

Conversations Today

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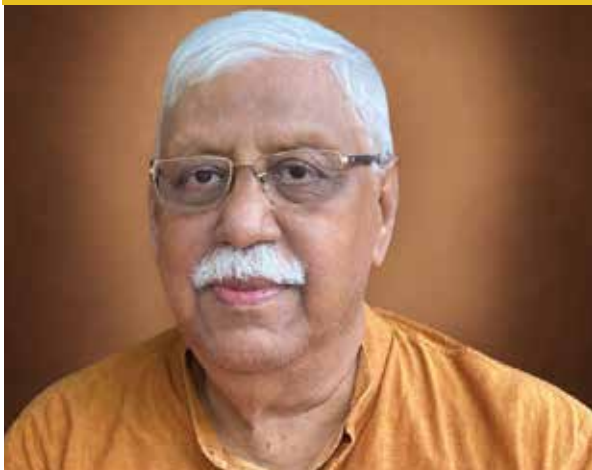


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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Life, in all its complexity, is a dance between attachment and detachment. From the moment we are born, we form bonds — with people, with places, with dreams, and with possessions. These attachments shape us, give us identity, and often become the very reasons we strive, sacrifice, and celebrate. Yet, life also demands a certain detachment — an ability to step back, to accept change, to let go when necessary, and to recognize the impermanence of all things.

This duality is not a contradiction but a necessary wisdom. Attachment without detachment leads to suffering; detachment without attachment risks hollowing our lives of meaning. The art of living well lies in holding on with love but being willing to release with grace.

Attachment, when rooted in love, care, and commitment, builds relationships and communities. It teaches us loyalty, compassion, and the value of persistence. Parents nurturing their children, teachers investing in students, citizens working for a better society — all are acts of attachment that create lasting impact. These are the attachments we must cherish and foster: those that uplift, inspire, and bring out the best in us and others.

However, detachment is equally vital. It teaches us resilience — the ability to accept loss, face change, and move forward. It guards us against possessiveness, entitlement, and ego. True detachment does not mean indifference; it means involvement without the chains of obsession. It is the wisdom to love deeply yet not cling, to dream boldly yet not despair when plans falter, to give our best effort yet accept outcomes we cannot control.

In today's fast-paced world, where the line between ambition and obsession often blurs, the values of balanced attachment and wise detachment are more important than ever. Our children and the generations that follow must learn that while it's noble to strive, it's equally noble to surrender when necessary. They must know that relationships are precious, but they should not come at the cost of one's self-respect or inner peace. They must understand that failure is not a dead-end but a bend in the road — and sometimes, the road itself must change.

Attachment and detachment are two sides of the same coin. Together, they teach us to live fully but not fearfully, to engage deeply but not desperately. They remind us that while we may not control everything that happens to us, we can control how we respond — with open hands and open hearts.

In the end, perhaps the greatest legacy we can leave is not material wealth, but a mindset: a way of embracing life's joys without clinging, enduring life's losses without breaking, and passing on to others a wisdom that endures beyond our own fleeting time.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY REDEFINED

What is productivity? It is the output generated per input unit, like labour, capital, or materials.

Keeping the requirement of building a sustainable world, I think we need to redefine the definition of productivity. The element that I added to redefine it is purpose. If the organisation does not have a purpose or vision at the individual or organisational level, that is unproductive. It is just doing something for the sake of doing something or doing things just for manufacturing a product or providing a service. However, we are genuinely productive when we have a strong vision and purpose and create products or provide services aligned with the vision. This applies to both individuals and organisations.

Before we even establish the organisation's vision, we need to understand what values the organisation follows, what value it wants to provide to the community they are serving, and the community's needs.

One of the popular lines of Bob Proctor, called Law of Compensation, puts it wonderfully. The amount of money you earn is directly related to the need for what you do, your ability to do it and the difficulty in replacing you.

The Japanese Ikigai concept also mentions that our reason for being is the sweet spot where the following four things merge - What You Love, What the World Needs, What You Can Be Paid For and What You Are Good At.

As Simon Sinek mentions in his popular TED Video and his book, Start With Why - it's the why that gives an individual / organisation the appropriate direction. The more precise you are about it, the easier it will be to know exactly which direction to go to make yourself productive and make your journey more meaningful and purposeful.

Your why is defined by the values you care the most about and what the ideal community looks like to you. When we mix both these aspects, you get to know your vision.

When you have a clear, compelling vision - you have a clear direction to go ahead. All that you have to do is ensure the people within your organisation and the activities they do daily are aligned with that vision.

All the function-level goals, KRAs and KPIs you define should direct your organisation toward its vision. When you have these things set, and your team is also clear



about it and working towards that vision - your organisation will be in a state of flow.

One challenge organisations have is making their entire team align with the vision. One of the best possible ways to do this is by creating a Code of Honour - something I learned from my mentor, Blair Singer. This is where you define a set of few principles that are clearly communicated to your team, revisited often by everyone within the organisation. That set of principles is called a Code of Honour. Like any other process or system, this ought to be followed by each and every one from your organisation.

So the vision, values, KPIs and Code of Honour set a clear path for your team toward the direction you want to go, as an organisation.

Now we come to the later part of productivity. For this to be clear we need to understand two aspects of Productivity - Effectiveness and Efficiency. This is better explained with a simple example of a dart board. Let us say five darts are given to you to hit the dart board, and you are expected to hit the dart board at least once in the center. If you throw all five darts one after another or together and able to hit the center of the dartboard with at least one of the darts - your purpose is served. This is what is called effectiveness - achieving the intended results. And if you are achieving this in such a way that instead of one of the darts hitting the target, if more than one of them hits - that is what is being Efficient - achieve the intended results (outputs) with less number of resources (darts).

Whether our team members are effectively or efficiently walking on the path we laid for them composes the later part of productivity and is also the most spoken aspect. Remember that

productivity always starts with effectiveness and then is enhanced with efficiency. The more efficient your team is at achieving the intended results, the more productive your team is.

So how can our teams become more productive?

This needs improvement in the areas of Attitude, Skill or/and Knowledge (ASK). It can be in how they think about the work or how they do it. It includes whether they have the apt knowledge of what they are doing and the tools they use for their work. It also consists of the kind of tools they use for their work and how good and well-versed they are with the tools they use for their work. So we have to make sure they improve the Attitude, Skill and Knowledge to do their work effectively and empower them with the right tools for their work.

This is what is a pathway to make your organisation productive, as per the redefined productivity path we mentioned earlier in this article.

To sum it up, clarify what you want, and then become efficient at what you are doing toward what you want. These two steps give you an edge over others and make you more productive. So embrace this and implement this within your organisation.

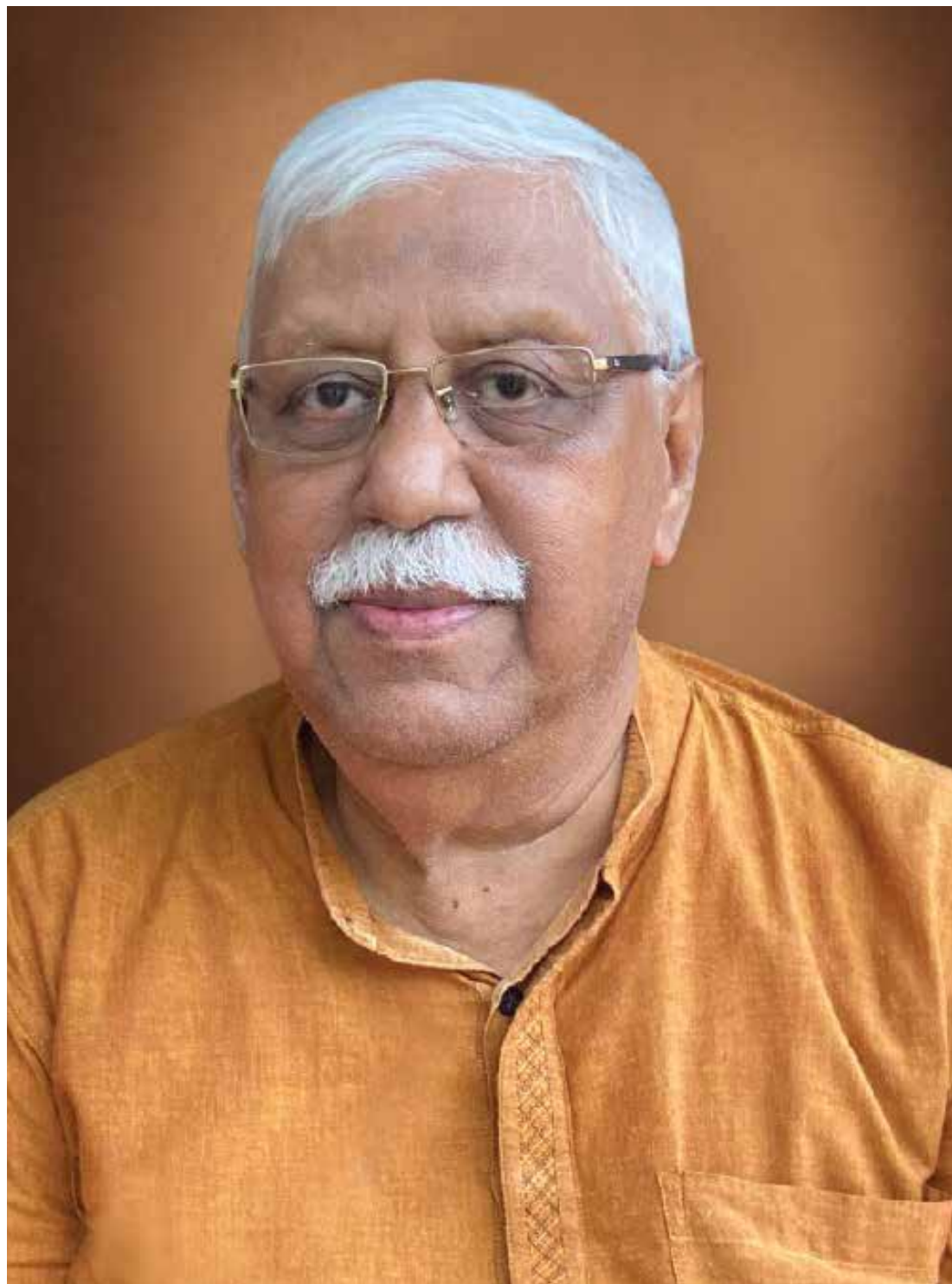
Remember the more productive you become, the more resources you save, contributing to building a sustainable world. This is how we become productive and sustainable.

Do share the insights you got through this article and the article with your network so that people embrace this new redefined productivity and make the world productive and sustainable.

SRKR | S Ravi Kanth Reddy,
Productivity and Sustainability
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DR. C. KUMARBABU:

A MASTER OF MINDS AND A MENTOR OF HEARTS



Dr. C. Kumarbabu, MD, DPM, PhD, FIPS, was more than a psychiatrist; he was a philosopher in practice, a teacher by instinct, and a seeker at heart. His career, which spanned decades, was defined by his pioneering work in integrating scientific meditation with psychiatric treatment. A bridge between science and spirituality, Dr. Kumarbabu connected the intellectual rigor of the West with the wisdom of the East, creating a harmonious blend of

intellect and intuition.

Affiliated with the Institute of Mental Health in Kilpauk, Chennai, Dr. Kumarbabu reshaped the landscape of mental health care. His impact continues to be felt in the 25,000+ individuals he personally trained in meditation for emotional well-being and stress management, leaving a legacy that transcends time.

What truly set him apart was his empowering approach to counseling. As he often said,

“Transformation arises not from advice, but from insight.” Dr. Kumarbabu didn’t impose change; instead, he held up a mirror, guiding his students to discover their own paths to transformation.

Ms. Bhagyalakshmi, a meditation student since 1996, recalls, “He was always a teacher, finding something to teach in every moment. Even in casual conversations, he could discuss anything—from classical philosophy to quantum

physics—with ease. His intelligence and humor kept every room alive with laughter and learning.”

Dr. Kumarbabu’s spiritual teachings were both profound and practical, making abstract concepts accessible. Mr. Haridas Menon, a retired metallurgist, shares, “I’ve been a fan of his spiritual lectures for 35 years. He blended science, spirituality, religion, and mental health effortlessly. His punctuality was legendary, and his brilliance was as much in his conduct as in his content.”

His meditation sessions were about exploration, not control. “He never policed our thoughts,” says Ms. Vijayalakshmi, a long-time student. “He encouraged us to observe them without attachment. His guidance inspired a deep transformation in me—what words rarely can. I went from being angry to calm and aware. Even my daughter found clarity after just three sessions.”

Dr. Kumarbabu’s memory was legendary—not for mere recall, but for its ability to connect the past with the present. “He could recite long film monologues and immediately link them to our lives,” says Ms. Vijayalakshmi. “His memory bridged knowledge to the moment, making his teachings come alive.”

For Mr. Senthil Kumar, an IT professional from Chennai, a chance visit to a meditation class led to a life-changing experience. “I came out of curiosity, but stayed because everything was so practical and relatable. No mysticism, just real talk. He made meditation accessible and linked great masters and scriptures to everyday struggles.”

Dr. Kumarbabu’s ability to balance reverence with relevance was a hallmark of his approach. Rooted in Eastern wisdom yet respecting the scientific rigor of the West, he integrated both to offer a holistic, sustainable vision of wellness.

Beyond his clinical expertise, Dr. Kumarbabu was a gifted mentor and educator. He trained countless social workers, police officers, and other stakeholders in child and adolescent psychology, equipping them to work meaningfully with children in distress. His approach was always rooted in empathy and

insight, placing the child at the center of care and protection.

Dr. Kumarbabu was also a cherished faculty member of CSIM since its inception. His counseling sessions were more than classes; they were heartfelt conversations that opened minds and hearts. Generations of CSIM students benefited from his gentle guidance, deep understanding of human emotions, and unwavering belief in the power of listening and healing.

A significant part of Dr. Kumarbabu’s journey was the unwavering support and shared commitment to social causes by his beloved wife, Mrs. Girija Kumarbabu. Together, they inspired countless individuals in their community, demonstrating a shared dedication to improving the lives of others. Mrs. Girija Kumarbabu’s compassion and dedication to social work have been as integral to their mission as Dr. Kumarbabu’s own contributions. The couple’s collective work continues to be a source of inspiration, reminding us all of the profound impact of service and care in shaping a compassionate society.

Dr. Kumarbabu’s legacy endures, not just in the minds he helped heal, but in the hearts he awakened. Through his teachings, he showed us that peace begins within—and that in stillness, we often find our greatest strength.

Shanmuga Priya. T

It is with deep sorrow that we remember Dr. Kumarbabu who passed away on 16th April 2025. An extraordinary psychiatrist, compassionate teacher, and a pillar of strength in mental health and rehabilitation, he was CSIM's faculty and handled sessions on Counselling for our students.

Time Heals All Wounds: Implications For the Human Body

We refer to Time as the greatest healer. And that is absolutely true - many a time, we are quite astonished at how well Time has healed us, especially when we suddenly realise that we have somehow gotten over something we thought we never could. This could be the passing On of a loved one, some deep disappointment that we have faced, or some serious illness that made us feel like we will never be the same again. Yet life goes on. Most of us do manage to come out the other end of the tunnel and continue with our lives.

When it comes to our bodies too, we constantly see how miraculously it heals, given the right amount of Time. In fact, I am sometimes quite awe-struck by its resilience, creativity, endurance and an infinitely strong never-give-up attitude. One of the earliest stories around this that I have heard was when my grandma was diagnosed with a block in her heart, and she was told that immediate surgery was her only option. But for many reasons, the main one being her extreme unwillingness to get it done, she didn't get the surgery. She was unwell for a while, and then she slowly but steadily recovered, and after a while, she started going about her usual (very strenuous rural-Indian-woman-style!) routine too. And everyone forgot about the surgery. Eventually, when a cardiologist in the family insisted upon it, she got an angiogram, and to the utter astonishment of the entire town's cardiac physicians' fraternity, it turned out that her 60-year-old heart had grown alternate vessels to bypass the block! If you're interested in the specifics and details, please mail us, but the point I'm making is that it's just mind-boggling to see what the human body is capable of.

The human body has a superpower - the survival instinct. Give it time, and it will repair itself (unless the breach in health is just too much of course). Even on the smallest injuries or discomforts, the body keeps working away tirelessly till the matter is resolved to its satisfaction. We see examples of it all the time - when the body believes that raising its own temperature is the right path towards healing, no matter how many analgesics you take, the fever keeps reappearing. Small children often pick at the scabs of their bruises, but how ever many times they pick it off, the body doesn't let it go - it keeps re-building the skin till the bruise finally disappears.

But I've seen this super-power work against itself quite a few times too. Did you know, any chronic inflammation causes our body to deposit bony tissue at the site of the inflammation? I think the body hopes that adding hard tissue will protect and heal the area, but often this added bony tissue forms protrusions and spines that further exacerbate the problem. One common example of this are heel spurs - these are nothing but



bony protrusions formed by the body under the heel in an attempt to help chronic inflammation and/or pain in the plantar fascia (a thick band of tissue that runs from the heel to the toes). But such bony protrusions in places where they are not intended to be only restricts movement and could cause further problems. I recently came across a case where this had happened. The metatarsal (toe area) joints of a 40+ female had previously sustained repeated small and big injuries. Over 16 years, the body had worked to protect this area by building many bony protrusions over the joints, which were visible on an X-ray. Paradoxically, the protrusions severely restricted movement because they were taking up the space needed for the joint to move. Perhaps this would not have happened if the lady had taken all possible care to help heal the very first injury that had happened, and then had taken utmost care of the area to never let it get hurt again.

One more recent case related to the body's healing powers involved surgery. Doctors had operated on the urethra of a 70+ male patient to increase the lumen diameter. All surgical sites however, invoke the body's healing powers, as any surgery is seen as a breach of security by the body. So the body of the patient got to work, and soon scar tissue re-narrowed the lumen. When this scar tissue was surgically removed, once more, in a couple of months, more scar tissue was formed by the body. After this second interference, the lumen became even narrower than before the first surgery.

So what is the moral of the story here? It is to take swift and decisive action whenever the body is suffering from something, whether it is a pain or an ache or inflammation or acidity or some other issue - anything that troubles the body enough for it to bring it to your notice. Swift and decisive action here often means giving your

body the most powerful restorative - rest. We often see people battling on through their aches and pains, and through their colds and coughs. In fact, in some societies, this kind of negligent behavior may even be considered praiseworthy. But in fact, giving your body something chronic to worry about is a dangerous thing to do. You are then invoking the healing powers, and you've seen how strong and tireless (and sometimes over-zealous!) they are. Over time, your body's determination to heal that chronic something - the one for which you won't consciously allow it the time - could lead to negative consequences.

So next time you sprain your ankle or hurt your hand, you catch a cold or get a tummy upset, down all tools immediately. Remind yourself that it is your responsibility and no-one else's to work alongside your body and not against it. Ignore artificial pressures, and prioritise your greatest treasure, one without which you are nothing - your body. Take time off, put your feet up and allow yourself and your body to heal completely and totally before you go back to the daily grind. After all, if you are not going to be your own body's best friend, then who is?

A. Ramashree



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

WHEN VOLUNTEERING BECOMES A MOVEMENT



Volunteering for environmental causes has inspired people for decades. It offers a chance to make a real, visible difference, be it planting trees, cleaning up coastlines, or organising garbage clearance with the local municipal body. It helps connect to nature in a meaningful way and brings people together around a shared purpose. In a world where environmental problems can feel overwhelming, volunteering is a powerful way to take action and feel empowered. “This category of volunteering will never lose its charm because it taps into a deep, universal sense of purpose and connection—with nature, with community and with something bigger than ourselves,” says Mr. S. Senthur Pari, President of ExNoRa International Foundation, Chennai.

Childhood in Thiruvavarur naturally blended culture, community and a deep respect for nature—shaping him into an individual grounded in strong values. After his Masters in Social Work from Coimbatore, he joined hands with his brother in managing educational institutions established by his father under the Veludaiyar Educational Trust in Thiruvavarur. Alongside, he also joined ExNoRa as a volunteer in 1994. “Back then, it was only a five year old organisation that was actively engaged in various activities. Their conscious focus on environment, as a cause that cannot be seen as a future concern, but as something that needs immediate attention and action, inspired many youngsters like me,” he recalls, delving further to justify why environment has very much been a contemporary issue for many decades now.

“There is so much work we must do and few organisations cannot do this in isolation. In the next five years, almost half the world’s population will be affected by water crisis. Climate refuge will become a common reality. Agricultural production will decline with increasing temperatures and rise in sea levels.

Rains will also increase by almost two times. Can you imagine the plight of cities like Chennai that flood annually in the last few years? Future is alarming and we must do all that we can, in our capacities. We are a state that has lost the most water bodies. In a span of 40 years, we lost almost one third of our water bodies, but the sadder reality is only a very few know this fact,” warns Senthur.

He started by engaging in tree plantations, hospital cleaning activities, environmental awareness programs, etc. From a volunteer, he grew to become the Director, Thiruvavarur Town President, District President, ExNoRa State President and now, the President. Having witnessed the repercussions of different developmental decisions made by the state administration, he acknowledges that lack of awareness permeates all levels of society, from individuals to institutions, hindering collective action on a large scale. Hence the need to encourage volunteers and community participation in all activities, especially, rejuvenation of water bodies. “Had we known the consequences of losing water bodies 40-50 years ago, a lot of decisions could have been different,” he introspects.

Backed by the vision and values of futurists like its founder, Mr. M.B. Nirmal, ExNoRa started as a grassroots movement to address solid waste management through community participation. It pioneered door-to-door waste collection and segregation, often employing local residents and informal workers. It empowered citizens to take ownership of their neighbourhoods, fostering clean and green public spaces. Above all, spreading awareness about climate change, pollution and water conservation has been a major objective, further encouraging collaborations with like-minded institutions, communities and local bodies. Almost four decades down the line, ExNoRa has grown into a broader



platform promoting environmental awareness, civic responsibility and sustainable living.

An important aspect of their work is providing machinery to other organisations that are working on the field to restore and protect water bodies. “We give rental free excavators to encourage work to protect the remaining water bodies. Often times, small NGOs do not have the funds to purchase or rent machinery and that is a big obstacle to their work on the field. Our machines support these efforts. In Hosur for example, an organisation that cleaned 36 water bodies was able to do efficient work at a lower cost with the help of our machines. In efforts like these that have a long term, profound impact on the quality and quantity of water we consume, it is important to stay united,” he adds. Expressing deep concern over the silent deaths caused by water-related issues, he laments the continued lack of urgency around water crises—even as over two lakh people in India lose their lives each year to water-borne diseases.

Senthur shares the example of places like Papanasam, where people leave behind their clothes in sacred water bodies as a symbolic act of shedding their sins. On certain significant days, this practice results in nearly 100 tons of clothing being dumped, heavily polluting the waters. “We work with organizations that not only remove these clothes but also create meaningful change by employing local women to repurpose the fabric into mats. For us, it’s not about who actually does the work—it’s about ensuring the problem is addressed and the solution creates value for the community,” he says. India has the highest clothes wastage in the world and the fact that there are many religious places like Pambai, Rameswaram, Thirukadaiyur, etc explains the scope and potential of such initiatives. “We worship our water bodies and also pollute them in the worst possible way. It is high time we protect whatever is left,” warns Senthur.

Over the years, ExNoRa International has steadily evolved into a powerful force for environmental awareness and community empowerment. Through regular programs in schools and colleges, they have educated countless individuals on modern waste management techniques, geo textiles, biofuels and environmental protection. Beyond awareness, their work extends to providing vital infrastructure support to schools, health centres and farmers—ensuring holistic development at the grassroots. From building urban forests and eco-parks to running skill development programs and offering disaster relief, every initiative is grounded in strong community participation. Their work stands as a testament to what sustained, inclusive efforts can achieve in protecting both people and the planet.

Shanmuga Priya.T

BLENDING ENTREPRENEURSHIP WITH PHILANTHROPY



Narinder and Bindu interacting with teachers and students of a school they collaborate with.



Science students explaining their experiments



Providing shoes to children living close to Utopia's office in Bangalore

Narinder's journey from a physics scholar to a successful entrepreneur and philanthropist is one of resilience and transformation. Growing up in Pilani, Rajasthan, he pursued his education there, culminating in a master's in physics from BITS Pilani before earning an MBA from XLRI. "I used to joke that I'd make a poor scientist but maybe make a better manager," he recalls, reflecting on his decision to shift towards management.

His career began at Hindustan Lever (now HUL), where he absorbed invaluable lessons in ethics and values-driven leadership. "At Hindustan Lever, I learned that integrity and ethics are non-negotiable. It shaped how I approached business and leadership later in life," he says. However, recognizing the limitations of his corporate salary in fulfilling his aspirations, he moved to Dubai and later to Singapore, where he transitioned into entrepreneurship. "To me, that switch from being an employee to being an entrepreneur was a very creative thing to do," he explains.

After a couple of ventures, Narinder co-founded Utopia Global Inc., a company that grew into a global

enterprise. "We started as a call centre company and then pivoted into enterprise data and software for customers running SAP as their ERP," he says. With operations spanning multiple countries, Utopia Global thrived until it was successfully acquired by a private equity firm during the peak of COVID. "We had run it for enough years, and it was a good time to take a break," he reflects saying, "Letting go of something you've built for years is not easy, but growth sometimes requires knowing when to step back."

Parallel to his business success, Narinder nurtured a deep commitment to philanthropy, inspired by his family's values. "My parents had a tradition of doing philanthropic work in Pilani, even when resources were limited," he shares. His journey into structured giving began with a simple act—providing shoes for underprivileged children in Bangalore. "It was a new experience, and I was hesitant, but our watchman became the conduit, and it worked. I realized then that small acts of kindness could scale into something much bigger," he says.

This initiative evolved into a global program, the "Joy

of Giving," within his company, eventually raising significant funds for various causes in India and the US. "As our company became financially stronger, we started topping up employee contributions with company contributions," he notes.

After Utopia was acquired in 2020, Narinder and his wife Bindu extended their philanthropic efforts to supporting education, funding schools, and introducing leadership training for teachers, among other initiatives. "We realized that education is the foundation of opportunity. When you educate a student you impact his/her entire family and future generations too," he says.

Narinder believes that entrepreneurship is not just about financial success but also about creating a meaningful impact. "When you build a business, you're not just creating wealth for yourself, you must share that with your employees via stock options and other means. You're creating jobs, supporting families, and enabling dreams," he asserts. "You have to take care of your people, listen to their concerns, and make decisions that benefit the collective, not just the bottom line," he asserts.

His message to budding entrepreneurs is clear:

When you build a business, you're not just creating wealth for yourself, you must share that with your employees via stock options and other means. You're creating jobs, supporting families, and enabling dreams

"Philanthropy, even on a small scale, has a huge payoff with your employees and your colleagues. They see that as a company that cares. First, make money in entrepreneurship, be profitable so that you can help somebody else. Like they say in airlines, in case of cabin pressure loss, put the mask on yourself before helping others," he emphasises.

Beyond his entrepreneurial and philanthropic endeavours, Narinder also deeply values personal growth and reflection. "You have to keep evolving. Learning doesn't stop when you exit a company or achieve financial stability. I make it a point to read, meet new people, and explore ideas beyond my comfort zone," he says.

Even after exiting his company, Narinder remains deeply engaged in mentoring startups and supporting impact-driven initiatives. "I want to use my experience to guide young entrepreneurs who are building the next wave of businesses. If I can save them from making some of the mistakes I did, that's a win." He actively mentors social entrepreneurs and advises businesses on

sustainable growth strategies. "Every business today needs to think beyond just profits. Sustainability, ethical leadership, and social impact are no longer optional; they are fundamental to long-term success."

His story serves as a beacon for those who seek to blend enterprise with impact. "Entrepreneurship, when done right, can be a force for good. It's about more than just wealth—it's about using your resources to drive positive change," he emphasises.

Narinder's journey exemplifies the synergy between ambition and altruism, proving that true success lies not in accumulation but in contribution. Through both business and philanthropy, he has left an indelible mark, embodying the philosophy that success is most meaningful when shared. His story serves as an inspiration for those who seek to blend enterprise with impact, demonstrating that leadership is ultimately about lifting others along the way. "At the end of the day, the only thing that truly matters is how many lives you've touched," he concludes.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

HOW I BUILT MY MUD GRANARY

I've always had a soft corner for the old ways — of living, building, and thinking. There's something grounding about using your hands, your land, and your instincts to create something that will last. This mud granary was a dream I carried for a long time: a place to store my old varieties of paddy for a full year before milling. I didn't want concrete or steel. I wanted earth.

And that's exactly what I used!

The Materials — All from Around Me

I began with what was available right on the farm: clay soil, cut hay, umi (the dust from milling paddy), and sand. Sometimes I used Msand. I mixed them with water till the consistency felt right. For binding, I added jaggery and kadukkai — after removing the nut inside.

We stomped on this mix for 3–4 days using the oldest method: with our feet. It's still the best way to get the clay plastic and usable. Later, we added barbed wire (mullu kambu) to keep the layers in place when laying earthbags.

An important but tricky part was stitching the mouths of the filled cement bags with needle and thread after ramming the soil inside. It sounds easy, but it wasn't.

The Foundation and Structure

We dug a 2-foot trench and filled it with granite stones, jalli, soil, and a little cement, curing it with water daily for a few days. Ten stone pillars were erected, spaced 6 feet apart — the backbone of the structure.

Then came the earthbags, one layer at a time, each rammed and secured with barbed wire. Around doors and windows, we custom-cut bags to fit odd shapes and sizes. I had collected the frames over time from old homes and lumber shops, always buying ahead of need.

The arch of the front door was especially tricky — the semi-circular shape made aligning the earthbags tough. But persistence (and gravity) worked in our favor.

The Roof: A-Frame with Reused Tiles

For the roof, after considering options like Madras Terrace or a palm-leaf A-frame, I settled on an A-frame with Mangalore tiles — salvaged, not new. They carried history and were more affordable.

I already had some reapers (wooden beams), but had to buy more. I found a neem tree trunk at a lumber mill and sliced it into beams. Neem is naturally termite-resistant. We coated all the wood with cashew kernel oil for extra protection.

To close off the triangular gaps at the front and back, I reused old etched-glass windows, cutting them into triangles. My carpenter and I spent hours adjusting them to retain the etched parts. We didn't have one full piece, so we used two — it worked out beautifully.

Finishing Touches and the Thinnai

To seal the gap between the walls and the wooden runner supporting the tiles, we installed a perforated metal sheet — mainly to stop rats.



Mudhouse about 250 sq ft, rosewood pillars, Thinnai, roof made of used tiles



Side view of mud house: Ananda Vanam

For wall plastering, I used a mix of limestone, clay, cow dung, and Multani Mitti from one of our factories. The finish was smooth and earthy — just right for a granary.

For flooring, I rejected cement and red oxide. I wanted stone. When an old vendor called saying he was dismantling a house in Mahabalipuram, I rushed. The granite slabs were long, thick, and unfinished — perfect. We transported them with a crane and moved them into place by rolling them on coconut trunks. Their irregular size caused gaps, which workers filled with lime mortar at first but later with cement. Unfortunately, rats found their way through even the smallest gaps.

Inspired by village houses, I wanted a Thinnai — a 3-foot-high verandah. Using stone blocks from Chingleput and stone pitching, we built it up and topped it with a tiled roof supported by reapers.

As luck would have it, I found four beautiful rosewood pillars at a lumber

shop. Though someone had tried to repaint them to look new, I outbid another dealer and brought them home. They now proudly support the Thinnai.

A Living Space Among Trees

The site had many trees around the periphery: two sapotta, one guava, one thandrikkai, two glyricidia, one sembarutti, one pomegranate, and a thorny timber tree. At the center was an orange tree.

Workers advised removing all the trees, fearing they would damage the building. But I stood firm. I only removed and relocated the orange tree, carefully uprooting it, giving it Reiki, and applying Agnihotra ash paste before replanting. It flowered beautifully afterward.

Most trees stayed and have thrived, yielding sweet fruits each year. Sadly, the guava tree didn't survive due to waterlogging, but the rest continue to enhance the beauty and ecology around the granary.

Storage: Back to the Pathayam

The granary's purpose was to store my heirloom paddy varieties — not in plastic drums or steel bins, but in traditional wooden pathayams. I asked my lumber dealer to source old pathayams, which we reworked into five strong storage bins. They now sit inside, sturdy and proud.

Powering the Space

I extended the 2kW solar setup from our Kutir nearby and pulled an EB line too. Two good lights inside were enough for working and moving around.

Reflections and Learnings

Looking back, here's what I learned:

- Clay plasticity matters. Despite all the stomping, some bags tore after a year.
- Ramming is critical. When workers got tired and skipped it, structural strength suffered.
- Uneven bags meant uneven plaster, leading to cracks.
- Granite flooring wasn't pre-planned. Huge gaps made it easier for rats to get in.
- Labor training could have helped avoid many mistakes.
- Inconsistent labor availability remained a challenge.
- Labor cost formed 50% of the total, but was worth every rupee.

Four Monsoons — Still Standing Strong

This building has now weathered four monsoons without a single major repair. I consider that a quiet affirmation from the earth and the craft. To me, this isn't just a granary. It's a living structure — breathing through clay walls, sheltered under reused tiles, surrounded by trees that bloom and bear fruit.

I often recall what my friend and traditional building specialist, Ms. Karen Shetty, told me from her self-built home in Tenkasi: "These are living buildings. They will need a little maintenance — just like humans touch up their faces or bathe. One shouldn't be too concerned about a crack here and there — patch them up. Concrete buildings, on the other hand, are dead."

That perspective stayed with me. A crack is not a failure; it's a sign of life.

This granary is not just a storage unit. It's a statement — that we can still build with our hands, our soil, and our memories. That salvaged wood and reused tiles still have soul. That when we stop rushing and start listening to the land, the land gives back.

This house stands as a symbol of patience, persistence, and possibilities. It continues to evolve, just like the land around it.

If you visit, you won't just see mud and wood. You'll see time, care, memory — and a quiet refusal to let go of things just because they are old.

P.N. Subramanian

FROM KODAIKANAL TO FLORIDA: A FARMER'S JOURNEY

Good health is a basic human right, but unequal access continues to be a harsh reality. Food, too, reflects this divide—especially when it comes to organic produce. While urban, affluent communities have growing access to chemical-free, sustainably grown food, it remains largely out of reach for lower-income families and rural populations. True equity in organic food means that everyone—regardless of income, background, or geography—has the right to eat clean, nourishing and safe food.

“This inequity is systemic. We need a collective shift in mindset, and it begins with education—especially empowering the younger generation to understand food justice,” says Ms. Priya Varadheesh, a former IT professional turned regenerative farming advocate, now based in Florida.

Priya earned her degree in Computer Science Engineering in 1992 from Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, and later completed her Master's in Information Systems at Northern Illinois University. After gaining industry experience in India, she moved to Chicago in 2000, continuing her career while also building a passion for growing her own food. Her journey into sustainable agriculture began with a simple kitchen garden. She became active in community gardening, eventually leasing her own plot where she harvested vegetables successfully—even through Chicago's harsh winters, where wind-chill temperatures sometimes dipped below -60°C.

“We harvested more than we needed, so we donated the surplus to local homeless shelters and food pantries,” Priya recalls. “That experience—despite extreme weather—gave me the confidence to think bigger. I knew I wanted to grow more. That dream led me back to India in 2012, where the tropical climate was ideal. Leaving my job was a necessary step.”

Her return to India was driven by a conviction: that clean, organic food should be accessible to all. She was deeply disturbed that many families couldn't afford it. Determined to change this, Priya found an 84-acre coffee estate in Kodaikanal and fully embraced farming. During this time, she was mentored by the legendary organic farming pioneer, Dr. Nammazhvar. “He helped align my ideas with action. He emphasized that food purity isn't a personal battle—it's a community right. People must be educated to demand clean food,” she says.

Priya was part of the NGO Nambikkai Vizhudugal (Roots 4 Hope) based in Chicago, a 501(c)(3) organization. She also launched the idea of the ‘family farmer’.

“Just like we have family doctors, we need family farmers—someone who brings food production closer to the household. When people understand where their food comes from, they begin



to care about how it's grown,” she says.

Beyond awareness, Priya also sought to make commercial organic farming a viable and dependable livelihood. She began exploring farm-based tourism as a way to connect people to the land and farming. Tree planting drives, water body restoration efforts, and sustainable farming workshops soon followed—supported by her networks in both Chicago and Tamil Nadu.

In 2018, she launched Plumeria Eco Trails, a farmstay in Kodaikanal that invited guests to experience biodiversity, conservation and organic farming first-hand. With cottages and tents, and activities like high and low rope courses, it became a place where people of all ages could immerse themselves in the life of a farmer. “We wanted farming to be seen as more than labor. It's a way of life—a vital, sacred connection to the earth. When people recognize that, they start respecting and prioritizing clean food,” Priya explains.

She was deeply involved in every aspect—running the farmstay, mentoring youth, conducting workshops for farmers and advocating for food sovereignty. But the COVID-19 pandemic brought personal losses that reshaped her life's



direction. “Losing loved ones changed everything. I realized farming can be done anywhere—and I wanted to do it with my family,” she shares.

In 2021, she decided to return to the U.S. and purchased a 144-acre plot in Florida. By 2023, she had moved in with her family and began farming on the first 10 acres. Her vision now is to transform the land into a healing forest, inspired by ancient texts and traditional plant wisdom. “It's a plant (treasure) hunt—we're identifying and cultivating plants one by one, nurturing them in the nursery until they're ready for the farm,” she says.

Through each plant, every yield and especially the bumper harvests, Priya continues to affirm her belief in organic farming. “We grow for ourselves, but we also want others to realize they can grow their own food. Our treasure hunt continues, and we're excited to bring in many more plant species in the months ahead,” she smiles.

Her story is not just about farming—it's about transforming food into a right, reviving tradition with purpose and inspiring others to reconnect with the soil.

Shanmuga Priya.T



Next space was launched in Shillong in 2020 under the leadership of its founder, Logos, to challenge the prevailing notion that secure government employment is the only viable path for India's youth. From its inception at the height of the COVID 19 pandemic, Next space set out to equip young people with practical skills, entrepreneurial mindsets, and awareness of alternative opportunities. Operating under a lean structure that prizes passion and collaboration over formal qualifications, the alliance has rapidly expanded its footprint through targeted workshops, strategic partnerships, and immersive learning experiences.

Recognizing that "most of the youths... only focus on government jobs... because it's more secure," Next Space's orientation program for its Youth Club introduced participants to social entrepreneurship fundamentals, helping them break free from conventional career mindsets. This inaugural activity dovetailed with a collaboration alongside the Meghalaya Youth Involve Team, which provided regional insights and local networks to extend YIA's reach into rural and semi urban communities. By combining grassroots engagement with structured skill building, YIA ensured that participants left each session not just informed, but motivated to explore self employment paths.

Next Space's outreach extends directly to school authorities principals and



headmasters with clear pitches about its mission and programs. While some institutions defer participation due to scheduling or resource constraints, these conversations often lay groundwork for future collaboration. Attempts to partner with NGOs in the self employment space remain nascent, reflecting a broader scarcity of like minded organizations in the region.

Behind these efforts is a team steeped in social work and driven by local needs. With a background in social work, volunteers and staff are motivated by the high levels of unemployment in Shillong and surrounding rural areas. By targeting

students at an early age, Next Space aims to instil entrepreneurial mindsets before traditional career paths narrow their options.

For the team, the most rewarding aspect has been the journey itself "going through all the struggles and... learning how to overcome those challenges." These incremental victories, from a successful workshop pivot to seeing a student's confidence blossom, underscore the deep personal fulfilment found in social impact work.

In partnership with the BSW Women's College at Pahsyntiew Memorial School in Nongkrem, Meghalaya, Next space

conducted a soft skills workshop designed to enhance communication, teamwork, and leadership competencies. Here, Ronan emphasized that "one of the core values is teamwork... we were very open minded, and you can advise us if we're doing anything wrong..." and flexibility is also one core value," underscoring the organization's inclusive culture and its commitment to co creating program content with every stakeholder.

Building on this momentum, Next space successfully led a social entrepreneurship workshop for BSW trainees at St. Edmund's College. The primary objectives raising awareness about social

entrepreneurship and cultivating a positive perspective toward self employment were achieved through hands on exercises in ideation, market analysis, and pitching. Another session at Bethesda English Secondary School in Mawiong offered high school students a similar immersion, reinforcing the alliance's belief that entrepreneurial mindsets are best instilled early and through active participation.

Expanding its toolkit, Next space partnered with Quest Alliance to deliver a two day intensive on self employment and digital marketing. This collaboration equipped youth with both traditional business planning frameworks and modern online outreach tactics, reflecting Next space's holistic approach to enterprise development and its agility in integrating digital skill sets into social impact programming.

Throughout all initiatives, Ronan notes that program design "is all brainstormed between us... we figure out how to present the message to the students and how they can benefit from the program," highlighting Next space's collaborative methodology and its reliance on internal ideation to ensure relevance and impact. Supported by a core team of two driven professionals—and a rotating roster of passionate volunteers Next space values intrinsic motivation above formal credentials, fostering an environment where every team member contributes fully to planning and execution.

Despite launching under pandemic constraints which prevented in person workshops and strained funding Next space's resilience shone through. Ronan reflects, "the most rewarding aspect would be just going through the journey itself... learning how to overcome those struggles and challenges," a testament to the alliance's enduring commitment and adaptive capacity.

Looking ahead, Next space aims to formalize its model school curriculum and establish a Youth Club network that offers ongoing mentorship, peer support, and access to micro grant opportunities. As Ronan advises aspiring changemakers: "First you'd have to take a risk... know when to ask for help... you have to be very patient with running an organization," a reminder that meaningful social impact requires both courage and perseverance.



With a growing portfolio of workshops, deepening partnerships, and an unwavering focus on youth empowerment, Next space is poised to become a cornerstone of entrepreneurial education in Northeast India—lighting the path from classroom ideas to real world ventures.

To those considering similar ventures, Next Space offers candid counsel: "First you'd have to take a risk... know when to ask for help... you have to be very patient." Building a sustainable social organization is neither quick nor easy, but for those with perseverance and passion, the payoff lies in empowering future changemakers and reshaping community mindsets. As Next space embarks on these next steps, its commitment to iterative learning, collaborative leadership, and community centered design will continue to guide its evolution—transforming early enthusiasm into enduring economic and social impact.

Bhavadharani



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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“It’s Not Just Organic Farming, It’s a Way of Life”

Mr. Maga Belliappa shares with Marie Banu his passion for natural farming.

Mr. Maga Belliappa is the President of The Nilgiris Organic Horticulture Farmers Association (TOHFA). In an exclusive interview with Marie Banu, he shares his passion for natural farming.

Can you share your journey in farming, including how you transitioned from natural farming to organic farming and the role your family in shaping your approach?

My farming journey began in 2003 when I first learned about the concept of organic farming. Prior to that, I had been involved in natural farming, which was a key area for us. My family has a long history in tea farming, spanning three generations. My grandfather, father and have all been tea farmers, and I continue this legacy today.

In 2003, I discovered the organic farming approach through Vanya Orr, who had been working in the field since 1999. Our collaboration with Namalvar Aiya and Subash Balekar helped us gain deeper insights into organic practices. This led to a profound shift in how we approached farming. Though the cultivable land in Nilgiris spans 72,000 to 73,000 hectares, only about 6,000 to 7,000 hectares are dedicated to agriculture, mostly vegetable farming. The remaining land is used for tea and coffee cultivation. While the tea industry is largely controlled by corporate estates, we, as small-scale tea farmers, face challenges in receiving adequate support. Despite these obstacles, my passion for organic farming has shaped my journey over the past 23 years.

How did TOHFA come into existence and what are its key activities?

TOHFA, which stands for The Nilgiris Organic Horticulture Farmers Association, came into existence in the year 2018. It started with a small group of people—just about 30 of us. It was a group of individuals who had a strong interest in organic farming. We were either already practicing organic farming or wanted to shift from chemical-based farming to organic methods. At that time, the awareness about organic farming wasn’t widespread in the Nilgiris. We were passionate and determined, and we came together to form this association to support each other.

Our initial goal was to build awareness about organic farming. We had discussions among ourselves and shared information about natural methods of cultivation. We were mostly small farmers. Some of us had land where we had already stopped using chemicals. We also wanted to learn from each other—what worked, what didn’t. We conducted small training sessions among ourselves and invited people who had experience in organic practices. The idea was to create a support system, where we could learn, share, and grow together.

Over time, the group grew in size. More people started showing interest in organic farming. We were very clear that TOHFA would be a farmers’ group, and membership was open only to farmers.

How is TOHFA governed, and how are decisions made within the group?

TOHFA is run by farmers, for farmers. We have a committee of members who are elected. Every year, we have an annual meeting where we review the year’s activities, accounts, and challenges. Decisions are taken collectively. Each member has a voice. This is very important for us. We don’t want outside agencies or non-farmers to control the association. That is why we are strict about membership—only practicing farmers can be members.

How has TOHFA evolved over the years, and what are some key milestones?

One of the biggest milestones was getting our members certified. That gave us credibility. Another was when we started collective marketing. Even though it had its challenges, it showed that we could work together. Getting recognition from the district administration and from agricultural departments was also important. We have also been invited to share our experiences at state and national level events. These things show that we have come a long way from where we started in 2018.

What kind of training or knowledge-sharing activities does TOHFA organize for its members?

We regularly organize training sessions. These could be about composting, making bio-inputs like Jeevamrutha, or pest control using natural methods. Sometimes, we call experts. Most of the times, we just learn from each other. Field visits are also important. When one farmer tries something new, others visit and learn. We have WhatsApp groups where we share updates and solve problems. Documentation is a part of the training. Farmers have learned to maintain their diaries and input records.

What was the approach taken for the pilot project in Kinnakorai, and how did the government support it?

We had been studying the organic farming system for 3 to 4 years, but we still needed further research and significant changes to implement organic practices in the village. A considerable amount of infrastructure was required to transform the area organically, and without the proper infrastructure, achieving the desired changes was not possible. We submitted a proposal to the government.

For our organic farming pilot project, we chose the village of Kinnakorai. Under the leadership of Ms. Innocent Divya IAS, the government adopted the village based on our vision and provided us with a grant of 72 lakhs for mechanization.

Can you explain about the process of organic certification?

Certification is a very important part of organic farming if you want to reach the market. Initially, it was difficult for farmers to understand the requirements of certification. There is a lot of documentation involved. Every input you use, every practice you follow—everything has to be recorded. We were not used to that kind of recordkeeping. But with training and support, we learnt.

We are approached by like minded NGO’s like Garden of Good Hope who has expertise in organic certification and documentation. They may support us with training, technical guidance, and also in maintaining records. This help us prepare for third-party certification.

What kind of crops do TOHFA members typically grow?

The Nilgiris is a very unique area in terms of agro-climatic conditions. TOHFA members grow a variety of crops—mostly vegetables like carrot, beetroot, radish, leafy greens, and beans. Some farmers also grow fruits like passion fruit and guava. A few of us grow traditional crops like millets and indigenous varieties of

vegetables. Because of the altitude, we can grow temperate vegetables that are not commonly grown in the plains. Some members also grow tea and coffee organically. Each farmer chooses based on their land and climatic conditions.

How does TOHFA ensure that its members follow organic practices?

We have a system in place. Members are expected to attend meetings regularly. In those meetings, we share updates about our farming practices. We also conduct internal inspections. Farmers from the group visit each other’s fields to check if organic practices are being followed. The group itself is responsible for ensuring that the standards are maintained. If someone is found to be using chemicals, we discuss it in the meeting, and action is taken.

Sometimes, farmers are tempted to use chemicals because of crop failure or pest attacks. In such cases, we talk to them. If it is serious, we suspend them from certification. This is necessary to maintain the credibility of the group. It is not easy, but we try to support the farmer to come back to organic methods. Transparency is key. The group has to trust each other. Otherwise, the whole system will fail.

What are the challenges TOHFA farmers face in marketing their produce?

Marketing is one of the biggest challenges. In the beginning, there was no organized market for organic produce. Farmers had to sell in the local markets, where consumers were not aware of the benefits of organic food. Price was always a challenge. Organic produce costs more to grow, but the market didn’t give a higher price. Slowly, with awareness, some consumers started valuing organic. But we still face issues. Transport is a challenge—many farms are in remote areas. Collecting produce and getting it to the market is not easy.

Have there been any attempts to create direct links with consumers?

Yes, we tried. We started with small steps—putting up stalls in the premise of Horticulture

Department at Ooty and Coonoor. We also tied up with some organic shops in Ooty and Coimbatore. Some farmers have direct customers who come and buy from the farm or place orders over the phone. But it is not enough. We need better infrastructure, like collection centres and transport facilities. Some of us are exploring online platforms, but again, that needs investment and training. So we already started discussion with Farmer Producer Companies from inter district as well as intra districts to ease the flow of marketing.

What are TOHFA’s plans for the future?

We want to strengthen our marketing systems. Maybe create a brand for our produce. We are thinking of starting a processing unit—for pickles, jams, and other products. That will help us reduce waste and increase value. We also want to involve more young people. Many farmers are aging, and their children are not interested in farming. We have to show that organic farming can be viable and meaningful. That is the only way TOHFA will survive and grow.

