

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

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“AN EMPOWERED WOMAN IS POWERFUL BEYOND MEASURE & BEAUTIFUL BEYOND DESCRIPTION.”

6 COVER STORY

By Women for Women Entrepreneurs
About Women Entrepreneurs India and their activities



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Changemakers



3

Pioneering Education, Health, and Empowerment in Misoram

Laltlankimi's groundbreaking initiative bridging cancer care and community health in Misoram

Profile



9

The Green Responsibility

About Senthil Kumar Murugan, an IT professional turned plantation icon in Hosur, Tamil Nadu.

Chit Chat



12

"Astitva is about transformation—helping tribal women and children achieve good health and independence."

An exclusive interview with Ms. Malati Mukherjee, Founder, Astitva

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement and economic progress, the call for social consciousness has never been more urgent. Holistic growth—one that transcends material success and integrates social responsibility—is the need of the hour. Without social consciousness, economic and technological gains risk being hollow, unsustainable, and even detrimental to societal well-being. A truly progressive society is one that balances economic prosperity with ethical responsibility, environmental stewardship, and social inclusivity.

Social consciousness is the awareness of societal issues and the moral obligation to contribute to their resolution. It fosters empathy, equity, and justice, ensuring that growth is not limited to a privileged few but benefits the broader community. In the absence of such awareness, development becomes exclusionary, deepening economic disparities and social unrest.

Holistic growth is multidimensional—it encompasses economic progress, environmental sustainability, and social well-being. Nations and organizations that prioritize social consciousness integrate ethical business practices, inclusive policies, and sustainable development goals into their operations. For instance, businesses that incorporate corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives not only improve their brand image but also contribute to societal upliftment.

Education plays a pivotal role in fostering social consciousness. By integrating ethics, environmental awareness, and community engagement into academic curricula, we can nurture future leaders who are not only skilled but also responsible citizens. Schools and universities must emphasize values such as empathy, inclusivity, and sustainability, shaping individuals who recognize their role in society beyond personal success.

Furthermore, policymakers must adopt a social-conscious approach to governance. Laws and regulations should aim to bridge inequalities, provide equitable opportunities, and ensure environmental conservation. Public-private partnerships can be instrumental in addressing pressing issues like poverty, healthcare, and climate change.

At an individual level, social consciousness translates into daily choices—supporting ethical brands, engaging in volunteer work, advocating for marginalized communities, and practicing sustainable living. When individuals align their actions with social and environmental well-being, they contribute to a collective movement toward holistic growth.

The path to holistic growth is incomplete without social consciousness. Economic success alone cannot define progress; it must be accompanied by ethical considerations and a commitment to societal well-being. By fostering a culture of empathy, responsibility, and sustainability, we can build a future that is not only prosperous but also just and inclusive.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

WHILE WESTERN GHATS IS IN PERIL THE COFFEE LAND STORY CHISELLING MANY PATHS



In the year 2003, my initial encounter with Sakleshpur's coffee growers and the Karnataka Growers Federation marked a pivotal moment. It coincided with Oxfam's impactful report, "Mugged," and a journey with Satish, then in his late twenties, capturing the voices resonating amidst the global coffee crisis, particularly felt in Karnataka.

Without Oxfam's direct support, these resilient coffee growers rallied behind the "Make Trade Fair" campaign, amassing a staggering 200,000 signatures on locally crafted petition sheets, amplifying the outcry across the South. Dr. Pradeep's involvement with the Global Alliance of Coffee (GLAC) and subsequent adoption of the Common Code for Coffee (4Cs) further underscored their commitment.

By 2009, although Oxfam had shifted focus, my ties with the Western Ghats remained steadfast—the vital lungs of the South and the master regulator of India's monsoons. Oxfam's pivot towards climate discourse in 2009 led me on a transformative journey to Copenhagen, igniting my affiliation with the Center for Social Markets in Bengaluru and rekindling my connection to the Western Ghats.

The ensuing "Coffee to Go?" study became a watershed moment, illuminating the intertwined fates of South Indian coffee, grown under a triple canopy, and the imperative of sustainable Arabica cultivation in preserving the Western Ghats' rich biodiversity. This collaborative effort with stakeholders became a hallmark, echoed by robust reports from the Hassan branch of the Coffee Growers Association, documenting challenges, innovations, and the enchanting diversity of flora and fauna.

Fuelled by my passion for coffee amidst global trade turbulence and mounting climate threats, the community faces uncertainties: soaring production costs, volatile prices, and relentless bouts of disease and disaster. Yet, amidst these adversities, the growers remain proactive. Initiatives in natural and organic farming, diversification, value addition, and international certifications are

forging new pathways.

It is inspiring are the "Seven Bean Team," a cadre of young and middle-aged farmers employing cutting-edge techniques to optimise yields and minimise ecological footprint. Despite their success, challenges persist: from climate shifts and market volatility to labor shortages. Yet, the Western Ghats' fragile ecosystem remains a pivotal lifeline, sustaining monsoons and livelihoods alike.

In my encounters with Asha Shvapradas and Nadita Das of the Women Coffee Promotion Council, dynamic entrepreneurs forging a path in coffee production, I glimpsed resilience and innovation. Their journey, spanning a quarter-century, epitomises the region's vibrancy and the evolving plantation economy's trials.

Lastly, noteworthy among these efforts are the Arehally farmers, guided by veteran activist Raje Gowda, alongside newcomers like Satish and Priya, blending modern expertise with traditional wisdom on their modest 3-acre plot. Certified organic and marketing through innovative channels, these pioneers offer a beacon of hope. Their organic practices mitigate climate impacts, enhance biodiversity, and ensure sustainable livelihoods, all while yielding promising returns. Vikas, the Son of Mr Raje Gowda joins the company of Priya to set a blazing path fully regenerative and eco

friendly business partnership.

As we confront these multifaceted challenges, the urgency of safeguarding the Western Ghats grows clearer. Its biodiversity and ecological vibrancy are not mere luxuries but essential to sustaining life and livelihoods. With optimism, I entrust the future to the burgeoning youth brigade, already taking strides to address these complexities.

The story of Coffee Land unfolds not just as a tale of cultivation but as a testament to resilience, innovation, and the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Watch this space as the narrative continues to evolve.

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy



PIONEERING EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND EMPOWERMENT IN MISORAM



Project Faith was born out of a profound desire to help underserved communities in Mizoram. "I was only a college student, and one of the reasons we started was to help those in need, especially those who couldn't afford medication," shared Laltlankimi. Initially, the project focused on supporting individuals requiring medical aid but lacking resources.

The pandemic became a turning point for Project Faith. After being scattered across different states due to their studies, the founding members reunited and refocused their efforts. A deeply personal event reshaped the initiative: Laltlankimi's mother was diagnosed with cancer, underwent a biopsy, and required surgery. "When it happened to someone close to me, my whole view of cancer treatment and its mental, physical, and social aspects changed," she reflected. Her Ph.D. research in cancer further fueled her passion to support those battling the disease.

This transformation led Project Faith to adopt the biopsychosocial-spiritual model of intervention. Unlike traditional interventions, which focus solely on medical treatment, Project Faith highlights the need to address the psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of cancer care. "Many cancer patients cope with their struggles through faith and spiritual beliefs," she explained, drawing on her internship experience at the Mizoram Cancer Institute.

Given Mizoram's strong Christian faith, church communities play a vital role in



patient resilience. Recognising this, Project Faith incorporated spiritual support into its intervention framework. "The biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects are integral to what we do," Laltlankimi emphasised.

Addressing Lifestyle-Related Health Issues

In its mission to create a healthier society, Project Faith has identified lifestyle-related cancers as a significant issue. Research shows that many of the state's most prevalent cancers stem from tobacco and alcohol use. Alarmingly, Mizoram leads the country in statistics related to these habits. "Many cancers here are lifestyle-related," she explained, emphasising the need for preventive measures.

To address this, Project Faith focuses on

adolescents, a group particularly receptive to behavioral interventions. "Adolescence is a time when behavior can still be shaped. Interventions are more effective at this stage," she pointed out. The team is currently conducting a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of health interventions aimed at promoting healthier behaviors among youth.

Despite its achievements, the project has faced challenges. "Initially, manpower was an issue. Some team members had to leave, and new ones joined. But as we moved forward, we found like-minded people and networks," she said. Collaborations with organisations working in cancer care and mental health have helped the team overcome these obstacles.

With a vision to create lasting change, Project Faith remains committed to fostering healthier habits among

adolescents and providing holistic support for cancer patients. "We hope that in the coming years, we will see the impact of our work and encourage healthier behaviors across the community," the founder concluded.

Integrating Education and Awareness

Project Faith continues to evolve as a groundbreaking initiative bridging cancer care and community health in Mizoram. In its early stages, the initiative faced unique challenges, including addressing misconceptions about cancer. "Many people base their understanding of cancer on movies or myths, making awareness campaigns challenging," said the founder. "For instance, some believe that because an elderly relative smoked all their life without issues, smoking isn't harmful."

Despite these challenges, the team has learned to engage with the community effectively. "We're finding ways to make them understand how it works," she shared, highlighting their dedication to creating meaningful conversations about health.

One of the pillars of Project Faith's success is its strategic collaboration with schools and organisations. Laltlankimi attributes this to her deep-rooted connection with the education sector. "My parents started a school in 1996, and I grew up helping them. Because of that, we've built strong networks with other school owners, making collaborations easier."

These partnerships allow Project Faith to conduct interventions in schools without incurring high operational costs. "When

we partner with schools, they provide us with free space, which helps us reduce expenses," she explained. This model enables the team to integrate art and music classes into their interventions, making them engaging for students. "If we just organise a cancer awareness event, students might find it boring. But integrating awareness into music and art classes makes it more interesting," she noted.

The team is also aligning its efforts with the New Education Policy (NEP) to ensure its initiatives are sustainable and impactful. "We're careful not to lose sight of why we started. It's important to balance social impact with our vision," the founder emphasised.

To ensure sustainability, Project Faith has adopted a fee-based model for its programs. "We charge fees for the art and music classes, but they are much lower than what other institutions charge," she explained. The partnerships with schools help reduce costs, allowing the project to expand its reach without compromising quality.

Providing Long-Term Support

Beyond immediate interventions, Project Faith aims to provide long-term support to families affected by cancer. "We're working on setting up fellowships or scholarships for students whose family members have cancer. Treatment is expensive, and many families struggle to manage medical costs alongside their children's education," she shared. By partnering with schools and sponsors, Project Faith aims to ease this burden and provide students with educational opportunities.

The founder remains optimistic about the future. "We're working to expand our reach to more schools and communities while continuing to measure our impact. If revisions are needed, we're ready to make them," she said.

Through its innovative approach, Project Faith is fostering resilience, understanding, and hope in Mizoram's communities. In a region where access to education, cancer awareness, and recreational opportunities is limited, the initiative emerges as a beacon of hope.

Expanding Impact and Sustainability

Driven by a mission to create sustainable



social impact, Project Faith operates at the intersection of education, health intervention, and community empowerment. Its multi-faceted approach

addresses complex social challenges through cancer intervention programs, affordable recreational activities, and life skills development for students.

A key challenge remains the prevalence of misinformation about cancer and health. "Many people believe in hereditary immunity or dismiss smoking risks based on anecdotal evidence. This makes awareness campaigns difficult," the founder explained.

Despite these obstacles, the team remains committed to engaging communities in meaningful conversations. By leveraging creative strategies like art and music classes, they make educational interventions more accessible and appealing to students. These classes also provide children with much-needed recreational outlets.

The organisation's collaboration with schools has been a cornerstone of its success. The founder's experience in the education sector has enabled seamless partnerships. Currently, Project Faith has partnered with schools to pilot its initiatives, minimising operational costs and ensuring accessibility for students. These partnerships align with India's NEP, integrating social impact initiatives into academic curricula.

"We're cautious not to lose focus on our

mission while collaborating with others. Balancing social impact with sustainability is key," the founder shared.

Project Faith's financial model ensures affordability without compromising quality. Fees for art and music classes cover instructor costs while remaining lower than those of other institutions. Collaborating with schools that provide free spaces helps maintain cost-effectiveness.

Looking ahead, Project Faith plans to offer fellowships and scholarships to students from families affected by cancer. Recognising the financial strain of cancer treatment, this initiative aims to prevent education disruptions due to medical expenses.

A Vision for the Future

To streamline its initiatives, Project Faith operates under three key verticals:

Project Faith Organ and Ministry – Focuses on community outreach and health interventions.

Project Faith Academy – Offers skill-building classes in music and art, blending recreation with health awareness.

Project Faith Media and Publications – Develops educational resources, including moral education books and documentaries tailored to the region's cultural needs.

By addressing these diverse areas, Project Faith creates a comprehensive ecosystem supporting both immediate and long-term social change.

In the next decade, the initiative aims to expand across Mizoram and beyond, providing adolescents with affordable, high-quality educational and recreational opportunities. "We want to create inclusive platforms, not just for those facing cancer but for every child and adolescent who deserves an equal chance," the founder emphasised.

When asked for advice, the founder highlighted resilience. "Challenges are inevitable, but knowing why you started keeps you grounded. It's easy to get disheartened, but staying true to your purpose will see you through."

Project Faith's journey is a testament to vision, adaptability, and perseverance. As it continues to evolve, the organisation is poised to make a lasting impact on countless lives, proving that meaningful change is possible with determination and a clear sense of purpose.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

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

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

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STAYING WELL AS SEASONS CHANGE: SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

[The Story So Far: In the last article of this series, among other movement-related aspects of wellbeing, we spoke about how deep breathing or yogic breathing impacts the immune system. In this one, we shall look at some practical aspects related to breathing, such as how to deal with cough and cold in a proactive but health-friendly way]

Right now, as you read this, we are passing through a period called *ritu-sandhi* - the transition of one season into another. We are moving from winter into spring. Our winters in southern India are not as cold as those in north india, and other parts of the world, but this time of the year is still synonymous with colds, coughs, fevers and such. Even people who don't fall sick in the winter, sometimes succumb in the transition period, as we move out of 'shishira ritu' into 'vasantham'. All these upper respiratory troubles are necessarily related to the breathing movement, and in fact disrupt it in various ways. Let us look at how to cause the least disruption, and get back to good health in the shortest possible time.

Dealing With Coughs and Colds

Coughs and colds bother us a great deal, but part of the bother is that we don't consider them as real sickness, and so we are reluctant to take time off and get well first. We keep addressing our usual tasks (which the cold/cough makes very tedious and slow). This drastically reduces our productivity, it spreads the cold around to family, friends and colleagues and, most distressingly, it lengthens the duration for which we suffer from the cold/cough. So the first thing to do is to try taking a few days off. Yes, of course this is not always possible, but if you have the luxury of taking time off, please indulge yourself - it will certainly help you get back on your feet quicker and easier.

In the post-Covid world, the nature of colds seems to have changed, have you noticed? They seem to be going on for much longer now, than they used to. This makes it difficult to take time off work, and rest. After all, how many sick days can you take? So now let's turn to other tips and tricks that could help, the first one being breathing deep and easy.

Did I hear you sigh irritatedly, and think 'of course I want to breathe, this cold just isn't letting me!!' Well, right off, here is a super-simple trick to clear your blocked nose - close your mouth tightly, and jog on the spot for 30 seconds. Believe me, the need for air will liquefy whatever goo is blocking your nose, and you will get immediate and welcome relief from your blocked nose. Then just blow it all out, and enjoy at least a couple of hours of easy breathing. I know, if you're already feeling weak, then this sounds difficult to do, but the gain from it will always beat the pain of it - do try!

Another nearly-magic solution to blocked noses is a yogic technique called *Jala Neti*. In recent times, many people around the world and especially in our



country, are realising the value of yoga, and so almost every family has some members who actively practise yoga and/or know of a good yoga teacher. I could describe the technique of doing *Jala Neti*, but it's always better to learn it in-person, which is why I recommend you do this, ideally before you catch a cold. *Jala Neti* is a technique of making water flow in through one nostril and out through the other. It's extremely easy to do (contrary to how it sounds!) and a fool-proof technique to physically clear out whatever is obstructing your nasal passages, with zero side-effects.

Gargling with warm salt water is also a great way of easing aching throats and heating up the inner passages so that whatever is inside will get liquefied and flow out easily. It is a way to prevent infections too - you can wash out potential germs from around the tonsils and inner-throat area with regular gargling. Allied to gargling is the process of steaming - just inhale steam from over a bowl of hot water. My personal favorite additive to the hot steaming water is a piece of ginger. Ginger seems to have endless medicinal properties, and helping with colds is definitely one of them. Do remember to follow both gargling and steaming with a few dedicated minutes of blowing your nose though - otherwise you might feel worse than when you started after a while, as the quantum of liquid in your nose is now more than before!

Have you seen how colds make people feel irritated / angry / sad / upset and generally not in the best of moods? Earlier I used to think this is because of some imbalances in the emotion-related

hormones, but these days I'm wondering if this isn't Nature's move towards getting well too - having a good cry is another sound, safe, and sure way to not only having a psychological catharsis but also a nasal one! In fact all the pungent spices recommended for colds - pepper, ginger, lavang, etc - make our eyes water, and in the process send a lot of lachrymal juices down our nasal passages, and ultimately result in the nasal passages getting a thorough cleanse.

Often, the coughs accompanying colds are a worse source of discomfort than flowing noses. Coughs are the body's way of throwing out whatever needs to be cleared, so that the flotsam and jetsam of the cold is gone too. So the important thing is not to suppress it. The ways to ease a cough and shorten the period for which it plagues you is to keep getting rid of whatever your lungs bring up. Gargling (yes, I've mentioned gargling already, but it's crucial in easing coughs too!) helps a whole lot, as the back of the throat gets rinsed every time you gargle. This way, you are proactively easing the need of the body to get rid of everything stuck around the throat, and thus dramatically reducing the duration of the cough. And it's so easy to do, has no negative side effects, and helps with prevention too.

Do try these tips and techniques as needed, though of course our hope is that you will succeed in keeping season-change ills at bay entirely, and enjoy a peaceful and pleasant 'vasantha panchami' in the coming days....

A. Ramashree



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

WEI – BY WOMEN FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS



Women entrepreneurship in India has been steadily gaining momentum, with women breaking barriers to establish themselves as leaders and innovators across various sectors. They constitute 18% of start-up founders and 22% of MSMEs. However, the journey is far from smooth, as they often face significant struggles that usually cause them to retract. Many lack support from family members, as entrepreneurship is still seen by some as a male-dominated domain. Limited access to financial resources, time constraints due to domestic responsibilities, and resistance to change within households further add to their challenges. Despite these hurdles, many women entrepreneurs in India exhibit remarkable resilience, leveraging education, technology and self-help groups to overcome obstacles and inspire change within their communities. “I have struggled too. That is why I envisioned an organisation that can stand by them and handhold them in every step,” adds Ms Mahalakshmi Saravanan, Founder of Women Entrepreneurs India (WEI) in Chennai.

Coming from the Badugas community in the Nilgiris, she had a very protected upbringing. While most of the girls in this community were married off early, by the age of 16 years, Mahalakshmi’s father thought of education as the best investment for girl children. “Thanks to him, I became the first graduate in my family. After finishing my post-graduation in Food Science and Nutrition I was offered my first job as a professor. My father once again stood by me and insisted that I must not miss my first opportunity,” she shares. Simultaneously, she also cleared the state and national level exams conducted by the Agricultural Scientists Recruitment Board.



Marriage brought a turning point in Mahalakshmi’s life, leading to periods of loneliness that pushed her to explore new avenues. With her husband’s encouragement, she began freelance content writing in 2009. This

endeavour quickly evolved into launching her IT company, Ameya Media, where she prioritised recruiting women. Discovering a passion for computer technology, she taught herself essential skills like search engine optimisation. However,

her entrepreneurial journey faced a major setback when she lost her brand identity due to a missed domain renewal, wiping out years of hard work and her client base. This experience was an eye-opener, highlighting the struggles many women

face due to a lack of awareness in business operations. Determined to address these gaps, Mahalakshmi founded Women Entrepreneurs India (WEI) in 2013, a platform dedicated to supporting women in their entrepreneurial

journeys and helping them navigate challenges with knowledge and confidence.

Mahalakshmi’s dedication to women empowerment seems to be a deeply ingrained family value, one that is exemplified by her mother-in-law, Ilakkiamamani Mani Arjun. A retired government school English teacher and prolific author of over 20 books housed in state and national central libraries, her mother-in-law has been a pillar of support in Mahalakshmi’s journey. As the co-founder of Women Entrepreneurs India (WEI), she played an instrumental role in transforming it into a comprehensive resource organisation offering end-to-end consulting for businesses across sectors. The overwhelming reach and meaningful connections made within the initial months of WEI’s inception highlight the pressing need for such a platform, solidifying its position as a cornerstone for women entrepreneurs seeking guidance and growth. WEI is the only social enterprise from India to be recognised by the government of Japan. “I lucked out. Neither of us were interested in making money, rather we wanted to ensure that we were useful to women. Every day, as I speak to different women about their business development, I realise that we are building a credible ecosystem of support,” she emphasises.

WEI also supports men and student entrepreneurs. Today, they are active in 15 states including Jammu and Kashmir. Over 60,000 women have directly benefitted from these services. Free networking events, mentoring services and her talks in different places like colleges, corporate offices have touched the lives of more than 50,000 women. More than 100

college students have completed their internships with WEI and are exploring their business ideas with WEI’s mentoring service. Interestingly, WEI also encourages entrepreneurship in kids! Mahalakshmi’s daughter is an entrepreneur herself at the age of 5 years.

“My daughter learnt about website development, photoshop and other features during the pandemic. She does different kinds of art work and sells them in stalls. She is also a professional chess player. Her income is invested in the education of underprivileged children,” she proudly says. In fact, both mother and daughter also intend to support women chess players from poor families who are unable to afford participation in different competitions.

Mahalakshmi wants to see WEI becoming a household name and building a bigger, stronger ecosystem that not only boosts the confidence of women entrepreneurs but also prepares them with all tools to navigate challenges and thrive in the competitive business landscape. Coming from a modest background where women completing graduation itself is a rarity, her journey is a remarkable testament to perseverance and vision. She is a first-generation social entrepreneur who built her journey from scratch, learning valuable lessons through her mistakes and experiences. Her talks on various platforms and occasions not only inspire listeners but also highlight that women empowerment is a collective effort requiring societal and systemic support. Recognised and awarded by national and international bodies, she dedicates this organic growth to all the women who came forward to approach WEI.

Shanmuga Priya.T

SEEDING HOPE:

HOW FREE TREES CAN HELP FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE

I'm 75 years old now. Older than many trees in Singapore. I know this because I have planted tens of thousands of them during the decades long journey Singapore has taken in its mission to balance progress and nature conservation.

In the 1960s, the 'Garden City' vision took shape — to create a city filled with greenery and a clean environment. By the 2000s, however, we prioritised environmental sustainability as a core focus, shifting towards 'Singapore, a City in Nature.'

A range of initiatives followed — sustainable urban development, green infrastructure, eco-towns like Punggol and Tengah, and more green spaces like forest corridors, parks and park connectors.

I recently learned about a World Health Organisation urban city report, which recommends 50 sqm of green space per person. I was glad to hear that Singapore has worked hard on this, and we now have 66 sqm per person. With the Singapore Green Plan 2030, we're going to double our annual tree planting rate which will see a million more trees planted in the next decade. We're only halfway though this time frame but we've already planted over 718,000 new trees here.

But it's not just about green spaces. These efforts have nurtured a growing community of nature lovers. Back in the 70s, there were only a few of us leading the charge for the environment; good people like Chua Sian Chin, Hardial Singh, and Eric Alfred. But today, I am heartened to have hundreds of thousands of people, especially youths, involved with hundreds of NGOs and ground-up initiatives in environmental action. One such community-led effort is the Green Volunteers, which I founded in 1997. Our hands-on work — mangrove clean-ups, reforestation, and building biodiversity gardens — has helped restore Singapore's flora and fauna.

This combination of government-led and community-driven projects is exactly what's needed for such an important cause. It's been incredible to witness Singapore's transformation and there's so much knowledge that we can share with the region. But there's still so much more we can do, and even learn from our neighbours.

We could take inspiration from Malaysia's Free Tree Society. Their efforts to use people to green their surroundings are impressive. In Singapore, schools hold great potential for something similar. Imagine if every school planted 10 native fruit trees a year, with students taking care of them. These schools could become mini-nurseries, distributing saplings to the public.

I appreciate how Free Tree is bringing environmental education to the public and to schools as education is key to shifting attitudes towards climate change. Singapore's education system is doing a



good job of educating young minds about conservation and the environmental challenges we face, but I believe we can do more.

Simple actions, like dedicating 20 minutes at the end of each school week to discuss topics like recycling or energy conservation, could make a difference. Children could then apply these lessons over the weekend and document their eco-friendly actions to inspire others. I also plan to run events at Bukit Timah to show people the value of our forests, which I would like to invite every school to send their students to learn how forests are our lungs, indispensable to our survival.

But these ideas aren't just meant for Singapore or Malaysia — they're for the global community. If we could stop thinking along national borders and instead see ourselves as citizens of the world, collaborating to solve our shared environmental challenges, we can create a better planet and improve our collective wellbeing.

I've worked across Asia — in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, China, and more. Even now, at 75, I'm knee-deep in the swamps

of Batam, Indonesia, helping to rebuild mangroves. Healthy mangroves prevent soil erosion, filter harmful chemicals, produce oxygen, and sustain fish populations like Sea Bass and Mangrove Jacks which benefit local fishing communities. Nature helps us, so we must help nature in return.

It takes a village of committed individuals to not just imagine a sustainable future, but to make it happen.

Youths today are more environmentally aware, and I believe they should be the ones bringing home the message of conservation. Let's nurture creative thinkers who can develop nature-based solutions to environmental problems. Let's make Green Clubs in schools 'cool' and challenge students to make the most impact. Let's work towards a future where we live in harmony with nature.

About Free Tree Society

Free Tree Society, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is a non-profit organisation dedicated to addressing climate change and promoting environmental sustainability. Its mission

centres on a simple yet powerful action: distributing free plants to the public. The more plants there are, the more carbon dioxide is absorbed — a straightforward, nature-based solution to counter a greenhouse gas that is a major contributor to global warming.

Beyond plant distribution, Free Tree Society seeks to cultivate environmental stewards who lead the way in building sustainable communities. Through gardening and planting workshops, participants are empowered to grow green spaces and understand their role in shaping a greener, more sustainable urban environment that works in harmony with nature.

The workshops are a gateway to broader environmental awareness, addressing key issues such as waste management, rainwater harvesting, and nature preservation. Presented in an accessible manner, these initiatives make complex sustainability topics approachable and actionable for all.

Volunteers play a crucial role in this movement, helping to expand green spaces, preserve biodiversity, and raise awareness of sustainable living—all of which contributes to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly climate action and sustainable cities.

By volunteering, individuals contribute directly to Malaysia's environmental future, promoting eco-conscious lifestyles and taking a stand against climate change. Free Tree Society provides a platform for meaningful action, making a lasting impact on both communities and the planet.

A story by Our Better World — the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International Foundation

THE GREEN RESPONSIBILITY



Environmental sustainability is a concern that has transcended professions, cultures and backgrounds. Small actions like conserving water, reducing waste or planting trees, can collectively lead to significant change. It's a cause that unites humanity, reminding us that safeguarding the environment is not just a choice but a necessity for future generations. "The beauty of sustainability lies in its ability to connect people with a shared responsibility to protect our planet. And this responsibility inspires me to connect with those who take such efforts," says Mr. Senthil Kumar Murugan, an IT professional turned plantation icon in Hosur.

Hailing from Madurai, his childhood is filled with memories about local water bodies, lush green pockets in the city and nearby districts, seasonal rains that added a fresh flavour to life every time. He has always had a deep connection with nature and that reflects in his love for rain. Even today he makes it a point to pause and soak in the earthy fragrance of wet mud after the first drizzle. "As much as I loved the rains, autumn made me sad. I couldn't see trees lifeless. I couldn't accept water just running away. I wondered why we couldn't bury rain water into the ground. Why didn't everyone work on storing the run off water? Every time I shared such thoughts aloud, I was laughed at," recalls Senthil.

Similarly, the growing practice of online shopping and packaging practices concerned him due to the quantum of waste it all led to. He clarifies that using different products is understood superficially as lifestyle. "The chain from purchase to usage to responsible disposal must be taught and practiced from a very young age. Preparing manure is as much a creative work. We are creating life, we should be proud to do so. But this perspective comes very late," he laments. All these concerns

convinced him that his career was not the end point. He used every opportunity to travel and meet different personalities who thought and worked on matters he considered significant. "None of these can be understood or worked upon in isolation. Rain water harvesting, soil enrichment and waste management are all interconnected. Their symbiosis is the foundation of survival for future generations. In this exploration, I identified the actions I can take," he shares.

After about fifteen years in full-fledged IT career, he resigned and interacted with farmers from different parts of the country. He volunteered to work on their fields, learnt a lot and also read failure lessons that were documented by others. When a friend requested his help in marketing the spinach and vegetables he had harvested, Senthil sprung into action. "Somehow, farming and planting activities made me feel at peace. I felt I was doing something that everybody must be doing. Gradually, I began supporting plantation initiatives in different locations," he adds.

With consistent support from friends and good networking skills, Senthil was able to handle all activities right from the preparation of soil bed. He collaborated with scientists, academic and regional institutions and has completed over 500 sustainability projects across the country. "I have been a plantation and waste management consultant for more than 13 organisations now. Biotasoil Foundation was founded in Hosur, in 2019 to take this forward organically. Planting trees and managing the activity on a large scale are now my mainstream activities. I won't go jobless now, nor can someone lay me off, I can do this work as long as I want," he laughs.

Since its establishment, Biotasoil has created 11 urban forests, restored 2 lakes, installed rain water harvesting structures in 4

communities and has also conducted many ecology awareness programs. Noticed by corporates and other clients, the foundation is a renowned name to implement plantation projects on a large scale. Demanded by this scale of afforestation work, Senthil also runs a coco peat manufacturing unit in Kaveripattinam (Hosur). Besides plantation, Senthil and team have also collaborated to organise Titan's Go Green project, which is listed among the top 25 CSR projects in the country. "It went up to 40 days, over a



stretch of 2850 kilometres, resulting in the plantation of 72,000 trees. We also collaborate with the Titan Group to organise their Green Run event – it emphasises the power of collective action towards a sustainable future. Often accompanied by activities such as tree-planting drives or eco-friendly campaigns, it serves as a reminder that small efforts, when united, can lead to a significant environmental impact," says Senthil.

Senthil and Biotasoil Foundation have inspired countless individuals and organisations to take responsibility for a greener future. His work underscores the fact that small, consistent actions can lead to monumental change, proving that sustainability is not just an individual choice but a collective mission. Their efforts are a testament to the potential of aligning skills with needs of the planet.

Shanmuga Priya.T



MISCHIEF & MAYHEM:

EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY

Art has the power to transform lives, yet many young creatives face challenges in pursuing their passions. L. S. Vangchhia, founder of Mischief & Mayhem, established the organisation to empower young artists and address youth unemployment.

“As an artist, I believe in the transformative power of art as both therapy and expression,” says Vangchhia. “But I’ve seen many talented individuals struggle to find opportunities. This inspired me to create Mischief & Mayhem.”

The organisation provides resources and platforms for young talent, offering workshops, mentorship programs, and collaborative projects. “Our mission is to tackle youth unemployment by creating opportunities that turn negative circumstances into positive outcomes,” Vangchhia explains. By fostering a nurturing environment, Mischief & Mayhem helps young creatives develop their skills and find sustainable paths in the arts.

Addressing Challenges and Creating Opportunities

Youth today face numerous challenges, including idleness and financial barriers. “Many lose sight of their goals due to a lack of resources,” says Vangchhia. “We provide free and open spaces for collaboration and expression, helping young artists regain their aspirations.”

Mischief & Mayhem also creates employment opportunities by hiring young talent for various roles. “By involving them in meaningful projects, we offer them work experience and a sense of purpose,” he adds.

Looking ahead, Vangchhia envisions Mischief & Mayhem as a catalyst for change, fostering a strong artistic community. “We aim to provide a safe, inclusive space where young artists can share ideas, collaborate, and grow together.”

Programs and Initiatives: Nurturing Talent

Mischief & Mayhem operates as a movement to support young creatives. Its programs include:

Dance Workshops: Tailored for different styles and skill levels, these workshops help participants develop confidence and connect with like-minded individuals.

Art Workshops: Providing space to explore mediums like painting, drawing, and mixed media, these sessions encourage self-expression and artistic growth.

Exhibitions and Events: Platforms such as art exhibitions, open mic nights, and musical gigs help young artists showcase their work and gain exposure.

Collaborative Projects: Dance jams and artistic collaborations allow participants to share skills, learn from each other, and create innovative work.

“We also ensure that products under ‘Mischief & Mayhem’ are designed by young artists, providing them with



financial support and recognition,” says Vangchhia.

Overcoming Barriers and Achieving Success

Vangchhia’s experience in the art and dance community enables him to identify and support emerging talent.

“Understanding artists personally helps me decide who to collaborate with,” he shares.

The organisation has already seen success. “At the Fit In Dance Jam and Winter Fest 2024, we brought together a diverse group of dancers,” Vangchhia recalls. “One highlight was the all-girl group ‘Wabi-Sabi,’ which performed at multiple events and gained industry connections.”

Challenges remain, especially in breaking societal stereotypes. “In a dance class at GHSS, some male students hesitated to participate due to gender biases,” says Vangchhia. “Through encouragement, we helped them overcome these notions.”



Building a Community and Inspiring Change

Fostering a sense of community is central to Mischief & Mayhem’s mission. “We provide spaces where young artists can learn, share, and grow,” says Vangchhia. “Whether through workshops, dance jams, or exhibitions, these experiences build connections and confidence.”

The organisation prioritises inclusivity. “We bridge gaps between artists of different backgrounds and encourage collaboration,” he says. “Our culture of mentorship keeps creativity alive.”

For young people struggling to find their path, Vangchhia offers advice: “Take your time and trust the process. Stay consistent and believe in yourself. If you can envision it, you can achieve it.”

A Vision for the Future

Mischief & Mayhem is a vision brought to life by Vangchhia, inspired by his own struggles as a dancer. “We had no studio, so we practiced in parking lots or on highways,” he recalls. “These hardships

made me realise the need for accessible creative spaces.”

The organisation’s programs—ranging from dance and art workshops to exhibitions and collaborations—provide young talent with opportunities to learn and grow. “Success for us isn’t about numbers; it’s about impact,” Vangchhia emphasises. “If we can help even one person turn their passion into reality, we’ve succeeded.”

Looking forward, Mischief & Mayhem aims to establish free creative spaces, expand workshops, and increase in-house product production by 2025. “In the next 5-10 years, we hope to become a recognised hub for young artists,” says Vangchhia.

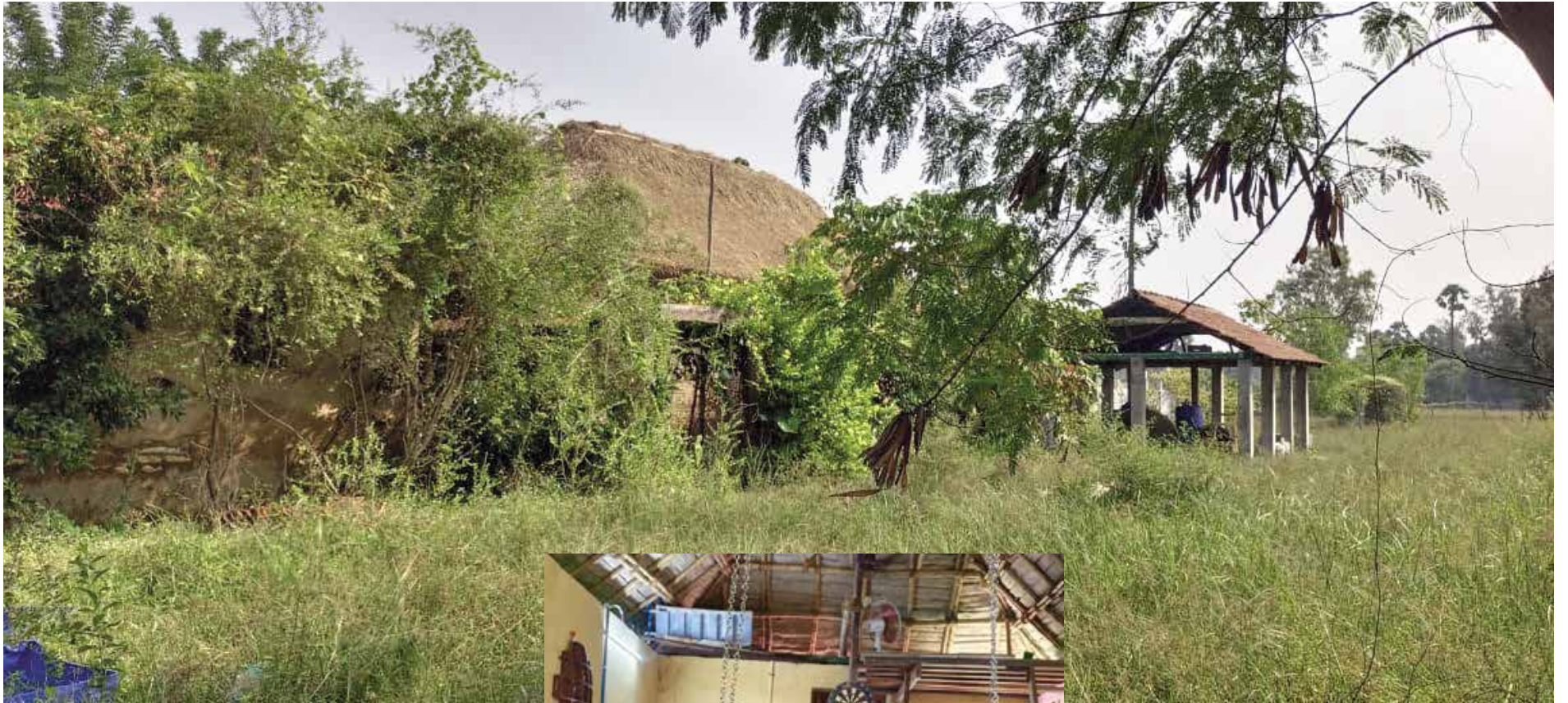
Support from the community is essential. “Spreading the word, attending events, and supporting our products helps us continue our mission,” he says. “Those with expertise in arts or business can mentor young artists or help develop programs.”

Mischief & Mayhem’s impact extends beyond providing opportunities—it fosters a sense of belonging and inspires young people to believe in themselves. Vangchhia’s message to aspiring artists: “Keep pushing forward. Pursuing your passion isn’t easy, but it’s worth it. Believe in yourself, and don’t give up on your dreams. You have the power to shape your future.”

With its commitment to empowering youth, Mischief & Mayhem continues to build a future where creativity and passion drive change.

FARMHOUSE CONSTRUCTION: ADOPTING REUSE, RECYCLE, REDUCE PRINCIPLES

My First One



Growing up, my father's resourcefulness in adhering to the 3R principles—Reuse, Recycle, and Reduce—was a profound inspiration. As a child, I watched him gather broken stones and discarded bricks from the roadside and use them to construct compound walls, binding them not with cement but with locally sourced clay. His approach to sustainability stayed with me and shaped my own aspirations.

I always dreamed of building tiny farmhouses on my land where family and friends could gather, away from the hustle of city life. My vision for these homes was rooted in the principles of a circular economy, incorporating reuse, recycling, upcycling, and repurposing. Choosing recyclable materials was vital to my plan, as it minimized resource consumption, energy usage, and labour compared to producing items from virgin materials.

As a trustee of the Reach Foundation, an organisation committed to restoring 1,000-year-old temples, I was familiar with lime mortar technology and the traditional grinders used in temple restoration. These techniques inspired the construction methodology for my first farmhouse, or "Kutir." To deepen my understanding, I enrolled in an online course by Thannal, Tiruvannamalai, and joined international forums on conventional construction. Pinterest became a wellspring of ideas. Guided by these learnings, I crafted a plan for a farmhouse adhering to the following design principles:

Design Parameters

- Sise: Less than 600 sq. ft.
- Floor: Ground floor only, conforming to Vastu.
- Roof: Thatched roof approximately 9 inches thick.
- Elevation: Elevated 3 feet above ground to prevent water seepage during monsoons.
- Power: Solar PV system as the primary source, with state electricity as backup.
- Features: A "Thinnai" (sit-out) in front, an attic accessed by a fixed ladder made from used wood, and an internal water tank supplying water pumped from a well.

Construction Materials and Techniques

1. Reused Bricks: Sourced from Kumbakonam, these 100+-year-old bricks were half the thickness of modern ones but demanded more binding materials and labor.
2. Limestone: Procured 8 tons from Pollachi and mixed with water to produce slaked lime, which took six months to supply.
3. Recycled Wood: Teak, Kongu, and Marudu lumber salvaged from a demolished house, along with wooden pillars.
4. Granite Stones: Unfinished granite for the "Thinnai" and large boulders for the 3-ft foundation to mitigate water infiltration.
5. Roof Materials: A layered roof featuring:
 - Inner layer of date palm leaf mats.
 - Intermediate layer of coconut leaves.
 - Outer layer of local grass ("Veghil").
6. Windows and Doors: Reused windows from a furniture dealer. Teak wood was used for the main and rear doors due to family sentiments.
7. Binding Material: A mixture of "Kadukkai" (Terminalia chebula) fermented with jaggery and blended with slaked lime for a strong binder.
8. Solar Panels: Repurposed damaged panels from another farm to power a 1 HP submersible pump directly.

9. Tiles: A mosaic of low-cost and gifted tiles for the toilet, bathroom, and "Thinnai."

10. Miscellaneous:

- Cashew kernel oil to protect wood from termites.
- Recycled plywood for attic flooring.
- Cuddappah slabs for the kitchen counter.

Construction Challenges and Timeline

The construction journey spanned 14 months, primarily due to delays in limestone supply and contractors' unreliable timelines. Different contractors were hired for specific tasks:

- Walls: Constructed with lime mortar by a contractor charging labor rates only.
- Toilet and Bathroom Block: Built with cement and bricks due to lime shortages.
- Roofing: A third contractor completed the intricate thatched roofing in a week.

Final Touches

The farmhouse did not include air conditioning, as the natural materials provided sufficient cooling. Instead, I purchased a Mitti Cool natural cooler. The kitchen was equipped with a functional gas connection, and the interior wood and brickwork were left in their raw, unfinished state, embodying the beauty of imperfection.

Sustainability and Reflection

This project embodied the principles of reuse and recycling, using salvaged and local materials to create a sustainable living space. It showcased the potential of circular economy practices in construction, blending tradition with modern needs. My first "Kutir" stands as a testament to the resourcefulness and resilience my father instilled in me, and to my commitment to building responsibly for the future.

P.N. Subramanian

"Astitva is about transformation—helping tribal women and children achieve good health and independence."

Malathi Mukherjee shares with Marie Banu her vision for Astitva

Malathi Mukherjee is a multi-faceted professional with a career spanning over 35 years across corporate leadership, writing, translating, editing, and social impact initiatives. She is the Founder Member of Astitva, a grassroots organisation dedicated to improving nutrition and education for tribal women and children.

An MBA from XLRI, one of India's premier management institutes, Malathi has led multinational teams in Operations and Human Resource Management in India and the UK. Her last corporate role was as Director of Operations on the Board of Mastek (UK).

Malathi Mukherjee shares with Marie Banu her vision for Astitva.

Could you share what inspired you to co-found Astitva and focus on nutrition education for tribal and underserved communities?

During the lockdown, some of us in the Nilgiris partnered with the local administration and other NGOs to provide rations to the Guest workers until they could return home. Once their needs were met, we consulted the then Collector, Ms Innocent Divya, on how we could support the district. Based on her requirement for food, health, and nourishment for tribal women and children, we started a community kitchen in four Kurumba hamlets, serving hot lunches and educating women and adolescents on diet and hygiene. Within months, mothers observed a noticeable growth in malnourished children, confirming the impact of our efforts.

We also ran adolescent classes on health and hygiene in the hamlets. These teens quickly became health ambassadors for their communities. Their success led to an invitation to expand our work to two tribal residential schools. Today, we support five tribal schools across all levels.

To address malnutrition early, we launched a project for children under six and ante/post-natal mothers, using a supplement formulated by CMC Vellore. Within a year, 50% of children improved from severe to moderate or moderate to normal nutrition levels, achieving a 100% overall improvement.

With over 35 years of professional experience, how has your leadership style evolved when transitioning from corporate boardrooms to grassroots initiatives?

This is an interesting question. Reflecting on my leadership style, I'd say in the corporate world, I focused on sharing the vision, communicating

values, equipping my team with the tools to succeed, and providing unwavering support. I trusted my team, pushed them hard, celebrated their efforts, and made decisions collaboratively wherever possible. As a board member, I emphasised the human side of strategy, ensuring decisions aligned with our vision, mission, and values. Every policy was evaluated through this lens to maintain coherence across levels.

Currently, as Program Director of a start-up NGO, I work through our Program Manager, Nivetha, and her dedicated team. My role involves strategy, direction, and fundraising, but a significant part of my time is spent mentoring and supporting my young team. I don't think my style has changed very much, though. While setting up systems and processes remains key, my priority is still people. My goal is to achieve sustainable results while building a strong team capable of running impactful programs throughout their lives.

Astitva operates in the Nilgiris, a region with unique challenges and opportunities. What are some key issues you've observed among the tribal and underserved populations there?

One of the key issues in the health and nourishment area has been the lack of a nutritious diet in the family. There are a large number of homes which cannot afford nutrition because the money that the head of the family earns does not make its way to the table except to afford the bare minimum. As a result, while the male working members are largely healthy, the women and children are anaemic and malnourished. Even in homes where families can afford good food, the lack of understanding of what a healthy, nourished diet can achieve causes families to feed their children junk food and an unhealthy diet, influenced by social media or erroneous television advertising.

Secondly, these tribals who have traditionally foraged for their food in the forests have, over the last several generations, found the forests closed to them and, as a result, have forgotten which trees, plants and roots to forage for. Not having the wherewithal to earn sufficiently to run their lives away from the forests, they have fallen back on the free white ration rice which the government has been providing but have not managed to augment it with protein-enriched pulses or vegetables and fruits. As a result, there have been generations of malnourished adolescents—married when they are barely 14—leading to stunted and wasted children and



perpetuating the perennial cycle of malnourishment.

There are other issues, but these two seem to be the overwhelming ones. The government today is trying in many ways to support this lack of nourishment, but it is a huge task and requires very focused and sustained efforts and adequate funding.

What have been the biggest challenges in addressing issues of nutrition, education, and livelihoods for underserved communities, and how have you overcome them?

We've faced several challenges and learned that even foolproof plans can falter on the ground. Contingency is key.

One major issue is the shifting population. People move to relatives' homes in far-off hamlets for work, school, or illness, often staying away for months. This causes a 20% shift in program beneficiaries, complicating calculations of progress. We now account for these shifts to continue tracking improvements.

Initially, tribal women were wary of vaccines and medical checkups, running away from healthcare workers. During the pandemic, we raised awareness about vaccination, masks, and hygiene, and their hamlets were largely COVID-free. Over four years, we've helped build confidence, teaching women to open bank accounts, use government IDs, and access hospitals, banks, and ATMs.

Education poses challenges too. Tribal children often drop out of city colleges, feeling out of place due to language barriers and insensitive treatment. To address this, we focus on teaching English from primary school,

though funding remains a challenge.

Foundations like Azim Premji, HPCL, and Microland have supported us, recognizing our results. The administration has been our greatest ally, helping ensure last-mile connectivity for beneficiaries.

What is your long-term vision for Astitva? How do you plan to scale or deepen its impact in the Nilgiris? What advice would you give to individuals transitioning from corporate careers to working on social issues?

For me, Astitva represents transformation for tribal women, adolescents, and children. For women, it offers the chance to achieve good health, gain confidence to step out of their hamlets and access the support they need. For adolescents, Astitva provides the opportunity to dream and pursue their ambitions. Like a young girl—once painfully shy—who now confidently says, "I want to be a Collector!" For children, it ensures a healthy, nourished life to support their growth and potential.

In the Nilgiris, we aim to move to a higher leverage of impact by focusing on training and awareness, particularly in hotspot areas. We've begun by training Anganwadi workers across the district and plan to do more to combat malnourishment in our region.

To anyone entering the social sector, I'd say: choose this path only if you're passionate about creating transformative change. It's not just a career—it's a way to transform your own life while making a meaningful difference. What could be more fulfilling?