative world.

Along with these conceptual friends, she also found a partner, co-dreamer and co-creator in Siddharth Maskeri. They lived together and later indulged in

court marriage in the year 2006. He walks with her in the Soulify journey along with Advait, their son and eternal philosopher guide in her evolutionary learning. Advait is a self-directed curiosity-based learner who embraces learning outside the four walls and Siddharth Maskeri is a visionary writer, facilitator and filmmaker. They together questioned the institution of marriage and family, redefined family and now call themselves a ‘Soulify Family’ where all are equal stakeholders.

At Soulify, they facilitate the participants to experience their life’s story as the creator-hero and not the victim, by seeing and embracing themselves in completeness, with their strengths and limitations and seeing their challenges as opportunities to evolve and grow. And the process involves various forms of storytelling such as writing, art, dance, theatre, music and film.

Smriti takes inspiration from her own life to design her processes for her participants. Her journey from 1981 when she was born, to being a child observing life and being carefree, to a youth who questioned and fought the norms of society and her own indecisiveness, to transforming into acknowledging her own existence and being the leader of her own life.

The process of envisioning led her to redefine ART - ‘Awakening to the Rhythm with Truth’ and that everyone is a HERO - ‘Harmonious Energy Resonating Oneness’.

“The truth of life is reflected through the elements of nature around us, and this truth keeps me grounded, rhythmic and intuitive in my connection with the ground, this ground is the stage of any character to thrive in life. It encourages me to fly as I know the ground is waiting with open arms to embrace me, this is where I am born,” says Smriti. This affirms her to be rooted, connect with her participants and liberates the child in them. She is keen to meet the world family through her travels, gift Soulify sessions and experience the abundant cultural diversity.



Smriti and Siddharth (Photo: Gayatri Pardeshi)

Smriti can be reached at:

 smriti.maskeri@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/soulifyideas>

 <https://www.facebook.com/soulifyIdeas>

 <https://www.youtube.com/@SoulifyOrbit>

 <https://www.soulify.org.in>

Meeting Smriti was the best part of my fellowship. Through Smriti, I learned to see each day differently. Smriti played a crucial role in my facilitation journey. I feel I learned facilitation after meeting Smriti. She helped me to acknowledge my aspirations and to be more open to them. In that journey, I learned how to be more grounded. Smriti always wonders about the impact of her experiments in the design and experiences she creates, the facilitation and the processes she follows.

She thinks that working towards impact is a short-sighted, result-oriented, goal and is misleading. If we meet someone who is working to give a new direction to society and ask them what impacted their life to do what they are doing right now, you would hardly get a concrete answer to it. But instead, if we ask about their inspirations, then we would get where their actions are coming from. So hence she feels that we should look for inspiration rather than measure the impact. We should recognise the fact that impact is time bound but even if we do not acknowledge our inspiration, it percolates generation by generation and manifests itself. "If we decide for ourselves whether we want to create an impact or create an inspiration, our efforts would become timeless," says Smriti.



With Smriti and Siddharth

Epilogue

Travel perception has changed as a result of the fellowship. Because I could relate to every city's everyday life, including its customs and culture, I was able to appreciate the strength of community. Even though I was adding new experiences, culture and people in life I was connecting deeper with my old roots as well.

With the help of my mentor, I was able to see how to recognise and internalise the experiential learning while travelling. The fellowship encouraged me to be more open to new perspectives in life. It helped me to see the ground realities around me and within cities. I explored different art forms in facilitation space and in the lives of people which in turn nurtured my facilitation skills.

I gained an understanding of other art cultures and how they are celebrated after travelling and meeting a variety of individuals. Unknowingly, I participated in a number of facilitations, and every time I led a session, I did so from the bottom of my heart. I experientially learned the essence of healing in a non-judgmental space. The whole learning process made me feel grounded and also overwhelmed that I could embrace kinaesthetic empathy. I never considered these items to be a tool with therapeutic potential. I gradually understood that it would be better if I properly educated myself.

I learned about dance movement therapy, which uses various gestures and body movements as a medium for expression. I realised the importance of movement in the healing process, and after the fellowship, I am now pursuing the Dance Movement Therapy diploma course at Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai.

All these things have given me perspective to understand the hierarchies in society. Structures of caste, class and gender and their intersections make me uneasy. I am able to look at my privileges and sensitive enough to step back for people placed in underprivileged positions because of the world order. My own journey has shown me the struggle, hardship and trauma that people go through because of their social locations. I want to listen as much as I can, I want to see people dancing and healing, and I want to be the facilitator who empowers people by connecting them with themselves!

Ridhima Agarwal

Jaipur, Rajasthan

Grassroots Social Work & Community Intervention for Change

Ridhima was born and brought up in the Jaipur city of Rajasthan. She graduated in B.A. Programme with majors in Economics and Political Science from St. Stephen's College, Delhi. Being trained in a thorough academic tradition, she tries to gain a sensitive and diverse understanding of the social, economic and political perspectives our community deals with.

As a 52 Parinday Fellow, she travelled to collect narratives of various grassroots-level interventions in India. She believes that the communities hold immense wisdom, love and strength to thrive and fight for their own cause. In her journey she tried to build the fundamentals of community work, the relationship individual has with the community, the stories of resilience, lessons in moving forward as a collective and the principle of oneness which breathes in every element of social work.



“ “ As part of the fellowship, I got a chance to explore my own interests while travelling across India. I researched various factors of community engagement in rural India by tracing the life and philosophy of seven grassroots-level community workers and the various shades of issues we deal with on-ground. The exploration was beautiful and led me to a new understanding of work that came to be defined as Livelihoods. Which in my experiential encounters included a non-division of work with other aspects of living, realising harmony of self and community and working in the interconnectedness of all beings. It also meant delving deeper to break away from the necessity of indulging in hurtful labour to choosing a way of life which we connect with, and through that connection comes a radically new understanding of life.

Prologue

*“Ze qaid-e dojahan azad gashtam;
Agar tu hum-nashin-e bandah baashi.”*

“I shall be set free from the bonds of the two worlds
If you become my companion for a while.”

- Khusrao

From experience and feeling, I can see that there is an inner and an outer. And that we are subjected to the flow between the two. The outer shapes us and in turn, we shape the outer. This rather is a creative field, when one becomes conscious of it. leading me to see living as a creative force of shaping reality and seeking harmony. We as individuals are guided by the same principles which dictate our surroundings. For e.g. awareness of our own mental and bodily state is essential for the development of self, the same way awareness of educational and health facilities in the vicinity will count for development in the community. Similarly, the reduction of natural life in urban cities echoes the sense of alienation from our own selves in daily lives. I begin by inquiring about how the self is connected to the world around us through direct experiences, and community as an internal force. This consideration underlines most deeply our own origin and purpose. For me, travel gives a chance to come face to face with this flow of the inner with the outer without a delusion of positionality. What struck me particularly is the mismatch of intention with the practice, to strive for progress and benevolence but to create conflicts and degradation. Why is such a phenomenon recurring, and where can we look again to understand what is creating this division? As we have a body, society also has a body which feels. The interaction of images, ideas, people, culture, and necessities produces sensations in this body, thus also producing reactions. I wanted to experience these social sensations of Indian society and to see what are the underlying issues which we as a collective and self are going through.

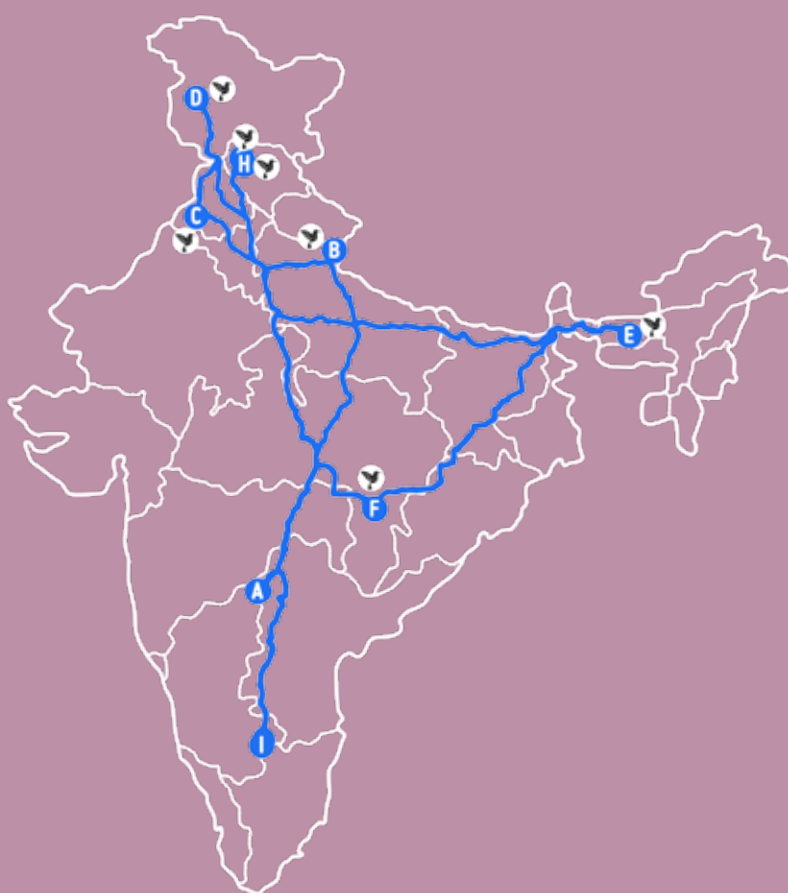
To see development as an act of becoming whole (through resonance with the community of beings around us) and the realisation of it through a self-transformative journey is what is featured in these stories. I feel, rural India is that beating sound of the land, which is yet conserving the story which India has to tell the civilisation. To account for this study, I went around the most beautiful rural ecologies to live with various rural communities, be a part of their struggles and celebrations, and see the effect of our thinking and practices on each other. In this context, I undertook research to trace the lives of seven grassroots community workers in various capacities and in various issues from gender, ecology, traditional knowledge, education, and caste. It traces lessons of community development in rural India, where the lives of these individuals are a synthesis of the inner and outer. The effort is also to relook at the notion of social work in times when it is getting overpowered by hierarchical and power-centric approaches, doing more harm than good. The reason for studying rural community work is not because rural needs improvement over the urban but rather therein might lie the learnings to shape a perspective and practice which we require to deal with the needs of contemporary life. Having met these people and recorded their life journeys, the work became real when the stories assumed a collective identity. The process of interviewing these individuals was the most sacred part of the whole documentation, where I came face to face with the teachings they offer to us through their experiences. Eventually, the whole research naturally took me to unravel the seven living philosophies of life, community and work, and the extraordinary power in the simplicity of practising one's own life philosophy truly rooted in interconnectedness.

While following the trajectory of complex and diverse narratives, readers will understand the inseparability of devising philosophy to social change, much to be taken over by the need to reconsider our own daily perspective and actions with the 'why' and 'how' of development.

These stories hold the courage of accepting the 'other' and consider change as an element in ourselves. And although these stories talk about gender, indigenous knowledge, khadi, Indian villages, life incidents, etc., do not mistake them to be talking about anything other than your own self and the world you inhabit. The writing carries oceans of thoughts but I will humbly ask the reader to take a chance to think of one's own philosophy of life, to feel the presence in one's direct environment and acknowledge it. Lastly, the link which connects all of these fragments but is not yet mentioned is the role of women in development, and on a

deeper level, the role of the feminine in shaping and protecting the world. The contribution of the feminine has been overlooked, suppressed or fabricated. As you read the stories, they speak of a different way of looking at and being in the world, which is closely linked to acknowledging the feminine in our lives. The issues they raise are very urgent, relevant and serious. These seven women create the possibility of incorporating the feminine way of action and feeling in the field of social work and development. As it is yet unspoken of, their effort also brings out the themes such worldview carries in relation to our lives and wellbeing. I owe my most enlightening and humble realisation of this to these women who will continue to inspire and guide me throughout the course of my life. And in my belief, they give us all a philosophical-empirical base on which the feminine can find its position, voice and expression in Indian society, and birth a possibility of governance of life which is spiritual, actual, relevant and rooted to the truth of our self and community.

Map of Ridhima's Journey



| | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|----------------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Ruth D Costa | Community Work | Champawat, Uttarakhand |
| C | Rupsi Garg | Community Work | Jaito, Punjab |
| D | Lubna Rafiqi | Community work & Social Enterprise | Watlar, Kashmir |
| E | Manjuwara Mullah | Social Enterprise & Community Rights Activism | Barpeta, Assam |
| F | Swarnima Kriti | Social research & Community work | Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh |
| G | Vimla Vishwapremi | Social activism | Palampur, Himachal Pradesh |
| H | Fatema C | Community Work & Education | Palampur, Himachal Pradesh |
| I | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

Facilitating Personal and Communal Well-being: HaiJalo, Making it Happen

Parindey: Ruth D'Costa

Alivelihood: Community work

Region: Kaflang, Champawat district, Uttarakhand



And when it finally dawns on us that we have entered a downslope of destruction on this Earth and don't have the wisdom to make the sacrifices that are needed to go back to healing the damages we have done, we have only one way left—decide on how we want to live, the choices we want to make right now, and the kind of relationships we want to have with ourselves and the world.

- Ruth D'Costa



Ruth D'Costa (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Life moves at its own pace in the beautiful village of Kaflang in Champawat, Uttarakhand. The community lives in the hilly area; the women handle the household, agricultural, and cattle-rearing tasks, whereas the men join the army or the police force,

take up government jobs, set up shops, or undertake physical labour on farms. The neoliberal policies that have resulted in global warming and the consequent climate inconsistencies add to the existing challenges faced in agriculture here, with crop destruction by

wild animals being the primary concern. Further, access to mobile phones, advertisements, and a market filled with plastic-packaged goods has opened a window to material aspirations for the youth. Meanwhile, their self-image is under constant scrutiny and their career aspirations remain limited without the right guidance. Many pahadi (mountain) villages do not have access to well-functioning schools, good roads for commuting, or a reliable healthcare system. Their lack of awareness about their rights and education restricts them from rising as a collective.

Born and raised in Mumbai, Ruth's dream and inner calling had always been to live in a village and move away from urban life. Bombil is the name she gave herself and loves to be called after an ex-boyfriend

tagged her for her love of walking through puddles. In 2018, Bombil moved to Champawat, where her husband worked, and ventured into a new life. The villagers used to speak to her husband but seldom acknowledged her. She learned that the women there are not allowed to explore their own identities. This was unacceptable to her as a woman who had made most of her own choices and advocated for social causes. Hence, she gradually began to build her own space in the community. Having lived a financially challenging life, she decided to earn for herself by offering English coaching classes after identifying a need for it amongst the children. However, she did not take this forward because 500 per month was expensive for most families, especially in this region where most children attend government-run schools.

Bombil returned to Mumbai, her hometown, the same year to run a prison rehabilitation project. After that, she came down with anxiety and depression, but with the help of her sister, she initiated the process of inner healing. Upon returning to Champawat, she noticed many children addicted to mobile games due to poorly planned digital access. Subsequently, she gathered a group of teenagers and invited them to participate in activities and learn together. 'HaiJalo', her collective, took its first steps in providing a nurturing ground for youth. "Hai jalo", a pahadi phrase that means "it shall happen", is used locally to encourage people to surrender to possibility and have faith. When they decided to collect old garments from across the village, stitch them into cloth bags, and distribute



Digging our own grave: Forests of Champawat (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Ruth interacting with youth in Bilhedi village, Champawat. Bilhedi is accessible only on foot and is 1.5 hours away from the nearest village. (File photo)

them to shopkeepers to address the excessive usage of polythene bags, the process began to grow organically with its strong roots in the community. Through this initiative, the children experienced the beauty of meaningful, collective action and tremendous self-growth for the first time.

HaiJalo nurtures the children's creative potential, which is otherwise suppressed in the formal education system. Realising the emphasis on sovereignty and the democratic nature of the cause, a local group of 16-19 year old teenagers who volunteered daily at HaiJalo decided to raise awareness on menstrual health. It was not easy at first as most of them were boys. Still, they managed to facilitate awareness sessions in schools and coaching classes. This was a massive leap for the community's empowerment.

After conducting programmes such as cloth bag drives and kooda kasrat (garbage collection designed as a workout), Bombil initiated her most ambitious intervention for pahadi youth which was called 'Rukh Thoko'. She named it Rukh Thokko (woodpecker) because a woodpecker constantly knocks against a tree to find food and survive. The name is symbolic of the perseverance that rural development workers must possess in order to effect change.

Holistic education via the Rukh Thokko Fellowship involves lessons on giving and receiving; looking after each other; how to love, care and take action in a community, etc. With its focus on lesson planning, student progress, addressing students' emotional and psychological needs, interpersonal relationships, and instilling confidence, the fellowship is radical in its approach. Bombil wishes to equip the fellows to become community workers and take her work

forward through them. Through HaiJalo, she aims to enable the pahadi communities in Champawat to take action on local problems related to food, water, shelter, clean air, and education, and make them aware of their rights. HaiJalo's next step towards development is through sports. 'Pahadi Khiladi' is a space for pahadi youth of all ages to come together and play sports regularly. It has been a successful programme because, every evening, the children's joyous screams and laughter have uplifted the entire village and made them forget the obstacles that divided them. Bombil stresses on the need to reconsider our definitions of "skilled" and "unskilled", especially in light of rural societies, their structures and role divisions and most importantly, old wisdom and indigenous knowledge.

The notion of a woman is considered different, non-conforming, when she chooses to live a life aligned to her calling and the identity she asserts, and when she commits her life to work with the community. By the end of her life, whether it is trees or ideas or people or communities, Bombil says she will have lost count of how many children she has had. In Champawat, Bombil met Janki didi, her pahadi landlady. Didi gave her a home to live in and taught her the value of unconditional love and proper nourishment, the qualities she used to build her social work. Now, as she passes these qualities on to other people through her work, Bombil's identity merges with that of the community, dissolving the division between the individual and the other.

Excited at the prospect of helping didi during the ghas katai (grass cutting) season, Bombil says, "The idea of drinking fresh milk is a very romantic notion, and behind it are women without much choice because the responsibility of finding fodder



Children of Champawat (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



A group of Rukh Thokko fellows pore over information on forest fires. The three-month fellowship programme concluded with a 'Van Utsav' (forest festival). During the programme, a few of the fellows were accommodated at Bombil's house, otherwise known as HaiJalo House. (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

and feeding, cleaning, and milking the cows falls on them. As a result, they rarely leave the house to visit their maternal homes. One needs to see how much labour a woman does to get us that one glass of milk; we better acknowledge it.”

The flow of funding is one of the challenges she encounters, and a lot of effort is required in collecting funds to sustain ground projects. “The people who are trying to fix broken parts of the country are forced to spend time on presenting their work to potential funders or applying for grants to governments. The time available for community service is spent on requesting funds. Partnering with governmental bodies requires sufficient bandwidth—both financial and mental—for multiple trips to governmental offices, feeding egos, and completing paperwork of bureaucratic proportions. Ill-planned rural development is a waste of resources of every

conceivable kind and the side effects are long-lasting. Rural communities that have become accustomed to receiving free support have damaged both community interdependence and self-dependence.” Further, in the course of her work, Bombil faces several questions about her own caste and religion, which she has been navigating and addressing.

The light of Bombil’s being is reflected in her surroundings and her work: her relationships with the rest of nature, people, and her work; creating beautiful art; writing letters; decorating homes; greeting every soul on her path; and considering work as sacred, illustrate how one connects back to the community when one discovers their true self. In essence, what Bombil does is “unhoni ko honi karna”, i.e., to make things possible. Bombil is a walking expression of love, the shade of a tree in Champawat, and a true guide on going back to the essence of life, i.e., to heal each other and to realise the harmony of oneself with their community and the rest of nature. Eventually, Bombil hopes to move to farming to be closer to earth and life.



Ruth and Janki didi on a trip to Pancheshwar river, the first in a series of trips for pleasure. (File photo)

Ruth D’Costa aka Bombil can be reached at:

 bombilism@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/hai.jalo>

 <https://www.facebook.com/haijalo>

 <https://www.haijalo.org>



A glimpse of her community life: Ruth’s home in the village (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

One would often find Didi calm even in chaos. She had a million tasks and responsibilities on her shoulders that are necessary for day-to-day survival. In the midst of the serene skies of Uttarakhand, also known as Devbhoomi or the land of Gods, and the mighty mountains, these tasks seemed herculean. But these skies and the mountains play an essential part for humanity. They help us align the body and the mind and unite the within and without into one entity. Didi in many ways is an epitome of the natural state and ideal vocation of an individual. Didi was an image of Earth herself; the Earth that nurtures and shelters us, connects us with each other, and induces life in our dreams. Didi would farm and grow food, rear cattle and take care of the household with great care. However, unseeing women's work is an unfortunate socio-systemic reality. But that doesn't mean that what is unseen or intangible, doesn't exist.

Ruth had the good fortune of being able to spend a lot of time with Didi and derive inspiration from her work. One day, I thought of taking Didi's interview. She was reluctant but I convinced her. Ruth also felt happy that Didi would get a chance to be on camera. Didi had to graze the cows afterwards so while she was braiding her long, lush hair, it was decided by everybody that the interview would happen then and there. Ruth and Didi pulled out two chairs, I pulled out my camera gear and off we started. When Ruth had first set foot in the village as a city girl, it was Didi who had given her a place to stay, where she continues to stay to this day. While reminiscing the good moments of their long friendship, both expressed how important they have been in each other's journeys and got teary-eyed. It was at that moment I realised that we can fulfil each other's needs with love. At that moment, I felt as if the whole wide world could redeem itself by taking a holy dip in the healing waters of those tears. Ruth taught me that to love someone truly means to not want to change them but rather to understand them. I learnt from her that it is only when we experience pain in its rawest form, we are able to know and experience true healing, true happiness.



Ruth and Didi on canvas, Champawat, Uttarakhand

Learning the Organic Way

Parindey: Rupsi Garg

Alivelihood: Community Work

Region: Jaito, Punjab



Rupsi Garg (Photo- Ridhima Agarwal)



When people weave, their emotions and love are woven into the fabric. This way, our physical and mental health needs are addressed, which is impossible with machine-made cloth. The spinning process requires extreme patience and softness, and women should lead it further. This art is deeply associated with our own lives. Most importantly, we derive self-satisfaction or satisfaction of our soul, which reverses the idea of labour—now we are working only because we connect with our work and enjoy it. This is a sincere way to address issues of health, labour, and happiness.

- Rupsi Garg



Antique traditional charkha (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Gandhi, with his slender physique, sitting with his charkha, was one of those historical images that could transform or touch people's very consciences. What did it mean for us? Where does it stay in our memory now? What ideas does it evoke? All of it comes alive today in the town of Jaito, Punjab, where an aura of sanctity spreads when Rupsi, in her utmost simplicity, walks up to her room, opens her charkha box, and begins spinning silently. Moment by moment, the ideas of freedom and power turn upside down with the wheel, and in the softness of the thread being made, she lays out the map of true development and socio-spiritual guidance for India.

Rupsi was introduced to the charkha by a friend in Bangalore in 2017. She began spinning, unsure of what destiny had in store for her. Her decision to learn this art came from a deeper source, and only when it transformed her within, did it start to flow out of her wherever she walked. Born and raised in the small village of Tepla in Punjab, Rupsi acquired education upto graduation in Biotechnology from Haryana. Her cultural roots were strong and close to her heart, but she would realise them only later. In 2011, she moved to Hyderabad to pursue research at the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology and completed her master's in Development Studies at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. Influenced by Gandhi's idea of swaraj (self-rule) and Guruji Ravindra Sharma's talks, she subsequently returned to her hometown to work with the Kheti Virasat

Mission (KVM), a socio-ecological movement that promotes organic farming in harmony with nature in rural Punjab to ensure nutritional security. In the last few decades, chemical-intensive agriculture in Punjab has increased food-chain toxicity, affecting women the most. Increased mechanisation diminished their function in agriculture and more of them are affected by ailments such as cancer, anaemia, and reproductive difficulties. Working with KVM became a vital part of Rupsi's life. She was organising women in the field to grow vegetable gardens at home and spreading awareness on the consumption of poisonous food. Thus, she built trust in her people, especially women. She found a treasure no one could see.

Charkha spinning, hand weaving, and handloom weaving have long been a rich tradition in Punjab. Trinjan was a Punjabi tradition in which women would gather to spin charkhas, sing songs, counsel, dine, and learn from one another. The implications of this practice were much deeper and provided the village with a strong sovereign foundation, a platform for artistic expression, and a sense of connectedness in the community. Such cultural gatherings were lost due to industrialisation and modernisation; charkhas were abandoned, and livelihoods were affected. Women have become confined to domestic duties and reliant on ready-made apparel. The loss of tradition somewhere symbolised the loss of their freedom.



Artisan working on traditional khadi in Punjab (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Rupsi with an artisan during fieldwork (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

“Let me weave your name, in the loom of my mind
Let me weave freedom in the loom of my mind.”

- Unknown

When Rupsi visited the Punjab districts of Faridkot, Barnala, and Muktsar, the women started speaking about the charkha, opening old locked boxes containing handwoven cloth, and its eventual stagnation as the market made it obsolete. The interactions were magical, and Rupsi’s connection with the charkha made these conversations reach her heart. Asserting the importance of cloth self-sufficiency and a holistic village unit, she began her effort to revive the lost tradition of Trinjan. Under her initiative called ‘Trinjan’, she identifies local artisans and encourages and provides them with a platform to reconnect with their art, earn a livelihood, and unite for a cause. This is achieved by acknowledging the villages’ existing resources, utilising local knowledge, and creating a value chain of interrelated units. First, under the guidance of KVM, farmers are encouraged to grow indigenous cotton. This cotton is procured by Trinjan, hand-spun using charkhas, and handwoven by rural artisans. Other arts like embroidery, basket weaving, and knitting are also encouraged. This external assistance has helped these artists revive their

art with pride and become independent. It also creates a generational bond as the elderly teach the youngsters. Trinjan is a strong and growing collective with more than 350 spinners, dyers, and weavers. Today, Rupsi says that she was destined to come face-to-face with this situation and that she was led here from within.

Rupsi speaks about a social ecosystem, of which economics is only one aspect. Trinjan was never about money but about empowering people through art and community. She emphasises the value of understanding the village ecosystem and its power when it is rightly channelised. As Gandhi stated, the charkha in these villages symbolises freedom from foreign rule, healthy life, and dignity. The Khadi concept involves decentralising the production and distribution chain for basic needs. Rupsi, alongside Trinjan, tries to guide us to the true path of development.

One of the challenges that Rupsi is concerned about is migration in Punjab, where youth prefer to flee their culture and study abroad rather than take charge of their own community’s water, farming, and education. “Why do we lack a support system for securing our younger generation in our villages? The lack of skill transfer is the major reason behind the vanishing of local knowledge because children do not want to learn what their mothers did. It is deemed outdated. We need to create interest in young people



Trinjan Kudrat Hut: a storehouse of resources and organic seeds (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

to carry on our tradition,” she asserts. Furthermore, Rupsi notes that developing a sustainable market for these products in an era of fast fashion presents another significant challenge since these artisans must be compensated fairly for their labour in making cloth.

Trinjan is one of several paths to progress and self-reliance. Rupsi believes it is vital to preserve our local traditional knowledge, whether it be farming, art, or folklore; otherwise, our most precious resources for wellbeing deteriorate. The youth of our country must rediscover the ground realities and richness of our local resources. Reflecting on her work, Rupsi states,

“When we are making a thread, what comes out of it is another thing, but the inner process we go through while making it is what is transformational, liberating, honest and holds the true integrity of labour and self. The whole life is an act of teaching and learning and finding inner freedom through which we step onto the true path of dharma and serve all.”

Understanding Rupsi’s work requires an understanding of the charkha, the relationship of art to society, local customs, the idea of swaraj, and the role of women in development. According to Gandhi, “the charkha replaces the spirit of exploitation with the spirit of service.” And spinning, as Rupsi says, “teaches us many things, like how to balance things, identify the inner voice, respect labour, and clarity of vision.” Rupsi emphasises that “whatever we choose to do, we should do it with all our heart because our heart raises the voice of the inner soul, which we can only identify when we listen to it and become agents of betterment for ourselves and our surroundings.” Trinjan, for her, is about bringing that inner voice to the outer world. She continues to spin every day and wants to be recognized as a spinner all through the beautiful course of her life.

“TRINJAN is Weaving the Social Fabric with a Compassionate Warp and Dedicated Weft.”

- Rupsi Garg

Rupsi Garg can be reached at:

✉ rupsigarg@khetivirasatmission.org

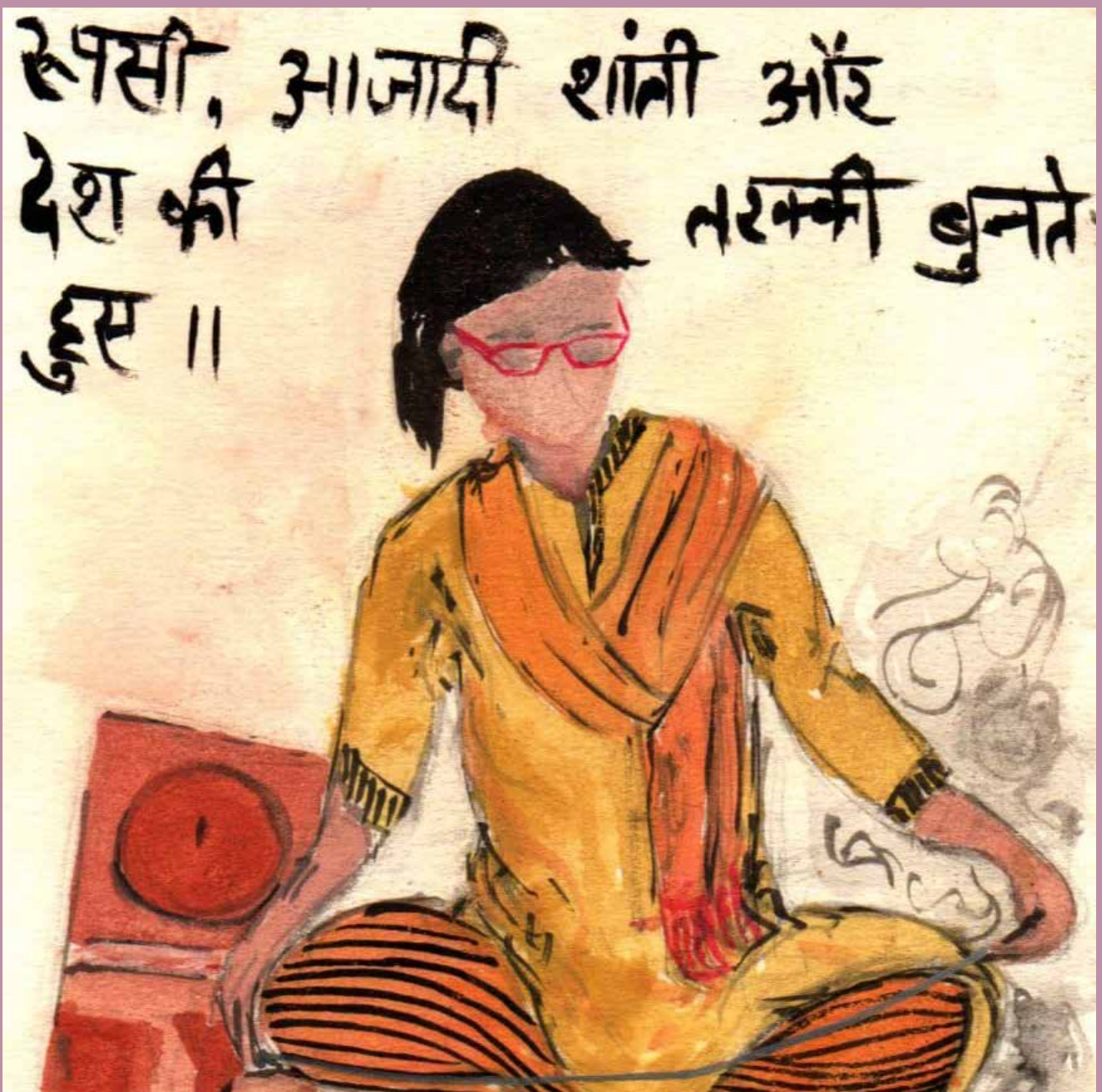
📷 https://www.instagram.com/trinjan_kv

🌐 <https://khetivirasatmission.org/trinjan>



Processing cotton into thread (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Those days I used to carry around a book on historical materialism, which had been published in the days of the Soviet Union. The book pointedly discussed the powers that shaped civilisations, society and systems that were birthed when humans tampered with nature. Umendra ji, Rupsi's mentor, talks about dharma and India. He believed that Western philosophy can never comprehend the ground realities of India which have been ingrained and elaborated in our ancient texts and scriptures. The roots and realities of India can only be experienced in proximity to rural life. I saw it in Rupsi's spinning wheel. The land of India has absorbed and endured so much that it runs in our consciousness as a cacophony of emotions. And then there is a sense of freedom in the ability and the right to express these emotions. This freedom is as liberating as touching the open skies of a serene village at sunset. All of nature, all life, on this planet are in sync with each other. The earth births abundance, which leads to needs. Needs build human arms into assets and with these hands, we weave threads of connection and give shape to society. When Rupsi spins her wheel, it is as if a woman is blooming, coming undone strand by strand, in the softness of the thread. As I watch her a great calm descends on me. I feel as if she is speaking her heart out to me, her spinning wheel, brilliant in its simplicity. I could listen forever, and could try to understand her unspoken words without fatigue. In those moments I felt as if unrealised dreams were realising themselves, as if by magic. What is the duty of water? What is the duty of fire? What is the purpose of parents? Umendra ji used to say that Rupsi is living her purpose.



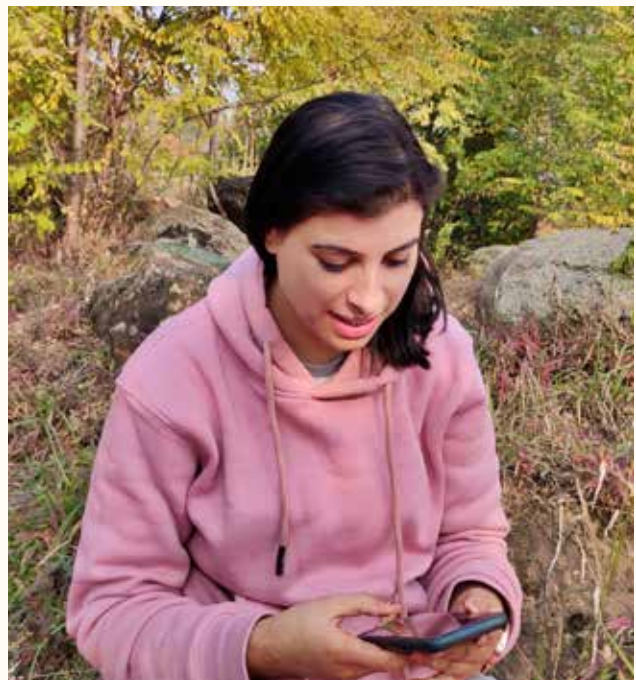
Rupsi on her charkha on canvas, Jaito, Punjab

Strengthening roots, Nurturing sovereignty

Parindey: Lubna Rafiqi

Alivelihood: Community work & Social Enterprise

Region: Watlar, Kashmir



Lubna Rafiqi (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Let the rage within guide you towards self-knowledge.

- Lubna Rafiqi

What kind of relationship do we share with our surroundings? How do we organise the basic unit of self, family, and community? What are the core values of education? How can we build a self-sustainable and just lifestyle system around us? What is conscious living? Lubna Rafiqi provides deep insights and her lived experience growing up in a closed-knit religious, conflicted and patriarchal society. The rage she went through began her quest for self-knowledge.

In Kashmir, youth growing up in a fragile environment is one of the most vulnerable groups with unsupportive emotional growth, lack of direction, uncertain educational policies, and a non-participatory system. Lubna claims that the people here grow with subconscious fear and suppression of self-expression. This gets translated into the need for security and compromises on the youth's potential. Secondly, the land in Kashmir is one of the richest sources of livelihood with apt climatic conditions for growing food and medicinal plants and other forms of farming. With growing unemployment, migration and uncertainty over the basic security of education and family, it was necessary for young

people to go back to their own locally available resources, traditional knowledge systems of house building, cooking, recycling, natural living, and holistic education relevant to the Kashmiri context. And create a space where the community can come together to work on varied aspects of health, culture, economy, and education.

In 2010, at the crossroads of the struggle between a growing need for traditional rootedness, identity formation, and modern sensibility, a group of people came together to attempt to understand and identify the needs and aspirations of the youth in Kashmir and other conflict-ridden areas. Lubna became a part of this group, and an extensive survey-based study was undertaken on lived experiences of youth and education patterns in Ladakh, Kashmir, and Jammu. After a year, it was realised that everyone seeks a few universal values of equality, participation and inclusivity. Realising an urgent need to work on them under a collective, 'Mool Sustainability Research and Training Centre' was established in 2012. The term Mool means root, the core of everything or the origin of something. As the term implies, Mool alleviated the unrest and uprootedness amid modern Kashmir's worst years of conflict between 2005 and 2018. The participatory socio-economic action followed by Mool inspires and enables youth to develop resource-based, environmentally friendly, and regenerative lifestyles.

Born and brought up in Srinagar, Lubna grew up like any other Kashmir woman. With a strong sense of identity in her land, she enrolled herself in a

bachelor's in psychology at Kashmir University. "The moment I became aware of nature and my surroundings, the feeling of doing something was very clear. Something was coming out of the universe, and I asked myself what I was doing. What are we all doing? And that brought about rage in me, which was the beginning of all things."

After completing her master's in psychology, she travelled to understand the world better. She gave a lecture series on 'Identity and Region' in Germany in 2015, surveyed 'Youth Education in Kashmir' in 2016, studied 'Women and Conflict' in Scotland in 2019, and researched 'Conflict and Youth' in London as a Commonwealth Fellow in 2020. Later she came back to Kashmir to work on the actualisation of her vision. Mool provided a collaborative space for people to come and intervene in education policies. This is done through counselling, discussions on self-development, and channelising the aspirations of Kashmiri youth into actual sustainable models of entrepreneurship and lifestyle beyond the conflictual reality of Kashmir.

Lubna realised that although Mool held strong values and successfully organised youth, as an NGO it had its limitations. She states, "And we can't possibly talk about sustainability without being truly sustainable ourselves. From here arose the need for an innovative, natural, and truly sustainable model for community work."

A business using natural laws – Eco village and ecopreneurship

Roots (mool) need water, i.e., nourishment to grow. Lubna, with her team, navigating through and understanding the realities of Kashmir and a strong intention to work on education and lifestyle, set up the foundation for Sagg. Saggdiyun is a Kashmiri word – sagg is to 'nurture' and diyun is to 'give'. Now known as 'Sagg Eco Village', the eco-village was set up in 2016 by local people in the foothills of Sindh, Watlar region in rural Kashmir. According to Lubna, 'land is the richest resource for livelihood'.



Addressing a gathering of women's college students on bio-farming under Mool (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Lubna singing traditional songs during a cultural concert at Sagg (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Mukhtar bhai, caretaker of farms in Sagg (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

And so began the work of creating a truly organic, diverse, and self-sustainable space.

Lubna and her team started farming on the land and eventually began processing the output. Based on natural resources available, eco huts called 'Kothe' (mud house in Kashmiri), a restaurant and a processing unit were established in 2017 to create a

holistic chain of production and consumption around the basic needs of life. Forming a business model based on the natural activity of the campus gave the idea of ecopreneurship or basing the business models on ecological preservation in the surroundings and creating livelihoods through it. The development of Sagg has been exceptional and transformed the lives of locals working here.



Campus café and the traditional mud roofs 'kothe' (Photos: Ridhima Agarwal)

Sagg is realising the vision which Mool had set for itself. It is done through a diverse means of socio-economic-cultural practices whose core is the 'individual'. Believing that mother and father are the first and primary units of learning, Mouj Baap Sufficiency School was set up in 2016, where educational camps, workshops and counselling take place. Exploring diverse methodologies for learning, cultural events, trekking and eco-tours are designed for interacting with the ecosystem and our body and mind. "There is a physical body and a soul that cannot be seen, and to live fully, we have to find a connection through both. Similarly, the space of Sagg is a physical manifestation but the people here are the soul through which things get alive and function. Our aim is to build that soul connection." All products, services and programmes of Sagg are value-based. The founder of Sagg, Fayaz Ahmed, who is also Lubna's husband, believes that the journey began even before they were born, stating that Sagg is "an extension of ourselves and our love for our people".

While activism has taken a limited understanding, the initiative of Sagg lets us reimagine community

building and intervention from a fresh perspective. This means balancing the traditional with the modern, redefining lifestyle choices, and using the available structures to realise ecological and social development. And in the long run, they aim to consolidate the learnings and share this unique socio-economic model with the world to reimagine lifestyle practices, holistic education, cultural preservation, ecological safeguarding, community building and sustainability through natural and conscious living. Lubna states the challenges of working in a region like Kashmir, which constantly goes through scrutiny and uncertainty. One must be very strict to ensure safety and balance it with openness to outside elements. She also aims to reach more youth in Kashmir and strengthen the revenue model of Sagg for a stronger functioning and expansion of her work in areas of Kashmir.

Although stating the external challenges, she lays the highest importance on working on the inner self. Lubna talks of Sagg therapy, providing therapy to anyone who visits here by simply being, experiencing

and connecting to oneself. Sagg, through her vision, is practising building an integrative and regenerative community living through ecological entrepreneurship. Sagg, for her, is a conscious element, a possibility of creation through self, of transcendence, and of development in the Kashmiri community in a truly sovereign sense. In Islam, it is said that human is the best of all creation of Allah, referred to as Ashraf ul makhluqat, one such a creation is Lubna, who, through her quest for knowledge, has created a world of possibilities for change while nurturing her roots.

Lubna Rafiqi can be reached at:

✉ rafiqilubna@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/moolsustainability>

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/saggecovillage>

🌐 www.moolsustainability.org

🌐 www.saggecovillage.earth



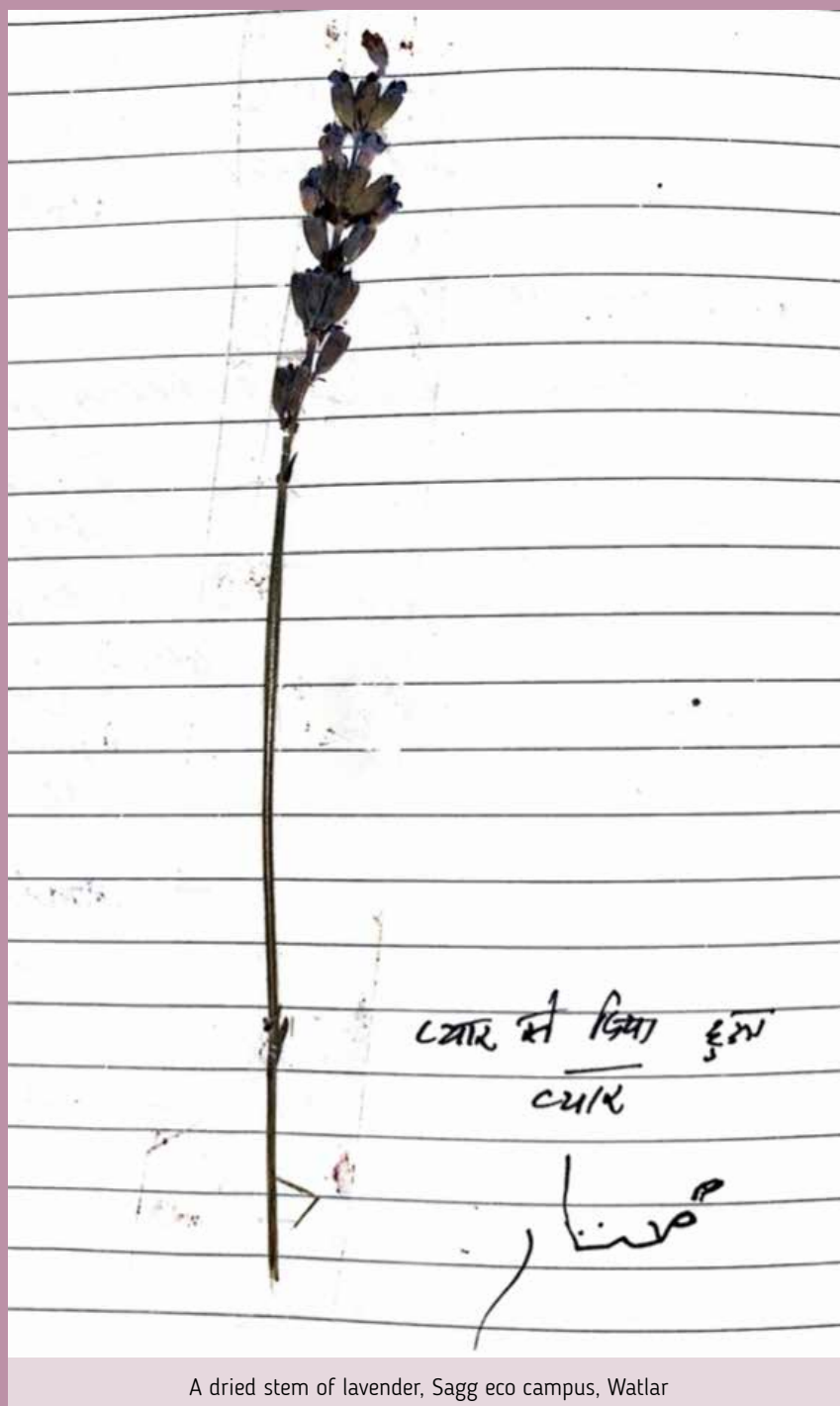
Apple farming and various products from farm produce like pickles and jams (Photos: Ridhima Agarwal)



De-stress-heal-regenerate (entry to Sagg), Values board (Photos: Ridhima Agarwal)

I still remember the night when I saw my first moon in Kashmir. Words won't be able to do justice to how I felt then, but I can say with certainty that I had found my purpose in that moment. Often, actions say more than words. Mukhtar bhai is a storyteller, who tells the story of farming and hard work. When one uses their own hands to engage with the rest of nature, it brings calmness to their character. With the same calmness, one day Mukhtar bhai told me that his father was critical and he just wished to spend some time with him. The next day, news of his father's passing away reached me. My chest felt hollow. He had expressed the wish to be with his father in his last moments just a few hours ago, and now that wish would remain unfulfilled. We reached his village to partake in the funeral rites and saw that the entire village had shown up. His family was drowned in a sea of grief. Mukhtar bhai's hometown gives a glimpse into the life of rural Kashmir. I was lucky to be there because I could witness the nuances of the locals' day-to-day lives with my own eyes and touch the fabric of Kashmiri society very closely. There was a teary-eyed silence which was mourning the death of a loved one in the presence of the community.

I met Lubna when she was in the throes of happiness, the kind that only a newlywed bride, with the smell of henna still fresh on her hands, experiences once in her life. Witnessing women talking and having a good time together openly is a rare sight. Lubna always instilled the belief in herself and the people around her that gender disparity can be overcome by conscious efforts. To celebrate the success of her wedding ceremony, she sang a song in front of the audience. That song was her victory song. She would sing it to keep her morale up in tough times. And now she was a victor. She got emotional and tears flowed down her cheeks as she sang the song. She sang it with such deep emotion that her voice still echoes in the deepest corners of my soul. Nowadays, people are obsessed with lifestyle analysis. How should one eat, wear, walk, laugh and look? Which lines should be visible on the face and which shouldn't? These are the questions that plague our modern society. But no matter what the lifestyle, our lives are driven by the pain of losing and the joy of meeting loved ones. Social dilemmas and nature's nurture and non-negotiable aspects of our lives. Can we strike a balance between these? How can we live a life that is in direct connect with the realities of our emotions, traditions and grassroots? Gibran says engaging with life on a day-to-day basis is the intrinsic purpose of living.



A dried stem of lavender, Sagg eco campus, Watlar

The Threads of Empowerment

Parindey: Manjuwara Mullah

Alivelihood: Social Enterprise & Community Rights Activism

Region: Barpeta, Assam



I just knew something wrong is happening with women, and my life led me to a struggle of their liberation, my liberation.

- Manjuwara



Manjuwara Mullah (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Char-Chapori region (river islands) near Barpeta, Assam (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

A few tributaries of the Brahmaputra river flow near the beautiful town of Barpeta in Assam. The food, culture, and livelihoods practised here are organised around the island's ecology. Barpeta is mostly inhabited by Mia Muslims, a community that holds minority status and has a complex history of religious marginalisation, identity loss, and being adversely affected by inequitable resource distribution and climate change. Many villages are surrounded by river islands known as 'Char-Chapori'. These villages are the worst affected by floods

and erosion every year, making their settlement impermanent and highly volatile. Most women work as daily wage workers making fishing nets while others are engaged in agriculture.

Manjuwara Mullah hails from one such village in the Char area and belongs to the Mia community, marked by rigid economic and gender barriers. She had to fight for her education. As a child, she could see the predicament of early marriage, and something felt wrong to her. After her Bachelor's,

she was forced to stop her education and get married. Finding a supportive partner allowed her to step out of these boundaries, and she joined an organisation working with poor urban women in Guwahati. Although she performed well there, she had to leave the job after facing discrimination for her pregnancy. Then, she moved back to her town to work on development issues with women in the Char Chapori areas. Due to neglect and unreachability, the area lacks access to stable education opportunities and health infrastructure. She began her journey of self-identity, passion, and struggle from here. Together with her husband, she worked with the Jhar foundation, which worked closely with people in the Char areas on their socio-economic development, disaster management, setting up libraries, building better livelihoods, eradicating child labour, intervening in various ground-level issues etc. Manju was closely associated with the women of Char and worked on organising awareness campaigns for health and socio-political rights, being vocal against child marriage, supporting women in education and fighting for equal wage pay. She was beginning to gain the trust of women in the area.

However, she still felt that something was lacking, that her efforts were not integrating into meaningful change on the ground, and that the gender reality remained structurally unchanged. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation in Char in early 2020. As a community worker, Manju began receiving distress calls from women, who were daily wage workers, stating lack of income, food security, and growing domestic violence. Then, in the same year, came the worst flood disaster Assam had ever seen. The double predicament (the pandemic and floods) created a crisis on the ground that required urgent interventions and relief work. Manju, with her team, procured aid and went to these islands with supplies filled in a boat. Anxiety was building up with the scale of the disaster. Manju recalls, “On an 80x80 ft platform, there were around 800-900 people and

400-500 animals, with pregnant women, adolescent girls, and disabled people all living in such inhumane conditions.” She would heave a deep sigh, sit on the boat, and come back. She recalls that when coming back from relief work, eating or resting, she would have flashbacks of the faces of those girls, pregnant women, and hungry children, which pushed her into an emotionally weak state. Any relief they managed to provide was negligible considering the large-scale crisis. During her fieldwork, women would come to her and share their feelings. Questioning how long they would be provided with ration, the women began to ask Manju to think of more sustainable work so that they could gain long-term security.

Manju picked up a plain white bedsheet and started embroidering floral patterns on it to cope with the stress. She states, “An immense sense of calm enveloped me even as I etched the outline of a flower in red wool. Inspired, I began to work late into the night. Following the legacy of my mother and grandmother, layering old fabric between embroidered sheets to create a kheta or quilt.” Traditionally known as Katha stitch, this craft is well etched in the hands, hearts, and memories of women in this region of Assam. They used to make various fabrics for use at home and gifting, and learned this skill from other women. But as the work done by women is neglected, this art was limited to something done in free time and not acknowledged as a very valuable skill that women hold with them.

Wondering how she can help these women, Manju realised that this is a traditional skill that the women in this community are well-versed in and have done previously. Why not acknowledge it and convert it into a livelihood for these women? She shared her idea with the charwomen of her team and received a positive response from all stakeholders. This resulted in the organisation of a women’s self-help group and a collective to stitch and sell khetas, named ‘Amrapari’, which means ‘We can’. First established



Manju on relief work during the Assam 2020 floods (Courtesy Ango Khabar)



Manju doing katha stitch on a white bedsheet (Courtesy Ango Khabar)

in Rupkuchi village, located between the Beki and Chaulkhowa rivers, five women became a part of the group. They were daily wage labourers who had hope in this attempt. Manju started by procuring raw materials (e.g., fabric, embroidery thread, and sewing supplies) and provided basic training to the five women.

Manju shared a few products made by the women on social media. As with any good movement, the work expanded as women gained dignity and a stable share of income through this livelihood. The collective has grown in strength and range of craft, with over 70 artisans now associated with Amrapari. They have established an office where all administration and design work is done and they gratefully receive orders from customers throughout the country, and the income goes to these artisans. Manju states, “We continue to expand our repertoire of designs, patterns and colours. For a group of 5-6 women, it takes 5-6 days to stitch a kheta while doing all their housework and meeting other caregiving responsibilities.” She adds that the work speaks for itself, and their dreams are beautifully woven as Katha stitches by the hands of these artisans.

Manju notes a decrease in domestic violence in the places where Amrapari has helped with livelihood building. The women today value their skills, feel dignified about their work, earn for their families, and want equal status in the household. They no longer stand silently before violence. Now, their husbands sometimes help with stitching or caring for the children while the artisans work. Manju was overjoyed while sharing this. Amrapari enables her to intervene more effectively on the ground and revive women’s traditional skills. It will take time to break deep-rooted patriarchal and economic patterns. Furthermore, a highly mechanised market is also a challenge. Changes in market patterns towards developing and valuing such products might strengthen the collective. Manju’s desire for designing Katha and the changes she sees in women’s lives



“We use three layers of fabric; two layers of good quality cotton-polyester mix fabric with a layer of recycled fabric in between.” (Courtesy Ango Khabar)

stimulates her work with hope and determination.

Economic empowerment is not the final aim, but it is an effective tool to engage the community and spark a vision for women’s welfare and liberation, resulting in community upliftment. As the sun sets on the beautiful stretches of Char, the wind carries women’s smiles, moving into a better tomorrow with a more honourable present. And Manju, being one of them, chose to lead this women’s struggle with compassion as it is not just a social issue for her but a way of life itself. Amrapari is a much-needed redefinition of women’s empowerment in India. Manju is an example of what lived experience, traditions, right guidance, and genuine compassion mean for our lives and community.

Manjuwara Mullah can be reached at:

 amraparicreations@gmail.com

 <https://www.instagram.com/amrapariassam>

 <https://www.facebook.com/AmrapariAssam>

 www.amrapari.org



A traditional katha stitch design (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



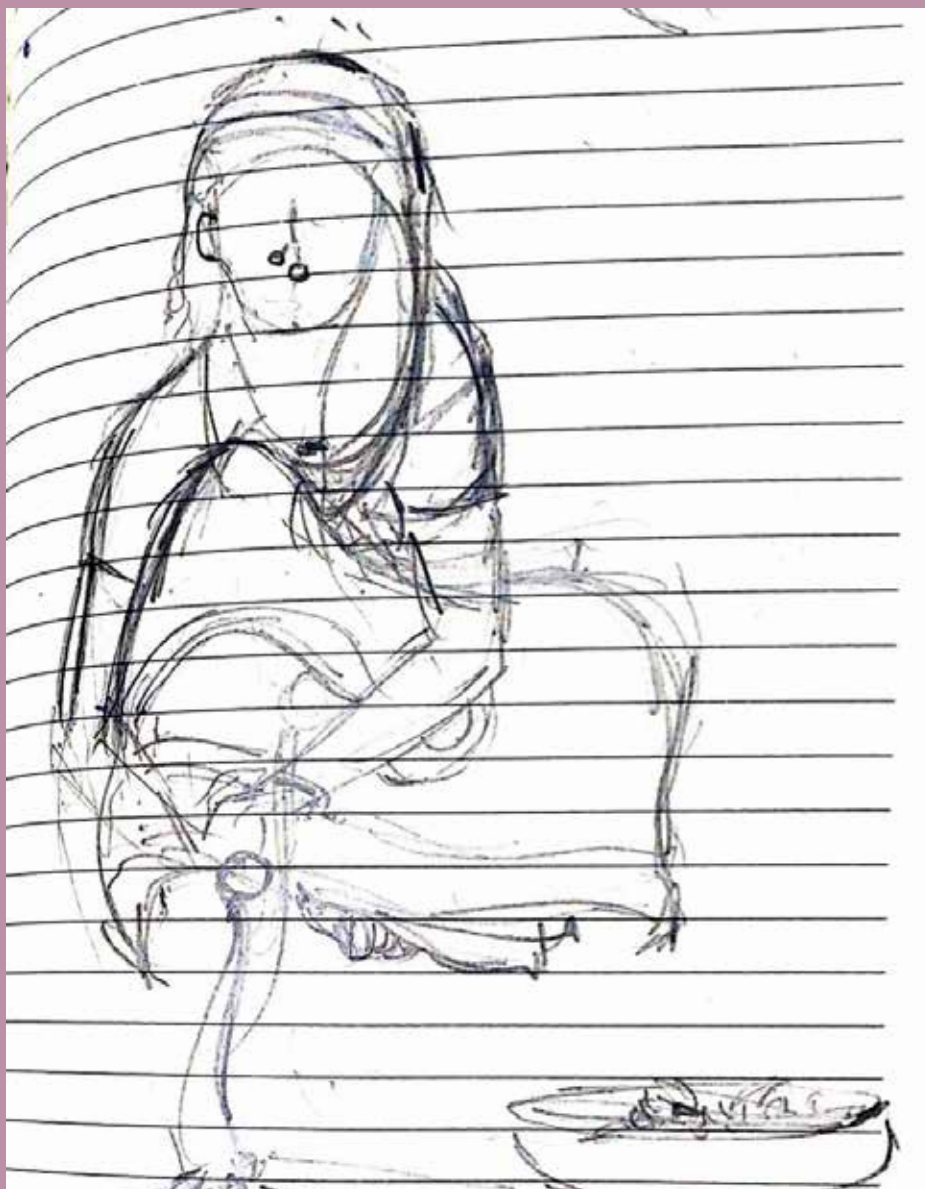
Stitching dreams on fabrics (Courtesy Ango Khabar)

Understand the struggle, prosperity and the love in the food that is served to us. If one eats mindfully, a myriad of aspects of the community will reveal themselves. As I allowed Manju's scrumptious cooking to fill my insides with delectable warmth, I realised that in India, we connect to each other through food. But at the same time, I could also sense the presence of the native Miya Muslim community of Assam in that food. Just like this Earth is our home, a home is also built in the image of this Earth. This is not merely a structure of stones and bricks which can be broken. Rather, it is a feeling, a living principle where the feminine is the foundation.

Home nurtures us. Although a home runs on multiple basic, but necessary, processes like cooking, cleaning, tradition and relationships, it is the woman who keeps a check on the purity of the household. But we live in a world where artistic expression is the primary essence of a woman's life, where she connects processes of living to the elements that surround us. Mirroring the world outside, a home is also a place where artistic expression resides in its most beautiful and unique forms. For instance, a woman works hard to fulfil the needs of every member of the family. She weaves the various dynamic relationships within a family into one thread and then gives it a splendid shape. The way she does this is the way of the artist.

The tradition of weaving stories that are passed down to generations is as deeply ingrained in the women of Char, as the lines of their palms. These women are inhabitants of the riverine islands in the regions of Bhramaputra, which are formed during monsoons through sedimentary deposits. Their stories reveal the colourful, alive and magical aspects of their lives and ways of living. However, our collective ignorance has blinded us to the sanctity of home. But for societal welfare, it is important to study the various aspects of the household. When Manju

was praying for relief in her tough times, art flowed from her. She became the source of artistic expression for the women of Char to such an extent that these womenfolk have now become storytellers. This has given their innate artistic expression a new identity. Manju just wanted some relief from the pains of life but instead, she was blessed with blossoms of art all around her. Her beauty lies in her ability to see women for who they are. Their true selves. Artists. People whose fates have kept them away from the reach of institutional education actually turn out to be masters of art, culture and environmental knowledge. This reminded me of the song of a fish seller singing in the noisy markets of Barpeta. The song was his, the tunes were his: "The Earth is my mother, the sky is my father".



Sketch of a Domestic helper in Barpeta, Assam

Chinhari: Listening to the Rhythm of the Feminine Earth

Parindey: Swarnima Kriti

Alivelihood: Social research & Community work

Region: Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh



Swarnima Kriti (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



One cannot practise any social change without a strong philosophical basis, one cannot form any philosophy which is devoid of practice. In this view, the question is not whether we need development, but why and what kind of development we need.

- Swarnima

A thinker, researcher, and community worker, Swarnima Kriti is dedicating her life to understanding and working with the Gond Adivasi community of the Northern Chhattisgarh belt. Gonds follow the process of community involvement where rights and justice are thought of in close association

with the welfare of the whole community. Based on the interdependence of all elements, their daily outlook and activities are linked to their own socio-political-cultural modes, natural habitat, and non-capitalist modes of production and consumption. In recent years, imposing a homogenised linear



Artwork depicting Chinhari by Swarnima (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

model of development enforces the image of the underdeveloped or ‘negative’ experience of living which needs to be fixed by external action. It has resulted in a loss of livelihood, ecology, and identity in these areas based on material coercion, cultural stagnation, and environmental degradation. At this crucial intersection of gender, ecology and adivasiyat, Swarnima Kriti, going through a self-transformative journey herself, asks a pertinent question: “how do we look at things?”

Hailing from Bihar, her interest in social and inner psyche began at a young age. After graduating from Indraprastha College for Women in 2013, she became a researcher with the Centre of Development Practice at Ambedkar University, Delhi. She was introduced to the philosophy of praxis, i.e. theory with action. Destined to come to the village of Mardapoti, Chhattisgarh, on 3rd January 2016 for a 10-month field immersion with absolutely no road map and a pure will to understand the community, it has now been six years since she began working with the Adivasi villages of Dokal, Mardapoti, Raipara, and Bagroomnala. In Mardapoti, she started engaging the community on water issues and slowly realised that it is not the problem of water scarcity but the problem of ‘who’ brings water. Usually, women do a larger share of household work, compromising their health, education, and self-growth. From here, she got interested in the intersection of gender and ecology. Through her involvement with the villagers, she started learning Gondi, their language, and their rituals and modes of governance. She asked herself, “Is it possible to create a space where we can think about development for ourselves and create our expressions of living and well-being?” Devising a method for feminine logic of action and bringing forth the feminine qualities of kindness,



A village meeting of women with Swarnima at night
(Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

stability, and hard work she identified the young Adivasi women as fertile ground. They are still in the curious stage of constant re-shifting, negotiating with the world, and absorbing new learnings about themselves, their community, and the outside world. A group of young women, mainly between 9 and 28, was formed in 2016 - 2017 and was later named ‘Chinhari’ in 2018, which means ‘leaving a mark’ in the local language because they think their being would leave a mark behind. Chinhari is a collective that is non-definable as it is constantly evolving and developing a methodology for its own growth. They do not disassociate themselves from their surroundings; instead, they use kindness and critical thinking to challenge the present notion of gender.

On noticing an increase in farming of hybrid crops in villages, which harmed their soil, traditional cultivation patterns and health, they initiated vegetable gardening in the plot allotted to them by the villagers behind the school. It was also a metaphor for their seeding as a group of action, woman’s assertion, hope and growth. Later, they



A morning in Gond village, Mardapoti, Chattisgarh
(Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Chinhari collective in action (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

prepared a play for the village council in which they discussed the need for the men of the village to share their workload. These activities strengthened their bonds and slowly made them self-aware of their physical and mental tendencies.

Now, organic farming is one major work of Chinhari. When the lockdown began, Swarnima began painting to let her emotions out and express herself. She shared it with the girls, and they began to find their creative freedom in colours and brush strokes, which became their collective exercise for strengthening their relationship with themselves and representing their world on paper. Besides, Chinhari meets regularly to share their worldviews and discuss each other's problems. They learn about new things, educate themselves on their body and health, stitch, study, play games, and think about their community and family issues. It is thinking about our relationship with each other and the rest of nature. They also work in a community library where they learn about their own Gond culture, history, and mythology to uphold the dignity and wisdom of their village through such practices. Swarnima presses the importance of traditional knowledge of the Gond community and tries to make these women upholders of their rural Adivasi identity rather than becoming passive agents of modernity. They work on reclaiming their language, knowledge, experience and ethos through critical, emotive and intellectual means.

Chinhari also helped in contributing to the research and cultivation of lac insects in Adivasi forests. Earlier the insect used to be cultivated using pesticides, but Chinhari collectively figured out a way through group experimentation to cultivate lac organically, which has far more ecological-economic



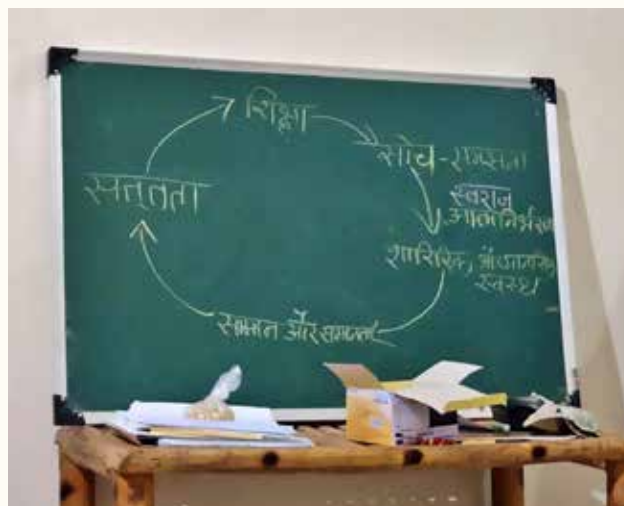
Chinhari participating in a village meeting
(Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

advantages. Thus, Chinhari is becoming a part of defining the development discourse of their villages. In this view, their action is twofold. One is to form and acknowledge their relationship with the village life, slowly identify issues to work on, and second, in the process, to gain their own identity and expression. Chinhari also started issues of a quarterly newsletter named 'Abhivyakti' in 2019, a community-based paper written by the girls to connect with the larger world and find a platform to discuss their efforts and worldviews. It builds solidarity, promotes Adivasi women's lived experiences, and gives them recognition for their work.

Chinhari, in its nature, is a dynamic and diverse force which makes it a bit unstable at times due to early marriages or dropouts of women due to family pressure. Also, not fitting into the traditional NGO format, people sometimes fail to see the depth and methodology of their work, making them face a shortage of support and funds. Being an Adivasi area, the isolated perceptions with a rapidly increasing influence of modernity in these villages



Evaluating the progress of Lac preservation in Adivasi forests
(Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Rethinking, redefining, reflecting: development for Chinhari
(Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Swarnima, Lalita and the village sarpanch reading a newsletter (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



A stall in Raja Rao Pathar mela, reversing the structure of clocks (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)


also make it challenging to work around and is a slow and time-consuming process. Swarnima reflects how it has taken years for her to form that trust, and that it happens with dedication and patience. She has established herself as a trustworthy part of their group, having been invited to weddings, rituals, and gatherings. Now, Chinhari is also invited to participate in important village decision-making. She says they do not follow a road map of empowerment but think about their progress for themselves.

Swarnima finds her inspiration from the constant source of love, hope, and learning of the girls of Chinhari. Through working on the interconnection between Adivasi, feminine and ecology, her vision is to create a philosophical Chinhari, a seed which carries its own blooming. She says that her quest is to make critical individuals as it is the only thing she could pass on to others and their communities. She hopes that wherever these girls go, they can form their own Chinhari. She dreams of it as a way of seeing the world in every village through democratic inclusion, relationship nurturing and keeping alive

the Adivasi wisdom. In a conversation with Lalitha, a Chinhari member, Swarnima says, “Instead of focusing on male dominance, we should focus on our interpersonal relationships.” Thus, Chinhari becomes a truly educative and philosophical movement, creating its discourse of self-realisation. While entering into the celebration of life and spirit at Raja Rao Pathar Mela, an annual tribal festival celebrating the legacy of dissent and identity, Swarnima’s efforts were evident in the lovely smiles of the girls, with Chinhari echoing far behind like the beats of the drum on which Adivasis celebrate their land, nature, and adivasiyat.

Swarnima Kriti can be reached at:

 swarnimakriti92@gmail.com

 https://www.instagram.com/chinhari_the_young_india

 www.chinhari.co.in



Swarnima taking a session on Gond mythology on a sunny day (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Nowadays social development revolves around materialistic belief systems rather than emotional values, which in turn takes its collective toll on society. And what are our lives, which if bereft of emotional values, cannot be used for the greater good? They are like dead branches, sans life, sans use. Here, old people talk about saving forests because, like we have nurtured and supported our children, the forests have done the same for us. Here people engage and use their hands to nurture and nourish nature. It is the same relationship that a foetus has with the womb. One night, when all the women and their daughters gathered in Mardapoti, it created an ambience of light-hearted gossip and laughter. Some asked me, "What does a camel look like?" The mixing of cultures is so unique and so is the curiosity of these women. In the discussion, empathetic questions and assurances like, "I understand your pain", "What do you need?", "Do you have any complaints?" were stressed on. I truly felt the soul of democracy alive there. And it turned out to be a highly powerful experience for me. Young girls from Chinhari would come together and discuss tribal affairs, politics and folktales among themselves. I could hear a few questions that Swarnima, along with other fellow Chinharis used to raise among each other. In my opinion, the contemplation of these questions gives birth to a very deep, precise and important way of thinking for us.

Is development a boon or bane? Is development equivalent to the accumulation of money? What is the difference among people and why does it exist? What is the state of our forests? What is the ideal system of governance most suited to villages, and what is the need for it? Are the concerns of the world our concerns? Why are our villages changing and for whom? How do we build connections? If there is no environment, how will there be songs? Can we write our own history? How do we perceive time? Why are we alienating ourselves from our villages?

Swarnima says that education is the ability to think and that it has the power to solve its own problems. Anoop was also present there. He says that we humans study everything except how to build relationships. Probably, we move forward with this question burning in our hearts, "Who is Mother?"

Time is definitely flowing in the reverse direction. Where was I in those days? Looking back, I feel that I was with the guardians of the earth and I have bathed in their prosperity and goodwill and returned. Standing in some corner of the village of Godi and witnessing the villagers' sense of cleanliness and capability, I felt redeemed. Lalita's smile and courage were the most beautiful glimpse of women's struggle for me. Swarnima was like a burning, bright ray in the dark. She was like a lamp, which when lit near the Tulsi plant in a village courtyard, lights up the whole house with its brilliant light.



The Gond symbol of religion and salutation, Dhamtari, Chattisgarh

Fostering Collective Action Against Oppression

Parindey: Vimla Vishwapremi

Alivelihood: Social activism

Region: Palampur, Himachal Pradesh



Vimla Vishwapremi (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



But first, let's listen to what the last one standing in the line has to say if we want to be guided on the right path of social progress.

- Vimla Vishwapremi

Born into a family of weavers belonging to a scheduled caste community known as Bunkar in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, Vimla Vishwapremi says that there were several mouths to feed when she was born. She began to feel that her presence was different when she went to school. Her caste was

marked by deep stigma and discrimination. She was asked to occupy the last benches in school, made to sit separately at birthday parties, do household chores from a very early age instead of focusing on her studies, and so on. Even though she was good at sports, especially volleyball and kho-kho, her coach



Mountain women with their children at home (Photo: Vimla Vishwapremi)

never supported her in going to matches or taking the lead over other students. “Day and night we were made to work in farms, graze cattle or run here and there. By the end of the day, I was too exhausted to do anything. Education was secondary for us then, and there was never really any space where we could be mentally free enough to study or even ask for that time,” she recalls.

After completing her 10th standard, she faced tremendous pressure and discouragement from all sides to leave her studies and accept her fate as a ‘Dalit woman’. But something in her made her different, conscious, and she struggled to study further and kept reading, knowing about the things that interested her. When she was young, she witnessed the death of her elder sister, who was married early without choice and tortured by her in-laws for dowry. This was the turning point in Vimla’s life, after which something within her began struggling for the dignity and rights of the oppressed, the women. During her schooling, she enrolled in a stitching camp and came across a training programme on women’s health conducted by a local NGO, and it opened new worlds for her. She used to go to women’s gatherings and speak about women’s rights, health issues etc. As an adolescent, many people did not take her seriously, and she frequently encountered derogatory comments about her gender and caste. However, she was successful in gradually forming a collective of young women in the village, who would then go around singing songs of awareness and disseminating information on important women’s issues. Vimla felt a strong

need to speak up against the very evident atrocities of caste and gender-based discrimination in her own and nearby villages, and she saw it as the only way for her to move ahead in her life. She was transforming herself through her struggle by not getting subjected to the same fate.

The women in the mountains face issues of poor livelihood opportunities, patriarchal oppression, and domestic violence. Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent evils in these societies and results in the compromise of the dignity of women and serious psychological harm to children and families. Furthermore, Dalit women bear a double burden with their caste position, making it impossible to approach or demand an equal status in society. Vimla organised women on many issues in the villages around Kandbari, Palampur etc., creating platforms for awareness and discussion where women can speak up and express themselves openly.

She first began interacting with the women who were elected panchayat representatives. However, slowly, she could see why women refrained from making any decisions. Constant reinforcement that they are inferior, incapable, and limited played a major role in their diffidence. Moreover, women from the lower castes do not manage to become a part of elected representatives in local governance, which largely remain accessible to upper-caste women. Vimla became increasingly concerned about the Dalit women of these villages, who remained on the margins amongst the marginals. Thus, she began to travel around villages with her wand of love and struggle, gathering crowds and speaking on caste-



Vimla addressing a gathering of mountain women (File photo)



Initial days of the Parvatiya Mahila Adhikar Manch (File photo)

gender issues. It was only in 2007, on International Women's Day, that elected representative women came together from a few districts of Himachal Pradesh to discuss various forms of sexual, emotional, physical, and caste-based violence, opening up a new dialogue. The women collectively felt the need to show solidarity and formed an organisation named 'Parvatiya Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch'. Led by Vimla's close guidance and effort, the organisation was a much-celebrated statement on her struggle. Slowly, developing her knowledge of the legal, political, social, psychological and economic aspects of human rights, gender, and caste, she got training as a human rights defender. She gradually brought over 1000 women as members of the

Manch. Realising the universality of her cause and focusing on the most marginalised, the Manch's name was changed to 'Parvatiya Mahila Adhikar Manch' in 2014 to reach all relevant sections.

The Manch is growing every day. Their primary aim is to provide a space for women to feel confident and a sense of belonging, which they have been denied in every other space. They have done exceptional work in raising women's consciousness of their issues and reinforcing the Dalit voice. The Manch comes to life through daily interaction with the masses, and Vimla skillfully communicates with both men and women to make her point. Lata, a domestic violence survivor now associated with the Manch, says, "My children used to be scared when there was violence at home. I have suffered my fate as a woman. Meeting Vimla ji opened the world to me. I feel this strength in me, which was not there before. Because of her, I can fight for myself and my children today without feeling like nothing is mine to call, not even my respect." Vimla has always shown concern for women's right to decision-making in giving birth and reproductive matters. She thinks that keeping women away from decision-making in these aspects is a fundamental beginning of discrimination and subjugation. Dalits too are denied self-expression in similar ways.



Various shades of struggle (File photos)

In a successful journey ahead, the Manch faces challenges such as funding to undertake programmes, difficulty in reaching remote areas, and a risk of violence and offence while dealing with sensitive cases of atrocities. Other challenges include mental and physical exhaustion, restrained action due to caste conditioning, lack of resources on the part of the organisation in providing good legal aid sometimes etc. However, Vimla believes in collective action as the supreme force and that all these factors can be overcome by the sheer will of people to fight for their cause.

Vimla envisions a space for Dalit women where they can go to in case of a violation of their rights in any capacity and where they can live with dignity and respect. It is conceived as a type of shelter home that can develop into a space where they earn their living, one that welcomes them when they have nowhere else to go. "A space where she feels free, unrestrained, loved, and respected." Establishing such a space in Himachal, amidst the natural tranquillity, can be a healing and enlightening environment for women who have been subjugated in all spheres of life.

Vimla's life and work are not separate. They are inextricably linked through living and action, with her politics manifesting itself in her personal life and her personal connections influencing her politics. Her happiness on seeing a woman do well for herself, the deep sufferings she so closely empathises with, the courage she radiates, the compassion she holds beneath the layers of rage and the sharp observance of social realities- everything flows under the abundance she has which gives her the strength to fight, magic to organise, and power to change. When asked about her favourite flower on a trip to court with a woman for a hearing of a POCSO act, Vimla replied, "Marigold. Do you know why? Look at it closely, and you will see many petals coming together into a beautiful assembly, becoming a flower. It holds so many petals together in unity, like representing a sangathan, a collective, where each petal is part of a beautiful whole."

Vimla Vishwapremi can be reached at:

✉ mdwforum@gmail.com



Vimla and women of the Manch (File photo)

Grassroots reality or an abstract concept? What would you choose? Abstract concepts are lost in their vagueness. Neither do they satiate hunger, nor quench thirst. The garden on which the course of the river has turned its back is now merely reduced to a dry, dead trail with time. The stream that brings the water to the garden, is destined to do so. The garden is destined to bloom and the colours of nature are destined to scatter on this Earth. "Didi I had never thought that my children would have to suffer in this manner!" Despite being a victim of domestic violence, the woman always thinks of others first. Her cry is the whole world's cry and I can hear that. I was coming back from Hamirpur in a car with Vimala ji and Nanki Devi. While enjoying the scenic beauty of the valleys of Himachal, I observed that Vimala ji is always in a fun-loving mood. I have noticed that whenever she sees a woman doing well for herself, she feels extremely happy. It is as if she is fighting this fight in every breath of hers. A lot of us have the ability to see, but it feels as if she is one of the few who can truly see. Her struggles and experiences with caste and gender have toughened her like fire hardens clay. She is like a vessel; she pours unconditionally and people come to her to quench their thirst. The orthodox traditions of society anger her. But if one looks closely, one can fathom how full of love even that anger is. And revolution from the ground up, from the grassroots levels can only take birth from that angst and anger which is rooted in love. She would often ask this question to the womenfolk of the village, "Where do you feel rested? What is that place where you are able to spend some time with yourselves?" But the truth is that 'me time' and a space of one's own are rare luxuries for these women. They don't have a corner to cry in peace, so the most common answer that they give is the kitchen. Or sometimes they talk to their cows and cattle. Animals are their friends, their confidants. They probably feel light-hearted after confiding in them.



With Vimla di in Palampur

Enabling the Spirit to Soar

Parindey: Fatema C

Alivelihood: Community Work & Education

Region: Palampur, Himachal Pradesh



Fatema C (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



It is not just about cutting trees but also about the kind of relationships we hold with the rest of nature. It is symbiotic, not pyramidal. We do not control everything but tend to think that we do. This experience of nature is what I want to imbibe in children.

- Fatema C

An ode to the feeling of that bird who doesn't like to be caged,

Who sings in love, who sings in rage,

Of the past she holds, of the chains she breaks,

The future for the world she nurtures, she creates,

And through her echoes far in the sky above the earth, a message to humanity.

Fatema expresses herself through her life journey of rethinking relationships and education; to follow the path of nurturing children. Fatema was born into the Bohra Muslim community in Mumbai, Maharashtra. She grew up in economically impoverished conditions and experienced the struggles that follow them. As any individual aspires, she says, "There is a notion that we have to study well, and when we grow up, settle with a good job, get married and send our children to the best schools." Apart from schooling, Fatema encountered various social-political realities that shaped her worldview, including the 1993 Bombay riots and discrimination for belonging to a minority community. She managed to complete her Bachelor's in science from a local university. However, she could not take up a Master's due

to a lack of encouragement and opportunity. She took up a job at a call centre and aspired to speak fluent English, earn well for herself, and become independent. She got married a few years after graduation, and with the birth of her son Qasim in 2010, her life took a completely new turn. After having settled down with her son, husband, and a stable income, she realised that they needed to spend more time with each other rather than get busy chasing materialistic possessions.



Fatema with her son Qasim, near a waterfall behind their home (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Exploring perceptions on education, lifestyle and money, Fatema realised that to educate her child she needed to rethink her education and foundational ideas on upbringing and schooling. Having witnessed riots, oppression, and ecological degradation, she was concerned about the kind of world being created for children to grow in. In 2011, she attended the first homeschooling conference organised by Swashikshan (<http://swashikshan.org>) at Khandala near Mumbai to explore alternatives to mainstream education for her child. She met people who practised diverse vocations and were consciously working on improving their lives and those of their children for a better world.

Observing Qasim made her realise how profoundly creative, intelligent, loving, and curious children are. After attending three homeschooling conferences, with the last one held in Palampur, they decided to leave their Mumbai-based life and move to the mountains. Something that Fatema always valued within was getting manifested. Leaving a corporate job and moving to a biodiverse landscape where they grew their food, lived with just the essentials, and rejected consumerist culture, was a tough but life-changing step for her and her family.

Her husband Mohammad got associated with Sambhaavnaa Institute (<https://www.sambhaavnaa.org>) in Palampur, and their new home on the campus of Sambhaavnaa was a conscious space for rethinking development. Slowly absorbing the surroundings, the rural community, and alternative ways of organising daily life, Fatema decided not to send Qasim to

school. The campus had a learning center where children would play. Fatema used to go there with her son. Slowly, there arose a need for a facilitator in that learning space. Her nature of nurturing and observing young souls manifested in her joining the Udaan Learning Center. 'Udaan' means flight, and Fatema's intention in her work with the children here is to enable their spirits to soar. She began directly intervening and shaping the learning process for rural children in Kangra district. She was instrumental in establishing a working philosophy for facilitating a space for children to explore themselves after school. The learning center is a space where resources are always available for children to create and learn something. "Adults keep lecturing children, but they learn through the experience and interactions with themselves and the world around them," she states.



Inside Udaan Learning Center (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)



Sambhaavnaa, situated in a valley of the Dhauladhar range, Himachal Pradesh (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

Her primary work, experiential education and building an alternative lifestyle, is supported by her inclination towards discussing environmental consciousness and sustainability. These are not new ideas but deeply engraved in our ancient culture and experiential reality. For instance, “If we ask children to save water, teach about pollution, but keep them away from the landscape, how will they ever learn to care for or protect something that they haven’t experienced?” asks Fatema. Conventional schools ignore the emotional parameter of the child, and they do not include the awareness of social and environmental degradation.

Along with her team at Udaan, she accentuated the importance of experiential and context-related learning and critical thinking. She designed and facilitated creative learning sessions with the local children and conducted environmental consciousness camps where children from different parts of the country joined. These camps were designed with a focus on biodiversity to understand the myriad ways in which the natural world and the human world are connected. She facilitated sessions on interdependence in nature, plastic pollution, pottery, carpentry, bird watching and gardening to emphasise learning through the harmony of head, heart and

hands. Her pedagogy was to nurture critical thinking and scientific inquiry skills in children.

While making Christmas cards, Fatema says, “People see it only as paper cutting and pasting. But in the process, I am trying to bring attention towards the feeling of sharing, knowing about the world, respecting each other, listening to inner creativity, improving the quality of attention, and expressing emotions in a welcoming way.” The mindset is not to equip children with the English language and other skills, but to try to tap their own needs and aid them.

“The center has undergone many changes, and our blood and sweat have placed each stone over the other. It is not just a physical space, it is a feeling.” The place breathes life back to anyone who visits it by reawakening their creative energy and the need for innocence, colours, and expression. Facilitating learning is challenging as each child’s psychological and social needs are unique. Leading a sustainable life comes with its complexities in growing market culture, with difficulty in procuring clean food, electricity, and resources at the right value. “The mainstream is not just concerned with education, it is a competitive, alienating way of life that seeks to control the environment. Parents work to earn money



Fatema interacting with children from nearby villages (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

to ensure their children's future security, but in the process, they do not have time to spend with them. The question is whether children require material comforts or their time. By prioritising money, how are we contributing to the child's growth?" she inquires.

She wishes to contribute to the idea and practice of holistic education and asserts that if one works with children right from their childhood, a lot can be saved. She feels that she has re-lived her life after her child's birth, having taken up a firm and compassionate responsibility for providing a nurturing ground to lead and pass on a sustainable lifestyle. Believing that travel is one of the best ways to grow and relate, she began travelling across India with Qasim to learn more about themselves and to expose him to a different educational experience. As the basic needs for food, clothing and shelter are satisfied by the environment, she asks how education can be disconnected from the environment and asserts the need to make our surroundings a part of the educational process itself. She believes in learning to take charge of the environmental responsibility that we all share. Fatema envisions a future where more conscious spaces can be created by collaborating and volunteering to design educational modules, working towards her desire to learn more and creating a generational link of conscious education through environmental learning.

Fatema comes alive in her love for and awe of the little beautiful things of the natural world. Her

engagement in local knowledge systems; interest in growing food, exploring different crafts, and creating handmade artefacts; concern towards human-environmental degradation; paying complete attention to children and becoming a part of their growth; discussing various life perspectives with Qasim; and wishing to travel the world speaks of the learning methodologies she practices in her daily life. Her efforts are for protecting the heart and soul of human civilisation i.e., its children, by doing her bit in their education. From this perspective, Fatema considers motherhood as her most dignified work. For the world, she is a true educator, lighting our paths to collective wisdom and safeguarding our world's future.

In one of the activities, Fatema gathered children around a tree and asked them to write a message to humanity on their cards and use them to decorate the tree. The smile on her face while reading those cards later is a true reward that one can receive for one's work. One of the cards wished for a healthy and happy family and another one read "bea good".

Fatema can be reached at:

✉ fatema@sambhaavnaa.org

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/udaanlearningcenter>

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/udaanlearningcenter>

🌐 <https://www.udaanlearningcenter.org>



Spreading colours, spreading smiles (Photo: Ridhima Agarwal)

If you think about it, it appears as if a new meaning of development is being made where a better life means buying more things. Nowadays parents spend their entire lives expanding their earning capacity. To be able to afford everything, from good education to cool gadgets, for their child(ren). Have our collective identities merely been reduced to consumers, where development is measured only by our ability to buy and consume more and more things? But this story seems half-baked, with many aspects behind it. Our current education system pushed us to subscribe to this story. But we are not machines. We are the sum total of uncountable and immeasurable emotions, relations, cultures and dreams. The intention behind educating one's children is noble but it is often forgotten to take into account the real relationship between things; that of a teacher with their environment, of living with needs, of culture with behaviour and of the present with the future. Without preserving the culture which is born out of our earth, forests and traditions, how is the right nurture possible? Children observe us closely and interpret the meaning of this world from us. Their laughter brings our tired souls back to life.

One day, Kasim asked Fatema, "Mummy, by the time I grow up, all the trees in the forest will be gone. Then what will we do?" Every person, whether it is through their name or actions, leaves a legacy behind before leaving this planet. Usually, they carry out this task of leaving something behind in the form of their offspring. What kind of a planet are we leaving for them? Keeping this thought in mind, Fatema guides us as a teacher. She listens to the inner being of children very carefully and talks with nature. After Kasim's birth, she started trying to build a world where Kasim could be safe. She says Kasim has given her a new life. And she is in the favour of using this gift of life rather than wasting it away. She believes that we are responsible towards our environment and education. Fatema knows how to drink the nectar of life well and teaches the same to children. When she is with the village kids, it gives rise to a golden ray of hope for humanity which carries in it the promise of a revived tomorrow.



Walking with Fatema on a street in Watlar, Kashmir

Epilogue

I have had a chance to become a part of various diverse landscapes, conversations and ways of life itself. They include urban homeless shelters, Adivasi hinterlands, middle-class bourgeois cafes, student activist circles, and more. I have also witnessed various degrees and intensities of how we express ourselves in a community. Looking back I remember neither names nor issues but only the dust of the roads shaping the faces I interacted with. No matter what my given topic of research was at that point, I would always end up asking one question to the person in front of me, which again was from such diverse backgrounds and experiences that my heart is overwhelmed thinking about the gaps through which the connection is built. I would ask, "What is it that you look forward to and want for yourself in this beautiful life?" The method and dialect of the question would change with context and so did the responses, but the answer would always be, "We want a good life for our children and a secure future for them." Maybe therein lies the ancientness of our link with community. No matter how greedy the institutions and lifestyles become over time, somewhere on a very fundamental level, we still are a species which lives for and wants to protect its generations and community. We tend to nurture the future that is going to come. And I hope these stories illuminate the interconnectedness of various aspects of daily life. There lies the concern and love which I have also felt physically in a village somewhere, on the folded palms of an old lady's hands.

I thank my mother for teaching me service, my father for enabling me to study, my sister for support, Travellers' University for the vision and guidance, my friends for companionship and laughter, and all the souls I have met on this journey who have graced this path of knowing, being and doing with their presence and abundance.

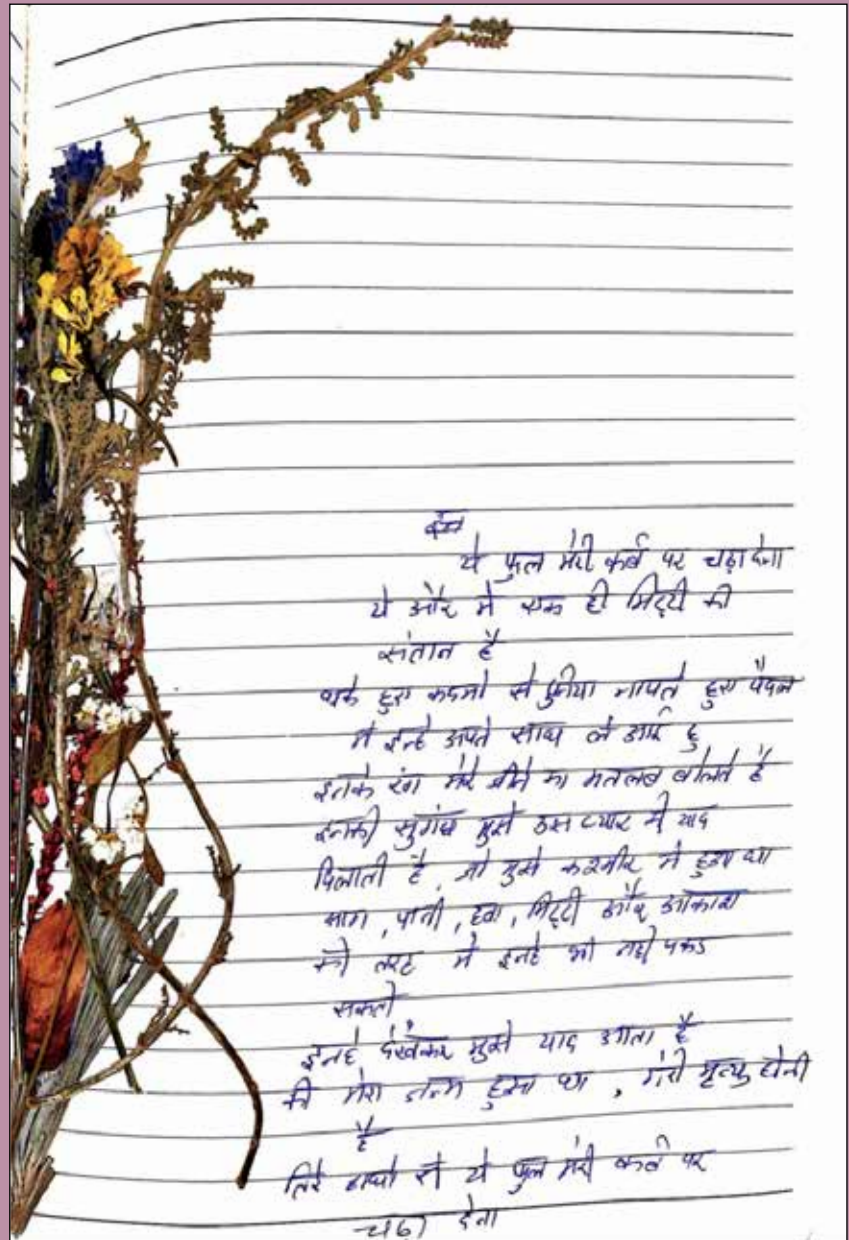


Photo Gallery



Sorting thyme leaves with Ruth in Champawat, Uttarakhand



Understanding how to weave on a loom with Rupsi in Jaito, Punjab

Attending an evening learning school run by local ngo in char, Barpeta, Assam



Picking cherries from tree in Sagg eco campus, Watlar, Kashmir





Professor Anup, Swarnima and Ridhima in front of a traditional gond home, Dhamtari



Eating Dham in Palampur with Vimlaji

Riverside settlements of Brahmaputra valley, Barpeta



Saumya

Ernakulam, Kerala

Food Systems & the Politics of Food

Saumya is an intersectional feminist who is vocal about the relationship between mental health, feminism and environment conservation and likes to interact with people working in such spaces. She studied History, then Social Work and worked for a non-profit and realised her vocation does not fit into an organisational space, but in Alivelihood spaces. As part of the 52 Parindey Fellowship, she explored food systems in seven Indian states and experienced the diversity, humanity, and love at each location. Her initial focus on food systems and sustainability has now expanded to cover conservation, activism, and value addition in different forms.



“ “ Defining my learning journey around food systems and environmental sustainability in a coherent, linear manner would be a puzzling activity. Each Parindey was an experience, that expanded my comfort zone to include more humans, more nature-based practices, and more hope for the future. It has led me to believe in Alivelihoods as Alive-lihoods; livelihoods that make one feel alive and in sync with the rest of nature. At the same time, the political, social, economic, and gender dynamic that defined the Alivelihood of each Parindey added more depth to my journey. I hope more people turn towards Alivelihoods and take inspiration from the Parindeys.

Prologue

Herein, I invite you into my world of uncertainties and hope, of fear and courage.

Before the 52 Parindey Fellowship, I was on an explorative journey around environmental sustainability and individual role in conscious decision-making. Institutional education in History and Social Work had driven in me a sense of upholding constructive traditions and supporting communities. But, I did not have clarity on a niche area of focus for this. I was an explorer lost in the vast sea of environmental sustainability. I was also getting disillusioned by the absence of tangible results of my actions and thought processes. I explored waste segregation, gardening, natural building, painting, writing, therapy, music, and movies and then got comfortable telling people about these. At the same time, none of this happened in a linear tangent—uncertainty, imposter syndrome, mental health issues, and disconnect from social interactions affected the flow and frequency of my involvement and interest in explorations.

As the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic started getting lifted in 2021, I started getting anxious about what to do for a means of livelihood. I had a list of organisations, individuals and theories that I could visit, study and explore. But, there was no sense of where to start or even the confidence that I was capable of starting something of my own. In the middle of this, I came across the invitation for the 52 Parindey Fellowship. The initial response was to check the application process and tell myself that I am incapable. I got out of this self-loathing when a friend joked that I should probably not try it out because it would be out of my league. A challenge and the need to get back at somebody drove me to apply. And as I started the procedure, the butterflies in my stomach that tell me something good is about to happen started fluttering.

The lack of direction and a fear of asking for support had held me back long enough. The knowledge that I would be working with people who I had already met and knew made me go ahead with the application. I also had the belief that Travellers' University practises what it preaches in terms of ideologies and the approach towards travel. At that moment I needed a safe space for interactions and hand holding and direction for my explorations and questions.

While applying I felt the need to explore waste management and food systems, going on to write the story of a waste collector as part of the application. Each interview as part of the application was a test and flare-up of my anxiety and fear of interaction. I started to realise how much the lockdown had affected me, but then I got accepted to the fellowship. I attended the orientation workshop where I met a whole new set of humans, ate with them, became vulnerable with them, and trusted them. Numerous discussions and sessions later, I decided to focus on food systems and environmental sustainability. I realise now that feeding people is my love language, but at the time of the orientation it was a question that I felt unclear about. Segregating waste, connecting to organisations that support the management of waste, and spreading awareness about the issue were all things I had already done. But when it came to food systems I felt lacunae in that I had experienced it through a myopic urban lens. I grew up in a migrant house feeling disconnected from my ancestral land and the land that I was brought up in. In the minimal time I would get in the region where my blood family grew up, I would experience stories and food that were different from what I would experience in the land I was growing up in otherwise. Every year the two months of vacation from school were the time for me to experience a cuisine my birth mother called home, greenery that always felt deeper, and water straight from the well and not a machine. It was also the time my grandmother would keep aside jackfruit from the harvest of the year, for my birth mother. Food is what I associated with belongingness and love. These thoughts went through my head when I decided I wanted to delve deeper into growing food, the access to it, the socio-economic layers that affect decisions around food, and the structures that are built around it.

Map of Saumya's Journey



| | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | G. Nanadakumar and G. Anilkumar | Organic Farming | Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh |
| C | Akash Badave | Organising Organic Farmers | Dantewada, Chhattisgarh |
| D | Jeewika Bhat | Permaculturist and Eco-preneur | Bir, Himachal Pradesh |
| E | Purvi Vyas | Organic Farming | Kheda, Gujarat |
| F | Bhairab Saini | Organic Farming, Activism & Conservation | Bankura, West Bengal |
| G | Mandar Deshpande | Organic Farming | Wardha, Maharashtra |
| H | Dr K. G. Sreeja | Paddy farming, Climate change Research & Consulting, Thrissur, Kerala | |
| I | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

Learning the Organic Way

Parindey: G. Nanadakumar and G. Anilkumar

Alivelihood: Organic Farming

Region: Madanapalle, Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh



We would do organic farming at Marudam but the farming we did at my village was with chemicals. I did not see a better future in my village. I was worried about my village.

- G. Nandakumar



We have so many trees and birds and hills here, I sometimes catch myself thinking that all of it will be replaced with big buildings. It is a scary thought.

- G. Anilkumar



Nanda and Anil at their field (Photo: Saumya)

Nanda and Anil, young brothers from Diguvapalem, have their share of fears and worries rooted in our country's present political and economic climate. Gopanavaripalli, officially known as Diguvapalem, is a small village a few kilometres away from the sub-urban settlement of Thettu. Anil and Nanda embarked on the journey to re-imagine their village as self-sufficient; revive the connection of the villagers with the land that cultivates their food, the water that quenches their thirst, and the air that they breathe.

The first residents of Gopanavaripalli (which loosely translates as "the village of cow caretakers") were a few farmers who had travelled from the village of Thettu to hunt wild boars. The availability of fertile land, space for their expanding families to live comfortably and the serene view made them settle here permanently. The village now has 27 houses, where the progeny of the original inhabitants now live.

The Rishi Valley School (<https://www.rishivalley.org>) was set up in Madanapalle in 1926 by J. Krishnamurti, philosopher, speaker and writer, with the intention to build a culture to consider education beyond institutional learning as a means of holistic growth. The school has impacted the perception of learning among villagers. Teachers from Rishi Valley often visit the village to interact with the children and provide support in their areas of interest. It was at the behest of one of these teachers that Nanda and Anil decided to change their life's trajectory.

As kids, the brothers often lent a hand at their father G. Narasimhulu's farm. One of the teachers from Rishi Valley School, a good friend of their father's, suggested that Nanda be sent to Marudam Farm School (<https://marudamfarmschool.org>) in Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu- a school where his interest in farming could be mentored and he could also gain connections with like-minded youngsters. Nanda and his father had already been discussing ways to shift from their present chemical-based farming process into an organic one. His father had been influenced by Subhash Palekar, the person who introduced the concept of zero-budget natural farming to the world. Hence, the suggestion made by the teacher was easily accepted.

Nanda initially planned to stay at Marudam Farm School for three months, but that extended to three years. At the school, his roles changed from volunteer

to student to teacher. The diversity of activities at the school such as nature walks, creative sessions, and organic farming, coupled with a supportive staff awakened his desire to set up a similar space in his village. Nanda got his brother Anil to join Marudam while he was in the 10th standard. Anil gradually developed an interest in nature photography there. This was a marked difference from a child hunting birds and insects and indulging in fights to a person thinking consciously about his actions. Anil later decided to return to the village and join the work Nanda had started by then. The learnings and experiences from Marudam school propelled the brothers to return to their village and venture into community-based impactful activities.

The brothers were aware that moving from chemicals towards organic farming would not happen in a day's time. They figured that they had ideologies, practices, and behaviours to revise, rethink and re-imagine. As a first step, Nanda decided to develop a sense of togetherness among the people and then put forward his ideas. Over the years, community celebrations of festivals had become restricted to individual families only. Ganesha Chaturthi marked the beginning of Nanda's efforts; he somehow convinced the youth of the village to celebrate together, by collecting money from each house to bring a common Ganesha for the village. It was a success as the songs and dances were liked by everyone. With each passing year, the



Nanda and Anil with their mother during a construction activity (Photo: Saumya)

celebration became a means for people to interact, get over their differences and build an annual event to look forward to.

At present, the villagers refer to Nanda as “youth leader”, with many people working closely with him. The collective identity of belonging to the same region, religion and caste, and relating to similar stories inculcated a sense of belongingness among the youth who have slowly opened up to discussions around staying back in the village and reviving traditional farming practices as an alternative to moving to the city. The brothers have led by example by coming back to the village and not choosing city life; discussions on amenities in the city are being replaced by discussions on the next project to start in the village. Together, they have fought forest fires in the surrounding hills. The youth in the village have now started taking the initiative to come together to protect the hills, which Nanda sees as a big step towards conservation.

Nanda’s and Anil’s shared interest in healthy food made them slowly turn to growing more organic produce on their farm. From buying seeds from Auroville-based seed conservationists Deepika and Bernard to fetching native rice seeds from Vijayram, an organic farmer from Hyderabad, people and places were explored to derive resources to support their cause. Rain-fed crops such as groundnuts, red gram, horse gram, etc., were already being grown without the need for harmful inputs. The traditional method of using cows for ploughing the land, broadcasting seeds by hand, and harvesting using human resources, etc. are also employed in the farmland. They recently installed a greywater harvesting system. The filtered waste product is used in the fields as fertiliser. However, this experiment is yet to find any takers among the other farmers.

The children of the village were also roped in for conversations impacting their future, during which they expressed their interest in having their own space to experiment, delve into thoughts, or as



The hills before and after tree plantation drives (Photos: G. Anilkumar)

they say, “find ways to stay away from television”. Subsequently, a learning centre was constructed, ideated from possible solutions to the problems mentioned by the children. In addition, were activities to connect with nature. Two teachers were recruited as well, who went way beyond book learning and teach stitching, painting, singing, and more. Marudam Farm School and a few of their friends pooled in to ensure remuneration and supplies for the teachers.

Furthermore, a tree nursery was also started to regenerate the hills which were seeing a fast depletion of green cover due to forest fires and grazing. The weekly nature walks from the learning centre served as tree plantation drives. The children collect seeds from the existing trees during the fruiting season and germinate them in the nursery and then plant the saplings on the hills during monsoon time. In the last four years, almost 600-700 trees have been planted so far. Closer to the plantation site, an area was cleared to build an artificial pond for rainwater to collect. As support, the villagers have agreed to not let their livestock graze in the sections where tree plantations have been done. The regeneration of the hills and water conservation are looked at as community needs now by the villagers.

The brothers have kept the village at the centre of their initiatives, with an aspiration to make it into a self-sustaining one, creating a system that sustains everyone’s needs. A system that is worlds apart from the present situation of market forces controlling farming practices, discouraging the growing of cash crops in an organic way, or keeping only sheep for livestock. Setting up cooperative stores is the next big agenda for them; this will not only reduce household demand for cooking oil, and sugar that is procured from cities, but also a commonplace would

be established for the farmers to sell their organic produce free from plastic packaging. The store would also seek produce from neighbouring villages and the plan is to develop an interdependent support system among the nearby villages. Moreover, the market for organic produce has suffered since the quantities are too small for larger markets to accommodate, and the sales have largely happened through personal networks. The stores would compensate for such challenges as well.

The quest from Gopanavaripalli to Marudam and back was a long one infused with varied explorations, connections, and reflections. The learnings at Marudam continue to shape their initiatives. The two brother’s idea of development is not in the manner of the mainstream definition of profit and losses but based on human connections and inherent worth and self-reliance. In the centre of it, is the desire to survive with dignity with one’s own people and one’s own traditions and stories. The aspirations sold to the youth from televisions and social media are something that they had to fight against. This sense of community with their fellow humans and environment has guided some youth to return back to their village. Transformation, and transcending towards greener hills, shifting to organic farming and the ambition of the villagers to not migrate, is an obvious take on Nanda’s and Anil’s accomplishments; extending more by their continued efforts, initiatives and conversations.

Nanda and Anil can be reached at:

✉ nandudhanush7@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/diguvapalem.project>

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/nandakumar588>

📷 https://www.instagram.com/nature_lessons_

In the context of the village where the younger generation had started migrating to the cities in search of work, the image of two young men striving to make their village self-sustainable was inspiring to see. This made me look at their context of farming as a livelihood both in terms of the livelihood and the life they were bringing back to the village. Farming as an act of revolution starts from the resistance of so-called better aspirations in cities and extends to toiling the land and beyond. The awareness that for future generations to have a village to call their own and have decision-making powers over food, a system has to be set up now- is a thought process that I am still to understand the nuances of.



Hallikar and Gir breeds of cows, native to the region, herd together as they move towards the nearby hills. The paths in the village have not been cemented over and are still the stone slabs that the ancestors who found the village had laid. The village was a reminder of resilience in the face of a fast-changing world.

The Commons of Dantewada

Parindey: Akash Badave

Alivelihood: Organising Organic Farmers

Region: Dantewada, Chhattisgarh



Akash Badave (Photo: Saumya)

The official government website of Dantewada district mentions it as one of the oldest inhabited places in India, courtesy of the tribal communities that have lived there for centuries. Their traditional belief in nature as the mother has ensured their unity against political and economic forces encroaching on the region's natural resources. Their culture of decentralised decision-making regarding common resources was the seed for 'Bhoomgaadi', a collective of organic farmers in Dantewada.

The idea for Bhoomgaadi was initiated by Akash Badave, based on the belief in commons in nature and the passion to set everything right on humanitarian grounds for an environmentally

sustainable society. He is the third generation of a family believing in active social work, following the ideals of Sarvodaya, the development of all based on equality and liberty.

From his school days, Akash immersed himself in acts that helped identify thoughts and norms that need to be altered for a better world. While pursuing engineering, he became more aware of what he did not want to be a part of; he craved more human-centric and ground-level efforts that did not solely depend on technology.

He gained an understanding that though there exist multiple solutions for social and environmental



Akash with organic produce at a farmer's meeting (Photo: Jaswinder Singh)

issues, they were not being followed or implemented. He indulged in readings and research on the same. Soon, he was able to define sustainable development as “satisfying one’s own needs while being in harmonious coexistence with the rest of nature.” Hitherto it was just the start of his further exploration.

He participated in Shodh yatra (<https://www.sristi.org/shodhyatra/>), a journey to rural India in search of knowledge, creativity, and innovations that helped him to relate to issues and their solutions with better clarity of thought. The experiences and reflections culminated in his application for the Prime Minister’s Fellowship in 2012, which allowed him to explore sustainable livelihoods at Dantewada in Chhattisgarh, his assigned location as a PM Fellow. Along with the District Collector at that time, Akash collaborated on several initiatives aimed at the betterment of the farmers such as the revival of organic farming and training on new techniques to improve yield. These training sessions by the Agricultural Department and Akash’s team initiated conversations among farmers on how they reimagined their land and community. After some sessions and reflections, the farmers were in a place to be able to question the agriculture department about the Department’s earlier stance on using chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Previously in the wake of the Green revolution, toxic-chemical-based fertilisers and pesticides were promoted in villages by the department. Yet, very few farmers would use these as they already had good yields and did not feel the need to use them. The transition of several farmers to use these pesticides and fertilisers was the result of a lack of access to markets and the desire to make produce last longer.

In 2012, Akash and the then District collector started the revival of organic farming in a few villages of the district. The same agricultural officers would promote toxic fertilisers in one village and promote organic fertilisers in another. This irony was not lost on the farmers who could see the difference in their lands.

Continuous imparting of knowledge and learning from experiences led to a historic moment in 2016 when the farmers as a group demanded that the then agriculture minister of Chhattisgarh deny permits to private stakeholders to sell chemical fertilisers and pesticides in their region. It was a moment of solidarity among farmers, their questions about the contradictions in the approach of the agriculture department could not be ignored, considering they came from a group that had always been non-confrontational.

This brought to the fore other issues: how to ensure stable productivity? Who would buy organic produce? How would the farmers get out of the middlemen’s circle?

Previously, certain farmers had been slowly losing the urge to continue organic farming due to the onset of the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS). The PDS would not procure red rice varieties like sathka, meher, rakhi or jondhra that were predominantly grown and consumed in the area as well as the vegetables that are grown in the region. Furthermore, farmers who did not depend on the government to sell their produce had to depend on middlemen who paid very low rates to the farmers while making huge profits in outside markets. To ensure that the farmers continued organic farming, introducing them to new, locally relevant and sustainable technologies along with continuous handholding was necessary.

These issues prompted resolutions; In 2016 Akash with a group of farmers decided to set up a Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO), ‘Bhoomgaadi’, in the name of the local tribal festival celebrating yield and harvest. The structure of Bhoomgaadi was designed to increase food security and sustained income for the farmers along with a potential market. In addition, the organisation offered employment for those skilled in documentation, accountancy, mechanical works, etc.

Akash has been the link between the Government and the people. His experience with the government eased out the setup and functioning of the organisation. It also helped allow for collaborations and resource mobilisation: Vacant government buildings being used to store produce before the sale, and women’s self-help groups under National Rural Livelihood Mission collaborated to clean and sort the produce. Partnerships have also been built with NGO Nirmaan (<https://nirmaan.org>), for supporting the farmers on the field, through their field team called Jaivik Karyakartas.

Bhoomgaadi ensures that the farmers are supported right from sowing time to the sale process and their efforts are rewarded in a fair market space. Every year, Bhoomgaadi does market analysis on Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the prevalent rates which is then discussed with its board of directors, who are organic farmers from the region themselves. The farmers are also supported by providing diverse native seeds such as oilseeds, vegetables, millets, varieties of paddy, etc. and encouraged to exchange these among themselves. They are encouraged to



Farmers selling produce from their farms at Geedham market (Photo: Saumya)

grow vegetables and keep a share of the harvest and seeds for their consumption and safekeeping. To restore the connection with traditionally cooked meals, Bhoomgaadi also runs Café Aadim which is managed completely by members of the local community.

“Food is a core cultural aspect, which is not easy to influence. A lot of it has to do with identity, caste and culture. The region where you come from, the geography, agro-climatic conditions, etc. influence the food systems.”

- Akash Badave

The region's population consists mainly of tribal communities- the Maria and the Muria who depended majorly on forest produce. Other communities like the Halba and Gondi have been agriculture-oriented along with non-tribals like the Dhakar, Raut, Kalar, etc., people from Scheduled Caste communities, and a few people from Brahmin communities. The diversity of the population is reflected in the food practices: a mix of forest produce, cultivated food and a meat-based diet.

However, with the influx of urbanised educators, missionaries and government officials, the food system changed gradually. There was also a feeling of inferiority that developed as a result of the presence of the outsiders.

In such a context, it became imperative to relearn self-reliance in communities that have historically been frontline protectors of forests and livelihoods. Bhoomgaadi believes in collaboration between the locals and well-meaning outsiders to make it completely farmer-run.

For years, the communities have practised the belief that “if I put anything bad on my land, it will harm my neighbour's land and harvest”, as stated by an organic farmer, who along with a few others had continued to practice organic farming even after the implementation of schemes pushing toxic chemical-based farming. These farmers were instrumental in bringing up conversations about the shared land, water, and air of the community, which constitutes the commons. This awareness and learning of the rules of commons that support their life have led to the farmers uniting towards building resilience and sustaining themselves and the rest of nature around them.



Akash with board members of Bhoomgaadi (Courtesy Bhoomgaadi)

Even though the market that Bhoomgaadi connects the farmers to is part of the same system of profit-making, their processes are starkly opposite. There is considerable autonomy and decision-making power among everyone involved in the farming and value-addition process from start to end. Akash has immersed himself to ensure all aspects at Bhoomgaadi are interconnected activities and has invested in creating a vibrant community-based organisation.

The future plans of Bhoomgaadi are to make the organisation more self-reliant and free from any external control. Regular training, conversations, and interactions about the larger context are intended to expand the skill base of the farmers and increase their participation in administrative

work. Furthermore, it is hoped that the 120 villages that Bhoomgaadi works with would become the catalyst to get the Dantewada district to be declared as organic, while still ensuring transparency and authenticity during organic certification. The possibility of neighbouring districts receiving support for organic farming, setting up farmer-producer companies, and getting organic certification is also being looked at.

Akash can be reached at:

✉ akashsbadave@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/bhoomgaadidantewada>

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/bhoomgaadi>

Here was a society - a common love for the land and its resources, one that pushed the government to ban artificial fertilizers completely. There was a relatively higher level of independence for women to make life decisions, and freedom to choose partners and live-in relationships were accepted in some communities, especially the tribal communities. Caste differences though practised in the villages are ignored in common workspaces, especially in meetings for decisions pertaining to land. Yet, I feel hopeful knowing that the people are connected and grounded in their relationship with food and traditional livelihoods. Farmers with large areas and farmers who have been thrown out of their lands, continue to grow food in whatever bit of soil they have. They live with the common consensus that what goes into one's land will affect the neighbours' land, water and food. And, hence the belief in jaivik krishi (organic farming) still survives.



Each village of Dantewada comes with its own story of an experience with political intervention, mainland invasion and misrepresentation in the media. The bridge newly built for the mining companies to extend their area of control to a new village, across a river, over the bodies of individuals called Naxals, stands witness to the resistance that has shaped the past and present of Dantewada.

Sowing Seeds of Ecocentrism

Parindey: Jeewika Bhat

Alivelihood: Permaculturist and Eco-preneur

Region: Bir, Himachal Pradesh



Jeewika Bhat (Photo: Saumya)

It is often rare to meet someone who aptly suits their name- “an aptonym!” Jeewika (Hindi for livelihood or the one who gives life) is one such being. As an educator-ecofeminist-farmer-ecopreneur, she has been practising permaculture, natural farming, and nature-based healing for over 3 years now. Presently, she resides in a small village in Upper Bir, Himachal Pradesh. Her decision to move from urban life to a mountainous rural one was not

just about romanticising the view, clean air, or slow life but about growing her own food, uphill hikes to fetch supplies, and encouraging the locals to sync with their roots in the village. Tenacious tasks, yet worth the effort!

Jeewika is qualified in ecology and environmental management coupled with experiences in sustainability and carbon reporting, community mobilisation, training and facilitation, natural



Jeewika's painting of her vision for the World (Photo: Saumya)

farming, and an eco-friendly lifestyle. Her endeavours at Bir include working and learning at Shunya Farm (<https://www.facebook.com/shunyafarmbir>) – a dedicated place for permaculture and natural farming. Permaculture, in practice, is an amalgamation of conscious design and maintenance of agricultural ecosystems that follows principles with the potential of being useful to humans across different domains. The design philosophy can be replicated to create layouts for organisations, businesses and/or even one’s life trajectories.

The dissemination of the knowledge of the philosophies of permaculture, and natural farming as well as of indigenous food systems among the local people have been Jeewika’s purpose of being. She envisages communities delving into egalitarian, and ecocentric thoughts, and taking decisions keeping in mind the rest of nature while respecting the abundance in nature. She considers families as a unit that should be free from gender norms and practice equitable division of labour among individuals while also being spaces for learning. This vision is inspired by the concept and theories practised in permaculture – earth care, people care and fair share. Her vision is a culmination of experiences at the farm on three levels:

- Building of perspective that moves beyond just crops and food, in fact, moves towards soil life,



Matasharan conducting a session during farm tours at Shunya (Courtesy Shunya Farm)

balancing groundwater, and more.

- Understanding the social aspects of the region, the dynamics and gendered space while navigating the challenges of existing in a culturally diverse community,
- Inputs on the health-based parameters on the what, how and when to eat.

Shunya farm was started in 2013, on the principles of permaculture and natural farming by an American couple, Dr Spero and Robin. Over the years, the farm has transitioned through several farmers and has evolved through each person’s ideas



Shunya Farm, Bir, Himachal Pradesh (Courtesy Shunya Farm)

and perspectives. The work at the farm has been influenced by Masanobu Fukuoka's natural way of farming and permaculture design. The belief in a holistic culture that considers the dimensions of spirituality, social relationships, and ecology has been at the foundation of this work.

The only constant contributor to the farm was Matasharan, a local farmer. He is a family man who has been instrumental in organising and managing Shunya farm. His discord with city life made him return to the village and engage in farming as a way for a slow-paced routine, an example of reverse migration or as Jeewika calls it ruralisation. Matasharan has been a source of inspiration for Jeewika to explore her Kashmiri roots and the food systems that her grandmother had built and maintained around her. She started incorporating the traditional style of cooking, masalas, preservation techniques, and food-related community activities such as seed-saving, drying vegetables, etc. into her daily life. She further got to explore the local food systems in Bir through several women whom she met during her community visits. These experiences encouraged her to add the aspect of learning space to the farm.

The farm is located in Upper Bir. Over the years, non-local urban residents who tour to Bir and foreign nationals practising Tibetan Buddhism, have become the main consumers of the farm produce. In addition to this, the farm invites volunteers to develop their own understanding of food systems and to support the day-to-day activities of the

farm. The basic techniques of farming are taught to visitors and volunteers by Matasharan and Jeewika. The tours conducted within the farm by her have been impactful, as many visitors either contribute to the farm or incorporate elements of organic farming, herb gardens, permaculture, etc. into their own food gardens and daily lives.

These experiences, insights and learnings from volunteering, observation, community interactions and imbibing theories of permaculture in life decisions have added to the quality of life of Jeewika. She shares how the farm has made her more empathetic and patient and helped her let go of things outside her control. The use of hands whether for cooking, plucking weeds, knitting, or working with compost or soil has taken a therapeutic form. There is aliveness and increased consciousness to daily existence, and that has led to the birth of her organisation 'Seeds and Deeds'.

"Seeds and Deeds is an outcome of all the short-term and long-term learning experiences I have had, ranging from exploring the worldly concepts of development, education, politics, economy and societal constructs to the ecological concepts of biodiversity, health, wellbeing, geography, and growing food, to diving deep into the world within. It originates from a personal desire to seek truth and wisdom of both the inner world and the outer."

'Seeds and Deeds' is being built on the idea of promoting ecological intelligence by tapping into the existing knowledge of individuals and communities. It looks at aspects of expanding eco-intelligence by involving the body as well. It is based on Jeewika's deeper sense of the need to initiate conversations about less spoken issues surrounding environmental sustainability, ecological systems, eco-consciousness, and living in sync with the rest of nature.

Traditionally, women have been associated with roles that are ecocentric or nurturing like bearing a child, taking care of the household, ensuring the health of the family, etc. The intersections between food and feminism and ecology, referred to as the eco-feminist aspects of food are one of the central themes at Seed and Deeds. Herein, nature is synonymous with feminine attributes that are life-giving and sustaining. This ecocentrism is reflected in the organisation's values where the focus is health, education, seed sovereignty and equal decision-making power.



Winters are a time to bask in the sun and dry and store vegetables for the coming year. (Photo: Saumya)



Jeewika explaining composting to a participant at a session by Seeds and Deeds (Photo: Saumya)

There are two main educational and reflection-based workshops that translate the values of the organisation into a tangible form: 'O ri Duniya' and 'Orzuv'. These workshops combine elements of theory, spirituality and physical rigour to cultivate ecological intelligence.

- O Ri Duniya is focused on the exploration of the outside world and connecting with the inner world among the participants. It uses a blended model (offline and online), to allow space for inner voice keeping an emphasis on reflections on the themes of the surrounding air, water, food systems, health, biodiversity, and regenerative development.
- Orzuv is a Kashmiri word used as a blessing by


elders for good health. The workshop intends to conduct in-depth discussions on health and wellbeing, specifically the reproductive health of women. The holistic approach is a combination of social and scientific aspects and helps participants explore the relationship between health, food and inner self.

The workshops have become a platform for individuals to explore the unexplored aspects of their routines, in addition to being safe spaces for them to reflect. The spirit of volunteerism, eco-feminism, ecology and exploration lies central to these initiatives.


Jeewika continues to bridge the urban-rural to re-energise relationships with the rest of nature, together with extending learning space beyond physical confinements. Her thoughts and practice break the gendered glass ceiling while she embraces her interest in being a nurturer, ecopreneur, traveller, and farmer. Though her journey till now has been arduous, it is channelled by the belief in the self, and guided towards the journey of truth.

Jeewika can be reached at:

 connect.seedsanddeeds@gmail.com

 https://www.instagram.com/seeds_and_deeds

 <https://www.facebook.com/connect.seedsanddeeds>

 <https://www.seedsanddeeds.com>

Lately, the term 'Eco-preneur' has been used frequently and also abused for greenwashing. Jeewika's conscious usage of the term to refer to herself was a loud political statement. A chord that struck me was the connection between food systems and women. The role of women in decisions around the process of growing food is ignored, while around cooking it is accepted to be the norm. Women work in the fields as much as their male counterparts yet the image of a farmer in a textbook is always of a man. It is 'maa ke haath ka khaana' (food prepared by mother's hands) and 'dadi ma ke nuskhe' and no expressions exist for a male relative's expression of care. Conversations around the active role of women in growing crops, reaping them, cooking it and choosing which stakeholders to support in the process become important in this context.



Feminist theories guide the house that Jeewika and her partner live in. Free will and access to love whether it is for humans or the rest of nature are practised actively. Juniper, abandoned by her previous owner, found a home in Jeewika's house. After Jeewika's initial reluctance to attach herself emotionally to Juniper, lest her previous parent return, Jeewika and her partner adopted her. Now she is the guardian and the cuddle buddy of the house.

Decoding Politics: of, in, about Food

Parindey: Purvi Vyas

Alivelihood: Organic Farming

Region: Matar village, Kheda district, Gujarat



Purvi at her residence in Gujarat (Photo: Saumya)

Women farmers are often unheard of or unrecognised in the mainstream agrarian discourse. Purvi, a resident of Gujarat, is a farmer—a woman farmer—voicing her opinions and asserting her rights. She is also a professor who teaches the politics of food, a niche study that though seems a simple topic to cover, is rife with layers of capitalism, colonial hangovers, casteism and many other ‘isms’ that define the present world.

Purvi was unaware of the theories of food systems before she chanced upon the opportunity to set up a farm on her mother’s property. It was the start of her relationship with research, and practice on food systems. She tutored herself on the topics of agriculture, communities, cultural significance, consumption patterns, and more. The interlinks of agriculture as a cultural, regional and seasonal activity constituted a revelation for her. Combined



Purvi experimenting with a new technique of watering saplings in her farm (Photo: Saumya)

with her love for food, her quest to read more and engage in conversations, she could join the dots of inquiry- from Columbus' voyage for pepper to the French revolution, she found a common ground of food, culture, habits and climate, among others.

As a medium to articulate her learnings, she began conducting workshops on “understanding food systems and the politics around them”. These workshops acted as an opportunity for her to magnify her reach by teaching college students as well. At present, she is associated with five different universities, along with her engagement with women farmers in a non-profit organisation ‘Working Group on Women for Land Rights and Cohesion’. Her workspaces, the universities and the non-profit, are stark opposites with regard to the audience; their social and economic backgrounds, their relation to food systems, and their accessibility to make choices.

- The lectures at the universities are focused on food and environment sustainability, and its influence on self, health, society, and the ecosystem. The content remains the same across different levels of students' academic graph; centred on conscious food choices. Though the first response of students is indifference towards their power to create an impact on food systems, consistent discussions and directed actions outside classrooms propel stimulation of their thoughts and beliefs. Some of the college alumni have connected with Purvi to share incidents of transition to healthy lifestyles as an outcome of



Making use of available space to set up a nursery
(Photo: Saumya)

her lessons. The advantaged social and affluent economic background of the students commonly does not include narratives of food choices unless it is an in-trend diet or a prescribed requirement. Policy regulations, climate change or the position of farmers is a distant concept for them. Purvi combines videos, activities, discussions and workshops to create a holistic learning model on the Politics of Food. The food values that are sustainable and slow, are a challenge to assert in the world of fast-food college-goers. Indeed a time taking, and rigorous process, however, it is the need of the hour.

- At the Working Group on Women for Land Rights and Cohesion, she engages with women farmers. When the word ‘farmer’ is used, the tendency is to envision “a man working on the field”, it is rare to think of women as anything more than



Training women farmers to partake in decision making processes at their farms (File photo)

support (labour) on the field. Similarly, Purvi too has experienced the discomfort and hesitation of people to recognise as well as accept her as a farmer. More so in training where she has witnessed how her role is deemed to be limited as an attendee and not a contributor, unlike her counterparts. Her challenge is two-fold; her urbanised image and her gender identity; as a result of which she has endured biases from organic farmers who are farming tutors as well.

Purvi has embarked on training mainly women farmers to transition to organic farming. She guides the women to recognise and leverage their inherent skills, knowledge and abilities, along with navigating their way out of considering themselves only as defined by their relationships as a wife, sister, or mother. The social stratification placing women at the lowest rung in society plays out in subtle ways in farmlands, amplified through layers of caste. Decisions about the farm seldom include women who toil on the land or are part of the land-owning family. Purvi's efforts are to make these women farmers visible and heard.

“I am hoping people are listening, the whole idea is not to change the world or stop them from eating processed food. I just want them to understand that when they eat from packets there is an impact- it does not happen in isolation. There are many people, including themselves, who are affected by it.”

- Purvi Vyas

The transition to organic farming requires a strong community to support the process, as it includes the upheaval of practices that are engineered to support only toxic-chemicals-based farming. The uncertainty of produce, pest invasions and disrupted supply chain are some of the demotivators for farmers to transition to organic farming. Hence, Purvi supports the community that she is part of, to secure financial resources, develop market networks and receive moral support. She also connects the transitioning farmers with like-minded potential consumers of the produce.

The existing political and economic environment makes it all the more challenging for farmers to make shifts in farming practices. “Food Inc.”, a documentary Purvi refers to while teaching about the politics of the food systems, narrates - “McDonald's.. they trained each worker to just do one thing again and again and again. By having workers who only



Purvi with one of her fur babies Reva at her home where she conducts workshops around the politics of food (Photo: Saumya)

had to do one thing they could pay them a low wage and it was very easy to find someone to replace them... that mentality of uniformity, conformity and cheapness applied widely and on a large scale has all kinds of unintended consequences”. Traditional knowledge pertaining to growing food for self and sustenance becomes invalid when faced with an environment non-conducive to the use of such knowledge. In such a scenario, Purvi's training and support are instrumental for the ones who require direct information, updated knowledge as well as an understanding of the benefits of shifting to organic farming.

The politics of food is beyond the demarcation of political and democratic boundaries; it encompasses the accessibility, affordability and more so the acceptance of food choice and selection. Ranging from eating a packet of potato chips to opting for specific variants due to religious sentiments, each personal choice holds the power to drive markets. Food imports, resource allocation, foreign processing units, targeted advertising, and engineering food to make it ‘addictive’ to taste buds are all the results and causes of individualised food choices and structures facilitating this. Purvi's role in helping the individuals around her be aware of this power has been a steady process. From an urban college student consuming a mass-produced burger, or a rural farmer growing food with toxic chemicals, there is resistance, yet hope for realisation. The personal is political and more so food: the basis of society and civilisation.

Purvi can be reached at:

✉ poorvivyas@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/farmingmatters/>

A few thoughts and phrases that stand out from the ted talks, documentaries and short films that Purvi uses to teach her students are “we are consuming the concept of food”, “food is engineered to appeal to certain sections of the brain”, and “uniformity, conformity and cheapness”. Understanding the power of structured propaganda to control individual choices, while maintaining the hegemony of profit-making powers is helpful in letting go of individual guilt.

The image of a farmer in the popular narrative is of a man in traditional clothes, covered in mud, speaking in a regional Indian language, bowed in humility and living in an interior village with a thatched roof or a single-story house. Here the farmer is a suit-pant-wearing woman who is multilingual, and a professor standing tall in humility. The contrasts might seem wide but the similarities are deeper, with food and culture being the locus of existence for both. A general observation I made was, the farmer in the village unknowingly practises their political viewpoints while the city-returned farmer articulates their political and economic understanding surrounding food. Purvi shares the hesitation of people to accept her as a farmer and more so in training with farmers where her male counterparts are listened to while she is accepted as just existing. Her issues are two-fold: her urban image and her gender identity.



In all the days that I lived with Purvi I never had the same food twice. Her mother continued her explorations with food, feeding me one new Gujarati dish every day. She shyly mentioned her own love story, of her husband's love for the food she cooked. I could see how food took the form of an expression of love.

The Saga of a Seed Saver

Parindey: Bhairab Saini

Alivelihood: Organic Farming, Activism & Conservation

Region: Panchal, Bankura district, West Bengal



Bhairab Saini (Photo: Saumya)

Successful food systems are anchored on “seeds”, nurtured by water, air and soil and given subsistence by a farmer. Growing food isn’t just a livelihood, it is also a channel to give back to the soil, facilitating the life-cycle of consumption of food—growing, consuming, composting—a skill that is inherent to some, while others can simply learn. Bhairab Saini continues the legacy of his farmer ancestors while pursuing a new-age farming livelihood. He displays it

as an act of resilience as well.

Though he has been practising farming since 1993, it was only in the year 2004 that he began farming for organic produce. The backdrop of his shift to organic was based on the experience he gained in 2002 assisting Dr Debal Deb (<https://www.thebetterindia.com/189462/debal-deb-seed-bank-conserves-native-rice-variety-inspiring-india/>), an agricultural activist



Bhairab at his farm, where he grows paddy in small patches to save seeds. (Photo: Saumya)

and ecologist who started his own Rice Research Station (RRS). At RRS, Bhairab understood the 'how' and 'why' of the resilience of indigenous seeds against genetically modified/hybrid seeds. While the former seeds would survive (germinate) in floods and droughts, the latter would struggle to do so.

It was Dr Deb who reminded the residents of Arjunpur, a village in the Bankura district of West Bengal, how organic farming is not only more economical but also a better way to conserve natural resources. As Bhairab got familiar with the concept of organic farming and understood the harm of using chemicals in farming, he was willing to convert his farm completely to organic, against the advice of people who suggested experimenting in a small patch of land first. He was the only farmer at the time to practise non-toxic means of growing food. It took the neighbouring farmers two more years to transition after witnessing successful harvests on Bhairab's farm, with minimal inputs.

"It is not just toxic farming; it is us feeding ourselves toxic food, corporations selling us poison, pesticides, herbicides which we consume through food and slowly poison ourselves. The same corporations will also sell us treatments, for cancer, diabetes and many more. To save ourselves from their network we have to do organic farming for the health of the self and the environment. Nature will exist even if humans don't exist but for us to stay alive we need nature and natural ways of farming."

- Bhairab Saini

In 2016-2018, many farmers started organic farming under a government scheme- Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY). As soon as the tenure of the scheme expired, many farmers stopped organic farming too. Only some of the farmers continued the practice. Bhairab, who had started long before his fellows, continued to do so along with 27 more farmers.

This group of organic farmers sells rice and its traditional value-added forms like beaten rice, parched rice, and popped rice at several outlets across the country and to regular customers outside the village. Within this group of farmers, there are those who are driven solely by economic gains and look at the produce solely as a commodity. They sell their entire harvest and do not keep any for home consumption or save seeds for the next crop.



Different varieties of Ragi and Rice tagged and prepared for characterisation. (Photo: Raju Pathak)

There are also those who view their farming more holistically. They sell only the surplus grain after keeping aside what the family needs. They also grow vegetables and pulses on part of their land for household needs. Bhairab is a believer and persuader for respecting the food grown organically as a means of life, not solely for monetary gains. He believes that looking at organic farming just as a means for monetary gain is disrespectful as such an approach facilitates disconnection with food and soil. There is also a higher chance of the farmer moving on to a more profitable farming style as the principle is absent.

Bhairab also partook in seed conservation efforts. Along with Debal Deb he grew 600 varieties of rice on his land. However, this had to be stopped after a severe drought in the year 2010. The rice research station was shifted to Odisha, yet Bhairab persisted in his efforts. He received 120 types of rice seeds including drought-resistant varieties from Debal's



Traditional container called morai/gola, made of straw for storing grains. (Photo: Saumya)

seed bank*, where in previous years he had saved and stored diverse varieties of traditional seeds.

*Seed bank – A seed bank is similar to a gene bank, where seeds are stored after each harvest in their original form/in their husk itself. It helps in increasing yield, building resistance against diseases, tolerating drought, and maintaining the nutritional quality and taste, etc. of crops. Storing seeds also helps in maintaining the genetic diversity of seeds.

Bhairab's conservation methods were noticed by another forest management researcher Soumik Bannerjee who introduced him to more varieties of wheat, mustard, maize, millets and cotton seeds. The huge diversity of seeds that are being conserved on his land is being characterised by his team of interns to protect against seed piracy. The fear set in after biopiracy by Monsanto India Limited; stealing indigenous seeds, and developing genetically modified versions of them, without giving any compensation back to the local people or nation where the plant originally came from.

He considers Vandana Shiva (<https://vandanashivamovie.com>) as his inspiration to save seeds, and build a community that grows food organically. He believes that the rights over seeds should be in the hands of farmers. Thus, he has never sold seeds to other farmers, instead has only exchanged them. Farmers have also been actively discouraged in using genetically modified seeds. As a result, there has been an increased diversity and resilience in the seeds of the region. At present, he has conserved and preserved 240 varieties of rice seeds, 35 of wheat, 6 of barley, 42 of mustard, 37 of maize, 32 of millets and 33 of cotton. Even though the maintenance of the seed bank and remuneration for the interns is financially tough to manage, Bhairab is in the process of raising funds and securing grants to meet the requirements.

There is also an urge to conduct experiments that can ensure more yield. Along with the System of Rice



Bhairab leading a forest walk and sharing deep knowledge about the biodiversity in the region. (Photo: Raju Pathak)

Intensification (SRI) method, Bhairab has tested new techniques on his paddy, millets, and mustard seeds. One of the experiments, “Clonal propagation” where paddy seeds are transplanted 4 times, met with immense success this year.

He is also invested since the last five years in research on comparing the loss in weight of potatoes grown organically and potatoes grown with toxic chemicals, stored in the conditions. The data quantifies the common knowledge that organic and traditional varieties of produce are resilient and farmer-friendly. The data findings of this research have represented the obvious of organic and traditional varieties of produce being resilient and farmer-friendly.

For him, the government bodies and policymakers are unreliable forces that should not be decision-makers for one’s own piece of land. His resistance stems from the fact that the policymakers do not have a stable identity on whom to support: it can be any MNC or any profit-making business depending on who can bring more tax. The farmer in his perspective should be independent of what the government declares, the focus is on maintaining

the health of the self and the environment. For the past few years, he has been part of peaceful protests against laws that are harmful to food growers, the most recent being organising protests in his village against the farm laws passed in 2020. He is preparing to also fight against the policy and regulations allowing for the sale of fortified foods.

Bhairab’s ideas and practices are based on the thought of sustaining self and future generations in an environment built on foundations of support and respect. He and many other farmers have faced threats that are beyond their control, including but not limited to political forces and climate change. The ill effects of rains during the sowing season, droughts and floods have begun creeping up on their fields. Yet, the spirit of hope that comes with bowing to the powers of nature guides them, as they look at this as an opportunity to change old timings of sowing and harvesting, and continue protecting the diversity of seeds and the land.

Bhairab can be reached at:

 sustainableagriculture2015@gmail.com

The gap between organic farming and chemical farming and the challenges in the former are vast—no market, difficulty to convince other farmers, and lack of government support—forcing farmers to turn to harmful chemicals. As markets are built only for certain kinds of produce, several native varieties are only found in interior rural areas. The data collection and maintenance practised by Bhairab establishes the importance of experiments. He reads up on several journals and research papers and tries out the experiments he reads about. The changes in the weight of organic and non-organic potatoes, and the differences in yield from different experiments, are some of the experiments he has done. He explains that the basis of all survival—the seed – is susceptible to piracy, hence the need to have extensive data on its growth, characteristics and geographical importance.



Chandan, an eighteen-year-old, was my companion at Bhairab ji's hut near the farm. He worked at the farm, characterised* the farm produce, cooked and cleaned the hut, and maintained the garden; a means of survival for a village boy. A boy surrounded by mud huts in his village while he gazes longingly at a supposedly modern life through his phone screen.

* Paddy characterisation refers to noting the data about each type of paddy grown, its flag leaf length, flag leaf breadth, culm length, panicle, grain, awn length, etc.

Earth-friendly self-reliance

Parindey: Mandar Deshpande

Alivelihood: Organic Farming

Region: Wardha, Maharashtra



Mandar Deshpande (Photo: Saumya)

Every drop makes an ocean,
Every step counts to a mile,
Every thought adds to a change...

And sometimes existing in one's own being, contributes to a revolution. In a world of stereotypes, indifference and ignorance towards each element of nature, Mandar and his family stand testament to the opposite. The future demands alterations in existing ways of living to ensure that there is "some"

future for the generations to come.

An engineer turned farmer, Mandar presently resides with his family in Wardha. They grow food mainly to meet the household kitchen requirements. They are passionate about using elements that exist in nature, thereby being as earth-friendly as possible. Their shift from the city to the village came out of a desire to lead a slow-paced life, away from noise, pollution and adulterations as well as a desire to explore village life.



Mandar's mother adores the farm. (Photo: Saumya)

Around 10 years ago, the entire family discussed and debated their realisations, that their daily life was being affected by stress and toxicity and it would only increase for future generations. Mandar's father set out to find like-minded individuals in Wardha, who were looking for similar conversations and for alternatives. He was able to connect to almost 50 such families with whom the discussions became explorative spaces.

Their collaborative explorations paved the way for acknowledging that with their skill sets, social spirit, and farming knowledge they could easily guide people towards a nature-friendly lifestyle. Dilip and Poornima, a couple based in Konkan, Maharashtra have been working on this since 1983; they helped them understand that mainstream development is moving towards the destruction of humans, society and the earth. Their books *Samyak Vikaas*, *Nisargaayan* were essential to help them reflect on this. Interactions with them helped the family get more clarity about creating their own definition of development that is earth-centric.

After completing his education, Mandar continued the discovery (*shodh*) that his father had started. He felt that there was still a need for more participation from the community. Thus after a discussion with the 50 families that his father had connected to, four families agreed to delve into an earth-friendly lifestyle and engage in organic farming. Unfortunately, the younger generation in the families did not feel confident to move in

this direction after a period of time. The idea of moving to a village, and enduring patience to reap farming benefits was something they couldn't align with. Mandar did realise by now, that absence of a familial or educational background in agriculture was detrimental to practising farming by individuals. He wanted to fill the gap in his knowledge and was sure that practical knowledge as opposed to theoretical knowledge would be far more helpful.

He connected with Dharendra and Smita, a couple who too had adopted an earth-friendly lifestyle. For almost one and a half years, Mandar was part of their farm in Gujarat. The immersive experience expanded his understanding of the interlinking role of education, health, environment and society. The impact of organic farming on humans in the form of improved health, diversity in food, cleaner environment, physical and mental health, and increased decision-making power leads to the holistic development of humans- a symbiosis of existence that is felt on a daily basis. Once he gained more clarity about organic farming, he restarted farming but the group of families slowly weaned off completely from the farms. Since 2010, he has been practising organic agriculture at Amgaon (Wardha) alone.

In his context, he defines self-reliance (*svav lamban*) as the ability to meet one's own needs using the resources available at a local level. At the individual and community level self-reliance, diversity and nutrition in food and access to it become essential.



Mandar on the bullock cart used to plough his field. (Photo: Saumya)



The produce from the farm feeds the family for the whole year (Photo: Mandar Deshpande)

Nature-friendly (*Nisarga snehi*) is understanding the relationship between elements of nature - trees, plants, animals, bacteria, pests, weeds and taking the learning to one's own life. He further believes that it is reducing the use of any material-chemical pesticides, insecticides, fertilisers, etc.-that could potentially harm humans and the rest of nature alike.

He joined Beejotsav (<https://www.facebook.com/nagpurbeejotsav>), a voluntary movement where the community comes together for conversations, ideas, and exchange of seeds. For 5 years, before the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown in 2020, Beejotsav was conducted once a year from March-April, around the end of Rabi and before the start of the Kharif season*. It was started as a means to build a community in Maharashtra that meets regularly at a space for learning exchanges and to provide a market for organic farm produce. The daytime is reserved for the sale of produce directly from farms and sessions by experts; evenings to night are reserved for conversational circles regarding public policies, climate change, experiments, best practices, challenges and seed exchange. It also served as a platform for relationship-building between the sellers (organic farmers) and buyers of the produce, and for assessing the market for organic produce.

Through Beejotsav, he has been able to connect to people outside the Wardha district who are interested in and practising organic farming. Yet, at the local

level, conversations have not led to tangible changes. Discussions and questions revolve around the type of farming and lifestyle that Mandar and his family lead, yet systemic challenges and mindsets have delayed the return to organic farming among the farmers.

Concerns for the future lay at the foundation of the move from Latur city where Mandar grew up, to a remote village in Wardha. Facing questions, accepting lacunae in knowledge, unlearning and learning, physical exertion and loads of hope for a better future guided the family. Mandar hopes to give forward the gifts he received in his learning journey by opening up his space to others who want to learn farming and practice community living. Researching and developing one's own definition of nature, nature-friendly lifestyle, self-reliance and development took immense courage. Courage is often derived from the belief in one's own ability to change one's own life and one's family.

Mandar can be reached at:

✉ mandar9999@gmail.com

To know more about Beejotsav, contact:

✉ ngpbeejotsav@gmail.com

* Kharif and Rabi seasons - Indian cropping season is classified into two main seasons- Kharif and Rabi based on the monsoon. Rabi crops are grown in the winter season whereas the Kharif crops are grown in the monsoon season.



A family meeting for relatives based in the city to get to know life in the village (Photo: Saumya)

The particular regional context sets Mandar apart. It has been 5-6 decades since the “Green Revolution” and the farmers in the region today are far from their history of organic farming practices. Convincing them to return to or shift to non-toxic farming practices is an uphill task. Yet, just like the existence of a solo woman traveller like me is a threat to the patriarchal practices in Mandar’s house, his existence too is a threat to profit-oriented farming.

The family together decided to shift to a more earth-friendly and alternative lifestyle yet the absence of gender-oriented discussions puts bare the question: for whom is it easier to become alternative? Who makes the decision to shift? What is alternative if it is only focused on the lifestyle and not the life and existence of a fellow being? - Though earth-centric practices have historically been associated with women, their presence is not acknowledged. The caste and gender background seemed the privilege on which Mandar could buy a large piece of land, shift with family and independently choose what to do ahead in life. Yet, nothing changed for the women in his life, they continued to work in the kitchen, clean the house, and wash the clothes of the men.



The farm was a live example of symbiosis in nature. As the tractor ploughed the land, it brought up worms and insects for the waiting storks to feast on. Each morning the field would be covered by parakeets coming to get their beaks on the seeds sowed. The plants heavy with legumes and grains became buffets for various migratory birds.

Confluence of Academia and Traditional Knowledge Systems: Towards Climate Resilient Agriculture

Parindey: Dr K. G. Sreeja

Alivelihood: Paddy farming, Climate change Research and Consulting

Region: Thrissur, Kerala



Dr K. G. Sreeja (Photo: Saumya)

We are defined by what we choose to do—consistently and convincingly; instrumental of our being, and a voice to our priorities. Sreeja is no different! As a farmer (by chance), livelihood researcher and climate change consultant, she wears many roles. She sets the tone of her day around the burning of her fire hearth (*viraku aduppu*) followed by planning her day around the seasonal rhythms

of her paddy field. For each life necessity such as food, education or medicine, her farm is the central point, which provides her with the possibilities of experiential and wakeful living.

Sreeja's involvement in paddy farming alongside her academic accomplishments of attaining a PhD in agricultural sciences is deeply ingrained in her values. She has been part of various movements and protests against government projects that have had a damaging impact on the environment such as the proposed Athirappilly hydro-electric project in Kerala. She is now based in Thrissur, with her partner Dr Madhusoodhanan (fondly called Madhu) and her mother-in-law. They own a share in the nearby *paada shekharam* (paddy fields), which was a by-product of dissent.

Back in 2005, the Thrissur Municipal Corporation had planned to divide the fallow paddy land polder (tract of low-land, at sea level or below) behind their newly acquired home, into smaller plots for house construction. However, this move did not take into account that the said land was a floodplain wetland that used to get completely inundated during the



Sreeja and Madhu in their paddy field (Photo: Saumya)

monsoons, acting as a natural reservoir that reduced the impact of riverine floods in the region. The Corporation's plan led to an uprising among farmers and other community members which Sreeja and her partner joined. The Corporation finally withdrew its decision after a signature campaign led by Sreeja and Madhu.

Around the same time, an old farmer offered a piece of his paddy land at an affordable rate to Sreeja and Madhu. They bought it so as to have a stake in the area, as questions were raised as to why they were involved in a region without any tangible stake. Their well-wishers also helped them financially and some bought bits of land to support them. In 2008, the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act was passed by the Kerala government which lent strength to their struggle to conserve the stretch of paddy lands. At present, they own 4 acres of land, completely crowdsourced. As a result of their actions, increased State support to paddy cultivation and the new law, the region saw a revival of the Padashekhara Samithi (the paddy holder association), cultivation of fields that had been fallow for decades, and a slow return of cultivators into paddy, hoping to be part of the community again.

The paddy land that they farm on is environmentally and geographically important in terms of its role in sustaining and regenerating the symbiotic existence

of nature. A river is a collation of many streams flowing into it, forming micro-watersheds that then form the larger river basin. These streams in the midland stretches of a basin often originate from wetlands that are the floodplains of the river when in spate (flooded or about to flood). These wetlands are ideal for growing paddy as they are mostly watered perennially, thus acting as a natural water reservoir, enriching the groundwater and making 'room for rivers' when they flood during the monsoons. In Kerala, there are four main rice-producing regions - the district of Palakkad, the Kuttanad and Kole deltaic wetlands below mean sea level, and the midland agro-ecological zone spread across the state from north to south, including in the Thrissur district. Sreeja's field is located at the mid-stream of Karuvannur river in Thrissur. These wetlands are sanctuaries for a diverse group of weeds, insects, and migratory birds that ensure that the nutritional value and balance of microorganisms remain intact. Though Sreeja had studied this as part of her agricultural sciences course, it was only when working in her fields that she experienced this interdependence in nature closely.

The struggles that Sreeja and Madhu faced in the initial farming days brought them closer together and gave them the strength to address challenges like non-seasonal rainfall and storage. The issues



Sreeja in the forests of Vazhachal with Raman, a member of the Kadar Tribal community. (Photo: Saumya)

required that not just them but the entire community be able to collaborate with local and district authorities and a need for real-time information backed by accurate data.

Sreeja and Madhu are bridging this gap, as they understand the importance of data and its dissemination for mitigating climate-related challenges. She explains it thus, *“In order to face a challenge that is being experienced by everyone for the first time, all sorts of authentic, well-curated information is required.”*

Kerala had been facing consecutive floods over the past years. In the year 2020, when the nation was under lockdown owing to the pandemic, a flood could have added more to the worries of locals. During this time, Dr Jayaraman, an energy management expert, conversed with Sreeja and Madhu and shared his concerns; ‘EQUINOCT’ was thus born- with the intent to find solutions to climate change-related issues and set up community-sourced modelling solutions. Through this organisation, they are setting up an integrated knowledge base using mainstream scientific tools and traditional practice-based knowledge from the lived experiences of generations. Their expertise in research and technology is being leveraged to support climate change solutions, prepare for disasters and design energy efficiency programs for policy interventions.

Sreeja looks at the integration of multiple sources of data as a means to advocate for accountability from the government and ensure proactive involvement. Furthermore, EQUINOCT equips and empowers communities to collect scientific data to understand what is happening to the environment around them. In her previous experience of studying the administrative responses to the Kerala floods, she had seen voluminous data and information that were left without any assessment or evaluation. A study of the indigenous and experiential knowledge

of the fisherfolks on the seas during climate change brought out the further marginalisation of these knowledge systems as well, in the management of climate change impacts and disasters.

To mitigate such issues, EQUINOCT now works with communities affected by climate change to collect crowd-sourced data about groundwater levels, rainfall levels, and tidal floods. The community component is very strong in what Sreeja does, be it in helping communities reach out to the government or in building a community of paddy farmers vocal about their rights. EQUINOCT is registered as a business, as the idea of profit is beyond “just monetary”. They want the government to be part of their work process while also ensuring community participation. They persuade various government departments such as the Disaster management authority, Kerala State Electricity Board, the Agriculture department of the state and various industries and institutions, to collaborate with the ones affected by and be equipped to manage climate change challenges.

The macro and micro-systems of nature work in tandem to survive. Similarly, the role of micro and macro in climate change resilience is paramount. Sreeja works with her equally passionate team to ensure that all community voices are heard, all-natural parts are valued and sustainability is defined in one’s own context. She believes that those more affected by climate change will be the ones with the most resilience to act towards reducing its impact. It is her hope to drive collective endeavours from individuals and organisations to reduce the disparity between the affected and the privileged.

Sreeja can be reached at:

 kg.sreeja@gmail.com

 <https://www.equinoct.com>



A meeting with community members of Vellotupuram to discuss issues faced by tidal floods. (Photo- Saumya John)

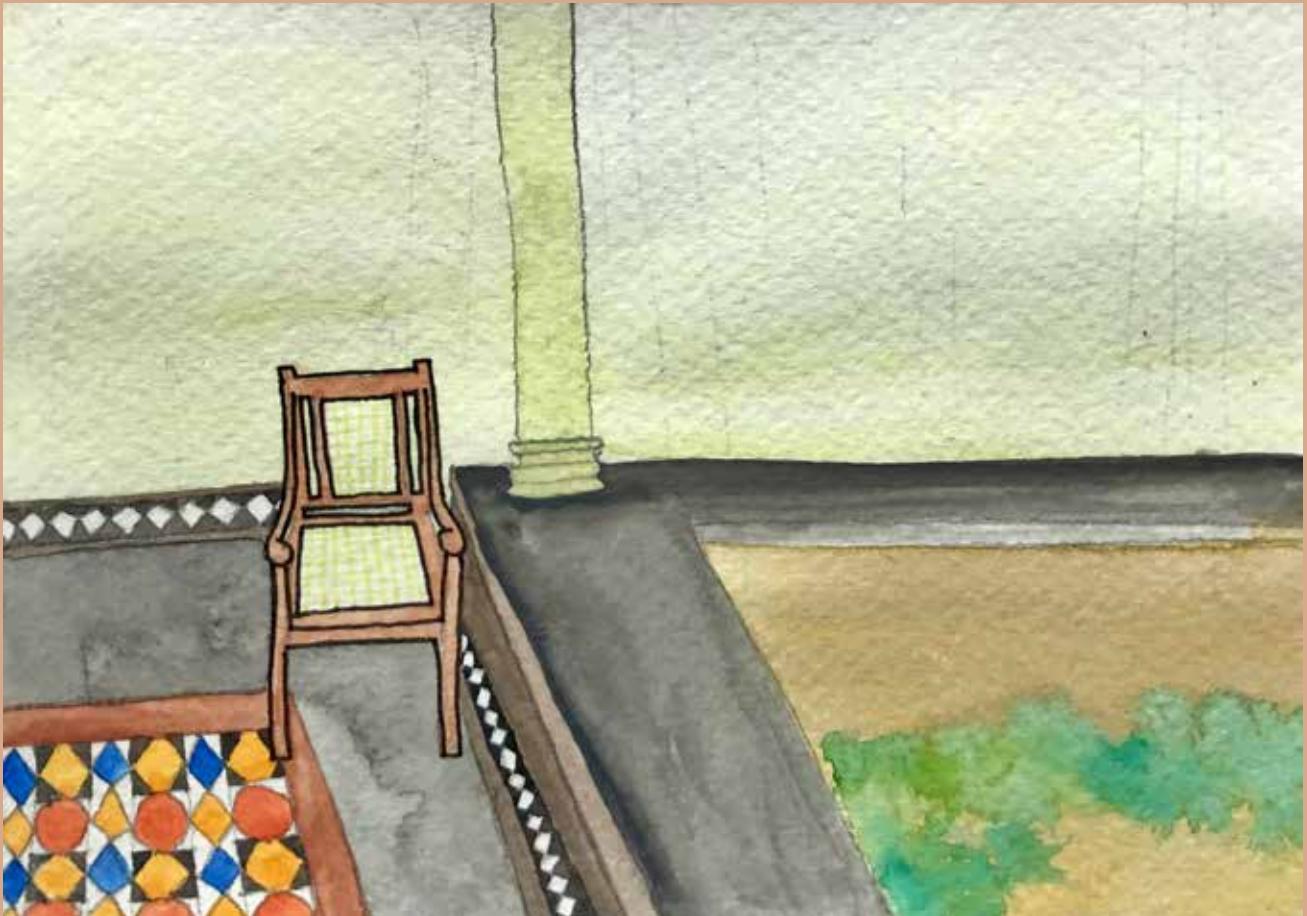


Session at Cochin University of Science and Technology on Energy Conservation (Photo: Saumya)

I was part of two sessions and one meeting conducted by the EQUINOCT team where I could see the importance of - data, analysis, images, personal experience and its simple expression - to connect to people.

The gradual climate change and its impact on food growers that are receiving the attention of neither the media nor the government is scary. I see how the growth of food is hindered and it feels like a drought/flood incurred starvation is about to rise.

In the context that Sreeja and her team work, farmers are unable to gauge rainfall, tidal floods affect their planning, there is a threat to food security and several of them have started planning to migrate to the cities. The government/public representatives have turned a blind eye to changing issues of farmers caused due to climate change. Sustainability for such a person is only in the context of sustenance and the importance of the environment becomes a secondary topic- "Scarcity brings out the worst in people".



Sreeja's partner Madhu belongs to the Nair community of Kerala, a community that was matrilineal. His mother belongs to the last generation of women who were financially independent, free from the ostensible control of male figures and socially mobile. As she sits on her designated chair every day, she sees the world pass by, and traditions that once accepted women as free individuals twisted to suit political needs.

Epilogue

The journey from one state to another while trusting the process, trusting strangers, and preparing to receive with humility and give in abundance, was a learning journey that expanded my comfort zone massively. Travel as a means for learning opened up an array of opportunities for me; from personal reflections to unlearning beliefs and biases around food systems, it has been a deeply engaging journey.

Each Parindey who worked with food systems and environmental sustainability introduced me to their own definition of the same. Be it the politics and economics involved, the climate change aspect, conservation, or the slow living involved. Everything was unique and connected at the same time, everything was something new and every human was an experience in acceptance. These are all stories of resistance and resilience, of surviving inner and outer demons, of living. Each Parindey, made me stronger in my belief to do things that made me feel alive. A livelihood becomes regenerative only if the person practising it is regenerating their soul each day.

There were many moments when my existence as a woman became a question, where my life choices became rebellious decisions and I had to take a step back from the travel. Each female Parindey of mine who had fought against social stigma and norms to carve a path in life for them felt like a reflection of my own self. They kept me wanting to continue.

The person I was a few months back would be proud of what and where I am today as I write, paint, travel and express my emotions openly. At this moment in life where the travels have ended, the documentation has ended and new connections are being built, I still fear uncertainty. Yet, I have a community now that keeps me safe, pushes me out of my comfort zone and holds my hand through new environments.

Before you go

What is one food from the place that you call home that few people outside the region could possibly know?

Do you know how to make it? If you don't then who would you contact for help with it?

What are the raw materials required to make it? Are they local to the region?

In which seasons are the different raw materials grown?

Were these raw materials always a part of the region or were they inculcated in the cuisine through trade?

If you were to consume it now would the political, religious, or social context ostracise/harm you in any manner?

Some questions to ponder upon and connect to the food that you grew up eating or heard stories of growing up. Food apart from being a source of nutrition acts as a social glue that has held together communities for centuries. In the present political climate of the country, I hope some nostalgia and reflection guide us to more respectful relations.

Photo Gallery

From a forest walk led by Bhairab



Accompanying Anilkumar on a tractor to plough another farmer's land



Helping with data collection of rice seed varieties at Bhairab's farm



Team effort to collect and document data about seeds before harvesting

Learning the art of harvesting rice from farmers





Helping out with harvesting rice



With Jeewika after attending a workshop conducted by her on permaculture



Sieving grains harvested from Mandar's farm before it is stored for the year

With Akash and his friends at Aadim cafe managed by Bhoomgadi



The view of Purvi as she waited out my multiple location and angle changes.



Sneharshi Dasgupta

Kolkata, West Bengal
Independent Media &
Education

Sneharshi Dasgupta was born and raised in the city of Kolkata, West Bengal. He has worked as an American India Foundation (AIF) William J Clinton Fellow with Bhasha Sanshodhan Prakashan Kendra in Tejgadh, Gujarat. For his AIF fellowship project, Sneharshi focused on the 'Museum of Adivasi Voice' where he researched digital accessibility, virtual curatorship, and outreach for museums during the pandemic times.

As a 52 Parindey Fellow, he travelled extensively in India and explored independent media and education initiatives. His goal was to document what remains undocumented by mainstream media. Furthermore, through his work, he delves into the ways in which community-led initiatives operate.



I had a very enriching experience while travelling across India as part of the 52 Parindey Fellowship. Prior to my journey, I had a limited understanding of alternative forms of livelihood. In the course of my journey, I not only had the opportunity to witness and learn first-hand about regenerative livelihoods but also immerse myself in some of these meaningful pursuits. This would not have been possible without the strategic guidance of the 52 Parindey Fellowship programme team and all the individuals who supported me. Forever grateful for this learning experience, I have acquired virtues like patience and humility during my pursuit of understanding diverse geography and knowledge systems.

Prologue

The 52 Parindey Fellowship offered me the opportunity to travel across India and understand the heterogeneity of the subcontinent through the lenses of diverse innovators and their respective communities. The innovators, or as we at Travellers' University refer to them, the Parindeys, practice a form of livelihood that is driven by a sense of responsibility for the local community that they are a part of, albeit not in the conventional sense. This responsibility is strictly not out of obligation that one must give something back to the community where one was born. Rather, it is a product of love that one has towards one's surroundings—not necessarily towards one's birth community. Therefore, the Parindeys do not perceive their livelihood simply as a means to generate revenue, but fulfil the goals and vision that they have for their communities, and their collective aspirations, which are derived from a shared sense of being. It is their resistance towards the forces of commerce and industrialisation that makes their pursuit valiant.

The courage to stand up and voice what is just is a common shared trait of the Parindeys that I documented, as part of this fellowship project. It is for this reason, at TU, we refer to their approach to life and livelihoods as alivelhoods. They feel alive while doing what they do. They are bound neither by societal constraints nor by a destructive livelihood. In an age wherein most individuals have no time to spare and think about what is happening around them—be it the climate crisis or social and political degradation—the Parindeys are consciously trying to paint an image contrary to those in power who are always looking for avenues to exploit. Their livelihood is not destructive because it is not influenced by giant corporations with vested interests, but by the dreams and hopes of the local members. Their approach to life and livelihood is local because of the unique regional predicament that they find themselves to be in.

As I travelled from one region to another, from West Bengal to Assam, or Himachal Pradesh to Goa, I had the opportunity to experience the warmth and hospitality of diverse communities. Prior to this travel journey, as is the norm for many students, I had read about the plurality of Indian society and so on. But to witness it first-hand was truly transformative. From living with communities that are actively resisting unequal politics of development to those facing persecution because of their identity, I witnessed the power of communities, their ability to mobilise, and their role in the age of globalisation wherein local identities have to be constantly asserted, or they stand the chance of decaying.

Thematically, I focused on independent media and education initiatives. It is because both these domains have constantly been homogenised. When I started my journey, I had questions such as: how does community media voice local concerns vis-à-vis mainstream print and digital media? How can alternative learning models benefit young people in an age wherein degrees from certain notable institutions are preferable? More or less, based on such a line of inquiries, I endeavoured on a journey of over a hundred and some days across India to comprehend alternative approaches to life, community, and progress. I am grateful to all the Parindeys and the programme team at Travellers' University who not only encouraged and nurtured my curiosity but also spoke with all the fervour for a future wherein individuals and communities will make conscious and empowered choices.

Map of Sneharshi's Journey



| | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Sourav Dutta | Filmmaker and Media Professional | Mumbai, Maharashtra |
| C | Vimal Kumar | Education, Activism, and Social Work | Ladwa, Haryana |
| D | Boro Baski | Education, Activism, and Social Work | Bishnubati, West Bengal |
| E | Siddharth Agarwal | Environmental Activist, Media Professional, and Educator | Kolkata, West Bengal |
| F | Kazi Neel | Poet, Media Professional | Barpeta, Assam |
| G | Sona Murmu | Educator, Social Worker | Ghoshaldanga, West Bengal |
| H | Devidas Gaonkar | Community Correspondent | Cotigao, Goa |
| I | Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues | Environmental Activist, Researcher | Vaxim, Goa |
| J | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

Filmmaker who Travels across India to Document Stories of Change

Parindey: Sourav Dutta

Alivelihood: Filmmaker and Media Professional

Region: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Can learning take place outside of the classroom? What are some of the alternative ways to acquire education, especially at a primary level? These are some of the questions many young parents are grappling with due to the increased use of technology for education owing to the pandemic. Given that schools around the world were closed for a significant period of time, these questions have become imperative and have resulted in the reimagining of the classroom. However, several individuals started to rethink education way before the pandemic to develop a robust, relevant, and sustainable model of learning. For instance: a

learning model which does not emphasise solely on rote learning but equips the child to think critically or help them in identifying their true interests which may go beyond the structure of the traditional curriculum, or going beyond the traditional relationship that exists between technology and education. Furthermore, experiential models of learning like community-based learning are largely unheard of in India. Here is the journey of a film professional and his quest to learn and document such unique learning practices and various other conscious efforts of living by diverse individuals in India.



Sourav Dutta in his hometown Kolkata, West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

In 2019, a year before the COVID-19 pandemic, Mumbai based filmmaker Sourav Dutta started an initiative called 'Project Nomad' alongside two Pune based educationists Harshad Tathed and Abhilasha Kulkarni that aimed to document alternative educational and learning practices across India. They hoped to bring forward the stories of attempts by individuals to establish alternative learning spaces for young parents to have a platform to understand the challenges and complexities associated with education in India. Sourav's gradual transition process from working in the mainstream Mumbai film-television industry to being an independent filmmaker is quite intriguing. This journey started from his hometown, Kolkata, which brought him to the city of dreams. Sourav, who neither went to any film school nor completed his undergraduate studies, landed in Mumbai in the year 2011 when he got an offer to work in the film industry based on a short film that he and a couple of his friends had made in Kolkata. "I had executed a shot wherein the protagonist had a double role. As part of this shot, the requirement was for the protagonist to stare at his own dead body. I did this without a proper chroma background which is the norm to execute such shots. I did it using a blue tarpaulin that was lying around at a friend's place because of some painting work that was happening at his place during that time. One of my seniors saw this shot and was impressed by how easily I executed this. Thus, when he was away for work, he called me to take up a vacant spot at their production set. That is how I landed in Mumbai," says Sourav, reminiscing about the time he spent in the city learning the trade of filmmaking.

Although he studied Science in his high school and later was enrolled in an Economics programme, he never planned on becoming a film professional. "... I did not go to a film school, I was more keen on learning various aspects of filmmaking that revolve around pre-production, production, and post-production," he asserts. Thereafter, Sourav worked diverse roles in various successful productions, but slowly realised that his learning remained stagnant. He was not allowed to implement any of his knowledge despite some of his ideas being appreciated by his seniors and peers. "There is a fixed set of rules that is adhered to within the television-film industry, i.e., the creative process is structured in a manner that there is no room for new kinds of development," says Sourav, recalling his past experiences. Around this time, he had a discussion with director Satish Kaushik who encouraged him to look for other opportunities that may provide the space for him to grow as a professional. In

time, he realised that he must interact with other individuals for him to grow as a professional and produce meaningful content. With this mindset, he welcomed the challenges that came with independent filmmaking.

Soon after, in 2016, Sourav's son was born which led him to rethink some of the learnings that he would like to pass on to his son. "I did not want my son to be part of the same educational structure that I was a product of," says Sourav smiling about some of his own past experiences. This was when he started to look for alternative and sustainable learning spaces and started a group on Facebook called Home-schooling India in 2017 to form a community and brainstorm with other like-minded parents. The group initially started with a handful of interested members. "Since the pandemic began, the number of members rose to 13,000. Now I get calls from parents across the country who are interested in home-schooling and do not wish to send their children to mainstream schools," he adds. Around this time, he gained an insight into the alternative educational spaces that exist within India. Hence in January 2019, alongside Harshad and Abhilasha, he launched Project Nomad to document such distinct learning practices. Their goal was to make these spaces known and accessible to other individuals in India and elsewhere. According to him, "learning processes should be fun, inclusive, not rigid, that allows one to grow as an individual and develop one's interests." Ever since then, as part of Project Nomad, Sourav has documented various sustainable alternative spaces across the country that deal with a range of themes - from natural farming to educational spaces. According to him, this initiative is called Project Nomad because individuals back in time would travel from one region to another looking for sustainable educational and livelihood opportunities. He adopted a nomadic lifestyle to travel and document these unique initiatives and



Sourav with dir. Satish Kaushik in Mumbai, Maharashtra (Source: Sourav Dutta)

as a result of this, the initiative is named Project Nomad. The kind of educational spaces that he documents are alternative because these spaces are all purpose-driven as opposed to revenue-driven which makes them sustainable in the longer run. “The individuals who run these initiatives are not concerned about making money but look for ways to make an impact,” echoes Sourav who immerses himself in the documentation process by living with such individuals and interacting with the larger communities they seek to make an impact on.

There have been various material challenges associated with an initiative such as Project Nomad. However, for Sourav, it is the exchange of energies that matters and the relationships that he has formed with communities that keep him motivated. For instance, his first story as part of Project Nomad was with an inclusive educational school based out of Karjat district in Maharashtra known as Samaaveshi Pathshaala (<https://www.samaaveshi.org/>) run by Ashok Shah and Nivedita Tiwari. “I would visit this school once or twice every year to help them in any capacity I can. I find the core idea of this initiative very inspiring wherein both differently-abled and able-bodied children study together. The unique pedagogical approach

adopted by Samaaveshi inspired me to learn more about this initiative and the kind of impact it had on the children who study there,” he adds. For Sourav, these are not mere stories of successful alternative ventures, but lived experiences that he would like to voice using his skill sets.

Thus far in his journey, apart from voicing sustainable alternative learning models, Sourav has documented various conscious ways of living in India – from natural farming practices, sustainable ways of water conservation, to problems faced by marginalised communities as a result of the climate crisis. He believes it is important for one to know where their food and water is coming from. For instance, what are the conditions under which vegetables are being produced or how clean is the water that one gets to drink in cities. With widespread consumerism, individuals have stopped questioning the authenticity of the food and water that they consume – something he considers to be the bare minimum that one can do when one aims towards living an ecologically conscious lifestyle. According to Sourav, the long-term goal of Project Nomad is to form a community wherein the emphasis is on happiness and living in harmony with the rest of nature. He believes that the learning experience in its true essence cannot be monetised, and it must flow freely like air. His dream is of an inclusive society wherein every individual has equal access to resources. In future, based on his present learnings, he hopes to build a community and prove that such coexistence can effectively be achieved with the right ethos. Currently, he uses his skill sets in filmmaking to raise awareness on diverse issues and document stories of individuals invested in socially and ecologically conscious lifestyles. He perceives film as a medium that can be constructively used to produce discourses on intricate socio-political and environmental issues.

Sourav Dutta can be reached at:

✉ sourav.gmjns@gmail.com,
improjectnomad@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/improjectnomad/>

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/improjectnomad>

📺 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtF2S6cN_hOWu8BW2qA1BZQ



The making of the shot paved the way for Sourav to arrive in Mumbai, circa 2008-09 (Source: Sourav Dutta)

My journey began with my interaction with Sourav Dutta—a filmmaker based in Mumbai who travels across the country to document stories of change. From our very first phone call that I made to him, while I was in Telangana at the Deccan Development Society for the fellowship Orientation with my co-fellows and the TU programme team, Sourav has been extremely helpful and generous, and curious about my journey which was somewhat similar to his own (considering the travel part). He gave me a warm welcome at his house in Mumbai and shared his experiences of working in the mainstream television industry, starting an initiative such as Project Nomad, and the kind of work that is part of this alternative venture (how it is done). He shared about his initial journey, the challenges that he faced while working in Mumbai, and his learnings over the years. The overall experience of travelling across Maharashtra with Sourav was one that I cherish. I found it challenging (the long days of travelling, making sure to be at the next destination on time and so on), but fulfilling. From interacting with indigenous communities, and rural activists to urban change-makers, educators, and climate activists, this extensive travel within Maharashtra gave me an opportunity to first-hand witness and understand some of the grass-roots development work that is happening in the field of alternative education, organic farming, community media, and conservation.



With Sourav Dutta and his team at Chinchwadi Village in Maharashtra as part of Project Nomad field visit

Emancipation through Education: Vimal Kumar and his Movement for the Scavenger Community

Parindey: Vimal Kumar

Alivelihood: Education, Activism, and Social Work

Region: Ladwa, Haryana

There have been various bills proposed in the parliament to ban manual scavenging in India. In the most recent bill, which was introduced in 2020, there were talks of amending the controversial manual scavenging law. However, after six months of discussion, the government manifested no plans to amend. The draft for the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Amendment Bill proposed for a mechanised process of cleaning sewers, septic tanks, and a lawful basis to provide compensation to those pursuing this livelihood in the event of fatalities. Irrespective of the legal talks of the amendment and much awareness regarding this issue by various activists

and non-government organisations, the issue of manual scavenging persists because it is deeply rooted within the question of caste. Individuals involved in manual scavenging are from marginalised Dalit communities. They have been practising this livelihood for generations, mostly because they have no agency to pursue anything else owing to unequal access to education, healthcare, and other caste-based barriers. Although this inhumane practice had been made illegal decades ago, individuals continue to perform manual scavenging in not only remote or rural areas but also in tier-one Indian cities. Here is the journey of Vimal Kumar, who runs an initiative called 'Movement for Scavenger Community'



Vimal Kumar delivers a speech (Courtesy: Movement for Scavenger Community)

(MSC), which is working towards eradicating the practice of manual scavenging across the country by forming independent resource centres amongst the communities that pursue this livelihood. Vimal comes from a family of manual scavengers himself. He has dedicated his life to annihilating the vicious cycle of manual scavenging.

Born and brought up in a settlement for manual scavengers outside the town of Ladwa in Haryana, young Vimal had witnessed his mother and grandmother performing manual scavenging. “Childhood memories always stay with one – be it a good or bad experience. When I was four or five years old, my mother and grandmother worked as manual scavengers in the school that I went to. My classmates would bully me that I am untouchable and that my family members performed unsanitary tasks. My teacher would not call me by my name but refer to me as Jamadarni-ka-beta – meaning manual scavenger’s son. I hated this and I had no interest in studies because of this,” says Vimal with a smile on his face as if he could almost reminisce about this experience with his eyes shut. Children from manual scavenging communities often face discriminatory behaviour at school by not only their peers but also teachers who take no interest in helping them progress. Experiencing discriminatory behaviour first-hand and all the casteist slurs attributed to him at a young age and later during his adult life shaped his vision to work towards eliminating caste-based violence. Today, he leads a pan-India movement that works towards raising awareness and improving the lives of manual scavengers through education and other sustainable livelihood opportunities. The need for such a movement emerged in Vimal’s thinking process while he was in school.

During his school life, he contributed to forming a cricket team in his hometown and competed against other teams. One would think what is so extraordinary about forming a cricket team, but

the journey behind this was something that has stayed with Vimal till now. In his hometown, most of the other cricket teams would not play cricket with individuals from Vimal’s community owing to their caste differences. “We did not have gear and equipment to play cricket. We used whatever we had at hand to play the game. This one time, we lost a game against a team of upper-caste individuals. They bullied us and proclaimed that we manual scavengers must not play this game as it is our destiny to be involved in this profession. So, we formed a team and started practising under the sun in peak summer afternoons when nobody would use the playground. We did manual scavenging, worked odd jobs for daily wages to gather money and took part in a city-wide cricket competition. We defeated all the so-called strong teams in the city,” asserts Vimal who later went on to organise the pan-India movement for the scavenger communities based on some of the learnings he acquired while forming the cricket team at his hometown.

Having acquired leadership and organisational skills at a young age, along with his learnings from the cricket field and school life, Vimal has established six resource centres spread across the country with talks of forming many more in other parts. All the centres that he has set up and the work he has initiated as part of the movement is community-led. Indeed, it was Vimal who helped organise the communities, but since then these communities have actively taken an interest and are leading towards making an impact in their neighbourhoods. He believes the movement should continue even if he is not around in the region. These centres are known as B.R. Ambedkar Community Resource Centre, given they are based on the Ambedkarite thinking of education, agitation, and organisation.

From leading an extraordinarily difficult life owing to caste-based discrimination during school, university,



Vimal discussing the vision of MSC at a gathering in Phalodi, Rajasthan (Courtesy: Movement for Scavenger Community)



Vimal at a meeting on behalf of MSC (Courtesy: Movement for Scavenger Community)

and later in his workplace, Vimal has fought the injustice with his sheer willpower, determination, and commitment. He never gave in to the unfairness and went on to study in the United States and Germany. In Washington, he was a Next Generation Leader as part of the prestigious McCain Institute named after the former US Senator John McCain. Ever since an early age, as part of his quest to understand the caste question in India, Vimal went travelled to fifteen Indian states and interacted with diverse communities who indulge in manual scavenging. In 2009, individuals from twelve states came to Haryana for a conference and that led to the initiation of the MSC.

Based on his learnings from abroad and within India, Vimal uses education as a tool to pass on to the youth of his community. He believes that true change can only take place when there is access to education. “The attitude that manual scavengers must do manual scavenging generation after generation must end. This sentiment can only be changed through education,” argues Vimal who has designed a fellowship for young professionals to work towards social equality. As part of this fellowship, youth from marginalised communities work towards improving educational outcomes, identifying, and encouraging sustainable livelihood opportunities within their communities. This is achieved through partnerships and the encouragement of other local initiatives with similar visions. Thus far in his journey, wherever Vimal has travelled, he was able to organise and set up sustainable communities and other forms of self-help groups. However, this did not come without any challenges or opposition. “Sometimes the problem is not from outsiders, but from people within the community. Of course, there are problems from outsiders as well. But mostly, it is from the so-called political agents or village headmen (the sarpanch) of these communities who questioned our cause. They are in power because of polarising politics in the name of religion. They do not want marginal communities to progress because then they lose their stronghold,” echoes Vimal who continues to fight against many such oppositions as part of his fight for education, equality, and social change.

At MSC, they work on a need basis and travel across the country where they are invited or where they have identified a need for change. “How this works is that we interact with the community and identify the various problems first. We then bring forward the local people’s interests and brainstorm with them collectively to design the movement. We ask them about the kind of work they have done in the



Vimal at the McCain Institute, USA (Courtesy: Movement for Scavenger Community)

past and what work can be done at present. Then we identify interested individuals, talk to them in detail, share our past work with them, and our larger mission and vision. This is a long process which sometimes takes weeks or months”, argues Vimal based on his experiences of organising this movement in more than five Indian states. In the coming months, he plans to establish three more centres in three different states.

Overall, the Movement for Scavenger Community is a community-led effort by young individuals, social activists, and other like-minded stakeholders who continue to work towards abolishing this unjust practice. Their goal is to ensure that all the families that they have worked with do not indulge in manual scavenging. They hope to create a choice amongst individuals from such families who pursue manual scavenging for generations. In doing so, they aim towards breaking the chain of manual scavenging and eliminating caste-based barriers. Through Vimal’s journey, one can see how long-term social progress can be achieved and sustained through education.

Vimal Kumar can be reached at:

-  vimal@scavenger-movement.org
-  <https://www.instagram.com/movement4scavengers>
-  <https://www.facebook.com/mscommunity2009>
-  <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXTLQiRhLVv0Cr9e1E1VXUw>
-  <https://scavenger-movement.org>

I first learnt about Vimal Kumar and his initiative the Movement for Scavenger Community (MSC) in around 2016. If memory serves right, I was in high school when I read an article on Vimal's journey online. He was an educator who was heavily discriminated against on the basis of his caste during his early childhood in school and later in the workspace as an adult. Overcoming complex barriers posed by society and his bitter first-hand experiences, Vimal started to spread awareness by initiating community resource centres across India. The communities of manual scavengers are one of the most marginalised caste based groups. Vimal, coming from a community such as this in Haryana and actively working towards social change was something that I perceived—at the time and even now—as an inspiration. The fellowship with TU gave me the opportunity to reach out, interact with Vimal and learn first-hand about his journey as an educator and changemaker. As a researcher, I found it extremely insightful to understand how groups can be mobilised (in this context, a historically marginalised community) to oppose the dominant rhetoric of those in power. I hope my article on Vimal's journey and philosophy serves as a reminder that it is important to formulate counter-public groups and philosophy to challenge the dominant public and rhetoric. This is one of the ways through which one can actively challenge and even disrupt the status quo.



With Vimal Kumar at Vashisht, Himachal Pradesh

Preserving the Santali Self: History, Memory, and Culture

Parindey: Boro Baski

Alivelihood: Education, Activism, & Social Work

Region: Bishnubati, Birbhum district, West Bengal

Knowing oneself is synonymous with knowing one's history and culture. The past gives one an impression of who one is, where one comes from, and what one's future might look like. The past also shapes the culture around one, which is fundamental to one's survival, especially in an increasingly globalised world. However, many indigenous communities in India have little or no written documentation of their history. As a result of this, many are forced to proclaim, "we have no history". This does not mean their past is ahistorical or irrelevant. But rather their traditions and culture rely more on oral forms of knowledge. In historiography, these small voices are often lost in the larger discourses of the elites. Here is the story of Boro Baski, an Adivasi activist and educator based in West Bengal, who aims to preserve the history of his community and culture through a community-led museum, and by instilling the essence of these values amongst the children of his community. Baski belongs to the Santal community, one of the largest and most homogeneous indigenous groups in South Asia. They primarily reside in the eastern region of India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

Born in the village of Bishnubati in West Bengal, Baski's parents worked as agricultural labourers. He was the first one from his entire village to attend school. He then completed his master's and doctoral degree in social work at the Viswa-Bharati University in Santiniketan. This was because traditionally individuals from the Santal community do not attend mainstream schools. They have their ways of learning within their villages. They learn from their elders in their families and villages through oral techniques, in an overall setting that is much more open and informal than conventional classrooms. At a young age, Baski had experienced some of the problems that the youth from the Santal community face in mainstream schools, the primary one being the language barrier. Santali is an Austro-Asiatic language that is distinct from the Indo-European languages largely prevalent in South Asia. For generations, the Santali language has survived within oral traditions of knowledge sharing. It has no definite written script. For instance, the Santals residing in West Bengal use the Bengali script to write their language. Whereas the Santals residing in



Boro Baski presenting the Museum of Santal Culture, Bishubati at an event hosted by the Kolkata Centre for Creativity in Kolkata, West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

Jharkhand or Bihar would use the Devanagari script as it is more contextually relevant to their immediate setting. Similarly, Santals in Odisha use the Odiya script and those in Assam adhere to the Assamese script. For a community that is neither part of the Hindu caste system nor caters to a definite script, and has been historically marginalised, it becomes challenging for youth to communicate beyond the margins of their village. Recently, Ol-chiki has been recognised as a newly developed Santali script, but the Latin script has its distinct set of problems.

Owing to the complexities associated with the Santali language, children from this community often feel alienated in mainstream schools and drop out without completing their education. Baski, however, understood the root cause of this problem and co-founded an informal school called the Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV) alongside Gokul Hansda with support from Sona Murmu, Martin Kämpchen, Snehadri Sekhar Chakraborty, and the villagers of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati in 1996. This community work was facilitated under the Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha (GASS) initiative. Located in Ghosaldanga village of West Bengal, this school instils both traditional values of Santali life and modern values within its children. This allows the students to effectively enter mainstream institutions and make meaningful choices in life. The school preserves the traditional Santal self through cultural activities such as music, dance, fishing, beekeeping, and organic farming, but also coexists with the modern educational value system. As a

result of this, the students from this school have entered not only government institutions but also private institutions in other Indian cities – something that seemed far-fetched if not impossible a couple of decades ago for many individuals from this community. Most importantly, although the school has adopted the Bengali script as it does not aim to burden the children with learning too many scripts, it does encourage youth in knowing the Ol-chiki script which is better at representing the Santali phonemes.

Apart from co-founding the school, Baski has also set up a museum in his village Bishnubati to voice the Santali history, memory, and worldview. This museum is managed by the Bishnubati Adibasi Marshal Sangha (BAMS), a community-led initiative registered in 1997. This museum is



Sona Murmu (left) and Boro Baski (right) standing in front of the Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, Ghosaldanga, West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)



The entrance to the Museum of Santal Culture, Bishnubati, West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

supported by the Ghosaldanga Bishnubati Adibasi Trust, another community-led initiative of both the residents of Bishnubati and Ghosaldanga. The Museum of Santal Culture, established in 2007, with support from the Indian Museum, Kolkata, BAMS and GASS, has over 150 artefacts that comprise diverse traditional musical instruments, cultural ornaments and clothes worn by elders, hunting equipment, historical photographs of the Santali past, stone sculptures, amongst other objects that illustrate the Santali memory of the region. “We added these diverse artefacts because our main purpose was for the children of our community to visit this museum and learn about their traditions and culture. We consider this as part of their learning process,” says Baski who has effectively connected different worlds through this museum. Beside the Santal region that comprises Baski’s village of Bishnubati and Ghosaldanga amongst other Adivasi villages in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, there is Santiniketan – a prominent neighbourhood around 150 kilometres north of the city of Kolkata. Santiniketan is famous because of poet Rabindranath Tagore’s mission and vision to set up a university town that started with the creation of Viswa-Bharati in 1921. Between the academic town and the Santal region is the Kopai River. This river is not only a geographic divider but also one of culture. Although the separation is only ten kilometres or so in distance, a couple of decades ago, one could explicitly perceive the visible differences between

these two regions in terms of how the residents lived, interacted with their surroundings, and their worldviews. Through the Museum of Santal Culture in Bishnubati, Baski has developed a platform that enables the other communities residing in the larger region to learn and understand more about the Santali way of life. The museum accentuates the Santal values and their worldview. “Individuals from other communities who have been living beside us for years know very little about who we are. The museum would act as a reminder for them to rethink their prejudices that they hold about the Santal community,” asserts Baski who takes pride in promoting his cultural heritage and preserving its rich legacy.



Traditional stone sculpture exhibits at the Museum of Santal Culture, Bishnubati, West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)



Indigenous mural at a house in Bishnubati village in West Bengal (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

Besides co-founding an informal Santali school and setting up a community-led Santali Museum, Baski also facilitated the formation of local coaching centres to consolidate the learning process of youth from his community. These centres spread in different villages in the region help children in their academic training and extra-curricular endeavours. “The RSV school, coaching centre, alongside the mentorship of Boro Baski, Gokul Hansda, and Sona Murmu had a tremendous impact in my life. Without their guidance, I would not be where I am today. I had the opportunity to communicate in my language that helped me to excel in studies and grasp difficulties,” says Anil Hembram, a former student of the RSV school, who now works at the sports and games division of the initiative. Anil graduated from the second batch after the initiation of the RSV school and now holds an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in Sanskrit from the Viswa-Bharati University. These centres are all community-led initiatives, which is based on the larger vision of BAMS and GASS, wherein individuals volunteer to educate the youth and help them in addressing difficulties that they may be facing in school. For this, various individuals have welcomed spaces within their homes for children to come and study in a group. This allows the local youth to understand problems and challenges in their native language and progress with mainstream curriculums, alongside the training that they receive in school.

In an increasingly globalised world, where identities are becoming homogeneous, it becomes fundamental

to preserve local traditions and knowledge systems, especially those that are at the risk of decaying. There are various indigenous languages, history, and memory that are rapidly moving towards extinction in India. Given most of the indigenous traditions of knowledge are largely oral, when a generation passes away, with them the culture starts to fade. With their efforts, Baski and the larger community that he is a part of have effectively preserved the Santali self, traditional knowledge systems and memory without compromising on modern modes of education that may be fundamental to one’s existence in today’s day and age. Baski has also gone beyond the borders of West Bengal and travelled to various Indian states as part of his quest to study other indigenous communities and some of the methods that they have adopted to progress in their respective regions. Overall, the essence of India is not based on a uniform Indianness, but within the heterogeneity of the local cultures found in the subcontinent. Something Baski is actively working to preserve, protect, and promote in his region.

Boro Baski can be reached at:

[✉ borobaski@gmail.com](mailto:borobaski@gmail.com)

Bishnubati Adibasi Marshal Sangha (BAMS) can be reached at:

[✉ bams.sec@gmail.com](mailto:bams.sec@gmail.com)



Students performing tasks as part of their class on agriculture at the RSV School (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

I spent my formative years and early adulthood in Kolkata and rarely have I had the opportunity to visit Birbhum district, which is a little over 150 kilometres. Perhaps I have been to the region three or four times. Maybe five. But each time I was there, it was for the purpose of a family vacation. Prior to my work at TU, I worked with an indigenous museum in rural Gujarat for which I had the opportunity to research extensively on indigenous museums in India and elsewhere. This is when I came across the Museum of Santal Culture in a village in Birbhum and the work of Boro Baski. I was curious about the museum and Boro, but this was the pandemic time. Travel and movement were restricted. I was curious about a museum so close to home, yet I never had the opportunity to visit. Museums always fascinated me. Thus, this museum remained in the back of my head. When I was designing my travel journey, as part of the TU fellowship, I thought I must incorporate this destination. Soon after, I corresponded with Boro and after some time, they offered to host me and encourage my curiosity. This experience helped me to perceive Birbhum in a new light—knowing and accessing communities and localities which otherwise I would not have. When one talks about achievements, one thinks of acquiring a new skill or attaining something materially. However, one of the achievements of my travel journey would be to form a relationship with Boro and the members of his community, who warmly hosted me in their village, showed me around, and shared the history of their community.



With Boro Baski at Birbhum, West Bengal

Walking the talk: The Environmentalist who Travels on Foot in India

Parindey: Siddharth Agarwal

Availihood: Environmental Activist, Media Professional & Educator

Region: Kolkata, West Bengal

“Walking has the capacity to disarm someone you are meeting. And that allows for a very fluid, very fluent conversation, with whoever you are meeting, and all the layers of separation that we generally have on meeting someone new, walking enabled the removal of all these layers, in a very direct, intimate conversation, in a very quick amount of time”, argues Siddharth Agarwal, in his documentary “Moving Upstream: Ganga”. One is forced to think how a mundane form of movement like walking can effectively dismantle complex societal power dynamics. This is an intriguing story of an IITian who started his journey in the social sector on foot, walking by rivers in India, to understand and document the predicament of communities who reside beside waterbodies. An aerospace engineering graduate from IIT Kharagpur, Siddharth has been on many long walks in the Indian subcontinent. Most notably, his six-month-long walk from river Ganga in West Bengal to Gangotri in Uttarakhand. Moving Upstream: Ganga is based on this 3000-kilometre-long slow travel experience. From downstream to

upstream, Siddharth’s movement encapsulates not only the stories of diverse individuals who live by the river but also the trajectory of Ganga as a waterbody and the kind of impact it has endured because of human interventions in varied capacities.

Based in Kolkata, Siddharth founded the Veditum India Foundation, a not-for-profit research and media organisation working at the intersection of social, environmental, and cultural issues. According to him, the idea behind this initiative is to facilitate the production of grassroots research wherein the emphasis is on originality based on lived experiences of people and their communities. “Seeing and learning about injustices that exist and knowing one’s limitations can be rather frustrating. I have had an incredibly steep curve of learning knowledge about the environment and people’s lives first-hand which is very different from the idea of a progressive India or the world’s largest democracy. It feels like a joke sometimes hearing these notions about India that are far fetched from



Siddharth Agarwal at his home in Kolkata, West Bengal. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

reality. It makes me feel schizophrenic about reality”, asserts Siddharth who founded Veditum intending to form publicly accessible records. As part of this initiative, he has spent significant time in the field to understand the complexities associated with ground realities, document diverse viewpoints, and maintain an archive on this. For instance, if one takes the example of the issues concerning rivers in India, what one knows based on literature and what one perceives while being near rivers are two distinct vantage points. Using unique and innovative techniques, Veditum brings forth stories of ordinary Indian people and the larger environment they are a part of.

At present, as part of Veditum, Siddharth is primarily working on issues concerning rivers in India. The larger vision behind the documentation that he does is his mission that calls for collective action which may influence policy-level change. “I have always felt strongly about issues concerning the environment and social justice. Even when I did not fully understand what these meant. It was during college that I was motivated to go out and learn more about these issues. Over the years, what I have learnt has informed my present viewpoint,” says Siddharth who believes to be on a learning journey. Veditum is primarily working on four major projects, a) the Moving Upstream project series that engages with India’s river ecosystems and riparian communities b) a fellowship designed for young professionals to experience and document the same c) city

water walks campaigns to understand urban water commons and where water in urban cities come from and d) an environmental accountability project under which the focus is to monitor and evaluate floods and their impact in Bihar.

Through the Moving Upstream fellowship experience, which is an extension of the original Ganga project, Veditum offers youth to engage, document, and endeavour on a journey about knowing waterways in India. This fellowship is co-hosted by Veditum alongside the National Geographic Society’s ‘Out of Eden Walk’ (<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/out-of-eden-walk/>) initiative. As part of the Eden Walk endeavour, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Salopek is walking across the world in the footsteps of our ancestors who discovered the world on foot, starting from Africa. Thus far, as part of this fellowship for over three years, fourteen Moving Upstream fellows have walked thousands of kilometres along River Betwa and Sindh in India. The stories by the fellowship participants were published on platforms such as the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI) and South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, and People (SANDRP), amongst other forums. Furthermore, in an individual capacity, Siddharth has completed other river walks in India such as Ken and is currently walking along River Mahakali in Uttarakhand, as part of the Moving Upstream project series.

Aside from the long river walks, due to Veditum’s



Siddharth during one of his long walks. (Photo: Shridhar Sudhir)

efforts, various individuals and groups have successfully documented urban water bodies in their own cities. With on-ground exercises already undertaken in Mumbai, Chennai, and Ahmedabad, there are plans of expanding this idea to other cities in India. The primary idea behind the 'City Water Walk' initiative is to understand the origin of the water that one drinks in urban spaces – where it comes from, how clean it may be, and to maintain a public record of the damages being inflicted upon water bodies in cities. "All this work that we do at Veditum is for evidence creation. The negation of reality happens only because there is not enough evidence for the public, aside from official records. Maintaining robust public records by enterprising citizens can address this kind of negation. If someone's land is taken by force, it should be documented. Without this documentation, rampant corruption or illegality takes place," argues Siddharth whose initial journey was driven by the idea of exploration and meeting people with whom otherwise he would not have interacted in unfamiliar landscapes. Walking as a tool enables one to break away from pre-existing societal power dynamics that one implicitly adheres to. It allows one to place oneself in unknown geography at ease and observe the local circumstances. Siddharth believes social progress and harmony can take place if individuals reach out to each other and lend an ear.

As part of their environmental accountability project, Siddharth has collaborated with Megh Pyne Abhiyan, a public charitable trust working on issues concerning water distress in the Eastern part of India, to monitor floods and their overarching impact in Bihar. In recent years, states in East and Northeast India have witnessed alarming floods resulting in widespread ecological damage and loss of livelihood. The Sundarbans in West Bengal, for instance, were significantly hit by four major cyclones in the span of three years – Fani (2019), Bulbul (2019),

Amphan (2020), and Yaas (2021). The Bihar Floods 2021 project, initiated by Veditum, is an attempt to monitor the flood situation in Bihar and its official state responses. This project acts as a repository of flood-related information and governance. Siddharth hopes to build more on this learning experience and expand the environmental accountability project on other major issues such as illegal river sand mining and deforestation by partnering with other like-minded individuals. "The work that we produce, be it writing articles, making films, contributing to magazines, or delivering talks is to engage with diverse groups of people and make information on pressing issues such as climate change more accessible. Our work can effectively be utilised by researchers, climate activists, journalists, or even a concerned citizen," echoes Siddharth who believes it is the least he can do as a co-citizen of this country.

In addition to his work at Veditum, Siddharth is also part of various other forums such as the India Rivers Forum, Rights of Rivers South Asia (RORSA), and India Youth Water Network (IYWN). He believes in fostering partnerships and using innovative methods for the collective good. He has contributed in myriad ways, from communication, research, and design, to photo and video documentation, on varied issues being raised on these platforms. He hopes to encourage and support more young individuals in India to participate or collaborate in knowing the ecosystems that they are a part of. In doing so, he promotes walking as a method to witness one's surroundings and be actively present in the world. This quest came with many challenges. For instance, during the Ganga journey, Siddharth was asked questions like, "do you have permission to walk here?", or "why are you walking here?" Instead of considering this as a difficulty, Siddharth used such an opportunity to interact with diverse individuals and embraced some of the long-lasting human connections he formed in the process. Something



Siddharth during the river Ganga walks, as part of the Moving Upstream project series. (Photo: Nupur Agarwal)

he cherishes as these connections are organic and without intermediaries, which is the first step towards understanding individuals or communities different from one's own. In conclusion, based on Siddharth's journey, one could see how it is possible to talk about social and ecological issues, suggest

meaningful changes based on ground realities and lived experiences of people, and at the same time advocate for policy reforms. One may be keen on referring to this unique practice as walking the talk as opposed to mere talk.



A self-photograph from one of Siddharth's long walks in India. (Photo: Siddharth Agarwal)

Siddharth Agarwal can be reached at:

✉ asid@veditum.org, contact@veditum.org

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/veditum>

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/Veditum>

🐦 <https://twitter.com/veditum>

📺 <https://www.youtube.com/c/Veditum>

🌐 <https://www.veditum.org>



Siddharth in discussion with Mumbai-based filmmaker Sourav Dutta in Kolkata, West Bengal. This discussion led to a meaningful partnership between Sourav's initiative Project Nomad and the Veditum India Foundation for a screening of the documentary Moving Upstream: Ganga in Mumbai, Maharashtra. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

I did not anticipate documenting a story of an innovator in Kolkata in the city where my parental house is located. Kolkata, for me, is home. Needless to say, home can have different definitions for different individuals. For me, it is a space where things have remained unchanged. Of course, there is no such thing as unchanging, because change seems to be the only constant. There are new buildings, malls, and initiatives. Old spaces get demolished, and new ones are established. However, it is the temperament of ordinary people that remains unchanging. The upper caste and class continue to hold positions of power and dictate what is right and just. Anyhow, without delving into the unequal politics of progress or development, home for me remained a space where I was always welcomed. With familiar faces. Unchanging in the narrow sense of the word. Indeed a privilege of sorts for a few. When I started my travel journey, I decided I would only explore spaces where I have not been: experiencing unfamiliar landscapes. Why visit a space (like Kolkata) that is already known and remains unchanging of sorts (for me)? Then I heard about Siddharth Agarwal and his journey which involved walking for thousands of kilometres along rivers in India. Immediately, I was curious about this individual: what drives him and his aspirations. Soon after, based on a couple of articles on his work available online, I learnt about his initiative Veditum India Foundation and about his background as an IIT graduate from Kharagpur. My curiosity increased. Later, as it would turn out, Siddharth only lived a block away from where I grew up and my parents continue to live. I thought about how this individual, with a degree from one of the foremost engineering colleges, decided to walk away from mainstream, lucrative livelihoods and pursue something which is not only mentally exhausting but also physically. As my article on Siddharth's work highlights, interacting with him has been very insightful, inspiring, and one that would remain memorable.



With Siddharth and Sourav at Kolkata, West Bengal

The Politics of Identity in Assam: Deaths, Defiance, and Doubtful Voters

Parindey: Kazi Neel

Avivelihood: Poet, Media Professional

Region: Barpeta, Assam

“They are not humans, they are Miyas,” reminisces Kazi Neel about one of the many discriminatory experiences he had to endure since his childhood days. Miya, which translates as a gentleman in Urdu, is a pejorative word attributed to Bengali-origin Muslims in Assam, meaning “Bangladeshi”, “outsiders”, “refugees”, or “illegal immigrants”. The migration of Bengali Muslims from the erstwhile Bengal province to Brahmaputra Valley in Assam happened in several waves. Historically, the migration dates to the nineteenth century with the British annexation of the region. In the early twentieth century, when many Bengali-origin Muslims migrated to Assam, they adapted to the Assamese

culture and language, and were responsible for its prevalence in the valley. Thus, in post-independent India, the Miyas were referred to as neo-Assamese. In the 1951 census, they declared their language as Assamese. Yet the community was never considered an equal stakeholder in Assamese nationality or politics. Despite adjusting to a way of life that was different from their own, and living in a region for generations, individuals from the Miya community are still questioned about their citizenship and allegiance. The dehumanisation of the Miyas has become openly apparent in recent years.

The ‘othering’ of the Miyas is deeply rooted within



Kazi Neel at Rupakuchi Village, Barpeta, Assam. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

identity politics in Assam in the backdrop of the global migration crisis under which territorial sovereignty and citizenship are often questioned. The fear of illegal immigrants occupying lands, transforming the existing status quo, or reshaping the Assamese culture and language is rampant insofar as the Miyas and their char-chapori culture are frowned upon. This is the story of Kazi Neel, a poet and video journalist, who voices the lived experiences of the Miyas in Assam through poetry and a community media platform known as Ango Khobor, meaning Our News. His poems have been published on various print media and digital media platforms such as Scroll, Al Jazeera, and Raiot, amongst others. Some of his poems have also been published as part of books. Most notably, 'This Land Is Mine, I Am Not of This Land - CAA-NRC and the Manufacture of Statelessness', edited by Harsh Mander and Navsharan Singh. For his quest to be considered as an equal being in Assamese polity, Kazi has been slapped with sedition laws alongside nine other Miya poets in 2019 after their poems went viral on social media. Their resistance through poetry (not violence) and demands for equal human rights (not a piece of the moon) has caused them grief, displacement, deaths, detention, and even forced them to live a life in hiding.

Char-chaporis are shifting riverine islands in the Brahmaputra River in Assam that constitute plain flood-prone grounds. The settlements in these regions primarily comprise Bengali-origin Muslims and other marginalised groups such as the Mishing and Deori communities, and Nepalis, amongst others. The inhabitants of this region continue to face organised hate crime, and citizenship issues, bearing the impact of changing climates such as soil erosion and overflowing which have resulted in the loss of life and livelihood. The residents of char are also facing educational issues resulting in poverty and illiteracy. Many of the residents also do not have access to healthcare. "It is a peculiar and vulnerable geography for which there ought to be separate policies catering to its specific needs. But in the absence of it, the region faces existential threats which may lead to its extinction," echoed Kazi who has extensively worked in this region to promote education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities.

Born in Jyoti Gaon in Barpeta, Assam, Kazi Sharowar Hussain alias Kazi Neel, writes poetry in Miya, Assamese, and Bengali languages illustrating the contemporary political predicament of the Miya community in Assam. Through his poems, he also talks about love and hate, war and peace, and what



Kazi sitting on a boat at Beki Riverbank, Assam. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

it means to be a doubtful individual in Assam. “The issue of citizenship for the Miyas has been persistent throughout their migration history. In 1997, many individuals from this community were categorised as doubtful voters. With this categorisation, one loses political rights and any benefits which one may expect from the government. Both my parents were labelled as doubtful voters. Paradoxically, since 1989, my father has been a teacher in a government school. For an individual who serves the government to be labelled as doubtful is nothing short of harassment and structured violence to subdue a community for who they are,” argues Kazi who actively voices the Miya people’s struggles and their historical oppression, their love and rage, their deaths and defiance using poetry and visual forms of storytelling. Both Kazi and his father were born in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

After his graduation in 2016, from the West Bengal State University in BSc Multimedia, Kazi worked with the Jhai Foundation – a non-profit organisation based in Barpeta, Assam. As part of this project, he lived in the char region in Assam and worked

extensively on issues concerning development. In 2019, while being enrolled as a student pursuing a Master’s in Cultural Studies from Tezpur University, his poem titled This land is mine, but I am not of this land stirred controversy resulting in an arrest warrant on his name. “Several individuals in Assam asserted that I and my acquaintances were trying to portray the Assamese public as xenophobic. They alleged that we were hampering the process of NRC. Hafiz Ahmed’s poem, Write down I am a Miya, made several rounds on social media for months. I was shattered that I was facing jail time because I spoke about my rights. I was forced to live in hiding,” shares Kazi who has been writing Miya poetry since 2016 and has hundreds of poems written under his name – some of which are yet to be published. Apart from writing poetry, Kazi has worked as a Media Fellow at the Centre for Equity Studies. His role involved working as a community video journalist and documenting life in the char region. Through the alternative community media platform Ango Khabar, Kazi works towards bringing forth the continuing challenges faced by the Miyas of the char-chapori region and their everyday dilemmas, especially in the aftermath of the implementation of the controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, which has resulted in the detention of many individuals. He argues that the mainstream media fails to capture their life and ways of being or would simply portray them in a negative light as “criminals” or “foreigners”. The need for Ango Khabar was born out of this need to voice their opinions themselves. “The experiences that I highlight through my work are not only mine but also of the larger community that I am a part of,” says Kazi who facilitates the development of this platform for collective action. One can access this community-led media outlet’s work on Facebook and YouTube. In the near future, Kazi hopes this initiative would go beyond documenting the predicament of the Miyas and focus on other marginalised groups in Assam such as the tea tribes.

To conclude, using poetry as a medium to register his protest, Kazi is actively resisting the inherent idea of the ‘other’ in Assam. His work as a video journalist has accentuated many voices of individuals from his community. Yet with the horrors of death, displacement, and detention at the back of their heads, many individuals of the Miya community are living under the immense pressure of having to prove their Indianness. Therefore, the question still stands, considering the ethnic-nationalistic rhetoric in Assam, can Assam look beyond its dominant ethnicity that it considers as its own and embrace the other? Perhaps new political discourses that may emerge from Miya poetry and alternative media platforms like Ango

The Son of a Doubtful Person

The son of a doubtful person
can at best write a poem
or in a fit of anguish and anger can say—
This land is mine, I am not of this land.

The son of a doubtful person can at best
join a procession and be shot dead
or to save his life can run off
leaving his shoes and slippers.

A little more than that,
the son of a doubtful person
can go to the jungle
with a blind craze for liberation.

The son of a doubtful person can do nothing
besides screaming in front of Raj Bhavan
or hurling his documents of legitimacy
on the face of the state.

The son of a doubtful person
can at best write a poem.

The sons of the martyrs
can do something far better--

They can split the country down
the middle and give away
which the son of doubtful person can never do.

One of Kazi’s famous poems titled ‘The Son of a Doubtful Person’ was translated into English.

Khabar would help the people of Assam to collectively reimagine the kind of politics they would want to rally behind – one of love and social harmony.

Kazi Neel can be reached at:

✉ kazi.neel92@gmail.com

Ango Khabar can be reached at:

✉ angokhabar@gmail.com

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/angokhabarassam>

📺 <https://www.youtube.com/@angokhabar98>

🌐 <https://angokhabarcom.wordpress.com>



After an eventful conversation about the local cuisine and culture, in the photograph, Kazi can be seen sitting alongside a few craftswomen. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

When I first heard that I was to be given the contact of a poet whose work would be relevant to my learning journey, I was thrilled. One of the TU team members, Rahul Karanpuriya, told me first about Kazi Neel and his work as a poet and community journalist in Assam. Rahul had already met Kazi as part of a workshop in Himachal and was familiar with the latter's work. I did not anticipate anything. I was already thrilled about interacting with a poet and going to Assam. I had no idea what I might learn. During my first conversation with Kazi, he asked me to come straight away, a prospect which was difficult for me given that I was in rural Telangana. Perhaps after a month or so, if I recollect correctly, in late November, I arrived in Assam. The journey was nothing short of an adventure. I was supposed to reach Guwahati first and then leave for Barpeta (where Kazi resided at the time) and reach around breakfast time. However, as is the case in any adventure, nothing happened as per plan. On my way from Kolkata to Guwahati, I realised Barpeta station comes before Guwahati. I got down at Barpeta station at one in the morning. It was pitch dark and there was no public transport available or a lodge where I could rest. My journey in Barpeta started with me attempting to sleep at the station with mosquitoes and annoyed station staff around on a fairly cold November night (considering Assam standards). As soon as the sun rose, I made my way to Kazi's house on the outskirts of Barpeta city. From our first conversation, with shared interests in authors and poetry, I formed a connection with Kazi unlike any of the other individuals I had met prior to this or with whom I would be interacting in the future after completing my work at Assam. We had similarities that were hard to miss: both our grandparents were immigrants and we shared the same views on the issues of citizenship (the government's arbitrary policies) and many other problems prevalent in Eastern India (broadly speaking, of course). Some of the issues in Assam that I was able to witness first-hand can be reflected in the story that I did on Kazi's work.



With Kazi Neel at Rupakuchi Village, Barpeta, Assam

The Ghosaldanga Model of Indigenous Development

Parindey: Sona Murmu

Alivelihood: Educator, Social Worker

Region: Ghosaldanga, West Bengal

Diverse individuals may differently understand the idea of education. Some may perceive it as a means to acquire certain skill sets whereas others may think of education as a tool for social progress. Certain individuals view education synonymously with livelihood security, i.e., job stability and social conformity. Then there are formal and informal modes of education. Formal meaning education that one can acquire in schools, colleges, and universities through a fixed curriculum adhering to certain rules of normative engagements. By informal education, one may refer to knowledge that one can acquire without having to be part of a formal educational structure. For instance, one can be an apprentice of a doctor and learn the art of treating a patient in due

time or understanding how conventional diseases may be cured. For this one need not spend five years of their time at a school of medicine. However, in the Indian context, many indigenous communities do not have basic access to education which has resulted in poverty, poor healthcare, and a lack of livelihood opportunities.

Consequently, such communities struggle to be part of mainstream society and institutions. This is the story of Sona Murmu, an indigenous educator, first-generation learner, and the first individual from his village to acquire formal education, who despite all odds stacked against him endeavoured on a quest to educate the youth of his village. This journey was



Sona Murmu standing in front of Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV), Ghosaldanga, West Bengal. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

never formally planned. Rather it emerged out of a need to progress. It was a chance encounter between Sona and Martin Kampchen – a German scholar, who performed a significant role in shaping Sona’s journey as a leader.

Sona Murmu standing in front of Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV), Ghosaldanga, West Bengal. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

Born in the village of Ghosaldanga in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, Sona belongs to the Santal community, who are the original inhabitants of the region. The Santals are a homogenous indigenous community that can be found in the eastern region of the Indian subcontinent and neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. While Sona was a student at the Bergram School and had completed his school final, in the early nineteen-eighties, he met Martin while the latter was passing through Murmu’s native village Ghosaldanga. Neither of them had planned to invest their time and energy in social work. Martin was pursuing his second doctoral degree on the works of the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore at the Department of Philosophy and Religion, Viswa-Bharati University, Santiniketan. He was a student of the renowned Indian philosopher Kalidas Bhattacharya. Apart from being a prolific scholar and translator, Martin took

a deep interest in the development of the village of Ghosaldanga, often contributing from his student scholarship fund.

“I helped a Baul singer to buy a plot of land at a short distance from his village Bautijal on which he built a mud hut for himself and his family. This plot was at the edge of Ghosaldanga. When I visited him at his new home, I quite naturally got to know the entire Ghosaldanga population gradually. I loved to sit with them in the evenings, enjoyed observing their rural life and learn about an aspect of Indian life which had been concealed from me although I had already spent nearly a decade in India,” shared Martin, in a lecture delivered at Viswa-Bharati on February 2012, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha (GASS), an initiative solely dedicated to community development in the village of Ghosaldanga. As echoed by Martin, he never visited the village with a plan of doing any kind of development work. It just happened with the help of Sona and later other youth leaders from neighbouring villages.

“I was seventeen years old, and I realised how the lack of education had affected my village. There were no proper roads that would connect our villages to the mainland. Being poverty-stricken, living conditions were difficult with rampant illiteracy.



Students at the RSV school alongside two of their teachers after a sports session. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

Around this time, while I was roaming with no purpose in life, I came across Martin, a German researcher. I became friends with him and ever since I knew I had to work towards making a change in my village. I knew we had no hope without education,” shares Sona who chose to stay in his village and work for his people instead of getting a job elsewhere after completing his education.

Initially, when they began working in the mid-nineteen-eighties to educate youth, they only had basic supplies such as chalk and a board to write on alongside a kerosene lamp for light when it got dark. The work was slow and would be disrupted when Martin was not in the region. Although he would visit about twice a week, there would be interruptions when Martin goes back to Germany. However, slowly, they built a structure, and the development was consolidated. “Martin helped me to complete my studies in turn if I helped set up evening classes for children of my community. To which I agreed, and our journey started in 1985,” says Sona who has been part of this initiative for over thirty-five years. From evening classes, they gradually worked their way up to not only strengthening their vision by registering their organisation but also setting up an informal school in the region catering specifically to the needs of the Santali youth. Like Sona, there are other community youth leaders including Boro

Baski from neighbouring Bishnubati village and Gokul Hansda of Dhansara. Their vision was not one of achieving a short-term goal, but one of continuing development.

“I told my friends again and again that I should make myself redundant; that they did not work to please me but to serve their village people. I never lead from the front in any function or event; rather, I do prepare the event or programme with my friends, but then I urge them to represent the village and experience the ownership of their work and of human responsibility,” expressed Martin who facilitated the development of this community from within. In 1996, they set up a school known as Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV), as part of the GASS with the support of many individuals who believed in this cause.

Today, the villages of Ghosaldanga, Bishnubati, and other neighbouring villages have medical aid available to them, a school being run by and for them, evening classes to help the youth excel in their studies, alongside other practical initiatives for children to effectively enter mainstream institutions and society. The RSV school, informal in its approach to cater to the practical needs of its students, offers not only a formal educational curriculum but also extra-curricular activities such as classes



An open classroom for students to collectively sit and discuss their learning from their teachers.
(Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

on agriculture, fishing, permaculture activities for interested students, beekeeping, sports such as cricket and football, dance, and music, amongst other pursuits. At this residential school, the students grow their food organically as an attempt towards self-reliance. This school aims to train the youth not only in academics but also to help them in retaining their cultural life. For instance, the students work in the fields and simultaneously indulge in sports and other activities. This allows each student to find their interests naturally and work on them. In doing so, they enable the students to adopt both aspects of modern life and their traditional village worldview.

Most importantly, the medium of instruction at the school is in their native Santali language which enables especially the young children to grasp ideas and concepts easily – an aspect otherwise overlooked at government schools where the youth struggle to understand the medium of instruction that is in the Bengali language. Furthermore, various individuals from the nearby city of Kolkata, other urban and rural spaces in India, and even various parts of Europe come and live at the school as part of diverse programmes that give the local Santali students exposure that is beyond the margins of their villages. Many students have travelled to different places in the Indian subcontinent and Europe. For Sona and his peers' efforts, the Ramkrishna Mission in Narendrapur, Kolkata recognised their struggle early on and gave them official acknowledgement. This

helped them to organise their working structure and formally strengthen their cause. Sona's work helped not only many of his peers but continues to help second-generation learners from the Ghosaldanga village who have secured jobs beyond the borders of West Bengal.

In conclusion, contrary to popular conception, development may not necessarily be visible at the onset, but it slowly takes a form. Communities that have been struggling for generations may not instantly progress and witness social change. For social improvement and steady betterment, it takes collective willpower, determination, and continuing labour. Something Sona and other youth leaders' efforts have shown. Against all odds and their challenging predicament, Sona and his peers' collective efforts illustrate how community-led development can be achieved and sustained. One could say that what started as a social experiment with good faith with barely any resources has taken the shape of this beautifully designed initiative. Much like the seeds that were sowed decades ago have finally taken the shape of a robust tree that caters to the needs of each of its branches.

Sona Murmu can be reached at:

✉ s.joharmurmu@rediffmail.com



Youth leader Sona Murmu alongside his peer Boro Baski facilitated the community development of the region. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

When I first started my travel journey, I was told by the TU programme team that I must not plan all the stories beforehand because I might come across individuals, during the course of my travels, whose journey I would be compelled to document. At the time, I was not entirely sure what it meant. In retrospect, I realise such things cannot be anticipated. One cannot know how one might feel before arriving in a region. Feelings change, experiences transform, information is gleaned, and so on. This is how I came across the story of Sona Murmu. I had no knowledge about him or his work. It was only when I was documenting the story of Boro Baski, I had the opportunity to interact with Sona. That was when I decided I must come back to the village of Ghosaldanga, particularly to interact with Sona in length and learn about his journey in great detail. This eventually did happen before I made my way to Goa. Every time I reflect on this journey, I am reminded of resilience—a noun we tend to use casually in everyday situations. In the following pages, Sona’s story titled “The Ghosaldanga Model of Indigenous Development” echoes the story of resilience, hope, the power of chance encounter, and not foreseeing things.

Empowerment via Community Media: Through the lens of Devidas Gaonkar

Parindey: Devidas Gaonkar

Alivelihood: Community Media

Region: Cotigao, Goa

In a world of globalised media networks with their central focus being on business and commerce, it becomes increasingly important to have decentralised media networks that voice the opinion of ordinary people and their everyday challenges. Community media that empowers and enables its participants to address the issues faced by their communities locally and is decentralised in its approach, can be perceived as an alternative to commercial/mainstream media. This facilitates the process of community development that is not the focus of mainstream media. Here is the story of Devidas

Gaonkar, a local journalist based in South Goa, who voices the continuing challenges of his community by facilitating public platforms for debates and discussions using media as a tool. Through his work, Devidas has been instrumental in various change-making movements.

Born in Baddem Village in Cotigao, Goa, Devidas belongs to the indigenous Velip community that traditionally resides in the hilly areas of Canacona in South Goa. His village, which is amongst the several indigenous villages in remote forest areas within the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary, is in the South end of



Devidas at the backyard of his house. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

Goa, near the border of Karnataka. Many residents in other parts of Goa, outside of Canacona and in the Northern parts of Goa, do not know that there are indigenous communities residing in the forests for generations. However, as a result of Devidas's work with various media outlets, he is quite famous in the larger Canacona area. He happens to be the only journalist from his village who is actively voicing the challenges that are being faced by the members of his community.

Without any formal education and training in media and journalism, Devidas learnt reporting and videography with the help and support of various individuals. His interest in the field developed naturally. "From my childhood, if I witnessed injustice in my village or the larger block area, I informed it to someone or tried to disseminate about it locally," shares Devidas who has been associated with the Video Volunteers since 2009, a not-for-profit initiative that promotes community media to facilitate the participation of individuals from marginalised communities across the globe. His first tryst with media started when he attended a workshop on media that was conducted in his village by a Chief Reporter. Post the completion of the event, he kept in touch with the reporter and sent him multiple letters about issues that were important in

his village as part of the editorial section. His first piece was published in Sunaparant, a local Konkani language newspaper in Goa that is no longer active. "I realised this local newspaper had limited reach. Thus, I reached out to one with a good reach and asked if I could send them editorial pieces on my village's development issues. They offered me the position of a reporter, but I said I did not know how to report. Then they asked me to meet a reporter who worked for them and that he would help me learn about media reporting. This is how I began my journey as a reporter then slowly worked towards consolidating my skills in writing and conducting research," shares Devidas who now does local reporting as part of 'Goa 365', a local news channel based in Goa, on wide-ranging issues from ecological to cultural.

Apart from making videos as part of his role as a Community Correspondent at Video Volunteers, Devidas has been simultaneously associated with both electronic and print media. "Since I began my work with Video Volunteers, I realised that development can be achieved and sustained through media. I believe that anyone from my community facing a problem is something that concerns me. Addressing the nature of this problem not only helps the larger community that I am a part of but also



Devidas interacting with an individual from a neighbouring village at Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary, Goa. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

is an attempt towards social progress,” remarks Devidas who has been threatened multiple times while pursuing his work. Thus far, aside from his media work, he has written three books – one on poetry, one on indigenous communities in Goa, and one on an indigenous struggle for equal rights that had taken place in Goa in 2011. He writes mainly in Konkani and Marathi. He also contributes research articles on Goa’s indigenous population as part of the special edition titled Manthan by the Lokmat newspaper. This gets published every Sunday.

In his journey, Devidas has faced various challenges – from powerful opposition to finances. “Initially, when I started to write in 2007-08 in a Marathi newspaper, I would only receive a meagre amount of 300 rupees. It was not enough to sustain yet I was driven by the idea that I have to write about issues and contribute towards the development of my community,” expresses Devidas, who takes a lot of pride in doing what he does and wants to continue to be the voice of the indigenous population in Goa. He believes that the bigger the problem is the bigger the success would be after eliminating the problem. For instance, in his neighbouring villages, five-six villages still



Devidas posing in front of an entrance to the reserve forest areas. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)



Devidas with the local Panchayat head. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

do not have road connectivity. Villagers had to ride cycles and motorbikes on a dirt road at risk or had to walk for kilometres to reach the nearby water body or neighbouring villages to access the water supply. Two villages still do not have electricity, something which is completely unheard of in contemporary India. In Marlem village, the residents collectively protested and decided to boycott the elections until their demand for road construction was fulfilled. Devidas made a video on this issue, addressed the needs of the residents, and sent it to various local media platforms. Once the news made headlines, all-weather roads were sanctioned, and the construction began.

Devidas has been unhappy with some of the developments undertaken by the Forest Department within the Cotigao Sanctuary. For instance, trenches were created in the forests which affected the free movement of animals. “The Forest Department does not conduct meaningful studies to monitor and evaluate the far-reaching impact of its projects. We have witnessed animals being killed in trenches.

Sometimes villagers would click photographs of the dead animal and circulate them. We even met the local MLA and filed memorandums”, asserts Devidas who argues that the Forest Department in Goa has often destroyed natural forest areas to set up plantations. He argues that this practice is unjust as this inflicts immense ecological damage. Besides, the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary was officially established in 1968, but long before its initiation, indigenous communities resided within the forest areas for generations. Thus, any request of making roads within these forests to connect villages is problematic because of the Forest Act. Aside from poor road connectivity in some villages, Devidas’s village and many of the neighbouring villages still do not have mobile phone networks. In the event of a healthcare emergency or other problems, villagers are forced to travel kilometres to access medical aid.

In the future, Devidas would like to critically engage with issues such as climate change, waste management, and decaying indigenous culture, and traditions. “There is no awareness about climate



Devidas in conversation with a few members of his village. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

change in the village. People in my village still follow the same lifestyle as they would decades ago. But earlier there would be forests behind our houses. Nowadays there is no forest. There are various cashew plantations. Growing only cashews takes a heavy toll on the environment. Monoculture is proven to have a disastrous impact. There must be mixed plantations. This is an issue I would like to push in the future,” echoes Devidas who has also worked with the fisheries union in Goa aiming towards sustainable development keeping the larger environment in mind.

To conclude, Devidas’s journey illustrates the power of community media in the context of community development, enhancing local literacy and awareness, and empowering the participants to express their concerns. This form of media also allows for preserving local ways of being which are at risk of decaying with the emergence of global media. In an era of disinformation and post-truth wherein

validating the nature of news is a research task, community media can effectively speak truth to power. Devidas’s journey echoes how youth from remote villages without formal training in media and journalism can step up to be leaders and represent their communities and their continuing challenges. Sustaining community media networks not only is an indicator of a healthy democratic society but is an act of asserting the local cultural landscape, community life, and its development trajectory.

In Devidas’s words, “The difference between mainstream and community media is that of purpose. Any agenda can be made the news. Mainstream media may run an issue and then forget about it. However, community media would keep up with the issues, and the progress it has made, and find out appropriate solutions. Community media holds power to transform the life of a community. This, however, does not mean mainstream media is irrelevant. It has its merits.”

Residing in the hilly areas of Canacuna, inside the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary, Devidas Gaonkar is a community journalist based in South Goa. I managed to contact Devidas before visiting his village, and he kindly offered to host me and share about his work. However, the day I left for his house, I could not contact him and so I arrived in Canacuna with some uncertainty. Much to my surprise, Devidas was quite well-known in the region. From forest department authorities at Cotigao to the shopkeeper at the Canacuna Bus Stop (which is more than an hour away from his village), everyone knew Devidas based on his extensive media coverage of diverse issues in South Goa—from standing up for indigenous rights to constructing roads to increasing accessibility to discussing the impact of climate change. Devidas in the face of powerful opposition has spoken the truth. Later I also found out that he is quite well known amongst the riparian communities, for he has spoken about their rights as well against industries that planned on setting up watersports that affect the fishing villages, fisherpeople's livelihood, and fish habitat. Therefore, purely on his reputation, I was able to locate his house which is some thirty kilometres or perhaps more inside the Cotigao forest area. This took quite some time. Devidas too seemed to be fairly surprised that I, without knowing the local Konkani language, was able to find his house. The difficulty was partly because mobile network towers are scarce inside the wildlife sanctuary, as they should be, but the individuals residing within it face many problems because of it. However, I had a great time there: enjoying the local company, culture, and cuisine. The fish curry I was offered for lunch and dinner was nothing like I ever had in my life. Besides, this was the first time I used a leaf to brush my teeth, which was a bizarre experience for me. This actually made me realise first-hand how industries keep producing artificial needs and have disconnected the individual from nature. Much of the issues of community development in rural India actually hinge on trivial issues such as toothpaste, washing powder, etc. Recycling the waste of these commodities is difficult and it further adds to the changing climate crisis. Anyhow, interacting with Devidas made me grasp how community media can be an effective tool to illustrate local voices and local modes of expression, which is the need of the hour when one talks about inclusive development in a globalised world.



With Devidas at Cotigao, Goa

Of ecological damage and the politics of development in Goa

Parindey: Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues

Alivelihood: Environmental Activist, Researcher

Region: Vaxim, Goa

At a time when many young individuals across the globe are advocating for intergenerational solidarity and for their governments to take sound policy level action, it becomes imperative to discuss individual accounts of resistance against the forces of aggressive industrialisation leading to ecological and livelihood destruction. Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues, known as Seby to his friends and family, is an environmental activist and researcher based in Goa who has been actively fighting for nature and human rights in the region and elsewhere (briefly in Delhi and rural Jharkhand) for little over three decades. For his activism and community engagement, he has been offered economic incentives, sued in a court of law (when refused to bend), threatened variously,

and more. He has fought against mining barons and corporations that have destroyed the local environment on behalf of local small-scale riparian communities, and illustrated a picture of Goa that is contrary to the popular imagination. Conventionally, Goa is imagined as a place of tourism, a space where life is relaxed—an idyllic setting. However, Seby's work shows there is more to it than is known, as is the case for many tourist spots.

Born and raised in Goa, Seby completed his undergraduate studies in Sociology and Economics at St Xaviers College, Mapusa. Around this time, in the mid-nineties, he started working as a part-time journalist covering stories of ground



Seby at Vaxim Island, Goa (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

realities in Goa. By the time he was pursuing his postgraduate studies, he was already quite well-versed with the diverse local communities of Goa and their continuing struggles. His brief stint with a law degree gave him knowledge of legal affairs when it came to issues concerning the degradation of the environment. Recently, his doctoral research focused on conflicts in the field of environmental ethics. As part of this, he extensively studied the destruction of fishing in the Zuari river from a grassroots perspective. His research focused on the lived experiences of the local small-scale fishers or traditional fishing communities, who use non-destructive fishing gears, compared with commercial fishing companies. For instance, industrialised fishing enterprises use destructive practices such as trawling or purse-seine fishing methods. Trawling essentially destroys the seafloor as it catches even the smallest of fishes on a large scale and in the process destroys the eggs, and releases pollutants stored at the bottom of the sea. This not only destroys the natural habitat of organisms but also destroys the livelihood of traditional fishers who do not catch the number of fish (as the trawler does) in a full season. Furthermore, in Goa, many trawlers catch fish even in the months of monsoon (June-July) when fishing is prohibited. Of late, due to government orders, trawling has been banned. However, many individuals

appear to violate the law and use trawling machinery with LED which is very destructive for marine life. The ban during monsoons is because of the regeneration of marine life. Yet the trawlers continue to catch fish in the rainy season violating the law of the land.

According to Seby, the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill 2021 is more of a threat to traditional fishing communities than it does any good. The Bill denies the existence of mechanised fishing by large firms or companies. “This bill proposes to allow mechanised fishing within a radius of five kilometres. It claims there are no large-scale fisheries and only small-scale fisheries exist in India. This is because of pressure from the WTO on the Indian government. Furthermore, the bill claims there is only one type of fish found. Therefore, the securities that were available for small-scale fisheries are now under threat. Protests are ongoing and several MPs have been informed. All Goa Small Scale Responsible Fisheries Union, an initiative set up by the fishing communities of Zuari, Chapora river, and Arabian Sea, have protested against this bill,” shares Seby who currently functions as the Goa State Convener of Bharat Mukti Morcha (BMM) and is also a member of the National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (NPSSFW). Both these initiatives continue to fight for the traditional fishing communities and actively



Seby at a riverine village, North of Goa. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

object to this problematic fisheries bill. Moreover, another threat faced by the local fishing communities of Goa is high-end tourism, which comes often with the support of the central government. These luxury tourism companies get ownership of the river by acquiring a lease for thirty years and so on. As a result of this, “the river as a space for fishing was replaced with water sports,” claims Seby who has fought extensively against such companies.

Seby was not always so well informed about the challenges faced by the local fishing communities. It took him several hours of interviews, spending time with the communities on the ground, who patiently explained their complex predicament to him. However, Seby’s main focus had always been the mining issue in the region. He planned to pursue his doctoral research on the ecological and livelihood destruction caused by mining in Goa. It was only when he started spending more time in the riverine villages that he changed his mind to focus on the more pressing challenges faced by fishing communities. To know more about certain aspects, which were otherwise not known even to the local fishers, Seby filed an RTI with thirty-six questions

to the Department of Fisheries. “This letter got so famous that it went to several official departments in Goa. I would get police officers frequently visiting me at the BITS Pilani campus wherein I was pursuing my PhD as if I were some criminal. However, they came to visit me with responses to my RTI letters,” remarks Seby reminiscing about some of the challenges he faced.

He got support from many local individuals, government officials, and groups. For instance, Govind Jaiswal, an IAS officer, ordered a study to understand the impact of water sports on marine fisheries and fishing by appointing scientists from the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO). This study was never sanctioned, and Jaiswal was shunted soon after. In 2022, the Mormugao Port Trust (MPT), a subsidiary of the Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, was changed to Mormugao Port Authority (MPA), under the Major Ports Authorities Act 2021. Many environmentalists in the region claim that this gave the central government even more power and authority to conduct whatever they wanted within the state of Goa. Therefore, the issue of luxury tourism and the destruction of livelihood



Seby with Sanjay Pereira, a local fisherman who has known Seby for twenty-three years. Both have worked together as part of various issues. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

[Goanet] I love Pissurlem (a poem)

Seby | Tue, 03 Jun 2003 15:22:04 -0700

I love Pissurlem

[By Seby]

[A poem about mining in interior Goa, from the village of Pissurlem, where the bowels of the earth have been excavated for over five decades.]

Mining has played havoc
With the lives of people
With the agriculture
With the forest cover and its microbe wealth
With the democratic tradition
With the workers
With the wells and water
With the tiger, fox and squirrel
With the nests of mainah, sparrow and parrot
With the habitat of the sanke and calotes
With the fish, fishing ponds and frog
With the fish, fishing ponds and frogs
With the natural springs and its coolness
With the trees -- big and small

Mining has pumped dust
Into the lungs of neighbourhood residents
Mining has corrupted
Politicians and bureaucrats
Mining makes a joke
Of democracy in my land

I can't remain in peace
And witness the houses of Pissurlem in peril
The mark of muddy flood-waters
Inside the bedroom
The land of mining
Victimised and rendered useless

"I love Pissurlem", the poem authored by Seby. This was later used as a means to spread awareness regarding the impact of mining on local life, livelihood, and the larger environment. The poem effectively spread the message when physical protests and demonstrations appeared to be dangerous owing to the reputation of the mining industry. Seby would raise funds, use money from his pocket, print out a hundred copies, disseminate, and then do it all over again to generate action and awareness. (Source: <https://www.mail-archive.com/goanet@goanet.org/msg01283.html>)

for the fishing communities remains an ongoing matter.

Before he engaged with the fishing communities, Seby for almost a decade fought extensively against mining companies in Goa. In April 2001, through a chance encounter at a public meeting, he got to know about water not reaching certain villages despite the region's close proximity to the sea and rivers. At the time, talking about the mining industry was highly dangerous because of their stronghold and presence everywhere in public life. The mining companies always hired individuals from local areas, especially truckers, and made them invest in the mining industry so the locals would not revolt against ecological destruction. Seby, travelling in the back of such trucks, went to many mines and first-hand witnessed the damages which were being inflicted upon nature. In the village of Pissurlem, the conditions moved him to the point that he authored a poem titled "I love Pissurlem". After mining was banned in the state, individuals across socio-economic classes who owned trucks faced a major blow to their livelihood. Many since then have actively spoken out against the ills of mining in the region.

"I love Pissurlem", the poem authored by Seby. This was later used as a means to spread awareness regarding the impact of mining on local life, livelihood, and the larger environment. The poem effectively spread the message when physical protests and demonstrations appeared to be dangerous owing to the reputation of the mining industry. Seby would raise funds, use money from his pocket, print out a hundred copies, disseminate, and then do it all over again to generate action and awareness. (Source: <https://www.mail-archive.com/goanet@goanet.org/msg01283.html>)

It was only around 2007 that protests started to erupt, and mines were consequently ordered to shut down. However, the problem did not end here as transportation of the remaining ores, especially the rejected ones, would be unloaded in rivers like Zuari and Mandovi. This contributed to massive ecological destruction. The riparian communities had no idea what was happening. Neither did they anticipate repercussions such as bad fishing seasons, destruction of fish eggs, fish life, water pollution, and so on. "Creating awareness and learning how mining was linked to the issues faced by the fishing



Seby standing in front of the Vaxim Church in Goa. (Photo: Sneharshi Dasgupta)

communities posed quite a bit of a challenge for me,” shares Seby who has also been at the forefront of a defamation suit for his extensive blogging about the mining issue on the website Mandgoa (<http://mandgoa.blogspot.com>) –an Adivasi-rights research and resource centre, an initiative by the Gawda, Kunbi, Velip and Dhangar Federation (GAKUVED). The issue of illegal sand mining in rivers like Mandovi remains persistent. Most recently, in 2022, Seby has been threatened in many ways to not file police complaints or speak up against the sand miners in the region.

Previously, in his quest to voice the ecological damages inflicted by mines in Goa, in December 2008, Seby was sued in Kolkata High Court by Fomento Group of Industries for allegedly publishing false and defamatory statements. This defamation suit was for 500 crores. However, it is ironic when the issue at hand is in Goa and the case filed is in Kolkata. Many local residents and government officials came in support and argued this was nothing short of harassment. Referring to Seby as a Naxalite, many mining companies tried their best to silence his voice. For Seby, “lack of public awareness allowed mining and hence we used this spotlight to create more awareness on the issue. Consequently, we got great community support from not only Goa but from all around the world.” From around this time, mining had been banned in Goa, yet many individuals continue sand mining after sunset, but this does not go without notice. Many locals call the police because of the awareness generated during the protests. Seby functioned as Convener of Goa Mines Affected People (GOAMAP) for two years from August 2008 to August 2010.

Currently, Seby is also fighting against the illegal sale of Vaxim island (without any of the residents being aware) wherein industries are trying to set up a golf

course and other high-end tourism enterprises. In February 2006, it was the Church that sold off this island privately. Until 2010, the residents had no idea that their homes had been purchased. According to canon law, Seby argues, “the Church may sell a piece of land if it wants to build a hospital or school, but to sell off an entire island to private companies without informing the inhabitants of the land is a whole different thing altogether.” Vaxim, relatively unknown although close to Panjim, can only be reached by ferry and is home to local communities for generations. As a current resident of this island, Seby is actively resisting the encroachment of the island as it is a vulnerable geography for any high-end tourism constructions. Since this intrusion, albeit no construction work has officially started, many individuals have moved out of the island to other parts of Goa and elsewhere. Very few residents are left. Yet Seby continues to fight for what he believes to be just for the local community and environment.

In future, his goal is to see empowered communities wherein the public can take up the dissemination of information without any fear of what might happen or get help from activists. In his journey, the abundance of support and encouragement he has received from the locals drives him to work furiously against the unequal politics of development in Goa. After all, whose development is it anyway—the locals or the industries? Through Seby’s work, one can see how industries and corporations can be effectively held accountable for their perverse actions. In an age of climate crisis, individuals must resist the external threats and so-called developmental projects imposed by the state and private actors.

Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues can be reached at:

 sebydesiolim@gmail.com

It was during my research and interaction with many individuals that I came across Devidas's work. Therefore, the trip to Goa, in some sense, was partially planned. But then I was supposed to go to Kerala to document my final story, before meeting the TU team and my co-fellows at Bangalore in Bhoomi College for the last leg of my travel journey. The journey to Kerala remains unfulfilled and one that remains on the list of regions in India I am yet to explore. There were many factors at play for not being able to go to Kerala: the logistics of it and a delayed response from the host in Kerala. It was during this uncertainty, in a conversation with Devidas, that I first heard about Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues, commonly known as Seby. Apprehensive at first, but Seby soon agreed to meet me and invited me to his house on the island of Vaxim, near Panjim (North of Goa). I learnt about Seby's activism and briefly about his research work from Devidas. I was more excited to visit the island. As soon as I arrived in Old Goa, where I was supposed to meet Seby, I decided to document Seby's story. Old Goa is a space that reminds one of the bygone local social and cultural space that used to exist yet the one it has become (with globalisation and a boost in the local economy because of an increase in tourism and so on). This was when I realised the importance of Seby's work: advocating for the locals and the local ways of being. At the very onset of our conversation, when I posed a question vaguely along these (read: what drives him and how he sustains himself) lines, he had a concise response: "if you are honest to yourself, and what you are doing is just, then there would always be people looking out for your well-being". This was perhaps one of my biggest takeaways from the time I spent in Goa with Seby. One of his neighbours who no longer resides in the region told me, "What Seby is doing is remarkable, his work represents all our collective angst and concerns." Seby's journey and his commitment are an inspiration to me. I hope his story documented in the subsequent pages inspires many others who aim for dialogue, activism, and peace in a world which needs these things more than perverse development and conflicts.



With Sebastiao at Vaxim, Goa

Epilogue

All the stories that I documented made me realise many things—especially values such as defiance, resistance, commitment, etc.—and I acquired various kinds of skill sets (for the lack of a better word) such as travelling with minimum resources, travelling frugally. The last is an aspect that I would like to emphasise upon. I realised during the course of my journey across India that one need not be a tourist to travel and explore one's surroundings and go beyond it. I shall forever be grateful to TU for not only giving me this opportunity (and equipping me) to navigate a space as a traveller, but encouraging me to do better, and be better. All the stories that I was able to document have shared the labour of love: not only the labour that I put in but also of those individuals who stood beside me and constantly motivated me. For without them, these stories would have never come into print. The diverse learnings I acquired are not my own, but theirs. It is a labour of a community that dreams for a better future for they know the impact of collective efforts. The power of mutual aid is something that I learnt during my journey to various Indian states—be it while I was in Himachal Pradesh or Goa. I encountered communities and individuals who were able to do fantastic work because of mutual aid that they received and gave in return. Helping one another, a phrase that we so casually use, is a way of life and operation for many empowered communities that I had the opportunity to know. In a time when there are buzzwords such as inclusive development or alternative development in circulation, what does it truly mean to progress? I realised it was only by helping one another and utilising the existing abundance of resources and capacity wisely can progress take place. The Parindeys and their stories of change are a proof of that. I hope these stories of change inspire other students and young professionals as much as they did to me.

Before you go

How can one reimagine development in India keeping the specificities of the needs of diverse communities in mind?

How might one see the role of community media in an increasingly globalised world?

How does one imagine the role of alternative learning spaces in a world wherein jobs are mostly accessed by those with formal education from premier institutes?

Srilaxmi

Vasco, Goa

Conservation & Co-existence

Srilaxmi is from Vasco, Goa. Open-hearted, she is willing to immerse, learn and create. Flawed like anyone, confused like many, the rope in a tug of war like few, and herself like nobody else, Srilaxmi is figuring her way through. And in all the madness of the mind, heart and soul, she thrives most in the strong arms of nature and community living.

In the fellowship, she explored conservation and coexistence, whilst also questioning contemporary notions of development and trying to locate peoples' aspirations within this. She sees a gap between traditional understanding and scientific knowledge which needs to be bridged through respect, harmony and empowerment of the self and others.



A man I once met in my journey of life told me, “When you choose to fight, you choose a life of struggle. And this life is hard, but it is also meaningful.” Over the past few months of exploring the coexistence of humankind with the rest of nature, and conservation, this thought became profound learning, taking form in different people and journeys, but with one little addition: that struggle isn’t just a struggle anymore when you accept it. Aliveness, after all, is something that makes you come alive, and feeling alive is feeling beautiful, whatever be the force that is firing your spirit.

Prologue

Do you ever feel lost? Always, sometimes, most times, rarely? Do you find yourself questioning existence? Always, sometimes, most times, rarely? Do you ever think about why you are here, born as a human on this planet?

What do these questions do? They make me question things. Keeping the existential part of it aside, they make me want to know more about what's going on, within and around. The seeds of change, I believe, are laid somewhere between the lines of thoughts and actions and nothingness.

In all of the stories I listened to in my four months of travel, there were landmark moments that occurred, instigated sometimes by the exterior world, and sometimes by the interior world, but always colliding between the two somewhere. These moments, landmarks though I may call them now, were just a little more significant than a dust particle floating in the air in the realm of time we call "the past." Looking back, my parindeys can trace it to that event or that feeling. But at that point, they just kept moving. And maybe it brought another landmark moment or two. These moments will occur at different points in time. And one day in the realm of time we call "the future," if you speak to one of them they can trace it back to these points in time as the "turning points." Maybe for some, it will all be a blur, for some, it will be clear. But we can all trace our reason for being right back to our fruition in a womb. And that goes back to much more. But the reason I mention this is, change can happen at any time in our lives, and I was shown and told that again and again by all these beautiful people that I met on my journey. You can find faith, not by searching, but by experiencing. All I'm saying is I hope to keep hope and give and take love, along with all the other things I do, and I wish the same for you.

With this abstract expression of feelings, I will now tell you a little bit about what got me here in the first place, and why. I found solace in the natural environment, I found care for the people and other beings of this planet, but I felt a disconnect as if the things around me were so familiar, yet so distant at the same time. I found it fascinating that my grandmother would make coconut oil from the fruits falling from coconut trees, whereas I only knew the part where it stood on the shelves of stores in plastic bottles or packets. I learnt from my grandfather to use mango leaves for brushing my teeth. I learnt from them many other such things, but far away, where I grew up, I remained disconnected from these wonders. As I grew older, I felt a longing to understand these intricacies of co-dependency on our natural environment. There was this concept I read about in my geography lessons of class XI- Naturalisation of Humans and Humanisation of Nature, and I remember feeling very attached to it- yearning to know more. Although the latter was pretty much everywhere, the former seemed to be in hiding. At that point though, these were sporadic flares, so I didn't know then of their much more permanent nature in building my interests. By this time I had also graduated from school and was in college, where I explored my passion with a newfound zeal. As I set out to wander out on new paths that were uncomfortable and challenging, and even old paths in a more focused manner, I think I was able to connect the dots better. I knew that I wanted to chase my passion for the natural world and tackle the issues that face our society. But I was quite lost with these realisations. I didn't know what to do with them, and I was absolutely mercilessly confused by the plethora of options that I had the opportunity to delve into. And it was not easy to explain why, as an arts graduate, I wanted to do something that was considered science ("nature or conservation = science"). Not having much exposure to the interdisciplinarity of the subject, I too had no answer. I just wanted to.

So I searched for an opportunity that would allow me to explore this interest. I was told of the Travellers' University fellowship by a friend of my mother's, and you know that gut feeling that tells you that this is it? I felt that. And knowing little about the alternatives then (i.e., an alternative approach to learning or doing something such as education or a subject such as economics, etc.), I couldn't believe that such a thing existed. The next thing I couldn't believe was being accepted into the programme. We often doubt ourselves, think that we aren't or may not be good enough. But I think differently now, and I'll tell you why in a bit. Anyway, I met the team for the first time on the 11th of September 2021 at the orientation workshop in Didgi village, Zaheerabad. By the end of the 10-day workshop, I had found a home within a home. A drawing sketched by my co-fellow till date reminds me of what I find when I interact with new places and its people- many homes within a home. Kudos to the TU team for creating a safe space for expression, and to everyone else for being

such compassionate beings, and great company. I was sad to leave my newfound friends, but I was eager to learn more.

At first, I wasn't even sure of how I would contact my parindeys, but once I understood that part, you know what scared me? How in the world was I supposed to ask them if I could live with them? I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. It absolutely baffled me that Rahul did this for a year. But if I didn't ask them, then I wouldn't know if I had any place to stay. So I called up my to-be first parindey, and said, after a lot of hesitation, "Uhm, can I live with you?" The response gave me the dose of assurance that I needed to put myself out there. "Of course, you are going to live with us. We'll all live here like a family."

And so it began. I invite you to experience the peoples' stories and a few of my insights into it as you continue reading.

P.S.: Why has my thought process on being good enough or not, changed? At the right time, in the right place, I will find what I need. It's not me against the others, it's me being in the right place at the right time for the step that I aim for. This is not a black and white philosophy. In times where there are metrics aimed to assess our capacities, it is difficult to single out why one makes it and one doesn't. But in general, I'd do it more easily if it was me that wanted to fit in. I have TU to thank for really helping me perceive things in a kinder sense.

Map of Srilaxmi's Journey



| | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| A | Orientation Workshop | Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad | |
| B | Mrunalini and Mohammad | Conservation through community participation | Dhamapur, Maharashtra |
| C | Victor Hugo Gomes | Conservation and Restoration | Benaulim, Goa |
| D | Mahendra Paradkar | Conservation and Community Rights Activism | Dandi, Maharashtra |
| E | Jenukuruba community | Tribal Rights Activism & Conservation | Nagarahole, Karnataka |
| F | Kunal Singh and Malini Kochupillai | Bee Conservation | Jia, Himachal Pradesh |
| G | Avani Pandya | Textile-design & Livelihood Conservation, Rural & Women Development | Jia, Himachal Pradesh |
| H | Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan | Rights-based activism, Education, Conservation | Uttarakhand |
| I | Reflection Workshop | Bhoomi College, Bangalore | |

If Nature was our Teacher, would things be different?

Parindeys: Mrunalini and Mohammad

Alivelihood: Conservation through community participation

Region: Dhamapur, Sindhudurg District, Maharashtra

What is the quest for truth? Is there a truth? Is truth a world that opens up possibilities, mistakes, retrospection, and direction? Syamantak University of Life is one such place, space, organisation and commune, where truth guides living and learning. Born out of experience, this home consciously learns and unlearns through sustainable living and open education. Mrunalini came here at the age of three with her parents, Sachin and Meenal, and has had a unique journey of learning. Unlike most kids, she did not attend formal schooling. Her parents came here with a quest to understand how they could educate their child in a holistic way, and thus Syamantak University of Life came to be. Life is the circle in which all those who live on Earth are placed in, and the problems or obstacles that one witnesses in their life, become their syllabus for learning. The campus is located in Dhamapur, a village nestled snugly amidst lush forests and an ancient lake in the Malvan taluka of Sindhudurg district, which lies in the Konkan belt of Maharashtra. The house that Mrunalini lives in was constructed by her great-great-grandfather in 1931 before he moved to Kolhapur and settled there. Dr Kalbag, the founder of Vigyan Ashram and Sachin's inspiration, had advised Sachin and Meenal to have their child brought up in a rural setting where she would learn the practicalities of life from her immediate surroundings. So, 76 years later, they set foot into this house, heeding Mrunalini's great-grandfather's advice.

This is about the time when the idea of 'School Without Walls' (what University of Life was earlier known as) began to take shape, but to set it into motion this family of 3 needed a larger group. That was when Mohammad, Syamantak's first student, came to be a part of this dream. He was from a child care centre in Kondura, also in the same district. After completing his 10th standard, he did not know how to go ahead, but what he did know was he did not want to follow the crowd. He met Sachin during this phase of his life and came back with him to Dhamapur. Here, for the first time, he was exposed

to the concepts of open education and sustainable living amongst others. He learnt the art of operating computers. Back in school, a computer was something he could only look at from the back of a class register, waiting for his turn, but would instead hear the bell ring, bringing the period to an end. At Syamantak, he thought of himself as a student for the first year. After that, he became a part of the rural and natural setting they lived in. He is now the managing trustee of Syamantak.

The foundation is 14 years old, with six people as part of the commune, with interns from across the country and the globe joining in every now and then. Vishwas and Shobha are the other two who make up this small tight-knit group of Syamantak. A homely and spiritual atmosphere is an important part of their value system, and the beginning of this value is



Mrunalini while filming for the documentary being made on Dhamapur lake (Photo: Srilaxmi)

a learning journey in itself. In that journey, University of Life evolved from a more technical & skill-based approach to place more value on relationship building and togetherness. Every morning and evening, they dedicate a prayer session to their guru, out of gratitude for the guidance offered at challenging times.

Together, they take up a multitude of issues. Each issue that they deal with generally has an interesting backstory. For example, they had left a dropper in a fragrance bottle when they had been making hand-made soaps. The next day, it had burnt. This incident became a new topic of study: if synthetic chemicals were so harmful that a dropper could burn overnight, what happens to our skin? Why do we need perfumed soaps anyway, isn't the purpose more important than the smell of it? What are the natural and safe alternatives to this problem? Similarly, other topics of practice, natural construction, cow rearing, cooking, legal studies, natural products, conservation, etc. came into their lives and realm of learning. Mrunalini kept close to these subjects

of study, and through these, she indirectly learnt what one learns in watertight compartments at school – Math, Science, History, Geography, etc. She is now 17 and pursuing a distance education degree in Journalism. For her, opting for this course came organically with her lived experience. “Whenever it came to any issue, I would take up the drafting or writing part. These are skills I am good at, and it is something I enjoy doing. So for me, journalism came naturally,” recalls Mrunalini. She also states that there are multiple things she enjoys doing, like understanding legal terms, natural farming and natural construction, and these are skills that she perceives as a must for living a healthy life. “If I want to live a good life, I need to know a little about everything,” she asserts. A major challenge, which later transformed into a landmark moment, occurred when Syamantak received a notice from the Department of Education enquiring why Mrunalini was not admitted to school. In response, they filed a PIL in the High Court, which resulted in the setup of the “State Open Schooling Board” in the state of Maharashtra.



Mohammed, captured in a light moment (Photo: Srilaxmi)

Mohammad likes to take up more of the conservation research and development work. “In this house, everybody does everything. There is no ‘one demarcated role’ as such,” he says. It is just that someone handles more of what they like and are good at. He did his Masters in Rural Development after a diploma in Rural Technology and is now looking to do a PhD in oral history related to local traditions. “The foundation that was laid here is strong, but will we be able to carry it and make it stronger for the coming generations?” That’s the real challenge, according to him. “The work that we



Dhamapur lake constructed in 1530 (Photo: Srilaxmi)

do should create an impact in the society or village we live in. That is what we hope for. It is difficult because people living in rural areas today want to give up their practices and traditions to live a lifestyle as one does in the cities. The lure of the cities is tempting and distracting. Only when you observe it closely do you realise how messed up it is,” says Mohammad. Almost half the population of Dhamapur has migrated to Mumbai or Pune. Farming is not how it used to be. Young folks do not know how to respect the surroundings they are blessed with. But some people are changing for the better. There is hope. People like Manoj, a local who used to ride a petrol-fueled boat in the Dhamapur Lake wetland, the only World Heritage Irrigation site in Maharashtra, is now looking at building a sustainable business out of a rowboat.

The Wetlands Conservation movement is another interesting tale that started from the Dhamapur Lake struggle. Meenal, Mrunalini’s mother, was pursuing her MA in Rural Development, and she chose Dhamapur Lake as the topic for her dissertation. As part of University of Life’s practice, everyone got involved in the project. While studying the area, they found out about violations happening in the 500-year-old lake, while also understanding the history and traditions associated with it. A singular struggle to save Dhamapur Lake was initiated, which then transformed into a first-of-its-kind documentation process of 480 wetlands, across 5 districts of the Konkan region solely through community participation. Apart from creating and suggesting this unique idea, Syamantak also took responsibility for appointing civil society members belonging to different faculties to form an expert committee to document the wetlands ecosystem. The organization is appointed as a Wetland Coordination and Training Organisation for districts in the Konkan division of Maharashtra. The documentation done by Syamantak on Dhamapur Lake resulted in the lake receiving recognition as a World Heritage Irrigation Site by The International Commission on Irrigation



Srilaxmi with the Syamantak family - Vishwas, Mohammad, Meenal, Mrunalini, Shobha and their cat Taru

and Drainage (ICID), the only one in Maharashtra.

Mrunalini and Mohammad are currently part of the efforts in making a short film ‘Mee Dhamapur talaav boltoye’ (This is Dhamapur lake speaking), which seeks to educate viewers on the local traditions, biodiversity, and the need for the conservation of this wetland. This short film is completely based on voluntary participation from different communities, too.

Mohammad hopes that more and more members of the village adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. In Syamantak’s future, he sees an organization completely self-sustaining both in terms of lifestyle and funds. He says that while it is important to generate revenue, it has to be balanced on the scale with life values. “We have to remember to never compromise on our values.” He wants to be able to run projects for the local community while also being able to finance it. “Now, we run fundraisers to support most of our campaigns, which is alright. But I hope in the future, we can cover the cost with our revenue.” Syamantak runs a natural products store called Swayam Naturals (<https://swayamnaturals.in/>) which is the base of their sustenance. They also make and sell organic shrikhand and ghee from their Gir cow’s milk, but all the revenue generated here goes to the welfare and maintenance of the cows Sindhu, Narmada, and her newborn calf, Nandi.

In all this, rural journalism has a major role to play. Mrunalini hopes that with her practice, she can bring about grassroots level changes in the community through awareness and education, while also impacting policy-making at the bureaucracy level. “When I talk about creating an impact in rural communities, I believe that a major part of it involves changing mindsets. And when I talk about the bureaucracy or policy level, a major part of it will involve pressuring the authorities to take up and give due importance to matters that they are negligent about today - like conservation, rural development, etc.”

At Syamantak, everyone believes that no matter what achievements and failures they have endured so far, the real success lies in carrying forward the vision and impact of sustainable living and open learning. So each day, they strive to take a step towards achieving just that.

Syamantak University of Life can be reached at:

✉ 163dhamapur@gmail.com

🌐 <https://www.universityoflife.org.in>

Syamantak hosted me like family for two weeks. We baked pizzas in an oven built by two French interns years ago, which is now almost falling apart. We made mud plaster for a new oven to be built. We baked cake that refused to rise and naturally dyed pieces of cloth some of which did not soak through. But whatever we did, we saw it through and through with utmost fun.

I went around the village of Dhamapur to do the People's Biodiversity Register (PBR). I had immense fun while doing it as I had the chance to observe things about the village, through action and words. In a lot of the traditional occupations associated with their respective communities, women's roles were not acknowledged in the equation of these occupations like agriculture, although they play an important part in activities related to agriculture and allied activities.

People here are stuck in limbo- whether to leave the village and go live in the city for money, a corporate job and city lifestyle, or remain in the village (and still try to lead a city-like life), or stay in their villages and continue practising traditional occupations that sometimes bring them hardships, but always keeps them close to what they know as their home. Modernisation has entered the roots of most village cultures today in some form or the other, but in a rather confusing way. For instance, I was going around searching for fruits, and found that there was no fruit in any of the shops. Only during the summer seasons when mango, kokum, and other such fruits belonging to the natural habitat of the Konkan region come to fruition, do they sell fruits around here. Now although that is an example of simply being local, where the availability of food differs according to season, what I also couldn't help noticing was that in every small store, among other local products, there were Coca-Cola bottles and other packaged savouries, sweets and drinks belonging to what one may refer to as the "globalised market." It led me to think about the types of commodities and their distribution with respect to globalisation. What commodities have more preference? What is the demand and supply pattern? What effect does it have on health and nutrition? How does it contribute to the larger waste economy?

I won't say the issues of village life are unique to only villages, but the beauty of village life truly is. There is community and there is tradition. There's time and there's family. There's help and there are conversations. I am not racing against a clock, but the hands of the clock work like my limbs, going along with my pace.

At Syamantak, it felt even better when the living space itself was consciously established with the intent to unlearn and relearn traditional ways of life while choosing to be open and adaptive. There's a lot about conservation that I learnt from there, about the connection between people, tradition and landscape. The importance of biodiversity, its role in our lives. Coexistence. While learning all this all that it dwindled down to was, it's all there. It exists! We just need to jump back in time a little, dig underneath a bit to uncover what's been buried now, while also being conscious to not glorify everything and consciously pick a balance between the traditional and modern- not everything traditional is glorious, just like not all things modern are.



This is an aerial view of the Dhamapur lake, with a 2D drawing of the temple beside the lake as I remember them.

What Wisdom Should We Carry Forward from Our Past?

Parindey: Victor Hugo Gomes

Alivelihood: Conservation and Restoration

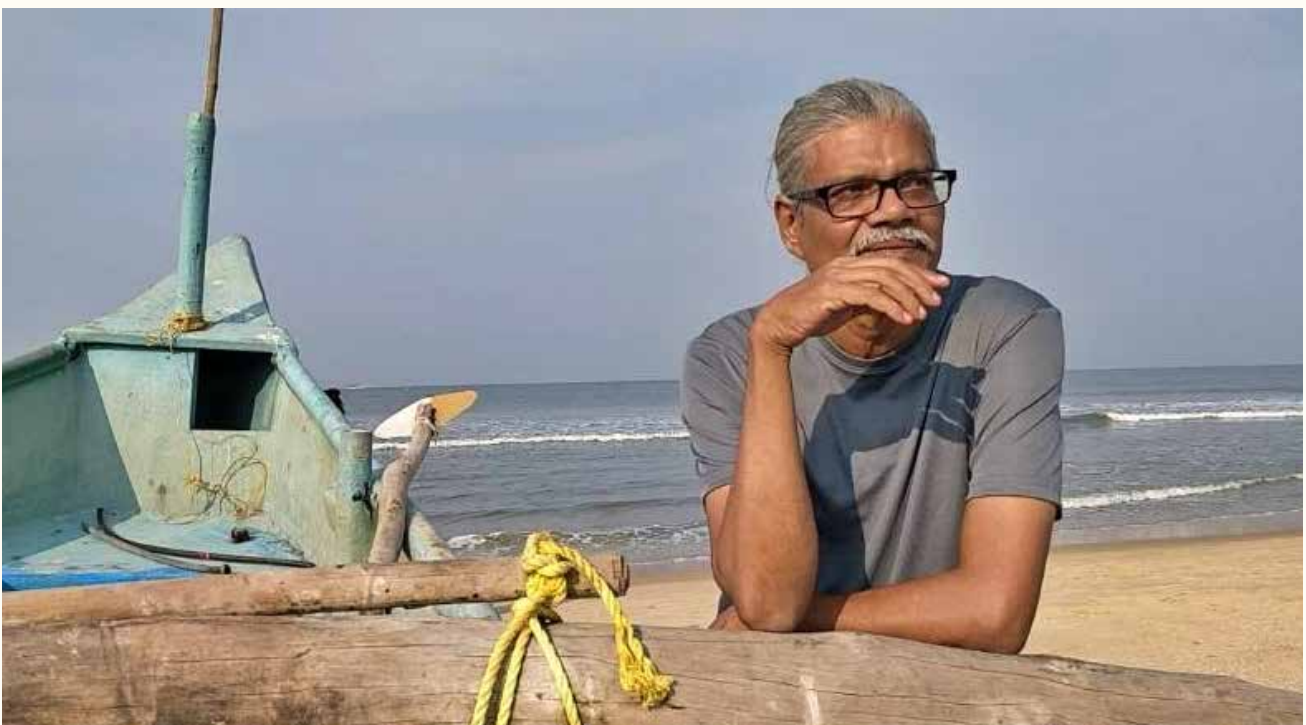
Region: Benaulim, South Goa, Goa

“We were six siblings, and in the cupboard that was intended to hold my father’s import material, my mother filled the six shelves—there were exactly six—with our toys.” Toys were one thing that Victor’s mother had never passed on from one child to the next. Instead, she had collected and stored each child’s toys on distinct shelves, with the oldest child’s on the top shelf and so on until the bottom shelf held the toys of the youngest. If one’s eyes were to travel down this cupboard, they would notice a gradual change: wooden toys; toys made of wood and metal; metal toys; plastic toys. “As I grew older, I came to observe the drastic change that was taking place around us. That is when I truly acknowledged and understood what my mother had done. And I am the same,” says Victor Hugo Gomes—a collector, curator, restorer, storyteller, artist, and conservationist.

“When I was little, I collected speakers and other

machines, broke them apart and put them together.” This fascination for collecting and restoring objects remained throughout his childhood and youth in Goa, and it only grew when he went to study “Experimental transitions in the world of art” in Lucknow on a Lalit Kala Akademi scholarship. There, he got the opportunity to accompany a researcher studying tribal art and lifestyles on his travels across northern India. This journey helped Victor understand the value of the work and skills that an artisan dedicates to creating an artefact and the significance of the materials used. Soon after, Victor completed a course conducted by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage on the restoration and conservation of art.

At this juncture, he received a proposal from Mario Miranda—one of Goa’s most prized artists—to set up the Museum of Christian Art in Goa. Victor accepted this opportunity, gave up his scholarship,



Victor on an early morning stroll at Benaulim beach (Photo: Srilaxmi)

and returned to Goa. When he set up this museum in his early 20s, Victor had never previously seen a museum. The museum still stands today as a significant part of Goa's heritage museums. Although Victor later resigned from curating it, the experience made him aware of the heritage that Goa was throwing away for "modernisation." He had observed that ancient household artefacts and religious depictions crafted using wood or metal were being sold at throwaway prices. His passion to collect "became an obsession" when he realised the need to preserve Goa's heritage.

However, when Victor had returned home from Lucknow, he found that the room that was once filled with all his collections, was empty. His parents had burnt it all, assuming that it was a waste. Victor does not blame them; he calls this his turning point of becoming a collector. "There is a time in everyone's life when their purpose is most tested. That incident was when I passed mine because although it broke my heart and most people would have completely abandoned collecting at that juncture, I did not."

He would collect artefacts and keep several of them in his house. "When people visited, they would say to me, 'you should start a museum.' It never occurred to me then. I was just doing this because I loved it." Once, after a long chase and many heartbreaks, Victor managed to acquire a ghano (oil grinder) that is now out of use in Goa. As it was large and also needed to be rooted to the ground, he made space

for it in his garden. When the monsoons approached, he built a shed to protect it. "As I placed more and more items beside the ghano, the shed just kept on extending, and Goa Chitra came to be." Goa Chitra, a combination of 'Goa' and 'pictures', is a collection of three ethnographic museums—Goa Chitra, which celebrates the people's connection with their land; Goa Chakra, a collection of non-mechanized vehicles from across country and time; and Goa Cruti, a colonial testimony to the objects introduced by the Portuguese in Goa. Apart from these houses of heritage, a cafeteria, an art gallery, an organic spice garden, and a farm are integral parts of this thirty-acre expanse of land.

Even back in Lucknow, a city whose tongue he barely spoke and whose culture he did not fit into, Victor had not stopped collecting. In its streets, he once happened to pass by an old gypsy cart that appeared



The gypsy cart as it stands today in Goa Chakra (Photo: Srilaxmi)



The part of the ghano wherein coconuts can be crushed to obtain oil (Photo: Srilaxmi)

ready to bite the dust, and was mesmerised. He immediately struck a deal with the owner of the cart; a deal that would one day be the genesis of an entire collection. They had agreed at 70,000 for the cart. At that time, Victor's scholarship amount, also his sustenance, was just 2,000 a month. It took him seventeen years of paying in small instalments to complete the payment, following which in 2014, the gypsy cart travelled a long way by train to a new land and a new man. It arrived in bad shape, broken by the jolts of the journey. Bit by bit, Victor pieced it back together until it was restored to dignity; this was the beginning of Goa Chakra.

Victor simply chased his curiosity for Goa's olden ways and paid from his own pocket for everything he found. He often did not have the money required, compelling him to pay an advance and request the owners to take care of the objects until he could buy them. Even today, there are several things that he wishes to collect but cannot afford. Some funds that have been sanctioned to Goa Chitra by the State have been pending for a long time, and he hopes to receive those. "It is not easy; I am self-funded. I am not even registered as an NGO or non-profit. I run these museums not as spaces where one comes to see the dead, reads labels, and moves on but as collections of pieces that have an extensive story to tell and are living odes to our material heritage and culture." Victor believes that museums in India need "urgent reform," stressing on the need to document the narrative behind an object.

Sometimes, visitors to the museum question the entry charges, not realising the effort that goes into taking care of the artefacts within. Apart from hard labour, their care involves immense dedication and patience because most of them are crafted using natural materials and, therefore, are perishable. "We are just prolonging their death by keeping them here for a little longer so that the world can see what once used to be. They too will eventually go back to the soil. I feel that this is an old-age home and my role here is to be their caretaker."

The impact of Victor's work is evident from the words of Pantaleão Fernandes, an ethnographer, who writes, "As (Victor) guided me around the exhibition area, contrasting emotions began surfacing from my being. Feelings of happiness and sadness tried to emerge simultaneously. Anger and a sense of peace fought each other. Outrage and satisfaction tried to reign within... (Victor has) escorted the dead or dying treasures of Goa and placed them in a temple with dignity and honour."

Goa Chitra would frequently host cultural activities such as book readings, music performances by jazz artists from across the country, artist retreats, etc. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted them severely, and Victor is steadily working to revive this vibrant cultural hub. Further, he is dedicating his efforts to opening more museums that showcase Goa's distinct flavours. One such adventure that is already open is a museotel exhibiting his collection



An array of traditional pickle jars housed in Goa Chitra (Photo: Srilaxmi)

of seashells, boats, and all things ocean, which is located about 20 km south of Benaullim, where Goa Chitra resides.

Victor feels hopeful about the younger generation. He observes them questioning things and feels that they are beginning to appreciate the value of things and not simply moving with the herd. “I wish to see more youngsters and more discerning travellers visiting this space.” Victor aims to convey the importance of recognising and carrying on the wisdom—or the “intangible heritage”—of the older generation. For instance, he describes how earlier, the potter communities would dig up silt from streams to

compensate for the soil that they extracted from the land for making pots. Through this practice, they also cleaned the streams and made the land fertile for cultivation. He hopes for Goa Chitra to be a centre of education where one can learn about such sustainable traditional practices that are today considered alternatives.

Victor Hugo Gomes can be reached at:

 goachitra@gmail.com

 <http://www.goachitra.com>



Corine Fernandes, a guide and manager at Goa Chitra, on an interactive tour with visitors (Photo: Srilaxmi)

As I comprehended the work at Goa Chitra, I felt amazed. It was like sunlight falling through a forest canopy at dawn. I was just in awe. The more intimate I got with each object, the story behind it and its past use through Victor's storytelling, the more I resonated ever so strongly with our ancestral wisdom and the need to learn and manifest some of their ways of understanding living. With my Konkan identity, I always felt a disconnect of sorts within me. I didn't know where exactly I belonged, having been born in one place and brought up in others. And at Goa Chitra, I felt like I was on stepping stones, getting closer to filling this gap I've had for so long. The puzzle yet remains to be completed, but so many more pieces are in store right now and that feels good.

Just some fun info: The fact that one man is the reason behind this entire collection was hard for people that come to Goa Chitra to digest, just like it was for me too. In my time there, people often remarked, "It must have been a painstaking task?" I heard people emphasising the same to Victor while they spoke to him. But for me, after spending the little bit of time that I did with Victor, it is focus. Of course, it's pain too, but more importantly, it is focus. The collection here is not just a simple stock of auction-bought stuff. The way Victor did it was his curiosity to understand. So he asked and asked about what could have been, and whenever he heard answers, he chased it to see the real thing, the real person behind the thing and document it all before the person and the object could go back to the soil. It was the will and dedication of one man to not let these treasures of the past go by that made this happen. In Syamantak, there was a turning point that made it all happen, and in Victor's case, there was a defining point or a defining act that made him a collector, or caretaker, as he'd rather call himself, of these objects.



The ceramic pickle jars in the museum reminded me of the pickle jars in my grandparents' home that would come out of the storage area in the summers and be kept on the red-oxide mud floor, ready for pickling.

What can Traditional Fishing Communities Teach us about Sustainability?

Parindey: Mahendra Paradkar

Alivelihood: Conservation and Community Rights Activism

Region: Dandi, Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra

Mahendra Paradkar was born in Dandi, a coastal gaon (village) in the Konkan belt of Maharashtra. The primary occupation here is fishing, which has been passed on through the generations and is an integral part of their lives and livelihoods. Mahendra was one of the few of his generation to have received and continued formal education, and it was important for him to get a job. However, he did not want just any job. In college, he wrote for a college-edition

supplementary newsletter of Tarun Bharat, a widely read Marathi newspaper. “My classmates, professors, and others around me enjoyed reading my articles and encouraged me to keep writing. Motivated by their consistent feedback, I considered pursuing a career in journalism.” Based on his work, he was offered a four-month training in journalism at Tarun Bharat, which kick-started his career in journalism. He enjoyed covering stories ranging from politics to



Mahendra Paradkar (Photo: Srilaxmi)

culture to education; however, his focus remained the one thing that connected him to his roots—fishing. It was important for him to actively take up issues pertaining to this and amplify them because writing was not only his passion but also a means of providing a platform to the traditional fishing communities of Malvan, which are now struggling owing to excessive industrial fishing.

When he was a child, Mahendra's father would wake him up just before sunrise to have his favourite breakfast of chai and freshly baked chapatis. Mahendra would go back to sleep after eating, and his father would go hook-and-line fishing to catch shengti or catfish, which was a speciality that was caught using this technique. On the weekends, if the catch was good, he and the other kids would gobble down their lunch and run to the markets where the boats would dock and sell their catch. Children used "seeing the shengti" as an excuse to go and eat Bengali khaja, a sweet sold at the stalls nearby. They would also take home some of the day's catch for dinner. Shengti is now a rarity, with its population dwindling due to extensive mechanised fishing. Consequently, the memory associated with Bengali khaja and shengti is now lost. "Several experiences can be lost with the loss of just one fish. This saddens me because the present generation has not been able to witness what I experienced as a child."

Mahendra practises dialectical reporting. "I try to understand both sides of the story and balance them out while writing because I am a journalist. However, when it comes to industrial fishing, I have no two opinions about it." He believes that his work on non-mechanized fishing is not against someone

or something and that it focuses on creating an impact to regulate the manner of fishing today. "If there is a ban on fishing during a certain season, it should be followed strictly. Strong winds and rough seas during the monsoons are our planet's way of saying that this is break time; the time to replenish and regenerate. However, fishing still happens. Why?" Monsoon is the main breeding season for most creatures that inhabit these waters. Earlier, people used wooden boats and would not venture into the sea during monsoons. However, motorised boats are now slowly wreaking havoc by disregarding these age-old practices. Although most fishing communities across the country have switched to industrial modes of fishing, Dandi is one of the few villages that still practises the traditional way.

"The thing about Dandi is its strength as a unit. We come together for anything and everything. People from the outside fear this about us," says Mahendra. This togetherness guides the community of Dandi. All matters, especially those concerning the fisher folk, are deliberated at Chowkchar mandir, the local temple. Here, where the people of the village decide their future, everybody assumes the sole identity of a fisherfolk, irrespective of their social and financial status. This tradition of a grassroots democracy of sorts began with a major event that took place in 1960 when the Malvan municipality imposed taxes on fishing. At that time, the late Dnyanesh Devulkar, a teacher from a fishing community, brought all the fishing communities of Malvan together to protest the imposition of tax in front of the Malvan Nagar Parishad building where it was initiated. This was the first time that all the fishing villages in this part of the coast had come together. Stirred by success,



Mahendra at the launch of his book titled "Machchhimaar Jagat: Purse seine net virudhacha hallalob" (Photo: Sameer Mhadgut)



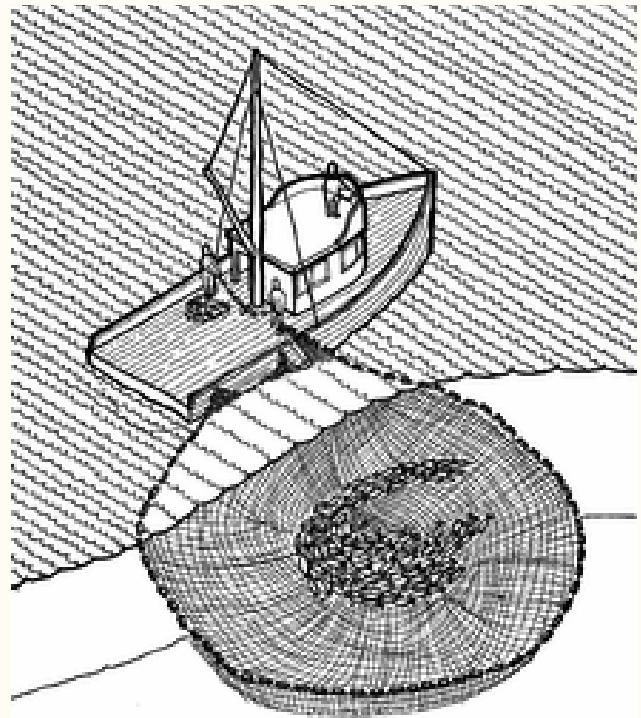
A breakfast of chai and chapati (Photo: Srilaxmi)

the communities grew stronger in voicing their concerns. However, today, with purse seine nets, high-speed trawlers, and LED boats emptying the sea in large quantities even in the off-season, the traditional fishing communities are not only suffering but also dwindling. “The only reason some traditional fishing communities are still surviving and fighting against the injustice of excessive mechanised fishing is that a few people like Mahendra still believe in and strive for sustainable fishing,” says Devulkar’s daughter, Charushila Devulkar, a social worker and counsellor.

After an 11-year period with Tarun Bharat, Mahendra resigned from his position as Chief Representative of Malvan to focus his full attention on converting the 2012 recommendations of the Somvanshi Committee into law. This committee was formed in 2011 to study the impact of purse seine nets on traditional fishing communities and the ecology of Maharashtra’s coast. In 2016, with the Fadnavis government in power, Mahendra and his team’s efforts were successful, resulting in the creation of a Notification under the Maharashtra Marine Fishing Regulation Act dated February 5, 2016.

During this time, Mahendra also joined hands with a Mumbai-based NGO, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, which had launched a programme focusing on the welfare of women in fishing communities. The role of women in fishing often tends to fall beyond recognition and/or acknowledgement. Fishing involves more than just going out to the sea and laying nets for the fish. Once the boat comes back from the sea,

the women gather around the boat to remove the fish from the nets, segregate them, store them in ice boxes, and take them to the market early the next morning. Further, the famous monsoon diet of dry fish in the Konkan region is the outcome of women’s efforts in sun drying them. They also shoulder the responsibility of feeding the household. However, upon conducting a survey of women along the Sindhudurg coast, Mahendra, along with the



An illustration of a purse seine net (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)



Traditional fisherfolk on a morcha from Dandi beach to Malvan police station in December 2014 to protest false cases filed against them after instances of stone-pelting between the fishers of Nivati who practise mechanised fishing and the traditional fishers of Dandi (Photo: Sameer Mhadgut)

NGO, found that most of the women had lower than normal levels of haemoglobin. Those who lived in remote coastal villages that did not have access to ice to store fish would hardly get 2–3 hours of sleep at night, and the women who spent afternoons selling fish at the market usually had bhajji and chai for lunch, resulting in low levels of haemoglobin and iron. “We are pushing the State government to establish Poli Bhaji Seva Kendra near the markets to ensure a nutritious meal for women in the market itself. Work is also underway for facilitating leadership training for women in the society to enable them to gain opportunities.” Mahendra also rejoined Tarun Bharat last year as a reporter. “I have some things to write, and I think I shouldn’t let go of that.” Alongside writing, he started documenting issues through videos.

Mahendra looks back at his childhood days and says, “If I have to credit someone for inspiring me to do what I do, it would be my history teachers throughout school and college. Reading about figures

such as Mahatma Gandhi, Lokmanya Tilak, and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj inspired me to fight for the truth; to fight for what is right.” His hopes extend beyond individual dreams to community-based aspirations. He hopes that more of the village children, especially the girls, receive a good education and work towards promoting traditional methods of fishing, conserving marine biodiversity, and sustainable tourism.

He also aspires that the traditional fishers remain strong in the face of capitalist expansions that perceive fishing as a secondary business venture. The question that is often asked by the fishers who have moved to mechanised fishing is, “If others are exploiting our fish, why can’t we?” Upon close observation, one can see the multiple layers to the impact industrial fishing has on communities and biodiversity. Mahendra believes that everyone is entitled to a good life but not the kind that is being promoted today. “One should be happy with what they are doing. I don’t demand that motorised



Traditional fishermen going out to sea to lay the raapan—a traditionally used seine (shoreline) net (Photo: Mahendra Paradkar)

fishing be banned. What I do say is, give priority to the communities that have practised this skill for so many generations, because we are emotionally and socially tied to the oceans. Give priority to the biodiversity of the oceans to ensure it is thriving, be it fish populations or coral reefs, because we can't just take, take and take. We have to give back as well," says he.

Mahendra can be reached at:

✉ tbdmahendra@gmail.com

📷 https://www.instagram.com/tarunbharat_official/

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/Tarun-Bharat-News-Sindhudurg-102398094970386>

🌐 <https://www.tarunbharat.com>



Traditional fishermen going out to sea to lay the raapan—a traditionally used seine (shoreline) net (Photo: Mahendra Paradkar)

When I came to Malvan, I came with little to no background knowledge. Funnily, having lived in coastal areas almost all my life, the tradition of fishing and its history and recent developments were relatively new to me. I thought of exploring marine biodiversity, and I had, over the last couple of years, come across issues that the fisher communities were facing like projects that the government were sanctioning of industrialists who were looking to dig deep into the blue treasure trove. But this was the first time I came to a place with the sole purpose of interacting with the fishing communities and understanding their perspective. As the stories unravelled, I understood that the place I had come to was one of the only traditional fishing communities still existing and that there is a conflict going on here with traditional and industrial fishing methods, something I had only just heard of recently. I had the opportunity to meet people belonging to different sides of this coin: fishers working with National Fishworkers' Forum; elderly fishers that witnessed the shift from old methods to new methods; young fishers who actively advocated for traditional fishing; officers from the State fisheries department belonging to fishing communities or actively involved with them; and with students working on culture fisheries. I also had the opportunity to converse with the daughter of the man who first gathered all the fisherfolks to protest the introduction of a tax back in the 60s, with a man from one of the many families that transitioned to industrial fishing from traditional methods, and with journalists from the region. This offered me insights into very varied perspectives that led me to understand the complexities and diverse aspects of the issues present in relation to fishing and some marine conservation too. This was an intensely stimulating experience that helped me understand the importance of listening in research.



The fishing net represents an hourglass where over time the size of the fishing net has changed with a change in fishing practices from traditional to mechanised forms; the former representing a net that was shallow with bigger mesh sizes and the latter representing a much deeper net with smaller mesh sizes.

What do the Forest Dwellers Want to Say?

Parindey: Jenukuruba community

Alivelihood: Tribal Rights Activism & Conservation

Region: Nagarahole, Kodagu district, Karnataka



Naavu yaake horata maadubeku? Naavu illi namma hirikaradu kaala inda eerthaidhivi, addu sulla? Matte yaake naavu namma haqqugallige horata maadubeku?

Why should we protest? We have been living here since our ancestors' times, is that a lie? Then why should we be fighting for our rights?

These are just some of the questions that the Jenukuruba community ask with regard to their daily lives. The Jenukuruba are a forest-dwelling tribe that used to primarily practise agriculture and extract 'jenu' (honey) from natural combs. The tribe is spread across the forests of Karnataka, Tamil

Nadu and Kerala, their habitat extending beyond state borders, much like the forests and wildlife that coexist with them. Until the 1970s, the tribes would live in their respective hamlets in homes built from the earth in forest clearings, growing crops like rice and ragi and fruits and vegetables that would



A still from a meeting amongst community folks at Gadde Adi, Nagarahole. J.K. Thimma, sitting off-centre to the right in a white shirt, spearheads the conversation. (Photo: Srilaxmi)

sustain them, and venture out deep into the forests to obtain forest produce and during the latter part of monsoon to obtain honey.

But sometime in the mid-70s, a couple of years after the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 was introduced, the forest department sent a notice to the community to stop farming. Elephants were brought to trample their crops, and a fire was lit across fields to enforce this notice. 70-year-old Thimmanna, a member of the tribe who saw the events unfold, still remembers that there was just one officer who came to their rescue and stopped the department from destroying the fields. But agriculture was brought to a stop. Soon after, came the notification that the tribes had to leave the forests and that they would be compensated in resettlement areas established outside the forests with “money, RCC houses and agricultural fields.” “At first, I was sold. They said they would give us 6 lakh rupees if we agreed to rehabilitate. But I put a condition,” says Thimmanna. He had requested the forest department and partner NGOs heading the resettlement campaign that they give him 5 lakhs instead, but in-hand cash, not money put in an account. They agreed but sent him on a wild goose chase that ended with them ultimately not handing over the money, and instead

suggesting how he could cheat others in his village to make that money. This made Thimanna realise the corrupt practices and the lies the administration was telling them. It also brought him back to the ground he was born and raised in, and he has since fought for it with valour.

Although quite a few people left for the resettlement camps or were forcefully evicted, some stayed back and resisted. The latter happened because



God's abode: This tree is a spiritual place of worship for the Jenukuruba community (Photo: Srilaxmi)



Growing with coexistence: Deer foraging for food grains outside the forest dwellers' mud huts (Photo: Srilaxmi)

of one incident that took place in a village called Gaddehaadi located in the Nagarahole forests of Karnataka. Here, J.K. Thimma learnt of the contract people were being made to sign. J.K. Thimma is a leader and member of the tribe who was one of the first to start revolting and even today champions the movement. "Not a lot of people knew how to read and write, so they couldn't know what was actually written on the paper. We just believed what we were told." But he was one of the few who was literate, so he went through the contract and realised what was in it for them. "We weren't going to be allowed to come back to the forests even to visit our Gods and temples. We weren't allowed to come back for anything once we left. We were going to be completely disconnected and detached from our roots, they wanted us to leave for good." This made Thimma aware of the motive behind and the consequences of the resettlement, and he immediately began campaigning amongst his people, sharing this knowledge. This sowed the seed of resistance among the tribes living in the forests of Nagarahole.

The series of events that followed resulted in multiple protests, court cases and even the drafting of the FRA law. To begin with, in the 1980s came the massive project of building a Taj resort in the midst of the luxurious forest in Nagarahole. "They

are okay with throwing us out, but they don't mind cutting trees and threatening the very survival of so many endangered species to build a resort," says Thimma. This move brought all the tribes living here together- the Jenukurubaru, Bettakurubaru and Yeravas- to protest. The police went to the extent of arresting little children protesting in their school clothes to dissuade the people. "My daughter must have been 5 or 6 then, and they had picked her and some other kids up." The Taj-resort-resistance matter was taken up in the court of law, where the verdict was pronounced in favour of the tribes, thus putting a full stop to the resort. As if all this wasn't enough,



The luxurious forests of Nagarahole (Photo: Srilaxmi)



Male members of the Jenukuruba and Bettakuruba tribes gather for a photo. J.A. Shivu, a youth leader, can be seen sitting on the right in a black checked shirt and white checked lungi (Photo: Srilaxmi)

Nagarahole was proposed to be made a national park called 'Rajiv Gandhi National Park.' Once again, the tribes were being forced to leave the forests on the basis of fortress conservation- where humans and animals exist separately. The tribes gathered once more, to protect their rights to peacefully live and coexist in their homelands.

One of the landmark protests that took place in more recent years came after Nagarahole was declared a Tiger Reserve, where no vehicle was allowed to enter the premises from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. "We had just come back from leading a protest in another place. It was about 9 p.m. They wouldn't let us go to our own homes." So we sat there, on the road, and said that no other vehicle goes in either, not the forest department vehicle or any other that may come. Word spread, and the hamlets within the forest got news about what was happening at one of the entry points. "It was miraculous, first it was just a few of us, and then children, women and men, ajjis and ajjas, all gathered here on such short notice. We felt hope come alive then," says J.A. Shivu, a youth leader, who although could not complete his studies beyond 10th standard, can narrate all the

laws related to ST and FRA rights off the back of his hand. He goes on to say, "It's like the trouble doesn't end, they just want reasons to trouble us." False cases against members of the tribe are a common thing affecting those who raise their voices.

In December 2005, about 250-300 members mostly hailing from the Kodagu district, got on a train to Delhi without even knowing the language, to join the assembly of tribes and others from all across India to stage peaceful demonstrations demanding their protection under the law. This was an important trigger in creating the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, a landmark law for all tribal communities that acknowledges their rights separately and contains a list of provisions to claim rights to live and practice livelihoods within forests and seek redressal for any untoward actions caused to them. Under the FRA, tribes like the Jenukuruba that traditionally practised agriculture are entitled to 10 acres of land per household to cultivate inside the forests. Each locality's forest department is tasked with the responsibility of conducting surveys, but the department has been avoiding conducting this survey that measures the plot of land for each household



A day in the life: Women having a discussion while cleaning a pile of hanibe or mushrooms foraged from the forest floors (Photo: Srilaxmi)

for a long time now. “We are only demanding 3 acres of land for cultivation. We do not want 10 acres, let that be forest, but they do not even give that,” says Thimma. When he was building a house, that too became an excuse for an FIR to be filed against him. After 7 long years of battling it out in the court, the court ruled in favour of Thimma. Even after this judgement was passed, the department has not allowed it. “We are not going to quiver under oppressive forces, we have the law protecting us,” Shivu remarked.

Shivu also shared his thoughts on those seeking to return to the forests. His kutumba (family) too live a few kilometres outside the forest in a resettlement area, where people of the community do odd jobs or work in Coorg’s extensive coffee and timber plantations for a living. “Outside, we are not in touch with our culture, our language, our Gods, our food... nothing. We are completely disconnected from our kind and our traditions, and I want that to change. I intend to come back to where I rightfully belong, with my family and the families of other Adivasis whose only home is the forest.” He reiterated this sentiment by saying, “Without our forests, we are no longer Adivasis.”



A smiling and energetic Thimmanna (Photo: Srilaxmi)

“There is a lot of pain, but we fight and we will keep fighting until we succeed,” says Navina, a female youth representative. The community hopes that the forest department eventually comes to support them. In the meanwhile, they are working tirelessly to access opportunities to uplift their lives. “Thimmanna and I are travelling extensively to meet members of the tribe when they need support, to conduct gram sabha meetings and to educate and raise awareness amongst our people about our rights. We also hope to open a library that contains books in Kannada with respect to Adivasi rights,” says Shivu. Funding is a major challenge they face, as coolie jobs do not offer permanent work or enough pay. Since literacy is low amongst the tribe, they also face the issue of not being able to document their work independently. “We want our voices to be heard and we want to be able to write our own story.” They are seeking to reach out to organisations that can conduct training in regional-language journalism to help them overcome this obstacle.

The Jenukurubas along with members of other tribes are working hard to secure their right to livelihood within the forests, such as the right to procure and sell non-timber forest produce and practice subsistence agriculture. 70-year-old Thimanna shares an account of the times when elephants would come to eat the ragi crops that they would grow. “They would take some, but always leave enough for us as well.” He also goes on to mention that instances of human-wildlife conflict have increased over the last couple of decades because there aren’t any food crops or enough indigenous tree varieties in the jungle anymore, forcing the animals to venture out into the plantations. “If we have coexisted in harmony with the jungle for many years, why do we have to exist separately now? If you observe closely, you’ll notice that it’s only the jungles where Adivasis still live that native species thrive,” says he. The community hopes that people will recognise the role they play in conserving our natural ecosystem and fostering coexistence. They aim to preserve and revive the rich traditions that have tied them so closely to the forests for centuries. “Our values are intertwined with beings of the forests, they are the Gods we worship and we, its protectors. We are happy here...”

Jenukuruba community can be reached via J. A. Shivu:

✉ shvuja9108@gmail.com, shivushalu126@gmail.com

When I was in school and was told about the Adivasi communities, I remember a black and white picture depicting a figure with a skinny build, a haggard-looking face and wild hair. It was followed by a rather romanticised tale of Adivasi lifestyle and how “backward” they were in terms of development. When the opportunity came my way to live and interact with a tribe residing in the Nagarhole forest of Karnataka, my heart leaped. I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t know how it was going to be. But when I went there, it was a humbling and beautiful learning experience. Living with them showed me ways of how one survived with one, the natural environment; and two, basic necessities. The former is a gateway to coexistence, and the latter is a door to talk about access to resources and economic and social standards, but I am not going to dwell on either here. What I will add though is that these people who had been living with the forests for centuries are enduring hardships today because of their relationship with a natural resource that multiple actors seek to get control over in the name of either development or conservation. “Development” here is a power struggle that is exploitative, and “conservation” here is an idea that is propelled by saviour complexes, both leading to systemic injustices of dispossession and displacement.

Their fight today is a fight for the truth, and I believe more of us need to have our eyes, ears and heart open to support their people in their endeavour. The injustices suffered by them are by no means justified, and we, as part of today’s modern “educated” populace need to stand with them and make space for their voices to be heard. They are taking up active leadership and activism roles to fight for their rights. I remember that at a gram sabha meeting, where the tribes of the region- jenukurubas, bettakurubas and yerevas - had gathered, Shivu stood up and explained to them the laws. Thimmanna stood up and explained to them why it was important to keep thriving in this fight. Sommaiya stood up and reminded them of their history, their traditions, and why they need to fight for this truth. I remember on another day, the sheer strength of a woman’s voice when she said they’ll fight and keep fighting until their last breath, and Navina’s courageous steps to reconnect with her roots and fight while sustaining herself. I also recall Thimmanna talking about sharing agricultural produce with elephants, how they took some but always left enough for the people to harvest because they just understood. And how food, at one point, was so rich in taste and nutrition- “aatara ruchi” (so much flavour)- that just a little would keep them full for long, but now so much isn’t enough and lacks taste. I remember tears as I spoke to that gathering on the gram sabha day, clouding my eyes and slurring my speech and making me feel really stupid, as I told them how important they were, not just to me, but to the world- their forests, their people, their fight.



This is a scene from the Nagarhole forest when aiji and I used to walk onto the single road stretching across the forest in the early mornings.

Beeing: Harmonious, Slow, Tenacious

Parindey: Kunal Singh and Malini Kochupillai

Alivelihood: Bee Conservation

Region: Jia, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh

When Kunal met Malini at her exhibition of ‘Khirkee Avaaz’- a community-driven project attempting to unpack complex social, cultural, and economic divides of the neighbourhood of Khirkee (Delhi) through arts, creative expression and storytelling- and upon

learning that he was from Himachal Pradesh, the first thing she asked him was to get her some raw honey from the mountains. She had been looking for it everywhere. Little did they both know then that this little demand from her would take the form



Malini and Kunal along with their dog Minni (Courtesy Malini)

of a challenge and then, a journey on the quest for solutions. “As a child, I remember that we were gifted a bottle of raw honey on our birthdays. This was the sweet the elders would feed the kids since too much sugar isn’t healthy,” says Kunal. Yet, it was proving to be a difficult task to find raw honey. “I made multiple calls back home, but instead of returning with a bottle of honey, I returned with a problem, “Where were the traditional beekeepers and the raw honey?”

This was the beginning of Kunal and Malini’s hunt across Himachal Pradesh to do something about this, and it took them from one corner of the mountainous state to another, until they finally got a break in Kangra. Here, in the village of Dyala, a female sarpanch received them. Over their journey across the state, this was the first time they had met a female sarpanch. Patriarchy had proven to be a challenge in the other regions that they had visited, the sarpanch least bothered about a pair with some ideas on reviving traditional beekeepers and harvesting of pure honey. But Kiran ji was welcoming. She even hoped that someone would conduct training here for the same. “The people have lost the touch they once had with beekeeping,”

she said. Excited, Kunal and Malini arranged for a discussion for which they brought together a bunch of people- traditional beekeepers, village heads etc., and had a day-long conversation on bee-keeping.

Following this, Kunal and Malini set up the ‘Tenacious Bee Collective’ (TBC) in July, 2018. TBC is an initiative that works on promoting sustainable harvest of honey and conservation of bees while employing the values of small-scale production, rural-livelihood development and women empowerment. It is registered as a private limited company, and whereas this may come as a surprise to some, Kunal explains the meaning behind this move. “We want to spread a message to people-be it private or social endeavours-that private companies can also be sustainable, people-oriented and eco-friendly in their ways. In the future, we hope that profit is not based on exploitation, but is slow and rewarding to one and all.”

The products at TBC are packaged by a self-help group consisting of 6 women from the surrounding areas. The women gather at the workshop every week-day morning where they package and even curate some products over love, laughter and chai.



Beeswax salves from TBC (Photo: Srilaxmi)

Challenging the shackles of patriarchy, they embody independence and strength with their motivation to work for themselves. “I’ve always wanted to learn new things... After coming here it has been good, you know, we spend some time away from home and we get to learn new things!” Nirmala Devi shares. To source honey, the collective works with beekeepers across the Western Himalayas. They also encourage villagers to keep bee boxes to invite bees to set up their hives in backyards or fields. TBC follows a policy of harvesting only 30% of the honey in a comb to ensure that it is harvested in small amounts so as to keep enough for the bees as well. To incentivise such practices amongst the local people, they offer a higher rate per kg as against the normal price range across the country.

The villagers of Jiya initially regarded them as crazy people with crazy ideas who, like most others, would come, do a little something, and leave. But over time, the villagers’ perspective has shifted. They now not only believe in their ideas but also consider them as a part of their village. Kunal and Malini also receive calls from people seeking advice regarding their children’s education and employment opportunities. Once, they had received a call asking if their newly welcomed daughter-in-law, who was educated, could work with them. Kunal says, “Calls like these can also be difficult because we want to help and we want to be able to provide more employment. But

we are working at a very small scale right now and we do not want to accept someone and not be able to pay them or pay them less.” During the winters, when the bees move down from high altitudes to set camp in lower altitudes where the villages are, they receive a lot of questions from villagers on how one can do bee-keeping at home, how to tend to bees, what to feed them, when and how much honey they can harvest, etc. To address knowledge gaps in such areas, TBC often conducts training and workshops for the local villagers, also curating specifically tailored sessions for different groups of people, for example, fun art lessons for children and product crafting workshops for women.

They also host gatherings where traditional beekeepers meet people from academia aimed at bridging the knowledge gap between these two worlds and giving value to traditional knowledge and its practitioners. One important piece of information this exchange has revealed is that in academia, *apis mellifera*, an Italian species of bee, is more commonly used in commercial beekeeping. This is because they are very industrious and produce larger quantities of honey. But these bees are not resilient to the local climatic conditions of the Himalayan region. Whereas the Italian bees can travel up to 3-4 km, the *Apis Cerena Indica*, an Indian species of bee, can travel up to 6-7 km. This endurance helps them do the tough job of flying uphill and downhill,



Packed with love: The women of the SHG carefully packing the goodies over smiles (Photo: Srilaxmi)

battling strong winds and going about their bee-duties. This calls for prioritising the local species and researching them to effectively contribute to their conservation and sustainable honey harvesting practices. They also work best for rural ecologies.

At Tenacious Bee, Kunal identifies some challenges that the collective faces and aims to overcome through their work. A major hurdle lies in receiving funding and grant opportunities. “Funders want instant returns. But the only thing in nature that is instant is destruction.” Organisations that can be potential funders usually demand an end result like upscaling within a short time frame and a tight budget. Kunal and Malini are not afraid to shun such players, explaining that if a system is exploitative, they would rather not partner with them. Within the collective as well, lack of good packaging material proves to be an issue. The challenge lies in procuring material that is consistently of good quality and fit, which it sometimes is and other times isn’t. TBC tries to be sustainable and small-scale even in

sourcing material, thus reaching out to other SHGs for items like hand-made boxes wherein they pack their honey samplers and bee-care packages which include beeswax candles and salves. There is also a need for better research and infrastructure that can help them develop and be able to provide more jobs.

TBC hopes that the work they do ignites a fire that burns bigger and brighter beyond their lifetime. They do not expect to see any immediate results but instead aim to contribute towards the larger goal of a sustainable and just world. “Bees are the perfect example of living harmoniously with nature—they take nectar and pollinate nearly 70% of earth’s plants in exchange- creating all the lush biodiversity we take for granted. If humans were to give back to nature as much as we take from her—the world would be a very different place,” shares Malini. In fact, bees can teach us a lot about what a democracy should truly look like. Every decision that is taken is a collective decision reached through a dance form called “waggle dance.” In this, bees with differing



Busy-bees: (clockwise from the left) The *Apis Cerena Indica* bees swarming over a hive, a bee box, and a freshly harvested batch of local honey (Photo: Srilaxmi)

perspectives come together and communicate their opinions through a zig-zag-shaped movement, where each bee dances along a pattern of its own. But when a consensus is reached, the bees unite in one movement, forming one pattern. Just like the bees, TBC aims to be a localised and democratic initiative spread across the Western Himalayas.

Tenacious Bee Collective can be reached at:

✉ kunal@tenaciousbee.com, malini@tenaciousbee.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/tenaciousbeehive>

🌐 <https://www.tenaciousbee.com>



The TBC team gathered for a photo at the workspace (Photo: Srilaxmi)

I associated bees with honey, with large honeycombs they would make in my backyard and with bee stings. I didn't have much idea about them, their nature, or their contribution to the ecosystem. I was doing research a couple of years ago, and it was there that I received profound insight into the crucial role they played in maintaining our ecosystem and in contributing to livelihoods, as well as the threat they face today due to loss of biodiversity and excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers.

During my travels, I heard about the work Tenacious Bee was doing with bee conservation and honey harvesting. I travelled to the village of Jia in the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. It was my first time in Himachal, so the brown rocky mountains capped with snow behind lush green ones were a mesmerising site in itself. Anyway, on my first day, I met the women of the Self Help Group at the workshop where they packaged the products. They did this over conversations, so I got to learn a little more than just their roles at Tenacious Bee. They told me about their culture, home routines, marriage, education, and the way all these aspects affected and shaped their lives. We also spoke about aspirations and work and the challenges they sometimes faced due to the idea of women working outside of their homes or their family land was quite new. It was interesting to listen to them because you know how there are some challenges or joys or just other normal life instances that one can encounter as a woman or a female member of society, but how different factors like geography and culture localise these experiences in a unique way. I had experienced some of the things they talked about, and I had heard from my mother and grandmother about some others, but to hear it from their context showed me how similar yet unique a shared experience can be with a change of locality and also, just a change of personalities. This, for me, highlighted the importance of not blindly promoting "outside" ideas of change and development, even if with good intentions.

In the following days, I saw a small portion of honey being harvested for household consumption from combs in the villagers' houses. In the winters, bees build combs in houses, trees and other such structures at lower altitudes because of the cold. Upon harvesting, I chewed beeswax, I held a small slice of comb in my hands, and I had bees buzzing all around me for the first time. TB also has a little piece of farmland where they do organic farming, and try to encourage other farmers who use chemical fertilisers and pesticides to switch to organic methods of growing crops. On this land are a couple of bee chambers, and since it was winter, we set about "wintering the hives," i.e., sheltering it from the cold and predators by applying mud onto the exposed parts of the chamber made of wood, leaving just a small gap for the bees to commute. Here I got to witness the meticulousness in the way each worker bee operated- taking off when the wind was right and zooming back in at the correct angle to make a good landing. Having them sit on my hands and arms as I wintered the hives was even more thrilling. About then Kunal asked me, "Have you been stung?" I said no. He said, "Ah, you have no fear and that's generally when the person either does not know the feel of the sting or is too seasoned with bees."

I experienced a slow, but hard-working life here. Bees are good teachers, and so is mountain life, and initiatives such as this.



This is a painting of the time I experienced bees sitting on my hands and arms, buzzing all around me, trusting me with the process of wintering their hives.

Weaving together threads of Then and Now

Parindey: Avani Pandya

Alivelihood: Textile-design & Livelihood Conservation, Rural & Women Development

Region: Jia, Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh



Avani sporting a shawl designed and made by Yoshita Crafts (Photo: Srilaxmi)



I've worked in various stages of (textile) production, but at the bottom of my heart, I have always been a designer.

- Avani

Avani Pandya is a designer and creator of the brand Yoshita Crafts that she set up with a small rural community in Jia, Himachal Pradesh. Having graduated as a designer, she went on to don different robes in her corporate career, varying from designing to sourcing to retail. "I just thought that I will get back to designing when I am older. But in 2017, when my health took a toll, I knew that I could not wait any longer. I didn't know how much time I had left." In that moment of realisation, she quit her corporate lifestyle and moved to Jia, a village she was relatively familiar with in the mountainous Kangra district. The village panchayat's pradhan, Kiran ji, was a woman who was excited to work with another woman and for the women of her village and their empowerment. She was more than welcoming and helped Avani reach out to the local folks to spread the word. "Crafts in other parts of India are flourishing, like Gujarat. But Himachal Pradesh is a state with a lot of potentials that remains unexplored. This is why I particularly chose Himachal." The state is known for its woollen shawls and stoles, and more so for its distinct border designs, which change from region to region.

When Avani put the idea out there for people to know, about 40 people showed up for a meeting to explore this opportunity. She was surprised and

heartened at the enthusiasm shown by the villagers. "But I have been very clear from the start that if you are helping someone, do it thoroughly. So I had to do the difficult task of picking and choosing. The five people that I started with then are with me even today." Each person has a dedicated role they specialise in, and are also versatile in the sense of being able to manage other tasks. The workshop is a vibrant little space with a woollen thread of varying colours everywhere, in the form of a fully-knitted sweater or a half-done stole or a bundle of neatly folded shawls, and always rolls of thread. Handloom and handicrafts are the primary modes of creation here, and three wooden handlooms grace the back of the workshop. A hand knitting machine along with needles sits somewhere in the middle, and a small table stands stacked against a wall nearby, on which is an induction cooker used to make chai. Near the entrance are a couple of sewing machines, high power and low, next to which is a big table where measurements are usually calculated. Two-three gaddas lie stacked on the floor, to sit on for knitting, drinking chai and pulling coloured yarns. Next to this is a spinning wheel. This is where the ideas of Yoshita Crafts come through for output creation.

From a design and textile perspective, Avani's primary intention is to work with traditional

Himachali designs while contemporising them so as to evolve and meet the needs and preferences of the new generation. She stresses the importance of preserving and giving due importance to handicrafts and handloom textiles, which have been on the decline with the advent of machine-made textiles. “The essence of Himachali designs lies in the local raw material and design of the region.” But since it mostly revolves around wool and winter-bearing clothes, she also works on ways where they can cater to the demands of people residing in warmer areas too, since winters aren’t that harsh in all of India. This process is termed product diversification, where Avani combines cotton and wool to make a shawl or makes something else entirely other than a shawl using traditional designs.

Using local wool in their products is a very crucial part of the work they do. The local Gaddi tribe belonging to this region are transhumance people that migrate with their sheep twice a year. “It is a practice that takes a lot of hard work, they have to endure tough climates and terrain. And the price that they receive for their work is very little, so what incentive do they have to continue it?” Avani believes it’s important for their contribution to be recognised and valued. One way to do this is by employing women from the local households to continue working on handlooms and knitting. “Almost every woman knits in her household from sweaters to socks to pattu.” Pattu is a traditional piece of clothing used by the men on their arduous journey over the mountains to keep them sheltered from the cold and rain. It’s a thick shawl that is generally made by a woman in the household using the wool reared from the herd. The practice of migration and handlooms, like most traditional occupations

and crafts, is on a decline now, with the younger generation moving to urban landscapes and securing salaried jobs. But Avani believes it is the younger generation who will carry forward the importance of handloom and handicraft to the future, and not let these die. That is why the key target of Yoshita Crafts’ products is the youth because she wants more and more young people to get involved in the craft and understand what goes into creating it and why it’s important to preserve it. She says that today’s youth not only have the power to buy, but they also have the power to ensure its continuation. Therefore, empowering the people sustaining this industry becomes an important part of the work that Avani does.

Empowerment is a domain that is close to Avani’s heart and when she initially came to Jia, she came with the mindset of helping people, empowering women, and generating rural employment. “And I still have those values, but I have realised that I am also doing this for myself.” This realisation has come after the struggle of starting a textile design brand at a small scale in a rural area with a focus on handloom and handicrafts. Having worked in the corporate field for years, Avani came with a certain manner of professionalism that is common in the corporate world. But things work drastically differently in a sustainable, rural set-up. Here, the employees at Yoshita Crafts do not feel the need to inform her before going off on a 3-4 day holiday. If she questions such an act, they casually respond with “Mai kuch din nahi aayi toh kya hua.” “This used to frustrate me in the beginning, but I eventually understood that even if I hadn’t come here, life would go on for them. Accepting that this was my idea and I am doing this for myself has helped me



Where the magic happens: (clockwise from left) The entrance to the workshop adorned with colourful tassels; Kamlaji on the loom; a bamboo ladder exhibiting finished pieces; the warm and vibrant studio where the designing takes place (Courtesy Avani)



Sourcing sheep wool from a member of the local Gaddi tribe (Photo: Srilaxmi)



Creating Together: The team at Yoshita Crafts (Photo: Srilaxmi)

make peace with myself and help others better.” In fact, Avani is very happy with the person she has become today. If given a choice between the person she was four years ago and now, she firmly says she would choose her current self without any hesitation. “It has been a day-in-day-out struggle for the last four and a half years, but it has made me a better person.”

The challenges at Yoshita Crafts are many. One such struggle is to explain to people why handlooms and handicrafts take so much time because people expect things instantly with the mechanised world enabling instant gratification. Just the warping process, which involves combining yarns together to get ready for weaving, takes about 3-4 days. After this, the artisan sits at the loom to start making the shawl, which takes a minimum of 10 days for a simple shawl. Sometimes, if the roll of thread used to create the product runs out without prior warning, Avani has to rush out to find a roll of the same colour which is a hectic process that can delay the manufacturing time even more. But most of Yoshita Crafts’ consumer base is aware of the work involved and willingly cooperates with time. If a customer demands products to be made and sent instantly, they prefer not to take the order at all. New and unaware customers generally also question the pricing of the products. They are more expensive than machine-made shawls, but that is how much time and effort it takes to source the material locally and make the product with one’s hands, and there is a need for awareness to be generated among consumers on this.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a huge impact. “We had to shut down for four months straight, and this happened just when we were receiving a good number of orders,” says Avani. She thinks that if she had not chosen to keep Yoshita Crafts small-scale, she would have had to shut shop. Since Yoshita Crafts is not yet at a stage where the revenue is more than the cost, managing finance is a critical aspect. “I was speaking to a friend who works in a similar fashion and she said to me, “Avani, I had

to work for at least 8 years to make more money coming in than going out.”

It is Avani’s aim that the consumers know the person who actually sat on the loom to make their shawl, rather than just knowing the designer which is the case with most high-end boutiques. Avani dreams of going with her team to shows like the Lakme Fashion Week to present the people at Yoshita Crafts and their work. She believes that people need to make this conscious switch of consuming sustainably not just to promote the handloom industry, but to empower the person that is making it. “The work is amazing. When I joined, it was the first time that I was working outside my house, and it feels good to be an independent, earning woman.”

Ever since the journey of Yoshita Crafts began, Avani has found the creative freedom that she feels she had to suppress for years working for other brands. The brand intends to create a unique design for each one. “We do not make more than 3 pieces of each design,” she says, “but even then, since customers mostly view the catalogue and place an order, there is always some degree of customisation that takes place and the end product is unique always.” On the new-ideas front, she has already started playing with natural dyes to enable the transition to products that are completely natural and nature-based. She realises that such a transition will take time, since making them would involve a lot more energy and hours, thus also increasing the price, which people should be ready for. Avani is working on upcycling textile waste too, by making cute little things like funky borders where she mixes and matches colours to make vibrant designs. “The least I can do is to not create waste. And it is also something I can hold myself accountable for.”

Avani can be reached at:

✉ yoshitacrafts@gmail.com

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/yoshitacraftsstudio>

"You know, I read somewhere that youth today spend an average of 2000-3000 rupees on self-care per month. Why not spend that amount by contributing to something sustainable while also taking care of yourself?" Avani said to me. I replied, "If we buy an organic or sustainably made small-scale product, isn't that self-care in itself? If we have the money, rather than dividing it among many pieces of mass-manufactured products, why not invest it here once in a while?" Avani smiled, "Exactly." To me, Avani is somebody who held herself accountable for the choices she made, and no matter how demanding the struggle in front of her was, she ascended one mountain to climb another, slow and steady. Yoshita Crafts is a product of perseverance, and it speaks through the team's actions.

There's a small group of five apart from Avani that works at the workshop, four of them women and one man. It's an interesting group of people, each with a story to tell, and an amazing hand at a particular skill, either weaving, knitting or stitching. I would just sit and observe the complex yet simple motions that Pinky didi used to knit that cute lavender sweater. It was amazing to see the flow of her hands! Also, it finally quenched my thirst to understand how the clothes we wear are made (by hand). As I sat there every day, I got to know a little more about each one and where they come from. Sulochana didi who sits on the loom and weaves shawls beautifully has a son who is her driving force. She comes to the workshop every day to make sure that she does what's in her hands to ensure that she is independent enough to take care of herself and her son. Avani tells me that the women here, when they first came, would not speak much at all and they'd mostly not comment on any designs she suggested or question stuff. But the women I met welcomed me with warmth, taught me with patience and made fun of things and laughed with me. 4 years since the start of YC, this workshop has become a comfortable space for them, and a break for some independence too. Masterji, the only man at the workshop, is an expert with the sewing machine. He was with the army as a tailor for a long time and often tells stories about the places he has seen. Together, they each gave me a face, hands, and all in all a human dimension to the textile industry today.



This is a representation of a shawl I had seen in a woman's house who had woven this using her khaddi (a traditional handloom). I particularly chose this shawl for the classical Himachali border design woven beautifully into it. Almost all the women here know the art of weaving and knitting, and make their own shawls, patti (a time-honoured pure coarse wool shawl), sweaters, socks, gloves, etc.

When the Forest is our Garden, the garden also becomes a place for Conflict (of Interests)

Parindey: Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan

Alivelihood: Rights-based activism, Education, Conservation

Region: Uttarakhand



Van hai vanvaasio ke ghar ka bageecha, van ke phul vanvassiyon ki aangan ki phulvadi hai...

The forest is the forest dwellers' garden, the flowers of the forests the forest dwellers' yard's flower orchards...

The Van Gujjar are a pastoralist tribe spread across the Northern region of India, from Jammu and Kashmir to Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally, they are transhumant people, those who practise seasonal migration with their cattle to high mountainous pastures during the summers, valleys and plains during the winters, but lately, more of them opt for

permanent settlements. They mostly rear buffaloes and some cows. In Uttarakhand, with the creation of National Parks, like other tribal communities across India, the Van Gujjar community too faced displacement and resettlement, although some still stay on in the core and buffer zones, refusing to leave their homes. The knowledge that they had



A landscape view with Gujjar deras and their cattle. (Photo: Srilaxmi)

the right to stay within the forest first came to a Gujjar residing in Ramnagar, Nainital district of Uttarakhand. Safi Gandhi as he is popularly known was informed about the Forest Rights Act (FRA) that recognised and protected the forest dwellers' rights to live and practise their traditional ways of life and their rights to livelihood. "When I first began campaigning and defending our rights to remain in the forest against the forest department's campaign to evacuate us, I was alone. People from my community thought I was a madman to fight back," Safi says. Houses were being broken, no electricity was allowed, and cases were being filed against the community to coerce them into moving out.

Word of the FRA law and Safi bhai's resistance spread, and farther away in the Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand, multiple instances of eviction from the core zone areas in 2017 spurred another local, a youth of 24, Amir Hamja, to stand up and fight back. Being one of the literate members of the community, he decided to harness this to learn more about the FRA law and the provision of rights under them. Later that year he set up the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan, a group consisting of youth from the community who were like-minded in their motivation to secure their rights, spread education and literacy, and conserve lost traditional and cultural practices.

The Sangathan channelises a great chunk of their energy and efforts to ensure access to the FRA and Community Forest Resource rights, which protect their right to live on forest land and their grazing and migration rights respectively. Since the community is spread out across the state, members of the Sangathan are delegated duties to go out on drives cross-checking and completing the paperwork required to file these claims. Another important intervention the group does is to conduct workshops

on FRA for the local youth so as to empower the community to be able to handle these tasks on their own while simultaneously assuring the youth take responsibility for the needs of their community, especially the older folks, most of whom are illiterate. Every day, the members of the Sangathan receive at least a dozen calls from persons across different villages for help. "This is one of our biggest challenges as we need more human power on this, which is something that can only happen if there is



Amir Hamja (right), with Aman Gujjar (centre) and Shamshad Gujjar (left), form a core part of the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan workforce. (Photo: Srilaxmi)



Gojru buffaloes (left); a structure that holds fodder for cattle called twala (right). (Photo: Srilaxmi)

education and awareness in the community,” says Amir Hamja.

Since literacy is a major barrier to not just accessing their rights under FRA, but accessing other opportunities too, the Sangathan took it into their own hands to teach children living in remote regions from where schools are either very far or inaccessible for other reasons. They have established three schools so far across the state in different villages where children of classes 1-5 gather to attend daily lectures consisting of regular subjects and activities. The syllabus, although taught using mainstream reference books, is customised to suit a Gujjar child’s understanding and context, taking examples from their natural environments. For example, ‘buh’ (in Hindi or the Devanagari script) can be bainth (a traditional style of singing) or bakra (goat) instead of battakh (duck). Apart from helping make sense of things, this provides children with traditional knowledge that is increasingly lost today, thus conserving and building a crucial part of the child’s identity and relationship with their surroundings.

The third aspect of the Sangathan’s work revolves around protecting and, if necessary, reviving cultural traditions. One of the landmark moments in this vertical of the Sangathan’s work is the rebirth of the sela parab festival, celebrated in the month of July with the onset of monsoon showers. This festival celebrates nature by planting native varieties of trees that protect the forests, offer food for the buffaloes

and provide the community with essential forest produce. It had been absent for almost a decade when the Sangathan decided to revive this practice. They also invite the forest department and local MLA leaders to be a part of this, thus creating a space for mutual interaction and expression of concerns. “As a forest dwelling community, this was one of our



Filing CFR papers with the community. (Photo: Srilaxmi)



Children from classes 1-5 attending the school established by the Van Gujjar Yuva Sangathan. (Photo: Srilaxmi)



GPS mapping on plantation trees. (Photo: Srilaxmi)

major festivals, a way of giving back and thanking the environment.” This festival is known by different names across India, and in Uttarakhand, one such name this festival goes by is “Hariyali.” Festivals such as these speak of the human species’ connection with the rest of nature, being a part of the larger ecosystem and protecting the land that gives life. This is also an important step in conserving native species.

Often, protected forests are made “greener” by planting trees that increase green cover rapidly or with timber plantations. These foreign species are sometimes also invasive species and pose a threat to the survival of native trees. Such trees also attract few to none of the local fauna that can often be seen around native species. The objective of conservation is not just making forests bigger and greener, it is about the thriving of local flora and fauna species coexisting along with human communities whose lives and livelihoods are closely intertwined with the land. One beautiful way the community is trying to achieve this is by recognising and documenting traditional practices of migration with the cattle that allow for coexistence and conservation. For instance, the indigenous gojru buffaloes feed on native



Reshma Gujjar, and her sisters sharing a laugh. (Photo: Srilaxmi)

species of trees and grasses while grazing in forests and grasslands. The seeds of these trees are then dispersed to other parts of the forest through their dung, thus assisting in the growth of more native trees.

Literacy and some clashes with the forest department are not the only concerns to achieving a better standard of living. The women of the community are severely underrepresented, and their contributions to daily routine are often overlooked in the narrative for rights and well-being. Women play a significant role in the pastoral methods of living, as they are the ones responsible for milking cows and buffaloes, collecting fodder for the cattle, obtaining firewood for cooking and cooking itself, making lassi and makhan and ghee out of the milk obtained, caring for the family and other such duties. Literacy amongst female children is only just beginning to rise, and negligible amongst adult women. Access to health facilities is low, and concerns related to menstruation and pregnancy and family planning need to be addressed. The involvement of women in activism is low, but slowly rising as more girls exercise their choices, and the community becomes more inclusive. Support and necessary intervention from governmental and non-governmental organisations that work with matters of women, domestic issues, and health will help address these challenges and sustain the will and optimism for women to be more involved in activities outside of the household. The Sangathan is already at work to tackle this. “If we can empower our women and children so they can help themselves and the community in a meaningful way, only then can we

move forward,” says Ishak Gujjar, president of the Sangathan.

Funds are another challenge for the community, project grants and personal incomes being the major source of funds for the work they do. “If we could provide people with solid employment, that would not just be a great incentive to get involved in the Sangathan’s work, but it would also ensure that they can support themselves while doing this work.”

Apart from the primary objectives of the Sangathan’s work, the community hopes to create a better organised market for their milk and milk products. Those of the community that still migrate to mountainous terrains in the summer intend to secure temporary permits in a hassle-free manner that gives them the required permissions to migrate with their cattle to the mountains and set home there for the five months of summer and monsoon between April-September. Those who choose to stay in a permanent settlement wish to secure the rights to stay on the land permanently under the FRA law, to settle and build a home with access to basic facilities without conflicts with the forest department. Some of the women also want to sustain crafts that the community earlier engaged in, but are mostly lost now. “We have so much potential, and I want us to harness it,” says Amir Hamja.

Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan can be reached at:

📍 https://www.instagram.com/van_gujjar

It took me a little while to remember that Kunao Chaurh was called Kunao Chaurh. But the mud huts, the plains, the trees spreading out, the invasive lantanas creeping in, and the small streams that flowed beside the dera (hut) all stayed with me since its first impression. What living with the Van Gujjars taught me was how important a role cattle played in their lives. It was the first time I was interacting actively with a pastoralist community, and brought out significant parts of people-animal relationships, and how each contributed towards the other's survival. Coexistence and a shared idea of wellbeing thrive in this community. They collect the firewood for cooking, cook, they milk the cows/buffaloes twice a day, make chaach, lassi and makhan or ghee. They take care of the children and the household, carry the water from the stream for utility purposes, fill and carry pots meant for drinking water from the common pipe, cut grass for the cattle to feed on and go fetching leaves that serve again as fodder. But as patriarchal settings go, the role of women remains unrecognised and their challenges underserved. According to them, hygiene and sanitation and access to health care facilities, especially during menstrual cycles and pregnancy, are lacking, making them susceptible to infections which they often do not speak about for lack of awareness and education. The Sangathan today is making efforts to involve more women in different capacities to take leadership roles and bring awareness to the issues. Salma didi, who makes traditional neck-pieces and earrings, told me that this tradition was dying but it was hard to convince anyone nowadays to learn how to weave thread and beads into jewellery when there are other things keeping them busy.

I also visited one of the schools that the Sangathan ran. There's a mat spread out in front of a dera (house), where children sit according to which class they are in, the youngest at the front, and the older ones behind. Two to three teachers take lessons in their respective subjects. The syllabus, which includes maths, language and other modern schooling system-based subjects, is made as local and contextual to their settings as possible to enable the kids to make sense of the world better, while also ensuring that traditional knowledge is passed on. Since gojri as a language does not have a written script, it is used as a vernacular medium to deliver the teachings. The kids learn how to read and write English and Hindi too. The efforts that the Sangathan has taken to accommodate and adapt learning to ensure education is reaching where their community resides, even the most remote places, is really commendable. The difficult part is for those kids who travel with their families during migration and often have to miss out on school for half an academic year. The Sangathan is making efforts to devise a plausible solution for that too.

The pastoral way of life requires land for grazing, some price regulations set in motion to ensure that they are not exploited by the market fluctuation, recognition of the indigenous breed of buffaloes that they call as gojru buffaloes, access to forest resources, community forest rights, land rights, access to health facilities, women and child care, and such. It is surprising how one may give more importance to chai than to the source of where the milk is coming from and the community that is responsible for it. It's often the communities that help sustain the basic necessities of life like food and clothing that face the brunt of an economy chasing industrialisation. One Gujjar man said this to me, remove "van" (forest) from the "van gujjar" and we are nothing...



The traditional kol (tea cup) in which Van Gujjars serve chai.

Epilogue

And so it ends, my journey to explore people and the natural environment...

The journey was an exercise of exploring discomfort and stretching unflexed muscles. It was intense on the physique to travel and get accustomed to a new place every two weeks. The mind and the heart were disoriented too. But do you know that feeling you get when you stretch a stiff leg? It is euphoric, right? That's how I felt when I visited Syamantak University of Life in Dhamapur; Victor and Goa Chitra in Benaulim; Mahendra and the traditional fishing community of Malvan, Jenukuruba in Nagarahole, Kunal and Tenacious Bee in Dyala, Avani and Yoshita Crafts in Jia, and Van Gujjars in Rishikesh and Kumaon. Each parindey had their own unique way of connecting with the rest of nature, and the work they did was diverse in terms of the subject right from conservation of natural habitat to cultural and material heritage, and advocacy for rights and empowerment, showing both individual and community driven efforts. They gave me a broad insight into the theme of conservation and coexistence and helped me make a little more sense of my inclination towards this.

Every place I went to, I felt like Alice dropping down the hole to a new Wonderland, but with constant reality checks of the challenges and hurdles one endures in doing something that is not the most acceptable, for it's not the safest or easiest thing to do, lacking establishment and even institutional backing. But the fact that they did it anyway, that they had a reason to fight for, was amazing. It made me feel alive to be a part of it, and to feel alive every day taking life one step at a time is what livelihood is about isn't it? It is important to note here that I'm not glorifying it- to be alive is to not only be on top of the world, but it also means to be under it, halfway to it, nowhere near it. But it means carving out a path that meets at the crossroads of reality and dreams that we constantly live in between- one of creating possibilities.

One of the challenges I constantly faced was maintaining consistency in shifting environments. Each place had its own set of mental and physical challenges, and I found it hard to maintain a routine that I would have ideally liked to maintain. This would often lead to self-loathing and despair in times of apparent failure, and happiness and pride otherwise. This has turned into a process of self-learning in itself, where I've come to acknowledge my relationship with ideals and perfection, and the wars I wage on myself, weakening my spirit. Another challenge that I encountered was although I was living the fight of my parindeys, albeit a tiny fraction of it, the large sets of information I received were overwhelming. There was so much I wanted to do, but I didn't know where to begin, and where to place the information. One thing that became very clear to me was that one problem often does not have one solution, especially when it's a lived experience. The complexity of life involves the social, economical, political, cultural... (whatever other bracket of study it can fit into), and this requires an engagement from the multiple actors involved to come together and co-create. Therefore, although I was (and am) keen to jump in wherever I can to help with whatever I can, I am learning to engage with the information I receive in a simple yet nuanced manner.

My parindeys each taught me a little bit of something that I can put together as the importance of dedication, of sacrifice, of struggle and living a meaningful life. When I look back and see the others along with them who taught me this, I resort to calling them all my parindeys- and today, my sky is dotted with free birds that teach me how to fly. A special thanks to my family and friends for staying by me and supporting me in my endeavour to explore the world and my role(s) within it.

Activity to the reader

Close your eyes. Now imagine you are planning a holiday. What kind of places would you like to visit? Make a note.

What is on your list? Cities? Mountains? Beaches? Jungle safaris? Now, if it's any or all of the options leaving one (cities), think about this- why is nature a getaway? Why do we plan a holiday to visit nature?

Okay, second prompt. What comes to your mind when you see greenery? Note this too.

Do you feel the lush beauty associated with this colour abundant in nature? Do you feel joy, clean air and quiet maybe? Do you stop to identify the plant? Do you stop to observe the tree? Do you know or wonder what its uses are? Or where it came from?

Third prompt- imagine you are eating food. What kind of food comes to mind or what is it that you'd like to have? Think about where this food item comes from, and what cuisine does it belong to? And who grows it?

Do you have a kitchen garden or do you live on a farm? Does your food come from stores and/or supermarkets? Is your taste very local or is it more worldly? What about your access- do you have choices such as pan-Indian, continental, pan-Asian and more to choose from or is it something else?

For the fourth prompt, make a list of all the things in your house that are derived from nature, for example, broom sticks. Do you know the source of the product? Think about that too, or find out, if you have to.

If you had to make a product out of a nature-based raw material right now, what would it be and how would you go about doing it?

The answer to these prompts is not one, but many. It is not to determine right or wrong, but to make you think/wonder/curious/ask. Think about this- why is nature today considered a holiday, somewhere we escape to? Shouldn't it be something that abounds all around us? After all, we are part of nature's creations. Be it cities or villages and all things in-between, we can make space for coexistence. A lot of what we do under conservation today entails "fortress conservation," where nature is isolated from humankind. Why? In forests, communities are observing that this is causing the loss of native species in the flora variety. This leads me to my next question. Today, if we see green, a lot of us believe we are "in nature." Sure, it is part of nature. But is it suitable for the local environment you are in? Are other plants, animals and birds enjoying this patch of green too? Plantations by the government in protected forests are often timber trees meant to serve the commercial timber industry. These trees are usually of little or no benefit to people and flora and fauna. Plantation and conservation of timber trees was a colonial policy when the forest department first came to be. This mindset and ambition of the department is changing today, but it is uneven and slow, and thus, needs to be prioritised.

Our lifestyles determine our interconnectedness with the rest of nature. This brings me to our third prompt- food. We can see that in a metropolitan, access to food from world-over is easy and this has a direct influence on our taste preferences. Smaller cities have access to lesser cuisines but are still able to offer food from different parts of the world or the country at least, whereas, in smaller towns and remote villages, access to food other than regional food may be almost unheard of. This is not to glorify or generalise a certain lifestyle or food choice, but instead, this is meant to highlight our knowledge of regional food, its uses, its availability, where it comes from, what used to be and what is, changes in cropping patterns, and also, the art of growing food. With access being made easy, some of us know little about growing food, whether the food is seasonal and/or local, how much water the crop may need, and such. Small initiatives today such as growing food in your backyard or even on your balcony is an effort to overcome this knowledge gap. The same goes for the last prompt which speaks about the utility of nature. In my journey, a lot of what I saw in my observation of coexistence, was the utility of nature in small ways to fulfil basic needs and make handy accessories to facilitate daily activities. For example, the fishing community in Malvan would make a rope out of a plant to carry bangda (mackerel) back home, and the Jenukurubaru would use branches to make toys for their children. Of course, coexistence entails more than just utility, which is but a portion of it albeit an important one. Coexistence, if I were to simply put it, means being roommates with your surroundings- you give and take, you be and let be.

Photo Gallery

A Jenukuruba family's hut in the Gadde haadi village



Wintering the hives in the Tenacious Bee farmland



A mahila panchayat meeting in Jia



A smiling bunch in Gadde Haadi

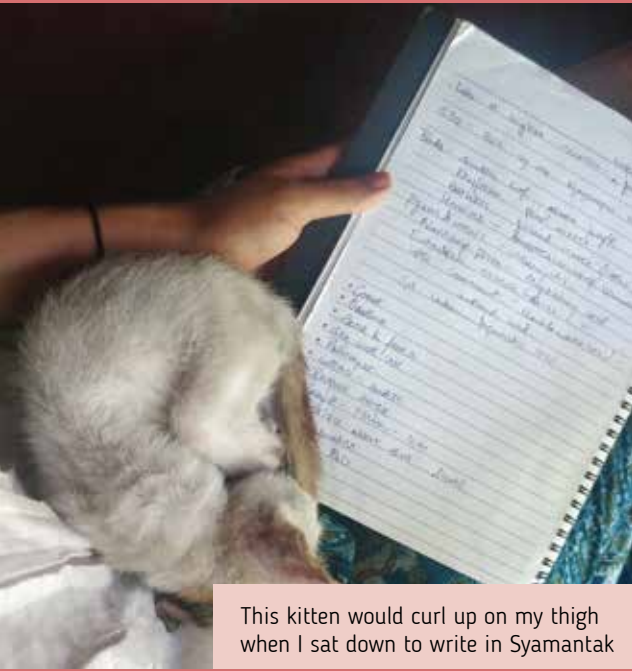
Fisherfolks' baskets displayed in Goa Chitra



Photo Gallery



Amir bhai and Aman bhai sharing a laugh



This kitten would curl up on my thigh when I sat down to write in Syamantak



Fishing trawlers at sea

Mrinalini in front of the Syamantak house built in 1931





A picture with the Yoshita Crafts team



Victor's miniatures of the exhibits at the museum made with wood

Women selling fish at the night market in Malvan



Alivelihoods

Introduction

Alivelihoods are meaningful and regenerative livelihoods, livelihoods that are oriented towards social, ecological, and personal wellbeing, which have the ability to:

- Make the one pursuing it feel alive, joyful, and content (individual/personal level)
- Facilitate localisation, build local economy and create resilient economic and social structures (community level)
- Regenerate our planet, showcase resilience to climate crisis, and mitigate global inequities (planet level)

They are long-term livelihoods that shift the pattern from extraction and consumption of resources to conservation and regeneration of resources, from profit to prosperity, and from scarcity to abundance.

Examples:

- Bee conservation for pollination and enhancing biodiversity, which is also a major step towards facilitating agroecology
- Responsible waste management to control different types of pollution and the spread of infectious diseases, which also conserves natural resources
- Vernacular eco-architecture that minimises

negative ecological impact, which also creates work opportunities for local craftspeople and artisans

The social context in which a certain skill or expertise is practiced is what sets Alivelihoods apart from other jobs and careers, whether modern or traditional. For example, the work of Dr. Lalitha and Dr. Regi in Sittilingi Valley, Tamil Nadu (<https://www.travellersuniversity.org/post/the-road-less-travelled-by-that-made-all-the-difference>) where they work for Swaraj (self-rule, self-reliance, self-governance) in Health, Food and Economy or the work of Alternative Law Forum (<https://altlawforum.org/>) in Bangalore, a lawyers collective that is committed to a practice of law which responds to issues of social and economic injustice, and provides qualitative legal services to marginalised groups.

We see that the pursuit of Alivelihoods has immense potential for personal growth and transformation, and thereby the idea behind this section is to offer an overview of what such a pursuit would entail. We have shared information on some of the Alivelihood areas the fellows explored during their fellowship journey. The information regarding the learning resources, organisations etc. provided is not a complete listing, but a few initial readings and spaces to check out to support one's initial exploration of the respective Alivelihood areas.



Agroecological Farming



Agroecological Farming covers a variety of farming techniques such as Natural Farming, Organic Farming, Permaculture, etc., practices that are not reliant on chemical inputs, make use of traditional seeds and focus on regenerative soil practices aimed towards localisation and resilience.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Natural/Organic way of growing food that caters to the local needs.
- Providing toxin free, safe and healthy food to people at a fair price.
- Earth-centric practices to make decisions about the land according to season, local ecology and traditional wisdom.
- Growing native food crops without over extracting resources.
- Autonomy to the local community in decision making in the farming process.
- Preserving and passing on local and traditional knowledge on food, seeds, seed-saving, harvesting, etc.
- Sharing and distributing seeds of traditional/ indigenous varieties of native crops.
- Seed saving in varied quantities along with detailed information on these to fight bio-piracy.
- Facilitating climate resilient farming.
- Environmental activism to ensure rights of farmers are not curtailed.
- Being cognizant of the local cultures that play a crucial role in the decision making around food systems within the communities.

Knowledge, Skillset, and Mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Basic knowledge of farming helps in the initial stages. Volunteering in other farms or fields helps in building a basic skill set.
- Knowledge of traditional varieties of seeds that are resilient to natural calamities.
- Knowledge of topography, water tables, sowing and harvesting seasons for fruits and vegetables.
- Slowing down, be with self' and 'in the moment'.

- Being observant and learning from the rest of nature.
- Experimenting on land in terms of trying different watering, transplanting, animal rearing techniques.
- Interest to work towards growing one's own food.
- Patience to learn a new lifestyle altogether that is dependant on the land, living according to circadian rhythms, seasonal labour, and humility to natural forces.
- Readiness to face challenges and failures when starting out a new life different from urban life.
- Openness to unlearn and gain new information according to regional demands such as culture, market systems, community interest in collaboration.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Huge need for safe food in today's world.
- Conscious shift is happening around growing and consumption of healthy food.
- Many more people are including millets in their diet. There is a demand for millets, but availability is less.
- Many people in the cities are lacking time to prepare millet based food as they need to be soaked for a few hours, opening up possibilities for millet based restaurants and food courts.
- Assimilating the vast knowledge and converting it to a simple form for people who find it difficult to access it- students, women farmers, economically and socially underserved farmers.
- Building a support system of individuals with similar interests to help with market and climate issues.
- Living a community life and in harmony with the rest of nature.
- Knowledge exchange with researchers can lead to indigenous knowledge gaining scientific validation and reaching a wider audience.
- Farms can serve as learning spaces.
- Living off land and having control over one's means of survival.

Learning resources

Readings

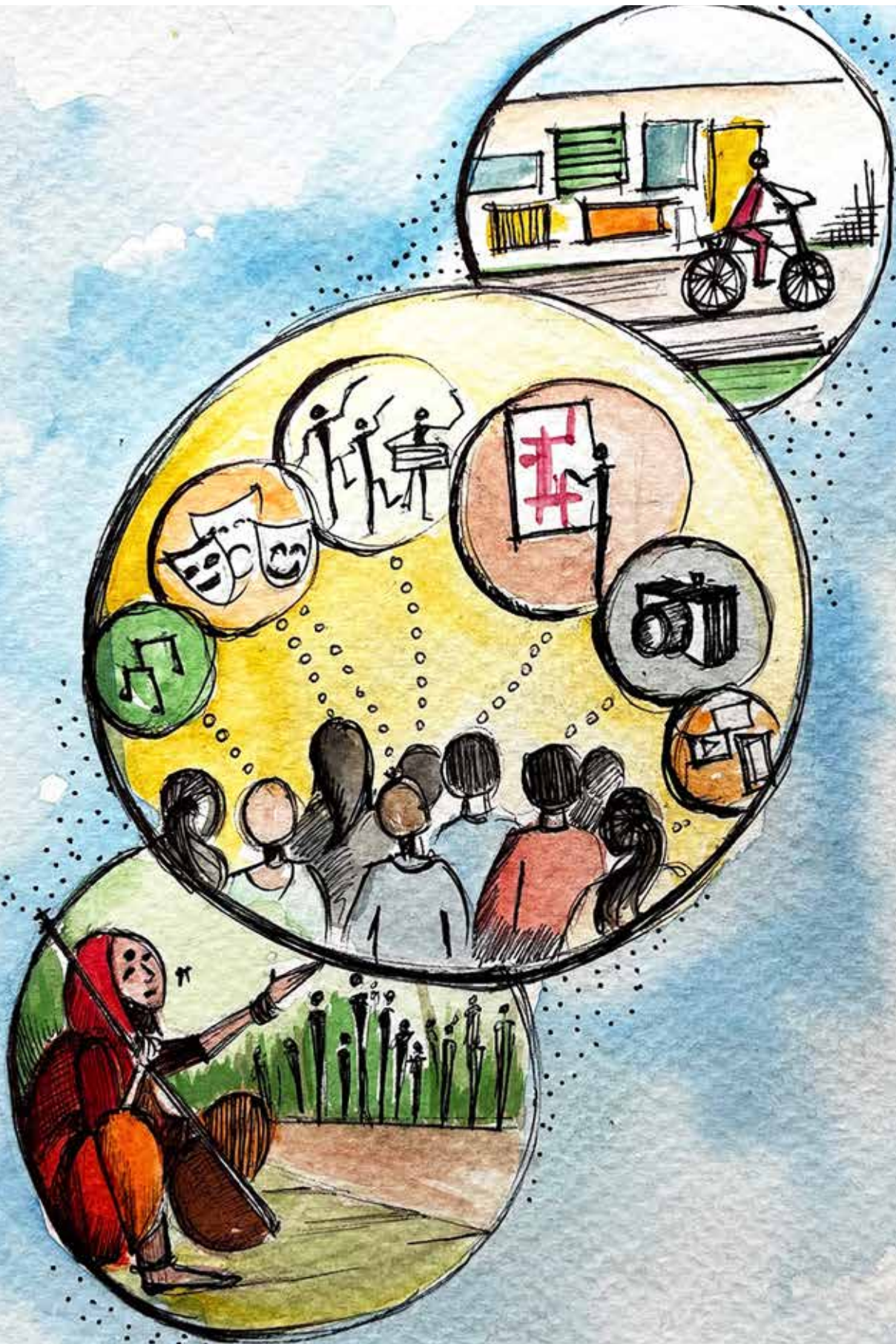
- One Straw Revolution, Masanobu Fukuoka
- The Natural Way of Farming: The Theory and Practice of Green Philosophy, Masanobu Fukuoka
- The Road Back to Nature, Masanobu Fukuoka
- The Green Sprout Journey: Exploring Home-based, Ecological Activities with Children, Satoko Chatterjee
- Economy of Permanence, J.C. Kumarappa
- Scrapbook of Food and Farm System, Anshuman Das

Networks

- The Organic Farming Association of India (OFAI) - <https://www.ofai.org>

- National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF) - <https://www.nfcoalition.in>
- Aranya Agricultural Alternatives - <https://www.permacultureindia.org>
- Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) - <https://www.kisanswaraj.in>
- Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN) - <https://www.wassan.org>
- Bhoomi Network spaces - <https://bhoominetwork.org/spaces/bhoomi-vivasayee-maiyam-thiruvanamalai>, <https://bhoominetwork.org/spaces/bhoomi-eco-village-gumlapuram>
- Organic Farmers Market - <https://www.ofmtn.in>

Arts for Social Change



Arts for Social Change as a pedagogy involves using different art forms (music, dance, theatre, painting, etc.) as tools to bring about change in the society and environment. It recognises the power of creativity as a catalyst to generate collaboration, build interpersonal skills, and facilitate introspection, to work towards social change.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Using Arts in the learning process and for personality development.
- Using Arts for mental health and healing.
- Using Arts to get in touch with one's emotions, feelings and thoughts.
- Using Arts for building understanding between and within communities.
- Talking on taboo issues through Arts, for e.g. making songs on menstrual hygiene.

Knowledge, Skillset, and Mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Understanding importance of Arts in education and learning
- Understanding facilitation and having facilitation skills.
- Building communication, management and mentorship skills.
- Awareness of social issues and their interconnections.

- Interest and willingness to work in teams.
- Building relationships with the community.

Opportunities in such a pathway

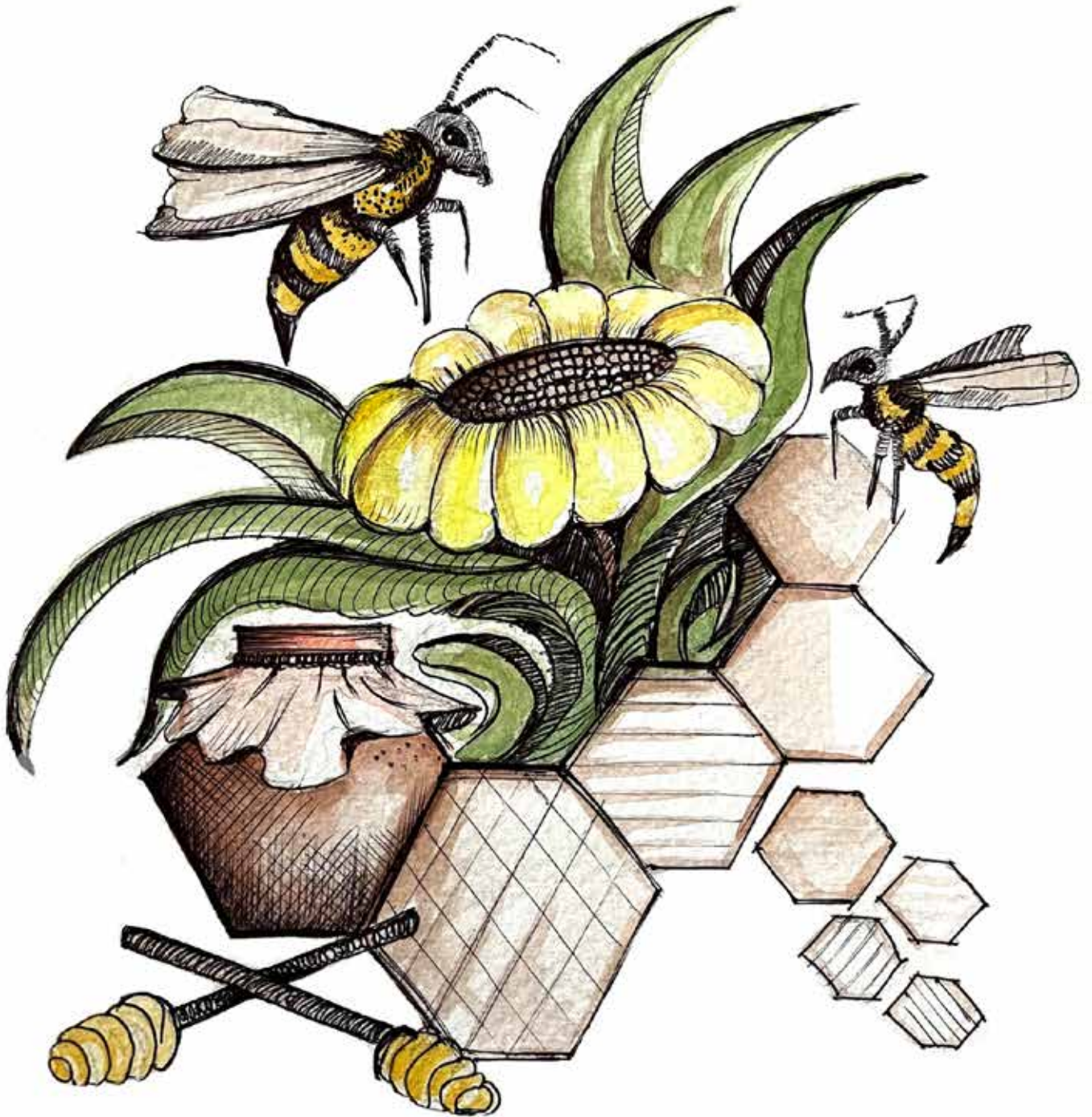
- Engage with diverse groups of people and communities.
- Engage with the deep rooted conditioning of caste, class, gender, etc. in a constructive manner.
- Help change stereotypes and build a more inclusive world.
- To aid in children's overall educational and creative growth, helping them realise their potential.

Learning Resources

Campaigns

- Protest against the denotification of a part of Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary, Chennai, through an art storm as part of the Save Vedanthangal campaign - <https://youtu.be/nN5i4EhoGiA>
- Rap song protesting against Hindustan Unilever Ltd. illegally cutting 425 trees adjacent to Kodaikanal Wildlife sanctuary leading to toxic mercury from its plant flowing into the nearby forest, rivers and villages - <https://youtu.be/nSalms0vcl>
- The Warli Revolt - <https://youtu.be/sYADNgIkeIY>

Bee Conservation



Bees pollinate one-third of the food we eat, and a decline in bee pollination will alter our food systems, changing our diets and threatening access to nutritional food. **Bee conservation** thereby is not limited to the mere protection of bees, but extends to safeguarding the environment, securing food justice, habitat creation, research and advocacy.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Sustainable harvest of honey: 30% of total honey left in a bee chamber to ensure there is enough for the bees.
- Ensure no larvae are killed in the harvest by using bee chambers that separate comb containing larva and the queen bee along with honey, and the comb containing just honey.
- Incentivising traditional beekeepers to do both beekeeping and harvest sustainably by offering higher returns per kg of honey, as against the normal running price range in the region.
- Involving local people in the packaging of the products, while also sourcing materials for packaging from small-scale and sustainable initiatives.
- Conducting training workshops regarding bees for the community, and organising educational workshops for the children.
- Trying to bridge the knowledge gap between academia and tradition around bees.
- Spread awareness that profit can also come in a sustainable manner that does not exploit, but instead conserve and care for the environment and people.

Knowledge, Skillset, and Mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Finding a mentor, learning and working under an established beekeeper before going independent.
- Know-how of bees and flora-fauna of the respective region.
- Ability to extract and process products such as honey, beeswax, etc. and know-how of the timing for the same.
- Patience to work closely intertwined with

community and the rest of nature.

- Willingness to learn in the process, gaining knowledge from different sources and experiences.
- Open to ideas, and the fervour to take on new ideas.
- Living and building slowly.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Creating new products and updating existing products is a creative pursuit which involves learning and unlearning.
- Apart from selling natural honey, natural and handcrafted products made from beeswax can also be made as part of the product range.
- Invest in knowledge dissemination of bee behaviour and lifestyle, about the different flavours of honey that is made, etc. through art and other creative mediums.
- Bees are excellent creatures to learn from, and there is such a wealth of knowledge that lies in the way they conduct themselves.
- Appreciating life and the rest of nature in a slow, interactive form.

Learning Resources

Readings

- A floral calendar for bee conservation, Sahana Ghosh - <https://india.mongabay.com/2019/06/a-floral-calendar-for-bee-conservation/>
- Could tribal honey hunters help save the bees and improve our food security?, Catherine Gilon - <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/03/could-tribal-honey-hunters-help-save-the-bees-and-improve-our-food-security/>

Organisations

- Tenacious Bee Collective - <https://www.tenaciousbee.com>
- Bee Basket - <https://www.beebasket.in/bee-conservation>
- The Honey Portal Project, Keystone Foundation - <https://www.honeyportal.keystone-foundation.org>

Community Work



Community work is the work done by a person or group of people that benefits others, benefits a community. A community can be defined as a group of people who share a common geography and/or common interests. Community work can help any group of people in need: children, women, senior citizens, people with disabilities, etc. but community workers look at the entire community as a whole while working for its betterment.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Addressing the needs of the community.
- Sustaining and promoting traditional wisdom, culture and practices.
- Working on dignity of labour, women and awareness of people.
- Challenging power structures of patriarchy, class, caste, etc.
- Addressing gender based violence.
- Challenging the dominant notion of success and wellbeing.
- Empowerment through grassroots intervention.
- Rethinking development model for inclusion and justice.
- Creating dignified livelihood opportunities.
- Judicial usage of resources available.
- Interconnected approach to gender, ecology and identity.

Knowledge, skillset and mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Good knowledge of the local resource base and land geography.
- Awareness of community issues and interconnectedness of various domains.
- Building connections and relationships with the community.
- Engaging with the community through means of art, research, and recreation.
- Interacting and engaging with various stakeholders such as volunteers, community members, funders to on field authority.

- Organising, mobilising and creating spaces for dialogues.
- Closely work with gender relations and acknowledge aspects of women's development.
- Ability to comprehend the community's wisdom and make it part of one's work.
- Sensitivity on how to approach the community members and the different issues.
- Collaborate with like minded people.
- Having a grounded perspective on development.
- Practise sustainability, patience and wellbeing in daily living.
- Have deep respect and appreciation for the community.
- Long term dedication to the people and field work.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Build new development models based on needs of the community and thought of by them.
- High potential of exploring sustainable living.
- Chance to work on multiple aspects of social work such as education, gender, health, etc.
- Enable youth to become enablers of their own community.
- Create volunteering opportunities for people to experience, learn and contribute.
- Facilitate in building a self-reliant community.
- Rethink gender work in marginalised communities and challenge notion of power to counter patriarchy.

Learning Resources

Readings

- Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, M. K. Gandhi
- The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
- Writings of Babasaheb Ambedkar
- Writings of Jyotirao Phule

- Writings of Periyar E V Ramasamy
- The Search for Alternatives, Vikalp Sangam
- The Constitution of India

Organisations

- Deccan Development Society - <http://www.ddsindia.com>
- Timbaktu Collective - <https://www.timbaktu.org>
- Tribal Health Initiative - <https://www.tribalhealth.org>

Farmer Producer Organisation



A **Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO)** is a legal entity formed by farmers. A FPO can be a producer company, a cooperative society or any other legal form which provides for sharing of profits/benefits among the members. The main aim of FPO is to ensure better income for the farmers through an organisation of their own. Small producers do not have the volume individually (both inputs and produce) to get the benefit of economies of scale. Additionally, in agricultural marketing, there is a long chain of intermediaries who very often work non-transparently leading to the situation where the producer receives only a small part of the value that the ultimate consumer pays. Through FPOs, the farmers can avail the benefit of economies of scale.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Farmers with small land holdings face tremendous challenges during the agriculture production phase such as access to technology, quality seeds, finances, etc. and also in marketing their produce due to lack of economic strength. FPOs provide this collective strength to the farmers.
- Supporting and training farmers, enabling them to make collaborative decisions with regards to farmlands and natural resources.
- Revival of traditional farming practices to ensure food security and improved health of the living beings dependent on the land.
- Using organic fertilisers and pest repellents to maintain the health of the land, water, air and the micro-organisms surrounding the region.
- Conversations about communes to support the villagers reconnect to the shared land, water, and air.
- Autonomy and decision-making powers of everyone involved in the farming and value addition process from start to end.

- Self-reliance to unite the farmers towards building resilience and sustaining themselves and the rest of nature around them.
- Reconnecting with the traditional food system throughout the whole supply chain.
- Community-based organic farming and knowledge exchange to ensure the land is replenished.

Knowledge, Skillset, and Mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Knowledge of government schemes and support systems for farmer communities.
- Skill of listening and problem solving from a grounded perspective that is oriented in regaining self-reliance.
- Resilience in the face of market and policy changes.
- Collaboration with other farmers for profit and loss sharing.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Nearly 86% of farmers in India are small and marginal with average land holdings in the country being less than 3 acres. FPOs help in the collectivisation of such small, marginal and landless farmers in order to give them the collective strength to deal with issues and challenges related to production, distribution, marketing, sale, etc.
- Build an interdependent collaborative community.
- Create value added products that offer better income.

Learning Resources

Networks

- FPO Hub - <https://www.fpohub.com>

Place-based Learning



Place-based learning engages students in their community, including their physical environment, local culture, history and people. Place-based education centers the educational process in the local environment. This form of learning requires the facilitators and learners to be placed in their communities so that they can engage with community-based problems.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Organisation of life, self and community.
- Providing earth-friendly and people-friendly alternatives in education.
- Rethinking education with environmental consciousness and compassion.
- Providing a learner-centred and locality-centered educational environment.
- Developing curriculum which is tailored to the needs of the learners.
- Facilitating life-centred learning rather than career-centred learning.
- Facilitating connection with oneself, community around and the rest of nature.
- Making the community an important stakeholder in the learning process.
- Creating contextual curriculum based on immediate surrounding and ecology, land, water, air, etc.

Knowledge, skillset and mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Requires in-depth understanding of the communities in the place where the learning space is functioning - the culture, customs, beliefs and problems.
- Basic understanding of the methods in which to run learning spaces.
- Understanding facilitation and having facilitation skills.
- Designing education and workshop modules around environment and sustainability for learners.
- Intention to rethink systems of society like work,

education, relationships, money, etc.

- Keen observation, learning and patience to engage with learners from various backgrounds.
- Skills in designing academic curriculum suited to the learners' environment and needs.
- Intention to shift the pattern from competition to cooperation, co-creation and co-learning.
- Ability to diversify and relate various aspects of life with one's learning and education.
- Communication and observation skills and connection with the community.
- Understanding of experiential learning.
- Enthusiasm to understand learning and education as a part of life.
- Love for working with the learners and natural spaces.
- Being passionate about teaching and sustainable living.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Build an alternative model of education which is more relevant to the community.
- Create space for mutual learning.
- Chance to work on local issues through education.
- Build a new lifestyle in harmony with the rest of nature.
- Develop and disseminate various practices for sustainable living.
- Travel across different regions to explore different models of education.
- Engage with various social-ecological issues and effectively contribute to the movements.

Learning Resources

Readings

- Divaswapna: An Educator's Reverie, Gijubhai Badheka
- Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi
- Letters from a Forest School, Chittaranjan Das

Films

- Schooling the World: The White Man's Last Burden - <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/schooling-the-world-2010>
- Marudam Farm School - <https://youtu.be/1599z2uYG70>

Organisations

- Marudam Farm School - <https://www.marudamfarmschool.org>
- Puvudham - <https://www.puvudham.in>
- Thulir - <http://www.thulir.org>

Social Enterprise



A **social enterprise** is a cause-driven business improving social objectives and serving the common good. Social enterprises have business, environmental and social goals. They seek financial benefits while maximising benefits to society and the environment, instilled in the principles of fair share and fair price.

Planet-centric approach involved and importance

- Creating dignified livelihood opportunities for the local communities.
- Judicial and mindful usage of resources available.
- Sustaining and promoting traditional wisdom, culture and creating livelihoods through it.
- Providing an alternative to capitalist business models.
- Working on social equity, environmental sustainability and economic empowerment.
- Focusing on localisation.

Knowledge, skillset and mindset to be developed to become a practitioner

- Basic understanding of different departments like statistics, accounting, designing, logistics, marketing and relationships.
- Understanding of artistic, traditional craft history and a will to promote it for artisan based social enterprises.
- Ability to design a space and an economically sustainable model to undertake social action.
- Creating a space of dialogue with the community.
- Focus on localisation.
- Respect and appreciation for the community and their culture.
- Research on community's aspirations and methods to incorporate it in the enterprise model.

- Having a long term dedication to the community and work.
- Ability to overcome fear and reflect on oneself.
- Believing in the process of starting small.
- Willingness to step out of comfort-zone, handle challenging situations.

Opportunities in such a pathway

- Establish a model of entrepreneurship which is based on gender justice, fair trade and promotion of traditional knowledge.
- Work towards a self-reliant and dignified community.
- High potential for cultural and economic development of the community.
- Sustenance and revival of traditional crafts.
- Potential to create alternative markets.
- Address various socio-political issues through economic activity.

Learning Resources

Readings

- Farmer's Share: Towards Dignified Rural Livelihoods, Ashik Krishnan - <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/farmers-share-towards-dignified-rural-livelihoods>

Organisations

- Forest Post - <https://www.forestpost.in>
- Tula - <https://www.tula.org.in>
- Yellow Bag - <https://www.theyellowbag.org>
- Banyan Roots - <https://www.banyanroots.in>

We are building a platform to facilitate further exploration and pursuit of Avelihoods. The platform will include more information, learning resources, opportunities and also details of events and workshops regarding various Avelihoods.

<https://www.alivelihood.org/>

Invitation to the Reader

Most of us have been shown a unidirectional path to success that involves going to schools and colleges, getting good grades, and doing everything along the way in the interest of making a living in the future without necessarily asking our own selves what that might mean for us. While it may have worked for some, a lot of us have felt disengaged and unfulfilled in that pursuit.

We recognise this collective pain and through this book, we offer some antidotes by sharing ordinary stories of ordinary individuals who took a leap of faith and did everything they could to discover what brings them alive. Somewhere along the journey, some were able to engage with their fears and negotiate the imbibed social contracts, some could see the glimpses of their dreams come to life, but everyone was able to appreciate the abundant learning opportunities that are all around. The freedom to convert our question into our learning goals(course), the responsibility to choose our own teachers, and the creativity to find our classrooms all around the universe is the art one learns by undertaking such meaningful journeys. The art that lasts lifelong.

The book also offers examples of Alivelihoods, life-oriented pursuits of Parindeys whose work emerges from a deep understanding of self and its intersection with the planet and the community. Throughout the book, you would see how certain engagements fill you with joy and how certain pain points tear your heart. These are important experiences one needs to hold onto as one explores what could emerge out of them. Many Parindeys, as you would have realised, have converted their passions and pain into lifelong pursuits, aka Alivelihoods, and in the process have shown many of us pathways to more meaningful lives. The conscious act of transforming your experiences and learnings into meaningful actions is a pivotal one. It would allow you to channel yourself in building an easier world for humans and the rest of nature alike.

Now that you have had a glimpse of an array of Alivelihoods and the journeys and attempts of different people in pursuing them, we invite you to embark on a journey to find/pursue your own Alivelihoods.

Want to see if you want to take such a journey?

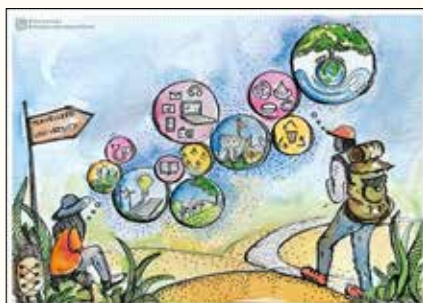
- What about yourself have you been meaning to learn more about??
- What are the top online searches that you ran in the past month?
- What daily actions that you see in the outer world break your heart? And what fills it with joy?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- Do you want to take control of your own learning?

As you answered these questions, what emerged for you? Stay with it, and see what you can do about it. If you decide to act on it, we are here to support you through that journey.

- Team Travellers' University

The 52 Parindey Fellowship Postcard

The 52 Parindey Fellowship postcards represent a travel-learner exploring different Alivelihood areas. The postcards were created by Rachana D M, one of the applicants for the fellowship. Even though Rachana didn't become a fellow, she expressed her interest in being part of the process, and created something with us. We saw that she was an amazing artist and asked if she would design a postcard in the theme of the fellowship. She offered two versions, both of which were used. The postcards were gifts offered to make and build connections with the parindeys, people met on journeys, and more. They were also starting points to build conversations on the idea of Alivelihoods.



Check out Rachana's art on: <https://www.instagram.com/shadesofmysketchbook/>

The 52 Parindey Fellowship Journal

The 52 Parindey Fellowship Journal was co-designed and co-created with Rahul Hasija of SwaCardz. The journal includes sections for free writing, check-ins, making maps of observations, resources for self-care during travel and more, intended to support the fellows to articulate their thoughts, emotions and feelings during the journey.

Check out the different offerings from SwaCardz on: <https://www.swacardz.com/>





The TU team members during the orientation workshop and reflection workshop at Deccan Development Society, Zaheerabad (September 2021), and Bhoomi College, Bangalore (January 2022), respectively.



The fellows and the team: Sneharshi, Ridhima, Srilaxmi, Saumya, Ashik, Preksha, Ashwini, Gayatri, Amal, Anil, Rahul & Sharmila (from left to right)

The 52 Parindey Fellows of Cohort 1 can be reached at

Amal Dev - creativecreature1183@gmail.com

Anil Uppalapati - aniluppalapati96@gmail.com

Gayatri Pardeshi - gayatripardeshi199@gmail.com

Ridhima Agarwal - agarwalridhima1@gmail.com

Saumya - john20saumya@gmail.com

Sneharshi Dasgupta - sneharshigupta01@gmail.com

Srilaxmi - srilaxmi0928@gmail.com

Travellers' University can be reached at hello@travellersuniversity.org



Scan this QR code to watch the presentations by the fellows where they share their key experiences, learnings and insights from the fellowship journey.

Published by

Travellers' University & Sahyatri Foundation

Travellers' University offers travel-based experiential learning programmes. Our commitment at Travellers' University is to promote lifelong learning by using travel as a pedagogical tool. Learners are encouraged to investigate the relationships that exist between themselves, the systems they are connected to and part of, and the rest of nature. Through our programmes, we aim to equip learners with the perspectives and tools they need to make conscious and critical decisions to journey towards a more sustainable, equitable, and just world.

Travellers' University is the brand name for the work we do and Sahyatri Foundation is the registered entity, a Section-8 company.

<https://www.travellersuniversity.org/>

Vikalp Sangam

Vikalp Sangam is an evolving process that involves in its core functioning, over 90 movements and organisations in India. It is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision.

<https://www.vikalpsangam.org/>

Digital Empowerment Foundation & A-CODE

Founded in 2002, Digital Empowerment Foundation has been working to empower marginalised and unconnected communities living at the edge of information by enabling them with digital capacity, access and rights across the pillars of education and entertainment, livelihood and finance, health and agriculture, culture and heritage, with a special focus on digital rights for women and adolescents.

'A-CODE: Art and Collective for Digital Empowerment' was curated to bring several 'Community of Practice' to be a part of the collective that would work together to advocate for the inclusion of arts in social change. Through this network, DEF aims to create a cohort of organisations that work together to have dialogues, advocacy and engagements through culture, design, art, heritage, music, film and traditional practices for peaceful human coexistence.

<https://www.defindia.org/>



Year of Publication:

2023

Curation and Coordination:

Ashik Krishnan

Editing:

Ashik Krishnan & Sujatha Padmanabhan

Editing support:

Apoorva Bhatnagar, Arnaz Khan, Ashwini Shah, Deepak Hariharan, Madhu Bala R, Meghna Sankar, Nayan Jain, Niveditha, Ramakrishnan M N, Susruthan, Vaisakh Somanath

Translations (Malayalam to English):

- 'The man who speaks with his heart', 'Raja of Stances', 'Kanavu: The Home of Scintillating Butterflies', 'Puvudham: A University for Sustainable Living' - Anju Chithrakumar
- 'School of Dreams' - Susmith C. S.
- 'Agrini: A Space for Endeavour and Creation' - Tanya Prasad
- 'Aaranyak: Where Child Rights Awaken Inner Strength', 'Gramani: A Place Filled with Art and Humanity', 'Adishakthi: Where Education is Woven through Rights' and Amal's Prologue, Reflections & Epilogue - Riya Orison

Cover design and Alivelihoods art:

Rachana D M

Design & Layout:

Satish Kumar, Digital Empowerment Foundation

Printer:

Shree Mudra, Pune

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To download this book:

www.travellersuniversity.org/52pf2021-22

How alive do we feel in our current pursuit of livelihoods and life? In the quest to understand this deeply, we designed the 52 Parindey Fellowship programme that explores meaningful and regenerative livelihoods that makes one feel alive i.e., 'Alivelihoods'. As part of the programme, a group of individuals, all youth, travelled across the country in search of Alivelihood practitioners or Parindeys (free birds who designed their own paths). They lived with them and documented their life journeys to understand how they earn their livelihoods in a socially and ecologically conscious manner.

This book offers a collection of stories of the Parindeys and their Alivelihoods written by the fellows. These Parindeys have found their Alivelihoods through their planet-centric approach, creating an enriching world around them. Through this book, we celebrate their journeys and their effort into bringing their eco-conscious livelihoods, and their emerging importance in today's world, to the forefront.

