

inside43

Celebrating the Nilgiris

Winter 2023/24 ₹100

The Way We Were

A journey into 1950s Coonoor

Flight Path

In conversation with a
Nilgiris high flyer

It's a 'Kinder' Magic

One woman's mission to
level the playing field

places to eat | where to shop | things to learn | columns to read



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inside43

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The Gratitude Attitude

The Nilgiris is a special place. Not JUST because of its magnificent views, teeming wildlife, vibrant social life, its clean air or rich history. What makes this district unique is its incredible community spirit that is rarely seen anywhere else in the world. In times of trouble people come together, to aid a cause everyone lends a hand in some shape or form, and in good times we rejoice together.

This magazine is living proof that the communal spirit that lives in these hills is a force in itself, no less than the winds and rain that sweep through its crevices and trees. What began as an idea took on a life on its own and the magazine you hold in your hand was conceptualised, curated and printed in just three months - possibly an international record of some sort, we are sure.

Anyone we spoke to came on board in an overwhelming show of support to ensure that the magazine became a reality. From the editorial committee that contributed ideas, to the entire team of volunteers that worked tirelessly to bring together advertising, content, photography and funding, despite being committed to their daily jobs and responsibilities, **Inside43** is truly a magazine that was made by the district, for the district,

Our absolute gratitude to our advertisers, patrons, writers and photographers, and the amazing people and organisations who agreed to be part of this initiative, cannot be expressed in mere words, but we shall try...

Thank you our wonderful advertisers - you gave shape to a communal dream - Habba Kadal, MindEscapes, Orchid Square, Everserve Dental Clinic, Cherrie Berry, Bluebell Shoes, Wild Springs, Akshay Tea, Teens World, De Rock, Teknecraft, Global Tea Auctions, KooHoos, United Consultants, Agro Farm Fresh and Shantiniketan Heritage House - you are, without doubt, the real stars in this magazine. We, of course, owe much gratitude to Dr Chhabra, Preetham Philip, Radhika Shastri and our other patrons who wish to remain anonymous.

Those of you we were lucky enough to feature in our launch issue - Preetham Philip, Sunita and Shanmugham Vedantam, Molly Crocksten Elliot, Ramneek Singh Pannu, Dr Tarun Chhabra, Iyaswamy, Bhavani Vishvanath, Arpana David, Mukund Ravishankar and Diana Barucha - our first issue is special because of your presence. **Inside43** offers you its heartfelt appreciation.

Writers, columnists and photographers - we could not have done this without your efforts and talent. You all came together to create a living library of our much-loved Nilgiris and we have all created something that will capture life in all its glory in this unique part of the world. This will continue to be something that joins us in the spirit of community that makes the Nilgiris all that it is. A place that is connected by love, friendship, caring and support.

Thank you from all of us at the Editorial Committee.

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Humans of The Nilgiris

The Nilgiris is fascinating. Having lived in places like London and Brussels for many years, I can say, with some authority, our district is one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world, with a unique blend of people from everywhere, local residents, tribals and a continuous stream of visitors. It is wild, yet utterly civilized, gentle, yet rough around the edges, so strong in personality, and yet so vulnerable, especially in these days of such relentless change.

It seemed the right time to curate a magazine that brings together all these elements and showcases the incredible diversity and dichotomy of this wonderful part of the Western Ghats. Having made the decision to start this community initiative mid-September 23, alongside a enthusiastic and wise editorial committee, we ambitiously decided to launch the magazine at the beginning of December. Planning it was hard... what does one include in a first issue of a magazine that is meant to represent a place so rich in people, wildlife, beauty and history? Certainly, we wanted a mix of people and initiatives and stories that was as broadly based across the Nilgiris, as was humanly possible, given the short time we had set ourselves to launch. And here you have it... the first of many issues that showcases our beautiful Blue Hills and the life that it holds.

We could not have conceived a magazine that did not tell the story of the well-known Molly Crocksten Eliot, one of Coonoor's best loved figures. And we are incredibly proud to present as our main feature, the story of Preetham Philip, from Ooty, who we can all thank for enabling an industry in this country and making it possible for all of us to jet around the country safely, and for the most part, quite cheaply. We bring you the history of Pithapuram Palace on the Coonoor-Kotagiri road, one of our lesser known historical buildings, and we have covered the

ground-breaking (literally) work of the Edhikwehlyawd Botanical Refuge in Kundah, started by Dr Tarun Chhabra and Ramneek Singh Pannu. We paid tribute to the magnificent work of Diana Bharucha and the steadfast Kinder Trust she runs, and we have brought you the voice of our very own district nightingale, Arpana David. This first Issue walks you through the lovely home of Sunita Vedantam and P Shanmugham on Ralliah Dam road in Bettati, and also brings you the wise and loving teachings of the small tea grower, Iyaswamy, in Kotagiri. There's a lot more as you will find out as you read the magazine. Like the stories of life as it was in this district 70 years ago, from those who were lucky enough to experience that time in these hills. And we were fortunate to have the well-known Apsara Reddy talk about her experiences in a column, as well.

This magazine is a reality today because a group of people came together, believed in it and then made it happen. My sincerest thanks are owed to the Editorial Committee, the advertisers and supporters of **Inside43**. Without them you would not be holding this magazine in your hand. They are but a microcosm, however, of all the multifarious facets that make up this district, because, at the end of the day, any place is only as good as its people. I personally think we the Humans of The Nilgiris are truly a special breed. Unique, distinct, layered, edgy, talented, feisty.. making up a large, extended family that comes together in all sorts of wonderful ways, both weird and marvellous to create a way of life, that **Inside43** hopes to capture again and again. Every three months.

Sangeetha Shinde
Managing Editor

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INFORM

Pg 3: A Beautiful Experience

An introduction to our new magazine about this incredible district

INHABIT

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INFOCUS

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In a town where everyone knows everyone, few people are as well-known as Molly. In conversation with one of Coonoor's best-loved characters gives us a snapshot of her colourful life

Pg 16: Flight Path

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A transgender politician and activist recalls how a chance encounter at the Ooty market connected her to her purpose

Pg 48: Of Forest, Friends and Family

A Nilgiris old-timer recalls his early days in Coonoor and the colourful characters who once were resident there



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A born artist, Mukund Ravishankar speaks about his artistic journey and his foray into the magical world of ceramics

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Bhavani Viswanath tells us about her calling which turned into a home-based dance school and a way of life for her and for others

Pg 26: A Noteworthy Calling

Arpana David shares her lifelong tryst with music, teaching, running a creative academy and living her best life



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De-Rock

Above the Ordinary, Beyond the Clouds

Elevate your senses at De-Rock, a mesmerizing retreat at 6500 ft surrounded by tea gardens, Lambs Rock, and a natural rainforest. Step into an "Island in the Cloud" where every moment is a celebration of nature. Inhale the scents of fresh blooms, drink from pure mountain springs, and witness sunrise magic amidst mountains. Recognized as an Awardee of the "hidden gem of the year" 2023 by MakeMyTrip, in collaboration with Times of India. De-Rock invites you to unwind, embrace humility, and experience the gentle rocking of nature's embrace.





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INSTORE

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INFUSE

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Take a look at the first unisex gym in the Nilgiris, that is committed to building a fitter, happier community

INFLUENCE

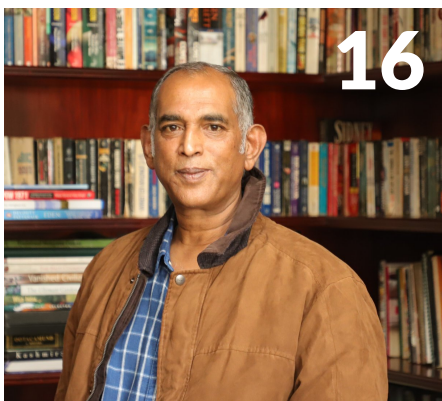
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Read about the the Kinder Trust that has transformed lives with the simple mission of making the world a better place, one initiative at a time

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A gallery of images that captures the stunning diversity of the district we all love



INTIME

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It's not on the tourist trail, but here is a very quick guided tour of the Pithapuram Palace, and a brief glimpse of its history

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Growing up in the Nilgiris was a special experience, especially in the first two decades following Independence. Take a trip down memory lane and visit the Coonoor of the 1950s

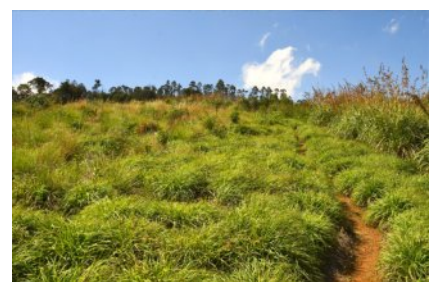
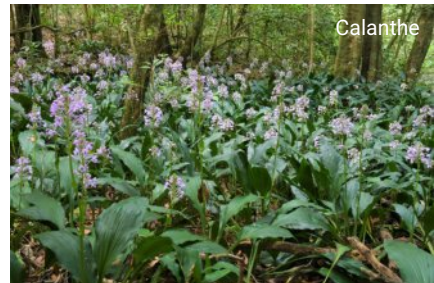
INDOORS

Pg 56: The Heart Is Where The Home Is

The cottage that turned into a sprawling 4-bedroom home still retains the feel of a cosy snug. Inside43 peeks into a unique and elegant home in the hills



A Place With a Spectacular View



The EBR Centre Trust's commitment to preserving the natural legacy of the district is one of the Nilgiris' most notable initiatives - Inside43 looks at what it does and what it has achieved

Nestled amongst the lush landscapes of the Upper Nilgiris, amidst the vibrant flora and fauna, a silent movement is afoot. Determined to restore the ancient ecological landscapes of the Nilgiris to their former glory, the movement is garnering the attention and support of citizens who are committed to this worthy cause.

From preserving the extensive biodiversity that is endemic to the region, to reviving Toda culture and livelihood, the *Edhkwehlynawd Botanical Refuge (EBR) Centre Trust* is making strides through its conservation, awareness and educational efforts. Despite the mission's sheer scale and demand, EBR Centre Trust's revolution will leave a lasting mark not only on the Nilgiris and its inhabitants, but on the nation as well.

Edhkwehlynawd, a Toda term that translates to 'place with a spectacular view', pays homage to the formidable mountain ranges of the Nilgiris. An oasis within the mountains, EBR is home to approximately 24 acres of land, which predominantly consists of tea plantations. The land, situated in the biodiverse Kundah region, borders the core area of the renowned Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR). The movement has not only resonated with several donors and environmental organisations but also united inhabitants of the Nilgiris to strive for a cleaner, greener future in the face of over-development, deforestation and pollution.

The EBR Centre Trust is led by co-founders and trustees, Dr Tarun

Chhabra and Ramneek Singh Pannu. Dr Chhabra, an anthropologist, author and ecologist has also founded EBR Centre Trust's sister organisation, Toda Nalavaazhu Sangam. Ramneek Pannu, a tea planter, naturalist and restoration ecologist, works dedicatedly alongside Dr Chhabra to restore, revive and protect EBR. Both trustees understand and recognise the importance of the Nilgiris – which is not only home to several indigenous communities, diverse vegetation and endangered animals, but also maintains a delicate ecological balance that is crucial for the survival of verdure, man and beast alike. They are also credited with having discovered several species of flora in the Nilgiris.

A unique biodiversity hotspot

The Nilgiri mountains stretch over the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, connecting the Western Ghats with the Eastern Ghats. Being located upon the convergence of both Ghats endows the Nilgiris with highly unique ecological and geological characteristics. One can discover an assortment of vegetation within these mountains, from evergreen forests and lowland savannas to highland shola-grassland ecosystems and deciduous broadleaved forests. Amongst the hills and valleys graze various endangered species including the Nilgiri Tahr, Nilgiri Langur, and Nilgiri Marten, along with the Nilgiri Laughing Thrush. Apart from the fascinating inhabitants, enchanting flora encompasses the length and breadth of the Nilgiris. The NBR itself is home to approximately 3,300

species of flowering plants – out of which 132 species are endemic to the region. Dr Chhabra and Ramneek Pannu rediscovered a highly rare flowering plant, *Arisaema Translucens* (commonly known as cobra lily), in 2009. The cobra lily, which was first discovered in 1932 by British botanist Edward Barnes, is noted by researchers to be threatened by illegal collection and the expansion of tea estates into its shola habitat.

The oldest occupants

While the flora and fauna are the original and oldest inhabitants of the Nilgiris, they share the mountains with indigenous communities that have not only lived on the plateau since ancient times but are also a example of peaceful coexistence. It is estimated that the Toda community established a home amongst the Nilgiris approximately 3,500 years ago, making them the oldest community to inhabit the region. Famously known for their pastoral way of life, coupled with their non-martial, non-hunting, pacifist and vegetarian lifestyle, the Todas have carved a distinct identity for themselves. Their lifestyle has played a significant role in ensuring not only the community's survival but that of the flora and fauna that encompass their settlements. From their philosophies to their artistic skills, all aspects of their lives are inspired by nature. During an infant's naming ceremony, the grandfather uncovers the child's face outdoors for the very first time, showing various elements of nature: the rising sun, the birds, the

buffaloes, etc. Traditional Toda embroidery represents an ancient art form and has been granted a Geographical Indication (GI) patent by the Government of India.

Travellers and tourists may discover remnants of the community's past at prehistoric sites scattered throughout the hills. Comprising stone and earthen circles, cists, dolmens, shrines and rock art, these sites not only showcase the history of the Todas but also other communities including the Kotas, Kurumbas and Irulas. While these communities continue to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the wild, their existence is threatened by a range of factors – from water pollution and the expansion of tea estates to the degradation of the shola-grassland vegetation.

The umpteen threats to both nature and civilization are something EBR Centre Trust is well-acquainted with, and striving to combat.



Grassland flower

EBR Centre Trust's objectives

As the Trust's green movement continues gaining traction, the founders have highlighted several important objectives for the future:

1. To restore the original ecology in a degraded zone surrounded by areas of high biodiversity
2. To propagate the plant species crucial to the Todas
3. To reintroduce and propagate the endangered flora of the Nilgiris
4. To prevent further degradation and encroachment onto the adjacent hinterland
5. The protection and preservation of all the mammals, birds and amphibians of the area, including the Toda buffalo, which is a breed restricted to the Nilgiris District
6. To establish a botanical documentation and ecological research centre, with live seed, herbarium, photographic and illustrative records of the rare, endemic and endangered flora

Amongst the various projects undertaken at the Trust, efforts to protect the 'Toda buffalo', also referred to as the Asiatic water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*) are underway. This species is not only important for the Todas' livelihoods, but an integral part of their cultural beliefs and practices. Along with that, the Trust owns a nursery where saplings, grasses and seedlings are being nurtured to restore the original shola-grassland-wetland ecotypes – in place of tea plantations.

The journey is long and arduous, but an abiding passion for the Nilgiris and a sense of urgency to preserve its legacy continue fuelling the seeds of this revolution planted by Dr Tarun Chhabra and Ramneek Pannu. ■

❧ Despite the mission's sheer scale and demand, EBR Centre Trust's revolution will leave a lasting mark

IN RAMNEEK'S WORDS

"Growing up in the Nilgiris in the 1970's, with a father who was an avid outdoorsman, my two brothers and I naturally became fond of nature. In the early 1990's I became a member of the prestigious Nilgiri Wildlife and Conservation Association and later a committee member and its honorary secretary. This was the beginning of my initiation towards conservation of the Nilgiris. So when my good friend Tarun asked me to join as a trustee to start the Edhikwehlyawd Botanical Refuge Trust (EBR), I immediately said yes. Being a fourth generation tea planter in the Nilgiris, I was always wanting to give back to our beloved hills, after living off them for so many decades. With a full-fledged nursery in place at EBR I started restoration / rewilding our own tea plantation in the areas without tea. I planted over one thousand indigenous shola saplings along the mile-long stream running through the valley. The workers were instructed to take care of all shola trees and never to cut or uproot any naturally sprouted shola saplings within the tea plantation. With the rewilding effort going on for over fifteen years, it has brought about a remarkable change, with numerous birds and animal species coming into our valley. I have also introduced indigenous fish into the stream."

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The Jolly Ms Molly

In a town where everyone knows everyone, few people are as well-known as Molly Crocksten Elliot. **Patricia Shilpa** gets in conversation with one of Coonoor's best-loved characters and gives us a snapshot of her colourful life



If you've taken the trouble to walk around the Coonoor market or bus stop, you'll undoubtedly have bumped into her. You'll catch her firmly directing traffic, or munching on a piece of fruit, or in cheerful conversation with some of the passers-by. She has a smile for everyone, and her shrewd, twinkling eyes make her seem like an elf or a pixie, of this world, but also not. Her signature uniform of fleece jumpers, boots, warm socks, and baggy trousers set her apart from the crowd immediately, and even if you do not get to talk to her, you would notice her if she crossed your line of vision.

Tough beginnings

Molly Crocksten Elliot was born far away from the Nilgiris, in the capital city of Delhi as the summer heat was giving way to cooler weather. On Independence Day, 15th August, 1947, as a nation celebrated its freedom from outside rule, Mr Crocksten and his wife, Mrs Elliot gave birth to a little baby girl. While her father was a DSP and her mother also a government employee, one would have expected Molly to grow up in a warm and caring household, but this was not the case. She was given up for adoption when she was just a year old and sent away to Underfell, an orphanage run by the Christian Mission Services in Coonoor. And that's how Molly came to live in the Nigiri Hills. To this day she does not know the reasons her parents gave her away, and despite encountering them in later life, she was unable to get a clear answer as to why her parents set her on that particular course in life.

Molly studied at Mountain Home High School, in Coonoor, and

managed to complete her 11th Standard. But in her typical bid for freedom and independence she decided to start working after that, undertaking a variety of different jobs, sometimes working in homes, and helping those in need. The income from the work was welcome, enabled her to survive, and most importantly, it gave her a sense of power over her own fate, at last.

The volunteer

In 1972, while she was living at Tiger Hill, in those days a richly forested and lush part of Coonoor, she came across a British gentleman, out with his gun, tracking down a tiger. Molly, in her idealistic way, and with her innate love for animals was having none of this on her watch or in what she perceived as her territory. She persuaded the gentleman to put away his gun, abandon his killing quest, and saved the life of a tiger in the process. The Forest Department got to hear of the story, and being impressed by her dedication to the environment, appointed her as a volunteer in the department. Molly took to this new role like a duck takes to water and channelled her love for all things living into a fierce determination to help the forest officials do the best job they could. It gave her the opportunity to wander the hills she loved and protect the animals that she cared about deeply.

It was these selfsame wanderings that led to her next big adventure. A fish vendor had killed his wife, and was on the run from the police, hiding out in the forest. The police were unable to track him down, and the hunt was in full swing for the murderer. It was Molly, out on patrol, who figured out where he was and

accordingly led the police to him. He was duly apprehended and punished for his crime. Molly was the original Mama Ramotswe of the No 1 Ladies Detective Agency (Inside43 recommends reading the series by Alexander McCall to while away a lazy weekend in the Nilgiris) and has maintained that position ever since. She has been a friend of the police since that intervention and became an informant, to this day passing on relevant news that she collects in her own inimitable manner as she goes about the daily business of life.

“ Her signature uniform of fleece jumpers, boots, warm socks, and baggy trousers set her apart from the crowd immediately

Community love

Molly loves her work with the police. It reinforces her passion for the Nilgiris, and as a volunteer traffic controller she gets to help direct the course of life in the town she adores. As an informer she gets to patrol the streets and forests, at will, and her love for nature and wildlife can be seen in the serenity of her expression when she talks about these hills. There are few in Coonoor who have not heard of her, or encountered her, and her innate *joie de vivre*, friendly smile and service to the community for over three decades have made her the darling of the district. She isn't all sunshine and light, however. Molly has a short fuse and those who have crossed her have known quickly not to repeat a

transgression anytime soon. Violence in any form angers her and she will stick her neck out to put a stop to it.

Molly is testament to the power of community in the Nilgiris. Her 75th birthday was celebrated at the All Saint's Church in Coonoor, and she recalls the pomp and ceremony of that with great joy and happiness. To this day her well-wishers bring her food and clothing, and she rewards them with the grace of her cheery smile - it is impossible not to feel uplifted after an encounter with this very special lady. She was also provided paid employment by Cherian Mancha, who appointed her to look after the beautiful colonial bungalow he had inherited from his parents. She diligently looked after the property, eventually moving back into her little shed in Sim's Park. As a general rule, Molly has refused charity in all its forms, and only accepts something if she knows it is given with love in mind, rather than pity. She is proud of her traffic warden badge, given to her by the Coonoor Police, and carries out her duties with the honesty and enthusiasm that marks

all her endeavours. Her private life is her own, and she lives quietly, with grace and dignity and channels her love for the district into every area of personal functioning.

Molly fell sick in January this year and was admitted into the Government hospital for treatment. The district collector, Mr Amrit, ensured that she was well looked after and her gratitude to the hospital

“ It gave her the opportunity to wander the hills she loved and protect the animals that she cared about deeply

and the staff is immense. While her spell of illness has weakened her a little, it has not diminished her larger-than-life personality. She continues to be the The Jolly Ms Molly we all know and love, and should you pass by her, stop and say hello. She is always up for a quick and friendly chat with anyone, as long as they are not breaking the law in some way.

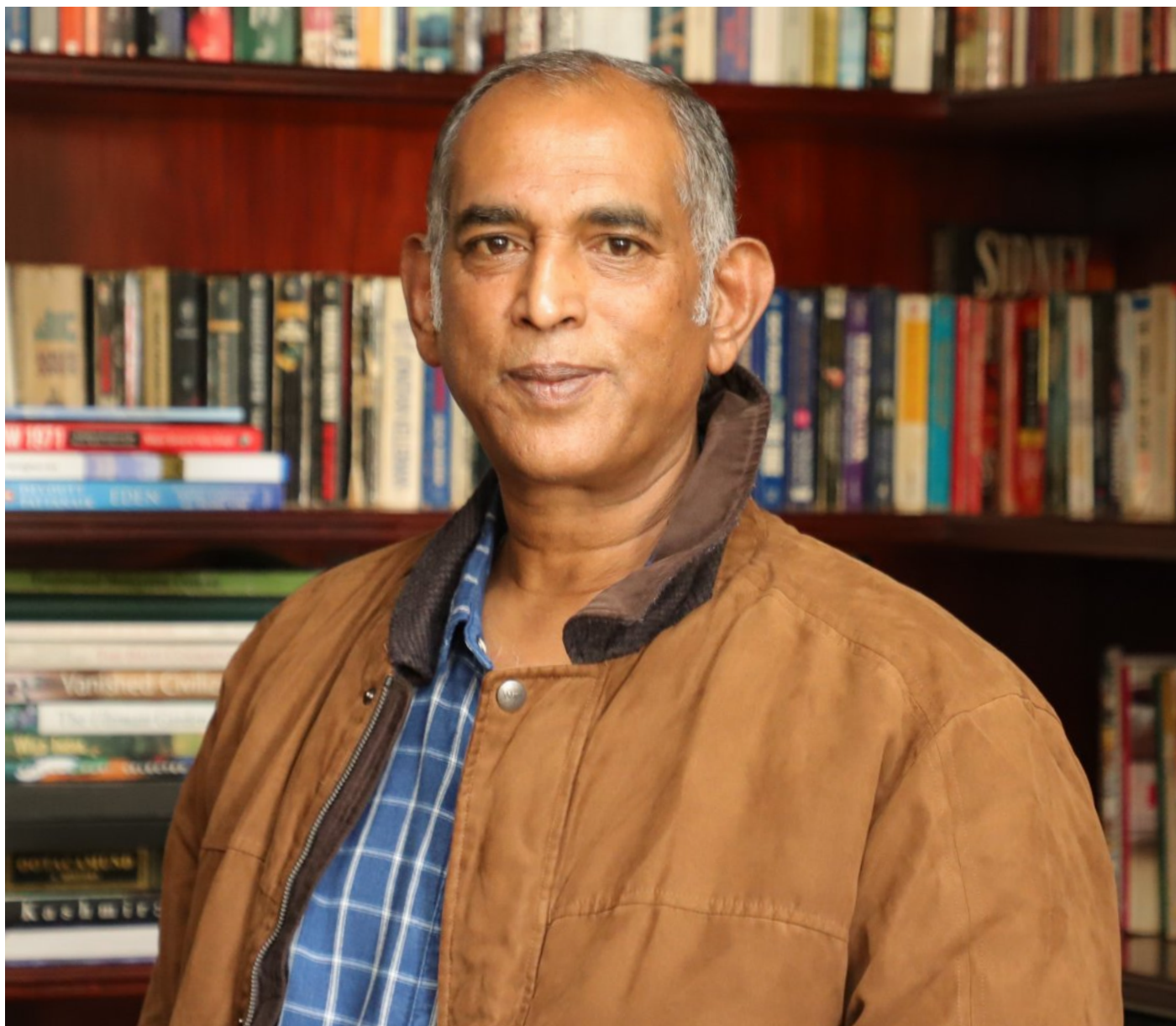
Despite starting life in an orphanage, and struggling to find her path initially, Molly has woven herself into the fabric of life in the Nilgiris in a very special way. The affection Coonoor has for her is reciprocated in all the little things she does for the town, and as a community, we are blessed to call her one of our own. ■





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Flight Path

*Charting new courses has been a way of life for this remarkable son of the Nilgiris.
Krishna Barot talks to Preetham Philip about his adventures in the skies*

Captain Preetham Philip is not someone you come across every day. He carries a collection of inspiring stories - from his aviation adventures across the world that were guided by his entrepreneurial spirit, to his enduring love for the sea, to his commitment to his family and the Nilgiris.

His life has been steered by several passions, nurtured since childhood. He fell in love with flying at a young age and developed a keen interest in angling to go alongside it – as a result, he has touched the skies while keeping his feet firmly planted on the ground and his dreams afloat on water. But whether he was on water or cresting the clouds, his heart has remained very firmly in the place he was born in – and has always called home.

There's no place like Ooty

There is no place like home and for Preetham, that happens to be the vibrant town of Udthagamandalam, or Ooty as we all call it. To visitors and tourists, it is a beautiful, picturesque hill station – ideal to escape the summer's scorching heat. To Preetham, the Ooty of yore was a quaint town, relatively unknown and unvisited - except during spring. "I led a very carefree existence in Ooty," he says with a smile. "I used to go camping for a week and would be in the woods till I ran out of supplies. The water was crystal-clear, the scenery, out of the world." He was often accompanied by friends and acquaintances, as the community some 50-odd years back was small

and extremely tight-knit and everyone knew each other.

His father, who had settled in the Nilgiris in 1959, owned a tea and coffee estate in Biterkhad village, while his mother ran the Hillwoods Preparatory School. Life came full circle when Preetham decided to return to Ooty for good with his family: his wife, Surachna Philip, and their children Samira and Rehaan.

In Ooty, Preetham remains busy managing his long-standing entrepreneurship venture, his father's tea estate, and serving as a key committee member at The Ootacamund Club – one of India's premier clubs. He also proudly served as the Club's president for three years. It is said that snooker took root at Ootacamund Club, where British officer Neville Chamberlain invented and laid down the game's rules in the billiards room that is still present today. It is one of the many legacies preserved ardently by Preetham and the club's other members.

The flying bug

Preetham studied at the renowned Lawrence School, Lovedale, where he fell in love with planes. He frequented the library and would be immersed in books about aircraft and flying. "At that time, flying was a very romantic thing. It was flamboyant and free. It wasn't long before I was bitten by the flying bug," he says with a laugh.

After graduating from high school, he began pursuing his commercial pilot's licence at the Coimbatore Flying Club. His passion for flying had him winging his way to the US, where

he received his commercial pilot's license, along with a degree in aviation management. And that was just the beginning.

Preetham's next step is deemed very rare amongst pilots, as he acquired a helicopter pilot's license from the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Uran Akademi. He speaks enthusiastically of how versatile helicopters are, as they can fly to places an aeroplane cannot, and can perform intricate manoeuvres beyond the ability of planes. Today, he is amongst a rare breed of pilots that can manoeuvre both rotary wing and fixed wing aircraft.

His professional journey began with Pawan Hans Limited, where he initially conducted operations at offshore oil rigs. He went on to serve in the Malaysian Helicopter Services and undergo training for underslung, and search-and-rescue operations. These challenging operations were carried out in the South China Sea and the North Sea, no insignificant achievement, by anyone's standards.

1996 was a particularly memorable time for Preetham. During that year, he prepared a document which is touted as the industry's first concept of an aviation safety management system, and is an integral industry standard today.

Sailing the entrepreneur-ship

In 1999, Preetham and Surachna returned to Ooty, marking a new professional step for him. A chance meeting with retired Indian Army officer, Captain GR Gopinath resulted in a partnership that would



revolutionise India's low-cost carrier industry.

Deccan Air, now known as Deccan Charters, was founded by Gopinath in 1997 – and Preetham played a pioneering role in setting the company up. In his memoirs Gopinath refers to Preetham as his 'rock' during these initial and pivotal years in the aviation industry in India. He was also a tremendous help in establishing Deccan 360, a cargo airline that was formed after Deccan Air was sold to Quikfisher Airlines in 2007.

After years of being 'joined at the hip' with Gopinath, Preetham decided to kickstart his own venture. He took over Quikjet Airlines and powered its rise through all its hiccups and challenges. Currently, the organisation operates a fleet of aircraft that transport cargo for companies like Amazon Prime.

Another feather in Preetham's cap is setting up the first heli-pilgrimage operations at the sacred Vaishno Devi

in Jammu. "It was a great project," he states proudly – one that was initially met with scepticism but one that he accomplished nonetheless in his usual determined way.

Stories of his work reached Ooty, where a close friend, Murli, asked if he could take his mother to Vaishno Devi by helicopter. With Preetham's help, Murli fulfilled his mother's lifelong dream of worshipping at Vaishno Devi – by helicopter no less.

While Preetham may have stopped flying professionally, his connection with aeroplanes followed him from the sky to the earth – where he continues serving Quikjet Airlines as CEO.

An avid angler

Besides flying, angling is an activity Preetham has taken great interest in since childhood. Before angling was banned in India, he and his friends would often venture to different water bodies and spend many pleasant hours with their fishing lines. The

activity forged his connection with the sea. So while he cannot stand the heat and beaches, he absolutely loves the water and is an avid deep-sea fisherman. He explains why. "Ooty people are often disconnected from the sea," and Preetham is attempting to change that with the fishing excursions he organises.

His annual fishing trips to Port Blair are made up of friends and children who wish to learn angling and unwind by the sea. "I've got them hooked now," he jokes, while recounting his aqua adventures.

He also actively attends research camps and engages keenly with the Wildlife Association of South India on their on-going studies of the humpback Mahseer, a species of fish endemic to the Kaveri River. He is disheartened by the impact of deforestation and land encroachment in the Nilgiris, noting how rivers have been significantly damaged over the recent years.

These are not the only changes Preetham has witnessed over the years and he tries to balance a sense of nostalgia with hope for the future.

Balancing past and present

The Ooty of Preetham's and many other residents' past seems to be at loggerheads with the present. Because of tourism and increased footfall in the Nilgiris, the district has witnessed a mass migration as people arrive to establish businesses – from real estate to hospitality. While tourism is an important source of revenue for Ooty and the Nilgiris, natives of the region have noticed jarring changes in the environment, culture and community.

"Back then, everybody knew everybody," Preetham recalls. "But today, I sometimes feel like an outsider in my own town."

He spoke of how irresponsible tourism is posing consequences for the environment – which will be borne by none other than the locals. Entitlement and a lack of civic sense have cluttered many areas with garbage, while tourists often do not support local businesses; rendering the economic benefits completely null. Although this has deeply impacted Preetham and long-time Ooty residents, he hopes that there is a gradual change that transforms the throngs of tourists into responsible, patient visitors.

Despite the changes and issues that have cropped up with time, Preetham and his family continue living life to the fullest in Ooty. To date, basking under the dazzling view of the moon and stars during a night out in the mountains is still the perfect adventure for him.

Some things never change.... ■

“There is no place like home and for Preetham, that happens to be the vibrant town of Udhagamandalam



The Goddess of Small Things

*The Nilgiri Hills offer a special tranquillity. **Apsara Reddy**, transgender politician and activist recalls how a chance encounter at the Ooty market connected her to her purpose*

From the warm embrace of the hill roads to the soft summer rain to the howling monsoon winds, the Nilgiris, for me, echoes life and nurtures it. Growing up in a traditional South Indian family, my childhood was filled with as much love as it was with customs, expectations, and a prescribed way of life. All I ever wanted was understanding, compassion and a right to decide my own definitions of dignity, identity and potential. At every step I faced challenges that called for great mental and emotional reserves to claim who I really was. The world was quick to respond harshly and cruelly, but one significant meeting in the Nilgiris showed me what true love and acceptance was.

On a cold winter evening in 2014, just a couple of years after my gender reassignment surgery, my family and I visited Ooty to check on our ancestral property. My father (who passed away recently and with whom I shared a complicated relationship) wished to dispose the property and reinvest in Chennai. Many were the reasons given to me by well-wishers

and ill-wishers to convince me this property was not intended for me.

In an effort to escape the conflict I took to exploring the town. At every turn I found strangers waiting to be friends. On one such excursion to the municipal market I found myself walking through delicately formed pathways lined with fresh vegetables, fruits, herbs and traditional snacks. At that time I wasn't a television personality or a politician; my only identity was that of a trans woman still trying to find her feet.

As I kept walking, from a distance, a frail old woman beamed and waved at me and gestured for me to walk to her shop. Curious eyes, some nervous, a few avoiding eye contact, watched me carefully. The lady, in her 80s, introduced herself as the snack lady of the market, selling home-made chips, murukku and cream biscuits. She asked me where I was from and looking me in the eye said, "Everything will be OK, you are God's child." I looked at her, smiled, and overcome by emotion, I thanked her. From a sea of negative feedback, suddenly here was a woman I had

just met, brimming with positivity and acceptance. And something within me changed with that simple sentence. I began to believe that there was a meaningful place for me in this world and I didn't need to be apologetic for who I truly am.

She went on to tell me of her life, one of struggle, forced marriage, abuse and hunger. But she believed in her strengths and banked on her cooking skills. In her story I found encouragement and the will to persevere. I learned, that day, in the Blue Hills, that we need to look at each other's souls and not at the flaws.

That goddess incarnate at the Ooty market offered me acceptance and belonging and she showed me who I was really. A human soul who was meant to live here, in these hills, where the mist and the rain wipe away fear and prejudice and nature looks past race, belief and background. Where peace in infinite guises, is found in small things and big, to the children of God who seek it. Blessed are we to call these hills home. ■



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Hands On

A born artist, Mukund Ravishankar talks to Inside43 about his artistic journey to the magical world of ceramics

My fondest memories of when I was younger were of my brother and I, walking around the roads and estates surrounding our home looking for various birds and other tiny creatures that frequently visited the mighty trees and little streams. With a small notebook and a pair of binoculars, my brother noted the various species and upon returning home, cross-referenced what we found in "The

Book of Indian Birds" written by Salim Ali. This book was filled with beautiful coloured illustrations of all these different birds and my favourite thing to do was to copy the birds we saw onto my notebook to keep a record of it. This is when my love for drawing really began. Growing up surrounded by the natural beauty of these hills, almost everything I create has this strong influence behind it.

Pandemic and after

After finishing my schooling here, I joined the College of Fine Arts in Bangalore and specialised in painting. I then went to Pondicherry just when the pandemic had started. This is where my curiosity for the world of ceramics began. Pondicherry and Auroville have quite a few creative people influenced by international artists, doing a lot of different things with ceramics. But they seemed quite busy or were reluctant to have people visit just when the pandemic was dying down. Still, I managed to connect with some of them and take a few classes to learn the basics. Even the small villages around there had some local families that were practising and teaching pottery. I kept in touch with them but when I got back to Coonoor, I was a bit confused as to how I would improve on what I had learned or where I could practice my new skills.

A couple of months went by and a friend of mine sent me a message saying that there was someone in Coonoor taking a small workshop on the weekend, teaching the basics of ceramics.

New learnings

I immediately signed up and that's where I met Ayra, who had just moved to Coonoor, from Dehradun, to set up her studio here. She has been working with ceramics for almost 8 years and did her graduation in product design in Pune. I spent the next few months taking classes, practising the wheel and learned more advanced techniques regarding the hand-building process. Holding and building forms with this earthy material feels limitless in possibilities. It does require a certain amount of

patience and is extremely rewarding if done right. In fact, it forces a certain amount of patience, without which, there's a pretty big chance of everything falling in on itself and you'll have to start the process all over again, whether it's on the wheel or if you're building something by hand. Making sculptures is something I've come to enjoy immensely.

After creating something, the pieces go in the electric kiln and are heated to around 800°C to remove most of the moisture and make them more durable. These pieces are called bisque (or biscuit) pieces and are still fragile. Opening the kiln and making sure these pieces are intact brings a lot of relief, for if there are any air bubbles stuck in the clay or if anything was too rushed in the previous process, or some bits weren't stuck together properly, they could fall apart and break while being heated up.

The next step is the glazing process. Glaze is a glass coating that melts onto the bisqued pieces while the second firing happens. It's a slurry mix of water, silica, ground minerals and other colourants that the pieces are dipped in and left to dry. It then fires at above 1200°C so all the components are evenly melted, forming either a glossy or matte

“ This is when my love for drawing really began

surface on the clay. The colourants and oxides vary from iron oxides to cobalt carbonates to tin and all of them create various colours and textures depending on their quantity and ratios. Unlike painting, mixing a green pigment with a yellow powder will not give you a blue. A number of chemical reactions happen in the kiln at high temperatures including crystal formations and nothing is more satisfying than getting the desired finish that stays consistent.

Just the beginning

All this is barely scratching the surface with everything that is there to learn in this ancient art form. Having the privilege to practice it here in Coonoor is something that I'm grateful for and the inspirations I get from my surroundings are endless. We're excited to see what we will create in the studio and where it takes us. Hopefully we inspire many others to create and maybe even incline other artists from all over to come to Coonoor and set up their spaces, forming a hub of creativity, beauty and inspiration. The possibilities are endless and I, for one, plan to stay hands on. ■





A Life in Dance

*It is a way of life with her. **Sreeram V** talks to Bhavani Viswanath about her calling which turned into a home-based dance school*

Bhavani's tryst with classical dance, which includes the dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam, and Kuchipudi, began at the age of nine. In the early 1970s, her father, Prof N Kailasam of St Thomas College, Thrissur, an avid lover of all classical dance and music forms (and an author of many books and notable works of translation), took her and her siblings to various classical recitals. It was the beginning of an enduring and lifelong love.

You're a teacher of dance. Who were your gurus and mentors?

My very first gurus were Parvathi and Nirmala (both of them are sisters) of Natana Nikethanam, and I completed my Bharatanatyam Rangapravesam under their expert guidance at the age of 13. After completing my Bharatanatyam Rangapravesam, I went on to learn Mohiniyattam under guru Husnabanu Sunnajan, under whose aegis I completed my Mohiniyattam Rangapravesam. I am the recipient of many notable awards and recognitions bestowed by the Kerala Government.

When and how did your teaching career start?

I first began teaching students in Thrissur before my marriage. Around ten students performed Rangapravesam under me back then. They also participated in various competitions and won accolades. I also had an opportunity to train a few students of my guru, Smt Husnabanu Sunnajan, in a few months of her absence. That was a tremendous honour and gave me a wonderful experience and exposure, all of which have added to what I am today as a teacher.

Can you elaborate on the significance of Rangapravesam?

It is a maiden stage performance for any student after they learn a repertoire of dance items. It is the first time they get to perform in front of a live audience and orchestra, which is why it is also known as Arangetram, which means entering the stage.

Can you explain what classical dance does to the body and mind?

You have to involve your entire body while dancing - the neck, eyes, face, and literally all parts of the body. The mind plays a pivotal role in imagination and that produces the desired Mudras. It is a perfect exercise that improves the breath and harmonises the body and mind. Even watching a dance recital can do wonders for the mind.

Can you tell us about your brief stint in Pondicherry?

I first performed at Bharathiyaar Palkalai Koodam, a college of Arts affiliated with Pondicherry University. I then began teaching there for a while until we made the move to Coonoor. I like to remember this brief tenure for what I learned from the then-principal of the Institution, Smt Jayashree Narayanan. I used to watch her teaching Bharatanatyam and it was always a master class on the way students must be taught and developed. She was a very patient guru who made learning a very fun process.

What are the best memories of your Mudra School of Dance?

The school has, in 25 years, choreographed and staged various dance performances in the Nilgiris

district. Notable among them are "Colours of India", "India on the Move", "Vibrant India", "Celebrate India" & "Independent India" for the Nilgiris Cultural Association; "Dances of India" for Kairali, Aruvankadu; and "Bharathanatyam Night" performed at Taj Garden Retreat, Coonoor on the occasion of an Indo-China government delegation on boundary settlement. In March 2013, Mudra gave an outstanding 3-hour performance on the different dance forms of India to mark 15 years of its service in the district. All these experiences were so exciting, as we had to learn about the different stages, arrange the respective costumes, learn about the folk culture of the different states, and help students bring it all together on the stage.

Mudra School of Dance has now completed the Rangapravesam of 57 of its students, and two more of its students are being trained for this important stage.

Can you tell us of your honours and accolades?

I was conferred the honour of "Kalai Nanmani" by the Government of Tamil Nadu in the year 2016 for my services in Bharatanatyam. The same year, the NCA recognised me with a "Best Performer" award.

It is indeed an honour to receive these awards after the amount of hard work, team work, and togetherness that has gone into it all. This wouldn't have been possible without my dearest students, their parents, the splendid orchestra team from Kerala, and my beloved guru. We, as a family, have achieved this together. ■

A Noteworthy Calling

*Arpana David talks to **Krishna Barot** about her love of music, teaching and living her best life*



For Arpana David, music is not simply something one learns to pass an exam or bolster their resume. Rather, music nurtures the soul and impacts various aspects of one's life, from cognition and academics to one's understanding of society and culture. It was this philosophy that encouraged her to launch her academy, *The Mad House* (Music.Art.Drama) - Coonoor's very own centre for children to experience the sheer, unbridled joy of music. Along with teaching children all things musical, artsy and dramatic, she is a loving mother and wife, a gardening aficionado and possesses a wicked sense of humour. "It feels like I am giving a job interview," she jokes when asked about her background. "It's been 11 years since someone asked me this question!"

Before the Nilgiris

Before The Mad House and Arpana started on her professional path, her love for music began at a young age – at the church. She often found herself singing and listening to church music, along with African gospel music. Her father, a member of the Indian Navy's rock band, deeply influenced her love for music as well. A professional drummer, she recalled receiving a drum set as a gift during her childhood – the first of many instruments she would go on to master. Touted as one of Coonoor's most mellifluous singers, Arpana's voice is unfailingly met with deep admiration from her listeners. However, she only came to realise her vocal talents in college.

Throughout school, she assumed that singing was as normal as sleeping and eating. "Everybody sang," she explains. "It was very normal and back then, I had no idea that I was any good."

She would go on to understand her talent years later while auditioning onstage for her college's a cappella band: The Flip Flops. Not only was she immediately accepted into the band, but The Flip Flops dominated various festivals and cultural competitions, bagging first place 3 years in a row. Ever since college, Arpana has relished each moment on the stage, calling it her second home.

The hills are alive

Her professional association with music began several years later, upon returning to Coonoor post-marriage. Encouraged to find a job by her father and husband, she applied to a local school for the role of music teacher. She landed a job as an English teacher, however.

To combat the dreariness of correcting endless compositions, Arpana crafted a new curriculum, one that integrated English with music. To her delight, the school administration eventually transcribed her curriculum into their textbooks. This not only encouraged her to aim higher but also to pursue her love for teaching. And that is precisely what she did.

After scoring a staggering 99 marks out of 100 in the coveted Trinity exams, she began teaching classroom music in another institute. Not only was she teaching over 40 children simultaneously, but also inculcating diverse music curricula to create an enriching environment in her classes. Her efforts caught the eye of the school principal, who

motivated her to take on additional responsibilities. In a short time, Arpana was equipped with a budget for her curricula, new instruments for her students and an opportunity to direct a full-fledged musical programme with Kevin Oliver, the cultural coordinator at GEMS Academy. She recalls their production of The Lion King; a musical that attracted a 2000-strong audience from across the Nilgiris - and she still remembers the tremendous love and support the production received.

Several years later, Arpana made the big jump with The Mad House, teaching a handful of children. Today, she welcomes over 40 students who are eager to learn music, sing their hearts out and express themselves wholly through theatre. "The academy is one of the first ones in India to introduce musical teaching concepts such as solfege and kodaly," she says enthusiastically. A pioneer in her field, Arpana maintains the delicate balance of teaching her students various musical techniques, while encouraging them to find their own voice.

"At The Mad House, kids are not forced to sound like anyone else – they are taught to feel comfortable with their voices," Arpana shares. She has watched children who joined her at the tender age of four, grow up to be confident singers. One of her students also went on to participate in the popular Tamil reality television show, Super Singer, emerging as one of the Top 5 singers in the competition.

Amidst the singing competitions, exams and various lessons, Arpana consistently reminds her students that they are not simply learning

music, but experiencing it while, loving every second of it.

Orchestrating the future

The years of teaching have rewarded her with a sense of pride in what she has accomplished, along with a searing ambition to achieve more. She now hopes to open her academy doors not only to young children, but aspiring music teachers as well. "After all, teacher training is the best way to spread the message of music," she says. A more streamlined teaching process, a focus on vocal training and plenty of innovative workshops are already present on her roster.

❧ After scoring a staggering 99 marks out of 100 in the coveted Trinity exams, she began teaching classroom music in another institute

When Arpana is not teaching or conducting workshops, one can find her singing the Blues and Jazz, coupled with some rock and roll. She believes that her faith in God has aided her through some of her most important decisions, and is thoroughly grateful for the guidance. She is a keen member of the the Rotaract Club, where she volunteers on charitable projects and she runs a Facebook group for the district that encourages recycling and upcycling.

Her ventures and adventures, both present and future, are guided by the simplest yet most fulfilling thing; her lifelong love for music. Those who have heard her and know her will testify to this. ■



In The Zone

Sreeram V visits Workout Zone Fitness Studio, the first unisex gym in the Nilgiris, that is committed to building a fitter, happier community



Great minds can achieve great things together. Be it Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid in cricket, Bill and Melinda Gates in charity, Aswathy and Srikanth in the field of classical dances, two people with great minds find ways to be creative and unlock unseen potential.

Coonoor's Flavin and Paramesh may not find themselves in the record books yet, but they may have just laid

the stepping stone to that. Paramesh is an award-winning body-building enthusiast with a love for fitness that spans 35 years, and Flavin is a dietician and nutritionist. Together, they founded the *Workout Zone Fitness Studio*, a first-of-its-kind unisex fitness studio in the Nilgiris.

When did you both open this gym; tell us about your journey?

We wanted to put our capabilities into creating a state-of-the-art gym in the Nilgiris. We achieved that quite recently, in April 2023.

The facilities you find here are a class apart, which explains why we have drawn many people in a short span of just around six months. We have many eminent people of the Nilgiris training in our place. This includes the current DSP, the traffic inspector of the town, sitting and retired judges of the district, advocates, athletes, marathon runners, doctors, students, and even people over 60 years old. We work with qualified trainers and people who know what it takes to get the right outcome with a trainee.

People here are always treated well and have their needs addressed. We have neatly maintained wash rooms and changing rooms. A music system is installed, and people can connect their Bluetooth and listen to any songs they like. We have a dedicated time for home-makers, too. People find it a home away from home. The glowing reviews on Google are testament to this.

Paramesh, how long have you been training people?

I have been training people for the last 20 years and I have to say it has been a fulfilling experience.

Tell us about how your enthusiasm for fitness began?

I was initially practising like everyone else, and made gymming a way of life, but then the passion grew over time and I wanted to encourage other people to discover the benefits and joy of working out regularly.

What awards and honours have you received?

I received the Mr Nilgiri Award in 2014 at an event by the Mirza Fitness Studio. The same year, I won the 6th prize in an event organised by the Anna Stadium Body Building Camp, Gudalur. I was again the winner of the Mr Nilgiri Award in 2015. Master Nani Ibrahim Mirza Fitness Gym, Gudalur, organised this event.

Many people view the gym as a place only meant for body-building. Are there other important purposes it serves?

It obviously serves various other purposes. You can hit the gym to reduce weight, perform cross-fitness activities, or work on your core strengths. Most importantly, a gym serves to keep your body and mind fit and healthy. Bodybuilding is simply one of the focus areas rather than *the* focus area. I think in recent years more and more people are becoming aware of the holistic benefits of being in a gym and receiving the right kind of training.

Flavin, is consuming protein powders good for you?

We don't see any harm in consuming protein powders, but it is advisable to avoid tablets or injections. These powders have only been in India for the last 15 years or so. Before that, people used to consume country



eggs, chicken, etc., to complement their workouts. The natural way will always be the best way.

Exercise and diet – how do we strike the right balance?

I brought my weight down from 95kg to 65kg with this perfect balance. I didn't go for muscle building. I used to jog for around 10-12km, worked on cardio exercises, and followed a strict diet. I completely avoided white products like salt, sugar, etc. I instead consumed brown sugar, millet-based foods, and the right proteins.

I believe that the intake of food and output of energy must be balanced with appropriate workouts. For example, if you eat 3000 calories and burn only 1500 calories, then there will be a surplus of 1500 calories. We usually prepare a chart for people

based on their food preferences. We do this to bring them to the desired fitness objective. We try to do this in as personalised a way as possible, that accommodates people's lifestyles and preferences.

Are you preparing anyone for the Mr Nilgiris event?

We haven't had the competition for a few years post-COVID. As you know, the pandemic put a halt to many such things. But if it takes place, at least two people are preparing to participate in the competition, and we are hopeful.

Is today's generation more health conscious?

Yes, that's somehow built into them these days. While people use cars and bikes more than was once the norm, and have sedentary jobs, there

seems to be increased motivation as a result to add movement to their daily schedules. Coming to the gym and seeing others working out spurs them to stay on course.

What plans to you have for the future?

We intend to expand the gym to a 2500-square-foot space to cater to an increased number of people as we are seeing a lot of interest in what we offer. We have already started looking for a suitable location, but we have no intention of closing this place. We just want to increase the capacity of our offering and make it as widely accessible as possible. ■

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It's a 'Kinder' Magic

*This organisation has transformed lives with the simple mission of making the world a better place, one initiative at a time. Inside43 was fortunate to talk to **Diana Bharucha** about The Kinder Trust and its many accomplishments*

"I just wanted to help people, you know? Help people and make a difference in their lives." This was not an out-of-the-blue, dawn of realisation that struck Diana Cyrus Bharucha. Rather, this had been what she wanted to do for years, and it was eventually realised in the form of the *Kinder Trust*.

Registered in 2017, Kinder Trust's vision was simple: to provide relief and support to differently-abled people, no matter the gender, age or physical and mental health issues they faced. Almost 6 years later, the Trust has not only provided comprehensive medical aid and assistance to multiple beneficiaries

but has also branched out to a rehabilitation centre, training programmes for differently-abled and financially challenged people, skill development centres and ongoing community service.

“...her ethos and vision are shared by a committed team of social workers, corporate heavyweights and more

At the heart of all activities, ventures and programmes, Diana and her team tirelessly strive to

accomplish the organisation's motto – making the world a better place together.

A lifelong passion

Much before social activism and Kinder Trust, Diana's life revolved around garments. Equipped with a degree in Design, she worked in the garment industry for 12 years before launching her own garment export venture. But even amidst her commercial activities, social service was never too far from her heart. Her factory floor was often operated by differently-abled people. "My telephone operator was a visually impaired lady, several of the tailors we hired had a disability. I always felt

great empathy towards them,” Diana shared.

Twenty-eight successful years later, she decided to move to the Nilgiris from Bangalore, and founded the Kinder Trust in 2017. The Nilgiris held fond memories of her grandfather, the PWD Chief Engineer in the Nilgiris, of the Madras Presidency, who, like her, was very passionate about social service.

The cornerstone

As Founder and Managing Trustee of Kinder Trust, Diana has her hands full with various responsibilities. But, her ethos and vision are shared by a committed team of social workers, corporate heavyweights and more. Her co-trustee, VS Ramana, has served across various sectors for the past 38 years, from advertising and pharmaceuticals to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and skills training. Samantha Iyanna, who finds her roots in Coonoor, is also a member of the team. A travel agency owner, wildlife photographer and environmental activist, she is passionate about preserving the Nilgiris. Also on team Kinder is Sreenivas Naidu, a corporate professional with over 28 years of work experience, holding in-depth knowledge of the CSR vertical. The Trust also has the formidable support of another Coonoor resident, Radhika Shastry; a corporate whiz, seasoned traveller and restaurateur, she works alongside the team as a project advisor to ensure the sustainability and expansion of this dedicated initiative. Latha Narsimhan is the legal advisor.

Over the years

“When we started Kinder Trust, we began without a place,” Diana

recalled. “We brought a doctor from Bangalore to help children with physical and mental conditions.” A pivotal initiative for the organisation was getting surgery completed for 5 children afflicted with cerebral palsy. As this occurred during the pandemic, there lay the mammoth task of ensuring the children’s safety, finding a physiotherapist for them and ensuring their continued care and support. Today these children can walk and even look after the home in the absence of their parents – a phenomenal feat given the scope of their challenges.

Rehabilitation centre

Aware that people in Coonoor needed and thoroughly deserved a functioning rehab centre, Kinder Trust obtained a defunct primary school from the Regional Director of Municipal Administration (RDMA) and established a rehabilitation centre. The centre offers an array of medical services to Coonoor’s populace, including physiotherapy, speech therapy, audiometry, psychotherapy, electrotherapy and occupational therapy. It maintains a technical alliance with the Association of People with Disability (APD), Bangalore and the National Association for the Blind (NAB),

Karnataka. Operations at the centre began in 2021 and soon began treating 15-45 patients daily. Apart from highly skilled doctors and dedicated volunteers, the centre also offers home services for patients with mobility issues, as well as teleconsultations.

Kinder Trust has been supported in making all this happen not only by partner organisations / hospitals, but also the General Hospital, Coonoor, the municipality, governmental bodies and generous donors. Financial aid is provided by Portescap, a company that has continually given rock solid support, as per Diana. “Everyone in Coonoor has been extremely cooperative and done their bit to help.”

Learn and earn

Along with medical assistance, Kinder Trust also empowers the differently-abled with a job or self-employment. The Learn & Earn programme welcomes the differently-abled, their relatives and even women in need to benefit from the extensive training. During the financial year 2021-2022, the programme trained over 150 people across varied skills, including tailoring, food preservation, knitting, crocheting, basket weaving, paper pen crafting, PCB assembling, and





beautician services. The tailoring trainees now provide their services to a social enterprise in Ooty. The beauticians dabble in bridal makeup, house services and even makeup for film sets. Many of the food preservation trainees sell their pickles and jams from their homes, while the creative crafts trainees sell their products to tourists and consumers across various towns of the Nilgiris.

TARVI

Designed to empower the visually impaired, the Training and Resource Centre for Visually Impaired (TARVI) was inaugurated by the Collector of the Nilgiris in 2022-2023. The programme is also supported by Microland Foundation. Trainees are taught skills such as basic computer course, mobility, basket weaving and crochet. Progressing shortly to music and reflexology. "I was amazed at how well they were able to crochet," Diana expressed. "It is very intricate work, but they are very good at feeling things – as if they can see with their fingers." Several of TARVI's trainees are also appearing for examinations for basic computer training certified

by NAB Karnataka, and will soon be entering the job market. Kinder Trust hopes to see them, along with the rest of the trainees, placed in sectors such as the hotel industry, banking industry and even call centres.

The future

These initiatives barely scratch the surface of Kinder Trust's diverse portfolio. And there is much left to do.

With a cancer awareness outreach programme in the books and a potential collaboration with the government psychiatry department for the rehabilitation centre, Kinder Trust has never been busier. Its biggest challenge however is organising larger premises for their

the centre also offers home services for patients with mobility issues, as well as teleconsultations

centre – which will not only provide much-required space but will also facilitate the introduction of new departments and programmes. Help in the form of donations will aid Kinder Trust inch closer to their goal; of changing lives for the better.

The organisation's goals and vision are as crystal-clear as the first day. While Diana and her team continue their relentless pursuit, they also hope to combat the widespread taboo of employing the differently-abled. "People often hesitate to employ them, although they are very capable of carrying out a job." This needs to change," says Diana firmly. And while Kinder Trust regularly updates its partners and donors with annual

To date, the centre has overcome incredible odds and performed miracles:

- 27 medical camps where wheelchairs, prostheses and hearing aids are often distributed to people in need.
- Registrations amounting to 3,035 patients, 7331 therapy sessions, including children and the elderly who visit the centre for different kinds of therapy.
- Eye camps in partnership with Aravind Eye Foundation (1,124 free tests, 366 free spectacles distributed and 26 cataract surgeries performed)
- Medical and surgical assistance programmes for children suffering from muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, etc.
- Outreach programmes for early intervention (EI) at 62 different locations in the Coonoor Taluk, along with training programmes for village head nurses and ASHA workers.

reports and social media posts, no statistic can do justice to the lives Kinder Trust has changed, the impact it has created and the movement it has pioneered, which displays no signs of slowing down. ■

Kinder Trust, Upper Vannarpet, Vannarpet, Coonoor, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu 643102

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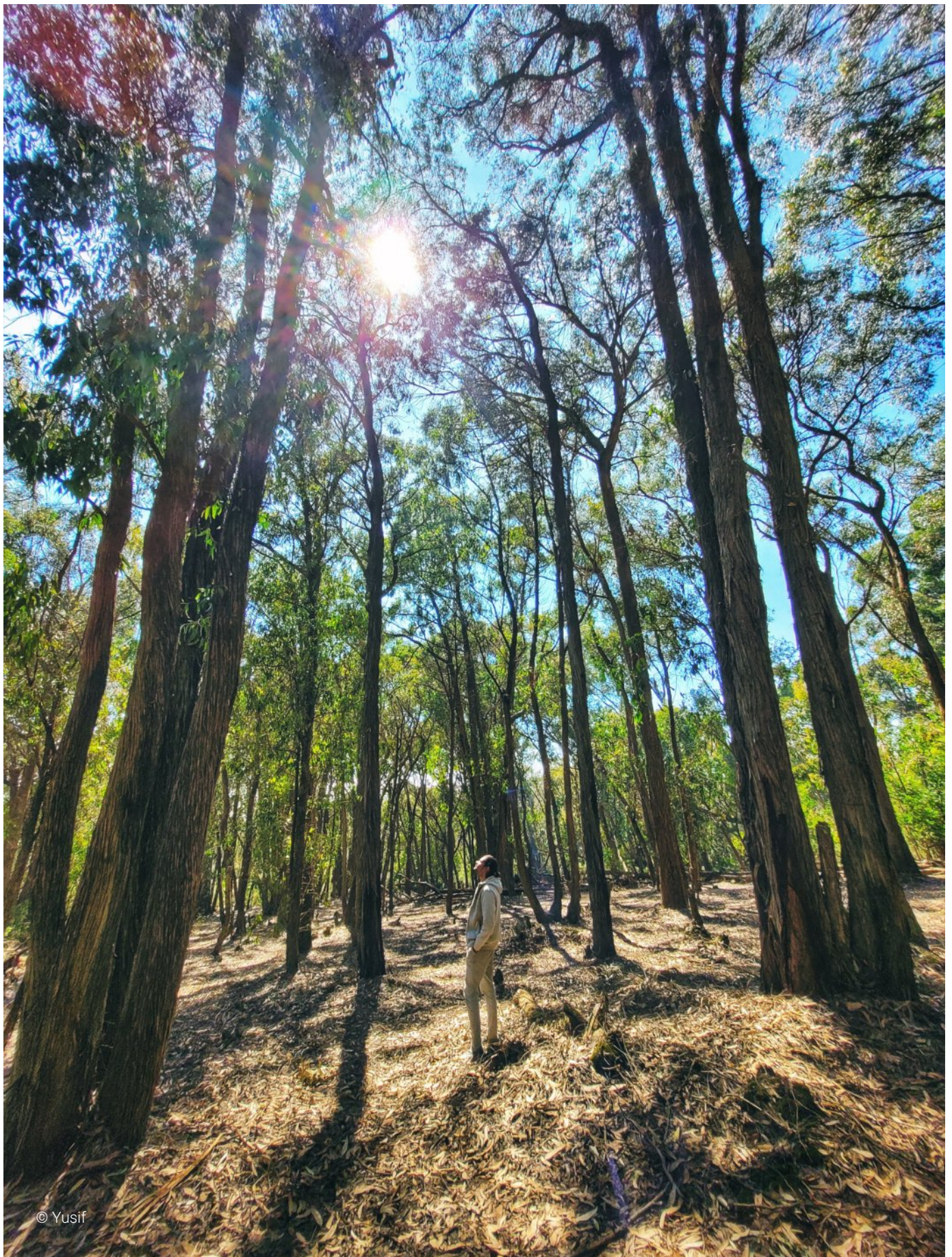
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Namma Nilgiris

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*A gallery of images that capture the stunning
diversity of the district we all love*



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Of Forests, Family and Friends

*Thespiian, hospitality expert and product of the Nilgiris, **Michael Rosemonde**, recalls his early days in Coonoor and the colourful characters who once were resident there*



It is indeed gratifying to be given the opportunity to go back over 60 years to share with you my memories of Coonoor, its flora and fauna and the incidents that I am still able to recall during the course of a lifetime!

I arrived in Coonoor in the 1950s. Accompanying us were two and a half lorry loads of our worldly possessions. Imagine our surprise and dismay when the house we had rented, which had been described as a lovely English cottage amidst sylvan surroundings, turned out to be a pokey dump, with hardly any room to swing a cat, as the saying goes. Although, for the life of me, I would never dream of putting a cat through such an ordeal.

Our first encounter with a local resident was not our neighbour, but a lady with a permanent smile on her

face, who stood outside on the road and stared at our front door. It was not an enigmatic Mona Lisa type of smile, but one that, being an avid reader of horror stories, sent chills up my spine.

These visitations became a daily occurrence until, in an effort to be cordial, we asked her if she would like to come in. Her response was a short but decisive – no, I would not like to come in. That was our first and last communication.

The one positive outcome of our rather disastrous introduction to Coonoor was the Tiger Hill forest which I was able to explore to the maximum. Decades later, the Nilgiri gaur put an abrupt end to such exploration, at least on my part!

My ventures into the forests in and around Coonoor were the highlights of my adolescent years. I was always alone at such times, which probably enhanced the feeling of being enveloped in the deep silence and the overpowering aura of absolute solitude.

These moments have remained with me over the years and, even now, when passing through a jungle, I feel the urge to stop and enter, to keep

walking deeper and deeper into it, and never turn back. Strange, you might say? A death wish? Far from it, my friends. Just an inherent love of nature which my childhood spent in Coonoor instilled in me.

The residents whom I came across 60 odd years ago have long since left this earth, by now experts in playing the harp amongst other heavenly bodies, or indulging in a bit of strip poker with the devil. Frankly, if given a choice, I would opt for the latter.

Our second abode was South Hampton, an annexe of Hampton Hotel (now the Taj Gateway), which was then owned and run by an Australian couple, the Camerons, and their son-in-law and daughter, the Butlers. The Marsdens, a very nice English couple, were permanent residents along with another retired planter who attributed his good health to the fact that he used to consume a handful of green tea leaf daily. I vividly remember his lamenting that he could never enter a movie theatre again because of the cigarette smoke that pervaded the hall.

That just covered two years. Another 61 to go. Watch this space! ■

COME HOME



The Nilgiris is an exceptional place to visit. It combines a rich history, with wide, sweeping vistas of carpets of tea, swirling clouds that soften craggy peaks, and sholas filled with a remarkable variety of flora and fauna.

There are little towns, streams, bustling markets and waterfalls to explore, and when that is done, nothing beats curling up with a good book and a cup of local tea to watch the sunset over the horizon.

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LE GRAND PLACE

It's not on the tourist trail, but many have heard of it. Hema Vikram gives us a very quick guided tour of the Pithapuram Palace, and a brief glimpse at its colourful history



The lotus pond today

A long time ago, a maharaja, from a town in present day Andhra Pradesh, needed a beautiful place to escape the searing heat of summer. And so he built a palace that sat amidst sixty wooded acres of the undulating curves of the Nilgiris, that commanded spectacular views of the sholas that spread their leafy shade over the blue-green hills. In 1936, the sprawling *Pithapuram Palace* became the summer residence of the Maharaja of Pithapuram and stayed in royal hands until it was bought in 1959, by the family of Rao Bahadur Bellie Gowder of



Hubbathalai and R Rajubettan, a prominent planter of the district. The Maharaja had fallen into debt and had sold all the exquisite antique furniture previously, and the Palace was purchased as an empty shell. Interestingly, it was the pioneering Rao Bahadur who was the contractor who completed the track on which runs our beloved toy train. He was awarded a medal from the British government for his outstanding work

in executing such a complex and important project.

A family affair

The Palace then became a joint family home, with the noted Badaga families raising several sons and daughters who still continue to fill the hills with their presence. Today, if you drive up from Sim's Park in Coonoor, around a discreet bend in the road, a smaller road branches off to the right, into the gated, family community that surrounds the Palace. Serene colonial-style bungalows lie scattered around the Palace and the woods have given way to the verdant tea estates that the Nilgiris is now popularly associated with.

The Palace, a solid, heavy, square-shaped structure, has, in itself, changed considerably since its heyday as a royal holiday home. Renovations have transformed the interiors into a more contemporary space, though the original shape stays as it was, dominating the rest of the estate that surrounds it.

Changing times

The Palace itself houses around 50 rooms, and is for the most part an unassuming looking building, despite its impressive size. Today some of the descendants of the original buyers live in the Palace, while other members of the family have spread out over the estate, building beautiful homes, managing their tea businesses and running quaint homestays that are well worth a visit.

The Palace was built to weather the ages, but its 'Madras Terrace' cannot be said to be particularly geared towards the vagaries of the weather in the Ghats. Over time, two major renovations were undertaken on the roof. The gracious floor tiles imported

from Italy, which have weathered beautifully, still remain in impeccable condition - an enduring testament to quality Italian design and manufacture. There was a 'Rosery' boasting flowers of that name in a host of different varieties that spread their fragrance far and wide across the property. In fact, the whole area used to be called the Rosery for this reason, in the early years.

There existed on the grounds a serene lotus pond that was supposed to have been built for the use of the Maharani herself. The pond now sits on the property of the youngest son of R Rajubettan, and the lotus blooms are no longer in evidence, but it is still

❧ In 1936 Pithapuram Palace became the summer residence of the Maharaja of Pithapuram and stayed in royal hands until it was bought in 1959...

a beautiful pond, surrounded by lush foliage and it attracts a remarkable variety of birdlife to itself over the seasons. Should you happen to visit this home, you would have to be careful while reversing your vehicle lest you roll into the lush carpet of grass and flora that bloom alongside the drive and over the body of water, where the Maharani once spent her leisure hours. Lotuses bloomed here until the mid-2000s.

A small path from the main building leads to an exterior kitchen of considerable proportions, as was the case with many structures of that era. It also had, many years ago, a generously-sized garage that boasted



R Rajubettan



Rao Bahadur (middle row, 3rd from left)

a ramp beside it, possibly used for car repairs of the fleet that, no doubt, served the Maharaja and his entourage. Of course, a garage alone would not be enough to accommodate the Maharaja's needs, and there were a few stables dotted across the wooded hillside, housing, we can be certain, some horses of exceedingly fine distinction.

Military ties

It is rumoured that the legendary Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, wished to purchase the Palace for his own personal use while he was the commandant of the Staff College, but decided against it, as it was just too big. He obviously must have loved this area, for his beautiful home, with the sunken living room, is just a short distance away on the same road. The Palace was then rented out to the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) for 15 years before the families decided to take it back into their hands and converted it into a personal gated community for the large, extended group of relatives that grow and thrive there now.

Pithapuram Palace is one of the Nilgiris lesser known historic gems, a living part of the richness of this district's multi-faceted past. It is one of those areas in these hills that, while changing quietly to accommodate fresh blood, has retained its old world sense of grandeur and panache, with sweeping drives, wide lawns, sprawling bungalows and families that are enmeshed into the warp and weft of these hills we all know and love. Long, we hope, will the Palace stand, its unchanging facade gazing serenely down on the sun-kissed tea gardens and sholas, as it continues to watch life unfold, generation after generation in these, our tranquil Blue Hills. ■



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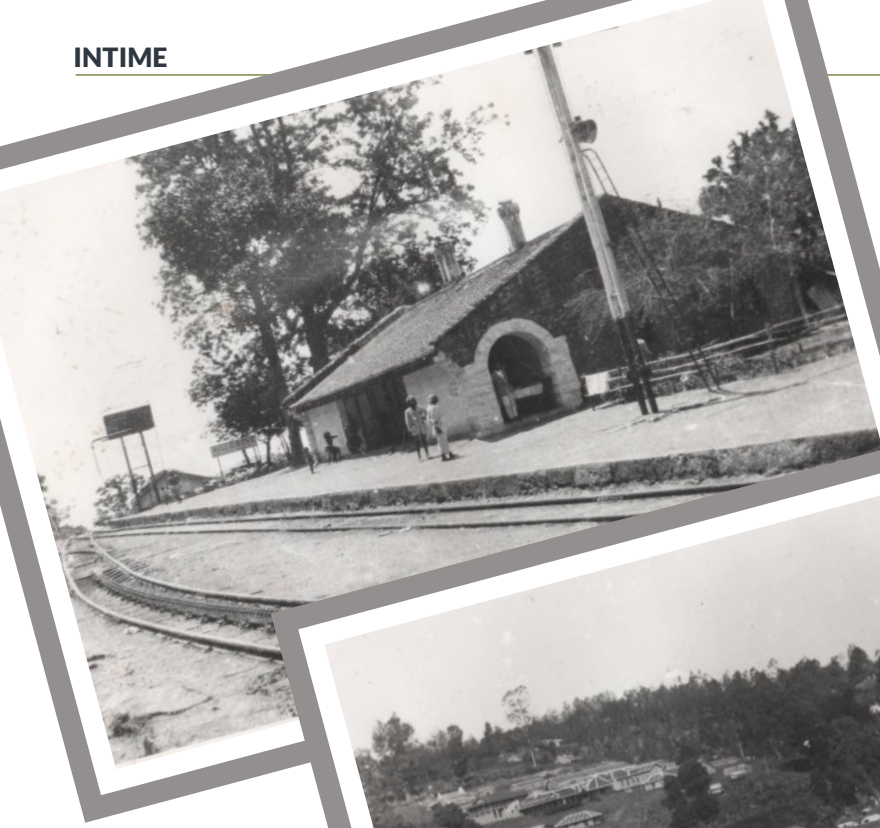


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The Way We Were

*Growing up in the Nilgiris was a special experience, especially in the first two decades following Independence. **Ravi Mathews** takes us on a trip down memory lane recalling Coonoor in the 1950s*

As Hill Stations went, Ootacamund was always the queen, revelling in its mansions and palaces, where paraded and pranced the plenipotents and plutocrats, and a dizzy array of maharajahs, nawabs and zamindars, in the resplendent shade of the Raj Bhavan. Coonoor was the lowlier maid-in-waiting, a quiet summer resort where, in 1947, my grandparents chose to retire, amongst a genteel genre of more modest folk, content to live in the balmier climate that this quaint little place offered. Coonoor in the 1950's, was a delightful town, where my brother and I would excitedly come up from Chennai for our holidays.

Well trained

The train journey from Chennai by the Blue Mountain Express was greatly anticipated, with its cosy leather-upholstered coupes and the tiny toilets en-suite. As the train steamed into Coimbatore at about 7.30am the next morning, the prospect of a substantial Spencers' 'English' breakfast was much looked forward to, when sashed, turbaned and gloved bearers served up trays of hot buttered toast, bacon and poached eggs. The drive up the ghat was a pleasure, and in spite of WWII vintage motors, took no more than the hour it does today, orderly traffic giving way to those going uphill, on road surfaces that were maintained, well-cambered, and drained with culverts neatly positioned along the gradient.

The NMT Company operated what was termed a 'First Class Bus' - white with a green stripe down its side, with limited stops and reserved seats, almost always on time and was a comfortable ride up from

Mettupalayam. As one came up the ghat, the lush growth on the verges released the rich earthy tang of aeons of humus, the trees on either side displaying shades of green, brown, crimson and gold.

Coming home

Closer to Coonoor, the heady fragrance of cypress, eucalyptus and pine, complemented the spicier overtones of the lantana, with the soft purple haze of the jacaranda trees framing glimpses of Glendale Tea estate. The town back then was a far cry from what it is today - Brooklands was all china tea, apart from the estate bungalow, staff and labour quarters. Quail Hill was a maze of casuarina, wattle, and blue gum with a sprinkling of modest bungalows amongst its groves. Tiger Hill was a bower of verdant sholas. Sims Park afforded many a pleasant ramble, strolling down the flower beds, or indulging in the forbidden thrill of rolling down its grassy slopes in breathless frenzy. Angling was permitted in the small lake and many

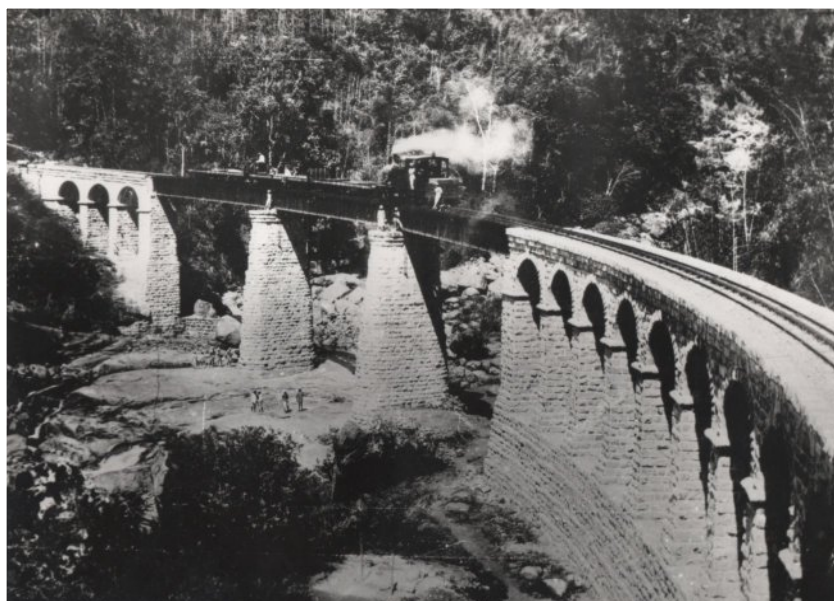
a lazy afternoon was spent baiting the carp that glided in its depths. Another haunt was the slope below the present Carritt Moran Office, running down to the stream, which was then a silvery brook, crystal clear with minnows flashing in the waters, dots of tadpoles in the shadows, dragonflies darting above, while one lazed on the meadowed banks under the dappled shade of the pear trees.



Bedford Theatre
screened the great
favourites - Elizabeth
Taylor, Rita Hayworth,
Maureen O'hara, Ava
Gardner, Jane Russel, Errol
Flynn, Stewart Granger,
John Wayne, Robert Taylor,
and the irresistible Laurel &
Hardy

Summer time

Summer saw orchards heavy with peach, plum, apple, and later in the





year, pear-gooseberry, strawberry and persimmon - manna to ravenous, growing youngsters. Could anything compare to the unblemished ecstasy of biting into a juicy greengage, the nectar flowing down your chin, perched on lichen-covered branches, the sun warm on your back? Monkeys were not the menace they are now, the numbers were fewer, of course, but the Pasteur Institute also had a system of using them for their vaccination trials, so that a form of culling was in place.

All those things

Game was plentiful - wildfowl, dove and pigeon (the Imperial with its emerald plumage, a stunning sight), hare, wild boar, and the odd panther. Bedford Circle, then as now, was the

hub of Upper Coonoor - taxis lined above Haughton Park with Vauxhalls, Vanguards, the odd Dodge and Ford. One solitary petrol bunk, dispensed fuel through glass cylinders - it was always a fascinating sight to see the fluid syphoning down the crystal as the tank filled up 8 annas a gallon (12 paise/litre). No diesel, of course! Wilfred Pereira, the Pharmacy, at what is now the Jograj Building displayed the distinctive blue, gold, green and red crystal globes in their windows testifying to the trade. You sometimes had to wait while your GP's prescription was pestled and mortared. Bedford Theatre screened the great favourites - Elizabeth Taylor, Rita Hayworth, Maureen O'Hara, Ava Gardner, Jane Russell, Errol Flynn,

Stewart Granger, John Wayne, Robert Taylor, and the irresistible Laurel & Hardy. What joy to sit in the rickety chairs, in a hall full of cigarette smoke and watch your hero and heroine dash and cavort, suffering the bite of the odd bedbug. Old Mr Boesinger (German and quarantined during World War II) had his photo studio above the Circle, his pretty blond daughter becoming the other attraction as we grew into our teens.

Along the way

There was a wonderful variety of pastries and confectionery at the Imperial and Davis Bakeries - veg and mutton puffs, chocolate biscuits, coconut sweets, sponge fingers, cream puffs, yellow, pink and green iced tea cakes, the best of biscuits,



bread and buns, all of uniformly excellent quality making for scrumptious treats. M/s. Jograj had just opened shop, the millinery trade was then in the hands of Milady and Chellarams with their rolls of silks, satins, lace and woollens.

The London Hairdresser, run by a talkative, ex-British Navy barber, had an array of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers on the walls, and of course, portraits of the King and Queen. This is where we were taken for monthly haircuts, but time passed quickly with London's tales of the high seas and epic battles.

Down Church Road was the magnificent All Saints Church, with its towering spires and splendid stained glass - the distinctive church bells

chiming the call to matins or communion services on Sundays. Brownwoods Auction Rooms next to the present YMIA building was run by the gentle, shy, smiling Mr Aaron who patiently allowed one to browse through his treasures - genuine antique furniture, carpets, crockery, glass and paintings. Further on, Primroses' was where we were treated to the yummy, gummy, Rowntree fruit drops, (but not as often as we liked), past the Matheson Bosanquet and Hampton Court Hotel gates, and on to the edifice of Spencer & Co. Here presided the portly, courteous, Mr Rosemonde (his wife, Madame Dorothy was everyone's favourite hairstylist) over his domain, that had just about

everything - the original shopping mall. But what drew us was the boggling array of sweets of every kind - barley sugar, lemon drops, bullseyes, cashew tops, mints and creams, chocolates, hard-centred toffees, and the ambrosial Spencers' lemonade, tangy with beaded bubbles winking at the brim.

Life indeed was filled to the brim... with an ease of living that made for a childhood that offered one the best of the East and the West. It was a time of easy and gentle living, of a carefree youth spent in a place quite unlike any other. And it is to these times I travel when my mind needs rest... ■

This is part one of a two-part series. Part two will be presented in the next issue of Inside43.

The Heart Is Where The Home Is



Sunita Vedantam always wanted a cottage in the hills with roses climbing over the roof. The cottage is now a sprawling four-bedroom home that retains the feel of a welcoming snug. She takes Inside43 on a journey into her unique home...

It all began when I, as a child, left Hyderabad and trundled up the steep roads to Kohima, Nagaland, to spend many memorable years. So when it came time for retirement, it had to be in the hills.

Nagaland was not an option, nor anywhere in the north. One had to be sensible, practical. It had to, therefore, be South India, where life is easier and nature is kinder. Of course, that meant only the Nilgiris, and more specifically Coonoor, with its milder climate as compared to Ooty, and its special warmth, connectivity via air and rail, and state-of-the-art hospitals should one need them. And in the Nilgiris we needed easy access to the Club and shopping areas. So began the long and tortuous 4-year search for that dream plot done over weekend forays in from Chennai. The search coalesced to the area near Ralliah Dam, as this had all the features I wanted. It had everything, and crucially a magnificent view, set in a welcoming community that was not too crowded. Price played a factor, but the cherry on the cake was Ralliah Dam in the backyard.

In the beginning

By 2017 the dream plot had been purchased. And then it was plans, approvals, architects and builders, cutting and filling pile foundation and retaining walls - we performed the Bhumi puja on Ugadi in 2018 and we entered our house again on Ugadi in 2022. Between these two dates, a lot changed.

I took early retirement from the Indian Railways in 2020 during the height of Covid, and moved lock, stock and barrel to Coonoor, initially renting close by to supervise construction. The house came into shape, as I suspect most homes do, in fits and starts.

Our home has a reserve forest on one side of the road, a lovely valley on the other, and a waterfall on the third, which turns into a little stream just below our home. A driveway from the road takes us into the garage which is attached to the house. Though most of my sensibilities are British, I am American when it suits me. I wanted to be able to drive in and out of our home, warm and cosy, without my shoes getting wet or have a leopard pounce on me in the dark. For the more intrepid walkers, the driveway leads onto a gravel garden and thence to a small portico with a green door. The house is long and narrow, all the better to enjoy the view, as every room had to be fronted onto the valley.

❧ *Never short of brilliant, if disastrously expensive ideas, we decided that we would use the French window in the garage*

Our son, Apurv, was given a valley view room, and our daughter, Abhilasha, a larger room, with a walk-in

closet, overlooking the forest, as she had once professed to like looking at trees rather than a valley. But when she returned from NYU, halfway through construction, she realised she wanted a room with a view too. So there was nothing for it, but to carve out a passage and convert what was to be a sit-out into a bedroom for her.

Then there were our books. I was set on having a morning room for myself where I could dabble in knitting, sewing and reading. But this room had to have the library too, which was overstraining the poor room's capacity. That's when Abhilasha came up with a brilliant idea of going up the wall for the library shelves. We tried very hard to have a spiral staircase to the library





from the living room below, but it was just not possible in the limited space and we had to use the staircase to the first floor to access the library. That's when Abhilasha had the inspired brainwave to build a secret door to the library and the little window nook. As I always say, all that's beautiful in the house is Abhilasha's genius and all that's sensible is mine.

Old world charm

Just because we could not afford a heritage home, all mellowed with age and moss, we were not going to be cheated out of the 'ye olde worlde look'. So we did our poor best, again drawing from Abhilasha's deep creative reservoir, the black and white chamfered marble and granite for the foyer and passages. And we had to have a real wood fireplace with a chimney and hearth. So that got tucked in the only corner available in the living room. The old furniture from Mumbai chor bazar and Karaikudi helped a bit too.

A wood and marble top bar had been planned and after the wooden flooring was to be laid, the last thing

was to seal the bar into the room. Sharing tea with the workers on one of my daily inspections, I thought that somehow the bar placement did not make me happy, and then Abhilasha remarked that the bar made the room too heavy. It was my builder, the most patient and supportive Gopi, who came to my rescue and agreed to pull out the bar, intact for future use. I then called my husband, Shanmugham, for his (always sage and practical) input. I don't know, to this day, what made him agree without demur. The bar was shunted to the storage shed in three pieces, and still awaits a home.

When the sofas and chairs were arranged in the living room, (this kept changing every few days) sitting on one of the sofas, we (Abhilasha and I) were sipping coffee and looking out through our French doors, when Abhilasha idly remarked, that the room needed more depth. We were yet to finalise on the veranda outside the living room and the minuscule pergola we were planning on installing. This was a few months into our moving in around October.

Abhilasha said it would be so lovely if we could push the living room out. From that was born the idea of the solarium with the glass roof, and picture glass and the deck. Now what was to be done with the French window already installed? Never short

“I wanted to be able to drive in and out of our home, warm and cosy, without my shoes getting wet or have a leopard pounce on me in the dark

of brilliant, if disastrously expensive ideas, we decided that we would use the French window in the garage turning it into an additional party zone.

Then I invited almost a 100 people to a house-warming, and as the days crept closer, so did my terror of guests rolling down our non-existent drive way, or tripping into the ditch that was our front lawn. All of this had to be done at record speed and Gopi moved heaven and earth and got it all done with two days to spare!



Just as we thought that we were done with it all and could now enjoy a construction-free existence came the dire need for an extra bedroom. My initial dream of a wee little cottage had died an unmourned death long ago, and I finally came to accept that the cottage had fattened to a four-bedroom house/villa. But as the entire family comprising two grown kids, (who, bless Covid, had decided to make Coonoor their base) in-laws and live-in nurse, the four bedrooms were woefully inadequate if even one guest wanted to visit. I had been warned early in my land quest days, that once the house was ready, I would have frequent guests. So, much to the impatient disgust of my husband and son, what was to be the family room was converted to a bedroom by adding a bathroom where a little pantry had stood.

And so we are where we are today, in a family home that has managed to acquire a look of a place that has been around for decades, still has a ton of things I want to do with it, has most of the things I dreamed of in a home and is a place of peace and beauty where I am surrounded by people and views I come to love more everyday... my heart is truly where my home is. ■





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In Good Taste

*The Nilgiris has a history of fine food. From the famous railway kebabs to the Ooty Varkey, and of course, the chocolates it is known for, this little district now has a selection of dining options to satisfy even the most critical palates. **Deepika Unni** takes you on a culinary tour of the Blue Hills to explore old and established eateries along with new culinary offerings that together delight both visitors and locals with their delicious array of local and international fare*



The Cherrie On The Cake

There is a new kid on the block, and he is a world traveller with a healthy outlook on food. No, we are not talking about a person but about the newest restaurant to hit the Nilgiris - **Cherrie Berry**. This is a pure vegetarian restaurant that has taken the hills by storm. Located in the Highfield Estate, Cherrie Berry has created something unique. Combining a fine dining restaurant with a supermarket, children's play area and café ensures that everyone has a reason to come here. The establishment has outstanding food as most of their ingredients are sourced farm-to-table from their own agro and organic farms. Cherrie Berry takes you on a culinary journey and offers you an opportunity in each section of their menu, to take a trip around the world. Be it the soup section where you can taste one of the best Minestrone Genovese, or the fresh kale and avocado salad, or the pizzas which range

from the Fiamma variety to a more desi one like paneer makhani pizza, each item is prepared with a lot of care and attention to detail. The chefs have also curated an interesting fusion menu with items like pav bhajji fondue, methi thelpa tacos and black rice phirni, to name just a few. To add to the uniqueness of the place, there is a fresh juice bar offering a delectable selection of recipes. The dining area is big and spacious, offering great views. Make sure you check out the private dining room where you can accommodate a party of 12 in exclusive privacy. If fresh, happy, healthy is the way you feel about yourself or have days when you need to have a bit of deliciousness in your day, make a beeline for Cherrie Berry, Coonoor.

Address: Highfield Estate, Coonoor

Table Reservation: +91 90255 44582



A View To Dine For

Celeste, the restaurant at MindEscapes, is a hidden gem that beckons those seeking a unique dining experience in the Nilgiris. Nestled conveniently between Ooty and Coonoor, this luxurious restaurant effortlessly blends modern sophistication with the serene beauty of its natural surroundings. Celeste is bright and open, with ample light pouring in from its glass-fronted facade that give you a breathtaking view of the Ketti Valley – the 2nd largest valley in the world. The 7,000-ft-deep Ketti Valley extends from the plains of Coimbatore all the way to the Mysore Plateau.

As you step inside, you are warmly greeted by Ram and Santosh, the Maitre d's. The menu is curated by celebrity chef and food maestro, the charming Vikram Malhotra, a culinary legend in Bangalore and Kolkata. The thoughtfully designed menu showcases pan-Asian and European cuisine that truly delights the taste buds.

Dishes like Korean beef or chicken, Greek fish, spinach ravioli, mushroom risotto are incredibly flavourful... and must be tried. Celeste is well-known for its exceptional salads and

desserts. Their watermelon and feta cheese salad is as mouthwatering as their Tiramisu and Zuppa Inglese.

Service here is friendly and attentive. The staff is well-versed in the menu, providing recommendations and ensuring that your visit is comfortable and enjoyable, whether you're dining alone or with a group of friends. One of the highlights of the restaurant is its outdoor seating area. On a clear day, the terrace offers a breathtaking backdrop for your dining experience and, of course, photographs. It's an idyllic spot for enjoying a sundowner with their rather well-known hot toddy. Celeste offers a delightful blend of culinary excellence and scenic beauty. With its inviting atmosphere, delectable cuisine, and extensive beverage offerings, it's a must-visit for those looking to savour the flavours of the Nilgiris. Whether you're a local resident or a visitor, Celeste promises a memorable dining experience, a perfect place to enjoy some of the best the Nilgiris has on offer.

Address: Yellanalli, Ketti Panchayat

Table reservations: +91 94890 52222



Cross This Bridge

The Nilgiris will never cease to surprise you with its eclectic nature. Would you expect to find a restaurant here serving authentic Kashmiri cuisine? Nestled in a quiet nook of Yedapalli, Coonoor, **Habba Kadal** offers a delectable culinary experience that encapsulates the rich flavours and traditions of Kashmiri cuisine. The name, "Habba Kadal," itself evokes images of the bustling bridge in old Srinagar, and the restaurant lives up to its name by providing a taste of the region's vibrant food culture.

Upon entering, the restaurant's ambiance immediately sets the stage for an unforgettable dining experience. Traditional Kashmiri handicrafts adorn the walls, and the melodious tunes of Kashmiri music transport you to Srinagar instantly. The personal family photographs of the families of the owners, Aparna and Upender, that adorn the walls, give it an extremely welcoming touch. The menu at Habba Kadal, personally curated by Aparna, is a treasure trove of Kashmiri culinary delights. From Rogan Josh to Dum Aloo, and from Goshtaba to Yakhni and Nadru (lotus stem), the restaurant

offers an extensive selection of both non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes. Each dish is prepared with authentic Kashmiri spices, and the use of saffron and dry fruits adds a distinct richness to the flavours. The restaurant's commitment to authenticity extends to its offering of traditional Kahwa which provides a delightful and refreshing complement to the flavourful dishes and breads like Girda and Katlam.

The service at Habba Kadal is impeccable, with attentive staff who are well-versed in the menu and eager to guide diners through their choices.

Whether you're a seasoned connoisseur of Kashmiri cuisine or a newcomer looking to explore the flavours of this beautiful region, Habba Kadal is an absolute must-visit. It's a place where tradition, flavour, and hospitality converge to create a dining experience that leaves a lasting impression leaving you wanting more.

Address: Coonoor-Kattabettu-Kotagiri Road, Yedapalli

Table Reservation: +91 76038 21537



One (Orchid) Square Meal

Orchid Square has a well-positioned location in the Nilgiris. Situated in the sweet spot in Upper Coonoor between Brooklands, Darlington Bridge and at the beginning of the popular Lambs Rock Road, Orchid Square is easily accessible to the residents of the Nilgiris and also finds itself on the tourist route.

Their restaurant, Aroma Treat, has a bouquet of food offerings that will please everyone in your family, including the pickiest of eaters. It is a multi-cuisine restaurant with a menu that boasts a remarkably wide array of Indian and international dishes. You will be able to choose from cuisines like Bengali, Mughlai, Goan, North Indian, Chinese, Mongolian, Thai, Mexican, Italian, Continental etc. With a mind-boggling range of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, whether you opt for North Indian classics like butter chicken and naan or go for something more continental, like a grilled vegetable platter, you're sure to be pleased with the taste and presentation. Their seafood speciality covers a wide range, from Vanjaram tawa fry fish (South Indian) to Bengali fish curry to butter garlic crab, each one testament to the skills of an excellent chef. Certainly try their pizzas, especially the cheese and jalapeno thin crust.

The service at Orchid Square is commendable. The staff is friendly and always ready to ensure a memorable dining experience. Aroma Treat is a place where you can have your meal without feeling rushed, allowing you to savour each bite at a relaxed pace.

In terms of value for money, Orchid Square is reasonably priced for the quality of food and service it provides. Whether you're visiting for a casual meal or a special occasion, you'll find Orchid Square giving you a singularly good experience when you walk through its doors.

This restaurant has always been a favourite with locals and visitors thanks to the location, the price and the comprehensive menu that has a little something for everyone. It is the perfect stop en route to popular tourist attractions or just a great place to meet for a glass of delicious 'nimbu pani'. Aroma Treat at Orchid Square is indeed a treat to the senses and one that leaves a lasting impression on your palate. Come here for a culinary experience that combines delicious food, a great location, value for money and good service.

Address: Orchid Square, Booklands, Coonoor

Table reservations: 0423 223 8306



When Hari Met Yummy

Hari Mess in Kotagiri is a culinary gem that immerses you in the rich tapestry of South Indian flavours. Situated in the charming town of Kotagiri, this blink-and-you-could-miss-it, unassuming eatery captivates diners with its traditional, home-style cuisine.

The ambiance at Hari Mess is unpretentious, reflecting an ethos that places food above everything else. The no-frills decor and 6 communal dining tables is a standout feature of Hari Mess, emphasising its commitment to stay true to their roots. The food here is purely South Indian boasting almost an entirely non-vegetarian menu, but with a few basic vegetarian dishes thrown in. Their biryanis, whether egg or chicken, their mutton fry and their rasam are droolworthy. While Hari Mess may not offer an extensive array of choices, it excels in what it does provide: authentic, homely fare that's rich in flavours and easy on the wallet.

With its unpretentious ambiance, authentic cuisine, and warm service, Hari Mess captures the heart and soul of South Indian home cooking - a place where simplicity and authenticity showcases the taste of the Nilgiri Hills.

Address: SH 15, Kotagiri

Contact Number: 0426 627 2148



A Slice of History

Anyone who has grown up in the Nilgiris will know and remember **Kurunji's** in Ooty, named after the beautiful blooms that cover the Nilgiri hills once every twelve years. Once the only drive-in restaurant in the district, and one of the few places young people could hang out, the little roadside restaurant has given way to town-planning and traffic regulations and now is an eat-in place that luckily still serves the same delicious range of dosas it always did. Other things have changed too. The once wholly vegetarian menu has expanded to serve delicious burgers and pizzas that cater to the aficionados of all things non-vegetarian. But it still manages to retain a sense of what it was, an open-to-the-road eatery where people sat on stone bar benches and ate off stone and cement tables. The prices are easy on the pocket, the owners and the manager are committed to providing an unpretentious dining experience that focuses on flavour, variety and authenticity. No visit to the hills would be complete without a pit stop at Kurunji's. Along with the dosas and idlis they are renowned for, they serve up something few other places can - a slice of history.

Address: Commercial Road, Ooty

Contact Number: 0423 244 7636

SHIELF LIFE

*From shoes to shawls, from flowers to fashion, from accessories to antiques. **Kripali Devraj** explores what's available in stores across the Nilgiris*



Koohoos

These intricately designed blue ceramic vases from Koohoos, have a glossy finish and beautiful floral motifs. They can be used to store small items or simply as artistic pieces to complement the interiors of any home.

₹850 each

Himadri House,
20/21 Church Hill Road (opp. Moddy's),
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Orchid Square

This ornate coin pouch from Orchid Square is perfect for storing any loose change. Its compact structure makes it easy to carry around in a purse or a bag. It makes for the perfect gift for yourself or someone else.

₹300

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 Nilgiris 643101

Teens World



This beige stole from Teens World can elevate a simple outfit, making it a perfect fashion accessory. This particular colour exudes a sense of understated elegance, seamlessly blending with various outfits courtesy its neutral tone.

₹850

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 Sims Park Road, Bedford,
 Coonoor 643101
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 Market, Coonoor 643102



Habba Kadal

This black Kantha hand-embroidered silk stole is crafted in West Bengal. The striking colour combinations are inspired by nature and the motifs a reflection of the intimate connect between indigenous people and Mother Nature.

₹1640



The indigo blue bed-in-a-bag is all in natural cotton with hand-block printing, a hallmark of the desert state of Rajasthan. The comes complete with a bedsheet, pillow shams and comforter.

₹3400.

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73 Everserve Enclave Sims
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Tamil Nadu 643101, India

☎ +91 98438 81800





Cherrie Berry

This bougainvillea plant from Cherrie Berry makes for a vibrant house warming present. These plants can be used as ornamental pieces in gardens, on fences, or simply as indoor potted plants.

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The Wealth Of A Man

*He has lived his whole life quietly and in service to many. **Mukund Ravishankar** meets up with Iyaswamy, a small tea grower in Kotagiri to discover his philosophical take on life is as simple as it is elegant.*



I went to meet Mr Iyaswamy on a Saturday evening at his house in Attavaala, a small Badaga village off the Kotagiri main road. I interrupted his evening as his work for the day was wrapping up, the wages were paid and he was unwinding with a cup of tea and checking the cricket score. It was quite a busy scene walking past the tea shed where sacks full of fragrant tea leaves are weighed and all the workers get their hard-earned wages.

We sat down after everyone left with our cups of tea and biscuits that his wife brought us. He then went through his hand-written accounts book. He set it down, and told me with a big, proud smile on his face that he hasn't used a calculator since his college days. Iyaswamy graduated from the Ooty Government College in 1974 with a degree in mathematics. After which, along with a few of his friends, he entered the tea business and has been at it since.

❖❖ **The small estates that I've looked after have won awards from UPASI**

His father, Bellie Gowder passed away when he was 30 leaving him to look after his mother and family which he undertook with much diligence over the last 40 years. He has overseen 13 weddings in his family, helped them build houses and kept the family together, notwithstanding differences that arose. Along with his sons, Suresh and Balachander, he overlooks and manages a few small tea growers'

lands along with his family's land. Close to 40 people work for him, mostly family and close relatives, but others too, who stay near the village as well.

"How do you manage and retain so many people?" I asked him

"We pay them a bit more than anyone else is willing to. We stay together as if we are one extended family, regardless of who it is: they all get paid the same. They work very hard, take care of the land and help me in situations even if I don't ask them for it. I have never skimmed even five rupees off anyone's wages or took a wrong weight measurement to save money." He remembers frequently telling his brother that, "If I ever change or write any number in these accounts that isn't true, God will change my fate."

He recalls his father telling him, "Even if your children ask for candy, don't take five paise from the wages that you owe someone else. That would invite bad karma. But if ever you can add as little as five paise extra to the work that they've done, give it away."

"What are your thoughts on the tea industry and the price of tea leaves today?"

"It's not too bad," he says. Which is not the answer I was expecting from a small tea grower.

"It's not too bad, it could be better, but a lot of people don't want to put in the extra work these days. You'll tell me that you can't find enough workers and you'll tell me that you want a higher rate for your tea but you won't go to the fields yourself, pluck the best quality of leaves you can find and bring it to me. You'll have

enough then. Of course, someone having 500 acres will make more than you if you have only five cents. But why compare yourself to him? Look after what you have, put in the work and you will have enough for your basic needs. And then you can build from there. The banks will help, people will help, you will have bad years, you will have good years.

The prices might go up and all of us might have a little more; of course, those wanting it have my blessing. If the factories buy at a higher rate, then we can pay the workers more, then workers will be motivated to bring me higher quality leaves and the factories can sell it at a higher rate. Everybody wins and everybody's happier. We can definitely raise the quality of how tea is produced and consumed.

But for now, there are a lot of factors that you can't control regarding price. Fresh tea leaves cannot be stored and have to be given to the factories at the going rate. What you can control is the amount of work that you do. Focus on that and put in the work and you will be rewarded. It won't be overnight though."

"Tell me more about yourself," I asked, entertained by the way he spoke and intrigued by the warmth that came from him.

"I've had no desire for personal wealth" he says. "I've spent every last rupee on someone who needed it. And that is what I've told my sons and nephews. If anyone asks for something, give it away. Don't hold resentment or have jealousy. All of you have children to raise and that's everyone's responsibility."

"I've helped people not just from our immediate community, but everyone

that came to me. If you do that, your house will be at peace. I've done good and I have close friends from various backgrounds who have always repaid the favour in kind. Mind you, there have also been people that have deliberately put rocks in my path but I've always used it for my betterment and I always have the habit of returning goodness, even if that is not what I've received".

"What advice can you give the younger generations?" I asked him curiously.

"Do as much good as you can. I'll help you if you want" he says with a laugh. "Don't fool yourself. Life and everything that comes with it, will never come again. Don't waste it. Use it, dance, sing and gracefully be on your way.

"Manam irunthal margam undu" (The Tamil equivalent of 'Where there is a will, there is a way'). There are a lot of ways to earn money and save up. And give what you saved. However little it may be. No matter what God has given me, from selling tea to selling potatoes, I've saved a bit of it to give. I've given to schools, hospitals and temples. For the past 40 years, I've been awarding a cash prize to the class topper from the Kattabettu High school and will continue to do so as long as I can."

"What would you say is the biggest difference between our time and yours?" is my next question to this endearingly, wise man.

"Gava attuthu. (There was love) Now there isn't. Back then if someone wanted help or advice for their kids and came to me, I'd do all that I could financially and give them guidance, but the hard work had to be done by

them. Now, if you go to someone and tell them that your kids need help, they'll turn you away thinking that it would somehow take something away from their children. Of course, it's not everyone who thinks this way. But many have this scarcity mindset and along with it, the love has become scarce too. A lot less people think positively. That's something that I think has changed over the years"

"Having said that, I would be more than delighted if some young entrepreneur reading this comes to me to learn or start a new venture with what I have to offer. All my working days are planned in great detail. The small estates that I've looked after have won awards from UPASI. I want to share what I know. Maybe ten people's lives will be improved as a by-product of that. And all of us can laugh together at the end of the day"

At 73 years old, Iyaswamy wakes up everyday around 5am, walks close to 7 kilometres around his fields and comes back home around 7am for his breakfast. He swears by his diet of ergittu (ragi) and rice for lunch, along

with a few vegetables that he grows in his organic vegetable patch next to his house. He still works as hard as he can, doesn't use a calculator and loves to have a chat with those that cross his path. His long-term plans are to guide and help the next generation any way he can, and his short-term plan is to get the temple door repaired because a bear broke it. His 50th wedding anniversary happens to be on the 1st of December, the same date as the launch of Inside43, and I am certain this is a good omen.

I visited him prepared to have a conversation on the intricacies and economics of tea but I left with lessons in kindness and generosity. Or, maybe, he was tired of speaking about tea and was delighted to find a young person come to him for advice. Regardless, I was grateful for this meeting and left with a reminder of what's really important in life. It brought home the quote by the American philosopher, Henry David Thoreau who so beautifully said, "A man's wealth is measured by what he can do without". ■



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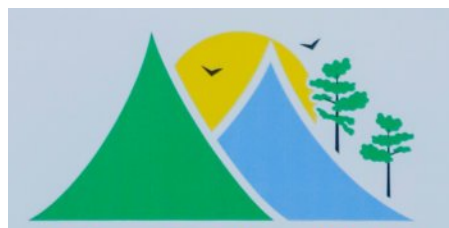
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**Remembering
& Reimagining**

**World
of Words**

**An Artist
Recreates
The Magic
of Ooty**

**Stories
Igniting
Minds**

**The Hills
Come
Alive with
Music**

All Lit Up

*The special 7th Ooty Lit Fest (October 6th and 7th, 2023) marked the Bicentennial of Ootacamund and played host to a plethora of well-known names and inspired ideas. **Kalpana Kar** looks back on the two-day event that had the Nilgiris buzzing*

In the scenic backdrop of the Nilgiri mountains, Ooty unfurled an extraordinary tapestry of ideas and expressions to mark its bicentennial year. The Ooty Lit Fest '23 was no mere congregation of literati and artists; it was a cerebral fiesta that manifested the multifaceted nature of this iconic hill station, aptly synchronised with its 200-year history.

Ooty Lit Fest '23 also created a unique Lit Fest Precinct that beautifully fused convenience with aesthetic sensibility. The Historic Nilgiri Library, The Courtyard at Little Earth Cafe, and the Police Hall were strategically chosen to host the diverse events, within walking distance of each other, complete with well-marked directions. This ease of navigation allowed for an intellectual migration as seamless as it was enriching, as audience members moved effortlessly from one venue to the next.

Community: the real VIPs

A cornerstone of the Lit Fest's resounding success was the robust involvement of the Nilgiri community. Schools, colleges, associations, book clubs and civil society inclusively brought the festive spirit alive, providing a stark contrast to the

traditionally exclusive aura of literary festivals.

The intellectual landscape

Opening the festivities was the segment named "The World of Words," where a medley of voices brought diverse themes to life. Undoubtedly, the crowning moment was the conferment of the Lifetime Achievement Award upon Thiru Perumal Murugan. An indisputable luminary in the Tamil literary scene, Murugan's acceptance speech was nothing short of a poetic essay on the transformative power of the written word.

“Ooty didn't just host a literary festival, it hosted a revolution of ideas

Environmental conservation also took centre stage. Rohini Nilekani and her esteemed panellists including Dr Mahesh Rangarajan, Dr Shankar Raman and Suprabha Seshan, cast a spell with their lucid expositions on the vulnerable Nilgiri biosphere. The sobering dialogues, did not just articulate the emerging perils facing

our planet but also held society accountable for its anthropocentric outlook.

Narratives of inclusion

In a pivotal move, the Lit Fest addressed gender and identity issues, a topic often relegated to the fringes. Apsara Reddy and Parmesh Shahani acted as catalysts in this robust dialogue, eliciting an audience response as emotional as it was thoughtful.

The narrative also included Sudha Murty, a name synonymous with generosity of spirit and intellectual acuity. She captivated attendees, young and old, with her tapestry of stories woven from life's simplest lessons. Murty's interactions transcended mere storytelling sessions, evolving into illuminating discourses that resonated long after their conclusion.

Youthful interactions

Breaking with tradition, the Lit Fest inaugurated a special track targeting the young minds of the Nilgiris. 'Igniting Minds' was curated to comprise sensitising sessions with Tamil and English Medium schools prior to the event, culminating in inspiring workshops in both languages. Spearheaded by Youth for Conservation Network and supported by the Madras Crocodile Bank and other organisations, it took students on a journey through the fascinating corridors of the natural world that surrounds us all. They engaged in candid and interesting conversations with notable figures like Sudha Murty, Apsara Reddy, Raja Krishnamoorthy, and Vikram Sridhar that broadened their understanding of the complex dynamics around identity, nature and co-existence.



Archiving the visual

Another milestone was the spectacular photo exhibition curated by Jenny Pinto. "Remembering and Re-imagining – A photo exhibition of the Social History of the Nilgiris" enveloped visitors in a time-warp, amalgamating rare photographs from different epochs and geographies. This carefully orchestrated visual narrative offered not just aesthetic pleasure but also an incisive socio-historical commentary.

Whimsical exuberance

Adding a dash of whimsy to the cerebral climate was Paul Fernandes, whose cartoons depicting Ooty's idiosyncrasies elicited laughter and applause in equal measure. He successfully navigated the fine line between satire and affection in his artistic tributes to the town's bicentennial spirit.

Symphonies in the hills

As the sun dipped below the verdant horizon, melodies rose to fill the cool mountain air. Musicians of diverse genres - from Nirmala Kannan's brilliance with the old pop favourites, to Rajeev Raja Combine's modern improvisations, to Moonara, and hypnotic Sufi tunes to unwind, as well as several individual performers... turned the evening into a musical extravaganza.

A community affair

Integral to the Lit Fest's unparalleled success was the collective effort of the Nilgiris' dedicated citizens. Local clubs, academic institutions, and associations actively participated, cementing the Lit Fest not as an isolated intellectual event, but as a community festival. The Friends of OLF and the Patrons are primarily those who have an enduring and deep



connection to the Blue Mountains and are irrevocably committed to its sustainability.

And finally...

In a world increasingly torn by ideological dichotomies, Ooty's Lit Fest '23 stood as a microcosm of what can be achieved when communities harmonise to celebrate both differences and commonalities. As much as it was a tribute to Ooty's rich past, it was a clarion call to its vibrant future.

With an astoundingly diverse range of speakers, thinkers, and artists, Ooty didn't just host a literary festival this year, it hosted a revolution of ideas. Here, in the heart of the Nilgiris, enveloped by the tranquil landscape that has inspired scribes and thinkers for centuries, attendees were reminded that be it through prose, poetry, pictures or music, storytelling remains humanity's most potent tool for change.

And so, as the mist settled over the hills post-celebration, one thing was evident: Ooty Lit Fest '23 will be recorded not just in the annals of literary history but in the hearts of all those it touched. ■

“ In a pivotal move, the Lit Fest addressed gender and identity issues



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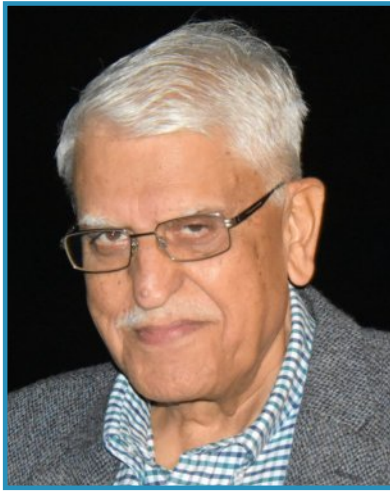


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The Number Matters!

Vijaya Dar, a well-known resident of the Nilgiris, gives us his take on the significance of the number 43, life in this district, and the importance of it having its own publication

Inside43 – what an incredible choice for the name of a magazine that is only about the Nilgiris! The Tamil Nadu Automobile Registration number 43 that identifies the Nilgiris region seems to have been an inspired choice made by some unknown bureaucrat, a tribe we find commonly at the end of a sneering diatribe. A prime number, 43 can only be divided by itself, and indeed, we will all agree this district is unique.

The Nilgiris is a quintessential part of Colonial India and its association with the Sahibs of yore. The social clubs dotted across Ooty, Wellington and Coonoor, are reminiscent of an era of languid ease of afternoon gins-and- tonic and evening whiskies-and-soda, or the legendary Bloody Mary concocted by the bartenders trained in the craft by aficionados who learned their trade in the pubs of the British Isles.

Two golf courses, the Hunt Club of Ooty, the game of snooker, angling in Pykara Lake and other streams, tennis and bridge tournaments testify to the leisurely life of many who settled in the Nilgiris, escaping the heat and dust of the plains.

The MRC Barracks, standing squarely in the middle of Wellington, houses the oldest infantry regiment of the Indian Army. Its origins lie in the 1750's when the British East India Company morphed from a trading house into a colonial military and administrative power. The Barracks were constructed between 1852 and 1860, and are one of the most iconic and imposing sights inside the district.

The number 43 also stands between the two ends of the second āsrama of the Indian Varnāśrama system that begins with Brahmaçarya, and through Grihasta moves on to Sanyāsa and Vānaprastha.

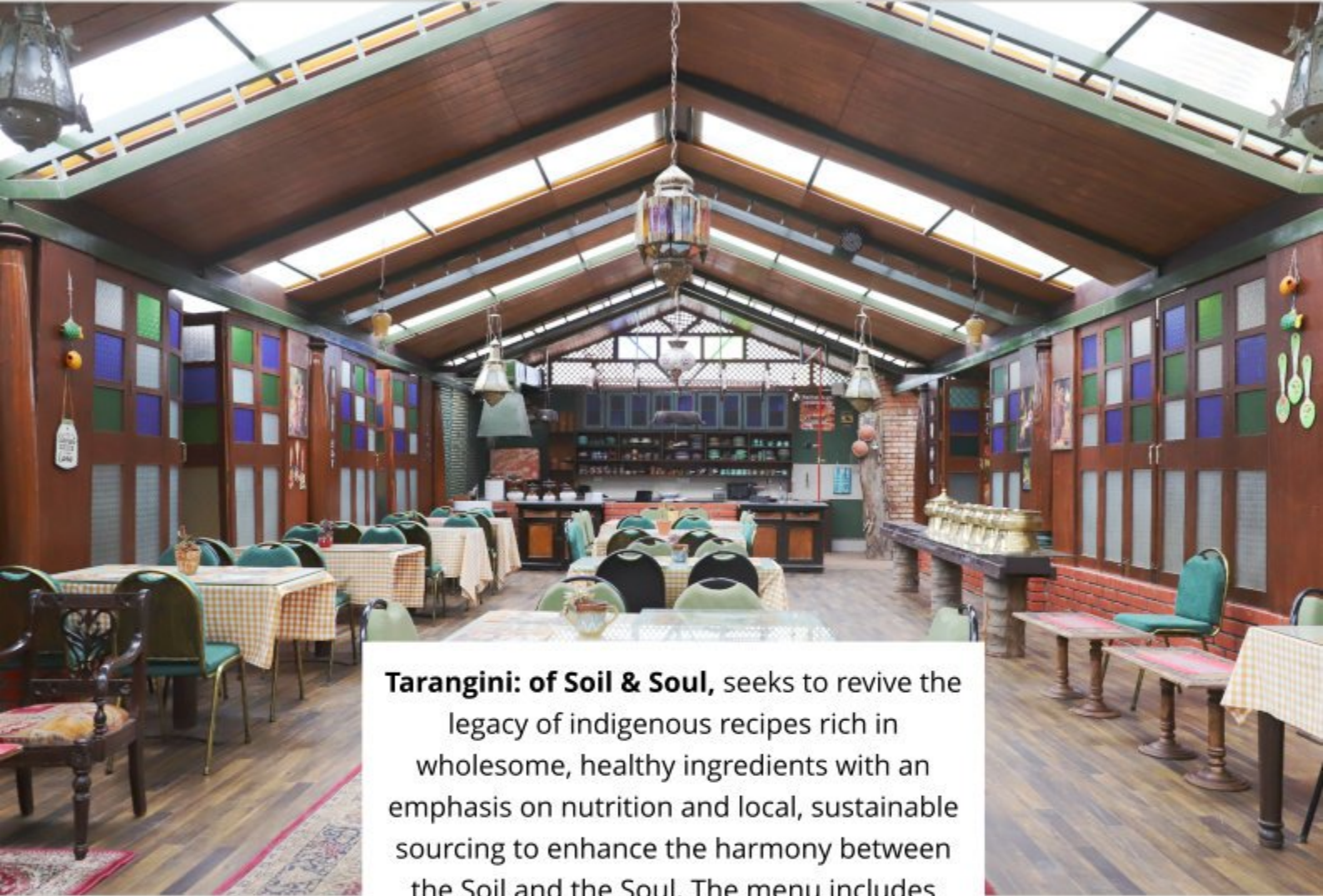
By the age of 43, most men and women are settled in their careers, have children about to embark on their own careers, and, are looking at the prospect of becoming empty nesters. The hills always beckoned, but not everyone could plan a transition that early, and many of the current residents made their move much later in life. Ironically, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this process of migration, as young professionals discovered that they could continue working

from home in much better and healthier environs if they shifted from the cities to the hills. TN-43's excellent connectivity via air, rail and road helped, of course. It has decent internet capabilities, and a reasonably safe healthcare system and an active social set-up. And so, since 2020, new homes are coming up with unprecedented speed all over the hills. This is a challenge in itself, and it is hoped that the District administration will allow new settlements without any degradation of the delicate ecosystem of the Western Ghats, keeping Inside43 safe from harm.

This magazine could not have been better named, or have come at a better time, serving to link the past to the present and act as a signpost to future, bringing all that is the Nilgiris under the banner of the number we all know and love. ■



Earth, Spirit and Fire



Tarangini: of Soil & Soul, seeks to revive the legacy of indigenous recipes rich in wholesome, healthy ingredients with an emphasis on nutrition and local, sustainable sourcing to enhance the harmony between the Soil and the Soul. The menu includes hearty soups, nutritious salad bowls and balanced platters that include vegan and gluten-free options.



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