

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 12 | Issue 7 | July 2024 | 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
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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In our fast-paced, technology-driven world, a troubling trend is emerging: the current generation seems increasingly disconnected from the wisdom and values of their elders. This detachment not only erodes the rich reservoir of experience and guidance that older generations offer but also threatens the transmission of essential values that underpin our society.

Elders are more than just aging relatives are living repositories of knowledge, culture, and experience. Their life stories, lessons, and insights provide a valuable counterbalance to the rapid changes and transient trends of modern life. Yet, as digital screens and social media platforms dominate our lives, the wisdom of our elders often gets overshadowed and, at times, dismissed.

This disconnect can be attributed to several factors. The shifting social norms create a generational gap that sometimes feels insurmountable. Young people, immersed in the immediacy of digital interactions, may struggle to relate to or value the slower, more reflective perspectives of their elders. Additionally, the demands of contemporary life often leave little room for the slower, deliberate process of learning from those who have lived longer.

However, the importance of teaching and embracing core values cannot be overstated. Values such as respect, empathy, and responsibility form the base of a cohesive and ethical society. Elders, with their rich life experiences, are uniquely positioned to impart these values. Their teachings are not just relics of the past but essential tools for navigating today's complex world with integrity and compassion.

Engaging in conversations with elders not only helps in understanding and appreciating their wisdom but also brings to light the challenges they face. These discussions can highlight issues that might otherwise go unnoticed, fostering a deeper empathy and connection between generations. It is crucial for parents and children to make a conscious effort to initiate these dialogues, exploring both the value of the lessons learned and the realities faced by the older generation.

To address this growing divide, we must take deliberate steps to foster inter-generational connections. Encouraging dialogue between young and old can bridge the gap, providing both groups with the opportunity to share perspectives and learn from one another.

Schools and community programs should integrate elder wisdom into their curricula, highlighting the relevance of their experiences in contemporary contexts. Additionally, cultivating a culture of respect for elders in both family settings and broader societal contexts can help ensure their contributions are valued and acknowledged.

By reconnecting with our elders and prioritising the teaching of values, we not only honour their legacy but also enrich our own lives and those of future generations. The wisdom of the past and the values we uphold are not just historical artifacts but vital elements in shaping a more thoughtful, respectful, and unified society.

We urge you to engage in meaningful conversations with your children, recognising the need for values and understanding the challenges faced by our elders. In doing so, we invest in a more cohesive and compassionate future for all.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHARING: UNDERSTANDING WHY WE SPREAD FAKE NEWS



In the digital landscape, the spread of fake news is not just an informational issue but a psychological phenomenon deeply rooted in human behavior. Understanding why people share fake news can help in devising strategies to counter its pervasive effects.

At the heart of why fake news spreads are cognitive biases. People have a natural tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, known as confirmation bias. This bias is enhanced on social media platforms by algorithms that selectively present content in line with users' existing views, deepening their convictions. According to a Pew Research Center study (2021), people are more inclined to share information that resonates with their perspectives, regardless of its accuracy, highlighting the critical need for fact-checking in our digital interactions.

Fake news often evokes strong emotional reactions, which significantly increases its shareability. A report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2018) found that false news stories are 70% more likely to be re-tweeted than true stories, primarily because they often contain novel or emotionally charged information. For example, a misleading headline that provokes outrage or fear about a political issue can rapidly circulate among like-minded individuals, reinforcing group ideologies.

Social influence also plays a crucial role. Sharing news, especially sensational news, can enhance one's social standing as a source of valuable information. This social affirmation is a powerful motivator for sharing any content without verifying its authenticity. Sometimes, the urge to get thumbs-ups can make us share stories without checking if they are true. We end

up chasing likes and shares instead of the truth and facts.

The effects of fake news are serious and far-reaching, especially when it comes to health. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of false tips and "cures" spread like wildfire on social media. Not only did this confuse people, but it also influenced their behavior during the crisis, making it more difficult to keep everyone safe. According to a 2020 report by the World Health Organisation, these myths had tangible impacts on public health actions and behaviors.

Addressing the spread of fake news involves enhancing digital literacy to empower users to identify and critically evaluate the sources of their information. Educational programs that focus on critical thinking and the assessment of information sources are essential in building a resilient public that can resist the lure of sensationalised fake news.

Furthermore, social media platforms are increasingly held accountable for mitigating the spread of misinformation. By improving algorithms to better identify and label misleading content, and by promoting transparency about sources, these platforms can help curb the proliferation of fake news.

Understanding the psychology behind the sharing of fake news reveals that it is a complex interplay of cognitive biases, emotional engagement, and social influences. By educating the public and adjusting how information is presented and regulated on social media, society can better manage the flow of misinformation and its wide-ranging effects. To fight against the infodemic, everyone should practice one action whenever go online, "Think before you share!"

Arulselvi Azhagiri

EMPOWERING HOPE:

ONE MAN'S MISSION TO ERADICATE YOUTH DEPRESSION



Through his unwavering commitment and compassion, Jenpu Rongmei exemplifies how personal pain can be transformed into a powerful force for community upliftment and hope

Jenpu Rongmei's journey is a powerful tale of resilience and hope. The story begins with his personal challenges that leads to transformation and renewal.

Jenpu founded "Can Youth," an organisation dedicated to uplifting youth facing depression and despair. Through compassionate outreach and community support, Jenpu's mission is to inspire change and foster hope, showing that even the darkest times can lead to a brighter future.

Growing up in Dimapur, Jenpu experienced the harsh realities of life, surrounded by alcohol abuse and family struggles. Despite these challenges, he recalls his early childhood as a time of happiness and love, especially when he was lived with his childless uncle and aunt. Reflecting on his past, Jenpu shares, "I had a very beautiful, and happy life also in my childhood days. My family faced many troubles and I lost all the smile, love, and things I deserved as a person." Jenpu's life took a tragic turn when his uncle passed away when he was in class 8, followed by his aunt's death. This forced him to return to his parents' troubled home.

Jenpu's educational journey was cut short due to financial hardships, with him and his siblings unable to complete their schooling. He was further marred by his father's alcoholism and domestic violence faced by his mother. She worked tirelessly to provide for her five children. "My mother was selling alcohol, to feed us," he says.

Despite the difficulties, Jenpu's relationship with his father has evolved. "It's good because I did my best to be close to him. Now he is not among us, he passed away in the year 2021 but I forgave him. I always wanted him to be the best dad. so I tried got getting close to him and telling him to take the role of being the head of the family."

Jenpu completed his class 10 through open schooling while working door-to-door selling perfumes. Open schooling provided him the flexibility to learn on his own terms, but his younger brother David struggled with frustration and depression, turning to drugs and ultimately succumbing to his addiction.

Nagaland faces severe issues with drug and alcohol abuse. Jenpu attributes this vulnerability to frustration and a lack of hope. "One reason people take drugs is because of frustration, and lack of hope. They don't know where to put the anger so they hurt themselves," he explains.

"I want to change my life," his brother had once said. "I've been struggling a lot, and I don't want to die." Despite Jenpu's promise to help, David passed away before he could fulfill his desire. This loss was a turning point for Jenpu. "Something was saying inside my heart that the promise to your brother was unfulfilled, must work for other young people. (do not give up).

Jenpu channelled his past experiences into positive action, determined to ensure



that other children do not face the same deprivations. Through compassionate outreach and community support, Jenpu's took on the mission to inspire change and foster hope, showing that even the darkest times can lead to a brighter future. He launched "Can Youth," in Dimapur aimed at helping young people, children and school/college dropouts. Through his NGO, he offered support of education, skill & vocational training, Jobs in private sector, Leadership program, Mental health program and Nutrition for children. to youth The Foundation works with school dropouts to help them understand the value of their lives and find paths to continue their education or choose vocational training.

Starting with no money, Jenpu sought

support from local leaders and wealthy families, by approaching them door-to-door to collect funds. His breakthrough came when he applied for a fellowship in Delhi and met Father Jerry of Bosco Institute, Jorhat. During the interview, Father Jerry's words had a profound impact on him: "Jenpu, it's okay. You know what, I trust you." This trust was a turning point for Jenpu, giving him the confidence and support he needed to move forward. "I received the fellowship from Youth Involve program at Bosco Institute. From there, I never turned back," he recalls. Father Jerry's belief in him was a crucial encouragement propelling Jenpu to continue his mission with renewed vigour.

With a mission in hand, the right ideas, essential funding and hand-holding support from Youth Involve Program, Jenpu embarked on the challenging journey of establishing CanYouth. Driven by his younger brother's memory, he set out to create a better future for young people in Nagaland, but the path was far from easy. Jenpu faced scepticism about NGOs, with many doubting their sincerity.

"People don't trust when we talk about NGOs," he reflects. "But I didn't give up because I know what I'm going to do." His perseverance was tested by moments of loneliness and despair, leading him to even contemplate giving up his own life. Yet, Jenpu's resolve was rekindled by a sense



of purpose and his brother's memory, prompting him to move forward. Through his relentless efforts, Jenpu got another fellowship program 'Acumen' which is also another strength for him to grow in the social sector and Can Youth began to gain traction, attracting volunteers and supporters. Jenpu's approach to motivation is rooted in his work rather than grand gestures. "Motivation is not something that we have to design. It's something that comes from the work," he explains. His team, now comprising of 11 board members including 3 legal advisors, 6 members in advisory board, and full time staff 9. The team includes young people, mostly women, who share Jenpu's vision and passion. The beauty of Can Youth is all the members and staff are consist of different tribes, community and Religion.

CanYouth has made significant strides in changing perceptions about education and providing support for young people. "The most important goal is that none of the students

discontinue their education and every children, Youth and women from marginalised community should live with dignity," Jenpu asserts adding that, "we are now aiming to shift the community's perspective on education, emphasising that it extends beyond job preparation to encompass personal growth and humanity." Despite the challenges posed by limited corporate social responsibility (CSR) investments and governmental support in the Northeast, Jenpu remains undeterred. "CSR doesn't want to invest much money and the reason is best known to them" he notes, underscoring the region's frequent neglect. Jenpu's journey is a profound reminder of the power of perseverance. His story defies conventional expectations, revealing that success is not solely about avoiding failure but about continuing to strive despite it. "Failure is not a problem. The problem is when you stop trying," Jenpu says, embodying a spirit that inspires others to embrace

resilience and never give up. Jenpu Rongmei's ultimate vision for CanYouth reflects a deep commitment to societal betterment. "To help young people and women for the society to function properly is my vision," he says, underscoring his belief that empowering these groups is essential for a thriving community. His dedication to overcoming adversity and transforming his challenges into opportunities for others highlights a profound aspiration: to create a society where every individual has the chance to contribute meaningfully and thrive. Jenpu continues to inspire and lead through CanYouth, driven by a vision that seeks to uplift and support the most vulnerable, ensuring a better future for all. He remains committed to make a difference in the lives of youth. "I know that I'm doing this to reach out to young people who have lost hopes. And I know that I'm doing this for my brother," he says.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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NURTURING ELDERLY: THE JOURNEY AND VISION OF ONE STEP ELDER CARE

In 2021, two social work students from Lunglei, Mizoram took a significant step toward addressing a pressing issue in their community—, it was Elder Care. Driven by a desire to improve the lives of senior citizens, they embarked on a journey to create a recreational centre for the elderly. The founder of One Step Elder Care K. Vanlalthangzuali and co-founder LP Vanlalnghaka, were deeply connected to their community, recognised the need for a space where senior citizens could engage in recreational activities and socialise, combating the isolation they faced.

The southern part of Mizoram, specifically Lunglei, is the second largest district in the state. It was here that K. Vanlalthangzuali (Tepuii) first noticed various societal issues. Initially, she planned a project focused on helping youth involved in drug abuse. However, her first survey revealed that several established organisations were already addressing this issue. "I felt that I would not be able to work properly because there are already some organisations addressing this issue in our society," says Tepuii. This realisation prompted her to shift focus. The second survey highlighted a significant gap in services for senior citizens, apart from the (MUP) Mizo Upa Pawl Senior Citizens association, which primarily supported pensioners without emphasising recreational activities.

Recognising this gap, the duo identified a need for a senior citizens' centre in Lunglei. "We also found out that they needed an Senior Citizens care centre, like a recreational hall, where they can come and spend their leisure time meet up with their friends," Tepuii notes.

To better understand the needs of the elderly, they began communicating with senior Citizens through phone calls and home visits. This allowed them to develop a structured plan for the organisation. The centre catered to two age groups: 60 to 80 years and 80+ years. While the younger elderly visit the centre independently, those over 80 years require assistance.

The primary motivation behind this initiative was the isolation experienced by many senior citizens at home. Tepuii elaborates, "We found out that there are many senior

citizens who are being isolated at home. They need a place where they can talk about the things they had experienced during their childhood and youth with their friends. This initiative seeks to improve their quality of life, offering them a sense of community and connection that many lack."

"The elderly have lots of talents like drawing, weaving, and making traditional crafts," Tepuii notes. These activities not only provide a sense of purpose but also helped to bridge the gap between generations by educating the youth about traditional practices. The recreational centre provides a safe, engaging environment where seniors can socialise, participate in activities, and receive the attention they need. The centre operates differently from traditional old age homes, offering a range of activities such as physical and mental exercises, and workshops on crafting, knitting, and other traditional skills.

Looking ahead, the organisation plans to introduce skill development training, allowing seniors to pass on their knowledge to younger generations. This initiative keeps elderly citizens mentally active and socially connected, while also contributing to the community's cultural heritage. "We are planning to expose them to exhibitions so that their products are valued and appreciated," Tepuii shares. Additionally, the organisation envisions publishing a book capturing the stories and wisdom of the seniors. "It will be a kind of souvenir for the younger generation," she adds.

Many seniors suffer from conditions like Alzheimer's and dementia, and there is a lack of adequate care for such persons in Mizoram. Families often keep these seniors confined at home, fearing they might get lost. "We found

out that many Mizo citizens didn't have a proper knowledge of how to take care of their Senior Citizens," Tepuii remarks.

One Step Elder Care organises free health camps, ensuring that Senior Citizens receive proper medical attention. They collaborate closely with government agencies to provide essential aids like wheelchairs and hearing aids, and charge a nominal fee to sustain their operations. Despite facing challenges such as transportation issues, the organisation has made significant strides. "Family members bring them to the centre," Tepuii mentions, emphasising the community's trust in their services. The organisation now has 53 members and collaborates with 14 M.U.P (Mizo Upa Pawl) units in the Lunglei District.

Tepuii emphasises the need to value the contributions of senior citizens in society. "We have to focus on their values to let our state grow. We should promote a culture of respect and appreciation for the elderly, recognising them as the 'diamonds of our society,'" she asserts.

Future plans include expanding One Step Elder Care to other districts in Mizoram, ensuring more seniors benefit from their innovative approach. While there are challenges, particularly in meeting the high expectations of families, the organisation remains committed to its mission of providing comprehensive care and support for the elderly.

As One Step Elder Care continues to make strides, its founders draw inspiration from mentors and role models who have guided their journey. Notably, 'Ka Thante In' and FLAT Insights for 'Full Life Access Trust', led by a supportive female entrepreneur, has been a significant influence.

Additionally, the fellowship offered for social entrepreneurs by Youth Involve project of Bosco Institute, Jorhat has provided invaluable mentorship.

For those aspiring to enter the elder care sector, Tepuii offers key advice highlighting the importance of preparation to navigate challenges effectively. "Deeply understand your target group. Learn about their mental as well as physical needs," she emphasises.

Financial stability is another crucial factor. Identifying reliable funding sources and maintaining accurate records are essential steps. Tepuii stresses the importance of a methodical approach: "Focus on one step at a time, if we focus on the fifth step and miss the first, we will definitely not succeed."

Bhavadharani K



THE QUEST TO REVIVE OUR RIVERS



Water bodies around us are an integral part of human, environmental health, climate regulation, water supply and of course, disaster mitigation. With an omnipotent impact on everything about life on earth, neglecting their care has come at a huge cost on all aforementioned factors. Public health crisis due to unsafe drinking water, increased costs of water treatment to make it safe for consumption, loss of biodiversity, destruction of local ecosystems, increased occurrence of disasters are just the macro markers that have had a profound impact on this generation’s notion of health and well-being. “Ask any localite, someone who recalls playing in the marshes or near the streams, canals about their relationship water bodies. It is not just beauty or recreation or the feeling of tranquility. It is an inherent sense of contentment and a strong sense of community. Their perspectives will tell us how urbanisation took us far from these experiences,” reminisces Mr. R. Manikandan, Founder of Kovai Kulangal Padugappu Amaipu (KKPA) in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Clearly, he doesn’t want to blame anybody or any phenomenon for lack of attention on our water bodies. “Caring for them should have come down from our ancestors. Where was the connect lost? How did we end up being careless about them? Its high time we introspected our attitudes and mended our ways to restore their lives,” reflects Manikandan. A resident of South Coimbatore, he lived near a pond – Kurichikulam, which was the main source of water for his region. However, rapid usage led to plummeting water tables and the pond went dry in less than a decade. “Ruthless usage by everybody alike, houses and industries,” he points out. With its natural path flowing towards Kerala, Manikandan thought that building a check dam could ensure supply for the local land but soon learnt that an already built check dam was damaged, dysfunctional. He took it upon himself to get this reported at the Collector’s Office for corrective action. In spite of being successful he was wrought in dismay that such concerns need to be raised to be addressed.

But the experience forced him to look further at Noyyal river and its distributaries. For the unversed, it is a river originating from the Vellingiri Hills in the Western Ghats, flowing through Coimbatore, Tiruppur and Karur, covering almost 175 kilometres, before joining Cauvery River in Kodumudi. He not only learnt the path of the river but saw every event in history that affected its existence. “I could clearly see that Noyyal’s health was critical for the well-being of region’s ecology, economy and society,” emphasises Manikandan.

2017 was a year of stunning revelations in the region. Most of the ponds had dried up, there was no public participation in protecting ancient water bodies and there were invasive species like the Ipomoea Carnea, commonly known as the Pink Morning Glory that affected local vegetation patterns. The drought in 2017 did not shock him but he used the circumstances to raise awareness on Noyyal and invite like-minded organisations to work on its revival. He brought together many NGOs in Coimbatore and led the work to

revive tanks/ponds that had no public participation in its care. Once an integral part of traditional water management system in the region, the health of these ponds was extremely important for storing rain water and recharging ground water. Two consecutive failed monsoons by then convinced people to prepare themselves to save as much rain water as possible when nature decided to shower the lands.

Leveraging the force of social media, Manikandan and friends invited volunteers to join hands in their efforts to revive Kovai’s ponds. Their first meeting in February 2017 was a success and many volunteers came in to support his efforts. Perur Periya Kulam, sprawling across 265 acres was their first project. They first cleared the pond of all invasive species and then cleared all the waste dumped there. Four hundred volunteers managed to clear all invasive plants and about two tons of plastic waste in a month’s time. Manual work was also complemented by the use of machines like JCB, sponsored by few industrialists who had pledged support. The overwhelming response allowed Manikandan and team to plan regular work. “Volunteers took over during the weekends and machinery came in handy to keep the momentum on during the weekdays. Volunteers felt good that work continued consistently,” he shares.

Since then, he has led such restoration efforts for the last 348 weeks. Another water body, Sengulam, that was used as a dump yard by local panchayat was cleaned and revived for storing rain water. The lake in Vellalore called in for more efforts. There was no water flowing since the last twelve years due to invasive species, piles of dumped plastic waste and encroachment. KKPA team petitioned to the Chief Minister’s Cell to draw attention to the water body’s importance and deteriorating health. After all the steps taken, the lake was desilted and ten thousand trees were planted around the lake in February 2018, also marking the first year of KKPA’s work. Today, there is visibly more biodiversity and the new species of flowers has led to the formation of a beautiful butterfly park.

After seven years, KKPA stands high with the support of over 35000 volunteers, 1.25 lakh volunteer work hours, 30,000 saplings planted and maintained, 15 water bodies rejuvenated and 1,155 lakh litres of additional water storage capacity created. This also means clearing more than 150 tons of plastic waste in the process and regular awareness programs in communities and educational institutions. Mr. Manikandan was awarded with “Best Water Warrior Award -2019” by Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India and KKPA received “Green Champion Award – 2021” from Government of Tamil Nadu. But he knows his work is far from over. “Our work can never be complete. There is no finishing line that I can see, for we have effortlessly drained water from mother earth leading to the disappearance of water bodies that survived centuries in just a matter of three decades. Reviving all of them to full capacity will take time. It is an enormous responsibility,” admits Manikandan.

—Shanmuga Priya.T



THE FUTURE OF FARMING: INTEGRATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Integrated farming, or mixed farming, values the local biome by aligning agricultural practices with the natural environment. By combining crops, livestock, and aquaculture, it enhances ecosystem health and reduces reliance on chemicals. This method promotes soil health, conserves water, and supports biodiversity by utilising native species and natural interactions. The result is a sustainable, productive farming system that respects and preserves the local ecosystem. “The more local we get to look into, the more diverse is the choice of crop and livestock species. As the daughter of an army personnel, I had the privilege of travelling to many places. I had lived in five cities including Baroda, Secunderabad and explored villages around them,” shares Ms. Jayalakshmi Balasundaram, an agriculturist who has worked on integrated farming and land development for more than two decades.

She got married to an air force officer soon after her post-graduation in agriculture and moved to Pathankot with him. So, the city hopping due to transfers was by now a very natural part of her life. She worked as a post graduate teacher to teach Biology but the farmer in her kept looking for an opportunity to initiate farming activities somewhere. The shift to Jodhpur after her second child in 1993 allowed the mother to immerse in new skills like painting and sculpting. Then came the opportunity to try landscaping in air force areas and soon after, husband’s transfer to Ambala. Here she taught at Chamman Vatika and then became a residential teacher at Sri Ramachandra Mission (Heartfulness Institute, Hyderabad). With husband’s new job at the National Aerospace Limited (NAL) in Bangalore, she was now back to the city where she was born. Transfers introduced her to different things but as a student, she had always wanted to be an entrepreneur. Back in Bangalore, the entrepreneur in her scouted for a variety of opportunities.

She started working in different companies for experience and also worked with ICICI Prudential for a year. “Suddenly, I studied life insurance very seriously,” she laughs. With new friends in the quarters requesting me to teach, I went ahead and opened the Sahaj tuition academy with few other friends. During the day time, this space was used as a play school and Montessori for children from underprivileged families in the neighbourhood. Her chance visit to a farm in Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh forced her to think about ways to divulge farmers from mono cropping as it leads to greater supply of the crop and hence, lower prices and loss. So, Jayalakshmi collaborated with Namdari Seeds in Bangalore and started seed production for five crops – tomato, bottle guard, bitter guard, Chinese pumpkin and long beans. “This was exciting to the farmer in me but didn’t work because farmers expected us to invest. By now my mind was fully into farming so moved to Kanha Shantivanam Heartfulness Institute in 2016, as a volunteer to work in different departments like solid waste management, organic farming, etc” she shares.

She also worked on hydroponics, aquaponics, neem, moringa projects, took care of goshala and cultivated 60 acre fodder for cattle feed. Jayalakshmi then explored production of



cleaning solutions that could be used in the farm, like hand wash and floor cleaners. “These products were expensive so we had to learn and produce to reduce costs of farm management,” she adds. Then came her 83 acres project in Hyderabad where the land was left unattended for more than 15 years. But the challenge and task at hand excited her. She installed two percolation tanks, planted around one lakh trees including timber, fruit varieties, reared animals like goat, donkey and practically lived the idea integrated farming here. “Did you know that donkey’s dung is a potent cure for respiratory diseases?” she casually informs.

Further ahead from this campus was another piece of land covering 7.5 acres where she planted neem on a large scale. She used both native variety and Malabar neem, and simultaneously ventured into production of neem oil, castor oil, pongamia oil and organic pesticides. She combined all these ingredients and produced a neem tonic. Moringa was also harvested and its powder was used in cattle feed. Among the animals reared here was a unique variety of goat called the Black Bengal, whose meat has a very good taste but the pricing in market is not encouraging. “That’s the beauty

in this concept. You get to use every part of the produce suiting market and environment needs. All you need is land and the freedom to try out all this in that land,” says Jayalakshmi, who was awarded the Global Neem Ratan Award by the state government of Uttar Pradesh in 2022. In the middle of all this, she also planted saplings in Horticulture University and RCI Campus in Hyderabad.

The experience with all these projects drove her to attend NABARD’s integrated course on chicken and goats. At 60 years of age, Jayalakshmi is still full of beans to invest in a low cost land with water supply. “The biggest challenge for my work is the lack of agreement for land, so I cannot benefit from subsidies and have to leave when the owners decide to sell or use the land for some other purpose. I started all this to show a model for farmers who are not motivated to prepare land and give up mono-cropping. In fact, mono cropping has limited their aspirations in variety so much so that their cattle feed is regular farm grass. We do have cacti variety without thorns and tree varieties apart from grass that are a good source of feed for cattle. All we have to do is cut the branches and feed them. Medicinal plants are also not explored enough. I want to show that all this in one land can perform wonders and allow a multitude of businesses to flourish. One land and many channels of income, why is this not comprehensible?” she questions.

Who would know that a weed (Lantana) can give us furniture from its stem and pesticide from its leaves? Her conversations are so full of knowledge about plants, farm animals and their varied applications that must be delved into to make the most from them. We are so used to hearing that transition from chemical to organic farming takes time but Jayalakshmi assures that 1-2 years period is all we need and soon green manuring will be an integral part of every activity in the farm. “Integrated farming is very promising. It is high time farmers gave this a serious thought,” she insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T

BEYOND THE DESK

Visible environmental changes like the tangible effects of environmental degradation, extreme weather events, rising sea levels and loss of biodiversity have time and again underscored the need for addressing environmental issues. Global, national initiatives and partnerships have emphasised the importance of a unified approach to addressing environmental challenges, leading to more opportunities for study and career development in this field. Integrating knowledge from various disciplines such as biology, chemistry, geology and social sciences, this interdisciplinary approach attracts students with diverse academic interests and backgrounds. “In a way this also reflects a broader societal shift towards prioritising environmental health and sustainability,” points Ms.S. Daksa, a postgraduate in the subject from Bangalore.

For her under graduation, she did a triple bachelor's degree in chemistry, Botany and Environmental Science. The ensuing projects and assignments made her realise that environment needs to be understood as a core subject and contextualised in the industrial sector. “Environment must be at the core, but industrial revolution and the story of exponential economic growth took us far from sharing concern for the environment. And that dream of perpetual, economic growth has depleted all our natural wealth in a matter of decades. Resources that took centuries to form and settle were just exploited. Global and national initiatives, protocols, landmark agreements, etc have attempted to anchor the right perspective and it is showing results with more youngsters coming forward to academically study and prepare themselves to work on these challenges,” explains Daksa.

Her love for travelling further took her closer to thoughts about environment and its profound ability to affect every aspect of human life. Touched by her volunteering opportunities and internship experience, she wanted to correlate people and environment in every work. “I was somehow drawn into exploring unexplored horizons,” she smiles. As a part of the college eco warriors' association she attended the workshop on eco-friendly Ganesha making workshop and over three years she has organised and helped create around 100 Ganesha idols. She also curated new ideas on making sanitary napkins from corn waste and production of cutlery from citrus waste.

In the last year of her post-graduation, Daksa worked on a project about challenges and opportunities towards a green aviation community, case study of Kempegowda international airport, Bengaluru. We all know that airports operate 24*7 and the emissions from airplanes go below the ground level atmosphere. “It all goes out, beyond our limit, so never really tried to learn its consequences,” laughs Daksa. She studied various green initiatives of T2 at the airport as part of her internship which includes the concept of the terminal, technology, art, terminal in a garden and sustainability. The terminal was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving performance across key areas such as energy savings, water efficiency, CO2 emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources. “It does sound technical to a lay person, but the basic fact

is there is very little harm to the environment because of this project,” she adds.

The details can also help others plan their buildings responsibly – like shift to use of green materials like bamboo, reuse demolished parts of old buildings, utilise sun light to the optimum level, treat flushed water within the campus and reuse. Daksa appreciates the idea of global biodiversity in this terminal as conscious efforts were taken to nurture and transplant over one thousand species with the help of an in-house nursery set up for the purpose. She is now researching about the in-house carbon dioxide removal projects at this airport. She has also supported the team to prepare the GHG (green house gases) inventory which helped her understand sources and their emissions in depth. “Every such project wants to show that it is trying to offset the carbon emissions it made. However, fewer nature based solutions (NaBS) meant that investment is unable to flow freely. This has given rise to a market for carbon trading, which is a very lengthy process of offsetting for every ton. But I looked for faster delivering solutions,” elaborates Daksa.

Her mother's chance reading of an article led her to research about bamboo plantation and all its pertinent features. She was elated to learn that bamboo grew faster than all other plants, and that too within a period of 3-5 years. Roads with a canopy of bamboo trees on either side reduced local temperature by almost 2-3 degrees further purified the air. Daksa was excited to learn more about this ‘miracle grass’ and the many products it can give birth to. “I was stunned when I saw the market for bamboo. I was learning more

about this carbon negative material, which also regenerates every time you cut it and can also go back to soil as biochar. I was visualising circular economy and went further to study about different species,” she says.

Daksa also recalls about the magical abilities of Vetiver to remove impurities and its good carbon sequestering capacity. It is more than evident that Daksa wants to explore nature based solutions with less sound technologies to all macro problems

because she believes that the journey towards net zero is essential and totally worth it. She is currently pursuing her post graduate diploma in Environmental Law and simultaneously learning a variety of frameworks to prepare herself for studying the impact of chronic and acute climate risks. In the process, she also engaged in interaction with multiple companies to understand and delineate ideas. Recently, she conducted hazard analysis for a pharma company and proposed for installation of biogas plant based on her study of food waste generation at the campus.

She is very active on social media and often shares her reflections from travel and interaction with local cultures. “Sustainability was a way of life five decades back. Modernisation came with its perks and now we stand disconnected, in the middle of a big mess. It is now time to clear this mess. And more enthusiasts like me must come forward to do their job,” appeals Daksa, who has already begun by designing carbon and environmental footprint games for the next generation to understand the impact of climate change.

Shanmuga Priya.T





VITAL WELLNESS: UNDERSTANDING STRESS

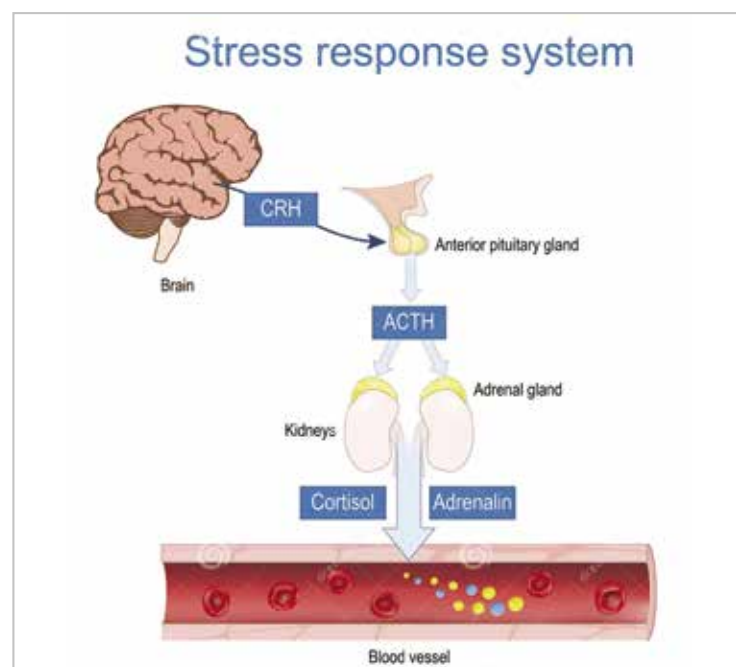
Every worthy human endeavor requires spirited action. But taking action is not the first step in the process that initiates or continues a change for the better. Before taking any action, we ideate. Once the idea becomes clear through a whole lot of thinking and brain-storming, we spend a lot of time planning how the idea can be implemented. Only after that can we take the right action towards a realisation of the idea. Thus the seeds of worthy actions in this world first germinate in the mind, making mental wellness a crucially important factor in creating a society of worthy individuals.

But we cannot have mental health without physical health - there is a bidirectional link between the two, and this makes them inseparable. Let us look at just a few recent studies that discuss this. Cosgrove, Sargeant, and Griffin [2008] have shown that patients with Type II Diabetes Mellitus are twice as likely to experience depression as the general population. Up to 50% of cancer patients develop and suffer from a mental illness, particularly depression and anxiety, according to Massie MJ [2004]. An Australian longitudinal study by Doan T, Ha V, Strazdins L, and Chateau D [2023] has found that physical health impacts mental health causally, with a 1 point improvement (or worsening) in physical health scores (1 - 100) resulting in a rise (or decline) of 0.43 points in mental health scores. (An aside: It is heartening to note that there is now more research being done in this avenue, which looks at physical health issues leading to mental health issues. This is a welcome

departure both from general maxims that a 'positive attitude' will improve your health, and the research that looks at mental health as the fixed variable and from that standpoint tries to find unidirectional causal correlations between the two)

This is a miniscule sample from the growing body of research that shows how the mind depends on the body. But we need not really look up academic research to experience this connection - when we have a bad headache, is it even possible to think beatific thoughts? When our bodies are tired or sore, how likely is it that we will come up with an awesome idea to solve some problem? When we are feeling hungry or thirsty, would we be able to write a clear and concise academic paper or come up with a beautiful original tune? The point I'm trying to make is that our state of mind depends directly on the state of our body, and the way to maintain short-term as well as long-term mental health, is to work towards maintaining good physical health.

Physical health is tangible. And when something is tangible and somatic, it is easier to address. But sometimes, physical and tangible issues are either not properly understood, or not properly dealt with, creating a grievously incorrect narrative around them. Yes, I'm speaking about that much-misunderstood word - 'stress'. Stress is a purely physical phenomenon. Students of physics and engineering know this - they have to routinely calculate stress factors, assess the strength of materials by stressing them, or figure out stress



In response to stress, the hypothalamus in the brain area secretes CRH (Corticotropin Releasing Hormone). The CRH in the blood triggers the release of ACTH (Adreno-Cortico-Trophic Hormone) from the pituitary gland. ACTH travels to the adrenals, where it causes them to release the human stress hormones Cortisol and Adrenaline.

coefficients. But as soon as this word leaves the realm of the nonliving, and is used in the context of health, it becomes some mystical and undefinable entity that messes with any and all attempts to understand it correctly. This need not be so. So what is stress really in the context of health?

Stress is a bodily reaction that helps us to survive. Yes, stress responses enable all animals, including us, to protect ourselves from danger. Stress was designed as a good thing, an aid to survival. When a predator suddenly appears out of the tall grass, herbivores who see it experience stress. Their vessels dilate, their blood streams are inundated with glucose, their lung capacity increases, their muscles reach their full extent of contracting and relaxing. All these together enable them to sprint away at speeds way greater than their usual unstressed speeds, and this makes sure they get away from the predator and survive to live another day.

This is the exact same thing that happens in the human body too, when we perceive whoever or whatever our 'predator'-equivalent is. In response to adrenaline and cortisol among other secretions, our muscles tense up, our breath speed increases, heart rate increases, pressure shoots up, more sugar is released into the bloodstream. This is our fight or flight response - we know this. The only but extremely significant difference between the herbivores and us is that, for them, the stressor is a physical, environmental entity, but for us it has become an all-pervading, constant, miasmatic social entity.

In other words, when the tiger is gone, the deers' stress goes too, but with us, it lingers. This lingering, low-level human stress, called chronic stress, is what causes a wider range of health problems than any other single disease.

The most important thing to note here is that human stress is not a mental construct, it is a physical, bodily construct. Just as it is tied to the sighting of a tiger for a deer, it is tied to various identifiers of danger/death/failure for us. It

doesn't originate in anyone's mind, it originates out there in the external world. Therefore - wait for it, this is big - stress cannot be eliminated by doing anything with the mind. It will not go away by 'thinking positive', by chanting 'calm down, calm down!', by making to-do lists. It will go away only when you deal with the exact physical, real entity out there that is causing it. If a thorn pricks you, you have to remove the thorn to make the pain go away - this is exactly like that. You have to come out of the ambit of your stressor. In a real, physical, tangible way.

There are many stressors all around us, and many ways of disengaging ourselves from these and leading a relatively stress-free - and therefore healthier and longer - life. In the subsequent articles of this feature 'Vital Wellness', we'll discuss some of these and how to understand them better. Till then, do ponder the fact of stress being a very measurable, physical response

Maybe you will also start noticing situations and sights that cause this physical response in you. If you do, please feel free to write about it to us at conversations@csim.in.

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

TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI

A question was raised as follows by Maj. A. W. Chadwick:-

Mr. Edward Carpenter, a certain mystic, has written in a book that he had Self-Realisation on some occasions and that its effects lasted sometimes afterwards, only to be gradually lost. Whereas Sri Ramana Gita says, "Granthi (knot = bondage), snapped once, is snapped for ever." In the case of this mystic, the bondage seems to have persisted even after Self-Realisation. How can it be so?

The Master cited Kaivalya as follows:-

The disciple, after realising the all-shining, unitary, unbroken state of Being-Knowledge-Bliss, surrendered himself to the master and humbly prayed to know how he could repay the master's Grace. The Master said:

"My reward consists in your permanent unbroken Bliss. Do not slip away from it."

D.: Having once experienced the Supreme Bliss, how can one stray away from it?

M.: Oh yes! It happens. The predisposition adhering to him from time immemorial will draw him out and so ignorance overtakes him.

D.: What are the obstacles to remaining

steady in unbroken Bliss? How can they be overcome?

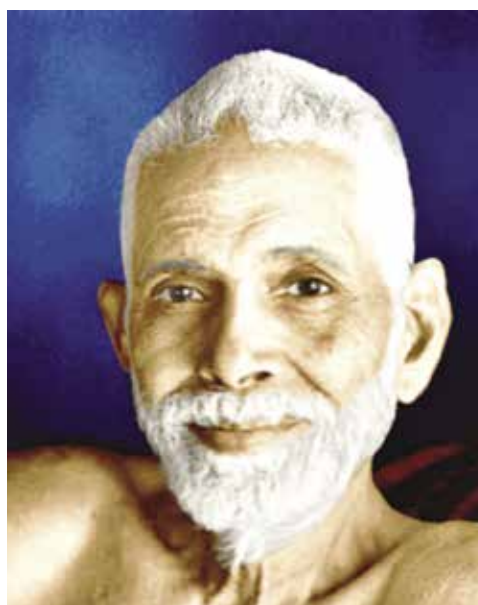
M.: The obstacles are:

- (1) Ignorance which is forgetfulness of one's pure being.
- (2) Doubt which consists in wondering if even the experience was of the Real or of the unreal.
- (3) Error which consists in the "I-am-the-body" idea, and thinking that the world is real. These are overcome by hearing the truth, reflection on it and concentration.

The Master continued: Experience is said to be temporary or permanent. The first experience is temporary and by concentration it can become permanent. In the former the bondage is not completely destroyed; it remains subtle and reasserts itself in due course. But in the latter it is destroyed root and branch, never to appear again. The expression yogabhrashta (those who have fallen down from yoga) in Srimad Bhagavad Gita refers to the former class of men.

D.: Is then hearing the Truth meant only for a limited few?

M.: It is of two kinds. The ordinary one is to hear it enunciated and explained by a master. However, the right one is to raise



the question for oneself and seek and find the answer in oneself as the unbroken 'I-I'.

To be reflecting on this experience is the second stage. To remain one-pointed in it is the third stage.

D.: Can the temporary experience be called samadhi?

M.: No. It forms part of the third stage.

D.: It looks then as if even hearing the Truth is limited to a very few.

M.: The seekers fall into two classes; kritopasaka and akritopasaka. The former having already overcome his predisposition by steady devotion, his mind thus made pure, has had some kind of experience but does not comprehend it; as soon as he is instructed by a competent master, permanent experience results.

The other class of seeker needs great effort to achieve this end. How will the hearing of the Truth, reflection and concentration help him?

They comprise upasana (the nearest approach to Truth) and will end in his Self-Realisation.

The fourth stage is the final one of liberation. Even there some distinction is made according to the degree, as

- (1) the knower of the Brahman (Brahmavid) (2) Brahmavid-vara
- (3) Brahmavid-varya
- (4) Brahmavid-varishta

But all of them are in fact liberated even while alive.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

“Engaging communities in Vetiver cultivation can ensure local participation and ownership.”

Mr. Shyam Goenka shares with Marie Banu his efforts to promote vetiver through media

Mr. Shyam Goenka is a pioneering figure in Nepal's media landscape, known for his instrumental role in establishing Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post in 1993. His vision was driven by a commitment to institutionalise democratic values and social justice following the promulgation of Nepal's 1990 Constitution. Despite widespread skepticism about the viability of a private media house, Mr. Goenka's relentless dedication and belief in the transformative power of independent media led to unprecedented success. Kantipur, particularly, achieved historical prominence, becoming a leading daily with unparalleled readership. Mr. Goenka's impact extends beyond media; his efforts have created thousands of organised sector jobs and elevated Nepal's media sector.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. Shyam Goenka shares with Marie Banu his efforts to promote vetiver through media.

What inspired you to start Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post despite the scepticism surrounding the viability of a private media house in Nepal?

The inspiration to start Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post in 1993 stemmed from Nepal's political and social transformation, marked by the 1990 Constitution which enshrined free press and freedom of expression. We, a team of 200 passionate individuals, were committed to institutionalising democracy, social justice, civil liberties, human rights, rule of law, and good governance. Despite scepticism about the viability of a private media house in Nepal, we believed that a robust, independent media was crucial for the country's democratic and social development.

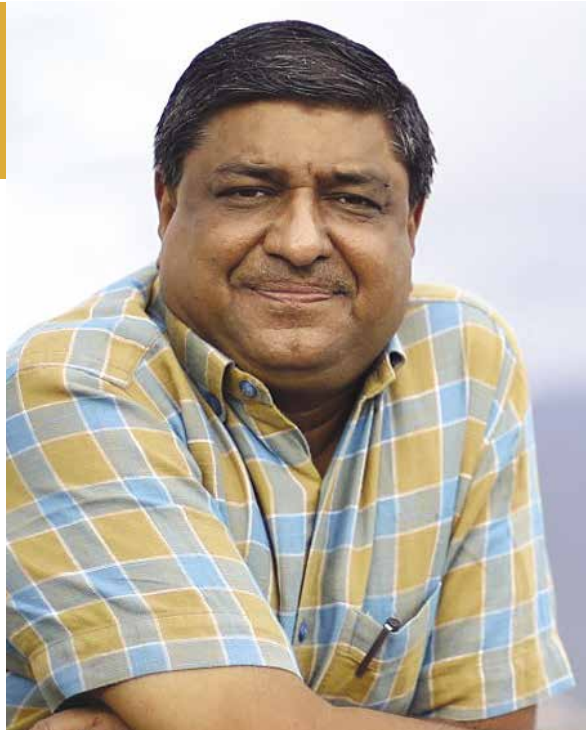
Our vision extended beyond reporting news; we aimed to build a strong foundation for social infrastructure, providing quality education, healthcare, shelter, livelihoods, and fostering sustainable, inclusive development. The initial journey was challenging, with limited resources and widespread doubt about our success. However, our dedication and belief in the cause drove us forward.

Kantipur, especially its vernacular version, defied naysayers, becoming an unofficial 'Ombudsman' and achieving unparalleled success with over 50 percent of the national market share. The success of Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post highlights the power of collective effort, solidarity, and commitment. Today, many of our colleagues lead the media spectrum in Nepal, bringing pride to the nation globally.

Can you elaborate on the significance of Vetiver grass in purifying contaminated water and its broader environmental benefits?

Vetiver grass (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*) is a remarkable plant known for its extensive root system and robust growth, making it highly effective in environmental management and ecological restoration. Its significance in purifying contaminated water lies in its ability to absorb and break down pollutants, heavy metals, and toxins through its roots. This phytoremediation process helps clean water bodies and restore their ecological balance.

Vetiver grass offers broader environmental benefits beyond water purification. It plays a crucial role in soil erosion control and land stabilisation. The dense root network of Vetiver can penetrate up to three meters deep, binding the soil and preventing erosion. This



makes it an ideal solution for rehabilitating degraded lands, protecting riverbanks, and stabilising slopes prone to landslides. Moreover, Vetiver grass enhances soil fertility by improving soil structure and increasing organic matter content. Its ability to thrive in harsh conditions, including drought and poor soil quality, makes it a resilient and sustainable option for land reclamation and agricultural productivity.

By promoting biodiversity and providing habitat for various organisms, Vetiver contributes to ecological balance and resilience. The broader environmental benefits of Vetiver grass underscore its potential as a natural solution for addressing some of the most pressing environmental challenges. Its ability to purify water, control soil erosion, and restore degraded ecosystems makes it a valuable asset in sustainable development and environmental conservation efforts.

How can the economic benefits of Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management be effectively communicated to farmers and local communities?

Effectively communicating the economic benefits of Vetiver to farmers and local communities requires a multi-faceted approach that includes practical demonstrations, education, and collaboration. Conducting on-ground demonstrations and training programs is essential to showcase the practical applications of Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management. These programs can highlight the economic benefits such as increased crop yields, improved soil fertility, and reduced disaster risks.

Farmers can witness firsthand the positive impact of Vetiver on their land and livelihood. Sharing success stories and case studies through local media, community meetings, and agricultural extension services can build trust and awareness. By highlighting the experiences of fellow farmers who have benefited from using Vetiver, communities can better understand its economic advantages. Collaborating with local agricultural cooperatives and organisations can enhance outreach and support for Vetiver adoption. These cooperatives can act as intermediaries, providing information, resources, and technical assistance to farmers.

Utilising digital platforms and mobile applications can facilitate information dissemination and real-time support for farmers. These platforms can offer instructional videos, best practices, and a forum for

farmers to share their experiences and seek advice. Governments and local authorities can provide incentives and policy support to encourage the adoption of Vetiver. Subsidies, grants, and technical assistance can make it more accessible and appealing to farmers.

By employing these strategies, the economic benefits of Vetiver in agriculture and disaster management can be effectively communicated, leading to broader adoption and improved livelihoods for farmers and local communities.

What role do you envision for technological advancements in enhancing the efficiency and adoption of natural solutions like Vetiver?

Technological advancements are crucial in enhancing the efficiency and adoption of natural solutions like Vetiver. Remote sensing and GIS mapping can identify suitable areas for Vetiver implementation and monitor its environmental impact, providing precise data on soil conditions, erosion patterns, and vegetation cover for targeted interventions. Data analytics can optimise Vetiver usage by analysing environmental data and predicting outcomes, guiding decision-making and improving resource allocation. Mobile applications can facilitate knowledge sharing, training, and real-time support for farmers and communities adopting Vetiver by offering instructional videos, best practices, and platforms for experience sharing and advice.

IoT devices can monitor environmental conditions such as soil moisture, temperature, and nutrient levels, informing the management and maintenance of Vetiver plantations for optimal growth. Drones can conduct aerial surveys, plant Vetiver on difficult terrains, and monitor growth and health, saving time and labour. Online platforms and e-learning modules can provide comprehensive training and resources, including courses, webinars, and research repositories. These technological advancements enhance the efficiency and adoption of Vetiver by providing innovative tools for monitoring, managing, and optimising its use, leading to more effective and scalable environmental conservation efforts.

How do you think media can play a role in raising awareness about sustainable practices like the use of Vetiver for soil erosion and water protection?

Media has a pivotal role in raising awareness about sustainable practices like the use of Vetiver for soil erosion and water protection. Investigative journalism can uncover the environmental challenges and highlight the success stories of Vetiver implementation. In-depth reports and documentaries can provide valuable insights and raise public awareness about the benefits of Vetiver. Newspapers, magazines, and online platforms can publish feature articles and opinion pieces from experts, farmers, and environmentalists. These pieces can educate the public about Vetiver's role in soil erosion control and water protection.

Producing documentaries and short films that showcase the impact of Vetiver on communities and ecosystems can create a compelling narrative that engages viewers and motivates them to support sustainable practices.

Social media campaigns can amplify the message and reach a broader audience. Engaging visuals, stories, and interactive content can raise awareness and encourage participation in Vetiver projects.

Media can collaborate with environmental organisations to promote Vetiver and other sustainable practices. Joint campaigns, events, and educational programs can enhance outreach and impact. Including dedicated segments on sustainable practices in news programs can provide regular updates and information on Vetiver and its benefits. This can keep the public informed and engaged in environmental issues.