

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 11 | Issue 12 | December 2023 | 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

Remembering Dr. Sailakshmi Balijepally
A Trailblazer in Child Healthcare and
Compassionate Advocate for Humanity

Changemakers



3

Construction to Nurture Nature

Karen' efforts to regenerate the land in a homeopathic way.

Profile



9

Instincts and Ventures

Samayapurathal Self-Help Group in Sivagangai that engages in diversification in products and acquiring new skills.

Chit Chat



12

“Vetiver, for me, is not just a cash crop; it's the main root of health and happiness.”

An exclusive interview with Mr. C. Pandian alias Vetiver Pandian

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The social sector, characterized by noble aspirations and numerous challenges, heavily depends on forward-thinkers for its progress. Visionaries, with their ability to envision a better world and the courage to challenge the status quo, are indispensable in addressing societal issues.

In resource-constrained social sectors, inspiring collective action is paramount. Visionaries act as beacons of inspiration, uniting communities and organizations toward a common purpose. Their infectious enthusiasm and unwavering commitment mobilize individuals to contribute time, skills, and resources. Through this collective effort, visionaries translate lofty ideals into tangible outcomes, fostering a shared responsibility for societal well-being.

At the core of transformative initiatives lies a visionary who transcends immediate obstacles, painting a vivid picture of a more inclusive and sustainable future. These individuals possess a unique blend of imagination and pragmatism, providing clarity to ambiguity and converting aspirations into actionable strategies, whether addressing poverty, educational disparities, or environmental challenges.

Visionaries play a crucial role in fostering innovation within the social sector by challenging conventional wisdom and embracing creative solutions. Recognizing that deeply rooted social issues require fresh perspectives, they leverage technology for enhanced educational accessibility and implement sustainable practices to combat environmental degradation. This dynamism enables the sector to adapt to an ever-evolving world.

Crucially, visionaries serve as custodians of empathy in a world often characterized by division and disparity. They champion the cause of the marginalized and vulnerable, fueling a genuine commitment to social justice. By amplifying the voices of those often unheard, visionaries ensure that the social sector remains rooted in fairness and equity.

The recent passing of Dr. Sailakshmi, an exemplary figure in healthcare and social work, underscores the urgency of addressing global healthcare challenges. Dr. Sailakshmi's legacy extends beyond initiated programs to the professionals she influenced, creating a ripple effect that multiplies positive societal impact.

In recognizing, supporting, and celebrating visionaries like Dr. Sailakshmi, we acknowledge them as the architects of a healthier and more compassionate world. Their contributions extend beyond the programs they initiate, leaving an enduring imprint on society.

Let us honor Dr. Sailakshmi by continuing to champion the visionaries who shape the landscape of healthcare and social work, paving the way for a brighter future.

Wish you a Happy, Healthy, and Prosperous New Year! May the coming year inspire you to embrace greater humanity, and may you be blessed with abundant health and prosperity.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

FAKES OF FACTS- A SIGN OF SLEEPING WITH SOCIAL STIGMAS



Fakes of facts transform their states from memes into deep fakes. Creative minds of deep fakes take advantage of Artificial Intelligence and technological advancements to blur the vision of truth. The widespread fakes indicate that the people are trapping themselves in the vicious cycle of social stigma and disinformation.

Social stigma is the social disapproval of a person in a society. Social stigma can be seen in various forms, including verbal abuse, social exclusion, discrimination in employment or education, and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes through media and cultural narratives. Stigmatised individuals chew these negative perceptions, leading to feelings of low self-esteem, and reluctance to seek help or participate in society. This malfunction of the social structure collapses social cohesion and creates an imbalance in the society.

It is no secret that social stigma and falsehoods are old friends, with a lot in common to fuel each other's existence. This interconnectivity between social stigma and falsehoods has unwanted effects on individuals, communities, and communication as well.

Misinformation can reinforce existing social stigmas by disseminating distorted information about certain groups, their beliefs, or behaviours. This leads to discrimination, prejudice, and marginalisation. On the other hand, social stigmas make people accept and share information that aligns with their preconceived biases. This vicious cycle fuels the harmful consequences of both misinformation and social stigma.

As misinformation spreads, trust in information sources can erode. This is particularly harmful when reliable sources are dismissed in favor of information that aligns with existing prejudices. False information stigmatises people and increases their chances of social rejection, discrimination, and exclusion. Addressing this societal menace is imperative for fostering a more informed and

inclusive community. Breaking this chain requires a multifaceted approach. This includes promoting media literacy, challenging stereotypes, fostering inclusivity and diversity in media and public discourses, and creating platforms for marginalized voices to be heard. This approach would incorporate the interconnected nature of misinformation and social issues, addressing both the supply and demand sides of the problem.

Media literacy education is crucial for empowering individuals to critically evaluate information sources, discern between credible and unreliable information, and understand the potential biases present in media narratives. By enhancing media literacy skills, people are better equipped to navigate the information landscape responsibly.

Fostering open dialogues that encourage understanding and empathy are instrumental in breaking down communication barriers. When individuals engage in respectful conversations, they can share diverse perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and build bridges of understanding.

Open dialogues contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant society. It is the need of the hour

to strengthen the cultural competence among the society. Being culturally competent when addressing stigmatized issues means recognising and respecting the diversity of cultural perspectives, avoiding stereotypes, understanding historical contexts, adapting communication styles, respecting sensitivities, involving affected communities, promoting inclusivity, and committing to continuous learning on cultural dynamics.

Wake up from the closed trap box! An open mind is a key to unlocking the world without barriers. It's the time to rejuvenate human minds to uphold respect for human dignity.

ArulSelvi Azhagiri



CONSTRUCTION TO NURTURE NATURE



Spirituality is a deeply personal and subjective experience. It's connection with nature is diverse, and individuals may experience or express this connection in unique ways based on their cultural, religious, personal beliefs. The restorative power of natural environments can have a profound impact on mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Recognizing the sacredness of nature can lead to a sense of environmental stewardship and a commitment to protecting the natural world.

Karen Shetty's story is an example of how spirituality and nature can intersect in a person's life, creating a completely new path for her to

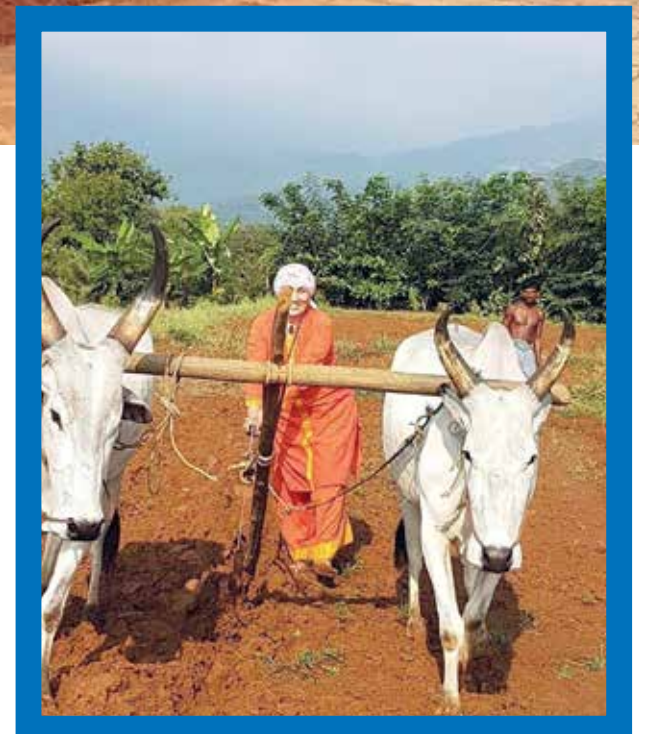
pursue. She does it with grace, humility and a big sense of contentment and says that she did not realise in the 22 years she spent in export business. "The spark can originate from anywhere but one must be conscious enough to recognise it, as I did. I was fortunate to be in a family that completely supported me," she says gratefully.

A post graduate in business administration from Coimbatore, Karen was able to participate productively in her husband's export business. Handling logistics, regulations and exports from Tiruppur, her experiences showcase her as a result-driven professional with extensive knowledge in the

sector. But the day she met her guru, a Himalayan Yogi, it was not a simple encounter. It was a transformative one that left an indelible mark in her life.

"In the simplicity of mindful breathing and the embrace of solitude, I realised a profound sense of peace in him—that permeated every aspect of his being. That realisation helped us connect and I learnt that we are more than what we see for ourselves," she reminisces.

To Karen this was not a wake-up call but the first step towards an inner evolution to rediscover herself. She travelled widely across the Himalayas, meditated and spent a lot of time to understand the process that





was happening in her. The vision of a landscape at the foothills of Himalayas was the 'spark' that defined her purpose in life now.

Back in Tenkasi district, she identified a land in Sathankulam Village, near the Kodanadu Tiger Reserve Forest that was surrounded by a river. This land was just the kind of place she was looking for to live in and nurture.

In the initial days, she rented a house in the nearby village and explored various possibilities. She started with planting trees but soon felt the need to stay closer to her land. That is when she made bricks

from local materials and built a mud house for herself. With the Department of Forests giving her 4000 trees, she felt drawn to her vision. "Things were falling in place gradually and naturally," she smiles.

Located in a remote surrounding on Agastya foothill, often characterised by rough winds, extreme weather, and absence of any modern facilities like transport or internet, it was all her call and exploration that eventually transformed this landscape into what it is today.

Karen tried mono cropping with peanuts and potato and did not use any chemical fertiliser or tiller. "I am not a farmer but

grew myself to be one. With every trial and error, the resolve to not disturb the natural composition of soil drew me closer to the notion of soil being the foundation of life in various forms.

Every species has its own place in nature and every form of life benefits life as a whole. Valuing every part of nature is crucial to show respect for mother earth," iterates Karen.

Very soon she saw the live nature of soil in her land. The farming activities rejuvenated the soil here and it allowed everything to thrive on it. "As the soil was alive, everything thrived, including us.

And the weeds were no longer in picture. As trees grew bigger many birds started coming in. We now have over seven thousand trees and the trees are now about thirty to forty feet in height. Animals like leopards visit us. Our space is for us and the all of them. We rebuilt a natural habitat and co-existed with all those natural beings. I live here as part of this whole – as part of Nature itself," she explains.

Mud is Karen's gold, literally. A lot of trial error in the design of her house in the first three years made her realise that mud was a potent building material but the knowledge about it was wading. The localities were able to share what they knew but this was not complete information. "Like most of us, they were also losing touch with traditional knowledge and natural materials. It was only when I got my hands on mud I started realising its nature, properties and strength," she adds.

As she worked to combine mud with other materials like limestone, bay and corn cobs (also used for the briquettes), she also observed how the materials worked in different weather conditions. When it rained, she saw how the walls reacted. "It was a completely organic process. Every species on earth knows to build its house. As I laid my hands on soil, it felt as if my cell memory got revived. Every element fell in place. It was like nature rising up to form a shelter for your protection and well-being," recounts Karen overwhelmingly.



The first house Karen built was spread across an area of 2,500 square feet. Having built over five houses till now, Karen explains that the real challenge is in the plastering stage. Guidance from a builder from Rajasthan helped her overcome that.

The plantation, the construction and the farming processes – all of it went hand in hand in regenerating the land in a homeopathic way. An acre of land that needed 150 kilograms of chemical fertilisers now provided yields with only 25 grams of organic inputs.

"This is soil rejuvenation in real work. We must get our hands on it to see it, to feel it and embrace our oneness with nature," she confirms.

Shanmuga Priya.T

PRAGMATIC APPROACHES TO PROBLEM-SOLVING

Solidaridad stands as a global civil society entity with over five decades of experience dedicated to crafting solutions that fortify communities. Its journey began with supporting marginalized Latin American communities and has since evolved to focus on fostering sustainable supply chains.

Spanning more than 40 countries across five continents, Solidaridad operates through seven independently supervised regional offices. Its central mission revolves around fostering international collaboration throughout the value chain, prioritizing small-scale farmers, families, and workers across farms, mines, supply chains, and their communities. The organization envisions an economy that serves everyone, where production and consumption sustainably coexist while honouring the planet, humanity, and future generations. Solidaridad's commitment lies in empowering farmers and workers to achieve fair livelihoods, shape their futures, and engage in sustainable practices that harmonize with nature by championing sustainability across the supply chain.

Solidaridad, despite its widespread presence and oversight by regional officers, holds steadfast to a set of fundamental values:

- **Solidarity:** Rooted in unity with smallholder farmers, workers, and producers
- **Solutions:** Prioritizing pragmatic approaches to problem-solving
- **Impact:** Driven by a commitment to meaningful change
- **Interdependence:** Recognizing the interconnectedness of all and the planet, collaboration remains pivotal
- **Innovation:** Belief in continuous learning for positive transformation
- **Inclusivity:** Acknowledging the value of each individual's contribution and their right to be heard
- **Integrity:** Committed to upholding the highest ethical and professional standards

Solidaridad's network structure operates on the belief that genuine change springs from within communities. It nurtures a collaborative environment that thrives on the exchange and debate of diverse ideas and perspectives, considering this interaction as the fertile ground for innovative solutions. Diversity and the representation of various perspectives and identities aren't merely nice attributes; they're fundamental to Solidaridad's quest to restore sustainability.

"In India, Solidaridad primarily works in the agricultural sector, mainly with small farmers, aiming to support them in transitioning to smarter and more sustainable production practices," says Suril Panneerselvam, Program Manager, Tamil Nadu, Solidaridad. He adds, "We aim to improve their livelihoods and make the supply chain fair and sustainable by promoting regenerative agriculture practices, improving environmental impacts through the adoption of renewable energy sources, encouraging responsible production, developing strong market linkages, and making workplaces safer."

Solidaridad has been actively prioritizing gender equity, women's empowerment, and the creation of environmentally sustainable job opportunities. Over the past 15 years, their efforts have spanned 15 different commodities in India, including Tea, Palm Oil, Soy, Cotton, Leather, Textile, and Rubber, among others. Its recent Annual Report in 2022 highlighted extensive work across 13 states, impacting approximately 700,000



farmers and significantly improving the income of 600,000 farmers.

Focusing on the Leather industry in Tamil Nadu, Solidaridad has made notable progress, following successful initiatives in the Tea sector. Presently, they are initiating new projects concentrated on Rubber in Kerala. Solidaridad's entry into the industrial sector began in 2017 with their inaugural project addressing Pollution abatement in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh.

This project, supported by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, received recognition from both governmental bodies and industries for its effective reduction of effluent discharge in over 200 tanneries. Subsequently, this successful model was expanded into other regions of India, including Kolkata and Tamil Nadu. Notably, both leather projects continue to receive funding from the European Union and are ongoing endeavours.

"Though we have been engaged in various fields for quite some time, especially focusing on industrial sectors lately, several significant barriers hinder the implementation of sustainable practices in these sectors," says Suril. "These obstacles encompass the conservative mindset ingrained in production processes and the resistance to adopting newer technologies, financial stability concerns, and the volatile market demand prevalent in the leather industry, the complex interplay of political and economic dynamics involved in the industrial shift toward sustainable development, and the crucial need for coordination among policies, stakeholders, and a dynamic adaptation of sustainable frameworks."

Despite these challenges, one of Solidaridad's primary issues is the imperative need for change to begin within oneself, which in turn emphasizes the importance of self-responsibility.

"In the leather sector, we've encompassed 80% of India's leather industrial clusters, directly engaging with 450 tanneries spread across three key locations – Kanpur, Unnao, Jajmau, Kolkata (Bantala), and Tamil Nadu (Pallavaram, Ambur, Ranipet)," says Suril.

He adds, "We're actively seeking other leather projects and reaching out to various global brands for collaboration. The insights gained from our ongoing project will be replicated in other clusters and scaled up in the future. Our latest endeavor involves showcasing

sustainable products at the upcoming Leather fashion show, part of the India International Leather Fair 2024."

Solidaridad collaborates closely with Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), addressing shared opportunities and challenges to bolster their comprehensive growth. Employing a strategic approach, Solidaridad actively involves Industry Associations to address these challenges proactively. Building trust stands as a cornerstone of their strategy, allowing entry into MSME clusters through these associations.

Gaining access to the cluster becomes pivotal in their strategy, facilitated by the association—a robust collective of member tanneries advocating and advancing initiatives for leather cluster development. Solidaridad engages with governmental and regulatory bodies, ensuring tanneries are informed and updated. By fostering collaboration with the Association, the execution becomes more streamlined and impactful.

Consequently, the organization forms a steering committee comprising enthusiastic members invested in the project. This committee leads to the establishment of a Public-Private Partnership platform, where members contribute guidance and chart a roadmap for the project, convening regularly to monitor progress.

Topics such as planning for market connections, financial accessibility, waste management, environmental sustainability, and community development undergo thorough discussion and agreement for implementation. This platform aims to ensure the project generates a lasting impact, sustaining its activities even after the project concludes.

Solidaridad's goals include undertaking impactful work across all spheres of solid-waste management in the leather industry, especially with a clearly defined purpose and timeline, and fostering inclusive growth in development areas by promoting women's empowerment, gender equality, and facilitating acceptable working conditions. "We are also working to elevate Tamil Nadu's profile within Solidaridad in the Southern region by introducing new projects focusing on commodities in the textile, agricultural, and dairy sectors," says Suril."

Rahul Philip

REMEMBERING DR. SAILAKSHMI

A Compassionate Advocate for Humanity



In a sad moment for the healthcare community, Dr. Sailakshmi Balijepally, the dedicated founder of Ekam Foundation, breathed her last on December 16, 2023, following a prolonged illness, aged 49. She leaves behind a legacy of compassion and tireless service to humanity, particularly in the realm of child healthcare.

Born into a family of doctors, Dr. Sailakshmi embarked on her mission to make quality healthcare accessible to every child, regardless of their socio-economic background. In 2009, she established Ekam Foundation with the unwavering belief that no child should be denied the fundamental right to healthcare. Since then, she worked tirelessly to mobilise funds for medical expenses, creating a ripple effect of positive change.

One of Dr. Sailakshmi's remarkable achievements was her strategic collaboration with the Government Public Healthcare system. By supporting staffing, capacity building, and equipment maintenance, she ensured the seamless provision of healthcare services to infants. Her initiatives reached over 300,000 children in regions spanning Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Uttarakhand.

Known for her visionary attitude, resilience and humble demeanour, Dr. Sailakshmi dedicated her life to the well-being of children. She extended her efforts beyond medical care, working closely with communities to improve maternal and child health. Her initiatives included working on behavioural change and raising awareness within communities, aiming to foster a sense of sustainable well-being and community ownership over healthcare.

Her relentless commitment to her cause did not go unnoticed. She won many accolades during the course of her journey. The President of India conferred on her the prestigious Nari Shakti Puraskar for 2014, a testament to her outstanding contributions to improving child, maternal and community health.

The news of Dr. Sailakshmi's passing has left a void in the hearts of those who

admired and worked alongside her. She is survived by her mother, Dr. B. Santha, and her sister, Dr. Sharada.

Her legacy, however, lives on through Ekam Foundation, an organisation that will continue to strive for the ideals that she held dear.

The world has lost a compassionate healer and a wonderful human-being but her impact on the lives of countless children and all whom she interacted with will endure for generations to come.

Neeta Nair



*We invite you to join us in celebrating the life of Dr. Sailakshmi.
Date: 30.12.2023
Time: 3pm to 5pm.
Venue: Asha Nivas, Rutland Gate, Nungambakkam, Chennai.*

MORE THAN WORDS: FACING AN UNSEEN DISABILITY WITH HOPE



Communication - the ability to comprehend or express oneself, is fundamental to everyone. But what if one day, your ability to process verbal information is compromised? If you could no longer say the words you want to?

This could happen to someone with aphasia.

Aphasia is an impairment of language caused by damage to the brain. It can affect a person's ability to speak, write or understand words. People with aphasia may confuse words that sound similar or have a related meaning. For example, when you say, 'I got a new cat,' they could interpret it as 'I got a new dog.'

Its severity varies based on the extent of the brain damage, and it's a disability that cannot be seen. One could be standing next to a person with aphasia and not recognise their struggle with this disability.

More than 2,500 individuals are diagnosed with aphasia in Singapore annually.

59-year-old Anthony Choon is one such person. After undergoing surgery for a brain tumour in 2022, Anthony realised he could not speak the words that used to flow effortlessly. He couldn't even ask the nurse for coffee or state his own name.

Persons with aphasia face challenges because of their communication difficulties. Speech therapy is one of the recommended treatments. Evelyn Khoo, a speech therapist, realised that more needed to be done to help these individuals after an encounter with one of her patients.

"We went out to order food, and he got stuck while trying to order. The store owner couldn't understand him and was a little impatient. I could see the helplessness in my patient's eyes," shares Evelyn.

Seeing him paralysed with fear, Evelyn stepped in to help. She realised that her work needed to extend beyond the clinic.

It is crucial for people to understand what aphasia is and show more patience towards someone grappling with this unseen disability. Living with aphasia is not just about the frustration of not being understood, but it can also lead to psychological impacts such as changes in identity and social isolation.

"Imagine if you lost the ability to speak your first language fluently. It really impacts a person's identity and confidence. Many of them start to socially isolate because they don't feel like they are the person they used to be," shares Evelyn.



➤ **Aphasia SG empowers persons with aphasia and their caregivers via virtual events and their bi-monthly Chit Chat Cafe**



This inspired Evelyn to start Aphasia SG, a non-profit organisation that provides support to persons with aphasia and their caregivers to alleviate them from this isolation.

The organisation is run by a dedicated team of volunteers. Through Aphasia SG, Evelyn hopes those impacted can find a community that empathises with them, fostering an environment free from judgement and fear.

"I think it's important for there to be a support network for people who need support," says Evelyn, "I hope that anyone who has aphasia knows that there is a community that they can seek support from."

Anthony learned about Aphasia SG through his speech therapist and has found joy in being an active participant in their community events. These events include the virtual Aphasia SG Choir and Games and

Craft Night, as well as the bi-monthly in-person Chit Chat Cafe, bringing together persons with aphasia, their caregivers and volunteers.

"Volunteers are the heartbeat of the organisation. They support the conversation around aphasia," says Evelyn.

These volunteers come from all walks of life. While some have experience in speech therapy, there are also students eager to grasp a deeper understanding of aphasia. What unites them is their desire to bridge the gap between persons with aphasia and society.

Anthony is glad to have a community that understands him.

"I feel this community understands each other, and it motivates us to stay strong," says Anthony.

ABOUT APHASIA SG

Aphasia SG is a not-for-profit organisation supporting persons with aphasia and their caregivers. It is run by a core team of dedicated volunteers. They organise virtual and in-person community events to foster a sense of belonging.

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

(www.ourbetterworld.org)

INSTINCTS AND VENTURES



Entrepreneurship is a comprehensive skill that develops with time, but for some it is their fundamental thought process. Irrespective of age, gender, education and back ground, these individuals are characterised by resilience and relentless pursuit to demonstrate that their ideas can actually work in reality. For Ms S Nirmala, member of a self-help group from Thirupuvanam, Sivagangai district, it was also the desire to be unique that geared all her efforts thus far.

Raised in a joint family by a single mother, who worked as a teacher in a mid-day meals school, Nirmala was fully aware that she will be married off soon after completing her school education. While this mentally prepared her for new responsibilities, her husband's work in a sugar factory that required shifting to new towns every three years allowed her to introspect on roles she was capable of taking up.

She was completely focussed on her family until 30 years of age. As both her children grew older and capable of managing their routine, Nirmala found a window of opportunity to engage with different groups.

She helped B Ed students with their craft projects. She also attended many vocational training programs and taught interested women in her neighbourhood. Every interaction and engagement expanded her social circle.

Seven years ago she moved to Thirupuvanam in Sivagangai district and started making fur toys at home. While she gifted most of the toys to her friends and family, she also considered the idea of putting up stalls at exhibitions and events. "I came across an advertisement of a self-help group, inviting women to learn the art of making jute bags. I was instantly drawn to it because it was something new to learn and also a widely accepted attribute of sustainable lifestyle," says Nirmala.



Since toys were her identity so far, she went to the training venue with her toys. Surprisingly, all women liked it and came forward to buy them. "They were all samples I had taken to show that I was capable of developing a product, but those women purchased them. It felt good and rewarding," she recalls.

Thus began her stall activity with the SHG members as they guided Nirmala to register and promote her products at various colleges and events.

A decade ago, revenue from her first stall in Thirupathur was around 750 rupees. "I knew this was not very lucrative, but I also understood that my customers were primarily students who cannot afford to buy expensive products. I therefore started making smaller toys to suit their needs," reflects Nirmala.

With no business acumen in the family, she wasn't as apprehensive as one would expect her to be. "It wasn't the absence of fear really. Rather, it was an excitement to present myself as able

and determined," she adds.

With time, she became a prominent name in her circles and marketing managers from the Department of Rural Development intimated her and her SHG about stall opportunities across the state. Within three years, she was also chosen to attend the Entrepreneurship Development Program offered by the Government of Tamil Nadu.

"I started from an activity I engaged in leisure. This program taught me the value of naming a product, branding it and the marketing strategies that may suit different stake holders. I saw it all with awe but the experience from stalls helped me relate my work in the larger scheme of things. I earned 10,000 rupees per day from my stall. It gave me the confidence to avail a loan from the Department of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises. I now have six members working with me. With each day, we are evolving into more capable and stronger individuals," contemplates Nirmala.

From toys to the 70 different products under her SHG's (Samayapurathal Self-Help Group) banner, it was diversification of products and acquisition of new skills that widened her networks. She learnt English to communicate to foreign customers. She taught skills like chocolate making to other SHGs and college students.

"I started as a learner. With chocolate making, I didn't even know how to manage temperatures. In the beginning, I faced loss and learnt my lesson. With growing awareness on millets, I tried making chocolates with pearl millet and it worked very well. While the result is visible, the time and effort that went into arriving at the right mix of ingredients is implicit. In all my classes, I insist that students dive into challenges and adopt means to overcome them because these are the true strength of an entrepreneur," she recalls, as a recognised trainer with the Department of MSME.

During the pandemic, Nirmala had to try a new product and her trials with Vetiver opened new avenues. She visualised its uses beyond the conventional wisdom and made products like hand fans, tea, car hangings, door garlands, body/hair wash powders, etc. Inspired by the versatility of Vetiver, she dedicated more time in developing new products and marketing them. The biggest hit was the herbal mosquito coil which has a huge fan base in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

A recipient of many awards including the Best Seller Award from the Department of MSME, Nirmala has come a long way to show all women that the ability to adapt, learn and persist are the fundamentals to growing as an entrepreneur. "It is the tenacious pursuit of opportunities, creativity and a willingness to take risks that defines entrepreneurial spirit in anybody," she affirms.

Shanmuga Priya.T

HOW TO RING IN THE NEW



ParuppuKeerai/Purslane

Credit: ZooFari - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8986945>

It's the time of the year when we somehow feel entitled to dream aloud and hope anew for all kinds of wonderful things to happen in the new calendar year. Of course, this is probably commerce-driven - just this morning, I saw an ad that said 'New Year, New You' and urged everyone to buy new apparel (or maybe it was new accessories?). Ads like these are just so wrong at so many different levels, but today, it is something else that I'd like to think through with you. It's this - what are the challenges that organic food-farmers and food-consumers currently face, and what can possibly be done to make things better?

Organic food farmers face plenty of challenges, but I think the primary ones are these:

- **Price Fluctuations:** Not knowing whether they can or cannot sell their produce at a price that enables them to make a living
- **Lack of Demand Data:** Not knowing how the demand for a particular item will move, and therefore not being able to accurately gauge how much of each item to sow/plant/harvest to avoid wastage
- **Inability to predict or control any of the million natural happenings that mess with produce:** Our friend Michuang is just one such. Locusts, unseasonal rain, aggressive pigs, heat waves, beautiful but peckish peacocks, and errant neighborhood goats are a few other examples.

Food consumers face the challenge (or at least, conscious ones should face this challenge) of finding clean, chemical-free, fresh, organic produce that won't come back to bite them or their livers or their endocrine systems or their children's lives a little bit down the line, at reasonable prices.

Now let's look at possible solutions to these issues that satisfy both the food-producer and the food-consumer.

Both price fluctuations and lack of demand data, as well as keeping consumers' costs reasonable can be addressed by creating some kind of system akin to a futures market. Here is more info about futures - I'll let you enjoy the story in Dr. Naveen Srinivasan's own words; he is a Professor, and Dean of the undergrad program, at Madras School of Economics:

"Once upon a time, long, long ago - at least 170 years - American farmers worked out a market system to provide some financial sanity in their lives. In essence, it was a kind of insurance and, as with all insurance, it involved paying a relatively small price (premium) as a guarantee against future loss. Why? During the early stages of the development of American agriculture, grain prices were subject to seemingly perpetual cycles of boom and bust as prices fell when farmers flooded the market with grain at harvest time and then rose later as shortages developed.

The system became known as the futures market and was centered in Chicago. The Chicago Board of Trade was founded in 1848....A rival exchange, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, was established in 1874 as a successor organization.

Despite their association in the financial press with speculation and gambling, futures markets have a valuable economic role. They permit both producers and consumers to transfer risks in such a way that all market participants can be better off. Contracts in the wheat futures markets, for example, typically stipulate the purchase and sale of specific quantities of wheat at fixed prices on a designated future date."

Essentially, a farmer enters into a contract to sell her output at the end of the growing season at a fixed price.

A consumer (either an end-consumer or not) can make a contract to buy a farmer's output at a fixed price too, and therefore avoid having to pay more even if market prices rise. Thus both of them are better off by transacting in the futures market.

Can this kind of a model possibly be implemented between individual farmers and individual families, or between farmers and townships of families? Well, there would be some issues to thresh out, such as who would take care of storage if required, and maybe how the logistics would be made workable, but it does seem possible, doesn't it?

And why am I trying to cut out a Board of some sort as liaison between the two? This is because the moment you bring in a third party, not only do all kinds of overheads, but also all kinds of rigidities, and distances, creep into the system.

There's the rigidity in terms of quantities expected from the farmer to consider, among others; without some minimum quantity, it's simply not possible to support a Board. And as soon as expected quantities go up, the small farmer suffers. He instantly becomes dependent on other people and other people's facilities. Even if a farmer is not a typical small farmer, and in fact owns large tracts of land, the pressure to produce a large quantity of one crop not only deals a death blow to the effort to multi-crop, but also brings with it all the problems associated with monocropping.

And there is the distance between the farmer and the consumer to consider. When there is an opaque Board in-between, the farmer can no longer call up the consumer and say, hey, I've got some strange mid-season raw mangoes out here, do you want some? And the consumer can't call the farmer and say, you know what, my daughter is studying plant responses at



Amla/Gooseberry: A Resilient Species

Credit: A. Sumana

school, may I bring her over to touch your touch-me-nots?

Why this distance is a threat becomes clear when we back up a little and consider the third challenge farmers face - the inability to control deterring natural events. If a consumer is used to having personal face-time with the farmer, the farmer doesn't have to explain why bananas are in short supply a little while after a cyclone (as now). The consumer can actually see the bent and broken plantain trees with his own eyes. And of his own volition, he will probably buy guavas or gooseberries for the fruit nutrition he needs. (These usually just fall to the soil in high winds - the trees are not as prone to damage as plantain, and if left on the soil, guavas and gooseberries rot. So it makes more sense to collect and eat them). There are many insects that attack and destroy palak (*paala keerai*) but leave *paruppu keerai* (*kulfa/purslane*) alone. A consumer who has walked on farmland would know this, and happily substitute one for the other as needed. And so on and so forth with most natural deterring events - knowing how the whole food-growing ecosystem works actually benefits both the farmer and the consumer. The farmer doesn't have to run pillar to post trying to arrange for some particular quantity of an item that is unavailable, the consumer doesn't have to eat some artificially ripened item full of harmful chemicals. Instead, he can buy something fresh, and he will get it at a very reasonable price too.

Perhaps this is a good way to ring in the new year - to work towards living in small, tight-knit communities that bring together food-farmers and food-consumers, communities peopled with those rich ones who are able to eat local and eat seasonal all the time, their intake untouched by preservatives and plastics. People who are therefore absolutely glowing with good health..... *Wish you all an year filled with good health and good cheer!*

Ramashree



The author Ramashree Paranandi is a partner in The Organic Farm, located near Nedumaram, TN. She consults on all aspects of the farm and often stays over for long stretches to enjoy pollution-free days with the other farm creatures. When in Chennai, she writes, teaches and sings. She can be reached at aramashree@eltconsultancy.org



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

Contact Persons:

Ms. Marie Banu Rodriguez
Director, Chennai
@ 9884700029

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

Dr. Agyeya Tripathi
Head - North & NE India
@ 91-8058662444

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

CSIM also facilitates Social Accounting and Audit for social enterprises, CSR projects, and NGOs through Social Audit Network, India (SAN India).

For further information, please contact: Ms. Latha Suresh
Director, SAN, India
@ 92822 05123.
www.san-india.org

“Vetiver, for me, is not just a cash crop; it's the main root of health and happiness.”

Mr. C. Pandian shares with Marie Banu, his experiences in the realm of Vetiver farming in India.

Pandian, initiated his journey into Vetiver farming by collecting wild varieties of this versatile grass in the Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu. Over time, he transitioned to cultivating new varieties, particularly those developed by the CSIR-Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CSIR-CIMAP), a prominent Indian research organization. Notably, Pandian has played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Vetiver saplings for both commercial cultivation and public awareness.

His contributions are substantial, with the supply of 1.5 crores of saplings facilitating widespread commercial cultivation. Furthermore, he has distributed over 60 lakh saplings as part of public awareness initiatives, emphasizing the importance of Vetiver in sustainable farming practices.

In addition to his cultivation efforts, Vetiver Pandian has diversified his portfolio, now producing over 100 types of value-added Vetiver products. This extensive range includes handicrafts, cosmetics, and medicinal items, showcasing the versatility and commercial potential of this wonder grass.



In an exclusive interview, Pandian shares with Marie Banu, his experiences in the realm of Vetiver farming in India.

Can you share your experiences in venturing into Vetiver cultivation?

Certainly. I hail from Sivaganga district of Tamil Nadu, where I own a 10-acre land. The decision to explore Vetiver cultivation was not merely a financial endeavor but a transformative chapter in my life, one that would redefine my understanding of agriculture and its potential.

Due to financial constraints, I worked for a brief while in Singapore as a cashier in a mall. When I returned to India and worked in Coimbatore, an article emphasising the role of agriculture in India's prosperity caught my attention, sparking a curiosity that would change the course of my life. In 2007, I stumbled upon Vetiver and its myriad uses, realising the untapped potential this grass held.

About your entrepreneurial venture?

The turning point in my journey came when I decided to set up a stall at the Agriculture Expo in Coimbatore. Distributing small packets of Vetiver and informative leaflets, we witnessed an overwhelming response. In just four days, we sold out all the packets and started disseminating

leaflets on the benefits of Vetiver. This marked the humble beginning of my entrepreneurial venture.

How did you integrate traditional wisdom and innovative applications into Vetiver cultivation, and what unique products did you develop?

Recognizing the need for authenticity, I documented the medicinal properties of Vetiver from a laboratory and delved into Siddha books for additional insights. Names like "Vasiya Moligai" and "Nidhi Nayakan" from Siddha books found their way into our products, adding a layer of tradition to our offerings. Beyond traditional uses, we explored innovative applications, creating products like curtains and essential oils.

What challenges did you face in marketing Vetiver products, and how did you navigate them?

Unlike conventional marketing strategies, we chose not to give our products on credit, and we refrained from enrolling external marketers to minimise expenses. Instead, we focused on crafting products that catered to diverse health needs. This decision, while challenging, allowed us to maintain quality and profitability.

How do you perceive the multifaceted benefits of Vetiver?

Vetiver, for me, is not just a cash crop; it's the main root of health and happiness. With its diverse applications, from eye care to skin health, Vetiver addresses various health needs. Moreover, its use in preventing soil erosion, its moisture retention property, and its potential for groundwater replenishment make it an environmentally sound choice for sustainable farming practices.

Vetiver symbolises transformative change in agricultural practices. Vetiver's potential extends beyond profit margins to encompass environmental stewardship, community prosperity, and a redefined narrative for sustainable agriculture. It stands not just as a cash crop but as a symbol of harmonious blending—tradition and innovation, profitability, and sustainability.

How did your journey evolve into establishing Cm. Eco – Herbal Plantations?

In 2006, I took a significant step by establishing Cm. Eco – Herbal Plantations in Tirupattur, Sivaganga district. This venture involved contractual production of Vetiver in 60 acres and the promotion of Vetiver in my own 10-acre plot. Beyond cultivation, we ventured into value addition, developing various products from Vetiver. These

products are actively marketed through online platforms and direct sales.

What initiatives have you undertaken to raise awareness about Vetiver cultivation?

My commitment to community development extends beyond my farm. I supplied nearly 60 lakh Vetiver slips for public awareness campaigns focused on soil and water conservation. Additionally, I distributed 1.5 crores of planting material of Vetiver varieties to fellow farmers, encouraging them to take up cultivation. These initiatives foster a sense of collective responsibility towards sustainable agricultural practices.

The essential oil distillation unit was a pivotal addition, allowing us to extract and market high-value essential oils derived from Vetiver. This innovation added sophistication to Vetiver products, creating new avenues for revenue.

Please tell us about your plans for furthering Vetiver in the coming years?

Looking ahead, I envision promoting Vetiver Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), connecting the fragrance market with FPOs, and obtaining Geographical Indication (GI) tagging for Cuddalore Vetiver. These initiatives, with the support of The India Vetiver Network, aim to propel Vetiver cultivation into a mainstream and sustainable agricultural practice.

Vetiver's potential extends beyond profit margins to encompass environmental stewardship, community prosperity, and a redefined narrative for sustainable agriculture. It stands not just as a cash crop but as a symbol of harmonious blending—tradition and innovation, profitability, and sustainability.

What overarching lessons can be drawn from your personal journey and the broader implications of Vetiver cultivation?

My journey is a testament to the transformative power of innovative thinking in agriculture. From financial constraints to international recognition, it underscores the potential of harnessing nature's bounty for the greater good. Vetiver's impact extends beyond profit margins to encompass environmental stewardship, community prosperity, and a redefined narrative for sustainable agriculture. It is a symbol of transformative change, illustrating how a humble grass can redefine the narrative of agriculture, becoming a source of innovation, entrepreneurship, and holistic community well-being.