

# Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 12 | Issue 9 | September 2024 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | [www.msdsrtrust.org](http://www.msdsrtrust.org)



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

## 6 COVER STORY

### Celebrating Rural Livelihoods

About Srijan – Self Reliant Initiatives through  
Joint Action and its activities

### Changemakers



# 3

#### Empowering Dreams and Communities

Momee's initiative that fosters youth, women, and children's potential through community empowerment initiatives.

### Profile



# 9

#### From Slum to Strength

About Integrated Social and Institutional Development for Empowerment - North East (InSIDE - North East)

### Chit Chat



# 12

#### "Automating organic farming can make a huge difference for farmers."

An exclusive interview with



# FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In our fast paced modern life, it's easy to overlook the simple act of gratitude. With goals to chase, problems to solve, and the constant push to achieve more, we often forget to pause and appreciate what we already have. Yet, fostering an attitude of gratitude is not just an act of courtesy; it is a transformative mindset that shapes our emotional and mental well-being, relationships, and overall quality of life.

Gratitude is the cornerstone of a positive outlook. By focusing on what we are thankful for, we shift our attention from what's lacking to what's present. This shift in perspective nurtures contentment, reducing stress and anxiety. Studies have shown that people who regularly practice gratitude report feeling happier, more satisfied with their lives, and less prone to depression. Gratitude allows us to embrace the present moment, cultivating mindfulness and fostering emotional resilience.

Beyond personal benefits, gratitude has the power to strengthen relationships. Expressing thanks to others, whether through simple words or thoughtful gestures, deepens bonds and fosters a sense of connection. It reminds us that we are not alone in our journey and that support, in various forms, comes from the people around us. Whether it's a family member, a colleague, or a stranger, acknowledging the kindness of others creates a ripple effect of goodwill. A culture of gratitude encourages reciprocity, reinforcing mutual respect and collaboration.

Moreover, gratitude nurtures humility. It reminds us that our successes are not solely our own but often the result of many factors, including the efforts of others and the opportunities we've been given. This awareness makes us more empathetic, compassionate, and generous, encouraging us to give back and help those in need. In a world increasingly driven by individualism, gratitude serves as a reminder of our shared humanity.

While it's easy to be consumed by ambition or dwell on challenges, practicing gratitude daily can ground us in positivity. Whether through journaling, saying thank you more often, or reflecting on the day's small joys, developing a habit of gratitude transforms our inner landscape. It shifts our focus from scarcity to abundance, from entitlement to appreciation. Gratitude, truly, is the best attitude—not just a virtue, but a way of life that unlocks deeper happiness, connection, and fulfillment.

Marie Banu

## EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh  
Marie Banu Rodriguez

# HONORING THE PILLARS OF SOCIETY



**T**eachers' Day, celebrated on September 5th in India, marks the birth anniversary of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a renowned philosopher, statesman, and India's second President. The day is an occasion to honor teachers' pivotal role in shaping lives, building communities, and fostering the intellectual and moral growth of students. Teachers are the cornerstone of society, nurturing the next generation with knowledge, values, and the skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world.

At its core, the celebration of Teachers' Day is a recognition of the tireless efforts educators invest in shaping young minds. They not only impart academic knowledge but also serve as role models, instilling values such as empathy, resilience, and critical thinking. Their influence extends far beyond the confines of the classroom; it touches every aspect of a student's life, preparing them for future challenges.

In the digital age, the role of teachers has evolved. With the advent of technology and virtual classrooms, teachers have had to adapt to new methods of instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this shift, with teachers worldwide quickly transitioning to online teaching, often with limited resources and little prior experience. This adaptability highlights the incredible resilience and dedication of teachers, who continue to educate despite obstacles, ensuring that no child is left behind.

However, the celebration of Teachers' Day also offers an opportunity to reflect on the challenges educators face today. In many parts of the world, teachers work under immense pressure, often with inadequate resources, low pay, and little recognition. Despite these hardships, they persevere, driven by a passion for education and a commitment to their students. The day should serve as a reminder that more needs to be done to support teachers

— from better training and resources to improved salaries and working conditions.

In India, initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offer hope by emphasizing the need for holistic teacher training, curriculum reform, and an enhanced focus on foundational literacy and numeracy. Strengthening early learning programs like Nali Kali and leveraging technology in education can empower teachers to become catalysts for change. The focus on experiential and activity-based learning further enhances the potential for teachers to inspire creativity and critical thinking in their students.

Moreover, community involvement in education is vital. Recognizing the interconnectedness between teachers, parents, and society can create a more robust support system for educators. Teachers are not the sole bearers of responsibility for a child's education. Collaborative efforts between schools, parents, and communities are essential to maximize the impact of education. This communal approach reinforces the idea that nurturing a child's potential is a shared responsibility.

As we celebrate Teachers' Day, let us not only honor the immense contributions of educators but also commit to creating an environment where they can thrive. Teachers are the architects of a brighter future, and by supporting them, we invest in the next generation of thinkers, leaders, and change-makers. A well-supported teacher is a catalyst for societal transformation, and their influence can shape the future trajectory of nations.

In a world where change is the only constant, teachers provide the stability and wisdom needed to navigate the uncertainties ahead. Their contributions are immeasurable, and on this day, we express our deepest gratitude for their unwavering dedication to the cause of education.

Marie Banu



# EMPOWERING DREAMS AND COMMUNITIES



With over a decade of dedicated experience in Majuli, Momee has been instrumental in creating supportive environments and safe spaces for young people, children, and women to explore their potential and contribute to their community. In 2015, she founded RIGBO with a vision to empower youth, subsequently introducing innovative projects like the RIGBO Craft Bazar in 2016, aimed at training and showcasing bamboo crafts, and the 99 Street Cafe in 2018, providing a hangout space for all age groups attached to the RIGBO Youth Resource Centre.

In 2019, Momee expanded her vision to unite people through music, leading to the inception of the Majuli Music Festival Project. Beyond fostering youth unity, this initiative seeks to promote rural tourism, bolster the local economy, encourage entrepreneurship, and provide a platform for aspiring talents in Majuli. Through her multifaceted endeavours, Momee continues to uplift her community, harnessing the power of creativity and collaboration to drive positive change. A visionary social worker, she has transformed her community by promoting sustainable development, fostering youth engagement, and championing local artisans and organic farming.

In 2010, after completing a Master's degree in social work from Bosco Institute, she had already planted the seeds of a dream that would later become the foundation of her life's work. During her time in school, she experienced a "safe space" that allowed her to grow and understand that individuals are capable of much more than societal or familial expectations suggest. Inspired by this, she sought to create a similar environment in her own community.

"I always wanted to create a safe space for young people," she said. This aspiration became the driving force behind the establishment of the RIGBO Foundation in 2015, with a mission to provide a platform for youth to explore their dreams and talents





in a supportive environment. Her journey into organic farming and the establishment of the craft bazaar in 2016 stemmed from her continuous work in youth development. These projects serve not only as economic support but also as an avenue to promote local artisans. "We train young people in these crafts to develop their skills," she explained. The craft bazaar has evolved into a thriving space where local youth can exhibit their talents and create sustainable livelihoods. The organic farming initiative, meanwhile, supports her community's shift toward healthier, environmentally friendly living. The opening of the 99 Street Café in 2018 was an extension of her Youth Resource Center, an informal meeting place where individuals can gather, connect, and exchange ideas. The café, which also serves local cuisines, employs locals, contributing to the community's economic well-being. "It's an out space for young people to engage, discuss issues, and just hang out," she noted, emphasizing the importance of building strong one-on-one relationships.



In 2019, the Majli Music Festival added another dimension to her mission: to unite and inspire through music. The idea originated from a community member, and it grew into an event that not only supports rural tourism and the local economy but also provides a platform for young musicians to pursue their dreams. The festival offers more than just entertainment. It fosters entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, and professional growth, particularly for young people interested in making music a career. "A

lot of young people want to take up music, but they don't have the support. The festival helps promote their talents," she shared. When asked about the challenges she has faced, she highlighted the community's perception of NGOs as organizations that receive large sums of money and grants. "The reality is the opposite," she stated. Lack of access to resources, funding, and skilled personnel were significant obstacles, but she never let these deter her. "The idea is not to stop, even though we drag at times." Working with youth presents unique challenges, especially when their issues are constantly evolving. But her dedication to creating a supportive environment keeps her grounded, despite the hurdles. She recognizes that societal

and family expectations place immense pressure on young people, and she hopes to cultivate a space where they can balance those demands with their personal dreams and aspirations. Her vision for the future is as innovative as she is, she expressed a desire to "systematize" the work that has already been done, aiming to impact even more individuals in a structured manner. By 2026, she hopes to witness a more proactive society—one where young people are not lost in the process of realizing their dreams, but rather actively engaged in meaningful and fulfilling careers. For those looking to embark on a similar journey, her advice is simple yet profound: "If you feel for something, go for it." She acknowledges that the path may not always be smooth, but she encourages others to hold onto their vision. Criticism, disagreements, and betrayals may come along the way, but focusing on the end goal is what matters most. Her resilience and dedication to her community stand as a powerful example of how one person's vision can inspire and uplift countless others.

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](http://www.csim.in)

Contact Persons:

- Ms. Marie Banu Rodriguez  
Director, Chennai  
@ 9884700029

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

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

CSIM also facilitates Social Accounting and Audit for social enterprises, CSR projects, and NGOs through Social Audit Network, India (SAN India). For further information, please contact: Ms. Latha Suresh Director, SAN, India @ 92822 05123. [www.san-india.org](http://www.san-india.org)



# LEADING A NEW PATH BY APPLICATION CREATING A AHIMSA ECONOMY

**A**nantha Sayana: The name evokes a serene image—a reclining figure—but Anantha is anything but still. He is a whirlwind of activity, tirelessly working across different fronts: advocating for safe, healthy food while passionately spearheading the revival of hand-dyed, handmade clothing, recreated in vibrant designs that seem to bloom anew with every collection. His clothes beckon with ravishing colors, innovative cuts, and an allure that makes you want to try them all.

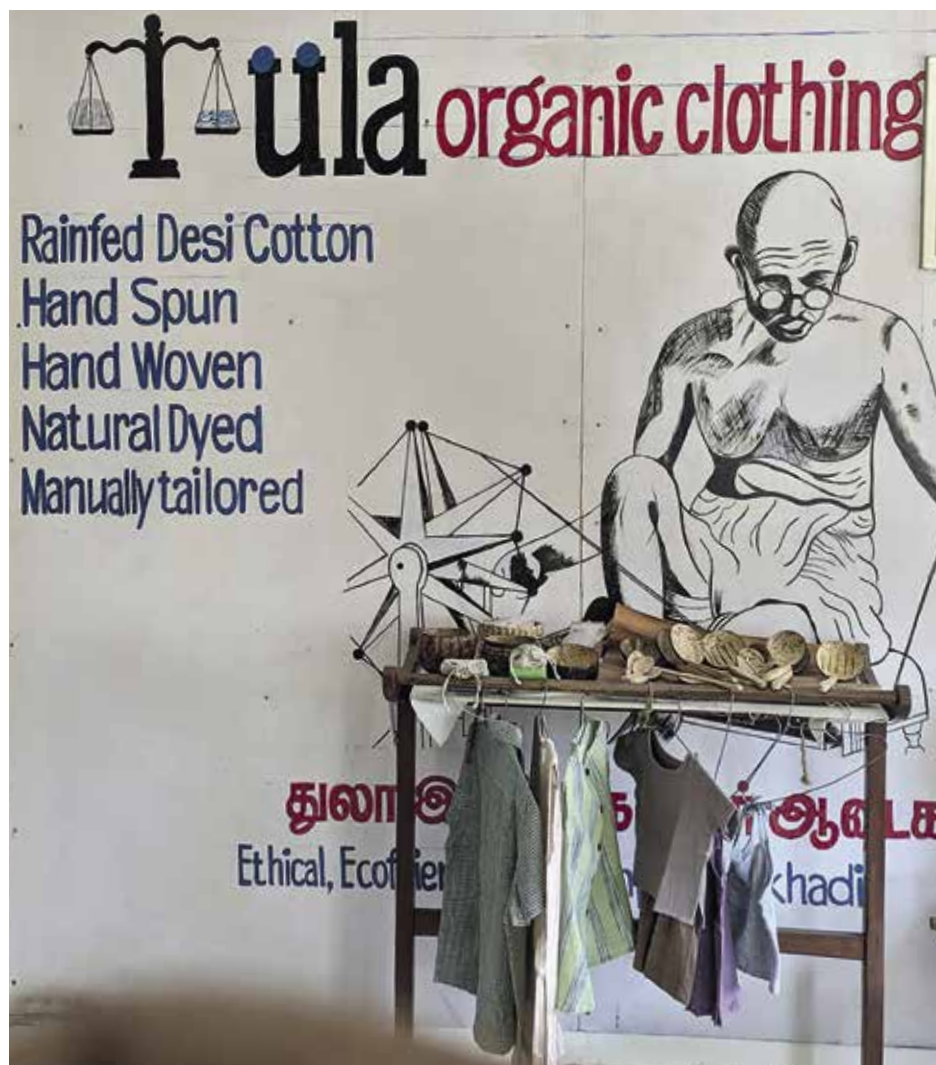
I first met Brother Anantha Sayana in Madurai, though his two decades of impactful work had long preceded him. His speech at the Ahimsa Santhai in 2022 was nothing short of inspirational. He spoke with a rare combination of passion, knowledge, and authenticity—each word affirming a deeply held belief in sustainable living and community empowerment.

Our paths crossed again in Chennai, where Anantha and others were showcasing their work at a local fair. His venture, Tula, was on display, but what struck me was his commitment to uplifting others alongside himself. He wasn't merely a producer; he was a facilitator, opening doors for fellow artisans, farmers, and creators.

Curiosity led me to his headquarters at the Organic Market in Indiranagar, where I found Anantha—affectionately called Anathoo—seated cross-legged on the floor, working through supply lists as his phone buzzed constantly with inquiries. Despite his busy schedule, he was generous with his time, walking me through the market, where each product had a story. As we moved among organic vegetables, dry millets, oils, grains, and medicinal herbs, Anantha narrated a saga of fifteen years of relentless effort. His work has given rise to over fifteen such stores—havens of wholesome, organic produce in a market otherwise dominated by crowded supermarkets.

His growing network of customers and volunteers trusts that, from seed to plate, the products they buy are safe, fairly priced, and ecologically sustainable. Anantha told me how one senior IAS officer, deeply moved by his work, organized a talk that shifted government attitudes toward millets. No longer mere "bird feed," millets were being recognized for their potential to transform both agriculture and dietary habits. As the talk went on, senior officials were served multi-course millet-based meals, sparking both surprise and admiration.

As we continued our tour, Anantha shared samples—a millet muffin, groundnut sweets, specialty chocolates—crafted by customers and volunteers. This wasn't just a store; it was a movement. The products themselves spoke of their authenticity. Sharp-eyed customers knew when they were getting something fake, and quality always matched the price. Not fancy prices, but fair ones. The trust came not from external certifications but from



the integrity of the product itself.

Scaling up, as Anantha sees it, is not about mega-stores but rather small, well-managed shops run by different generations of people, each contributing to a sustainable future.

For more on his inspiring journey, see this well-documented article in YourStory.

But what excites me even more is the story of handmade clothing and indigenous, sustainable dyes. Tula's range—filled with splendorous colors and innovative designs, crafted by design students and passionate supporters—is finding its footing in an industry otherwise ravaged by the negative impacts of fast fashion. Slowly but surely, Tula and its

network are gaining traction. Engagement with stakeholders, consumers, schools, and producers is growing, and each item on the shelf carries a stunning backstory. Visit the store, and you'll feel it.

The organic movement is here, and it's thriving. We owe thanks to people like Anantha and his peers for their relentless efforts, for their refusal to give up in the face of exploitation, and for their steadfast belief in the power of sustainability. This two-decade journey is as complex as it is compelling, started by a handful of committed individuals who dared to challenge the system.

"I've never taken money from donors, trusts, or loans," Anantha said, "but tried a



different path that works. Our scale, our certification, and our end users all know that this sustainable journey can be achieved—and must be—in this time of economic and ecological crisis."

A true champion of Ahimsa, I felt deeply humbled to meet and learn from him.

When I asked if he would attend Kula 2024, he simply said, "There's no need for me to go. Others, who are looking for an investing path, might benefit. As for innovation," he added with a smile, "we've only revived what was always there."

For me, every step of his story is a path-breaking effort. In it, I see innovation, excellence, trust, confidence, and, most importantly, collectivity. It's the embodiment of a new Ahimsa economy, one that champions well-being.

In the coming days, I look forward to meeting some of the producers directly in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu.

*Pushpanath Krishnamurthy*



# CELEBRATING RURAL LIVELIHOODS



Sustainable development, social equity and empowerment together create a virtuous cycle where rural communities can lift themselves out of poverty. Sustainable development protects resources and builds climate resilience, social equity ensures everyone has fair access to opportunities while empowerment gives people the tools to actively shape their futures. In the Indian context, addressing rural poverty through this lens ensures long-term impact and fosters inclusive growth. Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action (SRIJAN) – has been a successful grass root organisation for more than two decades adhering to these principles. “Rural Poverty and agriculture are very strongly related, which also means that managing community resources like water must be an integral part of any development intervention. Our founder understood this and founded SRIJAN with strong values fostering these linkages to promote self-reliance in rural communities,” says Mr Aditya Kumar, Program Manager at SRIJAN.

Registered as a Charitable Trust in 2000, in Delhi, SRIJAN is now present in four states across India. Back then, with liberalisation yet to take off fully, it was a period where reach of government schemes needed extra hands. “It was called the Go-NGO partnership then. Government of India had many good schemes like the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) but needed grass root level support to be able to reach out to remote villages. SRIJAN acted upon this responsibility and also shared feedback to improve the schemes. And so, we began with the District Poverty Initiative project in Bundelkhand, Madhya

Pradesh,” recalls Aditya Kumar. Gradually, SRIJAN played a remarkable role in the implementation of many government schemes on agriculture, horticulture and poverty alleviation in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. With strong field presence in the villages, it also began to form federations of farmers, women as community institutions to initiate focussed interventions.

One of their most successful models is that of nano orchards that managed to diversify and enhance the farm income of small farmers. While it was accepted and believed that horticulture was meant for big farmers, this model promoted cultivation of fruit plants as main crop, along with a short term fruit or vegetable intercropped in a land holding as less as 0.25 acre. By training farmers and building their capacities for canopy management, SRIJAN prepared the community for this new practice. At the same time, SRIJAN also worked extensively to integrate relevant government schemes to enable asset creation, productivity enhancement and labour payments. Over 1779 nano orchards have been set up in ten districts, in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhatisgarh. “Water sources in the form of farm ponds or wells were developed under MGNREGA, while farmers were linked with Nandhan Fal Yojana scheme, which supports farmers in setting up fruit orchards/vegetable farms by the provision of labour payment to farmers for working in their own orchards,” he adds.

The experience allowed SRIJAN’s recognition as a technical resource agency and government

departments regularly consulted them to plan their scheme implementation in backward districts in these states. This also led to SRIJAN’s entry in Uttar Pradesh to operate the state’s Rural Livelihood Mission. “Sustainable livelihoods is the cornerstone when it comes to tackling rural poverty. Any migrant would say this from his

Registered as a Charitable Trust in 2000, in Delhi, Srijan is now present in seven states across India. Back then, with liberalisation yet to take off fully, it was a period where reach of government schemes needed extra hands.

context. Our focus and experience led us to implement externally aided projects in other states like Assam, Telangana and Maharashtra. We were growing and also influencing policy,” says Aditya. SRIJAN successfully ventured into other models like dairy cooperatives, agriculture productivity enhancement programs, etc.

SRIJAN’s consistent growth and expansion has been due to its team with members from diverse backgrounds. “Our founder insisted that we have a heterogeneous team – we had farmers, engineers, social workers, rural management students and the gender balance was prioritised. This was a conscious effort to integrate diverse perspectives and shape initiatives that can actually survive in the remotest villages,” he explains. The team’s enthusiasm is reflected in SRIJAN’s recognition as the ‘Great Place to Work’ in Non Profit/ Charity Organisations category for three consecutive years. Growth happened internally and externally, and many community level federations were formed.

A key development of the Companies Act in 2013 was the new interest in farmer producer companies (FPCs) that allowed small and marginal farmers to aggregate and plan bulk procurement of field inputs. Apart from the input cost advantage to the member farmers, this led to aggregation of produce and its processing, which incredibly influenced their final income. The story of Ghummar Mahila Custard Apple Pulp Producers Company from Pali, Rajasthan emerged very successful in demonstrating the role FPCs can play in increasing income of small/marginal farmers. It was awarded



the first Prize in the Special Category for SHG Federation Owned and Managed Enterprises at the Best SHG Awards Federation Ceremony in October 2023.

Comprising of 3000 Garasia tribal women, the venture not only built a value chain management around custard apple but also an agency for these otherwise marginalised, unheard women. Trained in plucking, grading, weighing and managing the village level collection centres, women not only earn better incomes, but have turned efficient managers of these units. Realising the market potential of this pulp, SRIJAN also integrated its nano orchard strategy to promote plantation of custard apple plants in small land holdings. “This was essential as we learnt that consumption of pulp is higher in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. So plantation of custard apple is necessary to keep these small

enterprises in business,” adds Aditya.

SRIJAN also works on climate smart agriculture, restoration of traditional water bodies and other soil/water resource management projects in seven states. “We have reached out to more than 2.5 lakh families in 4037 villages, across 31 districts in 7 states. They are all self-reliant and to keep this stride relevant, SRIJAN has introduced the Buddha Fellowship Program. It intends to provide a platform for interested professionals to experience life in our villages and develop new rural enterprises. SRIJAN talks from its experiences and the evidences it has built over the years. Agriculture is more focussed upon productivity now and we would like to promote climate smart agriculture as the priority,” concludes Aditya.

Shanmuga Priya.T



# JEEVAN FRONTIERS

## UNSUNG HERO OF SINGAPORE MIGRANT WORKERS



Jeevan Frontiers supports migrant workers in Singapore with subsidised healthcare and counselling as well as uplifts underserved communities overseas.

Sundays at Singapore's Little India district unfold to what can be described as scenes of organised chaos, with thousands of migrant workers thronging its streets to enjoy their day off. As the day wanes and the crowds dissipate, a group of workers gather outside a nondescript clinic. While they're largely here for the subsidised healthcare, they're served by a clutch of volunteers from local non-profit organisation Jeevan Frontiers, which also offers practical advice and moral support to help them overcome numerous challenges, including debt incurred from paying recruitment agencies to secure employment in Singapore, chronic health conditions and alcohol addiction.

"Besides their physical health, we also address workers' mental well-being, because they face a very intense work environment," says Dr Simon Mahendran, Jeevan Frontiers' founder, who adds that workers may feel compelled to work overtime even when they are ill, to earn extra income.

A dentist by profession, Dr Simon became attuned to the travails of Singapore's migrant workers in the 80s, when he opened his dental clinic in the heart of Little India. The ethnic enclave is an established haunt of the community, which now numbers more than a million. Back then, he met workers who had sustained work-related injuries they couldn't afford to have treated, and others faced with a raft of difficulties, including financial hardship and exploitation by their employers.

He began assisting them through simple acts of kindness, such as counselling them and distributing used clothing he'd collected. As his reach expanded, he enlisted the help of volunteers to teach English language classes and lead tours of local attractions during the workers' rest days.

Then in 1994, Dr Simon established Karunya Community Clinic adjacent to his dental practice, offering migrant workers affordable healthcare delivered by a team



of pro-bono doctors on Thursday and Sunday evenings. The clinic sees an average of 70 patients every week.

Besides medical attention, the workers also seek advice on various issues, including contractual disputes for which the team refers them to the Ministry of Manpower and legal experts. Importantly, beyond rendering practical assistance, Dr Simon's team of 30 volunteers also nurtures enduring friendships by routinely reaching out to the migrant worker community across the island.

"The counselling, in a way, provides them with inner stability. When we offer encouragement for their jobs or families, they know they have a friend here who can

listen and care for them," shares Dr Simon.

The organisation has since expanded its initiatives to India, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh, where it delivers crisis relief as well as runs literacy centres, leadership courses and income generation projects. The latter includes a programme where it disburses loans for leasing agricultural land and equips farmers with practical skills to manage it. Jeevan Frontiers also provides family counselling, supports microenterprises, fosters leadership development, promotes creative art, and deploys medical teams.

Dr Simon reveals that beyond helping to improve livelihoods, their efforts have paid off by bridging cultural divides

between Singapore's migrant workers and its citizens. He seeks more volunteers to boost Jeevan Frontiers' capabilities within Singapore as well as contribute specific skills to overseas projects, while bolstering cross-cultural ties.

Bearing testament to his ground-up movement's ripple effect, are the migrant workers who now pay it forward by serving as pillars of support within their communities. Among them is India national Thiru (not his real name), who approaches his counterparts at Tuas, a far-flung western industrial estate that accommodates tens of thousands of labourers in purpose-built dormitories.

"We don't have our families here to care for us when we get sick or injured, which makes me want to help when I see someone in a bad state. I just want to provide some hope and joy to everyone I meet," he shares.

### ABOUT JEEVAN FRONTIERS

Local non-profit organisation Jeevan Frontiers supports migrant workers in Singapore through subsidised healthcare and free counselling. It also empowers underserved communities in India, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh by implementing educational programmes; providing family counselling; supporting micro-enterprises; fostering leadership development; promoting creative arts, and deploying medical team

*A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation*  
([www.ourbetterworld.org](http://www.ourbetterworld.org))



# EMPOWERING CHANGE THROUGH VISION, LEADERSHIP AND PASSION



In the tumultuous landscape of North East India, where conflict, poverty, and injustice often overshadow daily life, a beacon of hope and transformation shines through Integrated Social and Institutional Development for Empowerment - North East (InSIDE - North East). This non-profit organization, registered under the Manipur Society Registration Act, is a testament to the power of collective action and visionary leadership. It was founded in 2013 by Hejang Misao, whose personal journey and deep-rooted values drive the organization's mission to foster a just and peaceful society.

Hejang Misao's journey to founding InSIDE - North East is deeply personal. "I strongly believe in gender equality and empowerment because who I am today is all because of my mother," Misao reflects. Growing up in an environment marked by conflict and societal challenges, Misao's mother played a pivotal role in shaping his values and vision. Her resilience and strength in the face of adversity left an indelible mark on him. "If you empower a boy, you empower an individual. If you empower a girl, you empower the whole family," Misao explains, highlighting his belief that women's empowerment is crucial for societal progress.

InSIDE - North East operates with a clear and compelling vision: to create a "just and peaceful society." This vision is reflected in the organization's mission to empower the powerless by building their capacities and reinforcing traditional institutions of love, mutual understanding, communal harmony, and brotherhood. The organization's goals are ambitious and multifaceted, addressing issues from gender imbalance to policy advocacy.

One of InSIDE - North East's primary objectives is to sensitize people to their rights and values, breaking the culture of silence that often suppresses voices. "Our aim is to enable people to fight for their own causes and engage policymakers to enact and implement laws that favor the

poor," Misao notes. The organization also focuses on fostering youth creativity and leadership, which Misao sees as essential for a better society. "Our future depends on the next generation. By empowering youth, we are investing in the future," he asserts.

InSIDE - North East employs a range of strategic interventions to achieve its goals. These include conducting residential and non-residential training programs, spreading awareness through various media, and engaging with policymakers.

The organization's key thematic areas include education, gender equity, human and institutional development, youth development, conflict transformation, social security, health, and the environment. These areas are interlinked, reflecting a holistic approach to addressing the complex challenges of the region. Misao emphasizes that tackling these issues requires a comprehensive strategy: "We need to address education, gender, and health in an integrated manner to create sustainable change."

Women's empowerment is one of the central focuses of InSIDE - North East, deeply influenced by Misao's personal experiences. "Our goal is to empower women leaders and challenge the patriarchal norms that restrict their choices," he says. This commitment is evident in the organization's programs, such as the Football for Girls initiative.

Football for Girls is a groundbreaking program aimed at breaking stereotypes and encouraging girls to engage in sports traditionally dominated by boys. "In a society where sports like football are seen

as masculine, we wanted to provide girls with the opportunity to play and excel," Misao explains. This initiative has not only given girls a platform to showcase their talents but has also challenged societal norms, empowering them to pursue their dreams.

The program's success is reflected in the



growing number of women participating in football, with some even joining Indian football clubs. "We have seen many girls move beyond traditional roles, pursuing careers and leadership positions in sports," Misao adds. This initiative is a testament to the transformative power of sports in breaking gender barriers and fostering empowerment.

Despite its successes, InSIDE - North East faces numerous challenges. Misao candidly acknowledges the difficulties encountered on his journey. "I might get some jobs, but I might be a poor guy. I might be a safe man, but I won't be able to give people a sense of this life," he reflects. The challenges range from dealing with societal resistance to

navigating the complexities of funding and resources.

Yet, Misao's resilience and unwavering belief in his mission keep him focused. "I don't have pain, so I don't have any. And apart from that, I'm more and more mistreated now," he says. Despite these obstacles, Misao remains steadfast in his commitment to his dreams. "Deep within me, I always believe in myself and in the dreams that I have. The dreams that I have are something in the feelings that I have all the time," he asserts.

InSIDE - North East has made significant strides in empowering communities, particularly women and youth. The organization's efforts have led to increased awareness, improved access to resources, and greater participation in various programs. Misao's focus on gender equality and empowerment has resulted in tangible changes in the lives of many individuals, challenging societal norms and creating new opportunities for growth.

InSIDE - North East's commitment to youth empowerment is a cornerstone of its mission. Recognizing that the future of the region hinges on its younger generation, the organization implements programs designed to nurture creativity, leadership, and a sense of accountability among young people. "Our future depends on the next generation," Misao asserts. "By empowering youth, we are investing in the future of our society." The organization's initiatives include leadership training, mentorship programs, and opportunities for youth to engage in community development projects. These efforts aim to equip young people with the skills and confidence needed to become proactive leaders and agents of change. By providing a platform for youth to voice their ideas and participate in meaningful activities, InSIDE - North East is fostering a new generation of leaders who are prepared to tackle the challenges of their communities.

*Bhavadharani K*



# VITAL WELLNESS 3:

## STRESSING PREVENTION OVER CURE



**T**he Story So Far: In Episode 1, we saw how stress is not a mental construct but a tangible physical phenomenon. In Episode 2, we looked at sleep, sleep disturbances and sleep-related stressors and touched upon how to deal with these issues better. We ended with the intention of discussing other stress-points as crucial as sleep, which are hunger, illness and pain]

Sleep is up there at the top, in the list of factors essential to our survival and our quality of life. Close to it are the dreaded trifecta of Hunger, Illness and Pain - which form the hip acronym HIP. All these have the potential to cause acute physical stress, resulting in all sorts of health issues for us. This is because all these are threats to survival, in the evolutionary sense of the word. In the ancient world, if anyone went hungry for too long, they ran the risk of death. If they fell terminally ill, or suffered from unbearable pain, then too, directly or

indirectly, their survival was at risk.

We saw that stress is an evolutionary mechanism that helps us survive. So how does stress help the ancient human who's hungry? It sharpens his vision, increases his speed, and therefore increases his chances of success when he hunts. This success means he has food to eat, and his hunger is appeased. (We are speaking of course, of reasonable levels of hunger - not starvation, which would actually handicap him.) In this case, as soon as the hunger is appeased, the hunger-induced stress disappears. But staying willfully hungry (as in fad 'diets'), over long periods of time causes something called decision fatigue. Decision fatigue is the tiredness you feel when you are constantly battling with the natural tendencies of your body. It saps your energy, makes you feel weak and is a quick route to chronic stress, which is again a trigger for overeating. (This is one of the major reasons why 'crash-diets' are

unsustainable, and never work out in the long term.)

Short-term stress is also the natural response to injury and pain. Since in the natural world, an injury could jeopardize survival, the immediate response to an injury is a release of stress hormones that enable the creature to get away from a dangerous situation in spite of the pain of the injury. However, chronic pain causes chronic stress. Of the many obvious reasons to avoid chronic pain, this is one - that the chronic stress that follows chronic pain is extremely harmful to all the systems of the body, not only the part which is in pain. This fact adds a significant dimension to the adage 'prevention is better than cure'. It is while we are healthy and pain-free, that we should take every measure we can to make sure we remain so. Addressing any pain as soon as it arises, is the way to prevent it from becoming chronic. Addressing such issues immediately helps

us avoid serious chronic stress-induced complications at a later point. This is where a sattvic diet and a good yoga routine are of great help - they are powerful tools of prevention which can preclude the possibility of becoming a victim of chronic pain.

When we are stressed (with chronic stress), we get ill. We know this from the studies we discussed in earlier editions. But the reverse is true too - falling ill can cause stress too. Typically, when we are unwell, we are unable to follow a good diet or maintain a healthy lifestyle, and get enough exercise. These exacerbate the original illness by causing stress - anything that the body interprets as a threat to survival causes stress. This is one of the reasons why falling sick is a bad idea, at two different levels - there is the direct and immediate discomfort of the illness, of course, but there is also the added factor of the illness itself causing stress, and this



stress turning chronic to mess some more with the various systems of the body. It is a vicious cycle on its own. The only way out of it is, again, to focus on prevention. When we're healthy, all the factors that keep us that way need to be given their due focus. When we're sick, first we need to ensure we don't get sicker, and second, we need to do those actions that would lead us back to good health.

Come to think of it, hunger, pain or illness are the only issues that cause a little child to cry, have you noticed? The reaction to these is instantaneous in a child - there's no time-lag between the feeling of hunger/pain and the expression of discomfort in the form of crying or whimpering. This is probably the reason why we are all evolutionarily geared towards taking the crying of a child so very seriously - there's hardly any adult who won't react quickly to the sound of a child crying. Once an adult responds, the crying child is also reassured that the source of the stress is being attended to, and will be removed soon.

A very necessary digression here - there's a prevalent idea I've sometimes heard, that it's somehow 'good' for a baby to cry, and it

somehow helps them. There doesn't seem to be any basis for this - in fact, leaving a crying child unattended only increases her stress, and we all know this is not good in the long term. If at all any child is crying out more frequently than normal (ie, more than 4-5 times a day over and above hunger

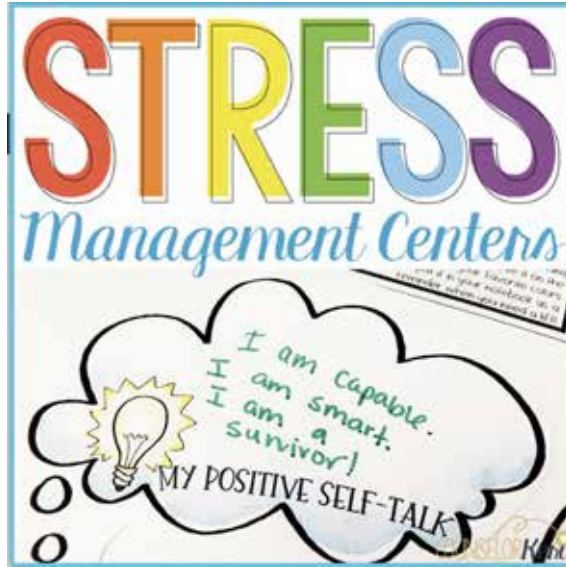
times), the child is either in pain or is unwell, and every effort has to be made to figure out the source of these with a view to fixing them.

We are all more or less aware that prevention is better than cure. But there is a deeper significance to this. It is not only true because

curing is more difficult, and painful and time-consuming than preventing. It's also that prevention avoids a great deal of unnecessary stress. It avoids the stress of falling sick and also the stress involved in getting back on the road to wellness.

Here's wishing all our dear readers a stress-free and joyful festive season!

**Ramashree Paranandi**



*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.*

## TALKS WITH SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI

**M**r. Varma, Financial Secretary of the Posts and Telegraphs Department, Delhi: He has read Paul Brunton's Search in Secret India and The Secret Path. He lost his wife with whom he had led a happy life for eleven or twelve years. In his grief he seeks solace. He does not find solace in reading books: wants to tear them up. He does not intend to ask questions. He simply wants to sit here and derive what solace he can in the presence of Maharshi.

Maharshi, as if in a train of thoughts, spoke now and then to the following effect:

It is said, "The wife is one-half of the body". So her death is very painful. This pain is however due to one's outlook being physical; it disappears if the outlook is that of the Self. The Brahadaranyaka Upanishad says, "The wife is dear because of the love of the Self". If the wife and others are identified with the Self, how then will pain arise? Nevertheless such disasters shake the mind of philosophers also.

We are happy in deep sleep. We remain then as the pure Self. The same we are just

now too. In such sleep there was neither the wife nor others nor even 'I'. Now they become apparent and give rise to pleasure or pain. Why should not the Self, which was blissful in deep sleep, continue its blissful nature even

now? The sole obstruction to such continuity is the wrong identification of the Self with the body.

The Bhagavad Gita says: "The unreal hath no being; the real never ceaseth to be; the truth about both hath been perceived by the seers of the essence of things." "The real is ever real, the unreal is ever unreal." Again: "He is not born, nor

doth he die; nor, having been, ceaseth he anymore to be; unborn, perpetual, eternal ancient, he is not slain when the body is slaughtered." Accordingly, there is neither birth nor death. Waking is birth and sleep is death.

Was the wife with you when you went out to the office, or in your deep sleep? She was away from you. You were satisfied

because of your thought that she was somewhere. Whereas now you think that she is not. The difference lies in the different thoughts. That is the cause of pain. The pain is because of the thought of the wife's non-being. All this is the mischief of the mind. The fellow (i.e. the mind) creates pain for himself even when there is pleasure. But pleasure and pain are mental creations.

Again, why mourn the dead? They are free from bondage. Mourning is the chain forged by the mind to bind itself to the dead.

"What if anyone is dead? What if anyone is ruined? Be dead yourself - be ruined yourself". In that sense there is no pain after one's death. What is meant by this sort of death? Annihilation of the ego, though the body is alive. If the ego persists the man is afraid of death. The man mourns another's death. He need not do so if he predeceases them (by waking up from the ego-dream, which amounts to killing the ego-sense). The experience of deep sleep clearly teaches that happiness consists in being without the body. The wise also confirm it, speaking of liberation after the body is given up. Thus the sage is awaiting the casting off of the body. Just as a labourer carrying a load on his head for the

sake of wages bears the burden with no pleasure, carries it to the destination, and finally unburdens himself with relief and joy; so also the sage bears this body, awaiting the right and destined time to discard it. If now you are relieved of one half of the burden, i.e., the wife, should you not be thankful and be happy for it?

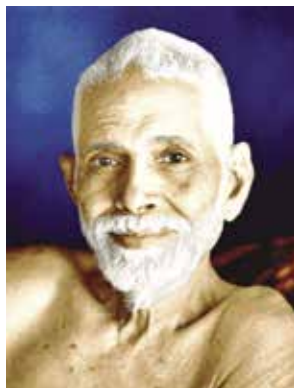
Nevertheless you cannot be so because of your physical outlook.

Even men who ought to know better and who have known the teaching about liberation after death etc., glorify liberation along with the body and call it some mysterious power of keeping the body eternally alive!

There will be no pain if the physical outlook is given up and if the person exists as the Self. Mourning is not the index of true love. It betrays love of the object, of its shape only. That is not love. True love is shown by the certainty that the object of love is in the Self and that it can never become non-existent. (Maharshi cited the story of Ahalya and Indra from Yoga Vasishta in this connection.)

Still it is true, pain on such occasions can only be assuaged by association with the wise.

**Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi**





# "Automating organic farming can make a huge difference for farmers."

## Nayan shares with Marie Banu his interest in the automating organic farming

Nayan is an entrepreneur focused on sustainable agricultural solutions. As part of the Stanford University's Seeds program, he is working on a solution that enables organic farmers to efficiently pass Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation systems, enhancing soil enrichment. His innovative approach aims to support organic farming by improving nutrient delivery to crops, thereby promoting healthier, more productive farms. With a passion for sustainability and a keen understanding of agricultural practices, Nayan is committed to advancing eco-friendly farming solutions that benefit both farmers and the environment.

*In an exclusive interview, Nayan shares with Marie Banu his passion for organic farming.*

### Can you explain what inspired you to create a system that passes Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation?

The inspiration for this system came from a combination of practical needs and personal experience. My partners and I did not set out with a grand plan to innovate in agriculture. In fact, it all started when one of my partners, who was experimenting with organic farming, faced challenges applying Jeevamrutham manually. For those unfamiliar, Jeevamrutham is a nutrient-rich organic slurry made from cow dung, urine, jaggery, and water, used as a natural fertilizer. It's highly effective but labour-intensive to apply.

My partner noticed that the manual process of spreading Jeevamrutham was cumbersome, time-consuming, and sometimes inconsistent. Farmers would often struggle with how to apply it uniformly across large fields. The idea sparked from a simple question: "Can we automate this?" He realized that if the organic slurry could be passed through the existing drip irrigation systems that many farmers already had, it would save labour, time, and ensure more even application. This would not only reduce the farmer's workload but also enhance the efficiency of Jeevamrutham application, providing consistent nourishment to crops.

This practical need evolved into a prototype that was entered into a national innovation competition, where it received attention and encouragement. Although we didn't win the competition, the feedback and recognition fuelled our motivation to continue developing the system. Over time, as we worked on refining the product, it became clear that this idea had the potential to impact a large number of organic farmers by providing an easier, more effective way to enrich their soil naturally.

### What role has mentorship, including your experience with Stanford University's Seeds program, played in your journey?

Mentorship has been instrumental in my journey, particularly because of the unique challenges we've faced in scaling this agricultural innovation. When we started, we had a vision and a product, but we lacked the strategic insight and broader business acumen needed to take the venture to the next level. That's where mentorship, particularly through Stanford University's Seeds program, made a significant difference.

While my engagement with the program is recent, it has already had a profound impact. My mentor, Mr. P.N. Subramanian, has a wealth of knowledge and experience that he brings from other sectors. This has helped me look at our business in new ways and think beyond the day-to-day challenges. For example, early



on, our focus was almost entirely on product development and R&D. We didn't give enough thought to aspects like scaling, distribution, and market penetration. My mentor has helped shift my perspective to consider these larger business strategies. Had I received this mentorship earlier, I believe we could have avoided some of the mistakes or slowdowns we experienced along the way.

Mentorship gives you a broader perspective, helping you make more informed decisions by understanding the ripple effects of each move. The Seeds program, specifically, is designed for entrepreneurs like us, who have a working product but need guidance to navigate the complexities of scaling and expanding. I've learned to approach problems more holistically and focus on building a sustainable business model, rather than just a product.

### How does using Jeevamrutham through a drip system benefit soil health and crop yield compared to traditional methods?

The use of Jeevamrutham through a drip system offers several advantages over traditional methods, both in terms of soil health and crop yield. Traditionally, Jeevamrutham and other organic slurries are applied manually, which can be inefficient and inconsistent. This process also requires a significant amount of labour, and it's difficult to ensure that the organic nutrients are spread evenly across large fields.

By automating the process through a drip irrigation system, farmers can apply Jeevamrutham in a much more controlled and consistent manner. Drip systems allow for a precise and continuous supply of nutrients directly to the root zone of the plants, ensuring that the soil receives the right amount of nourishment at regular intervals.

In terms of soil health, organic inputs like Jeevamrutham improve the structure and fertility of the soil over time. The regular application of Jeevamrutham helps to build up organic matter in the soil, which improves water retention and microbial activity. Healthier soil leads to stronger plant growth and better resilience to pests and diseases. Additionally, because this system makes it easier to apply organic nutrients consistently, farmers can reduce their reliance on expensive chemical fertilizers, which are known to degrade soil health over time.

The benefits to crop yield are also significant. When plants receive a steady supply of nutrients in an efficient manner, their growth is more vigorous, and yields tend

to be higher. Farmers who have adopted this system report improved crop quality and quantity, as well as a reduction in overall input costs, making it a win-win solution.

### What sets your product apart from other soil enrichment and organic farming solutions available in the market?

Our product is unique because it addresses a very specific problem: the labour-intensive nature of applying organic fertilizers like Jeevamrutham. While there are many products on the market that focus on soil enrichment, few have tackled the issue of automating the application process. Our solution is specifically designed to integrate with existing drip irrigation systems, which many farmers already use for watering their crops. This makes it easier for farmers to adopt without requiring them to invest in an entirely new infrastructure.

Moreover, our system allows for a more hands-free approach to organic farming. In a sector where manual labour is often one of the biggest constraints, especially for small and medium-scale farmers, automating this process can make a huge difference. Unlike other products that focus solely on the input (i.e., the fertilizer itself), our innovation focuses on the process—how those inputs are delivered to the crops. This makes our product not only unique but also complementary to other organic farming practices.

### How have organic farmers responded to your solution so far, and what feedback have you received?

The response from organic farmers has been generally positive, though the journey to widespread acceptance hasn't been without challenges. When we first introduced the concept, many farmers were sceptical. Using liquid slurries like Jeevamrutham through drip irrigation was a novel idea, and it wasn't something they had encountered before. Early on, we had to do a lot of convincing and provide free samples to get farmers to try the system. However, as early adopters began to see the benefits, word spread, and more farmers became interested. Farmers have noted that they no longer need to spend hours applying Jeevamrutham manually, and the consistency of the application has led to better crop results.

### What are your plans for scaling your solution, and how do you see it expanding across different regions and farming practices?

Scaling is a key focus for us moving forward. India's agricultural landscape is incredibly diverse, with different regions facing unique challenges. For example, farmers in arid regions like Gujarat have very different needs compared to those in high-rainfall areas in the East. To address this, we're developing multiple variants of our product to suit different geographies and crop types. We're also experimenting with more flexible designs that can be adapted to a wider range of farming practices. Currently, our system requires a certain amount of water pressure and investment in infrastructure, which can be a barrier for smaller farms. By developing more cost-effective, flexible models, we hope to make the system accessible to a broader audience.

In terms of distribution, we're exploring partnerships with various government programs and local agricultural cooperatives to reach more farmers. We're also looking at ways to leverage technology, such as e-commerce platforms, to improve our go-to-market strategy. Right now, we've deployed our system in around 10,000 sites across India, but that's just the beginning. Our goal is to reach hundreds of thousands of farmers in the next few years, helping them transition to more sustainable and cost-effective farming practices.