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Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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Changemakers

Profile

Chit Chat

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In a world that often looks to governments, institutions, or corporations for solutions, we must remember that meaningful change often begins with individuals. Individual Social Responsibility (ISR) is the conscious choice each of us makes to contribute towards the well-being of society. It is not mandated or enforced; it stems from awareness, empathy, and the desire to do what is right.

While corporate social responsibility (CSR) is celebrated and structured, ISR operates quietly through personal actions—often unseen but deeply impactful. When a young professional teaches underprivileged children over the weekend, when a citizen responsibly segregates waste, when a retired person offers time to a local shelter, or when a student organises a blood donation camp, these are not acts of obligation but of ownership. They reveal that social responsibility is not only a policy—it is a mindset.

ISR means asking ourselves one simple question every day: "What can I do for someone beyond myself?" It may be time, knowledge, resources, or simply kindness, but when multiplied across thousands, such efforts build powerful movements.

Today's challenges—poverty, climate change, social inequity, mental health distress—cannot be solved by policy interventions alone. They require citizens who are not passive observers but active contributors. We often underestimate the impact of a single person, but history repeatedly shows that every transformative journey began with one individual choosing to care.

At Conversations Today, we consistently feature such inspiring voices—ordinary people leading extraordinary change. They may be grassroots innovators, educators, environmental crusaders, health workers, social entrepreneurs, or community mobilisers. Their stories demonstrate that social responsibility is not reserved for the privileged; it is accessible to anyone with conviction and compassion.

These changemakers remind us that you do not have to change the world—just change one life, one neighbourhood, one situation, and the ripples will follow. Their journeys are not just to be read, but to be modelled upon. Inspiration is meaningful only when it leads to action.

Let us move beyond admiration to involvement. When every individual becomes socially responsible—whether at home, in the workplace, or within the community—society evolves not through policy, but through people.

Because real change does not start in boardrooms. It begins in our hearts.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

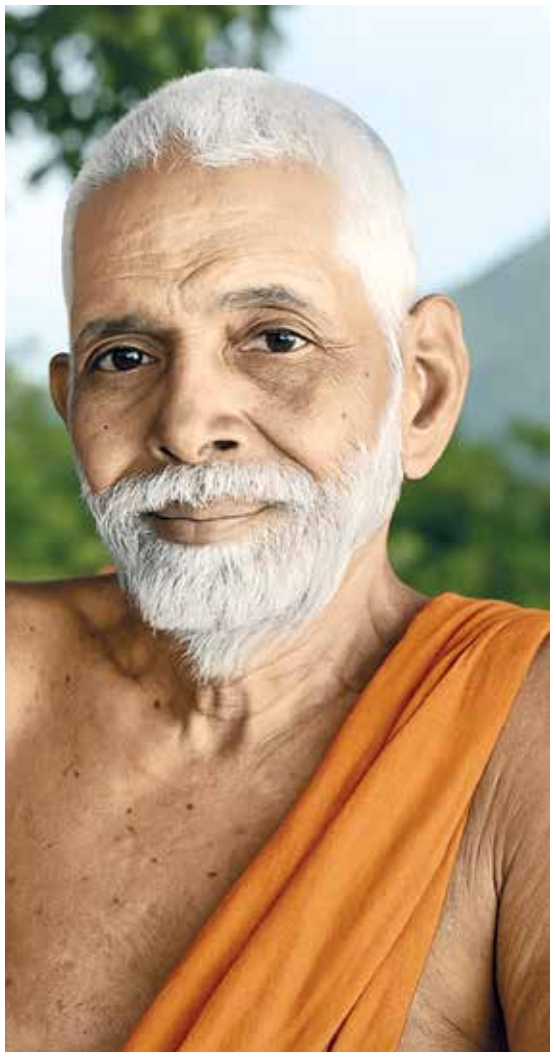
EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh

Marie Banu Rodriguez

TRUE RESPONSIBILITY BEGINS WHEN THE DOER ENDS

In the vision of Ramana Maharshi, true responsibility does not mean accumulating burdens of duty, guilt or fear of outcomes. Rather, it means a radical inner surrender — relinquishing the sense of separate doer-self, and offering all action to the underlying Self. In this way, responsibility becomes not a weight to carry, but a path to freedom.



The burden of the ego-doer

Ramana taught that when we identify with the body-mind and feel "I am doing this," we bind ourselves to attachment, expectations, and consequences. This sense of doer-ship — the ego — creates tension and bondage. In one of his teachings he says that if one enquires "Who works?", the enquiry removes the notion of separate agency. By turning attention inward, one sees that work continues — but the identification with doer does not. This shift dissolves the binding effect of action and frees one from the burden of bearing the results.

In other words, real responsibility is not about controlling external events, nor about trying to manage outcomes. It is about witnessing — offering every action to the Self, and relinquishing attachment to results.

Surrender: the highest responsibility

If the ego-doer is relinquished, what remains is surrender — the deepest responsibility one can assume. Ramana points out that when the ego dissolves, the divine Will functions, not the limited will of the individual. The body and mind may continue to perform their functions according to destiny or past actions, but the individual is no longer bound by them. He said that one could then act without being tied to the fruits of action — free from joy or pain, success or failure. (Know Thyself)

In such surrender there is no inner conflict, no anxiety about results, no burden of responsibility as commonly understood. Instead, there is peace — the tranquil ground of pure being. One's true responsibility becomes abiding in the Self, being present, and letting action arise spontaneously.

Duty in daily life: householder, not recluse

Ramana's teaching is especially relevant for those living an ordinary, worldly life ("householders"). He made it clear that spiritual realization or inner surrender is not confined to renunciation of home, job, or family. One does not need to abandon one's daily duties to realize the Self or fulfil spiritual responsibility. Whether one is a householder or a recluse, the same inward attitude is what matters. Changing external circumstances — leaving home or becoming a monk — will not resolve the real issue. The mind (ego-I sense) itself is the obstacle, and that must be addressed, regardless of one's external role. (Google Groups)

Thus real responsibility is not about escaping life's demands. It is about living fully, sincerely and inwardly — rooted in Self-awareness, even while performing external duties.

What 'responsibility' becomes — clarity, freedom, and inner peace

When the sense of doer dissolves, one gains clarity. Actions are no longer coloured by selfish motives or expectations. There is a spontaneous alignment with what is. One does what needs to be done, but without clinging to outcomes, without fear, without pride or regret.

This inner surrender brings peace — not a temporary calm, but a deep abiding silence beyond thought. The restless ego-mind falls silent; the Self shines as the true witness. In that state, there is no "burden of responsibility" — only the lightness of being, and a clarity of purpose beyond personal ambition or fear.

Responsibility reimagined

In the paradigm of Ramana Maharshi, responsibility is reimagined — from burden to offering, from ego-driven duty to surrender-rooted allowance. It is not about doing more or controlling outcomes, but about seeing clearly who really acts, who really lives. It is about letting go of the doer, and resting as that which is, even while the body moves, works and interacts.

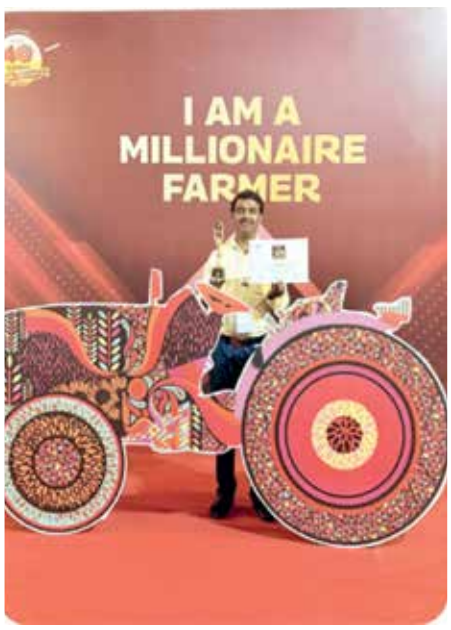
For those of us seeking a life not of guilt or compulsion, but of freedom and inner coherence, this teaching offers a profound alternative. It calls for inner surrender, self-awareness, non-identification — and in that surrender, a deeper, more authentic sense of responsibility emerges. May this understanding soften the weight of duty, clarify the inner path, and free the heart to act in silent surrender and inner peace.

Based on the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi

INTEGRATING ORGANIC AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

Ranjith Kumar. K, founder of Moringa Promise Wellness, embodies a new wave of professionals who are returning to agriculture with renewed energy and fresh perspective. Coming from a century-old farming family, Ranjith spent 15 years building a successful global IT career, yet the pull toward the land never faded. What began as a personal interest gradually evolved into a clear mission, to create a sustainable, organic farming model rooted in traditional wisdom but strengthened by modern processes. "Agriculture was always in the background for me. I wanted to bring structure, technology, and sustainability into our family land," shares Ranjith.

In 2020, he formally transitioned from IT to agriculture, establishing Moringa Promise Wellness on his ancestral 14-acre farm. His father manages day-to-day field operations, while Ranjith oversees marketing, partnerships, production planning, and quality systems. A key contributor to the enterprise's foundation was Ramu Thampalaya Gowda, former Assistant Director of Agriculture, Government of Tamil Nadu. With deep knowledge of Moringa varieties and organic cultivation practices, he guided the early stages of the venture right from crop planning to branding. "The early farming protocols came from Ramu sir's expertise and confidence in our vision," Ranjith notes. Gowda's passing during the COVID pandemic was a significant loss, but his guidance continues to shape the enterprise.



Why Moringa?

Moringa Oleifera, known as drumstick tree in English, is internationally recognised as a climate-resilient, nutrient-dense crop. It thrives in semi-arid conditions, requires minimal water, and regenerates quickly, qualities that align with sustainable farming principles. The leaves contain high amounts of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and essential amino acids. Beyond nutrition, Moringa has a long history of use in Indian traditional medicine systems, Siddha, Ayurveda, and Unani for wellness and immunity support.

Moringa Promise Wellness collaborates with Siddha, Ayurveda, and Homeopathy practitioners to design formulations aimed at supporting immunity, nutrition, joint health, and general wellbeing. "Our objective is to create clean, reliable products that combine traditional knowledge with modern quality standards," says Ranjith.

The enterprise follows organic and Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) practices across its fields. Moringa leaves are harvested every 50–60 days, allowing the trees to mature naturally. The post-harvest process includes washing, blanching, and solar drying, a system established in 2023 to meet global moisture standards of 6–8% (down from the natural 80%).

Their product line includes:

- Nutrient powders
- Herbal teas (including tulsi blends)
- Capsules and health mixes
- Skincare items derived from Moringa seed oil
- Flower-based products and gums

The manufacturing unit is located in Cumbum, Pudupatti Village, Theni District, where raw material is processed, packed, and prepared for retail and wholesale market. Beyond Moringa, the farm follows a diversified model cultivating chillies, onions, bananas, ginseng, and coconut. This reduces dependency on single-crop revenue and promotes soil health. Integrated systems such as dairy, poultry, and natural compost cycles support a circular and pesticide-free ecosystem.

Our objective is to create clean, reliable products that combine traditional knowledge with modern quality standards

Business Model and Market Presence

Moringa Promise Wellness works across B2B and B2C channels, supplying bulk dried leaves to partners while offering finished products through an e-commerce platform, social media, and participation in expos. The organisation also collaborates with educational institutions for awareness and outreach. The company employs around 10 team members, contributing to local livelihoods while maintaining a manageable and quality-focused operation. "Indian farmers face challenges mainly because pricing is unpredictable. We wanted a model where quality, sustainability, and fair value coexist," says Ranjith.

Looking Ahead

Today, the enterprise processes over 50 tons of Moringa leaves annually, with an emphasis on traceability, sustainability, and product integrity. Ranjith's background in technology supports improved systems, documentation, and scalability, aligning modern processes with traditional agricultural wisdom.

As global interest in plant-based wellness and sustainable farming continues to grow, Moringa Promise Wellness demonstrates how rural enterprises can blend organic methods, scientific processing, and responsible business practices to create long-term impact, both for consumers and farming communities.

Aatika Kundalam

TURNING FARM LOSSES INTO RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Earlier this year, at the bustling Chennai Trade Centre, two young women stood beside a beautifully curated display of vathals, vadagam, fruit candies, and malt mixes. It was a defining moment for Vervai Foods—a brand built on a simple yet profound belief: no farmer's effort should ever go to waste. The presence of Mr. Mathiventhan, Minister of Welfare, during the inauguration brought a sense of official recognition to a journey that began quietly in the fields long before it reached an expo stage.

Founded by Ms. Thamizharasi and Ms. Karthika, Vervai Foods is deeply rooted in lived agricultural experience rather than corporate vision or business models. "We grew up around farmers," says Thamizharasi. "Agriculture was not a concept to us; it was our lived reality. When you understand the sweat and uncertainty that go into every harvest, you feel compelled to do something meaningful."

Even the name "Vervai" reflects that purpose. 'Vair' means root and 'Vai' means world in Tamil—symbolising their mission of taking local roots to global consumers. The idea for the venture did not emerge from structured planning or entrepreneurial training but from witnessing agricultural inefficiencies firsthand.

Through their work with farmers, the duo repeatedly observed a disheartening pattern: perfectly edible produce being discarded due to minor cosmetic imperfections during harvesting or transport. "A scratch on a mango or a slightly uneven carrot does not impact its taste or nutrition," explains Thamizharasi. "Yet the market rejects them instantly, and farmers lose income over issues they cannot control."

Unlike many upcycling models that buy rejected produce at discounted prices, Vervai Foods sources directly from farmers and pays full value, even for cosmetically damaged fruits and vegetables. This practice ensures that farmers retain their livelihood without compromise while enabling the produce to be used at peak freshness.

Once sourced, the raw materials are processed using traditional Tamil household techniques. There are no industrial machines, chemical preservatives, or large-scale automated systems. One of their earliest success stories is the mango sweet—sun-dried fruit leather made from mango pulp and palm sugar. What started as a seasonal experiment using mangoes unfit for long transport soon became one of their signature products.

"We slow-cooked the pulp with palm sugar and dried it under direct sunlight," says Thamizharasi. "Just sunshine, patience, and traditional wisdom." She insists that their process is fundamentally sun drying, not mechanical dehydration. The natural heat, she believes, preserves the flavour and nutrition in ways that electric dryers cannot. Once dried, the sheets are simply cut—no preservatives, no chemical additives, and no refined sugar.

The same technique applies to vegetables like onions, tomatoes, carrots, beetroot, and apples, which are sun-dried and ground into powders to create malt mixes and seasoning blends.

Of all their products, the malt mix has been the most challenging to perfect. A blend of dried fruits, vegetables, nuts, and natural sweeteners, it had to satisfy modern taste preferences while retaining traditional nutrition. "We experimented with drying times, roasting methods, and ingredient combinations," she recalls. "It took months of trial and error." Today, the mix is made entirely from sun-dried ingredients without artificial flavouring, colouring, or stabilisers. "It's something you can confidently give a child," she states. "That is the standard Vervai stands for."

Naturally processed foods without preservatives demand meticulous hygiene. Vervai uses herbal water for washing, gloves during critical handling steps, and maintains high cleanliness in cutting, boiling, and drying. Due to their no-chemical policy, products like mango sweets carry a shelf life of just 2–3 weeks—a fact they take pride in. "If our sweets spoil after some time, it's because they're natural," says Thamizharasi.

Vervai Foods' motto—"Let's reduce harvest waste, create more jobs and make farming viable"—reflects the broader ecosystem they aim to build. Their processing methods are labour-intensive and intentionally decentralised to enable rural employment, especially among women. Tasks such as cutting, sun drying, grinding, and packing are distributed among local communities, creating supplementary income for farming households.

Their showcasing at Chennai Trade Centre marked a milestone. "When the minister visited our stall and listened to our story, it felt like our small beginnings had finally found a voice," she reflects. The recognition sparked wider interest and encouraged them to scale responsibly.

Yet, the founders are very clear about their growth philosophy. "Our dream is to take Vervai to more households across the state without losing the spirit with which we began," says Thamizharasi. "If we can reduce waste, support farmers, and revive traditional food habits, that is true success for us."

In a market dominated by fast-food brands, instant mixes, and chemically preserved snacks, Vervai Foods stands apart in its simplicity. It is not a brand built on technological disruption—it is built on intention. With their agricultural roots, adherence to natural methods, and unwavering commitment to fair farmer compensation, Vervai Foods represents a movement—a quiet yet powerful effort to uphold rural dignity and revive ancestral food wisdom.

Bhavadharani K

THE ATTITUDE OF GIVING

LESSONS FROM MY MANASEEGA GURU

The month of November always brings a wave of memories, for it was in this month that my Manaseega Guru, Shri P. N. Devarajan, fondly known as PND, attained Sivaloka Prapti. He was twenty years older than me—more a father figure than a brother. He was the eldest in our family of eight children, and I, the youngest. I still remember, as a boy of five, crossing the Adyar River to attend his convocation at A.C. College of Technology, when he received the Gold Medal for topping B. Tech. (Chemical Engineering) under Madras University. Even then, though I couldn't understand much, I sensed that I was in the presence of someone extraordinary.

Over the years, he shaped my thinking through words, actions, and the sheer power of his convictions. His philosophy was simple: delve deeper into whatever you do, contribute "a little of your little," and give one or more of the 4 Ts — Time, Talent, Treasure and Touch.

He truly lived the attitude of giving. "Every individual," he would often say, "should be taught the joy of giving right from childhood." I still recall the spark in his eyes when he spoke about his vision for what he called Bequeathment—a noble idea to inspire people to set aside a part of their wealth for the greater good. He was deeply committed to making it a reality and had even begun discussions with a reputed lawyer to establish a trust. I felt honoured when he invited me to be part of this initiative.

His philosophy was simple yet profound: we are only custodians of our wealth, and it must find its way to those who need it most. He often said that one should distribute one's resources to the needy rather than accumulate them. I still remember his words—spoken with conviction—that he should have no more than a 100 rupees left in his bank account during his final days, having given away everything else for the welfare of others.

Though the idea of Bequeathment could not materialise during his lifetime, it continues to live on in my heart. One day, I hope to fulfil his vision and bring his cherished concept to life—a legacy of compassion, generosity, and purpose.

That same spirit of service shone through his grand vision to install one crore Shivalingams, surrounded by schools, homes for the elderly, and social infrastructure. The scale was breathtaking. Even after a stroke, during his recovery at Apollo Hospitals, he would discuss drawings and plans with undiminished enthusiasm. Sitting beside him then, I learned one of my most valuable lessons: Execution is key. "Don't get bogged down by constraints," he would say. "Use them as opportunities to grow stronger."

Eventually, when he realised that the project could not be completed within his lifetime, he paused. "When signs are contrary to conviction," he told me once, "there's no harm in changing course. Maturity lies in knowing when to persist and when to let go." That flexibility of mind, that ability to combine determination with pragmatism, defined his leadership.

When I was working in Dubai, I often spoke to him about returning to India and entering entrepreneurship—a path no one in our family had taken. There were doubts and concerns from others, but he supported me wholeheartedly. He built the ecosystem, introduced me to people, and gave me options to explore. "Mistakes will happen," he said with characteristic calm. "Learn from them. But if you repeat the same mistake, you can never grow as a leader." His words guided me through many ups and downs.

Though I interacted with him often, I sometimes regret that I was not formally under his tutelage. Many others had that privilege. Yet, even from the age of eighteen, I found ways to learn from him silently. I would linger nearby when he spoke to his mentees or presented new projects, even sit quietly in an adjoining room when he discussed strategies with his team. Those sessions were a masterclass in management and leadership—rich in nuance, logic, and empathy. He never lectured; he demonstrated.

During my early professional years, there were times when I felt low and uncertain. One day, without saying much, he handed me a book—"The Power of Positive Thinking." I later learned that it had been a turning point in his own life. That single gesture changed mine too. From then on, I began to apply positive thinking in every sphere—personal, corporate, and entrepreneurial. It became a habit, a compass to navigate adversity.

He taught me that leadership was not about power but about listening, relationships, and trust. "Be a good listener," he often said. "People reveal their best ideas when they feel heard." Networking, he believed, was not a business tactic but an extension of empathy—his famous line still rings in my ears: "Your network is your net worth."

His thoughts on social entrepreneurship were ahead of their time. He used to say, "A social entrepreneur's focus is on people, not profit. One should be proud to give a daughter in marriage to a social entrepreneur." He wanted to erase the stereotype that such people lived in faded clothes and carried worn shoulder bags. "They are visionaries building value for society," he would say.

Even with his towering corporate responsibilities—Group President at Reliance Industries, Central Board Director at the Reserve Bank of India—he managed to help others establish industries, promote technologies, and mentor hundreds. He juggled multiple roles effortlessly, like keeping several balls in the air without letting one drop.

High ethical standards and a deep sense of compassion defined him. He would go out of his way to help the underprivileged. He often quoted the Paramacharya's words: "You are only a custodian of your wealth."

He practised what he preached—servant leadership in its truest sense. Even after his stroke, when people suggested he slow down, his reply was instant: "Age is just a number. Age is an attitude."

To me, he will always remain the embodiment of that truth. His life was a seamless blend of intellect, humility, ethics, and boundless generosity. The more I reflect on his lessons, the more I realise that his central message—to inculcate the attitude of giving from childhood—is the foundation on which a compassionate society must be built.

He gave without measure, lived without pretence, and taught without preaching. And as long as I continue to carry his spirit in my thoughts and actions, my Manaseega Guru, Shri P.N. Devarajan, will never truly be gone.

P.N. Subramanian

FROM CLAY TO GLOBAL MARKETS

In the quiet town of Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, where traditional livelihoods often fade under the pressure of modern industries, emerged a woman whose journey redefined the possibilities of craft-based entrepreneurship. Shakila Farook, now an internationally recognised pottery entrepreneur, began with no formal education, no business background, and very limited resources—only an instinctive connection to clay and an extraordinary ability to persist.

Married at just 14, Shakila slipped into adulthood far earlier than she was prepared for. Motherhood and household responsibilities followed soon after. Her life seemed destined to remain confined within domestic routines. But when her husband's family steel mill collapsed, their financial base crumbled. With two small daughters and no clear direction, the family moved to Villupuram in search of stability. Ironically, this uncertainty became the foundation for what would one day become a global enterprise.

One day, she learned of a government-sponsored Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) that offered subsidised loans to new entrepreneurs who completed a 26-day training. Her ration card made her eligible. She enrolled, travelling daily with an infant in her arms. She attended classes on costing, pricing, marketing, and loan procedures—often on little sleep but with unwavering determination.

At the end of the programme, each participant was asked to declare their business idea. While others spoke about tailoring, petty shops, or poultry, she calmly said, *Manpanai* meaning pottery. The room fell silent. Some laughed. Clay work? With two daughters? Why not save for their marriage instead?

Shakila had no formal training, no capital, and no examples to follow. But what she did have was the silent support of her husband, a skilled ceramist and sculptor, who believed in her vision.

In the early days, resources were scarce. There were no smartphones, no online references, not even professional colour kits. Shakila learned by observing life around her. She drew design inspiration from saree borders, milk packet patterns, temple carvings, and local textile motifs. She began experimenting with colour mixing using locally available pigments and soon mastered cone-based handwork on pots. Her first orders fetched Rs.10 per design. Even that was paid reluctantly.But she never compromised on quality.

Gradually, people began to notice the uniqueness of her work. What was once dismissed as ordinary clay art evolved into design-led craftsmanship. Over time, the same handcrafted designs that fetched Rs.10 started commanding between Rs.2,000 and Rs.20,000 per piece—especially for customised and export orders.

The turning point came when a visitor, who had seen her work on television, located her home, placed her first international order. She shipped an entire container of handcrafted pottery to Malaysia. More orders followed, reaching Italy and other parts of Europe. She achieved this without any advertising—only through word of mouth and product excellence.

She says with simple honesty, "I still don't know how to speak English. But I know how to send a container." Her entrepreneurial intelligence was shaped not by business textbooks, but by observation, experimentation, and persistence.

Ironically, the very reason people discouraged her from investing in the pottery business—her daughters—became her greatest strengths. Today, her elder daughter, a creative leader since her college years, heads design development and innovation. Her younger daughter, formally trained in ceramics, contributes to product refinement, trend research, and technical design. Together, they manage marketing and export operations, adding contemporary sophistication to the brand while preserving traditional artistry.

Clay, for them, is not just a material—it is heritage, livelihood, and inheritance.Though Shakila rarely uses terminology like social entrepreneurship or sustainability, her enterprise embodies both. She revives traditional pottery techniques, employs local artisans at fair wages, uses minimal industrial waste, promotes women's economic independence and keeps cultural heritage alive in the process.

Shakila reminds aspiring entrepreneurs that profit is not greed; it is responsibility. "If you want to keep helping others through your business, first ensure it is sustainable," she says.

Her path was not easy. She faced gender bias—many buyers preferred to negotiate with her husband. She struggled with accessing finance, navigating bank procedures without strong literacy. She balanced household responsibilities with business demands. Years of stress even led to a reverse heart attack. But she returned to work—slowly, steadily—because giving up was never an option.

As the world moved toward digital platforms, it was her daughters who introduced her to smartphones, WhatsApp coordination, and digital design documentation. She adapted with grace, participating in global buyer meetings and coordinating export timelines through mobile platforms. Today, her products blend ancient artistry with insights from global trends.

Shakila's journey shapes a powerful message for the next generation: "You have education. You have the internet. You have tools. What you lack is not money—it is determination." Her life is a masterclass in entrepreneurship without privilege—a story of how clay in the hands of a determined woman transformed not just products, but perceptions. From child bride to global exporter, from local artisan to employer of dozens, she embodies the spirit of innovation grounded in tradition.

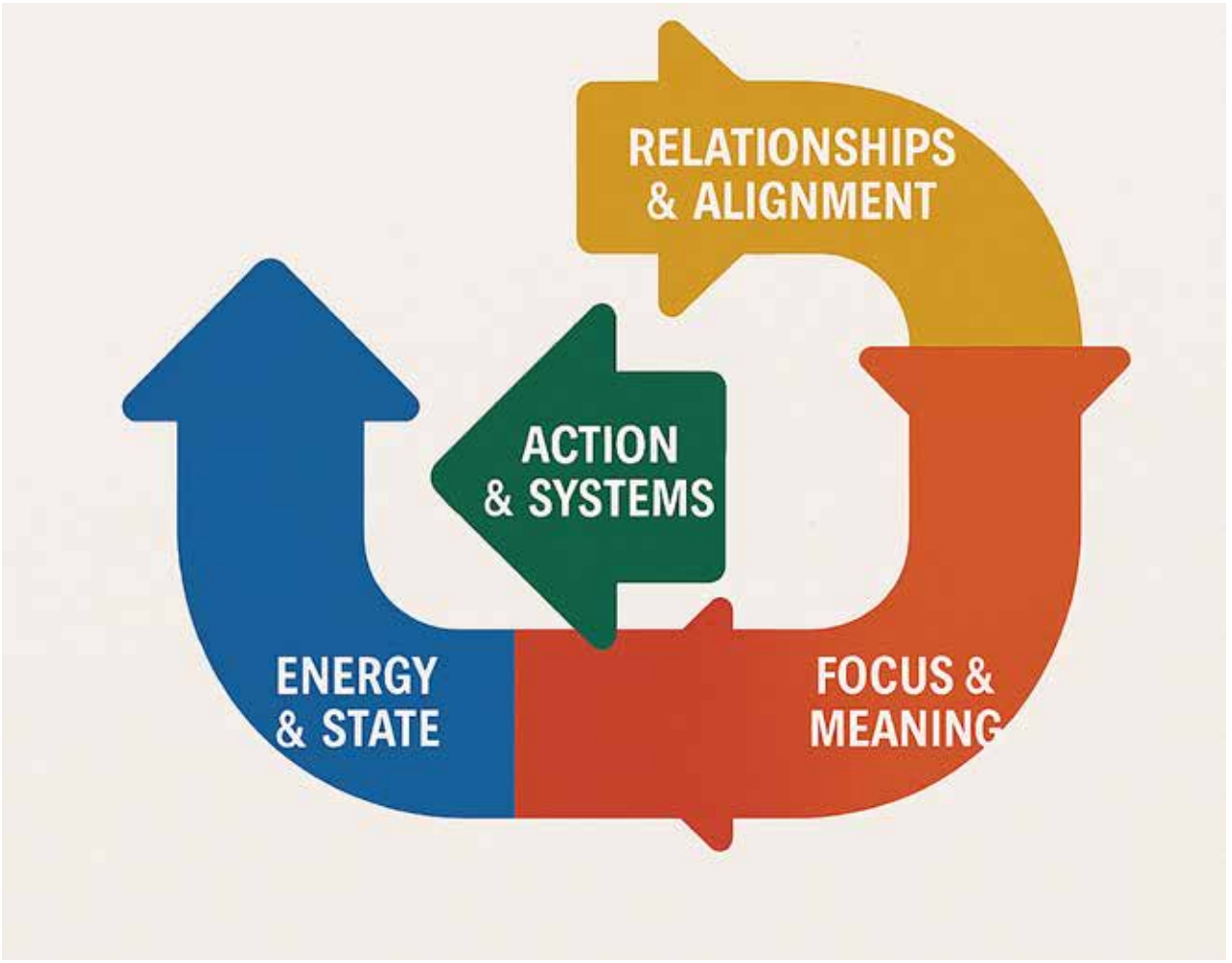
What began as survival became self-expression. What started in silence became a statement.A journey sculpted not just in clay, but in courage!

Marie Banu Rodriguez

WHAT MAKES THINGS HAPPEN?

Over the last 15 years, I have read many books, listened to audiobooks, and completed courses from a range of global personality development gurus and coaches. While each of the methods addresses aspects of life in diverse ways, using different methods, or sometimes only a specific aspect of life, there is a common thread that connects them, which essentially makes things happen in life. Some of these methods cover life holistically, while some cover one or a few aspects of life. When I consolidate my learning from all these methods to understand what makes things happen in our lives, I arrive at four distinct steps applicable to both individuals and organisations:

1. Energy & State
2. Focus & Meaning
3. Action & Systems
4. Relationships & Alignment



Energy & State

Where we put our energy is where we get results. The kind of energy you have is the kind of life you have. If you maintain a high positive energy, that's how your life will be.

Bob Proctor's Vibration / The Secret's Law of Attraction / Tony Robbins' State / Napoleon Hill's Thoughts / Joe Dispenza / Neville Goddard / Abraham Hicks's Allowing / Ho'oponopono are all related to this concept. Even the Landmark's Being is something suggesting this, in a subtle way.

Your energy or state is all about the feelings you carry, and hence the beliefs you hold as a human being. If you need results of a specific kind, you need to carry the energy that suits it. It is when you have fluctuating energies that your life becomes a struggle – at one point you want to conquer the world, at another you want to enjoy life by indulging in some unnecessary things.

Change your thoughts to change your feelings, and that changes your energy/state. One of the powerful ways to change your thoughts is to understand what's happening in the moment and let go. Often, we have blind spots here that we do not even realise – this is why many of us think we know all this stuff but are unable to do anything about it. Self-reflection, hence, plays a key role here in uncovering those blind spots.

Focus & Meaning

The kind of focus you have in life depends on the meanings you give to specific scenarios, situations, and relationships. What story are you building for the different happenings of your life – that is what will decide where you focus in life. Two people raised in similar conditions, with the same parents, evolve into different individuals because of the meanings they assign to different events in their lives.

Bhagavad-Gita, Stoicism, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or NLP, hint at this. The meaning you ascribe to relationships, work, money, family, and society defines how they appear to you. Your entire world is built around the meanings and stories we have built over our lifetimes. This area also needs self-reflection to understand where we have given unnecessary meanings to different events in our lives. Most of the time, what we did in the past helped us survive a few situations, but carrying those meanings now makes us handicapped – and doesn't let us grow. We have to get aware of and let them.

Action & Systems

No matter how high your energy level is, however focused you are, if this doesn't happen, things do not move – this is Action. The best way to make action happen is to have a system in place that ensures the necessary action is taken. We often talk about productivity and performance, and it's always the action that is responsible for both. Self-discipline is key to action. It is the ability to do what needs to be done, regardless of whether we like it or not. This is one reason you see some highly successful people (financially sound or rich) who are not really passionate about anything; they choose a field randomly or through chance, and they consistently keep taking action and doing what is needed. We can succeed even if we do not have the remaining three, but nothing can be done/achieved without action.

GTD, The 5 Seconds Rule, Kaizen, Lean, Atomic Habits, The 12 Week Year, etc, emphasise action.

Relationships & Alignment

We, humans, are social animals – we need other people throughout our lives. Even our biological role is to survive and reproduce. Connection is hence one essential component of human beings. And often we have unnecessary stories, assumptions, rackets, grudges, resentments, unfinished conversations, ego clashes, suppressed emotions, broken promises, broken commitments, and misunderstandings that make us incomplete and create a lot of stress. It is essential to clear off those things to create more space in life, where we can invent new possibilities and gain results like never before.

Ho'oponopono, Healings, Non-violent communication, and Servant Leadership all talk about this. We all start different things in our lives, and we leave them incomplete – it can be a book, a task, a project, a relationship, and more. The more incomplete things we carry with us, the more stressed we become. It is hence essential to let go of such incompletions by completing them. Completion doesn't mean always completing the task; it means accepting that you weren't able to complete it, that it is ok, and leaving it heartfully, rather than hanging on to it. The concept of Integrity, a strong pillar of Landmark, emphasises this in numerous ways.

If we can assess different areas of life in detail, we will uncover all our incompletions. Write down what you should do to complete them and do it, no matter what feelings you have towards those actions. For some, you may not be able to do anything; acknowledge that and let go. This sounds simple, but many of us have developed significant resistance to such completions, so this will surely be a challenge.

These four factors make up the common thread across the different methods we encounter for a productive human life. Start practising these for a fulfilling life.

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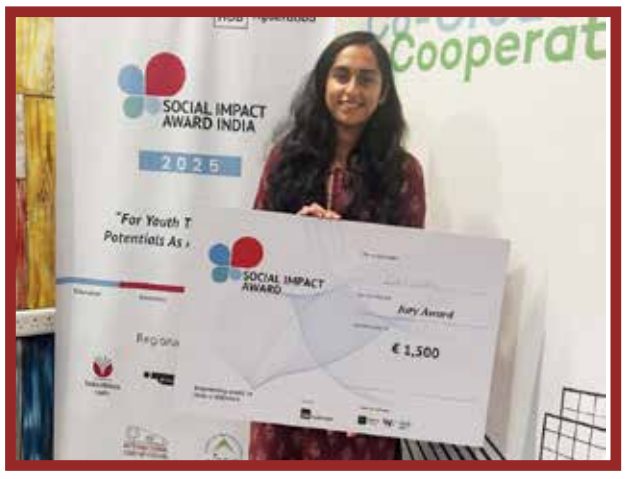
DESIGNING WITH PURPOSE

Sustainability, at the personal level, begins with the choices we make and the awareness of how those choices shape the world around us. While this mind set is still growing, there are remarkable individuals who embody it through their work and daily decisions. One such person is an MBA graduate who has chosen to turn business knowledge into meaningful impact by entering the sustainable furniture space. Her journey is a reminder that when we consciously switch to more responsible options — in what we buy, make or encourage — the rest naturally follows. By blending management expertise with a passion for eco-friendly design, she is helping redefine how furniture can be created, used and valued in a way that supports both people and the planet.

Ms. Shruthi hails from Chennai and holds a BA triple major in Communication, English and Psychology, followed by an MBA from Symbiosis, Bangalore. With a long-standing desire to work in the impact sector, she began her career in the fast-evolving electro-mobility space, spending 4.5 years driving strategy, business planning and partnerships for a company in Bangalore. "The sudden momentum for electric vehicles during and post-COVID was very encouraging and demanding. I saw the impact this industry was making, very closely, from the very beginning," she reflects. Her journey then took her to a Chennai-based start-up in the agri-tech sector, where she continued to contribute in similar strategic roles for over a year and a half—deepening her exposure to mission-driven industries and strengthening her commitment to work that creates meaningful change.



After these diverse experiences across impact-driven sectors, Shruthi felt a growing urge to move beyond technology and step into product design and development—spaces where her work could be more hands-on and closely aligned with her social ambitions. "Whatever I did, I wanted to build its social story as an integral part of the whole experience," she explains. This vision ultimately led to the birth of Ombak Life in 2022, in Chennai—a venture that brings together sustainability, craftsmanship and conscious living through thoughtfully designed furniture and lifestyle products.

A turning point came during her travels to Indonesia with her husband, where she observed how everyday products were crafted from local, eco-friendly materials. "I realised that in India, there was very little innovation in this space," she recalls. Curious and inspired, she began researching about natural materials and their untapped potential. The more she learned, the more determined she became to develop new products using eco-friendly materials that were still unexplored in the Indian market. With strong supplier networks available in Indonesia, she initially began crafting products there and bringing them to India. This journey laid the foundation for Ombak Life, which focuses on adapting natural materials to create thoughtful, everyday products—making sustainable living an effortless part of daily life.

Shruthi and team works with a range of thoughtfully chosen natural, renewable and biodegradable materials—each selected for its low environmental impact and its ability to be crafted into durable, functional everyday products. Their material palette includes (i) rattan – strong, flexible, light weight; used to make structured products like small furniture, baskets, organisers; (ii) water hyacinth – this invasive plant becomes a sturdy fibre when dried and braided, can be used to make trays, mats, boxes or décor items; (iii) seagrass – known for earthy texture and resilience, crafted into rugs, baskets, etc.

She observes that the buying attitude among consumers has shifted significantly in recent years, thanks in large part to the influence of social media. People are more aware and curious about sustainable alternatives, and in some cases, there is even a certain social pressure to showcase the use or gifting of eco-friendly products—especially in spaces like corporate gifting. While this trend has its limitations, she believes it has also opened doors for meaningful conversations around sustainability. At the same time, she is vocal about the resurgence of historic and traditional craft forms in contemporary markets. Products like the iconic Chettinad baskets, for example, are finding new relevance today—often refreshed with modern colours, updated designs and improved usability. This blend of heritage craftsmanship and thoughtful innovation is something she deeply advocates for, as it not only supports artisans but also brings cultural storytelling into everyday living. "New designs, new patterns to reimagine old materials or products will make them trend again. They can be tough competitors in the market. What better way than them to make our homes look more nature oriented?" asks Shruthi.

Today, Ombak Life derives nearly 80% of its sales from furniture—primarily chairs, side tables and ottomans—while the remaining 20% comes from home décor items such as vases, planter boxes, baskets and coasters. The brand has an in-house design team led by Shruthi herself, and its revenue has been growing steadily since the first year. From the beginning, she made a conscious decision to bring experienced people into the fold so that business growth and craftsmanship could progress together, without compromising the social values at the heart of Ombak. A strong part of Ombak Life's identity lies in its partnerships. In Indonesia, their primary manufacturing partner employs a larger number of women artisans. Ombak provides the designs and the raw materials, the artisans create the products and Ombak brings them to market—a model that keeps creative and economic value closely connected. In India too, their production partner has a predominantly women-led workforce.

Beyond commercial partnerships, Ombak also collaborates with NGOs to promote women's employment and traditional craft skills. All of Ombak's palm-leaf products, for instance, are made by women artisans associated with IndiaWorks, an NGO in Thiruchendur. "When values align, there is better connectivity to the mission," Shruthi says, noting that the NGO reinvests its earnings into the education of the artisans' children. A similar partnership with Swachatha Pukare in Kolkata enables the creation of water hyacinth products by women artisans, with earnings once again supporting children's education. Within Ombak itself, nearly 70% of the team comprises women. "This is the circularity aspect I realised in my business, and I feel very good about it," she reflects. For her, Ombak Life is more than a design-led venture—it is a social ecosystem where craftsmanship, sustainability, and women's empowerment reinforce one another in meaningful ways. Shruthi is also open to new collaborations and partnerships that can expand this impact and help explore fresh opportunities in the sustainable design space.

Shanmuga Priya.T

WHERE INNOVATION MEETS IMPACT

In a world that is urgently searching for answers to mounting ecological challenges, there are some who do not wait for solutions—they create them. Divya P. Venkat, Founder of Vidhai Recycling and Way Forward Foundation, is one such visionary, who believes that "waste isn't the end—it's the beginning of innovation." A trained Plastic Technologist, she has transformed her academic expertise into a mission-driven enterprise that diverts plastic waste from landfills and converts it into functional, durable, and aesthetically designed products. Her journey is not just one of entrepreneurship, but of purpose, persistence, and planet-first thinking.

Growing up in urban India, Divya witnessed what most of us tend to ignore—overflowing landfills, plastic-clogged drains, and the coexistence of convenience and carelessness. Unlike many who became desensitised to the surroundings, she felt deeply disturbed. Instead of accepting the problem as an inevitable consequence of modern life, she questioned why so much of what we discard couldn't be repurposed. This early awareness inspired her to pursue one of the country's lesser-known technical specialisations: Plastic Technology.

While most peers focused on designing new polymer materials or joining large-scale manufacturing industries, Divya looked instead at what happens after plastic's first use. She studied degradation patterns, residual material value, and the science behind remanufacturing. It was here that she discovered the power of plastic not as a pollutant but as a resource—if handled consciously.

After graduation, job opportunities in stable industrial sectors were available. Yet she chose an unconventional direction—to find solutions at the very intersection of environmental waste and technological innovation. A few years into field work and research, she founded Vidhai Recycling, an enterprise dedicated to upcycling low-value, hard-to-recycleplastics, including multi-layered packaging and rejected industrial scrap. These plastics typically cannot be processed through conventional recycling methods. Instead of being discarded or burnt, her team transforms them into:

- Outdoor furniture and urban fixtures such as benches, tables, and planters,
- Eco-bricks and building components,
- Road-based structural fillers, and
- Durable panels used in interior and site development.

By substituting materials that would otherwise contribute to landfill, she helps industries reduce their dependency on virgin plastic and non-renewable raw resources.

But Divya didn't stop at creating a business. She founded Way Forward Foundation to promote sustainability as a community practice rather than a corporate agenda. Through this platform, she works with schools, colleges, municipal bodies, corporate CSR teams, and residential communities to foster:

- Segregation of waste at source
- Zero-waste campus and office models
- Youth-led environmental action programmes
- Skill-building workshops for waste pickers
- Climate entrepreneurship training for young innovators

For Divya, awareness without implementation is incomplete, which is why the Foundation ensures behavioural change is translated into measurable outcomes. Their work with informal waste collectors is particularly impactful—they help register, insure, and train them so that they are recognised not as labourers, but vital contributors to environmental protection.

Throughout her career, Divya has developed a practical framework that she calls the Three D's, which form the cornerstone of her sustainability ideology:

- Design – Rethink how materials are used and create products that regenerate value from waste rather than increase waste.
- Diversion – Prevent plastic from reaching landfills by re-routing it into utility-driven applications.
- Dignity – Build systems that value not only the waste material, but also the people involved in recycling and repurposing it.

These principles are reflected not only in her organisational decisions but also in how she works with stakeholders. "The aim isn't to recycle trash," she says. "It is to redefine how we view resources, livelihoods, and responsibility."

Her journey has not been without resistance. The areas of recycling technology and plant operations are largely male-dominated. In the early days, she faced scepticism ranging from concerns about fieldwork to doubts about business viability. She met every question with persistence. "I didn't answer them with speeches," she says calmly. "I answered with projects."

Today, many of her clients approach her specifically because of the depth of her approach, not just the scale of it.Her leadership has also influenced social structures. Forty to fifty women's self-help group members have been trained through her systems to engage in small-scale upcycling initiatives. Over 5,000 students have participated in sustainability workshops. Corporate offices have adopted plastic footprint tracking models introduced by her team. Hundreds of metric tonnes of waste have been diverted from landfills.

Significantly, her innovations are not dependent on expensive machinery. Instead, she encourages decentralised, adaptable systems that can be implemented with local resources, enabling small enterprises and rural communities to participate in the recycling process. Her designs use modified compression systems, biodegradable bonding agents, and modular production rather than high-capital operations. This democratises sustainability and prevents control from being limited to larger firms.

Her collaborations span municipal environmental improvement programmes, EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) initiatives, green construction networks, and CSR impact-driven partnerships. She is also a strong advocate of measuring ecological gains, introducing frameworks that calculate carbon footprint saved per kilogram of repurposed material.

At the core of all this, Divya believes that sustainability and profitability must be complementary, not contradictory. She often says, "If a business harms the environment, it is not progressing—it is only expanding." She insists that the future of enterprise must be built on eco-accountability, and that the businesses that survive long-term will be those that adapt responsibly.

To young entrepreneurs, her message is powerful:

"Don't wait for perfect opportunities. Start solving problems with what you already have. Innovation isn't always about invention—it's often about intelligent design using existing resources." She adds, "If your business ignores the environment today, your customers will ignore your business tomorrow." It is this clarity that drives both her strategic decisions and her community voice.

Divya may describe herself as an engineer and sustainability practitioner, but her influence goes far beyond that. She is a solution architect, designing ecosystems where waste becomes worth, and where entrepreneurship becomes a vehicle for ecological transformation.

"The Earth doesn't need more businesses," she says. "It needs solutions. Business can be that solution—if we choose to build it that way."

Marie Banu Rodriguez

“If the soil gives us nutrients, shouldn’t the waste return to complete the cycle?”

Senthil Kumar Muruga shares with Marie Banu his passion for environment conservation.

Senthil Kumar Muruga is an environmental innovator and founder of the Biotasoil Foundation. An automobile engineer-turned-IT professional, he discovered his life purpose in ecological restoration. Passionately connected to nature since childhood, he left a stable IT career to focus on sustainable solutions. Senthil integrates traditional farming techniques with Miyawaki afforestation, rainwater harvesting, and waste-to-wealth practices.

His work spans water body rejuvenation, biodiversity enhancement, and soil revival, prioritising community ownership and local livelihoods. Known for his consistency and grounded approach, he believes that with persistence and integrity, one can build a livelihood while healing the planet.

In an exclusive interview Senthil Kumar Muruga shares with Marie Banu his passion for environment conservation.

Where did your deep connection with nature originate?

My connection with nature started very early in life. As a schoolboy, I often felt a kind of inner discomfort during peak summer or autumn—not sadness, but a quiet restlessness. I realised that what truly troubled me wasn’t loneliness—it was the sight of nature dry fields, shrinking ponds, wilting plants, and the absence of flowing water. I didn’t yet know what an “ecosystem” meant, but I instinctively felt that I was part of it.

During the rainy season, I would take my bicycle at dawn to check how much water had accumulated in ponds and tanks. I loved listening to the sound of frogs after a good rainfall. Even as a child, a question kept recurring in my mind: “Why can’t we collect all this water and let it soak back into the earth?”

Once in school, when a teacher asked a question about rain, I shared this idea of capturing runoff water for groundwater recharge. The entire class—including the teacher—laughed. It stung, but I didn’t let go of that thought. Years later, while living in Sivagangai, a drought-prone area, I saw rainwater harvesting implemented. Before this, our borewell water was so saline that after washing plates, a visible salt layer would dry on them. After rainwater harvesting came into effect and the rains returned, the water quality improved drastically. That moment reaffirmed what I believed as a child—it proved that what I imagined wasn’t naive, but scientifically sound and practically impactful. It was then I understood that my bond with nature was not just emotional—it was aligned with logic, sustainability and long-term environmental well-being.

How did your transition from IT to environmental conservation begin?

During my IT career, I was highly committed and constantly sought out new technologies, often working seven days a week when something excited me. But over time, I felt an increasing pull towards environmental issues—especially water conservation, waste management, and sustainability.

Even with a secure IT job, I would spend weekends and evenings working outdoors, volunteering around soil and water conservation. My family didn’t fully understand this shift initially, but they never discouraged me. As they watched my consistency, their hesitation gradually turned into support.

Observing how urban lifestyles disrupt natural cycles deepened my resolve. For instance, produce comes to cities from rural regions like Chengalpattu, but the biodegradable waste is never returned to the land it came from. I often wondered, “If the soil gives us nutrients, shouldn’t the waste return to complete the cycle?”

This line of thinking eventually led me to explore waste composting, source segregation, and larger ecological restoration work—marking the real beginning of my transition from IT to environmental conservation.

What sparked your engagement with the Miyawaki method of afforestation?

My journey into afforestation began through volunteering. I participated in small plantation drives and soon came across the Miyawaki method. The phrase 10 times faster, 30 times denser caught my attention immediately.

My first practical exposure was during a plantation drive at the Ashok Leyland factory in Hosur. I had recently relocated from Bengaluru to Hosur to be closer to land, hoping to pursue weekend farming. I saw a WhatsApp invitation to join the Miyawaki drive and reached the site. Due to safety restrictions at the industrial unit, I was initially denied entry because I lacked proper footwear. After much requesting, they allowed entry on a restricted path. By the time I reached the plantation bed, most instructions were over. I planted a sapling, but a volunteer pointed out that I had done it incorrectly. So technically, my first Miyawaki planting failed!

Instead of discouraging me, the experience deepened my curiosity. I realised I felt emotionally calm when touching soil—as if stress dissolved. That evening, I slept deeply, something rare during my IT days.

Through this volunteering network, I was introduced to Engineer Britto Raj and Ms. Malarvili, both of whom were strong advocates of natural farming. Along with a few others, we formed a group called Pagir. We began visiting villages, engaging directly with farmers, listening to their challenges, and slowly applying solutions based on practical observation and traditional wisdom.

What did you discover by integrating traditional farming techniques with Miyawaki afforestation?

Our early experiments were small-scale, carried out on a friend’s land. My prior experience with composting and terrace gardening from domestic waste became useful. Over time, I realised:

Rather than replacing soil, we should enrich it.

Waste streams such as STP sludge, agricultural residue, and biodegradable waste can be used to build soil fertility and shouldn’t be discarded.

On a later project executed for Volvo under CSR, we took an innovative approach. We dug six feet deep, placed construction debris at the bottom, and layered biodegradable material and enriched soil above it. The debris acted as a water-retaining layer. Plants don’t always need direct watering—they need consistent moisture.

Working with scientists and mentors helped me understand microbial ecosystems—how bacteria and fungi transform soil into a living reservoir that supports diverse species. I began studying rainfall data, moisture absorption, and plant water requirements per square foot. These insights allowed us to design afforestation models resilient enough to survive after two summers with minimal irrigation.

How did these efforts lead to the formation of the Biotasoil Foundation?

My transition began when I started informally supporting NGOs whose afforestation efforts had failed. One such organisation had created a forest near a water body, but poor species selection and inadequate bed preparation had caused most saplings to die. I requested permission to attempt restoration using natural farming inputs such as jeevamrutham, fish amino acids, and locally available bio-stimulants. I invested my own money into the experiment, driven purely by conviction. To everyone’s surprise, the forest began to recover and soon became their reference model.

Assuming it was a coincidence, they asked me to revive another site. When that too responded positively, they insisted on compensating me for my work. That experience made me realise that meaningful income did not have to come only from IT—it could also emerge from purposeful environmental work.

After several discussions with my family, I resigned from my IT job in 2019. I had no loans, minimal financial obligations, and full clarity of purpose. I believed that if I stayed honest to my intent, sustainability—both personal and ecological—would follow.

That same year, we formally registered the Biotasoil Foundation with a simple guiding principle:

“In every situation, do the best possible for the environment.”

What began as plantation revival gradually expanded to include water conservation, waste-to-wealth innovations, ecological enhancement, and carbon sequestration. Today, this principle continues to shape every decision and action we take.

I remain deeply grateful to all those who stood by me on this journey—my mentors, friends, family members, and well-wishers. Their trust and encouragement gave me the strength to transform a belief from childhood into an organisation committed to healing the earth.