

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 12 | Issue 10 | October 2024 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdsrtrust.org



PUBLISHED BY: P.N.SUBRAMANIAN
on behalf of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai - 600 116 and printed by him at
Express Press, Express Gardens, No.29,
Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate,
Chennai - 600 058. Phone: 044-42805365
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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The social sector is a demanding field that calls for more than just skills or resources. It requires a deep sense of passion — a relentless drive to make a difference in the lives of others, even when the path is riddled with challenges. Passion acts as the fuel that sustains commitment, ensuring that individuals and organisations remain focused on their mission, regardless of setbacks or uncertainties.

In the social sector, outcomes are rarely immediate, and change often happens at a gradual pace. Whether it involves working towards education reform, healthcare access, or environmental sustainability, the impact is complex and multifaceted. Those driven by passion understand that meaningful progress requires time, patience, and persistence. Passion ignites the willingness to take risks, experiment with solutions, and stay committed even when the results are not immediately visible.

Another essential role of passion is its ability to inspire others. Social work often demands the mobilisation of communities, institutions, and volunteers, which can only be achieved when people believe in the mission. Passionate individuals and leaders are capable of creating ripple effects, motivating others to join the cause, and fostering collaborations that amplify impact. Their energy becomes contagious, uniting diverse stakeholders towards a shared goal.

However, passion alone is not enough. It must be harnessed with purpose, strategy, and discipline to achieve sustainable results. There is always the danger of burnout in the social sector, where individuals invest their emotions and personal resources deeply. But when passion is aligned with long-term commitment, thoughtful planning, and realistic goals, it transforms into resilience — the kind of determination that helps navigate tough times and ensures progress.

The story of changemakers featured in this issue illustrates the importance of passion in the social sector.

In a world where social challenges continue to grow, the need for passionate, committed individuals in the social sector has never been more critical. Passion ensures that efforts remain focused on the bigger picture, reminding us that change — no matter how slow — is possible through dedication and perseverance. With passion at the core, the social sector becomes a powerful force for long-lasting, meaningful change.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

DIGITAL VIGILANTISM: THE EVOLUTION OF JUSTICE IN THE INFORMATION AGE



Vigilantism, the act of individuals or groups taking the law into their own hands, has existed throughout history. In recent years, this concept has transformed into a new form: digital vigilantism. This phenomenon leverages the power of the internet and social media platforms to enforce perceived justice, often with far-reaching consequences. The rise of digital vigilantism is intrinsically linked to the proliferation of misinformation in the online sphere. As false or misleading content spreads rapidly across social networks, it can fuel misguided attempts at justice. The symbiotic relationship between misinformation and digital vigilantism creates a volatile environment where facts are often secondary to emotional responses.

Social media platforms serve as the primary battleground for digital vigilantes. These spaces provide the tools for rapid information dissemination, community formation, and collective action. A single post can trigger a cascade of grievances, transforming individual grievances into a community movement within hours. Recent examples illustrate the potency of this digital phenomenon. In 2023, a cryptocurrency investor faced severe online harassment after being falsely accused of fraud on Twitter. The accusation, based on misinterpreted blockchain data, led to doxxing (revealing personal information) and threats before experts could debunk the claims. This incident highlights how technical misunderstandings can fuel digital

witch hunts.

Another case from 2024 involved a popular fitness influencer who became the target of digital vigilantism on Instagram. Manipulated images suggested the influencer was promoting harmful diet practices, resulting in a massive loss of followers and sponsorship deals before the truth emerged. This example demonstrates the real-world impact of digital vigilantism on individuals' livelihoods and reputations.

The evolution of digital vigilantism mirrors advancements in technology. Artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies now enable the creation of highly convincing false evidence, further blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Additionally, the rise of decentralised social media platforms has created new challenges in content moderation and accountability. The societal impact of digital vigilantism is profound. It erodes trust in institutions, as people increasingly rely on crowd-sourced "justice" rather than established legal processes. Moreover, it can lead to the targeting of innocent individuals, causing irreparable harm to their personal and professional lives. The phenomenon also contributes to a culture of fear and self-censorship online, stifling free expression and debate.

Tackling digital vigilantism requires a multifaceted approach. Education is key, as media literacy programs equip individuals with the skills to think critically, analyse and evaluate online information. For

instance, Finland's successful integration of critical thinking skills into its national curriculum has shown promising results in combating misinformation and its effects. Technological solutions are also emerging. Advanced AI-powered fact-checking tools can now detect and flag potential misinformation in real-time, reducing its spread. Social media platforms are implementing features that encourage users to read articles before sharing, slowing the viral spread of unverified content.

Legal frameworks are evolving to address digital vigilantism. In 2024, the European Union introduced regulations holding platforms accountable for prompt removal of content that incites vigilante actions. Similarly, some countries have expanded cyberbullying laws to encompass coordinated online harassment campaigns. Ultimately, combating digital vigilantism necessitates a collective effort. It requires collaboration between tech companies, governments, educational institutions, and civil society organisations. The challenge lies in harnessing the positive aspects of digital engagement while mitigating its potential for harm. By gaining knowledge on media literacy, responsible online behaviour, and fact-checking, we can collectively work to curb this dangerous trend and create a safer, more informed digital landscape. Together we can shape a digital future that upholds justice without sacrificing our humanity.

Arulselvi Azhagiri

SERENDIP GUARDIANS



Serendip Guardians is a mental health organisation based in Nagaland, was co-founded by Rini S. Ghosh and one of her close friends with a shared vision: to bring mental well-being to the forefront of community care. Focusing on the often-overlooked needs of children, women, and youth, Serendip Guardians offers a safe space for individuals to navigate the complexities of mental health. Their mission is to prioritise emotional and psychological well-being, ensuring that no one feels left behind. Through dedicated support and awareness, they strive to create a more understanding and empathetic society.

Growing up in Nagaland, Rini witnessed many individuals in her community struggling with mental health issues, often without any clear understanding of what they were experiencing. These unexplained circumstances lingered in her mind, but it wasn't until she pursued her Master's Degree specialising in medical and psychiatric health, that the pieces began to fall into place. Through her studies, she realised that many of the stories she had heard throughout her life were, in fact, connected to mental health. This "aha moment" ignited a passion within her; she understood that had they recognised these issues earlier, perhaps they could have offered support and made a difference.

Recognising a significant gap in mental health resources in her home state, Rini felt compelled to act. She noted, "We didn't even know that it's a mental health issue," highlighting the pressing need for awareness and support in Nagaland. As she continued her studies and entered the workforce, she became increasingly aware of the mental health challenges surrounding her, fuelling her desire to create change. This sense of urgency led to the founding of Serendip Guardians, an organisation dedicated to



prioritising the mental health of children, women, and youth in her community. Her journey illustrates the profound impact of understanding mental health and the crucial need for initiatives that can provide the support and resources that so many individuals desperately need. The name—Serendip Guardians—is deeply rooted in the concept of serendipity, which she and her co-founder, Michael Schroeder, embraced as they embarked on their initiative. Reflecting on the meaning behind the name, she explained, "We always said, for me, it was about serendipity—happy development." Their journey began with discussions about their dissatisfaction with their work and a desire to make a meaningful impact in their

community. Encouraged by friends and mentors who urged them not to wait for the "right moment," they took a leap of faith and began to explore their vision.

As they shared their ideas with others, they found that "things started falling into place." The support and encouragement from those they met reinforced their belief that their mission was destined to be. Rini emphasised, "It was like we were meant to be," capturing the essence of their journey and the serendipitous connections they made along the way. The term "Guardians" in the name reflects their commitment to being more than just professionals; they aspire to be caretakers for those who seek their help. Rini says, "We always wanted to be guardians to people who come under our care," underscoring the organisation's dedication to nurturing and supporting the mental health of their community.

Serendip Guardians has made significant strides in addressing mental health issues through a variety of workshops and awareness programs, often receiving poignant feedback from participants. Rini shares, "At the end of every workshop, there is someone who tells us: 'I never realised that it's a mental health issue.'" This response underscores the organisation's impact, as individuals begin to recognise their struggles and seek help, either for themselves or for loved ones in their communities. Each workshop serves as a reminder that their efforts are not only meaningful but also crucial in fostering awareness and support.

However, Rini and her team have faced substantial cultural and societal stigma surrounding mental health, especially in a predominantly Christian state where many associate mental health issues with spirituality. "When we started, there were hardly any organisations addressing

this,” she noted, emphasising the need for awareness in a community where misconceptions prevail. To combat this stigma, Serendip Guardians sought collaboration with local theological colleges, believing that educating church leaders could bridge the gap between spiritual support and mental health care. Rini explained, “It’s not like prayer is wrong or we are right...can we work together as a team?” This cooperative approach has helped create a more inclusive environment for discussions about mental health.

Despite ongoing challenges, Rini highlighted that young people often express a desire for confidentiality, stating, “Nobody needs to know,” when they reach out for help. This illustrates the persistent stigma surrounding mental health treatment, yet it also showcases the trust that Serendip Guardians is building within the community as they work to create safe spaces for open dialogue and support.

Rini emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to mental health in her organisation’s work, which extends beyond spiritual well-being to encompass physical and emotional health. For over a decade, Serendip Guardians has partnered with local churches to conduct summer camps and youth programs that integrate mental health awareness into their activities. She explains, “Churches are very much aware of the need for medical support along with their whole aspect of spiritual well-being.” This collaboration allows for self-care workshops and counselling sessions, offering attendees a safe space to discuss their mental health needs and access further support.

The organisation’s outreach efforts also extend to various NGOs that deal with sensitive topics such as violence and abuse. Rini notes: “Mental health is not one thing that you can ignore... they have undergone trauma... and they have mental health issues as well.” By providing training for staff and volunteers at these organisations, Serendip Guardians raises awareness about mental health and equips them to better support their community. Furthermore, she emphasises the necessity of mental health training for teachers in schools stating that “when the teacher’s know to identify the symptoms of mental health issues it will help the students immensely.”

Serendip Guardians utilises the strong presence of churches within Nagaland to reach marginalised groups. “If you look at the Nagaland scenario, the churches are very strong,” Rini remarks. This partnership allows the organisation to access remote communities and provide professional mental health support through established church networks. In addressing the growing issue of drug addiction in the region, she clarifies, “We don’t directly work for de-addiction, but we organise awareness programs and social intervention for those who are into addiction. We collaborate with local de-addiction centres to enhance the counselling skills of recovering addicts who often serve as counsellors themselves.

Recognising the emotional toll of their work, she emphasises the importance of mutual support within her team: “It’s not just about the professional team, but I think we’re a very close group of friends.” Regular check-ins and shared experiences foster a culture of care, allowing team members to prioritise their mental health and seek help when needed.

Serendip Guardians has cultivated meaningful relationships with interns, encouraging them to explore their strengths and engage creatively in awareness initiatives. Rini reflects on this process stating, “It’s not just about imparting professional skills, but also in supporting them and help them identify their own strengths.” This approach nurtures a sense of ownership among interns, empowering them to contribute to the organisation’s mission. Rini shares a vital message for the global community regarding mental health: “Having that one person in our lives does a lot of change in terms of our mental health.” She advocates for both finding and being that supportive individual, highlighting the profound impact this connection can have. “Being that person in the lives of the people who come around us brings a whole lot of change when we’re talking about mental health.” This ethos of mutual support and connection is essential for fostering resilience and well-being, both individually and collectively.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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INCLUSIVE WELLNESS

ZAMZO, a mental health organisation founded by Lalmankimi, stands out by prioritising both mental and physical well-being. Driven by a personal mission, Lalmankimi launched Zamzo to provide opportunities that were once denied to her. She aims to uplift and support her community, the Mizo people—a minority group in Nagaland—by ensuring they have access to holistic health care. Through this initiative, ZAMZO is not only addressing mental health challenges but also promoting physical wellness, creating a space where every individual can thrive.

Lalmankimi, founder of ZAMZO, she highlighted how the organisation's focus extends beyond mental health to also embrace physical well-being. When asked about the reasoning behind this approach, Lalmankimi shared, "We believe that health would be a balance between mental health and physical health." While many organisations centre on mental health workshops alone, ZAMZO stands apart by offering physical activities as well. "We are helping them and guiding them to do physical exercise," she explained, adding that the organisation also educates people on the importance of good food and overall health.

Additionally, they conduct games and was even in the process of organising a marathon to address mental health issues before it was disrupted by the COVID pandemic. In the spirit of community engagement, the organisation hosted a local football tournament. Lalmankimi emphasised that the Mizo community faces unique challenges, stating, "We are the one who started this intervention in our community, in our area. "ZAMZO aims to work on every issue that affects the community, with a holistic approach to health that reaches people of all ages—from youth to the elderly.

Lalmankimi reflected on the workshops and collaborations that have left a lasting impact on her. When asked if there were any specific moments that made her realise the importance of her work, she said, "I gained a lot from every workshop I attended. Earlier, I never attended a workshop, and moreover there is no other NGO working in our community." She emphasised how each workshop not only benefits the participants but also helps her to grow personally, boosting her confidence and believing in the organisation's mission. She shares, "I used to run every workshop with a mission to give a lot for the organisation as well as for myself."

Lalmankimi also spoke about ZAMZO's collaborative efforts with other NGOs, both locally and beyond. She mentioned an upcoming collaboration with CIDC Life Matters from Bhopal and White Heights CIPHRA, in which they will conduct a workshop in November focusing on using social media as a professional tool for disabled youth. She explains: "We used to collaborate with local NGOs, NGOs from outside, and also with some government departments. This spirit of partnership underscores the organisation's commitment to broadening its impact and addressing a



range of community issues.

Building on their mission to support mental and physical well-being, ZAMZO has implemented several initiatives to engage with different segments of the community. Among these efforts is the "Overflow Room", a listening space where adolescents can come and talk about their concerns, providing them with a safe and supportive environment. The organisation also conducts special classes for school dropouts, particularly students from classes 10 and 12, helping them catch up on their syllabus. Additionally, ZAMZO offer an "Aspirants Meet" for civil service aspirants, where they provide focused classes to guide them through the challenging preparation process. For younger children, they organise a story-reading sessions to inspire and nurture creativity, while their career guidance programs help youth make informed decisions about their future. Moreover, the organisation priorities "life skills education", equipping individuals with the tools to navigate everyday challenges confidently and effectively. Through these initiatives, they continue to foster holistic development in the community.

Lalmankimi sheds light on the mental health challenges her community faces and how they tackle these issues. She describes the initial hesitancy people exhibited when the organisation first opened its space for mental health support. "When we started opening our space for mental health and said that whoever wants to come and share, we're here to listen, people hesitated," she says. Many individuals, especially men, found it difficult to acknowledge or accept their mental health struggles. Lalmankimi

explains that the stigma surrounding mental health made it challenging for people to openly seek help, particularly young boys. "Boys believe they should not share their problems, and this happens in every society, especially in our tribe," she adds.

To combat this, ZAMZO shifted their approach, focusing on engaging with children in schools and creating a safe space for them to connect. Gradually, the children and others in the community began reaching out through phone calls, establishing trust in the process.

When asked about how she maintains her own mental well-being, given her advocacy for others, emphasised self-care. "In order to help other people, I believe I must first take care of myself. I'm learning to accept whatever comes my way and be healthy," she shares, highlighting the importance of personal well-being in her journey.

As for the future of ZAMZO, she expresses her vision for sustainability and community ownership. "I want my organisation to work even if I am not active. I want the youth in my community to become the owners of the organisation," she states passionately. Her vision is for the youth to be fully integrated into the organisation, contributing to society and helping others avoid the struggles she faced. "I started this not to earn money or become an entrepreneur, but to solve problems and help the children and youth from my community," she says. Through ZAMZO, Lalmankimi hopes to build a legacy of empowerment, where the youth see themselves as part of something bigger that they are destined to be.

Bhavadharani K



BUILDING TOGETHER



Nilgiris is known for its natural beauty and cultural diversity. The lush green canopies and the local tribe's lifestyle is so welcoming every time. However, despite this allure, these native tribes face a range of pressing social challenges that often go unnoticed. Whether it is access to education, health or malnutrition, gender inequality, tribal welfare, tribal rights, substance abuse, environmental degradation or the livelihood related challenges, they continue to be under represented even today. Domestic Violence is another social concern that has wrecked women and children very quietly. "All this was not easy for my father. He was an army veteran turned advocate who had practiced in Mumbai High Court. All these issues concerned him and he wanted to do something for the locals here. The gaps in the delivery of public schemes and services disturbed him. Drawing from the experience of pro-bono cases he took up in Mumbai, he began to help the underprivileged

here, one case at a time," says Mr Rajesh Krishnan, Trustee of 4Socio, Coonoor, Nilgiris. Founded as Awareness Charitable Trust (ACT) in 2016 by Advocate Krishnan, their work focussed on children, education, sanitation and environment. Their strong rapport with local officials has opened new avenues for intervention, and their on-the-ground presence has earned them the credibility needed to collaborate with government departments in implementing various schemes. "In 2018, when I had come here for a transition break, I got involved in the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan project. The District Collector had asked my father's team to take up the construction of 600 toilets for the underprivileged identified from these communities. I initially got involved to support my father, but little did I realise that I would soon become the face of this organisation," smiles Rajesh. Coming from a corporate background with extensive experience in business development

and software sales for global companies, this was a phase. After completing the project successfully, he got back to his corporate life to explore entrepreneurship role in training businesses. But then, he chose to get back to the Trust as it was winding up. "It was good, rewarding work. I felt I could take it up and revive its operations because all work that happened there was immensely useful to the indigenous communities," he adds. Given his experience, Rajesh brought on board new corporate partners whose support helped ACT implement new projects. One of the first projects was in collaboration with Tech Mahindra Foundation during the COVID Pandemic. Rajesh and team provided dry rations and cooked meals for the underprivileged in Chennai and the Nilgiris. He realised that ACT could grow as an efficient project implementing partner for different corporates, who faced challenges in identifying causes or organisations to work with. "It was a time when the CSR Amendment also

allowed many corporates to explore collaborations with organisations like ours. We decided to build our expertise in learning about the community, its strengths, weaknesses and concerns that needed external intervention," says Rajesh, whose leadership prepared the team to study indigenous communities for what they are and how they lived. Acknowledging the potential for bias to occur easily, he worked on a framework to ensure that basic, real problems were understood for what they just were. "We needed our facts right. We cannot overdo or exaggerate because that affects project planning and our credibility. We needed to learn the actual reality to be able to develop projects that suited them. That is how Project Parayavarna happened," he elaborates. The Anaikatti belt is predominantly dry forest, lacking fruit-bearing trees that elephants and other animals could consume during their journeys. Additionally, the absence of water in the



summer months compels these majestic creatures to migrate in search of more resourceful areas. As Rajesh notes, "Elephants are also like humans. We move to new places in search of water, jobs, etc. but for them, it is a matter of survival." This understanding of their migration patterns led Rajesh and his team to thoroughly investigate the pathways these elephants travel. They found that the elephants migrate from Kerala to Coimbatore and then to the Nilgiris before eventually returning to Kerala.

To support these migratory patterns, it was essential to provide water and food sources that would encourage the elephants to remain on their natural routes without encroaching on human habitats. Although forest officials had set up water troughs, many were in disrepair and went unused by the elephants. To address this, Rajesh and his team revived and, in some cases, rebuilt these troughs to ensure passing animals could quench their thirst. To further attract the elephants to these areas, they also planted native fruit-bearing trees, creating an environment where the animals could access both food and water in the same location. The project led to the restoration of 200 hectares of forest land and protected several endangered species, with a 20 percent increase in local wildlife population.

With each project, the organisation also grew and is now recently rebranded as 4Socio to emphasise on its ability to partner with different stakeholders and implement projects suiting the beneficiary communities. In the education front, 4Socio's cyber smart initiative has reached out to more than two lakh school children in Coimbatore alone. Engaging college students as volunteers for short training sessions to teach local school children proved to be a highly effective strategy. Workshops in schools, colleges and corporate offices, led to a 30% decrease in reported cyber incidents among participants. 4Socio, as an organisation is now eight years old but it has undergone a lot of transformation from within. With each such phase, it has also grown in both functionality and in capability. Each phase of this evolution has not only strengthened the organisation's mission but has also enhanced its ability to adapt to changing community needs. As 4Socio looks to the future, it remains committed to its core values while embracing innovation and collaboration, ensuring that it continues to make a meaningful impact in the lives of those it serves.

Shanmuga Priya.T



DECISION FATIGUE:

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT DOES

[The Story So Far: In the last 3 episodes of this feature, we have been looking at the primary and secondary impacts of stress, sleep, food, pain, illness and other health-related constructs on our well-being. In Episode 3, we briefly looked at Decision Fatigue in the context of stress. In the following discussion, we'll look at it in more detail.]

Some amount of friction is required for us to walk. If there is no friction at all between our feet and the ground we are walking on, we'd immediately slip and fall. At the same time, too much friction would make it very difficult to walk. We would probably still be able to take a few steps, but each step would cost us a huge amount of effort, to overcome all the friction that is working against us. And if the friction is insurmountable, we would not be able to move forward, in spite of all the effort we put in. To an onlooker, it would appear as if we are standing still - but in reality, we would be straining to the maximum extent, but not moving forward at all; our effort is all wasted.

Making decisions is actually a lot like taking steps against friction. There is always more than one option in front of us in almost every sphere of life, and choosing one option and rejecting all the others takes up our time and mental energy. Even when the choices are easy to pick, there is still some processing that goes on before each decision. This level of processing should be like an optimal level of friction that allows us to move forward smoothly and comfortably. This is where the significance of habits and routines arises from - if there is a set routine to follow, one that we have ourselves formulated with thought and care, a great deal of mental power is saved because we do not have to keep deciding what to do next. To some extent, the decision is already made, and we can expend only a minimal amount overcoming any inertia that we might feel. When we have good habits to follow, we reap their positive impacts relatively easily. But when we fall into unproductive habits too, the automaticity of the habit pulls us in its wake. This is why habits are so difficult to break, whether they are positive or negative.

But what is decision fatigue? Decision fatigue is the tiredness we feel from having to constantly make decisions. Naturally when the decisions are difficult ones, we get more tired, because we spend more energy making them. And why is the idea of decision fatigue relevant and important? It's because decision fatigue very often becomes an insidious hole in our store of energy - we think we haven't 'done' anything much strenuous, but we feel tired, and then wonder why. Very often, it's because our energy is being drained by invisible decision fatigue. Let's look at a few examples to clarify this idea.

Let's say you decide to do something



you don't want to do. (Why you don't want to do it is another story - right now let's just take it as a given that there is such a task in front of you.) Every minute that you spend doing this disliked task, you are actually pushing against yourself. Every minute you are doing it, you are having to spend extra energy making your eyes or hands or feet or mind do something they don't want to do. When you finally get it done, you're twice as tired - or possibly many times as tired - as you would have been, if you hadn't had to push against yourself.

Everywhere around us, we see this kind of decision fatigue affecting lives negatively. Students studying subjects they don't want to, children going to schools they don't want to, people working in areas they don't really love or enjoy - in all these situations, chronic but intangible decision fatigue is taking its toll.

Now if you look at someone who loves what they do, you will see the opposite of a victim of decision fatigue - you will see people easily and joyfully achieving whatever they have set out to. Such people are not having to work against decision fatigue, so their energies are put to good use. More to the point, all their energy is engaged in getting the work done, and none of it is being wasted overcoming any opposing force within themselves. You might sometimes have looked at someone around you, and wondered how they have so much energy and stamina. Very often, you will find that these are people who are doing what they love, they are serving their own purpose and potential, and are not being subservient to any other person

or situation. This is what listening to your inner voice actually means - it means that you are working in step with yourself, and not against yourself. Working against yourself is the greatest 'himsa' or harm that you can do.

The catch, of course, is that you must be sure its your own inner voice you are listening to, and not that of the crafty neighbor or a deluding ad in the TV, an evil manipulator, or even the voice of your own misguided taste-buds telling you to eat that chocolate loaded with white sugar and harmful chemicals. In the yogic tradition, there are prescriptions for this too - something that makes you straight and pure and clear-sighted, so that you can recognize which is which. These are called Yamas and Niyamas, and they form the first 2 'angas' or elements of Patanjali Muni's Ashtanga Yoga or the eightfold yogic path. Very briefly, Yamas tell you how to behave in society and the Niyamas tell you how to handle your own body and mind.

So what are the ways to avoid decision fatigue and use your energies productively? It is to build good habits and routines thus minimizing unnecessary options in daily life, having clarity about yourself and your work, and above all, not be in situations where you have to constantly battle with yourself. Here's wishing you an auspicious Deepavali that lights up your life, and your path ahead...

A. Ramashree



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

Trees are a symbol of life, growth and continuity. They not only sustain ecosystems but also play a central role in maintaining biodiversity and regulating climate. Unfortunately, we have lost a significant number of trees that has led to profound consequences. And this loss of huge canopies is a crisis for all species including humans and the whole planet as such. Yet, we have individuals and their efforts that continue to increase green cover, who thoughtfully promote the planting of native, traditional species and inspire many others to follow suit. “We have lost way too many trees. Our efforts must be on a war footing. Each one of us must plant few trees and take care of them. This is the only essential way to sustain and support humanity,” warns Mr Sree Kumar, Founder of Trust for Restoring Environment and Empowering Society (TREES), in Chennai.

Sree Kumar is a class ten dropout from Palakkad, Kerala who worked as a welder for survival. He worked in Mumbai also and upon returning to Kerala, he started working as a driver. He came to Chennai at the age of 30 years in 2000 and continued to work as a driver till 2009 for an American company. “I was an ordinary driver who often slept under the shade of trees in many cities, villages. The connect one feels with nature and trees is inevitable as we are all part of the whole planet’s symbiosis. Perhaps, this connection is not enough motivation to plant more trees. But being in the midst of personalities like Nammazhvar can change you fundamentally and compel you to think of nature from a functional perspective. I became humbled by what trees have been doing for us for eons,” he recounts.

While working for an e-publishing company, Sree Kumar got involved in their ‘one book-one tree’ project. “It is here that I met Nammazhvar. His passion and love for natural farming, his deep ecological wisdom recognising trees as foundational to balance in nature touched me,” he reminisces. His interest in these projects were noted and Sree Kumar got to travel with his inspiration all over the country. He learnt a lot in these trips and began to connect himself with the larger mission of afforestation. “It is not only about how trees helped natural farming or how they strengthen soil. Their presence is enough to help soil replenish itself with nutrients like nitrogen and potassium,” he adds. Then the reach of Green Kalam project, that was initiated by Actor Vivek made him realise that only trees can arrest global warming. “Ten years with such personalities convinced me to work on planting more and more trees. I knew what I had to do,” says Sree Kumar.

Sree Kumar founded TREES in 2019 in Padur, Chennai and engaged a lot of volunteers from schools, colleges and corporates to develop saplings in his nursery. But to plant them, Sree Kumar had a clear plan. He chose to plant his saplings on protected lands like defense areas, NSG, Navy campuses, universities, schools and colleges. He had seen that trees were easily evicted for metro rail, bridge construction and other development projects. Hence, chose these places so that the trees could survive and grow to their full potential. He also ensured that damaged trees were replanted in a suitable place and taken care of. TREES focusses exclusively on planting native, traditional species for diverse reasons. Their extensive root systems, adaptation to local conditions, ability to withstand extreme weather conditions, resistance to pests and diseases and their survival strategies makes them vital to maintaining the balance of ecosystems, especially as climate change increases the frequency of natural disasters.

“All of us know that trees are important. We all want to plant more trees. But only a few of us know the value of every tree we plant. Nature has gifted every species with a specific trait, like talent in humans. And that trait governs their role in every eco system,” explains Sree Kumar. Arjuna Tree for example, removes salt content from ground water and acts as a natural water purifier. Its bark is also found to have medicinal properties that can help in the treatment of cancer and blood pressure. The culturally revered Neem Tree is probably the only tree which gives Vitamin C along with oxygen. It is very well known that every part of this tree including seed, fruit and flower has

PLANTING HOPE WITH EVERY TREE

medicinal values. Sree Kumar is even more engrossed while explaining about the Mahua Tree, locally known as the Ilupai Maram. It belongs to a rare species of trees that absorb both carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide from the atmosphere. The tree produces fragrant, nectar-rich flowers that attract bees and other pollinators, thus helps sustaining pollinator population. Oil from the Mahua seeds are a good remedy for joint pain. “Did you know that fifty years back this oil was used to make Diwali sweets? This is the task in hand, the next generation must be educated and sensitised about the values of our native trees. There are about 69 varieties whose wide presence on earth is extremely vital to strengthen soil,” he adds, elaborating on TREES’ awareness programs for school, college students, community associations and also NGOs, volunteer groups who want to plant as many trees and nurture them.

Having planted, nurtured over 12,64,000 trees and educated more than 30 lakh school/college students in the last fifteen years, Sree Kumar is a name that now resonates with trees and their values. TREES has partnered with various groups to promote plantation. Chennai Metro Rail’s first plantation initiative and also Chennai Corporation’s plantation initiative are some of the recent projects. His field observations and travel to different states has also made him aware of the strengths of these trees, which he continues to share in all awareness sessions. “All of us can plant and take care of few trees. But I find it rewarding that I am able to build groups who will follow suit and inspire many more to do so. The growth of this chain of planters is a dream that has transcended from many thoughtful leaders like Nammazhvar and APJ Abdul Kalam. I will continue to do my part,” promises Sree Kumar.

Shanmuga Priya.T





SPORTS FOR ALL

Sports play a vital role in promoting physical health, social inclusion, and personal development, yet access to these opportunities is often limited for underprivileged communities. Engaging in sports can foster teamwork, resilience and discipline, equipping individuals with essential life skills that extend beyond the playing field. For children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, sports can be a powerful tool for empowerment, providing a safe space for expression, creativity and social interaction. “By investing in sports for underprivileged individuals, we can create pathways to a brighter future, instilling hope and inspiring dreams of achievement that might otherwise seem unattainable,” says Mr Vaishnavi Nudurumati, Founder of The India Sports Initiative in Pune, Maharashtra.

Having grown up in different cities, Vaishnavi’s interest and talent in sports gave her the exposure to interact

with different teams. “I started attending Taekwondo classes from my school in Gujarat. My coach was very encouraging and he guided me to pursue further. Every time I was part of a new team, I saw new athletes from varied backgrounds. Sadly, team mates from low income communities who had also won in state and national level competitions gave up after a point. This was not a one-time occurrence. It spoke volumes about the lack of infrastructure and financial support for real talent, that could come from anywhere in the country,” laments Vaishnavi.

Now an established Taekwondo professional who has won four national level medals and 12 state gold medals, she wanted to work on building Indian talent for international sports. “There is so much talent out there but very few resources to support their growth and access the right avenue. I can see an Olympian in every lane. I wondered if I could take games to them,” she shares. Vaishnavi was attempting to build a model to take structured, competitive sports to underprivileged communities, who would otherwise give up pursuit or compromise. After her graduation in Political Science from University of Delhi, she enrolled in Teach For India Fellowship and soon after incubated The India Sports Initiative in 2022.

Vaishnavi notes that sports interventions tend to focus either on promoting social-emotional learning or on preparing athletes for elite events like the Olympics. “These represent two extremes in a pyramid, with very little intervention occurring in the middle levels where there’s significant potential to nurture talent. This is where I envision TISI making a difference in the near future,” she explains. Identifying talent was the first step to building India as a sports super power. The initial level of intervention at TISI is the Starter Program, aimed at children aged 8 to 11. In this program, children from the community or schools are introduced to various sports activities and participate in games to gauge their interest in sports. Over time, they are assessed for



sport-specific requirements, such as shoulder strength for archery.

For the identified students, they have curated the core program where students undergo transformational training to cultivate athletic excellence and support their holistic development. This is usually implemented as an after school program till students reach the age of 16 years. There is more focus on competitive sports, professional training and mentorship under sport specific coaches. “This is the foundation they will need to plan for national and international competitions. We have planned it in such a way to give them a strong launch pad into competitions. Which is why we call this program ‘Rookies 2 Revere’,” she adds.

The third level is the Ignite Accelerator where exceptionally talented students in the 16-18 years age group are exposed to bridge programs to sustain their interest and learn latest techniques. “Our model is backed by the experience of all athletes on board and we really understand will work in the communities and schools. However, we are continuously learning and studying the sports ecosystem to keep the interventions relevant and innovative,” says Vaishnavi. Beginning with Taekwondo and Athletics workshop in six Mumbai schools where she taught more than 350 students, to the Archery pilot program in Pune’s Avasara Academy, TISI has come a long way in understanding how sports interventions work in India. “There is no prior experience to learn from. Any sports intervention in our country needs to be implemented to be tested. I can confidently say we are crossing this phase soon,” she smiles. TISI has designed the Archery pilot program with a vision to promote unconventional Olympic sports in the country.

Vaishnavi recognises that sports can be a powerful pathway for social mobility. She emphasises that achievements in any sport, even at district and state levels, can unlock numerous opportunities. She shares that her own journey led her to the University of Delhi through the sports quota. “Who I am today is because of what sports has given me,” she stresses.

—Shanmuga Priya.T



INVITATION FOR NGOS

Let Us Dream (LUD) is a globally recognised non-profit organisation, rooted in local communities and accredited as a UN-recognised NGO. Founded by Dr. Fr. Lijo Thomas, LUD empowers individuals and communities to realise their dreams through a holistic and inclusive approach, embracing the interconnectedness of people and societies to foster sustainable development.

The organisation brings together a diverse group of like-minded individuals from across the globe, working towards the shared vision of holistic development. Our members mentor, support, and guide communities, promoting growth and well-being for individuals and society as a whole.

The theme of this year’s conference is “**A Holistic Approach to Sustainable Well-Being.**” We are pleased to invite NGOs to participate in the **Let Us Dream National Conference, a one-day, in-person event on Saturday, 23rd November 2024, at Women’s Christian College, Chennai.**

This conference serves as a platform for learning, sharing experiences, addressing challenges, and celebrating successes, with the goal of improving lives through collaborative dialogue and exchange. Participants will have the opportunity to interact with individuals leading social change, making it an ideal space for networking and community engagement.



"My goal is to create a brand that connects farmers using organic methods with consumers looking for pure and authentic food."

Dhiraj Choudhary shares with Marie Banu his interest in soil conservation and organic farming

Dhiraj Choudhary, an electronics engineer turned entrepreneur, is passionate about leveraging technology for social impact. With ventures spanning healthcare to agriculture, he co-founded a startup focused on soil health. Through innovations like the Soil Doctor kit, Dhiraj aims to empower farmers, promote sustainable agriculture, and restore India's soil ecosystem.

In an exclusive interview, Dhiraj Choudhary shares with Marie Banu his interest in soil conservation and organic farming.

Your journey as a social entrepreneur?

I am an electronics engineer by education, and I completed my degree in 2013. From the beginning, I wanted to create something meaningful in the social sector, combining technology with real-world impact. I was passionate about using tech to solve problems, especially those that could improve people's lives. That's when I first ventured into building an artificial limb for upper-hand amputees.

The idea was to address the challenges faced by amputees. We built a myoelectric arm—this type of prosthetic uses muscle or neural signals to control the movement of the arm. The goal was to make the limb functional through these biological inputs, allowing users to control it naturally. We even successfully fitted the arm on one amputee. But at that point, it was more of a passion project rather than a viable business.

How did your management education help shape your entrepreneurial journey?

To better understand how to build a business around a problem statement, I decided to pursue a post-graduate program in management. I enrolled at XLRI and the experience gave me the tools I needed to create structured business models. Soon after, I co-founded a software startup offering a SaaS (Software as a Service) product. I spent around three and a half years building the company, and by the time I exited in 2021, we had reached an annual recurring revenue of 2.5 crore INR, with just a seven-member team.

Even though the software startup was doing well, I felt a strong calling to work in agriculture—something I had been interested in since childhood. The challenges of COVID-19 gave me time to reflect, and I realised I wanted to pursue that dream. I decided to exit the company and focus on agriculture. That's when I met Ms. Saumya Rawat,

my co-founder, in Delhi. Soumya is from Uttarakhand and was already working on soil health and regeneration. Together, we decided to focus on the fundamental issue in agriculture: soil health.

Can you tell us about the soil health solution you've developed?

We realised that many of the issues farmers face—like declining crop yields, increased disease outbreaks, and dependence on chemical fertilizers—stem from poor soil health. Soil is a living ecosystem that contains microbes, earthworms, and nutrients, all of which work together in a symbiotic relationship. However, overuse of harmful fertilizers and chemicals has disrupted this balance, resulting in degraded soil and unsustainable farming practices. Once soil is damaged, it is incredibly difficult to restore, which makes soil health a crucial aspect of sustainable agriculture.

That's where we decided to start. We developed a portable soil-testing device called the Soil Doctor. It's a lightweight backpack, weighing around 6-7 kg, that can be carried to farms. The entire soil testing process is conducted on-site, right in front of the farmer. This builds trust by addressing the skepticism farmers often have toward traditional soil testing methods. Conventionally, soil samples are sent to labs, and farmers receive reports after 20-30 days. Often, these reports are generic and offer identical recommendations for neighbouring farms, which frustrates farmers. With our solution, they see the testing process in real-time, making it transparent and credible.

Each kit costs around 75,000 INR. The device is easy to use and doesn't require any special infrastructure. It allows farmers to get instant soil health reports, which helps them make timely decisions about fertilizers and crop management.

We're building a network of trained micro-entrepreneurs called "Soil Doctors." These are individuals who use our portable kit to offer soil testing services at farmers' doorsteps. The idea is not just to provide soil reports but also to give actionable advice to farmers. These soil doctors are equipped with the knowledge to recommend appropriate fertilizers, crops, and organic practices. We've already completed a pilot project during the Kharif season in Uttar Pradesh, with five field officers and five soil doctors. We're now expanding into the Rabi season.

Can you share an example of a soil doctor making a difference?

One of the success stories from our



pilot is a young woman who had completed her 12th-grade education. She joined the program, received training on the Soil Doctor device, and now provides testing and advice for crops like rice, wheat, and potatoes. In just one month, she earned around 15,000 INR by offering these services. This income helped her pay her admission fees and contribute to her family's finances. Stories like hers highlight how the Soil Doctor model not only benefits farmers but also empowers rural youth to become entrepreneurs.

What is your long-term vision for this project?

Our goal is to create a network of 10,000 soil doctors across India over the next 4-5 years. We want to bring soil testing services directly to farmers, helping them make informed decisions about their crops and fertilizers. We also aim to promote organic farming practices by reducing the use of harmful chemicals.

Ultimately, we want to build a sustainable agricultural ecosystem where farmers adopt organic practices, consumers get access to chemical-free food, and soil health improves over time.

How have mentors supported you in this journey?

I've been fortunate to have mentors like Mr. P.N. Subramaniam, who has a deep passion for sustainable and organic agriculture. He has been guiding us regularly and even invited us to visit his farm in Tamil Nadu. His insights on sustainable farming have inspired me to think beyond just soil testing and focus on promoting organic practices as the foundation for healthy agriculture.

What challenges do you see in

changing farmers' mindsets?

One of the biggest challenges is the deeply ingrained belief among farmers that they already know everything about farming. It's common to hear them say, "Don't teach me agriculture." However, with declining yields, increasing crop diseases, and rising costs, many farmers are starting to realise that traditional methods may no longer be sufficient.

Our goal is to earn their trust by demonstrating the benefits of soil testing and organic practices. Just like the healthcare sector has evolved with accessible pathology labs and online consultations, we want to create a similar ecosystem in agriculture. By bringing soil testing services directly to farmers, we can make agricultural advice more accessible and actionable.

What role do you see for organic farming in the future?

Once farmers adopt organic practices and reduce the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the quality of food will improve significantly. Consumers will benefit from healthier, chemical-free produce. My goal is to create a brand that connects farmers using organic methods with consumers looking for pure and authentic food. Building this brand will ensure farmers have a reliable market for their produce, while consumers gain access to healthier options.

I believe the future of agriculture lies in building integrated services that connect soil health with crop management and market access. By empowering farmers with knowledge and tools, we can transform agriculture into a sustainable and profitable sector. The Soil Doctor is just the beginning—we plan to expand our efforts to cover every aspect of sustainable farming,