

Conversations Today

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EDITOR: MARIE BANU

6

COVER STORY

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

Fostering a sustainable, non-violent economic model

Changemakers



3

Crafting Dreams in Leather

Vezito Tetseo's journey into leather crafting in Kohima, Nagaland, through Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt. Ltd.

Profile



9

Healing the Lakes and Lands

About Ragavan, an Electrical Technician turned natural farmer and permaculture practitioner, advocating minimal human intervention to preserve natural ecosystems.

Chit Chat



12

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

An exclusive interview with Dr. Muyeed Ahmed S, Founder, Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Mahatma Gandhi's values of nonviolence, truth, and equality offer profound insights into promoting women's rights and creating peaceful societies. Our cover story on Pushpanath Krishnamurthy—a global consultant, trainer, motivational speaker, climate campaigner, and Fairtrade activist—highlights how his journey has been deeply intertwined with the Ahimsa economy, a movement committed to the ideals of a non-violent, sustainable economy. This alignment with Gandhijian principles reinforces the importance of women's rights in building a just and harmonious world.

Gandhi envisioned a society where justice and harmony were achieved through the empowerment of all, particularly the marginalized. His belief in gender equality was clear when he stated, "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman." This belief remains highly relevant today as we work towards ensuring women's rights.

Gandhi's principle of Ahimsa (nonviolence) is a cornerstone for addressing violence against women. Gender-based violence continues to be a significant barrier to peace and equality in societies worldwide. By promoting a culture of nonviolence and respect, inspired by Gandhi's teachings and the Ahimsa economy, we can work towards eliminating the root causes of such violence. This cultural shift is essential for creating safe environments where women can thrive without fear, contributing to a more harmonious society.

Furthermore, Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya—the welfare of all—emphasizes the importance of economic and social justice for women. Economic empowerment is crucial not only for women's independence but also for the overall stability and development of societies. When women have equal access to education, resources, and opportunities, they can contribute meaningfully to their families and communities, fostering resilience and peace.

Gandhi's idea of Satyagraha—the pursuit of truth through nonviolent resistance—can also inspire women to advocate for their rights. By adopting nonviolent methods, women can challenge oppressive systems and lead peaceful movements for change. This approach is vital in securing equal pay, education, healthcare, and protection from violence.

To build peaceful societies, we must commit to fully realizing women's rights, not just through legal reforms but also by fostering cultural changes that align with Gandhijian values and the principles of the Ahimsa economy. By doing so, we honor Gandhi's vision of a world where peace, justice, and equality are the guiding principles, ensuring that women are both protected and empowered to lead.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

ENSURING WOMEN'S SAFETY AND EQUAL WAGES IN INDIA'S WORKFORCE



In India, the journey toward gender equality in the workplace has been long and arduous. Despite significant legal advancements, women continue to face challenges that hinder their progress and safety at work. The issues of women's safety and the persistent gender wage gap remain pressing concerns, demanding both societal change and stricter enforcement of existing laws.

Women's Safety: A Persistent Challenge

India has made notable strides in legislation aimed at protecting women in the workplace. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, commonly known as the POSH Act, was a landmark move in this direction. The law mandates that all workplaces, irrespective of size, must have mechanisms to address complaints of sexual harassment, ensuring a safe working environment for women.

However, the reality on the ground is starkly different. Many women continue to face harassment, with fear of retaliation, societal stigma, and lack of awareness preventing them from reporting incidents. Furthermore, the enforcement of the POSH Act is inconsistent, particularly in small and informal sectors where most women are employed. The lack of comprehensive training and sensitization programs for both employers and employees further exacerbates the issue.

To address this, there is a need for robust implementation of the law, including stricter penalties for non-compliance, regular audits of workplace safety measures, and widespread awareness campaigns. Empowering women to speak out without fear is crucial, and this can only be achieved when workplaces foster a culture of respect and zero tolerance toward harassment.

Equal Wages: The Unfulfilled Promise of Equality

The principle of "equal pay for equal work" is enshrined in the Indian Constitution and reinforced by the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976. Despite

this, the gender wage gap persists across industries, with women often earning significantly less than their male counterparts for the same work. This disparity is even more pronounced in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and the informal economy, where women's contributions are undervalued or overlooked.

Several factors contribute to this wage gap, including traditional gender roles, discrimination, and the concentration of women in low-paying, unorganized sectors. Moreover, women's work is often seen as secondary to that of men, and their career progression is hindered by factors such as lack of access to education, maternity leave policies, and societal expectations.

To bridge this gap, India must adopt a multi-faceted approach. Strengthening the enforcement of equal pay laws is essential, with regular inspections and penalties for violations. Additionally, policies that encourage women's participation in higher-paying, formal sectors—such as skill development programs, accessible education, and support for entrepreneurship—must be prioritized. Companies should also be encouraged to conduct wage audits and address disparities through transparent pay structures.

The Way Forward

While laws exist to protect women's rights in the workplace, their effectiveness is contingent on rigorous enforcement and a shift in societal attitudes. A holistic approach that combines legal measures with education, awareness, and cultural change is necessary to ensure that women in India can work in environments that are safe, fair, and empowering.

It is time for India to move beyond symbolic gestures and take concrete steps to close the gender wage gap and enhance women's safety in the workplace. Only then can the nation truly achieve gender equality and harness the full potential of its workforce.

Marie Banu

CRAFTING DREAMS IN LEATHER:

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE ART OF CUSTOMIZED LEATHER DESIGN



In Kohima, Nagaland, Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd has carved out a unique niche in the world of handcrafted leather goods. Founded in 2021 by Vezito Tetseo, this enterprise has quickly gained a reputation for producing high-quality, genuine leather products using only rudimentary tools and equipment.

Located in the heart of Kohima, Headhunter offers a wide range of products, including wallets, belts, laptop bags, purses, keychains, necklaces, and more. What sets Headhunter apart is not just the craftsmanship but also its pioneering spirit. On December 1, 2023, the company was officially registered under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India. Additionally, it received a pre-incubation certificate for being part of the first North Eastern Entrepreneurial Development Programme, a joint initiative aimed at fostering innovation and entrepreneurship in the region.

For Vezito Tetseo, the journey into leather crafting began with a deep appreciation for the material itself. "I've always been drawn to the texture and durability of leather," he shares. "There's something timeless about it." This fascination led him to learn about leather crafting through YouTube videos and his own creativity. Whether influenced by classic designs, modern aesthetics, or cultural motifs, Vezito has developed a distinctive style that resonates with clients seeking something truly unique.

Every custom piece begins with a conversation. "Understanding the client's vision is key," Vezito explains. "I start by discussing their needs, preferences, and any specific ideas they have in mind." From there, the design process unfolds in stages, beginning with sketches and material selection, and culminating in the careful crafting of the final product. "Each step is crucial," he notes, "from choosing the right type of leather to ensuring that every stitch is perfectly placed."

Customization is where Vezito Tetseo truly shines. Offering a wide range of options, from personalized engravings to bespoke color choices, he works closely with clients to create items that are as functional as they are beautiful. However, meeting the diverse expectations of clients can be challenging. "Communication is everything," he says. "I make sure to set clear expectations and keep the

client involved throughout the process."

Despite the rewards, the life of a freelance leather designer isn't without its challenges. From sourcing high-quality materials to navigating the occasional creative block, Vezito has faced and overcome numerous hurdles. "One of the biggest challenges is ensuring consistency, especially when working on complex designs," he admits. Yet, these challenges are also what push him to innovate and refine his craft. "Every problem is an opportunity to learn and grow," he adds.

Running a successful leather crafting business requires more than just creative talent—it demands strategic planning and efficient operations. Vezito manages everything from marketing to logistics, ensuring that each custom piece is delivered on time and in perfect condition. "Pricing is always tricky," he reveals. "It's a balance between covering costs, valuing my time, and staying competitive." His approach to business is as thoughtful as his approach to design, emphasizing both quality and client satisfaction.

As for the future, Vezito Tetseo has big plans. "I'm always looking to explore new techniques and materials," he shares. "There's so much more I want to do." Whether expanding his product line, experimenting with sustainable materials, or simply continuing to perfect his craft, Vezito is committed to evolving as a designer and artist.

One of the distinguishing features of Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is its commitment to customization. Whether it's a personalized engraving on a wallet or a bespoke color choice for a belt, the company goes above and beyond to meet the unique preferences of its clients. This level of customization ensures that each piece is not just a product but a cherished possession that carries personal significance for its owner. "Our goal is to create items that people can connect with on a deeper level," says Vezito Tetseo.

When it comes to guiding the younger generation of aspiring entrepreneurs and artisans, Vezito Tetseo places a strong emphasis on the importance of branding. "Branding isn't just about a logo or a name—it's about creating a distinct identity that resonates with your audience," he explains.

I make sure to set clear expectations and keep the client involved throughout the process.

For Vezito, branding has been a crucial element in the success of Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd. It has allowed the company to differentiate itself in a competitive market and build a loyal customer base. He advises young entrepreneurs to focus on establishing a clear and consistent brand message, one that reflects the values and story behind their work. "In today's world, it's not enough to just make a great product. You need to tell a story that people can connect with and remember," says Vezito. His guidance underscores the idea that successful branding can elevate a business from being just another name to becoming a recognized and trusted entity in the industry.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Vezito's work is hearing back from satisfied clients. "It's amazing to see how much people appreciate the time and effort that goes into each piece," he says. Positive feedback not only fuels his passion but also informs his ongoing efforts to improve and innovate. "Every piece I create is a reflection of my commitment to quality and craftsmanship," he concludes.

Beyond its business success, Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is also dedicated to making a positive impact on the local community. Additionally, Headhunter is committed to environmentally friendly practices, carefully selecting leather and other materials that minimize waste and reduce the environmental footprint of their production processes.

In a world where personalization is increasingly valued, artisans like Vezito Tetseo are keeping the tradition of handmade, customized goods alive. His work at Headhunter Leather Crafting Pvt Ltd is a testament to the enduring appeal of craftsmanship, and his story offers inspiration to anyone looking to combine creativity with entrepreneurship.

Whether you're in the market for a custom leather piece or simply admire the skill that goes into such work, Vezito's journey is a reminder that the best things in life are made by hand, with passion and care.

Bhavadharani K



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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CSIM also facilitates **Social Accounting and Audit** for



THE CATALYST OF CHANGE IN RURAL EDUCATION

In the quiet village of Sathanuru, nestled in the Ramanagara district of Karnataka, about 80 kilometers from Bangalore, a remarkable story of dedication and transformation unfolds. Shwetha P.S., a teacher at the Government Model Primary School, has taken it upon herself to change the lives of her students, children from rural and underprivileged backgrounds, by empowering them with the gift of English.

Shwetha knows that for many of these children, whose world is shaped by the Kannada language, mastering English is not just a skill—it's a gateway to a brighter future. Recognizing the critical role English can play in their lives, she embarked on a mission to bridge this gap.

During the summer vacation in April-May 2024, Shwetha was selected for an online training program on Spoken English, organized by a Bangalore-based NGO, Sharada Educational Trust. The training introduced her to the Sulabh App, a powerful tool designed to teach Spoken English, Financial Literacy for children, and Soft Skills for teachers.

Inspired by what she learned, Shwetha didn't just keep this knowledge to herself. She approached the parents of her students and asked them to lend their mobile phones on Saturdays, so she could teach the children how to use the App. Her goal was not just to teach them English, but also to introduce them to basic financial concepts—how to open a bank account, understand loans, and manage money.

She identified 50 students from classes 5th to 8th and, week after week, dedicated her



Saturdays to teaching them both English and financial literacy, using the Sulabh App. In less than three months, 24 of these students earned certificates of completion in both subjects—a milestone they proudly celebrated when the certificates were presented by the school's Headmaster on Independence Day, August 15, 2024.

But Shwetha's vision didn't stop with her own students. She saw a greater opportunity to make an impact. Recognizing the potential to empower fellow teachers, she took on the additional responsibility of training five government school teachers from remote parts of Karnataka. She taught them Spoken English and how to use the App, equipping them to pass on this knowledge to their own students. The

training sessions, held online on weekends during late evenings, were designed to accommodate the teachers' schedules. This initiative is expected to touch the lives of over 500 students in the near future.

Shwetha P.S. is more than just a teacher—she is a catalyst for change, a beacon of hope for rural children and teachers alike. Her dedication reminds us of the power of one person to transform education and inspire a brighter future.

We need more Shwethas, who can light the way for others and make a lasting impact on the world around them.

Arvind kamath



PULICAT: THE SALT LAGOON, PALM LEAF BASKETS, AND MANGROVE



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

For four days, we were cradled by the warmth of farmers and simple folk, who offered us shelter, food, and the comfort of sleeping on earthen floors. We were welcomed not just by individuals, but by the collective spirit of organic pioneers, housewives, students, and professionals. It was in this humble, yet profound gathering, at the first Ahimsa Santhai organized by CESI and others at the revered Gandhiji Museum in Madurai, that we presented the concept of a historic Ahimsa path to then Finance Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. Palanivel Thiagarajan.

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

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

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

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

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

As always, my journey took me to the women who craft these products—to learn, understand, and narrate their stories.

60 kilometers from Chennai, in the village of Thiruvallur, lies Pulicat Lagoon, a place of breathtaking beauty and ecological wonder. Here, I met a handful of women on a blistering day, yet they toiled in a well-lit, airy, and congenial shelter under the auspices of the Pulicat Women Industrial Co-op, established in the 1960s.

The Palm Leaf Handicrafts produced here have earned a sterling reputation for their authenticity, creativity, and collective effort, reaching markets across the globe. There was a time when these products, with the support of institutions like the Commissioner for Handicrafts and associations such as South India Producers and Oxfam Bridge, found their niche. The women, who earned and learned much from this craft, saw it as a bonus to the main income derived from the lagoon's bounty—prawns, fish, and other natural products.

Pulicat Lagoon, the second-largest saltwater body, is a magical and biological marvel, its flora and fauna both incredible and overwhelming. Yet, the dual forces of human impact and climate change have dealt a devastating blow to the community that depends on this natural wealth. Life and livelihood are under significant threat.

Not long ago, a three-month harvest of prawns and fish would sustain a household for an entire year, with the earnings from Fair Trade baskets as an added bonus. But now, the economic decline is palpable. The

scarcity of palm leaves—exacerbated by rampant deforestation, a shortage of climbers, and other factors—has driven up production costs.

Rita, Kokila, Zelka, Thaiba, Sakil, Safnia—women who collectively possess over 150 years of expertise, skill, and ambition—though battered, have not given up hope. They told me simply, "We need markets. Let there be new investors. But more importantly, we need additional training in new designs and processes." The baskets, soap holders, and other products they showed me left me in awe. Their needs were straightforward and solid. They weren't asking for charity; they sought partnership, investment, skill development, and new pathways to sustainable production—and, therefore, critical income.

During my visit, I also spent time with the remarkable Meerasa S., the founding member and managing trustee of the Mangrove Foundation. His work on mangrove restoration is a beacon of hope, offering multiple benefits, including a robust response to the climate crisis.

This visit was profoundly significant for me—I learned so much, and felt deeply humbled by the courage and determination of the palm leaf basket-making women, alongside the pioneering efforts of Meerasa S., a child of the lagoon ecology and a champion of wetlands, recognized by the Government of India.

On August 15, a day after our meeting, I learned that Meerasa had been awarded the Green Hero Medal by the Government of Tamil Nadu. He works closely with the palm leaf basket-making women who craft magical bamboo baskets and other items. Such intersections and cooperation are vital—just as vital as an event like Kula 2024! I hope a few of these women can attend Kula, and with the unwavering support of mentor Panjaksharan from SIPA, showcase their stories and connect with everyone in Goa.

As I left Pulicat- late evening-I saw a single Pink Flamingo—slightly away from its family forlorn and pensive-waiting!

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy
Global consultant, trainer, Motivational Speaker, Climate Campaigner and Fairtrade activist.



WHY WOMEN MAKE AMAZING CHANGEMAKERS



Women, especially those from low-income communities, are not just homemakers; they are pillars of resilience and change in their families and community linchpins. Balancing the care of their children, spouses, and extended family, these women also often run home-based businesses to support everyone. Their vital role extends beyond financial contributions; they are key to improving their family's standard of living, ensuring access to quality education for their children, and paving the way for a brighter future. These traits can be seen in a third of women in our programs who achieved upward social mobility for their families.

Personal reflections

Throughout my life, I've had the privilege of being influenced by strong women. Whether it's my nanny, who raised me as one of her own when her kids were back in Indonesia, and always told me to grow up and help other women like her. Or my mother, who passionately wanted me to be a doctor (she believed I had healing hands) but told me it's more important for me to follow my dreams and to practice good values. Or my bosses who taught me that leadership means to serve and develop the potential of others. All these women impacted me in different ways and made me the man I am today.

Empowering women at Women Of Will

Through my years at Women Of Will (WOW), I've witnessed the profound impact of empowering such women entrepreneurs. By honing their leadership skills and providing access to essential resources, these women have also implemented remarkable initiatives in their communities that have impacted thousands of their fellow community

members. Their influence is far-reaching and transformative, from establishing community businesses to organising events that bring diverse social impact partners together.

Empowering a woman transcends individual benefits. It's a cascading effect of growth that enriches families and communities, promoting gender equality. Many of the women we work with from the B40 community (lower 40% of income earners) aspire to uplift others, driven by a deep understanding of their struggles. Their endeavours address more than immediate needs. They lay the

enhance her spa business and provide a better life for her children. The program did more than improve her income; it ignited her passion for community service. Kak Misha initiated a community business that creates job opportunities for other women like her. She also bridges the gap between change-makers, social impact organisations, and her community, ensuring solutions are tailored, targeted and impactful.

A visit to Kak Misha's community business revealed the profound impact of her work. A participant/woman entrepreneur, overwhelmed with tears of

Empowered women lead to empowered communities

So, why am I passionate about the work that I do? It's simple. Empowering women means igniting a chain reaction of positive change. It doesn't stop with one individual but continues to touch the lives of many. It leads to grassroots solutions that address the needs of those most in need effectively and efficiently. It ensures our efforts to improve the world keep multiplying.

In championing women, we are not just supporting a person; we are nurturing a catalyst for broader social and economic development. The story of Kak Misha and many others like her is a testament to this truth. It's a narrative of strength, resilience, and transformative power. It's about creating a sustainable future where every woman's potential is recognised and nurtured and their success becomes the community's success.

This is why supporting women just makes sense. It's logical, both from a numerical standpoint and a systemic perspective. We can reach many others through one woman and witness her family and community thrive. By giving women the tools they need, we create broader change. They understand the issues and can develop effective solutions while shaping the leaders of tomorrow in a more equal world.

As Kofi Annan puts it beautifully, "There is no development strategy more beneficial to society as a whole – women and men alike – than the one which involves women as central players."

Lakshwin Murugamoorthy
A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation



groundwork for systemic change and nurture the values and skills of future leaders.

How Kak Misha empowers others

Take, for instance, the inspiring journey of Kak Misha. As a single mother, she joined our entrepreneurship program to

joy, shared with me how her income had doubled within a month, thanks to Kak Misha's mentorship. This moment underscored the incredible influence women have in fostering change. Once a beneficiary of opportunities, Kak Misha had transformed into an empowerment agent herself!

HEALING THE LAKES AND LANDS



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

He was born in Pallathur, Thanjavur and his childhood is full of memories about his father’s experience in the farm. After completing his Diploma in Electrical Engineering, he worked in Singapore as an Electrical Technician in a ship building company for six years. “The routine there just did not fit in me. I felt exploited most of the days because the life cycle with machinery and the unchanging, mundane work culture that had no room for relaxation or creativity contradicted my personality. I finally gave up and decided to come back home,” recalls Ragavan.

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

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

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

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

Spread across 142 acres in two divisions, Ragavan was concerned that restoration of this lake was the only way to restore fresh water supply for agriculture in the region. Without any maintenance or care in the last 25 years, the lake had completely lost its holding capacity. He got in touch with local farmers and active youngsters who understood the need for such an effort, together they all mobilised funds from all houses in the town. “Contribution was completely voluntary and we had to go door to door,” he adds. The KAIFA farmers’ group provided the machinery support required and the

activities began to take shape. The weak bunds were strengthened and heightened, and all invasive species that grew on the lake boundary were removed. The bunds were then reconstructed to increase the holding of the lake. The western side of the lake had no shore, so Ragavan’s team built it from scratch through a stretch of 1.7 kilometres. The complete circumference of the lake, 3.6 kilometres is now strengthened and secured. “We could come this far with the funds we were able to mobilise. With consistent work in the



field, we also have witnessed new volunteers and contributions to take this forward,” he says, clarifying that funds were raised from farmers, friends, relatives from abroad and permaculture friends’ group. “Networking is an asset for farmers. The transition to natural practices can start on a small scale, but networking is key to take this bigger, into a movement and then completely transform the system,” he expounds.

Work has been completed in 70 acres and five dams, that were manually controlled are now repaired and will soon be supported by an on-off system. Ragavan and his team of enthusiastic farmer volunteers look forward to starting the plantation work in the next cycle of operations, specifically the cultivation of Vetiver. It not only adds to the

intercropping pattern, but also ensures diversity in the land, pest management and above all, income generation. He has plans to use income from the sale of Vetiver tillers to set up a maintenance fund for Pallathur lake.

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

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

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

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

Shanmuga Priya.T



VITAL WELLNESS: THE SLEEP STORY

[The Story So Far: In the last episode of Vital Wellness, we saw how stress is a bodily, physiological reaction to something in the real world. It does not have an internal, mental origin or cause - it is actually caused by some external entity in our environment, that we can see and understand. Sighting a tiger is a stressor for a deer. Sighting a tiger is a stressor for us too of course, but we also have many other stressors in our lives which impact our health]

All living beings have a survival instinct. This is an in-built evolutionary mechanism to protect themselves from death at all costs. When anything threatens survival, the stress response immediately kicks in, so that the being has a better chance of beating the threat and surviving. We saw in the last article how deer's stress helps them put in the extra effort needed to get away from threatening predators. So it follows that whatever threatens our survival makes us get stressed. When the source of the stress is gone, we are unstressed again, and settle back into our usual patterns.

Sadly, our current society presents us with too many sources of stress. This has

come about because of the way we have evolved, the advances in technology, and also because of one other crucial reason - the fact that our brains have not changed along with our lifestyles. Anthropologists, biologists, physio-archeologists all agree that the brain we have today is exactly the same in structure and function as the brain we had 60,000 years ago. Yet our lifestyles have changed a great deal over all these years. We are routinely doing things that go against evolution. And some of these are related to our sleep routines.

Imagine an early human happily curled up asleep in her cave. What would jolt her awake? The ominous sound of some wild creature scrabbling to get into her cave and eat her maybe. Or perhaps the sensation of something long, and thin, and cold, crawling over her skin. Or maybe it's the long-drawn scream of a cave-mate being bitten by a scorpion. These, and other stimuli like these will wake her up, and also have her body coursing with stress hormones, so that she can combat whatever threat is in front of her successfully - as we saw earlier, stress is a tool that helps us survive.

The sudden waking from sleep is a

Ischemic heart disease stands as the leading cause of death in India, reflecting the significant burden of cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) nationwide. Factors such as urbanization, sedentary lifestyles, tobacco use, unhealthy diets, and rising stress levels contribute to the high prevalence of IHD.

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10 leading causes of death in India - Times of India

trigger for our brain to start the stress hormones flowing - the sudden waking could be caused by an alarm clock too, but since our brains are exactly the same as they were in ancient humans, they react in

exactly the same way to the stimulus of a sudden rude jolt out of sleep, and turn on the stress hormone tap. This is one thing to keep in mind before we set an alarm to a time we will surely be fast asleep. A better

idea is to set a soft alarm to a later time, when we are at least half-awake, and go to sleep a whole lot earlier. By doing this, we avoid waking up to a whole lot of liquid stress in our bodies.

Now let's think about what would keep our ancient human up throughout the night, tired and miserable but not able to sleep. An icy wind, or rain, or hail maybe, that makes her shake and shiver from the cold. Or the burning thirst of the desert, when water is too far to reach by night. Or maybe the fire has gone out, and sitting huddled in the dark straining their ears is all the tribe can do as a defense against the pack of hyenas roaming their land. Now these causes are unavoidable for the early human, but since we have the very same brain, staying up at night causes exactly the same reaction in our bodies as it did in theirs - a cascade of stress hormones, and the dead, heavy feeling of their withdrawal the next morning.

This is the reason why alarm clocks, wake-up calls, all-nighters for work and pleasure - sleep deprivation in general is so insidiously dangerous. Our brain thinks we are actually dying - and tries to help us accordingly. But a continuation of this stressed state day after day is unsustainable - we then become victims of chronic, long-term stress, which is a potent killer. A way to avoid all this stress would be to sleep early, wake when our sleeping is done, and work all day with a fresh and active mind, unfettered by a body that has been told by its brain that it is dying.

But what about when you are ready and eager to sleep, but sleep just won't come to you? It's the same principle - you have to wonder what ancient mechanism is built into your brain that is preventing it from letting your body go to sleep. It is obviously not the cold rain falling on your head, or hyenas chasing you. So it is likely to be some other signal from the external world that sounds just as serious and dire to your brain. Of course, sometimes insomnia has physiological causes, but more often than not, it is the result of something that is going on in a person's life that the brain interprets as life-threatening. A way around this is to figure out what this situation is - maybe it's as simple as a room that is too brightly lit at night, and which therefore gives the brain a confused signal and messes with its circadian rhythm. Or maybe it is a more complex reason. But whatever it is, removing the origin of the stress is the only way to remove the stress itself, and therefore its impacts.

Like sleep disturbances, hunger, pain and illness can all cause stress. How that happens is a story for the next article. Till then, sleep well!

A. Ramashree



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.

TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI

Mr. Vankata Rao, an Andhra gentleman, in the course of conversation with Sri Bhagavan, was told:

"Until you gain jnana you cannot understand the state of a Jnani. There is no use asking about the work of Isvara and the rest. Some ask why Siva went naked in Daruka forest and spoiled the chastity of the rishi's wives.

The puranas which record this incident have also said that Siva had previously saved the Devas and the universe by consuming the poison halahala at the time of churning the ocean of milk. He, who could save the world from the deadly poison and lead the sages to emancipation, had also wandered nude amongst their women. Their actions are incomprehensible to ordinary intellects. One must be a Jnani to understand a Jnani or Isvara."

D.: Should we not learn the jnani's ways and imitate them?

M.: It is no use. Vasanas are of four kinds:

(1) Pure (Suddha), (2) Impure (malina), (3) Mixed (madhya) and (4) Good (Sat), according as the jnanis are the Supreme (varishta), the best (variya), better (vara), and good (vit). Their fruits are reaped in three ways: (1) of our own will (swachha),

and by others' will (parechha) and involuntarily (anichha). There have been jnanis like Gautama, Vyasa, Suka and Janaka.

D.: Was Vyasa also a Jnani?

M.: Yes. Certainly.

D.: Why then did the bathing angels don clothes when he appeared before them, but not when Suka passed?

M.: That same Vyasa sent Suka to Janaka for instruction; Suka was tested by Janaka and finally he returned convinced of Vyasa's greatness.

D.: Is jnana the same as arudha?

M.: So it is.

D.: What is the relation between bhakti and jnana?

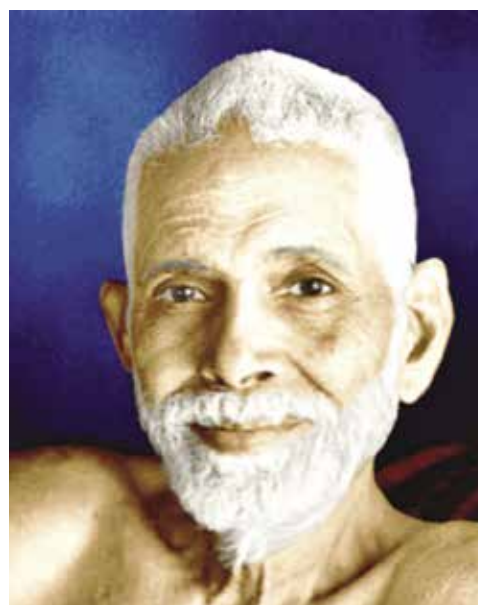
M.: Eternal, unbroken, natural state is jnana. Does it not imply love of Self? Is it not bhakti?

D.: Idol worship does not seem good. They worship the formless God in Islam.

M.: What is their conception of God?

D.: As Immanence, etc.

M.: Is not God even then endowed with attributes? Form is only one kind of



attribute. One cannot worship God without some notions. Any bhavana premises a God with attributes (saguna). Moreover, where is the use of discussing the form or formlessness of God? Find out if you have a form. You can then understand God.

D.: I admit I have no form.

M.: All right. You have no form in sleep, but in the waking state you identify yourself with a form. See which is your

real state. That is understood to be without form on investigation. If you know your Self to be formless by your jnana, should you not concede the same amount of jnana to God and understand Him to be formless?

D.: But there is the world for God.

M.: How does the world appear? How are we? Knowing this, you know God. You will know if He is Siva, or Vishnu or any other or all put together.

D.: Is Vaikuntha in Paramapada, i.e., in the transcendent Self? M.: Where is Paramapada or Vaikuntha unless in you?

D.: Vaikuntha, etc., appear involuntarily.

M.: Does this world appear voluntarily? The questioner returned no answer.

M.: The self-evident 'I', ignoring the Self, goes about seeking to know the non-Self. How absurd!

D.: This is Samkhya Yoga. Being the culmination of all kinds of other yogas, how can it be understood to start with? Is not bhakti antecedent to it?

M.: Has not Sri Krishna started the Gita with Sankhya? D.: Yes. I understand it now.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

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

Dr. Muyeed shares with Marie Banu his interest in the fragrance and flavour sectors

Dr. Muyeed Ahmed S is the Founder of Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances LLP, Bangalore a start-up established in 2019 that specializes in R&D for fragrances and flavors. With a background in biotechnology, forestry, and project management, Muyeed has extensive experience in plant tissue culture, genetic improvement, and sandalwood cultivation. Under his leadership, the company has developed innovative low-temperature extraction technologies, filed patents, and collaborated with government bodies like DBT, BIRAC, as well as international organizations like United Nations and IFAD. Biotherm has gained recognition by winning NBEC 2022, G20 DIA Innovation program at national competitions and selected as 75 innovations by BIRAC during 75 years of Independence program held at Biotech Startup Expo 2022 and positioning itself as a rising player in the global fragrance market. Biotherm Flavours and Fragrances LLP, Bangalore has been recognized as top 10 fragrance and flavour companies of year 2023 by Industry Outlook Magazine.

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

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

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

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

In the fragrance industry, I quickly realized that there was a lack of advanced technology and a shortage of raw materials. Initially, it seemed like it would be easy to establish a strong presence in the industry, but I soon encountered challenges with the existing steam-based extraction technology, which often leads to the degradation of essential oils. Leveraging my biotechnology background, I developed a new protocol for low-temperature extraction, which preserves the integrity of the oils. This innovation was supported by a significant project from the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India, and also by KITS, Government of Karnataka marked a major milestone for us. Additionally, we've worked on securing a continuous supply of raw materials by collaborating directly with farmers, offering them guaranteed buyback policies, technical support, and resources like solar water pump sets.

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

Our work on new extraction technology led to filing a patent, particularly for a method that not only enhances the extraction process but also allows us to obtain



secondary products with novel applications in the fragrance and cosmetic industries. These achievements have been supported and validated by top government research institutes, adding credibility to our work. We've also received backing from international organizations, including the IFAD from United Nations through Access Development Services, Delhi to further our collaborations with farmers. These partnerships have significantly contributed to our growth and the development of innovative products.

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

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

I adapted biotechnological techniques, typically used for handling temperature-sensitive substances, to develop a protocol that enables the extraction of essential oils at much lower temperatures. This method preserves the oils' molecular integrity, resulting in a higher quality product with a richer, more authentic aroma profile. This innovation not only enhanced the extraction process but also opened the door to extracting secondary products that have novel applications in both the fragrance and cosmetic industries.

Another key project has been our work with Vetiver oil, a crucial base note in many high-end fragrances. Vetiver, traditionally grown in India, has seen its production shift globally, particularly to Haiti, due to various socio-political and economic factors. However, recognizing Vetiver's deep roots in Indian agriculture—

both figuratively and literally—I saw an opportunity to revitalize its cultivation in India. We've worked closely with farmers, especially in regions with sandy, less fertile soils near the sea shores where Vetiver thrives, and to re-establish this crop as a major player in the global fragrance market. This not only converts the un-utilize land into use, but also provides livelihood for the marginal farmers and women folks from the fishermen community.

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

In addition to these, our work has expanded into exploring the medicinal properties of essential oils, particularly Vetiver. There is growing scientific evidence that Vetiver oil can have therapeutic effects, such as reducing stress and aiding in the treatment of conditions like ADHD and epilepsy. We are currently exploring these applications in collaboration with government institutes, with the aim of integrating these oils into broader health and wellness sectors.

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

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

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

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

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

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