

Conversations Today

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6 COVER STORY

Stitching Together a Brighter Future

About Yellow Bag and their products

Changemakers



3

Green Guardians from School

Abhijit, a class 10 student's Grow Green Community Initiative in Coimbatore that creates awareness on climate change

Profile



9

At the Crossroads of Educational and Livelihood Reform

Azad India Foundation and its literacy programmes for women and children in Bihar

Chit Chat



12

"Through social entrepreneurship, we aim to empower young people to creatively address societal challenges while fostering innovation and sustainable solutions."

An exclusive interview with Fr. Jerry Thomas, Director, Bosco Jorhat (Assam) Institute

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In a world often marred by divisiveness, conflict, and self-interest, kindness stands as a beacon of hope, reminding us of our shared humanity and capacity for compassion. Yet, as we navigate the complexities of human interaction, we must also recognise the intrinsic value of self-respect and the delicate balance required to cultivate both virtues harmoniously.

Kindness, the act of showing empathy, generosity, and compassion towards others, has the power to uplift spirits, mend wounds, and foster connections that transcend barriers of culture, religion, and ideology. It is a fundamental aspect of our moral fabric, guiding us towards a more inclusive and harmonious society where every individual is seen, heard, and valued.

However, kindness should never be misconstrued as a weakness or an invitation for exploitation. This is where self-respect comes into play. Self-respect entails recognising and honouring one's inherent worth, dignity, and boundaries. It is the foundation upon which healthy relationships, both with others and oneself, are built.

The interplay between kindness and self-respect is dynamic and multifaceted. At times, practicing kindness may require us to set aside our own needs and desires to uplift others, demonstrating empathy and compassion in the face of adversity. Yet, this should never come at the expense of our self-respect.

For instance, in situations where our kindness is taken advantage of or exploited, maintaining self-respect becomes paramount. Setting boundaries, asserting ourselves assertively but respectfully, and refusing to tolerate mistreatment or manipulation are essential components of self-respect. It is not about being selfish or closed off but rather about recognising our own worth and refusing to settle for anything less than fair and respectful treatment.

Moreover, self-respect serves as a safeguard against the erosion of our dignity in the pursuit of external validation or approval. In a world that often measures success in terms of material wealth, social status, or superficial accolades, maintaining a strong sense of self-respect allows us to stay true to our values, beliefs, and principles, even in the face of adversity or criticism.

The synergy between kindness and self-respect extends beyond individual interactions to shape the fabric of society at large. A culture of kindness and mutual respect fosters a sense of belonging, empathy, and solidarity, laying the groundwork for a more compassionate and inclusive world where everyone's dignity is upheld and celebrated.

As we navigate the complexities of human relationships and societal dynamics, let us strive to cultivate both kindness and self-respect in equal measure. Let us extend compassion and empathy to others while also honouring our own worth and dignity. In doing so, we not only enrich our own lives but also contribute to the collective well-being of humanity, one act of kindness and one affirmation of self-respect at a time.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

FOR THE LOVE OF ANIMALS

In India, a complex relationship exists with stray animals, characterised by both compassion and aversion. While many individuals and communities demonstrate kindness and care towards these animals, providing food and shelter, there also exists a prevalent aversion rooted in concerns over public health and safety. Instances of stray animals roaming the streets, scavenging for food, and occasionally displaying aggressive behavior have fueled apprehension among some segments of society.

Additionally, the lack of effective management and control measures for stray animal populations contributes to these sentiments. Despite efforts by various organisations and authorities to address these issues through sterilisation programs and public awareness campaigns, the aversion towards stray animals remains a persistent challenge in India. Efforts to foster empathy, promote responsible pet ownership, and implement sustainable solutions are essential to mitigate this aversion and create a more harmonious coexistence between humans and animals.

An organisation dedicated to championing the rights and welfare of animals, and with an unwavering commitment to compassion, LARA Animal Rights has tirelessly worked to raise awareness, enact change, and foster a world where every creature is treated with dignity and respect. Through education, outreach, and strategic campaigns, the organisation stands as guardians for those who cannot speak for themselves. Its mission transcends boundaries, as it stays united in a shared vision of a kinder future.

Amidst the collective efforts to forge the path toward a New India, LARA stands as a force to reckon with, spearheading transformative change by extending compassionate aid to animals in distress. The harrowing existence endured by these abandoned creatures on the streets, underscores the urgent need for intervention.

LARA, which stands for 'Love Animals Respect Animals', operates tirelessly, executing round-the-clock rescue missions, comprehensive treatment protocols, and tailored rehabilitation plans for the afflicted animals. With a commendable average of eight rescues per day, predominantly comprising canines, LARA's dedicated volunteers administer critical care, orchestrating seamless transitions into adoption programs or localised street reintegration efforts. Harnessing societal empathy, LARA has extended a call to collaborative action, inviting contributions to sustain its life-saving endeavors and facilitate vital animal population-control initiatives in communities where overpopulation is a factor.

In the course of its activism, LARA has embarked on a series of activities involving the society at large. Residents are informed about their entitlement to pet ownership within flats or apartments, with penalties and potential imprisonment stipulated for violations by co-residents.

Today, caregivers of stray dogs often face harassment and discrimination from fellow residents, despite their noble efforts to provide food, shelter, and medical care to these vulnerable animals. Despite their compassionate actions, some individuals view stray dogs as nuisances or potential threats to their safety, leading to conflicts and mistreatment directed towards caregivers.

Incidents of verbal abuse, threats, and even physical violence against these caregivers are not uncommon, creating a hostile environment for those who selflessly dedicate themselves to the welfare of stray animals.

This harassment not only undermines the caregivers' efforts but also exacerbates the challenges of managing stray animal populations effectively. Addressing this issue requires not only legal protection and support for caregivers but also broader community education and awareness campaigns to foster empathy and understanding towards the vital role they play in caring for stray animals.

LARA Animal Rights has cautioned gated communities against the removal of stray animals and the prevention of caregivers from feeding them, with similar consequences for non-compliance. Citizens are reminded to not engage in activities aimed at removing animals from streets or obstructing caregivers, under penalty of law.

LARA briefs police personnel on laws pertaining to the prevention of animal cruelty, including citizens' rights to intervene in cases of overloaded animal carts. Volunteers are trained to promptly secure and transport injured animals for medical treatment and provide educational sessions in schools and colleges on the importance of compassion towards animals.

The NGO also advocates for regular health check-ups of animals engaged in tasks by marginalised groups, such as load-bearing animals and those used for recreational purposes. Collaborative efforts with the administration are pursued to secure funding and allocate space for the treatment and housing of sick and abandoned animals.

In the recent past, the issue of animal rights in India has garnered increasing attention and advocacy, reflecting a growing societal consciousness about the welfare and ethical treatment of animals. India boasts a comprehensive legal framework aimed at protecting animals from cruelty, encompassing legislation such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

These laws outline provisions for the prevention of cruelty towards animals, the regulation of captive animals, and the conservation of wildlife habitats. Additionally, landmark judicial rulings have further reinforced the recognition of animals as sentient beings entitled to fundamental rights and protection from harm. While challenges persist, including enforcement gaps and cultural attitudes, India's commitment to animal rights is evident in the ongoing efforts to strengthen legal protections, promote ethical treatment, and foster a culture of compassion towards all living beings.

Acknowledging the widespread empathy towards animal welfare, LARA has issued an open invitation for individuals to engage and make a tangible difference. By joining this initiative, participants can directly influence and enact positive change in the lives of animals.

Contributions from supporters hold the power to greatly enhance the financial resources required for rescuing and providing care to distressed animals. Additionally, these donations will fuel essential initiatives like animal birth control programs, particularly in areas where population control measures are critical.

Rahul Philip



GREEN GUARDIANS FROM SCHOOL

Love for nature is a sentiment deeply rooted in the human experience. One's ability to appreciate and actively engage with the natural world should never be judged based on age. In fact, each age group brings its own unique perspective and contributions to environmental stewardship, demonstrating that caring for the Earth knows no age limits. "Our age was never a challenge to us, rather it was the general perception that we will make some noise about environmental concerns and go silent," says G Abhijith, President, Grow Green Community Initiative in Coimbatore.

For a class 10 student in the city, Abhijith's priorities are rather unconventional yet remarkably steadfast. But when we learn that it all started when he was in class 6, it is definitely surprising. It all sparked from a web story on the declining population of sea turtles that are dying from consumption of plastics. "It was a very disturbing image. I began to read up more and soon learnt that global warming has made the planet twice hotter than what it was for our grand-parents. Ice sheets are melting in Antarctica," he narrates, with the same shock and despair that hit him when he read about all this for the first time.

He wondered what he could do about all this and further read about various organisations that are working for the environment. Given the vast variety of organisations that worked on different aspects of environment and climate change, including disaster resilience, Abhijith felt confident and resolved to do his part as a student. His interest group had new members on board and within a month Abhijith built a team of 30 members in 2020, which largely comprised of his friends, few college students who were interested in the cause, parents and teachers.

In fact, the group is popularly known as the 'greenish army' by the locals as they often see them planting saplings and maintaining them sincerely. "The pandemic is remembered for many reasons, but we will remember it for the stories of many individuals who were able to recognise themselves with nature. It is this sensitivity that drove us and to be able to realise that we were not alone was motivating to look ahead," he recalls.

With advice from different contacts, Abhijith and team decided to remain as a community action group instead of working on a formal registration. They lined up online awareness campaigns on different concerns and diligently worked on the content to make sure that readers connected with shocking realities about nature and environment. "Human civilisation has built many things that can devour the beauty and synchronisation in nature, it is high time we acknowledge this and commit ourselves to simple reparable actions to start with," raises Abhijith. In 2021, Grow Green launched an online plastic awareness campaign and reached out to neighbourhood, family, friends,



relatives and school communities. "Some of them were shocked to learn that animals died so easily because of the omnipresent plastics," he adds.

Pandemic's restrictions confined them to work online but this definitely had its advantages. It was a powerful and accessible means to educate, inspire action and drive positive change. The real-time nature of online communication facilitates immediate engagement and response, encouraging active participation and discussion surrounding plastic waste reduction strategies. The next message was on the ill effects of phone radiation on birds, but nature's health was not everybody's priority.

The quick expansion into a bigger team

did exert pressure on their financial resources. With many members choosing to leave the team, it was a dull phase now where everybody became inactive. The revival took about eight months but this time, Abhijith and his co-founder Mr. Jeya Sudharsan thought strategically. They joined their school's Interact Club and also planned awareness campaigns with other schools. With their network reaching 100 members this week, this is a significant milestone that encourages them to stay focussed.

Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Discord have already crossed 100 members and the community is very active. With many school students and adults turning in alike,

founders have lined up interesting projects with a long term perspective. Grow Green has supporters from five different states of India and four countries.

Gradually assembling a force of eco-conscious champions, they are keen to work with the city municipal body – Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation (CCMC), noted non-governmental organisations like Siruthuli and other like-minded initiatives.

Stepping into class 10, Abhijith and his friends are undeterred by the boards pressure. "We are a community and therefore the idea is to make sure that activities continue irrespective of whether all members are active or not. We have planned few projects for 2025, but the Grow Green community will continue to grow and act," says a committed Abhijith.

Shanmuga Priya.T



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SHADES OF THE SAME SPECTRUM

“Look at my face. Can you tell me what I’m feeling?”

Muhammad Musyirif Mahadi, more commonly called Nick, stares at two flash cards on the desk, his expression tense. He’s breathing heavily, a sign he’s overwhelmed.

Seeing his struggle, the teacher says gently, “Take your time, Nick.” Nick grunts and rubs his stomach with his hands in distress. It takes a few minutes before he is composed again. The teacher repeats her instruction, this time widening her smile. “See teacher’s face. What is this emotion, Nick?”

He picks the card with the word “Angry.” “Are you sure Nick? Try again.” He studies the flash cards again. After a few moments, he chooses the one that says “Happy.” “Correct! Awesome, Nick!” A warm smile begins to spread across his face.

Making her way from across the room to join them, Nick’s mother, Rohani Abdul Raof, smiles as well. Seeing her son who lives with autism, learn to express himself better, is a heartwarming moment. This is a win for Faraliza Zainal too. As the founder of the school Nick is in, and as a mother herself to a son with autism, moments like these are what brought this

Singaporean to Malaysia to help make a difference by supporting youths living with autism and their parents.

MIJ International Hub, in Kota Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is a school for young adults living with autism. It is estimated that 1 in 68 newborns in Malaysia have autism. For people who have needs like Nick’s, acquiring essential life skills like understanding social cues and everyday household duties can be extremely challenging. Without early intervention and sufficient support, they may struggle to live independently as adults. This places significant physical, financial and psychological stress on their families and caregivers.

ASD, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder, is characterised by challenges in communication and motor skills, repetitive behaviours, and intense interests. The diverse range of symptoms and their varying severity has led to its classification as a “spectrum.” Symptoms of autism generally appear in the first two years of life. “I began noticing something different about him when he was about 20 months,” recalls Rohani. “At that age, a toddler will get excited when their parents get home from work. But Nick didn’t. If I gave him toys, he

struggled to figure out how to play with the toy, unlike other kids. He seemed to be expressing discomfort but as he was unable to communicate verbally, we couldn’t understand what was bothering him.”

Nick was eventually diagnosed with autism when he was two years old. “Like any mother, I did everything I could to give Nick the best quality of life. I enrolled him in the best schools, joined multiple support groups, went for all kinds of courses on autism. I even considered quitting my job to care for him, but my husband advised against it. He pointed out that this was not something that would go away in one or two years, but a lifelong commitment,” says Rohani.

This daunting path of challenges and burnout is one that Faraliza has walked down as well. “When I first heard that my son was special, it was difficult for me to accept. I had to work and travel, and my husband also had to work. It was really a struggle,” says Faraliza. Ashraf, her son, also had a rare disease called Tuberous Sclerosis, which gave him epileptic fits every night. The balancing act between parental responsibilities and professional obligations became an

overwhelming struggle for Faraliza and her husband. Faced with these challenges, Faraliza decided to quit her job and focus on taking care of Ashraf.

That pivotal moment led to the inception of My Inspiring Journey Hub (MIJ Hub) in 2011 in Singapore. A holistic school for children and young adults living with autism. A place to not just educate them, but to empower them with confidence, life skills, employment training, and to nurture them to find their place in society. Having run a successful initiative in Singapore, news of Faraliza’s impact crossed the border to Malaysia. Soon, Malaysian parents were reaching out to Faraliza to help them and their children as well. “I kept getting the request, ‘Are you going to open in Malaysia?’ When I asked them why, they said, while there are public schools for special needs children in Malaysia, there was a lack of local options to support life after 18 for someone living with autism.”

Being a mother to a son with autism and running a school in Singapore was already incredibly challenging. Setting up another school in Malaysia would require immense effort and resources. But for Faraliza helping out Singapore’s neighbour was an obvious decision. “It’s

not about being neighbours or not neighbours. It's more about helping people because I've been in their shoes," says Faraliza. And so in 2022, she set up the Malaysian branch, called MIJ International Hub. A place Rohani turned to for help.

"When I saw that MIJ had programmes to teach the child independent living skills such as how to make beds and clean up the apartment, I was immediately attracted," says Rohani. In April 2022, she enrolled Nick in MIJ International Hub, which welcomes students of all ethnicities and religions.

Nick's early days were a challenging time. The support and nurturing spirit of MIJ International Hub's teachers like Syafiqah Rosli were crucial in not just making Nick comfortable but helping him thrive. 28-year-old Syafiqah, who has been with MIJ since November 2020, started as a teacher in MIJ Singapore before being promoted to MIJ International Hub's centre supervisor.

"For individuals like Nick who are non-verbal, we use visual prompts to guide him through tasks," Syafiqah explains. "For example, when entering the classroom, we instruct him to switch on the lights, turn on the air conditioning, put his bag down."

From designing individualised teaching materials and visual aids to managing meltdowns in class, the work of an MIJ teacher requires them to be able to think out of the box and to pivot creatively all the time. One session even involves teacher and student doing the hokey pokey dance to improve limb coordination.

According to Faraliza, individuals with autism often have rich inner lives but frequently experience sensory overload, especially in stimulating or unfamiliar environments, and experience meltdowns if they are unable to cope. "Before one can even think of academic learning, an autistic individual needs to be emotionally regulated or they cannot learn anything," she asserts.

At MIJ, empathy isn't just a word—it's a guiding principle. The level of detail woven into every aspect of the school demonstrates a profound understanding of what students with autism truly need to thrive.

Within the welcoming walls of MIJ International Hub, "calming corners," meticulously planned activity schedules and reminder walls serve as tools for emotional regulation. Frosted glass walls minimise sound and distraction. "Social stories" (anecdotes to encourage/discourage certain behaviour), movement therapy, prayer practice for Muslim students and aromatherapy are used to help students cope when overwhelmed.

One of the biggest goals of MIJ International Hub is to train their students with skills that will help them gain employment in the future. At the school, a catering cafe opened by Mohd Adli Yahya, the father of an autistic child, operates seasonally to provide MIJ students the opportunity to develop work-ready skills in a live kitchen. Syafiqah shares, "When we had Nick for the first time in the kitchen, he was quite overwhelmed, because of the sounds from the chiller and the stove. It took quite a while for him to adjust. So we let him do the packing, where



there are not many machines around. Now he enjoys being there with other people around. He likes it so much that when I gave him visual cues to go to class, he continues standing there, looking at people, smiling. That was the first time I saw Nick being so different from when we first introduced him to the task."

Since Nick joined MIJ International Hub a year ago, it has been a time of learning, growth and discovery for the 24-year-old.

Rohani shares with pride, "Nick is now more independent. All this while, he has been dependent on our prompts to do things. But now, when the time comes for him to go to bed, he will go independently after brushing his teeth." The past 12 months have also given Rohani time to look after her own physical and mental health.

"We still have people who come to the house and say things like, 'Nick still cannot talk, ah?' Although there are ups and downs, Nick is a blessing. The time spent with Nick releases us from worldly stresses because the way he looks at life is very simple and basic. He won't get out of the car when we go to a mall. But when we go to a park or forest or river, he immediately wants to go down. In his own way, Nick reminds us of what's important."

She hopes her shared experiences will help other parents in the same boat. "If I had one piece of advice for parents of children with special needs, it's this: don't look at other people's success stories. It will kill you. Never compare your child's progress to other people because each individual is different. It's your own journey that matters,"

says Rohani

Though Nick and Rohani still face a long and challenging road ahead, witnessing their love and growth serves as a poignant reminder to Faraliza of the purpose driving her - caring for her own son, others like him, and supporting parents on a similar journey.

"As a mother, you naturally envision your son succeeding, attending university, securing a white-collar job, but I've had to adjust my expectations. The fact that he has developed well, is physically able, can work, and can express himself, brings me immense gratitude." - Faraliza

There are now even more requests coming for Faraliza to open up an MIJ centre in other parts of Asia as well to help other young people living with autism and their parents. As this Singaporean mother continues to help parents provide the best quality of life for their children, she is determined to find more impactful ways of raising awareness to foster a society that's more empathetic toward individuals with special needs. She points out that, like every human being, individuals with special needs possess unique talents and share a common desire for recognition, validation, and emotional well-being. "If we were to be truly inclusive, we have a responsibility to understand the world from the lens of these special individuals while they do their best to integrate into our society." - Faraliza

—Alexandra Wong

A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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

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STITCHING TOGETHER



In the heart of the bustling urban slums of Madhichiyam, Madurai, there exists a beacon of hope wrapped in the vibrant hue of yellow. This beacon is known as Yellow Bag, a small but impactful social enterprise that weaves tales of sustainability, empowerment, and community.

The story of Yellow Bag begins not with its colour, but with its purpose. Amidst a world drowning in the sea of plastic, Yellow Bag emerges as a champion of conscious consumerism. While tote bags have become a fashion statement, Yellow Bag goes beyond the trend, producing sustainable cotton bags that embody a commitment to the environment and social welfare.

But why yellow? It's not merely a colour choice; it's a symbol of the bright futures being woven within its threads. Yellow Bag's production process is as radiant as its hue, focusing on minimal environmental impact and maximising rural employment,

particularly for marginalised women.

Krishnan Subramanian, the founder of Yellow Bag, says, "Our mission is to weave together a brighter future for both people and the planet, one stitch at a time."

Sivakasi, famously known as the Fireworks Capital, relies heavily on the production of crackers, with around 6.5 lakh people depending on this industry. Yellow Bag sparked a different kind of revolution here. The organisation provided an alternative source of employment in collaboration with Credit Access, and successfully introduced an intervention. They trained 120 women in alternative careers such as tailoring and aari embroidery. Some women started their own tailoring businesses from home, while others found job opportunities in garment units thus igniting flames of entrepreneurship and job creation, offering a ray of hope amidst the shadows of traditional industries.

"My life changed when I started working at

Yellow Bag. Not only do I have a steady job that supports my family, but I've also found a community of strong, supportive women who uplift each other every day." - Priya, Employee at Yellow Bag

The majority of the workforce comprises women from marginalised communities. Their employment not only enables them to provide better education for their children but also empowers them to achieve financial independence, thereby strengthening their resilience against domestic abuse.

"Through our women's tailoring network, we have successfully established a micro-enterprise that produces cloth bags using eco-friendly materials and processes. Our model ensures that producers receive approximately 25% of the value of each cloth bag, contributing to their economic empowerment. Moreover, our efforts have resulted in creating over 1410 months of employment for women and have facilitated better education for over

500 students," says Krishnan.

Yellow Bag's impact transcends economic empowerment. Founded with a vision to transform society, Yellow Bag pioneers educational initiatives tailored to the needs of low-income children. Local individuals deeply rooted in the community through these programs nurture confidence and resilience, providing a lifeline for those vulnerable to abuse and violence.

As Kani Mohamad, the leader of educational initiatives at Yellow Bag, emphasises, the educational programs are tailored to the needs of low-income children, aiming to empower them to express themselves and be

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their potential. By providing guidance and fostering self-confidence, we help these children understand that they can achieve anything they set their minds to. Our interactive sessions, covering eight different fields of intelligence, are designed to engage and inspire. Our goal is not just academic; it's to provide holistic support, especially for those facing abuse and violence, ensuring their overall well-being."

Yellow Bag proudly belongs to Good Market, a special community uniting social enterprises, cooperatives, responsible businesses, civic organisations, networks, and changemakers. This curated community ensures that its members adhere to global standards and ethics, verified by the Social Enterprise World Forum (SEWF). SEWF's mission is to foster the growth of the global

social enterprise movement, facilitating a shift towards a new impact-driven economy. Notably, Yellow Bag was chosen as one of nine social enterprises from India to participate in the prestigious Upaya-YSB accelerator program stands as a beacon of integrity and authenticity in an age of green washing.

Aligned with the government's efforts to promote cloth bags, Yellow Bag embodies the spirit of Meendum Manjappai Iyakkam, reminding us of our elders' wisdom and the simple yet profound impact of conscious choices.

In a world where many claim to be sustainable for marketing purposes, Yellow Bag stands out as a true force for genuine impact. By supporting Yellow Bag, we not only protect the environment but also nurture the well-being of our communities, one vibrant tote at a time.

Kezia. S



CHARTING THE COURSE: COP AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Concerned citizens of the world view the COP forums as important markers for global leaders' steps to address climate change. Each annual meeting is looked forward to, partly with anticipation for what it will achieve and partly with trepidation that it may not take us much further.

The UAE was host to COP28 from November 30 to December 13 in 2023. Observers witnessed detailed discussions, negotiations and redrafting of statements which resulted in successes as well as disappointments on the countries' intentions, goals and results so far.

India's stance at COP28, as with earlier forums, was an equitable approach. Climate change action must be prioritised and environmental commitments met. At the same time, these must be balanced with developmental needs and include a fair and just consideration of the interests of developing nations.

Was COP28 a success or not? Are all countries doing what they can to help the world? Here is a rough and ready outline of some of the thoughts that were reported, to assess for ourselves where the balance lies.

COP Milestones: where are we

In the first COP In 1995, countries came together in Berlin. Presided over by the then German Environment Minister, Angela Merkel, they agreed to meet annually to maintain control over global warming and evaluate the need to reduce emissions of polluting gases.

In 1997 the Kyoto Protocol was the first treaty outlining the commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions reduction emissions. Industrialised countries, largely accountable for the current levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, were the ones responsible for taking action.

Then in 2015 came the Paris Agreement, which was legally binding on all signatories, not just industrialised nations. This agreement mentioned a specific number : the goal was to prevent global average temperature from rising more than 2°C above preindustrial levels.

A second aim was mentioned, that of pursuing efforts to keep temperature rise below 1.5°C. These targets and the creation of individual country plans for climate action, called Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), gave the Paris Agreement the distinction of creating a more practical, realistic framework to work within.

However, despite these and other efforts at successive COP meetings, as recently as November 2023 the UN Environment Programme reported an alarming trend: the world is headed towards a 2.7°C increase in temperature, significantly higher than targeted under the Paris Agreement.

While intentions had been good, results were disturbing. COP 28 delegates and the host, UAE, clearly had a challenge ahead to arrive at hard, actionable steps.

Global Stocktake

An important element presented at COP28 was the first five-year Global Stocktake, an assessment process of the world's collective progress towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement.

The results showed that current commitments are far from adequate to meet the 1.5°C goal. It also showed a huge gap in support towards developing countries, pointing to the need for trillions of dollars towards climate action and climate-resilient development in these vulnerable areas.

Reductions in emissions and emissions intensity

Given the data, one important outcome of the UAE summit was that all nations agreed to accelerate transition away from fossil fuels and richer countries agreed to lead the way.

In terms of the wording used, the countries noted the

need for "deep, rapid, and sustained reductions" in emissions to meet the 1.5°C warming threshold set by the Paris Agreement, in a "just, orderly and equitable manner". This agreement, considered one of the bigger achievements of the summit, builds on what was agreed at COP26 in 2021 at Glasgow, where the 1.5°C target was first crystallised and the phase down of coal (responsible for 40% of annual CO2 emissions) was first brought to the table.

Changes to Nationally Determined Contributions

The COP 28 decision underscores that new NDCs have to be more ambitious if the 1.5°C target is to be met. In this new paradigm, the world must reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60% from 2019 levels by 2035.

Countries should enhance current actions to reduce emissions. The NDCs are now expected to include plans and priorities for adaptation, transition efforts, details on loss and damage. Transformation plans are envisaged to be across multiple sectors, including clean energy, nature conservation and road transport, among others.

A welcome milestone was in the form of nations formal commitment to integrate food and food systems into their



NDCs by 2025, a topic that was first introduced at Egypt in COP27. Nearly 160 nations, covering nearly 80% of the world's land, signed the relevant declaration on sustainable agriculture and related climate action. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) released a roadmap on how to curb climate change while also eliminating hunger.

India's long-term commitment to sustainable agriculture and the Save Soil movement falls within the ambit of these actions. The National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture promotes sustainable agriculture practices through policies and incentives, including water use efficiency, soil health management, and the adoption of organic farming.

While changes to the NDCs are a welcome move, unfortunately, there was no agreement on a timescale within which all countries must take their agreed actions or what commitments would be met by high-income countries for a transition.

India's NDC and its progress

Like other countries, India's approach is to align climate action with its economic growth and developmental concerns. The 2030 NDC goals the country submitted were to reduce its emissions intensity of its GDP by 33-35% below 2005 levels and to achieve a 40% ratio of electricity from non-fossil fuel sources.

Achieving these targets well ahead of time, India has subsequently pledged (in August 22), to increase the respective 2030 NDC targets to 45% reduction in emissions intensity and 50% share of non-fossil fuel power in overall electricity production. The country is on track to achieve these targets too.

Despite its commitments to expanding renewable energy, however, India maintained its position on not phasing out coal-generated electricity in the near term due to economic and developmental reasons. India also did not sign the "Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge" at COP28, citing concerns over the implications of phasing out coal.

Operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund

India played a significant role in advocating for the adoption of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP28. The Fund, designed to compensate developing countries that are disproportionately affected by climate-change damages, was operationalised through receiving an initial corpus of roughly USD 700 million. Contributions include USD 100 million each from the UAE and Germany and USD 245 million from the EU.

While much appreciated as one of the successes of the event, experts mention there is far to go. This is a fraction of the economic costs of loss and damage actually incurred by developing countries.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One Future

Reiterating its message of global unity that was the theme of G20, India's exhibits at its Pavilion showcased the impact that can be created by change in lifestyles and consumption patterns. The Save Soil Pavilion too, echoed its message that protecting the soil is imperative to saving the planet. The discussions added to those on sustainable agriculture, spreading awareness through a number of public events and discussions

Looking Forward

As with all things, there were two sides to the coin. Some successes, some disappointments.

On balance, though some essential steps were initiated, countries need to make strong targets, begin delivering on these and create processes to ensure adherence. All this while ensuring more finance is mobilised to aid developing countries. Each COP meeting is looked forward to eagerly, not just by the social sector but everyone who is concerned about the fate of the world, and each one's successes are built upon those that came before. The next one is in Azerbaijan. Will countries, including India, be able to demonstrate their serious intent to keep the world safe for future generations?

The stock answer is Time will Tell. But time is what is running out now, and at a rapid pace. Perhaps the old saying could help : what gets measured gets achieved. Could governments use AI tools that are available today for measuring and reporting achievable metrics at quarterly intervals? This may help to adapt plans and achieve the overall 1.5°C goal.

Governments like ours who hold themselves responsible for their citizens' welfare need to act fast, potentially sacrificing some of the luxuries we enjoy today for the benefit of our children's future welfare, health and well-being.

Karuna Luthar

AT THE CROSSROADS OF EDUCATIONAL AND LIVELIHOOD REFORM

Kishanganj, Bihar is a culturally rich district located close to both the Nepali and Bangladeshi borders. Dismal literacy levels and economic disparities in this district pose a challenge that has taken on myriad forms over time. Yuman Hussain, Executive Director of Azad India Foundation, shares about the work that she and her team have been doing for nearly twenty two years now. Providing some context to how the organisation began, Yuman says, “Azad India Foundation was established in memory of my late father-in-law, Azad Mohammed Hussain. A visionary Muslim leader in Bihar, he was a six-time MLA who set up several schools and colleges in Kishanganj. He had also served as the Health Minister for Bihar. When he passed away in the 1990s, my mother-in-law wished to continue his legacy by establishing a non-profit organisation that would work along his progressive ideals”.

Literacy levels in Kishanganj have been abysmal. The communities settled in the area have been especially averse to sending their girl children to school. In fact, some families did not even let their girls step out of the house.

Around 1998, armed with an M.Phil in Sociology from the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Yuman along with her mother in law, started Azad India Foundation. She says she was eager to use all the knowledge she had, to improve the conditions in the region. So, together they set up an education centre and a stitching centre. Today the organisation is supported by 115 project staff.

Gradually, the organisation began to work with schools across different blocks. “Foundational literacy and numeracy development are our main focus. We have been helping to send children from over a hundred villages into mainstream schools”, says Yuman. Today, Azad India Foundation operates several education centres spread across 20 villages in the Thakurganj and Pothia blocks under Girl Education Program. Keeping with their mission, last year, 600 girls were transitioned into mainstream schools, ranging from elementary school to high school. Innovative teaching and learning methodologies play a pivotal role in improving the learning outcomes of these children. Access to library books across all these educational centres is yet another factor that has contributed to this success.

The Badhte Kadam project focuses on early literacy which involves the use of workbooks and activity sheets. From 2016, the organisation has successfully transitioned over 7,000 children into mainstream schools from Kindergarten to Class III. Currently 5000 children are directly studying in 120 learning centres in Thakurganj and Baisi Blocks.

“We work with school managements, training them on their roles and responsibilities, creating awareness on the different issues the communities face and try to get the managements to work with us”, says Yuman.

When the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, the dropout rates skyrocketed. Access to school managements also diminished. Though the organisation kept in touch with the students through the internet and WhatsApp, something else happened. Fathers and brothers of families, who had been working as migrant labourers in the rest of the country, were forced to return home. With their regular incomes cut off indefinitely, children

began to be used as labourers, or sent to work in the fields. Disinterest towards schools kept mounting. Says Yuman, “When schools finally reopened after the pandemic, while there was a 16% dropout among girls, there was a whopping 40% dropout among boys. We are now pivoting to focus on getting boys back into schools.”

In order to keep the programs geared towards career-success, Azad India Foundation teams up with individual donors and organisational partners to provide technology access- computers in the learning centres, local Madrasahs and schools; sponsorships to learn Tally; donating and/or shared sewing machines at the stitching centres. This helps improve to retain learners. Yuman explains, “There are no industries in Kishanganj. However, something as versatile as a sewing machine makes a world of a difference. Girls can now earn Rs. 4000-5000 per month through sewing”

In ten villages, Azad India Foundation run women literacy program and work with self-help groups linked with Jeevika program run by Govt of Bihar. AIF support women to buy goats, cows and set up shop. “Goats are quick to multiply. We get the SHGs trained by the Agricultural University on how to care for these animals”, explains Yuman.

For the past three years, through a Community Entitlement Program, they have been helping locals get their government-issued IDs such as Aadhar Card, Voter ID, residency certificate, etc. This helps gains access to useful government schemes such as old age pension, widow pension, Kanyadaan/Kanya Samriddhi Yojana, and so on. Over 7000 people have already benefitted from this program. “Sometimes there are discrepancies from one ID to another. Unless someone points it out and helps rectify the errors, the locals will never know and continue to suffer. We keep a list of government schemes and the list of documents required to obtain them. Women who lost their husbands a few years ago, living on the sheer goodwill (or lack thereof) of their local community, have started receiving their widow-pensions. Even if the amounts are paltry, it’s something they can put to good use”, adds Yuman.

Kishanganj is home to a large Surjapuri community, and a smaller Shershahbadi community. The Shershahbadis, self-proclaimed descendants of the historical figure Sher Shah Suri, are a Bengali-speaking community that have settled in this region for at least 400 years now. They are a conservative group that limits its interaction with the outside world. Their traditional embroidery, called Kheta, is a unique craft that makes the embroidery blend right into the fabric. Yuman, with the help of a friend who published papers about this unique craft outside of India, garnered enough support to make sure that the Shershahbadi community are recognised, trained in commercialising their craft and also get stipends from the government. In 2023, UNESCO included information about Kheta embroidery in their handbook. The women were organised into self help groups and have since been invited to set up stalls at fairs and exhibitions, including at the central government’s Atmanirbhar Bharat Mandapam.

When asked what her vision for the future is, Yuman says, “I would like every boy and girl to be sent to school. I’m worried about the alarming rate of dropouts among boys in recent years. Girls need the education because the men still control the purse in their families. In order for women to be major decision makers, they need to be financially independent and literacy is the route to get there!”



MISSION PULICAT



Since 2007, AARDE has been an actively engaged not-for-profit registered trust dedicated to promoting and conserving the natural and built heritage of Pulicat Lagoon. Its mission finds support through a range of activities, such as training and the sale of Palm-Leaf Craft, organizing workshops and architecture film festivals, as well as offering consultancy and research services.

The founder of AARDE, Xavier Benedict, also a member of ICOMOS-India and IUCN-CEM, holds degrees from prestigious institutions including the School of Architecture and Planning (SAP) in Chennai and Lancaster University Management School in the UK. As Founder-Trustee of the AARDE Foundation, he leads initiatives focused on conserving the Pulicat Lagoon, even as he has overseen design and construction of educational institutions, IT parks and infrastructure developments.

The organization's campaigns in Pulicat are spread across grassroot, national and international levels. As a member of the United Nations Habitat (UN-H) and The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR), AARDE actively participates in forums to advocate for the preservation of the Pulicat Lagoon on an international platform.

The organization also engages in continuous dialogue with state agencies, public, and the media to raise awareness and drive positive change for the lagoon. Since 2009, the foundation has organized exhibitions, workshops, and research initiatives across India to amplify its message.

Since it began in 2009, AARDE (Art & Architecture Research, Development and Education) Foundation has been committed to fostering a socially responsible and environmentally sustainable future through its not-for-profit architecture and design services.

Established by a consortium of distinguished professionals and registered under the Indian Trust Acts, the foundation has focused its work across both, rural and urban platforms. AARDE has actively engaged in the promotion and preservation of the Pulicat Lagoon, which is the second-largest brackish water lagoon in South Asia. The initiative is emblematic of the organization's commitment to nurturing and



conserving natural resources.

AARDE has also facilitated dialogue between architecture and the public. Through workshops, architecture-themed film festivals, and lectures, AARDE has created a vibrant exchange of ideas and perspectives within the urban context.

However, at the heart of its efforts lies AARDE's grassroots campaign. Through holistic sensitization activities, including local camps, quizzes, and workshops, the organization aims to garner support from inhabitants of the Pulicat Lagoon. The Pulicat Museum serves as a cornerstone of its ground-level actions, adding significant value to various endeavors.

Part of the work that AARDE does in Pulicat involves empowering over 120 female fisherfolk through palm-leaf craft. The traditional craft is known to improve the income of the women belonging to self-help groups and protect the environment. The birth anniversary of Chennai is generally celebrated at Pulicat through traditional catamaran races, quiz, drawing & kolam competitions.

However, AARDE's efforts in Pulicat don't stand in isolation. Part of the work the AARDE Foundation does, is revival of the cotton route along the Coromandel Coast. The TN coastline, or the Coromandel Coast, was the largest export base of cotton until the 19th century. Archival records prove that more than 4,500 ships visited Pulicat for over two centuries, with European and Japanese communities



visiting India to trade in cotton.

Given that cotton cultivators have lost their economic foothold, AARDE Foundation's project aims at revival of indigenous cotton in order to secure the economy of the Pulicat community along the Coromandel Coast that cultivates the cotton crop.

The locality's general hospital building, formerly the Dutch Governor's Office, dates back to the 1640s and stands in Pulicat. Damaged during the Thane cyclone in 2010, the historic structure was left in ruins. Efforts are now underway, in collaboration with TN-PWD and donors, to restore this significant edifice. The renovation of this building into a hospital holds the potential to benefit over 33 villages in and around Pulicat, revitalizing healthcare services for the community.

Today, Pulicat is in the midst of an environmental crisis. The erosion of sand barrier islands in the region poses a significant threat, as it would remove natural defenses against cyclones and adverse climate events. Experts warn that the proposed port expansion could exacerbate the issue by narrowing the mouth of the River Kosasthalaiyar, Chennai's largest natural drain, leading to overloaded floodplains and heightened flood risk for the city. Moreover, the expansion could endanger the adjacent Pulicat Bird Sanctuary, which is a protected area.

Frequent development and infrastructure projects have impacted the delicate ecological balance of the Pulicat Lagoon and several thousands of fisherfolk in the region fear for their livelihoods. Experts estimate that efforts by multiple conservationists and NGOs will be required to bring more awareness and sensitization to the issues faced by the region, and how they impact the local community.

AARDE's role in all this will be keenly watched even as the organization has stood up for the local community before, spreading awareness about the region on national and international platforms. A grassroots intervention or greater awareness may well be the way forward in the attempt to save the Pulicat Lagoon and the community that dwells within.

Rahul Philip

A BOLT, A PLATE, A HORSE'S CLEAT

There's a famous Telugu poet named Sri Sri who has said that it is the everyday ordinary object such as bolts, plates, cleats and such that are in fact pregnant with poetry, and it is up to the poet to divine what they are saying to him. When I look around a farm, I'm reminded of this because everything on and around a farm is equally generative - so many of these things not only inspire poetry, but can also generate cold, hard cash. This article is about (no, not about everything poetic on farms, that would become an endless treatise) the various activities that can potentially be engaged in by an organic farmer, in addition to farming, to generate income. As we'll see, it's a long and interesting list, and also one limited only by the farmers' creativity...

One of the major challenges organic farmers face is the unpredictability of Nature. This being the case, it becomes important to set up and operate multiple streams of income, so that even when there is some unexpected occurrence like unseasonal rain or locusts or a cyclone, there is still some income coming in from somewhere. The first and foremost action to be taken of course, is to ensure that as a farmer, you are not dependent on a single crop such as paddy or groundnut or watermelon for your livelihood - multicropping, and also investing in trees rather than seasonal crops, is absolutely essential to survive the vagaries of organic farming. Once you have an organic multicropping farm going, here are some of the things you can do with it, over and above selling the food you produce. It goes without saying that in addition to selling your produce raw, you can also preserve it in various ways such as pickle it, dry and powder it, etc. Its ways other than selling your produce in some form that I want to focus on today.

Education:

A working organic farm has so much to teach us that it almost defies categorisation. Dr. Montessori had in fact based one entire tier of her education system on farm life. This stage is called Erdkinder, and revolves around adolescents learning about, and in the midst of Nature. She envisaged youngsters working on self-sustaining farms, picking up crucial survival and organisational skills along the way, and emerging as conscious and independent adults at the end of the erdkinder years. In our current world, I'm not sure how feasible it is to start and sustain an erdkinder-style education system on organic farms, but even without going the whole way, I think organic farm visits have a lot to offer children, teens and adults by way of education. They can all be involved in sowing, transplanting, harvesting, weighing,



preserving and packaging farm produce. Being involved in the process goes a long way into giving people an appreciation of food, how it is grown, and how blasphemous it is to waste it. I've heard multitudes of parents marveling at the complete turnaround that their children have undergone with respect to being picky about food or wasting it on their plates, after a visit to our farm.

Another



experience that visitors to the farm enjoy is the taste of food before it goes through the process-it-to-death cycle, and its body gets mummified in plastic. For instance, did you know that poor dal / pigeon pea (used in masoor dal / pigeon pea (used in masoor dal) comes in green pods as soft, green spherical seeds, and is absolutely delicious to have raw? Or, that lemon just plucked and squeezed actually has a sweetish tinge (its a fruit after all) and is just so yum to have with plain water and no added sugar? Another fact people find surprising is that sweet-lime (mosambi) is actually hard on the outside! It just gets all soft and weak with all the travel from the tree to the market, and that's why it feels squishy when we buy it at the store.

Secondary school and high-school curricula now offer agriculture as a subject in the Xth and XIIth, and tying up with local schools to make this paper

come alive, and actually mean something, is another way organic farms can offer education.

Eco-Entertainment:

Farms are very happening places - there's never a dull moment. Spiders are spinning webs, insects are building cocoons, kittens are chasing each other up and down trees at an unbelievable speed, dogs are scheming and barking over territorial matters, calves are getting separated from their moms and making this known very very loudly, birds are hosting volume-oriented chirping competitions, the water is gushing, the wind is rushing and the sun wants to take it all in completely by getting into every nook and cranny without sparing a single one. If you just sat and listened to it all, it feels like a thousand intricate stories being told simultaneously - if you so

much as spoke a word, you would miss a crucial twist in all those plots. This is real entertainment - it's the panorama of life unfolding in front of your eyes. If people could experience this a few times, I bet they would find screen-games extraordinarily lame and limiting.

For those who can't take in the whole picture, you can still offer smaller slices of fun like bird watching, plant spotting, leaf naming, sunrise and sunset watches, and the like. Gathering all the ingredients available and cooking a meal with these ingredients is not only a challenge to culinary creativity but makes for a really fun activity too. Walking and hiking, exploring the countryside around, climbing trees and hillocks, plucking fruits, vegetable and leaves correctly for the market, feeding the various creatures around, creating photographic masterpieces out of everything present, setting up a tea station and having a cuppa, are some of the other activities the organic farmer

can offer visitors. (Please note that most of these are not possible on a chemical farm where everything is poisoned to death, and the crops are poisoned almost to death)

Leisure:

Many farms have a special blessing - no cell signal. There is so much rest in not being in electronic contact with anyone at all. You can just be you. In fact, this is what 'being you' really means I think, to be one's self, happily oblivious of what anyone else is doing or thinking (or buying!)

Of course, for an organic farmer to set up the systems to make all these activities possible is a good bit of work. But we as the potential beneficiaries of these activities can start the ball rolling by asking to visit. And if the farmer asks us why we want to visit their place, the answer is simple - it's because everything everywhere around Nature is Poetry waiting to be seen, heard, read and written.

A. Ramashree



The author Ramashree Paranandi is a partner in The Organic Farm, located near Nedumaram, TN. She consults on all aspects of the farm and often stays over for long stretches to enjoy pollution-free days with the other farm creatures. When in Chennai, she writes, teaches and sings. She can be reached at aramashree@eltconsultancy.org

"Through social entrepreneurship, we aim to empower young people to creatively address societal challenges while fostering innovation and sustainable solutions."

Fr. Jerry Thomas shares with Marie Banu the social entrepreneurship initiatives of Bosco Institute

Fr Jerry Thomas is the director of Bosco in Jorhat (Assam) Institute affiliated with Dibrugarh University. The institute offers a Master's program in Social Work to prepare professionally sound and socially committed social workers in and around India's North East.

In an exclusive interview, Fr. Jerry Thomas shares with Marie Banu the social entrepreneurship initiatives of Bosco Institute.

How do you see your transition from traditional social work to social entrepreneurship, and what prompted this shift?

My journey into social work began with extensive involvement in youth-related issues within schools and colleges. After completing my MSW, my focus shifted towards understanding the challenges faced by young people. Additionally, a close encounter with security forces during the height of the insurgency in Assam further fuelled my interest in social issues that pose challenges to youth, transforming them from intellectual concerns to personal challenges.

The journey from traditional social work to embracing social entrepreneurship has been transformative. We began introducing sessions on violence and conflict resolution and peace-building, recognising the need to address these issues proactively. My tenure at various youth development and social development offices deepened my understanding of the complexities young people face, particularly in regions marked by conflict like the Northeast. It became evident that merely advocating for peace was insufficient; we needed to create avenues for sustainable livelihoods. This realisation prompted our foray into entrepreneurship, initially with a romanticised vision but gradually evolving into a more structured approach.

We recognised that passion alone was not enough; sustainability was crucial. Thus, we integrated entrepreneurial elements into our programs, empowering young changemakers to not only address social issues but also sustain their initiatives financially. This journey has been characterised by experimentation and learning from failures, emphasising adaptability and resilience over rigid structures.

Pl tell us the impact Youth Involve initiative has had so far?

Our alumni have established approximately 17 social entrepreneur ventures, and they actively collaborate with each other, potentially involving over 20 alumni in various projects. Initially, our program was exclusive to our students, but we later expanded it to include others within certain limitations. Through this expansion, we have facilitated the initiation of around 31 entrepreneurial ventures under the umbrella of Youth Involve. Our primary goal is to provide a platform where young dreams do not die young and/or need not fear failure. We believe in offering opportunities for individuals



to pursue their dreams, even if they may not ultimately succeed. The journey itself helps them discover their true calling, even if some may decide to pursue other paths due to external pressures.

Currently, around 23 ventures remain active, while others have diversified into different endeavours. We are committed to building a robust network of these initiatives, although we are still deliberating on the optimal structure and approach. In our current cohort, comprising 13 ventures, we emphasise the importance of attendance at incubation and review meetings. These gatherings not only foster professional development but also cultivate personal connections through shared stories and experiences.

Managing an enterprise comes with its own set of challenges. How do you support your entrepreneurs in overcoming these challenges?

Throughout the two years of support we provide, we work closely with our participants to refine their focus and establish their vision and mission. Once their focus is clear, the path they take to achieve their goals can vary. Our assistance involves several components. We conduct regular review meetings, which are well attended by most participants. Additionally, we offer input sessions tailored to their specific needs.

Moreover, we provide coaching sessions that continue throughout their two-year journey, typically occurring every two to three weeks for about six months. During these sessions, which last for about an hour to an hour and a half, a coach accompanies them, addressing both professional and personal aspects. This holistic approach has proven beneficial for many.

Upon completion of the program, we facilitate connections with similar organisations and resource providers. We also keep them informed about potential grant opportunities. While not all ventures may succeed, participants develop valuable skills and may explore other training avenues. Occasionally, we offer financial support, but participants often find resources independently as well.

Another important aspect of our approach is delegating responsibilities to senior participants, including managing applications, screening, and

interviews. This not only empowers them but also enriches their experience.

Could you share a success story from your program that highlights the transformative power of social entrepreneurship?

One notable individual is Jenpu from Dimapur, whose journey is quite inspiring. Despite not having completed higher secondary school due to difficult circumstances at home, including alcoholism, domestic violence and drug addiction in the family, Jenpu took it upon himself to make a change. He started an organisation with the aim of addressing these issues, facing scepticism from others who questioned his motives. However, he persisted, driven by a genuine desire to make a difference. His determination led him to apply for the Change Looms fellowship in Delhi, for which I conducted his interview.

During our conversation, I was deeply moved by his sincerity and commitment, and I told him, "I trust you", despite any doubts. This simple act of trust had a profound impact on Jenpu, boosting his confidence and resolve. Today, he is employing over 20 MSWs and has expanded his organisation's initiatives, collaborating with various stakeholders including government agencies, district administrations, and financial institutions. His efforts have garnered attention from the government, donors in India, and on international platforms, like the BBC which interviewed him. He attended the recently concluded World Social Forum in Nepal. Despite facing personal challenges, Jenpu remains highly motivated, leading his team with enthusiasm and fearlessness. His story serves as a testament to the power of perseverance and the impact of trust and support in transforming lives.

What are your future plans for expanding your initiatives in social entrepreneurship?

We're planning to establish an alumni organisation and events that bring together young entrepreneurs in the region, thereby strengthening the ecosystem. Many young individuals are engaged in various activities but may not identify themselves as entrepreneurs. Our goal is to create a platform where they can converge, share ideas, and learn from each other. This is the driving force behind organising the upcoming confluence.

The idea is to expose young people to innovative ways of engaging with community issues and to harness the abundant resources of our region, rather than seeing all the wealth flow outward. We also aim to preserve their cultural heritage and traditional skills while leveraging technology to create this platform.

Evaluations and strategic planning are underway to chart the future path for our institution, which has evolved from being just a college. We have signed MoUs with nearby colleges, and our vision is to create a hub that fosters entrepreneurship through internships, volunteering, exposure, trainings, and word-of-mouth promotion.

Additionally, we have set up a makerspace in partnership with Turbit, a youth-led enterprise based in Shillong, where young minds can explore their creativity, learn to use tools, and innovate solutions for their communities. By channelling the media exposure that today's youth receive into focused entrepreneurial thinking, we aim to instil confidence in them to solve problems creatively and make a positive impact in their surroundings. The concept revolves around offering opportunities for recreation, creation, and innovation, aligning with our vision for the future.