

inside43

Celebrating the Nilgiris

Autumn 2024

And The Phoenix Sings

A snapshot of the Nilgiris favourite singer

A District Treasure

In conversation with a man who is an institution

Jumping Ahead

Meet one of India's leading equestrian successes

places to eat

| where to shop

| things to learn

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Memories Are Made Of This



I came to the Nilgiris as a young child. I still remember the smell of the pine and eucalyptus as it filled the winter air in Ooty. Driving down towards Masinagudi, to this day, I still inhale that same scent, and it transports me back to those first days in this district. I remember the faces of those who I met as a child - the many who welcomed me, the schools I attended and friends I made. I remember meeting Dr Indra Nambiar and Dr Anusuya, and being bowled over by these two ladies who were decades ahead of their time. I remember Reeba Cherian (pg 22) coming to town as a young bride and melting over her golden voice. I remember going to school with Deena, Neil Jeffrey's (pg 34) mother, and I remember Hiruthi Anna (pg 16), a young and sprightly man, who taught us all to play badminton and kept us unruly youngsters in check.

I remember Phyllis Wright (pg 94) teaching me songs at Sunday School and recently got to meet her wonderful granddaughters. I remember the goldsmith at the Coonoor Market and I remember the shows some of us youngsters put up at the Home for the Aged in Balaclava. I remember my first ride on the winch at Glen Morgan with Sonali Vadera, and soaking up the incredible vista of the Nilgiris that lay spread before me. I recently attended the funeral

of Wesley David, that gentlest of men, who spent hours making potato chips for me and his daughter, Supriya, who was my steadfast childhood companion.

There is no place like the Nilgiris to make memories. Every wonderful conversation with Jehan Manekshaw is a reminder of his iconic grandfather who made everyone feel special, even a scruffy teenage girl like myself. A conversation with Homi Dungheebhoy (pg 56) is a step into a world of long ago... to meet Tara Dewan (pg 90) is catch a glimpse into the future... As old yields to the new, and houses come up where once there were only tea gardens, I am constantly reminded of the incredible intergenerational connections that are to be found in our amazing hills. New friendships take the place of those that are no longer with us, and together we carry forward the torch of community that is the living, breathing spirit of the Nilgiris.

Long may we hold on to this spirit. Because, while other places may rival the Nilgiris for sheer natural beauty, few can hold a candle to the love and friendships that can be found in this town. The Editorial Committee of Inside43 is, perhaps, one of the best examples of the interconnectedness of this place. Where people born here and people who have made it their home, together bring a diverse pool of talents to the table to curate a living history of this incredible district. As we finish a year of operations with this, our 4th Issue, I am so grateful to them and all the wonderful people who gave of their money, talent and energies to bring this community project alive.

Any place is only as good as its people. And here in the Nilgiris, I'm sure you'll agree, we are privileged to have raised and attracted the finest there are. Inside43 is honoured to chronicle the life and times of this wonderful place we are so lucky to call home.

Sangeetha Shinde
Founding Editor



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64



INFORM

Pg 3: Memories Are Made Of This

What's in store in Issue 4 of Inside43 covering the district, its people and its spirit of community

INFLUENCE

Pg 8: Putting the Word Out

The Good Word Education Centre is a helping create a safe and fair space for children with special learning requirements

Pg 12: Compassion When It Counts

Visit the Palliative and Geriatric Care Centre at the Lawley Hospital, Coonoor, recently refurbished thanks to the hard work, dedication and support of The Rotary Club

INFOCUS

Pg 16: A District Treasure

He's such a well-known figure to so many in Coonoor. Meet the soft spoken, but determined, C Hiruthaswamy, who has served the Coonoor Club for close to 70 years

INSPIRED

Pg 22: And The Phoenix Sings

Meet Reeba Cherian, a person who has lent her voice to far more than just music, and risen to find her place under the Nilgiris sun

Pg 26: Of Sight and Sound

Explore a music academy in Kotagiri started by Sateesh Kumar, a visually impaired musician

Pg 30: A Creative Calling

The story of the journey made by five artistic friends who decided to launch a unique creative initiative in our hills

INHALE

Pg 34: Jumping Ahead

About Neil Kendall, from the village of Kothiben, and his incredible prowess in the equestrian field

INSCRIBE

Pg 38: Celebrating the End

Ishani Dutt Sarkar tells us why winding up the hill road can drive home some poignant lessons in the art of life. And how to live it right up to the very end

Pg 40: Let the Mountains Speak

Surekha Kothari tells us of the lessons to be learned from the majesty and stillness of the hills

Pg 54: The Homecoming

Vijaya Dar reflects on how our little home town has been affected by the rapid changes in the world

Pg 68: Modern Talking

Apsara Reddy beautifully describes why Moddy's, and others like it, have become the heartbeat of our local communities

82



CHERRIE BERRY FARM TO TABLE

KALE & AVOCADO SALAD



Kale, Black Dates, Avocado, Toasted Cashew, Pepper & Honey Mustard Dressing

12:00 PM - 9:30 PM

SIGNATURE CRUNCHY AVOCADO ROLL



Tanuki, Avocado, Japanese Mayo, Chilli Garlic

12:00 PM - 9:30 PM

MELONY VIRGIN WHITE SANGRIA



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12:00 PM - 9:30 PM



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INCREDIBLE

Pg 42: Star Light, Star Bright

Few things are as beautiful as the Nilgiris night sky, captured by astro-photographer, Arjun Cheyyur

INTIME

Pg 56: Two Centuries of Service

From a shop that opened almost two hundred years ago, in Ooty, until today, the Parsi community has contributed to this district in the most remarkable way

INHABIT

Pg 64: The Five Felines

After telling the story of the Wild Dogs, we now take look at the felines that live in our forests, and sometimes closer...



INCONVERSATION

Pg 70: Bird Call

With the effervescent Jennifer Nandi, who recently launched her first book, to talk about her early years in the Nilgiris

INDULGE

Pg 72: In Good Taste

A round-up of some of the best eating establishments that add flavour and flair to the Blue Hills

INSTORE

Pg 76: Shelf Life

From sarees to ceramics, from figurines to fashion, from tea to tableware, see what's available across the Nilgiris

INFUSE

Pg 82: A Perfect Combination

Take a tour around a place that allows you to sample the Nilgiris renowned tea and chocolate

INDOORS

Pg 86: Homestay Magic

If you're looking for the perfect holiday in the Nilgiris, Fairytale Cottage in Coonoor offers you the best of all worlds

INCOMING

Pg 90: Horse Sense

A little out of Ooty stand some beautiful stables and paddocks that are home to a set of magnificent show horses

INMEMORIAM

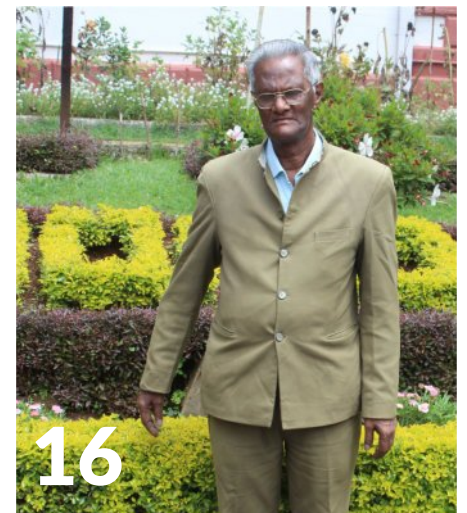
Pg 94: 'Wright'ly Said

Recalling a couple who embodied the spirit of the Nilgiris; the elegant Phyllis and Charles Wright whose legacy can never be forgotten

INSIGHT

Pg 96: Now and Then

A short look at life over the decades, seen through the eyes of one of the Nilgiris' earliest national figures. A word from the Onida devil himself...



Putting the Word Out



*The Good Word Education Centre is helping create a safe and fair space for children with special learning requirements. **Ayesha Mitra** talks to **Christine Morris** who has set up a training facility that trains the trainer as well as students*

"Child is father of the man." Wordsworth said it well, for the future undoubtedly lies with children of today. Each new generation seems to be smarter than the last, and as they grow and evolve, they change the world, hopefully for the better. However, change will not be possible without the foundation of a solid education that is needed to influence societies of the future. Every day, everywhere in the world, children are left behind in education systems, their

natural abilities curtailed, simply because of systems that fail to deliver to individual needs. One size does not fit all, as we know. These children are seen as 'not good enough', courtesy the social stigmas associated with the inability to keep pace with others in the classroom. More often than not, learning difficulties go unrecognised, and are often penalised, and many a child goes through life believing that they are not as smart as their peers. And this is

where the Good Word Education Centre (GWEC) steps in to change lives.

About the initiative

The Principal of the GWEC, Christine Morris, founded the centre during the time of the coronavirus pandemic, and its philosophy is to help "improve the quality of education and care for children with special educational needs." This primarily is for those children in mainstream schools, whose needs are not easily seen due

to the vast number of students. Christine began her journey by visiting schools to train teachers but soon realised it would be more feasible for them to come to her, which was when the idea of having a centre to train these teachers solidified. This would allow the GWEC to train several people simultaneously and efficiently. Today, the GWEC provides five training courses for teachers, one of which is taught in both English and Tamil. Two courses, the 'Diploma in Teaching Phonics' and the 'Diploma in Teaching and Learning', are taught for mainstream teachers, while the other three are tailored for teachers who want to specialise in special needs education practices.

The Good Word Education Centre wants to raise awareness about special needs cases through teachers, coaching them to impart learning in ways that allow children with specific needs to learn alongside their classmates. The teachers who take these courses are recognised by Bharathiar University after they are assessed and deemed ready to implement their special education methods in the field. There are both online and offline courses available for aspiring teachers, and the training can take from six months to a year depending on the course chosen.

The GWEC also arranges on-site tuition, so it is not rare to see children coming and going from the office for special classes. Alongside this, they have 'Griha Shiksha', a home-schooling curriculum for parents who would prefer to teach their children themselves. When this is applied, someone is sent over to the child's house every three months to assess their progress.

A Dream Begins

Christine Morris used to work in the UK and always wanted to be a teacher. She worked in Hebron School from 1992 onwards, and was appointed as the Special Needs coordinator in 1996. Soon after, students began to apply to Hebron as it was one of the only schools that had a Special Needs department. Christine began her venture by teaching children who had learning disabilities like dyslexia, and then began sharing her knowledge. She began to train other teachers how to identify and help students with such disabilities, soon realising that there was only so much she could do by travelling extensively to teach these students. She refocused her efforts and began to train teachers to help more children, allowing students who had not been identified with learning issues to have an easier time in the classroom.

Since there was always a social stigma surrounding Special Education, children were unable to receive proper help, and parents often had to leave their jobs to move to places where their children could get the required help. Christine was determined to prevent such cases from continuing, and despite the fact that there were very few openings in 2006 for special education teachers, she felt this was the job she was called to do. She believed she was better employed teaching children who have hidden disabilities and physical challenges, focusing on helping these students live normal lives. From 2009 to 2019, Christine worked in Delhi under an organisation known as Good Word Trust before getting involved with a University in



Shillong, and once that partnership ended, she joined hands with Bharathiar University to set up her own Good Word Education Centre.

A Dream Achieved

Christine Morris has lived in Ooty for several years, having worked in Hebron for fourteen of those years, since 1992. When the time came to create an abode for the GWEC, however, she couldn't find any property to place the office in Ooty, and so started her business out of a room in King's Kids School, Coonoor. That said, once GWEC got involved with the University, they needed to have a library, a teaching room, catering, and other specifics to be a recognised organisation, and so they found a beautiful place just below the Coonoor Post Office, one that provided not only the amenities needed for everyday functioning, but also a scenic view and an environment perfect for learning.

The teaching room sees visits from students from local schools, whereas students from mainstream schools have been sent tutors who teach within the institutes. Sometimes these tutors take students out of

class for special sessions that deal with teaching styles tailored to their needs. Currently, the GWEC actively works with four schools in the Nilgiris, Stanes School, St. Hilda's Girls and Boys schools, and Blue Mountain School, sending trained professionals to teach the students.

Uphill and Upwards

Of course, every enterprise is met with challenges, and to accomplish great feats, one must face them head-on. Christine claims that the most challenging thing about working in Special Education is convincing parents that their children have a disability. This, of course, is thanks to the social stigma that make life very tough for parents and children alike, especially when we consider minority groups in society. In addition, she faces a lack of educators in Special Needs, stating that, "If it (an offer to train teachers) never goes past the Principal's desk, teachers never get to know." This leads to negative impacts on the lives of students, naturally. The lack of teachers, in general, is an

issue, but more so is the lack of men in this field. Social norms being what they are, more women work in GWEC, than men. Christine firmly believes that having more men involved in this form of teaching would not only improve the learning experience of undiagnosed students in mainstream subjects, but it would also show young boys that they have several options awaiting them in the future, enabling them to have a more open mindset.

Light Amidst Darkness

Despite the many challenges, there are joys to be found in this line of work. Christine says that she greatly enjoys interacting with teachers. When she sees their growth, and their ability to help students as needed, it reaffirms her passion for this cause. Of course, the growth of the children is heart-warming as well. Seeing a student who has been helped by GWEC moving on in life thanks to the centre's teachings, being able to learn independently and climbing up the ladder of life provides a joy

incomparable to any other. There's a "thrill of seeing them (children) achieve" and no longer having to be punished for their disabilities. For Christine, there is an undiluted joy in seeing students she works with actually beginning to enjoy going to school.

A Song To Sing

The Good Word Education Centre is a small organisation, with hopes of reaching great heights. Their purpose is to help children who have been identified as special needs cases, and give them the necessary help to succeed in this game of life. GWEC is more than just another charity, and genuinely wishes to give students with hidden, as well as physical disadvantages, a crack at a more level playing field. It seeks to offer help and holistic support to improve the lives of children with special needs, and by doing so, making the world a kinder place for all. ■

*To support Christine and the work of the GWEC, please contact 91503 89513
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COMPASSION WHEN IT COUNTS

Inside43 had the incredible opportunity to visit the Palliative and Geriatric Care Centre at the Lawley Hospital, Coonoor, recently refurbished to international standards thanks to the hard work, dedication and support of The Rotary Club of the Nilgiris, and a host of generous benefactors. No article or imagery can do justice to this place, but we shall try...



Nagaratnamma lived her whole life in poverty. Towards the end of her days she battled cancer, the pain and discomfort was significant, and she had little support during this time. However, her story had a happier ending than most. She found her way to 'Karunai Maiyam' the Palliative and Geriatric Care facility, and there she ended her days with the love and care she had so lacked her entire life, and she passed away in the company of a dedicated, compassionate team of volunteers and support staff.

The Lawley Hospital in Coonoor has seen much community effort put into it in recent years. From building upgrades, to dialysis facilities, ambulance services, and most recently, Karunai Maiyam. Earlier known as the 'Stone House' and built circa 1935 on Vannarpet Road in Coonoor, it has catered to the medical needs of generations of locals, but unfortunately, the government hospital was cast aside over a decade ago, due to severe landslide risk around its immediate area. Left uninhabited, the building deteriorated rapidly, soon becoming dilapidated and run down with disuse. The Special Area Development Projects (SADP) team began to work on the land surrounding Lawley Hospital some years ago, and erected a durable and solid retaining wall ensuring the building's safety. While this was a good thing to have done, the building itself was still unusable.

Stepping Up

That is where the Rotary Club of the Nilgiris stepped in. The Coonoor chapter took note of the state of this once-beautiful structure and undertook to revive this important and beautiful heritage building. Their

aim was to re-open the hospital and turn it into what it once was – a significant asset in the healthcare offerings to the people in the Nilgiris. After several deliberations and reviews, the District Collector graciously permitted the renewal of Lawley Hospital and sanctioned the Rotary's proposal to build a Palliative and Geriatric Care Centre in the Stone House complex. It was a heavy responsibility, but the Club was determined to build a model facility - modern, aesthetic and practical.

The renovation of Lawley Hospital was considered the main, and most progressive project of the Nilgiris Rotary Club. The project was quick to garner support but given the scale of the undertaking, unsurprisingly, the renovations took a long time, considering the project involved intense research into the nuances and specifics of palliative and geriatric care. The Nilgiris Rotary conducted in-depth discussions with leaders in the field of palliative and geriatric care, even visiting other centres that had already been opened.

Smriti Rana from Masinagudi was one of the key experts who offered consultancy. She has been operating in this sphere for many years, through Pallium India, one of the pioneering palliative care organisations in the country that provides technical support nationwide. Smriti has contributed considerably towards enhancing access to pain medicines in Global South countries. Within India, her organisation works to improve services delivery, build capacity, and advocates for better policies and legislation. She summed up the importance of integrating palliative care at the community healthcare level, stating "The greatest myth about palliative care is that it is for terminally ill patients or that it is interchangeable with geriatrics. This deters a vast majority of those who would benefit from accessing these services. It is poorly understood even within the medical fraternity. Palliative care can help not just patients but also their families, who experience a wide range of conditions. It is cost-effective and improves quality of life. And when it happens the way it has in





Coonoor - where members of the community have taken the ownership to participate in its setting up and delivery - it is the best model of care."

The Rotary Club is thankful to her, Dr Balaji from PSG Hospital and Dr Suresh from the Institute of Palliative Medicine, Calicut, for their help and advice in getting this project off the ground.

Plan of Action

Soon, a detailed plan was constructed. The design of the Centre was created through a holistic approach, and emphasis was placed on every aspect of the equipment and treatment that palliative and geriatric care demands. Several points were brought up in discussion, and the design plan looked at providing not just medical and physical help to patients, but also catering to the psychological, physiological, and spiritual needs of those using the Centre. Alongside this, plans and provisions were introduced in order to make the hospital more handicap friendly.

The careful forethought and planning worked; the Centre has now turned into one of Coonoor's most

iconic structures. Renovated with great attention to detail, it now has a beautiful, aesthetic exterior design with well-planned gardens, and an exquisite fountain providing the positive effects of water therapy. Inside, the Centre has built-in oxygen pipes and suction facilities at every bed and treatment point. In addition, it contains a modern treatment room, a fully equipped special care ward complete with all necessary medical equipment to treat critically ill

patients, and a physiotherapy centre with state-of-the-art equipment.

When it comes to the comfort of its residents, as well, the Centre has not pulled any punches. The Palliative and Geriatric Care Centre prides itself on a well-equipped recreation room and pantry, along with sturdy and hygienic hospital furniture. The Centre also boasts privacy for each patient who is admitted to the hospital, and provides comfortable facilities to each attendant on duty. An elevator has been built to provide easy movement between floors and disability-friendly toilets with both hot and cold water have been installed. Patients and staff will also never have to worry about electricity, as the Centre houses a powerful standby generator that ensures uninterrupted power across the facility. A stage has also been erected on the grounds, dedicated to hosting small events and entertainment sessions for the patients.

People for People

The Rotary Club of the Nilgiris has



carried out this partnership using the PPP (Public, Private, Partnership) method, and has gathered the help of corporations to fund the maintenance of Lawley Hospital. Generous support from corporations



under the CSR umbrella as well as other gracious individuals who personally donated to the project funded the renovation budget of Rs 2 crore. The much-needed support provided by these donors was a singular display of the strength of a community coming together, and was underlined by the positive involvement of the Government to bridge the gap in consideration of public amenities.

The Rotary Club of the Nilgiris could not have completed the reconstruction and renovation of Lawley Hospital all on its own, and it acknowledges its appreciation to all those who helped in their journey to complete this wonderful project. Much gratitude is due to Rotarian Matthew Jacob of Pristine Construction and his excellent team of civil engineering staff and tradesmen who left no stone unturned to physically create this wonderful facility. Raunak Jain and his team of gardeners from Gyan Landscapes need special mention for creating the most relaxing ambience through their landscaping of the complex. Rotarian Nithya Ashish was a major contributor to the extensive market research for procurement of special equipment and value addition to the complex.

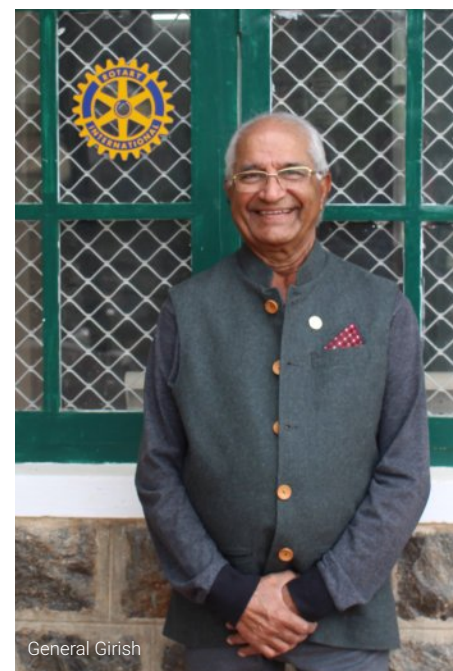
But none of them could have done any of what they did, without the leadership and perseverance of General (Retd) Girish, who brought military precision to the project. Ask anyone, and they will tell you his unflagging and unwavering commitment to the project, was what brought all the loose ends together to create the incredible facility we see today. He worked tirelessly day and night, ensuring that deadlines and goals were met. From choosing soothing colours, to instituting a meditation pavilion, to speaking with donors, to ensuring every last detail was comprehensively looked into, his untiring efforts and formidable organisational and leadership skills, were brought to bear on this project. The results speak for themselves.

The inauguration of Lawley Hospital's Palliative and Geriatric Care Centre was held on the 8th of February in 2024. The Chief Guest for the occasion was the Honourable MA Subramanian, Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu. Joining him as Guests of Honour were Mr Gagandeep Singh Bedi, IAS, Secretary, Health and Family Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu and Rotarian Suresh Babu, the current Governor of Rotary District 3203.

Mention must be made of the inspirational commitment of the current CMO of the hospital, Dr Ramesh, and the team of hard working, caring and committed nursing staff and housekeeping staff. Thanks to them, the Centre is now an oasis of comfort, care and professional excellence in the District and internationally.

The Nilgiris has always seen a community that cares. The Palliative and Geriatric Care facility in Coonoor Lawley Hospital is testament to the fact that when a community comes together incredible things happen.

If Nagaratnamma were around, she would agree. ■



General Girish



A District Treasure

*He is such a well-known figure to so many in Coonoor. **Ayaan Aziz** describes the life of the soft spoken, yet determined, C Hiruthaswamy, who has served the Coonoor Club for close to 70 years*

“Old-timers at the Club recall Hiruthi’s elegance on the court, as he played, something few were able to emulate despite their best efforts.

Three score and ten years ago, a nine-year-old boy in Coonoor started to work, to help support his family that had fallen on hard times. He came to the Coonoor Club along with four other young lads and they were hired as ball boys for the four clay tennis courts of the Club. Little did this nine-year-old boy know that his association with the Club would last a lifetime. In less than a century, ‘Hiruthi’ as he was called then, became ‘Hiruthi anna’ or ‘Hiruthi uncle’ as we know him today. On the eighth of June, 1954, Hiruthi officially registered as C Hiruthaswamy, joined the Coonoor Club and has since been a daily fixture in the Club for three generations of members. He has seen the transformation of the Coonoor Club and the Nilgiris over these years in a post-Independence India.

Another Time

Hiruthi was born in Coonoor in 1944. His first job at the club earned him a salary of about rupees eight. When he

became a little older it increased to rupees twelve with rupees three as an allowance. Those were very different times indeed! Coonoor was a sleepy little town with a small population. Nights were dark and cold. Houses were far apart. The Club offered the community a sense of togetherness and warmth generated by the Club’s fireplaces, and of course, a drink. When Hiruthi joined the Club, there were about a hundred and fifty members who were mostly British.

The culture of the Club retained its English ethos for a number of years after Independence. The members used to participate in a Scottish dance every Wednesday and Saturday. For Hiruthi, Ball Room Dance days were bonus days. The charm and courtesy of these young boys would earn them a rupee each for wishing members good night after the Ball. And a single rupee, back then, went a long way in making ends meet for Hiruthi.

Unsurprisingly, Hiruthi's good nature earned him the trust of the members and he was assigned to run errands for the office even as he continued to fetch balls on the tennis courts. He did this until he was fifteen; it undoubtedly built up the stamina that served him well in his later days as a sportsman of the most graceful ability.

Soon the demand for a badminton court took root in the club. The ballroom doubled up as a badminton court. Under the watchful eyes of Mr PC Varkey, his two daughters, along with two ball boys, started playing badminton regularly at the Club. And so it was that fifteen-year-old Hiruthi held a badminton racket in his hands for the first time. He displayed an unusual aptitude for the game and excelled in the sport, setting standards for years to come. He became so good that he became the Club's badminton marker.

At seventeen he was already everyone's go-to as a badminton coach of some ability. Old-timers at the Club recall Hiruthi's elegance on the court as he played, something few were able to emulate despite their best efforts.

Some of the best badminton players in the Coonoor Club were, at some point of time, coached by Hiruthi anna. Surprisingly, Hiruthi always played badminton in his iconic khaki bundgalla blazer. He could manage most players without breaking a sweat. Getting him to remove the blazer while playing was considered an achievement. It meant that he was being given a tough match. Such occasions were rare, however, as only a few could match his skills.

Unusual Challenges

Unfortunately for Hiruthi, his younger brother passed away leaving two boys. He took the two nephews into his care, providing for their upbringing and becoming a father to them. But soon after, yet another tragedy struck, where he lost his brother-in-law, leaving his sister a widow, and her five children without a father. Hiruthi was now supporting eight people, and for Hiruthi, this became his life's mission. He became a father figure at a young age and consequently, he never married. For him though, the love and affection of the children he was raising was enough, and earned him the title of uncle.

“ Little did this nine-year-old boy know that his association with the Club would last a lifetime

For all the children coming to the Club he was Hiruthi uncle. His kind demeanour and affection for children made him a friend to all these youngsters. Many of these children are now grown up with children of their own. Many of them will say, with much feeling, that the only constant over the three generations has been Hiruthi, who has now graduated from uncle to 'anna'.

Hiruthi left school after fifth grade. While at school he was initiated in to the alphabet and numbers, but it was EB Jones (an Englishman who lived down the road from the Club), who

taught him English. Back then, the Club owned the property all the way to Sims Park. EB Jones knew Hiruthi as a little boy, even before he joined the Club. It was this conscientious gentleman who took on the task of teaching English and reading to these five new ball boy recruits. Hiruthi remembers that while EB Jones was a very kind man, he was very strict as a teacher.

Of the four boys who joined the Club along with Hiruthi, one of them was named Cruz. He used to play badminton too. He grew up to become a tennis marker and joined the Bangalore Club. The other three boys left the Club and took up other jobs elsewhere. Hiruthi, however, hung on.

Another Place

Walking from his house above the Salvation Army Guest House to the Club and back, even in the middle of the night, was never a problem in Hiruthi's younger days. But things change with time, and around the 1980s, the police started questioning him for walking late at night as he returned from work, suspecting him of being a robber. It was then that he requested the Club for a cottage on the grounds. He got one allotted, and continues to live there to this day.

By this time, Hiruthi was doing additional work in the office, delivering bills and mail to the members. Walking from home to home helped him develop a special relationship with every member of the Club. Through all this, he continued his duties as a ball boy and ran extra errands for the office. As time went by, Hiruthi took up different jobs in the Club, except for the bar where he never agreed to work. Hiruthi's good



nature, trustworthiness and affable manner finally earned him a valuable position in the office. He continues to do that job to this day, and he is now the acknowledged 'grand old man' of the Club, an institution in himself.

Everyone's Uncle

A few years ago Hiruthi was diagnosed with a medical condition that required surgery. The members of the Club came together and stood behind him to go through the surgery and treatment. This kind of culture where Club members come together when needed owes much to people like Hiruthi who have helped nurture the spirit of kinship and community in Coonoor. He has stayed a constant presence, often parenting members' children, while the parents were busy. Some members (who wish to remain

unnamed) say they were more afraid of Hiruthi's displeasure if they misbehaved, and his firm and guiding hand has raised at least two generations of Coonoor's children. One of the members sadly remarked that there was a time when "he called us by our first names, but today calls us ma'am or sir, and this hurts. We can only think of him as the uncle that taught us to play, and taught us how to behave ourselves in the club and outside of it."

Ayaan Remembers

"I first met Hiruthi anna when I was ten years old. He always had (and still has) candies in his pockets for children. I learnt to play badminton from him. My commitment to the game and sharp focus was inculcated in me, by him. Even now, at

his advanced age, and with his health problems, he plays with a grace, skill and complete understanding of the game that most of us can only dream of having."

Little did the nine-year-old boy realise that he would shape the lives and memories of three generations of the district's residents. His familiar face, quiet voice and genteel demeanour are a steady lighthouse in a world that is changing rapidly in these mountains. And a single article is not enough to sum up the profound impact he has had on the lives of so many, and it is certainly not enough to give thanks to a man who has dedicated the bulk of his life in quiet service to an entire community, seeking little for himself. Hiruthi Anna, we salute you! ■



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And The Phoenix Sings

Her rich, husky voice has reverberated across the district for decades. Sangeetha Shinde catches up with Reeba Cherian to discover a person who has lent her voice to far more than just music, and risen to find her place under the Nilgiris sun...

If you go to a wedding and there's music there, as there inevitably is in a place like the Nilgiris, it will not be unusual to find the guests clamouring for Reeba Cherian to take the stage. And when she does, that's when the party really begins, for she has everyone on their feet, dancing, clapping and singing along as her vibrant energy and voice fills the room. For most of those who grew up in the Nilgiris in the 80s, Reeba is the voice of their childhood. When she

sings, to this day, it takes them back to a time when the district was a small, sleepy town, where everyone knew each other, and where community was everything. But Reeba's life did not begin in Coonoor. It just feels that way, because she has blended so beautifully into the warp and weft of life in our hills, and, for most of us, she's a child of the district, a daughter of these mountains, as much as anyone born or raised here.

The Early Days

Reeba was born in Singapore. Her father moved there from Kerala after his BA, seeking better opportunities, but, unfortunately, had to go into hiding because of the Japanese war. After the war, he joined the Singapore Police Force working his way up to become Commissioner of Police. He trained in Scotland Yard and was the first Asian to pass with distinction and received the Queen's Baton of Honour. He was present at the late

Queen's coronation, and then returned to Singapore. Her mother was, in her own words, "Loving, very hospitable and super efficient". And while they all lived in the palatial bungalow that came with her father's job, Reeba and her sister would often sleep on the floor, as her parents opened up their home to the many Indians who came to the country looking for a job. Her mother maintained an open door and there was always food to share with those who needed it. Reeba's mother loved music, but did not sing herself. She, however, encouraged Reeba to pursue her love for music and sports. She was a fine seamstress and was actively involved in theatre in Singapore.

Reeba admits that despite a loving home, she suffered a great deal in Singapore because of colour discrimination. The Chinese students would refer to her as 'black pig' or 'dirty pig', and looking back now she wonders how the teachers allowed that to happen.

School And Beyond

Reeba's father retired to Kulasekharam in Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, a significant rubber plantation belt in the country. This was also home to a large section of Reeba's maternal family. While most of her cousins and peers were sent to Bishop Cotton's in Bangalore, or to Montfort in Yercaud and Nazareth's in Ooty, Reeba's parents put her into St Joseph's Convent in Nagercoil, Kanyakumari, which was run by Belgian nuns. Here, in an Indian school, surrounded by her own kind, she instantly felt more at ease and accepted. But she also stood out from others as her clothes and demeanour were different, having

grown up in a foreign country. She learned the piano for eleven years and the violin for eight years, and performed at school concerts, and Rotary, Lions and Salvation Army functions. While she never understood why she was sent to Nagercoil, today, she is grateful for it. "I learned so much during the nine years I spent there," she says with a smile in her voice.

"I was quite lonely in Kulasekharam and would wait for my cousins to come home and live vicariously through them, as they regaled me with stories of the lives they had in their respective schools." It was the loneliness that made her an avid reader, a guitarist and a singer.

“My unrealised music dreams made me reach out and create a generous space for other singers to perform and thrive

Her brother Roy, 15 years older than her, was a gifted musician, a singer, violinist and guitarist. He formed his own band, the Hydro-Carbons, in Bangalore, and they were the first band to perform on Radio Ceylon. He was a powerful force in her life, teaching her to sing when she came home for holidays. Her sister, Reena, who was seven and a half years older than her, was also a pianist, a trained Indian classical singer, a Bharatnatyam dancer and a gifted

painter. Reeba's father not only sang, but was proficient in playing the accordion, harmonium, organ, piano and mouth organ. He was also a fine ballroom dancer and would often be invited to dance with the ladies at the Officer's Mess in Singapore. Reeba loved teaching him the latest dances she had learnt at college, and they spent many evenings, on her holidays, dancing together. They often played the piano duet, Heart And Soul, one of Reeba's favourite memories of her younger days with her father. And so it was, in this incredibly gifted family of musicians and performers that Reeba grew up, listening to rhymes, hymns and the pop bands of the 50s, 60s and 70s. It was in this environment of listening to records, writing down lyrics and practising over and over, that she self-trained her voice naturally, one that has enthralled listeners for so many years now.

College And Beyond

After her schooling, Reeba went to Chennai (then Madras) and did her PU in Psychology, from SIET College. Her dream was to become a doctor. But her family felt that it entailed too long a period of study. Her next desire was to be a psychologist. But when the college asked for a donation of Rs 2000 to enrol her into the degree course in psychology, her father, ever-principled, refused to engage in this form of racketeering, and so instead, she joined CMS College, Kottayam, to study English Literature. For Reeba, this was a huge let down, as becoming a doctor or a psychologist was a precious and cherished dream. But she says, with her usual good cheer, "I guess God had other plans for me," and now looks back on her

time in Kottayam as one of the happiest of her life. Disappointment aside, she passed out as a gold medallist from the college.

Other opportunities opened up during her time there. The lead singer and founder of the band "Violet Hazes" recognised her powerful talent and invited her to become their crooner. Together, they sang at college functions, charity events, weddings and Christmas and New Year celebrations. In her last year at university, she auditioned with the band for a Malayalam movie, Chamaram, that was shot in her college, and that went on to become a mega hit. Every weekend she travelled from Kottayam to Thiruvalla, to sing with the famous Thiruvalla Youth Chorus, founded by her uncle. This choir of 100 voices kick-started her journey with gospel music, and she performed with them all over South India.

In addition to all this, Reeba was also sent to a popular finishing school in Cochin called Vimalalayam, where she studied arts and crafts, painting, batik, embroidery, cooking, gardening,

housekeeping and budgeting. But through it all, she realised that music and dance was in her blood and that was her passion. She also did a diploma in computer programming and secretarial studies in Chennai and then came the big move that set her life on a new trajectory.

Marrying The Hills

Reeba came as a young bride to Coonoor, in 1983, marrying into one of the oldest Malayali families in Coonoor, and becoming the wife to Cherian P Mathew, popularly known as Sam, the oldest grandson of the Coonoor planter, PV Cherian. While plantation life had its undeniable charm, there were also challenges for Reeba. The cold, rain, mist and also the loneliness of being away from her family, and the influence of the British culture and protocols were initially hard to get used to. To top it all, a litigation on their tea estate brought with it over 30 years of worry and social unrest. But through it all, Reeba learnt to handle things with the same grace and energy she brings to the stage when she performs, and she and Sam managed to clear the

injustice of this time with their heads held high and their dignity intact.

Reeba says that she didn't quit on her life in the hills, because of the love, encouragement and support of the people of Coonoor.

She feels her singing made its mark because of the families and people who cheered her on, like the Mathews, Shindes, Chabras, Philips, Noronhas, Kuttayas, Avaris, Sethnas, Suarezes, Rajarams, Margi Vaz, Betty Harvey, Wrights, Stedmen, Molly Philip, Molly Zachariah, Pothens, Muthannas, the Menons, Narayanans, Kurians and Thilaks... and so many more. Testament to the power of community in the Nilgiris.

Very often, talent scouts and directors who came to Coonoor would hear Reeba perform and they would seek her out and promise to call her to Chennai and Bombay for auditions, or to give her a break in the music industry. Impressed as they were with her talent, the promises remained just those, and not a ticket or call ever came. It left Reeba with a deep feeling of insecurity about her own remarkable musical abilities. But,



championing her talent during her growing up years, were the appreciative and supportive families, friends and classmates. So, eventually she pulled herself together and started forming and joining choirs and music groups in her little town. The choir conductor Benjamin Paul (Benny) was instrumental in helping her in this. The congregation, the choir members, her special group of male choir singers and the youth of the Marthoma Church and the All Saints Church were her greatest cheerleaders.

"My unrealised music dreams made me reach out and create a generous space for other singers to perform and thrive," she says, her determination evident in her eyes and voice. She also conducted her brand of vocal coaching and singing at the Unwind Centre, Chennai.

Covid And Community

Reeba's contributions to society do not just stop at music. At the peak of Covid, she introduced a project called 'The Power of Rs 100' on her Facebook page to raise funds for a Coonoor boy, involved in a hit-and-run bike accident in Coimbatore. And with all her well-wishers, she raised Rs 4.5 lakh for the boy's multiple surgeries.

Also during Covid, along with her son, Rishanth, they formed a food delivery company called Cheribrews and teamed up with Purple Patch to deliver fresh vegetables to the communities of Coonoor who were strictly housebound.

When Reeba was blessed with a grandchild, she wanted to donate baby kits to the Primary Health Centre at Yedapalli. This was a turning point for Reeba. She met the dynamic Dr. Mahalakshmi, who guided her to her

next project, the PHC at the Ottupattarai village.

Ottupattarai was (and is) a highly populated area and many pregnant women there were without health care access, as the PHC had shut down during Covid. Stuck without public transport, these mothers-to-be had to walk long miles to the government hospital or to other PHCs for their maternity care. So, between Reeba and Rishanth, and their wide network of friends and philanthropists, they raised the money to reopen and refurbish the PHC, Ottupattarai, under the dedicated and hard-working Dr Karthik. In addition, this PHC became a distribution point for all the Covid vaccinations around the district. As a result, Reeba was able to help most of the communities of Coonoor, Ooty and Kotagiri with their timely Covid vaccinations.

Her 2024 community project was joining hands with KMF Hospital, Kotagiri and a group of closely knit, like-minded people from Coonoor and Coimbatore to showcase their talents and raise funds for 10 year old, Bhoomika, a stroke victim in Aravenu.

In the midst of all this, Reeba works part-time in CheriCo IT services, exercises five days a week, dances her weekends away and meets up with her vibrant lady friends twice a month. "I love my life in my Hills and I wouldn't trade it for anything else", says Reeba.

"Today", she says, with resolute faith and gratitude, "I stand before God, in gratitude, for carrying me through, and turning me into a loving, positive and empathetic person. My husband's family gave me the platform on which to stand and sparkle."

She also realises that she could have never reached her potential and accomplished any of the above without the encouragement and support and endorsement of her lifelines, Sam, Rishanth and Rushmitha, who trusted her and gave her the freedom to fly high.

It has been quite a journey for Reeba. From the bright lights of Singapore to the footlights of the Nilgiris stage, from wanting to be a doctor to becoming the voice that celebrates our beautiful hills (check out her Song-Anthem called Namma Nilgiris, online) from handling litigious trauma to reopening a hospital, and from a thwarted musical career to becoming the note that has nurtured countless musical abilities... Reeba Cherian has indeed risen from the ashes over and over... a Phoenix that continues to sing.

We are so glad to have her in our midst. ■



Of Sight and Sound



Kotagiri is home to a remarkable music school. Sreeram V covers the story of Theesha Music Academy, its founder, S Sateesh Kumar, and his colleague H Shanmugam

This is, in some ways, a typical story of these hills. Where people are helped and then go on to help others. Where community matters and where people come together to make a difference in the lives of others.

Theesha Academy is Kotagiri could be just another music school, but for the fact that its founder and one of the main instructors are visually impaired and have become able performers and music teachers despite the curve balls thrown at them by life.

Finding Music

Sateesh Kumar, the resilient founder of Theesha Music Academy, firmly believes in the transformative power of music. He was born in Palakkad, a town in Kerala, but now lives in Kattabetu, the Nilgiris, having come here as a young boy when he was just

eight. Being visually impaired from birth, he faced numerous challenges. However, his unwavering love for music helped chart a course through all of the trials that life threw at him. His story resonates with that of Shanmugam, another staff member at Theesha, an accomplished keyboard player.

Sateesh did his schooling in Kotagiri's Government School, where studies took second place to his love for music, an abiding interest that began in his childhood. Sateesh narrates an incident during his primary school years when he heard a parish priest playing a keyboard at a church ceremony. The music enthralled the young boy, and he couldn't resist sneaking the instrument from its bag after the event, and he was most disappointed when he found he could not play as effortlessly as the priest. This incident, however, led him to a curiosity about the instrument and the incredible music it could produce. He began dreaming of melodies and imagining his hands gliding over the keys - it was a passion waiting to grow into a powerful mastery.

But it took him four or five more years after this first encounter to own a keyboard which cost him Rs 40 - this was in 1995. The kind hand of his first teacher guided him through the fundamentals of playing this instrument. However, these lessons didn't last long and circumstances forced him to start lessons under a fresh instructor. But these lessons meant that he had to walk an incredible three hours for a one-hour lesson with his new music teacher. But this did not deter the boy, and he had made his first public

performance at a prayer session while still at school.

It was only after his 12th standard that he had the opportunity to be a part of Ooty's NRK Music Academy (now non-existent), and he paid for his lessons from his part-time earnings as a mobile service technician and electrician. Impressed with his talent and his diligence, and

“Music and arts can not only offer students the required relaxation, but they can also empower their minds and help them score well in the exams

out of compassion for his financial situation, the academy eventually offered him free classes to nurture his skills. His initial public performances on a major stage were for events such as Saraswathi Pooja and Janmashtami, and these successes helped Sateesh stay the course.

Sateesh completed his musical degrees at three distinguished institutions in Madurai: Sree Sadhguru Sangeetha Vidhyalayam (B.A. Music, 2016), Govt. Musical College (DMT Music, 2017), and Madurai Kamarajar University (MFA Music, 2017). Unlike many, Sateesh studied both Indian and Western forms of music, making him the expert he is today.

S Shanmugam, Theesha's keyboard specialist, exemplifies triumph over physical disability. His remarkable

journey as a musician is filled with inspiring tales from various Kucheris (concerts). Despite challenges, Shanmugam's resilience has continued to shine through his performances and travels. Shanmugam's story is a testament to the human spirit and musical dedication, proving that passion and perseverance can overcome any obstacle. His life serves as an inspiration, demonstrating the power of art to transcend physical limitations.

Shanmugam's story began with a love for the harmonium. It is the story of a man who achieved what he did due to the unstinting support of his family. Shanmugam lovingly and proudly narrates how his wife has been his rock in all his day-to-day activities, to the point of ensuring he has the perfect attire for his musical performances.

Sateesh and Shanmugam met each other when Shanmugam was pursuing a computer course at Coonoor's Tarvi Center operated by The Kinder Trust. Together they have turned their music academy into a beacon of hope for other aspiring musicians in the area. Theesha Music & Art Academy, based in Kotagiri, was established in 2018 with a unique mission: to train individuals in Western and classical musical art forms. It stands as a testament to the unifying power of music, demonstrating how it can profoundly enhance the quality of our lives. This one-of-a-kind institution is not driven by profit but by a genuine desire to share the joy of music in the most effective way possible.

Tribute to Tarvi

Sateesh is especially grateful to the

Bangalore-based Tarvi Center, an organisation that promotes voice-to-action software that helps the visually impaired operate their computers with ease. The tool is proving invaluable in helping the musicians at Theesha compose fine music. The District Differently Abled Welfare Office played matchmaker, connecting Theesha with Tarvi Center. Now, visually impaired musicians at Theesha effortlessly compose beautiful melodies using this groundbreaking technology. It is proving to be a gateway to creative expression, opening up a world of musical possibilities for these talented artists.

Service Through Music

Sateesh says the Academy is not a profit-driven initiative but was launched to impart to students the immense scope and scale of music that exists. Sateesh says that while

many academies teach a 6-month course for more than a year, he feels that the courses must be taught in a way that best serves the needs of the student. The courses must be taught by paying justice to the duration vis-a-vis the aptitude. He believes that hovering around on a single course, just to profit off a student for a longer-than-required duration is quite unnecessary.

Sateesh recalls his own experiences learning Carnatic music. He says that many teachers fail to teach students the nuances that help them learn faster, and this includes many of Sateesh's own learning phases. This is why he felt it was important to create an institution that teaches students the right way, for the art to be gracefully imparted to those with untapped potential and Theesha Academy espouses these philosophies. The Academy

continues to provide courses at an affordable fee structure and is in the 6th year of its operation. Their curriculum currently includes vocals, mridangam, violin, guitar, harmonica, keyboard, music theory, music production composition, and music background score mixing.

Sateesh says that though the sound of music is loudly heard across these hills, the knowledge of music and its scale of practice leaves a lot to be desired. There is talent inherent in people, but they don't know how to take it forward. To bridge this gap, the Theesha Team is doing Kacheris for free, across the temples of the Nilgiris. These destinations include Sathimalai Murugan temple in Kotagiri, Mariamman Temple, Bannari Amman temple, etc. Some of these places have also later invited the team for regular paid performances. Unsurprisingly, Sateesh Kumar has



been awarded the Kalai Valarmani award by the Nilgiris District.

Theesha uses a one-off-trial session, both online and offline, to understand the innate interests and skills of those who join their classes. These trial sessions are conducted free of cost. The students are then trained based on matching skill sets and interest levels. The Academy only hires personnel who possess the necessary qualifications and talent as part of its training pool. Theesha has now completed the Arangetram of 20 of its students. The students who learn Western Music are sent on for the certification courses of the reputed Bridge Academy.

What's Needed

Sateesh considers his visual impairment as a blessing in disguise. He says that musical sensitivity is heightened for the visually impaired as their ears are sharper. What takes a sighted person two to three years to learn takes a visually impaired version a year. The fundamental knowledge of a musician is to have good hearing capabilities and that, according to Sateesh, is very high in the visually impaired.

When asked if he has any message for the many who might be musically gifted yet visually impaired, Sateesh recommends a course in DLS (Daily Living Skills). It helps them handle their day-to-day affairs with ease, be it crossing the road or handling basic to complex affairs at home. He again stresses that music is very easy for them to master. Schools Are Doing It Wrong

Sateesh is disappointed about how schools today do not foster creativity as part of the learning process. He stresses that parents and schools



must enrol children in any one of the art streams. Many 10th and 12th standard students don't get to truly express their creativity as schools begin focusing more on academics from early on. But, Sateesh says, most schools are unaware of the toll it takes on students when learning focuses solely on book routes and academic excellence. Music and arts can not only offer students the required relaxation, but they can also empower their minds and help them score well in the exams. It is his request that all schools prioritize music and the arts throughout the entire student lifecycle. "We have presented these arguments before, but no one is ready to listen," says Sateesh sadly

Sateesh goes on to explain that Carnatic music has many ragas that can help you stay calm. For example, the Raga Hindolam is known to be effective in countering depression, and the Raga Nilambaram can offer the benefits of restful sleep. He is certain that the healing qualities of music that are so obviously present in musical notes can help people cope

better in life. Sateesh does not advocate against profits but requests the teaching fraternity not to deprive the financially underprivileged of the gift of learning an art form. While acknowledging the need for income, he encourages teachers to consider offering free lessons to those who can't afford them. He suggests that instructors could potentially benefit from students' future performances instead. His core message is to never deny anyone the chance to learn and grow through art. Sateesh emphasises that denying anyone the opportunity to learn an art form is a cardinal sin.

Theesha Academy should be better known. They have been leading by example by identifying and nurturing budding musicians in our district. There is a life in service to creative talent and hopefully the story of this little music academy will resonate and create ripples of change - and hopefully the entire district will benefit. ■

Theesha Academy can be reached at +91 97874 97015.



A CREATIVE CALLING



Kalaishola is what happened when fine young artistic minds came together to explore their talent. Mukund Ravishankar tells us how he and his four friends decided to launch a unique initiative in our hills

Around four years ago, just before Shawn went to do his Masters in Manchester, he and I had an offhand conversation about starting an art space or group, but we had no idea what it would look like. We imagined a small piece of land tucked away on top of a hill with five different, professionally equipped studios, an exhibition space and a living space where we could host artists from other spaces for residencies and collaborations.

That might still be the long-term plan but we have finally taken the first steps towards it.

Arjun, Ayra and I met around the same time, and we met Rishi soon after. We used to see each other occasionally as we were still in our individual worlds, busy working on our respective crafts, and randomly spoke about ideas for this imagined space of ours.

Shawn came back from his Master's this year, and around the same time, Kishore Pasari called me to come visit as he'd heard about me through Sangeetha, the editor of Inside43. Kishore runs Gaia Pottery in Bedford. The store is in a charming old building with two floors and a small garden, with an outhouse below. The shop is upstairs, and a wooden staircase leads down to a welcoming space with old windows, limestone walls and warm, natural light. The room leads to an outside space where there is a neatly kept

garden, a pretty little shed with pink bougainvillea spreading over the roof and a view of Brooklands and tea estates in the distance. The shed outside, I came to know later, was used as a space for typewriting classes and before that, as a space where Shawn's mother and mine used to get together for spoken English classes over 20 years ago.

Kishore suggested using the lower floor as an art or exhibition space and I immediately knew the people I had to call.

Coming Together

The five of us met that weekend and I was excited to put forward the idea. All of us were on board, and each had something to say about how we could contribute, and the various possibilities that were available, thanks to the space that had materialised for us.

“We decided to name it Kalaishola. It translates to ‘Art Grove’ in Tamil and we want it to belong to everyone interested and anyone wanting to collaborate

Arjun, a photographer by profession, is also a naturalist and a musician. He expresses his deep connection with nature through these mediums and his work focuses on communicating the challenges of the natural world around us. He hopes to share his passion for photography, nature and astronomy through workshops on these topics. Along with Shawn, he will also conduct immersive nature walk sessions, and teach how to connect with the natural world at a deeper level.

Ayra, a ceramicist and product designer, set up a studio in Coonoor after she moved here two years ago. Born in Dehradun, at the foothills of the Himalayas, she grew up surrounded by mountains and their natural forms, and this shapes her work heavily. She is a self-taught potter and has been working full-time with clay for the past eight years. Her journey has been about recognising the importance of Mother Earth, striving for balance and connecting with the delicate nature of being human. Her classes bring people together in a mindful yet rewarding environment.

Rishi, a food consultant with a background in gastronomy and food ecology, works on projects bridging sustainable food systems with traditional and indigenous practices. He is currently involved in setting up his own mushroom farm and gourmet food production unit in



collaboration with growers in the Nilgiris. He is also keen on teaching people the different ways of sourcing and using local ingredients. His workshops focus on fermentation and the impact that they have on our gut biome.

Shawn has a foundation in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester. He specialises in utilising photography, film, and sound as mediums for delving into, and representing, myriad lived experiences. Having only recently moved back to the Nilgiris after nearly four years in Manchester, he is looking to bring everything he has learnt thus far, back to the mountains that he grew up in.

"There is so much potential for creativity, storytelling and engagement in these mountains, and so many of its residents are already playing a part in bringing them to light. All I hope to do is help carry this forward by documenting the stories the Nilgiris has to tell, channelling it through accessible mediums and ensuring that as many people as possible are able to reflect on and

appreciate just how much these mountains mean to us," he says with energetic conviction.

Along with hosting speakers, Shawn wants to use the space to conduct workshops based on sound and the important role that sound plays not just in nature, but also in our day-to-day lived experience. Along with Arjun, he will also teach people about cyanotype printing (a method of making photographs without a camera, one of the earliest methods of its kind), digital photography and analogue photography.

Personally, I look forward to using this space to display some of my work, paintings and sculptures, that are inspired by the natural world that we see around us and also in collaborating with others in the collective through our exhibitions. These pieces will be on display at Gaia along with Shawn and Arjun's photographs and Ayra's ceramics.

What's in a Name

Naming our group was a bit of task as we spent over a week brainstorming. Our initial idea was to take our initials and form an acronym. We came up with the name, "RASAM" (Rishi, Ayra, Shawn, Arjun, Mukund) but were afraid if that would mislead people into thinking that it was a restaurant. Although, it could have worked to bring in people that were walking by on a cold, misty evening, I'm sure.

We realised that this project would involve people from all over and naming the space would make more sense. We decided to name it Kalaishola. It translates to 'Art Grove' in Tamil and we want it to belong to everyone interested and anyone wanting to collaborate.

Hopes and Dreams

Our vision for the space, along with exhibitions, is to build a community connecting artists from different backgrounds with people in fields related to ecology and sociology. We hope to curate a platform that showcases related work, builds conversations, and creates a living archive of the work we do.

We want to build awareness of topics we feel strongly about, help people connect to the natural world through our art, and help represent various aspects of the ecosystem and people within it.

We would like to build a space for locals who are interested in these areas by hosting and connecting with the tourists that come and go. We want to encourage a sharing of experiences and skill sets, connecting like-minded people. Our aim is to collaborate on projects that bring them closer to our ecosystem, and help the wider public appreciate and become aware of the various nuances present within the Nilgiris.

Coonoor and Beyond

The five of us are based in Coonoor but since we have work all around, we will be moving quite a bit and would appreciate any help. If any of this resonates with readers, or if you would like to share views through a talk or start and collaborate on a project, please reach out or join our events. We plan on having a couple of workshops and hosting a speaker each month, and holding an art exhibition roughly every two months. These will be held mostly on the weekends and there may be small changes depending on the weather and the availability of the people involved. But we hope to be

consistent with our events and build a local group and audience that look forward to what we bring together.

We are all grateful we found the space to kickstart this project right in the middle of town. The accessibility and the charm of the space will help us grow toward what we eventually want to become. We are excited about the plans we have for the coming year and any patronage, support and guidance in any form would be greatly appreciated. Also, any support we can get in finding people to speak at the venue would also be helpful. We want to not just host well-distinguished people, but anyone passionate about a particular niche that is relevant to this space, and has ideas worth sharing.

We are excited to see where this journey takes us and the creations that come out of it. We look forward to adding to the incredible creativity that the Nilgiris nurtures and becoming a significant part of its artistic narrative. We invite you to come along with us on this journey of discovery fuelled by our collective creative calling. ■

If you wish to reach out to us, please write to us at kalaishola@gmail.com, or contact us through our Instagram page [@kalaishola](https://www.instagram.com/kalaishola)



We plan on having a couple of workshops and hosting a speaker each month and an art exhibition roughly every two months



JUMPING AHEAD



*Neil Kendall, from the little village of Kothiben in the Nilgiris, has quite the journey with horses. **Inside43** explores his incredible prowess in the equestrian field and his undeniable love for these animals*

Mrinalini (affectionately known as Deena to freinds and family) and Jeffery Kendall had given up hopes of having a child. Even advancements in modern medicine failed them - and then suddenly after eleven years of marriage, they discovered that the longed-for baby was on their way to them, and they were overjoyed. And so, a little baby boy came into the

world in 2009, and his parents put considerable thought into naming their child. The name 'Neil' was not chosen easily. They wanted one with a deep meaning and positive connotations. 'Neil' seemed the most apt, as it meant champion and also could be interpreted as blue, a colour that associates with our Blue Mountains.

Starting Young

Neil's love for horses began to show when he was barely a year old as he naturally gravitated towards toy horses, and his passion for horse riding started showing not long after. On his first birthday, Neil's parents and their friends took the young boy to celebrate at the Ooty Gymkhana Club; on their way out they spotted a

man giving pony rides and this was the start of Neil's journey into horse riding. Since that day, Neil's love for horses grew steadily, becoming a part of his bedtime stories, nursery rhymes, movies, toys, and daily outdoor life. This was easy as Jeffrey, Neil's father, had several friends and associates who owned horses, and they were able to cater to their child's love for these magnificent animals. Jeffery Kendall worked for the Little Earth Group at the time, and when he went to work at the Group's farm resort, he would take little Neil with him, letting the little boy ride and play with the horses while he worked.

On Neil's seventh birthday, in 2016, Dr Karthikeyan, Deena Kendall's family friend, and the chief medical veterinary doctor at the Madras Race Club, called up the family and asked them to meet him at the Ooty Race Course where he had a surprise waiting for their son. After school, Jeffery Kendall took Neil over, and it was the moment that set the course in Neil's life. Dr Karthikeyan had not disclosed this over the phone, but when father and son got there, they discovered that he was rehoming a few of his prized horses, but wanted little Neil to choose one for himself as a birthday gift. The little boy was absolutely delighted as he looked at the horses that were being paraded around the course. The one that caught his eye was called 'Boeing', a three-year-old, black filly with a white blaze - and for Neil it was love at first sight. Boeing's trainer was apprehensive as he thought the filly was too young and feisty for a child of seven to manage, and attempted to convince Neil to choose another horse. However, Dr Karthikeyan

stepped in and approved the adoption, and Neil was suddenly the proud little owner of a beautiful race horse.

Although slightly surprised at the sudden transaction, the Kendall's welcomed their new family member in with much gladness, repurposing their laundry room to create a cosy stable for the mare to rest in. While other families were out taking their dogs for a walk, the Kendall family rose early each morning to take their steed strolling along the Ooty roads. As Boeing grew, the Kendall family realised that the mare needed a lot more care than they could provide, and she needed much more space for exercise. They ended up contacting a good friend, Lt Col Sandeep Dewan, who had just relocated to the Nilgiris and moved Boeing to his horse farm. This was a perfect arrangement, as Sandeep was a renowned equestrian rider himself. But then, seven months later, as Neil was enjoying his time with his horse, he was thrown off the steed's back.

The fall created a singular fear of horse riding at the time, but despite the fear, Neil could not bear to be parted from his beloved horse, even though he refused to climb on her again. After what felt like an age, one of Jeffrey's friends came up with a suggestion. His daughters were upgrading to a higher level of horse riding, and there was a calm steed he no longer had room for who would be perfect to gently encourage Neil back into horse riding. The horse, a benign, chestnut gelding renamed 'Rusty', was used as a bargaining chip to coax Neil back on the saddle - either Neil gets riding again or Rusty goes. It took a whole year, but Neil finally

agreed to get back in the saddle and two weeks after that he wanted to try saddling Boeing once more. The fear had gone, for good it seemed, and today Neil has seven horses in his family's barn.

The Power of Support

Today, Neil's parents continue to be supportive and are doing everything in their abilities to allow Neil to pursue his equestrian dream. They admitted him into the Hebron School, and the institution has been very supportive and encouraging of the young boy's career, and making adjustments to Neil's schedules to enable him to attend events and competitions as they come up.

Neil and his horses have been fortunate to be trained and guided by a large group of supportive equestrian experts. Col Sunil Shivdas, India's only 4-star international FEI



Dressage judge, Jacqueline Kapur and Kalivardhan from Red Earth Riding School in Auroville, Kishore Futnani from the Chennai Equitation Centre, Barath Manoharan from East Coast Equestrian in Chennai, Alexandre Roynette, a show jumping coach from France, M Vairavel who possesses an unending supply of equine knowledge and expertise, Dr Hasnein Mirza, Dr Jeyentra Balaji, and of course, Dr Karthikeyan, all renowned veterinary doctors - Neil has an army behind up helping him be all he is destined to be.

Over the course of the past few years, Neil has been to numerous equestrian competitions all over the country and has achieved six junior national equestrian champion medals. In the month of December 2023, Neil participated in the FEI World Youth Dressage category and was placed 10th in Zone 9 of the World Youth category. He now has almost 50 medals from various equestrian competitions across India.

The Obstacle Course

However, the challenges that Neil faces are not yet over. Other than the

hours of practice he puts in, in fair weather and foul, he has to cope with keeping up with his school curriculum. He is diligent in the pursuit of both, and shows a fierce determination to be the best he can be. He continues to progress rapidly in equestrian sports, but this means that as he moves up the ranks he will be joining competitions with his retired thoroughbred horses, while his competitors use imported, warmblood sports horses which have been specifically trained to participate in international-level competitions. Unfortunately, the cheapest of these horses can cost as much as Rs 50 lakh. Deena and Jeffrey have decided to give all they have to let Neil pursue his passion. During the Covid lockdown, they even moved to their farm, away from Ooty, and began developing a little barn at Kothiben village, near the Chamraj tea factory. Subsequently, they have also formed a Trust and have named it 'The Eastwoods Equestrian Sports Centre'. The Kendalls are currently in the process of creating a training centre, not only for Neil, but to encourage,

“Neil's love for horses began to show when he was barely a year old as he naturally gravitated towards toy horses

groom and develop equestrian talent in others also interested in the sport.

Neil and his family have barely started, but have already reached a point of financial constraints as the sport is incredibly demanding. They have invested in three horse ambulances and are renting them out to sustain Neil's activities, but unfortunately, it still isn't enough. They are hopeful of receiving sponsorship from corporate houses through CSR (corporate social responsibility) funds, but due to equestrianism being seen as a 'rich man's sport', these channels of financial support are a long shot; the family is assumed wealthy enough considering they already work with, and own horses.

Neil Kendall has a long and arduous journey ahead of him. But neither he nor his parents are giving up yet, and with the help of the wider community, they intend to create a centre that not only helps their son grow, but all other children as well. Neil's talent, his determination, and incredible affinity with horses must be encouraged, they feel, and perhaps one day, soon, we hope to see Neil take centre stage in the international equestrian arena - another child of the Nilgiris that we can cheer on and continue to celebrate. ■





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Celebrating the End

*Winding up the hill road can drive home some poignant lessons in the art of life. And how to live it right up to the very end, as **Ishani Dutt Sarkar** discovers*

We had been proud residents of Coonoor for a few months. It was probably our third or fourth trip to our beautiful home. It's always the final 15 minutes of the journey which seem the longest. Getting away from the madding crowd and hustle-bustle of the city and breathing in the fresh clean air, we can never seem to reach home fast enough. So despite the blue-green hills, the lush foliage, the little railway track with its rack and pinion system, all there for us to admire, we were in a rush to get to our abode in these hills. I guess when you've been breathing city air, the longing to come home to your own space in heaven becomes quite pressing.

On this particular afternoon, as we neared town, we fell behind a large procession near the Coonoor market. The road, as we all know, is relatively narrow, busy and winding so there was nothing we could do but slow down and follow the procession at an excruciatingly slow speed of 10kmph.

To anyone, and certainly it seemed to us, this was just another celebratory procession. Men and women walking alongside and behind a motor vehicle. They were playing gay songs, and people were dancing to it. It seemed joyous and fun, and if we hadn't been in a hurry, we might have got out and joined. So, with mild impatience we asked our driver if he could get past the procession, and get on with this last leg of the journey.

Imagine my surprise (read: initial horror) when the young man driving us said that this would not be possible, as this was a funeral procession and it would be disrespectful. He went on to explain how certain sections of the community, here in the hills, celebrate the life of the departed by sending him or her off with music and dance. Needless to say, it was assumed that the person had led a full life and it was not an untimely or unnatural end. And these communities deemed it important to honour the departed

with the joy of remembrance rather than the grief of loss.

We took a moment, letting it sink in, and paid our own silent respects to the departed soul. Only then did we silently wind our way past the market, overtaking the procession. Thus we shared a while in this incredible celebratory salute to the ending of the life of someone we did not even know.

The abundance of life and joy in this beautiful State is so enriching. In this district even more so. The spirit of the people here never ceases to amaze me. I will never forget that afternoon drive home. And the life lesson that my beautiful Nilgiris taught me...of never forgetting to celebrate life. Even in death. ■





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Let the Mountains Speak

Surekha Kothari has always had a home in these hills, and she tells us of the lessons to be learned from their majesty and stillness

"God! Please take me to that place where I can speak freely without words!"

An awesome thought! An energising proposition to me, who chose to and then proceeded to do just that. I made the Nilgiris my home away from home. Sitting in my garden for long hours, daunted only by heavy rains, I have been 'speaking' to all my flowers, the birds and trees, the bushes around me, to the mountains and the mist, to the dancing peacock within me that resonates with the pattering of every raindrop on my roof. When has anyone needed words to merge into the joy of nature? In fact, the Nilgiris have a way of communicating with us, if only we can understand their loving embrace and compassionate sermon it offers to all humans who care to listen. It feels unreal to move

here and then recreate the very environment of city life that we moved away from in the first place. I suppose we are all creatures of habit. The sages go into the lap of nature for spiritual enlightenment as nature supports seekers like nothing else does. Its giving spirit is nurturing and healing and gently and subtly points out to who we really are. The silence of the hills amplifies every sound so much that the raising of even one voice is jarring to the ears. There is a profound truth in the accentuated peace factor here, in that silence is the basic nature of man. We are the waves that rise, abate and rise again, but superficially, within the deep silence of the ocean, as if merely frolicking for a while. There is a natural stillness within us as vast as the ocean which, unfortunately, we rarely access. The mountains, which

are camouflaged by a thick mist every now and then offer space for reflective meditations to clear many mental and emotional cobwebs. This we access in the silence of the hills, bringing calm and peace within us, an inevitable effect of residing in these hills.

It is only natural for those living in cities to want to access the stillness of these majestic mountains, and I hope, to fuel the human need to develop their inner world, often relegated into the background in the humdrum of city life. We live in a world of time, space and causation. All three are of great essence in life, to grow from spiritual poverty to spiritual affluence. The spirit shines as the mind becomes calm and pure. And where can you find the ideal environment to achieve this but here, in our precious Nilgiris? ■



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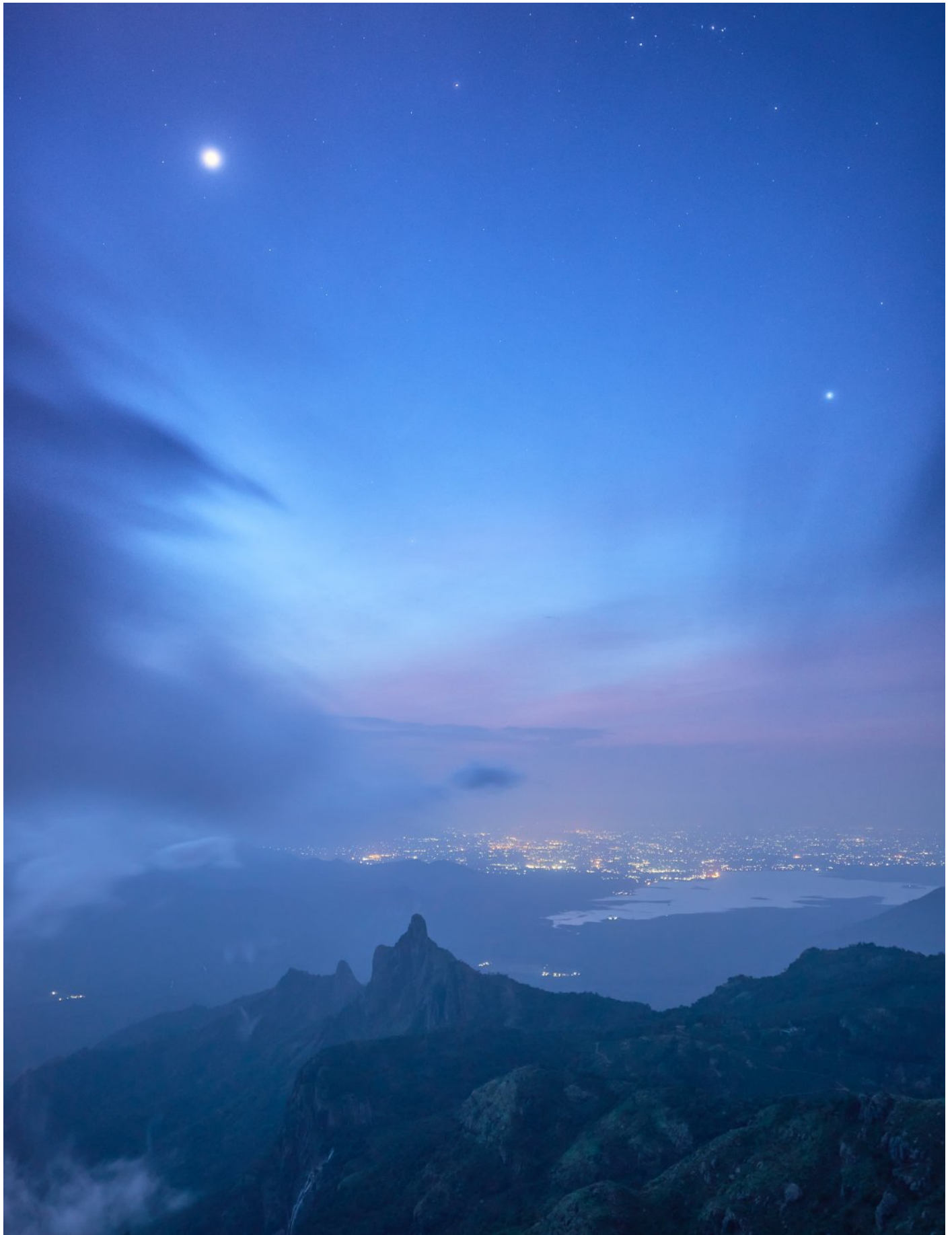
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Star Light, Star Bright

*Few things are as beautiful as the Nilgiris night sky, as captured by **Arjun Cheyyur**, a talented astro-photographer from our district*















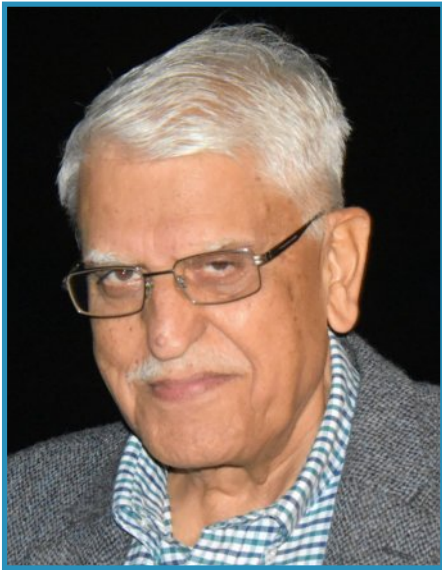












THE HOMECOMING

*As the world around us changes rapidly, **Vijaya Dar** reflects on how our little home town has been affected and asks an important question*

On my return flight from New York to Mumbai there was a bottle of mineral water on the small side table of my seat. It was labelled 'Himalayan, the natural mineral water.' An interesting legend printed on the bottle read:

"I look back on life – it's funny how things turn out. You, the creator of beeping sirens and honking cars, yearn for the solitude of the mountains. You, a connoisseur of fast food, now gaze at water that took years to gather natural minerals as it trickled down from the Himalayas to within your reach. And I, some of the purest water in the world, stand here, trapped in a bottle. Come enjoy the irony."

This month of June, I was away from Coonoor, visiting my daughter in New York City, and I was looking forward to evening strolls in Central Park, amid the leafy walkways within this green lung of the metropolis. But New York was in the middle of a heat wave that it had rarely experienced in the past, and the scorching sun of the long northern days did not help either.

Pretty soon I began to miss my little home, although even Coonoor has experienced an unusually hot spring and summer. Climate change is real, and no amount of pussyfooting around this global problem is going to be of any help.

Born in Kashmir, having grown up in the lap of the Himalayas, I have spent a large part of my adult life in different cities in India and abroad. I am quite used to the heat and humidity of the plains. And yet, the mountains continued to have a special attraction for me, and the yearning to get back to the hills never left me. It was only in the beginning of this century that I took a firm decision to retire from commercial pursuits to a life of peace and quiet in the hills. A return to the Himalayas was not possible for various reasons. Then, quite by happenstance I came to the Nilgiris for a holiday, and instantly decided to make my home amid these green blue hills. I have not regretted my decision even once. Eighteen years in the Nilgiris make

me feel like a native, and I love it. Every time I leave this little town, even if for a week, I am ready to make a comeback at the earliest. And so it was this time, while visiting the US.

But lately, with the urge to return always comes the sadness of seeing what I consider my home also become home to the environmental changes I see all around the world. And it makes me think that we humans are like that bottle of water on the plane. Often trapped in a prison not of our choosing, our purity of nature enclosed in a shell chosen for us by others.

The question remains, what can we do to get out? ■



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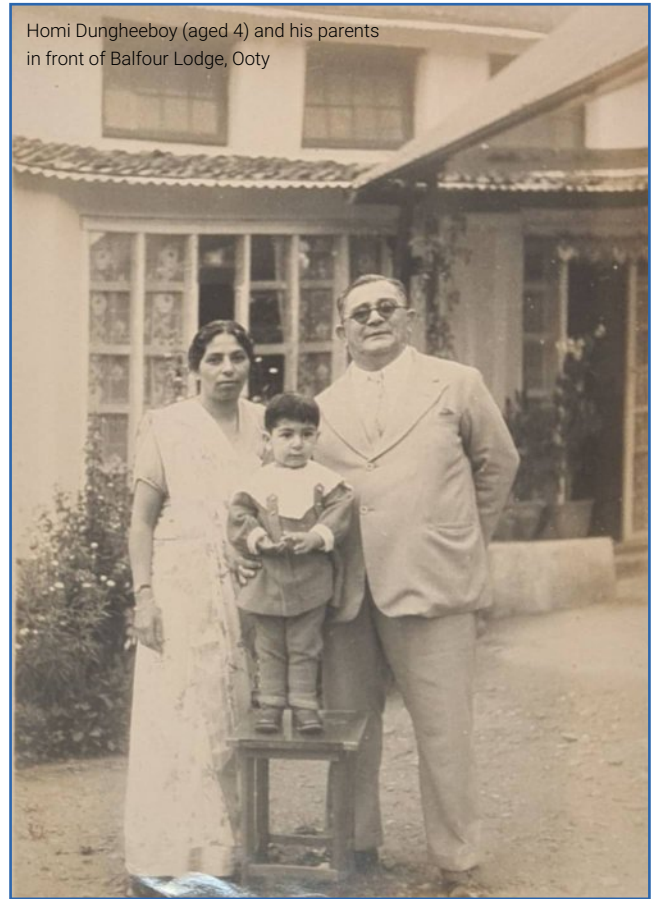
TWO CENTURIES OF SERVICE



*From a shop that opened almost two hundred years ago in Ooty, until today, the Parsi community has contributed to this district in the most remarkable way. **Homi Dungheebay** chronicles their remarkable history of entrepreneurship and public service*

“It is interesting to know that between 1959 and 1962 the community had the unique distinction of holding top positions at the Defence Services Staff College at Wellington

Homi Dungheebay (aged 4) and his parents in front of Balfour Lodge, Ooty



The British annexed the Nilgiris into the district of Coimbatore in 1819, when John Sullivan of the Madras Civil Service was the Collector of Coimbatore. Sullivan is, as many of us know, the acknowledged founder of the Nilgiris, and he approached businessmen in Bombay and towns along the West Coast to set up businesses in Ooty. Among the respondents were three Parsi brothers, Jehanjirjee, Framjee, and Pestonjee Nasserwanjee Bottlewalla who were from Billimora in Gujarat. They set up enterprises in Ooty in 1829. They prospered, and this prompted them to contact friends back in their village stating that Ooty was a good place to conduct commerce. This brought Eduljee Maneckjee, also from Billimora, who opened a bakery in 1840. The

Bottlewallas and Maneckjee brought with them other young Parsi men to help them in their business, and so began the small Parsi population of the Nilgiris.

The 1800s

Both these families prospered greatly, spreading their business to real estate and coffee plantations and later to tea and cinchona. Maneckjee's son, Dadabhoy took a prominent part in the civic life of Ooty and was among the first group of corporators when the Ootacamund Municipality was founded in 1866. There is a street in the main bazaar named after him where the bakery was located. Eduljee Maneckjee died in 1880, and his son in 1904, and both are buried in Ooty.

Eduljee had two other sons, Meherwanjee and Hormusjee. His

eldest son, Dadabhoy had no children. Meherwanjee had three sons, Eduljee, Hormusjee and Cawasjee. Meherwanjee settled in Colombo and took the name, *Nilgiria*; he fared well in business, and his descendants still live in Colombo today. Incidentally, his great-grandson, Ferhad Nilgiria visited the Nilgiris early in 2024.

In 1840, Pestonjee Nasserwanjee Bottlewalla donated a piece of land, 3.21 acres, to the Parsi community for use as a cemetery. The first internment was in 1846. In 1870, Burjorjee Billimoria arrived in Ooty with his family. He started a liquor business, and set up a tavern. Along with this, he had a business of repairing and selling watches and clocks and Nilgiri produce such as Eucalyptus, Gaultheria, and Citrodora oils and honey. His grandson,

Jamshed is currently a trustee of the Parsee Zoroastrian Anjuman (association) and resides in Ooty.

In 1892, Rustom Patel set up a business in Wellington. He had a dairy which supplied milk and milk products to the army. He also set up a General Store in a building opposite the Military Hospital, which is now the Pay Office. He was one of the early trustees of the Anjuman.

In 1894, my maternal grandfather, Hormusjee Nawrojee Hazary, and his friend, Kekobad Hormusjee Rao came to Mettupalyam to work on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway. Rao was an engineer and Hazary, a contractor supplying the project with labour, ballast, and teak sleepers. The railway line up to Coonoor was completed in 1897. The two friends went to visit Ooty, and, both being greatly impressed with the salubrious climate and the breathtaking scenery, decided to settle there. My grandfather brought his wife and four children to Ooty in 1898, the fifth being my mother, was born in Ooty in 1900.

The 1900s

Hormusjee set up a business under the name of, "Hormusjee Nowrojee Hazary Lampware House." Ooty was not electrified, so he identified a business opportunity in hiring out chandeliers and lamps for the British population, the army, the residences of the maharajahs, and the government house. Incidentally, the electrification of Ooty and Coonoor was done in 1919 and 1922.

Hormusjee's eldest son tried his hand at a variety of businesses and did various jobs, however, he was not successful. Dinshaw, the second son

was an able businessman and a good photographer, who took over the business of the famous photographer, ATW Penn. Hormusjee was the secretary of the Anjuman from 1900 to 1917, and thereafter his son, Dinshaw managed the affairs for 52 years, till his death in 1969.

Dinshaw was married to Jer, the daughter of Hormusjee Maneckjee Eduljee. She was a prominent social worker and associated with the Nilgiris Ladies Club, the Sree Shanti Vijaya Girls High schools in Ooty and Coonoor, the Friend in Need Society, Lady Willingdon Widows Home, and many other local institutions. She was awarded the Kaiser-I-Hind gold medal for the work she did.

In 1902, Mary Ardeshir Cama came to live in Ooty after the premature demise of her husband who was an ICS officer. She had two small daughters who she educated. She took up the post of Secretary of the Nilgiri Ladies Club which she held for five decades.

In 1904, Sohrabjee Meherjeebhai Billimoria came to Ooty with his parents and his sister who had five daughters and one son. He was a successful timber merchant dealing in teak and rosewood with the Rajah

of Nilambur, in the rich forests of Malabar. He married Meherbhai, the widow of Hormusjee, the son of Meherwanjee Eduljee and built two beautiful bungalows, 'Newington', and 'Melbourne'. He died in 1943, after a prolonged illness.

In 1905, Kamajee Kama arrived in Ooty and set up the Grace Hotel, which he unfortunately wound up in 1914. However, a well-known and popular hotel was opened in 1912 by Eduljee Piroshaw Sakhidas which he successfully ran for 58 years under the name of *Hotel Cecil*. He also ran a restaurant and bar at our beloved Assembly Rooms. Also in the hospitality trade, was Kekobad Hormusjee Rao who ran a popular guest house at Forest Glen in Ooty which was later sold to Naserwanjee Patel in 1941.

In 1914, Nasserwanjee Kawasjee Patel arrived in Coonoor, purchased about 100 acres of land, and planted tea. He started from scratch, establishing Adar Estate, manufacturing good quality teas. He ran the property for 40 years and sold it to Matheson Bosanquet & Co Ltd in 1954. Naserwanjee's son, Kawas helped him to run the property. In 1944, he settled down in Coonoor and



was a prominent businessman dealing in real estate, cars, and other enterprises. He was a long-time trustee and president of the Anjuman and a generous donor towards the Jal Piroj Hall. Mention must be made of Phiroj Clubwalla, a merchant prince from Madras. He built and donated the Jal Piroj Hall in memory of his son, Jal who passed away at the tender age of 14. The hall was formally handed over to the trustees of the Anjuman in 1907 to conduct religious functions.

In 1918, Khan Bahadur Manekshaw Rattanjee Dastur retired as a district and sessions judge of the central provinces. He came to settle in Ooty and lived at Kings Cliff. After a few years, he bought a small tea property known as Woodlees, in Aravenu, near Kotagiri, where he lived with his daughter, Bachubai, and sons, Ratanjee who was an engineer, and Khurshedjee who was a civil servant in the central provinces. Dasturjee, as he was fondly referred to by all, officiated at several navjotes, marriages, funerals, and house-warming ceremonies. He performed at my parents' wedding in 1933, as well as my navjote in 1943. He was a trustee of the Anjuman for many years. This gracious gentleman endeared himself to the Badaga community and was a patriarch of sorts to them. He passed away at the age of 87, in 1945. Many Parsis who died in various parts of south India were brought for burial to Ooty. In 1906, Lt Col HM Hakim died in Tanjore and his body was brought on a gun carriage, which took four days to reach Ooty. His great-granddaughter, Avi Mehta has a house in Coonoor and looks after his grave.

“They prospered, and this prompted them to contact friends back in their village, stating that Ooty was a good place to conduct commerce

In 1944, Mr Umrigar bought the Highfield Tea Estate in Coonoor. He was from the DC Umrigar family, the premier importers and distributors of wines and spirits from Europe. His estate overlooked the Wellington Gymkhana club, but he sold the property sometime in the 1970s and went back to Bombay.

My father, Dinshaw Heerjeebhoy Dhunjeebhoy, a Marine Engineer, retired to Ooty and married Gool, the youngest child of Hormusjee Nowrowjee Hazary and remained a trustee of the Anjuman for several years. I was born in 1936.

In the old days, many Parsis joined the government service apart from well-known commercial establishments. Jal Ardeshir Master reached the top of his cadre as a Chief Conservator of Forests of the erstwhile Madras Presidency, being the first Indian to hold the post. He retired to Ooty with his wife, Gool who was a well-known social worker and whose sole objective was to uplift the poor. Another such officer who lived in Ooty for 23 years till his death was Col Jamasp Cursetjee Bharucha, an officer of the Indian Medical Service, who retired as Inspector General of Prisons of the Bombay Presidency.

Maj Rustom Ardeshir Mehta arrived in the Nilgiris in 1952 and was appointed the Bursar of The Lawrence School in Lovedale, a position he held with distinction till his retirement in 1979. Generations of Lawrencians respected and loved him. After his retirement, he, and his wife Bachoo settled in Ooty. He served the community as a trustee of the Anjuman and later as a managing trustee for several years. The Mehta's have two sons, Navzer and Firdaus. The former retired as a commercial pilot with a reputed airline, having studied at the IIT Madras and now lives in Ooty. He is currently the President of the Parsi Anjuman of the Nilgiris, a position he holds with much aplomb. Firdaus studied medicine at AFMC, Pune, and retired to Canada after a distinguished career with the WHO.

Among the senior most professional plantation managers of Indian origin was Noshir Hormusjee Sethna, who was covenanted in the management cadre of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd in 1943. At that time, almost all plantation companies were owned or managed by the British. Nosh, as he was affectionately known among the planting community, was a lovable personality who steadily rose to the top of his company as Resident Director and held the post of president of UPASI (United Planters Association of Southern India). He retired in 1975 to Coonoor, with his gracious wife Freany, to his bungalow, 'Westcroft'. Other Parsi planters in the Nilgiris were Jal Mody, Siasp Kotawalla, Areez Kotawalla, Feroze Chinoy, Jimmy Kamdin, Edi B Sethna and myself.

Edi, especially had an illustrious career and reached the top of MB & Co Ltd and was President of the UPASI. He was also a trustee of the Anjuman for several years and after Noshir Vajifdar, he prayed at all jashans and funerals. He was president of the Ooty Club and the longest-serving vice-president of the Wellington Gymkhana Club. Edi continues to remain in service to this day. Others were Hector Kothawalla, Hanosh Sagar and a few propriety planters, AF Kaka, ZT Kothavalla, Kaiwan R Patel in the Nilgiris, and Navroze E Sethna, who owns a well-run coffee property in Coorg. Minoo Avari, having planted in north and south India, retired to Kodaikanal. Mention must be made of my first employer, Sohrab AC Ardeshir, the nephew of Lady Dhunjeebhoy Bomanjee, the owner of three properties, Glenmorgan, Arthala, and Tuttapallam. The Planters Co (Pvt) Ltd in Coonoor is where I worked and from where the three estates were managed. Sohrab was a solicitor and went to Oxford and Lincoln's Inn. He lived in Coonoor for about 16 years. His main achievement was the establishment of Coonoor as a tea auction centre and the establishment of Sohrab Ardeshir Brokers Corporation in 1964. For the past 30 years, Parsis have gone into real estate and building. Kaiwan Patel and Navroze E Sethna have built some high-class bungalows in the Nilgiris.

Noshir A Meherban, after a brilliant academic career served in the legal department of the erstwhile Bombay Presidency. After retirement, he was appointed legal advisor to UPASI.

It is indeed sad that today there are hardly any Parsis in the armed forces,

civil services, or for that matter in the plantations.

In Defence

It is interesting to know that between 1959 and 1962 the community had the unique distinction of holding top positions at the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington:

- Maj General SHFJ Manekshaw – Commandant, DSSC
- Col SN Antia – Chief instructor, Army
- Capt Dorab R Mehta – Chief Instructor, Navy
- Grp Capt Sarosh J Dastur – Chief instructor, Air Force

At no time has one community had this signal honour. Furthermore, two other Parsis have served as Commandants; Lt Gen AM Sethna, and Lt Gen FM Billimoria.

The most well-known Parsi of the Nilgiris was undoubtedly Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, who after his active service came to live in his bungalow, 'Stavka' in Coonoor with his wife Siloo, who incidentally had a

Nilgiri connection having studied at Nazareth Convent, Ooty. Sam was always impeccably dressed and had a tremendous sense of humour. There are innumerable stories, but the one that must be told is of President APJ Kalam's visit when Sam was in the Military Hospital in Wellington. The President took his hand and asked whether he could do anything for him. Sam replied that he was sad that he was unable to stand and salute the Supreme Commander of the Indian forces. During his visit, the President got to know that Sam was not in receipt of either his salary or his statutory benefits. When he returned to Delhi, he ordered that all his dues should be paid forthwith. An official of the Finance Ministry was deputed to proceed to Wellington with a cheque for the entire amount due to him. Sam thanked the official and said, "I hope the damn thing does not bounce." He donated the entire amount to the Armed Forces Welfare Fund.

When Sam passed away, the people of Nilgiris lined the road from the hospital at Wellington to the Parsi cemetery in Ooty where he was laid to rest next to his wife, Siloo.

Col Soli R Nazir came to the Nilgiris in 1958 as the Commanding Officer of the Military Hospital at Wellington. During World War II he was awarded the prestigious Military Cross for bravery of the highest order on the Burma front. After his retirement, he joined The Lawrence School at Lovedale as the Medical Officer. He was a scrupulously honest man with a no-nonsense attitude. He and his wife Roshun lived in Coonoor until their demise. Roshun wanted him to make her a brooch of his Military



Cross, which he refused; however, when Roshun died, he dropped it in her grave.

And The Rest

Dr Homi E Eduljee had his roots in Ooty. His great-grandfather came to do business in 1840. He had three sons, Dadabhoy, Meherwanjee and Hormusjee. Meherwanjee's son Eduljee was Homi's father. Homi was born in 1915 in Rangoon where his father was a Marine engineer. Homi went to England and studied at Imperial College in London where he graduated with honours in Chemical Engineering. He worked in England during the war years and returned to India in 1946 where he worked with many institutions and retired to Ooty in 1988 with his wife, Minnie, who incidentally was the daughter of Homi's cousin, Jer Dinshaw Hazary. They had two children, Gev and Jeroo. Gev lives in the UK and, sadly, Jeroo passed away in the US in 2007. Gev retains his ancestral home, Martyn Abbots in Ooty. Homi Eduljee was a trustee as well as the President of the Anjuman till his death in 2008.

In the early 1920s, Hormusjee Padamjee Sethna and his wife came to settle in Coonoor, and they ran a guest house which was later run by Keki and Rati Bhagwager, their daughter and son-in-law who were all from Wardha and Nagpur. They later settled in Bangalore.

Bhumgara after a distinguished service in the PWD of Madras Presidency, retired as Chief Engineer. He built three houses in Wellington. As of today, his granddaughter, Diana Bharucha lives in one of these, with her husband, Cyrus. Diana is a well-known social worker, who does a lot for the poor and needy.

Homi Sethna is a leading light of the Parsi community in the Nilgiris. He has served the Anjuman for nearly 25 years. He has been a trustee and managing trustee and has also been solely responsible for building up the funds of the Anjuman during his tenure. He is a Freemason, was the president of the Coonoor Club, and vice-president, and an active member of the committee of the Wellington Gymkhana club. He lives in his bungalow, Westcroft with his wife Shernaz, and sons, Sarosh and Jehan.

After a long and distinguished career with the Imperial Bank of India and its successor, the State Bank of India, Noshir Hormusjee Vajifdar retired to Ooty with his wife, Freany. He reached the top position of Secretary and Treasurer, Delhi Circle. He was a true Zoroastrian and had authored several prayer books, the popular one being, 'Let us pray'. He was a keen Rotarian, played the piano, and was an amateur

photographer. He took an active part in the Anjuman affairs. He was also the President of the Anjuman and kindly left a considerable sum of money to its funds.

Farokh Aga had a long stint with the Shaw Wallace group of estates in Assam before coming down south where he worked at Craigmore, and then with Forbes, Ewart & Figgis, the tea brokers. Later he was a consultant who, among other things, was involved in putting up the Tan Tea factory in Coonoor. He retired in Coonoor and passed away in his house. Dorab Kanga and his wife came to settle in Coonoor on his retirement after a very successful career in business in Calcutta, where he was also a director on the boards of many companies. He was the President of the Wellington Gymkhana Club. Dr Hirjee Adenwalla and his wife Gulnar came to Coonoor and built their house in the 1980s. Hirji was an eminent surgeon who specialised in operating on children having a harelip and cleft palate. Hirji and his wife, soon after their marriage, went to Trichur in Kerala in 1958 where he took up a very challenging job with a Christian mission, to set up a hospital. He started from scratch and today is responsible for setting up a huge medical institution, 'The Jubilee Mission Hospital'. Hirji lived the last days of his life in Coonoor and never retired. He passed away in 2022.

Dinshaw Hazary died in 1969 after managing the affairs of the Anjuman for half a century, a very efficient replacement was Erach K Meherjee. He worked in Aden, and in 1943, came on a holiday to Ooty, where he met Mehroo Billimoria the daughter



Hormusjee Hazary and Bachubai

of Darabhoy Billimoria. In 1944 he married her and took her to Aden. Later, he moved to Addis Ababa and finally retired to Ooty with his family. They had three daughters and one son. Erach got a job with the law firm of Gonsalves & Gonsalves. He readily accepted the job of Managing Trustee of the Anjuman which he carried out for many years. He passed away and was laid to rest in 1988 in the Aramgah, which he had looked after so well.

Maj Fali Vakharia, a bachelor, retired from the army and came to live in Coonoor. He lived with his uncle, AF Kaka. Sadly, in his old age, he became blind and lived alone, and eventually went back to Gujarat and passed away there.

Mention must be made of Rusi & Siloo Patel, the parents of Kaiwan Patel, who lived in Coonoor at their house, 'Gables'. Rusi's father also had an attachment to Ooty. Themrasp Patel had a bungalow, 'Resthaven', at which they spent the month of May every year. He had business interests in south India in addition to his main area of operations in Bombay. Rusi, the youngest son of Naswanjee Patel of Adar Estate, worked for a Tea plantation company in the Annamalais and Nilgiris. The district was also home to Soli Colah who was squash champion of India and ranked number one in the country in 1976.

A special world must be said about, Erach Avari. If ever there was an old world gentleman, it was he - the way he spoke, the way he dressed and the way he entertained, and most of all the way he told his stories. Equally charming and gracious was his 'lady', Hilla. They lived in Darjeeling and finally came down south and settled in

Coonoor. Erach rests in our Aramgah and Hilla left Coonoor to live with their daughter, Erna in the US. One of her sons, Minoo, is in Kodai, and the other, Nari, a successful Hollywood actor and stage actor, lives in the US. Hilla was a whisker short of 100 when she passed away and was cremated, and her ashes were interned next to Erach in our Aramgah.

And Then...

Finally, a few lines about myself, I was born in Ooty in 1936. At the age of four, I was sent to Miss Copcut's nursery. Interestingly Miss Copcut also taught my mother. At that time there were no schools in Ooty for Indian boys to study in English medium. I went to Nazareth Convent, where boys were admitted till the age of six. After which I was sent as a boarder to St Joseph's College, run by Irish Brothers, where I studied till the age of seven. In 1943, I joined Brecks Memorial School in Ooty which began admitting Indian children. I completed my Senior Cambridge from Brecks and went to college and graduated in Commerce from Loyola College in Madras. I started working in 1958 in Planters Co. (P) Ltd and later in the

year, I commenced my planting career with Travancore Tea Estates Co Ltd (TTE) until 1981, when I moved to work for the Mammen Mappilai Group of estates in Chikmagalur. The Group had three companies, Devon, Balanoor, and Badra. I worked for them for close to 30 years which were the happiest and most satisfying of my 51-year working life. I finally ended my career in the Group's head offices at Bangalore, where I worked for 15 years. Since 2008, I have lived in Coonoor with my wife, Khorshed. My two daughters studied in Lawrence School at Lovedale and now, Rohina works in Toronto, and Ashrafi works in Bangalore.

And so continues the story of the Parsis of the Nilgiris. New blood has arrived with young ones like Kainaaz and Rayan Sethna. New arrivals, like Kyrus Sethna and his wife have moved recently to the hills.

I pray that the next generation continues to serve the hills as their forebears did, and that the Parsis of these beautiful Blue Hills live here as happily as I, and many others, before me have done. ■



Homi Dungheebay

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Leopards (Photo: Aggal Sivalingam)



The Five Felines

*In the previous issue of Inside43, **Rohan Mathias** gave us an overview of the wild canines of the District. In this edition, he takes a look at the felines that live in our forests, and sometimes closer...*



While we tend to
humanise and romanticise
our relationship with big
cats, we must never forget
that we are historically
part of their natural prey
base

To think that there is Tiger habitat within 4 km of the heart of any major town in the Nilgiris, be it Ooty, Coonoor or Kotagiri, should sound absurd. But not to the locals. People spot tigers on their morning and evening strolls. Not often, perhaps, but often enough on the periphery of these towns. Leopards, however, are more frequently sighted much closer to home, post-sunset. While tigers predominantly hunt sambar, gaur, and domestic cattle in the upper reaches of the Nilgiris, homeless dogs and unattended pets are keeping a certain population of leopards well-fed within town limits.

These glamorous large cats took centre stage in the 1980s when their numbers were critically low, leading to various conservation drives and awareness campaigns. One of the more successful conservation drives was the growth of wildlife tourism nationwide. The shift from trophy hunting to shooting with a camera brought awareness and interest in all things wild. Enthusiasm grew from focussing mainly on megafauna (large mammals) to lesser-known creatures. Appreciating the wilderness in totality had begun.

Pictures of wild animals, landscapes and wildflowers replaced animal trophies as display pieces and home decor.

Earlier, people who lived around national parks did not want wildlife on their farms because of the damage they caused to crops or because they would prey on livestock, inflicting a significant loss of revenue. With this new era of wildlife tourism, some agriculturalists shifted focus and began encouraging wildlife on their properties. As interest in indigenous species of flora spilt outside of academic circles, farms started to promote these species as well, and they began to flourish.

Big cat sightings have been on the bucket list for a sizeable share of people. No photograph does justice to a first-hand or first-time sighting of a big cat. When you do see one, you understand why the thrill of it is so momentous, and why people talk about sightings they have had with so much passion. Every detail is revisited. How the light fell on the beast, or how the jungle responded in that moment. Every twitch of the tail or flick of the ear is recounted. Sometimes, the tale is twisted a little

to make the story more memorable. But as they say – why let the truth get in the way of a great story.

There is another creature that has lately fired the imagination of people, perhaps at times more than the tiger – the black panther. Just the name evokes mystery and enigma. At the risk of bursting a few bubbles, these panthers are not as rare in the Nilgiris as one might imagine. It is not widely known that the black panther is merely a melanistic leopard, born into the same litter as its spotted siblings. These ghosts of the night that haunt the outskirts of Coonoor and Kotagiri are not a species unto themselves. Look closely enough, and you will find the same rosettes dotting their coats in varying shades of darkness.

While sightings of the larger cats are more frequent than those of the lesser known wild species, the Nilgiris boasts five of the 16 wild cat species that now live in India: the tiger and the leopard are the two larger ones, and the jungle cat, leopard cat, and rusty-spotted cat are the smaller ones in diminishing order of size.

Spotted at night on security cameras of home gardens, at first glance, the leopard cat tends to be

mistaken for a leopard cub. Those fortunate enough to get a clear sighting should hold on to that memory, because this is not a common encounter. Leopard cats are incredibly stealthy, shy and hard to spot. They are about the size of slim and lanky domestic cats and they feed on mice, small mammals, birds and lizards. Adults are solitary except during the mating season.

Larger than a leopard cat but a lot smaller than a leopard stands the jungle cat. It is best described as sandy, leaning towards grey, with a tint of orange in certain parts of its coat. The tail has a couple of black rings, about three-quarters of the way down, and ends in a black tip. Other characteristic markings that will help

you confirm the species is a few black half-bands on their legs and furry black-tipped ears. They remain active around the clock with occasional, erratically timed snooze breaks. Rodents and hare make up a large portion of their diet.

The rusty-spotted cat is the smallest feline species in the world and the most elusive cat in the Nilgiris. Found only in India and Sri Lanka, an adult of this species weighs about 1.2 kilograms and can fit in the palm of your hand. Primarily nocturnal, the rusty-spotted cat lives on trees and inside hollows and feeds on rodents, birds, frogs, lizards, and insects.

Given that much cat activity happens between dusk and dawn,

you can unobtrusively be in on all the adventures without disrupting your sleep. Strap a portable motion-triggered camera to a tree or a flower pot in your backyard, and you may find that these cats you seek are much closer than you think. Motion sensor cameras can also be used as security cameras in areas where power cables cannot be run. You can secure your camera against theft using a 'Master Lock Python Cable' or a similar alternative. Having camera-trapped for around 16 years, I recommend either Bushnell or Browning amongst the available brands today. They are tried, tested and affordable and will see you on your way should you want to enter this incredible world of exploration.

Rusty Spotted Cat (photo: Pruthvi Basavalingaiah)

“With this new era of wildlife tourism, some agriculturalists shifted focus and began encouraging wildlife on their properties



They can be programmed to take photographs or videos, and can operate around the clock, or specifically during the day or night. It may not be long before you discover that more than one species is doing the rounds in your backyard. In time, you will be able to tell individuals apart by their variants in markings, sex or size.

While we tend to humanise and romanticise our relationship with big cats, we must never forget that we are historically part of their natural prey base. We have managed to change the power dynamic by asserting ourselves, using weapons, technology and various manipulations of the environment. But when it comes down to basic biology, we are no match, and one mistake from us is all it takes to turn the tables. When big cats attack humans, we respond with brutality. The animal is killed so that humans don't fall back into its prey base. Once a cat has made its first human kill and feeds, future attacks are inevitable. It is a fine line that we should maintain to prevent the loss of life on both sides.

Some of us come from a place of privilege, where our interaction with these animals is from the safety of safari vehicles, or from the vantage point of visitors. But there are those who must eke out a livelihood in settings where they do not have the luxury of viewing these animals with awe and wonder. Every day is a chess game of making the right move or paying a heavy price. And the presence of these incredible felines in our midst is a constant reminder that we humans need to respect nature and the diversity of life that surrounds us. ■

Leopard Cat (photo: Sameer Jain)



Bengal Tiger (photo: Sameer Jain)



Jungle Cat (photo: Sameer Jain)





Modern Talking

*We all know and love our Moddy's. **Apsara Reddy** beautifully describes why this place and, of course, others like it, have come to become the heartbeat of our local communities*

When I first stepped into Modern Stores, in Ooty, I felt a swirl of emotions - anxiety mixed with hope. As a transwoman, entering new spaces often carries a weight of uncertainty. But that day, I was met with a warmth and acceptance that would come to define my relationship with this incredible community. The staff greeted me with genuine smiles, their eyes reflecting a kindness that put me at ease. They asked about my day, remembered small details about my life, and made me feel truly seen and valued. Here, women burdened with their own struggles found solace, momentarily forgetting their woes as they shopped and chatted with the friendly staff.

I recall the varied reactions from customers - some curious, some surprised, and others seemingly enchanted. Yet, any apprehension I felt quickly dissipated in the face of the unwavering kindness of the staff. Modern Stores soon became my sanctuary. Indulging in their world-famous hot chocolate, topped with a few dollops of ice cream, became a cherished ritual. It wasn't just about the delicious treat I was partaking of; it was an emotion, a comforting embrace in a cup that soothed my soul.

Just outside the store, a frail yet resilient woman sits to this day, selling nuts and snacks. Murali, the generous owner, has given her a spot in the shade, allowing her to maintain her dignity despite her circumstances. Neglected by her children, she works tirelessly to support herself. Our interactions have always been deeply moving. She often sheds tears when I speak to her or give her a hug, yet she steadfastly refuses to accept money from me, offering her snacks to me instead. I've made it a point to listen to her, to understand her needs, and to provide comfort in whatever way I can. Her resilience and generosity have been a profound lesson for me. As someone who has experienced prejudice and abandonment, I am deeply touched by her capacity for love and acceptance. Despite her own hardships, she continues to give freely and unconditionally. Her spirit is a testament to the goodness that exists within all of us, a reminder that we must tap into this more often.

My own journey has been marked by acts of kindness and generosity. From being invited to address the European Parliament to serving as the keynote speaker at Princeton University to receiving the Shri Amit

Shah Award... to interviewing remarkable individuals like Michael Schumacher, John Howard, and Nicolas Cage... every encounter has been testament to the power of kindness and the doors it can open. And this is powerfully seen yet again with every visit to Modern Stores - not just a store, but a community where people come together, where smiles and small acts of kindness can transform someone's day. It is a place that has given me a profound appreciation for the powerful capacity of loving human interaction.

You see, our opportunities and achievements are often the result of someone's kindness and generosity, and this community, here in the Nilgiris, embodies that truth every single day. ■



Fine Things

"Dressing well is a form of good manners"

Tom Ford

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Bird Call

Inside43 caught up with the effervescent Jennifer Nandi, who recently launched her first book at the Ooty Library, to talk about her early years in the Nilgiris and how it shaped her life

Tell us about your time at Lawrence School, Lovedale.

It's interesting that I attended the same school my mother trained at, as a teacher, before she enlisted as an officer in the Royal Navy as a cypher officer. My father joined the Naval Hydrographic Branch of the Indian Navy after WWII. The data, then, was plotted manually onto linen-backed paper (known as Admiralty Charts), used by merchant vessels worldwide. These chart-drawing offices were in places with equable climates - such as the Nilgiris. And that's how I came to be born at the Military Hospital in Wellington in the Nilgiris!

I joined The Lawrence School, Lovedale in 1961. One of my favourite experiences was our yearly outward-bound camps in the Nilgiri plateau. Rambling, was a thing at school. Across our expanse of 750 acres of

forested land, our Senior Mistress, Shakuntala Bhalla, let us loose without a goal, a supremely efficient use of interstitial time. There was a feeling of safety in an unexplored environment that brought an enhanced enjoyment to the otherwise humdrum life of boarding school.

How did these years help chart the course of your life?

These were my early exposures to fostering positive patterns of conduct towards the environment and my fellow beings, learning about nature and our relatedness. Often in school, we would have sunshine periods where the classroom was shifted to the front lawns. We learned our literature lying on the grass, in the sun and then on stage. Nargis Gupta, my geography teacher at school, exposed us to the wider world in a way that left indelible marks on my psyche. This eventually exploded into what would become the most successful trip of all time for me... And so, I became a birding and wildlife guide.

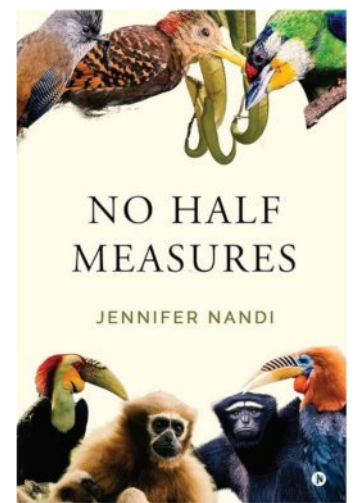
How does the Nilgiris of today compare to when you were younger?

The increase in traffic and the warmer climate are common observations. The loss of the Shola forests is particularly significant as they are such unique ecosystems. Consequently, because of habitat loss, the bison of the grasslands are

now commonplace in parks, on roads and around isolated homes.

Tell us about your book, 'No Half Measures'.

Within the hallowed walls of the 165 year-old library, the atmosphere quickly warmed up to welcome an old Lawrencian from the batch of 1966. The interactive session kicked off with a brief introduction of the book followed by carefully chosen chapters to provoke the listeners into laughter, while gasping at suspenseful moments. Towards the end, most questions were how one could join me on my next adventure. The book takes the reader on a trip when I steered a very important client through an area of unrest and insurgency, as I navigated uncharted territories on the edge of India's map. The area is staggeringly beautiful, blending intersections of culture and science that richly appeal. Being the only woman among the support staff, and mindful of my clients' safety while operating without a support system, through shared exploration, both client and I experienced things out of their normal frame of reference. And hopefully now, so will the reader. ■



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.

Shantiniketan Heritage House offers you the perfect place to relax and take in all the beauty and diversity this unique district offers to the discerning traveller. With all the comforts of home, you can be certain that you will keep coming back for more.

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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



Fire Up Your Plate

Highfield Estate, Coonoor

+91 90255 44582

When you head to or live in the mountains (as the case may be), what do you look forward to the most? For me, it's the cold weather and the authentic charm of a real wood fireplace. BBQ by Cherrie Berry offers this plus great food, making it a delightful weekend escape. Open only on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, this pure vegetarian BBQ spot is a must-visit.

We enjoyed their paneer offerings. Both the Achari Paneer and the Lasooni Paneer are exceptional, with rich flavours that linger on your taste buds. My partner is a complete potato fan so the BBQ Potato was relished as it was cooked to perfection with a hint of smokiness. The mushrooms too were just the right texture and crispness mixed with softness. But the real star for me was the BBQ Corn On The Cob. It's a perfect blend of buttery goodness and the traditional masala-

covered bhutta we used to relish. The ambiance at Cherrie Berry is just as inviting as the food. A lovely firepit invites you to gather around while Chef Binod prepares your meal. The warmth of the fire combined with the mountain chill creates an unforgettable dining experience. Since this is an outdoor setting, I'd recommend dressing warmly, no matter the season. The cool mountain air can be brisk, but it only adds to the charm.

Cherrie Berry restaurant has got their food right on point, every time, and their BBQ offering is no exception. However, it is not just about the food; it's about the experience. It's the perfect place to enjoy the serene mountain atmosphere while indulging in some fantastic vegetarian BBQ.

If yours is the family that likes to eat out on weekends, make sure to add this spot to your itinerary.



Bokkapuram, Masinagudi, Nilgiris

☎ +91 70101 19011

If you're flipping through this issue of Inside43 looking for a new culinary adventure, you've hit the jackpot. Whether you're a local in the Nilgiris or just visiting, let me tell you about a food haven that's just a 30 km drive from Ooty. Trust me, this journey ends in a retreat that'll have your taste buds dancing with joy. If you're coming from the direction of Ooty, hop in your car and prepare for an exhilarating descent to Masinagudi, navigating the thrilling Kallatti Ghats. This route boasts 36 hairpin bends, offering a drive that's as breathtaking as it is challenging. As you wind down the ghats, soak in the panoramic views of the Nilgiri Hills and the lush forests. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife – you might just spot deer, elephants, and a variety of birds, thanks to the proximity to Mudumalai National Park.

Your destination? The charming village of Bokkapuram, home to the delightful Jungle Hut, run by the wonderful Anushri and Vikram Mathias. While the resort's cosy cottages and earthy ambiance are enough to make you want to stay, today we're diving into their culinary delights.

Jungle Hut's buffet spreads for lunch and dinner are nothing short of spectacular. Thoughtfully curated by Anushri, the menu features both South and North Indian dishes, all made from organic ingredients sourced from farms in Ooty and Gundelpet. The home-made pickles, bread, and preserves are just the beginning.

A Culinary Safari

During my visit, I savoured dishes like Mango Curry, Drumstick Masala, and Nadan Chicken Curry with Neer dosas and Patri. But the star of the show? The Chicken Biryani. Imagine this: perfectly cooked basmati rice, each grain long and fragrant, mingling with tender, marinated chicken pieces. Saffron, green chillies, caramelized onions, fresh cilantro, and a squeeze of lemon – every bite was a harmonious blend of savoury, spicy, and aromatic elements. It was, quite simply, to die for.

As if that wasn't enough, my meal ended on a sweet high with an Orange Payasam. This refreshing twist on the traditional South Indian dessert was a creamy, sweet concoction with the tangy zest of fresh oranges. Garnished with orange pieces, cardamom, and slivers of almonds, it was the perfect finale to an unforgettable meal. My companion went back for seconds and thirds.

Jungle Hut is conveniently located 20 km from Bandipur Tiger Reserve, 35 km from Ooty, 100 km from Mysore, and 250 km from Bangalore. Whether you're looking for a memorable day trip with a scenic drive and a fantastic meal, or if Masinagudi is on your route to or from the Nilgiris, Jungle Hut is the place to satisfy your soul and stomach.

Just a heads-up – make sure to call ahead for meal bookings, as they can't accommodate walk-ins. Happy eating!



Soul Food Destination

Above Nilgiris Supermarket, Bedford, Coonoor

☎ +91 94890 52222

Anma – a word that is both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. Derived from the Tamil word for 'soul', Anma reflects a holistic approach to dining, while 'ma' honours the spirit of motherhood.

True to its name, every dish at Anma is fresh and wholesome, just like something your mother would prepare. The menu, curated by legendary culinary master, Vikram Malhotra, features health markers, emotional markers, social cause markers, and flower markers, spotlighting nutritional benefits and core values of the personalised dining experience.

Anma is an all-day breakfast café that serves my all-time favourite English breakfast, including a vegetarian version that is meat-free and eggless. My companion opted for the continental breakfast, which came with the most gorgeous bakery basket, including Danish pastries and croissants.

Their sandwich menu is extensive enough to be another full-fledged restaurant. I had the roast beef sandwich, which melted in my mouth. The Caprese sandwich, with the

freshest arugula in perfect harmony with mozzarella, basil, and pesto, was so delicious that I forced my lunch companion to share it with me.

Every day at noon, fresh offerings from the oven, such as patties, pies, and quiches, are brought into the restaurant. These are masterfully made and incredibly wholesome.

Unlike a typical café, Anma also offers a great selection from the Indian kitchen, including dishes like chana masala, rajma chawal, and rogan josh, served with rice or parathas.

To complete any meal, I need a hot beverage and dessert. Their dessert menu is three pages long, and I was spoiled for choice. Being a fan of lemony desserts, I chose a sinful lemon tart, while my companion indulged in a perfect rum ball. The variety of hot and cold beverages is plenty to satisfy even the pickiest of people.

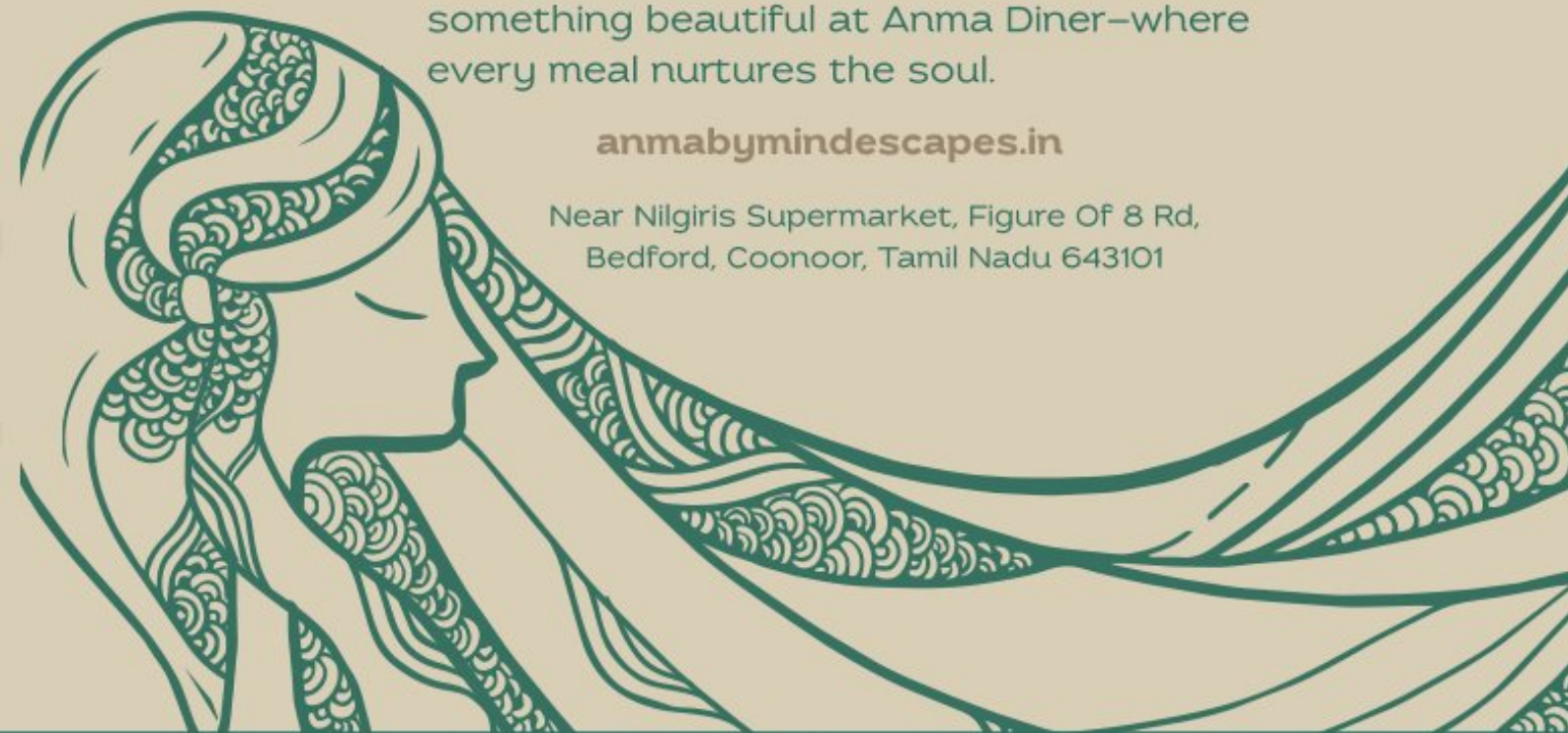
What I have to go back for next time is Anma's Weekday Afternoon Tea For Two, which includes tea or coffee, a sandwich, a pastry, and a savoury offering.

Who wants to indulge with me?



Anma is more than a dining spot; it's a haven for food lovers and change-makers. Come, taste the difference, and be part of something beautiful at Anma Diner—where every meal nurtures the soul.

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SHIELF LIFE

*From sarees to ceramics, from figurines to fashion, from tea to tableware, **Inside43** explores what's available in stores across the Nilgiris*

Please note, some products displayed are one-offs or part of a collection and are subject to availability

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Akshaya Tea Industries

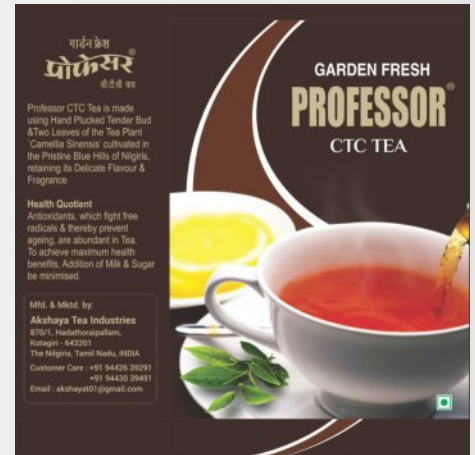
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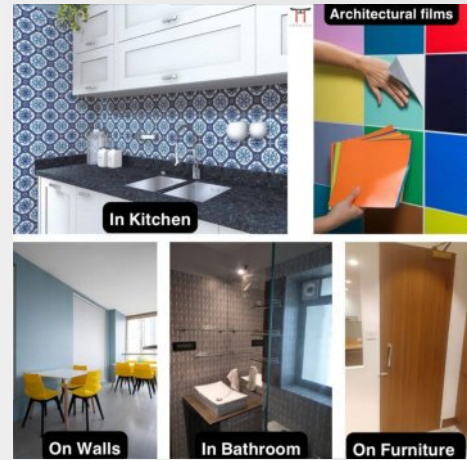
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A Perfect Combination

*The Nilgiris is renowned for its tea and its chocolates. **Inside43** takes a tour around a place that allows you to sample a bit of both...*



The story of Ooty's Benchmark Tea Factory and Tea Museum began nine years ago when Rajesh Devarajan's father bought a plot of land. After much planning he began constructing a large factory on the land, and at the time, their thoughts had not gone beyond simple tea production. But a

few years later he began to experiment with chocolate making as well, producing quality chocolate bars. As time went on, he started to experiment and learn the nuances of the chocolate-making trade, and switched from making bars of compound chocolate to pure instead.

Place to Go

The tea factory opened its doors to the public and it was an instant success. While he only began making tea in 2015, the chocolate production starting only four years later, in 2019, the benchmark is now chocolate, which customers seem to adore.

Their chocolate is widespread in popularity, with the tea factory having an average of 300 people per day, to an average of 500 during tourist season. Rajesh says this is because tourists come from across the world to witness the end-to-end process of how chocolates are made, a sight that very few factories permit visitors to see, and he prides himself on having a “no hide-and-seek” policy when it comes to his work.

He never stops learning and has reached out to dealers all the way in Italy about procuring state-of-the-art chocolate-making machines. Unfortunately, these proved to be far too expensive for what was supposed to be just an experiment in a tea factory.

Taste for Business

This business founded by Rajesh's father continues to be a family-owned business, but is now run by Rajesh himself, with general operations executed by his wife. It is currently a benchmark tourist centre. Alongside this, the family also owns other successful businesses such as the Wax Museum, Art Gallery, and the 5D theatre.

Rajesh's passion for chocolate shines through beautifully, as he expands on all the finer details of this delicious business. One may think there are three main types of chocolate - milk, white, and dark. But Rajesh speaks about the nuanced differences between compound and couverture chocolates. Compound chocolates, he explains, refer to the cheaper bar chocolates that are more commonly seen on the market. This type of chocolate contains hydrogenated vegetable fats, which counteract the health benefits of

cocoa. Whereas couverture chocolate contains cocoa butter, which has been shown to maintain cholesterol levels in the body, combat kidney problems and improve heart health. To make couverture chocolate, he sources cocoa beans straight from Ghana and roasts them at around 30°C. Then he removes the outer shells so only the nibs are left, which are ground down to produce the cocoa mass, after which they add cocoa butter from the oil of the pressed cocoa beans. White chocolate, incidentally, does not contain cocoa mass.

The Hard Road

But it isn't all sugar and spice in the tea or chocolate trade. Rajesh speaks of the hardships he went through when switching from a factory meant solely for tea production to a factory that also made quality chocolates. The biggest hurdle that Rajesh and his family faced was that they knew nothing about how to make chocolates. He even got scammed for four lakh rupees over a chocolate-tempering machine, saying that someone “tampered with my tempering machine”. The mistake led him to the realisation that a genuine machine was far more expensive, with prices beginning at Rs 14 lakh. It took a very long time for him to source the right equipment, and after that, he still had no teacher, other than YouTube to tutor him in the art of making chocolates.

Rajesh, however, felt that money was the least of his concerns. As he says, “If something does not work, it's still an experience. Many things can go wrong until you find out what suits you.” He believes that one should focus on outcomes and learning and



“The Tea Factory & the Tea Museum continues to draw customers and sightseers from across the globe



the rest will take care of itself. And so armed with determination and faith he continued making chocolates, and the business, unsurprisingly, has boomed.

Initially he allotted only 20,000 rupees out of his entire budget towards chocolate-making, while everything else was allocated for tea production. There has now been a 180 degree turn, and he has three whole floors dedicated to the chocolate business and only a single floor devoted to making tea.

Today Rajesh continues to find joy in making new chocolates, and has tried to make over 200 types of chocolates, attempting to learn new things whenever he can, and has kept and retained chocolates based on customer reaction. He currently has a range of signature chocolates that keep locals and tourists coming back for more.

Thriving on Chocolate

Chocolate-making has become a very enjoyable business for Rajesh, after the initial scepticism about whether or not making chocolates from scratch would be worth the investment. Today, he believes that it is the perfect job for him as he gets to cater to both tourists and locals. Rajesh, states with considerable marketing acumen, "The reason for this increase in the business of chocolate-making is that children are far more interested in chocolate

factories than tea museums or tea factories, and so will badger their parents until they get their way." He finds it amusing to see where he is today, as he looks back on the past, when he and his family had thought of building diverse tourist attractions, but the idea of building a tea and chocolate factory never crossed their minds.

It is worthwhile noting that most of the workers in the factory are women. As with many jobs, social stigmas have also been applied to chocolate-making, and it is seen as a very delicate employment. Women, it seems, are more passionate about chocolate-making than men. Rajesh states that this could be because men prefer taking the more heavyweight jobs when it comes to factory work.

The largest hand in the success of his business is that Rajesh has never tried to never raise the prices of the items that he sells. He claims that his ideal is to sell the "best chocolates for the lowest price". This is because he firmly believes that when it comes to this sort of business, you can only sell your goods if the price is affordable to all wallets. This has resulted in a very good relationship with his customers, and he goes as far as to personally replying to the online reviews that are left about his factory to ensure the trust and loyalty of his customers are returned in equal measure

Presently, entry to the Tea and Chocolate Factory is technically free, but to get a complimentary 35g of chocolate alongside the tour, you pay 30 rupees as an entrance fee. Alongside this, the entry to the tea floor of the factory is also free, but if you pay the fee of just 10 rupees, they will give you six varieties of tea to taste for free.

Rajesh strives to make his place welcoming and serene, and apart from his own efforts, the view surrounding the factory definitely helps. From the factory, Ooty is clearly visible, and he has two telescopes on the factory roof for his guests. The factory is also equipped with a Wi-Fi accessible café making it perfect for teenagers - the factory also hosts college interns who wish to learn more about the art. So far, the factory has hosted around 6,000 internship students.

The Tea Factory & the Tea Museum continues to draw customers and sightseers from across the globe, and Rajesh intends to continue creating new chocolates for everyone. He and his family have given tea and chocolate the most unique connection, and added to the legacy of these hills... that this is the place to come to if you want fine views, fine tea, fine chocolate and fine people. ■



The Benchmark Tea Factory and Chocolate Factory is located at 4/922, Kotagiri Road, Mel Kodappamund, Ooty, and is open daily from 9am to 6:30pm. More details at <https://benchmarkooty.com>

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Homestay Magic



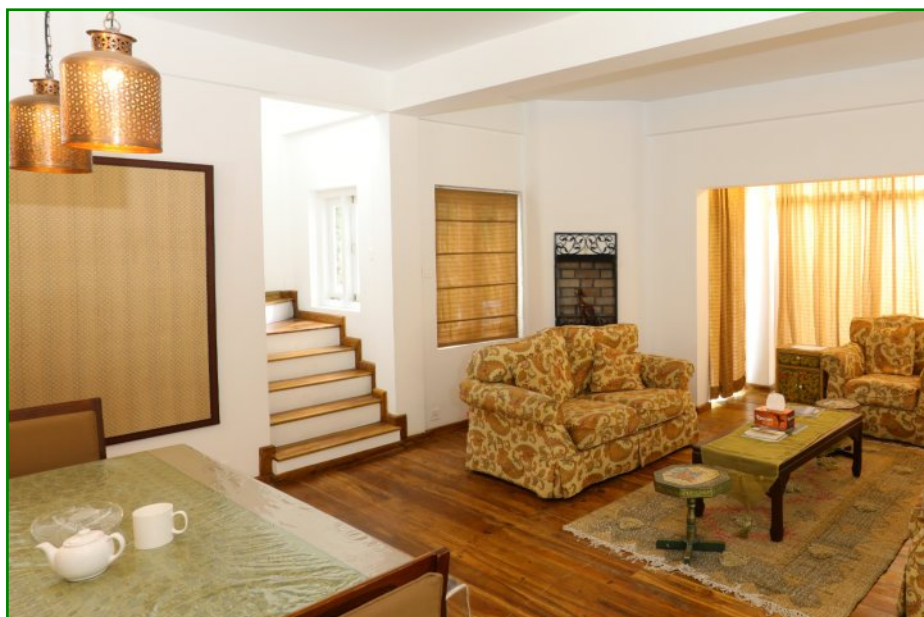
*If you're looking for the perfect holiday in the Nilgiris, Fairytale Cottage in Coonoor offers the best of all worlds. **Inside43** pops in to have a look around a newly launched homestay in the district*

Tucked up a tiny road, right at the Lamb's Rock junction sits a charming, Greek-style Mediterranean cottage. Much like the TARDIS, it looks small on the outside, but opens up into a spacious, three-bedroom cottage that brings together a colonial ethos, Mediterranean living and a Nilgiris atmosphere in an elegantly crafted space; one that makes wonderful use of the land it sits on. The cottage looks out right over Reserved Forest, one of the very few in the district to do so, and one of the first things that one sees most mornings is a family of Malabar squirrels jumping from tree to tree, in play, or foraging for their breakfast.

Come On In

As you step through the wrought iron gates, a uniquely stamped front patio leads up to a pretty front verandah with handcrafted grill work - the patio stamp has been taken from the grill work and instantly tells you that this cottage is different to others. A lush flower bed on one side hosts a profusion of hill flowers and creepers, and on the other side stands white trellising, along which grows climbing roses and ivy. It brings to mind a cottage from the stories of Enid Blyton, from which the name Fairy Tale Cottage was derived. The ethnic patterned tiles of the veranda, with their mehendi-coloured chairs, lead to a white-painted, front door with a Buddha-styled, brass door handle.

Step in and you are in serene surroundings. Warm peach and subtle green interiors offer a welcoming ambience and invite you to sink into the comfortable, paisley-patterned, deep sofas that look out over more flower beds. An open plan living and dining room features a bay



window and bespoke brass pendant lamps over a sheesham dining table and chairs which then leads you into the cottage-style kitchen, complete with a dining area and an American-sized fridge. The downstairs features rustic wooden flooring, a powder room and a cosy bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. Raw silk curtains and blinds in a gentle shade of rust-orange form the perfect palette for the original artwork on the walls. An assortment of toning rugs lie scattered about, and walking out of the backdoor offers a surprise. An enclosed back patio, hidden away flowering plants make it the perfect place to spend a quiet afternoon, reading, or perhaps just reflecting on life. An outside bar, with the same grillwork as the rest of the house, makes it the ideal spot to entertain friends and family, and is secluded enough to not disturb the animals or neighbours.

A wood-treaded staircase leads one upstairs to a small alcove study, a comfortable family room, and two other bedrooms, both cosy and snug, with their own en-suite bathrooms.

The family room leads out into a delightful balcony with an English country table and chairs that offer a restful, shaded spot to take in the magnificence of the Nilgiris lush shola forests. The family room also opens out to a comfortably-sized terrace with patterned tiles, and echoes the beautiful grillwork around the rest of the house. Seating for six gives one the opportunity to enjoy a meal upstairs, if need be, while taking in the beauty of the surrounding hills, tea gardens and flowering trees of the area.

Homeward Bound

Fairy Tale Cottage is perfectly named, as it is a magical little place that brings to mind stories heard in childhood, and one might almost expect a pixie or two to pop out of the flower beds to say hello. Those observant enough will find a seated fairy in the garden, watching over the place, and casting her spells over those staying in the house. The house was designed to be water-friendly, in a district short of water, especially during the busy season times. Which is why there are no vast lawns, but one is not starved of greenery in any

shape or form, and the profusion of flower beds might have one believing they are sitting in a cottage in the Kent countryside, in England.

The entire home is curated to be restful - a home-away-from-home, with art, curtains, furniture sourced from around the world and brought together with charming elegance. Every room has coordinated furnishings and paintings in muted, soft colours that instantly create a sense of peace and rest. While in the heart of Coonoor, it still feels secluded and far away from the bustle of the town. There are eating establishments close by, like the legendary Tiger Hill Tea Shop a short distance away. And for those who like walking and nature hikes, the potential for rambles and strolls along beautiful roads, tea gardens and sholas is endless.

As homestays go, Fairy Tale Cottage makes for the perfect cottage. While it offers the guest independence with self catering options, there is also the possibility of ordering in breakfast. Wonderfully, it is dog-friendly, as long as one's pets are house-trained and do not jump on the expensive furniture.

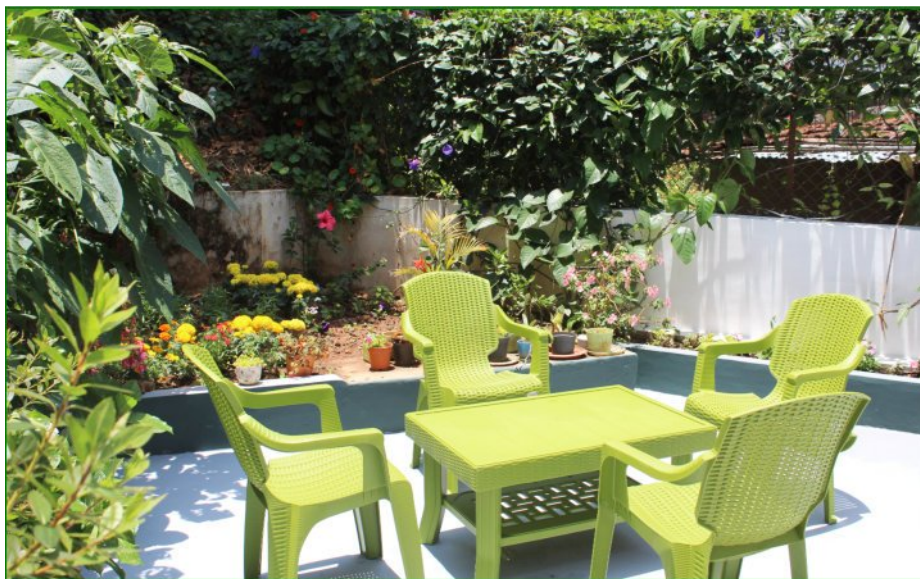
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HORSE SENSE



A little out of Ooty stand some beautiful stables and paddocks that are home to a set of magnificent show horses. Inside43 visits this recently set up equestrian centre to find out more about Tara and Sandeep Dewan, the couple who set up this impressive facility

Tara and Sandeep Dewan are no strangers to the Nilgiris. With an army background, both of them spent a memorable portion of their youth in Wellington, with fathers who were posted to the Defence Services Staff College. Sandeep followed in his father's footsteps, spending 23 years in the army, with the 61st Cavalry, an elite military regiment, renowned for its prowess in the equestrian field. With an innate love for and understanding of horses, it was a natural course for Sandeep, who had been part of the Junior National Team to Australia in 1984. While serving, he went on to compete nationally and internationally in equestrian sports; Dressage, Show Jumping and Eventing at the Asian Games, and the World Show Jumping Championships. He is a member of the Equestrian Federation of India, and a National Dressage and Show Jumping judge and coach. It was his dream to set up and have his own facility someday where he could train, breed and immerse himself completely in the field.

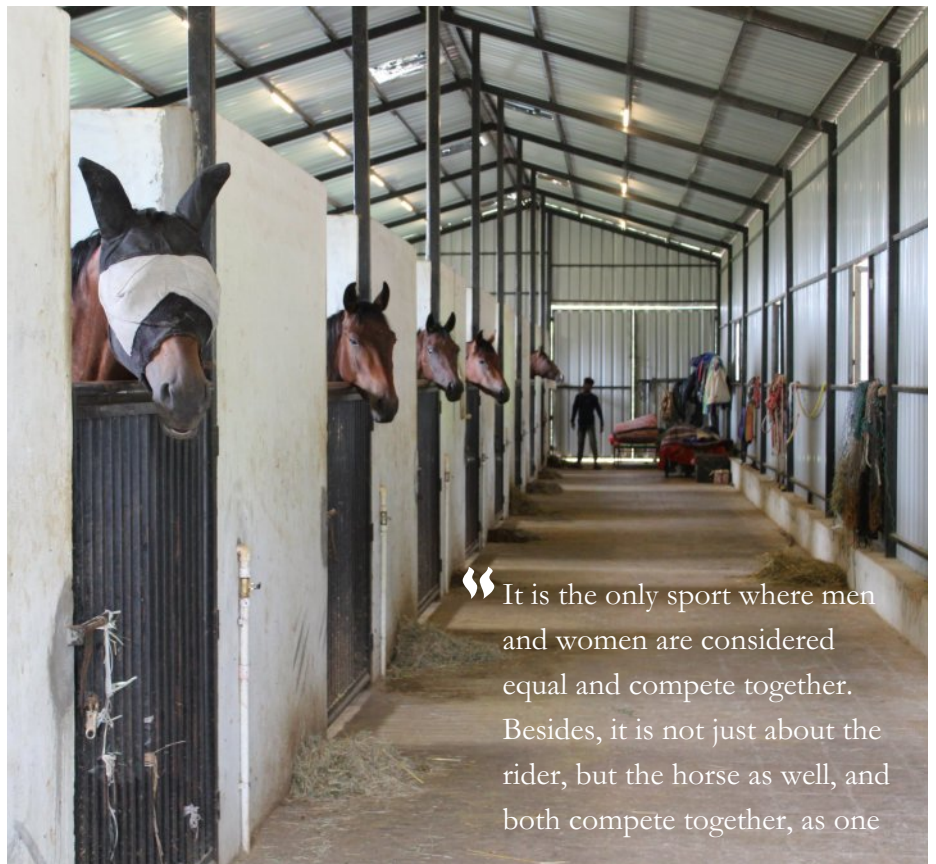
Tara's father was from the 45th Cavalry, who retired in Ahmednagar, and horses were not new to her either as she had been riding her whole life. As she says, "I love being around horses. You feel uplifted; they are so majestic, different, individual." She

and Sandeep met when she was just 19, while Sandeep was stationed at Ahmednagar and their mutual love for all things equestrian drew them to each other and has held them together for close to 35 years. They honeymooned at the Nilgiris, as well. Tara was the vice-president of the Latika Roy Foundation in Dehradun and she headed the counselling services for an overseas education company in Rajasthan State. After retirement, they moved to Jaipur where they set up a horse farm and

ran a bed and breakfast - Silver Spurs, as it was called - offering riding lessons and a farm experience. However, as time went on they found the weather was completely unsuitable for what they were doing. And so they looked southwards and of course, the Blue Hills beckoned...

The Nilgiris Chapter

The couple moved lock, stock and barrel from Jaipur, to the Nilgiris, in 2013 and after extensive searching found land in Kenthorai, a village about 11 kilometres from Ooty. They



“It is the only sport where men and women are considered equal and compete together. Besides, it is not just about the rider, but the horse as well, and both compete together, as one



bought a bungalow in Lovedale, and then began the work to set up High Acres Equestrian Centre and Stud. It was an incredible amount of work. From clearing the land to levelling it, to plotting out the various stables, terraces, flats and getting the seven acres ready for the horses. A road was constructed, a small studio apartment erected... none of this was easy, as the expertise for the very specific building requirements they had were hard to come by in these hills.

So they brought in staff and expertise from other states, and work progressed steadily to create the space they have today. "The rains made things really difficult," says Tara, "but we were determined to make the best of things." They constructed a massive covered arena for the horses... a beautiful open space surrounded by forest on one side and the vast sweeping hills, covered by tea, on the other.

They initially started by training horses and advanced level students. They imported some stallions and mares, while others were sourced

from race courses and breeders around India. Today, their facility is home to 18 brood mares, two ponies, two stallions, and with six foals expected this year, the Centre is growing rapidly. The horses are immaculately looked after with regular rotas for grooming, feeding and exercise. Medical care is keenly attended to with vets from Bangalore



being brought in to check on them each month, while Dr Ilona and Nigel from WVS, in Ketti, provide emergency care as and when needed. The Centre has first aid capabilities, as well, and one look around the place will tell you that, for this couple, horses are family, not just business. Running alongside the horses is the rescue dog, Blacky, and an assortment of cats who have made the Centre their home.

Creating Change

Tara and Sandeep currently employ 15 people to look after the horses, and have big expansion plans in mind. "Right now we provide advanced training for horses, but who knows, we may look at setting up a riding school in the future. We need to increase our scope, and it is my hope that we will be able to introduce more bloodlines and, with time, create an Indian Sport horse. But right now we breed and train horses for excellence in equestrian sports," says Sandeep.

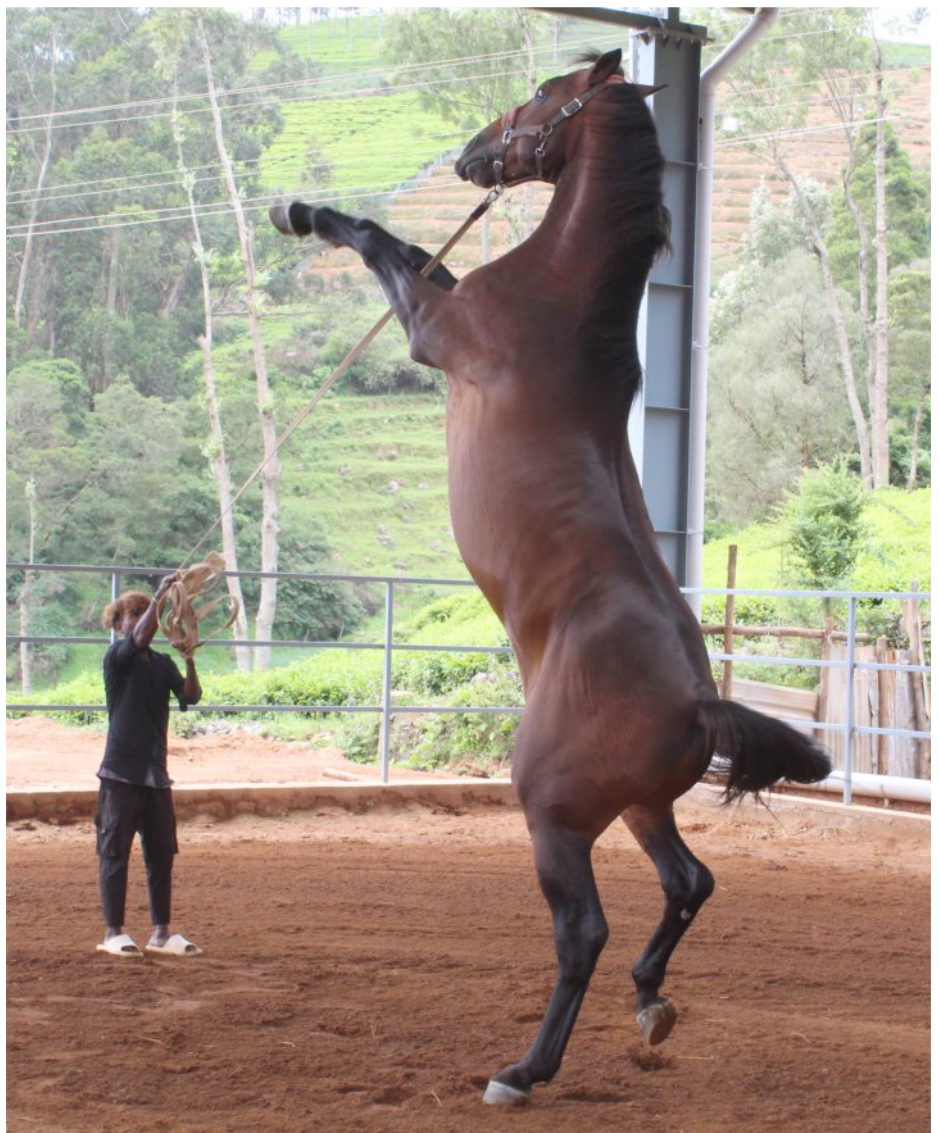
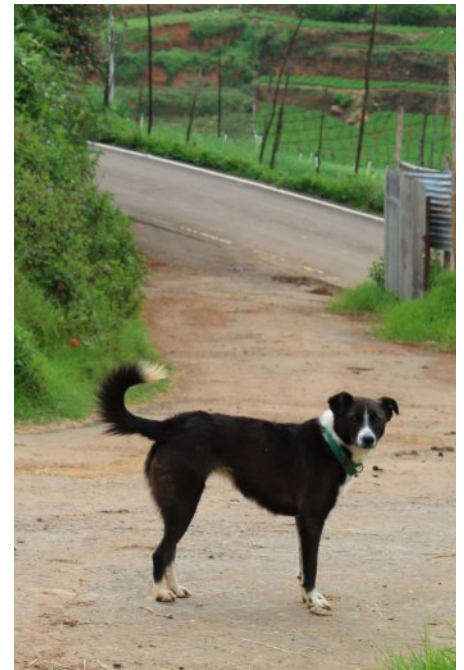
They both express concern about the industry, globally and nationally, "In India, the industry is at a very

“ The couple moved
lock, stock and barrel
from Jaipur, to the
Nilgiris, in 2013

nascent stage, as the investment to do it right, and the logistical requirements, are not insignificant. Sometimes we see horses kept in terrible conditions. There are industry mandates for the size of stables, shackle specifications, no spurs, feeding regulations, etc, but people often forego these in the pursuit of commercial transactions. Of course, there are organisations like the Embassy Group, Delhi Friendicos, The Brooke Foundation... that are doing a lot to mitigate these deviations and ensure that industry standards are met and maintained,” says Sandeep, in his quiet, composed voice. Tara is quick to add a couple of little-known facts about the sport. “It is the only sport where men and women are considered equal and compete together. Besides, it is not just about the rider, but the horse as well, and both compete together, as one. It is truly a place where man, woman and horse come together on equal footing.”

The Nilgiris has long attracted an unusual breed of humans. From the early and distinctive tribes that have known it as home forever, to newer entrants who have brought unusual skills and contributions to the district, Tara and Sandeep Dewan stand out. They have created an impressive equestrian centre, and brought

something distinctive and unusual to the landscape of our hills. The High Acres Equestrian Centre and Stud is a first for the Nilgiris, and has added a uniqueness to our mountains, placing it, yet again, on the international map. And while we are delighted to have this amazing equestrian centre as part of our district offering to the world, Tara and Sandeep say they are equally happy to be here. “There’s enough to keep one busy, nature here is so beautiful and welcoming, the people are friendly, and we truly believe moving to the Nilgiris was a great decision.” We put it all down to their horse sense. ■



‘Wright’ly Said

Recalling a couple who embodied the spirit of the Nilgiris - Inside43 pays tribute to the elegant Phyllis and Charles Wright whose legacy can never be forgotten

In 1920, Thomas Wright, the then sub-registrar of Coonoor moved into Bridge House in Wellington. The house belonged to the Zamindar of Uthukali who had five properties in the area, and family legend tells the story of how he told Thomas, “Tom you choose and stay”. And that’s how Bridge House was purchased and six generations of Wrights have now come to occupy the red-roofed bungalow, tucked cosily into a corner around Manekshaw Bridge.

About Charles

Colonel Charles Wright, Thomas’ grandson, studied at Lawrence School, and was an officer with the artillery who took premature retirement, having had an illustrious run with the military. He served with the Chindits, a regiment under General Lemaire, the first ever Commandant of the DSSC, and was part of the Burma Star Campaign. When the British Army offered him a position, Charles chose to serve in the Indian Army. Eventually, after his many postings around India, he returned to his roots and the very

bare Bridge House, along with his wife Phyllis, an invalid mother-in-law, a dog and 64 boxes. The earlier furniture had been disposed of by Charles’ parents who had thought that no one would ever return to the home. And so, they began retired life with a camp cot, and a nest of tables that still stands in the house today. He returned to the church of his boyhood, the Garrison Church in Wellington, and settled into life in our lovely hills.

In the mid 1970s, the Indo-German Project came to Ooty and this started Charles on a new venture. He began growing strawberries and became the largest grower in the South, farming three acres of the fruit that were bought up by companies like Kissan. He also had a few cows that he learned to milk and started making his own butter, ghee and cheese. A heart attack in 1980 slowed him down a little in his farming business, but his indomitable self would still be seen around the Nilgiris, as he went about on his motorcycle wearing his signature navy-blue army beret. He

was an avid lover of literature and was part of the Poetry Group. ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling was his favourite piece, and it was read at his funeral by his granddaughter, Tanya.

Charles was instrumental in starting the Martyr’s Day Service at his church, to recall those that laid their lives down for the freedoms we enjoy today. He was a member of the Freemasons and was celebrated for 50 years of service to the organisation. He was keenly interested in War Graves and was a life member of the British Association of Cemeteries in South Asia. He took personal charge of the 50 war graves in the Wellington Cemetery and looked after them with love and dedication until his very end. He was the go-to person for anyone researching their family roots in Wellington and stayed in touch with



families long after their research in the Nilgiris ended. He led the Anglo-Indian community and was in charge of Tamil Nadu. He never once missed an AGM, often travelling considerable distances to attend. He remained the oldest Lawrencian alive for many years, leading the Old Lawrencian march past at every Founder's Day event, often to thunderous applause. But, with all of this, Charles was perhaps best-known for his 'elevenses' and would often invite people back home to partake with him, a feature of which were Phyllis Wright's famous biscuits.

About Phyllis

Few may know this, but Phyllis Wright, née Gardner, was of royal stock. Her ancestor married a Mughal Princess and their lineage is recorded in Debrett's in the UK, with both Helen and Tanya, her granddaughters, also currently listed. She met Charles in Dehradun and they got married, producing a daughter, Dierdre, who now resides in Bridge House. Phyllis instituted Sunday School at the Garrison Church and was the organist and pianist for the church. Her knowledge of chords, her piano playing and singing were legendary. She graduated from the Isabella Thorborne College in Lucknow, where her musical talents were greatly encouraged, and then went to study further at the University of Birmingham. She and Charles would often perform musical pieces together - songs from *My Fair Lady* being one of their favourites. She started the Nilgiri Choral Society in the early 70s, which continues to this day. The choristers began by singing in each other's homes, but were soon performing all over the district. When

asked what does the Choral Society sing, she would always say, "Everything - from the sacred to the secular, from the sublime to the ridiculous." She would write the sheet music by hand and Charles would cyclostyle these for the choir. Their performance programmes never had a date, so they could use the copies repeatedly at different venues. They were environmentally friendly, long before it became the trendy thing to do, it seems. Phyllis was instrumental in producing musicals for schools. She and Ivan Enos (who needs no introduction) put up a phenomenal production of 'Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' in the late 80s, with the students of Mountain Home School.

She was an active member of the University Women's Association, and assisted with the free clinic they ran for over four decades. Once a week, come rain or shine she would catch the town bus from near her home and travel to Bedford Circle and diligently assist with her duties at the clinic. She always had a smile for the children of the town, and those who

remember her, will remember her smile and gracious ways that were uniformly bestowed on all, regardless of their station in life.

About Them Both

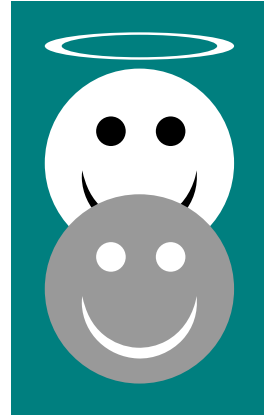
If ever there was a couple that knew how to work together in tandem, and yet give each other space, it was Charles and Phyllis Wright. They shared a deep friendship above all else, and as grandparents they were second to none, taking care of their grandchildren with absolute dedication and devotion, when their daughter Dierdre needed them to. Individually accomplished, together they were a force, a force that was felt by all who met them. In their gentle and humorous way they served this district, added to its charm and created legacies that outlived them both. Their passing, six years apart from each other, left a hole in the social fabric of this district that will never quite be filled. We are just grateful that for five decades they chose to make these hills their home, until they were finally called home.

Thank you, Phyllis and Charles. We shall not forget... ■





NOW AND THEN



A short look at life over the decades, seen through the eyes of one of the Nilgiris' earliest national figures. A word from the Onida Devil himself...

I suppose I can say my introduction to the Nilgiris was rather traumatic...

I was admitted as a boarder to Lawrence School, Lovedale, in 1965, at the tender age of ten. Home had been Bangalore until then and I found it extremely hard to be away from family and all that I held familiar as a child. But in a short three months I found myself loving school, and more importantly fell in love with the hills. My father was in the army, and after retirement was appointed secretary to the Ooty Gymkhana Club. My mother became principal of the Mountain Home High School, and some of her students still live in these hills and remember her well. My sister and I finished our studies in Bangalore, but we were up in our beloved Blue Mountains as often as we could get away and every visit was memorable and helped shape and form us as individuals. We worked thirty years and then, made the move back the Nilgiris. And the difference was palpable.

I remember a time when everything shut by 6pm - shops, markets - people went home and went to bed

early. We needed medication once in 1965, and we had to go to a hospital to procure it, as nary a pharmacy was open. In the early 70s one had to wait almost three months to get a gas cylinder refill. Today I can get a replacement cylinder in under three hours and we are spoilt for choice when it comes to supermarkets. I remember when we ran to Coimbatore to get a pizza, or even a good meal of Indian food. Today I get everything at the touch of a button, it seems, in the comfort of my own home. I suppose this is true of all small places across India. But there's something undoubtedly special about the Nilgiris.

But despite the modern-day conveniences, I yearn for that simpler pace of life of another time. And I do find it still. Despite the influx of commerce, exciting new entrants, the convenience of modern day, I still find that friends take time out for each other: there is a generational connect when I bump into people who knew my parents, or those who remember my Onida avatar. I still feel the same remembered breeze touch my face in

the early morning, and the shapes of these glorious mountains remain unchanged.

I am the envy of all my friends who think I live in an exotic resort destination and I suppose, in some respects I do.

And so, every morning, when I walk to have my morning coffee, I feel lucky. So lucky that these mountains have been my constant, something to cling to in a rapidly changing world. And I feel utterly so blessed that my life's journey has given me roots in this incredible part of the world. ■

David Whitbread has been associated with the advertising and fashion industry since 1982 as stylist, producer and model. He was the brand face of Onida TV from 1985 to 1999. He also modelled for other products, walked the ramp and did cameos in a few Bollywood productions. He continues to work with fashion guru, Prasad Bidapa and is currently living a semi-retired life in Coonoor.

Earth, Spirit and Fire



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



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