

inside43

Celebrating the Nilgiris

First Anniversary Issue Winter 2024/25

Coonoor's Cosmonaut

India's first man in space, in his own words

In Salute

The rich history of the DSSC

The Cycle of Life

A view of the Nilgiris, on two wheels



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We Are One



When I first broached the idea of a magazine for the Nilgiris there was a huge amount of scepticism, "What will you write about?" "How will you fund it?" "Don't do it!" Some of it was well-intentioned, some of it not so much. But amidst some negativity, the loudest sound was that of unstinting support.

Writers, photographers, designers, advertisers, patrons came out in such strength that it was overwhelming. Story ideas began to flow in from day one, and the entire community banded together under the umbrella of Inside43. Over 100 people from around the district put their shoulder to the wheel to make this magazine possible. Over 100 people are responsible for Inside43 making it through a whole year, and giving the district a publication unlike any other. A big thank you to you all!

From asking for small sums, we recently received a single issue sponsorship from the Neterwala Group of Companies, which has transformed the cash flow of this, our anniversary issue, and we are so grateful for their most timely generosity.

Navroze Sethna of United Consultants and Ravi Murugaiah most kindly supplemented our anniversary event with sponsorships... As a result, we were able to invite our advertisers, supporters and patrons, and thank them for being the wind under the wings of this community-led magazine.

Our anniversary issue packs quite the punch. From the legendary Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian man in space, to the life of the inspirational Tarun Chhabra, to a

charitable collective of daily wage workers, to recalling the life of Theo Devagnanam, founder of Needle Industries... we have once again put together a powerful issue that showcases the incredible diversity of this district and its people.

In the last year, we have all learned so much about the district, and reader feedback has been heart-warming and ever so encouraging. It keeps us, at Inside43, motivated to continue being the voice of all that is good in our precious hills. I and the team hope to keep this magazine alive for a long time. There are content ideas going forwards for years, so here's looking at another 12 months showcasing all our district has to offer.

Certainly, the actual work is unbelievably time-consuming and complex - normally a magazine like this would need a team of at least 15 dedicated employees to bring it together - we have done it with a core team of roughly three and a half people. While it's been tough, it has also been immensely gratifying to see how much the district loves its magazine.

So, here's to another year of coming together in support, love, collaboration, pride and friendship through the pages of Inside43. For, as we turn one, the most poignant thing I have learned from a year of doing Inside43 is that we are all, indeed, one.

Sangeetha Shinde
Founding Editor

A Homestay...



That Feels Like Home

Prakritilaya Nature Homes is a tranquil eco-stay nestled in Kotagiri, part of the Nilgiris' picturesque landscape. Surrounded by lush tea gardens, it offers guests an immersive experience with activities like tea trail walks, hands-on gardening, and biodiversity treks. Accommodation includes family, premium, and luxury suites, each designed for comfort with a warm, rustic feel. The eco-conscious environment emphasizes local, organic vegetarian cuisine and a zero-waste philosophy. Ideal for nature lovers and families alike, it's a refreshing retreat to unwind amidst serene natural beauty.



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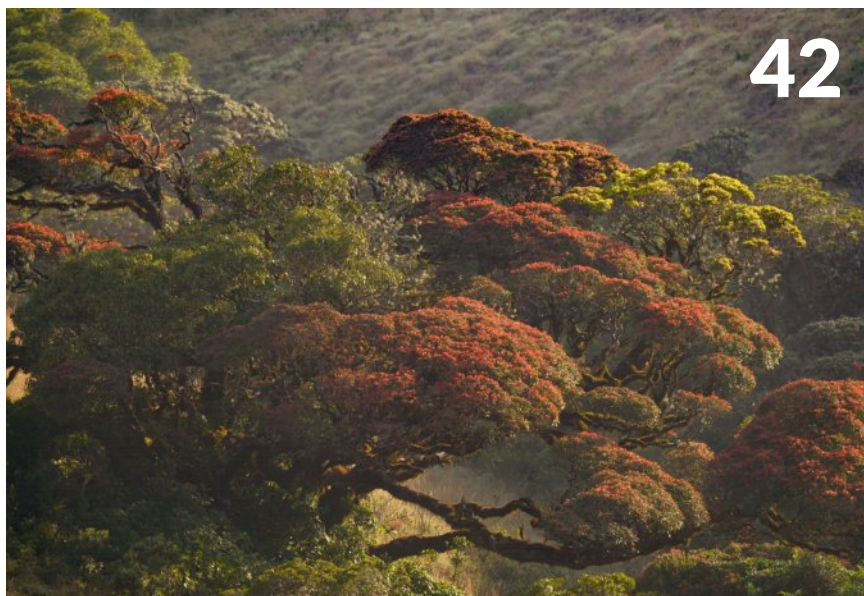
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42



INFORM

Pg 3: We Are One

Celebrating one year of Inside43 and looking back on how a district came together in its making

INFOCUS

Pg 8: Coonoor's Cosmonaut

India's first man in space tells us about his extraordinary life from air force pilot to cosmonaut to Coonoor

Pg 12: Finding His Tribe

The life and achievements of Dr Tarun Chhabra, champion extraordinaire of the Todas

INFLUENCE

Pg 16: Siren Call

The ambulance service, from the Rotary Club of the Nilgiris, we must all know about

Pg 20: Being the Change

Learn about the Abdul Kalam Foundation, a beacon of hope, run by Sathick Sana and a team of daily-wage workers

INSPIRED

Pg 26: A Stroke of Genius

Discover the vibrant canvas of Kabir Mehta, a part-time resident of the Nilgiris, and his exploration of abstract art

INHABIT

Pg 32: All Lives Matter

Meet Dr Ilona Otter, a Finnish vet, who has made a dramatic difference to animal care in the Nilgiris

INHALE

Pg 36: The Cycle of Life

Discover the uninhibited joy of experiencing the Nilgiris, as only a cycling enthusiast can

96



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INSCRIBE

Pg 24: A Dramatic Turn

Vijaya Dar tells us of his recent immersive experience in directing *Coonoor Tales - A Play in 3 Acts*

Pg 30: Divinity in Diversity

Ishani Dutt Sarkar on why living in the Nilgiris is such a special thing

Pg 64: So Much More...

Apsara Reddy tells us how relationships in these hills nurture and warm one's heart

Pg 76: A Blended Life

Surekha Kothari tells us how connectivity in our hills goes beyond the realms of technology

INCONVERSATION

Pg 40: Our Favourite Security Uncle

Meet the much-loved security guard who directs traffic at Moddy's, Coonoor

INCREDIBLE

Pg 42: Once Upon a Time

Beautiful aerial photography by Felis Films, from the documentary, *Nilgiris - A Shared Wilderness*

INTIME

Pg 54: In Salute

A fascinating journey through the history of the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington

Pg 60: The Nilgiris' First Nations

A snapshot of the six original tribes of the Nilgiris



INFUSE

Pg 66: RoyalTea

The Homedale saga: a story of how one family has taken a tea estate from strength to strength

INDOORS

Pg 72: Of Homes and Hills

Meet the company that has been building quality homes in the Nilgiris that are in perfect sympathy with the colonial ethos of this district

INSTORE

Pg 78: Shelf Life

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

INDULGE

Pg 86: In Good Taste

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

INCOMING

Pg 90: Daughter of the Hills

Meet Dipali Sikand, founder of MIndEscapes®, who has brought a unique stamp to our district with her innovative thinking

INMEMORIAM

Pg 94: Ripple Effect

In tribute to the life and impact of the visionary Theo Devagnanam, founder of Pony Needles

INSIGHT

Pg 96: The Making of Memories

Phiroosa Neterwala recalls the generational connections she and her husband, Feroze, share with the Nilgiris

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Coonoor's Cosmonaut

2024 marks exactly four decades since a Nilgiris resident was the first Indian man in space. Inside43 is privileged to feature the legendary **Rakesh Sharma**, in his own words...

Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, a former Indian Air Force pilot, holds a unique place in India's history. He became the nation's first astronaut when he embarked on a joint Indo-Soviet space mission in 1984. He is the only Indian citizen to hold this unique distinction to date. His historic journey to space was a culmination of years of rigorous training and selection. After serving in the Indian Air Force, he was chosen for the Soviet Interkosmos programme, where he travelled aboard the Soyuz T-11 spacecraft, orbiting the Earth for nearly eight days. During this time he conducted various scientific experiments.

One of the most memorable moments of his mission came when he was asked by ground control and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to describe the view of India from space. Sharma responded with the famous patriotic song, 'Saare Jahan Se Achcha,' expressing his love and pride

for his homeland. Rakesh Sharma was awarded the Ashoka Chakra, the highest peacetime military honour, for his achievements, and has also been accorded 'Hero of the Soviet Union', the highest distinction awarded to civilians or military personnel by the then USSR.

Sharma's famous flight not only marked a significant milestone for India's space programme but also inspired millions of people across the country. His courage, dedication, and unwavering spirit continue to serve as an inspiration, and will do so for generations to come.

What were your thoughts and emotions when you first saw Earth from space?

I thought I was well prepared and primed up, quite sure of what to expect, having read a great deal about the visuals, and having seen some excellent photographs. But no, I was not prepared to take in so much natural beauty. I was mistaken

because what was on view was in living colour, and three-dimensional. In one word - breathtaking.

The emotional impact took some time, for the reasoning went like so... if our planet was an object of such beauty, it needed to be protected from environment-destroying human action. More so, when one looked the other way at the harsh, uninviting visuals presented by the black, hostile nothingness of space. There was no other place as inviting as our planet.

What was the toughest part of your assignment aboard Salyut-7?

I was torn between the need to work diligently on the long list of experiments given to us when, in truth, I wished that, instead, I could just watch our beautiful world going by outside the viewport. That was the toughest part. It was a huge, missed opportunity. Can't complain, as mine was a free ride. I did not have to pay a zillion dollars to buy my seat.

You took Indian food to the stars. Who prepared it?

The Indian à-la-carte menu consisted of just two items. There was barely enough time for DFRL (Defence Food Research Laboratory, Mysore) to develop food that could meet the stringent microbial food standard required for the space flight. Uncertified food has the potential to mess with the sterile environment of the Space Laboratory.

You had to learn Russian to communicate with the other cosmonauts. Do you still remember any of it? Did you stay in touch with any of your fellow crew members?

Yes, we did learn the language as the entire course of instruction, the conversation with mission control, and intercommunication between



crew members during the flight had to be in Russian. Learning the language was challenging indeed, and I guess we left our language teacher quite exasperated because she thought that picking up Russian would be a breeze for us as its grammar is akin to that of Sanskrit. She was quite disappointed that we did not know Sanskrit either. It all came together 18 months later when I undertook the flight with Yuri Malashaev and Gennady Strekalov.

And no, I have not been in touch with either of Russian colleagues as both passed on a couple of decades ago.

Did going to space change your perspective on everyday life and living?

It certainly did. I was greatly impacted by the so-called 'Overview Effect'. Almost all humans returning from space do so with an altered opinion of what the future holds for humanity, in general. They notice that the Earth is a mere dot compared to the scale of the Universe itself, and realise its fragility as it occupies its position in our galaxy. If I were to condense the various thoughts articulated by space

travellers ever since Gagarin's flight in 1961, it would go something like so:

"That national boundaries are not visible from space; that earth is visible as a single interconnected and interdependent entity; that it appears defenceless in the hostile environment of space, surrounded as it is by a black void with only a thin blue band surrounding it. This thin band and the magnetosphere together does not allow radiation from space to burn us; that we can observe bad land use practices - the cutting and burning of forests causing an erosion of topsoil that is carried into the oceans by rivers that discharge into it; that there is no other habitable place till as far as the eye or telescopes can see; that thanks to unchecked atmospheric pollution, the earth now looks more grey and less blue than it used to, a few decades ago."

In fact all of us returned with a palpable feeling of unease and these feelings have stayed with us ever since.

What made you choose the Nilgiris as a place to call home?

After my space flight and the socio-political run around the country to

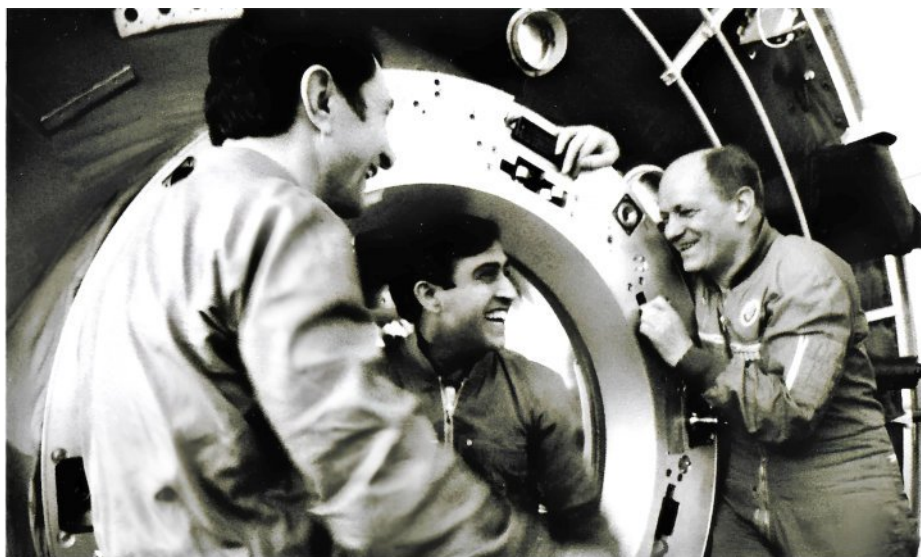
various states governed by the Central Government of that era, my family and I felt over-exposed, and we craved for some anonymity and normalcy. I returned to my test-flying career and after retirement we searched for a serene and not easily accessible destination as our final resting place. There are hill people, beach people, and big metros people. We are hill people.

Describe a typical day in the Nilgiris for you.

A morning walk while avoiding murderously speeding vehicles. Dealing with traffic snarls around Coonoor's commercial district. Preparing for meetings at ISRO Headquarters in Bangalore. This leaves us enough time to shoot the breeze!

Lastly, any words of advice to the readers of Inside43 from the man who saw life from a unique vantage point?

I wish to assure all our readers that we are so privileged to live on this lonely planet we call home. This is the only home we will have for the foreseeable future. This privilege reminds us of our duties to do our bit to preserve planet Earth for future generations. We need to adopt sustainable practices. Enough said. JAI HIND! 🇮🇳



Rakesh Sharma urges our readers to find time to view the following videos on YouTube:

- *The Pale Blue Dot* – Carl Sagan
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wupToqz1e2g>
- *Antariksh* - a short film, written and narrated by a proud Indian
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SQC9YnmnAw>



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FINDING HIS TRIBE

*Dr Tarun Chhabra has been a visionary champion of Toda culture and ecological restoration in the Nilgiris, and beyond. **Sabrina Gill** and **Prynich Prym Raman** bring you his story, his vision and his many accomplishments*

In the heart of the Nilgiris, where rolling hills meet ancient shola forests, lives a man whose life's work embodies a rare fusion of modern science, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship. Dr Tarun Chhabra, a dentist by profession, has emerged as a key figure in conserving the cultural and ecological heritage of this unique region. With a journey that transcends the boundaries of dentistry, Chhabra's story is an inspiring narrative of dedication to the Toda people, a deep love for the Nilgiri hills, and a lifelong commitment to service.

A Chance Read

Tarun Chhabra's career began, conventionally enough, in dentistry. He set up his practice in Ooty, serving the local community with the precision and care that define his work. But from the outset, he treated his profession not merely as a job but as an opportunity to give back. For 32 years, every Friday, he ran a free clinic

where the indigent could receive treatment and medicines at no cost. The Toda people were given special access to this service on any day of the week, ensuring they always had support.

But there is more to his story than just dentistry. During his mid-20s, Tarun stumbled upon a book titled *The Todas* by WHR Rivers, sparking a lifelong fascination with this indigenous community. What began as a casual curiosity soon evolved into a profound commitment to understanding and supporting the Toda way of life. Now, he's one of the few non-Todas fluent in their language, and his work has gone beyond just documentation, to active advocacy for their rights and traditions.

A Cultural Advocate

Tarun Chhabra's role as a cultural advocate extends far beyond research. He has been instrumental in securing the Geographical Indication (GI) status for Toda embroidery—a

recognition that not only celebrates the craftsmanship of Toda women but also provides them with economic opportunities and safeguards the cultural heritage of the community. When Toda women at a recent conference acknowledged Tarun's initiative in securing the GI patent, it was a poignant reminder of how his efforts have created tangible benefits for the community.

He has also played a significant role in advocating for improved infrastructure in Toda hamlets, including access to electricity and other essential services. His hands-on involvement in cultural preservation encompasses reviving traditional Toda architecture, ensuring that the community's unique building styles endure in a rapidly changing world.

Giving Back to the Land

Tarun's love for the Nilgiris extends to its unique ecology. He co-founded the Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam in 1992, an organisation dedicated to the

cultural and environmental preservation of the Nilgiri Hills. His conservation efforts came to the fore in 2002 when he helped organise an ambitious project to set a Guinness World Record for planting the most native tree saplings in a single day. It was a monumental day for the district, with participants from all walks of life coming together to make a positive impact on, and contribution to, the environment.

The Nilgiris are home to a globally unique shola-grassland ecosystem, characterised by its rolling grasslands and dense patches of evergreen forest. However, over the years, the area has faced significant threats from invasive species and commercial plantations. Tarun's Edhikwehlynawd Botanical Refuge (EBR) has been at the forefront of efforts to restore this ecosystem. Through EBR, he has led the restoration of more than 25 acres of degraded land back to its original state, carefully nurturing native species through a specialised plant nursery.

He led the discovery of three new taxa of wild balsams (given Toda-related nomenclature), which was published in the *Nordic Journal of Botany* (December 2016), and featured on the front page of *The Hindu*.

But his love for the Nilgiris isn't just seen in large projects. His home in Ooty stands as a testament to his dedication, featuring a small forest of over 60 shola tree species that he has planted himself. This personal oasis reflects his deep respect for the traditional ecological wisdom of the Toda people, who have maintained a harmonious relationship with nature for centuries.

An Environmental Voice

For twelve years, Tarun edited *The Tahr*, a quarterly environmental newsletter that became a cornerstone of conservation discourse in the region. The newsletter highlighted important environmental issues facing the Nilgiris, and served as a platform for advocacy and education. When Tarun stepped down as editor, the newsletter folded, underscoring his crucial role in its publication.

His voice has also resonated through academic channels, with research published in journals and presentations delivered at international conferences. His book, *The Toda Landscape: Explorations in Cultural Ecology* (Harvard Oriental Series, vol.79), is a comprehensive look into the cultural and ecological history of the Nilgiri Hills. It dives deep into the ways the Toda community has influenced, and has been influenced, by their natural surroundings, offering insights into how traditional knowledge can be harnessed for modern conservation.

More than an Anthropologist

For Tarun, the connection with the Toda community goes well beyond cultural research. His work with the Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam and EBR has opened up new opportunities for Toda youth. Over 25 students have received support for their education, including those who have gone on to become the community's first nurses, engineers and lawyers. Through his initiatives, Tarun has helped some of these students secure admission to prestigious boarding schools under the Right to Education Act, fully supporting them in their educational journeys. His efforts also extend to



“Now, he’s one of the few non-Todas fluent in their language, and his work has gone beyond just documentation, to active advocacy for their rights and traditions

conserving the Toda buffalo, a breed integral to the Toda’s pastoral traditions. These animals are not just a source of livelihood but hold significant cultural and spiritual value. His conservation programme aims to ensure the survival of the Toda buffalo, further preserving an essential element of the community’s identity.

A New Beginning

Recently, Tarun established the Nilgiris Kuttawddy Centre (NKC) in Ooty, a hub for cultural revival, research and community engagement. The NKC supports the education of local students, fosters the cultural resurgence of tribal communities, and addresses the challenges facing the Nilgiris through meetings and lectures. With a library that houses literature on the Nilgiris, the centre is quickly becoming a resource for researchers and locals alike. The goal is to keep the region’s rich history and culture alive while finding practical solutions for its future.

Everyday Acts

Though known for his larger-than-life projects, Tarun’s commitment to service can be seen in the small,

consistent acts of kindness that have become part of his routine. Since 1996, he has facilitated the weekly distribution of food donated by the Taj Savoy Hotel to the needy, ensuring that support reaches those who require it most. These everyday acts of service are interwoven with his broader advocacy for the Toda community and the environment. Whether it’s providing healthcare, supporting education, or helping maintain traditional practices, his efforts speak to a holistic approach to community well-being.

Multi-speciality

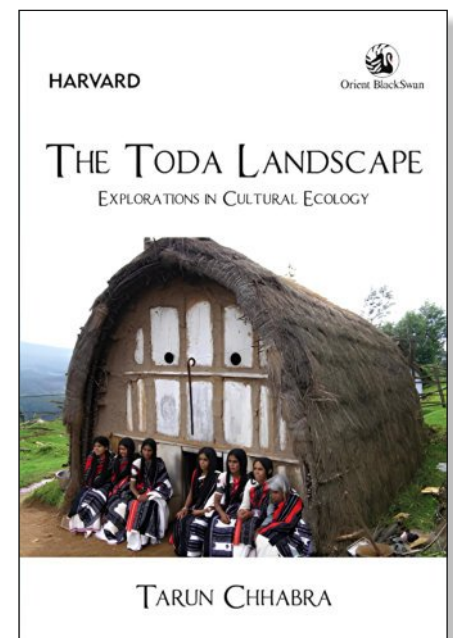
Tarun’s multilingual abilities, including fluency in Toda and a working knowledge of Punjabi, reflect his commitment to breaking down barriers. His ability to communicate in Toda has not only helped him connect deeply with the community but has also turned him into a cultural bridge, making their stories and traditions accessible to a wider audience. His recognition as a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Western Ghats Plant Specialist Group is another testament to his expertise in conservation. His past involvement on Tamil Nadu state-level committees, like the Architecture and Aesthetics Aspects Committee, demonstrates the range of his influence.

Living the Legacy

Dr Tarun Chhabra’s life is a powerful example of how a person can leave a lasting impact on both cultural preservation and environmental conservation. His journey from dentistry to becoming a cultural advocate, environmental activist, and community leader is a story of

passion and resolve. The people of the Nilgiris have recognised his deep respect for their traditions, and his work continues to inspire those who are fortunate enough to witness his dedication first-hand. As he embarks on the next chapter of his life, having recently retired from dentistry, the initiatives he has established and the lives he has touched have created an enduring legacy. His story is a reminder that one can indeed bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, finding a harmonious balance between cultural identity and ecological responsibility.

In an ever-changing world, Tarun’s life reminds us that genuine impact is often found in the details: in the care given at a free clinic, the saplings planted to restore a forest, the revival of a traditional hut, or the food provided to the hungry. Or even a book that was the work of a lifetime spent in study. For Tarun Chhabra, all these are not just part of a profession but an uncompromised calling to serve, preserve, and inspire. ■



SIREN CALL

High up here in the mountains, a medical emergency is something we all fear. While help is readily available, often a trip to a nearby city is needed if a life is to be saved. Here's where the Rotary Club of Nilgiris has stepped in



It was a warm and sultry day in Coonoor. Ram's mother, well over 70 years old, was admitted in a local hospital when she suddenly developed severe pain in her arms and shoulders, broke into a sweat, and began experiencing severe breathing difficulties. The doctor on call realised that the lady needed urgent and specialised attention, and had to be rushed to a multi-specialty hospital in Coimbatore. The patient needed to be moved with intimate medical support, and with critical care equipment to maintain all physical parameters until she was

safely handed over to a specialised hospital facility. Ram was a man with limited resources.

So the call was made, and the well-appointed Rotary Advance Life Support Ambulance was requisitioned. In less than half-an-hour the patient was on her way to Coimbatore in air-conditioned comfort, safely supported by critical care medical equipment on board the Rotary Ambulance and professionally cared for by the on-board competent paramedic, with all medicines and facilities needed for the journey, at hand.

Need Of The Hour

The Rotary Club of the Nilgiris in Coonoor has launched a very well-appointed, and managed, Advance Life Support Ambulance, more commonly known as a 'Critical Care Ambulance'. Its roll is to transport critically ill patients from the Nilgiris, where multi-specialty medical facilities are limited, to the well-developed medical facilities in Coimbatore and other large metros in the plains. The facility has been fully functional and sought after since its launch on Independence Day 2022, India's seventy-fifth Independence

Day. The ambulance is a fully functional ICU-on-wheels as it is equipped with a multi-para monitor, ventilator, defibrillator, infusion pump, syringe pump, suction pump, spine and scoop stretchers, head immobiliser, oxygen facility, complete medical kit and all medicines that might be necessary during an emergency. As mentioned, the ambulance is fully air-conditioned.

most reasonable cost, and, in fact, at a subsidised cost. The shortfall in operational cost is met from a corpus created from donations from gracious donors. Patients pay a consolidated fixed cost which includes all facilities and medicines. There is no separate cost for the facilities or medicines consumed, irrespective of the quantity utilised. The Rotary Club believes that the

mention must be made of General Girish, who was instrumental in the implementation of this incredible service, and saw it through the finer details of the set up.

Just In Case...

The Rotary's Critical Care Ambulance is available at short notice. It is maintained to the strictest standards of cleanliness and hygiene, and comes with the professional, competent care of its skilled and compassionate paramedic and the professionalism of a driver who understands that urgency and safety go hand-in-hand while transporting a life that needs to be saved. The availability and serviceability of the Critical Care medical equipment, the emergency kit and the medicines available, have all received much positive response from the community, which is so relieved to have this facility at hand. Everyone knows that someday this is what they are all going to be depending on to keep them breathing.

Thank you, Rotary Club of the Nilgiris, and of course, their generous donors. We as a community are grateful. And every time we hear that siren, we know that you answered a most important call for all of us. ■



The Ambulance comes with a well-trained, well-experienced and committed paramedic on board. The driver has repeatedly proven himself to be a very skilled and conscientious person with excellent driving skills.

Service Above Self

The Rotary project through which this facility was created has been graciously and generously supported financially by Kotak Mutual Fund. In keeping with the Rotary motto of 'Service Above Self', the ambulance is being operated more as a social commitment to the community. It is being made available to patients at a

facility should be affordable at the bottom of the pyramid.

From the time the ambulance rolled out its services, it has saved well over 300 lives, and has since transported patients from the Nilgiris to many different destinations including Coimbatore, Bangalore, Chennai, Calicut, Salem, Perindalmanna, Erode, Palghat and many other places in South India.

Positive and encouraging feedback from the users has been a source of great joy to the small team of Rotarians who closely oversee the operation of this facility. A special

Rotary 
Club of The Nilgiris

Vignesh, the affable and efficient person coordinating the facility is available 24 x 7 on mobile +91 75980 85444 and +91 75980 86444. Medical facilities in the metros are now just a call away.



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BEING THE CHANGE



*The Abdul Kalam Foundation is a beacon of hope for those who may otherwise have none. **Sharmatha Shankar** meets with Sathick Sana, who started a movement whose ripple impact has given dignity to many in the district*

There are a very few people who give of themselves continually expecting little in return. Selflessness of the kind that they carry is so very rare, as most of us go about the busy business of our daily lives. Say hello to Sathick Sana, a medical representative who lives in Coonoor, and runs the Abdul Kalam Memorial Trust, a non-profit social service organisation.

The Trust, started in 2011, has 28 members, all of whom are daily wage workers. Of the 28 members, 10 are women, and the unique thing about this organisation is that it is almost entirely funded by the members themselves.

Their activities range from traffic rules awareness programmes to animal welfare to child abuse awareness. But their most important work involves helping those who have been abandoned. These include the extremely elderly and people of reduced mental capacity who are lost or have been renounced by their families.

An Early Start

Sathick began his journey into social welfare when he was in class 10, in the year 2002. It was part of his school activities. He recalls his involvement with Rotary when he was made aware of the lost or abandoned dying of extreme cold by the roadside in harsh winter weather. His family, and one of his friends, Sathish, would help Sathick in providing aid to these people in the form of food and blankets. On one particular night when he was out with his daughter providing food and blankets to people on the roadside, his daughter wondered aloud to him about what would happen to these unfortunate

souls the next day. One night of aid was clearly not going to be enough. And this conversation sparked Sathick to start his own organisation.

His Trust helps to find these people old age homes or nursing homes so that they can be rehabilitated, as the organisation itself does not have its own quarters or facilities to serve this purpose. Sathick confessed that he feels a pang of guilt every time he leaves the people he has rescued in these homes, because he firmly believes that he and his team could take much better care of them if they had the means to do so. He truly believes that even though these people may not have very many years left, they deserve to spend them with dignity and peace.

He recalls the challenges the organisation faced during the Coronavirus pandemic when the country was under lockdown, and it became doubly difficult to conduct operations. It was much more difficult to locate, test for illness and rehome these people. The organisation was able to keep 32 rescued people at a school near the Veterinary Hospital, Coonoor. But when elections started, they had to unfortunately vacate the premises.

Lost Battles

Sathick narrates a particularly heart wrenching incident about a young man by the name of Suresh who was recovering from severe drug addiction. It was quite a challenge to rehabilitate this young man, but through dint of effort and love, they managed. But things fell apart when the inmates had to leave the school and be rehabilitated into other nursing and old age homes. Suresh ran away from his new home, because he

couldn't bear to be with anyone other than the Abdul Kalam Memorial Trust and Sathick. A couple of days later, poor Suresh was found dead at a bus stop. Sathick confessed that he believes that if his foundation had its own quarters and Suresh had been kept there, the young man may still be alive. He still carries a great amount of guilt regarding this incident to this day.

Dead or Alive

If the organisation happens to come across an abandoned corpse, they take the responsibility of informing the police about it. If no one arrives to claim the body, the organisation makes sure that the deceased is given a dignified funeral in accordance with the religion they followed whilst they were alive, if that can be found out. If someone comes to claim a body, they even help with conducting DNA tests to make sure the corpse goes to the right family.

They also provide aid to injured and abused animals. Another one of their remarkable endeavours is having conducted rescue operations during the Wayanad landslides and floods that occurred earlier this year. Sathick mentioned that they were on site on the second day itself. They carried out the last rites of unidentified corpses there, as well. When the helicopter carrying late General Bipin Rawat, former Chief of Army Staff, crashed in 2021, the Abdul Kalam Memorial Trust was part of the team that recovered the bodies and brought them in for the post-mortem.

They collaborate with the police and some good-hearted folks, who are aware of the organisation, to help identify cases of people who need to be rescued and rehabilitated, and go



to pick up unidentified corpses. They also rent an ambulance for ₹8,000 a month to carry out operations.

Food for the Soul

It must be mentioned that the food provided for the rescued people is cooked by Sathick's mother and wife. His family, comprising two daughters, is very supportive of him in his social welfare endeavours, and he derives a lot of strength from them. It must also be mentioned that female members of the organisation play a key role in rehabilitating abandoned women, and approaching potential patrons for funds who happen to be women. Women play a significant role in driving the Trust forward and it

is Sathick's hope that more women will join the work they do.

The Abdul Kalam Memorial Trust is a remarkable organisation that has managed to do a lot of good and transform lives from the time it started. They are driven and compassionate, but they could achieve so much more if only they had more funds. Sathick himself has been running a tea stall near the bus stop for eight years from 4am - 8:30am every morning to gather funds for his organisation. But due to restrictions he had to shut it down and is now looking for alternate means of funding for some of the work he and his team does.

Their hope is to one day have their own physical headquarters and a home where they can house the people who need it. Funding would enable them to carry out their work they do in a more systematic and cohesive manner. Currently they hold meetings in public parks and other venues that can accommodate them. The fact that the organisation has achieved as much as it has, with so few resources, is a credit to this group of people who have come together to bring love and empathy to those who need it most sorely.

One only has to look into Sathick's eyes to see the light that exists within, and that shines on the world around him. He and his team of volunteers seek no fame or recognition, and do all they do from a purity of heart that is powerfully inspirational. ■

If you want to help the Abdul Kalam Memorial Foundation, call them on 99431 55201 or drop a contribution to:

- Name: Abdul Kalam Memorial Trust Nilgiris
- Acc.No. 334401010260886
- Branch: Coonoor
- IFSC Code: UBIN0533441

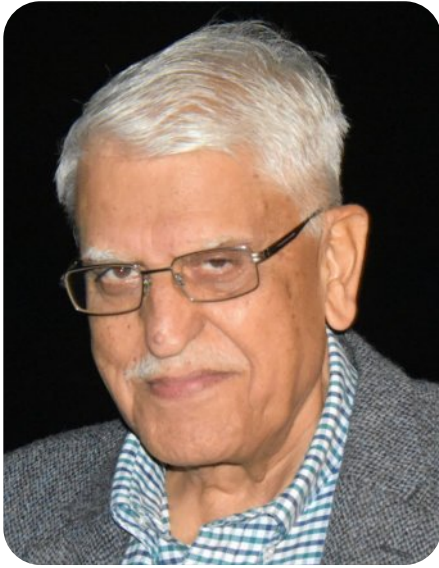


The image shows the interior of a restaurant. The room has a high ceiling with exposed black beams and track lighting. The walls are a mix of light beige and a dark, textured grey. There are several large windows with black frames. The floor is made of large, light-colored marble tiles. The seating consists of dark wood tables and chairs with orange upholstered seats and backs. A white rectangular box with the text "Hungry...?" is overlaid in the center. In the bottom left, there is a logo for "SPICE CODE RESTUARANT" with a colorful vertical bar. At the very bottom, there is a line of text providing the address and phone number.

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A DRAMATIC TURN

Vijaya Dar, a well-known resident of the district, tells us about his recent immersive experience in directing Coonoor Tales – A Play in 3 Acts

A random conversation with Sangeetha Shinde, the editor of Inside43, had me telling her about my dabbling in drama during my university years. I told her I wanted to write a screenplay from scratch, but I was stumped after writing a couple of pages. She suggested I could look at adapting one of her stories from her book, *A Moral Murder*, into a stage play. The thought was interesting. I had read the book when it was released about 15 years back, and I have always been a fan of her writing, but I needed to read it again before attempting to adapt a story.

The stories are short and crisp, and it would be difficult to convert any one of them as they would be over too soon on the stage. So I thought of combining three of the stories that would provide some heft and length to the drama. But the stories are all independent anecdotes and combining them was hard. The only link was the location, as they are all situated in Coonoor and the Nilgiris. So, in a way, the true protagonist of what came to be 'Coonoor Tales' is the setting of the stories. I had to exercise some poetic license and created situations that tenuously linked the three tales into a continuum of sorts.

The first draft was ready in two days, and I forwarded it to Sangeetha for her perusal. Her response was positive, and so I set the ball rolling for an actual production. It was a daunting challenge as we needed some 15 actors for the

performance. We called for auditions through which we discovered a lot of unknown talent in the district. In fact, most of the cast would be performing in front of an audience for the first time. But they proved to be a fabulous bunch and their zest and enthusiasm would be the advantage of any director.

A hyper-local play, written by a Coonoorian, adapted for the stage and directed by a Coonoorian, performed in an auditorium in the Coonoor Club, with all the actors from within the Nilgiris – is something unique, and that perhaps has not happened before. The audience's response was overwhelming. In an auditorium that had 170 chairs for the audience, there were people sitting on the floor, and standing in the aisles. The doors had to be shut as there was no more room, and we had to turn people away. One of the reasons for this response is that the stories are located in the Nilgiris and the audience could easily relate to the lives and their narratives, and of course, many people knew and loved the book.

Coonoor Tales has demonstrated that there is a tremendous appetite for good amateur theatrical performances in the Nilgiris. And it proves, yet again, that this district can give you the opportunity to fulfil passions, dreams and hopes no matter what stage of life you are at. I am living proof of this. ■

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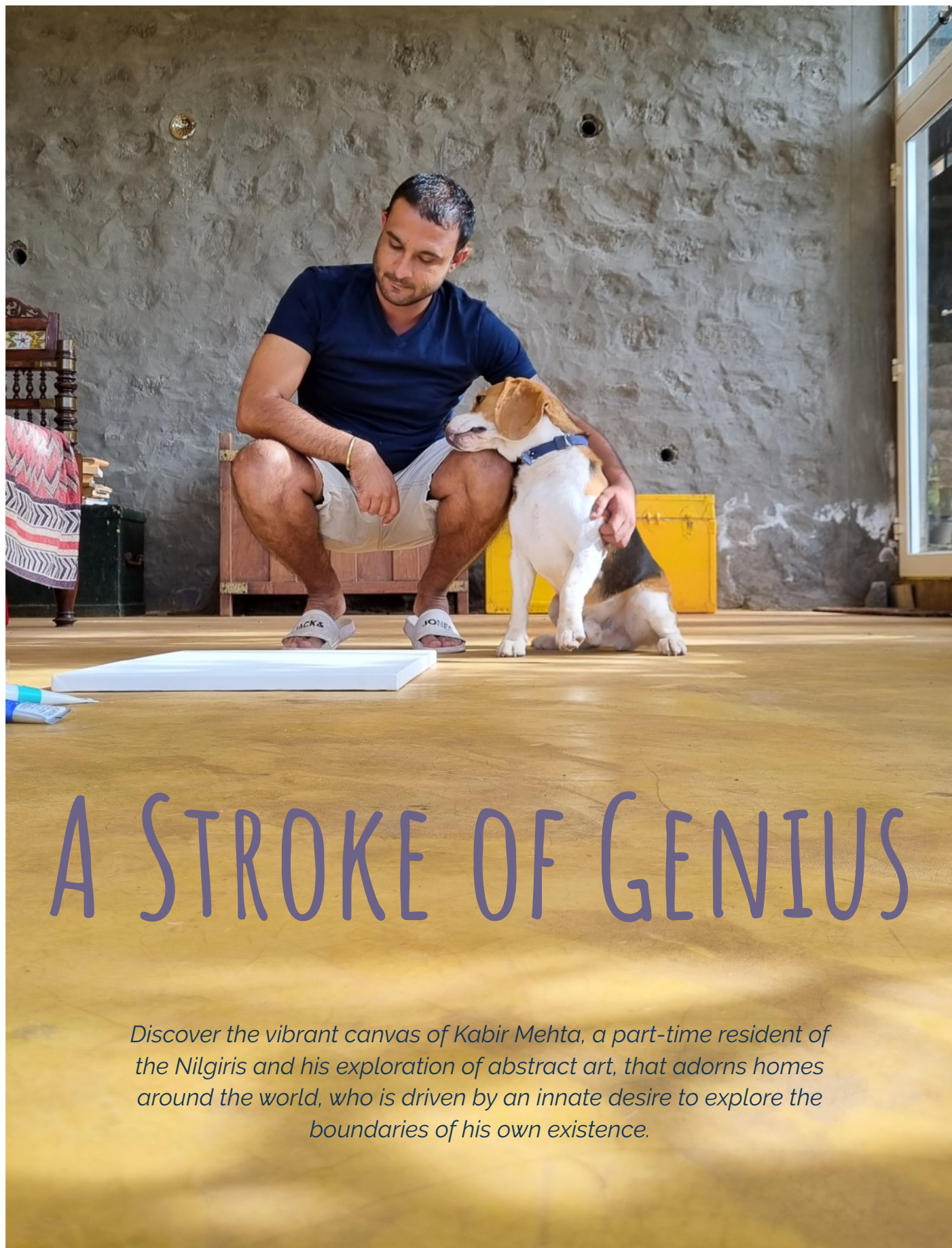
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A STROKE OF GENIUS

Discover the vibrant canvas of Kabir Mehta, a part-time resident of the Nilgiris and his exploration of abstract art, that adorns homes around the world, who is driven by an innate desire to explore the boundaries of his own existence.

In a world turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic, many found solace in new hobbies. While we went into a universal confinement as we battled an unknown foe, many turned to hitherto untapped inner reserves of creativity to unleash potential that had lain dormant for years. For Kabir Mehta, a unique journey into the realm of abstract art began unexpectedly in 2020. Following a month-long course in past-life regression, Kabir tapped into a wellspring of creativity that not only transformed his life but also resonated with audiences, globally.

The Awakening

Kabir's artistic voyage emerged during a time of global isolation, when traditional forms of engagement and expression were curtailed. The past-life regression course he undertook during this period was intended as a means of self-exploration but had a profound impact. It consequently sparked an innate desire to express the emotions and revelations he encountered during the regression. "I realised that painting was my way of making sense of those experiences," Kabir reflects, speaking about the catalyst that made him pick up a brush. What started as a therapeutic outlet quickly blossomed into a full-fledged passion. Kabir embraced the spontaneity of creativity, discovering that his self-taught approach allowed him to explore the depths of his imagination without boundaries, to produce works that were free-spirited, yet spiritually immersive in their rendition.

The Technique

Kabir Mehta's art is characterised by its boldness and distinctive technique. Unlike traditional painters,

he eschews brushes, opting instead for a freehand approach that incorporates various tools and his hands to manipulate enamel paints on canvas. This unorthodox method results in striking compositions filled with vivid colours and dynamic textures.

"My process is all about addition and subtraction," he explains. Kabir layers colours, applying and then removing paint to create depth and movement. This technique not only enhances the visual impact of his work but also reflects the emotional journey that lies behind each piece. The interaction between adding vibrant colours and removing them symbolises the ebb and flow of experiences in life. The enamel paints he chooses offer a unique vibrancy and a glossy finish, allowing his work to stand out in any setting. "The medium gives my art a sense of permanence and intensity," he notes, underscoring his commitment to creating lasting impressions through his artistic process and the work that ensues from it.

A Global Canvas

Despite having had a relatively short artistic career, Kabir's distinctive work has captured the attention of audiences across the globe. His art

has been exhibited in prestigious cities such as New York, Rome, Hamburg, Paris, and Tokyo. Each exhibition represents not just a showcase of his work, but a celebration of his journey and the connections he has forged through art.

Kabir recalls his first major exhibition in New York as a pivotal moment. "I was overwhelmed by the response," he says. "It was the first time I saw strangers engage with my work, interpreting it in ways I never anticipated." This interaction ignited his passion to continue sharing his vision with the world. His exhibitions often draw diverse crowds, all of them intrigued by the boldness of his abstract style. Viewers are encouraged to interpret the art on their own terms, connecting with the emotional undercurrents of each piece. "Art is subjective, and I love that people can find different meanings in my work," Kabir explains in his usual measured tones, with a hint of a smile that plays around his eyes that actually tell you how excited he is to witness the reactions to his work.

Inspirations and Influences

Kabir's art is informed by a variety of influences. While he admires the bold





expressions of abstract pioneers like Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler, his inspiration often springs from his own experiences and surroundings. Nature, urban landscapes, and even the chaotic beauty of city life play a significant role in shaping his creative vision.

"I find beauty in the everyday chaos," Kabir states firmly. He often embarks on walks, taking in the colours and shapes of the world around him. These excursions fuel his imagination, providing a rich tapestry of ideas to explore on canvas. His self-taught journey is also marked by a desire to continually learn and evolve as a person and an artist. Kabir frequently experiments with different materials and techniques, pushing the boundaries of his creativity. "Every piece is a new exploration," he says, emphasising the importance of growth in his artistic practice.

The Artist's Philosophy

At the core of Kabir Mehta's artistic philosophy is a belief in the healing power of creativity. His paintings serve not only as a personal outlet but also as a means to inspire others.

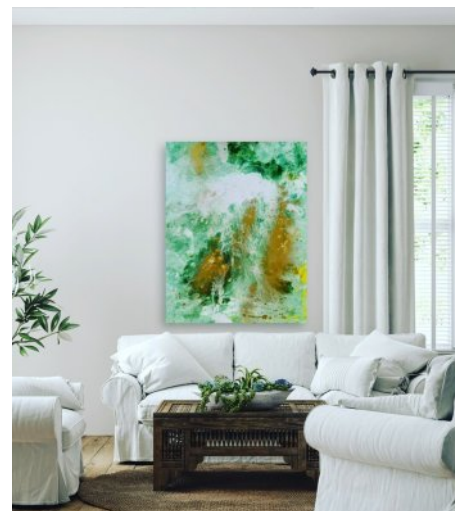
"I want my art to resonate with people, to evoke emotions and provoke thought," he states. The process of creating art, for Kabir, is akin to meditation. It allows him to connect with his inner self while navigating the complexities of life. This connection is palpable in his work, which often embodies a sense of movement and transformation, seen in vivid strokes, fierce colours, thoughtful layering and gentle shading.

The Future

As Kabir continues to develop his craft, he remains open to new possibilities. He envisions future collaborations with other artists and exploring different mediums, such as mixed media or installation art. "I believe art is a constantly evolving journey, and I'm excited to see where it takes me next," he shares.

Kabir Mehta's story is a testament to the power of creativity as a tool for self-discovery and expression. From his beginnings during a challenging global crisis to exhibiting internationally, he has carved out a unique niche in the abstract art world. His commitment to bold

experimentation and emotional authenticity invites viewers into a vibrant dialogue with his work, leaving a lasting impact that transcends borders and cultures. As he continues to paint his journey, the world watches eagerly, ready to embrace the next chapter of Kabir's artistic odyssey. ■



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Divinity in Diversity

Ishani Dutt Sarkar gives us another reason why living in the Nilgiris is such an incredibly special thing, and why the connections here are different

July has always been a good month for me. 2018 was no different. We were in the process of moving in and settling down in our home in the Nilgiris. Of course, we wanted to do a small griha pravesha pooja in our new home. While my husband and I are not overly religious or superstitious, we did want to commemorate the occasion with some sort of homecoming ceremony.

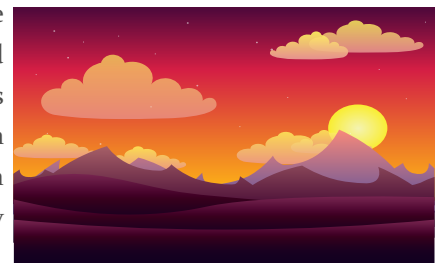
Not knowing a word of the local language or customs, we sought help from the little social circle we had built in the few months of our association with the town. I managed to get hold of a priest who said he would come and do the needful and obligatory divine salutations.

The family woke up early and eagerly and were ready and waiting for our little pooja to begin. Our family comprised my husband and then seven-year-old daughter, my mother-in-law and her caregiver; and me, of course. Sharp at the designated time, we heard the autorickshaw rumble up the lane to our home. A middle-aged gentleman got off and came in and said his 'assistant' would be joining him. Imagine our surprise when the auto driver followed him into the room. He was the assistant. They changed into their priestly attire, and then sat down to sort out the flowers and utensils required for the puja. To our amusement, there was absolutely zero communication between them and us. We speak Bengali, English and Hindi. The two men spoke only Tamil. Thankfully, our

trusted property manager, Taj bhai spoke Hindi and Tamil and he graciously served as translator.

My little story, though, is not about the language barrier of that day, or the religious ceremony that followed, but the love and acceptance that we saw and felt in the room. In the next couple of hours that followed, we had Taj bhai sorting out the flowers for pooja, our family caregiver, Matilda, washing and cutting the fruits for prasada, while our lovely Tamil priest and his assistant performed a ceremony for the peace and well-being of a Bengali Hindu family from Mumbai. Soon after, we realised at that very point, we had Hindus, Muslims, Catholics and Jains partaking in the very same ritual. The collective love and peace in the room was the stuff we only dream about nowadays.

At a time when the world is going crazy fighting over gods and religions and geographical borders, all it takes is a large heart and broad mind to find your peace and haven. And we know we have found ours in this beautiful district of the Nilgiris, where love and acceptance and community bind us together with invisible yet firm cords. Long may these cords last! ■



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All Lives Matter

*Dr Ilona Otter has made a dramatic difference to animal care in the Nilgiris. **Anjali Mehta** tells us how the young Finnish vet came to live here and chronicles her contributions to these hills*

It is the year 2003. A young idealistic veterinarian from Finland was looking to volunteer at a charity that could use her services. She first looked towards Africa, where her paternal grandparents were missionaries. She had grown up hearing fabulous stories of that continent, but every project in Africa that could use veterinary volunteers was in French-speaking parts of that continent. The young vet spoke no French, however. Surfing the internet she found an animal rescue sanctuary in South India needing help. The sanctuary was Hill View Farm Animal Refuge by IPAN, run by Nigel Otter (who she ended up marrying), in Masinagudi. She applied and that began her ongoing story with the Nilgiris.

Meet Ilona, of Worldwide Veterinary Service India fame (WVS India), based in Aruvankadu, which she runs along with Nigel. WVS India's spay/neuter programme and veterinary clinic has been functioning since 2010, and is the largest controller of the stray dog population in the Nilgiris, and Ilona is an angel of competence for all animal owners in the hills.

When she first arrived 30 years ago, Ilona started out by helping with farm animal welfare, and surgeries for the

ten villages that were under IPAN's care. Nigel already had a veterinary doctor employed in the IPAN team and spay/neuter surgeries were also undertaken. It was very much a country practice that was vastly different from what she had experienced in Finland. It was through this community service, however, that she learnt the challenges of rabies control and animal birth control – the two pillars of the bulk work done by WVS India today.

Ilona and WVS

It is a joy to meet Ilona. Tall, graceful and kind, she bursts with a lively intelligence, full of ideas for the future, and committed to, and focussed on, the work currently at hand. Presently WVS India is a centre for veterinary capacity-building, and also for multiple outreach programmes being run in different parts of India: Goa, Hyderabad, Kerala, Chandigarh, etc. WVS India teams, that is doctors trained through the WVS India practice, provide surgical capacity-building to other vets, mostly through neuter programmes, and diagnosing and treating animals, with help from various public and private organisations all over the country. The Chairman of WVS India is Nigel

Otter, her husband, and Ilona is an independent consultant, running the administration and overseeing the training. In the WVS India centre in Aruvankadu, 25 programmes for training vets are run every year, with 12-15 doctors participating in every programme. Alongside this, WVS India, which was established in 2010, does spay/neuter surgeries every day, with funds mostly from overseas donors via WVS in the UK. WVS India has its own vets as salaried staff, and these doctors treat all the animals that are brought in for treatment. Private owners who can pay, are asked to do so, nominally.

Personally Speaking

Ilona has not only catered to the animal welfare needs of the district, but she has raised two daughters in Mavanhalla in a totally alien culture. And she has done it with far fewer facilities and privileges than she was





accustomed to in her homeland, Finland. So, what is it that drove her so far away from her home and comfort. She laughs and says, "Well, my grandparents were missionaries in Namibia, and I was influenced by their fantastic stories. Also, I used to watch a television programme as a child, of a zoo vet in San Diego, and how he healed animals, and worked with teams of volunteers, and I felt the joy of learning and interacting with people working towards the same goal. It really fired my imagination."

Early Inspirations

While in her teens, Ilona turned to horse-riding, and found she had no taste for competitive sports or dressage. At one of the stables where she rode and worked with the horses, the owner was a vet, and she started hanging out, helping the owner with her practice. This coalesced into a desire for further study and veterinary school. There, her initial interest was wildlife study, but at a conference in Rotterdam, where she was presenting a paper, she realised that all the

studies were about dead animals in zoos, and how to control those deaths. It dawned on her that what she really wanted to do was to work with living animals, to make their lives better - not necessarily with wildlife - and in countries that had little recourse to the advanced knowledge that came from the west. She also wanted to do fieldwork in developing countries. There was the missionary spirit - genetically embedded in her

DNA – honed through a nature that eschewed competition and display – and it came to fruition in the action of service to animals, in whichever way was possible.

Present Day

Today, Ilona is a well-known figure in the Nilgiris. Her contributions to the betterment of the environment cannot be summed up in a mere article. One has to meet her - to look into her clear, honest eyes and see the determination and compassion in them for all living beings. In a district that once had little access to veterinary care, she has brought hope to countless pet parents. Where once testing and care of sick animals was only the purview of the Government Veterinary Hospitals, or required transporting a pet to Coimbatore, Bangalore or Chennai, today, thanks to Ilona and her unflinching efforts, we need to go no further than Aruvankadu to get access to competent vet care. Humans and animals of the Nilgiris are both glad that she chose to make these hills her home. ■



COME HOME



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

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

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The Cycle of Life

*We all know the undeniable beauty of these mountains. **Rajat Kumar** shares with us the uninhibited joy of discovering them as only a cycling enthusiast can*

It was 5.30am one early winter morning. Getting up and trying to noiselessly move around the house whilst getting on cycling bib shorts and a jersey is not for the untrained, I assure you. Having successfully made my way out the door and wheeled my bike past the gate, I set off towards Wellington through a dawn that was somehow fighting back the light.

Approaching Wellington, I encountered a large herd of Toda buffaloes ambling in the same direction, taking up the entire road. In my head I figured, "How hard could threading through this great herd be?". So I set off like Tom Cruise on his motorcycle, whizzing past half a dozen buffaloes before I started to close in on this really large mama buffalo. As I was coming up to flank past her left, she decided to glide across my path, stop, and turned to look at me, cutting off my only path of exit past her.

I started to panic! This was not supposed to happen. It never happened to Tom Cruise in any of his movies! He always found a way through physics-defying spaces. So I did the next logical thing that occurred to me. I told myself – "Just stop, and let her continue on." The only problem, and one which I realised a bit too late, was that I was still clipped in quite securely to both my pedals. Now instead of the graceful stop that I had planned in my head, I gracefully, and in very slow motion, fell to my left, all the while still clipped quite securely to my bike. The ground rushed up, we met with my shoulder

stopping my oh-so-graceful fall towards earth where I found myself, lying prone in a riding position, holding my handlebars, clipped in to my bike, but with my face two inches from the road, and the six buffaloes I had whizzed past just moments before, walking past me, looking down at me, quietly judging my cycling skills, or lack thereof!

Going Solo

That incident marked my early tryst with cycling these picturesque mountains. Whilst I had mountain-biked in various places I had lived around the world before returning to these mountains, I had never really discovered cycling here. Of course growing up here, I had a cycle; we all had cycles then... complete with rusty chain and squeaky wheels, with brakes that heavily relied on faint hope and hasty prayers every time you wanted to stop.

But my discovery of these hills continued unabated in spite of my tryst with those judgmental buffaloes. I began with short rides from home. These were morning rides to Kotagiri and back, which I then used to consider quite the achievement, having completed a there-and-back loop of around 15 kilometres. The more I rode, the more I felt I could push myself to go further. This desire wasn't driven by some statistical need to record greater distances on a bike. But the more I rode out through these mountains on roads I thought I knew, I felt I was discovering them for the very first time. It's something about the pace that you keep on a bike that invokes very visceral responses from the environment you pass through. You smell everything, you hear everything and you feel every little gradient change, either pacing uphill or going downhill.





Over these many years now of cycling these wonderful mountain roads, I've discovered the joy in the solitude of solo rides where I've managed to startle sambar deer, taken gaurs by surprise and ridden past oblivious sloth bears.

But I also realised, much as I loved the serenity of my solitary rides, I was not prepared to give up on the camaraderie of the group rides with my mates. These were filled with banter, coffee stops, gossip, whilst gasping up a climb, and the playful ribbing of each other.

Whilst cycling started out for me as something I did to try and push my limits of endurance and fitness, it thankfully didn't limit itself to this pursuit alone. I've discovered a newfound connection with nature and I've come to deeply appreciate the social aspect of cycling, as well. Being out there with friends, riding and enjoying being on a bike in what is such breathtaking countryside and nature is indescribable.

Double the Fun

One of the happiest days of my life thus far was when my son, Aarav, told me that he wanted to join me on my rides. Until then Aarav had only cycled around on his starter bike, content with his loops of the driveway and yard where he learnt to ride.

And so began Aarav's tryst with cycling the Nilgiri mountains. We began short rides of no more than five kilometres. To watch his joy at being on his bike, and his sense of accomplishment with each trip, was immensely satisfying and infectious. The process of staying out longer and reaching further on the bike was an organic one for Aarav and we allowed it to evolve the same way - organically. His love of his bike and being out there despite the occasional desire to give up or turn back spurred him to reach further. Today he cycles up to an eighty-kilometre round trip, and this is completely attributable to his will power and resolve.



So I set off like Tom
Cruise on his
motorcycle, whizzing
past half a dozen
buffaloes before I
started to close in on
this really large mama
buffalo

Hilly Heaven

I also believe that we've not given due credit to these wonderful mountains we live in. There are few places in India where you get such all-weather, high-altitude access to such roads. There are few places in India where the environs you ride in offer such dramatic vistas and undulating countryside. But more importantly, there are few places in India that nourish your soul the way the Nilgiris does, especially when you're amidst its great outdoors.

If Aarav and I had a prayer, then it would recite itself as follows:

"I pray to the hills to always allow me to meander through her natural beauty. With the strength and resolve of two legs, straining against the pedals of gravity. But when I despair in my pain, when I want to turn back, may these great mountains whisper to me.... Stop and stay a while, friend! As it's my beauty that you set out to revel in when you began."

I encourage you all to live this prayer. ■

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Our Favourite Security Uncle

*We've all seen him smiling and waving us in and out of the Moddy's parking lot in Coonoor. **Jude Angelo** tells us a bit more about Philomin Kumar, a man we all know as Babu*

Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I was born on July 22, 1952 at Arokiapuram which is near the Barracks. I've been working in the field of private security for over ten years. Before this I worked at the Cantonment School as a security guard. Now, of course, I work at Moddy's, as you all know.

What are your responsibilities in your current job?

I do quite a lot actually. I ensure the security and safety of the vehicles, while they are parked, and while they are getting in and out of traffic. So I have to maintain discipline and order, which can be tough with the traffic situation being what it is. I also promote cleanliness and hygiene, and make sure no one is littering in public areas and that waste is properly disposed. I mentor the young people who stop by to have a chat with me. This is most satisfying.

What about your personal life? Are you married?

Yes, indeed. I am married. I have three children - two sons and a daughter - and I love them dearly. I consider myself to be a family-oriented man, and I am dedicated to the happiness and well-being of my loved ones.

Give us some inputs on your work ethic

I love my work and take pride in keeping the premises secure and clean. My previous experience at Cantonment School taught me the importance of discipline and grooming and I try to bring that to bear on all I do. At Moddy's, I find I'm treated with respect and affection, like a godfather, when I guide shoppers and their vehicles, and this gives me great joy. I always have a smile for everyone and take my responsibilities very seriously. I have found that it is important to do little and big things with pride, diligence and honesty. It is the key to a happy life. ■



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An aerial photograph of a lush forest. Large, gnarled trees with dense green foliage are scattered across the landscape. Interspersed among the green trees are large, rounded bushes or trees covered in vibrant red flowers, likely rhododendrons. The terrain appears to be hilly or mountainous, with the forest covering the slopes. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day, with some areas of the forest appearing slightly hazy or misty in the distance.

ONCE UPON A TIME...

Beautiful aerial photography taken during the making of the documentary, 'Nilgiris - A Shared Wilderness', captures what the district might have looked like before the Colonial era



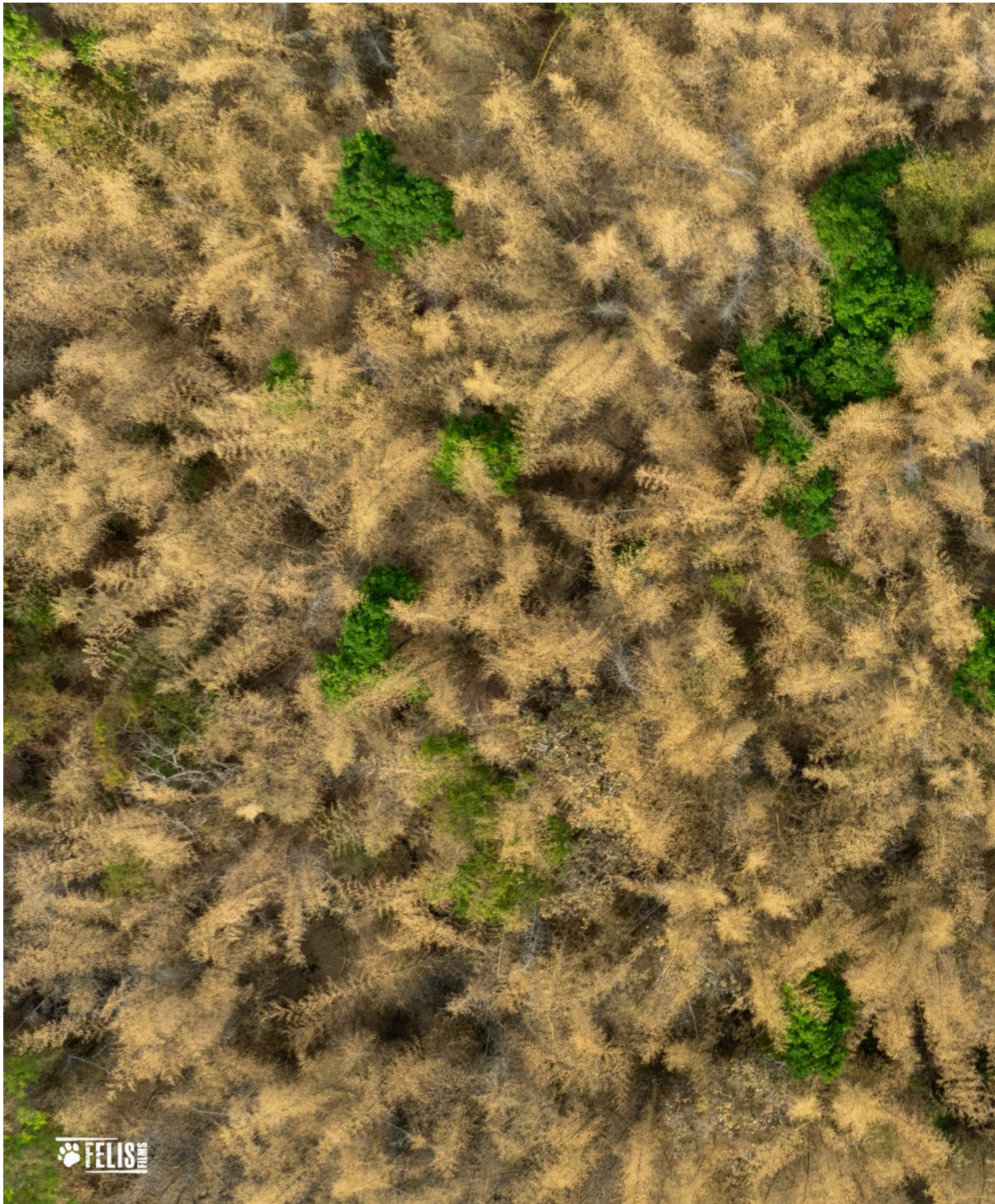


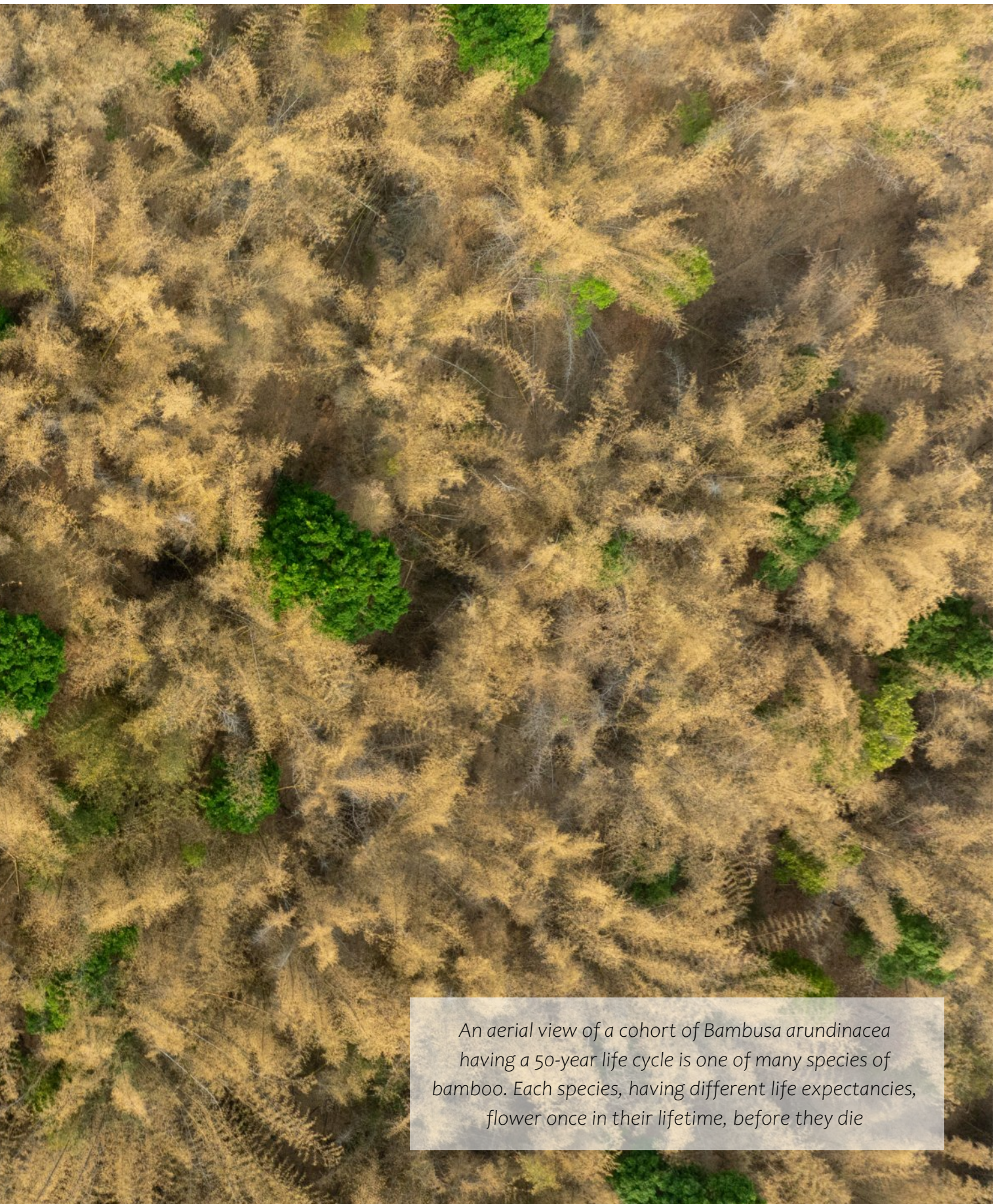
*These ancient, gnarled shola trees are
a signature sight found in untouched
high elevation landscapes*

*The Nilgiris is where the Eastern
and Western Ghats meet*









An aerial view of a cohort of *Bambusa arundinacea* having a 50-year life cycle is one of many species of bamboo. Each species, having different life expectancies, flower once in their lifetime, before they die

The unmistakable Moyar gorge is the deepest (260m), longest (22km), and oldest (2.5 billion years) gorge in the Indian peninsula (Pranay Lal), and forms a natural boundary between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka







*The possible landscape of much
of the upper reaches of the
Nilgiris before Colonial times*



Summer strips the rolling
hills of colour, revealing
their rugged contours





IN SALUTE



Lt Gen (Dr) SK Gadeock, AVSM (Retd), former Commandant of the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) takes us on a fascinating journey through the history of this globally renowned Nilgiris institution

From its birth in Quetta, and subsequent translocation to Wellington in 1948, DSSC today is a 'Monument Académie' ranking amongst the best in the world. Its character epitomises a composite multi-service and multi-national amalgamation of student officers and its distinguished faculty. The College

provides an invigorating environment for developing analytical thinking as military leaders, emphasis on jointness, game-changing strategies, transformational ingenuity and path-breaking innovativeness. Life at the DSSC aims at the holistic personality development of an officer and his family, to include well-imbibed social

graces, sophistication and the value system followed in the armed forces, in conformity with our noble traditions.

This is about the evolution of the DSSC, its unique ethos, values and traditions and the infrastructural enhancements over the years. It is an account of the incessant efforts of

the extraordinarily competent and dedicated faculty to constantly nurture a dynamic 'Purple' (tri-services) curriculum and syllabi incorporating the requisite tenets of 'Jointmanship' and achieving the objectives of 'Vision, Values and Vitality' whilst keeping pace with contemporary institutions across the world.

The Genesis

It was during colonial times, that the British thought it imperative that military officers be required to further improve their proficiency in arms. The initiative was taken by the Duke of Cambridge, the Commander-in-Chief, who mandated certain salient qualifications required of a staff officer and soon the senior department of the Royal Military College (established in 1802) at Sandhurst was designated to train British officers in organisational skills and develop their intellect and mental acuity. In 1862, the Staff College shifted to Camberley. From 1864, officers who passed out of the College began to be distinguished by the letters 'psc' (Passed Staff Course) and this tradition continues to this day.

The syllabus included mathematics, military history, topography, astronomy, French, German and

Hindustani language. The General Officers in the field army required efficient and brilliant staff officers who could sketch rapidly, build bridges, make roads, construct field works, all very quickly, had tactical acumen of battlefield milieu and were required to be fluent linguists.

Professional Imperatives

The mutiny of 1857 came as a rude shock to the British. Subsequently, major reforms were constituted, and the Indian Army was reorganised and reduced in strength. In 1868, under the Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell, a Royal Commission was instituted, who ostensibly, and most prudently, considered the possibility of a Staff College in India. Though an Indian Staff Corps had been set up to provide the Indian Army with British officers, they were not staff trained. General (later Field Marshal) Lord Strathnairn contended that India should have a Staff College of its own.

However, the proposal was turned down, as the Government felt that suitable instructions and a conducive environment might not be available in India. Moreover, India was perceived to have an unsuitable climate and lack of opportunities to study modern battles.

Repeated requests were turned down until 1902, when Lord Kitchener took over as the new Commander-in-Chief. He strongly proposed to establish an Indian Staff College, very similar to the one at Camberley, with the same regulations, syllabus, entrance examination, and a possible interchange of instructional staff, and an inspection by the Camberley Commandant. Though his proposal met with the same apprehensions, ultimately his efforts were successful, as he managed to overcome all opposition. The proposal was sanctioned in 1905 and finally the Indian Staff College was all set, principally, to be established in Quetta (now in Pakistan).

The Quetta Heritage

Pending completion of buildings at Quetta, the College was temporarily established at Deolali, in India, utilising the buildings in which the Military Hospital and some portions of School of Artillery are now located. The first entrance exam was held on 15th May 1905 and the first course of two years' duration commenced on 1st July, the same year. The first Commandant was Brig Gen AWL Bayly, CB, DSO, a Camberley graduate.

In 1907, the College moved to Quetta, from Deolali, and it was

Staff College at Quetta





Lt Gen SD Verma

officially given the wherewithal on the 1st of June, the same year, by Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) HL Smith-Dorrien, who was then commanding the 4th (Quetta) Division. The aim of the College was to produce officers who could organise all the necessary staff work that guaranteed success in war. The Staff College, Quetta, maintained close liaison with Camberley and even adopted the Owl with the motto 'Tam Marte Quam Minerva' as its own.

The year 1906 saw the formation of a General Staff in the British Army. All General Staff Officers were essentially to be Staff College graduates and were to be rewarded with accelerated promotions. Hence, there was keener competition to seek entry to the Staff College. These officers came to be regarded as the 'brain-trust' of the army. Their role was to advise on strategically important matters, supervise training of officers and men, study military

plans, collect and collate military intelligence and direct general policy in army matters. The Staff College, Quetta was closed after the outbreak of the First World War, on 15th September 1915. The accommodation was transformed into a Cadet College to train young men for grant of commission in the British and Indian armies.

It was only in 1919 that the College started functioning again. Quetta had its share of brilliant students and instructors. Field Marshal Slim attended the two-year course in 1926. Field Marshals Auchinleck and Montgomery respectively were Chief Instructors between 1932 and 1937, in the rank of Colonel. The first King's Commissioned Indian Officer (KCIO) to attend the 1933-34 Staff Course was Capt KM Cariappa, later the first Indian Commander-in-Chief and Field Marshal.

The next KCIO to get his 'psc' was Capt (later Lt Gen) Kalwant Singh of

the 1st Punjab Regiment, who attended the 1936-37 Staff Course. He was followed the next year by Capt Thakur Sheodatt Singh of 16th Cavalry and Thakur Nathu Singh of the 7th Rajput Regiment.

Partition and After

The partition of India was discussed openly, but the Defence Services kept out of the controversy and went about their job as usual. After the failure of the Cripps Mission in early 1946, all mayhem broke loose, and the British Government decided to leave India by June 1948. Lord Louis Mountbatten took over as the Viceroy of India on 24th March 1947 and announced on 3rd June 1947 that the sub-continent would be divided on 15th August, that same year. Indian officers and men were offered the choice of service in the Armed Forces of either of the two dominions, or to serve neither. British officers were also given a similar choice. The Service headquarters and training

establishments were split commensurately, in conformity with instructions from the Viceroy General of India.

Division of Military Assets

Col SD Verma was posted to Staff College, Quetta, in early 1947 to instruct a division of 60 officers. On 'Partition', a mixed Indian-Pakistani-British board was assembled to divide the assets of the Staff College in the ratio of two to India and one to Pakistan. Col SD Verma and Maj Zaheer represented Indian and Pakistani interests respectively. The Quetta library stayed with Pakistan and India got the Defence library located at Delhi. Other items included mess property, crockery, cutlery, cups, silver trophies and oil paintings. The division of the other assets posed little problem, and the process was completed quite smoothly, except for the Camberley Owl.

The first one-year course began in 1938, and was attended by Capt PN Thapar of the 1st Punjab Regiment, who became later Chief of the Army Staff, Capt Naranjan Singh Gill of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment and Capt Sardar BS Chimni of the Royal Army Service Corps. Several future Army and Air Force Chiefs, Field Marshals, Heads of State and the Commandants of Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, attended the student war courses at Quetta between 1939-41.

A New Beginning

It was in the capable hands of Col SD Verma, a senior Indian officer on the Directing Staff (DS) of the Staff College, Quetta, that the Indian Army Headquarters chose to entrust the setting up of an Indian Staff College. In early October 1947, he was sent a

signal from the Director of Military Training, Army Headquarters, stating that he should undertake reconnaissance to locate the new College, which was to start functioning from 1st April 1948. The signal also stated that he had been appointed as the Commandant of the Staff College, India. Staff College was established in 1948, and Wellington was designated as its temporary home. Among the many tasks in the itinerary of Col SD Verma was the search for a permanent site for the establishment of the Staff College. However, after carrying out extensive surveys in Bangalore, Belgaum and Deolali, he recommended that Wellington was the most fitting location for the Staff College.

Staff College at Wellington

The 15th Staff Course at Quetta terminated on 10th October 1947, with 32 Indian officer graduates. A special train, escorted by some Baluch and Gorkha jawans, left Quetta on 15th October 1947. Its passengers, the Indian officers, their families and many civilians reached Ambala Cantonment safely, three days later. Expecting more instructions, Col SD Verma reached

Delhi to find everybody preoccupied with the post-partition mayhem in Kashmir. In Col (later Lt Gen) SD Verma's own words, "Eventually I managed to corner an officer in the Quartering Directorate and asked him to give me a list of places where there was some accommodation lying vacant. He was kind enough to give me a list, and as an afterthought, he said, 'Oh, yes and there are a few barracks and some empty British Other Family quarters in a place called Wellington, near Madras.'"

A quick rejection of places like Deccan College in Poona, Barnes' School at Deolali, Kamptee Barracks near Nagpur and Belgaum, for either lack of accommodation or training facilities, led him to Wellington. It was love at first sight with the exquisite Nilgiris, its picturesque and idyllic surroundings, conducive tranquillity and serenity, a *sine qua non* environment for intensive studies by officers, far from the 'madding crowd'. The army man from Quetta made his decision. To top it, the hills were ideal for mountain warfare exercises, the Coimbatore plains for mobile warfare and the Mysore jungles were easy to reach. On 3rd



Gandhi Hall 1948 (later renamed Sardar Patel)

November 1947, Col Verma took a final decision and requested that these trains be routed from Ambala to Mettupalayam, and this is how Staff College was located in the blue-green district.

Salubrious Climes

The special train left Ambala Cantonment on 4th November 1947 and reached Mettupalayam on 8th November. The Madras Regimental Centre (MRC) arranged the reception and placed all its resources under Col Verma. Initially, the Staff College had to make do with improvised buildings for most of their requirements, but it was essential to have a hall of some kind, with an auditorium, and a model room. It was decided to convert a small dining room and kitchen into a model room (the present Mountbatten), but the hall had to be built ab-initio. The Assistant Garrison Engineer (AGE) had neither the authority nor the plans for the construction of a new hall. Col Verma, then promoted Brigadier and appointed Commandant of Staff College, made a start without waiting for the sanctions. Thus came Gandhi Hall (later to be named Sardar Patel Hall). When the hall was finally completed just before the opening ceremony on 5th April 1948, it possibly had the state-of-the-art acoustics of the time.

When setting up an institution, every minute detail must be investigated, be it cutlery, crockery, chairs, silver or even paintings to adorn the walls aesthetically. To collect, assemble and then place an essential rightful place was no easy task, and the credit for much in the Staff College of today goes to Brig Verma. Constant appeals and



Maj Gen WDA Lentaigne CB CBE DSO

persuasion resulted in numerous books, trophies, silver, gold and cash as donations for the new College. This helped immensely in accumulating other essentials like cutlery, furniture, etc. A cash crunch meant that there were obvious limitations, and it took a lot of persuasion on the part of Brig Verma to get non-essentials, like horses, sanctioned from the Government. Other requisites for the courses like exercises, books, précis, maps, Directing Staff notes were compiled and prepared with utmost perseverance; some from the already existing material from Quetta and the rest from extensive research of the resources at hand.

Fledgling Years

The Staff College Wellington, established by Brig Verma was essentially an army institute of excellence for military studies, with an onerous responsibility of producing junior staff officers for the Army. As at Quetta, a couple of officers each from the Navy and the Air Force were to attend the staff course and study how the Army operated during war and peace.

Maj Gen WDA Lentaigne CB, CBE, DSO took over as Commandant on 10th March 1948. In his seven years as the head of the College, he contributed immensely towards the setting up of a modern joint services establishment.

The early years of free India were trying times for the country, and especially for the Army, as there was a shortage of arms and ammunition, trained soldiers and staff. In turbulent times when there were raiders in Kashmir, refugees were to be rehabilitated, and a general disorderliness was evident in the newly independent nation. Thus, the first and second interim courses emphasised more on quantity to fill the many vacancies for officers, rather than on quality. The syllabus was based on the British establishment and tactical doctrines as evolved during World War II. It was modified to primarily suit battle conditions in Kashmir. 1948 was also the year in which the Staff College journal made its appearance, named 'The Nestling', with Maj PLN Choudhary being its first editor. From the second course onwards, 'The Nestling' fledged into 'The Owl'.

The Second World War had vividly highlighted, the increased interdependence of the Services on one another, and on the civilian war effort. This gave an impetus to the thought that the three Services of the Armed Forces should train and function together, learning the nitty-gritties of the organisation and staff management at the Staff College. Thus, it was felt that it would lead to an overall increase in the efficiency, desired symbiosis, mid-level leadership and jointmanship in the Armed Forces in the long run. That being so, Maj Gen Lentaigne won over the then Commander-in-Chief and Chief of the Army Staff, General FRR Bucher, and the Governor General of India, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, to the idea of converting the College into

a proper well-organised Inter-Services Institution. On the advice of Earl Mountbatten the then Defence Minister, Sardar Baldev Singh, gave his consent, and from 23rd May 1949, the day the 3rd Staff Course was to commence, the College came to be regarded as an 'Inter Services Staff College'.

The third course, the first 'ten months' duration course, commenced in a considerably better political scenario, and the partitioned Army too was rebuilt and organised. It had one full syndicate of Indian Air Force (IAF) officers. With the formation of the Naval Wing before the start of the 4th Staff Course, the College became a truly Joint Services Institution, the only one of its kind in the world. It was also from the 4th Staff Course onwards that students from foreign countries began attending the course in 1950. The College was rechristened more appropriately as the Defence Services Staff College. The organisation of the Staff College also underwent a change with the addition of the Air and Naval Wings. The first interim course had only 11 Defence Staff.

Towards Today...

On 11th May 1955, Maj Gen Lentaigne relinquished office. He left an indelible imprint not only on the DSSC, but on the life of military officers and their families in Wellington, and the Nilgiris, in general. He was instrumental in reviving the Wellington Gymkhana Club and the Ooty Hunt Club. It was mainly due to his indefatigable efforts and enthusiasm that the College was elevated to a high threshold of excellence in joint military education. Through his consistent efforts,

students from other Commonwealth countries were invited to attend the Staff College at Wellington. His most outstanding contribution was the conversion of the Staff College into a Defence Services Institution.

The odyssey of DSSC from its inception to the present times has been replete with challenges and transformational dynamics, but it has emerged to be one of the most enviable joint training establishments in the world, epitomising the 'Purple' tri-services military culture, on the credible edifice of 'jointmanship and leadership'. We, in the Nilgiris, are so proud that this premier institution is part of our daily lives, and it is here in this district, that we see, most keenly, the incredible symbiosis that lies between the Armed Forces and civilian population of this country. May divine providence shine eternally on this kinship. ■

A BRIEF PROFILE OF THE AUTHOR

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- Commandant, Amity Institute of Education & Training (AIET)
- Former Commandant, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (2014-2017)



*An anniversary issue demands a round up of the history of the people who first occupied the Nilgiris. **Dr Susan Sridhar** gives us a snapshot view of the six original tribes of the district and NAWA, the organisation that is mandated with their welfare*

The Nilgiris district is the Queen of hill stations, and not without reason. She sits regally at 1800 metres – forming the bordering ranges overlooking Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. These lovely mountains are part of a larger mountain range – the Western Ghats. The name Nilgiris literally means ‘blue mountains’; ‘Nila’ meaning blue and ‘Giri’ meaning mountains. This blue colour is generally credited to the hue of the eucalyptus trees that traditionally dotted these hills, as well as to the violet Neelakurinji flower that is fabled to bloom once every 12 years. The mountain ranges in this district

are home to six major indigenous tribal groups, namely the Todas, Kotas, Irulas, Kurumbas, Panniyas and Kattunaickans. They are also, according to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act 1976, the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG). These tribes are forever engulfed in a continuous tug-of-war between holding on to their ancestral culture and traditions while also facing the challenges of modernisation and development. As records state, they have already lost much during colonialism - their homes were turned into cash-crop

plantations where they were forced to labour as low-wage workers.

The Badagas, interestingly, who were formerly known as one of the hill tribes, are no longer so. They are, today, considered as Backward Class here in Tamil Nadu and as Other Backward Classes by the Central Government.

So, for those of us, who still may not know, or would like a quick refresher, here are the six indigenous tribal groups of the Nilgiris...

The Todas

The Todas are found only in the Nilgiris District. The name Toda is supposed to be derived from the



Gathering of Todas for a ceremony



Kota women dance

word 'tud', which is their sacred tree - scientifically known as *melisoma simplicifolia*. The "Toda dialect is an independent language of the Dravidian family affiliated to Tamil and Malayalam" as stated by the linguist, Emeneau, in the mid 20th century. In the Toda dialect, Ootacamund was Othekalmund which later came to be known as Udthagamandalam. The Toda village is called a 'Mund', which literally means a cattle-pen. It is usually a collection of three or five half-barrel-shaped huts with a small doorway (as shown in the picture above). The Todas are ethnically pastoral people and the care of buffaloes and duties connected with the dairy are their chief occupation. The Toda women

are experts at embroidery with their distinctive black, red and white combinations, and their beautiful shawls have become famous all over the country. Agriculture is still fairly new to them. At present there are around 800 to 1,600 Todas living in these hills. They have a Sangamam Federation with 300 members and 120 self-help groups functioning for the benefit of the people.

The Kotas

The Kotas, also Kothar or Kov by self-designation, are again indigenous to the Nilgiris District and approximately 2,000 to 2,500 of them are distributed in seven settlements. They speak the Kota dialect - an old dialect of Kannada mixed with Tamil words.

Kota villages are known as Kokkal, which represent a kind of linear structure with around 30 to 60 houses in two or three localities, called Keris. Their traditional garment is known as Varad - a white bed-spread cloth which is thrown around the body by both men and women.

The Kadk (ear-rings) are also used by both men and women. The Kotas are basically an artisan community. The men work with wood and metal and are skilled carpenters, blacksmiths, potters and musicians. The women are experts in pottery work. They worship their deities Kambattarayan and Kambatiswari who are also known by the names of Ayyanor and Ammanor.



Irula men with traditional music



Ancient Kurumba rock painting



Paniya women with traditional earrings



Traditional Kattunaickan musicians

The Irulas

Irulas are one of the major tribes of Tamil Nadu, and are distributed in ten districts, which include the Nilgiris. They speak 'Irula' which is a South-Dravidian language of the Tamil-Malayalam sub-group. These Irulas should not be mistaken for the Irulas who live in warmer climates and are famous as snake catchers. The Irulas here, numbering around 25,000, collect wild fruits, herbs and roots to appease their hunger. They are also known for their knowledge and skill at collecting honey, beeswax, dyes, gum, and medicinal plants and herbs. They place great value on the practice of ancestral worship and are known to be skilled healers and magicians. They believe that they cohabit their land with their ancestors, with the latter believed to reside within each seemai – the Irulas' geographic classification. Today many of them are wage labourers, working in farms and tea estates in the district.

The Kurumbas

The Kurumbas of the Nilgiri hills numbering around 2,500 to 3,000 are entirely different from other groups such as Kuruman, Kuruban or Kuruba. According to the Madras

Census Report of 1891, their ancestry could be traced to the Pallavas. They have been categorised into the Alu Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas and Betta Kurumbas.

The Alu Kurumbas are skilled foragers, shifting cultivators and honey hunters. They are also skilled in traditional Kurumba paintings. The Mullu Kurumbas are hunters and gatherers. Betta Kurumbas are more of shepherds with Betta meaning hills and Kurumbas being the word for shepherds.

The Paniyas

In the Nilgiris district, the Paniyas are found only in the Gudalur Taluk and they number around 9,500 to 10,000. They were held as bonded labourers before Independence and now most of them work as farm labourers or undertake menial jobs on tea estates. They speak a dialect mixed with Malayalam and Tamil words. The Paniyan settlement is known as a Paddi, which consists of a few houses or huts built in rows in one corner of the agriculture farm. They seem to be the least well-off among the tribal groups in the hills and have shied away from any sort of development. There are several

voluntary organisations now helping this community in areas such as health and education.

The Kattunaickans

The Kattunaickans are like the Paniyas, found only in the Gudalur Taluk. The Kattunayakan people are one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Western Ghats. They consist of approximately 450 to 500 households and each household has not more than four people in residence. They get their name from the words 'kadu' (forests) and 'nayakan' (leader/chief) connoting that they are the lords of the forest. They speak a Kurumba dialect mixed with Kannada. Their village is called a Padi which consists of five to ten huts in a hamlet. The Kattunaickans were hunter gatherers. Nowadays, besides gathering the minor forest produce, they are employed by the Forest Department as mahouts and watchmen. They were animists and worshipped trees, snakes and animals but now most of them claim to be Hindus and use popular Hindu names. They worship Lord Shiva under the name of 'Bairavan'. Music, song and dance are important to them and form a huge part of their lives. ■

The Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association

The Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) is a secular, charitable, non-government organisation founded by late Padmashri Dr S Narasimhan, and was registered in 1958. He was awarded the Padmashri by the Government of India and the Dr BC Roy Award by the Medical Council of India in recognition of his work for the welfare of the Nilgiri tribal communities.

H Alwas, the person who spoke to Inside43, is the current Secretary of NAWA and the Chairperson for all the tribal groups in the Nilgiris. In 2001, there was a tripartite agreement whereby the Forest Department, the Women's Development Corporation of Tamil Nadu and NAWA began to work as one. Alwas was also the President of the Kodanad Municipality and Manager of Kodanad Tea Estate from 1980 to 1995. Being a Toda himself, he is not only well-versed with the tribal people, he is committed to their welfare and progress.

With 62 years of experience in tribal welfare, NAWA has become a model in tribal development. The Govt of India and the Govt of Tamil Nadu have approved and grant-aided several programmes in tribal locations in the Nilgiris and adjoining districts and States. It is managed by a Committee consisting of members from various tribal communities. From a simple

beginning in 1958, NAWA has become a peoples' organisation today embracing the empowerment and upliftment of the tribes they represent..

Activities of NAWA

- Medical and health care through health centres in tribal settlements and mobile medical units.
- Screening of Sickle Cell Anaemia and neonatal screening and interventions such as genetic counselling and treatment.
- Crèche and nutrition centres in 18 tribal settlements and preschool education with opportunities for learning through play.
- Education and economic development through sponsorship programmes to provide financial assistance to tribal children and youth to pursue regular education in schools, universities and in vocational training centres.
- Capacity building and empowerment of children and youth.
- Financial assistance to tribal farmers to develop wastelands with tea, coffee, spices and other sustainable agriculture.
- Empowerment of tribal women through support to self-help groups, and training men and women in entrepreneurship and capacity development.

- Promotion of sports and skills development among tribal youth.
- Documenting, preserving and promoting tribal arts and crafts.
- Rehabilitation farm colony for formerly bonded labourers.
- Promotion of herbal medicine preparation and marketing.
- Training on pottery, paintings, embroidery and other tribal crafts.
- Representing development issues of the tribal people on wider platforms and collaborating with other agencies for resource mobilisation.
- Addressing environmental issues and forest management.
- Securing forest tribal land rights under FRA 2006.
- Disaster management / keeping peace among tribal communities.
- Securing State / Central funds for tribal communities with their influence.
- Establishing tea industries for tribal tea growers
- Promoting federation for livelihood.

They are, at present, looking forward to developing the Tamil Nadu Tribal Mart where they will be procuring and selling tribal products to visitors, in order to raise funds and promote the diverse tribal cultures in their portfolio.



So Much More...

Apsara Reddy's heart is firmly planted in the Nilgiris, and it has everything to do with the warmth and love that comes her way from the people in these hills

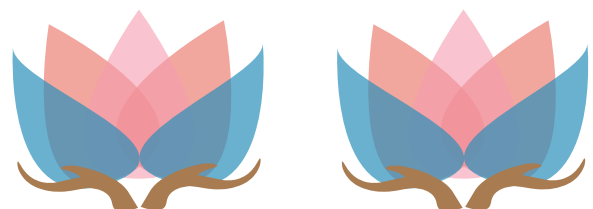
In the misty, quiet hills of the Nilgiris, where gatherings often seem limited to those who play bridge or golf, I discovered something far deeper: a community bound by warmth, camaraderie and kindness. What started as a simple introduction to this close-knit group blossomed into lasting friendships, revealing that these 'circles' are much more than social gatherings—they are places of support, compassion, and shared experiences that enrich daily life in this mountain district.

A wonderful lady I met during a literary festival in Ooty opened the door to this world, her intelligence and graciousness immediately making me feel welcome. It was through her that I began to see the heart of this community—a space where intellect and empathy meet, and where bonds formed over conversation feel as enduring as the hills themselves.

Another friend became a steady source of support, making early morning breakfasts before her eating establishment even opened, and standing by me as I navigated the everyday challenges of life in this town. Whether it was pitching in to help solve overwhelming landscape issues or simply offering a listening ear, her actions proved that these friendships are rooted in generosity and care.

Then there's the culinary delight of another dear friend, whose Chettinad specialities have become a spicy highlight of my experiences here. Her home is a haven of hospitality, and her unfiltered companionship leaves me with a sense of comfort and joy. Sharing meals and stories in her warm company, I've come to appreciate that social gatherings here are about far more than just socialising—they're about fostering genuine connections.

It's easy to think of Nilgiris' circles as simple gatherings for golf or bridge, but that misses the deeper truth. These communities have shown me that friendships here are meaningful, where people truly show up for one another. From intellectual generosity to steadfast help and heartfelt hospitality, the people of these hills have taught me that this hill district is more than just a scenic retreat—it's a place where warmth and kindness turn acquaintances into lifelong friends. Here, I've found not just a social circle, but a community that feels like home. ■





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Royal Tea

*The Homedale saga is a story of excellence in tea -
Inside 43 looks at the history and story of the family that
has taken this estate from strength to strength*



“ In a world where change is constant, Homedale stands as a beacon of tradition and quality

Nestled in the picturesque Nilgiri hills, the property boasts a rich history spanning over a century. The saga of Homedale began on 13th July 1917, when the Stradling Estate, Brooklands Estate, and Springfield Estate were sold by William Alexander Talbot and Elizabeth Sarah Talbot to William Rierison Arbuthnot and Ashley Herbert Arbuthnot for ₹10,000. This transaction marked the beginning of a story that would intertwine with the tea industry, evolving through the decades into the Homedale we know today.

A Journey Through Time

The early years of Homedale are steeped in a sense of continuity and change, mirroring the larger historical context of India during the 20th century. The sale of the estates to the Arbuthnot family represented a shift in ownership and the potential for growth in a burgeoning industry. By 25th October 1923, these estates were conveyed to the Nilgiris Plantation Company Ltd for ₹55,000, signalling a new chapter that would set the stage for future developments.

The year 1927 marked a significant turning point when the Nilgiris Plantation Company gifted the property—now commonly known as Homedale—to Mrs Ruth Rodgers in recognition of the contributions made by her late husband, Leslie Rodgers. This gesture illustrated the value placed on service and commitment, setting the tone for future generations who would follow in these footsteps.

The history of Homedale took a further turn on 12th October 1937, when Mrs Ruth Beaver Hayne, formerly known as Ruth Rodgers, sold the estate to the Maharani of

Cochin, Smt Parukutty Naithyarammah (Lady Rama Varma) for ₹13,500. This transition was not merely a transaction, but an evolution of stewardship, as new hands would guide Homedale into its next phase. Lady Rama Varma's ownership would soon lead to the establishment of the Homedale Tea Factory, laying the foundation for a legacy steeped in quality and excellence.

The Birth of Homedale Tea

In November 1949, the Homedale Tea Factory was founded by Shri VK Aravindaksha Menon, a man whose credentials reflected a remarkable

“Raman’s dedication was not merely about preserving the past; it was about evolving the family business to meet the changing demands of the tea market

journey of education and professional growth. Born as the second son of His Highness Rama Varma, Maharaja of Cochin, Aravindaksha was shaped by a blend of aristocratic heritage and a drive for modernity. His educational pursuits took him to Madras Presidency College and the prestigious Engineering College at Guindy.

After spending two years at Tata Steel in Bombay, Aravindaksha travelled to the United States to undertake an apprenticeship at the General Electric Company’s plant in Schenectady, New York. His experiences there instilled in him a profound understanding of industrial

processes and engineering practices that would later benefit his endeavours in India. Upon returning to India, he joined the Cochin State as an engineer, rising through the ranks to become the Chief Engineer. His legacy included the construction of enduring landmarks such as the Ram Mohan Palace, which now houses the Kerala High Court, and the Trichur Town Hall, both testaments to his quest for perfection.

After retiring from his governmental position, Aravindaksha and his wife Smt Malathy and children decided to settle in the Nilgiri hills with his mother, Smt Parukutty Naithyarammah, who had acquired the tea estate. His pioneering spirit, coupled with the skills he had honed, led him to build one of the first tea factories in the region. This was no small feat; Aravindaksha was not just an engineer, but a visionary who recognised the potential of tea as a commercial product. With the same pioneering spirit that made him among the first Indians to serve an apprenticeship in the United States in the early 1920s, he became one of the first Indians to establish a tea factory in the Nilgiris.

Tea quickly became Aravindaksha’s abiding passion, and the mark of ‘Homedale’ was firmly established as a name synonymous with quality and respect in the world of tea. His vision laid the groundwork for the brand that would flourish under subsequent generations, reflecting both his commitment to excellence and his understanding of the growing demand for high-quality tea.

A Legacy Continued

Shri VK Aravindaksha Menon passed away on 11th July 1978, leaving



© Suraj Mahbubani

behind a rich legacy that was carried on by his son, Shri Raman Menon. Like his father, Raman was dedicated to maintaining the high standards that had become synonymous with Homedale. With a deep understanding of the industry and an unyielding commitment to quality, he ensured that the brand continued to thrive.

Raman's dedication was not merely about preserving the past; it was about evolving the family business to meet the changing demands of the tea market. He instilled a sense of responsibility in his children, emphasising the importance of quality, innovation, and community

engagement. As he managed the estate, he navigated the challenges that came with running a family business, blending tradition with modern practices to ensure the brand's relevance. Automation and computers were installed during the late 1980's.

With the arrival of Prashant Menon, Raman's son, in the management team in 2003, Homedale embraced a new wave of innovation and modernisation. Prashant grew up immersed in the family legacy. He pursued his education at the prestigious Madras Christian College (MCC) and then ventured into the corporate world in Bombay, interning

with PricewaterhouseCoopers for three years. However, after earning his MBA in Cardiff, Prashant faced a pivotal decision: continue his career abroad or return home to the family business.

Returning to Coonoor, Prashant embraced the lifestyle of the Nilgiris, determined to infuse new ideas and energy into the family legacy. His arrival signified a shift in perspective, as he sought to modernise operations while honouring the foundational principles established by his forefathers. The challenge was to revitalise Homedale in ways that reflected its storied past and the realities of the contemporary tea market.

Modernisation and Growth

Both father and son were involved in modernising the production processes at the Homedale Tea Factory. They recognised that to compete effectively, the brand needed to embrace technological advancements while retaining the artisanal quality that had defined its reputation. By investing in new machinery and refining production techniques, they aimed to enhance the quality and efficiency of the tea-making process. This has assisted Homedale in maintaining a high quality through the seasons leading to ever increasing consumer appreciation and demand in both the tea auctions and in retail trade

Sustainability has been a cornerstone of the managements vision for Homedale. Recognising the importance of environmental stewardship, they installed solar energy to reduce the factory's electricity consumption. This commitment to sustainability resonated with consumers who increasingly value eco-friendly practices, further enhancing the brand's appeal.

The managements approach is characterised by a meticulous attention to detail. Every decision

made in the factory is subject to thorough scrutiny, ensuring that only the most secure and beneficial changes are implemented.

The Role of Family

While the business thrives, the familial bonds that underpin Homedale remain strong. Raman's wife, Geeta, and Prashant's wife, Gayatri, play a vital role in the family dynamic. Together, they create an environment that fosters creativity and innovation while maintaining the traditions that have defined their family for generations. Prashant's

❧ The early years of Homedale are steeped in a sense of continuity and change, mirroring the larger historical context of India during the 20th century

son, 13-year-old Dhruv Menon, has already shown a keen interest in the family legacy. This connection to the family business ensures that the values of quality and dedication are passed down to the next generation.

The Menon family is not alone in their journey. They have established a strong network of relationships within the Nilgiris community, fostering connections that have proven invaluable to the brand's growth. The warmth and support of the local community have been instrumental in shaping Homedale's identity, reinforcing the notion that tea is not just a product; it is a way of life.

Challenges and Triumphs

During the early years, the tea market experienced significant fluctuations. The pricing and quality of tea were inconsistent, and the market was saturated with low-quality teas with no recognition for quality teas. However, Homedale continued to manufacture high-quality teas. They maintained the importance of quality control and worked diligently to establish standards that would differentiate Homedale from its competitors.

Efforts taken have not gone unnoticed; the factory has garnered multiple awards for the brand in recent years, celebrating Homedale's commitment to excellence and quality. These accolades are a testament to the hard work and dedication that have gone into the brand, solidifying its reputation as one of the most beloved tea brands in the



region. The family's unwavering commitment to quality has resonated with tea enthusiasts, ensuring that Homedale remains a favourite choice among consumers.

The Future of Homedale

Looking ahead, the family is optimistic about the future of Homedale. "We aim to continue the family legacy while embracing innovation and modern practices. As tea consumption patterns evolve, we recognise the need to stay ahead of the curve, ensuring that the brand remains relevant in an ever-changing marketplace," says Prashant.

The team envisions expanding Homedale's presence as a household

brand. By establishing a robust online presence and leveraging e-commerce platforms, Homedale aims to connect with tea lovers around the world, bringing the taste of the Nilgiris to homes far and wide. Even locally, Homedale Tea has a fine reputation and its distinctive packaging can be seen gracing the shelves of most grocery outlets in the district.

And so...

The Homedale saga is a testament to the enduring spirit of innovation and tradition. From its humble beginnings to its current standing as a symbol of quality tea, the legacy of Homedale is woven into the fabric of the Nilgiris. As it moves forward, the family is

poised to continue its remarkable journey, ensuring that Homedale remains a cherished name for generations to come.

In a world where change is constant, Homedale stands as a beacon of tradition and quality. The Menon family's unwavering commitment to excellence is a reminder that even in the face of challenges, a rich legacy can endure and thrive. As they look to the future, the Homedale brand will continue to be a source of pride, not only for the family, but for the entire community, embodying the spirit of tea that has united them all, and made them one with these hills. ■



L-R: Prashant, Geeta and Raman Menon

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Our teas come to you freshly hand-plucked, retaining their essential oils, to give you the unmistakable spirit of the Nilgiris, appreciated by connoisseurs everywhere.



Of Hills

© Rajat Kumar



and Homes

*Few things look as lovely as a colonial home tucked into a hillside. **Sharmatha Shankar** takes a look at United Consultants, the company that has been building quality homes in the Nilgiris, which are in perfect sympathy with the colonial ethos of this district*

Wooden floors, cosy fireplaces, gabled roofs and neat sweeping lawns. These are just some of the details that come to mind when one thinks about a colonial style home. Now, imagine living in one of these beautiful homes up in the hills, surrounded by lush greenery, tea gardens, clouds and cheerful sunlight. Ah, bliss!

Colonial-style homes have a timeless charm, beauty and warmth. In an era of minimalist design and large, stark, imposing structures that can often seem at odds with the feel of a hilly place, it is always a joy to glimpse a red-roofed bungalow through beautiful wrought-iron or picket gates. Wouldn't it be lovely to bring back that beauty and old-world charm by constructing new builds that complement and enhance the lay of the land? And what if they were built in a way that puts minimum impact on the environment? Well, that's exactly what United Consultants, a construction firm run by Navroze Sethna, is doing.

Navroze has a great fondness for colonial-style homes, as he grew up in one himself, in a neighbourhood that continues to exude old-world charm.

He firmly believes that this style of design is apt for hill station towns like Coonoor, Coorg and Kodaikanal. As a policy, he only builds homes that echo the architectural heritage of this district. In a time of climate change and rampant, unchecked development, he stands firm on creating homes that he believes are the need of the hour.

Diligent and Stringent

Government rules are followed diligently while carrying out construction operations, and United Consultants is unwilling to cut corners or attempt shortcuts of any nature. Every minute detail is thoroughly looked into, studied and planned out before construction begins. United Consultants follows the '75% green and 25% grey' policy scrupulously. Only twenty-five percent of the land on which the home is to be built is allotted for construction of the house itself. The remaining seventy-five percent is reserved for green spaces.

The homes are no more than two hundred and fifty square metres in size. All homes compulsorily have rain water harvesting and are solar powered for electricity as well as

water heating. The earth is also cut to a minimal degree, and the houses are designed and built as per the contours of the land.

Navroze is ethically driven not to work with people who disagree with this approach. On principle, his company does not get involved in projects that would be damaging to the environment or detract from the district that he passionately loves.





Navroze's homes include wooden floors, tiles with subtle designs, high ceilings, fireplaces, large kitchens, spacious living areas and even sun rooms. The tenets of Vaastu are also rigorously implemented as a science, rather than an art, which helps in maximum natural light and fresh air, while also offering sweeping views of the surrounding countryside. Large sloping lawns and winding driveways are typically what one gets in a house constructed by United Consultants. While Navroze would like to stay true to the colonial style while designing the homes, he has had to incorporate certain modern construction techniques to keep with the times such as column and beam structures, instead of load-bearing structures. However, if a client wishes to have a modern finish in the interior of their home, he is happy to accommodate them as long as the exterior facade retains a colonial style.

"The quality of construction of our house is excellent, but more importantly, the entire experience of buying and completing the house has

been extremely positive. Navroze Sethna was open to all our modifications, suggestions and requirements, and implemented them carefully and committedly", says one of his many satisfied customers.

What's more, Navroze sources his materials from wood to sand to steel to bricks only from the best vendors. A lot of emphasis is placed on the quality of materials and the final finish of every home. The appearance as well as the structural integrity of each home is of primary importance at United Consultants.

“On principle, his company does not get involved in projects that would be damaging to the environment or detract from the district that he passionately loves

"Our home, as designed by United Associates and built by United Consultants, fully leverages the spectacular view of the hills around while providing maximum ventilation and great natural lighting. During the construction, Navroze Sethna was very responsive and flexible to our suggestions for modifications and improvements. The materials used were of the best quality and all transactions were transparent and above board," says another happy client.

Relationship-Driven

From Navroze's side, he works with his clients on all facets of the dream

home they wish to live in, and the relationships invariably go from professional interactions to lasting and strong friendships.

His company motto of *Socii Stamus – Cadimus Dividui* (which in English means *United we stand, divided we fall*), was adopted for United Consultants because Navroze believes that every aspect of the business, be it marketing or design or construction or customer relations, need to meld together, if one is to build a superlative home.

While the construction and design aspects of the business are central, other aspects such as the finance and marketing are just as important. Navroze believes that a successful business absolutely requires an amalgamation of each of these aspects. He runs a very successful team of professionals, all based out of Coonoor, who work together seamlessly. Another client happily remarked on this. "Be it the accounts maintained by Sathish, design by Prabodh, office follow-up by Mary, or site execution by Navroze, all were in perfect synchronisation. The overall service and quality were exemplary."

Building Excellence

Navroze has constructed quite a few homes since 2012. There is a good market for colonial style homes in the Nilgiris, in general, and Coonoor in particular, with demand outstripping supply. Navroze adds that his own office building was restored by United Consultants. This beautifully revamped space looks like a cottage out of an Enid Blyton novel, complete with window boxes, wooden floors and a pretty garden surrounding it.

Most of his clients looking to construct new homes, would like

them to be in the colonial style. Clients mainly include people approaching the age of retirement. Some clients are alumni of boarding schools in the Nilgiris, and they settle here out of a sense of nostalgia. Coonoor is a very cosmopolitan town where a wide variety of communities from Tamilians to Sindhis to Malayalis to Parsis, to even the odd Thai lady or Englishman co-exist. While there is a good mix of the quiet, slow life, and the upbeat, glamorous, high-flying life, the quality to be found in Coonoor is difficult to find in big cities, or even other hill station towns for that matter. United Consultants and Navroze would simply like to enhance this appeal and add to that experience.

Starting Out

Navroze got into the construction business purely by chance, after a meeting with Kailash Sancheti whom he fondly refers to as 'Kailubhai'. Kailash Sancheti is the largest and one of the most respected developers in the district today. "I consider Kailubhai, my elder brother. He has been my inspiration and indeed my guiding angel. United Consultants could not have been conceived, but for that fateful meeting with Kailubhai." After Navroze began his construction business United Consultants, he gradually ventured into architecture and interior design with his new firm United Associates.

Hailing from a family of planters, his parents Edi and Shireen moved to Coonoor in 1975. His father, Edi, was a tea planter in the Anamallais for thirteen years and is probably among the senior-most planters in the Nilgiris today. Navroze was born in 1977, and did his schooling at St

Joseph's and at the Lawrence School, Lovedale. He then did his higher studies in Mumbai and Karnataka, and then went on to build and run a tea factory. He still runs a coffee plantation in Coorg. While planting will always be his first love, he has taken a keen interest in real estate and also credits his success to the connections he gained while studying at the Lawrence School. In fact, his first client was an Old Lawrencian by the name of Joseph (Mohan) Vellapally.

Navroze and his wife, Sanayia, got married in 2005 and have 2 lovely children (Kainaaz and Rayaana), who he hopes will join the business some day and carry on his legacy of constructing beautiful, elegant homes that add to the beauty of these hills, while being environmentally ethical and sustainable. While he would like Kainaaz and Rayaana to follow their own paths, he hopes that they will, in time, take over United Consultants and expand into other hill stations, and maybe even to a seaside paradise like Goa. Like all parents he hopes his children will fly far, but

eventually return to the hills in which they grew up.

For those of us who were raised here, it is especially disheartening to see the effects of climate change, that are so keenly felt up in the mountains. Unfortunately, the Nilgiri hills are not what they once were. This is precisely why it is imperative to have builders like Navroze around who have taken the initiative to retain the colonial splendour of our hills, by building beautiful, luxurious, high quality homes that retain the flavour and feel of this gorgeous district that we call home. ■



Navroze and Sanayia Sethna



United Consultants Office, Coonoor



A Blended Life

Surekha Kothari, a well-known music artiste and author tells us how connectivity in our hills is not bound to technology, and why it is the place so many wish to live in

It is really a terrific boon to have worldwide connectivity at our fingertips today. The natural human instinct to connect and keep connected has brought about a revolution through technology like WiFi, 4G and 5G. Somewhere along the way, however, the fabric of human connectivity is getting lost. Personal connections have largely been replaced by social media and heart connections by superficial ones. This is more evident in a metropolis. Time is at such a premium that, more often than not, what and who you don't see, you don't miss, and so, tend to forget about. Sadly, there can be a certain element of feeling jaded and being marginalised.

But not so in the hills. Revisiting Coonoor has been like a breath of fresh air, a rejuvenating experience which is both binding and addictive. I had to recalibrate my opinion on connectivity after I began to spend more time in Coonoor. This is, traditionally, a simple and close-knit society of planters where the delicious blends of tea also reflect a happy blend of the people here.

My father-in-law was a prominent planter, and one of the earliest tea estate owners. But despite our hiatus from Coonoor, our family has been welcomed back warmly. Happily, I discovered that people here not only remember and value old connections, but they harbour genuine goodwill towards them. This is generally a rare

phenomenon elsewhere, but typical of the congeniality prevalent in the Nilgiris.

I had a rich life in Chennai, where we lived a long time, and where I still have an active footprint. Friends, family, memories, these are all in abundant supply. I have travelled the world, most recently, to Africa, which delighted my soul. My work with various organisations, my spiritual evolution, and my music career have taken me to far-flung places that I would not have ever imagined. And of course, with it all, I have met all kinds of people, from all walks of life, and I have realised this much...

I believe that all people are just people, yet we are all fundamentally different, and I'm sure you have realised this, as well. And it doesn't surprise me that the history of humanity is the history of war, in some ways. But, yet, here in the Nilgiris, we find the perfect example of how human beings can coexist harmoniously on the strength of mutual acceptance. This district is like a giant family home, bound by generational connections, a social fabric that occasionally frays but never tears, and that is welcoming to all who pass through its winding roads. It is no wonder that most don't wish to leave, many wish to come and live here, and those like me, who left, are compelled to return. Over and over. For in this whole big, wide world, there is nowhere quite like this. Take it from me. ■



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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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Teens World



This chic bodycon dress features a striking blend of pink, orange, and white floral patterns, making it perfect for casual outings. Crafted from comfortable cotton, it comes with an additional sleeveless layer inside for added style. Pair it with white sneakers for a relaxed yet trendy look.

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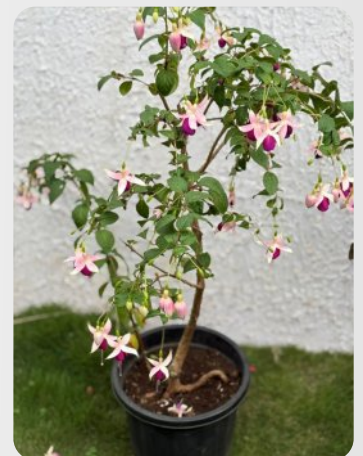
Cherrie Berry

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Anokhi

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In Good Taste

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



A Culinarium Delight

*The Culinarium, 7/75b, NH67, Ooty-Coonoor Main Road,
Ketti 643243*

☎ +91 423 251 7293

Long before the raft of eating establishments we see today appeared, The Culinarium in Ketti paved the way for things to come. Today it offers a bar, serves vegan/dairy ice cream and has the finest selection of artisan breads among other divine treats. The Culinarium serves up a mix of European and American food. The location itself is perfect - straddling the towns of Coonoor and Ooty, overlooking stunning sights of the Nilgiris. And the icing on the cake - this very elegant eatery has a copper fireplace that is a delight on cold winter evenings.

If you are craving finely balanced flavours, then this is the perfect choice for a relaxed, yet refined dining experience. We chose the mushroom soup, a light, whipped serving of deliciousness that was almost a meal in itself. We then

worked our way through the spinach tart which was the cherry on the cake, so to speak, and then greed forced us to try the chicken pot pies which are legendary for good reason. The crowning glory was the lavender ice cream, made with home-grown lavender, no less. The range of coffees were enough to delight the most critical connoisseur, and to cap it all, from the moment we arrived, the staff were incredibly attentive without being overbearing.

The highlight of the meal had to be the perfect balance between flavour and ambience. The menu at The Culinarium offers so much you'll be spoilt for choice. Whether it's the views, the warm service, or the consistently delicious menu, The Culinarium continues to hold its place as one of the Nilgiris' must-visit spots. We recommend it most highly.



*Café Diem, Big Bandisholai, 2a, Inside Camelot Heights,
Kotagiri Road, Coonoor, 643104 Nilgiris
☎ +91 96638 49639 By reservation only*

A Culinary Christmas

Ever since Café Diem launched, it has played to a full house, drawing visitors from near and far with its tantalising vegetarian menu that draws inspiration from all corners of the world. Radhika Shastry, the creator of Café Diem, is probably the most well-travelled person you will ever meet. This is clearly seen in the menus she curates for her cosy restaurant in Coonoor, that is tucked up on a hilltop, overlooking a sweeping valley and tea estates. While the menu changes from one festive moment to the next, the highlight is certainly the thoughtful Christmas menu each year. The menu is accompanied by the stunning Victorian village display that adorns the café's interior - you could spend a day just looking at the decorations that have been tastefully sourced by Radhika during her travels.

This year, the much-awaited, eight-course menu features a mouth-watering array of delicacies that may well be the

perfect Christmas gift you give yourself. Paris-Brest with hazelnut praline and vanilla mousse pairs perfectly with the creamy asparagus mint risotto with parmesan tulip. Or try the pasta rotulu with asparagus served on a flavourful bed of red pepper coulis. Greek yoghurt pudding on a speculoos base, with raspberry glaze tops this off most nicely, and of course, one must have a bite of the confit tomato dolma stuffed with saffron arborio rice and served with hibiscus coulis. Whatever else you do, do not forget to have a slice of Café Diem's plum cake, with its fruit filling that has been marinating for months.

A quick look at social media will confirm all we're saying. So, make sure you book in to Café Diem as soon as possible to enjoy this festive menu that is being served up this season. It will feel like a Culinary Santa thought you were extra good the whole year.



Another World

*Le Café, Little Earth Square, Oriental Buildings,
Commissioners Road, Ooty 643001*

☎ +91 94870 00444

Le Café in Ooty is one of those charming spots that perfectly marries the beauty of its surroundings with the comfort of great food and drink. Nestled in the cool, crisp air of Ooty, the outdoor seating with picnic benches feels like an invitation to slow down and enjoy the simpler pleasures of life. Whether you're savouring a hot cup of coffee or indulging in an iced version, the changing moods of Ooty's weather only enhance the experience. One moment you're basking in the sunlight, and the next, you're pulling on a cosy sweater as the mist rolls in.

The café offers a solid variety of café fare—think sandwiches, pastries, salads, and more, each dish prepared with care, balancing local flavours with international café classics. What truly makes Le Café stand out is the farmer's markets they hold, bringing the local community together with music, food and locally-sourced produce and products. Inside43 had the pleasure of visiting their Christmas market last year, and it was nothing short of magical.

For a short while you will forget you are in Ooty, and it will feel like you have stepped into a European winter wonderland. The weather—chilly yet refreshing—paired with the sights and sounds of the market make for an unforgettable experience. Smartly dressed young men and women, a younger crowd alive with energy, dancing, with music filling the air. It has a completely international vibe, as if the world has come together in this little corner of Ooty. Le Café with its simple yet thoughtful ambiance, has a way of making you feel like you're part of something bigger, while still offering the cosiness of a local, cherished spot.

The Little Earth Square is also home to an elegant supermarket that serves some of the finest chocolates in the district. And as if that is not enough, it is also the location of The Periodic Table, a fine dining restaurant that takes food chemistry to a whole other level, with its intelligent and innovative menu.

A must-stop on your culinary tour of the Nilgiris.

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DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS



She made an impactful re-entry into the hills after childhood summers that left a lasting impression. Meet Dipali Sikand, Founder of MindEscapes®, who has brought a unique stamp to our district with her visionary thinking, and her love for the place that has always felt like home



You have a history with these hills. Please tell us something about this.

The Nilgiris has been a part of my family's history for over a century. My grandparents moved here in the early 1900s after working on the Mohenjo-Daro excavation and established the first-ever epigraphic institute under the British. Growing up, I spent summers exploring these beautiful hills, and that connection eventually brought me back to build MindEscapes® here. This region has always inspired innovation, and I wanted to create something that would contribute to its legacy – an immersive ecosystem that marries hospitality and knowledge, where thinkers, creators, and innovators can thrive.

You have been an inspiration for many a successful entrepreneur in the country. How did all that start?

It began during a challenging time in my life. As a single mother, raising my son, Aditya, I found myself in need of solutions to manage the complexities of daily life. That's when the idea for Les Concierges was born, and from there, I've built a global business helping people live stress-free lives. Now, with ventures like MindEscapes®, Xin and Anma, I continue to push the boundaries of what is possible, always driven by the desire to innovate, and inspire others to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.



What were your biggest challenges to date?

The toughest challenge was in 2008, during the global financial downturn, when we had to write off nearly ₹20 crores in debt. It was a crushing financial blow, compounded by the personal loss of my father. Additionally, the rise of digital services posed a threat to our traditional concierge model, but we adapted and came back stronger. The challenges never truly stop, but it's how you view them that matters. As I often say, "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly."

What is it that drew you back to this district?

The Nilgiris has always felt like home to me. After years in bustling cities, I longed to return to a place that offers peace, reflection, and inspiration. The innovation history of this region further motivated me. From the earliest epigraphic discoveries to the birth of MindEscapes®, the Nilgiris has a rich heritage of creativity and invention. It's the perfect environment for fostering new ideas and building a future rooted in knowledge and community.

You have, in a short time, created such an impact in the Nilgiris. What made you start a think tank here, and what prompted the foray into the F&B sector?

MindEscapes® was born from my desire to merge hospitality with knowledge. In today's polarised world, true innovation is often lacking, and I saw the opportunity to create a blue ocean – a space where people could come together to spark ideas and nurture creativity. By partnering with institutions like KPMG, Bharat Design



Dipali and her husband Rajeev

Lab and Lead Cap, and hiring and working with experts like Vikram Malhotra, with years of experience in Calcutta's finest restaurants, and Satvik, with over 40 patents in sleep technology, we have created an environment where food, sleep, and intellectual discourse meet. Xin, with its three concepts – Xin Go, Xin Den, and Xin Fine – fosters creativity while revolutionising work and dining experiences. Anma is the world's first social dining experience, bringing people together through communal meals that foster connection, conversation, and a sense of belonging. The launch of Xin and Celeste in Bangalore, alongside the scaling of Anma, proves that the



With her son Aditiya



With her daughter Diya

Nilgiris is a hub of innovation, with ideas now being exported to other cities.

You have always believed that women should support other women. How does that tie in with your unique botanical project, Hill of Flowers?

Hill of Flowers is a manifestation of my belief in the power of women supporting women. This project not only beautifies the Nilgiris but also gives local women the chance to take leadership roles, develop new skills, and contribute meaningfully to the community. By providing them with opportunities to be involved in this project, we are creating a sustainable and empowering ecosystem where women can flourish and support each other in their growth.

You are so well-travelled. What, in your opinion, sets the Nilgiris apart from other places you have been to?

The Nilgiris offers a unique blend of natural beauty, rich history, and

cultural depth. While I've travelled all over the world, this region has a magical quality – it nurtures creativity, offers tranquillity, and inspires reflection. The serenity of the hills combined with the innovation that has historically emerged from this region sets the Nilgiris apart, making it the ideal place to build ventures like MindEscapes®, Anma, and Xin.

And your future plans for and with the Nilgiris are...?

My plans for the Nilgiris involve continuing to expand MindEscapes® across other regions, making it a global hub for innovation. We are also taking products born here, like Xin and Celeste, to other cities, proving that the Nilgiris is truly a centre for creativity and forward-thinking ventures. I am also deeply committed to preserving the natural beauty of the region while contributing to its cultural and economic growth.

Through innovative hospitality and a strong connection to knowledge, we aim to create a lasting impact that honours the legacy of this beautiful region. ■



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Ripple Effect

He launched a whole industry in the Nilgiris. Inside43 pays tribute to the life and impact of the visionary Theo Devagnanam, the founder of Pony Needles



An unusual and fortuitous set of circumstances led to Theo Devagnanam, then 22 years old, setting aside his hopes to be an automobile engineer and, instead, boarding a ship for the UK where he was to train to become a needle-maker. His employers were a British company, who planned to produce needles in India. They had selected The Nilgiris as their manufacturing venue because of the low relative humidity - a necessity for the manufacture of gramophone needles.

After an eighteen month training period in the UK, Theo returned to the Nilgiris and began work on the creation of Needle Industries, starting his career as the first employee of the company. Production started with the manufacture of gramophone needles, for HMV in 1950. In 1951, Theo married Shaku, who in addition to being a wife and mother, became Theo's most trusted adviser. Theo grew to be a man with exceptional natural engineering talent, seemingly instinctive business acumen, extraordinary personal charisma, and a clear vision for the future of his business. He never worked anywhere else.

When the project showed signs of failing for want of additional funding from the initial investors, Theo borrowed his parents' life savings and took the company forward as a part-owner. The company expanded

rapidly under his able leadership, introducing hand sewing needles in 1959, snap fasteners and hooks and eyes in 1960. In 1962, a range of knitting pins and knitting accessories was added. 1967 saw the introduction of a range of surgical, suture, and hypodermic needles. Safety pins were added in the mid-1980's.

Following India's independence from the British, the government allowed foreign investment in companies based in India with the proviso that over a period, shares had to be sold to Indian individuals or entities, thereby limiting foreign shareholding to a minority. The parent company was more than happy to sell shares to the Indian management. In the 1970's the parent company was sold to a multinational who wanted the shares to go to its subsidiary in India. The management, who held shares, did not want this. This situation resulted in a long and bitterly fought legal battle, culminating in victory in the Supreme Court of India, for the Indian shareholders. With the parent company now a minority shareholder, the world of exports was thrown open and the company rapidly grew in those markets.

Theo made sure that the employees of the company were always treated with respect and given all possible benefits and support. Apart from all

the statutory benefits the employees received many others. A Cooperative Credit and Thrift Society was started by the company in which any employee could buy shares, and then avail of loans, at low interest rates, from the society. A medical welfare fund was started with a small subscription from each employee, matched by the company. Employees, or their families, who needed money for medical expenses could draw this from the fund, free of cost, and without the need to pay it back. In 1969 a Welfare Centre and canteen was constructed. This complex housed the Cooperative Society, the employees canteen, where every employee could have a heavily subsidised lunch every day, a company dispensary, where consultation and treatment, including medicines was free of cost, a Fair Price shop, and sporting facilities.

Apart from the welfare of the employees, Theo was very aware of the welfare of the local community, and always supported it in any way that he could, particularly in times of need. In the 1960's a charitable foundation was started by the company. The Niechar Foundation offered scholarships to local deserving children to pursue higher education. It also now runs a clinic with a full-time doctor, nurses and a pharmacist. The clinic provides free consultation, treatment and medicines to the public. Support of the local temple and the local mosque was always forthcoming, and then in the 1970's a chapel was constructed, on land assigned to the company, by the Government, for that purpose.

The forward-looking company, under Theo's guidance, created and maintained a garden, on municipal land in the centre of Ooty, for many years. It was Theo who came up with the idea of The Summer Festival, in Ooty. In 1971 the district administration permitted the company to organise the first Summer Festival, in the Anna Stadium. It was just one evening of fun and it continues to this day, having grown into a month of entertainment, every evening.

In the 1980's Theo became aware of the lack of good ambulance services, particularly for the villages. He bought an Oldsmobile, which had been manufactured in America, as an ambulance. The Niechar Foundation provided a free ambulance to the local villages, twenty-four hours a day.

Certainly, Theo was a man with a charitable disposition. He became a Freemason in 1955, following in his father's footsteps. He was a member of the Lodge of Faith, Hope and Charity, under the Grand Lodge of England, in Ooty. He moved up in this charitable organisation to become an officer of the District Grand Lodge of Madras (DGL). The DGL, at that time had three or four charitable trusts, each with some money but not doing much with it. Theo suggested that all these trusts be merged into one so that the DGL could manage its charitable outreach more efficiently. Accordingly, the District Grand Charity Fund Trust was formed and Theo was appointed as its first President. Since then this Trust has done a lot in the cause of charity and today supports over 100 scholars, is involved in financially supporting

indigent Freemasons and the widows of Freemasons. It is also involved with PRISM, the prison reform organisation in Madras. At the time of his death, Theo was the Assistant District Grand Master of the District Grand Lodge of Madras.

Upon his sudden death in 1989, his grief-stricken Needle Industries community knew that to honour his memory meant to continue to work towards fostering the success of the business and all who worked in it. The family and many employees of what is today known as Pony Needles continue to uphold the legacy of one of the Nilgiris true business pioneers, holding fast his vision of community service and entrepreneurship.

Take a walk through Ketti. You will see a host of children who have been educated courtesy Theo's endeavours, you'll see people of all faiths benefiting from his charitable endowments, and you'll see a bustling town that was built on the shoulders of the giant that was Theo Devagnanam. This was a man who created a ripple effect of commerce and goodwill that continues to radiate outwards in generational circles.

Theo Devagnanam was truly a man of mercy whose righteous deeds will not be forgotten. ■





The Making of Memories

Phirosa Neterwala recalls how her connections to the Nilgiris began, and the generational link her husband, Feroze Neterwala, has to the district.

We came together to the Nilgiris for the first time in 1977 to honeymoon in the home of Kavas and Freny Patel, my husband Feroze's aunt and uncle. It was a memorable trip that started with my husband Feroze throwing up all over me courtesy the wobbly, dinky little planes that were in service between Bombay and Coimbatore back in the day. The first thing I had to do on reaching Coonoor was get cleaned up. With that done I took in the gracious home, the lovely gardens and the restful atmosphere, and I immediately fell in love with these hills. Even today the scent of eucalyptus, the majestic rock faces as you drive past Burliar and the rolling curves of tea estates amaze me every time I drive up the Ghat road from Coimbatore.

My husband's uncle and aunt were avid entertainers, very social and quite old school. Dinners were formal affairs, a Japanese dinner would see a Japanese table arrangement, and tennis parties on their lawn - the old tennis court is still in evidence - were a regular occurrence. I remember

their cook, Tulsi, who was renowned for his prowess in the kitchen, and the parrot that would call out his name, imitating Freny's voice to perfection. While Feroze was very close to his aunt and uncle, I grew close to them, as well, and my relationship with Freny was a warm and tender one.

Subsequently, we had children, and we spent many a happy summer in Coonoor with them, making memories as a family. And despite the passage of time - our children are all grown up and Freny and Kavas are no longer with us - I find the Nilgiris has retained its charm of long ago. Feroze, who has been visiting here since he was four loves his walks, golfing, the clean air and has taken to avocado farming in a small way.

We eventually want this district to be our base, and are slowly trying to spend more time here, in the home we honeymooned in. We have also, in our own way, continued the tradition of hosting that Freny and Kavas were known for, and we have a fine circle of friends who welcome us back to town most warmly with each visit.

After a life spent in Bombay, and with all our travels, the Nilgiris, draws us back over and over. Feroze and I are immensely grateful to have generational roots here, and we are hopeful it is a legacy we can pass on to our children and our children's children. We are delighted to be part of Inside43, which is capturing a living history of the Nilgiris, and we hope that someday, in the distant future, someone will chance upon a copy of this magazine, and read these words and say, "Wasn't life wonderful back then." And like those of us who know it as home now, think, "Aren't we lucky to be a part of these hills."

Because, isn't life all about making memories? And isn't there something about this place that makes for such happy ones?

Feroze Neterwala is the Chairman of the well-known Neterwala Group of Companies. Phirosa Neterwala is the founder of Neterwala Aibara LLP, an interior design house of considerable national and international distinction.

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