

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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# 6

## COVER STORY

### Healing the Waters

About Siruthuli in Coimbatore and their activities

### Changemakers



# 3

**Fempreneurs Flourish:  
Unveiling the Pathikrit Foundation's  
Gastronomic Valor**

Krishna Gogoi's efforts to break stereotypes, utilise local resources, and promote Assamese traditional food through Pathikrit Foundation

### Profile

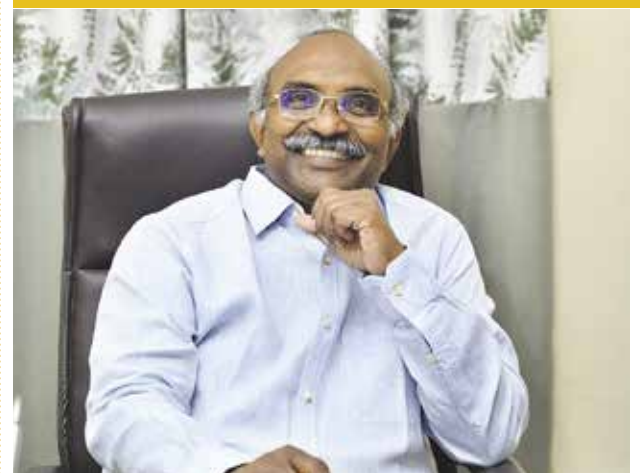


# 9

**From Slum to Strength**

About Senbagam, Founding Director of Aravanaikum Karangal Trust who works toward empowering slum children in Chennai

### Chit Chat



# 12

**“Integrating organic farming into rural development programs is crucial for addressing food security, health, and environmental concerns effectively.”**

An exclusive interview with  
Mr. J.A.C.S Rao, IFS, CEO, State  
Medicinal Plants Board Chhattisgarh

# FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Wildlife plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance. Each species, from the largest mammals to the smallest insects, contributes uniquely to its ecosystem. They regulate populations of prey species, pollinate plants, disperse seeds, and cycle nutrients—all of which are fundamental to the functioning of ecosystems on which we depend for food, water, and air. The loss of even a single species can set off a chain reaction of adverse effects, destabilising entire ecosystems and threatening the livelihoods of human populations.

Conservation efforts not only protect biological diversity but also safeguard cultural heritage and enrich our lives with the beauty and wonder of nature.

However, despite the undeniable importance of wildlife, human activities such as deforestation, habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and poaching continue to pose significant threats. Cutting down forests, polluting oceans, and changing the climate are pushing many species to extinction. Scientists say we are in the middle of a big extinction event caused by humans, where species are disappearing faster than ever before.

Addressing this crisis demands require global action. Governments, non-governmental organisations, businesses, and individuals must collaborate to enact and enforce effective conservation policies. This includes establishing and expanding protected areas, promoting sustainable land use practices, combating illegal wildlife trade, and mitigating climate change through reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Furthermore, conservation efforts must prioritise the involvement and rights of local communities. Indigenous peoples and local communities often possess traditional knowledge and sustainable practices that are essential for effective conservation strategies. Respecting their rights and empowering them as stewards of their lands can enhance conservation outcomes while promoting social equity and justice.

Education also plays a pivotal role in fostering a conservation ethic among the public. Increasing awareness about the importance of biodiversity and the interconnectedness of ecosystems can inspire individuals to make environmentally conscious choices in their daily lives and advocate for policy changes.

The conservation of wildlife and natural ecosystems is not a luxury but a necessity. It is a moral imperative to future generations and an investment in the resilience of our planet.

As custodians of Earth, it is our responsibility to act decisively and urgently to conserve nature and secure a sustainable future for all life on this planet. Let us therefore commit ourselves to the cause of conservation, recognising that the protection of wildlife is not just about saving species, but about safeguarding our own well-being and the legacy we leave for generations to come.

*Marie Banu Rodriguez*

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu Rodriguez

# CHILDREN AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: SHAPING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

**C**hildren and Artificial Intelligence: Shaping the Future Together

In the rapidly evolving landscape of technology, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping various aspects of our daily lives. Among the most intriguing and impactful intersections is that of AI and children. As digital natives, today's children are growing up with unprecedented access to technology, and AI is playing an increasingly prominent role in their education, entertainment, and overall development.

## Personalised Learning Experiences

One of the most significant contributions of AI to children's lives is in the realm of education. AI-powered tools and platforms are enabling personalised learning experiences, catering to the unique needs and learning paces of individual students. Educational apps like DreamBox, Khan Academy, and Duolingo use AI algorithms to adapt lessons and exercises based on a child's progress, providing tailored feedback and additional resources where needed.

This personalised approach not only enhances learning outcomes but also keeps children engaged and motivated. By identifying gaps in knowledge and offering targeted support, AI helps ensure that no child is left behind. Moreover, AI-driven educational robots, like ROYBI Robot, offer interactive learning experiences, making education more engaging and fun for young learners.



## Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking

Beyond academics, AI is also fostering creativity and critical thinking among children. Tools like Google's AI Experiment Quick, Draw! and various coding platforms introduce children to the basics of AI and machine learning in an interactive and playful manner. By engaging with these tools, children learn to think logically, solve problems, and understand the underlying principles of technology that powers AI.

Moreover, AI can assist in creative endeavours such as art and music. Applications like DoodleLens and AI Duet allow children to collaborate with AI to create drawings and music, sparking their imagination and encouraging them to explore new artistic frontiers. This symbiotic relationship between AI and creativity helps children develop a balanced skill set that combines technical proficiency with artistic expression.

## Ethical Considerations and Digital Literacy

As children interact more with AI, it is crucial to address the ethical implications and foster digital literacy. Parents, educators, and policymakers must ensure that children understand the potential risks and



responsibilities associated with AI. This includes issues related to privacy, data security, and the ethical use of technology.

Educational programs focusing on digital literacy should include discussions about the ethical use of AI, encouraging children to think critically about the technology they use. Understanding concepts such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the social impact of AI will equip children to navigate the digital world responsibly and thoughtfully.

## AI in Entertainment and Social Interaction

AI's influence extends to the realm of entertainment and social interaction as well. AI-powered toys and games, like Cozmo and Anki, provide interactive and educational experiences that blend play with learning. These intelligent toys can recognise faces, understand emotions, and even learn from interactions, creating a dynamic play environment that evolves with the child.

Furthermore, virtual assistants like Google Assistant and Amazon's Alexa are becoming commonplace in households, offering children a new way to interact with technology. These AI assistants can help with homework, tell stories, and answer curious questions, making information readily accessible and learning continuous.

## Preparing for the Future Workforce

As AI continues to shape various industries, preparing children for the future workforce becomes imperative. Introducing children to AI and related technologies early on can spark interest in STEM fields and equip them with skills that will be valuable in their future careers. Coding classes, robotics clubs, and AI-focused educational programs can provide the foundation for understanding and innovating in the AI-driven world.

The integration of AI into children's lives presents both opportunities and challenges. By leveraging AI for personalised education, fostering creativity, ensuring ethical understanding, and preparing for future careers, we can empower children to become informed and responsible digital citizens. As we navigate this evolving landscape, it is crucial to maintain a balanced approach, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for enhancing human potential and enriching the lives of the next generation. In doing so, we can shape a future where children and AI grow and learn together, driving innovation and progress for a better tomorrow.

PKS

# FEMPRENEURS FLOURISH:

## UNVEILING THE PATHIKRIT FOUNDATION'S GASTRONOMIC VALOR

Behind the resolute Pathikrit Foundation lies a profound inspiration rooted in empowering women on their entrepreneurial journey. Founded with a strong purpose, the Pathikrit Foundation is built on the belief that every woman has the potential to carve her path to success. Guided by this vision, the organisation endeavors to uplift women and provide unwavering support through its food processing services. With a mission to encourage and nurture women in entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation champions their dreams, fostering a landscape where their ambitions can flourish. Drawing its name from the Assamese term meaning "creating one's own path," Pathikrit Foundation stands as a beacon of empowerment, paving the way for women to forge ahead and redefine their destinies.

Led by Krishna Gogoi, the inspiring force behind Pathikrit Foundation, the organisation embodies the essence of empowerment and transformation. Rooted in the belief that women possess innate entrepreneurial prowess, Krishna's unwavering dedication has propelled Pathikrit Foundation to new horizons. "The mission is to empower rural women and local farmers to achieve socio-economic independence through food processing" Krishna says delightedly. With a resolute commitment to supporting and encouraging women in entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation has become a catalyst for change within the industry.

Krishna Gogoi draws her motivation from her upbringing and personal experiences in rural communities. Having witnessed first-hand the challenges faced by local farmers and rural women, she embarked on a mission to bring about socio-economic independence through food processing services.

"Having been born and raised in a rural community, I had the innate desire to make a difference," she says. Guided by the passion to make a difference in the lives of those around her, her background in social work provided a deep understanding of the complexities of rural life, fueling her resolve to empower local communities. "The Youth Involve fellowship, an initiative of Bosco Institute, has given wings to my dreams of working in the community, particularly with women. This opportunity has significantly enhanced my organizational journey and commitment to community service," she says.

When asked about the main mission and reason behind the formation of the Pathikrit Foundation, Krishna Gogoi states: "I had these three primary goals in mind while initiating Pathikrit Foundation, to break stereotypes, utilise local resources, and promote Assamese traditional food items."

### Breaking Stereotypes

In many rural areas, traditional



stereotypes persist, particularly regarding gender roles. Women often stay at home, handling household chores and childcare, while being financially dependent on their husbands. This dependency leads to issues such as domestic violence. Despite their skills and potential, many women do not realise their capabilities. Pathikrit Foundation aims to empower these women, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones and utilise their inherent cooking skills to become economically independent and socially active.

### Utilising Local Resources

Assam has a rich culinary heritage with a variety of nutritious and unique rice varieties and traditional food items. The Pathikrit Foundation is dedicated to reviving and promoting these traditional foods, both nationally and internationally. By doing so, it aims to give wider recognition to Assamese culture and provide economic opportunities for local women who produce these traditional items.

Further, the Northeastern states are rich in seasonal fruits and vegetables, yet many communities do not fully utilise these resources. The Foundation encourages local farmers to grow these local, seasonal produce, which the organisation then purchases. This not only supports the farmers by providing them with a steady income but also promotes sustainable

agricultural practices.

Through these initiatives, Pathikrit Foundation strives to create a more equitable society, leveraging local resources and cultural heritage to foster economic independence and social engagement among women in rural communities.

The Foundation has implemented several initiatives to support women in the food processing sector. "Initially, I formed self-help groups. That's how we started working. However, I soon realised that there were individuals who preferred working independently from home. We do have a production unit, hence gave the freedom for members to work from home," she says.

Training is a key component of their support strategy. "First, we give them training on food processing," she says, adding that she has been trained by Indian Institute of Food Processing Technology. "Now the group members have become experts, they also train other individuals," she added. The training programs are conducted frequently, and the Foundation is often invited to conduct food processing sessions by other organisations. Additionally, the Foundation organises



exhibitions where women and farmers can bring their processed products and homegrown items to sell. "They have a good sales platform and there is a good demand for their products," she said, highlighting how this initiative helps in

providing market access and sales opportunities.

Encouraging women to explore entrepreneurship and step out of their comfort zones was a significant challenge for Krishna Gogoi. She explains, "I am born and raised in this community with whom I work. They have seen me grow up, and initially had doubts on my vision. To start our empowering journey, I formed a self help group. 'Prarthana' Self Help Group was the first SHG we created. We began our journey with 15 women. Initially, we focused on making traditional Assamese food items. Later, we expanded to processing seasonal fruits and vegetables into products like pickles and jams. To give our women recognition and our local Assamese products an identity, we participated in the North East Festival in Delhi in 2018. This was our first major event and we received an overwhelmingly

positive response. The appreciation from the attendees motivated our women and inspired other women to join Pathikrit Foundation. This set an example in our community. People began to value our work and understand our vision. Since then, we have participated in major events in Assam, such as Momentum Northeast and the Majuli Music Festival, and we continue to participate in the North East Festival in Delhi every year. Most notably, last year, we had the opportunity to participate in the North East India Festival in Vietnam. This was a significant achievement as it allowed us to represent our work, our North East India on an international stage" she says.

"This success encouraged more women to join the initiative and today the Foundation works with more than 80 women," she says.

Despite initial challenges, including balancing family responsibilities, community support grew as families saw their women gain confidence and engage in social events. "Women are coming out from their comfort zone, and their family members are supporting them," she says.

The key skills and qualities necessary for entering the food processing sector begins with genuine interest. Krishna emphasises the importance of assessing both the interest and skills of potential participants. "If they're interested, we always welcome them, and then we train them and make them a part of creating such products. Commitment is also crucial, as it ensures that individuals are dedicated to the initiative and their personal growth within the sector. If someone is not interested, whether it's food processing or any other sector, then there is no use in involving them," she says.

The Pathikrit Foundation has also engaged in various collaborations to enhance its impact. "We have a Youth Involve Social Entrepreneurship Program at Bosco Institute which offers trainings and support to young aspiring individuals who dream of creating a positive impact in the society," she noted, highlighting partnerships with youth-led organisations.

Notable collaborations include working with Bosco Institute, Jorhat, Thoughts to Action, Jorhat and Can Youth, Nagaland. At Can Youth, the Foundation facilitated a Skill Training program on Food Processing in Dimapur, Nagaland. With Thoughts to Action, the Foundation conducted many relief programs during COVID-19 and organized Constitutional Literacy programs in schools.

"Recently, we also organized an open mic event under a national level campaign called Chota Muh Khadi Baat by Pravah organization. This event was held in Slogan Cafe, Jorhat. With collaboration with organisations and people, we promote women's entrepreneurship and work towards



gender equity and inclusivity," she adds.

#### Promoting Gender Equity and Inclusivity:

In addition to promoting women's entrepreneurship, the Pathikrit Foundation also focuses on gender equity and inclusivity. "Lately, I have realised that there are many young people who have been facing a lot of challenges, barriers in their day-to-day life," she says.

These challenges often hinder them from achieving their aspirations. "Like many other parents, my parents were also fearful of allowing me to travel alone due to my frequent organizational work, workshops, and training programs. Neighbours and other family members often question why I travel so much. They express their concerns about the safety of a girl traveling alone. They suggest I pursue a secure job that offers permanent settlement, which sometimes becomes a hindrance to taking further steps. Such traditional gender roles, which often portray girls as weaker than boys, pressure boys to secure high paying jobs to support their families, and restrict girls from traveling alone, traveling during their periods, and focusing on household chores, are significant obstacles. This societal pressure can demotivate young people from

pursuing their dreams. To address this, the Foundation aim bring young people together, share their ideas and experiences and develop collective solutions to societal barriers that hinder them from achieving their dreams," she says adding that the initiative also includes educating young people about the importance of creating a welcoming and safe environment that empowers everyone, highlighting that their opinions matter regardless of their age.

#### Future and Collaborations:

Looking ahead, the Pathikrit Foundation plans to further engage with the younger generation by collaborating with schools and colleges. "We want to conduct workshops and sessions on Assamese traditional food crafting, educating young individuals belonging to the age of 14 to 18 years. The goal is to revive traditional recipes and promote healthier eating habits over fast food. We already started our sessions in two schools and plan to collaborate with more," she says.

The Foundation also organises events on gender equity and inclusivity in collaboration with youth-led organisations. "Although it's not part of our organisation, we do it alongside to create awareness," she notes. These initiatives reflect the Foundation's commitment to fostering a supportive community where everyone feels valued and empowered.

*Bhavadharani K*



## Centre for Social Initiative and Management

**C**entre 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](http://www.csim.in)

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

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# EMPOWERING YOUTH:

## A SOCIAL WORKER'S JOURNEY TO TRANSFORM HER COMMUNITY



In the heart of Lunglei, a dedicated social worker has transformed her passion for community service into a thriving organisation aimed at empowering youth. Founded in 2015 by herself and a fellow Master of Social Work graduate from Bosco Institute, their initiative began with a simple yet powerful mission: to provide young people with the support and resources they need to thrive. "We started our organisation to address the lack of spaces for young people to express themselves," she explains, reflecting on her own experiences growing up in the community.

The Founder of a Full Life Access Trust Rebek Khiangte shares her journey and vision, detailing the origins and motivations behind her work. "I have the passion to contribute and give back to my community," she says.

Reflecting on her motivation, she recounts a pivotal moment during her studies: "When you look at your society; when you look at your community and if anything makes you angry, and moves you to tears, ask yourself—what do you want to do about that? How can you channel those frustrations, anger, into a positive act? These were the questions that ignited me to address societal issues."

"What made me angry, after becoming more self-aware, after doing my Social Work education, is when I often saw aimless youth without proper guidance and preparation for their future," she adds.

Drawing from personal experience, she mentions that there is a lack of support for young people. "As a young girl, living and growing up in my society, I witnessed very less spaces for young people to open up, to express themselves. Also, there is not a good physical space, like a hangout space for young people," she says mentioning that this understanding of her community's needs fueled her commitment to creating positive change through her organisation.

Reflecting on the challenges faced by young people, she says, "Where young people become frustrated and look for other means to express themselves, they get bottled up and look for other ways to satisfy themselves or to express themselves. This often leads to social problems such as drug addiction and mental health issues that are prevalent in the society."

Growing up amidst these issues, Rebek felt a strong desire to facilitate and mentor young people. "I aimed at

making the youth discover their true self and to realise their life purpose to live their lives to the fullest. I can say that became my calling and commitment," she shares.

Rebek's conviction that personal growth can lead to societal change was reinforced by her experiences at the Bosco Institute at Jorhat, Assam during her MSW days. She states, "By discovering one's self, skills and strengths, we can change the society." With this belief, she, alongside her friend and co-founder Mapui, who also shares this vision, decided to create a safe space for young people through Full Life Access Trust.

The Trust offers various programs and activities, including a personal safety education program designed to combat the high rates of sexual abuse against children in their region. Since its inception, this program has reached



2,350 children in schools, churches, and other community spaces.

The organisation also focuses on life skills education to address the lack of self-awareness and other core skills among young people. "By providing young people with the tools they need to navigate their lives effectively, we aim to create a more informed, empowered, and resilient generation," she says.

The Trust efforts extend across Aizawl City and Lunglei, making a significant impact on the communities they serve.

Rebek went on to describe several programs designed to support young people in their personal development and leadership. She explains, "We started life skills

education to boost leadership and to facilitate them to be vibrant and responsible citizens. Since 2023, this program has reached 880 young people. Another initiative, called Talking Out Café, encourages open expression and healthy discussion. We adopted this concept from the World Café," she says, "to break the culture of silence, to encourage listening, and to encourage healthy discussion."

Talking Out Café has engaged around 580 participants across more than ten sessions, addressing topics ranging from suicide prevention to personal dreams and aspirations.

A major project of the organisation is the Visible Hangout Space, known as Ka Thiante In, which means "my friend's place." This space is open from Monday to Friday and serves as a free resource center where young people from all backgrounds can gather. It provides a supportive environment for youth to connect, learn, and grow.

The resource centre has a reading room, a cafeteria, and a special Listening Room. "We call it the Listening Room as we tell the young people that we are here to listen to you," she explains.

Highlighting the impact of the Listening Room, Rebek elaborates, "It works like a counseling center, but we don't want to call it so due to the stigma attached. We prefer saying, come to us. We cannot guarantee that we will solve your problem or help you solve them, but we will listen to you."

Since its inception in 2017, Ka Thiante In has welcomed over 7,000 visitors. The Trust also runs several other impactful programs, including 'Messed Up Night', inviting guest speakers to share their experiences on how to overcome mistakes and failures. "We want to tell our young people that it is okay to make mistakes. Failure is when you stop trying," she emphasises.

The Trust also hosts 'Messed Up Night', an Unlugged Night showcasing local artists, and an annual Mental Health Camp on World Mental Health Day, offering free mental health services. "We also have a language hub that offers spoken English and Hindi classes, and a career guidance services. Based on emerging issues and problems, or the need or demand of the community, we conduct relief programs, she signs off.

*Bhavadharani K*

# HEALING THE WATERS



Periakulam Before



Periakulam After

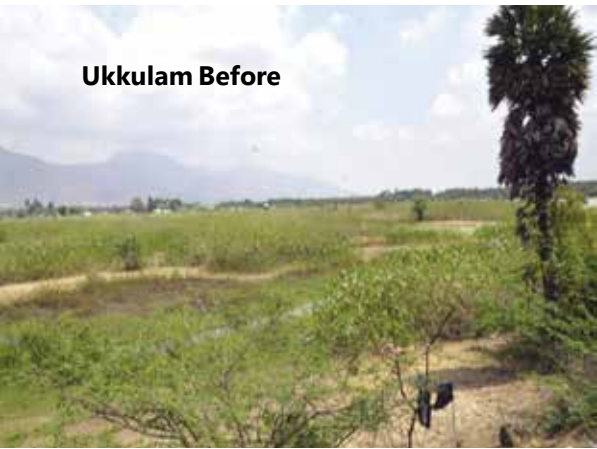
Coimbatore is known for its robust industrial sector, educational institutions, pleasant climate, and proximity to tourist attractions like Ooty and the Nilgiri Hills. With a population exceeding 1.6 million people, Coimbatore is one of the fastest-growing cities in India. But all this growth and rapid urbanisation comes at a heavy price. “A water surplus city started seeing water crisis and air quality declined. The city’s climate began to change and hence, its identity,” says Mr Chinnasamy, Chief Operating Officer at Siruthuli in Coimbatore.

Borewells evolved incredibly after the industrial revolution and allowed mankind to secure reliable water sources. Today, borewells play a crucial role in providing water for domestic, agricultural, and industrial use worldwide, highlighting the importance of sustainable groundwater management. As is the case with all critical resources, we took to exploitation first. Coimbatore was no different. A global study from the 1980s warned against the rapid depletion of ground water reserves and a few eco conscious individuals heard the bell.

“It was all loud and clear. In 2002, there was no water even if we drilled up to 1200 feet below the ground. The famous Siruvani dam that supplied drinking water to all houses had water reserves capable of supporting water needs for only a week. If there were no rains, Siruvani reservoir would run dry. It was such a dangerous predicament. What if we ran out of all water?” recalls Chinnasamy with the same shock and concern from those years.

In 2003, few industrialists came together to resolve this situation and save Coimbatore from facing an imminent water crisis. Thus was born Siruthuli, which translates to ‘small drop’ to demonstrate the strength of small, significant steps that can be taken on a large scale.

Nestled in the foothills of the Western Ghats, the Waterman of India – Dr Rajendra Singh from Rajasthan convinced the team that Coimbatore had lot of catchment capacity. And so, they started working on the Krishnampathy lake that was desilted cautiously to be able to catch the incumbent rains. And it did! It was completely full in three rains, with an enhanced capacity of 220 million litres. The result was more than convincing for the team to extensively focus on desilting local water bodies. Then came Ukkulam, Kolarampathy, Ganganarayana Samudhram, Ayyankuttai, Valankulam, etc. The revival was not just about water but the



Ukkulam Before



Ukkulam After

complete ecology of the locality, inviting the lost migratory birds back to their local habitat. Creation of new ponds within the campus of educational institutions, check dams inside forest areas followed suit and Siruthuli’s work expanded to neighbouring districts of Pudukottai, Sivagangai, Erode, Karur and Cuddalore.

More than 800 rain water harvesting structures were built across the city causing a remarkable change in the static ground water levels and quality. Together, it is the work on 17 lakes, 20 ponds, 7 percolation ponds, 10 check dams and 903 rain water harvesting structures that have added a holding capacity of about 19,845 million litres. Today, one can access ground water by drilling just upto 150 feet. “But this is not our success. We have done all that we could to store as much water and save as much rain water as possible. We envisage this storage not to be exploited again,” informs Chinnasamy with caution.

In 2005, Dr APJ Kalam’s visit defined Siruthuli’s next steps. Inspired by his words, Siruthuli began to focus upon improving air quality in the city. It was time to look into increasing the city’s green cover that has been disappearing with each passing year. Afforestation efforts led to the plantation of more than 8 lakh trees and absorption of 12,053.5 tonnes of carbondioxide.

In the Anna University campus, planting one lakh trees using Miyawaki method led to the revival of 21 micro fauna including soil insects, butterflies, reptiles and amphibians. The average temperature within the campus is now 4 degrees lesser than the surroundings. “It is now the time to talk about all this work to the younger

generation and prepare them for this responsibility. This is not just about awareness on environment but about mentally preparing them about the veracities of environment they may have to face if they do not consciously conserve critical resources like water and forests from now” he says.

“Right attitudes build right behaviours and that is what we are trying to do in our programs with school and college students in the city,” he explains.

Waste composting, roof top gardens and nature camps to encourage all these practices at household or community level are ongoing programs of Siruthuli that encourage budding eco warriors.

It has been 23 years since Siruthuli was born and the experienced team is doing all it can to revive the age old Noyyal River with the support of Noyyal Research Institute that was established in 2005. Alongside, partnerships have also been built to work on treating water bodies for sewage pollution.

Industrial and sewage waste has not only polluted surface water resources but have also reached ground water aquifers, posing a serious threat to the health of mankind and crops. Water treatment is being experimented using various methods and technologies and Siruthuli has vowed to bring ‘Nalla Thanni’ in all of Coimbatore’s water bodies by 2030.

With far reaching impact on environment, public health and economy, Siruthuli has shown the strength of vision in an experienced organisation.

Shanmuga Priya.T

# Rhino Population on the Rise

## Thanks to the Local Community



When the rhinos were hunted, a grassroots movement rose up from within an indigenous community, to rally everyone together to bring the species back.

### Poachers to protectors: The Manas success story

Sightings of the Greater One-horned Rhino always create a buzz among the local indigenous Boro people, as villagers gather to catch a glimpse of one of Manas National Park's most iconic species.

For Kalicharan Basumatary, a member of the Boro community, the presence of rhinos is the culmination of bringing back what was thought to be lost forever.

"The villages on the fringes of Manas National Park mostly consist of the Boro community. Animals, including rhinos, used to come into the village sometimes, even walk past my house", says Kalicharan.

"In the 1990's, big animals like elephants, rhino and tigers were being poached. In 2002, we heard the last information about rhino poaching. After that, we heard nothing. There was nothing in our Manas National Park. Rhinos were completely gone."

### Manas in Peril

In the 1990s, fighting broke out in Assam. There were calls for a separate state to be created which led to an armed struggle. A time when the Boro people, who were desperately looking for ways to sustain themselves, turned to hunting the native wildlife.

"A lot of outsiders were coming with trucks full of logs. They gave a little money to economically-disadvantaged people who didn't know better, to convince them to hunt wild animals such as elephants, rhinos and tigers, and cut down big trees for timber," Kalicharan recounts.

Budhiswar Boro, an ex-poacher, bears witness to the carnage.

"We could predict what kind of animal can be found in which area. I killed wild boar and then other animals like deer, tiger, bear, bison etc. because there was nobody to stop us from such activities."

The Greater One-horned Rhino population bore the brunt of this terror as



all of them disappeared, with the last known sighting reported in 2002.

### Career Change

Seeing the harm that was being done to the wildlife, members of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) decided to take action. They realised that in order to create change that was sustainable and impactful for both wildlife and the people, they had to centre their efforts around the community. So in 2003, they formed the Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society (MMES), an initiative that focused on getting the community invested and involved in the conservation of the land and its wildlife. The first order of business - stop the poaching.

As members of the Boro community, student leaders like Kalicharan were aware of who the poachers were in their respective villages. "We prepared a list of people who manufactured homemade guns and who were using guns for hunting. We issued them letters and invited them to the ABSU office to persuade them to lay down their arms." "The student leaders shared how valuable the forest is to us in preserving the atmosphere, providing good crop yields, and protecting our health," Budhiswar recalls. "Many wild animal species here cannot be found elsewhere on the planet, and could attract tourists." Initially only a few agreed to stop poaching. More meetings were organised with varying degrees of success. Prompting MMES to try other methods.

"We went house to house and talked to them in front of their wives and children to

motivate them. We asked them if their family supported their hunting. Their wives and siblings wouldn't. Even their children did not support their poaching activities. When their families also started supporting us, they eventually relented."

The ex-poachers were persuaded to use their knowledge to become patrol guards instead, to keep out other poachers and dismantle hideouts and traps that they come across, earning some money for their efforts. The sum was small, but significant during a time where many people were struggling to make a living.

For some poachers who feared for their livelihoods, a more persuasive approach was needed.

"We took them to other national parks like Kaziranga, Nameri and Orang to motivate them and show them how they're doing now, says Kalicharan. "We showed that the villages are earning through ecotourism now. After seeing this they were satisfied."

As for those who continued to resist, their guns were confiscated with the help of border guards and the Indian military.

### Sharing Manas with the World

Stopping the poaching was just the first step to change. MMES also focused on building up the capacity and infrastructure for ecotourism which would provide economic support for the community. It has helped train villagers as safari guides, drivers and homestay owners. Boro weaving and silk workshops, which are run by local self-help groups, are also part of the unique experience that eco-tourists

sign up for.

Kalicharan says, "If we conserve, there will be an increase in the number of animals and people will come to see them. So with tourists coming in, there will be income generation and job opportunities in the ecotourism industry."

Thanks to collaborations with other local and international NGOs, the Greater One-horned Rhino was also reintroduced to Manas. "They had brought in 30 or so rhinos from outside. The responsibility for protection was put on the Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society. The number of rhinos has increased. Now there are 48 here," beams Kalicharan.

### The Power of Community Conservation

MMES's conservation achievements have been recognised as a model that can be replicated in other places, and Kalicharan is proud of the critical role that the community played. "Local people's involvement is very important in conservation. MMES's conservation initiative is based on involving local communities and that's why Manas's conservation history is a success." "Rhino is Manas's pride. At one time, they were all gone but now they're back. Manas's former glory has been restored. We feel very proud that we have been able to successfully revive it. Our children should have better lives than ours. All this will be possible if we conserve Manas."

### About Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society

Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society (MMES) is a community based wildlife conservation NGO at Manas National Park in Assam, India. Established in 2003, to counter the poaching that had ravaged their wildlife, MMES has not just turned ex-poachers into protectors, they have also established a sustainable and renowned eco-tourism model that has brought positive impact to the local indigenous Boro community as well as Manas's resident wildlife like the Greater One-horned Rhino.

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

*International Foundation ([www.ourbetterworld.org](http://www.ourbetterworld.org))*

# FROM SLUM TO STRENGTH

Anybody can work for their community. The key aspects that distinguish someone who does so in an extraordinary way often include their level of commitment, the impact of their efforts, and their ability to inspire and lead others. With no prior background or association, it takes a lot of conviction to be able to speak up for issues that really matter, raising awareness on relevant subjects and advocating for changes. "I didn't know any of this. I didn't look into possibility, nor worried about how interventions may end up. I just continued to do what I could to improve the situation in my community," says Ms Senbagam, Founding Director of Aravanaikum Karangal Trust in Chennai.

Coming from a slum community in Thondayarpettai, Chennai, Senbagam saw her parents struggle to make ends meet. "My father was a cook and my mother ran a small tiffin centre. I also helped them in the evenings after school. I had to discontinue after class X due to financial crisis in the family but my mother ensured that I continued to learn some useful skills. For some reason she strongly believed that learning as many skills as possible is important for me," she recalls.

Senbagam learnt tailoring, nursing from a local health centre, basic computer skills, typing and also completed the beautician course.

"Discontinuing my studies bothered my mother a lot. So she chose to expose me to skills that were affordable and could be useful at any point, no matter where life takes me. It was a wise decision," she appreciates.

Senbagam worked in an export company after

school to support her family but her heart was in the evening tuitions she conducted to support slum children. She offered tuition without charging any fee as her aim was to ensure that these children never dropped out for lack of support to learn at home. This conviction soon forced her to look into dropouts in the community and she started readmitting them in government schools.

After marriage at the age of 21 years, she joined the NGO Karunalaya in 2007 and extensively worked in the slums. "That field presence could change the lives of slum children was an eye opener to me. It empowered me with complete knowledge about how systems within the slum worked and how people dealt with their concerns, both small and big," says Senbagam, who was always concerned about students in her community.

She continued to take tuitions for 50 children and in the process, also prepared them to present their issues in public forums like radio and television shows. Karunalaya appreciated her efforts with the 'Best Teacher' award.

Senbagam worked with HIV women, sex workers and their children. To be able to teach them protection and welfare

measures, without being affected by prejudged notions on their work is usually a challenge for any social worker, but it was not so for Senbagam. Her focus was only to convey how they could take care of themselves and live independently as entrepreneurs.

Her efforts led more than 150 women to start entrepreneurial ventures like doll making, tailoring, making/selling idli dosa batter, basket weaving, fruit/vegetable shops, etc. She was also instrumental in helping women avail loans from banks for their ventures. Wherever possible she also linked them to government schemes to procure tailoring machines.

Senbagam left Karunalaya in 2011 and got back to working for the slum children. She was committed about readmitting dropouts and encouraging them with stationery supplies. In 2016, she registered a Trust Aravanaikum Karangal in Chennai and continued to work for the welfare of children. Her experience in her own slum and from Karunalaya's field work allowed her to understand how children and teenagers landed in beaches for begging, and also identify abused children. She started the Boys' Home in a rented space to rehabilitate all those rescued children.

"These children have been scarred multiple times by situations, family members and most of the times, strangers. Counselling had a big role to change their outlook at life. We did a lot of role play to help them develop a positive attitude

towards life and growth. Today, including girls from the community, over 150 children have completed their schooling and are pursuing their higher education in city colleges," she says proudly.

Senbagam worked with adolescent girls to help them learn life skills and in all these efforts she was able to unravel the strength of her mother's thoughts. She believed that life skills were not just

about navigating life's challenges rather it was about making empowered choices that build a better future for self and community.

When the girls hesitated to open up, Senbagam encouraged them to write letters. She soon realised the issues she had to focus was about early marriages and teenage pregnancies. Together with 50 self-help groups, over 500 adolescent girls have been able to re-establish themselves as productive individuals. Provision stores, fruit/vegetable shops, handicraft stalls, sweet shops, etc. were set up as entrepreneurial ventures and women began to reap the benefits of financial independence.

Senbagam also focussed on boys affected by substance abuse and took police help to counsel them. "They were violent but we cannot let them be so. I sought help from the police to get closer to them. More than 30 boys are now in rehabilitation centres engaged in learning sports like carom, football and boxing. All these girls and boys reminded me that working with families was equally important to ensure that they all realised holistic support and social capital at home itself," admits Senbagam.

This led her to engage in other interventions like family counselling services, registration of 7 POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) cases, awareness programs in schools, distribution of excess food from parties/marriages and also support for terminally ill patients.

Senbagam never restricted herself and continues to explore all possible ways of improving the lives of people in her community. Her immersive, hands on approach to understand and address real issues has contributed to adaptive learning of the entire community.

*Shanmuga Priya.T*



# BOSS LADIES OF SOUTH ASIA:

## WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ARE TAKING OVER SOCIAL MEDIA AND HOW

Thirty-one-year-old Kriti Gupta has a busy morning ahead. She needs to get her daughter ready for school while her toddler demands her attention. Amid this hustle, Gupta's phone chimes. It's an Instagram notification. One of her clients has left a thank-you message for the timely delivery and premium quality of soap she sold on the social networking app. Gupta is a social media entrepreneur who has built a credible brand of customised soaps and toiletries.

Nearly 500 miles away, in Karachi, Pakistan Sara Zafar Mir is busy making her own money. Like Gupta, she too is running her own little online empire. She specialises in premium baby products and Facebook is her social media platform of choice. Every day, she reaches more than 150,000 followers who are all potential buyers, bringing to them customised baby clothes and postpartum care packages at the click of a button. She leads this while also raising two young pre-teens.

Mir said: "I am blessed to have a supportive husband and in-laws, who go out of their way to help me in my work. Both my kids help me in my business. It is great to be able to lean on family when needed."

Both Gupta and Mir may be separated by the India-Pakistan border, but their similarities far outweigh their differences. They both belong to a new generation of South Asian boss ladies who are taking social media by storm. They're creating unique online businesses. They use Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, not just to post selfies, or share pictures of their baby showers and family dinners but to earn a livelihood, chase their dreams, and be financially independent.

Over 4.26 billion people use social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost six billion in 2027. That's where a new, dynamic market is emerging, and South Asian women entrepreneurs are here to reach that whole new world of consumers. They are breaking stereotypes and patriarchal norms which had long been dominant in South Asian communities.

Gupta said: "My Insta-shop never shuts down. It is open 24x7. Living in a joint family I have realised that everything is manageable if you have a good mother-in-law. And I am blessed in that department,"

Living in a three-storey home in Jaipur in northwestern India, she cradles her toddler in one arm, while updating her Instagram business account with the other. The festive season is upon her, she has an order of more than 50 exclusive bath hampers in the pipeline. But she knows she can make it with the support of her family.

Born and brought up in Bangkok, Gupta was 21 years old when she moved to India to get married. Initially, it was a culture shock to settle down in a rich but conservative Marwari (an Indian ethnic group from Rajasthan) family. She dropped out of journalism school to have her dream wedding. Soon, she had her first child, and her career took a back seat. It was on her daughter's fifth birthday in 2020 that she kickstarted her entrepreneurial journey by starting Bath and Bubble Co, a brand that sells handmade, natural, artisan soaps and bath products.



***"My Insta-shop never shuts down. It is open 24x7. Living in a joint family I have realised that everything is manageable if you have a good mother-in-law. And I am blessed in that department."***





***"I realised that we need a new strategy. So, we began offering baby gift baskets for new-borns. This is now a favorite among our customers. Mostly grandmothers, aunts, and friends are ordering these."***



On the other side of the border, Mir, a Kashmiri, was married off at a very young age, moving to Karachi with her new husband. As a young mother in Karachi in 2013, Mir found herself searching for premium baby products and felt that there was a void to be filled. That led her to start Mummy and MiniMe, which is almost like her third baby.

Mir was a teacher before she got married. She left her job when she moved to Karachi. After her son was born, she was ready to start something but didn't quite know what and how.

"At the time my son was young, so I would always be looking for baby clothes, shoes and products," Mir said, "so I had some experiences (laughs). I realised that Karachi has some very good quality products which you don't find in other cities."

She explored the internet and found that there were not a lot of people in Pakistan who offered quality products at affordable prices. "We began with PKR 25,000 at the time, which is not a lot of investment," she added. And so, Mother and MiniMe was born on Facebook and then expanded to Instagram. After the launch of her business, Mir was joined by her sister-in-law Nauwarah, who was studying at the time. Mummy and MiniMe currently has 157,673 people following on Facebook and 4,782 followers on Instagram.

"My goal as a young mother was to provide affordability and uniqueness. When I used to shop for my son, I realised there were so many options and I thought to help mothers to get quality stuff in one place," Sara said. Apart from baby products she also began curating wooden toys. With time, the online space started becoming saturated. Many new businesses popped up online and the online market became competitive.

"In 2017, I realised that we need a new strategy. So, we

began offering baby gift baskets for new-borns. This is now a favorite among our customers. Mostly grandmothers, aunts, and friends are ordering these." Mir then started collaborating with bloggers on social media to promote her products.

"I sent a basket with panjeeri (nutritious mixture) to this blogger who had lost her mother and had just had a baby. When I sent her a PR basket, she called me crying saying that my mother used to send her this," Mir said.

#### **The business model**

Gupta exclusively uses Instagram to sell her products. Despite her humble 760 followers on Instagram, she has already found some dedicated and returning customers. Gupta offers over 25 varieties of exclusive, natural soaps. Currently shipping across India, Gupta's products are favorite among children due to their quirky and colorful designs. Her personalised hampers are a huge hit and are often ordered in bulk through Instagram and WhatsApp for special occasions. Since creating a website or an offline store would require a huge investment of money and time, she decided to stick to Instagram in the beginning.

"My business was started right in the middle of the pandemic. And I think because people were spending so much time online, it added to my advantage," Gupta said.

She manages to get four-to-five queries each day through Instagram. Although, not every query converts to a sale. "The Indian festival of Rakhi in August is the busiest month for me where I make somewhere around INR 50,000 in a month by selling customised bath hampers," Gupta said.

A majority of her buyers use Instagram DMs and WhatsApp to place orders and use online modes of payment like Google Pay or PayTm. Gupta also mentioned how using the right hashtags and trending reels has helped

her reach her target audience. The visual format on Instagram has helped business owners like Gupta to connect with their customers in a better way. She claims it is easier to track her customers on a real-time basis on social media and immediately find out what is working for them. Instagram trends also help in boosting sales.

"You never know what clicks. You have to constantly keep thinking of new ideas. I am currently manufacturing the soaps myself at home after I send my daughter off to school. I soon plan to set up a separate space for my business. The first person I plan to hire is someone who can handle our social media," she said.

In Pakistan, Mir's business has now reached a stage where she earns a decent living since she first began in 2013. The revenue spikes during Eid but even otherwise her business is consistent and is doing good. She receives around 10-15 queries a week. And a good 80 percent of those convert to sales.

Since it takes time to build trust among customers online, many first-time buyers pay through cash on delivery but the majority of their customers make online payments. Due to her regular and direct engagement with customers online, Mir's business rarely sees any returns or exchanges.

"It is hard work. You have to be consistent and patient. With time, we can get an idea who is going to continue ordering products and who is there just to window shop, just like a regular retail shop," Mir said.

There are thousands of such women who use social media exclusively as their main marketplace, especially in South Asian countries.

**Zeba Warsi, Shreya Pareek,  
Lubna Jerar Naqvi, and Anum Hanif**  
Source: thestoriesofchange

## "Integrating organic farming into rural development programs is essential for effectively addressing food security, improving health outcomes, and tackling environmental issues."

**Mr. J.A.C.S Rao shares with Marie Banu how organic farming concepts can be integrated into existing rural development programs**

**M**r. J.A.C.S. Rao, IFS (R) is presently the CEO, State Medicinal Plants Board Chhattisgarh. A seasoned leader in sustainable development and forestry, he has dedicated their career to promoting community resilience and environmental stewardship through innovative initiatives.

With a background in biochemistry from Andhra University, his expertise spans strategic planning, operations management, and project execution, pivotal in spearheading initiatives like the Crop-based Cluster Approach under NHM and pioneering herbal garden developments at prestigious national sites.

His leadership extends to previous roles as Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, where he championed R&D in forestry, wildlife conservation, and climate resilience, and as Additional Managing Director at the Forest Development Corporation, driving sustainable forest management and commercial species cultivation.

Mr. Rao's career underscores a commitment to integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices for holistic rural development and environmental sustainability, making significant strides in organic farming, horticulture promotion, and agroforestry integration, thereby empowering rural communities and ensuring socio-economic progress.

*In an exclusive interview, Mr. Rao shares with Marie Banu how organic farming concepts can be integrated into existing rural development programs.*

**How do you plan to integrate your experiences from forest management, rural development, and conservation into your current role?**

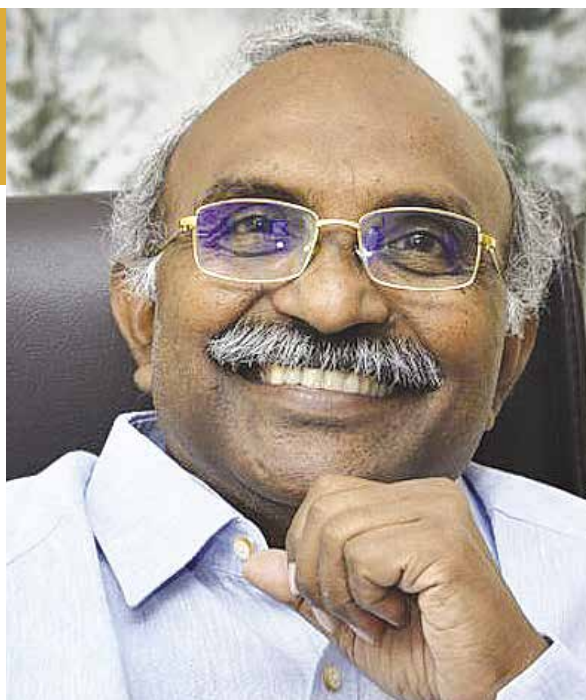
I plan to integrate my experiences into my current role through a holistic approach that emphasises sustainable development and environmental stewardship. My background in forest management equips me with the knowledge of ecosystem dynamics and biodiversity conservation. I intend to leverage this expertise to advocate for integrated landscape management approaches that balance conservation with community development.

In rural development, my experience has taught me the importance of participatory approaches and community engagement. I plan to apply these principles to empower local communities in decision-making processes related to natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods. By fostering partnerships and collaborative efforts, I aim to enhance the resilience of rural communities and promote inclusive growth.

My background in conservation has instilled in me a commitment to environmental sustainability. I will advocate for policies and initiatives that promote conservation practices, biodiversity protection, and climate resilience. By integrating these principles into strategic planning and implementation, I seek to address complex environmental challenges while promoting socio-economic development.

**Could you discuss the significance of developing Herbal Gardens at various levels, including Rashtrapati Bhavan and divisional levels, and their impact on promoting traditional health practices and biodiversity conservation?**

Developing Herbal Gardens at locations like Rashtrapati Bhavan and divisional levels significantly promotes traditional health practices and biodiversity conservation. These gardens serve as living repositories of medicinal plants, preserving ancient knowledge and validating traditional remedies. By cultivating and



showcasing these plants, they encourage scientific validation and bridge traditional and modern medicine. They also play a crucial role in biodiversity conservation by providing sanctuaries for medicinal plant species at risk due to habitat loss and climate change, thus contributing to ecosystem health. Herbal Gardens serve as educational centers, where visitors learn about medicinal properties and conservation values through guided tours and workshops. Moreover, these initiatives support sustainable livelihoods by promoting cultivation and responsible use of medicinal plants, creating economic opportunities while safeguarding natural resources and promoting environmental stewardship.

**What are the primary challenges tribal communities face in accessing traditional healthcare and preserving their traditional knowledge of medicinal plants? How do you plan to address them?**

Tribal communities face multifaceted challenges in accessing traditional healthcare and preserving medicinal plant knowledge. Limited healthcare infrastructure and sparse medical services in remote areas hinder the integration of traditional healing practices into mainstream healthcare. Additionally, the migration of younger generations to urban areas threatens the continuity of traditional medicinal knowledge within communities, impacting cultural heritage and well-being. Environmental degradation, including deforestation and climate change, further endangers medicinal plant resources vital to traditional medicine, risking biodiversity and ecological balance.

As CEO, addressing these challenges requires strategic interventions. Advocating for tailored healthcare solutions such as mobile clinics and telemedicine aims to integrate traditional healing into formal healthcare systems. Initiatives to document and digitise indigenous medicinal practices, alongside training in sustainable plant management, support the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge. Promoting sustainable cultivation practices and community-managed conservation areas ensures the long-term availability of medicinal resources. Advocating for policies that protect indigenous intellectual property rights and promote sustainable resource management is essential for holistic community empowerment and cultural preservation.

**How do you intend to integrate organic farming concepts and practices into existing rural development programs?**

Integrating organic farming into rural development

programs is crucial for addressing food security, health, and environmental concerns effectively. Prioritising farmer training and capacity building through workshops on techniques like composting, crop rotation, and natural pest management is essential for successful adoption of organic practices. Aligning these initiatives with existing agricultural schemes and subsidies amplifies their impact on livelihoods, food security, and sustainable agriculture.

Organic farming enhances food security by promoting diversified crop production and nutrient-rich crops, reducing dependence on monoculture and chemical inputs. It also improves health outcomes by minimising chemical residues in food, supported by awareness campaigns to stimulate demand for organically grown produce. Moreover, organic farming practices improve soil health and biodiversity conservation, fostering environmental sustainability. Developing local markets and supporting value addition through processing and branding will enhance farmers' income and create economic opportunities. Advocating for supportive policies and building partnerships across sectors will be crucial for scaling up organic farming sustainably.

**How do you envision promoting horticulture as a catalyst for socio-economic development in rural areas?**

My vision for promoting horticulture in rural areas aims to boost livelihoods, food security, and environmental sustainability. By encouraging rural households to adopt horticulture, we can diversify income sources and reduce reliance on volatile traditional agriculture. Promoting crop diversity will ensure a nutritious diet while supporting local food security. Emphasising sustainable practices like organic farming and agroforestry will enhance soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem resilience.

To ensure sustainability, I'll focus on training farmers, securing quality inputs, developing markets, fostering innovation, advocating supportive policies, and engaging communities. These efforts aim to create lasting socio-economic benefits and environmental stewardship in rural areas.

**How do you intend to align his initiatives with the broader goals of the Chhattisgarh Tribal Local Health Traditions and Medicinal Plant Board?**

Aligning policies and initiatives with the goals of the Chhattisgarh Tribal Local Health Traditions and Medicinal Plant Board involves integrating community development and environmental conservation into a cohesive strategy. My approach begins with a holistic framework that recognises the interconnectedness of community health, economic empowerment, and environmental sustainability.

By adopting this integrated approach, initiatives promote traditional health practices and medicinal plant conservation while enhancing overall community well-being and ecological resilience. Community-centric planning is foundational, ensuring policies address the specific needs and traditions of tribal communities. Engaging directly with tribal leaders and healers is crucial in co-designing culturally appropriate interventions that resonate with local contexts.

Efforts include documenting indigenous knowledge, establishing digital archives, and promoting sustainable practices like agroforestry and organic farming for biodiversity and soil health. Economic empowerment is facilitated through value addition, market linkages, and fair pricing.

Collaboration with research institutions supports evidence-based policies and protects community rights. Environmental education and awareness campaigns foster stewardship, integrated into education and outreach for sustainable living practices. Robust monitoring evaluates impacts on community development and conservation, ensuring adaptive interventions for long-term sustainability.