

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 12 | Issue 5 | May 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
EDITOR: MARIE BANU

6 COVER STORY

Ripples from Reviving Water Bodies

About Environmentalist Foundation of India and their activities

Changemakers



3

Fearless and Flourishing

The Inspirational Journey of Rongsenmongla Jamir, a former teacher turned entrepreneur in Nagaland

Profile



9

Heartbeats of Hope

About Child Heart Foundation and their multi-faceted approach that paediatric cardiology in India demanded.

Chit Chat



12

"I believe in fostering ideological bonds with farmers beyond just offering premium prices for their produce."

An exclusive interview with Mr. Saravanan, Barefoot Academy of Governance

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In the landscape of global challenges, from environmental degradation to social inequality, the call for innovative solutions has never been more urgent. Traditional approaches have often fallen short, highlighting the need for fresh perspectives and dynamic strategies. This is where entrepreneurs emerge as catalysts for transformative change, driving progress towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

Entrepreneurship, with its ethos of creativity, resilience, and adaptability, possesses a unique power to address pressing social and environmental issues. Unlike conventional models driven solely by profit motives, social entrepreneurs operate with a dual mission: to generate positive impact while ensuring financial sustainability. This mindset shift is crucial in tackling systemic issues that demand holistic solutions.

One of the primary virtues of entrepreneurship is its ability to identify unmet needs and devise innovative solutions to address them. Whether it's developing clean energy technologies, promoting ethical supply chains, or fostering inclusive economic opportunities, entrepreneurs have demonstrated an unparalleled capacity to disrupt entrenched systems and pave the way for progress. By harnessing market forces and leveraging cutting-edge technologies, they have the potential to unlock new possibilities for social change and sustainability.

Moreover, entrepreneurs are adept at catalysing collaboration and mobilising resources across sectors. Through partnerships with governments, NGOs, academia, and communities, they can amplify their impact and scale solutions more effectively. This ecosystem approach fosters synergies and creates a fertile ground for innovation to flourish, driving collective action towards shared goals.

Mainstreaming sustainability principles into business practices is essential for fostering a culture of responsible entrepreneurship. By adopting principles of corporate social responsibility, promoting transparency, and integrating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria into decision-making processes, businesses can align their interests with broader societal objectives, thereby driving positive change at scale.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

BEYOND THE GLITTERING FEEDS

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA, FAKE NEWS, AND CRITICAL THINKING

Social media platforms have become the pulse of our interconnected world. They provide a constant stream of connection, information, and entertainment, often presented in a visually appealing way. But beneath the glittering feeds and carefully curated profiles lies a complex reality. In the digital realm of social media, where information flows incessantly and attention spans are fleeting, the line between truth and fiction has become increasingly blurred. The glittering feeds that captivate our screens often conceal a murky underbelly of fake news and misinformation, posing a formidable challenge to the fabric of our society.

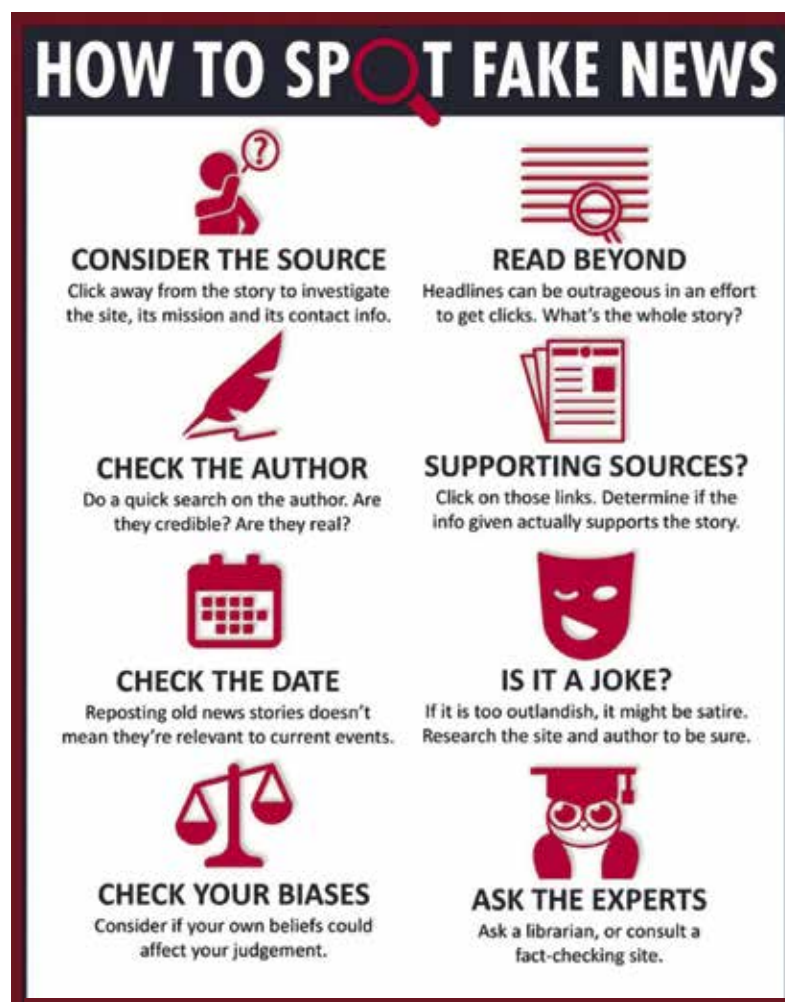
One of the key factors contributing to the proliferation of fake news is the ease with which information can be shared and disseminated on social media. With a few clicks, unverified and misleading content can rapidly spread across networks, reaching a vast audience. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the tendency of individuals to engage in confirmation bias – the inclination to seek out and embrace information that aligns with their existing beliefs and world views while disregarding or dismissing contradictory evidence.

In the Indian context, where diverse cultures, religions, and political ideologies coexist, the potential for fake news to polarise communities and sow divisions is particularly concerning. Misinformation can fuel prejudices, perpetuate stereotypes, and even incite violence, posing a threat to social harmony, democracy and unity. Moreover, the prevalence of "leaning on the mud wall" – a metaphorical term describing the tendency to accept information without critical evaluation or fact-checking – compounds the issue.

In many cases, individuals may share or believe in fake news due to a lack of digital literacy, or a tendency to trust information that aligns with their personal biases or comes from perceived authoritative sources, without verifying its authenticity.

In this information age, it is more important than ever to cultivate a critical eye. Ever seen a post so crazy it seems like it came from another planet? Yeah, that might be fake news! Social media is awesome for connecting with friends and seeing short videos, but it also contains a lot of false information. Here's how to be a social media superhero and avoid getting confused:

1. Don't Trust Clickbait: Those super catchy headlines that make you feel amazing, are often designed to get you to click without actually reading the whole story. Take a deep breath, scroll down, and read the full article before you share it with everyone.
2. Source Check! Who uploaded



Source : International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions



Source : Guido Rosa/Getty Images/Ikon Images

this information? Look for credible sources, such as well-known and trusted news outlets. Real news is based on facts and evidence rather than someone's own opinion.

3. 3. Fact-Check Like a Boss: Ever heard something that sounds fishy? There are awesome websites dedicated to debunking fake news! They check information and let you know if it's true or fake.
4. Be Skeptical (It's Cool!): Don't simply take everything you see online as true. Ask yourself, "Does this make sense?" and "Is there any proof?" If something looks too extravagant or too good to be true, it most likely is.

Being a critical thinker online is like having a superpower. You can see through the fake stuff and share only the real deal. So next time you scroll through your feed, remember – think before you click and share!

Social media is a powerful tool that can be used for good or bad. By understanding the purpose of social media and being critical of the information we consume, we can help to mitigate the spread of fake news and create a more informed and civil online environment. Let's move beyond the glitz and glamour of social media feeds and strive to be more discerning consumers of information.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

FEARLESS AND FLOURISHING:

THE INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY OF A NAGALAND JEWELLERY ARTISAN



Rongsenmongla Jamir, a former teacher turned entrepreneur, embarked on a remarkable journey that led to establishing a thriving business in traditional Nagaland jewellery. Her passion for jewellery design and her unwavering belief in herself propelled her to take risks and pursue her entrepreneurial dreams.

While initially balancing her teaching job and nascent business, Jamir felt the urge to dedicate more time and effort to her passion. Her journey as a jewellery designer and entrepreneur demanded a delicate balance between her studies and her burgeoning business. In 2020, an opportunity to open a physical store came knocking at her door, offering her a chance to showcase not only her creations but also the works of local artisans and budding entrepreneurs. She says "I grabbed this opportunity, as it would also benefit the local entrepreneurs."

In 2021, Rongsenmongla took the bold step of leaving her job as a teacher and putting her studies on hold in order to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams full-time. During her college years, she initially managed her business as a part-time venture. While attending college, she would dedicate time to creating and promoting her designs on social media platforms like Instagram. This minimal yet consistent effort laid the foundation for her online presence and gradually gained traction.

She discovered the power of Instagram and WhatsApp as e-commerce platforms, allowing her to take orders and interact with customers.

While managing her studies and jewellery business, Rongsenmongla also ventured into creating souvenir-based items. The unique design and quality of her products caught the attention of international conference attendees. Through this fortuitous exposure, her creations made their way to 15 different countries, further expanding her reach and recognition.

Within India, her business witnessed a steady growth, with orders flowing in from cities like Pune, Punjab, Haryana, and Bangalore. Despite the challenges of balancing her commitments, Rongsenmongla's dedication and passion for jewellery design enabled her to manage the orders efficiently. She collaborated with delivery agents, ensuring seamless dispatches and timely delivery.

Rongsenmongla's commitment to promoting local artisans and startups, in addition to her homemade jewellery, earned her store a reputation as a channel between buyers and producers. By featuring a wide array of locally crafted products, the store became a hub of creativity and a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Nagaland.

In addition to running a store, Rongsenmongla also provides training to aspiring individuals from all ages irrespective of gender. Her goal is to nurture and empower young minds with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in the jewellery industry. Through her workshops and mentorship, she encourages entrepreneurship and self-belief, helping others realise their creative potential.

Rongsenmongla's unwavering dedication to traditional Nagaland jewellery, coupled with her entrepreneurial spirit, has enabled her success. She proudly says "I have stopped my full-time work as a teacher; since 2022 I'm a full-time social entrepreneur and a jewellery designer"

Rongsenmongla Jamir's jewellery designs are a perfect fusion of traditional

Nagaland aesthetics and contemporary flair. Her collection encompasses both ethnic and contemporary pieces, allowing customers to embrace the rich cultural heritage while incorporating a touch of modernity.

In the realm of ethnic jewellery, Rongsenmongla and her sister work diligently to create designs that capture the essence of traditional Naga jewellery. They draw inspiration from the vibrant colours, intricate patterns, and authentic materials of Naga culture. She says "When we talk about our Naga culture, our traditional attires are heavy. So many times because of weather and many other perspectives, we are unable to carry our original ethnic wear. So my sister and I came up with some basic, simple designs."

However, they also understand the need for lighter, more wearable options. Thus, they craft simplified versions of traditional designs, making them suitable for everyday wear, formal occasions, and even casual outings.

Recognising that fashion is ever-evolving, Rongsenmongla also ventures into contemporary designs. She embraces the freedom of creativity, accepting custom orders from clients who seek unique and personalised pieces. This approach allows her to cater to a diverse range of preferences, ensuring that everyone can find something that resonates with their style.

When it comes to targeting customers, Rongsenmongla initially established her business through Instagram, leveraging social media as an e-commerce platform. Through captivating visuals and engaging content, she created an online presence that attracted a loyal following. As her business expanded, she decided to open a physical store, welcoming customers from the local community and providing them with a tangible and immersive shopping experience.

Her dedication to preserving and re-imagining Nagaland jewellery is not only reflected in her designs but also her marketing strategies. Through a seamless integration of social media, a physical





store, and personalised customer engagement, she has successfully built a strong brand that resonates with both traditional and contemporary jewellery enthusiasts.

The initial phase of her business, Mixpick Enterprise, was a result of trial and error. Rongsenmongla relied on her intuition, exploring uncharted territories and learning from her experiences. She metaphorically states her entrepreneurial journey “It was like wielding a machete in a dense jungle, I carved my path through persistence and resilience. I encountered obstacles along the way but always stood back up, using the setbacks as learning

opportunities.”

One of the significant challenges she faced was the need to continuously monitor the industry landscape and identify emerging trends. Rongsenmongla had to keep a close eye on evolving customer demands, cultural shifts, and fashion preferences to ensure her designs remained relevant and appealing.

Adapting to ever-changing tastes and styles required a strong understanding of her target market and the ability to anticipate future trends. Being a literature student, she firmly refused to be labelled as an educated but unemployed individual. Determined to forge her path, she went on



to acquire a B.Ed degree and embarked on a teaching career for a year. However, despite her dedication as an educator, Rongsenmongla couldn't shake off the nagging feeling that she was neglecting her true passion. With conflicting responsibilities, she found herself questioning the direction of her life. It was during a heartfelt conversation with the school principal that she finally made a bold decision - after she took a month to decide on fully committing herself to her entrepreneurial aspirations. This courageous step allowed her to concentrate on shaping her career and turn her dreams into reality. She states “Not taking risks is the biggest risk as an entrepreneur, so I took up the opportunity and surrendered myself to the whole situation and started focusing full-time on my business.”

When asked about mentor figures who guided her through her journey and have been a huge influence on her she talks about her parents’ influence, “My parents, they are quite crafty. When we were young, they used to make a lot of art and craft items. My dad would be making some art out of stones or out of wood. My mom, on the other hand, would curate flowers and pots, vases and all those things. So, they were very much inclined towards these craft items. Little did I know that I'd end up being crafty like them.”

Rongsenmongla says her parents played a

vital role in the development of the business and they will continue to do so.

Rongsenmongla products are all about client satisfaction. She creates her designs which are something of her own but also gives exactly what the client wants “We give liberty to the clients, it's all as per the client's wish.” She says they come up with unique products to impress the clients, if they don't want to wear a thick necklace in the scorching hot sun she designs brooches for them.

Rongsenmongla Jamir's story is a testament to the power of determination, resilience, and the pursuit of one's passion. Her journey serves as a beacon of inspiration, urging individuals to break free from societal expectations and nurture their entrepreneurial spirit.

With her business venture, she not only aims to achieve personal success but also uplifts the talented individuals of Nagaland, allowing them to create their own identities.

Rongsenmongla's unwavering dedication is a shining example of how one person can make a difference and pave the way for others to follow their dreams.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

Contact Persons:

- Ms. Marie Banu Rodriguez**
Director, Chennai
@ 9884700029

Dr. Madhuri. R
Head, Coimbatore,
@ 91-9840222559
- Dr. Agyeya Tripathi**
Head - North & NE India
@ 91-8058662444

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

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

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

BRIDGING THE INTER-GENERATIONAL GAP

In the heart of a bustling community, Purbali Tungkhungia from Jorhat, Assam, a social entrepreneur has started an inspiring new project called Haatipoti, which means “The Milky Way” in Assamese. This playschool and daycare is more than just a childcare center - it is a beacon of inclusive and nurturing early childhood care. This article will delve into the innovative methods and cultural significance embedded in Haatipoti's philosophy, exploring how Purbali's vision is transforming the landscape of childcare, particularly for working women who seek a supportive environment for their little ones in Assam.

Purbali Tungkhungia embarked on a remarkable journey that led her to establish Haatipoti that embodies her passion for nurturing young minds. Purbali has a Master's degree in Social Work from Bosco Institute, Jorhat, affiliated with Dibrugarh University. Her journey started when she joined Thoughts to Action - an organisation focused on social-emotional learning through art for children in the year 2020. She used to lead sessions in schools. In this role, she taught arts and crafts, which helped her connect with kids and gave her a better understanding of their needs.

Later, Purbali realised her passion for working with children and wanted to explore early childhood education further. She aimed to create a space where children could explore, imagine, and receive a holistic education. “I realised I love to spent time with children and engage them with colours. I wanted a school which would allow children to explore to their fullest potential,” she says. This sparked an entrepreneurial spirit within her, and on November 15th, 2023, she took the bold step of launching her own play school and daycare center, Haatipoti.

Purbali's vision was clear: to create a space where children could receive holistic development, going beyond mere academic learning. With Haatipoti, Purbali aimed to provide a nurturing environment that would foster the overall growth of her young students, and in doing so, fulfill her dream of making a lasting difference in their lives. “My intention was where my children also get holistic development.”

Purbali's Haatipoti is more than just a daycare and play school; it is a hub where innovative approaches to child development are put into practice. Recognising the lack of quality time children spend with their parents, Purbali introduced a unique platform that promotes intergenerational dialogue. She states, “I felt that there is no emotional bonding among them since they leave the children in my space”. This initiative allows parents and elderly family members to engage with children through storytelling sessions, sharing tales of wisdom, values, and personal experiences from their childhoods. The aim is to create an emotional bond and foster learning through the timeless art of storytelling, a tradition deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Purbali's vision extends beyond the

immediate interactions within the play school. She aspires to compile these shared stories into a book, preserving the wisdom passed down through generations. This project not only serves as a future reference but also highlights the importance of cultural heritage in early childhood education.

Haatipoti's educational philosophy is rooted in play-based learning, ensuring a safe and joyful environment where children are free to explore and learn at their own pace. Academic learning is integrated seamlessly with play, allowing children to develop holistically while fostering a love for learning.

Purbali's commitment to child development is evident in her continuous efforts to enhance daycare services and ensure that children feel safe and enjoy their time at Haatipoti. The play school's unique blend of play, learning, and storytelling creates a nurturing educational experience that honors India's rich cultural legacy.

As Purbali reflects on the challenges of starting Haatipoti, she acknowledges the difficulties faced in establishing a new venture. From navigating the complexities of setting up a daycare to fostering trust within the community, Purbali's perseverance and passion for child development have been instrumental in the success of Haatipoti. As a newcomer to the daycare industry, she faced considerable resource constraints, which made it difficult to get the center off the ground. Additionally, engaging the local community proved to be a major hurdle. Coming from a village and setting up her center in an urban area, Purbali initially struggled to connect with the local families. This lack of community engagement was a significant setback, as parents were not familiar with her or her daycare. However, over time, through persistent efforts and creating a welcoming environment, parents began visiting Haatipoti and gradually developed trust in her services.

Even now, Purbali faces the ongoing challenge of managing parents' expectations. Parents want their children to get good grades and be perfect. However, I think what parents often don't want is to allow their children to make mistakes. Balancing these demands while ensuring a nurturing and holistic environment for the children remains a continuous challenge for Purbali and her team at Haatipoti.

Haatipoti stands as a testament to the power of innovation, cultural preservation, and the transformative impact of storytelling on child development by having parents as storytellers. Haatipoti enriches the lives of children and families.

“Every woman has the potential to make a difference, whether it's within the confines of her home or in the broader scope of the professional world. It's about knowing your inner self and having the courage to let your voice be heard”. One of the key philosophies



underlying regardless of the challenges they face, they possess the resilience to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Despite facing initial challenges, including resource constraints and low community engagement, Purbali Tungkhungia remained steadfast in her mission to create a nurturing environment for children. Through collaborations with like-minded organisations, she expanded Haatipoti's reach by offering Sunday workshops for a wider age range of children and families. “I collaborate with them and conduct art and craft sessions open to anyone,” she says.

Central to Purbali's approach is the empowerment of women, both within her organisation and in the broader community. According to her journey of entrepreneurship is not exclusive to any gender. It's about recognising one's capabilities and seizing opportunities to create

positive change in society.

By providing employment opportunities to women, including single mothers, Purbali Tungkhungia not only supports their livelihoods but also helps them gain confidence and a voice in society. She also adds, “By providing work to women I am helping other women to go work peacefully in their workplace”. Through her leadership, Purbali demonstrates that women have the potential to excel in entrepreneurship and make a positive impact on their communities. As Haatipoti continues to grow and evolve, Purbali remains committed to her vision of creating a nurturing and inclusive environment for children and families.

Empowerment comes from within. When women believe in themselves and their abilities, they can break barriers and pave the way for others to follow. Her story serves as an inspiration to other women who aspire to start businesses in the field of childhood education, reminding them to embrace their inner potential, stand up for their rights, and make a difference in the lives of others. Boldness is key. “Women should be bold enough to confront challenges, pursue their dreams, and make their mark on the world, regardless of the obstacles they may encounter”. Through education and community collaboration, Purbali Tungkhungia is paving the way for a brighter future for the children of Jorhat, Assam and beyond.

Iniyath Asmin



RIPPLES FROM REVIVING WATER BODIES



Developing a concern for the environment often involves a fundamental shift in mindset. Individuals begin to see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem, understanding their inter-connectedness with nature. This shift can lead to greater empathy towards other living beings and a deeper appreciation for the natural world.

For Arun Krishnamurthy, Founder of Environmental Foundation of India, Chennai, rapid transformation of the lush green places around his home was impossible to ignore. “Urban expansion comes at a cost – the shrinking water bodies and water scarcity in a matter of few years was a big shock. I sensed my generation’s responsibility,” he recalls.

Even as a school student, Arun actively participated in conservation efforts. He was part of the local team in his hometown that came together to clear litter and clean a pond. He graduated in Microbiology and did his Masters in Advertising and Public Relations from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in Delhi. To help understand conservation of water bodies better, he also studied a course at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in Netherlands. Amidst all this, he also worked for Google. “Working at Google for three years did not disconnect me from my concerns about conservation. In fact, I grew determined to take it full time. There was little anxiety, yes but I did not want to wait for somebody else to take the responsibility. I have always done things on my own,” smiles Arun.

He founded the EFI in 2016 and today, they are present in 18 states across India. Under his leadership, EFI has restored 461 lakes and has created 91 afforestation sites. EFI’s work is not only about lakes and tress, but also about beaches. The new project ‘Samudra’ intends to create awareness on the unique features of Indian coastal line and prevent its exploitation for commercial and recreation purposes. “All of this has a lot to do with how we teach children to see nature. The general boredom, disconnect and self-centred approach of present day has to be shaken and waded off. Environment Conservation has to become a lot more interesting for the younger generation,” he remarks.

EFI’s strength has been its volunteers – with a 20 members team working full time and an annual engagement of around 85,000 volunteers, EFI has emerged a clear winner in encouraging participation on a large scale, consistently.

How did EFI manage to sustain its volunteer base? Do volunteer based conservation efforts suffice the need and task at hand? “Mass public awareness and volunteering on field is crucial. It can be that the entire population pollutes and a handful of people have to correct it. Nature conservation should become national discipline and routine. EFI focuses on this and executes projects. We largely target institutions to achieve the numbers required to carry out the work. Cutting across age-gender-socio economic classifications, nature

notified to the local community. “Involving them in the process in an inevitable effort because after all the hardships, they are the ones who will be immediately available to ensure that lakes are not polluted again. It is not simple stakeholder participation but that critical element contributing to long term sustainability and resilience of lake ecosystems,” he informs.

Arun’s work on the field is taken to the public through various means. One important channel is his documentaries and EFI’s YouTube channel which not only speak of impact but inform all volunteers about the result of what they had been a part of. These videos narrate the stories of water bodies from birth to the current condition, evoking a sense of wonder about the ancient wisdom of water conservation planning.



“Step wells from 17th century, swastik wells from 18th century, they are all still there, surviving the expansion of population and urbanisation. Such thoughtful planning before centuries has been an integral part of our civilisation. But how did we lose track of these marvellous structures that can support our water needs to this day?

enthusiasts from all walks of life are the reliable volunteers. Transforming a conventional human into an inspiring nature volunteer is the task at end,” he sincerely responds.

Restoring a lake is a long process that is meticulously planned to sustain local flora and fauna. It starts with removal of garbage and debris that has accumulated in and around the lake. Then comes desilting to deepen the water body. This step not only restores storage capacity but also removes accumulated sediments to maintain healthy aquatic ecosystems.

The in-depth study of local habitat and dependants guides decision on trenches and plantation around to further support the revival process. After that, the embankments are strengthened with bunds to regulate flow of water in and out of the lake. Finally, hydrological and legal boundary to safeguard lake and its ecosystem are demarcated and

At least now, we must restore them to their full capacity,” he says with determination.

Arun’s work has been recognised by numerous awards including the Rolex Award for Enterprise in 2012, the British Council International Climate Champion Excellence Award in 2010. CNN named him as one of the Environmental Heroes in 2021 and Time Magazine named him ‘Next Generation Leader’ in 2022. But what is he looking forward to?

“EFI wants youngsters and the general population to understand that nature cannot be taken for granted. Its high time we think on how to sustain development with little damage to the environment. It is an empty, lonely battle which many are fighting, the only solution is peace, love and togetherness. We will not harm the planet when there is collective wisdom and love,” he adds.

Shanmuga Priya.T

SANSKRIT SERENITY:

Rediscovering Indian Heritage and Cultivating Cultural Roots

Step into the fascinating world of Indian culture and delve into its rich tapestry of knowledge systems. Discover the fascinating journey of Vanaja as she delves deep into the realms of Indian culture and its profound systems of knowledge. She dedicated herself to delving into the realms of yoga, Ayurveda, and Sanskrit. Her fascination with the Shastras, the Indian sciences encompassing a vast array of fields, unfolded a treasure trove of deep scientific principles.

Vanaja discovered that these Shastras extended far beyond religion, encompassing domains like Vastu Shastra, Shilpa Shastra, and Rasayana Shastra, revealing remarkable advancements in chemistry and mathematics. Uncovering the accuracy of ancient astrology, she unearthed the obstacles hindering this wealth of wisdom from reaching the majority of western-educated Indians—limited awareness and poorly translated Sanskrit texts. Through this thought-provoking conversation, we gain insight into Ms. Vanaja's transformative journey and her mission to revive and disseminate ancient Indian knowledge for the modern world.

The challenge lies in the fact that most Indians are Western-educated and hence, unfamiliar with the rich knowledge contained within the Shastras. Furthermore, these ancient texts are primarily in Sanskrit, and the existing translations are often poor and sometimes inaccurate. This results in the Shastras being perceived as childish or irrelevant. Additionally, a significant amount of this invaluable knowledge has been taken abroad by colonisers and is now housed in countries like Germany, the US, and the UK.

Recognising this gap, Vanaja decided to delve into the Shastras, driven by the realisation that they are not solely about religious matters, but encompass guidelines for good living, health, ethics, and sustainability. Coming from a corporate background, she noticed the unsustainable practices prevalent in the business world and saw a need for integrating the wisdom of the Shastras into modern education and practices.

"My goal is to create a curriculum that makes the Shastras accessible to English-educated Indians. This is crucial as many lack the time or resources to study these texts in depth. The content needs to be accurate and engaging to counteract the poor translations currently available," she says.

The government also supports this initiative, recognising the value of incorporating traditional Indian knowledge into various fields of study. "Architecture students could benefit from



understanding astrology, space researchers from Indian astronomy, and medical students from Ayurvedic principles," she says.

By integrating the Shastras into modern education, we can broaden horizons, inspire new ideas, and encourage innovative thinking. This endeavor involves extensive content development, and Vanaja is committed to making these profound insights accessible and relevant to today's context.

Vanaja shares her journey after she left her corporate job. Driven by a deep interest in sustainability, she purchased a

small farm to experiment with soil

rejuvenation techniques. She undertook a teacher training program in natural farming with the Art of Living Foundation and began creating a food forest on my farm using entirely natural methods. This included practices like geothermal, mulching, and particularly the use of vetiver grass. Vetiver is excellent for soil management as its deep roots enhance soil porosity and facilitate drainage, which helps prevent water stagnation and increasing water table levels. Her experiments demonstrated the effectiveness of these sustainable farming techniques. While she has not yet started formally helping other farmers, her neighbours are observing her methods with curiosity. "Unlike their traditional practices, which involve heavy plowing, planting conventional crops like ragi and beans, and extensive use of urea leading to declining soil fertility and water table levels, my approach offers a promising alternative. By showcasing the success of these natural farming techniques on my farm, I hope to inspire and influence local farmers to adopt more sustainable practices, ultimately benefiting their soil health and reducing their farming costs."

Transitioning from a corporate career to a sustainable farming lifestyle was a significant challenge for her. In the corporate world, particularly in marketing, she enjoyed a well-recognised role and a lucrative income. Moving to a farming lifestyle meant stepping away from financial stability and entering a field where her work was not immediately understood or valued by others.

Teaching Sanskrit and Vedic Sciences at universities often met with skepticism, as many questioned the relevance of these ancient practices in modern times.

Despite these challenges, she found immense personal satisfaction and interest in her new path, even though it was less rewarding in material terms.

Vanaja's corporate skills and knowledge influenced her farming practices, particularly in understanding the broader implications of sustainability. Although her vetiver farming remains experimental and not commercial, she plans to use her insights to educate others. She noticed a significant disconnect between urban dwellers and the fundamentals of soil,

water, and air quality. Many people in corporate environments are unaware of how their actions impact these essential elements. By reconnecting herself with the basics of environmental health, she aims to eventually bridge this knowledge gap, helping urban individuals understand the importance of sustainable practices.

She believes that even those living in modern, urban settings need to grasp the significance of maintaining healthy soil, water, and air, as these are crucial for long-term sustainability and cannot be substituted by financial means.

Vanaja faced a unique challenge in transitioning from her corporate career to teaching Vedic sciences and Sanskrit. While she has not encountered direct criticism, many people who are uninterested in these subjects often dismiss her as eccentric. Interestingly, she notes a higher level of commitment to learning Sanskrit and Vedic sciences among foreigners and Indians living abroad, compared to middle-class Indians who view these studies as impractical for securing jobs. This cultural disconnect has made her mission more challenging, but it has not deterred her passion and dedication.

In her efforts to bridge this gap, she emphasises the scientific aspects of Indian traditions, which are often overlooked or misunderstood. She points out that disciplines like Ayurveda and yoga offer valuable insights into health and well-being, which became particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, she says "ancient Indian sciences address contemporary issues such as stress and mental health, providing fundamental knowledge about the mind, intellect, and emotions. Unfortunately, these teachings are frequently mistaken for religious dogma, deterring many from exploring their practical applications." She believes that reintroducing these concepts into mainstream education could significantly benefit society by fostering a deeper understanding of personal and environmental sustainability.

To spark interest and encourage others to spread the word, Vanaja suggests that people take a step back and reassess their connection to traditional knowledge. She urges them to consider whether they feel in control of their lives and to explore the wisdom embedded in cultural practices and ancestral advice. "For instance, traditional agricultural methods sustained humanity for millennia before the advent of modern fertilizers and pesticides, which have since led to numerous ecological problems," she says emphasising the need to critically evaluate modern scientific claims and recognise the enduring value of time-tested knowledge.

By fostering a mindset shift that questions the uncritical acceptance of Western science and acknowledges the profound insights of ancient Indian wisdom, she believes people can better navigate their lives and contribute to a more balanced, sustainable world.

Bhavadharani K



HEARTBEATS OF HOPE



The growth of healthcare in India has been marked by significant advancements and increased accessibility over the past few decades. The country has seen a substantial expansion in healthcare infrastructure, including the establishment of numerous hospitals, clinics, and specialised medical centres in urban and semi-urban areas. India has become a global hub for medical tourism, offering high-quality medical care at competitive prices. Technological innovations, improved medical education, and increased public health awareness have further contributed to the robust growth of the healthcare sector. However, this growth has not been uniform across all specialisations. Interventions in some areas has not been as successful as others. There are also fields that have not had the adequate support system to meet rising needs, like paediatric cardiology.

With the incidence of congenital heart disease (CHD) in the country estimated to be around 8-10 per 1,000 live births, India faces a substantial burden of paediatric cardiac disorders, translating to approximately 200,000 to 250,000 new cases annually. This significant prevalence underscores the critical need for robust paediatric cardiology services. Despite advancements in medical technology and healthcare infrastructure in urban centres, paediatric cardiology in India encounters numerous challenges. These include a stark disparity in access to specialised care between urban and rural areas, a shortage of trained paediatric cardiologists and cardiac surgeons, and financial constraints that hinder families from affording expensive cardiac treatments.

"Only 3 government hospitals in North India have full-fledged paediatric cardiology department. Furthermore, the lack of widespread new-born screening programs for CHD often results in delayed diagnoses and interventions, adversely affecting outcomes," informs Dr Sunita Harkar Shalla, Chief Operations Officer at

Child Heart Foundation (CHF), New Delhi.

Established in 2013 by a Pediatric Cardiologist, who after working in various hospitals abroad returned to India to make a change in the lives of poor children with heart disease, CHF was their answer to demonstrate the much needed multi-faceted approach that paediatric cardiology in India demanded. "They came with 6 parents whose children had heart conditions that needed treatment. In fact, all our trustees are parents of heart disease warriors," adds Sunita. The bigger problem, according to her, is the lack of awareness among parents and families that affects early diagnosis. CHF is addressing every challenge through its resourceful programs that engage health care professionals and hospitals across multiple cities.

CHF's community awareness programme SUGYAN focusses on training frontline health workers like ASHAs and Anganwadi workers to be able to assess early symptoms in infants and children. "It could be as common as excessive perspiration during feed time. Or the blue tinge in nails, lips, tongue that is caused by lack of oxygen. Some babies do not gain weight at all but thriving is also misunderstood for nutrient deficiency. Inability to feed is not taken as seriously as it should be. Repeated episodes of pneumonia, cold, cough also indicate and underlying heart condition. There is huge lack of awareness even among general doctors who end up prescribing antibiotics and the cycle of ill health persists," she explains.

While all this could be helpful for children living with families, CHF chose to reach out to abandoned children as well. Medical Camps were organised in collaboration with other organisations to examine children living near railway stations, bus hubs, pavements, etc and the suspected cases were brought to their centre for confirmatory diagnosis. CHF's

most significant contribution has been its Echo-cardiography Screening programme called PRADHAN, that is provided free of cost. Referrals for diagnosis come from across the country. In fact, all the 23 government hospitals in Delhi refer suspected cases to CHF. Post the diagnosis, due diligence documentation follows to assess patient's socio-economic background.

"The scale of need and gap in available services is terrific. Therefore, we want to make sure that we are reaching out to the needy. By focusing on the needy, we not only address immediate health concerns but also contribute to broader social, economic, and ethical goals, ultimately fostering a healthier and more equitable society," says Sunita.

Following diagnosis, CHF schedules treatment of the children by connecting with hospitals in its network. So far, 402 cases have been successfully treated. With out-patient services extended to Jalandar in Punjab and Siliguri in West Bengal, the reach is only increasing every year, in terms of number of cases and geography. But CHF has consciously decided not to restrict itself only to treatment related interventions.

Preventive Health Care is as much applicable in paediatric cardiology too and CHF is the first and only NGO to provide free fetal echo cardiography screening services under JEEVANSI program. This screening is done during the second trimester and parents are counselled accordingly. "We have screened over 7,000 pregnant women so far. If the condition is fatal or serious with no scope of recovery, parents are counselled for termination of pregnancy. In other cases that have a good prognosis, the unborn child is registered for treatment under our HRIDAAN programme," she adds.

While treatment is all about optimum utilisation of specialists and infrastructure already available, CHF strengthens this ecosystem by training doctors to do Echo-

cardiography and also donating ECHO machines to government hospitals. In Delhi for example, ECHO machines have been donated to 8 hospitals and 2 doctors have been trained to use them for early diagnosis. "These tests are expensive and are definitely out of reach for poor families. This is our effort to reduce the time wasted in identifying the affordable diagnostic facility. We want to use that in treatment and most of all, we cannot lose lives due to unavailability of affordable, accessible, immediate diagnosis," comments Sunita.

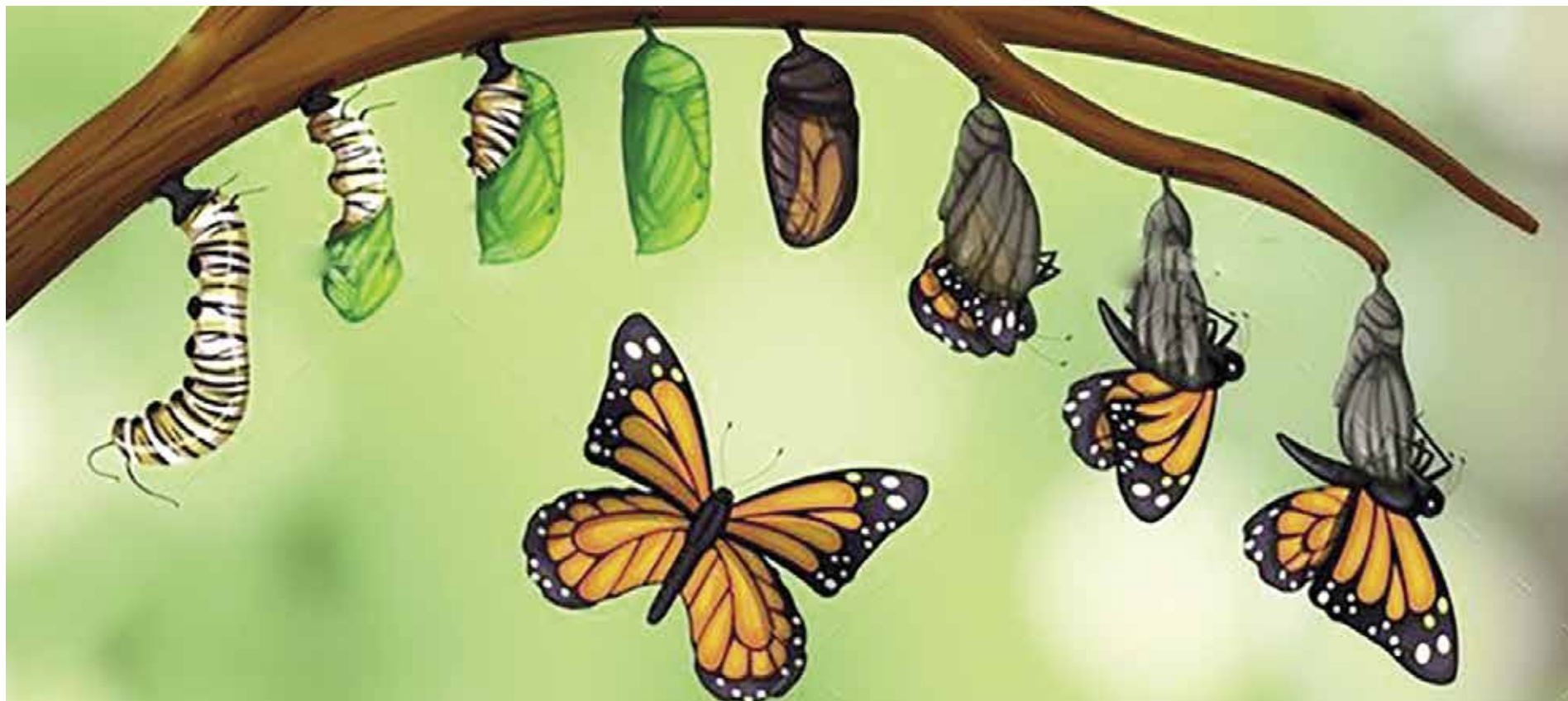
Pulmonary Hypertension is a life threatening disease with no cure and needs expensive medication for survival. The blood vessels that carry blood from lungs to heart are narrow, increasing the pressure on lungs. In adverse cases, it results in heart failure or heart attack. CHF's PH Life Care programme is providing free medicines for 57 patients every month. Patients' location has not been an obstacle in any of their programmes. With 200,000 infants born with heart condition every year, only 20,000 are treated in government set ups while the rest either do not survive or remain part of the treatment wait list.

The average cost of treatment for heart conditions is around 2.5 lakhs which is outside the affordability of a normal salaried person. Above all, heart conditions are not covered by insurance companies in India. Government of India's Ayushman Bharat scheme covers it but this is not accepted in all states. The relevance of CHF cannot be overstated in this context.

By leveraging its expertise and resources, CHF has tried to facilitate early diagnosis, expand access to treatment, and improve outcomes for infants with heart conditions. "Every child born with a heart condition should be able to thrive in India. This is our vision," commits Sunita.

Shanmuga Priya.T

TO BE OR NOT TO BE: A Twilight Question



I'm feeling frustrated and cheated," said Smitha as she looked up from her coffee. "I feel like I'm being taken for granted," added Janani, her voice filled with sadness and frustration. "I've been putting in so much effort, but it seems like it's not being appreciated."

"But why? You gave your best all the way!" exclaimed Sunitha.

"Well, that's just the way the world works, and maybe you could have made better choices," said Pavitra in a deep voice, her tone suggesting a hint of hesitation. "I mean, we all could have, right?" There was a palpable pause and heavy silence in the air. But none of the four women's minds was silent. A myriad of thoughts were racing through them.

Four friends, Pavitra, Smitha, Janani, and Sunitha, had met after a year-long silence, each busy in their world. Pavitra's house had a lovely terrace to relax and stretch. This place had been their *hadda* long back while they were students in college. After nearly two decades, they are sipping filter coffee again with crunchy Marie biscuits.

"I have always thought I have to do what is needed. But now I want to do what I want. I think being so nice, supportive, and accommodating to all is actually taking me for granted. In this saga, I have sacrificed so many desires and wants that have gone unnoticed by others. They now have made it a habit to expect me to sacrifice! Whew!" Smitha broke the silence, her frustration evident in her voice.

Hmmm, joined Janani. "In my life, however much I do, I am always called out

for what is not done. Yesterday, I was told I must take on more home responsibilities. I feel like running away and leading a life incognito." Sunitha and Pavitra, their laughter a familiar sound, joined in, and their shared understanding of Janani's plight was evident.

It's interesting that when they had last met on the same terrace, they were in their mid-20s, just married and full of life and energy, looking to give their best to life. The words that were spoken now seemed strange in light of those days. Even phone calls amongst them once a year were filled with the news of the progress they made in their career, children's awards, laurels, promotions, new ideas, and so on. Standing in the twilight of life, almost near retirement, why the change of colour?

Pavitra, coming from a core psychology background, had a pathway to explore them. "You know what, I think most of what we are questioning now are about the patterns we are all used to. We have grown up with a certain set of experiences and beliefs that we have made right from childhood. They have become our patterns now. I have been reflecting on this for the past few months. Getting in touch with what they are will help us realise our choices even today. You all

know I have been a great performer since childhood. I was the apple of my parents and relatives' eye. I was constantly appreciated and showcased in every space, home or school.

When I went to college, the first shock was that I was a nobody in the huge swarm of girls. Soon, in a few months, I had my formula kicking, and I was coming first, being recognised by all teachers and other beautiful girls. I think that has continued all my life, and I need my dose of achievement to keep me high. It is a kind of addiction, you know.

To be on stage, be important to all, being looked upon! I suddenly had this huge need to cocoon from life last year. I wanted to stop doing everything I was successful at and didn't know why. People kept telling me to slow down, and that upset me. I got into an anxiety syndrome. My knee pain, exhaustion, and diabetes made me suspect that I would become inefficient. That is when I realised this pattern I am into that is driving me so far and no longer!"

"Ohh! That was a profound reflection, Pavitra! Hmmm, I, too, think my mom has to be blamed for who I am today. Throughout my childhood, she reminded us that we had limited financial resources. She nudged me to be of use wherever we

went. She would advise me to help my aunts if I stayed with them, reminding me no meal is to be eaten free. I earned all my appreciation and love by being useful, helpful, and supportive to others.

When I married and moved into the new house, that was the formula for earning respect, acceptance, love, and attention. It meant I had to sacrifice my career. Always caring and satisfying other's needs overtook my wants.

From the past year, I have felt bitter and rebellious inside. My children call me a fool; I should do what I want. But this pattern hits me, making me feel very guilty every time I make a choice that supersedes other's needs and caters to my wants. Whew, this is a constant battle inside me," lamented Smitha.

Sunitha, who is usually soft and less spoken in a faraway thoughtful voice, added, "You all know I usually avoid conflicts and confrontations. I grew up as a middle-born, and no one in my home usually bothered to take cognizance of me. I never wanted to add to any fights at home. You all know even my marriage and career my brother and mother chose, and I had not said no to them. Remember that night, Pavitra and Janani, you both were so upset I had changed my stream of studies against my wishes? I think I have changed in the last few months, and my family and relatives do not like it. I have begun to exercise my right of speech, and a host of Nos are coming to what they want me to do. Pavitra, when I met the therapist you recommended to me, she said I am a mountain of anger ready to erupt like a

Yesterday, I was told I must take on more home responsibilities. I feel like running away and leading a life incognito

volcano." Sunitha wiped the tears that trickled down slowly. Bonding of the souls happened as Pavitra hugged Sunitha.

Janani, always thinking and responding from the head, said, "Me too... I have been a workaholic, and right from the day I graduated, I have never rested. My family's requirements are constantly growing, and they look upon me to stand strong and manage all challenges. I have not questioned if I ever need a break. Their insensitive, mounting expectations and absolutely no support when I needed them made me question my life. Hence, I am here today with all of you. I have begun to give myself some space and learn not to be the Hercules shouldering the world. I attended a workshop that made me review my purpose in life and learn to love myself a bit more!"

We have all been running in life. The patterns have been running through all of us. After nearly three decades, innumerable questions arise when we stop to look closely at our lives. Right from childhood, some core patterns have defined us and have been the source codes for most of our life choices and decisions. These patterns form our identity, and it is not easy for us or the world to accept a different person when we move away from the patterns. There is always a comparison. Anything away from the original in contrast to the changed version is seen as a physical health issue, menopause, depression, or selfishness. The judgments that hit us make us recoil, and we feel best to fall into the old, well-known patterns again. Yet, we fail to see how a caterpillar wraps itself in a cocoon to emerge as a butterfly. There is a way out of this by recognising and changing a pattern.

Smitha questioned Pavitra, "Hey Pavitra, tell me what

did you do when you had to break free?"

With a small smile, Pavitra answered, "One of the first things I did was to identify my core patterns, which confused me about whether to be or not to be. I reflected on how each pattern makes me angry, anxious, low, or disinterested. I sat and wrote who I wanted to be in the next decade. I spent more time on the process of life than the specific outcomes I was racing towards. I told myself the quality of choices I wanted to make for my current life. I don't want to be in the past or future. I wanted to set my present right. Of course, there will be certain repercussions. Some good, some challenging."

"Even now, we have repercussions anyway because of who we have become. So another set of challenges doesn't matter", said Janani, giggling.

After all this, life is about being happy and fulfilling what we are born for. We cannot reject the fact that each of us accepted the pattern and lived according to it. Our need for acceptance, appreciation, and recognition took over firmly from childhood. We must rise above our wants and other's needs and do what is required for each moment. When there is a deeper level of acceptance and surrender to consciousness, and we know we can make relevant choices, we will be more peaceful. When we begin to recognise the patterns, our ego plays a crucial role in defending us, making us think that the entire world has made us who we are. When the ego is replaced

by consciousness, we realise that we have allowed ourselves to be guided by the more extensive system, and significant people's beliefs are fed into us.

Pavitra pointed out to the rest, "If I had realised this 30 years back, I would have been more conscious and vigilant in interacting with my children. I see so much of myself in their behaviour now, and their struggle to get out of some patterns is so real, too. Interestingly, we do not impart to our children the ability to value and listen to the inner voice effectively in childhood. We think we need to teach children to live life and therefore impart decisions and choices rather than the process of making choices and decisions."

As the friends finished their coffee and biscuits, they felt a sense of relief and clarity. They understood that it was okay to prioritise their needs and wants and that there was always time to change their behaviour patterns. They also realised that they could support each other in this journey and that their friendship was

valuable. They hugged each other tightly, promising to keep in touch more often and help each other break free from these patterns. As they left, they felt a sense of hope and optimism for the future. They knew they had each other's back and could make the changes they needed to live their best lives.

Dr. Kalpana Sampath



TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI

On a former occasion B. V. Narasimha Swami, author of Self-Realisation, asked: Who am I? How is it to be found?

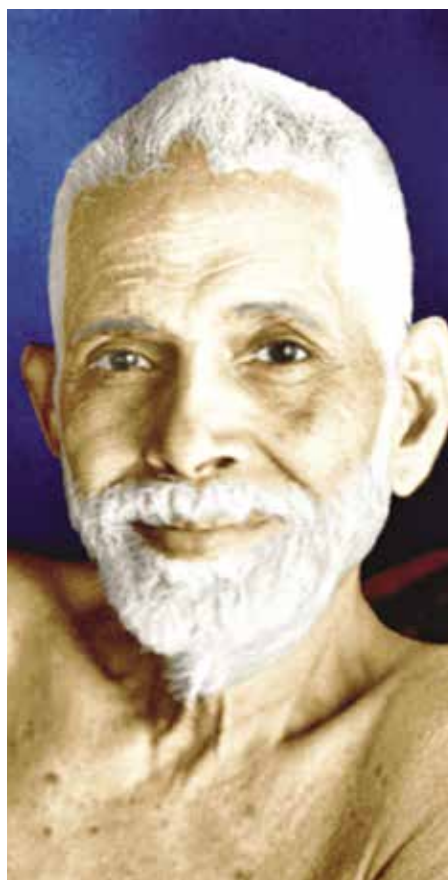
M.: Ask yourself the question. The body (annamaya kosa) and its functions are not 'I'.

Going deeper, the mind (manomaya kosa) and its functions are not 'I'.

The next step takes on to the question. "Wherefrom do these thoughts arise?" The thoughts are spontaneous, superficial or analytical. They operate in intellect. Then, who is aware of them? The existence of thoughts, their clear conceptions and their operations become evident to the individual. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the individuality of the person is operative as the perceiver of the existence of thoughts and of their sequence. This individuality is the ego, or as people say 'I'. Vijnanamaya kosa (intellect) is only the sheath of 'I' and not the 'I' itself.

Enquiring further the questions arise, "Who is this 'I'? Wherefrom does it come?" 'I' was not aware in sleep. Simultaneously with its rise sleep changes to dream or wakefulness. But I am not concerned with dream just now. Who am I now, in the wakeful state? If I originated from sleep, then the 'I' was covered up with ignorance. Such an ignorant 'I' cannot be what the scriptures say or the wise ones affirm. 'I' am beyond even 'Sleep'; 'I' must be now and here and what I was all along in sleep and dreams also, without the qualities of such states. 'I' must therefore be the unqualified substratum underlying these three states (anandamaya kosa transcended).

'I' is, in brief, beyond the five sheaths. Next, the residuum left over after discarding all that is not-self is the Self, Sat-Chit-Ananda.



D.: How is that Self to be known or realised?

M.: Transcend the present plane of relativity. A separate being (Self) appears to know something apart from itself (non-Self). That is, the subject is aware of the object. The seer is drik; the seen is drisya.

There must be a unity underlying these two, which arises as 'ego'. This ego is of the nature of chit (intelligence); achit (insentient object) is only negation of chit. Therefore the underlying essence is akin to

the subject and not the object. Seeking the drik, until all drisya disappears, the drik will become subtler and subtler until the absolute drik alone survives. This process is called drisya vilaya (the disappearance of the objective world).

D.: Why should the objects drisya be eliminated? Cannot the Truth be realised even keeping the object as it is?

M.: No. Elimination of drisya means elimination of separate identities of the subject and object. The object is unreal. All drisya (including ego) is the object. Eliminating the unreal, the Reality survives. When a rope is mistaken for a snake, it is enough to remove the erroneous perception of the snake for the truth to be revealed. Without such elimination the truth will not dawn.

D.: When and how is the disappearance of the objective world (drisya vilaya) to be effected?

M.: It is complete when the relative subject, namely the mind, is eliminated. The mind is the creator of the subject and the object and is the cause of the dualistic idea. Therefore, it is the cause of the wrong notion of limited self and the misery consequent on such erroneous idea.

D.: What is this mind?

M.: Mind is one form of manifestation of life. A block of wood or a subtle machine is not called mind. The vital force manifests as life- activity and also as the conscious phenomena known as the mind.

D.: What is the relation between mind and object? Is the mind contacting something different from it, viz., the world?

M.: The world is 'sensed' in the waking and the dream states or is the object of

perception and thought, both being mental activities. If there were no such activities as waking and dreaming thought, there would be no 'perception' or inference of a 'world'. In sleep there is no such activity and 'objects and world' do not exist for us in sleep. Hence 'reality of the world' may be created by the ego by its act of emergence from sleep; and that reality may be swallowed up or disappear by the soul resuming its nature in sleep. The emergence and disappearance of the world are like the spider producing a gossamer web and then withdrawing it. The spider here underlies all the three states - waking, dreaming, and sleep; such a spider in the person is called Atman (Self), whereas the same with reference to the world (which is considered to issue from the sun) is called Brahman (Supreme Spirit). He that is in man is the same as He that is in the sun. (Sa yaschayam purushe yaschasavaditye sa ekah).

While Self or Spirit is unmanifest and inactive, there are no relative doubles; e.g., subject and object - drik and drisya. If the enquiry into the ultimate cause of manifestation of mind itself is pushed on, mind will be found to be only the manifestation of the Real which is otherwise called Atman or Brahman. The mind is termed sukshma sarira or 'subtle-body'; and jiva is the individual soul. The jiva is the essence of the growth of individuality; personality is referred to as jiva. Thought or mind is said to be its phase, or one of the ways in which the jiva manifests itself - the earlier stage or phase of such manifestation being vegetative life. This mind is always seen as being related to, or acting on, some non-mind or matter, and never by itself. Therefore mind and matter co-exist.

Source: Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi

“I believe in fostering ideological bonds with farmers beyond just offering premium prices for their produce.”

Saravanan shares with Marie Banu his efforts to address environmental sustainability

Saravanan is a multifaceted individual dedicated to driving positive change in his community and beyond. With a background in Chemical Engineering from Vellore Institute of Technology, Saravanan's journey is characterized by a relentless pursuit of social justice and sustainable development.

Originally hailing from Cheyyar in Thiruvannamalai district, Saravanan's early experiences and education laid the foundation for his future endeavors. Despite facing setbacks in his attempts at civil services exams, Saravanan's unwavering commitment to public service remained steadfast. During his time as a student reporter for Vikatan, Ananda Vikatan group, he honed his skills in communication and advocacy, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

Saravanan's passion for societal change led him to pursue a one-year PG Diploma in Government at Pune, where he gained valuable insights into governance and policy. His subsequent internships with renowned organizations such as Tarun Bharat Sangh headed by Mr. Rajendra Singh, Water Man of India provided him with firsthand experience in grassroots activism and community development.

Later, he started working with Dr. Suresh, renowned human rights activist of PUCL and senior lawyer of Madras High Court. He focused on advocating for water rights, food rights, and conducting policy research. His work with People's Union for Civil Liberties initially as a volunteer and later as an office bearer underscores his dedication to addressing systemic injustices and promoting equitable access to resources. Saravanan also holds a PG Diploma in Facilitating Governance Reforms (Distance Learning) from TISS. He is the coordinator of Nammazhvar Iyarkai Sirudhaniya Uzhavar Urpathiyalar Kuzhu, a women farmers' collective based out of Veppur Block, Perambalur District.

In an exclusive interview, Saravanan shares with Marie Banu his efforts to address environment sustainability.

What led you to social activism or how was the transition?

My journey into social activism was influenced by my admiration for individuals like Dr. Irai Anbu IAS, a collector whose work I observed during my 11th standard. I was inspired to utilize my skills and knowledge for the common good, which led me to pursue civil services preparation. Additionally, during the final year of my UG year, I co-founded a voluntary organization named Bharati Ilaingar Sangam (Bharathi Youth Association), where we engaged in various social activities like reclaiming premises for community use, organizing blood donation campaigns, and offering counselling to students. This experience solidified my desire to work with people and contribute to societal welfare.

The transition into social activism was gradual yet purposeful. Over time, I started spending more time on issues related to farming and agriculture, driven by a passion for sustainability and addressing larger societal challenges. This transition was fuelled by my belief in the power of collective action and the importance of working towards positive change at the grassroots level.

How did your interest in environmental sustainability develop, and who were your influences in this area?

My interest in environmental sustainability was greatly shaped by individuals like Mr. Rajendra Singh,

known for his work in community-based water conservation methods. His efforts, along with inspiring personalities like Mr. Nammazhwar in Tamil Nadu, sparked a realization of the critical need for sustainable practices. These experiences underscored the urgency of adopting accessible technologies and measures to preserve our environment.

Additionally, my work with Barefoot Academy of Governance and exposure to grassroots initiatives like Sittilingi Organic Farmers Association (SOFA) further reinforced the importance of sustainability as the only viable path forward for our planet.

Could you elaborate on your efforts to address environmental sustainability, particularly through initiatives like the Veppur Millet Mission?

The Veppur Millet initiative stemmed from a deep-seated commitment to address the environmental and socio-economic challenges prevalent in agricultural practices, particularly in regions like the Veppur block, Perambalur District. Here, the predominant farming methods heavily relied on chemical-intensive crops like BT cotton and industrial maize, leading to environmental degradation and adverse health effects. Witnessing the dire consequences, including instances of pesticide poisoning and farmer deaths, highlighted the urgency to transition towards sustainable agricultural practices.

In 2015, as part of Barefoot Academy's work, we embarked on the Veppur Millet Mission, aiming to revive millet cultivation as a sustainable alternative. However, this transition faced numerous challenges, especially in garnering farmer participation and changing ingrained agricultural practices. Despite initial setbacks, we persevered, leveraging community engagement strategies such as organising conferences, providing training programs, and documenting farming processes meticulously.

One of the primary challenges we encountered was marketing the millet produce, as we lacked established contacts within the market. However, through strategic collaborations and persistence, we managed to secure buyers like... Earth 360 Eco Ventures Pvt. Ltd., who were willing to procure millets at fair prices, ensuring a sustainable income for the farmers involved.

Over the years, our efforts bore fruit, with increasing demand for organic millets and a growing network of supportive buyers, facilitating the transition towards sustainable agricultural practices and environmental stewardship.

How do you envision advocating for sustainable development with your human rights background in PUCL?

My engagement with PUCL provides a unique platform to intersect with issues of sustainable development, particularly in rural communities where agriculture plays a pivotal role.

Drawing from my experience, I believe in fostering ideological bonds with farmers beyond just offering premium prices for their produce. While financial incentives are important, they must be accompanied by trust-building initiatives, community mobilization, and ongoing dialogue to ensure long-term engagement and sustainable practices. PUCL's advocacy efforts helped me to go beyond legal frameworks to encompass grassroots community development, addressing issues of environmental sustainability and socioeconomic empowerment.

Additionally, my involvement in initiatives, which



mobilized farmers for the renovation of tank irrigation systems, highlights the importance of community participation and political understanding in effecting meaningful change. By engaging farmers in collective action, advocating for policy reforms, and facilitating capacity-building initiatives, we can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable agriculture practices and holistic development at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, our advocacy can extend beyond agriculture to encompass broader issues of environmental justice, advocating for policies that prioritize sustainability, equitable resource distribution, and protection of marginalized communities. By harnessing the expertise in human rights advocacy and leveraging my technical background, we can work towards a more sustainable and just future for all.

What are your thoughts on integrating technology into your work, especially in the field of agriculture?

Technology integration in my work, whether it's in agriculture or other areas, is certainly on the horizon. As a member of Thannatchi, an organization dedicated to strengthening local democracies, I'm already witnessing the transformative potential of technology in empowering communities and enhancing governance processes. In the context of agriculture, technology can play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable farming practices, optimizing resource management, and improving market access for farmers.

What are your future plans?

Looking ahead, I see myself continuing to work at the intersection of local democracy and sustainable development. Strengthening local governance processes and systems and promoting community participation will remain central to my efforts, whether it's through leveraging technology for citizen engagement or advocating for policy reforms to enhance accountability and transparency.

Additionally, my commitment to human rights will continue to inform my work, ensuring that marginalized communities are empowered and their voices are heard in decision-making processes. As we navigate the complexities of the future, I am excited to explore innovative solutions and collaborate with like-minded individuals and organizations to create positive change at the grassroots level.