

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 12 | Issue 3|March 2024 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdsrstrust.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

Champions of change

About MSDS Awards for Farmers

Innovators



3

The Nature's Touch

Yamunadevi's venture that focuses on re-purposing agricultural by-products into essential oils and herbal products

Trendsetters



9

Embracing Nature's Way

Balaji, a Computer Science graduate who revolutionised and changed the ways of stereotypical organic farming

Chit Chat



12

"Building a successful venture requires dedication, hard work, and a willingness to learn from failures."

An exclusive interview with Mr. R. Mananathan, Chairman, Manatec Group Companies

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Agriculture remains not only a fundamental pillar of Indian economy, but also a poignant symbol of the nation's identity and heritage. Yet, amidst the challenges and transformations of the modern era, the image of the Indian farmer has evolved beyond that of a mere tiller of the land. Today, we celebrate the rise of farmer entrepreneurs, innovators who are reshaping the agricultural landscape with their vision, resilience, and ingenuity.

India's agrarian sector has long been characterized by its reliance on traditional farming practices, often constrained by limited access to resources, technology, and markets. However, in recent years, a new wave of farmer entrepreneurs has emerged, leveraging technology, knowledge, and business acumen to revolutionize farming and agribusiness. These visionary individuals are not only producers but also value creators, tapping into new markets, diversifying crops, and adopting sustainable practices.

On March 16, 2024, MSDS Trust is recognising the achievements of farmer entrepreneurs at the Annual Sadguru Gnanananda Awards event. The event serve as a platform to celebrate the transformative impact of farmer entrepreneurs on India's agricultural sector. From innovative farming techniques to agri-tech start-ups, the Awards showcase the diversity and dynamism of India's agricultural innovators.

At the heart of the farmer entrepreneurship movement lies a spirit of empowerment and resilience. These individuals are not waiting for handouts or relying solely on government support; they are taking charge of their destinies, seizing opportunities, and driving change from the ground up. Moreover, the rise of farmer entrepreneurship holds immense promise for addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing Indian agriculture. By fostering innovation and diversification, these entrepreneurs are enhancing productivity, improving food security, and promoting sustainability. They are also creating new employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, and empowering fellow farmers to unlock their full potential.

As we celebrate the achievements of farmer entrepreneurs, let us also reaffirm our commitment to empowering and uplifting the entire agricultural community. Let us recognize that the future of Indian agriculture lies not just in the fields but also in the minds and hearts of visionary individuals who dare to dream, innovate, and transform.

By championing farmer entrepreneurship, we can unlock the full potential of India's agrarian economy and chart a path towards a more prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive future.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

EMBRACING SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

In the heart of Chennai lies Kazhani Native Farms, a beacon of sustainable agriculture founded by Mr. Gokul. Raised in a rural village amidst a farming backdrop, Mr. Gokul brings four years of dedicated experience to his venture. Witnessing the rapid detachment of society from nature, Kazhani Native Farms stands firm on the principle of leaving behind a greener legacy for future generations, rekindling our innate bond with the natural world.

At the core to their mission is a return to simplicity, advocating for a minimalist lifestyle deeply rooted in nature. Through fostering a sense of community, Kazhani Native Farms transcends the mere role of a supplier, inviting people to participate actively in farm activities, be it weeding, watering the plants or harvesting crops. Their doors open as early as 7 am, welcoming visitors to embrace the serenity of morning while handpicking fresh produce for their households.

With a commitment to purity, the farm proudly offers a diverse array of chemical-free, GMO-free goods, from vegetables and greens to millets, cold-pressed oils, dairy products and even venturing into cosmetics. Yet, Kazhani Native Farms is more than just a business; it's a platform for societal enrichment. Collaborating with social entrepreneurs, self-help groups, and eco-conscious educational institutions, they empower marginalized communities, including autistic children, nurturing a stronger bond with nature. Partnering with the NGOs, they also offer tailored farm sessions for young adults aged 14 and above, promoting holistic learning and sustainable living.

Gokul has a vibrant social network, linking over 1000 families, encompassing 600+ consumers and 380+ farmers, ranging from individuals to small-scale farmers, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and groups committed to organic and biodynamic farming across Tamil Nadu. They ensure a smooth supply chain, even during the monsoon season. Additionally, value-added items such as pickles, *masalas*, snacks, and savouries are crafted with the help of individuals from self-help groups and homemakers, nurturing employment opportunities within the community.

"Kazhani Native Farms has completely transformed my farming experience. Commitment to sustainable practices, diverse crop cultivation, and direct connections with consumers have revolutionized my livelihood. I'm grateful for the empowerment and sense of hope it brings to agriculture," expressed a farmer.

Operating within the urban sprawl of Chennai poses unique challenges, including transportation costs, agricultural workers, and seasonal disruptions. To address these issues, plans are underway to establish a backup farm closer to the city, guaranteeing a continuous supply chain even during monsoon disruptions. Additionally, innovative farming techniques, such as multi-cropping and strategic tree plantations, maximize land utilization while combating

soil degradation prevalent in sandy terrains.

Gokul employs a diverse farming approach called multi-cropping, where multiple crops are cultivated simultaneously. For instance, radishes are grown alongside vegetables, acting as natural mulch to conserve soil nutrients and moisture. Strategically planted trees like papaya, drumstick, plantain provide partial shade, enabling essential sunlight to reach the crops. This creates an ideal microclimate for plant growth, alleviating the impact of Chennai's intense heat. Through thorough research and experimentation with alternative planting methods, they have customized the farm layout to flourish in varied environmental conditions.

Embracing sustainability, Kazhani Native Farms not only grows traditional crops but also ventures into creating value-added products like millet-based idli and dosa batter, meeting modern consumer preferences. However, the farm's commitment to freshness underscores the importance of local production, minimizing transit times from farm to table for

perishable items. "The importance lies in gradually adapting to these lifestyle changes, urging individuals to incorporate them slowly and consistently," he emphasizes.

Highlighting agriculture as India's backbone, Gokul laments the underutilization of fertile land due to a shortage of young or second-generation farmers. He explains, "Many farmers encourage their children to pursue alternative careers, leading to a decline in agricultural knowledge and expertise. Even those eager to re-enter farming encounter challenges like land scarcity or inadequate training."

Recognizing the potential for economic empowerment, he advocates for farmer education on value-added products. By transforming raw materials into finished goods, farmers can demand higher prices, boosting their income. He proposes a direct farmer-consumer

relationship, bypassing intermediaries to meet consumer demands more efficiently. This not only enhances farmers' revenue but also ensures consumers access healthier, locally sourced products they can trust.

Looking ahead to 2024, Kazhani Native Farms aims not only to expand its commercial footprint but also to educate the younger generation on living in harmony with nature. "My focus is on experiential learning and encouraging parents to expose children to the wonders of farming rather than the allure of urban consumerism," he says.

At its core, Kazhani Native Farms epitomizes the resilience of Indian agriculture, connecting farmers and consumers while championing sustainable practices. As Mr. Gokul envisions, a future where farming isn't merely a profession but a cherished way of life, preserving the rich tapestry of India's agrarian heritage for generations to come.

Kezia . S



CHAMPIONING ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

Shankar, a distinguished chemical engineer, embarked on a remarkable journey of transformation in 1992. After spending years as a water treatment engineer, Shankar redirected his expertise towards a cause close to his heart – organic agriculture and soil health. This shift marked the beginning of a new chapter in Shankar's life, one dedicated to promoting sustainable farming practices and addressing the pressing issue of soil carbon depletion.

As Shankar reminisces about his early career, he recalls the pivotal moments that shaped his journey. "I began my career in 1972 as a chemical water treatment consultant, immersed in the world of conventional engineering practices," Shankar shares. "However, over time, I became increasingly aware of the environmental repercussions of chemical-intensive approaches, particularly in agriculture."

The 'green revolution' era, characterised by the widespread adoption of high-input agricultural practices, left a profound impact on Shankar. "The green revolution brought about significant increases in agricultural productivity but also led to detrimental effects on soil health," he explains.

"The excessive use of nitrogen-based fertilizers depleted soil carbon levels, posing long-term sustainability challenges."

Driven by a desire to address these challenges, Shankar made a bold decision to transition from conventional engineering to the realm of organic agriculture. "In 1992, I took a complete U-turn and delved into the manufacturing of biologicals for organic farming and solid waste management," Shankar recounts. "It was a leap of faith, but I was compelled by a sense of responsibility to contribute to a more sustainable future."

For Shankar, the heart of organic agriculture lies in soil health and carbon restoration. "Soil carbon depletion is a critical issue that demands immediate attention," Shankar emphasises. "Without



sufficient soil carbon, agricultural productivity and ecosystem resilience are compromised."

Over the past 15 years, Shankar has been a vocal advocate for soil carbon restoration and organic farming practices.

"Organic farming offers a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on regenerative practices that enhance soil health," Shankar explains. "By prioritising organic matter inputs, such as compost, green manure, and cover crops, we can replenish soil carbon and promote long-term sustainability."

"While organic farming has gained traction in recent years, the restoration of soil carbon remains a largely overlooked aspect," he observes. "We must bridge this gap by prioritising soil health and implementing regenerative practices on a broader scale."

Despite the growing interest in organic agriculture, Shankar highlights the need for greater awareness and action. The

concept of profitability is highly subjective, he says. "For instance, if a farmer sells onions for 20 rupees per kilogram this year and the next year they sell for 18 rupees, they might perceive a loss of 2 rupees. However, if the cost of production remains at 10 rupees per kilogram, they still make a profit of 10 rupees per kilogram, compared to 8 rupees the following year. Despite this, the farmer may lament a loss, failing to acknowledge that profit is still being made."

"In organic farming, the dynamics shift further," he adds. "Organic practices often entail lower productivity due to cultural methods, necessitating standardised practices. While some countries like India have implemented such standards in certain regions, resistance to change persists. For example, substances like *Panchakavya*, considered an organic nutrient, may contain insufficient nitrogen (around 3-4%) for optimal plant growth. This inadequacy leads to stunted growth and reduced productivity. Despite this, organic produce is marketed at a premium, often with narratives about its purity and quality."

Honesty and truthfulness are crucial in agriculture. By focusing on soil health and carbon content, farmers can optimise their yields and profitability in the long run.

Government support plays a crucial role in facilitating the transition to organic agriculture. "Government initiatives, such as financial incentives for farmers transitioning to organic practices, are a step in the right direction," he acknowledges. "However, sustained efforts are needed to address productivity challenges and market uncertainties associated with organic farming."

Shankar emphasises the importance of research and innovation in driving agricultural sustainability. "Investments in research and technology are essential to develop innovative solutions for soil carbon restoration and organic farming," Shankar asserts. "We need to harness the power of science and technology to overcome the challenges facing modern agriculture."

One of the key challenges in promoting organic agriculture is market acceptance and consumer trust. "Consumer awareness and demand for organic products are on the rise, but there is still a need for greater transparency and accountability," Shankar suggests. "Truthful labeling and certification schemes can help build consumer confidence and promote the adoption of organic practices."

Reflecting on his journey, Shankar remains optimistic about the future of organic agriculture. "As we confront the challenges of climate change and food security, organic farming offers a path towards resilience and sustainability," Shankar reflects. "By prioritising soil health and carbon restoration, we can build a more resilient and regenerative agricultural system."

Shankar's story serves as an inspiration for aspiring farmers and environmental advocates alike. His unwavering commitment to organic agriculture and soil health exemplifies the transformative power of passion and purpose. As Shankar continues to champion sustainable farming practices, his legacy will endure as a beacon of hope for future generations.

Marie Banu



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

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

THE NATURE'S TOUCH

A trailblazer who turns garbage into wellness develops in a society where environmental issues and the need for sustainable practices are major considerations. We explore the fascinating tale of a natural farm addition producer who is transforming goods that are widely seen as garbage into useful items that support sustainability and well-being.

Dr. Yamunadevi Sureshkumar is a visionary entrepreneur with a passion for harnessing the power of nature. Her venture focuses on re-purposing agricultural by-products into essential oils and herbal products, breathing life into what was once dismissed as waste. "Nature has provided us with abundant resources; it's our responsibility to use them wisely and sustainably," she remarks.

One of Yamunadevi's notable creations is the herbal tea drops crafted from lemongrass, a plant often discarded after essential oil extraction. Yamunadevi saw an opportunity to repurpose this overlooked resource into a refreshing beverage with numerous health benefits. The herbal tea drops are not just a delightful infusion; they are a sustainable solution to reducing waste in the essential oil extraction process.

Yamunadevi's commitment to sustainability doesn't stop here. She introduces us to her innovative Aroma Tea, a concoction carefully curated to not only tantalise the taste buds but also to provide a holistic approach to health. Packed with herbs known for their immunity-boosting properties, digestive aids, and weight management benefits, Aroma Tea is a testament to Yamunadevi's dedication to promote well-being through natural means.

Yamunadevi shares her journey from recognising the untapped potential in agricultural by-products to creating products that contribute positively to both health and the environment. She wanted to make better use of her Science education as well as contribute to the society. By up-cycling agricultural waste into products that enhance health, she not only reduces environmental impact but also fosters a culture of mindful consumption. "It's about understanding the interconnectedness of all things. I wanted to do something different instead of treading the traditional path of being a Professor," she explains.

Yamuna has transformed her passion for natural farm additions into a flourishing venture that not only produces unique products but also opens doors for learning and empowerment.

At the heart of Yamunadevi's garden is the enchanting 'Nakshatra Vanam', a celestial space where plants are carefully curated based on the Navagraha (nine planets), the 12 Zodiac Signs, and the 27 stars. This botanical haven is not just a collection of plants; it's a sanctuary designed to emanate positive vibes and connect with the

cosmic energies represented by these celestial bodies. "This garden was built not only to promote my products but to spread positivity to everyone" she remarks.

Yamunadevi's dedication to sustainable practices and holistic living extends beyond the garden. She has successfully introduced a range of natural farm additions that were once unknown to many but now boast a consistent and appreciative customer base. From essential oils to herbal products like tea blends, each creation reflects her passion for harnessing the gifts of nature in innovative ways.

The success of Yamuna's products is a testament to the power of word-of-mouth marketing. Her consumers, having experienced the benefits firsthand, have become enthusiastic advocates, referring her natural farm additions to friends and family.

This organic and authentic approach to spreading the word has not only established a loyal customer base but has also created a sense of community around Yamunadevi's sustainable vision. This grassroots approach to marketing speaks volumes about the authenticity and value of Yamunadevi's natural farm additions. It underscores the power of genuine connections and personal recommendations in building a thriving business rooted in trust and satisfaction. As Yamunadevi's customer base continues to grow organically, it reflects the resonance her products have with individuals seeking natural, sustainable solutions for their well-being. "Our customers are our best advocates" she proudly says.

Yamunadevi acknowledges the challenges of introducing unfamiliar products to the market. However, with resilience and a commitment to educating consumers about the benefits of her natural farm additions, she has overcome skepticism. "People are becoming more mindful of what they consume and its impact. It's about creating awareness and offering sustainable alternatives," she remarks.

Behind Yamunadevi's success lies a tale of unwavering support. Her family, especially her daughter and son, have stood by her side during challenging times. Witnessing them contribute to the venture before heading off to school exemplifies a shared commitment to the vision of creating something unique and sustainable.

Yamunadevi's journey is not just about cultivating plants; it's about cultivating a sense of harmony, learning, and empowerment. Through her natural farm additions, she not only offers unique products but also nurtures a community of individuals eager to embrace the wonders of sustainable living. Her story is a reminder that with passion, knowledge, and a touch of celestial inspiration, we can create something extraordinary from the seemingly ordinary.

Bhavadharani & Iniyath Asmi





UNVEILING THE ENIGMATIC VETIVER

In a world dominated by conventional career pursuits, there are individuals who dare to venture off the beaten path and embrace their passions with unwavering determination. Meet Sendhurvelan, a spirited BE student, whose story defies expectations and embodies the spirit of true entrepreneurship.

Shunning the allure of a typical corporate job, Sendhurvelan took a leap of faith into the world of farming, driven by a fervent desire to make a meaningful impact in the agricultural sector. The captivating tale of Sendhurvelan stands as an inspiration for those who dare to chase their dreams against all odds. Let's delve into his remarkable journey and uncover the motivations, challenges, and triumphs he encountered along the way.

Vetiver, a plant with widespread use in Tamil Nadu and beyond, is highly esteemed for its various properties. Recently, it has garnered significant attention across multiple industries, including cosmetics, spas, and medicine. The plant's cultivation involves harvesting its seeds from the soil, replanting them, thereby imparting the plant its distinctive name. While traditionally used in religious rituals like *Homams*, Vetiver has now found extensive application in cosmetics, including oils and perfumes, as well as in spa treatments and medicinal products.

"Garlands, scrubbers, car mats, windows screens, and yoga mats are made using vetiver. Maintaining this crop isn't easy, and it takes 12-18 months to harvest 42,000 to 45,000 plants in one acre of land," he says.

When it comes to cultivating Vetiver, profitability is paramount for farmers. The loans the farmers avail for Vetiver cultivation need to be paid back, and they must earn a sustainable income to support themselves and their families. Fortunately, the vast range of economic uses Vetiver offers provides promising prospects for profitability.



As Sendhurvelan notes, soil aeration represents just one of its numerous applications that make it a highly sought-after plant worldwide.

When Sendhurvelan first ventured into Vetiver cultivation, he faced a daunting challenge – finding a market to sell his crop. It was the farmers in his village who took matters into their own hands and began to cultivate Vetiver themselves. However, the absence of a clear market connection posed a significant obstacle, leaving them unsure of how to sell their produce. He says "Amidst the uncertainty, a turning point arrived when Mr. C.K. Ashok Kumar, came forward and initiated a partnership with the farmers. This

agreement provided a glimmer of hope and paved the way for the steady growth of Vetiver cultivation in the region".

The month of October 2023 brought an unexpected setback when Vetiver buyers suddenly stalled their purchases. This left Sendhurvelan in a predicament, unsure of where to sell his crops. Later, the local Pharmacies, including those in

Virudhunagar, Chennai, and Madurai, expressed their interest in purchasing the plant in substantial quantities. Encouraged by their response, he realised the untapped potential of Vetiver and decided to take it a step further.

However as demand continues to grow, he faced formidable obstacles. "The requirement for Vetiver oil surged, and the existing production capacity struggled to keep the pace. Despite the challenges, some companies managed

to secure vast expanses of land dedicated solely to Vetiver cultivation, aiming to meet the ever-increasing demand for its oil," he says.

While various industries may drive the popularisation of Vetiver, its foundation lies with the farmers and their advocacy. Through their knowledge, experience, and passion for the plant, they can inspire others to explore its untapped potential

By championing the profitability, versatility, and ecological benefits of Vetiver, farmers can play an instrumental role in its widespread adoption," he adds.

With the exponential growth of Vetiver cultivation, the future looks promising for this once under-appreciated plant. Its

medicinal benefits, combined with the increasing demand for its products, present a wealth of opportunities for farmers and entrepreneurs alike.

The journey of Sendhurvelan exemplifies the resilience and resourcefulness that lies within rural communities. His ability to adapt, explore innovative solutions, and overcome market hurdles showcases the indomitable spirit of Indian farmers. With Vetiver cultivation as a catalyst, he has taken control of their destiny, transforming their lives and cultivating a brighter future for themselves and generations to come.

Through their collective efforts and innovative solutions, Sendhurvelan and his fellow farmers have created a sustainable market for Vetiver, enhancing their livelihoods and cultivating a sense of hope and empowerment within their village. As their journey continues, the ripple effect of their success serves as a testament to the strength and potential of rural communities across the country.

Sendhurvelan's journey with Vetiver cultivation offers a glimpse into the immense economic potential of this remarkable plant. As he seeks profitability and advocates for its popularity, he embodies the spirit of resilience and innovation that lies at the heart of India's farming community.

With its numerous applications and global potential, Vetiver is poised to transform the agricultural landscape on a scale unparalleled in its history. However, its success hinges on the efforts of farmers, researchers, and entrepreneurs committed to exploring its untapped potential.

Bhavadharani & Iniyath Asmi

CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE: CELEBRATING ENTREPRENEURS



On the 16th of March, 2024, a significant event is set to unfold, one that not only honours outstanding individuals but also celebrates the spirit of social entrepreneurship and community service.

Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS), a Public Charitable Trust founded in 1999, will host an awards ceremony recognising the remarkable contributions of individuals in the field of natural farming and social entrepreneurship.

At the core of MSDS's philosophy lies the belief that every individual harbours an innate desire to serve others, a sentiment encapsulated in the Sanskrit phrase "Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani," meaning "the Divine Mother who kindles the natural, inborn but hidden inclination in every human being to serve others".

Late Shri. P N Devarajan, the visionary behind MSDS, recognised the widening gap of inequality in society and endeavoured to initiate social consciousness amongst people as a means to bridge this gap. His passion for understanding the dynamics of social change led to the inception of MSDS, with

a mission to promote social consciousness and enable social citizenry.

MSDS operates within a multi-pronged approach, fostering a supportive ecosystem for social entrepreneurship in India. Through various initiatives, the Trust encourages individuals with a zeal for social change to become agents of transformation in their communities.

By providing support, resources, and recognition, MSDS aims to empower social entrepreneurs and facilitate the growth of impactful projects aimed at addressing societal challenges.

The upcoming awards event serves as a testament to MSDS's commitment to honouring those who have demonstrated exceptional dedication and innovation in the realms of natural farming and social entrepreneurship. Among the accolades to be presented are the prestigious Karmayogi P N Devarajan Awards and the Sadguru Gnanananda National Awards.

The Karmayogi P N Devarajan Awards recognise individuals who have shown exemplary leadership and innovation in natural farming, a practice that aligns with MSDS's ethos of sustainable and eco-

friendly solutions for societal progress.

Dr. Yamuna Devi from Coimbatore will be honoured for her ground-breaking contributions in this field, showcasing the transformative potential of environmentally conscious farming practices.

Additionally, the event will celebrate Vetiver farmers, individuals who have displayed entrepreneurial spirit in their efforts to promote social change. Mrs. Nirmala and Ms. Sendhurvelan will receive the Karmayogi P N Devarajan Award for their outstanding work in this domain, underscoring the importance of innovative approaches to address social challenges. The Trendsetters in Natural Farming Award will be given to Shri S. Balaji and Shri Gokulnatha Natesan in recognition of their efforts to promote veteran farming.

The Sadguru Gnanananda Fellowships for Natural Farming will also be conferred upon deserving recipients who have demonstrated a commitment to advancing sustainable agricultural practices.

Smt. Vasanthi, Shri Manimaran, and Shri Arunkumar will be honoured for their dedication to promoting natural farming

techniques, highlighting the critical role of such initiatives in fostering environmental stewardship and food security.

As the world faces complex social and environmental issues, the work of organisations like MSDS and the individuals they honour becomes increasingly vital. By celebrating the achievements of these changemakers, the awards event not only acknowledges their efforts but also inspires others to join the movement towards a more equitable, sustainable future.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." Through initiatives like the MSDS Trust and events like the upcoming awards ceremony, we are reminded of the transformative power of service and the profound impact it can have on individuals and communities alike.

As we come together to celebrate social change and innovation, let us also reaffirm our commitment to building a more compassionate and inclusive society for all.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

DISTINGUISHED IDENTITY

Inclusive and sustainable development for tribal populations has been facing many challenges owing to its complexity and the need to preserve traditional practices, wisdom, values. The very fact that they usually lived in remote, inaccessible parts made things far-fetched and prolonged. However, we have had leaders who demonstrated the potential of continuous attention and concerted efforts at the grassroots level.

This story is about Ms. S. Vasanthi who never visualised herself as a leader. With humility, dedication and quiet strength, she transformed her community from within and continues to do so, focusing on one concern at a time.

Vasanthi has not missed any opportunity to learn about the lives of tribals across India. Her lessons from every trip broadened her perspective and gave new insights and she began to see the criticality of focusing on few basic rights like land pattas and caste certificates.

Drawing from her personal experience, her dedicated attention to these matters had a profound impact on people around her.

Born to farm labourers, facing poverty and livelihood challenges in a tribal family are something she was exposed to from birth. Brought up and educated by her maternal aunt, she was among the few from her village in Adigathur, Thiruvannamalai district, Tamilnadu whose school education was on track.

But this did not help her in college education as she did not have a caste certificate. “The lack of a caste certificate pushed me to experience all the demerits of not being officially granted an identity that I belonged to my community. We do have a big group of people who lament about the irony of caste certificates. They think these certificates underscore the persistence of caste-based identities and inequalities, which welfare programs seek to address. To us, it was a ticket ensuring access to a new opportunity,” asserts Vasanthi.

Vasanthi obtained her caste certificate at the age of 17 and began to identify opportunities. After her first child, she started her career with the Irula Tribal Women Welfare Society (ITWWS) by teaching tribal children in the NLP schools as a tuition teacher. She then grew to the position of Village Development Officer (VDO) and took charge of 10 villages in Kanchipuram district.

Lack of caste certificates was a big concern here and people were clueless about how to handle this predicament. The fast protest by 60 families in Chengalpattu in the year 1996 helped 30 families receive their certificates. Vasanthi took 30 women leaders from this group to Sirikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh to help them understand tribal lives and struggles in other states. A general need assessment survey in their villages revealed that caste



certificates and land pattas were major concerns. “Lack of certificates was omnipresent. I didn’t know why it was so, but certainly knew that it must be addressed immediately,” recalls Vasanthi.

Back in Kanchipuram, she handled issues of discrimination in schools and ensured that tribal children were not simply called as ‘mountain dwellers’ but as ‘Irulars’, reinforcing their identity.

She also felt the need for more anganwadis and got them sanctioned. However, the best aspect of these anganwadis was the community participation to add on to facilities like availability of plates, glasses, etc. Now that she was used to working with communities, village after village, she mobilised women into self-help groups and encouraged savings.

She also trained women on their rights, needs, welfare schemes and the strength of presenting their concerns as a collective force. All these efforts popularised the idea of land pattas with women names and reservation for women in gram panchayats.

By 2000, Vasanthi ensured that all Irular

children in the district went to school. She worked as a community mobilisation officer till 2003 and then came out to work with women’s groups exclusively.

The Vilvam Irular Women’s SHG with 15 members was a humble beginning but soon she trained many such groups and in the process

associated herself with Dalit and Irular welfare organisations in Chengalpattu district.

While working with marginalised groups, it is the reach that counts because every step changes the lives of the beneficiaries. “They learn what they must rightfully ask and get. Officers cannot speak on their behalf. Communities have to take the mantle,” says Vasanthi. Her efforts were instrumental in building concrete houses for the first time in the tribal village of Onamanjeri. In 2007, she joined the ‘Tamilaga Adivasigal Kutamaipu’ and worked in 18 districts in the Tamil Nadu. Here again, her focus was on caste certificates and land pattas.

Vasanthi contested the 2009 elections as an independent candidate. She did not win but got a new opportunity to learn the situation in 195 villages of Thiruvallur district. She organised a series of cultural programs to promote the idea of human rights and mobilised community to obtain caste certificates, land pattas, senior citizen petitions and aadhar cards.

“All these were simple steps to help

them free from the shackles of inter-generational poverty and discrimination. The cycle has to stop at some point,” she says. Her experience helped her join national advocacy groups and Vasanthi became a resource person to elucidate about tribal lives in different parts of the country.

Besides her countless awards, she was also invited by Tata Fellowship program to visit tribal villages in the eastern part of India. “All that experience strengthened my belief in equity. I thought all marginalised groups must understand this.

CSIM was a surprise to me. I saw people from all walks of life dreaming of development for different marginalised groups. I saw them taking unto themselves. More than inspiration, it reassured why equity was, and must be the priority,” she reflects.

Her selection by the State Commission for Women to be a Non-official Member of the Widows and Destitute Women Welfare Board was a recognition of all that she stood for in her life. “In 2023, 20 years after my post-graduation in Sociology, this position is a testimony to the progress I have been able to drive in different communities,” says a proud Vasanthi.

A renowned Women’s Day speaker too, she is now focussed on promoting the idea of herbal nursery as a livelihood option for women in five villages of Thiruvallur District. “I have long worked for tribal rights. I now want to focus on the economic development of tribal women because they must overcome double discrimination to be able to prove themselves. My CSIM days helped me realise that livelihood is a crucial part of equity,” she insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T

SOWING HOPE WITH EVERY TREE

Farming and plantation are two distinct sectors within agriculture, each with its own contribution to food security, economic development and environmental sustainability. While the choice can be governed by a plethora of factors, there are few incidents and interactions that help one make the final call towards one of them. Mr S. M. Manimaran, a metallurgist turned farmer from Ammaiarkuppam in Thiruvallur District handles his interest in both with such clarity that nobody can distance him from the thought of environmental stewardship.

His father was a farmer and therefore farming was part of his life since childhood. But, he was not associated with it until he realised his true calling. He graduated in Metallurgy and worked in a foundry for about five years. During these years he was distraught by the level of pollution industries caused and felt helpless about being a part of it.

“There was a point where I wanted to contribute for the mitigation of pollution I had caused. I was so stressed that I wanted to measure my carbon footprint accurately. But then, it is the realisation and the path chosen thereafter that matters, damage is already caused. I began to think about what I could do to show the earth that I am concerned. With concern came the connect and things fell in place,” recalls Manimaran.

In 2016, he happened to interact with Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam who inspired him to focus on planting and maintaining trees. “He acknowledged my realisation and my efforts to promote man’s connection with nature. He also told me that planting often has takers and will always have so. It is the maintenance of trees planted that requires manpower, perseverance and commitment. These words of wisdom kept ringing in me,” he recounts emotionally.

To prepare himself for this new journey and responsibility, he underwent a training in Tirupati organised by the Department of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh. He then founded the Thilakavathy Foundation in 2000 to spearhead plantation activities. Learning about a variety of trees also involves learning about the suitable soil, climatic conditions, water requirement path of roots, symbiotic relationship with other plants and also the ability to effect other plants nearby. Sandalwood, for example, is a tree that cannot survive alone because it takes from all roots. He also learnt about the species that suited the environmental conditions for every month in a year.

Manimaran has so far planted, maintained and taken care of over two lakh trees, all while working for the Department of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh. Banyan, peepul, neem, teak, sandalwood, redwood, etc have been planted in the forest areas without disturbing the existing flora and fauna. It all starts with identifying the places available, analysing the soil, ecosystem, choice of appropriate tree species, planting them, identifying members from local community who can support in watering and maintenance and then the most crucial part – regular visits to monitor growth.

“I had been doing this very quietly, without any noise. In fact, I do not encourage Miyawaki technique of plantation for different reasons but its popularity has urged me to realise that there are many people out there who really want to fix the environment. My strength lies in my local networks who have provided consistent support to protect all trees planted,” he says.

He takes all efforts to encourage community involvement in maintaining the trees planted. School children, for example, are gifted stationery/study items to aid in education. Apart from them, senior citizens, panchayat leaders and women’s groups are also engaged. The support of local networks is important because these plants have commercial benefits.

After three years of care and maintenance there is not much these trees require. They only need protection from men intending to cut them. That is their only grave



During the Covid Pandemic, he grew organic vegetables like brinjal, ladies finger, split beans, spinach, raddish, etc. in his farm but never found it difficult to find buyers. The demand for consumption of organic vegetables was already high and community members who knew about his farm came to buy what they needed. With over 10,000 buyers, his simple agri business is successful and promising.

Manimaran now wants to try integrated farming including poultry and encourage younger minds to consider this as a worthy opportunity. He also plans to try this model in at least five villages in the district and propose a plan for replication.

“No matter how much I do, the real change agent in these matters of long term sustainability is a collective action. With every seed I sow, I am hopeful that I will encourage new members to follow suit,” he says assuredly.

danger. “The rest, nature has taught them to protect themselves and that is why they are capable of standing long, steady and surviving different weather conditions,” Manimaran reflects.

His association with CSIM dates back to 2007. He initially felt that there won’t be much to take away as his work needs field presence. “I cannot focus on writing proposals because my work is all about field presence. CSIM taught me administrative work from a human perspective. It was taught in such a way that I will be able to apply it while starting any new work line,” he adds.

HARVESTING CHANGE



It's not uncommon for individuals from diverse backgrounds, to take interest in organic farming. The appeal of organic farming is multifaceted, encompassing environmental, health, ethical, economic, and lifestyle considerations. This diversity of motivations contributes to the growing interest in organic farming among individuals from various backgrounds and walks of life. But once that decision is made, there are a few sources of inspiration whose names echo across the country when we discuss stories of new age organic farmers. "Nammazhvar and Nel Jeyaraman are not just my inspiration. They personify quest for environmentally friendly and socially responsible farming practices. For new organic farmers, they serve as role models and guides, offering valuable insights on the path towards a more sustainable and resilient food system," says Mr. R. Arun Kumar, an electrician turned organic farmer from Dindivanam, Tamilnadu.

Raised by farmer parents, Arun's schooling was uninterrupted until class 10. Thereafter he lost interest in studies and chose to study ITI course to work as an electrician. "I somehow found that more attractive at that time," he giggles. After gaining seven years of experience as an electrician his parents decision to handover a share of their land got him thinking about the scope in farming. His

parents suggested that he must try organic farming instead of giving in to quick results from chemical farming. So, he began to explore.

Arun's role models gave him more insights and guided him to make all farm decisions with one key concern in mind - that production quantity should not be the focus, rather efficient production must be the concern and that efficiency can very well be accomplished by adhering to natural, organic practices.

Since he began exploring organic methods itself, Arun Kumar feels that it was fairly easier for him to prepare the field and decide on the crops. He produced just two sacks of cow peas from an acre and then tried peanuts. With each crop experiment, he also learnt better methods to prepare and apply organic inputs. The yield also consistently improved and reached about seven sacks from less than half an acre of land.

"Consistency is the key. Shri. Nammazhvar and Shri. Nel Jeyaraman advices organic farmers to stay patient because our work is only facilitation. Nature knows its business and processes thoroughly. We cannot disturb the flow," he reflects.

After legumes and vegetables, Arun started cultivating traditional rice varieties. The first good yield was a surprise and convinced him to promote

organic farming to other members in his community. He not only learnt about crops and cultivation methods, but also walked the extra mile to learn about the specific benefits of every traditional rice variety. "I believe farmers learn more about production but somehow lose interest or do not prefer to learn the specific attributes and richness of traditional crops. This is also partially why they are unable to engage in effective marketing of their farm products and value added goods," he says. He goes on to explain about few rice varieties with their benefits - rathasaali which helps in blood secretion, kaatuyaanam which is good for bones and constipation, pungaaru which is good for female fertility and also the popular maapillai samba which is good for men's health.

His efforts and growth convinced his parents to give him 3 acres of land. This gave Arun Kumar confidence to cultivate more traditional crops. He attended a training on Organic Farming organised by CSIM and sensed a business opportunity in producing value added products. "The training was not just about methods and theory. CSIM gave me a holistic perspective on what I was contributing to and encouraged me to identify livelihood avenues so that my work and contribution can remain consistent and sustainable. I saw it as an extension of what my mentors would

have told," he shares.

Arun Kumar engaged his wife in the new venture and both of them together came up with the famous 'idli podi' of Tamil Nadu. But their recipe was different – it was rich in nutrients from moringa leaves, curry leaves, thuthuvalai leaves (commonly known as climbing egg plant in English) and also vallarai leaves (popularly known as brahmi in Hindi and Indian Pennywort in English).

Then came the karuppukavuni chapathi mix – a roti base made from powdered black rice and broken wheat. Among the best sellers is their health mix powder that is bought for children – consisting 25 ingredients including traditional rice varieties, millets and nuts. It was soon improved and relaunched with 33 ingredients.

Sabari Natural Foods started on a simple note but the queries Arun Kumar receives these days indicate otherwise. Embracing a commitment to sustainable and ethical practices, the company forged partnerships with local farmers and suppliers, fostering a sense of community and supporting rural economies. With two farmers trained by him, he is gradually expanding his in-group to drive an organic farming movement in his district.

Shanmuga Priya.T

EMBRACING NATURE'S WAY

Balaji, a Computer Science graduate, is a Traditional Organic Farmer who revolutionised and changed the ways of stereotypical organic farming.

While he was taking care of his uncle during chemotherapy sessions, he came across children affected by cancer. The sight of suffering children and wailing parents is what drove him to delve deeper into the issue. He wondered why those who did not have smoking or drinking habits were affected by this disease.

He discussed it with Doctors and health specialists and understood that the adverse effects were caused by packaged food. His father encouraged him and thus he embarked upon this journey in organic farming.

Balaji was a beginner at farming despite his family's agricultural background. He learned through YouTube and experimented on his own. He launched Indiana Farms with the primary objective of producing chemical-free food, and after five years of struggle became successful.

Indiana Farms is all about "God is the supreme leader and the ultimate farmer. If we disregard the farmer, we will be forgotten by agriculture," he says.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and demand for organic food produced through sustainable farming practices. Balaji started learning the do's and don'ts of Organic Farming in the first year and in the second year, started recreating the soil. He ended up recouping 50% of the soil in the third year. The crop production started to increase and during his fourth and fifth years, he started using organic fertilizers.

Balaji initiated sale of his crops at stalls in local markets. He cultivated rice and sold it to wholesale traders. Despite its quality, it did not fetch a good price. "The shopkeepers took 90% of my products and were given credit only for 10% of my products which was not



what I wanted."

It was then, he decided to sell his product through Direct Marketing. He sourced local customers in his village and gained the trust of the local communities. He later expanding his reach and during the third year, he got acquainted with Shri. Ariyalur Jayachandran, who became his mentor.

Balaji's products started becoming popular and now he has a customer base of over 1500 families. He says "The shopkeepers who did not buy my products earlier are now procuring them at a better price. I proved that a

product sold directly by a farmer is always a first quality product."

Organic farming practices prioritises environmental protection by reducing soil erosion, conserving water resources, and minimising pollution. This contributes to biodiversity, healthy ecosystems, and overall well-being of our planet. "Embracing organic farming is not just a choice for farmers; it's a decision that impacts our health, environment, and the future of agriculture," he says.

"Jeevamrutham, a liquid organic manure and Panchagavya serves as the best form of manure. By using these fertilizers, I reap good yields that are excellent in quality. The crops that I produce allows individuals to reduce their exposure to harmful chemicals, making it a healthier option," says Balaji.

When inquired about erratic change in climate he says "The last two years have been the most difficult times to cultivate as we have to check the soil's Ph level and other external factors. Climate change has caused shifts in traditional growing seasons. We harvest limited crops that will require less water and maintenance."

Farming is an extremely profitable business but one should be ready to persevere until he achieves success. He says "The overload of cultivation and bleach in the soil will make it weak and completely useless for cultivation. My aim is to alter the mindset of common people's idea. Despite the notion that organic farming is exclusively for high-class individuals, my goal is to make it accessible to all," he says.

By supporting organic farmers and consuming organic products, we contribute to a more sustainable and resilient food system. Let's appreciate the power of organic farming and its potential to create a healthier and greener world for generations to come.

Bhavadharani.K & Iniyath Asmi

INSTINCTS AND VENTURES

Entrepreneurship isn't just a skill acquired over time; for some, it's ingrained in their very essence. Regardless of age, gender, education, or background, these individuals exhibit resilience and an unwavering drive to prove the viability of their ideas. For Ms. S. Nirmala, a member of a self-help group from Thirupuvanam, Sivagangai district, this journey was fueled by her desire to carve out a unique path.

Growing up in a joint family under the care of a single mother who worked tirelessly as a teacher, Nirmala knew early on that societal expectations would soon dictate her future. However, her husband's job, which required frequent relocation, gave her the space to explore her capabilities beyond traditional roles. Initially dedicated to her family, Nirmala found herself drawn to various community initiatives as her children grew older, engaging in activities like assisting B.Ed. students with craft projects and participating in vocational training programs.

Each interaction broadened her social horizons, leading her to discover her passion for crafting fur toys. What started as a hobby soon evolved into a business endeavor, as



Nirmala began showcasing her creations at local exhibitions. Encouraged by the positive reception, she seized the opportunity to join a self-help group focused on crafting jute bags, further expanding her repertoire.

Despite lacking formal business training, Nirmala embraced each

challenge with enthusiasm and determination. Through trial and error, she honed her entrepreneurial skills, learning the importance of product naming, branding, and marketing strategies. Her perseverance paid off as her stall activities gained traction, attracting attention from marketing managers

and earning her a spot in the Entrepreneurship Development Program offered by the Government of Tamil Nadu.

With newfound confidence, Nirmala diversified her product range, continually seeking to innovate and adapt to market demands. From learning English to cater to foreign customers to mastering the art of chocolate making and exploring unconventional materials like Vetiver, she remained committed to growth and expansion.

Her efforts bore fruit, with products like herbal mosquito coils gaining popularity and earning her recognition and accolades, including the Best Seller Award from the Department of MSME. Through it all, Nirmala remains steadfast in her belief that entrepreneurship is fueled by a relentless pursuit of opportunities, creativity, and a willingness to take risks.

Her journey serves as a testament to the transformative power of perseverance and the entrepreneurial spirit, inspiring others to embrace challenges and pursue their dreams with unwavering determination.

— Shanmuga Priya.T

“Building a successful venture requires dedication, hard work, and a willingness to learn from failures.”

Mr. R. Mananathan shares with Marie Banu his journey as an entrepreneur

Mr. R. Mananathan is an Innovator, Designer and R&D specialist in Industrial and automotive field. He has patented many products and been awarded as one among top 25 innovative companies in India by CII. He has also received an innovation award from Auto Mechanica, Germany for his development of a Multi Axle Wheel Aligner for Multi Axle Trucks.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. R. Mananathan shares with Marie Banu his journey as an entrepreneur.

Could you please share with us your journey as an entrepreneur?

My entrepreneurial journey is a blend of my upbringing in an agricultural family and my passion for technology and innovation. Born in a village Keezh Kumaramangalam, Cuddalore, and growing up and done my schooling in Kallakkudi (earlier Dalmiapuram), I was surrounded by the sights and sounds of agriculture, but my interests veered towards engineering. After completing my Diploma in Mechanical Engineering in Seshasayee Polytechnic, Tiruchirappalli and AMIE while working at Neyveli Lignite Corporation, Neyveli, I went to GASCO Abudhabi in 1980 where I gained valuable insights into high-speed rotating equipment like Gas Turbines.

Returning to India in 1987, I established my own company, Manatec, which marked the beginning of my entrepreneurial endeavour in developing a Shaft Alignment Computer for Rotating equipment in process industries. My journey eventually led me to diversify into the automotive sector, where I pioneered innovations in Wheel Alignment technology and other Garage Equipment.

What role did indigenous innovation play in your success?

My entrepreneurial journey aligned with the ‘Make in India’ initiative, although it wasn't initially a conscious decision. From the inception of Manatec, I was committed to leveraging indigenous resources and expertise to develop innovative solutions.

The mathematical formula I developed for alignment became the cornerstone for creating a product known as 'Shaft Alignment Computer'. This compact instrument proved valuable for various industries, particularly for process industries deploying rotating equipment. This product was developed in 1987 and was the first of its kind.

In 1990s many products like Wheel Alignment Computers, Wheel

Balancing Machines, Pollution Checking Equipment for automobiles, AC recycling Equipment etc. were developed.

Also, our Project Division developed Projects for Automobile OEMs for Track Setting and Axle Alignment. Leading Companies like Ashok Leyland used our Projects. Over a period of time, our products and projects were exported and they are now available in more than 70 countries. All our products and projects are entirely indigenous, showcasing the capabilities of Indian R&D, engineering and manufacturing. By embracing indigenous innovation, we demonstrated the potential of Indian entrepreneurship to drive economic growth and self-reliance.

I have never actively sought collaboration or tie-ups throughout my entrepreneurial journey. While this approach may have posed challenges, it also led to a profound sense of achievement. Unlike many other companies, I relied solely on Indian resources for the development of my products. This commitment to indigenous innovation made every creation a true 'Make in India' product, crafted through extensive research and development using local resources.

Although there were certain items, such as chips, lithium cells, etc. that India hadn't yet begun manufacturing, I had to import these essential components. Apart from these exceptions, I ensured that every aspect of my products was sourced from Indian companies.

Can you elaborate on the societal and economic impact of your entrepreneurial endeavours?

My entrepreneurial endeavours have had a significant societal and economic impact, particularly in terms of establishing Wheel Alignment centres across the country. This eventually resulted in employment generation.

Our Pollution Checking equipment contributed for measuring the pollution of vehicles on the road considering the fact that “What cannot be measured cannot be controlled”. This was a significant contribution towards checking pollution levels.

Even the Wheel Alignment computers and Wheel balancing machines reduced tyre wear, thus, reducing the emission of particulate matters into the atmosphere. Never the less the Retro fitment KIT developed by us to convert Petrol / Diesel Auto Rickshaws into electric can go a long way in reducing carbon



footprint.

Over time, I began to take pride in my ability to succeed without relying on external collaboration or imported technology. I remained steadfast in my dedication in leveraging indigenous resources and expertise. This unwavering commitment to self-reliance has been a defining feature of my entrepreneurial journey.

How do you envision entrepreneurship contributing to rural development and empowerment?

Today, entrepreneurship holds immense potential for rural development and empowerment, particularly in India's vast agricultural landscape. By harnessing the inherent strengths of rural communities and leveraging technology and innovation, entrepreneurship can create opportunities for economic growth and self-reliance.

In rural areas, where agriculture is the predominant occupation, entrepreneurship can diversify livelihood options and enhance income generation. Moreover, by fostering innovation and skill development, entrepreneurship can empower rural youth and women, unlocking their potential to drive societal change and economic progress.

What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly those looking to embark on a journey rooted in innovation and entrepreneurship?

In contemporary times, it's not uncommon to witness individuals diving into entrepreneurship without adequate planning and this is why 90% start ups fail. Whether fuelled by easy loans or family finances, many embark on this journey without a clear roadmap, often resulting in unforeseen challenges.

Hence, it becomes imperative to emphasise the significance of meticulous market study and planning as the cornerstone for any successful entrepreneurial endeavour.

Understanding the product, the machinery required for its production, the optimal timing for market entry, the manufacturing process to be followed, and the suitable location for operations are all vital considerations in crafting a robust business plan.

My advice is to stay true to your passion and vision. Jobs without a passion lack great success. Innovation is the key to success in entrepreneurship, and it's essential to embrace creativity and originality in every endeavour.

Additionally, I would emphasise the importance of resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges and setbacks. Building a successful venture requires dedication, hard work, and a willingness to learn from failures.

There is nothing more valuable than choosing a knowledgeable partner. This principle underscores the significance of surrounding oneself with individuals who possess the requisite knowledge and experience in the chosen field. Whether it's through personal expertise or the partnership with someone who brings complementary skills to the table, having a knowledgeable ally can significantly enhance the prospects of success in business.

Moreover, the wisdom extends beyond partnership to the selection of right employees. Just as it is essential to choose a knowledgeable partner, it is equally crucial to hire employees who possess the requisite expertise and skills. By assembling a team of knowledgeable individuals, entrepreneurs can leverage their collective strengths to drive business growth and success.