

# inside43

Celebrating the Nilgiris

Spring 2024

## Present and Future Perfect

The recycling initiative that never stops giving

## Brought Back to Life

The rejuvenation of a rural Primary Health Centre

## Keeping the Blue Hills Green

How Coonoor came together to clean up its act

places to eat

| where to shop

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# inside43

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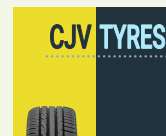
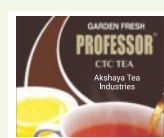
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# THERE'S Always A Bit MORE...



One of the questions I was asked when we first thought about putting together a magazine for the Nilgiris was will I find enough to write about. Well, I grew up in this district, and having left after university, like a moth to the flame I keep coming back more often than one would imagine necessary. I have seen it transformed from a sleepy, small town into the thriving, bustling place it has now become. And the one thing that I have seen stay constant is - there is rarely a dearth of things to talk about. (And yes, you may interpret that as you like.) The Nilgiris has always been home to an incredible range of talent and a unique blend of personalities, and the influx of new blood in recent years has added to the mix in all sorts of wonderful ways.

We have among us the first Indian man in space, world-renowned writers, successful corporate giants, poets, artists, filmmakers... And despite what my dear friend Gaurav Sharma says, I think this is still the most incredible hill district in the country; and in my humble, but, I believe, well-travelled experience, the most beautiful place on God's Earth, bar none. So, I knew finding things to put into the magazine would not be a problem.

This issue went up to 96 pages, from 80, and our content is a rich selection of all that the Nilgiris represents. We have the wonderful work of Clean Coonoor spearheaded by Samantha Iyanna, a true daughter of the Nilgiris, gracing our pages. And in no less measure, the innovative social enterprise of The Good Gift in Ooty makes for an interesting read. We have covered the

laudable work undertaken at the Kullakamby Primary Health Centre and brought you the story of a gentle Irula wildlife guide, Rajesh, from Masinagudi. And if homes are your thing, read up about Sonal Chordia, an interior designer of some exception, or if you are a foodie, then get to know restaurateur Vikram Malhotra of MindEscapes a little better. We have featured the sporting talent of chess prodigy Solomon Vivek from Kotagiri, the athletic prowess of Poulous of the Coonoor Club, and the musical talent of young Abel from Coonoor. And a lot of other people and things that you'll see as you turn the pages.

In addition, we are so grateful to have had the generosity of a new tranche of patrons who have extended financial support to this community-led magazine, as well as a few new advertisers. Without the faith and contributions of these Nilgiris people (who have literally put their money where their mouth is) you would not be holding this magazine in your hands right now. But you are!

And so, on behalf of the Editorial Committee, we hope you enjoy the read and see, yet again, what an incredible community we, who live Inside43, are privileged to be a part of. Because, with the Nilgiris, as we know, there's always that bit more...

**Sangeetha Shinde**  
Managing Editor



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# De-Rock

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inside43

# Present and Future Perfect



*'The Good Gift' is one that keeps on giving. Meet the understated, yet powerful duo who made their home in the Nilgiris and decided to give back to the community, sustainably and intelligently*



Nestled within Ooty's bustling Westbury Road is an organisation that is steadily sowing the seeds of change for the underserved communities of the Nilgiris. On a mission to promote sustainability and uplift vulnerable sections of society, the fruit of this organisation's labour will hopefully blossom for generations to come. *The Good Gift* is a company that, with its ethos and vision, has metamorphosed into a movement within the hills. Conceptualised and skilfully steered by Sunita and Suhas Ramegowda, it is reintroducing consumers to the old-world charm of handmade fabric dolls, which are creatively crafted by women of the Nilgiris' indigenous communities.

The organisation creates a diverse range of products for its signature collection of dolls. Unlike mass-produced products, each creation of *The Good Gift* reveals a story of empathy, resilience and passion. A passion so potent, it guided the Ramegowdas to the hills, from concrete jungles, deliberately transforming not just their lives but that of many others.

### Off The Grid

2015 was the year that would invite a paradigm shift into the lives of Sunita, Suhas and their son, Aarav. Prior to that, the family was living the urban dream in Bangalore. "We both worked hard in our corporate careers, eventually obtaining important positions," Suhas explains. "But it just wasn't enough. Money did not bring us happiness." Yearning to nudge their lives in a more meaningful direction, the family decided to make the big shift. "We thought life would be more meaningful if we lived off the

grid and away from mankind as much as possible," says Suhas, with a hint of a smile.

And so, the Ramegowdas began life afresh in the Blue Hills in 2018. Buying a piece of land in Kotagiri's lush forests, they started living off the land, harvesting water from streams, powering their home with solar energy and even growing their own food. The urban family's sustainable setup intrigued members of the Kurumba and Irula tribes, who lent a helping hand to the couple. These interactions forged a unique bond between the tribes and the Ramegowdas, who were soon privy to the difficulties ravaging the indigenous communities.

"Many of these people own more land than us but were still trapped in the daily wage cycle," Suhas elaborates. "Even now, for many, their work only provides enough to survive rather than thrive. While men often leave the hills in search of work, women are the most vulnerable as they remain at home without a steady income."

These harsh realities did not sit well with the couple, who were intent on making a long-term difference. They both decided that "this needn't be."

### Accidental Entrepreneurs

Suhas states that both he and Sunita are "accidental entrepreneurs", and they embarked on their journey without a background in business or entrepreneurship. Rather, they took the help of common sense to solve the problem. "Women are natural crafters and Sunita has been a craft practitioner for over a decade. We decided that it was the way to go," he recalls. Their goals were clear: to impart a solution that was financially

There is much in store for *The Good Gift* in the foreseeable future, as Sunita and Suhas aim to establish an ecosystem that brings wealth into the indigenous communities

viable but did not trap the communities in a factory model. Most importantly, they aimed to make entrepreneurs out of women.

"Much testing and experimentation occurred initially," Suhas says. "We attempted patchwork quilting, macramé, crocheting, embroidery, etc." They discovered a product-market fit in fabric dolls, early in 2023, and then it was full steam ahead. The couple decided to adopt the cottage industry model and for the first three years, helped women set up their materials and resources, and work in an organised manner. "People have been very kind to us," he expresses thankfully. "During the last year, our work here has evolved into an ecosystem that consists of a not-for-profit for upscaling and capacity-building, along with a for-profit that focuses on market linking." Word of the organisation's efforts flew across the country, and incubators, investors and donors congregated to provide help in the form of donations, market research and fellowships. Suhas also spoke of being approached by Rainmatter, an initiative by Zerodha, for funding, boosting the organisation's financials and motivation immensely.

"Today, our creations are present in over 40 stores across the country," he

reveals. "We have also forged various B2B collaborations with some of India's top brands."

### Community Dynamics

Often asked how the couple works smoothly with indigenous communities, Suhas shares a nugget of wisdom. "We are here, alongside them," he affirms, and that makes all the difference. Not only is decision-making and troubleshooting much easier, but the couple's personal interactions with the communities have formed an authentic connection. He remembers how they kickstarted the first year with five women – who

“These harsh realities did not sit well with the couple, who were intent on making a long-term difference

worked, trained and created in the Ramegowdas' living room. They were assured a fixed salary and encouraged to hone their skills without any stakes. The couple were only met with some resistance when they suggested the piece rate model; wherein the women would earn based on the number of dolls they crafted. Suhas pragmatically states, "We noticed that the community does not like change, but we persisted and soon, despite the initial resistance, they were earning double the amount of their earlier monthly salary."

Financial independence also generated a sense of confidence





among the women, some of whom became their family's breadwinners. On several occasions, the couple, during their routine visits, noticed how the women would be discussing work while their husbands offered to make tea. Change does not always come slowly, it seems.

### **Walking The Talk**

In an era where organisations throw about sustainability and empowerment terms way too often, Sunita and Suhas are change-makers who truly walk their talk. The couple strongly feel that one should incorporate sustainability at a very personal and fundamental level before launching any such initiative. The couple had adopted a minimalist lifestyle in Bangalore itself – doing away with the television, fridge and other items that are considered necessities today. These practices, to a large extent, have aided them in securing the organisation and combating challenges.

In response to questions about scaling, the Ramegowdas stand firm by their philosophy: depth before scale. For them, statistics hold little importance over their desire to bring

wealth and stability into the indigenous communities, and help them flourish and prosper.

Currently, The Good Gift comprises 60 women dotted across the Nilgiris; two of whom are differently-abled, but the most senior artisans in the team. For a region that is heavily reliant on the tourism and agricultural industry, the Ramegowdas hope that their initiative results in a parallel economy, where families are empowered to earn so that the pressure on both industries is less intense.

### **A Flourishing Future**

There is much in store for The Good Gift in the foreseeable future, as Sunita and Suhas aim to establish an ecosystem that brings wealth into the indigenous communities. "We aim to create producer groups of and for the community, ensuring that they own a stake in the market company," Suhas describes. "Within the next 10 years, we hope to see 10-15 producer groups emerge across the Nilgiris – that will be quite an achievement." The couple are also encouraging others to perceive social entrepreneurship in a mainstream light. "People often think that once

“We thought life would be more meaningful if we lived off the grid and away from mankind as much as possible

they earn enough, they will give back to the community. That is not necessary, and social entrepreneurship does not necessarily have to be altruistic,” he states. Keen to introduce and involve young minds in this sector, the couple are striving to prove that such ventures are not solely for retirees.

Sunita and Suhas are aware of the change they are facilitating – and are as enthusiastic about uplifting communities and the environment today, as they were at the very beginning. "The Nilgiris has about 83,000 households within the tribal landscape," says Suhas. "Even if we are able to create 1,000 entrepreneurs in our lifetime, they will go on to create more opportunities for upcoming generations."

Certainly, for this generation of entrepreneurs, Sunita and Suhas have ignited a flame that will hopefully pass down generations, providing opportunities and equity - proving that this unique and socially committed couple has a gift for bringing about positive and sustainable change. ■



Sunita and Suhas Ramegowada

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# Brought Back to Life

*A look at an impressive healthcare initiative in the Nilgiris, undertaken by a team of committed citizens, that made healthcare accessible to one of the district's most medically underserved areas*



Kullakamby village is nestled at an almost equal distance of 28kms from Ooty and Coonoor, in the Nilgiris. The beautiful landscape is covered by verdant tea gardens, agricultural fields, natural forests and the scattered houses of its local population - an idyllic rural setting that has its own old-world charm and challenges. Certainly, one of the challenges has been accessing immediate medical care due to the terrain, a paucity of transport facilities, coupled with inadequate medical infrastructure, or a complete

lack of it sometimes. The journey to the nearest medical facility in Coonoor or Ooty is akin to a trek to either Coimbatore or Mysore.

However, today, thanks to the hard work of a small group of individuals, the generosity of donors, support from the district administration and a team of passionate volunteers, there now stands a buzzing Government Primary Health Centre (PHC) with brand new state-of-the-art equipment. This facility services an area of about 13sq km, encompassing 57 villages, of which 14 are dominant tribal

villages, catering to a population of 22,000.

The team behind this incredible initiative was made up of Radhika Shastry, Charles Nathan and John J Thekkanal, who picked this PHC for an upgrade, and to convert it into a model facility, incorporating aspects of design for the comfort of both visiting patients and the medical personnel and staff working there. Radhika Shastry, who spearheaded this project, spoke of how the existing footprint of the building was retained, while they completely reworked the



floor plan with an emphasis on patient flow, privacy aspects, sanitation and hygiene, ergonomics, and ease of conduct and maintenance. This was accomplished with inputs from the doctors, nurses, and staff, and in her understated way, Radhika said, "We wanted to ensure that we handed over a facility that will make them proud to come back to work every day."

The cost of bringing this project to fruition was not inexpensive, nor was it an easy task to accomplish. Radhika, Charles and John made daily trips from Coonoor to Kullakamby in all kinds of weather, often facing seemingly insurmountable odds to get the project up and running. This included reaching out to a network of high-networth individuals to raise funding for this noble cause. The total cost of completely renovating, refurbishing, and upgrading the facility was close to ₹85 lakhs, which included hospital infrastructure, equipment, electrical and plumbing, doctors' quarters, three nurses' quarters and a health inspector's office.

In her usual way, Radhika is quick to give credit where it is due and is most grateful to those who supported her and her team. "We are grateful to our main sponsor, Regal Rexnord's contribution to the entire civil infrastructure costs, to Rekha Menon and Seema Mehrotra for all the equipment and furniture, United Way Chennai for its administrative support, and several others in helping us enhance this facility, to serve the people living in the surrounding 57 villages who will benefit from it. She added, "I have to say the Government authorities were extremely helpful,

and this stands out as an excellent example of how public and private partnership has worked to its best potential in the Nilgiris."

#### Word of Mouth

Mr Ramachandran, the honourable Minister for Tourism, Government of Tamil Nadu, who inaugurated the upgraded facility, said, "The nearest referral hospitals, the Government Lawley Hospital and the Government Hospital Ooty, take an hour and a half to reach from here, and this upgrade is expected to reduce the referral cases, offering speedy emergency medical treatment to the 22,000 odd residents of the surrounding area, and several more that will now use this hospital." He added that this PHC was a model created by the citizens of the Nilgiris in conjunction with the government and perhaps could be the best PHC in the state, if not the country.

The Nilgiris District Collector, M Aruna, who was present at the

inauguration of the renovated premises and presided over the function, highlighted further details of the refurbished PHC and spoke of the facilities on offer. "The hospital has a new OPD with two doctors' rooms, a patient waiting and registration area, a nurse's station, nurses' room, a pharmacy, a lab, two labour rooms, maternity and general wards, eight toilets, and two shower rooms for the ward, a medical waste room, electrical control room, staff meeting room, an ILA room and an ambulance bay with an enclosed stretcher ramp."

Dr Ranjith, the current medical officer of the facility stated that the hospital handles about 8-10 deliveries every month in addition to cases of fever, flu, respiratory infections, diarrhoea, gastroenteritis, skin infection and allergies, hypertension, diabetes, joint and musculoskeletal problems, eye and ear infections, urinary tract infections, anaemia and nutrition deficiency, maternal/child



health issues. This centre also serves as a model camp office for varied outreach health programmes of the government to the rural populace in the surrounding villages and tribal hamlets.

### Not The First Time

The Covid lockdown saw many volunteer citizens extend support services to the needy, and of course, Radhika, John and Charles also volunteered to participate in these relief operations. But they could not, as citizens, deliver the needed medical help. The district administration did their best in the Covid battle, especially in preventive disease control measures, but the demand for essential services such as ambulances, oxygen supply in district hospitals, etc, continued to exert high pressure on the already stressed district pandemic management.

The team's first relief efforts were to seek donors for oxygen concentrators, and over 55 were delivered to various medical facilities in the public and private sector. Post lockdown saw people still needing oxygen concentrator support. This led to the issuing of concentrators for use and return, free of cost, and even as of today, 12 persons in and around Coonoor are dependent on the oxygen concentrators. At an average of 5 hours of use per person, the oxygen support offered is 60 hours per day and averages 1800 hours per month. Radhika, John, and Charles find immense satisfaction in knowing that the service provides oxygen daily to those who require it, making this a truly gratifying undertaking.

The auto-ambulances, the brainchild of Radhika, came onto the

road to support existing transport services and, being highly manoeuvrable, soon penetrated narrow inroads and alleys of high population areas and rural hamlets. Later, when an ill-fated helicopter crashed onto a hillside, it was the heroic auto-ambulance that braved the rough terrain to get close to the crash site, and served itself as an emergency mode of conveyance for personnel deployment in the rescue and relief efforts.

Soon after, the team oversaw the installation of a 500 litres per minute oxygen plant at the government Lawley Hospital, and followed this up with the creation of a new casualty ward from an old motor shed! This is now a tested casualty unit of the hospital and a first-response centre for all kinds of emergencies such as accidents or injuries from natural calamities, to more everyday medical emergencies. Additionally, the paediatric ward for Lawley Hospital in Coonoor was renovated using a century-old building that was transformed into a 12-bed ward, complete with all equipment, including an advanced paediatric

ventilator. The work on these facilities faced many challenges during the pandemic especially, sometimes with Covid patients accommodated on each side of the building. Only when a room on either side was isolated and patients could be moved, did the work on the ICU conclude.

Radhika, John and Charles have been present through these tough times, even standing duty through long and late nights. Their primary focus was to ensure a timely completion and deliver the facility to those in need as speedily as possible. These acts of volunteership through trying times has built trust, mutual respect, commitment and transparency which is clearly reflected in all aspects of the team's undertakings. This little team of three, with their team of donors and volunteers, are truly representative of the spirit of the district. A place where people come together to make the world better for others, where community is paramount and where life functions on the principles of kindness and empathy towards all. Our hat tip to our three musketeers! Long may their efforts bear fruit. ■



R-L: Radhika Shastri, John Thekkanal and Charles Nathan





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# Keeping the Blue Hills Green





*Samantha Iyanna needs no introduction as her name has become synonymous with all efforts that help keep the Blue Hills green. Krishna Barot caught up with the soft-spoken woman whose efforts have touched the lives of all who live in the Nilgiris*

Samantha Iyanna's reputation precedes her. For starters, she runs a travel agency which is rooted in her love of travel; she works dedicatedly alongside NGOs supporting various causes; she is a fierce protector of Coonoor's ecosystem; and is a passionate educator of civic consciousness.

Of her many well-known endeavours, one that stands out is *Clean Coonoor*; an organisation that strives to keep the town clean and maintain its delicate ecological balance. Samantha is often at the heart of mass clean-up drives, public awareness events and meetings with the town's administration to ensure civic responsibility is upheld by all concerned.

At the heart of all activities, however, is her steadfast sense of purpose and love for nature, which have consistently guided her through the twists and turns of life.

#### **Of Roots and Connections**

Like many children of the Nilgiris, Samantha developed an unconscious connection with nature as she grew up in these beautiful mountains. Her father, Vittal Iyanna's work on a tea plantation meant that she grew up with the vivid views we all know and love. She credits him with being key to her achievements. "If there wasn't the support from him, none of this would be possible," she states. Her late mother was an avid nature lover

and gardening aficionado. "She is one of my greatest inspirations," Samantha reveals. "Not only would she be happy to see me today, but would also have enthusiastically participated in Clean Coonoor."

Although work took Samantha to cities such as Bangalore, Chennai and Coimbatore, her heart remained in the Nilgiris, and she returned to her hometown for good in 2003. She launched Yatra, a travel agency, in 2004, and the business was the core of her activities until life took a complete turn a few years down the line.



While consistent funding would make a sizeable impact, Samantha also hopes to change the community's mindset towards the environment, as this is the starting point for all positive change

#### **Cleaning Up Coonoor**

Diwali celebrations in 2014 had left the iconic Sim's Park in Coonoor, an utter mess, due to the excessive littering by tourists. A concerned

group of residents decided to host a voluntary clean-up drive and restore the park to the pristine state it is known for.

Samantha was one of the volunteers who joined the effort. "It all happened out of the blue," she recollects. "I joined the clean-up drive and, well, I continued cleaning up." Along with a handful of volunteers, she founded Clean Coonoor, to augment the local community's efforts to keep the town clean. The organisation was officially registered in 2019, and witnessed energetic participation from residents, students and volunteers from its early days, and has become a well-known resource within the district when it comes to cleanliness and ecologically-positive initiatives.

Beginning with simple cleaning-up operations, Samantha and her team began diversifying their efforts. From cleaning parks, bus shelters, culverts and drainages to beautifying public spaces with impressive murals and conducting awareness campaigns – Clean Coonoor has become the flag bearer of green awareness in the Nilgiris.

In all of this, Samantha has been supported by stalwarts such as Dr Vasanthan, who has stood rock-solid with her and the organisation throughout the challenging journey of keeping the town tidy and waste-free. Their collective efforts materialised in

the establishment of a solid waste management plant in Coonoor, "another out-of-the-blue surprise," Samantha adds. The plant was an answer to a 12-acre plot of land in town that had become its dump yard. Today, it has been transformed into a beautiful garden.

While the plant is not without its many challenges, Samantha is satisfied to have some semblance of a solution. Not only does it safely dispose and convert large amounts of waste into useful recyclable material and compost, but also generates employment, a growing issue across the Nilgiris.

### Challenges Abound

Tackling challenges is an inherent aspect of Samantha's work. From securing financial support for the plant to educating people on the consequences of littering and garnering public awareness of the scope of activities she undertakes - these are colossal tasks in themselves. In a world where many turn to social media to promote awareness, Samantha feels differently. "Social media doesn't seem to play a great part in this," she says. "There is so much information on conservation and environmentalism. Littering still happens, despite our best efforts."

She discusses the ignorance permeating environmental issues. "With materials such as single-use plastic, it is an out-of-sight-out-of-mind thing with people. They do not know that it accumulates in our rivers, which are the life-bearing arteries for all of us."

Samantha recalls fishing out two milk sachets of the same brand but at different times, from the Coonoor

At the heart of all activities, however, is her steadfast sense of purpose and love for nature, which have consistently guided her through the twists and turns of life

River, during a clean-up drive. "One sachet cost ₹8.50 while the other cost ₹21. The sachet from years ago had been in the river all this while, waiting for the new one's arrival." Both sachets remain with her, proof of the debilitating effects of plastic on the environment. On the other front, receiving funding for the plant's operations remains an issue too. Many donors advise the organisation and plant to become financially sustainable - unaware of the challenges in creating a viable circular economy, considering the peculiarities of a hill town, vis-a-vis, the nature of the waste handled, labour shortages, transportation costs, legal hassles, environmental issues, etc.

### Educating the Masses

While consistent funding would make a sizeable impact, Samantha also hopes to change the community's mindset towards the environment, as this is the starting point for all positive change. "It is disheartening when our efforts don't resonate with

people," she admits ruefully. "We have conducted awareness drives in schools and the very next day we see students littering." When asked how it would be possible to tackle this issue on a macro-scale, Samantha replies, "Fine them!" If campaigns and explanations do not complete the job, strict fines may probably discourage people from littering and harming the environment, she believes.

Along with that, she has frequently caught litterers red-handed and asked them to pick up their trash. "I preach a lot," she quips. "Because I know how difficult it is to pick up after someone. I have stood in places and waited for people to pick up their litter. Even when they are offended."

She heartily hopes that schools begin introducing social and environmental awareness as core subjects, "which are as important as the rest of their education."

The job is endless, and often thankless, but her determination is unwavering. "If not me, who else? I cannot ask anyone else to step up and do my work, can I?" she questions.

### Purpose and Practicality

Ten years into her journey, Samantha has achieved her purpose with a sense of practicality. She understands that there will be few who commit fully towards the cause and is used to watching volunteers come for a brief period and leave. "All part of the game," she shrugs. Whenever clean-up drives are organised, it is never too difficult to find volunteers; a positive sign for the district.

A cancer survivor, she briefly spoke of how the experience altered her perspective towards life. "Life is very



fragile,” she states. “After recovering, I realised that there is a greater purpose to things. But I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be doing all this work in this field.”

Her purpose has not only played a pivotal role in maintaining and restoring the environment but also resulted in various awards, accolades and media attention. Despite this, Samantha keeps a low profile and focuses on her core goal; to make Coonoor a model district for Indians to emulate across the country. “Maybe then all our work will register in a few minds,” she says hopefully. Often asked to guide neighbouring districts’ conservation efforts, she realises that little is possible without money and manpower. The day she receives both in ample amounts, she hopes to expand her initiative through the region.

Even today, when somebody questions Samantha’s work, she has, at the ready, a simple yet heartfelt response. “It’s just for the love of the town I grew up in and it is my way of giving back.”

While most people leave the problems of governance and civic duties to the powers that be, Coonoor is truly lucky to have someone like Samantha Iyanna who took the reins of civic consciousness into her own able hands. By dint of hard work, perseverance and a passion for turning improbability into possibility, she has impacted the ecology of the district tangibly. The next time you drive down the winding roads of Coonoor, and marvel at the cleanliness of the town, be certain Samantha and her dedicated team at Clean Coonoor had a large hand in keeping the Blue Hills, that we all love, green. ■

“Of her many well-known endeavours, one that stands out is Clean Coonoor; an organisation that strives to keep the town clean and maintain its delicate ecological balance





A man in a camouflage shirt is standing in a forest, holding a large telephoto lens to his eye. He is looking through the lens, which is pointed towards the right. The background shows several large trees with thick trunks and green foliage. The ground is covered with grass and some fallen leaves. The overall scene is a lush, green forest.

# A Beautiful Life

Few places in the world offer the sheer diversity and grandeur of the Nilgiris – especially when it comes to nature – from deciduous forests and shola grasslands to the Nilgiri flycatcher and langurs. With abundant flora and fauna to see, discover and learn about, it is easy to get overwhelmed. That is where the likes of Rajesh Sira come into the picture. Coming from the Bokokapuram district near Masinagudi, he is a true son of the soil, an avid birder and photographer.

His motto is a simple, yet wholly heartfelt one; to revel in the magic of the forests each day, while sharing it with others. Nothing makes him happier than capturing the distinct inhabitants of the forest through a camera lens – and there is very little he may be unaware of within the jungles. A trip with him into the forests shows you a person who is very much at one with nature.

## **Indigenous Roots**

Born on 25th March 1992 into the Irula community, Rajesh's affinity for nature was nurtured, in essence, by the ways of his community. "There are over 650 Irula families in my area," he shares. "Along with families belonging to the Kurumba, Kattunayakan and Betaguruba tribes." These communities live in harmony with nature and enjoy staying within



*A life lived simply has a charm all of its own. Inside43 brings you the story of Rajesh Sira, a wildlife guide and photographer from the Irula tribe in Masinagudi*



proximity to the forest. Be it collecting honey and firewood or simply unwinding in the woods with a leisurely stroll – living in sympathy with their environment is a fundamental aspect of their lives.

However, while these tribes are flag-bearers of sustainability and harmony, they often face a number of challenges in their daily lives. “While Bokkapuram and Masinagudi are beautiful places, it is extremely difficult for many tribals to get steady work,” Rajesh explains.

Passionate about strengthening the livelihoods of his community, he says, “Work opportunities within the forest are increasingly limited. As activities such as tree-cutting have been banned, there is little for people to do – forcing them to leave their homes. Perhaps if the government created more opportunities here, life in the

forest would be much better.” Currently supporting his joint family, Rajesh spoke of his two-room home, which houses 8-10 people. “I wanted to build a bigger house for my family, and even constructed quite a bit of it. But because of sudden financial difficulties, I had to stop midway,” he discloses quietly.

Rajesh also touched upon the availability of basic services in his village – which are usually taken for granted in a big city. Chief of them being adequate medical services. “We do have a clinic in our area, in which doctors conduct their evening rounds,” he says. “But for medical emergencies, a patient has to be taken to Ooty or Coimbatore.”

#### **Foraying into the Forest**

While it is his passion, wildlife photography and conducting tours were not always the end goal for

Rajesh. As a child, he aspired to secure a government job, however financial circumstances forced him to quit school after finishing his 10th grade. He joined Jungle Hut in 2012. “I thought I would learn some English and drive tourists around,” he recalls. Referring to himself as a rather shy person, Rajesh began learning English after the age of 14. His interactions with tourists and self-taught lessons not only aided him in sharpening his linguistic skills but also helped him emerge from his shell.

It was during these drives that his enthusiasm for wildlife was born. “I did not have much knowledge of the diverse wildlife in the forest,” he admits. “My cousin also worked in the resort – it is thanks to him and several others that I eventually fell in love with wildlife.” Rajesh began studying up on the forest’s

inhabitants and began accompanying his colleague, Solomon Daniel, on drives. "We would take the guests for a drive in the forest," he describes. "And Solomon would make a call to the elephants. Often, they presented themselves in front of us. Sometimes they even charged at our vehicle!"

There has been no turning back for Rajesh since then. Today, he is in sync with every bit of the forest and knows where to look to get a particular sighting. "I have spotted many animals over the years," he says. "I once saw a leopard lying majestically on a rock, I've encountered several tigers as well. But the leopard is my favourite – along with owls."

With over 450 species of birds within the Nilgiris, there is inevitably something new for Rajesh to discover during his birding expeditions. Birdwatching to him is not simply about spotting that one bird; rather, it is a meticulous exercise that involves careful fieldwork, mindful observation and a sense of forbearance. "I am always in awe of nature," Rajesh expresses. "Whether it's a new sight or a bird I have seen many times before, I always enjoy my trips into the forest."

While his day begins at 5:30am, he never misses an opportunity to venture into the jungle, alone or with tourists. A wildlife savant of sorts, Rajesh has taken on the coveted role of a guide and facilitates the journeys of many others into the mysteries of the forest. "A tip for tourists venturing into the jungle is to keep silent," he advises. "While animals are used to the sounds of vehicles, any human noise will cause them to retreat further into the wild. Which is why I

always advise them to remain as quiet as possible during our drives."

### Abundant Ambitions

Rajesh shares an incredibly special moment in his life; when he was gifted a camera by a guest at the resort. The gift prompted his love for photography – an activity he wholeheartedly enjoys to date. Along with capturing the beauty of the forests, he aims to share his passion for nature by conducting more birding and wildlife tours. Like many children of the Blue Hills, he hopes to promote responsible tourism amongst the many visitors to the Nilgiris. "Tourism is a good idea, but certain behaviours need to be controlled," he states. "Loud parties, the consumption of illegal substances and excessive littering do great harm to the environment. I hope authorities do their bit and place stricter rules to prevent such occurrences."

Outside Masinagudi, Rajesh has travelled to Mysore and Coimbatore. His most memorable travel so far is a trip to Mumbai by plane. Accompanying the team that created the award-winning documentary, "The Elephant Whisperers" as a translator, he reminisced over his first view of the sea. "It was truly breathtaking. And I would like to visit Malaysia or Singapore, but for the longer plane journey," he divulges innocently.

When asked if he had anything to share with readers, he has but one thing to say. "Help each other more," he earnestly asks. "Especially those who may not be as fortunate as you."

Rajesh's passion may well take him to other places, but at the end of the day, there is no place like home. "I like my home," he professes. "The weather is nice, the people are good,

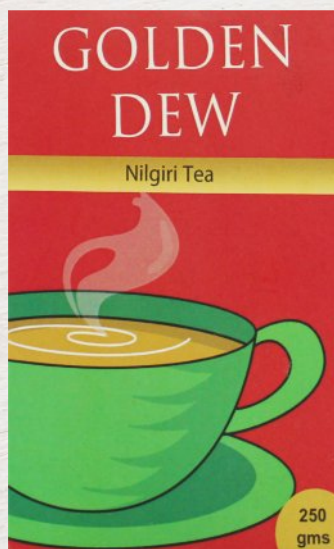
His motto is a simple, yet wholly heartfelt, one; to revel in the magic of the forests each day, while sharing it with others

the scenery is beautiful. Even if I go out, I would want to return within a few days. This is my home, and I will never leave it. Here, it is a beautiful life." ■





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# Collecting Hope

**Apsara Reddy**, the renowned transgender politician and activist, who has her home in the hills, shows us why we can be hopeful about those in seats of power

A few years ago I needed to meet the then Collector, Innocent Divya, to address certain property-related concerns I was facing. Be it welfare, health, women, economic empowerment for tribals, and prevention of crime; think of it and she was already ten steps ahead. I went nervously to the Collectorate as I didn't have an appointment, nor a prior introduction. Her gentle PA, Poovendran, took my request for a meeting, and after she had finished her appointments, I was called in to meet her. I laid out the difficulties I was facing. Her answer has stayed with me since. "Do not worry about prejudice and insensitive talk. Make an application; like any other citizen, you should have equal rights to build your own home." It was an emotional moment. Against a tide of familial and social opposition, here was an IAS officer, revered by the district, telling me, in her own way, to get on with what needs to be done. After submitting the necessary paperwork with relevant authorities, I would check in with the Collector on this, and she would always smile and say, "A home is permanent and you will enjoy building it only if the terrain and nature support your effort. So wait till all surveys are done." In about nine months I received my approvals and I shall never forget that she was the first of her kind who helped a transwoman build her dream home.

Months after this, a new Collector was in place, and this time it was a

no-nonsense man of few words, Amrith SP. Around this time I had construction woes; difficult neighbours, low-ranking officials wandering in at will, wanting hefty donations, and worst of all, people wandering through the forest to drink in my garden. Once again, I walked into the Collectorate and luckily, the same gentle Poovendran facilitated a meeting. Amrith was an able problem-solver with a knack for dealing with small issues tactfully. After submitting a petition I was able to fence my property, limiting access to both corrupt officials and the drinking menace. As a transwoman, the risks are that much more. Amrith, imparted to me his style of communication and functioning, and it has been invaluable in helping me strategically handle tough situations, executing things in a clear and straightforward way.

During this process I also got to know Amrith's wife, Abinaya, who became a close friend, and through her I learnt about government tribal welfare and empowerment initiatives. It underlined my deep interest in fighting against child sexual abuse and I would visit tribal hamlets and learn of their stories, customs and trysts with the law. So when the opportunity arose to meet the new Collector, Aruna, I jumped at the chance. There was such a warmth and sense of purpose in her voice as we discussed our views on child rights and women's empowerment.

She was clearly committed to the cause of children affected by all kinds of abuse, neglect, poverty and alcoholic parents, and I found in her a certain charisma I don't often encounter in bureaucrats.

As a result of these life-altering moments with various Collectors, I have started enjoying my trips to the Collectorate. That seat of power has a vibrant energy with the causes the officer espouses, their unswerving focus on implementing government schemes and steadfastly remaining dedicated to causes that matter. I am living proof that good governance is a reality, especially in this district. And I am certain that the next mind that occupies that particular chair will be no less than those that came before, and that I will continue my visits to the Collectorate and come away, each time, filled with strength and hope. ■





# TEKNOCRAFT

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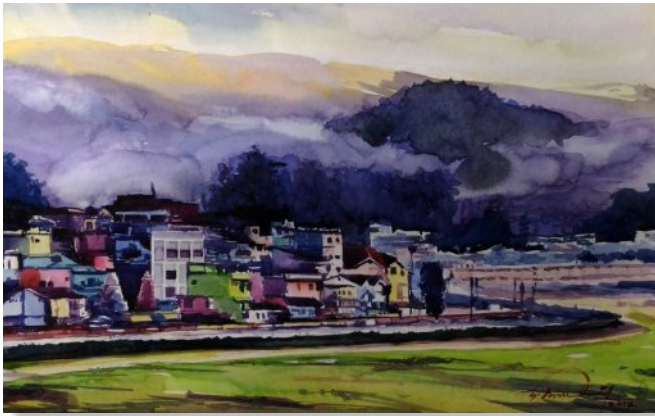
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YOUR #1 TECH STORE IN COONOOR





*R Solomon's enduring relationship with art, education and community led him to the Nilgiris to set up the district's first-of-its-kind gallery*

# At the heart of it

"As an artist, the most difficult thing to accomplish is translating the vision in your mind into reality. It takes time, practice, bold experimentation and effort. But at its core, art is one of the greatest sources of happiness and satisfaction." This is a mantra R Solomon firmly believes in and enthusiastically imparts to all. From receiving both state and national awards for his artwork and hosting exhibitions across the country to launching his very own art studio in Ooty, his career spanning 10 years has been kaleidoscopic, to say the least.

But nothing comes close to the sheer joy he feels in his studio;

surrounded by easels, paints, brushes and canvases, and even today, Solomon experiences the same level of excitement for his craft, as he did during childhood.

## **The Art Connection**

Creativity came naturally to young Solomon, who used powdered rice flour to design rangolis outside his home. "I was always fascinated with art," he shares. "Even my school books had more scribbles and drawings than notes." Despite his fascination with art, Solomon's family persuaded him to apply for a Computer Science degree, as they believed it was more viable. But destiny seemed to have other plans.



Solomon got wait-listed for a Computer Science programme and decided it was then or never. He enrolled in the Government College of Fine Arts in Chennai and began life afresh. It was a proud moment for the young man, as Solomon was amongst the 2,800 candidates vying for a mere 110 seats.

He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the institute and then proceeded to obtain a Master's degree as well. By the time he graduated, he was acutely aware that the canvas was his favourite medium of artistic expression. "I experimented a lot during college, from animation to art direction," Solomon explains thoughtfully, "But nothing quite spoke to me like painting did; I guess it was meant to be." He knew that pursuing a career in fine arts would invite difficulties such as a lack of opportunities as well as financial strain, but was confident that his passion would pave the way for a bright future.

### From Passion to Profession

With an appetite for risk-taking and adventure, Solomon began his career as a freelance artist. From creating murals to painting on canvas, he went with life's flow and seized any opportunity that came his way. Eventually, his career brought him to the picturesque hills of Ooty, where he now lives happily, making a living out of what he loves best. "I shifted to Ooty in 2013. It's been 10 years and I can confidently say that I am now a Nilgiris citizen," he says with a laugh. The cool climate and beautiful landscapes serve as a great inspiration to Solomon, as "there is something new to see and experience every day," and the ever-changing

landscape provides the perfect palette for his imagination.

It was in Ooty that he decided to diversify his career and share his passion for art with others. "There were many people who wanted to learn painting but did not know where to go," Solomon recalls. "And I believe that knowledge is meant to be shared, so I began teaching..." From instructing small groups of art enthusiasts to planning classes for students at McGAN's – Ooty School of Architecture and PSG Institute of Architecture and Planning, he found great fulfilment in facilitating the journey of young aspiring artists in various fields.

This led him, in September 2019, to inaugurate the *Solo Art Gallery* – his most demanding, yet rewarding endeavour to date.

### An Artistic Platform

Solomon's vision for his art gallery was not only to showcase his work, but provide a medium for artists around India who wished to pursue their passion professionally. "I faced many challenges," he admits. "But I had decided to launch this gallery no matter what." One finds more than a collection of striking paintings at Solo Art Gallery. A diverse array of statues and figurines dot the space; sourced from artists across cities such as Bangalore, Pondicherry, Chennai and Coimbatore.

"My gallery is unique," Solomon states. "The first of its kind in Ooty to showcase art, curate exhibitions, sell art materials and conduct classes as well."

His exhibitions have attracted visitors from across the Nilgiris, particularly the International Women's Day 2023 Exhibition, which witnessed

the presence of J Innocent Divya, Ex-Collector of the Nilgiris, and other officials. Be it officials, children or art enthusiasts, Solomon is at his proudest when he sees visitors enjoying their time in his gallery. "Many people have approached me and said that they feel happy and calm when they step into the gallery. What can be better than that?" he says with pride.

Between exhibitions, teaching and connecting with fellow artists, Solomon invariably devotes time to his craft. While he enjoys drawing inspiration from Ooty's landscapes and immortalising them on canvas, like much of his life, he is always open to experimenting and following new avenues.

Another mantra he ardently follows is that passion impacts output, no matter what. It is the perfect representation of his journey so far; one where passion has driven the course of his life and brought him to add his own brushstrokes to the vivid tapestry of life that unfolds across the hills every day... ■



*Solo Art Gallery, USSS Building,  
Charing Cross, Inside Hotel Sanjay,  
Pudumund, Ooty, Nilgiris 643001*

# Abel to Play

*Music is in his blood, as **Sreeram V** discovers when he meets up with Abel K, a musician who is a gifted artist in his own right*



Music is a way of life in the Nilgiris. From early morning temple bhajans, to church choirs, to the beat of Badaga dances, Toda tribal songs and the sounds of Carnatic music interspersed with strains of Country and Western, Music is as prevalent in the Nilgiris as the tea bushes. And Abel is a multi-talented young man who talks quietly, yet passionately about his life-long love affair with melody and sound.

## **Tell us about yourself and your affinity for music.**

I am a humble Coonoorian and I run my own networking business. I started practising piano at the age of five under the guidance of my father, Kosin Jin, and godfather, Amalraj. Music has always been a part of my life. My father and godfather are the inspiration behind my passion, and the little knowledge they imparted when I was young kindled an abiding

interest in me. They both have excellent knowledge of writing songs and composing them, and they passed this on to me.

They are still practising music to this day. My godfather was recently given an award for his contribution to music. He has been practising since he was a teenager. It is from him that I learned a lot about the technical aspects of music. My godfather is the author of many lyrics that are a



standard part of Christian worship across Tamil Nadu now. 'Enna En Yesu En Ullam Thedi Varigindra Neram Idhu' is one of his more well-known compositions.

**Can you talk about your recent endeavours with music?**

I recently opened a music studio. We have been purchasing the assets required to record and compose songs. Besides this, I generally make remixes of old Christian songs. I conduct singing classes (free of cost), to children at Our Lady of Health Church in Boys Company. I am also a part of the church choir. I also play a bit of Western music for fun.

**How keen, according to you, are the future Nilgirisians to continue the long-standing tradition of music that is a part of these hills?**

The Nilgiris resonates with music. The Badagas, for example, follow a very unique music pattern and I am a huge fan of it. And so do the Todas. The Nilgiris is culturally rooted in music. But you should understand that the journey with music is never-ending. While I say I teach music to students, I continue to be a student of music. I listen to many cinematic songs, and each song comes with a unique technicality. A musician has to listen very carefully or risk losing these minute technicalities. Illayaraja, for example, was a wonderful learner, making him the musician he is. I do believe that the music in these hills will never die down. We have fine

musicians and much talent and I am privileged that, in some small way, I am keeping alive a long-standing tradition in the district.

**Music is quite obviously much more than a form of entertainment. Can we have your expert view on this?**

A lot of studies point out that music impacts the brain in many ways. Listening to it creates a much-needed change. It keeps the brain functioning in optimum ways. Research has shown that music can impact mood, which is impacted by chemicals, and thus music can help regulate the chemical functioning of the body. Moreover, those who play music always have a great connection with people around them, as music has a way of uniting people in shared joy.

**What are your plans with the newly initiated studio?**

I would like to go down the route of my father and godfather. So, I intend to write and compose music that is enduring. I might be busy for around three days a week, but I have the flexibility to work whenever I wish, as I am running my own business. It would understandably be difficult if I was employed elsewhere. Being an entrepreneur offers these benefits.

**How do you think the music scene has evolved over the years?**

The last decade has seen a monumental shift. Thanks to technology, you can now experience a refined quality in the sound output. My godfather had to begin his

“My father and godfather are the inspiration behind my passion, and the little knowledge they imparted when I was young kindled an abiding interest in me

practice with a harmonium, though I've learnt on a keyboard. Gone are the days when you record a song on a tape recorder and take it to the studio. Musicians can get their job done (at least the fundamental part of it) right from the comfort of their homes. For example, you can compose a tune with a keyboard and make the necessary edits without the need for a retake. Long story short, technology has really come to the aid of musicians in more ways than I can describe here.

I, for one, am grateful to be living in the time that I do, in a place like this, where technology, nature and community have come together in a long history of music tradition that I am heir to. I hope I can add to the music of the hills in my own way as time goes on. ■

Abel K can be reached at  
+91 99437 90507 for music classes  
and performances





# Tree of Life

**Rohan Mathias** has lived in the Nilgiris for over 40 years and loves showing people how to responsibly enjoy and care for its natural magnificence. Here he gives us a glimpse into the life of the Borum tree

The Nilgiri massif creates a rain-shadow effect that prevents moisture-laden winds from reaching the low-lying areas on its leeward side. As a result, these areas bear a stronger resemblance to the semi-arid scrublands of north-western India, despite their proximity to the lush Western Ghats. And until recent times they were seen as 'wastelands'.

My relationship with one such landscape, located along the periphery of Mudumalai National Park, is over four decades old. Scarce water, and a highly undulating and nutrition-poor terrain, allowed this landscape to escape the attention of the commercial farmer, and retain its natural arid landscape without human interference.

But what may appear uninviting to a farmer evokes a different response from those interested in flora and fauna.

With succulents and fruiting trees, jumping ants and elephants, this landscape is deceptively rich in biodiversity. On the surface, it will often make you second guess the presence of larger mammals, until you see one.

One particular species of tree widely scattered across this region that has caught my attention time and again is the 'Borum', or *Ziziphus mauritiana* in Latin.

A striking tree of semi-arid habitats, the Borum is a drought-resistant species propagated from seed. It starts bearing fruit in about five years. Its red, fleshy fruit has a distinct strong, sweet smell, and many gustatory enthusiasts, some of whom have learnt over the years that timing is everything if they are to get their share.

Giant Malabar squirrels, grey langurs and bonnet macaques ride the canopy, dropping partially eaten fruit which are quickly devoured by many herbivores like the wild pig and spotted deer during the day.

Nocturnal species like the Indian crested porcupines and sloth bears join the party at night. The sloth bear has the best of all worlds; it feeds on fallen fruit, and then when nothing much is left to Hoover up from the forest floor, it climbs the tree to get those in the canopy. Its weight shakes up the branches, bringing down fruit that may have been inconveniently located. In the process of accessing their favourite winter treat, what these animals unknowingly also do is spread Borum

seeds far and wide, helping the species proliferate across the landscape.

It is not just the fruit, but also the ridged coarse bark of the Borum tree that provides a habitat to a diversity of insects that make this their home.

Clever birds like woodpeckers and nuthatches however have figured this out, and can often be seen wildly hammering at Borum tree trunks, seeking out insect larvae and adults concealing themselves in the deep furrows of the tree.

In the thick of summer, when all other trees shed their leaves to preserve water, the Borum clads itself in a generous veil of green, providing refuge to life from the scorching sun.

With the arrival of the pre-monsoon showers, the bronze and browns transition to green. And the Borum, having done its duty, sheds its leaves, and begins a new cycle of life for the year. ■





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# Literally Speaking

*A quick interview with Dr Bhuvana Natarajan shows us a dedicated citizen of these hills, committed to helping educate young women and thus shape the district's future*

## Where in the Nilgiris are you from?

I am from Coonoor, more precisely, I am from Mount Pleasant. This is where I was born, brought up, and where I got married and am glad to say, where I am permanently settled; in this beautiful part of the world.

## What do you like the best about living in the Nilgiris?

To me, Coonoor is everything I could ever want from a place. The people here, in the hills, are truly the best I have encountered over the course of my life. One will never see such warmth elsewhere in the world, be it the way conversations happen, the smiles of those one meets going about one's day, or the courtesy and hospitality... I could go on forever, but this can only be understood through experience. Apart from that, the weather and serenity is incomparable, and life is generally hassle-free. I guess these are some of the things I love about this place.

## What do you do?

I did my bachelors in English Literature from Providence College for Women, Coonoor followed by my masters, M.Phil and doctorate. I then joined the department of English Literature at my Alma Mater in 2000 after clearing the required eligibility test for lecturers.

## What do you like about your work?

I am the Head of the Department of English Literature at Providence College, and I am passionate about my work because I get to learn everyday. I am able to explore and undertake research along with my doctoral candidates, and this is something I truly enjoy. As a teacher, I try to impart the little I have learnt, and the knowledge my own teachers shared out of their wide and vast experience to generations of women in the Nilgiris.

## What is your hope for the future of this district?

I would say it is the youth of today who are the hope of this district. There is a lot they can contribute in different ways; right from the field of education, environmental conservation, animal welfare, upholding the heritage and culture of the district and its ethnic communities and much more. It is important that they live here to keep these blue mountains protected from all that we witness today. ■





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# A Smashing Chap





*He's been serving aces on all fronts for decades. Inside43 gets the score on H Poulous and discovers a man of not just determined talent, but one of honesty and integrity*

One can find many things within the hallowed halls of the Coonoor Club. A well-stocked library, the dining hall and bar, a frequently occupied bridge room and more. However, the Club also houses a veteran tennis champion whose can-do attitude and amiable smile are as consistent as his ace serve. Endearingly referred to as 'Coach' both on and off the court, H Poulous has taught several generations of Coonoor to master the game of tennis. But if you ask him to partake in a friendly game of football, badminton, billiards or table tennis, he will readily agree – even teaching you a trick or two of the game. Despite mastering several sports, tennis perennially holds a special place in his heart. And his saga with the sport began many years ago, at the very same court he now teaches on.

### **Humble Beginnings**

Poulous is no stranger to the struggles of life, as he witnessed the financial difficulties that impacted his family, from a young age. So much so that he forfeited his studies after 5th grade and obtained his first job – at the Coonoor Club. "My father was a cook and worked in several houses. But we were a poor family, so I began working when I was about 9 years old," he recalls in his quiet voice. From 1977 till date, Poulous has risen

through the ranks and has become an invaluable employee of the Club. "This was my first and only job," he shares with immense pride. "I have been working here for the last 46 years."

He began his journey as a ball boy at the Club – but collecting tennis balls from the sidelines was not the only thing he did. His interest in the sport was all-consuming from the first serve he saw, and he began



...he aspires to represent the Nilgiris and Tamil Nadu in state and national-level tennis competitions for veterans

observing each player, each game and the techniques used. He was soon promoted to line marker and eventually began learning to play the game himself. An autodidact, he worked on his skills by playing against the wall, and his mastery is all "all self-taught," he admits. His flair for the sport did not go unnoticed, and

his perseverance would go on to reward him in ways he never imagined.

### **Doing the District Proud**

The Club is not the only place Poulous has taught. His skills were welcomed at The Lawrence School and Riverside Public School, where he took many budding tennis players under his wing. Among those budding players was Akshay Ashok, who played in several tournaments and eventually settled in the Nilgiris. "I feel very proud to watch his success," Poulous says. "Even today, we both play a game of tennis whenever we get a chance." His students were not the only ones competing in tournaments though. 2016 was a pivotal year for Poulous, as he played in the veterans' category of the coveted Coimbatore Premier Tennis League. In several open tournaments, he was selected to play in the 'A' division. In 2023, Poulous partook in a tournament hosted in Bangalore, defeating his opponents and proceeding to the quarter-finals.

Throughout his recollections, what stands out is his unwavering appreciation of the Coonoor Club, which supported him financially whenever he was called to play. "The secretary, committee members, and everyone supported me," he says.

"And for that, I am very grateful." However, this is not the zenith of his dreams. At 55 years old, he aspires to represent the Nilgiris and Tamil Nadu in state and national-level tennis competitions for veterans. "Till now, I have not received the opportunity to participate in state or national tournaments. If given the support, I would be honoured to represent the district," he says hopefully.

### Off the Court

When he is not on the tennis court or dabbling in some other sport, Poulous can be found lending an experienced hand in the Club's scope of activities. From trips to the bank to

decorating the Club for an event, he enjoys the diverse range of responsibilities that make up his life in the Club and revels in them, for the Coonoor Club is the only home he has known for most of his life.

Over the years, he has never skipped his early morning jogs, crediting them to his good health and fitness. He believes that children today do not get much time to engage in sports, due to fierce academic pressure, and truly wishes that people understand the importance of sports in one's life. "Sports will always be my first priority," he states firmly. "Especially

tennis. My family comes a close second, though."

Poulous is happiest while playing and coaching, and hopes to continue relaying his skills to his last breath. Despite life's many obstacles which continue to come his way, and he does not talk about them openly, he continues to go about his day with a steadfast smile and a resolute disposition. A man of few words, he lets his actions do the talking. Perhaps his resilience to life's curveballs has inevitably helped him on the tennis court, as he continues conquering each challenge – one shot at a time. ■





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# ♔ Across the Board ♚

*A chess master himself, he has trained a multitude of children in the subtleties of this intricate game. **Mukund Ravishankar** met up with Solomon Vivek of Kotagiri to check out the moves he has made over the years in his dedication to chess*



## How did your interest in chess develop?

I started playing chess at home when I was quite young. My parents, especially my father, Mohanraj, taught me how to play and, in those days, the late 90's, most of the older people in the villages passed their time drinking tea and playing chess when they were free. I used to join them but

it wasn't until I reached high school that I really got into playing the game. During my younger years, I was much more interested in football. In fact, I was part of a team that won the Tamil Nadu state championship in 2002. It was during and after high school that I started taking chess more seriously. I won the district championship in 2004 and then went

to Chennai for another tournament in which I didn't perform very well, unfortunately. I saw this as a challenge, rather than a setback, and dedicated myself to practising and working much harder.

I got my international FIDE (International Chess Federation) rating in 2006 during a tournament in Kodaikanal after beating a certain



number of rated players. It was then that I realised that this was a potential path for me in the sport and I learnt as much as I could with any books I could lay my hands on. There weren't many around at the time and buying them from abroad was quite expensive. My parents were very supportive throughout, and I got into a college in Chennai because that's where the hub of chess is in the state, if not the country. I participated in all the tournaments that I could while completing my degree and once I was done with college, I decided to dedicate most of my time to playing chess. I had some trainers here and there, but my first chess coach was Manuel Aaron. He was the first International Master from India and an Arjuna awardee.

#### What tournaments did you participate in after that?

I played for India for the first time in 2010, in Lebanon, for the Asian Championship. The next big one was the Nationals in which I won the silver. I got selected again to play for India, in Turkey, in 2011. Then again in 2012 in Greece, 2013 in Romania, 2014 in Nepal, 2015 in Greece again and 2015 in Brunei. These were for the international championships in my category and I was also fortunate to have played invitational championships in Dubai, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and national tournaments in between my international trips.

#### How did you prepare for these tournaments?

I keep myself physically fit. I run, play football and badminton. Physical fitness is really important for the mind while one is competing. I make my own juices and electrolyte solutions that I take with me for

tournaments. It's extremely important not to get burnt out.

Studying your opponents is also helpful. There is a retired captain, Amar Shekar, who lives in Mount Pleasant and is currently 83 years old. I've known him for around 20 years and he is a chess enthusiast. He used to conduct tournaments when he was captain. We met at a couple of tournaments and developed a

“My job as a coach is to help the child figure out, on their own, what the next best move is and build confidence while they do that

compatible friendship. He's got a lot of books and is more updated on what's happening in the chess world than I am. He's very passionate about the sport and has been very helpful. In 2015, when I was preparing for the tournament in Greece, he invited me to his house three months prior to the tournament. He had taken the trouble to research the top 20 players in the tournament all by himself. He had analysed all their games over the preceding year and said to me, "Vivek, these are the playing styles and strategies of all these players. I want you to go through it". Data like this really helps you prepare and I've been blessed to have people like this reach out and help me be the best I can be.

#### How did you start teaching?

My father and the Head of Sports in Riverside School, Kotagiri were good friends and through him, Dr Suresh Belliraj contacted me and asked to meet up. He was interested in what I was doing as he too has an interest in chess and I told him what my plans were. He asked me if I was willing to work with the students at the school. I was a bit hesitant as I didn't want to commit to a full-time job while playing professionally, but he insisted, saying that I could make my own space here, teach the kids and have flexible timings based on my tournaments. Looking back, it is probably the best thing that happened to me. I was happy that someone was recognising what I had to offer and Dr Suresh also sponsored a lot of my travels for my tournaments abroad in my early days.

I joined in 2008 and my coaching career began as I was working on my career as a professional chess player. Awareness around chess was gaining momentum in the district, as well. As the years went by, my main focus was on the children I was coaching as they were doing really well. One of them won the nationals, some of them got into SGFI (School Games Federation of India), and the daughter of one of our teachers became the second woman in the district to get a FIDE rating. By the time I left in 2018, the school had 25 FIDE-rated players. That year, we won all the inter-school tournaments in every category, two state championships and were the national runners-up. I think this also inspired the other schools around to compete in chess and started hiring coaches. There weren't that many before.

### What was your journey after you left?

I started working with a former coach of mine, Grandmaster RB Ramesh and his wife, WGM Aarthie Ramaswamy, at Chess Gurukul, the academy they had started. They are the India's first Grandmaster couple. The academy is one of the best in the world and has produced R Praggnanandhaa and Bharath Subramaniam. We celebrated 15 years of the academy on the 1st of December, 2023. I am a coach and a curriculum developer for them. I started my own academy in Chennai in 2019 but we had to shut down due to the pandemic, and instead switched to an online model of training.

### How has the Nilgiris grown in respect to the sport?

When I started off, I was the first FIDE-rated player in the district. Now, we have around 50. We have around five to six tournaments that happen in the district, apart from the inter-school ones. There's easily around 400 to 450 players that play in these tournaments, which is great.

Two years ago, I took over as the Secretary of the Nilgiris District Chess Association. We're trying to organise more tournaments, but it's a bit difficult for us as we have a limited time frame.

The summer season makes organising them harder because of the crowds and the winters are too cold to bring people over. Tournaments bring in up to 400 people and we don't have the infrastructure to accommodate them.

In terms of coaches, we have around 6 professional coaches. The YMCAs in Ooty and Coonoor have

classes and they request coaches from us. Schools request coaches too. A lot of students are showing interest in the sport. It's definitely evolving. The government's involvement has also been really helpful. There was a 15-day coaching camp in 2010 held in Highfields for the Indian team going for the Olympiad in Russia. The top 5 from the men's and women's team, with their two European coaches visited and I had the privilege to see how they work. They won the silver medal that year. We also took some of our local school children to watch so they could be inspired.

### What are your future goals?

It's mainly about the students. I have one student currently who is 8 years old from Uttar Pradesh who is a current state champion. Seeing him becoming a national champion is one of my goals. His next tournament is in June and he's been practising since December. I teach him three hours a week. This kid practices three hours every day. I assign work and a timetable for him. He has his own Google spreadsheet in which he records what he's done each day and what difficulties arise. This is what it takes to compete in a country as competitive as ours.

When we ask a child to put in so much effort and sacrifice from the normal business of being a child, I feel it is my responsibility as a coach to see that his/her efforts bear fruit. Not necessarily in the form of a result in the next championship, but in evolution and growth. I need to be fully conscious of the child's efforts. I know some parents that have quit their jobs in order to accompany their children to tournaments. The trust

between the child, the parents and me is very important. I take around 40 hours of classes a week. In the morning, between five and seven, is when I conduct classes for my US students. My classes are mostly one-on-one sessions and a majority of my students want to do this professionally. They finish in the top three or top five in the tournaments

“Physical fitness is really important for the mind while one is competing

that they take part in. Most of my international students are of Indian origin. There is one girl from Singapore whose family is originally from Ooty, who was the under-14 Women's national champion there last year.

### How is your approach to coaching these students?

When someone first signs up for classes, I play a game with them and just talk about the sport to gauge their perspective on it and their skill level. We then focus on their tactical ability which is how they make calculations. Everyone thinks differently. Some use the process of elimination to come to a solution. Some have a built-in checklist and use that to come to a conclusion. Both are required and some of them will be stronger in one method over the other and we have to strengthen their weaknesses and balance them out. Chess is also a lot about pattern recognition and we help the students





build on that. Then comes logical thinking which includes visualising ten moves ahead, where you want to be and then work backwards. We assess all of this and then create a tentative schedule for the next three months.

A lot of parents come to me and say, my child is playing very fast, he/she does not think enough before playing. To this I say, we need to teach him how to think first. You can't just give them a board and tell them to think before playing. We need to teach them what and how to think. This systematic training is what I teach. Some children are taught to memorize a certain play which

usually produces a certain outcome and some parents who aren't very aware of chess, encourage it because it will bring the child some quick wins, but it's not a healthy way to think. It's not going to work out in the competitive circuit. One thing is that the child loses their ability to think on their own and the other is the child loses their creativity. Especially with children, unlearning is a lot more difficult.

So, it's really important that they are taught the right things in the right manner. You either win or you learn. Being encouraged to play to win is important but asking a child to not lose is counter-productive and

develops a negative outlook. Teaching them to enjoy the process and learn from their games is the most important thing.

My job as a coach is to help the child figure out, on their own, what the next best move is and build confidence while they do that.

I've picked up these methods from my mentors and coaches, but as an individual, my personality and the way I teach was shaped a lot by my time teaching in school and the support that Dr Suresh gave me. The space with my students, the time, the financial and moral support that was given to me at the time, for these I am eternally grateful. ■









# A Day in the Life of...

*Everyday life in the Nilgiris as seen  
through the eyes of a regular visitor*

Images © Karel Dobbels

































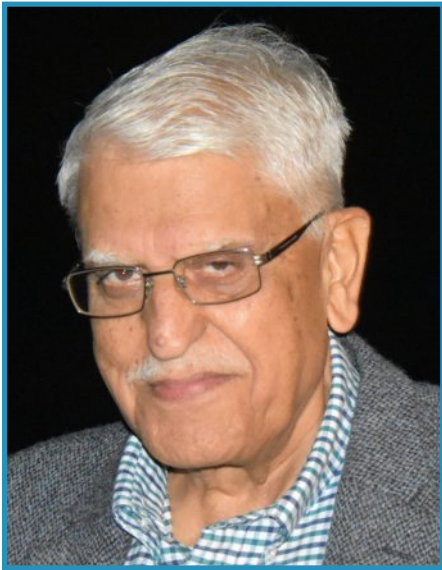












# Lessons From the Hills

*The hills impart wisdom; **Vijaya Dar**, a long-standing resident of the Nilgiris tells us the lessons of life brought home to him during his time in the hills*

When I first came to the Nilgiris in 2002, I knew practically nothing about this part of Tamil Nadu. Since I am a Kashmiri by birth, having lived my adolescent years there, the hills did not hold any special allure for me. But within a week of experiencing the beautiful mountainside, I began to seriously think about making a drastic and permanent shift from Chennai, where I then lived, to the little, rustic and idyllic town of Coonoor.

Professional commitments and obligations prevented an immediate move, but in April 2006 my wife and I decided to come back and perhaps rent a home for a year. Our first night in Coonoor turned out to be most exciting, as we awoke to sudden, loud cries of anguish from the family also staying at the same guest house we were. The matriarch had suffered a severe bout of bronchial constriction, being so unwell, that as she stepped out of the vehicle, she collapsed in the driveway and passed away. Quite the ominous welcome for me, a childhood asthmatic.

We, however, decided not to be deterred by this inaugural experience and at the end of August 2006 we

moved to Coonoor with the intention of making the Nilgiris our permanent home. Seventeen years later, I enjoy the pleasure of my own home in Yedapalli. My wife has passed on and for the last four years I have been on my own.

I have led a peripatetic life and have travelled extensively to some of the most beautiful places in the world. But having lived in Coonoor, I can say, without equivocation, that there is no place like this on Earth.

For starters, we have a moderate climate - the temperature bandwidth is so benign that it would be hard to find a parallel elsewhere.

The second positive about Coonoor is the people who have made their homes here and created an eclectic community of diverse backgrounds, cultures, languages, and professions. Yet, the harmony their vibrations generate is like a maestro's virtuoso piece. Coonoor loves one for who one is. Your past is your own while you are welcomed with open arms to become a part of their future. You are allowed to find your own space and discover your inner self without having to worry about building an

image. That is incredibly rare and it is what makes our slice of heaven special.

Lastly, there is genuine apprehension in people's minds about healthcare, or the apparent lack of it, here. Over the years I have come to believe that Coonoor does not kill people – what kills them is what they bring with them. There are enough facilities and doctors in the Nilgiris to stabilise and transport the critically ill to nearby Coimbatore. And it's best to enjoy the air, the climate and the fine company, and worry about health issues only when they arise. We can only cross bridges when we come to them.

I, for one, am so glad that I crossed the bridge across the Moyar river at the foothills and made my home here. Best decision I ever made... ■







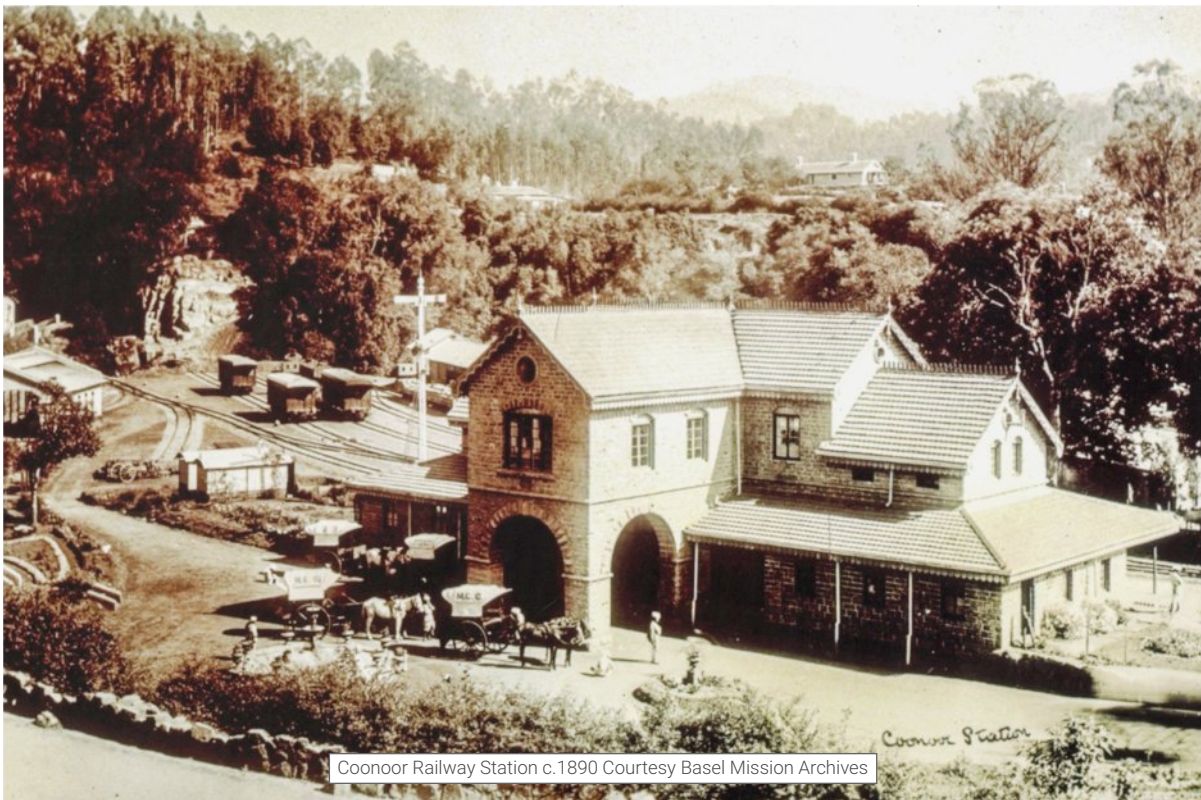
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# *The Way We Were*



Coonoor Railway Station c.1890 Courtesy Basel Mission Archives

*Coonoor of the 1950s was special in all sorts of ways. In the second part of his trip down memory lane, **Ravi Mathews** recalls what life was like during his early years in the Blue Hills*



Imagine a town, where there were no traffic snarls, the legacy of the Raj was kept present in rambling colonial buildings that overlooked tea and sholas, where one could fish in streams, and where the community was small, interconnected and genteel. A world where old and new dove-tailed in haphazard congruence and where time and people moved slowly to a rhythm all of their own. Beautiful homes and elegant life slid by languidly, as they did in E John Kuruvillas' "Brookside" - a show-place set in acres of woodland and lawn; with a summer house perched on stilts in the middle of a flowing stream where floated dozens of goldfish. An aviary full of cockatoos, parakeets and macaws, could be glimpsed through bevelled and etched glass. This was Coonoor in the 1950s, a place that was out of a storybook in every possible way, a place I was privileged to grow up in.

### At Home

Today one hears of how difficult it is to find people to work in all the homes that have mushroomed around the district. It wasn't always like this though. Domestic staff were easy to come by during my boyhood. My grandparents' bungalow, for example, maintained a butler, a cook, a maid, a driver, a couple of gardeners, and a scavenger (to clean out the 'thunderboxes', modern sanitation being yet unheard of).

We also had a youth to look after the pets, and he was often our playmate in the afternoons when the elders were at their siesta, wandering in the nearby shola with an airgun, catapult or home-made bow and arrow, playing at cowboys and 'injuns', coppers and robbers, or blasting each

other with papaya stem pipe guns, the pellets being Lantana berries. The Coonoor and Wellington Gymkhana Clubs were strictly 'Members Only', many being Brits, and some locals, mainly drawn from the planting fraternity. I remember being told that the dances held at the Coonoor Club were great fun (in spite of prohibition), with a live band in attendance, usually Enos and his Hot Shots. Bridge, then as now, was a popular pastime. The Coonoor Library, on the Club Road

“The Nilgiris, then as now, was renowned for its schools, and Coonoor had its fair share, for both boys and girls - no co-eds, no siree, except for Stanes, which still continues this tradition

(the striking building still in existence, but, unfortunately, the library itself, defunct) was our preferred place to visit twice or thrice a week, for its excellent magazines and books.

The lofty interiors induced children to be 'seen and not heard', but there was often a fire blazing, and the hushed silence inculcated a genuine fondness for reading. And then, home to a simple, wholesome repast, family prayers (with the resident staff in attendance at these times, who were usually converts, quite staunch in their belief, and dedicated to their duties in domestic service), and into a warm bed, reading a favourite author

till lights off, as decided by the parents.

### Of Ghosts And Soldiers

The Staff College had just about come into being. Except for the main campus and limited accommodation, officers had to find their billets in unoccupied bungalows in Coonoor. By and large, they were officers to the core! Officers and gentlemen, with their gracious ladies, adding lustre to an otherwise placid setting, and a whiff of, perhaps, much-needed style.

Ghosts were supposed to haunt some of the older and more decrepit houses and hoary tales abounded, narrated to our quivering selves by the more superstitious servants, who seemed to take perverse pleasure in relating the more hair-raising ones - enough to have us snuggle under the blankets and quiver and shake whenever the wind or rain rattled the window panes.

Spirits apart, there certainly were an organised body of thieves, not averse to violence, and notable among them a gigantic Jamaican (said to have jumped ship in Madras) who terrorised the neighbourhood for a couple of years. They were finally caught and jailed, at least the ringleaders were. But before bed, my grandfather used to make sure that all the doors were locked, and also took the precaution of keeping a loaded 12-bore by his side.

We also had a wonderful watchdog of the Kombai persuasion, who slept out on the verandah, and was frightened of no man, beast or demon, and sadly, his is a dying breed now. Seen only among some stalwarts who see the beauty and intelligence of this spectacular native Indian breed of dog.

### Schools and Sisters

The Nilgiris, then as now, was renowned for its schools, and Coonoor had its fair share, for both boys and girls - no co-eds, no siree, except for Stanes, which still continues this tradition. My brother and I spent a year there in kindergarten, when a Miss Barnard was Principal and we both got into a spot of trouble, he for locking the girls bathroom from outside during break time and trying to peek in, and I, for knotting together the irresistibly raven plaits of the girl in front of my desk. Bamboo reed canes saw much use those days, but the teachers, the brothers and sisters, who ran the Catholic institutions were remarkable for their dedication and commitment, and I do not think there are any who passed through their portals, who would not remember them with only

“This was Coonoor in the 1950s, a place that was out of a storybook in every possible way, a place I was privileged to grow up in

respect and affection. There is the story of how a Mr Parker, a retired planter in his dotage, a great benefactor of a certain Convent, bid adieu to a nun before she left on transfer, saying “Goodbye Sister, all the best, and I hope that when I see you next, you'll be a Mother.” Of course, he meant Mother Superior of her Order, but rumour had it the poor sister was quite mortified.

### And Down Below

Lower Coonoor was where all the marketing was done, Tuesdays and Saturdays being the major shandy days. No parking problems - ladies, with their favourite porters lugging baskets for meat, veg and fruits, trawled the neatly-laid-out stalls to pick and choose what they thought was the best for their tables.

The Nambiar clan, now fragmented, ran the grocery and provision stores.





Old Ramasamy still has his poultry outlet near the fish stalls - but the chickens were free range, and flavoursome compared to today's broiler birds. Fish came up on the mountain train, which chugged into Coonoor well past 11 o'clock, so those who wanted seafood had to time their shopping expeditions accordingly. And all banks functioned in lower Coonoor only. It was the place of trade and commerce, after all.

In retrospect, those childhood days were special, and are remembered with fond nostalgia (but then again, most childhood memories have a tinge of preciousness to them). I truly believe I was particularly fortunate to have had the advantage of summers here with caring grandparents, and perhaps, it was those memories that lured us back, when I was debating a

“Ghosts were supposed to haunt some of the older and more decrepit houses and hoary tales abounded, narrated to our quivering selves by the more superstitious servants

place to put down roots. Memories of a gracious era, with a wholesome quality of life, at a far gentler pace, factors which persist to a degree, today, and which is possible why so many are now being drawn to these environs.

Of course, we have the never-changing wonders of nature - the silhouetted harmony of the hills, the brilliance of the flowers, the vibrant hues of each season, and the oh-so gloriously exhilarating champagne air, that only Coonoor exudes in such gay abundance. Luckily these have stood the test of time, and will remain unchanged, even as other generations of young children spend lazy summer afternoons wading through the cool silver springs that dance their way across the placid blue-green mountains of my boyhood. ■



St Stephen's Church Ooty 1870 Unknown photographer

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# In Good Taste

*Take a culinary tour of the Nilgiris with **Deepika Unni** to explore old and established eateries along with new offerings that together delight both visitors and locals*



## The Cherrie-picked Cafe

Embarking on a culinary adventure, I treated my family, a mix of adults and children aged between 5 and 15, to the **Cherrie Berry Cafe** nestled in the enchanting Highfields Estate of Coonoor in the Nilgiris. This charming haven for food enthusiasts, operating from 9am to 9pm, instantly captivated us with its commitment to providing a purely vegetarian culinary experience and an all-day menu catering to diverse tastes.

Cherrie Berry Cafe stands out as one of the rare places offering a non-South Indian breakfast menu. The hot chocolate pancake with cinnamon cream and berries, along with the House special CB Toast with maple syrup, beckoned us to savour unique flavours. Each bite of their Iranian samosas, poutine fries, or nachos, coupled with sips of piping hot tea or filter coffee, immersed us in the romantic ambiance of mountain living.

The South Indian breakfast showcased traditional and innovative dishes. While indulging in the usual, we explored unique creations like jaggery and coconut uthappam, Rajini dosa, and the delectable cheese chilli uthappam.

As lunchtime approached, the menu expanded to include a diverse array of sandwiches, burgers, salads, and pastas. The corn avocado open sandwich emerged as a crowd pleaser, while the house-made onion and rosemary focaccia added a rustic touch to our culinary journey.

For my health-conscious cousin, the crispy Asian salad and the green apple, walnut and cranberry salad proved to be clear winners. Meanwhile, the young ones revelled in the joy of devouring the delightful mac-and-cheese and tantalising burgers.

Beyond the delectable dishes, the service at Cherrie Berry Cafe was both pleasant and prompt. The inviting ambiance, spacious and filled with light, made our experience even more enjoyable. Families with children, like ours, appreciated the thoughtful addition of a dedicated play area, making Cherrie Berry Cafe the perfect destination for a delightful culinary escapade for the entire family on weekends or weekdays.

**Address:** Highfield Estate, Coonoor

**Table Reservation:** +91 90255 44582



## The Real Food Journey

As I stepped into the heart of Upper Coonoor, Bedford Circle, I discovered a culinary haven known as **Coonoor Junction**, that quickly became a favourite for its gastronomic wonders. The moment I entered and was welcomed by Zubair, their manager, the meticulously-curated menu caught my attention, offering a diverse range of dishes that changed with the rhythm of the day.

The breakfast experience began at 8am, and I found myself immersed in a delightful South Indian spread until 11:30am. The exquisite dosas were particularly captivating, enhancing the charm of the morning affair.

As the day progressed into lunch hours, Coonoor Junction transformed into a culinary paradise, presenting Indian, Chinese, continental, and tandoor specialties. The South Indian executive thali stole the spotlight with its indulgent offerings like porial, kootu, and rasam. For North Indian cuisine enthusiasts, the diverse menu featured tantalizing tandoor specialties such as malai soy chaap, crispy corn salt and pepper, and paneer lababdar, creating a culinary ecstasy that left little room for the tempting desserts.

Surprises after lunch included the unconventional paan tea, which my companion praised for its light, refreshing, and flavourful essence, marking an unexpected highlight.

I went back later in the evening for the pièce de résistance, their chaat section, available from 3pm to 10pm. The menu covered classics like pani puri and bhel, to more indulgent options like cheese bhel and aloo tikki chaat, which reminded me of the tastes of the Bombay I grew up in.

Owned by the proprietors of Mittal's Natural Aroma Tea, Coonoor Junction went beyond the dining experience, allowing me to shop for a selection of tea flavours directly from the restaurant. The décor in a serene shade of blue provided a clean, spacious, and welcoming ambiance that seamlessly complemented the impeccable service flow.

Coonoor Junction, for me, wasn't just a restaurant; it was an exquisite culinary journey that is firmly on my list of places to revisit time and again to savour its delightful offerings.

**Address:** Gray's Hill, Coonoor

**Table Reservation:** +91 90808 21410 and +91 8098184327





## Xinfully Good

Quick service restaurants (QSR) have become all the rage across the country, and now the Nilgiris has its own QSR offering. Newly opened in Coonoor, **Xin**, the dim sum and bao restaurant, effortlessly marries traditional flavours with a modern twist, creating a culinary experience that left me awestruck. With an incredibly cute and well-executed space in wood and white, and a seating capacity for just 8-10, Xin is set to be an extremely popular eatery in Coonoor. As I stepped into the cosy ambiance, their unique self-service style set the stage for a memorable dining adventure and one quite unique to the district.

The menu boasts an impressive array of delicacies, but it was their thukpa that kickstarted the culinary journey. This hearty Tibetan soup, brimming with noodles, vibrant vegetables and the addition of meat for the chicken soup, was a symphony of flavours, making it a perfect prelude to the dim sum and bao feast.

The varieties of har gows including chicken, pork, corn and spinach, among others, were showcased in delicate translucent wrappers of beautiful natural colours derived

from beets, turmeric, spinach etc. The mushroom bao and chicken bao sang a duet that day with the pillowy baos cradling generous portions of perfectly seasoned fillings.

However, the stars of the evening were undoubtedly the prawn and chicken siu mai, which is a marriage of succulent prawns and well-seasoned chicken, creating a heavenly blend of surf-and-turf, and the chilli paneer bao, which was a fiery revelation, with the spicy kick of paneer complementing the softness of the bao.

As a sweet finale, the red rubies dessert was a stroke of genius. Water chestnuts transformed into vibrant, jewel-like treats, bathing in a sea of refreshing coconut milk. The burst of sweetness was the perfect conclusion to an exquisite culinary journey.

In conclusion, Xin surpassed my expectations with its inventive dishes and impeccable execution. Each bite was a celebration of culinary craftsmanship, making it a must-visit destination for dim sum and bao enthusiasts.

**Address:** Nilgiris Supermarket Compound, Coonoor

**Table Reservation:** No reservations taken



## Your Daily Cuppa

Nestled in Kotagiri, there is a gem of a cafe that blends modern aesthetics with European charm. **Daily Kota** is on the 1st floor of what can only be called 'downtown Kotagiri'. It has an inviting ambiance, designed by owners Sunil and Varsha in soothing teal blue, offering personal attentive service, creating an atmosphere perfect for relaxation. The cafe offers shelves of books for those seeking solitude and board games for those with little ones or companions.

The menu at this delightful establishment boasts an array of options, from cafe-style sandwiches to tempting egg preparations, small bites, and sinful waffles. Their beverage selection is extensive, featuring both hot and cold options, including a variety of milkshakes. For those seeking heartier fare, the cafe presents complete meals with a mix of Indian, Western and Chinese flavours, including classic butter chicken / paneer paired with a selection of rotis.

My culinary journey began with the chilli cheese toast, a perfect balance of spiciness and cheesiness. I then opted for

the healthy soup of the day, a refreshing start to the meal. The Daily Kota salad stole the show, featuring sautéed exotic vegetables drizzled with my favourite balsamic vinaigrette and mustard dressing.

For the main course, I savoured Chinese hakka noodles with a choice of veggies, bathed in a light soy sauce that elevated the dish's flavours. The slice of carrot cake with a luscious lemon cheese frosting that I ate, had a delightful surprise of roasted walnuts.

Before heading out into the chilly January afternoon, I indulged in a heavenly hot chocolate that proved to be the perfect companion to the cosy surroundings.

"Good food is all the sweeter when shared with good friends" is written on their walls and I couldn't agree more. Do make Daily Kota a part of your itinerary when you find yourself in Kotagiri.

**Address:** Expo Towers, 27/171, Kamaraj Square, Kotagiri, Nilgiris 643217





## Book Some Time Here

Nestled inconspicuously in the heart of Commercial Street, Ooty, **Willy's Coffee Pub** is a hidden gem with a tale as captivating as its culinary offerings. It was founded two decades ago by the visionary Pricilla Gonsalves, whose daughter, Kartiki Gonsalves, earned accolades as the director, co-executive producer, and cinematographer of the 2023 Oscar-winning documentary, "The Elephant Whisperers".

Tucked away on the 2nd floor of a modest building on Walsham Road, Willy's might escape the notice of casual passers-by. However, my commitment to culinary exploration paid off as I stepped into this unpretentious café. My hunger led me to order the toasted cheese chilli and garlic sandwich and a chicken burger, paired harmoniously with a heavenly mug of steaming lemon-ginger-honey water. The wafting aroma of a fresh batch of brownies from the oven proved irresistible, and let me assure you, the added calories were a small price to pay for such indulgence. What intrigued me most during my visit was the discovery of an actual lending

library within Willy's. In an age where such establishments are considered relics, the eclectic selection of books provided a delightful backdrop to my dining experience. Choosing one to peruse, I couldn't help but revel in the nostalgic charm of this literary haven.

Over the course of my meal, I learned that Willy's had recently changed ownership. However, Mr Kumar, the current custodian, has admirably preserved the original menu and the essence of a coffee bar, with a simple menu offering cakes, sandwiches, samosas, cutlets, pizzas, rolls, along with an array of teas and coffees. Some items are even personally baked by him and his wife.

Open between 10am and 9pm every day, Willy's offers you some tranquil time immersed in an enchanting collection of books, accompanied by a wallet-friendly menu of delectable delights.

**Address:** KCR Arcade, Walsham Road, Ooty, Nilgiris

**Contact number:** ☎ +91 98430 66657

# Variety is the spice of life



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**VARIETY HALL OOTY, Main Bazaar, Ooty 643001** ☎ +91 94425 42649



# SHIELF LIFE

*From shoes to shawls, from flowers to fashion, from accessories to art, Inside43 explores what's available in stores across the Nilgiris*

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## Habba Kadal

Tikuli Art wall hanging painted with vibrant colours, depicting facets of rural life. Inspirational and connected to roots. Coasters also available.

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38, Coonoor-Kattabettu-Kotagiri Road, Yedapalli, Yedapalli Hatti, Nilgiris 643103  
 ☎ +91 76038 21537 🌐 [www.habbakadal.in](http://www.habbakadal.in)



## Habba Kadal

Hand-painted decorative kettle reminiscent of the 'Chai ketli' commonly found in Indian dhabas and railway platforms.

₹1,200

38, Coonoor-Kattabettu-Kotagiri Road, Yedapalli, Yedapalli Hatti, Nilgiris 643103  
 ☎ +91 76038 21537 🌐 [www.habbakadal.in](http://www.habbakadal.in)

## Gaia

Beautiful decorative ceramic pots that add a touch of elegance and artistic charm to your home or garden. Size range of the ceramic planters: 8 - 30 inches.

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5/78, Union Church Rd, near Modern Stores, Bedford, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101  
 ☎ +91 93216 46624 🌐 [gaiapottery.net](http://gaiapottery.net)





## Akshaya Tea Industries

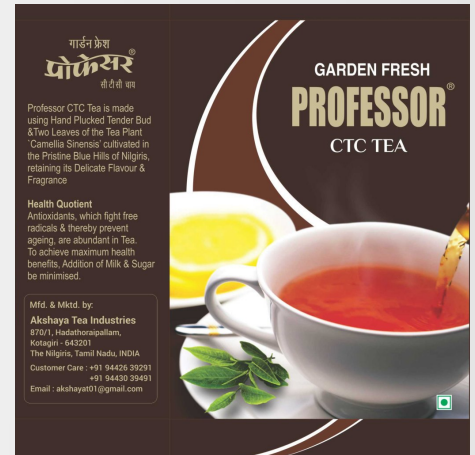
Garden Fresh Professor is pure, high-grown, CTC, Nilgiri tea sourced only from small holdings around the district. Buy some to help keep alive a small tea garden.

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Factory: 870/1 Hadathoraipallam, Naduhatti Village, Kotagiri 643201

Coonoor Office: 89 Gray's Hill, Coonoor 643101

☎ +91 94426 39291 ☎ +91 86109 08689 ✉ akshayat01@gmail.com



## Cherrie Berry

A festive centrepiece that adds a touch of holiday magic to any space, this Poinsettia plant from Cherrie Berry brings warmth and joy to your living spaces.

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141 Highfield Estate, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101

☎ +91 90255 44582 ✉ info@cherrieberry.com 🌐 cherrieberry.com

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141 Highfield Estate, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101

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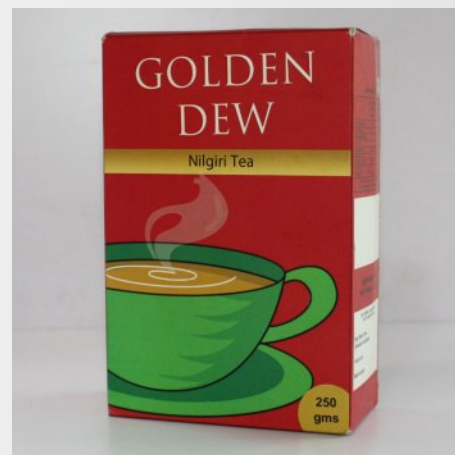
## Golden Dew

Savour the art of tea craftsmanship with Golden Dew Tea's diverse range, delivering a signature taste of the Nilgiris in every cupful.

₹90 for 250gms

49 Rathan Bagh Annexe, Figure of 8 Road, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101

☎ +91 94875 43406 ✉ admin@goldendew.in 🌐 goldendew.in



## Teens World

A unique dress, in a striking shade of pink, that is perfect for those occasions where you want to make a statement.

₹4,599



Upper Coonoor: 34, Grays Hill, Sims Park Road, Bedford, Coonoor 643101 ☎ 0423 223 0302

Lower Coonoor: 16/29 Municipal Market, Coonoor 643102 ☎ 0423 222 2302

## Teknocraft

Illuminate your space with the warm, ambient lighting of Teknocraft's brass lamp. Its lustrous finish exudes an elegant charm, while the classic design complements any interior style.

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77B Figure of 8 Road, Bedford, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101

☎ +91 94886 80306 ✉ teknocraft.cnr@gmail.com 🌐 teknocraft.store



## Everserve

A colourful bouquet of flowers from Everserve is a perfect gift for any occasion - birthdays, anniversaries or parties. Wrapped elegantly or presented in a vase, it can brighten up any space in your home.

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73 Everserve Enclave Sims Park Road , Bedford, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101,  
☎ +91 98438 81800



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₹150 for 250gms

Coonoor Junction, Gray's Hill, Coonoor, Nilgiris 643101  
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# An Organic Experience of Life



As life gets more urban, people, and children especially, have become increasingly disconnected with Mother Nature and the incredible benefits that are her gifts to us.

**Cherrie Berry** and **Springberry Farms** have provided the perfect way to reconnect children (and adults) with the pleasures of working with the life-affirming nature of farm life, and to educate them with a curated, hands-on experience of cultivation: from farm to table.

We provide an inclusive, interactive experience of farm to table, fresh-grown vegetables and fruits to our customers. We bring the best of good agricultural practice and production from our farms and teach children about the process of



organic agriculture in detail. We give everyone a live experience of agriculture, and create awareness about our organically-grown avocados, walnuts, cherries, strawberries and various varieties of fruit to school groups, tourists and other interested parties. Our guided and informative tour is offered at a minimal fee. As an added bonus, we throw in a tasting of our signature avocado ice cream that has been wildly popular with all who have tried it.

So while you visit the better-known tourist attractions, put our farm tour on your list of things to do in the Nilgiris, and discover a world where nature and humans come together in the spirit of learning to create the amazing world we live in.



“

*We bring the best of good agriculture practice and production from our farms and teach children about the process of organic agriculture in detail.*

”



## The tour

- Vermicomposting
- Meet friendly farm animals
- Plant a tree, methods and advice
- Art and methods of farming
- Medicinal plants and their benefits (identification, growing and extraction)
- Polyhouse, farming methods and crops
- Flora and fauna related to agriculture
- Eco-farming
- A look at a homestead (self-sufficient lifestyle by growing a kitchen garden or raising livestock)
- Hydroponics technique of growing plants
- Sprinkler and drip irrigation system
- Manure usage in agriculture
- Life cycle of crops
- Growing of ornamental plants
- Supply chain methods
- Trekking

## The details

- **Duration:** Two-and-a-half to three hours
- **Preferred time of tour:** 10:00 am to 3:30 pm
- **Minimum group number:** 10 people
- **Maximum group number:** 100 people



Open every day. Call  
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# Homeward Bound

*She has been crafting purposeful living through interior design and is known as one of the finest in her field. Inside43 visits Sonal Chordia to find out more about the girl who made the Nilgiris her home, and then made a home for so many others*

Sonal Chordia's creativity knows no bounds; especially when transforming houses into homes. An interior designer with a unique philosophy, she thoroughly enjoys translating the unique personalities of her clients into a tangible outcome. "It's a huge responsibility," she shares with a smile. "To craft something that will be someone's safe space, pride and joy. And, with each project follows a wave of satisfaction and a sense of self-accomplishment – particularly when I notice my clients' smiles as they enter their home."

Sonal's aesthetic sense and attention to detail have captured the attention of Coonoor's residents; along with renowned publications such as The Architects Diary, Elle Décor and Architectural Digest. But much before her professional pursuits came a journey of self-introspection and soul-searching. It was a journey that would help Sonal convert her passion into purpose and inevitably carve a unique identity amongst the many talented inhabitants of the Nilgiris.

## Discovering Her Purpose

About 24 years ago, a young Sonal shifted lock, stock and barrel to the Blue Hills for love. "I fell in love with my husband and decided I could stay

anywhere," she recalls. "My family was slightly hesitant as making the shift from Bangalore to Coonoor was a massive change. But I was determined." Her first few years in the town flew by as she settled into a joint family, managed various household responsibilities and eventually went on to raise her daughter. But it was not enough.

She sorely missed having a purpose – and soon set out to discover it in the form of the Udhavi Centre for Children with Special Needs – Coonoor. "Udhavi became my home and it felt like I had another set of kids who were my own," she says with the quiet enthusiasm that is her hallmark. But in her inimitable way, Sonal went a step further beyond volunteering activities at the Centre. She obtained a B.Ed. in Special Education and began playing a pivotal role in the organisation's sustenance and growth. "Udhavi has grown tremendously over the past few years," she says with pride. "We have recruited more teachers and staff, there is a new playground for children and bigger, brighter classrooms." The Centre also provides nutritious meals for children and facilitates access to physiotherapists, and speech and occupational therapists. But the

essence of the Centre remains the children. "The kids are always happy," says Sonal, her own happiness at this being reflected in her voice. "They constantly communicate in sign language – some of them went on to voluntary institutes, some stayed with the organisation and some passed out to move on to other phases in their lives."

The Centre occupies a special place in her heart and even today, despite her thriving entrepreneurial interiors business, she continues visiting the children once or twice a week to interact with them and ensure her part in their well-being.

## Crafting A New Career

As Sonal found herself with more free time on her hands, she resolved to utilise it both creatively and constructively. A cup of coffee and conversation with friend and mentor, Kailash Sancheti, was the watershed moment. "Navroze Sethna gave me my first project and that's how my foray into interior design began," she reveals. "I had a passion for doing up homes and even enrolled for a one-year course in the subject. Kailash gave me that simple but effective push: to just do it." And thus, *Hohm Design Studio*, Sonal's very own brainchild, was brought to life. Taking



Beach house in Pondicherry

Photo: Shamanth Patil

small steps, she began doing up smaller sections within homes. But it was not too long before she began receiving contracts for houses and had a team supporting her vision.

"Today, we are involved from the very beginning in certain projects – from shell to end," she states. "Sometimes we also get involved in the architectural stages. Each facet of a home is planned meticulously. We have even arranged cutlery for clients who just wanted to shift into their new home with their bags."

Designing and furnishing an 8,500-square-foot house in Pondicherry has been her most mammoth project yet. Her team was tasked with automating the house, designing an indoor pool and home theatre, and if that weren't enough, sourcing distinctive furniture and pieces from Bali. A firm believer in supporting local businesses, Sonal and her core

team employed many of Pondicherry's local vendors. While she works closely with five team members, her studio collaborates with multiple vendors and specialists – from carpenters to polishing heads, to ensure client needs are met.

Her growing team provides the perfect support for the increasing number of projects coming her way. "We normally undertake 7-8 projects annually," she says. Having accumulated ample experience and expertise, Sonal looks forward to selecting meaningful projects, "which will add life and soul to a home – not just furniture," she hopes.

#### Sustainability and Style

Those in the architecture and interior design industry are often at loggerheads with the environment. All too aware of her profession's impact on nature, Sonal walks a fine line between executing her client's vision

and incorporating sustainable elements in her designs. "I always advise my clients to synchronise with nature – especially in a setting like the Nilgiris," she articulates. "With their permission I try, as much as possible, to procure sustainably-sourced materials from traditional and local vendors. At the end of the day though, it is their vision and my responsibility to ensure that they feel right at home." With half-baked trends and modern structures cropping up over the hills, Sonal remains committed to simple and timeless designs – reflecting the timelessness of Coonoor itself. "My primary advice to people everywhere is to keep their vision simple, stay conscious of their surroundings and always opt for timeless aesthetics over modern trends."

Each project brings about a newness for Sonal, who is always



excited to interact with her clients and understand their needs. "There is a lot of psychology involved in understanding their tastes and style," she says thoughtfully. "I ask about their likes, dislikes and family dynamics, amongst other things. While some clients are often confused by my line of questioning, their answers arm me with a lot of clarity." The answers coalesce into a story within Sonal's mind. The moment she walks into a house, it is like a drawing board coming to life, with each detail perfectly fitting into each corner of the house like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

And no home is complete without a little piece of Sonal's heart. "Each house is special in its way and no matter the project, I always leave

behind a piece of my heart in it, at the end of the day." Her clients would agree. Sunita Vedantam, whose house in Ralliah Dam Road Sonal worked on (and which we featured in our launch issue, in December 2023) is just one of the many who cannot say enough good things about Sonal's talent and commitment to turning ideas into beautiful reality.

### The Future

When asked about her future plans, Sonal can't help smiling as she responds. "I am a very live-in-the-moment kind of person. My work gives me tremendous happiness and satisfaction and I am grateful for the love I receive upon completing a project." With a full roster of upcoming and ongoing projects, she plans to continue transforming

houses into homes with her creativity, passion and innovation, in the district, she now loves and cannot imagine leaving.

For Sonal, Nilgiris is home and always will be. She adds to its charm in her own special way, be it through her efforts with Udhavi, her interior business, her sweet smile and gentle ways, and her quiet positivity that can make anyone feel at home in her presence. ■

*Sunita Vedantam and P Shanmugham's home at Ralliah Dam Road was given Sonal's touch. Sunita says, "Sonal managed to turn our dreams into reality, adding her own touch of creativity while sourcing materials and embellishments we wanted."*





# Tale of a Tea Stall







*Appu Kadai was the place to go if you wanted a cup of tea in Bandishola in the years gone by. Sreeram V caught up with the legendary (now retired) tea seller, C T Appu to find out about his life and fabled tea shop that has been serving tea and smiles for the last five decades*

The Nilgiris is special because of its breathtaking beauty, but it is the people who make this part of the world a real wonder, creating stories of warmth and camaraderie that we often need in a life of glaring harshness. And it's not always the easily recognisable that create waves of change in this beautiful district, but those who live quietly, serving love and hospitality without asking for much in return.

You could easily pass by Appu Kadai without noticing that a tea shop even exists there. But this jewel of a place, located in the pristine, forested Bandishola, has warmed the hearts of Coonoorians for a little over five decades.

Talking to Appu throws up a story of a humble business that has created unforgettable memories of hot tea, delicious snacks, and conversation. From college girls to passing tourists, to locals going about their daily life, few people in the area have been left untouched by Appu's brews and gentle presence.

**The entire community of Bandishola recognised Appu Tea Stall as the best of its kind in Coonoor. Please tell us your thoughts on this?**

We had a wonderful run with the business, both in the old location (the old tea stall was located on the nearby highway) and in this new location. We had different crowds. College students, travellers, and people, young and old, used to flock to our place for hot tea, vadas, and bondas. Believe it or not, we have also catered to many marriages and college functions during our time. Notably, we were featured in a travel magazine back in 1985, when we were just setting up shop. Also, a channel named Chad's Opinion made a YouTube video of us around three years back.

**What kind of food was Appu Kadai known for?**

Our teas were very well-known. We initially started selling bondas and vadas but then decided to expand the food category by providing people with sumptuous food options such as

meals, chapattis, porottas, biryanis, appam, idlis, etc. Many people loved our appam. Just a couple of those would fill your tummy. We used quality rice and ingredients, which is why people kept coming back. The editor of your magazine used to eat bowl after bowl of our rasam and rice while she was studying in college.

**All of Coonoor seemed disappointed when you stopped the tea shop to start a tiny retail shop. Why did you make the switch?**

My children, now grown up and doing well with their families, felt that I had worked hard enough and maybe it was time for a little rest. They suggested that I start a small shop instead. So, I've rented out the tea stall and settled myself here in this little corner shop. All my old customers come to me still, for different things, which is nice.

**Do you miss serving your hallmark tea and vadas, after almost 50 years of serving them to your customers?**

We all need adequate rest. My son, Gopi, was working very hard in the tea

stall. After his passing, my children felt (and I agreed) that it was time for some rest. We all need to retire some day, like you would need to as well (he says with a chuckle). My son was also very involved in the shop, doing most of the work, and knew how to make fine dishes. He was a wonderful son, so loving that he'd get us anything the moment we asked. He even bought us a car, which we sold back to the company after his passing.

**You've been a part of Bandishola for quite some time now. How, according to you, has the place changed over the years?**

I find that the number of people has reduced. For example, we had college students flocking for tea back in the day. But today students bring food from home or even leave for home by noon. The culture has changed a lot.

**What, in your opinion, made Appu Kadai the most preferred tea stop for many?**

I always believe that people who consume our food must find it very tasty, to the extent that they want more. For example, many foreigners stopping for a cup of tea ended up having a cup or two more. This can only happen with good tea powders. I generally tasted a few tea powders and offered a mix of the best. Likewise, we used traditional grinding tools for preparing vadas over modern-day machines. Our dal (parippu) vadas had a crispy, yet soft texture. If you had tasted our vigna mungo (ulundhu vada), you would notice a bite of coconut which improves the taste. I'm certain you won't find this anywhere else.

Our food was known for its rich aroma that remains even after you



eat the food. We did not negotiate on hygiene standards and always served healthy, wholesome food. No leftovers were ever served. The food we prepared was either served on the same day or disposed of by the end of the day. But unfortunately, many people today don't follow such practices in pursuit of profit-making. But here's the catch. We made a lot of profits by doing it the right way. How could we not? People wanted more and more of our food. It also has a karmic effect, as now God is keeping us in good health and spirits.

While Appu Kadai has changed hands, his little corner shop is right

next door. He is still present, with his customary warm smile, in the maroon jumper and hat that has been his uniform for as long as most can remember. He will still offer you a cup of tea from the little roadside cafe he once ran, and if you're really lucky, he'll even go in and make you a cup of tea himself, one that will warm your heart for it will be served up with the Appu smile that Bandishola knows and loves. ■

*Appu's tea stall still exists, but under different management. It is known as Annalakshmi Hotel in Big Bandisola. Appu runs the little corner shop right next to it.*



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Akshaya Tea Industries  
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# LOCKING HORNS WITH NATURE



*The Indian Gaur is a commonplace sighting in the Nilgiris these days. Dr Suresh Belliraj gives us a look at how they became so prolific across these hills and the issues surrounding the surge in population of this magnificent creature*



Bison. That's my nickname actually. Earned almost 50 years ago at boarding school, all because there were two of us with the same name who joined that year. So, in good boarding school fashion, one had to get a nickname. If memory serves me right, while trying to select a name, some of my seniors asked me about any animals I had seen on my last holiday and I said, "Bison, while I was crossing Mudumalai."

The name has stuck to me ever since. Many people introduce and know me as Bison and honestly, sometimes, it's how I introduce myself too. I occasionally get asked if I mind being called Bison and I have three stock replies. In no particular order these are: I'm thankful that I didn't get some of the other nicknames my classmates got; Bison sounds majestic, at least. Secondly, there are so many Sureshes floating about around that it's hard to remember which Suresh one is talking about, or to. Bison, however, tends to stick in one's memory. The third stock reply (one, that if Samyuktha, my wife, hears again, she'll probably groan) goes as follows: "Oh, I don't mind being called Bison, but never ever-ever call my wife a cow." Now that this is in print, I will never try to use that joke again.

But enough about my nickname.

### The Population Explosion

This article is really about my majestic namesake in the Nilgiris. *Bos Gaurus* or the Indian Gaur for the scientifically-minded, but universally known to the common person as the Bison. To see a six-and-a-half foot tall animal, weighing up to a 1000 kgs, muscles rippling with untold power, jet black, with pretty white socks,

causally sauntering through any major town in the Nilgiris is truly awe-inspiring. That is the romantic image, and will thrill any tourist and many locals too. For the locals however, after the first flush of excitement comes an immediate question. What's going on and how do we deal with this? Majestic it may be, but almost all locals have a good friend or family member attacked or even killed by a bison. I don't claim these incidents are extremely common. Normally, unless they are startled or anxious because of the presence of newborn calves, bison are fairly docile and tend to mind their own business. They are classified as 'vulnerable' in the IUCN Red List, but of late they seem to be everywhere in the Nilgiris. This tremendous increase in both human and bison population is leading to many more fatal encounters, so where do we go from here?

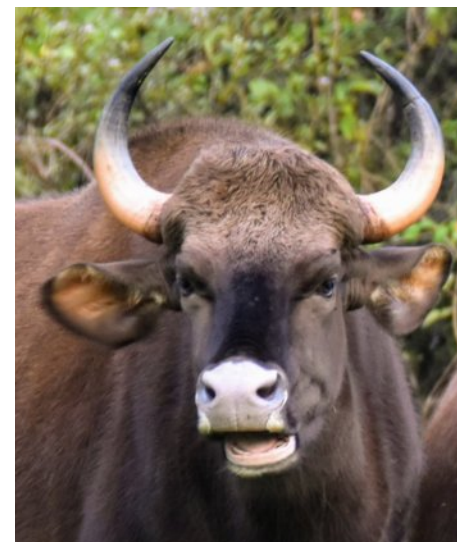
Let's start with the possible causes of the increase in the numbers of bison. Until about ten to fifteen years ago, bison were extremely rare in the upper reaches of the Nilgiris. They tended to mainly live in Mudumalai and the surrounding areas. In fact, the rinderpest outbreak in 1968 had almost wiped out the entire population. Since then, they have made a slow but spectacular comeback and have moved to almost all areas of the Nilgiris. Possible causes for this increase could be the ban on all hunting and the decrease in the population of their natural predator - the tiger. The causes for the spread of the population up the slopes could be the pressure of overpopulation in the national forests, the availability of vegetable cultivation in the peripheries and climate change,

amongst other reasons. This increase has naturally led to an expansion of the population in tea estates and eventually villages and towns. So, are there any possible solutions?

### Possibilities and Probabilities

In order to explore these possible solutions, we need to debunk some very common knee-jerk reactions that blame deforestation and encroachment for this problem. Though this may be true for a lot of other human-animal conflicts, my contention is that this issue in particular does not fall into those categories. Let me state some observations regarding this.

In the past couple of decades, I haven't seen much deforestation in the areas surrounding where I live. Even if this was the case, it would be counter-intuitive as clearings would be more suitable for bison to feed and live and lessen the necessity for them to come closer to areas of human activity. Encroachments also haven't been a major problem in the Nilgiris for a while. I had written the first draft of this article and had circulated it to a few friends for suggestions, when this topic became a flash point in our 'Namma Nilgiris'



“Since then, they have made a slow but spectacular comeback

WhatsApp group, and I have since included some points from those discussions.

So, regarding solutions, one school of thought is to just let it be. The thought process being - it's not a carnivore and the near-fatal or fatal incidents are just part of living with nature. For how long this would be possible before it becomes an everyday issue is debatable. Another possible solution is obviously to create more space for them to roam between forests, through corridors that could be grasslands that they can feed on. This solution would, however, require the procurement of lots of private property and that would also be a long-drawn-out and contentious issue. A third solution is culling, which is an established practice all over the world, but something that I am not at all comfortable suggesting. Sterilisation may be a solution, but frankly I'm not sure if it is even feasible. Domestication was also suggested in the WhatsApp discussions. Historically, bison have been domesticated - called Mithun - but even this has a very long gestation period.

### Moonshot Musing

If solutions are difficult, it would pay to think of something out-of-the-box, even a 'moonshot' idea if you will. In one of the threads of the WhatsApp discussion, Shobana Chandrasekar,

one of our favourite environmental activists, spoke of a massive bison which had, quite literally, settled in the garden of her mother, a doctor, posing a danger when she had to go to the hospital for emergency calls. Janardhan Nanjundan, on the other hand, quipped that it wasn't the problem of the bison in our gardens

involved in the conversion. Mostly, the children of the current labour force are well-educated and neither they, nor their children, are likely to re-enter this labour force. Another added issue is that tea is a dying industry and the reduction in production would eventually help the small growers in the district.



but we being in the bison's garden, and that was the issue. So, let's think about making more gardens for the bison. Afforestation (sholas and grasslands) is something I wholeheartedly support, maybe a solution to, not only, the bison issue, but to a lot of other problems, including the availability of fresh water throughout the year.

Is this possible on a large scale, is a legitimate question. In order to solve a pressing humanitarian problem, huge tracts of forest land were given to Tantea to convert into tea. Reconverting it to forest would be that moonshot idea. No labour needs to be fired - they could be the labour

Not only could bison gradually be relocated there, if done well, the amount of water we could produce, not only for the district, but our neighbouring districts as well, would be phenomenal. What is required is tremendous pressure from local people and phenomenal political willpower.

So my hope is that, in the future, when we see this magnificent expression of nature, it is only awe-inspiring and doesn't bring up mixed feelings that seem to be the current norm. Of course, these are just my thoughts, and I am always open to ideas that offer a win-win for my namesake and my own kind. ■



# 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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# Our Favourite Entrée

*His story is an exceptional one. Sangeetha Shinde spoke with the charming Vikram Malhotra to see what's been cooking over the years of his remarkable life and career and what brought him to these hills*

It's always a treat to have a conversation with Vikram Malhotra. He is cheerful, personable, urbane and has the ability to make the person sitting in front of him feel like the most important person there is. But behind the affable persona lies a keen business intellect that has its roots in Calcutta...

It all began back in 1935, even before he was born, even before the war, when Vikram's grandfather started the first stand-alone restaurant in Calcutta, departing from the usual trend of five-star hotel dining options. It was one of the top three places to eat at, back in the day. This spurred Vikram's father to follow in his footsteps and join the industry as a food entrepreneur, straight out of school. He began with a standard coffee house, and then launched Neera's, the first stand-alone air-conditioned restaurant which attracted an elegant and affluent crowd. Then came Skyroom and Blue Fox which soon became the talk of town. The two establishments took the city by storm - Skyroom had a distinguished drawing-room ambience,

where one could only hear the soft clink of cutlery, and rights of admission were reserved - to exclude anyone whose table manners did not make the grade. Vikram recalls that it was especially popular with the 'ladies who lunched' set. Blue Fox, which started in 1961, was a game-changer as well, in the city's restaurant business. It was a fun place for the young and young-at-heart to hang out. Such was its appeal that it was featured in Newsweek International magazine which called it "the only nightclub this side of the Suez Canal". Blue Fox brought in performers and crooners from the UK, and was the favourite hangout of people like Amitabh Bachchan well before he became the acting legend he is today. But with all the Naxalite trouble that was brewing on the streets of Calcutta at the time, Vikram's father decided to make a radical move and shifted his family to the more peaceful town of Bangalore. "I think I got my vision of possibilities from my father, who saw the potential in Bangalore and decided to start afresh there. I think I've done the

same with Celeste and my move to the Nilgiris," says Vikram, as the sunlight hits the glass-fronted windows of Celeste and reflects off his sunglasses.

“...everywhere the Malhotra name draws a dining crowd with little effort

## Best of Bangalore

Anyone who knows Bangalore knows of Blue Fox, the iconic nightclub and restaurant that was on everyone's go-to list for the weekends and was a raging success for three decades. Vikram grew up with this glitter around him and as he began to find his own feet, he decided to set up a few more places of his own.

"The passion was within me, and while I didn't really cook that much, I discovered that I actually had a talent for it," he says with a smile. He had saved all the recipes of his family dishes from the Calcutta restaurants, especially the prawn cocktails that used to be flown to Indra Gandhi in

Delhi. And so, Vikram launched another five restaurants in Bangalore - China Bowl which had two branches, La Terrazza, Vicky's Place on Church Street (which was reviewed by none other than Jag Suraya, the famous columnist) and Tawa Lounge.

However, for a range of logistical reasons, poor commercial neighbours and the desire to spread his wings more, Vikram decided to get into the restaurant consultancy business, "Strangely enough, my first gig was back in Calcutta, and I went over during the second wave of Covid and spent eight months setting up the place. Calcutta was abuzz, and it was all over social media that one of the Malhotra's had returned," recounts Vikram, the pride evident in his voice. It was part of an old house, and it was called 'The Olde House', but Covid struck and Vikram had to expand the scope of his work. It was at this point he caught up with Dipali Sikand, when he was back in Bangalore, and she told him about MindEscapes, the

think tank she had started in the Nilgiris. Despite many other lucrative offers coming his way to start up a Blue Fox and other restaurant businesses in different parts of the country, Vikram, who had been visiting the Nilgiris for over three

“... while I didn't really cook that much, I discovered that I actually had a talent for it

decades (his late wife being from the district) decided to set down roots in the place that had always felt like home to him. All it took was one visit to Ketti, and MindEscape's vantage spot overlooking the Ketti Valley on a rainy March afternoon, and he knew he could make his culinary magic work in the hills.

#### Business as Unusual

Vikram's late wife, Rupa was a Ms India, and a Wellington girl, so Vikram

was not unfamiliar with the Nilgiris. With Vikram's good looks, they both won the *Made For Each Other* contest that carried with it a prize of a Triumph Convertible. "I came to Ooty four times in that car," says Vikram, his face lighting up at the memory. When he and Dipali discussed his move, he was clear that he wanted to run several food outlets, not just one. And so was borne Celeste. "I have no clue how, post a soft launch, everyone got to know about Celeste and my connection with it. And from February 2021 onwards we were inundated. I am so thankful to God Almighty, and then my family of course, that we have built up the name we have, that everywhere the Malhotra name draws a dining crowd with little effort," says Vikram gratefully. After Celeste, Vikram launched Nirvana, the frontier cuisine Indian restaurant to rave reviews. Xin, the dimsum and bao shop, and Anma, a breakfast place, poised to launch in Coonoor at the time of writing. "I want to take Xin, a



Vikram and his talented team at MindEscapes





QSR (quick service restaurant), all across South India. But I also plan to launch a pan-Asian place with Dipali in Bangalore - we're in discussions about this right now," says the restaurateur, his enthusiasm and excitement clearly palpable about his plans for the future.

### Homing Beacon

Will all this take him away from the Nilgiris? "Yes," says Vikram, "but I will always come back here. This is where I want to be. This is where I will always come home to. I love these hills, and the community that has formed here. It is cosmopolitan and interesting and being here feels right and natural. I look forward to the times I will have here with my daughters, Anisha and Shivani, and my granddaughters, Amara, Shanaya and Mila."

From starting fine dining and QSR outlets to experimenting with his recipes and menus (the Chicken à la Kiev has Vikram's unique and secret signature stamp to it), this elegant and amiable gentleman is the poster child for all that the Nilgiris is. He is creative, gentle, refined, fun-loving with healthy doses of good humour and integrity thrown in for good measure.

In a small district where everyone knows everyone, and as a general rule everyone has something less-than-delectable to say about everyone else, it is rare to meet a newcomer as loved and popular as Vikram Malhotra. Because of all he is, and his helpful generosity that he extends to everyone, we can, with some certainty, say, he is one of the Nilgiris' most well-loved entrées. And as a community we are very glad to have him in our midst. ■

# The Others

## and Us

To others, small towns are peculiar. The air is peculiar. So is the water. And the people. The people are particularly peculiar.

This is all fun and games when you're just visiting a small town. And it's interesting to those of us who live here too. We regard each other with curiosity. You look at us through your rose-coloured aviators, and we at you, squinting against the light bouncing off those aviators. We have seen many like you come and go. People-watching is a serious pastime in small towns.

The balance shifts, ever so slightly, when you come back a second time, and then a third. And then when you explore putting down some roots here, things get serious. We take notice. The short hairs on our nape rise. We put on our glasses so we can get a better look.

This is when we decide if you will turn out to be one of 'The Others' or 'Us'.

Do you talk more than you listen?

Do you constantly refer to how things are 'back home'?

Are you condescending?

Do you attempt to learn one of our languages?

*With the influx of people moving to the Nilgiris, **Shobana Chandrashekar** offers some insight into the minds of those who were born and raised in the district*

Do you import your food?

Do you shop at the local market?

Do you visit the local library?

Do you walk when you can?

Do you call those older than you 'Akka, Anna, Amma, Aiyya?' irrespective of their station in life?

Do you try to solve the small niggling problems of small town life in ways that don't involve just throwing money at them?

Do you respect the traditions and cultures that were here before you arrived, and try to fit in without appropriating them?

Do you have impenetrable high walls?

Do you fear wild things? Or do you give them a wide berth and a nod?

Do you know all your neighbours, and share what you grow?

Have you borrowed some sugar or milk or yogurt culture?

Do you tell all your friends about how valuable the real estate is, and convince them to buy the plot next to yours?

Do you own more than one house, although you don't live here full time?

Yes. We notice all this and more. Hill-billies, village bumpkins, bareback riders in a one-horse town have got people-watching down to an art.

Living happily in a small town is also an art. Blending in without getting lost is an art. Standing out in just the right way is an art.

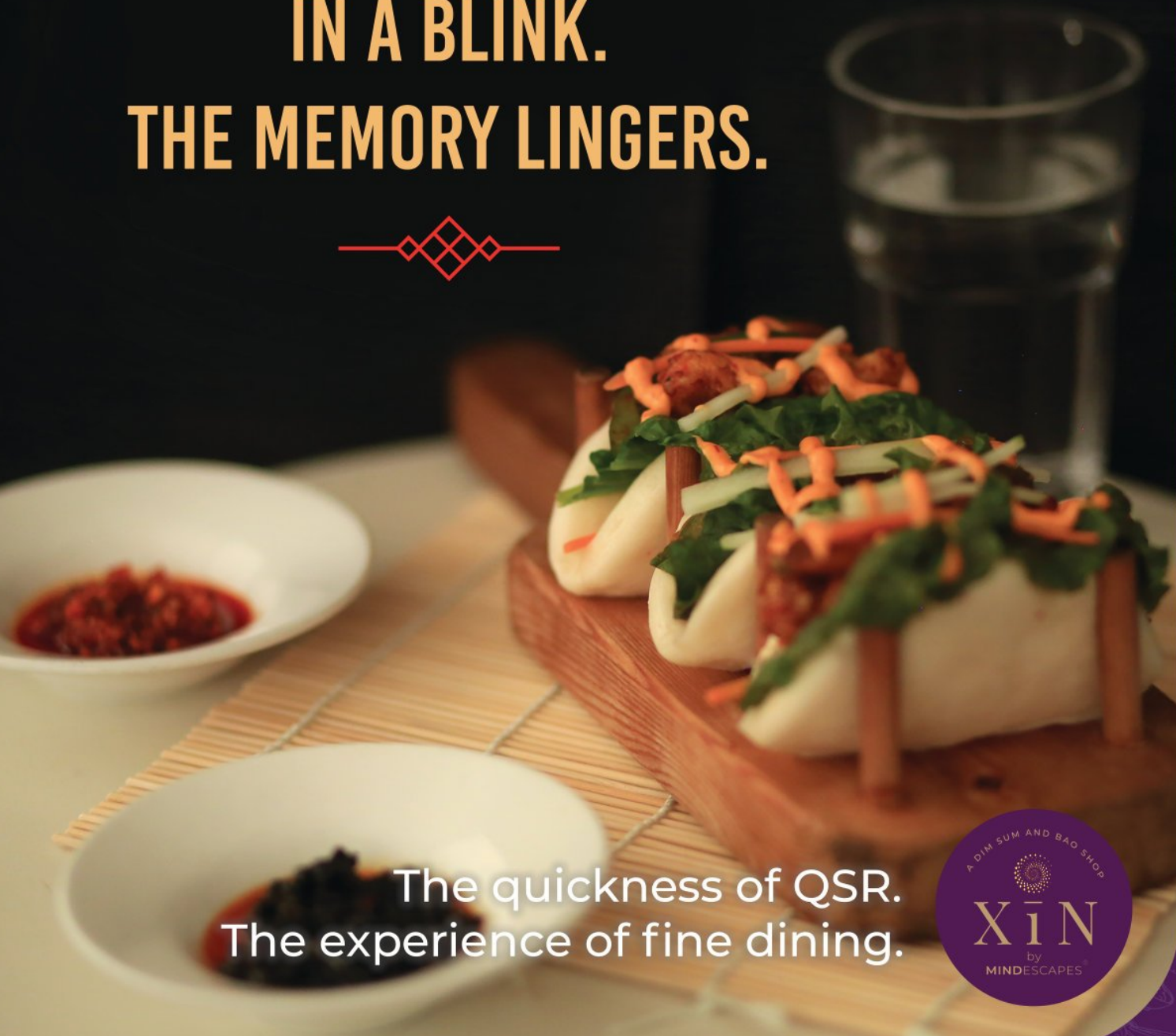
We hope you will be one of us. ■







# THE FOOD COMES IN A BLINK. THE MEMORY LINGERS.



The quickness of QSR.  
The experience of fine dining.



# A CURATED LIFE

If there is any embodiment of George Eliot's prominent phrase, "It's never too late to be what you might have been," it would be Kishore Pasari. A ceramics and pottery enthusiast, he orchestrates the eclectic collection of designer pots and accessories at Gaia Pottery, Coonoor.

Although Kishore's passion for ceramics was shaped during his college days in Bombay, it would be a long wait until the day he founded Gaia Pottery – at the age of 55. But age has little to do with his unparalleled knowledge in ceramics and his prevailing quest to take the path less travelled.

## A Multifaceted Pioneer

"I always enjoyed doing things nobody else did," Kishore answers when asked about his long-standing career. A pioneer in various aspects, he forayed into territories that were relatively unknown and unexplored by people.

He is credited with introducing the fashion of stonewashed jeans in India. From the kind of fabric one should utilise for the jeans to how they should be washed for their signature faded appearance, Kishore's expertise was unmatched. An unfortunate setback in labour shortages forced him to stop his business.

But neither did that hinder his spirit nor his desire to innovate. Much before many Indians, he was well-acquainted with the many benefits of adding millet to our meals. He went

*He brought a world of art to the Nilgiris. Inside43 caught up with Kishore Pasari of Gaia Pottery to get his take on ceramics, art, entrepreneurship and the environment*





on to establish 'Good Food Agro Ventures' with a simple purpose; to provide consumers with tasty, yet healthy, millet-based snacks. Approximately 25 years later, his son continues managing the company, while Kishore ventures forth into a long-cherished dream.

### Moulding Dreams

"When I first wanted to get into the business of ceramics, it was tough," Kishore shares. "There were not many ceramic requirements back then, no factories or infrastructure and importing anything was difficult."

At the age of 55 he decided it was time to finally "check off something" from his bucket list. Thus, Gaia Pottery was born.

"Gaia" is inspired by a Greek Earth goddess of said name; and a reflection of Kishore's unwavering commitment to keeping things natural. Proudly eco-friendly, all products bearing the 'Gaia Pottery' label have been carefully crafted without the usage of plastic or synthetic materials.

While Kishore does not dabble with the artistic side of his business, his keen eye for unique products has taken him across the globe – to secure the best products for his customers. "I take inspiration from the Far East," he adds. "And import from countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, China and Cambodia."

"A garden pot or a ceramic planter will give much more character to your living space than a plastic pot," he states. He's certainly not against mass-produced goods since they satisfy a certain section of the market, however he has striven to ensure a premium quality at affordable prices. While Gaia Pottery's

collections can be spotted in the homes of celebrities such as Jaya Amitabh Bachchan, Waheeda Rehman, Ratna Pathak Shah, Juhi Chawla, Anjali Sachin Tendulkar, Hiroo (Karan Johar's mother), JSW, Reliance Industries, GVK etc, Kishore is nonchalant about his customers' backgrounds.

"Each visitor is important to me," he speaks. "Whether they buy anything or not. We may not know their reasons for not buying something from us immediately – but they have given us their time, for which we must be thankful."

He truly feels that earthen and ceramic pots have been the hallmark and artistic expressions of advanced civilizations like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Even today, each one reflects a past and has a story to tell while it houses a life within. They come to life through skilled hands or a potter's wheel and continue to breathe life even if left forgotten in an unfrequented corner of a mansion. The Mumbai airport has multiple pots from the Gaia fold. They have been there for 18 years and will probably make an archaeological study one day.

"Garden pots are my favourite, because they give character to a space and also because I can make money out of it," he cheekily quips.

### The Coonoor Connection

It's been about 15 years since Gaia Pottery was founded in Bombay. And five years ago, the venture graced Coonoor when Kishore decided to make a second home in the hills. "I like Coonoor simply because of its perennial greenery," he says. He also acknowledged the helpful nature of many Coonoorians – an attribute that is intrinsic to him as well.

❧ A pioneer in various aspects, he forayed into territories that were relatively unknown and unexplored by people

Kishore prefers remaining under the radar when it comes to his social work. "Just because I like to do such things, it does not mean I want any mileage out of that," he firmly states. He is most passionate about lending a hand to underprivileged children. "If an underprivileged child scores high marks, they will receive support. But what about those who earn 35-40 percent? Don't they also deserve help?" he questions.

He is also a passionate advocate for the environment and has been maintaining an anti-plastic stance for the past 40 years. And what better place to seek a more sustainable lifestyle than the Nilgiris?

"For me, it is the scenery, the town's people and the Coonoor Club," Kishore says. As he continues expanding his venture and revelling in the Blue Hills, his mission remains the same.

To give each home some character and develop a sustainable model that will inspire generations to come. ■



# A Man For All Seasons

*More than beautiful homes, he built a life that served as an inspiration for all those who met him. Navroze Sethna remembers the much-loved, late Kaiwaan Patel who left his own unique imprint on the hills in so many different ways*



This was a difficult piece to write. How does one sum up the essence of Kaiwaan Patel's life and his impact on a place and its people in a few words? His understated nature belied the quality and depth of his personality and ethics. He was one of my mentors, but above all, he was my friend. He was my inspiration to become a builder myself.

## **The Builder**

I first met Kaiwaan in 1995, with his father, the elegant and gentle Rusi Patel, in Bombay, at Windcliffe. I was just 17 years old at the time, and the awe I felt for him, and indeed uncle Rusi, that day remains with me. My first impression of him was that he was very approachable as he took the time out to talk to a young teenager who was still wet behind the ears. He spoke with enthusiasm for the project he was planning at Pemberley, a gated community in Bearhatty, just a little beyond Staff College. Those who know the Nilgiris, will know that there are few addresses that compare to this exclusive housing enclave, that overlooks sweeping vistas of Wellington and Aruvankadu. Kaiwaan Patel was the force that made



Pemberley happen, garnering clientele of some distinction from around the world, and building homes of international quality that never once compromised on the ethos of this district. Plans had to be vetted by him, and only then did he go about building, by using the finest of materials, and the most skilled of labour.

He was deeply committed to the investments people made with him, and being a thorough gentleman, like his father before him, he offered quality in construction and integrity in all his dealings. In fact, he is one of the few builders who returned surplus funds to a client after a project had been completed. His company, Nilgiri Herbs, continues to operate based on his values and principles.

### The Man

Kaiwaan never compromised on his ethics. This was evident in all areas of his life, be it the quality of material he used, his elegant, yet no-nonsense demeanour to all he dealt with, and his generosity and kindness to those he worked with. His staff, be they from his company, or those in his household, knew they could count on him if things went awry in their life. They knew that they could depend on him to be a firm, but fair boss. It was these same qualities he instilled in his children; his daughter Meher, and son Tiraan, with whom he shared a close bond. He taught them the value of being courteous at all times and taught them that privilege and, indeed, respect are never demanded, but earned. His friends included people from various walks of life. He could engage in conversation with anyone, be it the Chairperson or CEO of a blue-chip company or the simple

mazdoor at his many project sites. His quiet voice and calm disposition made him a trusted friend to many, whom he never failed to help. It was typical of Kaiwaan to do everything quietly and behind the scenes. It was so very often that he went out of his way to see others get ahead - either through dint of his sound advice or by connecting people in ways that served them well. He never asked anything in return for these privileges he offered, and having faced some adversity himself, he made sure that he lent a leg-up to anyone who needed it.

### The Husband

Kaiwaan saw his wife as his equal. Few marriages will see the friendship, respect and love that Kaiwaan and Binaifer shared. They worked together like a seamless team, wherein they would glance at each other at events in unspoken communion. It was clear to all that they shared a bond not often seen in a world of twisted relationships and broken dreams. They made a striking couple - tall, elegant and a throwback to a time when elegance, humour, and graciousness made the world go round.

### The Friend

When I wanted to get into the construction space, Kaiwaan was one of the two people that I turned to. He was encouraging, supportive and genuinely keen to see me get started in the space in which he was the undisputed king. I still remember the advice he gave me, "Quality pays over all else", which is advice that I have rigorously followed over the years, with my company, United Consultants. Those few but powerful words have served me extremely well.

“It was typical of Kaiwaan to do everything quietly and behind the scenes

In all I do, I try to follow the fine example he set me, as a man and as a businessperson. I will always remember his sense of humour, which employed dry wit with a healthy dose of reality, and his rare smile which could light up the darkest of winter days.

His passing away was a loss that not only I, but the entire Nilgiri community feels. This remarkable man showed class even at his funeral, which apart from perhaps being one of the saddest days of my life, was typically Kaiwaan himself - elegant and classy. It overflowed with people from all walks of life, who came to mourn the loss of one of the finest this district ever has seen.

It was my absolute honour and privilege to have known Kaiwaan. As I conclude writing about this exceptional man who absolutely loved Western Classical music, it seems apt to end with the words from Mozart's Weigenlied, "Schlafe mein freund, schlaf ein", which in English translates to "Sleep my friend, sleep!" ■





# Paradise Regained

*A frequent visitor, and now resident of the Nilgiris tells us the reasons for her long-term love affair with the district*



The Universe always has a divine plan. It has a way of inextricably and karmically taking us back to places that we feel we have always belonged to, over many lifetimes.

So, when I came to the Nilgiri Hills as a young bride for the first time for UPASI, the connection I felt to this paradise was almost familiar and instantaneous.

I felt a rush of adrenalin as we drove to our home on Glendale Estate, ensconced between tea bushes from where, on a clear day, I could look down as far as Mettupalayam. The feeling of being among the most exquisite flora and fauna, inhaling the aroma of tea that wafted over miles and miles of lush greenery, and the sensation of the crisp, cool air on my face was unparalleled. I soon found myself in the midst of the warmth and friendly hospitality of the planters' community that really captured my heart and imparted a sense of belonging. I remember

vividly those magical UPASI evenings at the Ooty Club and the frequent visits to the Wellington Gymkhana Club where my father-in-law played golf regularly. Despite an inevitable absence for a while, I am now back to continue my love affair with the Nilgiris once again.

These past years have seen much growth in the Nilgiris community. People from all over India have realized how special this place is, have settled here, and contributed substantially to it. Today, there are many more amenities available: coffee shops, restaurants, more shopping avenues, better healthcare facilities and multifarious club and organisational activities. Intellectual and cultural activities have seen a definite spurt as well.

Despite all the progress, I feel a tremendous nostalgia! I often reminisce fondly about stopping for provisions at Burliar on the drive up to Coonoor. Many evenings were spent dining at the landmark Ritz Hotel. The only lending library for videos and books was a regular holiday haunt for us. Copper boilers were the only source of bath water in the winter. Fans were unheard of! Power cuts were rampant and the dial-up phones were more decorative than functional, except for the three-minute lightning calls in an emergency!

And who can forget the anticipation of a visit to King Star in Ooty for the best handmade chocolates and taking back to Chennai a large stock of eucalyptus and cinchona oil cans? And then there were days spent walking, horse riding, cycling down estate roads, all the while breathing in the invigorating mountain air.

I smile when I reminisce and write about these beautiful blue hills. They continue to enhance my spiritual energy and provide me with a calming and therapeutic environment in which I can write, sing, heal and evolve in my energy practices.

I will always think of my time in the Nilgiris as a continuum: as old wine in a new bottle, lifetime friendships with bonds that have stood the test of time, and new and unfolding relationships to nurture. And even though life may not be as serene and quiet during 'the season' as borne out by traffic bottlenecks and long queues at the famous Ooty flower show and the Ooty Lake, my little slice of heaven remains. My very own utopia. I am back to reclaim my paradise! ■

*Surekha Kothari is a published author, healer, past-life regressionist and speaker who has made the move to spend more time in the Nilgiris she has known and loved for over four decades*



# 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.



*Habba Kadal, 38, Coonoor-Kattabettu-Kotagiri Road, Yedapalli, Tamil Nadu 643103*

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# INSPIRED CUISINE

C E L E S T E ✨



*Exotic European & Pan-Asian  
Preparations*

*12:00pm to 10:00pm*

N I R V A N A ✨



*Traditional & Progressive  
Flavours of North India*

*12:00pm to 10:00pm*

D I V I N O 🍸



*Elegant Decor & Bespoke  
Infusions*

*Happy Hour from 4:00pm*

E U P H O R I A ✨



*Delicious Confections &  
Pure Indulgence*

*12:00pm to 10:00pm*

## **MindEscapes®, Nilgiris**

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