

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 13 | Issue 8 | August 2025 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdsrtrust.org



PUBLISHED BY: P.N.SUBRAMANIAN
on behalf of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai 600 116 and printed by him at
Express Press, Express Gardens, No.29,
Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate,
Chennai 600 058. Phone: 044 42805365
EDITOR: MARIE BANU

6 COVER STORY

CODING TO CULTIVATION

About Navin's journey in embracing sustainability, rediscovering health, and living with purpose

Changemakers



3

Where Art Meets Mental Well-being

Wiggle Room helping employees de-stressing, building teamwork, and awakening creativity beyond deadlines.

Profile



9

Shaping a Greener Tomorrow

Manju's journey in planting change, nurturing communities and inspiring generations

Chit Chat



12

"Every stitch carries a story, and every artisan deserves to be heard."

An exclusive interview with Ms. Mamta, Co Founder of TREY, a social enterprise based in Bengaluru

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In a world increasingly defined by urgency, outrage, and polarisation, one virtue stands out—not for its volume, but for its quiet, enduring strength: tolerance. Not the passive kind that merely endures, but the active kind that chooses to let go—of grudges, expectations, control, and the illusion that everything must go our way.

We live in times where every disagreement feels like a threat to identity, and every minor slight, an invitation to battle. Social media rewards provocation, workplaces demand relentless productivity, and relationships are often weighed down by ego and unspoken expectations. In such a climate, tolerance is no longer just a moral ideal—it is a survival skill.

Letting go does not mean apathy. It does not mean giving up or giving in. It means choosing peace over power, clarity over control, and forgiveness over festering. It's the ability to recognise that not every fight is worth fighting, and not every wrong requires retribution. It is the maturity to walk away without bitterness and the strength to speak with grace.

Many changemakers we feature in *Conversations Today* embody this rare form of conscious detachment. Their strength lies not just in what they do, but in what they choose not to hold on to—hurt, ego, anger, or the need to constantly explain themselves. Their "apathy" is not indifference, but a cultivated ability to stay centered amid chaos. It is this balance of empathy and equanimity that makes their impact sustainable—and their stories timeless.

This attitude is not weakness. It is the hallmark of the strongest among us. Leaders who inspire rather than intimidate. Teachers who listen before lecturing. Parents who raise without coercion. Activists who resist with compassion. Tolerance allows us to stay connected in a fragmented world. Letting go helps us move forward when the weight of the past threatens to hold us back.

Ancient wisdom traditions have always known this. The Gita speaks of equanimity in action. The Buddha warns that holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other to die. Sufi poetry sings of surrender, not defeat. Across faiths, forgiveness is sacred—whether extended to others or oneself.

Of course, it is easier said than done. Tolerance demands daily effort. It requires us to pause before reacting, to ask: Is this truly important? Letting go requires courage—to confront our insecurities, drop the need to be "right," and make room for different ways of being.

But when we do—when we extend empathy instead of judgment, curiosity instead of blame—we unlock a new level of freedom. We free ourselves from resentment.

In a time that urges us to hold tighter—tighter to our opinions, grudges, fears—may we learn the liberating art of release. Tolerance may not make the loudest noise. But it always makes the deepest impact.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

HOLISTIC WELLBEING IN THE LIGHT OF SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI'S TEACHINGS

Sri Ramana Maharshi is widely revered not only as a sage of Self-realization but also as a living embodiment of wholeness and equanimity. Though he did not speak of "wellbeing" in the modern wellness sense, his teachings provide a profound and timeless guide for living in harmony with the body, mind, and spirit. His central message—"Know thyself"—is also the foundation for true inner balance.

At the heart of Ramana Maharshi's teachings lies the inquiry: "Who am I?" This was not a philosophical exercise but a direct method of dissolving the ego and returning to one's true nature. According to him, most suffering arises from identifying with the body and mind, which are temporary and ever-changing. Instead, he urged seekers to recognize their true identity as pure awareness—the Self—which is eternal, peaceful, and unaffected by external conditions.

From this perspective, holistic wellbeing is not something to be acquired from outside but is revealed through stillness and inner awareness. When the mind becomes quiet through self-inquiry, the body naturally follows with calmness, and the heart opens with compassion. Sri Ramana's guidance shows that when we stop chasing pleasure and avoiding pain, we return to our innate state of equanimity.

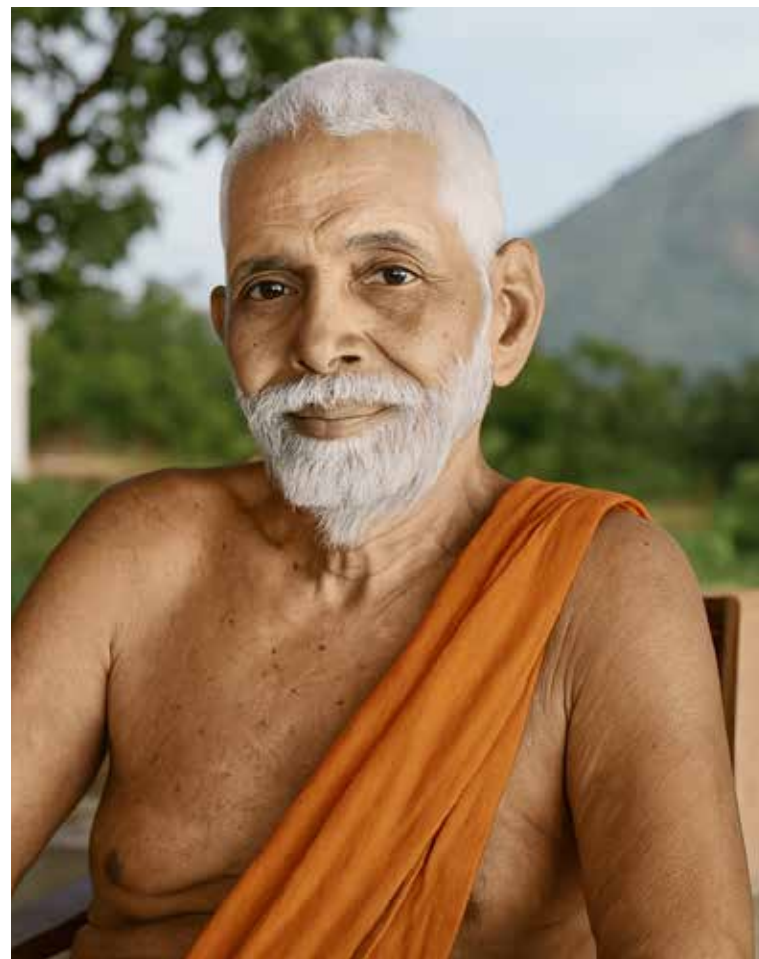
He did not deny the body or ignore physical pain. Even when he was suffering from cancer in his final years, he never identified with the disease. He remained in peace, saying simply, "The body suffers, the Self does not." This perspective invites us to transcend suffering by disidentifying from the temporary and abiding in the real.

Ramana emphasized simplicity in daily life. At his ashram, he led a life of minimalism and equality. He participated in simple chores, respected animals and nature, and embraced silence as the highest form of communication. These habits reflect an integrated life where wellbeing is not pursued through consumption but through connection—to the Self, to others, and to the natural world.

Mental peace, he taught, is not gained through external distractions or excessive effort, but by turning inward. He likened thoughts to waves on the surface of a still pond. Rather than trying to control them, he encouraged seekers to inquire into their source. When the mind rests in the heart, thoughts lose their power, and a profound inner stillness prevails.

Ramana's idea of love and self-inquiry were not separate. As the ego dissolves, the sense of separation disappears. Love, then, becomes our natural state—not emotional attachment, but identity with all. This awareness gives rise to effortless compassion, kindness, and selfless service.

In a world where wellness is increasingly packaged, marketed, and consumed, Sri Ramana's teachings offer a radically different path. He did not prescribe



diets or regimens. He pointed instead to the root of all imbalance: the mistaken idea that we are separate, lacking, or incomplete. In recognizing the Self, we rediscover a wellbeing that is unshakable, because it does not depend on anything external.

As he said, "Happiness is your nature. It is not wrong to desire it. What is wrong is seeking it outside when it is inside."

To walk in the light of Ramana Maharshi's teachings is to embrace a life of presence, simplicity, inquiry, and compassion. Holistic wellbeing, in this sense, is not a goal but a return—a return to what we already are.

Points for Reflection

1. Am I identifying myself with the body, the mind, or the ever-present awareness beyond them?
2. When I face discomfort or suffering, can I pause and ask: Who is experiencing this?
3. How often do I rest in stillness and allow thoughts to dissolve, rather than chase or resist them?

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

On a quiet December evening in 2023, two young social entrepreneurs—Arokia Puspa Blessie and Vignesh. B—invited a small group of friends and family in Chennai to try something new: an art session not defined by rules, but by freedom. What began as a modest pilot quickly blossomed into Wiggle Room, a thriving community initiative with two vibrant studios in Nungambakkam and Besant Nagar. At its heart lies a powerful idea—that art, even when not prescribed as therapy, can heal.

The spark behind Wiggle Room

Blessie, with a degree in banking, finance, and insurance, knew early that the corporate path was not for her. “I wanted to do something meaningful, something that brought people joy,” she recalls. That desire for impact led her to the MA in Social Entrepreneurship program at the Madras School of Social Work (MSSW).

There she met Vignesh, an engineering graduate and Teach For India fellow, who had spent two years teaching in a government school. His calm presence and ability to connect with people of all ages complemented Blessie’s entrepreneurial drive and digital marketing skills. Together, they saw the possibility of combining their strengths into a venture that fused creativity, community, and care.

Shaping the experience

Like many start ups, Wiggle Room began with experiments—trial activities, playful techniques, and open ended feedback sessions. Their first hundred participants, mostly friends and well wishers, offered encouragement; they shaped the very DNA of Wiggle Room.

“We learned from them every step of the way,” says Blessie. “Using gloves, blowing colours through straws, even adjusting board sizes—these ideas came from their feedback.” Today, Wiggle Room offers over 15 creative experiences ranging from painting and pottery to

WHERE ART MEETS MENTAL WELL-BEING



collaborative art workshops. While the team avoids calling it “therapy,” participants often describe the sessions as deeply therapeutic.

A space for everyone

One of Wiggle Room’s charms is its inclusivity. Children, parents, and even grandparents can be found working side by side, rediscovering playfulness with colours and clay. At times, three generations of a family share the same session—a grandmother rolling clay, a mother painting, and a child laughing through it all. Corporates too are finding value. Through customised workshops, Wiggle Room helps employees de stress, build teamwork, and awaken creative sparks often lost in the rush of deadlines. “We’ve seen people walk in tense from work and leave with bright smiles after a session. That transformation is why we do this,” says Blessie.

Rooted in social entrepreneurship

The foundation for Wiggle Room was laid at MSSW. The Social Entrepreneurship program equipped the duo with tools to design sustainable models while encouraging them to think about social impact. “We owe so much to our mentor, Prof. Pravin Kumar,” notes Vignesh. “The program gave us courage, clarity, and a network that still supports us.”

Sustainability at the core

Every choice at Wiggle Room carries an eco conscious touch. Brushes are crafted from natural materials, palettes have shifted to aluminium and pottery instead of plastic, and studios are designed to be environmentally mindful. “It’s not just about what you create here—it’s also about how responsibly you create it,” Blessie explains.

Steady growth, lasting vision

With just the two founders and one employee, Wiggle Room has grown carefully yet confidently. Their two studios are buzzing with sessions six days a week, and a loyal base of repeat participants keeps returning for more. Mental health professionals too are beginning to recommend Wiggle Room as a supportive experience.

Looking ahead, the founders dream of expanding to more locations, experimenting with DIY art kits, and forging stronger collaborations with corporates. But they are in no rush. “We believe in the turtle theory—slow, steady, and meaningful. Just like our sessions, our growth will be unhurried but lasting,” reflects Vignesh.

More than a studio

In a world that often celebrates speed and productivity, Wiggle Room is a gentle invitation to slow down, pick up a brush or a lump of clay, and simply create.

For Blessie and Vignesh, this journey has only just begun—but for the many who walk through their doors, Wiggle Room is already a sanctuary where art becomes healing, and creativity becomes community.

Aatika Kundalam

MAITRI INDIA

HELPING ABANDONED WIDOWS REGAIN THEIR DIGNITY

Maitri India Helps Abandoned Widows Regain Their Dignity

Besides food and shelter, the non-profit helps women gain a sense of belonging, identity and respect despite being shunned by society.

It's just daybreak, but 66-year-old Bijauli Modi Maiya is already among swells of devotees coursing through Vrindavan, circling sacred sites associated with the Hindu god Krishna. Her fingers work her prayer beads, as she navigates the crowd with her fellow widows. The women are fervently observing a ritual to attain a deeper spiritual connection with the deity, who represents compassion, protection and love. He's believed to have spent his childhood in this pilgrimage city, where many now seek solace and refuge after being forsaken by their loved ones.

"I came here looking for peace and to seek Krishna," says Bijauli.

Home to an estimated 20,000 widows — many of them elderly and destitute — Vrindavan is three hours from Delhi, India, by car. Women converge here after experiencing familial abandonment and at times, societal stigma. Some traditionalist beliefs in parts of conservative Hindu communities in India hold that women who have lost their husbands are considered diminished, because they "failed to retain their souls." India's traditional joint family system approach — one that cared for its elders — is in decline. The country's National Family Health Survey from 2019 to 2021 shows that nuclear families accounted for 58.2 per cent of total households. Not to mention, the COVID-19 pandemic placed a strain on families' finances, diminishing their ability to care for their elders. With these changes, more elderly widows are finding themselves in vulnerable situations.

Like many others, Bijauli found her way to Vrindavan due to economic reasons, among others. A year after her husband passed away, her son with whom she lived got married. "I began to feel I was being eased out of my son's life by his in-laws, as they wanted to take over our property," she shares. The breaking point came when Bijauli invested her life savings in shares, only to lose them in a crash. She began working as a housekeeper at a nurse's hostel to make ends meet. But it became increasingly difficult to work when her health deteriorated following a stomach tumour operation. This further soured her difficult relationship with her son and his wife, who themselves are impoverished. The simmering tension led to domestic violence. While they did not explicitly tell her to leave, Bijauli nonetheless felt like an unwelcome burden.

One day, she caught a live telecast of a spiritual guru offering to shelter widows in Vrindavan, and caught the first train



she could to the city. There, she was directed to an ashram called Maitri Ghar, where she eventually settled down in 2022.

The ashram was established under Maitri India, a non-governmental organisation that works to uplift vulnerable communities, in 2008.

Back then, the sight of women begging on the streets of Vrindavan and fighting over alms to survive provoked its founder, Winnie Singh, to help them. A dedicated social worker who worked towards the prevention of HIV and violence against women in the slums of Delhi, she first visited the city on a trip with a rotary club to distribute groceries.

"I began wondering why a mother has to beg, as every woman has a right to food, dignity and respect," recalls Winnie.

She started out supporting the widows by providing them with meals and free healthcare. Then, in 2012, she was invited to share about her cause on the popular television talk show Satyamev Jayate, hosted by Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan. The publicity, as well as a generous land donation from a philanthropic organisation, enabled them to establish two ashrams where they now accommodate some 150 women. Another 250 visit the ashrams regularly for meals and medical care.

They only take in abandoned widows



over the age of 60, as "they are totally disadvantaged with no source of income and left to fend for themselves."

Mothers come in extremely hurt and conflicted, so Winnie's aim is to help these seniors gain a sense of identity and dignity to brighten their twilight years. She contends that a secure, familial environment makes each mother feel validated. Maitri's staff are trained to be cognisant of their ailments, mental states, likes, dislikes and quirks.

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environment makes each mother feel validated. Maitri's staff are trained to be cognisant of their ailments, mental states, likes, dislikes and quirks.

Through regular counselling, art workshops, excursions and daily activities such as yoga, Maitri tries to draw them out of their shells, thereby helping them start the healing process.

To ensure they get sufficient exercise, staff nurse Rekha leads her charges in yoga sessions in the courtyard each morning. While some push themselves hard, those who can't bend their bodies due to aches adapt their moves on a raised platform, watched by others who are tired out.

Moving into an unfamiliar environment surrounded by strangers isn't always plain sailing. Winnie shares that the most challenging aspect of running the ashram is holding the peace among a group of women from diverse backgrounds. "These elderly women often behave like children, bickering over switching on the light too early," Winnie shares. Bijauli has experienced her fair share of such disagreements with her roommate, whom she says is prone to bouts of irritation. "They do fight but forget just as fast," says Rekha, who often finds herself playing referee. Beyond the trivial squabbles though, it's the lingering sense of anxiety that can underscore their time at Maitri. Many of the women spent their lives raising their children and bearing the load of household work without an income, leaving them without recourse to financial support after becoming estranged from their families. "I can't sleep. I worry about what will happen to me," Bijauli shares. Each week, Bijauli visits the Bhajan ashram (a spiritual retreat dedicated to devotional music), where some 300 widows from across Vrindavan are paid a small token to chant devotional songs. She uses her meagre earnings to pay for a specific medicine she prefers to treat the persistent pain in her waist.

Owing to their advanced age, many of Maitri's residents suffer from chronic health problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Without a social safety net, they're unable to afford their treatment, which Maitri fully sponsors.

Maitri holds medical camps for the women, and it was during such a session that Bijauli's cataract was detected. She subsequently underwent an operation, and also receives regular check-ups by an in-house general practitioner. "At least 45 per cent of the women here have had cataract surgeries in both eyes and are frequently in the hospital for stomach issues such as acid reflux," shares Winnie, who adds that the organisation has yet to obtain medical insurance for its beneficiaries.

Winnie shares that medical expenses are steep, as some of the women have to be escorted to bigger cities such as Delhi and Agra for treatment, owing to a lack of adequate healthcare in Vrindavan.

Despite the high costs, Winnie works to ensure that the women receive the treatment they require. Her organisation welcomes public donations to help them



cope with the women's medical bills.

In addition to an inability to afford their own healthcare, many of the women are either unaware of or lack access to their legal rights. A key aspect of Maitri's work is advocating for the entitlements of these women, many of whom are illiterate. They've successfully helped Bijauli to apply for her pension under the National Social Assistance Programme that supports widows living below the poverty line. Yet, their work isn't always cut and dry. When Winnie offered to help a lady challenge her son in court over a property dispute, she was told: "People will accept a son who beats up his mother but not a mother who kicks out her son."

But change is afoot. Maitri endeavours to help the women gain a sense of agency by earning an income.

With the help of a friend who is a designer, she's trained some women to stitch bags that are sold to the public. She also has plans to have the women craft block-printed stoles.

In the same vein of overturning stigmas in certain quarters of society and rebuilding the women's sense of identity, Maitri encourages them to celebrate festivals such as Holi and Diwali. While some may consider this to be inauspicious, Maitri is determined to bring joy and agency to the women.

The women even participate in the ritual of smearing one another's faces with sindoor (red cosmetic powder), a tradition that symbolises the power of womanhood in protecting her husband and children from all evil.

Their efforts to challenge such



superstitions are engendering change in a country where the welfare of widows is increasingly being championed, thanks to a raft of government and non-governmental programmes plus shifting attitudes.

"When I first visited Vrindavan in 2008, widows were considered to be untouchables. But that changed once we allowed people to visit the ashram," shares Winnie. "These days, newly married couples come here to receive blessings from the widows."

Despite their at times estranged relationships with their loved ones, many mothers at Maitri nonetheless pray that their sons will perform their last rites when they pass on. This includes burning their funeral pyres. Hindus believe that this will ensure their salvation in the afterlife. As such, Maitri's staff works towards reconciling beneficiaries with their children through counselling sessions. They have funded kin's visits to the ashram, and successfully reunited eight widows with their families.

Bijauli, for instance, has just returned from a month's stay at her son's home. "I was there for my granddaughter's birthday celebrations and every morning she would insist I fetch her to school," she says proudly.

While she continues to rebuild relationships with her family, she, like many others, have found companionship here. "It feels good to go to the Bhajan ashram with the other ladies, chatting and singing with them. I feel blessed," she says.

For some, Maitri is a backdrop for poignant friendships. These include

Nirmal Huria, who, in her early days in the ashram, would sit quietly for hours looking out the window. When her roommate, Savita, arrived, they immediately bonded over listening to devotional songs and have been inseparable ever since. Their beds are positioned next to one another, with both their clothes stored under Savita's bed.

The only person Nirmal talks about from her past is her loving husband, who taught her how to wear a sari. Savita is quick to interject that she still doesn't do a good job of it, and she has to help her. "Maybe I was meant to come to the ashram so I could meet her," shares Savita.

There may soon be more individuals like Bijauli seeking assistance at Maitri. Today's relatively young India is predicted to turn into a rapidly ageing society by 2050, with the elderly population expected to double by then. With women having a higher life expectancy than men, more will likely be widowed. Maitri, which has served more than a million meals to widows, is determined to continue supporting them. Its "Feed a Widow Mother" initiative encourages the public to help fund the beneficiaries' meals. The organisation also runs donation drives for programmes such as active ageing, and even financially supporting a widow, thus helping to enable a more altruistic society.

"We want to foster compassion. We want to teach them that life is valuable and an elderly person is not someone to be discarded, but assets who can connect you to your culture," asserts Winnie.

Winnie Singh, Founder, Maitri India. Importantly, they also strive to ensure that the younger generation can contribute to these efforts, by promoting intergenerational bonding through visits by students.

"We want to foster compassion. We want to teach them that life is valuable and an elderly person is not to be discarded, but an asset who can connect you to your culture," asserts Winnie.

Thankfully, Bijauli has found the solace she sought when she first came to Vrindavan in Maitri. "I like that I am able to pray here. I feel safe and secure," she concludes.

Writer & Photographer / Ruhani Kaur
A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

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

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises

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

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CODING TO CULTIVATION



Living a sustainable life means making conscious choices that reduce our impact on the environment, support social well-being and promote long-term economic health. As the effects of climate change, pollution, and resource depletion become more visible, sustainability is no longer just a niche concern—it’s becoming a global priority. People are increasingly drawn to sustainable living not only for its environmental benefits, but also for its potential to improve health, save money and create a sense of purpose. From eco-friendly products to energy-efficient homes and ethical consumption, sustainability is becoming more attractive as individuals and communities recognize the power of their everyday choices to shape a better future.

Mr. Shanmuga Subramanian, fondly known as Navin is a native of Coimbatore now settled in Chennai. A Mechanical Engineer by qualification, Navin has spent the last two decades navigating diverse roles within the IT sector. Despite a successful career on paper, he often describes his life as that of a sheep in a never-ending routine. “You’re just running with the crowd,” he says. “There’s money, yes—but no space to enjoy your life, no sense of owning your time. We tend to lose control over our time,” he adds. His story reflects a growing sentiment among professionals seeking more meaning, freedom and balance beyond the confines of conventional success.

Navin felt a deep and growing urge to break free from the monotony of corporate life and pursue something that allowed his inner self to breathe—to slow down and truly experience the small joys that often go unnoticed within the walls of a high-rise office.

Even while juggling his responsibilities in the IT sector, Navin found solace in terrace gardening and took part in group farming activities with friends. “We suddenly came up with the idea of buying farmland and doing this full time,” he recalls. One wise friend in the group suggested that they first gain hands-on experience by farming on someone else’s land. This approach made perfect sense to him—not just practically, but philosophically. By leasing land instead of buying it outright, they could focus on the joy and learning of the process, rather than being burdened by the pressure of financial returns. What started as a casual interest soon evolved into a deeper journey, as the group began organizing community farming activities—not for profit, but for the pure, fulfilling experience of working with the earth.

Navin’s interest wasn’t in conventional paddy cultivation—he was drawn to the idea of creating food forests: self-sustaining ecosystems that mimic nature and provide a diverse range of produce. In 2023, he leased a friend’s farmland in Thiruvadandai, about 1.5 hours from Chennai. Commuting back and forth using public transport, he found himself gradually switching to more sustainable daily habits. “Taking the bus meant less stress about traffic and zero worry about vehicle maintenance. Believe me, it saves quite a lot of money,” he laughs. That simple shift made him more conscious of sustainability, not just in farming but in everyday life.

In 2024, Navin moved to another piece of land in Polachery, this time with a clear intention to follow principles of natural farming. The results were remarkable—the soil’s fertility improved noticeably without the need

for chemical inputs or heavy labour. “When everything is natural, there’s really no workload at all,” he explains. “You go with nature’s flow, and things just fall into place.” He points out an often-overlooked truth: Terrace gardening takes more time, but farming on open land, especially with natural methods, is not only easier but also deeply beneficial for rejuvenating the soil. For Navin, the shift to sustainable, natural farming has not just been about food—it’s been a quiet revolution in how he lives and relates to the world around him.

“Every time you till the soil, you are actually destroying life,” Navin says with quiet conviction. There’s more life beneath the surface than we can even imagine - rats, insects, worms—it is a thriving world down there. For him, this understanding became central to how he approached farming. The more life there is in the soil, the healthier the plants—and the less effort we need to put in. “Nature does the heavy lifting,” he explains. Below the earth, there’s no competition; it exists only above the ground. All we really need to do is provide sunlight and the soil will take care of bringing life to the land. This philosophy, grounded in observation and experience, reinforces Navin’s belief that working with nature, rather than against it, is the most efficient and rewarding path to sustainability.

Navin chose to work on a small portion of land at a time, cultivating a variety of crops to maintain biodiversity and soil health. Staying true to his vision of keeping farming both sustainable and low-cost, he deliberately avoided hiring external labour. Every task—from sowing seeds to the transporting produce—was done entirely by him. “It was

important for me to understand every stage of the process, hands-on,” he shares. However, challenges like cattle grazing by free-roaming village cows eventually forced him to move on from that plot.

In 2025, Navin began working on a new piece of land near Mahabalipuram. He sowed green gram, urad dal, pumpkin, ash gourd, bitter gourd and squash—each selected not only for their nutritional value but also for their role in building soil fertility naturally. The land has since been revived and is now fully prepared for natural farming methods. With the harvest of urad dal expected in the coming week and green

gram in October, Navin is once again embracing the quiet rhythm of the land - planting with care, harvesting with hope and allowing nature to lead the way.

One of the most unconventional yet effective practices Navin adopted came from his learnings in Auroville—the use of human urine and biochar as a natural source of urea for soil enrichment. “It’s completely sterile if you’re not on medication and a powerful, free resource that most people overlook,” he notes. Navin applied this combination on every piece of land he worked and consistently witnessed improvements in soil vitality and crop growth. Over time,

his commitment to sustainability extended far beyond farming. One conscious habit led to another—switching to brushing with banyan sticks, using bio-enzymes for cleaning and washing, wearing natural, undyed fabrics, practicing yoga regularly and eating simple, home-cooked local food. Each of these changes, rooted in a deep respect for nature and mindful living, has become part of his everyday rhythm. Today, Navin’s life is not just about farming—it’s about living in harmony with the environment, in every possible way. His journey stands as a quiet yet powerful inspiration to many who are seeking a more balanced, intentional way of life.

Navin’s journey into sustainable living has not only transformed his relationship with the environment—it has deeply impacted his personal well-being. Remarkably, after wearing glasses since the age of 7, he no longer needs them. He hasn’t visited a doctor since 1997, a testament to the strength and balance his natural lifestyle has brought him.

With fewer health concerns and more freedom in his routine, Navin now finds ample time for hobbies like trekking and travelling. “The gift of health from these practices has allowed me to expose myself to nature’s elements freely,” he says with unmistakable joy. “It is one life. It must be healthier and fulfilling. I want to experience all that I can,” he says.

For Navin, sustainable living isn’t a sacrifice—it’s an invitation to live with full realisation of connectedness to the world around him.

Shanmuga Priya.T

THE GUIDING STARS



I was the youngest in a family of eight children. Two of them passed away in infancy, and six of us grew up together, carrying forward the dreams of our parents. Today, only three of us remain—my two eldest sisters, and me. In this journey of family and life, I had two elder brothers who shaped me profoundly: Shri. P.N. Devarajan (PND) and Shri. P.N. Ramamurthy (PNR).

PND's corporate brilliance and social initiatives are well known. He was not just a professional leader but a man who believed in serving society. To me, he was more than all that—he was my hero, my Manaseega Guru. But there is another story I want to share. It is about my other brother, PNR—the self-made man whose grit and determination became my compass. If PND gave me vision, PNR gave me perseverance. If one taught me to dream, the other taught me never to give up.

His sketches have been also featured in school text books. My father used to say with pride, "Every rupee he earned went back into learning." That determination carried him forward. He mastered shorthand and became a Gold Medallist in Tamil Nadu, proof that his conviction was stronger than his circumstances.

At 19, he boarded a train to Delhi with little more than a job letter from the Central

Government in his hand. He would say: "Opportunities don't wait. You have to step into the unknown and claim them." From those modest beginnings as a stenographer, he would one day rise to the rank of Joint Secretary in the Government of India.

When I was in school, I lived with him in Chennai, and later I often visited him in Delhi. At our dining table, our conversations became masterclasses in living. He would ask, "Have you read any autobiographies lately?" and then add with a smile, "In 200 pages, you can absorb 40 years of someone's experience. Isn't that like reading the Bhagavad Gita—life's wisdom condensed for you?" That simple advice shaped my lifelong habit of reading.

What impressed me most about him was his relentless pursuit of learning. After long workdays, he studied—first a BA, then an MA. When the Indian Economic Service relaxed its age limit, he seized the chance and qualified. At 42, when most people would have settled comfortably, he left for Leeds University in the UK to complete an MBA through the Commonwealth Exchange Program. "Never rest on past laurels," he would say. "Life doesn't stop teaching, so why should we stop learning?"

His senior positions gave me glimpses into a world I would never otherwise have

seen. As Government Director on the boards of Indian Bank, Indian Overseas Bank, Andhra Bank, Rural Electrification Corporation, and Garware, he would often take me along during his visits to Chennai. I was still young, still finding my way, but he introduced me to Chairmen and senior leaders. To me, those encounters felt extraordinary. He seemed to be saying, without words, "If I can reach here, so can you."

There was another moment that changed the course of my life, thanks to my sister-in-law, who worked at the Reserve Bank. I was trying to connect with the Managing Director of Al-Futtaim, a Dubai company. After several attempts, I paused in uncertainty. She looked at me with calm assurance and said, "Let me try." With one phone call, the connection was made—and within an hour, I was at the Oberoi Hotel, meeting the MD. The conversation led me to Dubai, an opportunity that reshaped my career. Looking back, I realise that without her persistence, and without the culture of resilience I had inherited from PNR, I might have missed that turning point altogether.

What I admired most about PNR was not just his rise in government service, but the way he remained grounded. He was affable, approachable, and emotionally



connected. Ambition never hardened him; success never distanced him. He carried his achievements with humility, combining determination with warmth.

For me, PND and PNR were like two guiding stars. PND, my Manaseega Guru, gave me vision and purpose. PNR, my resilient brother, gave me grit and courage. Together, they became my compass and my anchor.

As I reflect today, I know I was privileged. Not everyone has brothers who shape their lives so profoundly. I had two. Their lessons remain with me: dream boldly, work with conviction, never stop learning, and never give up. To have had such brothers is my greatest blessing. To live by their lessons is my responsibility. And to tell their story now—with love and gratitude—is the least I can do.

PN Subramanian

SHAPING A GREENER TOMORROW



The Inner Wheel District has long been recognized for its service-oriented projects, but few embody its spirit as completely as Manju, popularly known as “The Green Woman.” A dedicated environmentalist, creative entrepreneur, and active community member, she has made sustainability, waste management, and plantation drives central to her life’s work.

Manju’s journey began in childhood, when she spent time walking through the green rice fields of her hometown. She would bring home plants to nurture, a practice that sparked a lifelong passion for greenery. Her connection to plants was not casual; it evolved into an ethos of giving back to the earth. As she says, “If you give something to the earth, it will return you much more.” This philosophy has guided all her efforts in gardening, plantation, and conservation.

A defining feature of Manju’s approach is her insistence on reducing household waste. Nothing in her home is discarded without purpose. Organic kitchen waste is composted, while dry waste is reused creatively. This practical approach aligns closely with modern sustainability practices such as circular economy principles, which focus on reuse, recycling, and minimizing waste. Long before these concepts became popular in sustainability discourse, Manju was already applying them in her daily life.

Her experiments with reusing materials led her to develop handmade doormats that were both functional and aesthetically pleasing. She researched fabrics that could absorb water effectively while still looking attractive, and this innovation became a successful product that she showcased in exhibitions. From there, she moved into making soft toys, soaps, and spices, each reflecting her hands-on approach and attention to quality.

Manju’s culinary skills are equally notable. Known for her wide range of pickles, podis, and healthy laddus, she initially produced them as part of her entrepreneurial ventures but now focuses on sharing them with her community. Her approach to cooking is meticulous: every dish must be perfectly prepared, organized, and tested. She also adapts traditional recipes with her own innovations, making her creations both authentic and distinctive.

Food, for Manju, is not just about sustenance. It is a medium of connection. By sharing her homemade products freely today, she emphasizes the values of generosity and community bonding, which are central to Inner Wheel’s ethos. Manju’s most impactful contributions have been in the field of plantation and water body conservation. Through the Inner Wheel District and her initiatives, she

has spearheaded multiple projects. One of her most memorable undertakings was in BHEL, where she coordinated the planting of 750 saplings. Remarkably, 749 of them survived, a testament to her careful planning and follow-up.

In addition to tree planting, Manju has worked on restoring water bodies, cleaning polluted sites, and reviving them into sources of fresh, usable water. She recalls one such project in West Mambalam: despite the physical strain and challenges, the outcome of rainwater filling a clean, restored water body remains one of her proudest moments. These efforts contribute not only to local ecosystems but also to broader goals of combating climate change, enhancing biodiversity, and supporting sustainable urban living.

A strong believer in intergenerational learning, Manju emphasizes the importance of involving children in sustainability efforts. She encourages parents and teachers to let children plant seeds from the fruits they eat, watch them grow, and experience the joy of nurturing life. She also conducts awareness sessions in schools, where she explains the benefits of planting, composting, and waste reduction. “Once children put their hands in the soil, they will never forget the value of it,” she insists.

This approach resonates with contemporary educational frameworks that stress experiential learning, teaching children not only concepts but habits and values that stay with them for life.

Over the years, Manju has shifted her focus across different creative and entrepreneurial ventures. From crafts to food to plantations, each stage of her journey has been embraced fully, without regret. She adapts her passion to the needs of the time, demonstrating flexibility and resilience. Her current interest lies in micro-greens and organic food cultivation, which she believes can play an important role in addressing lifestyle diseases and promoting healthier diets.

Manju’s life and work reflect several important insights, such as Grassroots Sustainability Works, where she emphasizes that reducing household waste, composting, and reusing materials proves that sustainability does not require large-scale interventions alone; it can begin in individual homes. Follow-up is essential in her plantation drives, she stresses not just planting but ensuring the survival of saplings, something often overlooked in environmental projects. This focus on outcomes rather than symbolic gestures is a valuable model. Community engagement is key, as she showcases by giving away her food products and involving schools in the plantation. She



demonstrates that social acceptance and enthusiasm grow when communities are directly involved. Her willingness to reinvent herself, moving from crafts to plantations to food, shows that passion can take multiple forms while serving the same underlying purpose of sustainability and service.

Manju’s work with the Inner Wheel District illustrates how individual initiative, when combined with organizational support, can create lasting environmental and social impact. She stands as a role model for integrating sustainability into daily living, proving that meaningful change begins at home and radiates outward into the community.

As she often reminds others, “Start from home. Plant the seeds. Once you see them grow, you will understand what the earth gives back.”

Bhavadharani K

WHAT'S THE SOUL OF YOUR ORGANISATION?

What is the human soul?

The human soul is the essence of who we truly are as individuals – our purpose, our beliefs, our values, and how we live as individuals. Where do these things show up in our lives? These show up in our actions every day – the way we speak, the way we walk, what we value the most, the way we behave in different situations, both challenging and straightforward, our habits, our routines. Everything we do defines who we are as an individual human being.

Every human is not the same.

Every human has a different personality – no two humans are the same. Every one of us has our own experiences and beliefs that make us unique compared to any other human being.

Does an organisation have a personality?

Some of you say the people within the organisation give the organisation its personality. While that's partly true, to think of it practically, do you want to be defined by what is happening around you and what circumstances prevail around you or what kind of people are there around you or what people think of you? We all want our own identity, right?

Is the organisation above or below an individual?

An individual's thought is what brings an organisation into existence. So does that mean an organisation is below a human? Not at all – a properly groomed and nurtured organisation goes well beyond a single human being; it carries a legacy for generations, sometimes not just impacting those around it, but even the entire world. Such powerful organisations are.

What should define the organisation's personality?

Just as we want to set our own destiny and not leave it to chance or to anyone or any experience we come across, we also have to set the direction for our organisation. There are three things we need to set for our organisation to give it a personality:

1. Vision and Mission
2. Values
3. Culture

Vision is the eventual goal we want to achieve. It may include how we would want to position the organisation, or it can even go a level higher and focus on the ideal future we would like to create in the community we cater to, with our organisation's efforts.

The mission is what we will do as an organisation to achieve our vision. This may include 1 or 2 things that we will do, or sometimes a multitude of things.

Values are NON NEGOTIABLES for



your organisation. While some organisations have a vision and mission, many do not define their values. Some are defined, but often they remain only on paper, on walls, or in policies, and none are practically followed within the organisation.

If you want to give a solid personality to your organisation, we need to ensure the values are well thought out, finalised, and well integrated into everything within the organisation, including processes and culture.

That brings us to the third and most important attribute that creates a personality for an organisation and essentially acts as its soul: culture. How many times has it happened that you visited a company, a new place, or a new country, and you understood their culture and norms, only to follow them to fit in? That is the power of culture. When you establish a culture that all your employees embrace and carry forward the values you have adopted for your organisation, your organisation becomes one where, if someone joins, they can understand your culture and adjust accordingly. However,

this is a reactive approach. A proactive approach would be to filter out and recruit only people who align with your company's values and possess the right attitude required to fit well within your organisation's culture. Otherwise, the unseen costs you incur by hiring the wrong person will be far higher than those of going for a replacement.

One prime determinant of whether a culture reflects the values of an organisation is when those values are treated as non negotiable, and any instances of compromise are addressed immediately.

What is your organisation's soul?

Now that we have covered some important aspects of understanding the vision, mission, values, and culture, and how they actually create a personality/soul for your organisation, I leave you with the questions below to ponder.

If your organisation has to go around in the community as an individual, what would that personality look like? How would that person speak and behave? That's your organisation's soul and

essence.

- Does your organisation have a vision and mission that drives everything it does?
- Are non negotiable values determined for your organisation? Are there any deviations where values are not followed? What happened in such instances? Did your organisation stick to them or did it let go?
- How are the values of your organisation trickled down to different departments and employees across the organisation?
- What are three key things that you would want to change in your organisation to address any of the gaps identified or insights you got while going through the article or the questions above?

Do let me know your views and insights at connect@srkrvizag.com

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THRIVING AGAINST ODDS

When Umamaheswari was struck with polio at the age of two, and later underwent spinal surgery as a teenager, many around her feared her world would shrink. Instead, Uma chose to expand it. Today, she moves with the help of an electric wheelchair—her “empowerment,” as she calls it—because it gave her back her independence and freedom. But her story is not just one of personal resilience; it is about how one woman turned her challenges into opportunities for thousands of others.

In 2015, Uma and four friends—Dinesh, Rajan, Vino, and Akbar—all of whom live with disabilities, came together to start the DRUVA Public Education and Charitable Trust in Kilpauk, Chennai. The name “DRUVA” carries the initials of its founders, symbolising their shared journey. What began as a modest effort has grown into a collective that empowers people with disabilities through livelihood training, health support, mobility awareness, and personality development. Registered members receive ID cards, their needs are mapped, and they are connected to opportunities—be it scholarships through NGO tie-ups, CSR-funded support from corporates, or awareness campaigns that bring inclusion into the mainstream. Monthly meet-ups, held in accessible venues, have created a community where learning and belonging go hand in hand. “People with disabilities are among the most excluded worldwide,” Uma points out. “That’s why spaces like DRUVA are vital—they show that support and inclusion can change lives.”

Uma’s own journey is a testament to the power of opportunity matched with perseverance. Despite her physical challenges, she relentlessly pursued higher education, earning five degrees, including an MA in Social Entrepreneurship from the Madras School of Social Work (MSSW). At MSSW, she found mentors who encouraged her to convert ideas into scalable social enterprises. That seed of inspiration gave birth to HuMaart Social Enterprise, co-founded with two friends to create sustainable livelihoods for differently abled people. Starting as a humble kiosk at MSSW, HuMaart sold eco-friendly palm baskets, art pieces, and stationery. Soon, corporates began placing orders, and their crafts found an online marketplace. The name itself is symbolic: “Hu” for human, “Maart” for market—a reminder that everyone deserves a space in the marketplace, regardless of ability.

Encouraged by the success of HuMaart, Uma and her team launched HuMaart Healthy Eatery, a live food counter serving traditional millet- and herb-based meals. Corporate offices now invite their stalls regularly, turning lunch breaks into moments of awareness. More importantly, the eatery has provided employment for over a dozen differently abled individuals, some working remotely in food preparation. “The truth is, most people



with disabilities find themselves excluded from sustainable jobs,” Uma reflects. “That’s when we realised—we had to create opportunities ourselves. Entrepreneurship, for us, is not just about profit. It is about dignity.”

Global studies confirm what Uma has lived—people with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty due to barriers in education, transport, and employment. By designing inclusive enterprises, HuMaart challenges this cycle. For Uma, everyday victories fuel her vision. She



stitches her own clothes, modifying designs to fit her needs. “People once asked, ‘Can she do it?’ Now they say, ‘She has done it.’ That is the greatest feeling ever,” she says with pride.

Her ambitions are equally determined. She hopes to complete a PhD in

Social Entrepreneurship or Disability Empowerment, scale HuMaart into a private limited company, and build platforms where ability is recognised by potential, not mobility. Uma’s journey also reflects how systemic support makes

empowerment possible. At MSSW, the institution built a ramp and lift to make classrooms accessible for her. “Usually, colleges don’t even realise the challenges we face. But MSSW went out of its way to ensure I was comfortable. That’s what real inclusion looks like,” she says.

Today, as the driving force behind an NGO and two social enterprises, Uma is redefining what empowerment for people with disabilities can look like. Her message is simple but powerful: disability is not inability. With awareness, opportunities, and the will to treat everyone as equal contributors, society can change. Or as Uma herself puts it: “Life is difficult, but with support and willpower, you can always create your own path.”

Aatika Kundalam

“Every stitch carries a story, and every artisan deserves to be heard.”

Mamta shares with Marie Banu her vision to help artisans not just survive, but truly thrive

Mamta, an Electrical & Electronics Engineer from BIT Mesra, began her career with Tata Steel and GE before taking a break for her family. Craft has always been her happy space — from candles and crochet toys to her first venture, Kimbhoot Gift Studio. In 2024, she co-founded TREY with her school friends Neha and Supti, blending their passion for design with the skills of artisans. Guided by the motto Care, Comfort & Connection, TREY champions handmade products while ensuring dignity, visibility, and sustainable livelihoods for artisans.

Realizing the struggles artisans faced — seasonal work, unfair penalties from boutiques, and lack of steady income — Mamta and her co-founders built TREY to provide dignity, recognition, and fair earnings for their craft.

In an exclusive interview, Mamta shares with Marie Banu her vision to help artisans not just survive, but truly thrive.

What motivated you to connect artisans such as aari workers, block printers, and women from farming households with wider markets?

It all started very simply. I used to crochet dolls and sell them, and one day, Jahanara — who helps me with my household work — showed interest. When I asked her if she could crochet, she said yes. When I asked if she knew embroidery, her face lit up and she told me her entire family back home are aari artisans. That was the spark.

Through her, I met Farida and others — women who had come to Bengaluru because of difficult personal circumstances. They were doing seasonal aari work for boutiques, and worked from their home.

I realized they weren't happy; they were doing it only for survival. Yet when they spoke about embroidery, their eyes shone. This is their art, their love, their connection to roots. With TREY, I wanted to give them a steady livelihood and, more importantly, dignity and decision-making power. Today, when I sit with Bhai and Gulam, they suggest design changes, tell me which colours won't work, and together we decide. That collaborative relationship — artisans having a say in their own craft — is rare. But that is exactly what I want to nurture.

What kinds of products do these artisans create, and how do you decide which ones are showcased to customers?

At TREY, we started with home furnishings — hand-embroidered and block-printed cushion covers, table runners, and table linen. To stay true to our low-wastage philosophy, we use leftover fabric for pouches, small bags, or even fabric guitar straps, which people love.

Interestingly, our tailoring team came from a farming village. I had trouble finding tailors in Bengaluru because no one wanted to stitch cushion covers — too little money compared to blouses. Then, through our driver, I discovered women like Veena, Kavitha, and Shweta in his village. They were already skilled blouse makers, and they quickly adapted to stitching



furnishings. They're now the backbone of TREY.

When we showcase products at exhibitions, we don't just put items on a table. Each piece carries its artisan's story, their pride, their touch. That makes customers pause, connect, and buy — not just a product but a piece of someone's journey.

How do you balance preserving traditional techniques like aari embroidery and block printing while adapting designs to modern consumer tastes?

Aari embroidery and block printing are incredibly versatile. With TREY, we explore how to bring these crafts into every day, modern homes — minimal embroidered cushions, bold block-printed runners, or quirky little accents. Sometimes I suggest designs, but often the artisans guide me. I've learned not to interfere unnecessarily. They are the experts. Preserving authenticity while experimenting with new formats — that's where the magic happens.

How do you see TREY ensuring both business sustainability and social impact for artisans?

We're very clear: TREY is a for-profit social enterprise. Like any business, we need to cover costs — exhibitions, raw materials, our website. But one principle is non-negotiable: we never bargain down artisans' earnings.

Their craft is their livelihood. If a blouse earns them ₹5,000, they deserve that without deductions, without exploitation. Yes, our products are priced higher than mass-market items, but they come with dignity stitched in. Our job is to find customers who value that dignity. Business sustainability and social impact are not opposites here — they are deeply linked.

Through which platforms have you found the strongest connection with customers, and how do these channels help tell the artisans' stories?

Exhibitions are our strongest platform. They allow customers to touch and feel the work, and just as importantly, to experience the real life behind TREY. Often visitors overhear us calling Raju, our block-printing artisan, to confirm a custom order, or chatting with Veena about which products are getting good

feedback. That authenticity builds trust.

We also sell on our website and, during lean months, on Amazon. On Amazon, to stay competitive, we keep prices low by sourcing fabric from Jaipur and creating products from them. But exhibitions remain closest to my heart because they let us share not just products, but the spirit of TREY.

How has the additional income changed the lives of artisans, especially women balancing household responsibilities and farm work? Could you share an example that stays with you?

I'll never forget when Veena and her team proudly told me they had bought a washing machine with their savings. At first, her mother-in-law objected — “Why do you need this?” — but the women insisted: they wanted to save time on chores so they could take on more stitching work.

That moment meant more than just convenience. It was about women asserting their choices, using their earnings to shape their daily lives. Of course, challenges remain — many women still hand over all their income to the family head, keeping nothing for themselves. We're slowly encouraging them to save, whether through gold, post office deposits, or even insurance schemes. It's a process of building both financial literacy and confidence.

Looking ahead, what do you see as the future for artisans?

My dream is not just survival but security. Many artisans support their families and educate their children, but when it comes to their own old age, there is little planning or savings. That worries me deeply.

Through TREY, I want to build awareness about saving, about securing their future. Whether through small gold investments, government schemes, or just the confidence to manage their own money, I want artisans to feel they have a tomorrow. And beyond financials, I want them to be recognized as culture-keepers, respected for carrying forward traditions that define our heritage.

What struggles does TREY face in keeping this vision alive?

We're only two years old, and yes, the struggles are real. Most big suppliers of organic, GOTS-certified fabrics insist on bulk orders, which we cannot afford yet. Handcrafted products are high-priced, which means our audience is niche. And home furnishings, unlike apparel, are not impulse buys.

We've learned to balance — exhibitions sustain us, and Amazon helps us survive lean months, though at lower margins. But what keeps us going is belief. Conscious homes deserve conscious products. TREY is not just a brand; it's a collective heartbeat of artisans and friends who chose dignity over despair. The journey is hard, yes. But as I often remind myself — every day is new, and every day is worth trying again.

What message would you like to share with our readers about supporting artisan-made products?

The next time you see something handmade, pause. Think of the hours, the patience, the expertise that went into it. Pay the fair price. Because handmade is never just an object — it's a story of resilience, heritage, and human dignity. When you buy artisan-made, you are not only decorating your home; you are uplifting lives.