

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 13 | Issue 2 | February 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

Celebrating Agripreneurship About MSDS 2025 Awards

Changemakers



3

Wealth from discarded fruit

About Mr Siva, an entrepreneur from Panruti, in Cuddalore district.

Inspirations



9

Inspiring Conversations

Interview with Swamini Prabhavananda Saraswati, President, Sri Gnanananda Niketan, Tapovanam.

Chit Chat



12

"In nature, nothing goes to waste—everything has a purpose."

An exclusive interview with Ms. Santha Sheela Nair, IAS (Retd.)

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In a world increasingly defined by industrialization and urbanization, the role of agripreneurs—innovative entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector—has never been more vital. These individuals are not only sustaining the backbone of our food systems but also pioneering sustainable and regenerative farming practices that benefit both the environment and local communities. As we celebrate their contributions, it is essential to recognize their efforts and encourage more individuals to venture into natural and eco-friendly farming.

One such significant recognition is the MSDS 2025 Fellowship Awards, set to take place in Tindivanam on 1 March 2025. This prestigious event is dedicated to honoring natural farmers who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to sustainable agriculture. These farmers, through organic techniques, soil conservation methods, and innovative agroforestry practices, are setting an example for future generations.

The MSDS 2025 Fellowship Awards aim to spotlight agripreneurs who have successfully integrated traditional knowledge with modern sustainability techniques. Their ability to harness natural resources efficiently while maintaining ecological balance is a testament to their ingenuity and perseverance. Moreover, these awards serve as an inspiration for policymakers, educators, and young farmers who aspire to contribute to a greener, self-sustaining agricultural economy.

Natural farming is more than a method; it is a movement toward healthier soil, chemical-free produce, and a more resilient farming community. By embracing techniques such as zero-budget natural farming (ZBNF) and permaculture, agripreneurs are proving that profitability and sustainability can go hand in hand.

Events like the MSDS 2025 Fellowship Awards play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of these farmers. They provide a platform for sharing knowledge, networking, and fostering innovation in the field of natural farming. This recognition not only uplifts the farmers themselves but also encourages a broader shift towards sustainable agricultural practices at a national level.

As we look forward to this grand celebration in Tindivanam, let us take a moment to appreciate the agripreneurs who work tirelessly to nourish both the land and its people. Their dedication ensures a future where farming thrives in harmony with nature, ensuring food security and environmental well-being for generations to come.

Let us celebrate, support, and empower these champions of agriculture!

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

A FRAGRANT LEGACY

In the heart of Uttar Pradesh lies Kannauj, a city steeped in a centuries-old tradition of crafting exquisite attars and essential oils. Often hailed as the "Perfume Capital of India," its aromatic heritage has been preserved through generations. One such custodian of this legacy is Aviral Pathak, a young entrepreneur who, despite personal tragedy, has revitalized his family's perfumery business with innovation and determination.

Born on December 16, 2000, in Kannauj, Aviral was introduced to the world of fragrances at an early age. His father, deeply involved in the perfume and essential oil manufacturing industry, carried forward a family craft that had endured for generations. However, in 2017, tragedy struck when Aviral's father passed away unexpectedly. At just 17, Aviral found himself at the helm of the family business.

"I was very young, just 17 at that time. Suddenly, I had to take responsibility for the family business," Aviral recalls. "I didn't have much knowledge then, so I took a couple of years to learn and understand the intricacies of the trade."

While pursuing a B.Tech in Computer Science Engineering, Aviral's exposure to peers interested in startups ignited his entrepreneurial spirit. Recognizing the challenges within his hometown's perfume industry, he saw an opportunity to blend traditional practices with modern technology.

"I thought, why not address the problems my city is facing?" he says. "The perfume and essential oil market is quite cluttered. I began learning from my mother and uncles, combining my IT knowledge with traditional methods to create something valuable."

Historically, Kannauj's attar industry thrived under the patronage of Mughal emperors, who cherished its fragrances. However, in recent decades, the number of distilleries has declined from 700 in the 1990s to around 150-200 by the mid-2000s. This decline stemmed from challenges in pricing competition and adapting to modern market demands.

Aviral's family business primarily operated on a B2B model, catering to a select clientele. Recognizing a gap in the market, he launched a website to connect directly with consumers, offering small bottles of their traditionally crafted perfumes and essential oils.

"We received a positive response from customers," Aviral notes. "This encouraged us to invest in marketing and advertising, gradually increasing interest in our products."

With the global shift toward natural ingredients in beauty and cosmetic products, Aviral emphasized the purity of their offerings. "Consumers are now more aware of the ingredients in their products. They're seeking natural, plant-based components, which aligns with our traditional methods," he explains.

Traditional distillation methods in Kannauj, such as the deg-bhapka technique, yield less oil compared to modern steam distillation. To enhance efficiency and quality, Aviral experimented by setting up a fractional distillation unit.

"While 90% of Kannauj's manufacturers use traditional methods," he explains, "I've established a fractional distillation unit to produce the best quality oils with higher yields."

This fusion of tradition and innovation has positioned Aviral's enterprise to meet both domestic and international demands effectively.

One of the major challenges in Kannauj is the accessibility of authentic attars. Consumers eager to purchase traditionally manufactured perfumes often struggle to find genuine products in local perfumery shops. Many sellers either do not offer



original attars or mix synthetic chemicals to increase profit margins, resulting in customers unknowingly purchasing chemically altered products marketed as natural.

To address this issue, Aviral launched AttarKannauj.com—a platform connecting consumers directly with authentic manufacturers in Kannauj. This initiative ensures customers receive genuine attars and perfumes crafted using the traditional deg-bhapka method, preserving the legacy and authenticity of Kannauj's renowned fragrance industry.

Beyond business growth, Aviral is committed to community development. He sources raw materials directly from local farmers, ensuring fair compensation and fostering sustainable practices. Additionally, his company provides employment opportunities, particularly empowering women in roles like packaging and flower plucking.

"Women play a crucial role in our operations," Aviral emphasizes. "From packaging to farming, their involvement is invaluable."

By integrating his sister into the business, Aviral challenges traditional gender roles, promoting inclusivity in an industry where female participation has historically been limited.

Despite India's rich heritage in producing high-quality vetiver oil, the country has yet to establish itself as a leading exporter. Aviral aims to change this narrative.

"In 2019, the global demand for vetiver oil was around 408 tons," he notes. "Countries like Haiti and Indonesia are major exporters. India, despite having superior quality, isn't leading in exports. My vision is to position India as the top exporter of vetiver oil."

To achieve this, Aviral is establishing international partnerships, setting up dealers in countries like the USA, and educating local manufacturers about modern distillation techniques to meet global standards.

Through resilience and innovation, Aviral Pathak is not only sustaining his family's business but also contributing to the renaissance of Kannauj's storied perfume industry, ensuring its fragrances continue to enchant the world.

"In the future, I plan to raise awareness about the authenticity and quality of these products. By educating consumers, I aim to restore and secure the rightful place of genuine Kannauj attars in the market, ensuring their heritage and craftsmanship are recognized and valued," he concludes.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

WEALTH FROM A DISCARDED FRUIT

Value addition is an industry in itself that can hugely impact multiple sectors and contribute significantly to the Indian economy. While Tier 1 cities are saturated with industries and face infrastructure bottlenecks, smaller cities offer low-cost labor, affordable land and untapped resources—perfect for value addition industries. “But not everyone understands opportunities for what they actually are. New opportunities can thrive from where we choose to build them,” reflects Mr Siva, an entrepreneur from Panruti in Cuddalore district.

He grew up in Keezhmampattu village near Banruti, watching his parents manage home and the wood business. It gave him early exposure to business management and working with local labor. After graduating in Engineering from Dindivanam in 2012, he worked in Chennai for a couple of years. “Job was good. It was a standard routine but with little flexibility. I always thought through different business ideas because the sense of independence it promised was empowering and deeply fulfilling. As a person drawn towards planning my growth to benefit others, it was very encouraging. I wanted to create employment opportunities,” recalls Siva.

In his years of job, alongside research about potential business opportunities, he came to know about the export of herbs being very profitable. He registered a company called Green Max in 2015 but was not sure about the products to focus upon. Siva decided to prepare himself by starting from the basics and attended different training programs. In 2018, he also got a chance to meet with Dr C K Ashok Kumar, one of the sons of the late Shri R. Chinni Krishnan, the innovator behind the sachet revolution in India. Also, the Founder of First World Community (FWC) - an organization dedicated to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship across various sectors, Dr C K Ashok Kumar has built multiple platforms to bridge the gap between aspiring entrepreneurs and real-world opportunities.

“It was he who introduced me to the expanding Vettiver cultivation in Tamil Nadu and the vast opportunities it created. In Cuddalore alone, nearly 600 acres were dedicated to its cultivation. Seeing its potential, I began sourcing Vettiver from farmers and supplying it to pharmaceutical companies for Ayurvedic medicine production. A lawyer by profession, he left his career to join his brother in managing their father’s business. His insights and vision deeply inspired me,” explains Siva, who then became a regular attendee of talks on entrepreneurship.

Mr Suresh Sambandam is a visionary entrepreneur dedicated to fostering Tamil Nadu’s economic growth and transforming it into a trillion-dollar economy. His talk on mass entrepreneurship and the opportunities missed so far shocked Siva. “Suresh sir insisted that for tier 2 and tier 3 cities to grow, companies, brands and marketing must be built around them. His



talk compelled me to look into local opportunities. His column in a tamil magazine (Junior Vikatan) described about every district bestowed with different natural resources and the possibilities of building new brands for them.

The column on Cuddalore district highlighted the exports of Vettiver and Cashew. I was stunned to learn that cashew fruits have been discarded for over 200 years,” he emphasizes, still reflecting the same sense of disbelief. Upon discovering that cashew fruit contains five times more vitamin C than an orange, he couldn’t stay idle. Further, the article’s estimate about the potential of generating 1800 crores per year from adding value to cashew fruits reiterated the amount of revenue lost so far. “How could such a valuable opportunity be overlooked?” he wondered.

Siva then decided to invest, research and develop a product from these cashew fruits. He came up with an indigenous formula to produce cashew juice, without any added sugar, artificial preservative or colors. With a shelf life of six months, this product was very promising. He now founded the Cashvita Private Limited Company in 2023 and started producing cashew juice on a small scale. Very soon, grants from the Department of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of

Tamil Nadu and the award from Millionaire Farmer of India (MFOI Awards) encouraged him to grow further. “There had been several efforts since more than a decade to set up an industry for the processing of cashew fruits as it was a prominent industry in Banruti. However, it was all futile as no products were developed or tested. With my formula, I was able to take the leap and successfully

set up the factory,” he adds.

He did not stop here. Given the huge quantity of cashew exports from this region, around 28,000 metric tons annually, he felt that cashew nuts can also go through value addition to enable additional employment and revenue. He now developed an energy bar with cashew nuts and millets, which had a shelf life of about three months. “Tamilnadu’s GDP has primarily focussed on export of raw materials. It is high time that we also shed light on value addition to create new industries, new employment opportunities and further the economic growth. To build a strong economy, production must go hand in hand with value addition. We must know the complete value of all materials we produce,” insists Siva, who is also regularly visited by students pursuing agriculture.

With both the products being successful in the market, Siva now looks forward to diversify in this industry. “My goal is to fully utilize both cashew nuts and cashew fruits, exploring every possible opportunity to maximize their value and impact. In this effort, I want to create employment opportunities for at least 1000 youngsters, thus boosting local economy and building a sustainable agribusiness, tapping into the high nutritional and market potential of cashew based products,” he voices with a clear sense of direction.

—Shanmuga Priya.T



SEEDS OF CHANGE



Food practices have always been deeply intertwined with culture, evolving alongside societal changes and technological advancements. Traditional diets, rich in locally grown grains, seasonal vegetables and naturally fermented foods, sustained generations with balanced nutrition. However, modernization, urbanization and industrialized agriculture have gradually replaced these time-tested food habits with processed and convenience foods. As food culture moves away from whole, nutrient-dense meals towards refined, chemically preserved options, the link between dietary changes and rising health issues becomes more evident. Reconnecting with traditional food practices could be key to restoring both individual health and sustainable agriculture.

“How did we drift away from them? I still brood over this. Was it the mechanization of agriculture, the pressures of a growing population, or something else that led us away from our traditional crops? What we consume daily today was once an occasional meal, eaten just once a week or fortnight. Conversely, the wholesome foods our ancestors relied on every day have now become rare, reserved for special occasions—often only revisited after lifestyle diseases like diabetes force us to reconsider our diets,” ponders Mr Govindarajan, a member of the Senthamizh Traditional Farming Centre (STFC) in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu.

As a child who never attended school, Govindarajan was always engaged in assisting his parents in all farm activities, including rearing of cows. “We fetched

water from wells, manually processed grains for family’s use. We extracted oil from sesame and peanut. We ate what we produced,” he recalls. Things changed after his father’s demise and he was compelled to take up wage based work in and around his village. He managed farming on his land along with wage work to support his family. He also gave in to commercial agriculture and cultivated sugarcane for over ten years. “Everything we consumed came from outside and the sugarcane did not yield significant benefits. In 2010, I heard about the great agricultural scientist Nammazhvar and started following him,” he says.

Immersed in thoughts of traditional food, changing food culture and rising health issues, he was disturbed about his new born daughter’s health. “She was born in 2011 and ever since three months old, she had recurring episodes of phlegm build up but all medical attention did not help. She consumed what we gave her. Where did we go wrong?” he reflects. He was taken aback by facts spewed by Nammazhvar. “The magnitude of land under sugarcane cultivation doesn’t mean that farmers who produce them are earning profits. Over 22,000 acres are dedicated to sugarcane cultivation, yet farmers are compensated solely for its sweetness. Meanwhile, the industry reaps profits from its numerous by-products—molasses, liquor, paper and even electricity. In reality, our farming was never truly for us, but for the industry,” shares an astonished Govindarajan.

All these happenings convinced him to

give up on sugarcane and grow crops that his family needed. He started with vegetables and then tried pulses and grains. He successfully harvested traditional rice varieties like Kattuyanam, Karupu Kavuni, etc. In 2018, when he visited a stall to buy seeds, he learnt about natural fertilisers also being sold there. “I was excited to know that organic farming was a reality and that it was happening around me. And the awakened farmer in me kept asking why we should do farming for someone else. I became determined to farm for my family. We must practice farming for US,” he remarks.

He began to attend training programs conducted by agriculture officers. He got to know about the STFC group from another farmer and soon joined the group to learn all the intricacies of organic farming. “Every time I learnt something about organic farming, I had to unlearn a practice that I was rigorously following for decades,” he adds. Govindarajan not only purchased seeds from STFC but religiously followed all organic methods learnt from them. His first harvest in 2019 was small in quantity but rich in flavour. It was in total contrast to what was regularly used at home earlier, which had no

fragrance or flavour. “I was completely convinced with no speck of doubt. I was determined to cultivate all traditional rice varieties organically,” he exclaims.

Now that he cultivated over 35 different traditional varieties of rice and vegetables, he was a resourceful farmer who not only sold seeds but also taught organic farming and the traits of traditional food crops to fellow farmers and agriculture students. With the seeds extracted manually with local labour, he confidently claims that his seeds are also free from any kind of contamination. “We produce, consume and sell clean food,” smiles Govindarajan. He also tried organic farming methods for banana and papaya, both produced for the market, but the smaller size of these fruits was a disadvantage. Although disheartening, he managed commercial farming alongside preservation of seeds. Inspired by Nammazhvar’s words ‘Seeds are the biggest weapon’, he believes that traditional seed preservation has deep significance in sustainable and organic farming.

He envisions the crucial role of seed preservation in times of crisis, such as another pandemic. “During COVID-19, the availability of vegetables sustained us, but what if a future crisis disrupts food supply even further? Preserving traditional seeds is the key to long-term food security. This isn’t just a farmer’s duty—it’s a collective responsibility of our entire civilization. If we want a healthy, secure future, we must take charge of our food production,” emphasizes Govindarajan.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

FROM SOIL TO SUSTAINABILITY

Any farmer in Tamil Nadu who speaks for organic farming and is concerned about soil's health, its implications on the environment would have listened to the revered agricultural scientist, Late G Nammazhvar at some point in time. "He was also an environmentalist and a mentor to farmer mentor who was outspoken about the challenges in organic farming in the initial period and yet, so compelling to accept it for the sake of food security, biodiversity and sustainability. He is once in a millennia leader that every farmer in the world can relate to," says Mr Murugan, Founder of Senthamizh Traditional Farming Centre in Cuddalore.

He was a graduate in Mathematics who also ran a tuition centre for local kids along with his friends. As it was not sustainable, he underwent a vocational training program and worked as an electrician, specialized in handling motor repair works. "Agriculture was happening on my land. Like most farmers, we consumed what we produced. But somehow, I did not pay attention to it as my primary occupation. Listening to Nammazhvar in 2003 changed everything. I viewed farming as a profound practice, carefully developed by civilizations to harmonize human sustenance with nature's cycle of nutrient redistribution," explains Murugan, who wasted no time in shifting to natural farming methods on his land.

The fact that soil is losing its fertility is not new anymore, but farmers are also not fully aware of the long terms, devastating consequences this could lead to. One important factor we must understand is the carbon levels in soil. "Soil acts as a natural carbon sink, storing more carbon than the atmosphere. Unfortunately, soil carbon levels have drastically declined from 2.3% to just 0.3% over the past century, leading to a severe loss of soil microbial life and fertility. This depletion is primarily due to the overuse of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and intensive farming practices, which strip the soil of its organic matter and disrupt the natural



carbon cycle. The day this drops to 0.1%, no matter what we all do, we cannot grow our food. The damage becomes irreversible, creating a point where soil can no longer support plant life, no matter what interventions we attempt," reflects Murugan, with shock and disbelief. As carbon in soil decreases, carbon in air will increase manifold leading to a rise in global temperature and different species will struggle to survive. Droughts, famines, floods will become more frequent and delirious. "Now that I know my land can contribute to avert this disastrous cycle of events, I wanted to do something, engaging other farmers too," he adds.

Educating farmers about the perils of their practices is a loaded responsibility and Murugan feels that Nammazhvar has set a very good benchmark to follow. "We have all started realising the natural symbiotic bonds that agriculture nurtured. We have the most significant role to play in world's food security and climate change mitigation," he remarks. The enlightened farmer began to spend more

time in learning what all a farmer can do on his land, irrespective of its size. That is when he explored about the preservation of native seeds. He initiated the Senthamizh Traditional Farming Centre (STFC) in 2017 to popularise the ideas of natural farming and the significance of soil health for mankind's very existence. Twenty farmers from neighbouring districts joined this movement and started applying all their learnings from here on their land. "They learn, they implement and benefit, but the lesson reaches other farmers too, who continue to be sceptical about organic farming and are hesitant to take that one step forward," he says.

Gradually Murugan started simple initiatives like tree plantation around local water bodies with his farmers' group. In every such initiative, they also made it a point to spread the awareness on the harmful effects of plastics and encouraged the use of cloth bags. "In fact, no matter where we are and what we do, our motto should be to consume lesser and lesser goods, and add lesser garbage. It is easily said than adopted. Eventually, this is the

way and I am sure, mankind will come to terms with this reality. We cannot run away from the mess we, as a civilisation, have created on earth. Attention on poison free food is the best step forward, with implications on human, soil and animal health," he exclaims.

Apart from educating and supporting farmers in their natural farming journey, STFC also promotes cultivation of traditional food crops. Traditional crops like millets, native rice varieties and pulses require less water and fewer chemical inputs, making them more sustainable than hybrid varieties. They support biodiversity, enhance soil fertility and reduce soil degradation. Every farmer in the group educates more farmers about the same with dedicated attention to at least varieties by each of them. "There are so many traditional varieties in rice, vegetables and greens. Farmers must share this responsibility. STFC has guided the members to focus on two varieties each, use one for personal consumption and business purpose and the other, primarily for its protection. This will also help learn new ways of growing traditional crops and thence contribute to the dissemination of this knowledge. We will practice and preach from our own experience," elaborates Murugan, content that his group will preserve at least 40 varieties of traditional crops.

He is not only convinced that this approach is the most effective response to global warming and its escalating consequences, but he also firmly believes that locally driven initiatives can empower farmers. By adding value to farm produce and transforming it into products like soaps, pickles and porridge mixes, these efforts are not just preserving traditional practices but also strengthening the local economy. "All our ingredients are sourced from other farmer groups from neighbouring districts. All efforts are on small scale, but impactful, fully focussed on the real objective," assures Murugan.

Shanmuga Priya.T



MSDS AWARDS 2025

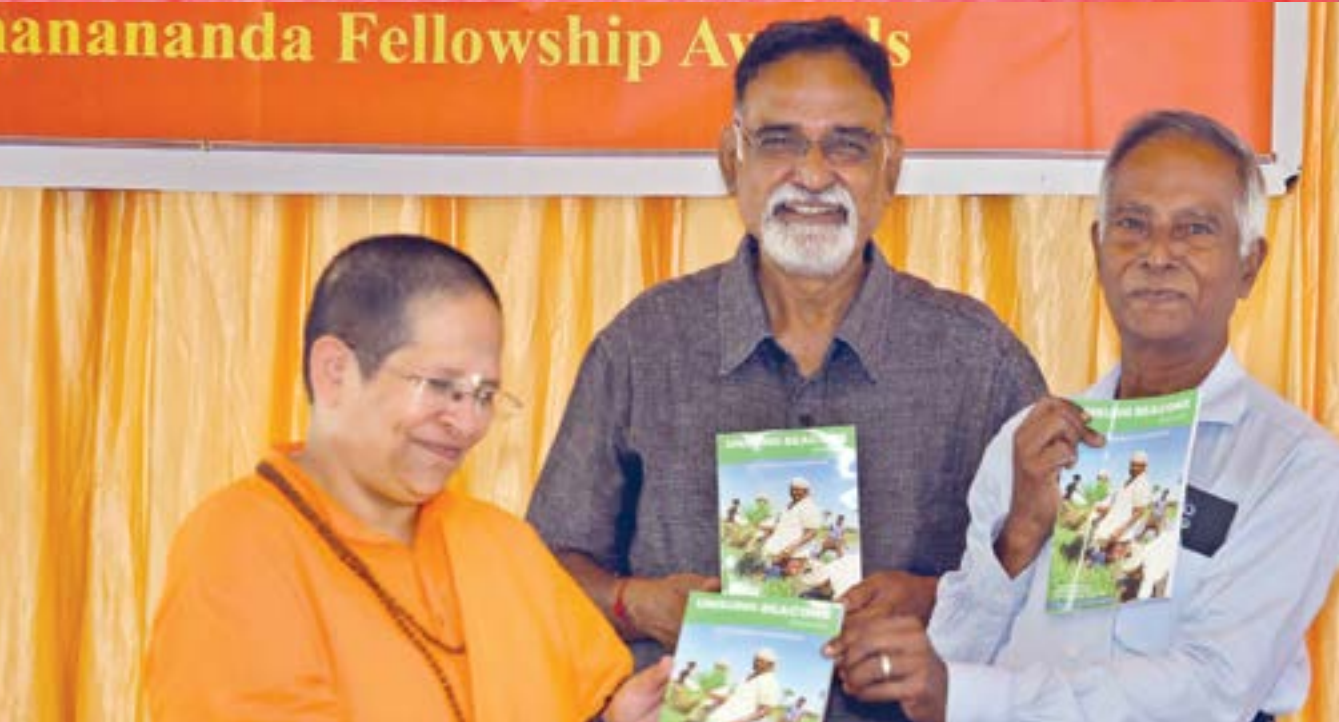
HONORING EXCELLENCE IN AGRIPRENEURSHIP



MSDS plays a crucial role in fostering a dynamic and supportive environment for social entrepreneurs and agripreneurs. By equipping changemakers with essential knowledge, resources, and support systems, MSDS enables them to drive meaningful and lasting social transformation. Through its efforts, MSDS empowers individuals and organizations to optimize their effectiveness, maximize resource efficiency, and showcase measurable value to stakeholders.

Key Focus Areas:

- Celebrating Social Entrepreneurs and Agripreneurs:** The MSDS Awards recognize visionary leaders, groundbreaking solutions, and impactful initiatives that drive social change. By honoring exceptional individuals and organizations, these awards serve as a catalyst to inspire future changemakers and foster a culture of innovation in the social sector.
- Coaching Aspiring Social Entrepreneurs and Agripreneurs:** Through Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) Learning Centers, MSDS provides aspiring entrepreneurs with capacity-building programs, mentorship, and guidance to help them successfully launch and scale their initiatives. This support network ensures that emerging social entrepreneurs are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to create sustainable change.
- Commemorating and Recognizing Social Initiatives:** MSDS highlights impactful social initiatives through publications like Conversations Today, Unsung Beacons, and other books on social entrepreneurship. These platforms showcase success stories, best practices, and innovative models, amplifying



- the voices of changemakers and facilitating knowledge exchange within the social entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- Strengthening the Credibility and Impact of the Social Sector:** By implementing social impact assessments, social audits, and Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluations through the Social Audit Network, India, MSDS helps social entrepreneurs enhance their impact, improve resource efficiency, and provide measurable proof of their contributions to society. These assessments add credibility to social initiatives, ensuring transparency and accountability in their operations.

The much-anticipated MSDS 2025 Awards are set to take place on 1st of March at St. Anne's School, Tindivanam. This prestigious event continues to shine a spotlight on social entrepreneurs and agripreneurs who are making a remarkable impact on society through their innovative and sustainable initiatives. The landmark event, brings together social innovators, industry leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders to celebrate the power of social entrepreneurship. This event not only recognizes outstanding contributions but also fosters collaboration and knowledge-sharing among changemakers, further strengthening the ecosystem for sustainable development.

DREAMS FROM DEEP ROOTS

Entrepreneurship offers the freedom to create, innovate, and witness the direct impact of one's effort. The challenge and reward of building something from scratch cultivate a deep sense of ownership and fulfillment, providing a purpose-driven path that aligns with identity and contribution to the world.

Kamalanathan, a native of Pondicherry, charted his unique journey from engineering to entrepreneurship, driven by a desire for meaningful work. His father, a teacher, instilled in him a love for learning. "One must learn enough to recognize opportunities but unlearn and relearn to create them," he recalls—a lesson that profoundly shaped his entrepreneurial path.

After working as an area manager in Chennai, Kamalanathan felt disconnected from his role. Seeking fulfillment, he enrolled in the Entrepreneurship Development Program by the Tamil Nadu government's Department of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. Exposure to agriculture, particularly high-value crops like aromatic plants, led him to intensive training in Lucknow.

He cautiously ventured into farming, starting with Moringa plantations and finding success in selling moringa powder. Encouraged, he diversified into indigo and palmgroves, focusing on soil rejuvenation and market demand. His most notable venture, however, has been large-scale Vetiver cultivation.

Vetiver fascinated him with its deep roots and diverse benefits. It conserves soil and yields an essential oil used in perfumes, cosmetics, and medicine. "The demand for Vetiver oil in domestic and international markets was promising. I saw an opportunity to create something impactful," he explains.

Despite labor-intensive harvesting and lengthy distillation, Kamalanathan dedicated two years to research and designed his own distillation unit to ensure high-quality output. Recognizing Vetiver's role in soil conservation, he distributes free saplings to landslide-prone areas.

During COVID-19, he supplied Vetiver roots for Kabasura Kudineer, a herbal immunity booster. Now, he aims for global expansion, planning a European office to showcase India's agricultural heritage. "Vetiver can connect our traditions with the world. I'm ready for this leap," he affirms.



MSDS FELLOW 2025

A VISIONARY LEADER



Mr. G. Selvaraj, the dynamic Panchayat President of Kulur, Erode District, has been at the forefront of green initiatives, earning multiple accolades from the State Government. His journey from a businessman to a committed leader has been inspiring for his community.

Born and raised in Govindan Naicken Palayam, Mr. Selvaraj pursued his education in Modakkurichi and later earned a BA in English Literature from Chiikkaiah Naicker College, Erode. Despite his initial ventures in the hotel and cone factory business, his deep-rooted connection to his village led him to step into politics. Encouraged by his neighbors, he contested the Panchayat elections against six candidates and emerged victorious. His leadership began on January 6, 2020, and his first initiative was the plantation of 500 trees to promote environmental sustainability.

His tenure saw remarkable progress in various sectors. Under his leadership, the village has planted over 8,000 trees, established three new ponds for water conservation, and constructed check dams to support irrigation. His dedication earned Kulur the "Green and Clean Village Award" from the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, along with appreciation from the Hon'ble Governor on September 26, 2023.

Mr. Selvaraj has also worked extensively towards making Kulur plastic-free. Households were provided with waste segregation bins, and strict measures were implemented to prevent plastic pollution. Additionally, he promoted organic farming and successfully reduced the use of chemical pesticides, positioning the village as a model for sustainable agriculture.

The district administration has played a crucial role in supporting these initiatives. Infrastructure projects, such as road development and rural connectivity, have significantly reduced travel time, boosting the local economy.

Looking ahead, Mr. Selvaraj aims to expand green initiatives, introduce solar power plants, and set up sustainable businesses like soap production. His ambitious vision includes water conservation, biodiversity promotion, and vetiver farming, which he believes will transform Kulur into a self-sufficient and prosperous village.

With elections scheduled for December 2024, Mr. Selvaraj remains steadfast in his commitment to uplifting his community, ensuring a brighter and greener future for Kulur.

MSDS AWARDEE 2025

FROM TRADITION TO INNOVATION

The story of agriculture has evolved over centuries, reflecting humanity's shifting priorities and deepening understanding of sustainability. From natural farming to chemical-intensive agriculture and back to organic practices, this evolution has given rise to approaches like agroecology, permaculture, and regenerative farming. These methods aim to enhance soil health, conserve water, promote biodiversity, and combat climate change.

Mr. Ragavan A, an Electrical Technician turned natural farmer and permaculture practitioner, has lived this transition firsthand. Born in Pallathur, Thanjavur, his childhood was steeped in memories of his father's farming experiences. After completing a Diploma in Electrical Engineering, he spent six years working in Singapore's shipbuilding industry. However, the monotonous routine clashed with his creative spirit. Feeling disconnected, he returned home, drawn by his passion for agriculture.

An avid reader of thinkers like Nammazhvar, Gandhiji, Masanobu Fukuoka, and J.C. Kumarappa, Ragavan was inspired by the philosophy of working with nature rather than against it. "I realized I am a farmer at heart," he says. He pursued a permaculture course at Aranya Permaculture Academy in Hyderabad, where he found his true calling.

Back in Pallathur, he noticed how excessive groundwater extraction and mono-cropping had led to water salinity issues. Recognizing that fresh water was the key to restoring agriculture, he initiated the restoration of Pallathur Lake, a 142-acre water body that had lost its capacity due to decades of neglect. With community support, funds were raised, bunds were strengthened, and invasive species were removed. So far, 70 acres have been restored, and Ragavan plans to cultivate Vetiver and native tree species around the lake for soil conservation and income generation.

In parallel, he is developing a model farm on temple land to showcase permaculture principles. "Farmers need to see what's possible," he explains. His dream is to restore all eight lakes in the region, ensuring a sustainable future for agriculture. "It's time we value the fresh water that has sustained us for centuries before it's too late," he says.



MSDS AWARDEE 2025



FROM DEPENDENCY TO LEADERSHIP

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been a catalyst for women's transformation, enabling them to earn, contribute and drive community development. Their impact extends beyond individual women—these groups strengthen entire communities. Women reinvest their earnings in education, healthcare and infrastructure, fostering sustainable development. “But every SHG has a story to it. I started working with women since 1991. Back then, there was a lot of apprehension and wariness. Bringing them together was extremely challenging. Their helplessness and desperation was the factor that actually facilitated the transformation,” says Ms Sivarani Balaguru, Founder of Advancing Community Empowerment Foundation (ACEF) in Salem, Tamil Nadu.

Sivarani, an agriculture graduate, had to mortgage her house to fund her education—an experience that reflects the financial dependence many women faced in the early 1990s. Her story is not unique but represents a broader reality where women had to struggle even for their basic rights, including education and economic empowerment. Drawn by the cause, she worked in different NGOs and also agriculture colleges. “I was passionate about the idea of SHGs. It resonated with my vision to shift women from dependency to agency, allowing them to access credit, generate income and contribute meaningfully to their families and communities,” she adds.

After having worked with 25,000 women and forming them into groups, she founded the ACEF in Salem, in 2017. Today, her leadership has reached out to over one lakh women who are part of the SHGs initiated and mentored by her organisation. Spread across ten districts in Tamil Nadu, these 8000 SHGs are a strong agency in themselves adding value to many other initiatives of ACEF. “Her 8000 SHGs are not just financial collectives; they have evolved into a strong agency for economic and social change. The impact goes beyond mere bank linkages—each member has an individual bank account, and 8000 women have benefited from insurance policies, securing claims worth 25 crore rupees. A major milestone has been facilitating 3000 crore rupees in loans, with an impressive repayment record—only 130 crore rupees remains outstanding. This access to credit has boosted women's confidence, enabling



them to make financial decisions for their families and communities,” elaborates Sivarani.

But the interesting part in this story is ACEF's income. Every SHG contributes about 5000 rupees annually to the organisation. “That is our source – it pays for all the 170 women staff and supports a wide range of intervention in the communities,” she proudly says. ACEF mobilised one hundred rupees from 50,000 women in the districts it worked and the collected sum of 50 lakh rupees was used to build a 12 bedded secondary hospital, also equipped with a pharmacy, laboratory and an operation theatre. “Namadu Arogyam Hospital was a strong need in this region. We also got in touch with doctors and requested them to provide consultancy at affordable prices regularly,” adds Sivarani. A nursing institute is also attached to this hospital to provide different nursing courses that can help adolescent girls get trained professionally.

Through its initiatives, ACEF has planted over two lakh saplings, contributing to greener landscapes and environmental conservation. By donating over one lakh kilograms of rice to orphanages, it ensures that vulnerable communities have access to essential nutrition. Every year, ACEF also distributes twelve different seeds to its women members to promote the idea of kitchen gardens. What started as a means to provide clean, home grown food has

now expanded into a self-sustaining agricultural practice. Women have harvested tonnes of vegetables, not only for their own consumption but also for selling and sharing within their communities.

Schools and Anganwadis have also been adopted and provided with infrastructure support. Differently abled individuals have been identified and connected with relevant government schemes. 43 trusts have been registered to carry forward different activities and one of them is linked to the central government scheme Cluster Based Business Organisation (CBBO). The scheme supports the formation and promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) by providing financial, technical and managerial assistance. CBBOs help farmers/rural/women entrepreneurs with capacity building, market linkages and access to credit, ensuring sustainable agri-business development. Sivarani and her team successfully mobilized over 1 lakh women farmers, organizing them into 1,000 groups and registering 26 companies to launch their entrepreneurial ventures. Under the Cluster-Based Business Organization (CBBO) Scheme, each block focuses on developing one key product, with aggregation, processing and value addition supported through scheme funds. After the three-year grant period, these businesses gain financial independence, allowing women entrepreneurs to reinvest,

expand and sustain their ventures, driving long-term economic empowerment.

“One of our companies that recorded a turnover of about 18 crores during the Covid pandemic received appreciation by honourable Prime Minister. More than pride, we felt the satisfaction of breaking cycles of dependency and the inspiration of creating lasting change in families and communities. It's the realization that empowering one woman means uplifting an entire generation, fostering confidence, dignity and true self-reliance,” she feels triumphant. In fact, to make things easier for these companies, ACEF also developed a brand called Narumugai, that can be used by all of them. “Branding and marketing for each company could be expensive and challenging, so we decided to create a single, unified brand for products from all our companies. To achieve this, women representatives from the 26 FPOs came together to establish the Asian Women Agri Business Consortium, ensuring collective strength, better market visibility and streamlined business operations,” explains Sivarani.

It has been a remarkable journey for her from the first SHG in 1991 to all the 1 lakh women, engaged in different activities by her organisation. She now wants to focus upon developing the second line of leadership and further strategise women's engagement in agriculture. “The intersection of women, agriculture and online platforms presents a tremendous opportunity for economic empowerment, market expansion and innovation. With the right support, digital agriculture can revolutionize women-led agribusinesses, making them more competitive, independent and globally connected. Most of all, I am interested in this potential enabling accessibility of good products for all sections of the population,” she says, quickly adding that the FPOs have produced more than 1 lakh litres of cold pressed oil. Sivarani and ACEF have demonstrated the strengths of an enabling model, which does take time but has permanent, long term influence on the community. Women who were completely dependent on their families are not only leading them now, but also running companies, contributing to meaningful initiatives and experimenting new income generation ideas, learning new things every day.

—Shanmuga Priya.T

Inspiring Conversations with Swamini Prabhavananda Saraswati

Swamini Prabhavananda Saraswati, disciple of Swami visharadananda saraswati, got sanyasa from Swami Dayananda Saraswati, of arsha vidya Gurukulam, and presently President of Sri Gnanananda Niketan.



Can you share your early experiences that influenced your spiritual journey and how your family respond to your spiritual inclinations?

From a young age, I was drawn to the Ramakrishna Mission. Passing by their centre daily on my way to school, I felt a profound sense of calm and curiosity about their teachings. This early exposure planted the seeds of spirituality in me. During my studies, I came across the Chandogya Upanishad, an ancient Sanskrit Vedic text and one of the principal Upanishads. I acquired a copy, but it remained unread for some time. Its presence, however, symbolized my enduring interest in spiritual wisdom.

I also listened to the bhajans of Swami Haridhos Giri, a disciple of Swami Gnanananda Giri. These devotional songs deeply influenced my understanding of bhakti (devotion). Reflecting on these experiences, I recognize that certain virtuous practices and perhaps destiny have guided me. It's essential to realize and embrace the journey that God has planned for each of us.

Although I pursued a career in Chartered Accountancy, my spiritual interests remained a significant part of my life. While my family upheld traditional values, they prioritized education and professional success.

What pivotal moments deepened your spiritual practice?

A significant turning point was reading a meditation guide from the Ramakrishna Mission. The insights from this book resonated deeply, prompting me to reflect on the competitive nature of the world and my place within it. Attending Swami Paramarthananda's discourse on karma shortly after qualifying as a Chartered Accountant was transformative. His explanations of Sanchita Karma, Prarabha Karma and Agami Karma provided clarity on life's disparities, reinforcing my understanding of cause and effect.

Could you tell us about your gurus?

Life continually presents us with situations to learn from. It's up to us to discern the lessons within these experiences. Being blessed with great mentors and having the grace to grasp their core messages is a true blessing. I consider my life fortunate in this regard.

Meeting my guru, Swami Visharadayananda of the Dayananda Swamiji lineage, was a blessing. Under his guidance, I balanced practical responsibilities with spiritual study, working abroad for five years before dedicating myself fully to scriptural learning.

Swami Visharadayananda emphasized the importance of practicality, especially for women in spiritual pursuits. He advised me to secure financial stability to focus on my studies without undue hardship, leading me to work in Kenya before returning to intensive scriptural study. Swamiji Dayananda was a great saint who profoundly impacted my life. He perceived everything as a manifestation of Ishwara, which allowed him to remain undisturbed by external events. After embracing sannyasa, Swami Nithyanandagiri provided invaluable support. His guidance helped me achieve emotional maturity and inner peace, essential for deepening my spiritual knowledge.

How did spirituality support you during challenging times?

When my mother fell ill, I experienced first-hand the profound emotional bond between a mother and child—it's a connection that's not easily severed. While other attachments can be relinquished, the mother-child

relationship is uniquely deep.

During my mother's illness, Swami Nithyanandagiri advised me to attend to her needs, acknowledging the importance of fulfilling familial duties. However, on the day she passed away, he instructed me to return immediately, emphasizing that my responsibilities were complete and that I didn't need to participate in the final rites. This guidance helped me release the emotional bondage and find peace. I feel truly blessed to have had such support.

Many individuals from diverse backgrounds visit the ashram, drawn to Indian culture and spirituality. How sustainable is their fascination with our traditions?

Initially, many are attracted by the rich culture. However, for this interest to be sustainable, it must evolve into a pursuit of knowledge. Both bhakti (devotion) and jnana (knowledge) are sustainable paths, but bhakti can be more challenging due to its structured nature. In our tradition, bhakti often involves seeing God as an embodiment of love, which provides emotional support. Our approach to bhakti is comprehensive, encompassing practices like meditation and austerities to synchronize the body and mind, facilitating a deeper understanding of Ishwara. Understanding Ishwara as both the material and instrumental cause of the universe allows individuals to see the divine in all aspects of life. This realization fosters a focused and dedicated mind, essential for delving into Vedantic studies and achieving spiritual growth. This holistic perception of the divine might not be as prevalent in Western traditions, leading to a gap in their spiritual experience.

How can the gap in spiritual practices for Westerners be addressed through Vedanta?

Western seekers often find that their spiritual traditions lack certain practices, such as upasana (devotional worship), which are integral to Vedanta. By studying Vedanta, they can fill this gap, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of spirituality that includes both knowledge and devotion. However, incorporating practices like upasana may require overcoming initial cultural and conceptual barriers. Embracing these practices can lead to a more focused and dedicated mind, essential for deeper learning in Vedanta.

Vedanta introduces concepts such as rebirth and karma, which may be unfamiliar to Westerners. While these ideas are deeply embedded in Indian culture, Western seekers can adapt by integrating the underlying principles into their own lives. This involves understanding the cause-and-effect relationship of actions (karma) and the continuous journey of the soul (rebirth), allowing them to live authentically within their cultural context while embracing Vedantic teachings.

How has the family structure evolved over time and what are the challenges?

Traditionally, joint families were the norm, where multiple generations lived under one roof, supporting each other emotionally, financially, and socially. This evolved into nuclear families, where only parents and children lived together. Today, we are witnessing micro families, where family members are often physically separated—husbands work in one place, wives in another, and children study elsewhere. This has led to a physically disintegrated system, though emotional connections may still exist.

Society has changed significantly. Earlier, young girls did not have strong individual identities before marriage and adapted fully to their husband's family. Today, both men and women build strong personalities and have attachments to their parental families, making integration into another family more complex. Balancing multiple family expectations and individual identities often leads to conflicts.

The fundamental emotional need of every human is "wanting to be wanted." This applies to both children and adults. While physical presence may be limited in today's lifestyle, fulfilling emotional needs through meaningful interactions, social engagement, and supportive relationships is crucial for a happy and balanced life. The biggest challenge today is the loss of daily interpersonal interactions that joint families provided. Parents struggle to meet all the emotional and developmental needs of their children due to their busy schedules. Similarly, couples often find it difficult to maintain their relationships as they lack time for each other. The absence of extended family support results in stress, loneliness, and weakened social bonds.

What can be a practical solution to manage the challenges?

While a full return to joint families may not be feasible, a responsibility-based relationship model can help. This means: living closer to extended family where possible, so children can spend more time with grandparents; encouraging inter-generational bonding, as grandparents provide emotional support and guidance in ways that parents, due to their busy lives, may not be able to; recognizing that one or two individuals cannot meet all emotional needs. Instead, family members should rely on a broader support system, including social circles and extended family and maintaining emotional connections despite physical distance through regular communication and visits.

The key is flexibility and understanding. Instead of expecting complete adaptation to one family unit, there should be mutual respect for individual identities. Balancing relationships across different families and social circles while ensuring children get the warmth and security of a larger support system can help recreate some of the benefits of the joint family structure.

What approach is suggested for guiding today's youth, who lead fast-paced and opportunistic lives, towards spirituality?

It's impractical to expect youth to make abrupt lifestyle changes. Instead, guiding them toward a duty-bound life allows them to enjoy life responsibly. Encouraging a shift from gross to subtle pleasures—such as engaging in yoga, meditation, and maintaining a healthy body and mind—can gradually lead them toward spirituality. Introducing them to satsang (spiritual gatherings) and the teachings of great saints can help them find peace amidst a fast-paced life. This approach fosters balance, integrating enjoyment with spiritual growth.

Embrace patience and self-compassion. Seek authentic guidance, maintain consistent practice, and understand that true transformation begins within. The journey is as significant as the destination. Recognize that spirituality is an inner journey. Trust in your path, remain open-hearted, and understand that every experience contributes to your spiritual evolution.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

THE ORGANIC WAY

Thirumurugan, a passionate organic farmer, has an inspiring story of perseverance and transformation. Coming from a traditional farming family, he was well-versed in agricultural practices but initially pursued a career in the private sector. However, his passion for farming ultimately led him back to his roots, where he embraced organic farming as a means to promote health and sustainability. Today, he stands as a beacon of hope for natural farming, having been selected for the prestigious Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship 2025 for Natural Farming.

Before fully embracing agriculture, Thirumurugan worked in a private sector. However, his farming background gave him a unique perspective on food production and sustainability. With a desire to provide healthier, chemical-free food, he made the transition to organic farming, recognizing the growing demand for sustainable agricultural practices.

The transition, however, was not without its challenges. Organic farming requires significant knowledge, effort, and patience. Unlike conventional farming, where results are often immediate due to chemical inputs, organic farming demands a long-term commitment to soil health and ecological balance. Thirumurugan had to navigate these hurdles by extensively researching traditional methods.

For the past nine months, Thirumurugan has been practicing organic farming, focusing on sustainability and purity. He cultivates a variety of crops, including vegetables, spinach, fruits, and millet. Unlike conventional farmers who rely on chemical pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, he uses only organic inputs—materials he creates himself from natural sources.

"Everything I use comes from nature. I don't believe in harming the soil with chemicals. Healthy soil gives healthy food, and that's my goal," he emphasized.

His approach to organic farming also involves innovative techniques, such as intercropping, composting, and natural pest control. These methods not only improve soil fertility but also contribute to a self-sustaining agricultural system. In



addition to farming, Thirumurugan also owns and manages an animal farm consisting of goats, cows, and hens. His integrated approach ensures that nothing goes to waste. The manure from his animals is used as natural fertilizer, enriching the soil and promoting biodiversity on his farm. Thirumurugan's vision extends beyond his farm. He strongly believes that farmers should unite to promote organic produce and support each other in their endeavors. To achieve this, he collaborates with fellow farmers, forming a collective society that produces and sells organic products. By working together, they ensure fair prices, increase market access, and encourage more farmers to adopt sustainable practices.

"Farming is not just about growing food; it's about growing together. We help each other, share knowledge, and create opportunities. That way, everyone benefits," he said with conviction.

However, the collective still faces difficulties in competing with large-scale commercial farming operations. The lack of strong market policies and financial aid for organic farmers makes it difficult for them to scale their operations effectively. Thirumurugan is advocating for more governmental and institutional support to



help organic farmers sustain their livelihood.

Apart from farming, Thirumurugan is deeply invested in raising awareness about organic food and healthy living. He educates people about the harmful effects of chemical-laden produce and encourages them to make healthier choices. His advocacy extends to local communities, schools, and agricultural forums, where he shares his insights and experiences.

"People need to know what they are eating. We should not compromise on health. Every household deserves chemical-free food, and every farmer

deserves to earn with dignity," he stated.

Despite his efforts, organic produce is still perceived as expensive and less accessible compared to conventionally grown food. Changing consumer mindsets remains a key challenge, and Thirumurugan continues to work on strategies to make organic products more affordable and mainstream.

Thirumurugan's relentless efforts in organic farming and his contribution to sustainable agriculture have earned him the Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowship 2025 for Natural Farming. This recognition is a testament to his hard work and dedication to bringing about meaningful change in the farming sector.

However, his journey is far from over. Organic farming, though rewarding, comes with its own set of challenges—ranging from unpredictable weather conditions to labor-intensive maintenance. Thirumurugan is now focusing on expanding his farm, experimenting with newer organic techniques, and seeking better market opportunities to make organic farming more viable for small-scale farmers.

As he continues his mission, Thirumurugan remains steadfast in his belief: "Nature gives us everything we need. If we take care of it, it will take care of us. That's the simplest truth of life."

His story serves as an example of resilience, passion, and the potential of organic farming to transform both individual lives and the agricultural sector at large. His efforts underline the pressing need for a shift towards sustainable farming practices that benefit not only farmers but also consumers and the environment as a whole.

Thirumurugan's work highlights a crucial question—can organic farming be the future of agriculture? While it presents numerous benefits, its scalability and feasibility on a larger scale remain debatable. Through his dedication, he is proving that sustainable farming is possible, but it requires collective efforts, systemic support, and a change in consumer habits to thrive in the long run.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

Contact Persons:

Ms. Marie Banu Rodrigues
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



FROM SOIL TO SUSTAINABILITY

Jayamala's journey into organic farming began in 2012, but her connection to agriculture runs deep. Coming from a farming family, she was familiar with traditional farming methods from a young age. What started as an attempt to control pests using biodegradable waste has now evolved into something far bigger—a mission to promote organic farming and empower others to follow in her footsteps.

In 2015, Jayamala joined RCT, where she met her mentor, Kumari. Kumari became an essential figure in her journey, instilling the confidence she needed to expand her efforts. "She gave me the confidence that I have now," Jayamala recalls. Initially focused solely on organic farming, Jayamala later joined Lisa Groups, where she received further training in organic methods.

With her growing expertise, she gained access to Reliance's platform, which allowed her to teach fellow farmers through video conferences. This medium helped her share her farming techniques, clear doubts, and provide guidance to many farmers looking to transition to organic practices. "Through Reliance, I got the opportunity to teach other farmers about the methods and ways I use for organic farming," she explains. Through the same platform, she also conducted medical camps for domestic animals across various villages, ensuring the well-being of livestock in farming communities.

As Jayamala continued to explore organic farming, she realized the importance of soil fertility and sustainable pest control methods. "Soil health is crucial; the fertility of the soil determines the quality of the food we grow," she states. To ensure the soil remains healthy

and productive, she emphasizes natural fertilizers and composting techniques rather than relying on chemical additives. She also integrates crop rotation and companion planting, which help maintain soil balance and prevent pest infestations.

One of the key differences Jayamala highlights between conventional and organic farming is the impact on soil and environmental health. "The big difference is that the soil is less polluted but remains healthy," she explains. She stresses that while hybrid varieties may grow faster, they do not necessarily contribute to the long-term sustainability of the land. "Hybrids take about 10 minutes to grow, but natural farming methods maintain soil quality in the long run."

Jayamala's work goes beyond just farming; she is deeply invested in creating opportunities for others, especially women. Currently, she employs 12 people, whom she trains in organic seed production and natural pest control methods. "I teach them how to create organic seeds and pest controls through training," she says. Her goal is to create a space where she can hire more women, making them financially independent and skilled in sustainable agriculture.

Her vision doesn't stop there. She dreams of opening a food establishment that uses products grown on her farm, providing people with healthy, chemical-free food. For her, organic farming isn't just about producing crops—it's about ensuring that future generations have access to nutritious food that isn't harmful to their health. "My main goal is to make healthy food for the next generation without it being slow poison to those eating them," she emphasizes.

Another challenge that Jayamala has had



to address is climate change. Unpredictable weather patterns and extreme conditions can impact yields, but she remains committed to finding adaptive solutions. "We have to manage climate change by making the soil more resilient," she states. By using organic mulching and water conservation techniques, she ensures that her farm remains productive even during harsh weather conditions. "We haven't done anything special to make water, but we make sure to use what

we have wisely."

She also focuses on creating a balanced ecosystem on her farm by promoting biodiversity and natural pest control methods. "When we go to the forest, the soil is clean. When we do organic farming, the environment is clean," she says, drawing a parallel between nature's resilience and organic farming principles.

Jayamala believes that organic farming is the future. She is determined to expand her reach, educate more farmers, and continue developing sustainable farming practices. Her journey, fueled by determination and a commitment to change, serves as an inspiration to those who want to embrace organic farming not just as a practice, but as a way of life.

Through her efforts, she is proving that organic farming is not only beneficial for the environment but also a means of creating economic and social change, particularly for women. With her unwavering dedication, Jayamala is paving the way for a healthier and more sustainable future. "We have to grow it," she insists, reinforcing her belief that organic farming is the key to a better tomorrow.

As she looks ahead, Jayamala envisions a world where organic farming is the norm rather than the exception. "I want to change the traditional way of farming," she asserts. By training more farmers, expanding her initiatives, and integrating sustainable techniques, she hopes to leave a lasting impact on both the agricultural sector and the lives of those who depend on it. Her journey is a testament to the power of resilience, innovation, and the unwavering belief in a healthier future.

—Bhavadharani K

"In nature, nothing goes to waste—everything has a purpose."

Santha Sheela Nair shares with Marie Banu her passion for natural farming

Ms. Santha Sheela Nair is a former IAS officer from the 1973 batch, having had a distinguished career spanning over 40 years of service to the nation. She was appointed as the first woman District Collector of Trichy and later retired as Secretary to the Government of India. Throughout her career, she held several key positions reaching the top most position as Secretary, Government of India. After her retirement in 2010, she served as an advisor to the Ministry of External Affairs for the Sri Lanka rehabilitation programme.

Ms. Sheela played a pivotal part in the 2004 Tsunami emergency response responsible for overall coordination, relief and rehabilitation operations in the worst affected Nagapattinam district. She has been a strong advocate for sustainability, and one of her notable achievements was being instrumental in implementing Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Sevi J Jayalalitha's election manifesto of rainwater harvesting which became a legislation. She also played a pivotal role in the implementation of the Veeranam and Krishna water schemes contributing towards improving the critical water situation in Chennai during the 1990s.

In an exclusive interview, Ms. Santha Sheela Nair shares with Marie Banu her passion for natural farming.

What inspired you to engage in natural farming?

I had a barren housing plot measuring about 30 cents in an urban layout in Padur Sea View enclave which was left unutilised for over 50 years. In 2020, after the loss of my pet, I brought him here to lay him to rest. By then, I had retired, and with the onset of COVID and a series of personal losses, I started visiting the land more frequently. My deep connection to my dog helped me rediscover the significance of this place, and I realised I wanted to put it to meaningful use.

Since I already live in Chennai, relocating wasn't an option. The land held sentimental value, so selling it wasn't on the table either. With my background in water conservation and sustainable practices, I saw an opportunity to create something impactful here, giving the land a new life.

How did your professional background influence the creating of information centre?

Throughout my career, I have worked extensively in water management, rainwater harvesting, and water policy, including roles with Metro Water and as Secretary of Water Supply at both the state and national levels. My work with the Agriculture Department further deepened my understanding of water usage and crop selection. I became increasingly concerned about the dominance of water-intensive crops like rice and wheat, while drought-resistant millets and small grains were largely overlooked. Long before the International Year of Millets, I advocated for their cultivation, especially in dryland farming systems.

My primary focus has always been on water usage and food sustainability, which led me to decide to grow millets. However, before I could begin, I had to address a major water challenge. Experts told me that my rocky land had no groundwater, and after an unsuccessful attempt at drilling a borewell, I realised the immense financial strain it would place on a small farmer. Rather than give up, I sought alternative solutions. I teamed up with Dr. Shekhar Raghavan, an expert in the field, to assess the land's potential. Together, we constructed a channel from the road to an open well, allowing us to capture rainwater for farming use. This system greatly improved water availability.

My goal was to demonstrate how diverse elements—



biodiversity, water conservation, sanitation, herbs, and more—could be integrated into a practical, sustainable model. This is not just theoretical; it's about real-world application.

What is your approach to farming, and how has it evolved over the years?

My approach has evolved from traditional organic farming to permaculture and now to natural farming. While organic farming replaces chemicals with organic alternatives, natural farming works in harmony with nature. In collaboration with the Andhra Pradesh Community Natural Farming Project, I've promoted methods that focus on improving soil health and farmer nutrition.

Natural farming emphasizes consuming what you grow, ensuring better nutrition and reducing reliance on external supplements. A small, one-cent nutrition garden can meet 80% to 90% of a family's needs—adding nutritional security to food security—and tackling issues like malnutrition affecting a large section of economically backward sections of the people, especially in rural areas, manifesting as anaemia in a large population and stunted growth among children.

The "Surya Mandalam" is a circular farming model where crops are planted to support and complement each other. Harvesting is timed so that as one crop is harvested, another is ready to grow. This method optimizes land use while aligning with natural growth cycles. We also use the "ATM" (Anytime Money) model, where farmers generate continuous income from their crops. By prioritizing soil health and biodiversity, we reduce the need for external inputs, allowing the ecosystem to self-sustain. This approach not only provides a steady income but also contributes to a healthier environment.

Rather than relying on pesticides, we let nature manage pest control. We cultivate a diverse range of crops that naturally complement each other, making it difficult for pests to thrive. Additionally, we plant flowers to attract beneficial insects that help regulate pest populations. It's about working with, not against, nature.

How did the idea for integrating energy solutions come about?

I didn't start with a fixed plan; rather, the idea evolved as I explored various aspects of sustainability. After reflecting on different needs, I began by setting up a biogas plant that utilises dry leaves and cow dung, even linking it to the toilet. This biogas system generates energy for cooking, heating and other purposes free of cost and contributes towards reducing the dependence to the highly expensive and polluting LPG.

My goal was to show that in nature, nothing goes to

waste—everything has a purpose. The terms "waste" or "weeds" are just labels; in reality, everything can be repurposed.

The solar unit was the next step in this journey. It produces solar energy, which I feed back into the grid through net metering—a system I helped introduce during my time at the Planning Commission. Initially, experts doubted the feasibility due to space and sunlight limitations, but I was determined to make it work. When the solar system doesn't produce enough energy, I can draw from the grid, creating a balanced, sustainable energy cycle.

I use solar dryers to dry and powder farm produce like moringa powder, curry leaf powder, and mushrooms, instead of electricity. In just a day and a half, the entire batch is dried. Dried products hold greater value because they concentrate nutrients and extend shelf life, creating new market opportunities. This is not only a sustainable farming practice but also a livelihood option for farmers, non-farmers and other enterprises.

While fresh produce holds value, drying it enhances its worth significantly. Dried fruits and herbs retain their nutrients in a concentrated form and have a much longer shelf life. By drying farm produce, we not only solve food storage issues sustainably but also boost the farm's economic potential. This illustrates how sustainable practices can drive both environmental and financial sustainability.

What is eco-sanitation, and why is it important?

Eco-sanitation is one of my favourite topics! It involves sustainable toilet systems that don't waste water. We need sustainable sanitation and water management in homes and communities, reducing dependence on external civic agencies and improving quality of life.

Why is sustainability important in everyday life?

Everything we do contributes to our carbon footprint. We need to ask ourselves: How do we reduce it? How do we use natural resources responsibly so that we don't deplete them at the rate we are now? More importantly, how do we replenish them?

I showcase various aspects—architecture, energy conservation, waste management, and more. For example, our waste management system ensures all biodegradable waste is turned into nutrients, and non-degradable waste is repurposed. Almost all the furniture here is reused, nothing is bought new. Our mantra is: reuse, recycle, refuse, and reintroduce.

Sustainability isn't just about farming; it's about our everyday choices—how we build homes, how we manage waste, how we design our living spaces. For example, instead of closing off bathrooms and installing artificial exhaust fans, simply having a ventilated window keeps the space fresh and dry naturally. Likewise, restaurants with artificial lighting and air conditioning make you pay for a less healthy environment, when natural lighting and ventilation would be far better.

How can individuals become more self-sufficient?

Many things don't require dependence on governments or civic services. If you grow your own food, dispose of your own waste sustainably, and produce your own energy, you become more self-sufficient. During the pandemic, people with home gardens fared better than those relying solely on markets. Self-sufficiency is key to sustainability.

Growing your own food means knowing exactly what you're eating. I recently processed turmeric from my farm, and the entire building smelled of real turmeric! Nowadays, store-bought turmeric is adulterated with starch and artificial colours, stripping it of its natural aroma and potency.

Experiencing the real thing sparks excitement and a desire to embrace sustainable practices.