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Changemakers

Profile

Chit Chat

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In an age of rapid urbanisation, shifting economies, and growing consumerism, sustainability often risks being reduced to a slogan rather than a genuine commitment. Yet its essence lies in a simple truth — the well-being of people and the well-being of nature are inseparable. One cannot thrive without the other.

For too long, human progress has been measured by GDP growth, industrial output, and technological achievement, while ignoring the social and ecological price. Depleted forests, polluted rivers, erratic climates, and widening inequality remind us that this model of development has reached its limits. The future demands a redefinition of progress — one that values balance, equity, and continuity over speed and excess. Sustainability is not merely an environmental aspiration; it is a moral necessity and a shared responsibility.

True sustainability begins with recognising that air, water, soil, and biodiversity form the foundation of human life. When a forest is cleared, a tribal family loses its livelihood and cultural identity. When a river dries up, a farmer's field turns barren and a child loses access to safe drinking water. Environmental degradation, therefore, is not an abstract ecological concern; it is a deeply human crisis that threatens our collective well-being.

Conversely, when communities embrace sustainable practices, nature responds with resilience. Farmers adopting organic and regenerative methods enrich the soil and revive biodiversity. Women-led collectives that manage waste or promote eco-friendly enterprises create dignified livelihoods while reducing pollution. Such actions prove that sustainability and social justice are inseparable — each strengthens the other.

Governments, corporates, and civil society must now move beyond rhetoric to make sustainability the central principle of every decision. Policies should safeguard both natural and human capital. Businesses must redefine success by integrating ethics, circular economies, and community welfare into their models. Citizens, too, have power — in the choices they make, the products they buy, and the habits they pass on to the next generation.

Ultimately, sustainability calls for harmony — between growth and restraint, consumption and conservation, present needs and future hopes. It is a daily practice of awareness and respect for the interconnectedness of life.

At Conversations Today, we remain committed to sharing stories of agri-preneurs, innovators, and changemakers who embody this balance. Their journeys remind us that sustainability is not a distant goal but a way of living with courage, compassion, and conscience.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

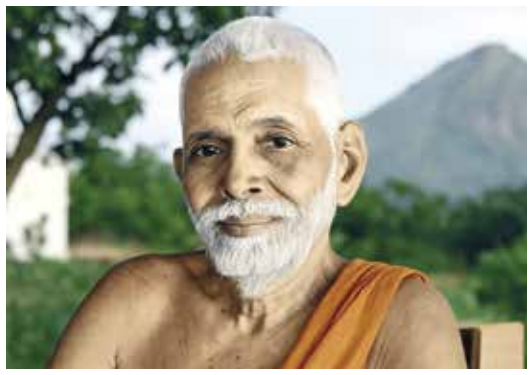
Latha Suresh

Marie Banu Rodriguez

THE SILENT WITNESS

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND

The human mind, according to Ramana Maharshi, is at once the source of our bondage and the key to our freedom. His teachings on mind and mindfulness — or more precisely, mindfulness in the sense of turning awareness inward — invite us to look deeper than the surface flow of thoughts and emotions, to the root from which they arise.



The nature of mind

Ramana uses simple yet profound statements to clarify what the mind really is. He says: "The mind is only a bundle of thoughts. The thoughts have their root in the I-thought." In other words, the sense "I am" (the 'I-thought') is the ground from which all other mental activity arises. He also says: "Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Find out what it is that remains." Thus the mind is not some independent entity, but essentially a stream of thoughts built upon the 'I' sense. And this suggests the possibility: if the 'I-thought' is investigated, the entire structure of mind may dissolve.

He further emphasises that meditation is not about acquiring something new, but removing what is alien. "Thoughts are the obstacles to realisation. One's meditation or concentration is meant to get rid of obstacles and not to gain the Self." He invites us to see that our true nature is already peace and awareness — it is the mind that obscures that fact.

Mindfulness through self-enquiry

In Ramana's approach, true mindfulness is essentially self-enquiry (ātma-vichāra). He guides the seeker to ask the question: "Who am I?" This enquiry turns the mind inward: "The question 'Who am I?' is not really meant to get an answer, the question 'Who am I?' is meant to dissolve the questioner." By persistently tracing the 'I'-thought to its source, all other thoughts lose their support. He explains: "When one makes the mind stick to one thought, the mind becomes rock-steady and the energy is conserved." This one thought is the I-thought, and staying with it dissolves the mind's wandering.

Ramana also says: "When the mind is left without anything to cling to, it becomes still." Mindfulness then is not simply monitoring thoughts or emotions, but abiding as the silent awareness in which they appear and vanish. It is a shift from "doing" to "being".

The stillness of mind and transcending agitation

Ramana emphasises that the mind's agitation—its restlessness of craving, aversion, identification—is the obstacle to recognising our inherent nature. "Agitation of mind is the cause of desire … Stillness will prevail and there will be no agitation of the mind." He explains that external objects, sensations and thoughts cannot bring lasting peace, because they are impermanent. As he says: "In no single one of the countless objects of the mundane world is there anything that can be called happiness." Mindfulness in his teaching becomes the art of turning away from the shifting contents of consciousness and abiding in the ever-present background of consciousness itself. He writes: "To remain quiet is to resolve the mind in the Self." Stillness here is not merely absence of noise or activity, but the collapse of the observer-observed duality and the abiding as the Self.

Practical pointers for applying his teaching

1. Notice the I-thought: Whenever any thought arises, inquire: To whom has it arisen? The answer 'To me' points you back to the sense of 'I'. Then ask: Who am I? This enquiry weakens the I-thought's hold.
2. Do not chase thoughts: Ramana emphasises that tracing each thought back is more powerful than trying to suppress them. "Render the mind quiescent. Once this has been understood there is no need for endless reading."
3. Abide as awareness: Recognise that beyond all thoughts, feelings and perceptions, awareness remains unchanged. Ramana writes: "Consciousness is indeed always with us. Everyone knows 'I am' …"
4. Inner orientation: Rather than becoming identified with outer objects or the fluctuating mind, he says the mind must be turned inward: "The mind should not be allowed to wander towards worldly objects …"
5. Surrender the sense of doer: The sense "I am doing" strengthens the ego-mind. Ramana states: "Thus long as the sense of being the doer remains, desire does also. Therefore the ego remains." When this falls away, the mind naturally stills.

The fruit of mindfulness in Ramana's vision

When the mind becomes still, the discovery of one's own true nature becomes possible. Ramana affirms: "The thing to do is to concentrate on the seer and not on the seen, not on the objects, but on the Light which reveals them." In that abiding, the 'I-thought' dissolves and pure being shines forth. He states: "When the ego rises, all else will also rise; if it subsides, all else will also subside." Thus mindfulness, properly understood, is not a technique for managing stress or emotions, but a radical descent into the source of mind itself. In that descent, the conditioned mind falls away and what remains is the Self — timeless, peaceful, and free. Ramana writes: "What exists in truth is the Self alone. The world, the individual soul and God are appearances in it." He describes the final state as one where "the Self is that where there is absolutely no 'I-thought'. That is called 'Silence'."

In the fast-moving world of mental images, reactions and external stimuli, Ramana Maharshi's teaching invites us to settle in the stillness that underlies all of that. The mind, once thought of as separate and uncontrollable, is shown to be nothing but the unsettled 'I-thought' and its derivatives. Mindfulness, then, becomes the inward turn, the steady enquiry, the surrender of the sense-of-doer, and the abiding as awareness itself. In that stillness one finds not an attainment but a return — to what has always been. As Ramana says: "Happiness is your nature. It is not wrong to desire it. What is wrong is seeking it outside when it is inside."

May this understanding of mind and mindfulness inspire a deeper turning inward, a gentler and quieter presence, and the abiding peace that is already here.

Based on the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi

FROM CAFES TO CONFIDENCE

MYPRENEUR BUILDS ENTREPRENEURS

In a city celebrated for its food culture and entrepreneurial hustle, Mypreneur has carved out a unique space, one that nurtures small food business owners through mentorship, not management. Founded by Suresh Radhakrishnan, a visionary entrepreneur and content creator, Mypreneur bridges the gap between ambition and execution, transforming everyday foodpreneurs into confident brand builders.

The idea for Mypreneur was born out of Suresh's personal experiences in the food and retail space. As the founder of Chai Kanth, a thriving retail tea outlet brand, Suresh had already navigated the challenges of building a small business from the ground up. Through his journey, he realized that while India's entrepreneurial spirit was strong, there was no structured platform offering mentorship for small-scale business owners, especially in the food industry.

"If you want to learn a skill or earn a degree, there are institutions for that," explains Hariharan Babu, Operations Head at Mypreneur, who has worked alongside Suresh for seven years. "But when it comes to learning how to run a business practically, there was nothing. That's where Mypreneur began to fill that gap."

What started as a digital knowledge-sharing initiative during the pandemic soon evolved into one of Chennai's leading EdTech mentorship platforms for food entrepreneurs. Suresh and his team combined educational structure with operational guidance, offering a lifeline to individuals eager to launch their own cafés, bakeries, tea outlets, and quick-service food ventures.

The journey began modestly. During the COVID-19 lockdown, when businesses were struggling and people were confined to their homes, Suresh began hosting online webinars to share insights from his years in food retail. The response was overwhelming.

What started as a simple weekend knowledge session soon grew into a structured mentorship model complete with workshops, live training, and hands-on operational guidance. The idea resonated deeply with aspiring entrepreneurs across Tamil Nadu and beyond.

In less than six years, Mypreneur has mentored over 70,000 individuals and helped launch more than 530 outlets across India. "Every outlet is a story of someone's dream becoming real," says Hariharan. "We don't run a franchise model we handhold each entrepreneur individually. We make sure their business becomes profitable."

The success of Mypreneur lies in its customized mentorship framework. Each mentee receives one-on-one guidance in areas such as location selection, customer targeting, menu design, pricing strategy, food cost control, branding, and

operations. The programs aren't theoretical; they're practical blueprints designed to help small entrepreneurs execute their vision confidently.

At the heart of Mypreneur's philosophy is Suresh's belief that entrepreneurship isn't about luck it's about learning. His journey as a self-made entrepreneur deeply informs the structure of every Mypreneur program.

The mentorship model is designed to simulate the real-world challenges of running a food business. Participants not only learn the "what" of entrepreneurship but also the "how" from managing vendors and handling customer feedback to analyzing sales data and balancing expenses.

"We ensure that every mentee understands where their business stands whether they're making profits, overspending, or mispricing," Hariharan explains. Weekly review calls, financial assessments, and performance tracking are integral to the process. "We sit with them, evaluate their numbers, and help them make corrections. It's about accountability, not just advice."

That accountability stems from Suresh's own experience building Chai Kanth into a recognizable brand. He knows firsthand that scaling a small business requires both discipline and adaptability lessons now embedded in Mypreneur's mentorship DNA.

From its early days of two people managing every aspect of operations, Mypreneur has grown into a structured organization with a clear operational framework. "In the beginning, everything was handled by Suresh and me from webinars to marketing to training," Hariharan recalls. "Today, we've built a system-based operation that runs efficiently, but never loses the personal touch."

Under Suresh's leadership, Mypreneur expanded its team in 2022, hiring more trainers, coordinators, and freelancers with a focus on creating flexible opportunities for women working from home in roles like telecalling and sales support.

What stands out in Mypreneur's story is its work culture one rooted in commitment, empathy, and ethics. "Suresh always believed that if we start something, we must complete it properly. There's no room for shortcuts," says Hariharan. "The culture we've built here reflects that it's about doing things the right way, even when it's hard."

Mypreneur currently offers two main mentorship programs an annual plan priced at Rs.85,000 and a five-year plan at Rs.1,25,000. Each includes end-to-end support: from brand design, logo creation, and website development to operational audits and cost optimization strategies.

The focus, however, is not just on launching businesses but sustaining them. Mypreneur's data-driven approach allows it to offer practical, measurable results. For instance, by restructuring their SOPs or controlling wastage, mentees often report 5–10% savings in monthly expenses, a small but crucial margin that determines long-term survival in the competitive food industry.

The mentorship programs also include case studies and use cases drawn from Mypreneur's previous mentees. "We show them real examples of what worked, what didn't," Hariharan explains. "It builds confidence because they see proof of progress."

More than a business platform, Mypreneur has become a movement of empowerment. Many of its mentees are first-time entrepreneurs, homemakers, or individuals from modest backgrounds who have turned their culinary passions into thriving local brands.

Suresh's initiative has indirectly impacted nearly 2,000 families through these ventures, creating not just profits but also livelihoods. "Even if the financial rewards are moderate, the social impact is immense," Hariharan reflects. "When someone recognizes us and says, 'I attended your workshop' or 'I started my business because of you,' it means everything."

With a solid base in Chennai and growing influence across India, Mypreneur is now preparing for international expansion. Suresh and his team are planning to take their mentorship programs to Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, targeting a 2026 rollout.

The vision remains consistent to empower local entrepreneurs with global knowledge. "What we decide today will shape tomorrow," Suresh often says, a sentiment echoed by the entire team. Mypreneur's growth reflects not just a successful business model, but a philosophy of perseverance, learning, and community building.

In a world where EdTech often focuses on academic achievement, Mypreneur stands out for bringing education to enterprise. It teaches not just how to start a business, but how to sustain one, a lesson rooted in Suresh's own entrepreneurial path.

For Suresh, success isn't defined by numbers. "This isn't our final success," Hariharan shares. "We have a long way to go. The real success will be when mentorship becomes a culture, when every small business owner feels confident to build and scale their dream."

As Chennai continues to evolve as a hub for small-scale innovation, Mypreneur's story serves as a reminder that mentorship is not just guidance, it's empowerment in action. And at the heart of it all is a founder who turned his personal journey into a platform for thousands of others to rise.

Bhavadharani K

WHY NAPS ARE NO GOOD:
A SECOND LOOK AT SLEEP

Naps are good for many things. They're good for refreshing you quickly for the next task during the day. If you're lucky, they're the best catalyst for creative ideas and solutions. And of course, they're wonderful for Sunday afternoons! But (and this is a big but), they are absolutely no good as a substitute for deep sleep, or NREM (Non -Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. Let us see why.

We know that the brain operates differently when we are awake and when we are asleep. When we are awake, a million neurons in multiple areas of our brain are firing continuously to different destinations, and responding to all the various messages they get from a million other neurons. Overall, if you look at electrical activity, our brains look like lit up orbs with constantly criss-crossing lines of light when we're awake. The astonishing part is that the brain looks almost exactly the same when we are taking a short nap too! In fact, sleep scientists tell us that there is no way to distinguish a waking brain from a brain experiencing REM only by looking at recorded brain activity. Isn't that extremely surprising? There are so many absolute differences between a state of wakefulness and a state of napping, yet brain activity between the two states looks absolutely the same. And both these states look utterly different from how a brain behaves during deep sleep, or NREM sleep. What this means is that we cannot benefit in the same way from any number of naps, as from a full night's sleep. Therefore we must all just abandon the idea that we can make up for lost night sleep with many day-time naps.

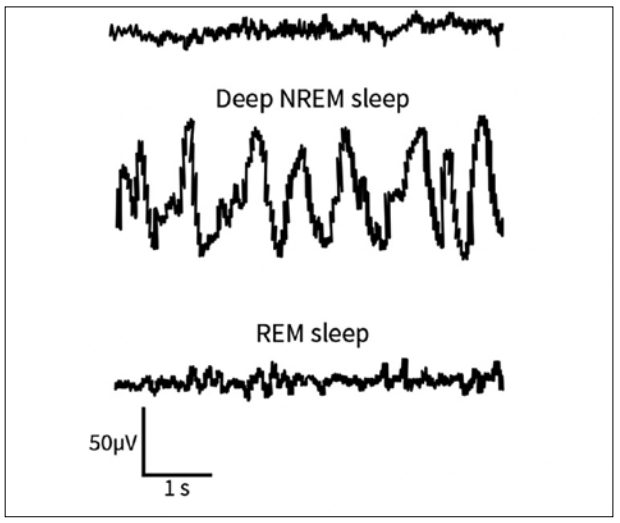


Figure excerpted from Pg50, Chap 3, 'Why We Sleep'; Mathew Walker.

(An interesting aside is that the difference between a waking state and a REM napping state is only in the amount of muscle tone the body has, actually. When awake, we show way more muscle tone than when in REM sleep. During REM sleep, our muscles are in fact much slacker than when we are in a deep NREM sleep. This lack of muscle tone is what prevents us from acting on all the sensations and feelings we experience in our dreams - we discussed the ways in which the brain heals our psyche through dreams in the last issue.)

So what really happens when we are sleeping deeply? Earlier, scientists used to think that there would be some reduction in brain activity when we are sleeping deeply. That perhaps every neural signal would be toned down, there would be less coordination and communication between brain cells, and deep sleep would be something like a state of dormancy or lethargic neural activity. But this is not so at all! Quite the opposite is true - deep sleep

sees the brain experience almost the highest level of coordination possible between all the neurons. Instead of a football stadium full of uncoordinated fans who don't know each other - which is that the brain feels like when awake - during deep sleep, all the neurons are in such close communication to each other that on a screen, their electrical activity looks like coordinated 'waves', as groups of coordinated fans in the stadium could practice and produce, or like a flash mob dance, done over and over again, all through the period of deep sleep!

Why does this happen? What is the body trying to achieve through such coordinated work? One of the functions of this deep-sleep brain activity is to keep out external sounds, so that the state of deep sleep can be continued in spite of various sounds and sensations from the external environment. The others are:

Enhanced Short-TermMemory: The extent to which you can learn and recall facts and figures is exactly proportional to the extent to which you are able to sleep deeply each night. On a given night, if you have not slept enough, then there is an exact and corresponding dip in the quality of your learning ability the next day. This has been proven without doubt by Dr.Walker, and by many other scientists. The decline of short-term memory is senior years is also directly proportional to the quality and length of deep NREM sleep that the person is able to get each night

Enhanced Long-Term Memory: The more NREM deep sleep one gets, the more information from that day is transferred into long-term memory. This means, the more of what they have learnt on that day can be recalled subsequently. The direct implication of this fact is that the more nights you have slept deeply after a certain skill or learning has been registered in your brain, the better you recall it later on. No wonder we all have such crystal clear memories of our childhood, and the skills learnt in childhood and youth, than we do of things we have learnt later on - we have spent years of deep-sleep time cementing our childhood stores of memories and skills. This is one of the most powerful rationales behind teaching crucial life skills to young children rather than to adults…

Enhanced Selection: The deeper and longer you sleep, the more your brain is able to forget those facts and experiences that need to be forgotten. This fact has great significance for general wellbeing, as well as for people who need to get over specific painful memories. The point to note here is that aided sleep - such as the one you experience when you take sleep medication - does not offer this benefit at all. So if a person were to drug oneself to sleep, then they would wake up with all the discomfort of unresolved painful memories still.

Incubation of Practice: This is perhaps the most surprising of all deep-sleep benefits - if you are trying to learn a skill, such as playing the piano, mastering a certain tennis move or learning to paint a certain stroke, your deep-sleep state will actively help you do it better. Experiments have shown that sleep between practice sessions more than doubles mastery rates, and also more than halves the number of days taken to master the new skill.

Prevention of Injury: When the brain has had enough deep sleep, it orchestrates a much higher degree of coordination between the muscles. This directly translates to less instances of accidental injuries, especially in the senior years.

And all these remarkable benefits are in addition to the known perks of deep sleep, such as a better geared immune system, better sugar control, more regulated BP, increased autophagy, quicker recovery, and an increased feeling of wellness.

Over this article and the last, we have seen the astounding potency with which sleep impacts our lives. We will conclude our foray into sleeping matters with the next issue, in which we will exclusively examine how, in practice, to get that good nights' sleep that adds so much to our lives. Till then, happy sleeping!

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.

SUPPRESSION TO EXPRESSION

What fosters growth in the workplace? The workplace is all about creating an environment where people are empowered and their best is brought out, for the individual's benefit and the organisation's. However, it's not as easy as saying it. It involves multiple-level initiatives to make it happen and requires a considerable amount of time. We must think from multiple dimensions to create such an environment. If the environment isn't right, it leads to the suppression of thought, emotions, ideas, creativity, etc. In contrast, an open and transparent environment fosters collaboration, teamwork, creativity, authenticity, and productivity. When we think that way, we identify key elements to make it happen. In this article, we will touch upon some of these significant elements.

Do they know how they are contributing to the organisation's vision?

First, the question is whether the organisation has an appropriate vision for itself. Is that vision communicated with the same passion and rigour with which the founders created it? Whether the employees even know if what they are doing is helping the organisation move towards achieving its vision. Having a crisp, clear vision and then communicating how employees are adding value to the organisation's journey towards it should also be clearly communicated to them. The organisation should have a clear system and process in place to make this happen.

Vision and Values are two essential drivers of an organisation. So if the organisation doesn't have a crisp, clear vision, the leadership should take time out to work on it and ensure they do. Alongside this, what are the organisation's core values it wants to embrace? Deciding this is also very crucial. This again varies from organisation to organisation and sector to sector. Having these values clear will ensure that all within the organisation are aligned, streamline hiring the right candidates, and even help get rid of employees who do not align with the values. If we are not sure what values we adhere to, we continue to adjust to all kinds of people, thereby reducing the organisation's efficiency and leading to a lot of conflict within the organisation.

Clear roles and responsibilities

One more grey area for many organisations is the lack of clear role and responsibility definitions for people within the organisation. Having clarity in this enables them to work effectively. This also helps them understand what is clearly expected of them. This should not start after the person is onboarded. It should start right from hiring. There should be clear communication of expectations from candidates by clearly stating them in the job descriptions. That also shows the organisation's efforts and clarity.

Guidance from peers and the reporting manager

Though the systems, documentation, and processes are clear, the people within the system must follow what is defined. Especially when working as a team. A proper appraisal process and system are to be brought into place. There should be a structure and framework around ways to ensure openness and transparency are maintained amongst teams. This will create an empowering, empathetic environment in an organisation, where people can openly express themselves rather than suppress their feelings and emotions. When humans work without hesitation and are authentic in who they are, they give their best, conflicts do not arise, and even if they do, they are immediately resolved in a mutually amicable way.

No hesitation about what the other person will think or do

One very powerful way to empower employees is to encourage them to be authentic and to express themselves and their opinions clearly. This is possible only when specific values are laid out and followed by everyone in the organisation. If the employee is under the impression that expressing his/her views openly might hamper his/her growth or lead to unwanted consequences, that is when organisational growth halts. There will be no scope for creativity and open expression in such organisations. The so-called 'freedom' or 'liberty' will not be available to employees in such an organisation. People who realise this hold on to it for some time and eventually leave the organisation. If the pattern of the worthiest players leaving an organisation is prevailing in your organisation, it may be because there is conflict. After all, either there are no core values, no openness, or no systems in place to ensure transparency. Unfortunately, many times the people who have created such a structure do not even realise that that is what they have built. So, it needs conscious effort to establish an open culture.

Process and Stability

In many organisations, the senior-most employees, or even the top management, are often seen creating exceptions to the processes they set for the entire organisation. This is a bad example of leading teams. This creates a similar culture across all teams within the organisation, thereby hampering the organisation's overall growth. As a leader, it's important not just to lay down guidelines, but also to walk the talk. We must walk the talk. Indeed, I would say "Walk it before you talk it", or "You be the start".

The working patterns and behaviours one finds in the top management of the organisation are what trickle down to the lower levels. So, if we want all our associates to be proactive, we also must be proactive. The kinds of people getting into the system, whether openness is there or not, or what type of culture prevails, depend not just on how it's managed by top management, but more so on what kind of values the top management has and follows.

Meaningful meetings

One major time-waster in workplaces is meetings without proper structure. Being completely busy in meetings doesn't necessarily mean they are productive. A proper structure and framework for meetings will save thousands of man-hours that would otherwise be wasted. A system and process should be brought into place to address this. A proper agenda, on-time start and completion of the meeting, minutes of the meeting, and a necessary follow-up plan in place to track progress on action points should be in place. If we have such a structure, we will be able to move faster with even a very meagre effort. How meetings occur within an organisation is also an indicator of its culture. A meeting should be a collaborative, open space where all can speak, not a unidirectional platform where one or a few people speak for most of the time. It should be a participatory affair rather than an instructional one. So who facilitated the meetings, and how they were facilitated, makes a lot of difference.

Together, all these elements ensure we create an environment where employees naturally move from a suppressive state to an expressive state. The more this transition happens within the organisation, the more employees will come to love it, become more loyal, and look forward to Mondays.

Reach out to me to discuss on what I have written here or on any of the previous articles at srkr@zenithimpactworks.com.

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FARMING WITH DISCIPLINE

The first step at Gratitude Farms is to develop the land by restoring its natural vitality

The intersection of natural farming and social entrepreneurship is gaining prominence as it combines environmental responsibility with innovative business models. Natural farming emphasizes soil regeneration, biodiversity and chemical-free cultivation, offering sustainable solutions to climate and ecological challenges. Social enterprises in this field are responding to the growing consumer demand for clean, organic and responsibly produced food, while also promoting ethical and sustainable market practices.

According to Mr. V. P. Sharma, a pre-retired Army officer, sustainable farming systems require the same discipline and process-oriented approach that the armed forces instill. He believes that qualities such as planning, consistency, teamwork and accountability—central to military training—are equally essential in farming to ensure efficiency, resilience and long-term sustainability. This structured mind set, he notes, helps transform agriculture into a systematic and goal-driven enterprise rather than a purely traditional activity.

He served in the Indian Army for 16 years, from 1985 to 2001, and pre retired as a Major. Following his military career, he worked with several multinational companies, including Nokia, gaining extensive experience in corporate operations and management. In 2017, driven by a passion for social impact, he and a colleague ventured into social entrepreneurship, leading to the founding of Gratitude Farms in 2018. "We travelled across the country and developed deep knowledge about natural farming. We are not interested in large scale farming or certification. Organic farming has many variants and models. We were drawn to the principles of natural farming because it focused on making the soil healthier. We understood the science behind it," reveals Mr Sharma.

Natural farming relies on locally available resources like cow dung, cow urine and plant-based formulations, significantly reducing costs and dependence on the market. It emphasizes restoring soil health, biodiversity and self-sustaining ecosystems, following a minimal-intervention, nature-led philosophy. This makes natural farming both environmentally responsible and farmer-friendly, appealing to those seeking simplicity and long-term sustainability.

Gratitude Farms adopts an innovative model by taking over unused or degraded farmland from private owners or institutions and transforming it into productive, profitable farmland. The organization follows a lease-based, profit-sharing arrangement, ensuring mutual benefit for landowners and the enterprise. Through the use of natural and sustainable farming practices, Gratitude Farms revitalizes barren land, improves soil health and generates economic returns. In the process, it also promotes environmentally responsible agriculture.

The first step at Gratitude Farms is to develop the land by restoring its natural vitality—this involves enhancing microbial activity, preparing the topsoil, and setting up rainwater harvesting, irrigation systems and nurseries. Once the foundation is ready, the farm is carefully designed based on natural farming principles, which focus not merely on crop growth but on soil replenishment and ecosystem health. "For example, planting vetiver grass helps sustain soil moisture through its deep root system, which enhances water retention and supports microbial life. Simply planting vetiver along plot borders and between crop beds naturally enriches the soil, maintaining its structure, moisture and biological vitality—without the need for chemical inputs," he adds, grateful to PNS Sir for introducing him to this crop. Since then, Vetiver is an integral part of Gratitude Farms' projects and designs.

In fact, he uses Vetiver and biochar together as they both complement their roles - vetiver boosts biological activity while biochar preserves and amplifies it, resulting in richer topsoil, higher fertility, better moisture regulation and reduced nutrient loss.

Once the soil is restored, the next step is multi-cropping, where 4–5 crops are cultivated per acre, leading to about 100 trees per acre. The focus is primarily on horticultural and medicinal plants. Each acre is carefully designed and divided into multiple plots, with medicinal plants strategically planted along plot boundaries. These design elements have been refined over multiple trials, ensuring optimal soil health, biodiversity and farm productivity. "Our expertise in farm design grew through numerous trials and experiments, but the key insight is that plant systems naturally manage pests when designed thoughtfully. Trees and crops often complement each other, creating resilient ecosystems. Observing market price asymmetries and exploitative trading practices, we chose to focus on medicinal plants, fruits and flowers. Guided by research, we selected plant and tree species that are naturally resistant to pests," explains Mr Sharma.

Some of the trees cultivated at Gratitude Farms include moringa, a renowned herbal supplement; pirandai, known for supporting joint health; tulsi; pather chatta, traditionally used for kidney stone relief; as well as papaya, jackfruit, amla and more recently, sitaphal. Gratitude Farms now spans over 200 acres, cultivating more than 5,000 crops per acre. Each acre supports over 216 medicinal trees, complemented by 10,000+ intercropped plants, reflecting a carefully designed, high-density and biodiverse farming system.

While discussing a mango farm previously ruined by excessive chemical use, Sharma highlights how natural farming has fully revived the land. The farm, which produced 62 tonnes in July 2025, is now projected to yield 100 tonnes in summer 2026. "Real knowledge must translate into systems and processes that can be executed effectively to achieve the desired outcomes. Earlier, farms were cared for like babies, but that emotional connection is missing today. Labourers now simply complete their work and leave—they are not truly attached to the land, and that disconnect is one of agriculture's biggest challenges. To address this, we bring in workers who stay on the farm and begin early in the morning, which is the most productive time for agricultural work. Our standardized systems, combined with the involvement of ex-army personnel, have delivered strong results. Having ex-soldiers as supervisors has emerged as a best practice—their discipline ensures that every process is followed rigorously and without compromise," he emphasises.

For years, agricultural textbooks have described farming as a climate-dependent and high-risk activity, but Gratitude Farms has proven that well-designed systems and processes, grounded in research and experience, can significantly reduce that risk. "We measure every activity, every plant, and every yield," says Sharma. "We understand unit economics—the cost of transport, irrigation, labour, logistics, lab tests, and packaging for every cycle. The farm operates much like a factory, where monitoring and precision at every step are crucial. That level of care and attention is what delivers the high-quality results we see today. And through it all, our core focus remains on soil and irrigation—because nature knows its job best."

Alongside their farming activities, Sharma and his team experimented with multiple business models. Initially, selling produce through online platforms led to losses due to additional logistics costs and wastage. Learning from this, Gratitude Farms shifted focus to supplying directly to Ayurvedic and herbal companies that require high-quality, chemical-free herbs. By eliminating intermediaries, they reduced costs and ensured better margins, helping the enterprise grow its revenue to around Rs.4 crore annually. The team has successfully developed over 50 acres in Tamil Nadu and 150 acres in Hyderabad, with projects in the pipeline for more than 1,000 acres. "We aim to reach one million acres in the next decade," says Sharma confidently.

Shanmuga Priya.T

THE FRAGRANCE OF THE EARTH

MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

My father was more spiritual than religious. He performed his Sandhyavandanam every day, twice without fail, but unlike many others, he didn't believe in elaborate daily poojas. His connection with the divine was quiet, personal, and deeply disciplined.

What I remember most vividly from those days is walking with him every evening to the Siva Vishnu Temple in Mambalam for spiritual discourses. I must have been only six years old, barely understanding what was being said, but he insisted I accompany him. There was never an excuse for staying back. Often, I would return half-asleep, leaning on him as we walked the short distance home. Looking back now, I realise those evenings were my first grounding in spirituality. As they say, what enters through the ear, stays in the conscious or subconscious mind—and those words, absorbed unknowingly, shaped my thoughts for a lifetime.

Even today, I enjoy attending spiritual discourses whenever I can. I particularly look forward to the sessions of Tmt. Vishaka Hari. Her storytelling, her voice, and her ability to weave the wisdom of the epics into simple life lessons always leave me feeling nourished and clear. Listening to such sessions, I believe, is like drinking distilled knowledge—you come away not only informed but transformed.

To me, spirituality is simple. A spiritual person lives with the awareness that there is more to life than what meets the eye. Humility and contentment—that, to me, is spirituality.

My father taught both these qualities by example. He repeated them often, until they became second nature to me. They have guided my thoughts and deeds for over sixty years.

During my years with Utopia, I often went to my farm and set up a small table and chair under a tree. I would handle my business calls watching the paddy fields sway gently in the wind. Those moments were profoundly spiritual—peaceful, grounding, and deeply effective. It was as if nature itself participated in my work.

One of my cherished practices is planting Nakshatra trees for the birth stars of friends I wish well. It is a sacred tradition connecting the cosmic energies of one's birth star with the earth, believed to balance personal energies and planetary influences. Each tree is planted with intention and prayer—it is both a gift and a blessing.

Over time, I have planted and nurtured many trees that carry deep spiritual symbolism:

Thiruvodu (Calabash): Sadhus use its dried shell to receive bhiksha; its white flesh is called the Elixir of Life.

Nagalingam (Cannon Ball Tree): A divine tree whose aromatic flowers are sacred to Lord Shiva.

Vilva: Its trifoliate leaves are offered to Shiva, and its fruit is highly medicinal.

Manja Kadambu: Believed to be the tree under which Krishna played his flute for Radha.

Each of these trees connects heaven and earth in its own way. When I walk through the grove, I feel their quiet power.

My journey into natural and organic farming has been equally spiritual. I learned to respect the soil—Bhoomi Matha—and to let her breathe. While many workers preferred a "clean" tilled field, I chose to let grasses grow naturally, cutting them just above the ground to protect the soil from the sun. "Respect the earth," my father would have said, "and she will nurture you."

As a Reiki practitioner, I was taught to be in harmony with trees—to hug them, talk to them, and pass energy to them. It may sound unusual to some, but spirituality is about sensitivity, not scepticism. When we allow ourselves to feel the life force in plants and soil, something shifts within us.

One of my most memorable experiences was when I had to transplant an orange plant that had already begun yielding. I gently dug it out, placed it on my lap, and gave Reiki energy, moving my hands from its roots to its tip. Then, I applied a paste of Agnihotra ash over its stem and leaves. My farmhand looked puzzled and whispered that I had lost my mind. Two weeks later, the plant stood upright and flowering. He was speechless. I just smiled.

Touching a plant with care and intention, believing it will grow well—that, to me, is spirituality in action. I often hug trees and offer Reiki energy whenever possible.

At the farm, I have fourteen cows and bulls. Feeding them bananas by hand, feeling their breath and the warmth of their heads, fills me with peace. The blessings of Gomatha are said to cleanse one's karma, and I believe it. Bhagavan Krishna says in the Gita, "I am the fragrance of the earth."

This connection to the earth continues through my work with vetiver, the divine grass. Vetiver is one of Bhoomi Matha's most generous gifts to humankind—its roots purify water, prevent soil erosion, spread fragrance, and offer medicinal and spiritual benefits. It is used in temple garlands, perfumes, and sacred rituals. Promoting vetiver has become a mission for me—a way of serving both nature and people.

Over the years, I have realised that spiritual growth is not about rituals or renunciation. It is about awareness, humility, and harmony—with people, with nature, and with oneself. By decluttering both the material and emotional aspects of life, we create space for abundance, growth, and peace.

As N. Karthikeyan, editor of Vasudha: Everlasting Sustainable Living, once wrote so beautifully: "By freeing ourselves of what we do not need, we create space for sustainability, growth, and peace."

That, to me, sums up the essence of spirituality.

My journey continues—not in temples or scriptures, but in the quiet companionship of trees, the fragrance of earth after rain, the calm eyes of a cow, and the soft rhythm of the wind in the paddy fields. In every leaf and every breath, I see the same truth my father once taught me: life is sacred, and to live with humility and contentment is the highest form of prayer.

P.N. Subramanian

HEALTH, EMPOWERMENT, AND SUSTAINABILITY

In a world where food often travels thousands of kilometres before it reaches our plates losing nutrients, freshness, and trust along the way, Vridhi Techno Farms (VTF) offers an alternative vision. Founded in 2020 by Vasukumar N., Managing Director and CEO, and Sandhya, Director, the Coimbatore-based social enterprise is reimagining what "good food" means in a modern, health-conscious India.

By choosing fish as their first transparent and traceable food, VTF is not only addressing a nutritional gap but also challenging deep-rooted perceptions. Fish is a superfood, rich in essential nutrients but its perishability and stigma around "stink" often overshadow its value. Through their residue-free supply chain, they aim to shift this narrative while spotlighting the hidden health risks of contaminated food.

VTF's journey began in Coimbatore, where they focused on building consumer demand through education and awareness. As the model scales, VTF will empower small and marginal farmers, especially women, to adopt intensive backyard aquaculture systems, unlocking new income streams and fostering rural resilience. This dual-impact approach fosters sustainability across the ecosystem, where every stakeholder, from farmer to consumer, is respected and empowered. It's a regenerative model that values people, health, and the planet, proving that ethical food systems can nourish both bodies and communities.

"We wanted to make traceable, natural food the standard, not the exception, at the same time, we wanted to show that sustainability can uplift rural communities", says founder Vasukumar N.

A New Model of Conscious Consumption

Vridhi Techno Farms is India's first online platform dedicated to bio-secured, farmed fish. Its vision is rooted in the idea that healthy living begins with knowing what we eat and where it comes from. Fishes are grown in indoor & outdoor aquaculture farms (which are in Fresh Water / Sea Water / Backrish Water) that are checked and monitored for pesticides, antibiotics, and heavy metals. Once harvested, they are cleaned, processed, and delivered Safe & fresh through a cold chain maintained at 0–4°C to preserve freshness, flavour, and nutrition. Quality Checks are performed at the Processing Unit for validating if traces of Ammonia or Formalin is used in ICE or Fish.

VTF currently offers over 14+ species and 60+ SKUs of farmed fish, including Roopchand, Rohu, Murrel, Karimeen, Sea bass, Trout (Salmon Family) , Milk Fish, Mullet, Silver Pompano, Tilapia, Basa, and Catla. Their promise is simple: premium-quality, safe, that are odourless and delicious protein that supports both personal health and community well-being.

Sustainability Meets Social Responsibility

VTF's' impact extends beyond its urban consumer base. The enterprise has built a model that empowers small and marginal farmers (SMFs), many of them women, to participate in the growing aquaculture sector through what it calls Women Aquapreneurship.

The initiative provides rural farmers with indoor farming units, technical training, and guaranteed buyback, helping them integrate aquaculture with traditional agriculture. This approach not only diversifies their income sources but also fosters resilience against agricultural uncertainty and climate disruptions.

"Our goal is to create a community of empowered farmers who become micro-entrepreneurs. That's what sustainable progress really means", Vasukumar N explains.

The project has received support from the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India, through the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB), validating its potential to create meaningful social and economic change.

Technology, Traceability, and Trust

Vridhi's processing facility in Coimbatore is A+ Grade-certified, and designed to minimise contamination, waste, and handling errors. Even the ice used in cold storage is made from purified water. Every operational detail reflects a single guiding belief: nutrient safety is non-negotiable.

Scaling Impact and Building Wellness Communities

Having established its model in Tamil Nadu, Vridhi Techno Farms now plans to replicate it across India's Metro Cities with farm partners from nearby rural areas. The company aims to build a network of 500+ small and marginal farmers, connected through training, technology, and transparent supply chains.

VTF's future include expanding into vegetables, fruits, and eggs, each adhering to the same bio-secured, residue-free standards. Beyond selling food, the company envisions creating wellness communities where consumers and producers are connected through shared values of health, sustainability, and responsibility.

A Vision Rooted in Responsibility

Vridhi Techno Farms represents the next wave of India's social entrepreneurship movement, one that blends innovation with empathy, and growth with accountability. By transforming the way food is grown, distributed, and consumed, the company is proving that doing good and doing well can go hand in hand.

In a marketplace where buzzwords like "organic" and "farm-fresh" are often loosely used, Vridhi offers something rare: proof. Proof of origin, proof of safety, and proof that a business can nourish both people and the planet.

"We're not just selling fish, we're nurturing trust, livelihoods, and health. That's the ecosystem we're building, and it's only the beginning", says Vasukumar.

Aatika Kundalam

ROOTED IN CHANGE

A HOMEMAKER'S JOURNEY TO ORGANIC FARMING

When the world was forced to pause during the pandemic, many rediscovered forgotten hobbies. For some, it was cooking or painting. For one woman from Theni, it was the soil beneath her feet that called out to her. What began as a modest experiment on a terrace in Chennai has now blossomed into a thriving organic farm — and a movement that is quietly inspiring others to rethink what it means to grow food, live sustainably, and find purpose.

"I never knew I had this passion in me," says Raji Rajasekar with quiet amazement, recalling the months of isolation in 2020 that would change her life. "COVID, for all its challenges, turned my life for the better. It helped me discover something I never knew I could love so deeply."

Born and brought up in Chennai, Raji studied computer science in Coimbatore before marriage took her to Theni — a small town nestled at the foothills of the Western Ghats. "I was just 21 then," she remembers. "I came from a nuclear family and suddenly found myself in a large joint family with a shared business and traditional ways of living. It was an adjustment in every way possible."

For years, Raji's life revolved around home and family. "I was a typical housewife and mother of two," she says, smiling. "My son is married now, and my daughter works with Tata AIG in Chennai. For a long time, I never thought I would do something outside the home." Yet, destiny had other plans.

Her first brush with agriculture came through terrace gardening — small pots of greens and herbs grown for the kitchen. "At that time, I didn't even know that soil was a living thing," she laughs. "But slowly, I began to realise how alive nature is, how responsive it can be when treated with care." Those simple discoveries planted the first seeds of curiosity.

Then came the lockdowns. "We were all homebound. And for the first time in years, I had time to think, to read, to watch, and to learn," she says. "It started with terrace gardening videos, and before I knew it, I was reading about natural farming and sustainability."

But turning that interest into reality was far from easy. "In our family, farming has always been about production — quick yield, assured returns. When I said I wanted to try organic farming, people thought I was joking. They said it's fancy, impractical, and not possible in our conditions."

Despite the scepticism, she persisted. "There's a misconception that organic farming is costly," she explains. "It's not. The cost only seems high when people watch YouTube videos and assume they need expensive equipment or inputs. But when you actually do it — when you learn to make use of what you already have — you realise it can be self-sustaining."

Her goal was simple: self-sufficiency. She began with a 50-cent piece of land — not even traditional paddy land, but dry soil. "Everyone said it was impossible," she

recalls. “But I wanted to experiment. So I used drip irrigation and the SRI (System of Rice Intensification) method for paddy cultivation.” The attempt was costly, but it worked. “It gave me a decent yield and taught me more than any book could.”

Those first few seasons were filled with trial and error. “I learned and unlearned constantly. I realised that no single method fits all. You can’t blindly follow what works elsewhere. You have to understand your soil, your climate, and your resources.”

Gradually, she began to see results. “I discovered that you don’t have to run to the store for everything. The farm gives you what you need if you know how to work with it.” This shift — from dependency to self-reliance — was liberating. “Once you see that cycle complete itself, it’s magical. You start to believe in nature again.”

Her biggest breakthrough came with turmeric cultivation. “I just had an intuition that turmeric would do well in Theni,” she says. “No one told me that — it just struck me one day.” She began with 100 kilograms of seed turmeric on two plots, one near Theni and another in Gudalur, 50 kilometers away. “Both yielded beautifully. From 100 kilos, I got nearly one tonne,” she says with excitement that still feels fresh.

At a workshop on vettiver (khus grass) organised by the Peermade Development Society (PDS), she met Mr. P.N. Subramaniam, a well-known advocate of natural farming. “I went there to learn about vettiver, but meeting him changed everything,” she recalls. “When the organisers learned that I was cultivating organic turmeric nearby, they visited my farm the next day. The Executive Director of PDS himself came, walked through the fields, and offered to buy the entire lot. He even gave me a premium price. That was my first real reward — both financially and emotionally.”

The experience gave her a new sense of confidence. “It wasn’t just about profit. It was about validation. It showed me that this was possible.” Soon after, she began encouraging other farmers in her region to follow suit. “Around 10 to 12 farmers joined me in growing turmeric organically. I connected them with PDS so they could sell directly too. When you see others benefit from your journey, it’s deeply fulfilling.”

Yet, the challenges remain. “Organic farming isn’t easy, especially when the weather turns unpredictable,” she admits. “Farmers have a very short window to act. Heavy rains, pest attacks, or heat waves can ruin a crop overnight. That’s why many hesitate — they can’t afford to experiment.”

There was also resistance from labourers and traditional farmers. “They’re used to quick solutions. If a pest appears, they want to spray chemicals right away. Convincing them to use natural repellents at the right time — say, early in the morning or before dusk — wasn’t easy. It took patience, and persistence.”

Her belief, however, is unwavering. “Once you start farming this way, it becomes addictive,” she laughs. “You can’t stay away from it. Watching a seed sprout, grow, and yield — it’s pure joy. It’s also humbling, because you realise how small you are in the larger rhythm of life.”

She attributes her success to curiosity and intuition. “I didn’t have a technical advisor. I learned from everyone — farmers, workshops, YouTube videos, books. I would try something, observe, and adapt. Nature teaches you if you listen carefully.”

Her journey from 100 kilograms of seed turmeric to 16 tonnes today is not just about numbers — it’s a story of transformation. “Farming has changed me,” she says softly. “It has made me more patient, more grounded. It has strengthened my faith — in nature, in myself, and in perseverance.”

Her family, too, has begun to see her in a new light. “My daughter is proud of me,” she smiles. “She listens to all my stories and gets excited. My son is still sceptical — he thinks organic farming is just a fad, like what happened in Sri Lanka. But that’s okay. I know that time will show him that this works.”

For now, she continues to nurture her fields — and her dream of making farming viable and joyful again. “I want to show that you can grow food that’s safe, sustainable, and profitable. You just need patience and belief.”

Raji's words reflect not just her own journey, but a quiet revolution taking root across India — where homemakers, engineers, and even city dwellers are returning to the soil with new eyes. “Once you feel the earth in your hands,” she says, “you’ll never see life the same way again.”

Marie Banu Rodriguez

“Sustainability is not just about protecting the soil—it’s about nurturing the soul of agriculture.”

Dr. Thomas shares with Marie Banu his efforts to support farmers in marketing organic spices.

Dr. Thomas J. currently serves as Advisor to Peermade Development Society (PDS) Organic Spices, one of India’s largest and most reputed exporters of certified organic spices since 1998. With over 45 years of distinguished experience in research, development, and administration, he has played a pioneering role in advancing India’s organic spice sector and sustainable agriculture practices.

Dr. Thomas holds a Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the University of Bristol, UK; a Ph.D. from the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, Pusa, New Delhi; and Master’s and Bachelor’s degrees in Agronomy and Agricultural Science from Kerala Agricultural University. He serves on the World Advisory Board of the Xichong Organic Innovation Committee, China, and is an active member of IFOAM International and IFOAM Asia. He is a Member of the Executive Committee of the World Spices Organization, the All India Spices Exporters Forum, and the State Medicinal Plants Board, Kerala.

In an exclusive interview, Dr.Thomas shares with Marie Banu his efforts to support farmers in marketing organic spices.

What inspired your lifelong commitment to agriculture?

I am an agronomist by profession and a Keralite by birth. My father was an estate manager in the Nilgiris during the British era. As a child, I would watch British planters ride through the estates on horseback, managing tea and spice plantations. That early exposure to plantation life sparked my fascination with agriculture. Even though I had the grades to study medicine, I chose agriculture out of sheer passion.

After my studies, I returned to Kerala Agricultural University as a professor and later headed the division on aromatic and medicinal plants for nearly sixteen years. That period shaped my deep interest in the healing and economic value of plants. My professional journey later took me to national institutions—the Spices Board of India as Director and then the Rubber Board of India as Rubber Production Commissioner. Working across India—from Sikkim to Kerala—gave me a panoramic view of Indian agriculture and its diversity.

Tell us about Peermade Development Society?

PDS was founded in 1980 by Father Matthew Arakkal, who later became Bishop of Kanjirappally. He was a visionary who believed that faith must express itself through livelihood and dignity for the poor. The guiding philosophy of PDS comes from the Gospel: “Let there be life, and have it in abundance.” This verse became the foundation of our work, interpreted as life in its totality — not just human life, but all life forms that share the ecosystem.

The story of how it started is quite interesting. Father Arakkal once saw tribal people bringing honey and forest produce to a local market, where they bartered these valuable goods for half a kilo of salt or sugar. That moment of injustice left a deep impression on him. He realized that unless small farmers and tribals were organized, educated, and given fair access to markets, the cycle of poverty and exploitation would never end. So PDS was created as a faith-based, not-for-profit organization to empower small and marginalized farmers, especially in the fragile ecosystem of the Western Ghats. Remember, this was the peak of India’s Green Revolution. While everyone else was chasing chemical fertilizers and high yields, Father Arakkal was thinking about sustainability.

PDS is today recognized as a pioneer in organic spice cultivation. How did that journey unfold?

This region of Kerala is known as the land of spices—the birthplace of pepper and cardamom, often called the king and queen of spices. When the global organic movement began to gain attention in the 1970s and 80s, Father Arakkal aligned our farmers with that philosophy. The irony is that our farmers were already organic by default. They were cultivating on small plots using traditional, chemical-free practices long before certification became a concept.

Our role was to align these traditional practices with international organic standards and build credibility. By 1998, we began exporting organic spices to global markets. PDS established one of India’s first internationally accredited processing units with certifications such as BRC. We maintained one-to-one relationships with our overseas buyers, who guided us on quality improvements and compliance.

What are your thoughts on the feasibility and market potential for organic spices today?

Organic farming remains viable, but we must recognize its complexities. The yield reduction after converting from conventional to organic systems depends on the crop and existing intensity. For example, pepper, being a vine crop, may see only a 10–20% yield decline in the first two to three years. But cardamom, which is highly input-intensive, may drop by as much as 70%. So we can’t generalize.

Globally, the organic market has also shifted. After COVID-19 and the wars in Europe, many exclusive organic stores closed—Germany alone lost nearly 500 such shops. Organic products moved into discount chains and supermarkets, becoming mainstream but less profitable. The niche exclusivity is gone; organic is now sold at par with conventional produce in many places.

Meanwhile, India’s reputation suffered because of fraudulent certifications. Some exporters had no farmer base and outsourced certification paperwork. When the EU investigated, several international certifying agencies operating in India were disqualified. This severely dented our credibility. The government has since tightened norms, but the cost of compliance—testing, documentation, certification—has doubled. These costs rarely benefit the farmer; they are mostly procedural.

How does PDS maintain its credibility and support farmers through such stringent standards?

We operate through a rigorous Internal Control System (ICS) covering about 2,500 certified organic farmers. We don’t randomly certify anyone. We identify potential farmers, train them in organic methods, monitor compliance, and maintain complete traceability.

Farmers in our network receive a premium for their produce. They also benefit from our technical and market support. Because certification is managed internally, we can ensure 100% authenticity. Expanding beyond 2,500 farmers isn’t feasible right now because monitoring and traceability would be compromised. Organic integrity depends on proximity and trust. Our model works precisely because it is local, personal, and accountable.

There is another unique model under PDS called the “Land to Lab” programme, where traditional knowledge and innovations from the grassroots are validated scientifically. If a farmer identifies a promising local crop variety—say, a special pepper strain—it is taken to our lab for testing and validation. Once its potential is confirmed, that variety is promoted as a farmer’s variety. The farmer then develops his own nursery to multiply and sell the plants, often naming the variety after his family. This gives him not only income but also identity and community recognition.

Through Land to Lab, we bridge two worlds—the wisdom of the field and the rigor of science—while helping farmers evolve into entrepreneurs. It has become one of our most powerful farmer-led innovation models.

You also promote Vetiver cultivation. Could you explain its role in your ecosystem?

Vetiver is deeply embedded in our philosophy of ecology and sustainability. When you certify land as organic, every crop on it falls under the same certification, provided the land is managed organically. We promote Vetiver not as a commercial crop but as an ecological solution. Our terrain is hilly and prone to erosion, and Vetiver’s roots penetrate two to three meters deep, holding the soil firmly and preventing landslides.

It also improves water quality. Planting Vetiver around wells acts as a natural filter, cleaning runoff water before it enters groundwater sources. The species we use is indigenous to this region—it has always been part of our landscape.