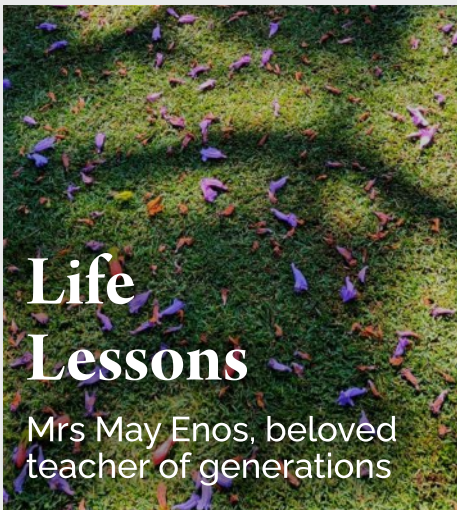
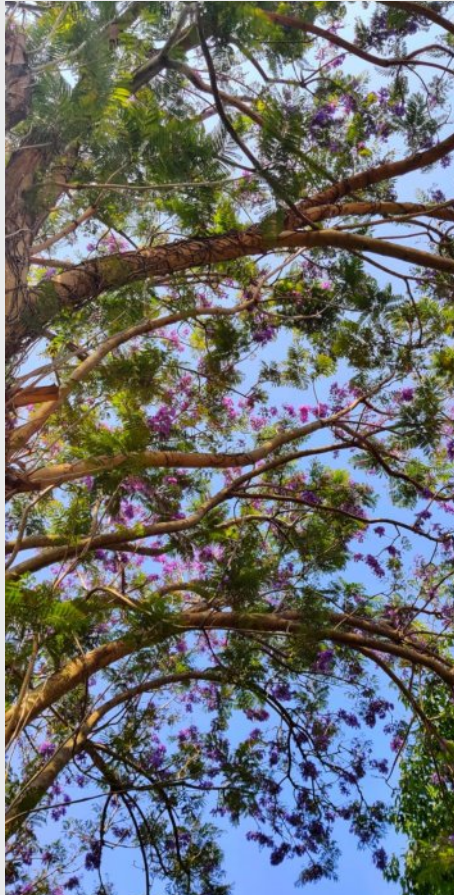
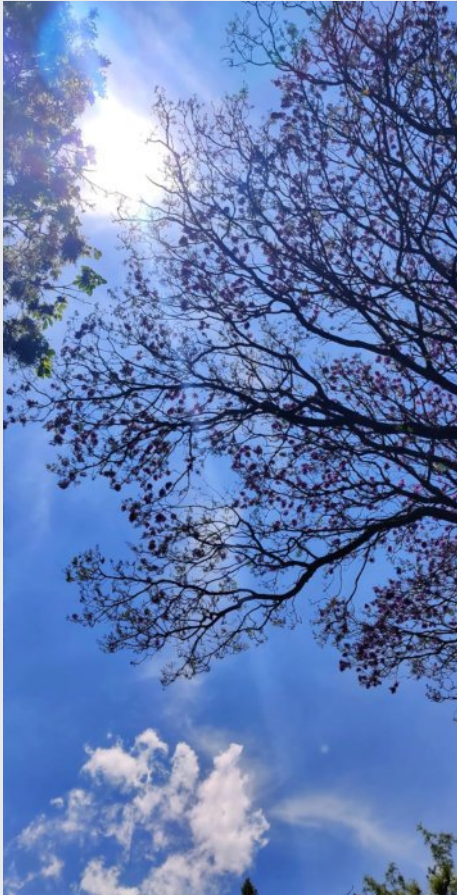


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Celebrating the Nilgiris



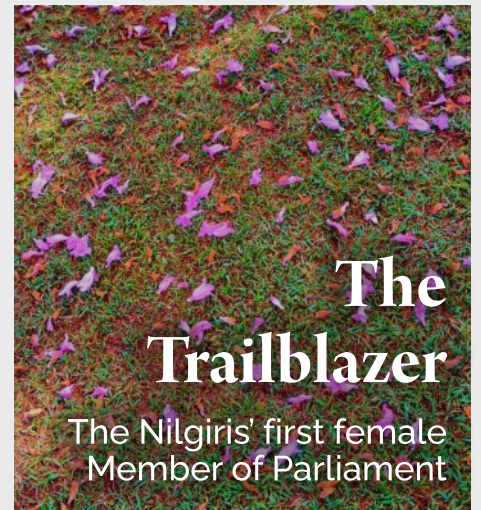
Life Lessons

Mrs May Enos, beloved teacher of generations



Women for Women

Our longest-running women's charity



The Trailblazer

The Nilgiris' first female Member of Parliament

places to eat

where to shop

things to learn

columns to read



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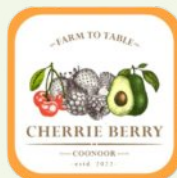
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We the Women

From time immemorial women have carried the world. For the ancient Greeks, Gaia was the great goddess, the mother of all creation. The famous adage of “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” still holds true today. We talk about Mother Earth and Mother Nature. From Palaeolithic times, we have discovered archaeological evidence that the Sacred Divine was venerated and worshipped almost 25,000 years ago. We, as women, bring life into the earth, and bring into our circles the nurturing quality of feminine love. We have risen through challenges, social and physiological, across millennia, battling inequity, to emerge powerful, and we have done it in uncomfortable clothing and footwear, no less. Women are incredible beings - we are a conflicting mixture of soft and strong, love and rebellion, meek and mighty, wounded yet resilient. And with our very special hormones that act as our worst enemies, often, we have managed to lead armies and win wars, birth and raise children, run businesses, stand up to centuries of blame and shame... and we're still here. Mostly unfazed, going about the business of our lives, carving out success from failures that were never entirely of our own making.

And here in the Nilgiris, we have our own tribe of fearless women. In fact, there were so many we had a tough time picking out stories for this very special 'All Women's Issue' in celebration of International Women's Day. But a quick read will tell you the stories of incredible courage and determination, the tales of women who rose above their circumstances to bring light into the world, women who have used creativity and talent to follow their passions, and women who have lifted other women in all kinds of ways, both big and small.

Any conversation with Smriti Rana is a lesson in humility and the power of doing good, and her story is nothing short of inspiring. And the same is true of Mrs May Enos - a lady who taught for six decades, spawning generations of successful careers. Or Divya, a make-up artist from Aruvankadu who makes her life beautiful by making others look their best. Or read about Anjali Mehta and Priyanka Bandopadhyay who have made it their mission to ensure stray animals get the love and nurturing they deserve. And



let's not forget the incredible **University Women's Association, who have sponsored this issue** - their sixty years of service to healthcare and societal well-being cannot be summed up in just an article, but if anyone deserves a salute on International Women's Day it would be this band of women who have tirelessly served the district with little fanfare. And there's so much more.

The Nilgiris is filled with stories of women who have made a difference. So, it is my utter honour to be associated with the women of these hills, who lead such inspirational lives, to be a woman from these hills, and to bring, for the first time, to our beautiful blue-green district, an issue of a magazine that features only women, cover to cover. They are but a microcosm of the women of these hills... mothers, entrepreneurs, aunts, artists, social workers, musicians... and this issue is a salute to each and every one of them.

Sangeetha Shinde
Founding Editor



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Printed at

Chitra Sehar Offset Printers, Sivakasi

Created and designed by

media43
1/121H4 Ralliah Dam Road
Bettati, Kotagiri, Nilgiris
www.media43.in

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INFORM

Pg 3 We the Women

An issue celebrating the incredible women of the Nilgiris in all their diversity

INFOCUS

Pg 8 A Matter of Life and Death

About Smriti Rana, a pioneering force in the area of pain relief, palliative care and end-of-life care

Pg 12 Life Lessons

Mrs May Enos reflects on her life, teaching, and the remarkable journey that shaped her legacy

INTIME

Pg 16 Women for Women

Our sponsor this issue - UWA - an organisation that has served women for close to six decades

INFLUENCE

Pg 20 Proud Mary

Meet Mary, the woman who shaped her troubles into a launch-pad for others to succeed



Pg 24 Love Actually

Swimming against the tide to impact lives, one child at a time - the inspiring story of Udhavi

INSPIRED

Pg 28 Doorway to Creativity

The art and philosophy of Sabrina Gill, who combines spirituality with creativity

Pg 32 Against All Odds

Divya has made countless women look and feel their best, while carving a life for herself from a difficult personal history

Pg 36 The Genesis of DJ Jenesis

Inside43 explores the evolution of a path-breaker from Kotagiri - her journey from a curious child to a professional DJ

INCREDIBLE

Pg 42 Bird's Eye View

Gaythri Mansur shows us the incredible birdlife she spots on her visits to the Nilgiris



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INSCRIBE

Pg 40 Toot Sweet

An unhurried pace and road grace make the Nilgiris a place to feel alive, says Deepika Unni

Pg 56 Goddess of Small Things

Apsara Reddy recalls how a chance encounter at the Ooty market connected her to her purpose

Pg 84 Mountain Mama

Ishani Dutt tells us why the Nilgiris is the best place in the world for women across generations to bond and make happy memories

INCELEBRATION

Pg 54 The Feminine Divine

This unique Baduga celebration draws tribe members back together from around the world to celebrate and venerate their female ancestors

INHABIT

Pg 58 From Passion to Purpose

Wagtail Rescue came to life to save lives, thanks to Priyanka Bandyopadhyay and Anjali Mehta

INCONVERSATION

Pg 64 Full Circle

A catch up with Elinor Corfield, descendent of, Jim Brecks, the first Commissioner of the Nilgiris

INHALE

Pg 66 L'air du Temps

Fitness rises to new heights under the guidance of Vinutha Padmanabhan and CorePower Studio in Ooty



36

INFUSE

Pg 70 Sowing Seeds

Riya Premchand stands out not just as a product of her heritage but as a game-changer in Nilgiris agriculture

Pg 74 Breaking Barriers

Nithya Premsagar's inspirational journey with tea is the stuff that books can be written about

INSTORE

Pg 79 Shelf Life

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

INDOORS

Pg 86 Betty the Builder

A tongue-in-cheek look by Meera Nair, at a month-long period she spent in the hills bringing together the finishing touches of her home



12

INMEMORIAM

Pg 90 The Trailblazer

The life of Akkamma Devi who was light years ahead of her time and paved the way for other women to follow

INREVIEW

Pg 94 In and Around

All about the beautiful Craft Store in Ketti and where to head for a delicious meal at a women-run local mess

INSIGHT

Pg 96 Learning Curve

These hills are not just a home but teachers of lessons that shape and define us, says Reeba Cherian

Sponsored by



A Matter of Life and Death



Meet Smriti Rana, who has been a pioneering force nationally, internationally and locally in the area of pain relief, palliative care and end-of-life care.

"Where would you like to be if you were seriously ill or at the end of your life?"

"If you knew you only had a few days to live, how would you like to spend them?"

"Have you written your Living Will yet?"

Not questions commonly asked outside healthcare settings (if at all), and certainly not at dinner parties. Questions like these earned Smriti the nickname 'Grim Reaper' from some friends, who observed that no matter the social context, it took her approximately 20 minutes to start talking about illness, death and palliative care. "I am available to come and clear out guests who overstay their welcome at parties", she jokes.

Roots In Ooty

Smriti arrived in the Nilgiris in 1982, at age one. She had been adopted by her mother's sister, Jayanti Rana, who was unmarried and raised Smriti with help from her own mother. The three of them became a deeply-bonded unit that went everywhere together.

Jayanti was a well-loved resident of the Nilgiris from the 1950s and

known for her prowess on the golf course. She was one of the players chosen to represent India in the 1982 Asian Games. Her love for golf and the outdoors often meant that Smriti's birthday parties were held at the Gymkhana Club, and party games included putting competitions. Smriti recalls walking every inch of the course with her mother, especially during board exam study breaks, when the two would revise chapters while Jayanti played a round.

Smriti's early education was at St Hilda's and later at the Lawrence School Lovedale. At 17, she left for Delhi to attend Jesus and Mary's College.

That year, in 1998, Jayanti was diagnosed with advanced cancer of the uterus and had to be moved to her sister's (Smriti's biological mother) home in Allahabad so she could receive treatment and have family support. The treatment proved more brutal than the disease. Unable to be away while Jayanti suffered, Smriti dropped out of college to be with her.

When asked about that time in her life, Smriti responds:

"I was 17, fresh out of school and in an unfamiliar city that I found harsh and abrasive. It was unusual for Mamma (Jayanti) to stay in Allahabad more than a month, more so in the warmer months. Twice, when I called, she was at the hospital and no one was willing to tell me why. Sensing trouble, I went to Allahabad and that is when Mamma sat me down and told me about her diagnosis, against the advice of other well-meaning family members. That was the kind of relationship we had, and I will always be grateful that she

told me the truth. 'You can't fight something you cannot even face' were her exact words. My first lesson in naming a beast."

Jayanti convinced Smriti to return to college, this time in Bangalore. The two years that followed the diagnosis were excruciating. Jayanti passed away in September 2000 as Smriti held her close – her first encounter with death, aged 19.

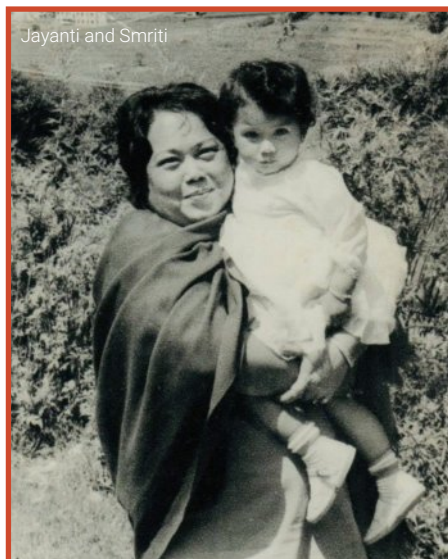
Twenty days later, Smriti accidentally found herself in Karunashraya, a hospice in Bangalore. She wanted to donate the obscenely expensive leftover medications, but instead came face-to-face with palliative care for the first time.

Finding Direction

How did these experiences shape her? Smriti eloquently states, "The pain I had witnessed was indelible. When Mamma died, I felt a wave of relief – not something any 19-year-old should feel when the person they love the most dies. I just wanted her to be at peace, this gentle soul who never hurt anyone. So, when I first walked through Karunashraya, I was confused. Why was no one screaming in pain? 'This is palliative care. We manage pain,' I was told. Rather than arriving as an epiphany, this tore open every wound I had tried to bandage. I was enraged. I could not believe that this had been an option all along. To withhold it was unforgivable. I signed up to volunteer, and the path ahead showed itself."

That year Smriti experienced the deaths of four more beloveds, followed by two more in the following year.

After completing her Masters in Psychology, Smriti worked in various healthcare settings, including the



Kidwai Memorial Cancer Hospital in Bangalore. Unfortunately, she was infected with tuberculosis while on duty there and had to step back from healthcare.

Smriti met her husband, Rohan Mathias, when she visited Jungle Retreat en route to Ooty. Jungle Retreat was a popular wildlife destination in Masinagudi that Rohan had begun in 1996. During the hiatus from healthcare, Smriti returned to Jungle Retreat to help out for a year. "It has now been 18 years", she laughs. Although Jungle Retreat was closed in 2018, Rohan and Smriti continue to live on campus.

A series of fortuitous events led Smriti to Pallium India where she was taken under the wing of Dr MR Rajagopal, whom the New York Times has described as "the Father of Palliative Care in India". He is the recipient of several awards including the Padma Shri and Human Rights Watch's Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism. In 2018 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Under his mentorship, Smriti continues to support patients, families and communities; develop curricula and teach allied healthcare workers; create collaborations across the country; and engage in policy advocacy at the international level.

Learning From The Best

When asked what it is like to work with Dr Rajagopal, she candidly shares her experiences.

"One (amongst hundreds) of the stories that I often recount is when, as a greenhorn, I accompanied him on a home visit to the house of a fisherman that the Pallium team was seeing for the first time. It was a fairly long walk from the main road, over

“You can’t fight something you cannot even face’ were her exact words. My first lesson in naming a beast

unmotorable terrain. From deep amongst the coconut trees, we heard the agonising screams of a man. The stench hit us in the face even before we entered the house, where we found a young man and his wife with desperate eyes. He had been discharged from the hospital with a feeding tube and uncontrolled pain. He had a bowel obstruction that made him regurgitate his own waste. The situation was dire. Even after he had been cleaned up and morphine had been administered, the man reported that he had 6/10 pain.

Dr Raj took this man’s hand in his, leaned forward, placed his other palm on the man’s forehead and asked

“What’s bothering you?”. It took the man a full 5-6 minutes to respond. With a trembling voice, he said “All I wanted was for my children not to be fishermen. I have failed.”

Being the only breadwinner in the family that was now financially destroyed, the man’s biggest worry was not his pain or his impending death. It was the loss of his children’s futures.

Through the educational support programme Pallium runs, we ensure children from such families don’t drop out of school. Dr Raj made some urgent calls and the next day we were able to return to the fisherman’s house with pledges that would ensure his children received a college education. On our arrival, he reported that his pain was still 6/10. Dr Raj then showed him the documents that would secure the children’s future. I will never forget how that man’s face changed. Smiling through tears, when asked to score his pain, he replied ‘1’. He died a few days later, pain-free.

That day, I learnt what humane healthcare was. I witnessed a master in action.”

Thirteen years with Pallium India, Smriti now heads the WHO Collaborating Centre for Training and Policy on Access to Pain Relief. She advocates for better access to pain relief for India, as well as the Global South, by working closely with national and international agencies and civil society groups. She is deeply invested in disentangling the colonial roots of inequity in access to medicines, and creating better ecosystems for appropriate and affordable care. She is a co-founder of the Advance Care Planning Taskforce in India and chairs the



International Drug Policy Consortium – a global network of over 192 NGOs that works to promote person-centred drug policies, globally.

With these impressive credentials, one wonders if Smriti would have done things differently. Her response speaks to the woman she is today. Forthright, emotionally compelling and grounded in common sense.

“Early in Mamma’s illness we succumbed to the war rhetoric that accompanies illness, and I generously utilised its vocabulary – fight, survive, defeat. While well-intentioned, it didn’t accommodate her preferences. If allowed to, Mamma would have stopped futile treatment and returned to the Nilgiris. Been amongst her trees and hills, under the blue sky she loved. But she never did. This approach left no room for reflection, grace or equanimity regarding mortality. We didn’t put down our weapons till the end. Mamma’s dignity became collateral damage.

Having said that, when my biological mother died in 2023, I was able to draw on these lessons. And I like to believe that the events she set in motion in 1982, allowed me to midwife her, with grace, at the end of her life.”

Bringing It All Together

Smriti’s deep personal losses and vast experience in her chosen field have equipped her with a vision for palliative care and death literacy in India, and more specifically in the Nilgiris.

“The political is the personal, and vice versa. There is a saying we have in advocacy circles – ‘If you don’t have a seat at the table, you’re probably on the menu’. On the macro level, my job is to get us (low and

middle income countries - LMICs) off the menu, and if needed, bring our own chairs to the table. The last few years have been like a homecoming of the prodigal daughter. It haunts me to this day that Mamma couldn’t return to the Nilgiris because there was no care available. Something took seed in a subterranean part of my being when she died, perhaps. A need to make things right. That people have to leave their homes to receive any semblance of pain relief or symptom control is an unacceptable travesty.

A fierce woman who pioneered palliative care in Uganda once told me - ‘Never forget the face of the person who made you choose the work you do. Remember why you are here.’

To me, that face will always be Mamma’s - a champion even in death.

I cannot overstate the fact that palliative care and pain relief are not just for those who are terminally ill. It can begin at diagnosis. And the focus always, is on living well.

We now have the building blocks to make community-based palliative care a reality in the Nilgiris. The wonderful team at Kotagiri Medical Fellowship hospital has already begun outreach work. We have infrastructure in Coonoor. Most

“That day, I learnt what humane healthcare was. I witnessed a master in action

importantly, we have a population that is becoming increasingly aware of how essential such a service is. If we can combine the might of the government with professional upskilling, and civil society ensuring quality and technical expertise, I’m confident that the Nilgiris can become a model district for palliative care provision.

And no one will have to leave to get care, or die away from home.”

Here’s to you, Smriti Rana, child of these hills. Your life is one we all rejoice in. ■

Editing credits to Indira Chowdhury, Founding Member – Oral History Association of India

Visit www.palliumindia.org to know more about palliative care.

Write to smriti@palliumindia.org



Dr Rajagopal and Smriti



Life Lessons

In a candid conversation with Inside43, Mrs May Enos shares her reflections on life, teaching, and the remarkable journey that has shaped her legacy in these hills

Teaching is without exception one of the most noble of professions. From popular movies like *To Sir, With Love* in the 1970s, to Margaret Landon's book about Anna Leonowens (the legendary primary school teacher in Siam in the 1800s) teachers are the people who have truly shaped the world. Female teachers especially so. Even Socrates credits the intelligent and charismatic Aspasia as his instructor in rhetoric. Which one of us, over the course of our lives has not had a kindly teacher tend to a cut finger, or help us with our spelling, or give us a well-deserved rap on the knuckles to set us on the straight and narrow. Teachers are expected to be surrogate parents, educationists, nurses, psychologists, talent scouts, disciplinarians and guides on things that go beyond the educational curriculum. It is a tall order and many do it with a grace and love that have kept the world turning for millennia.

Today we pay tribute to one such teacher who has served the Nilgiris for close to six decades, shaping the lives of countless students, and in the process becoming a legend herself.

Say hello to Mrs May Enos. She's a well-known figure in these hills of ours. Generations of students have studied under her, benefiting enormously through the course of their lives from the gentle guidance and tutelage they received from her. All of 103, and with her wits as sharp as ever, Inside43 had the utter privilege of meeting Mrs Enos in her pretty cottage in Lovedale, a place straight out of an Enid Blyton storybook.

A Century Of Life

At 103 years old, Mrs. Enos stands as a beacon of wisdom, resilience and grace. Born in Karnataka, and now a revered figure in the Nilgiris, her story traverses decades of transformation, from Colonial India to the vibrant,

modern-day hills she calls home. Those living in Bangalore will know of a road named after her family - Cunningham Road. But here in these mountains, Mrs Enos is known for much, much more than a family name.

When asked about the one lesson she wishes to impart after a hundred years on this planet, Mrs Enos's answer is both simple and profound: "Love to live, to give, and to share." This philosophy encapsulates the essence of her life and the values she holds dear, resonating deeply with all who have had the privilege of knowing her.

Born to a family of planters in Coorg, Mrs Enos's early years were marked by migration and adaptation. Her father's work brought the family to the Nilgiris, where she was raised amidst the lush landscapes of the hills. Educated at St Joseph's Convent in Coonoor, she recalls her school

days as a time of spiritual grounding and intellectual curiosity. After school she was a little rootless, and toyed with careers in stenography and nursing, none of which really held much interest for her, and fate, luckily, had other plans. Encouraged by mentors and family, Mrs Enos pursued a course of teacher training, supported by her uncle, Jim Edwards, who worked in the Guwahati railways. "I never imagined I'd be a teacher," she admits thoughtfully, but it became her calling. And so began the journey that launched a thousand lives, her magnetic presence, warmth and ability to inspire children setting her apart from others in the profession.

She married the late Mr Enos, who some may remember as a musical genius, part of a team of a five-brother band that played at the late Queen's coronation at the Ooty Club. In 1947, the year of India's independence, Mrs Enos saw an advertisement for teachers at The Lawrence School, Lovedale. She applied, and the rest, as they say, is history. Over 35 years of teaching, she left an indelible mark as an educator, dramatist, sportswoman and mentor. She recalls helping students navigate the linguistic and cultural transitions of post-Independence India, embracing the influx of Indian students while saying goodbye to British ones. "It was difficult for some of them to adapt, and I made it my business to make sure that these children were given the attention they deserved," she says, a gentle smile playing across her still-youthful face. Her gentle nature, however, was also marked by a steely post-Independence resilience, and even today, in her conversations her

determination and pragmatism shine through. Especially when she speaks of her age-related frailties. "I am 103, my dear," she says with a laugh. "I think I'm doing quite well for that."

Memories From The Classroom

Her time at The Lawrence School, Lovedale holds beloved memories. "I gave The Lawrence School the best part of my life," she says. Her multifaceted role included teaching academics, leading dramatics, coaching sports, and even caring for students in the hospital, where her relative, Peggy Rickets, served, as matron for many years, as well. Most

❧ ...her story traverses decades of transformation, from colonial India to the vibrant, modern-day hills she calls home

former students remember her with admiration and affection, often visiting or sending messages to express their gratitude. Testament to this was, that as we were interviewing her, a former student, Anand Natarajan, walked into her home. An anaesthetist and pain management expert, he had come all the way from Australia, bringing a colleague with him. And on their travels though his homeland, he made it a point to visit The Lawrence School, where he studied, and came to meet Mrs Enos. Incredibly, with all the students who had passed under her gentle care,

Mrs Enos remembered Anand, the village he came from and the village his best friend from school days came from. For those of us who cannot remember where we left our phone five minutes ago, this is a feat akin to a miracle. Her delight in Anand's visit was clearly reciprocated, and he told us that it was Mrs Enos who had helped him refine his language skills in English, and owed much of his success to the foundational effort she put into his growth and education.

After he left, Mrs Enos smiled and said a lot of visitors came to see her, especially old students, and these are the moments that fill her with happiness and keep her going every day. She said it made her heart glad to see her students doing well and succeeding in life for, with that, she realises her life has had greater purpose.

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Reflecting on a century in the Nilgiris, Mrs Enos paints a picture of a paradise transformed. She reminisces about the pristine beauty of the region in her youth, contrasting it with the challenges posed by deforestation, commercialisation and changing climate. Yet her love for the hills remains unwavering. The profound impact of Mrs Enos's teaching extends across generations. From academics to life lessons, she shaped the lives of countless students. "The power of a teacher is incredible," she remarks, sharing her belief in education as a force for change.

Despite the physical challenges of age, Mrs Enos maintains her zest for life. She spends her days reading, reminiscing, and meditating, drawing



strength from her faith, and the love of her family and former students. Her two children, Marcel and Tina, have carried forward her legacy, contributing to education and community life in their own way. She spends a lot of time colouring and indulging her artistic side. Her table is strewn with mandala colouring books, the pages filled in meticulously, in iridescent shades, each one a reflection of her colourful yet serene personality.

A personality from which flows timeless wisdom: "Learn to connect with the older generation. There's much to gain from their experiences." She emphasises the importance of balance, cautioning against an over-reliance on technology and urging young people to cherish human connections, to embrace life beyond the technology at their fingertips.

Mrs Enos's story is testament to the benefits of simple living, the profound impact of good teaching in shaping a nation's course, and the enduring power of love and resilience. Her life's work has touched thousands, her

lessons extending far beyond the walls of her classrooms. As she lives out her 104th year, she remains an inspiration - a living bridge between the past and the future, embodying the timeless values that make an everyday life truly extraordinary. ■

Inside43 extends its heartfelt appreciation to Ivan Enos for helping arrange this interview, and capture this piece of living history in our Nilgiris.

“Over 35 years of teaching, she left an indelible mark as an educator, dramatist, sportswoman, and mentor



Dr Anand Natarajan visits his beloved teacher

WOMEN FOR WOMEN

*It is an organisation that has served the district and served to empower women for close to six decades. **Sharmatha Shankar** speaks with Rajeshwari Shinde, its current and long-standing President, about the incredible impact the University Women's Association has had on these hills*



The building at Bedford, Coonoor, out of which the UWA Clinic operated, for almost 25 years

The University Women's Association, started in 1919, is an organisation headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, which aims to empower women and girls. It was started after the First World War; one of its goals was the fostering of peace by bringing together women from across the world. This remarkable organisation

spread wide and far, and eventually made it to our very own Coonoor.

The idea to start a branch of the UWA in Coonoor was proposed by a Mrs Joseph, and kicked off in the year 1964, with only ten members.

Clinical Trial

During the initial meetings and discussions the UWA had, over a

period of two years, the idea formed to set up a free clinic to provide quality healthcare to the underprivileged - already being run informally by Dr Belheart, a resident doctor in Coonoor at the time. In 1976, the clinic officially became a UWA project, and initially operated out of the All Saint's Parish Hall. The

clinic was unique, because it was the first one in the entire district to provide virtually free healthcare, charging just twenty-five paise from each patient for registration. However, if a patient was genuinely unable to afford even that much, they were still given the necessary care.

In 1978, Siloo Manekshaw, the indomitable, straight-talking wife of the legendary Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, took over as President and it was she who decided, in 1991, that the organisation needed its own premises. The committee members decided the best thing would be to acquire a piece of government land on which they could construct a building and carry out operations.

Enter Rajeshwari Shinde in 1983, an energetic woman, whose husband, the eminent Dr Shinde, was posted as medical specialist at the Military Hospital, Wellington. Mrs Shinde was a dancer, who also loved dramatics and thrived on getting involved in community activities. Siloo Manekshaw saw her potential and inducted her into the organisation as fast as you could say the word 'clinic', and appointed her as Secretary.

Letters of appeal and calls for donations were sent out for the building of the clinic. The first letter was sent to the Collector of the time, N Athimoolam, and although the reply was extremely favourable, it was clear that further permissions would be needed from Chennai, and this would be a time-consuming task. Rajeshwari Shinde, undaunted, went to Chennai and managed to get a meeting with the Director of the municipal administration. She explained the state of healthcare for the underprivileged in the Nilgiris at

the time (back in the 80s), why the UWA clinic was the need of the hour, and there was an urgent necessity for their own premises. Despite verbal agreement, it took some effort before the approval finally came.

In the meantime, the number of patients coming to the clinic, which operated three times a week, had significantly increased, because of the excellent care provided by the doctors and volunteers. "All of us had to give voluntary service," emphasises Mrs Shinde. "Not a penny was charged by the doctors and volunteers who came in."

The government finally decided to give the UWA a piece of Poramboke land near Bedford, (a piece of land owned by the government that was unused and could be utilised by the public for worthy causes.)

Fundraisers

Once the land issue was settled, Mrs Shinde, along with Siloo Manekshaw and Sudha Parikh, a founding member of the UWA, Coonoor, took up the gruelling task of finding donors for the building. They sometimes had to go to Coimbatore to persuade textile kings such as PSR Silks and Mahaveers to make donations to the cause. They also approached wealthy and affluent members of local society to contribute towards this project. Field Marshal Manekshaw was instrumental in getting the bulk of the donations, not only for the construction of the building, but also for years following, from large government conglomerates such as Air India. And so in 1994, the clinic moved from the Parish Hall to its own premises. Mrs Shinde fondly gazes at photos taken on the day of the inauguration of the building and

recalls that along with a Christian hymn being sung, phrases from the Bhagavad Gita, the Zend Avesta and the Bible were read out. "It was a very inclusive initiative, and symbolic of the spirit of these hills," she says with immense pride. The new clinic premises saw the number of clients increase exponentially. "We catered to sixty to eighty patients coming in on each working day," says Mrs Shinde.

The patients who came in were mostly estate workers, the homeless, and individuals who had no support structures to sustain them. Care and medicine, along with high-protein food packets were provided. Complicated cases were referred to Dr Shinde, and he referred them on to other specialists if needed. If they had no homes to return to, suitable funding would be provided to ensure that they could at least buy food for a while. Language was sometimes a barrier between the patients and the volunteers at the clinic, but the effort was made to overcome that problem with a certain tenderness and sensitivity that only a woman can have, and sometimes with a little dose of humour thrown in.

And The Rest...

The UWA also took up the initiative to take residents of the Balaclava home for the aged, on picnics to Ooty, often in two large vehicles provided by the Staff College Commandant at the time. They were accompanied by two jawans and a mobile toilet to ensure their comfort. "All of them were dressed up in their Sunday best," Mrs Shinde says, her eyes lighting up.

UWA also undertook to fund three scholarships each year for bright and deserving young women who showed exceptional potential but had



Dr. Belheart

Inner-left and inner-right photos:
Inauguration of the UWA-owned
Clinic building



Field Marshal Sam
Manekshaw

insufficient means to realise their dreams. Two daughters of a tea plucker who lived near Selas benefited immensely from this scholarship in 2006. Bright, hard-working and sincere, they had no electricity in their home, and were studying by street light. The UWA supported them through college for five years by providing both tuition and hostel fees. "Today one girl a senior consultant physician at Stanley Medical College, and her sister is a very senior manager in an IT firm in Salem," says Mrs Shinde proudly.

A couple of years ago, the UWA also helped to fund the setting up of a free palliative care ward at Lawley Hospital, Coonoor. They were approached by the Rotary Club for this and Mrs Shinde immediately called for an emergency committee meeting and managed to raise the sum of twenty lakh rupees to

contribute towards this project. The UWA kickstarted the donations and, on the back of this, the money started pouring in for the project.

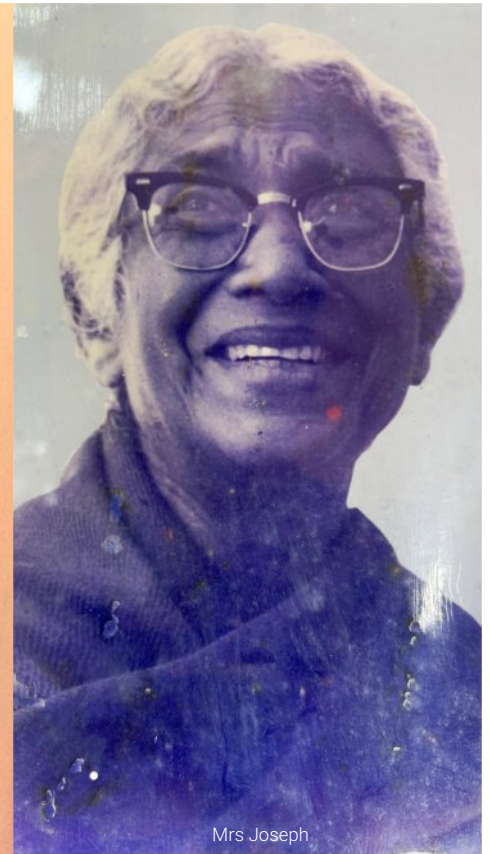
The UWA also sent bandages and cotton swabs to the Front during the Kargil War. They continue to conduct educational sessions for its members by inviting industry leaders to speak at events, and to raise awareness on a variety of issues.

So It Goes

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the clinic unfortunately shut down. The fact that the land on which it is built was leased from the government, unfortunately, proved to be a hurdle to its reopening. Nevertheless, the UWA still assists with scholarships, funding critical operations like heart and kidney transplants for the underprivileged, supporting NGOs like The Kinder Trust, and helping old age homes and educational

establishments attended by the indigenous tribes of the district. Despite setbacks and challenges the organisation has managed to keep going for over sixty years, always supported by a wonderful team of women from the Nilgiris who pour their sweat and passion into keeping this organisation a living, breathing force in the district.

"It was inevitable that it all took off so well," Rajeshwari Shinde reminisces. "They were very dedicated", she says referring to the members at the time. "Dr Bellheart, Phyllis Wright, Dr Jacob, Dr Sodhi, Radha Balachandran, Siloo Manekshaw and Sudha Parikh were instrumental in the clinic's success," she says. She also mentions two members from Kotagiri, Taru Desai and Seetha Srinivasan, who despite the distance and other responsibilities, religiously dedicated



time and effort to the clinic. They would catch the early bus and arrive punctually on working days so as to carry out their duties. The ladies would work with an unwavering dedication and, sadly, all of them have now passed on. "I think their spirits are still guiding us, though," says Mrs Shinde.

When I asked her what drives her to continue this good work, she says she's always been someone who sympathises with the underprivileged and can't help but lend a helping hand. It is her fervent desire that younger, and more energetic women start getting involved in the UWA now, as she feels they will bring a renewed zest and enthusiasm to the organisation that only a person of a certain age bracket can.

And work of the kind that the UWA does is so important. Its enduring legacy (spanning six decades of

service and commitment to making the Nilgiris a place that is supportive, inclusive and welcoming to all), cannot be summed up in mere words. Perhaps we should talk to the doctor in Stanley Medical College (or maybe even her patients) to see how far the circle of service, that the UWA started so long ago, extends today. We salute them, this generation of women who have served quietly, sincerely, asking nothing in return, wanting no acclaim, no social media fanfare or even a simple thanks. All they wanted was to

plant trees that would provide shade for future generations that they would never meet. We could all take a lesson from these ladies, of the yesteryear, and the ones who serve the organisation today. They are without doubt, all of them, women of such substance. ■

UWA Presidents: Mrs Joseph 1964 -1973, Mrs Sue Adige 1974 -1978, Mrs Siloo Manekshaw 1978-2001, Mrs Sudha Parekh 2001-2004, Mrs Rajeshwari Shinde 2005-2017, Mrs Indu Shah 2017-2022 and Mrs Rajeshwari Shinde 2022 to date.



UWA Current Committee (L-R): Mrs Maria D'Souza, Dr Sheila Chandran, Mrs Rajeshwari Shinde, Mrs Nina Jayanthilal, Mrs Indu Shah. Not present: Mrs Malathi Mittal, Mrs Sharon Mathew, Mrs Benifer Patel

Proud Mary



She is a reminder that in every individual we meet lie stories of courage in the face of despair. Meet Mary, the woman who shaped her troubles into a launch pad for others to succeed

In the quiet town of Kolakambai, nestled in the lush Nilgiris, a story of unparalleled strength and resilience began on February 25, 1959. Mary, born to estate workers from an immigrant family, would grow up to embody the essence of true feminism. Her life is a testament to the power of self-reliance, determination, and the unyielding spirit that overcomes life's adversities.

Humble Beginnings

Mary's childhood was anything but easy. Her family had migrated to the Nilgiris, from Kanyakumari, during the British Colonial period, working tirelessly as estate labourers. Despite their challenges, they managed to

give Mary a basic education at estate schools, living a simple, yet fulfilling, childhood. However, tragedy struck early when her father passed away, leaving 11-year-old Mary to shoulder the responsibility of raising her three younger siblings, while her mother worked tirelessly to support the family.

This early burden of responsibility shaped Mary's character, instilling in her an unshakeable resolve to be self-reliant. She became a pillar of strength for her family, learning to manage household chores, while ensuring her siblings' well-being. "I realised that I must always fend for myself and create my own path," she recalls. This ideology would define her journey and the many roles she would take on in her life.

Marriage and New Beginnings

Mary married William Sekhar, an estate worker at Sutton Estates; she found in him a supportive partner who encouraged her ambitions. The couple worked side-by-side for five years, managing the estate's demands and building a life together. Mary's drive, however, extended beyond the confines of estate work. She longed for change and seized an opportunity to move to IIT Adyar, in Chennai, where she worked as a cook for a Bengali professor. It was here that Mary discovered her innate talent for cooking, mastering traditional and regional recipes with remarkable ease. Her time in Adyar not only expanded her culinary skills but also ignited a passion for the art of cooking.

Budding Entrepreneur

Mary's entrepreneurial spirit began to bloom when she moved to Tirupur after her son's marriage. Refusing to

idle away her time, she started a small business, making and selling pickles and tea powder sourced from the Nilgiris. Her enterprise gained local acclaim, and she continued this venture for a few years. Mary's dedication to her craft and her meticulous attention to quality earned her a loyal customer base in her neighbourhood.

In 1985, the opening of Asia's largest theme park, Black Thunder in Mettupalayam, reignited her passion for cooking. Mary joined the staff canteen, specialising in South Indian

Through sheer grit and an unwavering commitment to her ideals, Mary has transformed her personal tragedies into a mission to uplift others

cuisine, where her dishes won over employees and visitors alike. This marked the beginning of a decade-long association with the park, interrupted, only briefly, by a year's break. During her time at Black Thunder, Mary refined her culinary expertise and gained a reputation as a dependable and talented cook.

Tragedy And Resilience

Life's adversities tested Mary time and again. The passing of her beloved husband in 2010 left her grief-stricken and searching for renewed purpose. She sought solace by returning to the Nilgiris and working as a cook for an estate family. It was during this time

that Mary expanded her culinary repertoire, mastering pan-Asian and continental cuisines. Her ability to adapt and learn new skills showcased her strength and determination to keep moving forward.

However, the greatest blow came with the untimely death of her only son, who passed away after enduring years of marital strife. The memory of his last moments haunts Mary, but it also serves as a catalyst for her to channel her grief into purpose. "I wanted to contribute to society and give hope to women facing similar struggles to mine," she says. Her profound loss became the driving force behind her desire to make a difference in the lives of others.

Finding Purpose

In 2014, Mary's life took a transformative turn when she was hired by Diana Bharucha, as a housekeeper, in Coonoor. While reflecting on her life during moments of solitude, Mary found her calling in 2018 with the Kinder Trust, a charitable organisation for people with disabilities. This marked a new chapter in her journey, one where her skills and compassion could create a lasting impact.

Mary's innate ability to learn quickly and her drive to make a difference saw her mastering new skills, from crafting pens out of recycled paper to creating bio-enzymes. Her journey with the Kinder Trust began during the Covid lockdown with baking classes, and she soon became an expert, specialising in bread, buns, cakes, jams and even traditional Parsi sweet pickles. Her contributions played a pivotal role in the training of over 300 men and women with disabilities, empowering them to



become independent and break societal stereotypes.

A Legacy of Empowerment

Today, Mary is a vibrant 65-year-old who embodies resilience and true feminism. She serves as one of the skills development trainers at the inspirational Kinder Trust, inspiring others to develop life skills and rebuild their lives. Fluent in Hindi and Tamil, Mary is also a culinary artist whose talents extend far beyond the kitchen. Her work with the Kinder Trust has given her a sense of family and belonging, which she cherishes deeply. "I may not have my own family now, but the organisation, and Diana, have always stood by me, empowering me to give back," she shares.

Mary's latest endeavour involves the training of people with disabilities at a cafeteria that will open shortly at the new Kinder Trust Centre, in Naduhatty. The facility will primarily train individuals with hearing and speech disabilities, in baking, providing them experience and employment skills to lead

independent lives. "No one should ever have to depend on others to make a living," Mary asserts, her head held high, and a smile of determination lighting up her face.

Beyond her role as a trainer, Mary's influence extends to mentoring other trainers and encouraging them to nurture talent among the community of people with special needs. Her vision for the new cafeteria project is not just about imparting culinary skills, but also about fostering confidence and a sense of achievement, in those she trains.

A True Feminist Icon

Mary's life is a shining example of true feminism - a movement rooted in equality, independence, and empowerment. She has shown that one's background or circumstances do not define their potential. Through sheer grit and an unwavering commitment to her ideals, Mary has transformed her personal tragedies into a mission to uplift others.

Her journey, from a young girl burdened with familial responsibilities to a beacon of hope for many

disabled individuals, is a story that inspires and uplifts. Mary's dedication to her work and her belief in self-reliance exemplify the essence of womanhood and the limitless possibilities of the human spirit.

Her story also highlights the importance of community and the role of organisations like the Kinder Trust in creating inclusive spaces where individuals can thrive regardless of their challenges. Mary's work is a reminder that empowerment is not just about individual success, but about lifting others along the way.

In a world where narratives often sideline women's achievements, Mary's story stands as a powerful reminder of what true feminism can achieve. Her life's work ensures that no one is left behind, and her legacy will continue to inspire generations to come. As she puts it, "I have dedicated the rest of my life to helping the needy and disabled. This is my purpose, and I will see it through."

And so, just like the song, our very own Proud Mary keeps on rolling... ■

Interviewed by Jude Angelo



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Love Actually

*Swimming against the tide to impact lives, one child at a time - **Sreeram V** brings you the inspiring story of Udhavi at Darlington Bridge, Coonoor*

Udhavi started at the close of 1991 as a volunteer project of the Family Planning Association of India. Founded by Malathy Ramaswamy and Deepa Mukherjee, Udhavi (meaning 'assistance') is a beacon of hope for specially challenged children in the Nilgiris. Since 1991, this unique initiative has been identifying and nurturing children in need, and creating a lasting impact on their lives.

Humble Beginnings

Udhavi started small, with just two children and a physiotherapist. Initially, they didn't have any permanent trained staff to take care of the very specific needs of the children. However, they had visiting faculty who came in during the week

to assist with the training and development needs of the Udhavi students.

Udhavi's team, over time, understanding the unique challenges of nurturing differently-abled children, has developed a specialised approach. They recognised early on that it takes a significant amount of effort, particularly in the areas of teaching and task distribution, to effectively care for these children. Small, incremental steps are a measure of progress, and often require time and consistency of effort on the part of student and teacher, and of course a willing heart. This is the philosophy behind Udhavi's practices, and has kept them going for over three decades now.

An Independent Institution

After a successful few years of working with the Family Planning Association of India, Udhavi felt that they would be able to operate independently, and this would enable them to better carry forward their pioneering work. In 1997 they decided to fly solo, but unfortunately, this is where challenges hit hard and fast. Most organisations like theirs face their unique set of hurdles, but Udhavi faced a critical threat when they were asked to pay for the land they occupied. With funds already tight for the education of the children in their care, this additional financial constraint was a massive stumbling block. Shutting down operations was a tempting choice, but the management and staff at Udhavi weren't ready to surrender. They were completely unwilling to give up on the children they were serving, and the kind of difference they believed they

could make to those in need. Several appeals to the government, and a further court hearing, enabled them to continue their work. A few more trips to visit officials in Chennai saw results, and the government allocated the necessary five cents of land to Udhavi.

However, the dust hadn't settled yet. As their family of children grew, so did their needs. Udhavi requested more land on lease. And again it meant dealing with a host of paperwork and permissions, and yet again they persevered doggedly, and once again it paid off. They secured not just extra space, but also a playground for the children. Through it all, Udhavi's kept the spirit of their organisation intact. Today, they continue the incredible work they do, stronger than ever before, touching the lives of those who have no one else to give them a leg up in life.

A Systematic, Proven Approach

Udhavi works with students who may not get the attention they deserve in a regular school. But when a child shows progress, they try integrating them into regular classes. A classroom with 30-40 students would probably be tough on a child needing special attention. But through individual and specialised coaching they can be upskilled to integrate into mainstream educational modalities. Lathika Rao, Udhavi's special educator, sums it up by saying, "In our school, when we work with smaller numbers, we can really pay attention and get the children to a level where they can be integrated into a regular school. In the last so many years we have been able to integrate about 8-10 children. We take the rest of them as far as they can go, and then, based

on individual needs they may be put into a programme which we call functional literacy."

Functional literacy entails a lot of practical living courses, which includes minor day-to-day activities, such as reading signs on a bus, getting in and out of public transportation, and how to be part of the general population instead of being home-bound. All the tasks are designed to enable the child to integrate into everyday living within their communities.

The students undergo a special programme which involves a lot of environmental awareness, like basic reading, writing and maths skills. If they understand the concepts, they can even use a calculator to try and work more efficiently. So, each child's programme is designed to maximise their individual ability.

But it's not all serious business. The school tries to make learning fun and there is always excitement as students dive into paper crafts, explore their musical talents, and let loose on the playground. By focusing on real-world skills and fostering creativity, this programme opens doors and changes lives. Not just for the children but also the families and society they are a part of. Udhavi strives to provide those under their roof with a passport to independence and a sense of belonging.

There is a pre-stage for their youngest children. Udhavi starts with an assessment to identify if the child really needs a special intervention. Once a child is admitted, they initiate them into a programme called Early Intervention. This involves sensory integration to develop the child's senses so that he or she is aware of

her own body and its relationship to the environment. Changes are made to the programme whenever the child achieves the specifically outlined goals.

Nourishment certainly plays a pivotal role in developing young minds. Udhavi provides students with healthy meals, such as milk when they start their day at school, ragi dishes with jaggery, around mid-morning, and a meal around 12.30 noon. The meal is a balanced one, with a mix of protein and carbohydrates. This is followed by tea and biscuits by 2.45pm, and the children then leave for the day by 3.00pm. The junior students leave after lunch at around 1.00pm.

The Community Comes Together

Udhavi owes much of its success to the community. As an organisation that primarily operates on donations, they owe much to those who have contributed financially to make their work possible. Individuals from various backgrounds have lent support over the years, enabling the organisation's growth and impact. "It was very, very challenging. Slowly, people heard about us, and we started receiving donations. A plantation company was supporting us through their CSR. But unfortunately, during the pandemic, that came to a stop. But somehow, we've been managing and doing quite well with these children. We only have to look to the heavens in gratitude," says Malathy Ramaswamy, the gentle and soft-spoken founder of Udhavi.

People donate both in cash and kind. Some people provide rationed rice or other provisions. They also make meaningful gestures sometimes in honour of a wedding

anniversary or a birthday by sponsoring goodies or a special meal. The story of the late Mrs Slater and Coonoor's Vijaya Stores beautifully illustrates how kindness ripples through this hill town. Mrs Slater's support for Udhavi inspired Vijaya Stores to contribute sugar and biscuits. This act of giving didn't stop there – it sparked a chain reaction of goodwill. Enter Mr John, a pivotal figure in this narrative. Working for the Coonoor Tea Trade Association,

John became the bridge between local shops and Udhavi. His weekend ritual of collecting donations – be it a half-kilo of rice, meat, biscuits, or cooking oil – has persisted for over two decades. John's dedication embodies the true essence of community service that is so prevalent in the Nilgiris.

Such small acts of kindness showcase the unique power of tight-knit communities. As Malathy accurately points out, such stories

find their true home in places like Coonoor. Here, a local magazine like inside43 can deeply touch hearts, whereas in bigger cities, such tales might get lost.

Committed and Caring

Trained staff are one of the pillars of the organisation. The staff at Udhavi are taught a Diploma course by the institution, in which they learn how to plan a programme for the child. The graduates undergo two stages of learning: to maximise their ability to understand, and to rethink whatever has been taught to them. Most importantly, the candidates must have the heart for this career stream. Lathika says, with a smile, that the staff at Udhavi are passionate about what they do. "I have never seen such a dedicated group. They are so involved in the well-being of the child and it's amazing. I know of organisations where the staff don't put their heart and soul into the overall well-being of the child, but in this particular school, there is a 360 degree involvement in their care and development."

Udhavi now works with a strong, qualified staff, which includes its special educator, Lathika Rao. They have a physiotherapist who comes in three days a week, and is assisted by two more people. They have a speech therapist and an occupational therapist visiting them twice every week. The institution works with teachers who are trained to deal with children who have physical disabilities. The teachers undergo training under various institutes, which include Chennai's Spastic Society, Coimbatore's Ramakrishna Mission, and the Good Word Education Centre in Coonoor. They



also employ willing mothers to assist them in their various endeavours, such as cooking and serving meals. These parents are paid for their assistance.

A Better Perspective

Malathi says that Udhavi would like to see a lot of younger people coming into the organisation, people who can look at these children with a tender, but not necessarily sympathetic, eye. This, she says, people in general are unable to do. These children don't need any sympathy; they would rather have people empathise with them. You can communicate or relate to these children by merely being empathetic. "I think, since many of us work here, we just look at them as children first, and only then as children who have some problems. And all of us usually have problems, but for many of these children, the problems are more obvious. So, we like to think of them always as children with special needs, not special needs children. And therein lies the difference, a significant one, don't you think?" asks Lathika Rao, with a smile. She says that they have

children who come in with dirty clothes. They don't have a bath. So, you have to start from scratch, which includes educating the parents and the household. She recalls her visits to other childcare institutions where the entire place looks grim and depressing. She says that these places may play the role of a daycare centre, but are dark, unhygienic places. Parents leave them for the day, while they go off to work, and the children remain there until the evening, with the stench of urine, spending their days in a generally very unhealthy environment. However, everyone at Udhavi aims to make the school a place where the children are happy, clean and healthy.

"Some volunteers who come get emotionally upset seeing the children, and I tell them very frankly that they are not meant for this type of work because their depression transmits to the child," says Lathika in her frank and forthright manner.

The Real Heroes

While international schools often steal the spotlight, perhaps it is time

“Founded by Malathy Ramaswamy and Deepa Mukherjee, Udhavi (meaning ‘assistance’) is a beacon of hope

to refocus the spotlight on hidden gems like Udhavi. These institutions are creating waves of change for children who need it the most, those who may not be able to survive a world that is already challenging, and evolving rapidly, in myriad ways. Udhavi stands as a testament to the power of community-driven initiatives, showing that, sometimes, the most meaningful changes start with a simple desire to help others. Inside43 is truly blessed to have had the opportunity to cover the story of Udhavi - an institution that quietly, and gently goes about making the world a better place, one child at a time. ■



Some of the Udhavi volunteers

Doorway to Creativity



Art has been a calling since she was a child. Inside43 brings you the story of Sabrina Gill, a Nilgiris resident, who has combined spirituality and creativity into a successful career

Sabrina Gill, an 'army brat', spent her childhood moving from one army station to another with her parents and two siblings. Her mother, a person with artistic and literary leanings, soon recognised Sabrina's potential, and would often tell her that she had the fingers and handwriting of an artist. This early encouragement, and a childhood enriched by extensive travel and exposure to diverse global cultures, influenced Sabrina's artistic journey, shaping her unique perspective and creative abilities.

Sabrina, after majoring in Sociology from Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University, embarked on a new chapter in her journey and married a tea planter based in Assam. In this picturesque setting, she led a charmed and privileged life, surrounded by the beauty of tea gardens and the tranquillity of nature. Always a spiritual seeker at heart, Sabrina delved into the study and practice of various healing modalities, enriching her understanding of the mind, body, and spirit.

As a practitioner of Buddhism and a member of the Bharat Soka Gakkai for 22 long years, Sabrina found inspiration in the teachings of this

beautiful philosophy. The spiritual path enabled her to tap into her inner wisdom and manifest her highest potential as an artist. The principles of Buddhism, with their emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and interconnectedness, influenced Sabrina's artistic vision and approach, infusing her creations with depth,



meaning and a considered sense of harmony.

Sabrina works with watercolours, acrylics and pastels. A powerhouse of talent and good with most subjects, she enjoys portraiture, figurative work, cityscapes and florals. "I like to keep experimenting and playing around with different themes, though my

signature style and strokes are a constant."

In Her Words

"Art is my life blood, my essence and my identity. Each day is an opportunity to start a new project, or take my current project to the next level. I consider art a panacea to all of life's challenges," says Sabrina when

asked about how she views art as a way of life.

Sabrina is often asked where she got the inspiration for her beautiful creations. Invariably, this is the start of a long conversation and a connection between the artist and the prospective client. Different things inspire different people – from beauty to simplicity. Sometimes it's the most mundane, routine, everyday occurrences that capture the attention of the artist and set off the birthing process of a painting. "Every painting has unique beginnings and an interesting story to tell. On road trips, I am

constantly stopping to photograph a quaint alleyway that escaped the attention of my companions. It was from those charming, small town streetscapes that my acrylic on canvas series, 'Alleyways of India' was born."

"On another occasion, I found myself staring at two wizened, old

“On road trips, I am constantly stopping to photograph a quaint alleyway that escaped the attention of my companions

men, on a cold winter morning at a tea stall, at the railway station. An aluminium kettle was on the boil on a makeshift stove. My embarrassed husband restrained me from taking photographs, so I captured the image in my mind, (which meant more staring) and turned it into paintings. I can recount many moments in my journey as an artist when the beauty of something as ordinary as a weathered, derelict building with weeds growing out of the cracks in walls, has struck me and grabbed my attention. The subject inspired me enough to go back to the site at noon, to see how the midday sun cast shadows on the decaying building.”

The Public Eye

Sabrina Gill's artistic prowess extends beyond her personal experiences and spiritual insights; she handles a whole range of themes - from ethnic Indian art to Western subjects - with remarkable ease and panache. Her versatility as an artist is evident in her body of work, which reflects a blend of cultural influences and styles.

Sabrina's talent has been showcased in over twenty-five exhibitions over the years, each one a testament to her skilled artistry. From her debut at the Quill and Canvas Art Gallery in Gurgaon, in December

2011, to her solo show at the Taj Palace Hotel, Delhi, in August 2014, her journey through the art world has been marked by significant milestones. Other notable exhibitions include her participation at the Lalit Kala Academy in New Delhi and multiple showcases at Epicentre, Gurgaon, where her work resonated with audiences and critics alike.

In 2018, she participated in 'Inner Vision,' a group exhibition at The Visual Art Gallery, India Habitat Centre, Delhi, which showcased her ability to convey profound emotions through colour and form. Her solo show, 'A Melody in Colour,' held at the Convention Foyer of the India Habitat Centre, in 2019, further solidified her reputation as a distinguished artist.

With a keen eye for detail and a passion for storytelling, Sabrina continues to create evocative pieces that invite dialogue and connection. Among her other exhibitions, include the Poland International Art Exhibition held in October 2022. The upcoming India Art Festival in April 2025, in

Hyderabad, promises to captivate audiences both locally and internationally. Each exhibition is not merely a display of her work; it is an opportunity to share the narratives that inspire her creations, bridging cultures and perspectives through the universal language of art.

Artistic Reflections

As she reflects on her journey, Sabrina reminds us that every brushstroke is a step in her exploration of beauty, a celebration of life, and an invitation for others to join her on this creative path. In her world, art is not just a medium but a profound expression of existence, deeply intertwined with her experiences, observations, and the stories waiting to be told. Sabrina Gill aspires to leave her footprints in the world of art, a legacy that resonates far beyond the canvas. She aims to create a body of art that reflects the richness of human experience. She hopes her footprints will lead others on their individual journeys of creativity and self-discovery. ■



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Against All Odds

Divya, a make-up artist from Aravankadu, has not only made countless women look and feel their best, she has carved a beautiful life for herself from a difficult personal history. Sharmatha Shankar talks to her about her journey thus far

Life finds its way. It always does. No matter how bleak and hopeless it seems, it simply always finds a way. Bit by bit, day-by-day things will change, and one day you will look around you and realise you've made it to the end of the tunnel. You keep forging ahead with your head held high and your willpower lighting the way. In time, and with lots of patience, you make it. In fact, you don't just make it. You thrive. And you're ready for more.

Human resilience is a wonderful thing, isn't it? It may even be part of the reason why we've evolved and made such advancements as a species. This is one such story of resilience. This is the story of Divya, and her fighting spirit.

Divya is a twenty-eight year old makeup artist who grew up in Aruvankadu and currently resides in Wellington. Raised by a single mother, Divya does not have a surname. On being asked if not using a surname was her way of challenging the patriarchy, or has some other significance, she cheerily replies, "No it isn't like that. I've just been raised that way."

Quite unusual. But it only piques one's curiosity about this young lady and her story. Divya says that her mother, being single, really struggled to bring her up. She worked in the

front office at Riga Residency Hotel, Coonoor, and then as a cook at the MRC Barracks, Wellington, to support herself and her daughter. Divya went to Holy Angels Matriculation High School, but did not graduate. This resulted in seemingly insurmountable difficulties in making a career or finding a good job.

“Running her own business affords her some financial autonomy, and there is pride in what she does when she leaves a client looking her best

When asked if she would be comfortable sharing why she was unable to complete her schooling, at first Divya was reluctant. But as she continued talking more about her life, Divya shared that she was in a toxic, controlling and abusive relationship. Growing up without a father left a deep wound in her, and young and naïve as she was, she fell in love with the wrong person. He didn't want her to grow, and as a result, she faced several challenges during this

relationship, and was even made to discontinue her schooling. When her classmates graduated and moved on to college, Divya felt the sting of being left behind and lost. "I thought that was the end of my journey," she says, "And I had lost all hope."

But one day, something inside her, that inner strength that is within all women, finally gave her the courage to end the challenging relationship she was in, and start living life on her own terms.

New Beginnings

So began the new chapter in her life, and despite everything, things began looking up again. Divya admits that from childhood she had a passion for art and painting. She had always been fascinated with makeup. Maybe she couldn't pursue professional courses like her peers, but she was determined to forge a career of her own that would provide a way forward. A purpose; something that she loved to do.

Divya decided to do her beautician's training at a Green Trends Salon in Coimbatore, and then proceeded to work as a beautician in various branches from 2018-2019. She then went on to do an online makeup artistry course from Vah Vah Institute, Bangalore during the Covid-19 pandemic. She worked long, hard hours, funding the course by herself,



I am working. Not because of the money, but because of the experience," she says with a smile. Running her own business affords her some financial autonomy, and there is pride in what she does when she leaves a client looking her best, be it for a wedding or a birthday or special event of some sort.

her family, her work and animals are what keep her busy and content.

So yes, life always finds a way. Things may not turn out the way we planned and hoped and worked for. Life can be random and unexpected and terrible. Sometimes nothing is under our control and all we can do is hope. But that hope is what really counts. That glimmer we find within ourselves when we're thrust in the dark. Despite the tough circumstances Divya had to face in her early years, she has managed to pull through, and she has managed to thrive. Today, she is part of a happy family, has a successful business and a social cause that she dedicates herself to. She has carved out a peaceful life for herself despite the difficult beginnings that were handed to her. She has done all of this with a gentle spirit and fierce determination, and in doing so has become an example to us all. ■

Follow her on her Instagram: [@groomed_styled_bydivya](#) to see her work and contact her for personalised doorstep beauty services.

and then slowly started to establish a client base. She is currently a freelancer and her clients are mostly brides. She also contributes her services to the Purple Queen beauty pageant that takes place at the Defence Staff Services College, every year.

The Highs And Lows

Even though she loves her job, Divya has had her share of challenges. There have been times when she has had to work very late hours. Sometimes, the work carried on till midnight, and she would return home in the early hours of the morning. As a freelancer she goes to the homes of her clients to provide make-up and beauty services, and this is not without its problems given the vagaries of weather in the hills, and sometimes clients are less than courteous in their dealings with her. She recalls an incident where a client accused her of theft, which is still a painful memory, but none of this seems to have deterred her. "I am happy when

Happy Families

Divya currently lives with her mother (who is now remarried), her stepfather and her half-brother, who is now in the seventh standard. She admits that she is very close to them, and that she is quite maternal with her little brother. This enterprising young lady is also an animal lover. She has four dogs, one of which is a rescue, and three cats. She feeds strays on the roadside whenever she can, and she hopes to one day open her own animal welfare centre where she, and other other animal lovers, can help make the world a better place for stray animals. On being asked why she never moved out of Coonoor to pursue opportunities elsewhere, she simply says "I have pets here. I couldn't just leave them and go somewhere else."

Tomorrow's Plans

In the future, she hopes to open a salon of her own, and maybe even find love again some day. But till then,



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The Genesis of DJ Jenesis



Her journey from a curious child, with a penchant for melodies, to a professional DJ, commanding the decks, is a captivating one, that reflects the transformative power of sound. Inside43 explores the evolution of a path-breaker from Kotagiri

From the serene hills of the Nilgiris to the pulsating rhythms of global dance floors, the story of DJ Jenesi, born Jennifer Roberts, is one of passion, perseverance, and a profound connection to music.

Roots in Nilgiris

Nestled in the picturesque town of Nilgiris, known for its rolling hills and lush greenery, Jennifer Roberts' early life was nothing short of idyllic. The serene beauty of her surroundings was more than just a backdrop; it became a source of inspiration, nurturing her creative spirit and fuelling her deep love for music. Growing up in a family brimming with musical talent, Jennifer was enveloped in an environment where melodies were as omnipresent as the mist that draped the hills. Music wasn't just a hobby - it was a way of life.

In her household, instruments and vocal harmonies were staples of everyday life. The influence of her

family's musical pursuits ignited her curiosity and set her on a path to explore the vast world of rhythm and sound. Even as a child, she demonstrated an uncanny ability to appreciate and dissect the nuances of music.

Jennifer fondly recalls the many evenings spent listening to her parents play instruments and sing together. Their impromptu jam sessions were a cornerstone of family gatherings, and they often encouraged her to participate. Her early exposure to this supportive and creative environment sowed the seeds of her love for music.

An Early Love Affair

Music became an inseparable part of Jennifer's daily routine. From a young age, she was enthralled by the idea of creating her own soundscapes. With cassette players and Walkmans as her companions, she embarked on her first creative venture: crafting mix-tapes. These humble beginnings laid

the foundation for her future artistry that would resonate with audiences wherever she played.

By the age of 12, Jennifer's curiosity had expanded into a voracious appetite for discovering new sounds. She eagerly downloaded and explored a wide array of genres, from classical and rock, to hip-hop and jazz. Her eclectic taste was a testament to her openness and adventurous spirit. This period of exploration was crucial in shaping her understanding of the emotional and technical elements that make music resonate with listeners.

Jennifer's knack for identifying and blending different styles became apparent to her friends and family and anyone who heard her. They often sought her advice on playlists for events they were organising. Her ability to seamlessly transition between genres, and craft a mood through music, foreshadowed the skills she would later refine as a DJ.

Transformative Influences

As the years passed, Jennifer's relationship with music deepened. Her exposure to different styles expanded her creative horizons, but one genre stood out above all others: electronic music. The energy, innovation and diversity of electronic beats captivated her, offering a sense of liberation and boundless possibilities. It wasn't just the sound that drew her in; it was the culture and community that surrounded electronic music, a vibrant global network of creators and enthusiasts who spoke the universal language of rhythm.

This fascination became a driving force in her life. She spent countless hours immersing herself in the works of iconic DJs and producers, dissecting their techniques and absorbing their creative philosophies. She particularly admired the way electronic music could evoke such a wide range of emotions - from euphoria to introspection - often within a single track. This period of intense study and appreciation marked the beginning of her transformation from a music lover to an aspiring artist.

Jennifer's interest in electronic music coincided with the rise of streaming platforms, which made discovering new artists and sounds more accessible than ever before. She eagerly explored these platforms, creating playlists that reflected her growing love for the genre. Her passion for electronic music morphed into the defining feature of her musical identity.

A Defining Moment

For Jennifer, the spark that ignited her dream of becoming a DJ came at the

💥 This period of exploration was crucial in shaping her understanding of the emotional and technical elements that make music resonate with listeners

age of 18. Attending a concert by the legendary DJ Hardwell proved to be a life-changing experience. The electrifying atmosphere, the seamless transitions and the sheer power of the music left an indelible mark on her soul. In that moment, she saw her future with crystal clarity: she would become a DJ. The decision to pursue her passion was not made lightly. It was a bold step, one that required courage, commitment, and a willingness to venture into uncharted territory. Inspired by Hardwell's performance and the realisation of her own potential, Jennifer embraced the challenge of turning her dream into reality.

Jennifer vividly recalls the energy of the crowd at that concert. "It was like we were all connected by the music," she says. "That's when I realised I wanted to create that same feeling for others." The experience solidified her resolve and gave her the confidence to take her first steps into the world of DJing.

Training and Growth

Determined to hone her craft, Jennifer enrolled in Beatworx Academy, a prestigious institution renowned for its comprehensive training in DJing

and music production. At Beatworx, she delved into the technical aspects of her art, mastering the tools and techniques that would enable her to express her unique musical vision.

Her time at the academy was life-altering. Under the guidance of seasoned mentors, she learned to blend her diverse influences with contemporary trends, creating a sound that was both innovative and deeply personal. The rigorous training also instilled in her a sense of discipline and professionalism, qualities that would prove invaluable as she embarked on her career. In addition to technical skills, Jennifer gained valuable insights into the business side of the music industry. She learned about branding, audience engagement, and the importance of staying true to her artistic vision while adapting to an ever-changing musical landscape. This holistic approach to her education went a long way in setting her apart from many of her peers, and this is apparent through her all performances.

Looking Ahead

Today, DJ Jenesis stands on the cusp of a promising career, ready to share her love for electronic music with the world. Her journey from the tranquil hills of Nilgiris to the dynamic realm of DJing is a testament to her passion and perseverance. Rooted in her small-town origins, yet driven by a global perspective, she embodies the spirit of an artist who is unafraid to dream big. Jennifer's performances are characterised by her ability to connect with her audience on a deep level. Whether she's spinning tracks at an intimate gathering or commanding the stage at a grand festival, her mission remains the same: to create

moments of connection, joy, and transcendence through the universal language of music.

As she continues to evolve, DJ Jenesis remains committed to inspiring others through her music. She hopes her story will encourage aspiring artists to pursue their dreams, no matter how daunting the journey may seem. "Music has always been my compass," she says.

"It's guided me through life's highs and lows, and I want to share that gift with as many people as possible."

Looking ahead, Jennifer envisions expanding her creative horizons by collaborating with other artists nationally and globally, and exploring music production. She also dreams of bringing electronic music to underserved communities, using her platform to make the genre

increasingly accessible to a diverse audience.

Her journey is far from over, and if her past is any kind of indication, the future of DJ Jenesis promises to be as dynamic and inspiring as the beats she creates. With her heart firmly planted in these hills, and her soul seeking the global stage, the musical genius of DJ Jenesis will soon be the sound we hear reverberating far and wide. ■





Toot Sweet

*An unhurried pace, and good manners, make the Nilgiris a place to feel alive, says **Deepika Unni**, who moved here to get away from the bright lights of big cities*

You know how they say true kindness is planting a tree knowing you'll never sit under its shade? That idea comes to life here in the Nilgiris, in ways I never imagined. Kindness isn't loud or flashy in these hills; it's quiet, steady, and deeply ingrained in the way people live. I moved to the Nilgiris three years ago, drawn by the promise of misty mornings, the weather and breathtaking views. But what's kept me here, what's made this place feel like home, are the people and their incredible warmth. There are so many acts of kindness that make me fall in love with this place over and over again. But if I had to pick one, it's something so simple yet so heart-warming - the car horn.

Now, I know what you're thinking. A car horn? How can that be about kindness?

Let me explain. In cities like Mumbai or Bengaluru, honking is the sound of impatience, frustration—a language of chaos. But here in the Nilgiris, it's completely different. It's a 'half horn'—a quick, gentle toot that says "Thank you".

Imagine this!

You're driving on a narrow ghat road. Someone pulls over to let you pass. Instead of speeding off, you give them a little honk—not out of annoyance, but as a way of saying, "I appreciate you." And you know what? They honk back. It's not loud or aggressive—it's warm, almost like a smile exchanged between strangers.

The first time I experienced it, I was baffled. Why are people honking when they've done something nice? A friend explained, and I remember thinking, of course! This

is the Nilgiris. It fits so perfectly with the spirit of this place—unhurried, thoughtful, connected.

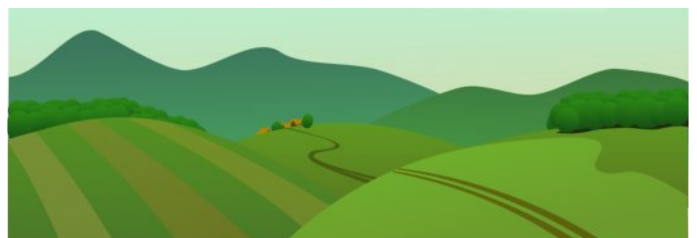
Now, every time I hear that little toot, it makes me smile. It's such a small gesture, but it carries so much meaning.

And it's not just the horns. Kindness here is everywhere, woven into the everyday.

On my morning walks, I often see an older man cycling with his granddaughter. Every so often, they stop to pick up trash along the road. There's no announcement, no fuss—just a quiet act of care for the land they love. Watching them fills me with such hope. I think about the kind of person that little girl will grow up to be, having learned from someone so deeply connected to the world around him.

It's one thing to be kind to those you know. But to go out of your way for someone you don't know? That's what makes the Nilgiris special. Living here has changed the way I see the world. It's not about grand gestures or making a big splash. It's the little things—the toot of a horn, a helping hand, a quiet moment of care—that make life meaningful.

For me, that's why the Nilgiris isn't just where I live. It's where I feel alive. It's where I've found a rhythm that feels just right—a rhythm of kindness, connection, and joy. ■





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Great Hornbill

A large, dense green tree with a hornbill perched on a branch. The hornbill has a large, colorful beak and black and white plumage. The background is a soft-focus forest.

A Bird's Eye View

*Gaythri Mansur shows us the incredible
birdlife she spots on her visits to the Nilgiris*

Brown Wood Owl



Long-tailed Shrike





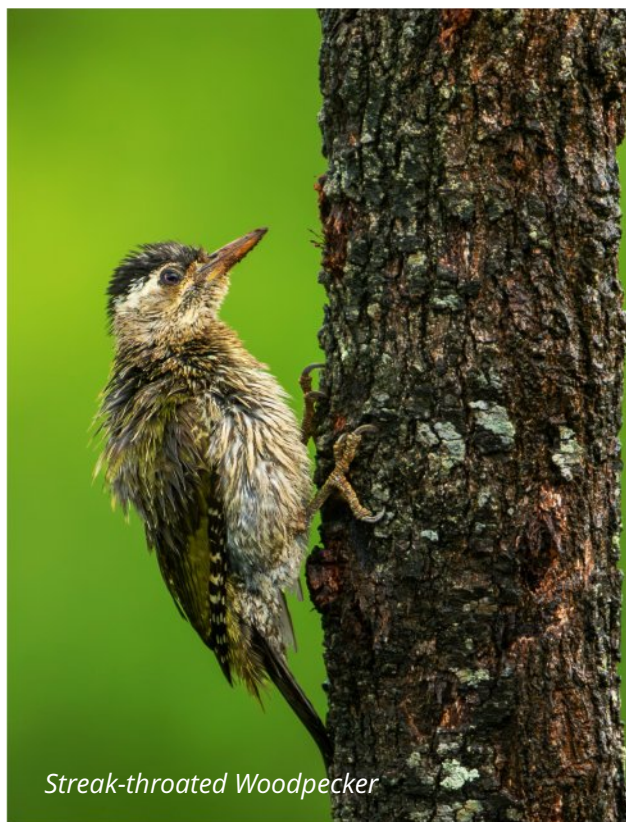
Brown Fish Owl



Indian White-eye



Shikra



Streak-throated Woodpecker



Blue-bearded Bee-eater



Kashmiri Flycatcher



Malabar Parakeet



Red Avadavat



Painted Bush Quail





Great Hornbill



Black and Orange Flycatcher

*Streak-throated Woodpecker*

Gaythri Mansur: Capturing the Wild, One Frame at a Time. Passionate. Patient. Perceptive. These are the qualities that define Gaythri Mansur, a celebrated wildlife photographer who studied at St Joseph's Convent, Coonoor. Gaythri shares a profound connection with the Nilgiris, both personally and professionally. With over two decades of experience, her career has taken her across diverse terrains—from lush rainforests to sun-scorched savannahs—where she documents the raw, unfiltered essence of wildlife in their natural habitats. Driven by a deep respect for nature and its inhabitants, Gaythri's work transcends the boundaries of photography, seamlessly blending art with advocacy, telling a compelling story—of survival, resilience, and the delicate balance of our ecosystems. Specialising in big cats and birds, her

evocative imagery raises awareness about the urgent need for conservation. Gaythri's stunning photographs have graced the pages of prestigious publications such as Sanctuary Asia and major news magazines, and her work has been prominently exhibited at the Chennai International Airport. Beyond the accolades, Gaythri is deeply committed to wildlife conservation, collaborating with organisations to promote sustainable practices and protect endangered habitats. Through workshops, talks, and social media, she inspires aspiring photographers to view the natural world with curiosity, compassion and responsibility. She also runs Tiger Scouts, a wildlife tours and travel company, where she guides nature enthusiasts and photographers on unforgettable journeys into the wilderness.

The Feminine Divine

This unique celebration draws the Badaga community back together, from around the world, to celebrate and venerate their female ancestors.

Monisha Raman takes gives us a front-row view

At the end of winter, when the mountain frost covers the hills, abundant over the peaks and valleys, almost like a huge cloak, some Badaga habitations across the hills gear up for the biggest event of the year, *Hethey Habba*. Hethey refers to the divine ancestress, and habba is festivity or celebration. The Badaga people from far and near gather to pay obeisance to their guardian ancestress who once lived in the mountains.

The Monday closest to the winter's full moon in the Badaga month of Koodalu marks the beginning of the seven-day festivities. A certain fervour takes over the several Hethey Mane (Hethey's abode) spread across the

hills. Devotional music celebrating the ancestress fills the air. People dressed in white flock to the sacred sites (*suthakalu* in local parlance) across the valleys and peaks. There is sense of bonhomie, a remembrance that we belong to these hills and our history is entwined with the forests and peaks. This community gathering is also a way to rekindle their reverence for the land.

The Badaga hamlets, approximately 390 in number, are spread across the Nilgiris. The social organisation is complex, with a cluster of hamlets forming a major lineage, and several such lineages form the *seemae*, which are four in number. Though Hethey Habba is observed in several

of these lineages, this piece describes the events held in the Porangadu seemae (Kotagiri region).

Hethey and Her Beginning

In the hamlet called Beragani, where Hethey is worshipped as a virgin, her story traces back to the quaint hamlet of Nundhuva, in the western part of the Nilgiris. Legend has it that Aiya (ancestor) landed at her doorstep from Aliyur, a hamlet near Kotagiri and helped Hethey's father with his large buffalo herd. Hethey was promised in marriage to him, but in a dramatic turn of events, Aiya breathed his last before their wedding rituals. One afternoon, as Hethey sat in the meadow grazing her buffaloes, her heart heavy with grief, she



mindlessly dug the earth with her staff. To her surprise, water sprung from the pit she dug. In that pristine water, she saw the image of Aiya with whom she thought she would spend her life. Overcome with emotions, she disappeared into the miraculous water; later, the villagers found her clothes and staff.

In the Pedhuva hamlet, two ancestresses are worshipped for their divine prowess. Both of them were married to the same Aiya, but not at the same time. The older of them who is referred to as Doda Hethey (elder ancestress) married Aiya and they both lived a content life with their three sons, tending to their herd. Hethey was known to be a benevolent and loving woman who everyone loved. After her death, Aiya married a woman known as Kunna Hethey (younger ancestress). This Hethey lived a few years after Aiya. A misunderstanding with her stepson angered her, and she cursed some of her stepsons. Shortly after this sour incident, both Aiya and his first wife appeared in a water body, and she disappeared into it.

In both the villages, the ancestresses are held in high regard for their virtuous qualities.

The Rituals and Practices

The groundwork for the seven-day festivities commences in the previous lunar month, the preceding full moon. Ancestors are venerated on the day of the full moon by decorating the roofs of traditional homes with native flowers. Thus, commences the sacred lunar month.

On the first Monday of the Hethey Habba, a full lunar cycle later, men from both the lineages around



Pedhuva and Beragani perform the same rituals simultaneously. Certain families within the lineage, inherit the sacred staff that is taken out this week. The revered procession commences from Hethy's abode in the two hamlets with men dressed in traditional attire, *selai* (wrapped around the shoulders) and *mandrai* (headgear). At the centre of this march are two umbrellas, one in pink and the other green, held by the male members of the family presiding over the ritualistic duties. For the people in these major lineages, this week is the most sacred one of the year.

For the next week, until the following Monday, the members of this procession stay away from their respective hamlets in a shelter in the valleys. This shelter house is now a concrete building, but in the past, they braved the brutal winter frost in thatched roof huts and open air. The following Wednesday and Friday, this procession moves around the old routes, stopping at sacred valleys and

peaks where people come to pay obeisance. The gatherers are all dressed in white - men in dhoti and white shirts, along with a white garment over their shoulders, and women with a white cloth wrapped over their sarees.

This procession has moved across the same valleys and plateaus, stopping by the same sacred sites for centuries, thereby preserving these pockets and safeguarding them from excessive anthropogenic activities. From one generation to the other, these rituals have connected the community and empowered the individual as well as the collective.

Community lunch is served at certain designated places throughout the week. The people gathered are seated on the ground and a simple meal of rice and staple beans curry with a spoon of ghee is served on banana leaves.

On the concluding Monday, after these processions reach the hamlet where they started, and after the rituals for the day are complete, the gatherers pay their respects one last time. After this, the staffs and the umbrellas go back to the inner precincts of the temple and respective houses until the following year.

The power of this divine ancestress brings the Badaga people from across the country and overseas flocking to The Nilgiris for this week. It is the time to connect with their pasts, offer their gratitude to the land and revel in its graciousness. To a Badaga, Hethey is not just a guardian or divine ancestress; she is the embodiment of truth and light in this ephemeral world. ■



GODDESS OF SMALL THINGS

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

Reprinted from Issue 1, Winter 23/24



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

On a cold winter evening in 2014, just a couple of years after my gender reassignment surgery, my family and I visited Ooty to check on our ancestral property. My father (who passed away recently, and with whom I shared a complicated relationship) wished to dispose the property and reinvest in Chennai. Many were the reasons given to me by well-wishers and ill-wishers to convince me this property was not intended for me.

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

As I kept walking, from a distance, a frail old woman beamed and waved at me and gestured for me to walk to her shop. Curious eyes, some nervous, a few avoiding eye contact, watched me carefully. The lady, in her 80s, introduced herself as the snack lady of the market, selling home-made chips, murukku and cream biscuits. She asked me where I was from and looking me in the eye said, "Everything will be OK, you are God's child." I looked at her, smiled, and overcome by emotion, I thanked her. From a sea of negative feedback, suddenly here was a woman I had just met, brimming with positivity and acceptance. And something within me changed with that simple sentence. I began to believe that there was a meaningful place for me in this world, and I didn't need to be apologetic for who I truly am.

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

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



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From Passion to Purpose

The inspiring journey of two animal rescue founders from different parts of the world coalesced into a rescue movement in the Nilgiris. Meet Anjali Mehta and Priyanka Bandyopadhyay, founders of Wagtail Rescue, and be inspired...be very inspired



Sixty-two years ago, long before animal activism was a recognised movement, a child lay curled in her warm bed, listening to the sound of icy sleet and freezing rain outside. She quietly pleaded to the power in the sky, asking it to protect all animals suffering in the harsh winter

weather. That young girl was Anjali Mehta, or Anju as she is known to most, whose deep empathy for voiceless creatures sparked a lifelong mission - one that would eventually lead to the creation of Wagtail Rescue. Priyanka Bandyopadhyay, the other co-founder of Wagtail Rescue,

had a different journey. Initially indifferent to dogs and cats, her perspective dramatically changed in 2007, when she cared for a friend's adopted dog for a week. The dog's trusting eyes and gentle presence stirred something deep within her, and a passionate advocate for animal

rights was born in that week. During the Covid-19 pandemic, seeing the plight of abandoned pets and strays motivated her to start rescuing and rehoming dogs. Then in October 2023, she went a step further and left her corporate career to establish Wagtail Rescue Foundation with Anju, both of them dedicating themselves fully to animal welfare.

Word From The Ground

Anju says in her forthright manner, "For us, rescuing and rehabilitating animals isn't just a job - it's a calling. It's rooted in an unwavering passion and a profound empathy for abandoned and injured creatures who cannot speak for themselves." Priyanka agrees with her. "Absolutely. Working in animal rescue can be mentally and emotionally draining. We often see the worst of humanity, which brings a daily mix of sorrow, frustration, heartbreak, and even anger. People often tell us they couldn't do what we do, that it's too distressing. I'm grateful that some of us can channel those tough emotions to help animals without completely losing our minds." Anju goes on to say, "Our empathy stems from understanding the suffering these animals endure. Many arrive malnourished or ill, and in desperate need of medical attention. We treat them, restore their health, and work tirelessly to find them loving homes. The biggest challenge we face is finding responsible adopters. Many people prefer purchasing specific breeds over adopting. There's often a gross lack of understanding regarding the responsibilities of pet ownership, with some viewing pets as mere possessions or toys, rather than lives requiring care. Priyanka adds to this,



William, a Wagtail rescue, before ▲ and after ▼ adoption



stating, in her clear voice, "There's also a deep-seated bias against local breeds. Despite our pride in indigenous foods, festivals, and cultural traditions, we often overlook the value of mixed-breed and local dogs. My own dogs are 'indie' mixed-breeds, and they're amazing - perfect family companions."

Awareness Is Key

And this is very true. Unfortunately, people insist on, and continue to breed or support breeding of animals that are / were imported from other countries. Most are highly unsuitable to our environment and lifestyles. That's why at their planned rescue centre, Anju and Priyanka want to create a welcoming space where the public can engage with dogs and cats of all types, and learn about compassionate pet care, animal birth control, pet behaviour and training, etc. They feel that engaging with volunteer educators and inspiring the younger generation is the only way to build a society that values animal welfare from an early age.

"We're hoping to focus on more awareness programmes this year," says Priyanka. "I wish I had known even half of what I know now when I was a child. Thankfully, my 9-year-old is growing up with much greater awareness and compassion for animals. Teaching responsible pet ownership is crucial, as many of the cases we encounter involve abandoned pets from irresponsible owners or backyard breeders. In our district, German Shepherds and Labrador Retrievers are the most abandoned breeds - nearly 60 GSDs and 50 Labs were rescued last year. Sadly, this is just a fraction of the actual numbers, as many cases likely

go unreported. While abandonment is illegal under Indian animal welfare laws, enforcement remains a challenge, and public awareness is still low." Anju echoes this, while adding, "That's incredibly frustrating. Three years ago, many of these dogs would have been abandoned on the streets, but now, organisations like ours can step in when alerted. Currently, my home serves as a rescue centre, housing over 10 dogs at a time, along with some occasional cats. This is in addition to 4-5 permanent residents. Priyanka has also fostered many in her home. But relying solely on our homes and personal resources is incredibly challenging."



...it's a calling. It's rooted in an unwavering passion and a profound empathy for abandoned and injured creatures who cannot speak for themselves

A Permanent Home

And this is why Priyanka states the need for a permanent base for Wagtail Rescue. To ensure that their rescue work has a lasting impact and can continue regardless of individual circumstances. Their mission is clear: to rescue, rehabilitate, and rehome dogs and cats, while promoting responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. In 2024, they received around 8-10 new cases each month,

with numbers rising as awareness kicks in. To meet the demand, Wagtail Rescue is building a fostering/rescue centre, and planning to hire and train staff. They know it is going to take time, effort, and funds, but they've already started on this incredible initiative and there will be no turning back for them now. But even without the proposed centre, they have an impressive track record.

Anju outlines their scope of work. "Beyond our local rescues, we've also helped find homes for cold-weather breeds like huskies and retrievers, rescued by other organisations from hot cities like Chennai. Keeping such breeds in unsuitable climates is cruel. We need very strict regulations against breeding, selling, and owning these breeds in the warmer regions." Priyanka stresses the importance of fostering connections with other like-minded rescue operations. "This sort of collaboration with other rescue organisations is crucial. Like the Jack Johnson song - we are better, together," she says with a laugh. "For instance, I continue to be involved with the NSPCA's centre in Ooty, where I help manage medical needs for several dogs and sponsor vaccinations and treatments. About three years ago, a group of us volunteers, with the support of donors, helped establish that centre out of urgent necessity. Given the NSPCA's limited resources, we've also allocated a portion of our staff member, Shashank's, time to assist the NSPCA with fieldwork, logistics, record-keeping and social media operations." An excellent point. Many rescue organisations, including Wagtail, face resource limitations. It is vital to work to control the pet



population through measures like regulating pet breeding and promoting animal birth control (ABC); thereby reducing the number of animals in need. There is a notion, even amongst educated pet owners, that it is the pet's 'right' to breed, without considering the consequences. Wagtail and other rescuers rely on Worldwide Veterinary Services to sterilise all their rescues. They've also helped several pet owners sterilise their animals, and they undertake to do this for stray dogs also, wherever possible.

Be A Part Of It

With perseverance and more community support, this resolute duo

are confident that they can expand these efforts and improve animal welfare in the Nilgiris. Priyanka says, with great optimism, "Indeed. I also hope that our rescue work serves as a testament to the transformative power of love and compassion. By volunteering, adopting responsibly, supporting local rescue organisations and educating others about compassionate pet care, we can all play a part in creating a community where animals are treated with the respect and love they deserve."

Anju and Priyanka are absolutely right. Humans have shared a deep, historical bond with animals who have supported us in countless ways

over the centuries. For these warriors of justice, this animal-human connection led to a powerful realisation: a moral responsibility for the welfare of animals.

Their mission goes beyond rescue and rehabilitation—it is about creating a world where animals are treated with dignity and kindness. And it is this mission that continues to drive them to provide their support every day. ■

Readers may reach Wagtail Rescue Foundation at ☎ +91 93428 92442. Follow them on Instagram @wagtailrescue, and Facebook @Wagtail Rescue Foundation

COME HOME



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

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

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

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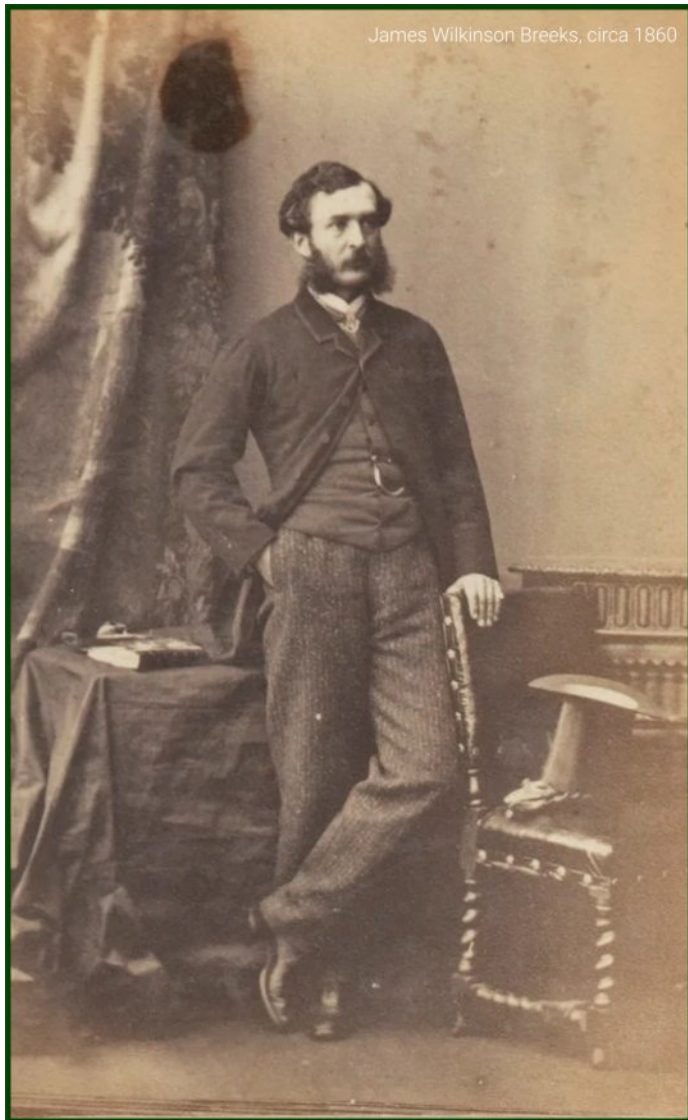
The image shows the interior of a restaurant. The room has a high ceiling with exposed black beams and track lighting. The walls are a mix of light beige and dark grey textured panels. There are large windows with black frames. The floor is made of light-colored marble tiles. The seating consists of 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.

Hungry...?

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Full



Circle

Inside43 was lucky to catch up with Elinor Corfield, whose ancestor, James Wilkinson Breeks, was the first Commissioner of the Nilgiris, and after whom Breeks School was named

So what brings you to the Nilgiris?

Well in some ways, retracing the footsteps of my ancestor, James Wilkinson Breeks, who was the Collector here. I was invited to attend the 150th year anniversary of the Breeks Memorial Higher Secondary School, in Ooty. I'm several 'greats' away from Jim Breeks, as the family calls him. He died here unexpectedly when he was just 42.

So what do you know about your ancestor?

Well, we know he was passionate about studying and understanding local communities and spent a lot of time researching these issues. I guess he made a lot of impact here and, after he died, the locals and the Britishers put aside some money and set up an Anglo-Indian school which, as you probably know, you can see from Charing Cross - a beautiful red structure that perches above the traffic quite serenely. It was a very progressive school for the time, and everyone was welcome, regardless of nationality or caste or background. As a family we are very proud of that. We are here, quite by chance as my father holds a lot of archival information from Jim Breeks. He bumped into someone at the British Museum in London who was researching this ancestor. You see, when Jim Breeks' widow returned to the UK, she gave away a lot of the research he did on the local communities, to the British Museum. So here we are, celebrating the

school, with the alumni, 150 years after my ancestor passed away. This is, of course, such a privilege for me, to experience this part of my history.

So what has this trip to this district, this journey into your own past, been like for you?

Incredible, really. It's been a time, a chance to catch up on his work, his legacy, and to understand it some more. Mostly, Brits are too embarrassed by their Colonial history to even talk about it, so I'm trying to navigate that and understand this connection between our two nations through the life of my ancestor.

People have been so welcoming, and it has been the most moving experience for me. This sense of being part of something so much bigger than myself. Just visiting the Nilgiris, this is my first time, has been incredible, and I find these mountains stunning, especially with the blue skies and clear air we have had the last few days.

What would be your big takeaway from this trip?

I would say the importance of shared values. I've met people who were students here as far back as 1957, and it's clear that this school, named after Jim Breeks, had a lasting impact on these hills and beyond. The students clearly value the education that is given to them here, and I personally have loved spending time with people who value their roots in such a profound way. In some ways, these are my roots too.

Tell us something about yourself...

I live in London and I work as a speech language therapist. I used to work for the NHS, but now I have my own business. I guess Jim Breeks and I have a connection, through time, by virtue of education, as well. He actually only came here because of his education, I believe. He was a farmer's child who studied incredibly hard to learn Indian languages, understand the culture and the work he was getting into. I guess, like him, I share an interest in linguistics.

Does your family in the UK still have links to the places that James Breeks lived in?

Funny you should ask. My sister actually lives in Jim Breeks' house which is in Warcop, in the north of England, close to the village he was born in. He came back to the UK for a while, after spending some time in India, and bought this house. It's in a valley, surrounded by the Pennine mountains, very wooded, and visually it's similar to places I've seen in Ooty. He then went back to India, and ended up in Ooty... perhaps he came here because it reminded him of home? I spend a little time each year in Warcop, where he was born. After this trip, the visits will be that much more meaningful.

Do you think you'll come back again to the Nilgiris?

Oh, definitely. There's still so much to see and learn, and this, I hope, is the first of many visits to this wonderful place that I feel so connected with. ■



L'air du Temps

*She's raised the bar for physical fitness in the Nilgiris. **Shobana Chandrashekar** gets into conversation with Vinutha Padmanabhan of CORE FITNESS, Ooty, to talk about her unique offerings in our hills*



What inspired you to start Core Fitness in Ooty, and how did you discover your passion for fitness?

My passion for fitness has been with me since my school days. Growing up in Bangalore, I was always engaged in some form of sport or physical activity. However, when I moved to Ooty, I realised the fitness options were limited, with only gyms available. Wanting to stay active and give back to my community, I decided to pursue a Teacher Training Course in Power Yoga, in Bangalore. This became the starting point of my fitness journey, where I not only focused on my own well-being, but also worked to keep my community engaged in physical activities.

What drew you to aerial yoga? Did you always know it would be a key offering at Core Fitness?

When I opened my fitness studio, I quickly recognised that people are constantly seeking something fresh and different, which is what keeps them motivated. I also saw that in a town with limited fitness options, many weren't aware of the variety of workouts available. That's when I decided it was important to ensure my community wasn't missing out on diverse fitness experiences, especially since it's my area of expertise. They needed to be introduced to different workout styles. Here's an interesting fact – after Chennai, we were the first in all



of Tamil Nadu to introduce aerial yoga. In fact, even Coimbatore followed our lead.

Why do you think fitness is particularly important for women?

Fitness is incredibly important for women because it not only improves physical health but also boosts mental and emotional well-being. Regular physical activity helps prevent chronic diseases, builds

role in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, while also boosting self-esteem and confidence. Women need to prioritise time for themselves, as it provides not only physical strength, but also a sense of inner peace and a 'feel-good' factor.

What unique challenges have you faced running a fitness studio in Ooty, and how have you managed to build a community around it?

The weather poses a challenge as it often makes people feel lethargic and the constant push for motivation is essential. Now, no matter rain, wind, or sun, they eagerly look forward to the classes every day. I achieved this by not only offering a variety of high-quality workouts, but also by going beyond just fitness. I took them on treks, organised get-togethers, celebrated special occasions, and even went on picnics, creating a sense of connection and community that motivates them to stay engaged.

How have people in Ooty, especially women, responded to your aerial yoga classes?

The response to aerial fitness has exceeded all my expectations. When I first introduced Aerial Yoga, people were curious, but unsure, about what it entailed, so I offered a few free trial sessions to help them understand. At first, there was a fear of letting

themselves into the sling and wondering how to do inversions without the risk of falling. But once they got the hang of it and experienced the sensations it offered, they became unstoppable. Women, in particular, felt like they were flying, leaving all their worries behind. It turned out to be more than just a workout — it was a rejuvenating, calming experience for both the body and the mind.

Do you have male students attending your classes?

Yes, I do have male students as well. While most men are strong, they often struggle with flexibility. They're thrilled to work on it using the aerial swing, which helps them achieve postures they once thought were impossible. In my experience, many men are initially curious, but also a bit sceptical, about aerial yoga. They often associate it with being too 'gentle' or geared toward women. However, once they try it, they're surprised by how challenging and effective it can be. Aerial yoga not only helps improve flexibility and balance but also builds core strength, which is something many men are looking for. The suspension in the sling adds an element of support that makes it easier to deepen stretches and achieve postures they might

“ Aerial yoga can have a profound impact on mental well-being, especially for women who juggle multiple responsibilities

strength, and increases energy levels, which are crucial for maintaining an active, balanced life. Women especially juggle multiple responsibilities, whether they're working or managing a household, and this constant multitasking can lead to significant mental and physical stress. Fitness offers a way to relieve that pressure. Beyond just physical benefits, exercise plays a key

struggle with on the ground. Once they see the physical benefits and feel how it enhances their overall fitness, they start to appreciate it more.

What kind of training or certifications do you have in yoga and fitness?

I have completed a certified Fitness Trainer Course (FTC), as well as a Teachers Training Certificate (TTC) in Power Yoga, including postnatal and prenatal. I completed my TTC in Bangalore, and a year later, I pursued my FTC there, as well. Every year, I make it a point to learn something new. A few years ago, I completed a TTC in aerial yoga, and recently, I got certified in Bungee Fitness. I strongly believe in continuous learning — no matter the age, there's always something new to discover!

Who or what inspires you to keep pushing forward in your fitness journey, and to help others?

As a fitness trainer, I'm inspired by the progress and determination of my clients. Seeing them overcome challenges, reach personal milestones, and grow both physically and mentally keeps me motivated.



Their dedication and hard work fuel my own passion for fitness. Also, constantly learning new techniques and knowledge in the fitness world helps me stay inspired, and provides me with fresh ways to push both myself and my clients forward. I want to lead by example, showing that no matter where you start, improvement is always possible with consistency and a positive mindset.

Do you have other instructors working with you?

I have an instructor who is certified in Hatha yoga and aerial yoga. He teaches both yoga and aerial yoga classes at my studio, and also assists me with other classes.

Have you faced any societal stereotypes or misconceptions, especially about women pursuing fitness?

Absolutely. Another common misconception I encounter is that some housewives feel that the physical activity they do around the house - cooking, cleaning, or managing household tasks - is sufficient for their fitness needs. While these tasks certainly involve some movement, they're not necessarily designed to target the whole body in a way that structured workouts do. I address this by explaining that household work is often repetitive, and doesn't provide the variety or intensity needed to truly strengthen muscles, improve cardiovascular health, or increase flexibility. I emphasise that dedicating time specifically for their bodies, through exercise, can help reduce the physical strain that comes with daily chores, improve posture, prevent injury and boost energy levels. It's about giving the body a balanced

“When I opened my fitness studio, I quickly recognised that people are constantly seeking something fresh and different

workout that addresses all areas - strength, endurance and mobility - something daily tasks often don't provide. It's important for women to recognise that prioritising their health isn't just a luxury, it's a necessity for long-term wellbeing.

What advice would you give to someone who's completely new to fitness or aerial yoga?

For someone new to fitness or aerial yoga, my first piece of advice would be: take it one step at a time and remember that everyone starts somewhere. It's normal to feel intimidated, but it's important to approach your journey with patience and self-compassion. Whether it's fitness in general, or aerial yoga, start with beginner classes or workouts and don't compare yourself to others - progress happens at your own pace. In aerial yoga, for example, it's all about building strength, flexibility, and trust in the equipment. Start with the basics, and allow your body to adapt to the new movements. Trust your instructor, ask questions if you're unsure, and never feel like you have to 'keep up' with anyone. Consistency is key - just showing up and being

present will lead to improvements. Most importantly, enjoy the process! Every small accomplishment, no matter how tiny, is a step forward. Fitness is a personal journey, so focus on progress, rather than perfection.

How do you modify classes for different ages, or those with specific needs?

Yes, I work with a wide range of age groups. Our classes typically include participants from 21 to 65 or even 70 years old. I have to say, the older individuals often turn out to be the most dedicated, and it's truly inspiring to see them match the younger members in enthusiasm and stamina. For the older individuals, I modify the workouts by offering alternative, low-intensity variations for exercises that may be too challenging for that age group. It's all about making sure everyone feels comfortable and can progress safely. I also offer personal training sessions for those who have specific needs or goals they'd like to focus on.

In what ways does fitness - especially aerial yoga - help improve mental well-being, particularly for women juggling multiple responsibilities?

Aerial yoga can have a profound impact on mental well-being, especially for women who juggle multiple responsibilities. It provides a unique combination of physical movement, breath-work, and mindfulness, all of which help reduce stress and promote relaxation. The inversion aspect of aerial yoga, where you're gently suspended in the hammock, allows for a release of tension in the body, stimulates circulation, and helps clear the mind. For women constantly on the go, it



offers a moment of escape—an opportunity to fully focus on themselves and be present in the moment, which can be incredibly grounding. The practice encourages deep breathing, which helps lower cortisol (the stress hormone), and can lead to improved mood and clarity. Over time, aerial yoga also helps build strength and flexibility, which not only boosts confidence but also supports the body in carrying out daily tasks more easily, reducing the physical strain that can contribute to mental fatigue. It's a holistic practice that nurtures both the body and the mind, creating a powerful sense of balance and wellbeing.

Where do you see Core Fitness in the future? Are there any new programmes or plans you're excited to introduce?

I see my fitness studio evolving into a community-centred hub that offers a diverse range of services tailored to meet the needs of all fitness levels. I envision expanding both in terms of physical space and the variety of classes offered, incorporating more cutting-edge equipment and

technology to enhance the member experience. Ultimately, I want the studio to be known not just for helping people achieve their fitness goals but also for fostering a supportive, inclusive community where members feel inspired and motivated to lead healthier, more active lives. This year, we've already introduced Bungee Fitness, and Aerial Hoops will be launching in a few months.

Is there a special message you'd like to share with women about fitness, self-care, or pursuing their passions?

Absolutely. I want to remind all women that fitness is not just about physical appearance; it's about strengthening both the body and mind. Pursue your passions, whether they're in fitness, or anything else, with determination and belief in your own strength. The journey toward your goals is just as important as the destination, and every small step counts. Stay consistent, celebrate your progress, and never forget that you deserve to feel empowered and strong in every aspect of your life! ■

“I achieved this by offering them not only a variety of high-quality workouts, but also by going beyond just fitness

Vinutha Padmanabhan can be reached on +91 89034 28099 and +91 70105 51900. Also on Instagram @corepower_studio_

Sowing Seeds

Riya Premchand stands out not just as a product of her heritage, but as a game-changer in agriculture, in the Nilgiris. Inside43 talks to the dynamic young woman who is changing things, one bold move at a time...



As the torch-bearer of a family deeply entrenched in farming for two generations, Riya is on a mission to modernise perceptions of agriculture and bring innovative practices to the forefront. With her education, passion and a vision for sustainable growth, she is redefining the agricultural landscape of the Nilgiris.

Roots in the Hills

Born into a prominent family known for its unflinching dedication to agriculture, Riya's upbringing was steeped in the natural beauty of Coonoor. Her childhood was split between two prestigious schools, Stanes and Mountain Home, where she gained a strong educational foundation. Later, she pursued a bachelor's degree from Jain University in Bangalore, and completed her MBA in Business Management from Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies in Mumbai. Despite her modern education and exposure to urban life, Riya's heart remained tied to her roots.

"Holidays were always at the farmhouse, surrounded by nature. It was there that I developed an intimate connection with plants and learned how nature works," she reminisces. Growing up in a family of ten, Riya found inspiration in their close-knit dynamic. Each member had a role to play in the business, and even as a child, she contributed in small, yet significant, ways. This ingrained in her a strong sense of responsibility and the value of teamwork.

Her fondness for the hills and their natural beauty shaped her world-view early in life. The Nilgiris, with its

unique ecosystems and biodiversity, provided Riya with a constant source of inspiration. Even as she travelled and studied across India, she often longed for the tranquillity of her home town and the sense of purpose it gave her.

Changing Perceptions

As a Gen Z successor to a thriving family-run business, Riya's vision extends far beyond the traditional. She is determined to shift the perception of farming as a laborious, poverty-stricken occupation to one that is innovative, profitable and essential. "When people think of farming, they often associate it with poverty. My aim is to change that mindset," she asserts.

With modern technology and advancements in cultivation techniques, Riya believes that agriculture can captivate today's youth. Her family's approach - supporting small-scale contract farmers and adopting GAP-certified practices - is a testament to this philosophy. Organic farming is another area they have embraced, striking a balance between innovation and sustainability.

"Our products are not just from our farms, but also from small-scale farmers who benefit from fixed pricing and guidance on maximising their yields," Riya explains. By offering these farmers stability and support, her family's business fosters a symbiotic relationship that uplifts the community, while maintaining high standards.

Her efforts also extend to educating others about the opportunities within agriculture. "Farming today is not what it was decades ago. With

technology, it's an industry full of potential," she says, emphasising the need to make farming appealing to younger generations. Riya's goal is to create a ripple effect where sustainable practices and innovative methods become the norm, inspiring others to join the movement.

The Birth of Cherrie Berry

In 2023, the launch of Cherrie Berry, a farm-to-table outlet and vegetarian fine-dining restaurant, marked a significant milestone. Located in a refurbished tea factory in Highfields, Cherrie Berry has become a hub for showcasing locally-grown products. "What started as an idea for a localised farmers' market evolved into something much bigger," she shares. The outlet combines the essence of a farmers' market with a dining experience that caters to vegetarians - a rarity in the region. Riya also highlights that the farm tours conducted at Cherrie Berry showcase not just sustainable methods to cultivate fruits and vegetables, but also the variety of medicinal and ornamental plants grown on the farm. This holistic approach enriches visitors' experiences and emphasises the versatility of agriculture in the Nilgiris.

The response to Cherrie Berry has been overwhelmingly positive. Visitors from across the Nilgiris, and beyond, have embraced the concept, appreciating the fusion of tradition and modernity. This venture supports local farmers and strengthens the community's agricultural ecosystem.

Innovations and Experiments

Riya's contributions to her family's agricultural ventures are remarkable. She has introduced microgreens,

vermicompost and dairy products to their portfolio, diversifying their offerings and exploring the unique agricultural potential of the Nilgiris.

Among their most notable achievements, Riya's family business, Cherrie Berry, is pioneering the successful production of avocado plants using the clonal propagation method - a first in India. This breakthrough has placed the Nilgiris on the map as a hub for innovative agricultural techniques. This 7-year-long experimental method enables farmers to maintain uniformity in the orchard and maximises their yield, as well.

Her latest endeavour focuses on promoting avocado cultivation. "Avocados thrive in the Nilgiris' rich soil and microclimates. With their health benefits and popularity among vegetarians and vegans, they're a perfect addition to our crops," she explains. Riya's forward-thinking approach aligns with global trends while capitalising on local advantages.

Experimentation has always been at the heart of Riya's work. She believes that the Nilgiris' diverse microclimates provide a unique opportunity to test new crops and farming techniques. From introducing organic farming practices to advocating for sustainable water usage, Riya is constantly pushing boundaries to ensure long-term agricultural prosperity.

Sharing Expertise

Riya's influence extends beyond the farm. In October 2023, she gave a speech at the Indian Institute of Horticulture Research (IIHR) on avocado plantation and nursery management, sharing her expertise

and vision for the future of this crop. Her contributions to the agricultural discourse continued in December 2023, when she joined a panel discussion on agriculture at the 12th edition of TiEcon Kerala where she stated, "Even when people are working in IT or any other field, they should try to engage in something related to agriculture." She has also been invited by the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI), Coimbatore, to discuss the potential of avocado cultivation, further cementing her status as a thought leader in the field - no pun intended. The latest edition of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Cell of the Government Model Engineering College, Thrikkakara, has invited Riya to share her invaluable perspective on bridging industries and agriculture.

Inspiring the Next Generation

Cherrie Berry actively encourages schools to bring students on excursions to the farms, fostering an understanding of agriculture's importance and the values of the land. "We live in a beautiful place surrounded by nature. It's essential for our generation to explore opportunities here, help the town grow, and preserve it for future generations," Riya emphasises.

To make agriculture more accessible to young people, Cherrie Berry has initiated workshops and training programmes in collaboration with local schools. These programmes introduce students to modern farming techniques, underlining the importance of sustainability and innovation not just with fruits and vegetables, but also with a variety of ornamental and

medicinal plants. By engaging with the next generation, it hopes to cultivate a new wave of agricultural enthusiasts who will continue this mission.

For Riya, agriculture is not just a profession, but a way of life. Her personal dream of cultivating her own coffee field and creating a custom blend underscores her deep connection to the land. "Whatever we do, we should do it with 100% love and dedication. That's been my guiding principle," she says with conviction.

A Visionary Leader

Riya Premchand is young, enthusiastic and intelligent. A woman with a clear mission: to transform agriculture into a modern, respected and sustainable industry. From her simple love of gardening to her ambitious projects, she embodies the perfect blend of tradition and innovation. Her journey - from a curious child on her family's farm to the visionary behind avocado plantations - is a testament to the power of sustained interest and commitment. Riya is not only shaping her family's legacy, but also inspiring a new generation to see agriculture as a field of endless possibilities. In the verdant hills of Coonoor, she is sowing the seeds for a brighter, greener future. With her determination and steadfast spirit, she is ensuring that the Nilgiris remain a beacon of agricultural excellence for generations to come. ■



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Breaking Barriers



*Nithya Premasagar's inspirational journey with tea is the stuff that books can be written about. **Prynica Prym Raman** gets a head start on narrating her remarkable story*

Born as Navalingam in Subramaniapuram, a vibrant town in Tamil Nadu's Tuticorin district, Nithya Premsagar's life journey is a celebration of resilience, transformation, and empowerment. As the youngest of nine children in a family whose enterprises spanned successful trading businesses and hotels, including ventures in erstwhile Ceylon, she clearly inherited her father, SVPS Sellathurai's, commercial acumen.

"My childhood was free-spirited and wild," Nithya recalls happily. "I had the privilege of riding bikes, and even going hunting and fishing with my cousins." This adventurous upbringing, coupled with the family's love of the outdoors, shaped her bold and independent personality. Living in a large household with multiple families, Nithya was surrounded by people and comfort. She did her schooling in her village, where Tamil was the medium of instruction, and completed her college degree in Tuticorin. Through her student years she always retained a zest for life and learning.

A New Chapter in the Nilgiris

In 1988, her decision to marry Premsagar Pandiaraj, who hails from a Christian industrial family settled in the Nilgiris (the son of GT Soundara Pandiaraj and Janaki Soundararaj) was met, initially, with scepticism. However, Nithya married despite this and moved to the picturesque town of Kotagiri.

As the first daughter-in-law of the family, adapting to life in the Nilgiris was a stark transition. As part of a well-known estate-owning family, she found herself in a culture that

emphasised decorum and formality. "The first thing I noticed was the feudal system," she explains. "Unlike my home town, where workers and owners shared a personal connection, interactions here were minimal." Despite these differences, Nithya embraced her new role with grace, following in the footsteps of her mother-in-law, Janaki, who had also come in from a similar background.

“ At 60, Nithya continues to inspire with her unwavering spirit, balancing her roles as a mother, wife, entrepreneur, and community leader

Feminism Through Action

Nithya's story is a testament to quiet yet powerful feminism. She entered the male-dominated tea industry in 1995, breaking barriers and redefining norms. Determined to contribute meaningfully, she learned the intricacies of tea production through observation and persistence. "It was challenging," she admits. "No one wanted to teach me, and I had to learn by asking questions and watching closely." The Pandian Tea Industries, established in 1969, was unique in that it had both Orthodox and CTC production lines, and she had to master both methods of manufacture. Her entrepreneurial

instincts soon led her to transform the way tea was marketed. She introduced retail-ready tea products, an innovation that required extensive travel to source quality packaging materials. "At that time, tea was mostly exported in bulk. I wanted to create a brand," she recalls. Despite societal ridicule, Nithya persevered, proving that women could be both visionaries and leaders in an industry that was resistant to change back in the day.

Building a Legacy

Nithya's innovative approach extended to employee welfare. She set up a subsidised mess for factory workers, ensuring nutritious meals and thereby boosting productivity. Reflecting on her leadership style, she says, "I brought in locals, even those who once sold movie tickets in black, and taught them how to pack tea. Everyone deserves a chance." By 2005, Nithya took full charge of the factory, overcoming resistance from supervisors who doubted her capabilities. "The workers didn't expect a woman to walk the fields, inspect the books, and notice every detail," she shares. Her resilience earned her respect, even as she faced deliberate attempts to undermine her efforts.

Under Nithya's leadership, the tea factory has flourished for the last 20 years. Her efforts earned multiple accolades, including the prestigious Best Tea Award from the Tea Board of India. She represented the Nilgiris at international forums, such as the International Tea Convention in Atlanta, USA. More recently, she introduced natural-flavoured teas, showcasing her ability to innovate and adapt to changing market trends.



“It was challenging...No one wanted to teach me, and I had to learn by asking questions and watching closely

cultivated a vibrant rose garden in her village. “Ooty’s greenery inspired me to recreate that magic,” she says. Limited space around her home didn’t deter her; she grew organic vegetables and planted flowers amidst the tea bushes. “I even brought plants from my travels and experimented with them here,” she adds, her face lighting up at the memory of her gardening adventures.

Her backyard became a haven, complete with cows, goats, and hens. “Gardening and caring for animals brings me peace,” she says. Despite the physical challenges posed by an accident in 2015 that left her without a right arm, Nithya continues to walk

Overcoming Adversity

In 2015, a freak accident resulted in the loss of her right arm, marking the year as the most challenging period of her life. “People doubted my ability to continue,” she recalls. “But I told myself, I still have one arm, and that’s enough.” Her faith in God and her determination to overcome physical limitations and professional challenges was (and remains) inspiring. Within a few months, she was back at work, proving her resilience to sceptics and supporters alike. While others may see the loss of an appendage as a blow from which they may never recover, Nithya gathered herself, and instead decided to take on life with all she had.

A Labour of Love

Amid her professional accomplishments, Nithya nurtured a lifelong passion for gardening, a reflection of her love for creating and nurturing life. Her fondness for roses began in her childhood, where she



the fields and tend to her beloved plants. "Nature has a way of making us grateful for the life given to us," she reflects.

Philanthropy and Community Engagement

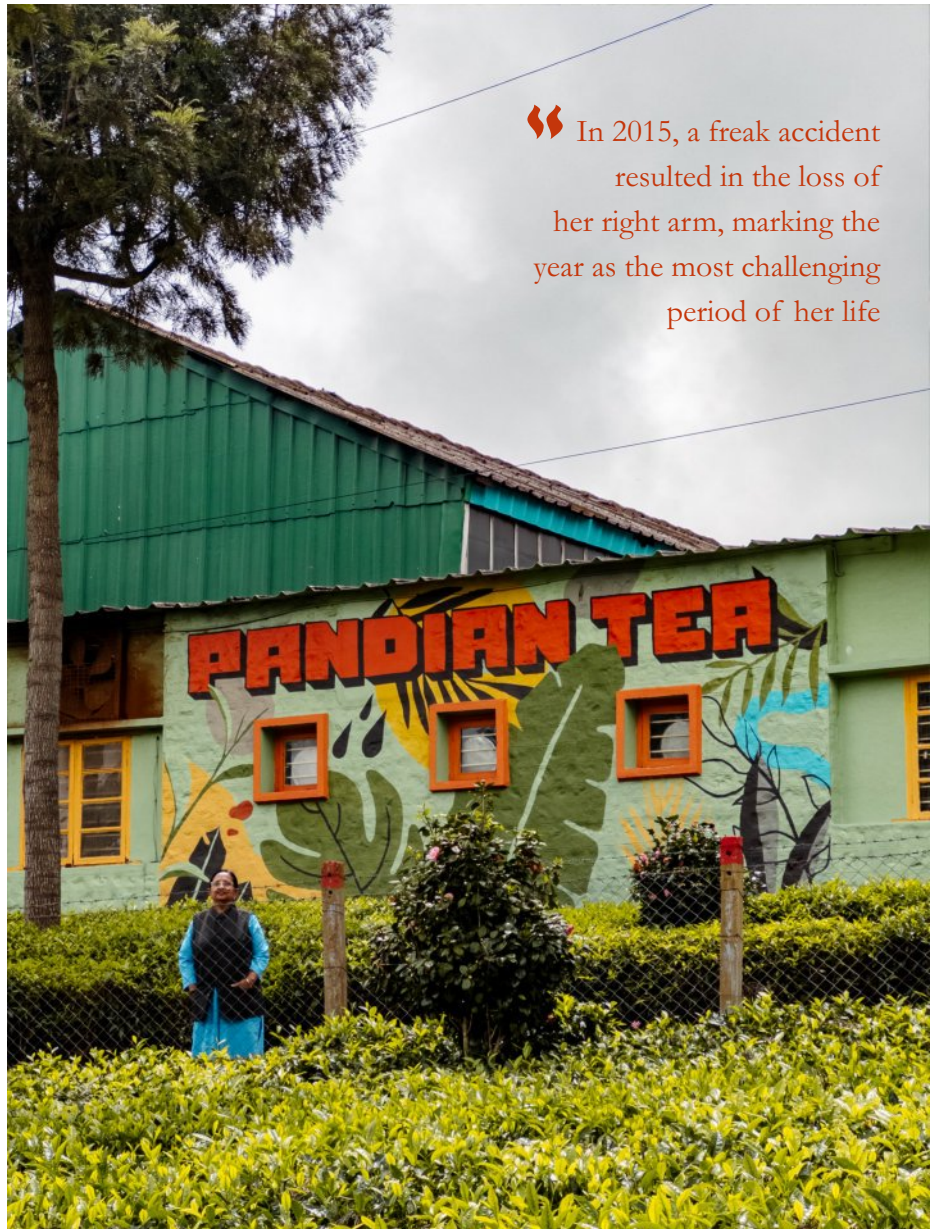
Nithya's dedication extends beyond business. Collaborating with friends, she participates in relief efforts, often travelling to remote tribal villages with officials. "We distributed essentials to communities without road access," she recalls. Her contributions, though significant, were often anonymous. As one of the few women leaders in the tea industry, Nithya is a role model for aspiring entrepreneurs. Her advice to the next generation is rooted in values of family and faith. "A woman's foundation is a happy close-knit family and the faith and values she imparts to her family" she says with conviction. "Without that foundation, personal achievements lose their meaning."

A Life Well Lived

At 60, Nithya continues to inspire with her unwavering spirit, balancing her roles as a mother, wife, entrepreneur, and community leader. She remains active in her fields, unbothered by the presence of wild animals like bears and gaurs. "We coexist peacefully," she says with a smile.

Her journey, marked by resilience, innovation, and faith, is a testament to the power of perseverance and purpose. She is proof that whatever the setback, life can go forwards and upwards and that spirit trumps flesh every time. For the women of Nilgiris and beyond, Nithya Premasagar's life serves as a lighthouse helping them to guide their course with dignity, courage and determination. ■

“ In 2015, a freak accident resulted in the loss of her right arm, marking the year as the most challenging period of her life



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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*

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Mountain Mama

Ishani Dutt tells us why the Nilgiris is the best place in the world for women across generations to bond and make happy memories



Country roads, take me home to the place I belong. West Virginia, mountain mama, take me home... this song plays automatically in my head as I sit to write about the Nilgiris.

While the English language assigns a neutral gender to the word 'mountain', 'earth' is always a woman. In any language, in any culture, any religion. We assume it's feminine because it produces, nurtures and protects life.

Our association with the hills of Nilgiris began almost a decade ago when we went for a regular vacation. How we wound up there eight times after that, culminating in buying a beautiful little home, is a story for another time. The one steadfast strain through it all was how much my daughter took to the place. She was barely a 5-year-old tot, albeit going on 50. I have to also admit that my mother played a role in our decision to be here. She is a mountain mama in the true sense - at peace and so happy in these Blue Mountains. In fact, as a young mother back in the day, Nilgiris was the first hill station she took her firstborn to. Serendipity...?

We, however, my husband and I, are thorough city-breds. The method in the madness of big cities is what drives us. But there was always something amiss.

The calm and the quiet. The cold and crisp fresh air. The smell of mother earth. And so we are happiest in our home in Coonoor, especially the women of the house. From identifying different kinds of flowers to naming the squirrel family that visits us daily - these are regular living

room conversations between mother and daughter now. Once, in the midst of a heated "should we go for a walk before it starts raining" debate, a blanket of misty clouds came right into our living room to put our questions to rest. The little wise one said, "See mamma, the clouds will protect us either way".

Another time, we happened to be in our hill home, with my mother, on Mother's Day. We kept wondering what we should do to celebrate the day, given that three generations of women were under the same roof on their special day. Instead of the Mumbai norm of a fancy meal, we simply lazed around all day in the garden, with a gorgeous bonfire at night.

We were lucky to get a bright and sunny day, so we foraged for our own dried twigs and branches (with some help from our trusted house-help, didi). We picked our own wildflowers to fill our vases, and plucked the biggest kaffir limes from our own tree to make us our lemonades.

As the sun dipped, so did the needle on the thermometer, and it was a cold, crisp night with a raging warm fire in front of us. Plates of delicious home-cooked food and mugs of hot chocolate kept us wonderfully warm. Thus enveloped with the maternal warmth from the hills around, my daughter looked up at me and said "This is the best mother's day ever".

And there I was - literally on cloud nine - one very happy mountain mama indeed. ■

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Betty the Builder



*A tongue-in-cheek account of her Bob-the-Builder days has **Meera Nair** recounting the challenges of a long month, while trying to complete building her home in our hills*

After a well-deserved holiday in New Zealand and Australia some years ago, each of us in the family returned with renewed goals. I aimed to complete the pending work at our Coonoor home within a month. Heading out into the Nilgiri mountains from Coimbatore airport, I felt like *Bob the Builder*. Little did I anticipate that the next thirty days would not be something out of the children's television series.

Painting a Pretty Picture

I thought of the beautiful 30 days ahead of me when I selected the colours for the exterior of my home, but alas, it was not meant to be. It was a cat-and-mouse game from day one. The painters played truant, and I felt like a school teacher monitoring each of the four, and sometimes six workers... since the daily labour wages were on me. Workers in Coonoor differed from those in Mumbai, where I lived the most part of my years, or Thiruvananthapuram, in Kerala, where I hail from. Perhaps this was due to the Tamil Nadu government's generous freebies policy, or maybe it was because we were about 1,850 meters above sea level. The painters came in with the village bus at 9.45am, and I stared at them in disbelief every time 'the transformation' took place. At the beginning of the day, they donned their painting attire, and at the end of the day, they became film heroes in their own right. Each could give Dhanush, Vijay, or Karthi a run for their money.

I realised that some painters came for the extra pocket money. One of them was a professional modern-day dancer who often took part in television programmes and taught dance to school children as well. I asked him why he was wasting his time at my house when he had no interest in the job at hand. Wryly, he said he was currently unemployed. So, what about my employment – I thought indignantly. Does he not consider my job a job at all, and what about the result of my painstaking selection of paints?

Not only did my painters use costly cell phones on which they had

hushed conversations with their respective girlfriends while on the job, but there was also plenty of soulful music on their speakers. My home was transformed into a film set from morning 10am to 4pm for the next 30 days.

The Heroine

I had mentally christened my house help, 'Vayadi' or chatterbox. She walked in with a swish of silver anklets clinking, and a mobile tucked away between her shoulder and right ear. She was a true beauty especially when she wore her blood-red saris, which offset her natural chocolate

“Solar fencing was a way out, and in came my very own Shylock from Coimbatore – the plains, as they call it here

brown tan. The painters greeted her every morning like a long-lost friend – it was their moment for light-hearted banter. The heroine of the film set was seen giving smart repartees to each question and comment, while soaking in all the attention. Through the two hours she spent with me morning and evening, I got my daily dose of juicy gossip of what was happening in the village, including how her husband had put an end to her way of an extra income when I was not around. This involved helping out at the local tea shop. The reason? Footfall had increased at the shop since her arrival, but sales hadn't.

The Water Diviner

My neighbour introduced me to a character straight out of Charles Dickens. He had a scar on his cheek and seemed perceptibly impoverished. Though he had been in this business, charging hefty sums from all his customers over several years, he still seemed to look forever hungry, thin, and cold, which I later realised was a ploy to gain the sympathy of gullible clients like myself. He claimed to have the powers of a mystic who could locate water. Though we already had a water connection, a well would be required for the orchard and vegetable garden that I had plans for. The Dickensian character, with a flourish, brought out a coconut and placed it on his palm. He asked me where I would like the well to be located in my compound. I dutifully pointed out to a corner, and he walked towards it purposefully, his right arm outstretched with a coconut placed on his palm. After circling in the area for about 10 minutes, I saw a fantastic sight – at a certain point, the coconut almost stood up in his palm – just like that. “Ah ha,” he said, “You are lucky. The water resource is just where you wanted it to be.” My joy knew no bounds, though my mind was sceptical about the procedure. My friend assured me that this was how it was done here in Coonoor. Water diviner or mystic, I never will be able to tell. Still, I am eternally grateful – and after five days of digging we had a wonderful well at our disposal, with crystal-clear mountain water.

Monkey Menace

As we all do, I woke up one chilly morning to the scent of mountain air and the chatter of birds. Sipping my piping hot coffee and enjoying the

“My neighbour introduced me to a character straight out of Charles Dickens. He had a scar on his cheek and seemed perceptibly impoverished

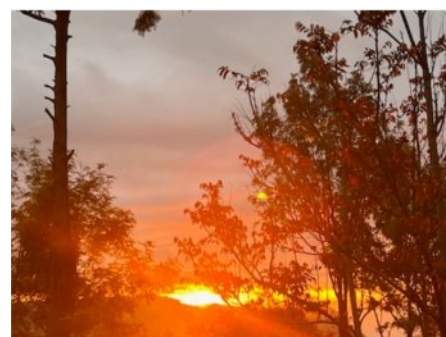
panoramic view of the hills my patio offered, I felt blessed and at one with nature. This feeling was short-lived. Within a few seconds, a whole troop of monkeys had descended onto my lawns, terrace, and patio. They seemed angry and were methodically destroying my flowers... daylilies, dianthus, salvia, balsam...their petals lay strewn around. I later learned from reliable sources that they had been relocated from Coonoor town to the Shola tree-covered forest near my home. It was clear that the forests no longer held an attraction for the monkeys, except for the purposes of nightly retirement. Monkeys, it seems, preferred leftover rice, sambar, and rotis to climbing trees and looking for fruit. The shola forests are conserved and protected with an abundance of fruit trees that are not accessible to the public at large. Only the local tribes knew their way around the forest. It soon became clear that monkeys were on the trail of easy monkey business, and managed to find it in my carefully cultivated garden.

Solar Solutions

It was my trusted Man Friday from Uttar Pradesh, who single-handedly kept the monkeys at bay, let our garden flourish, and held the fort in my absence, and during this month he was off on a long holiday. Amid all my work, I had to wrack my brain to think of alternate solutions to retain our newly painted walls from 'the monkey's paw,' so to speak. Solar fencing was a way out, and in came my very own Shylock from Coimbatore – the plains, as they call it here.

Blessed with the gift of the gab and getting his pound of flesh when things didn't necessarily go his way - he camped in my staff quarters along with his entourage for a good seven days - after initially promising that the work would get over in four - and enjoyed a free holiday at a hill station at my expense. It was only later that I realised that he was not the owner of the company responsible for the solar fencing but was only there to cook for the team – like a mother hen, I thought. And when I discovered this, he said, “I cooked for You, madam, so that Your work gets done, so therefore, you need to pay me the daily wages for the seven days as well.” Well played, Shylock, well played, indeed!

Having handled 25 workers in a day at various stages of work completion, and sometimes being at my wit's end - my Bob-the-BUILDER days finally came to a close on the 34th day. By this time, I was ready to start my own television series called 'Betty the Builder,' who says, “Yes She Can.” I believe it will resonate with readers who have all had to build, up here in these hills. ■





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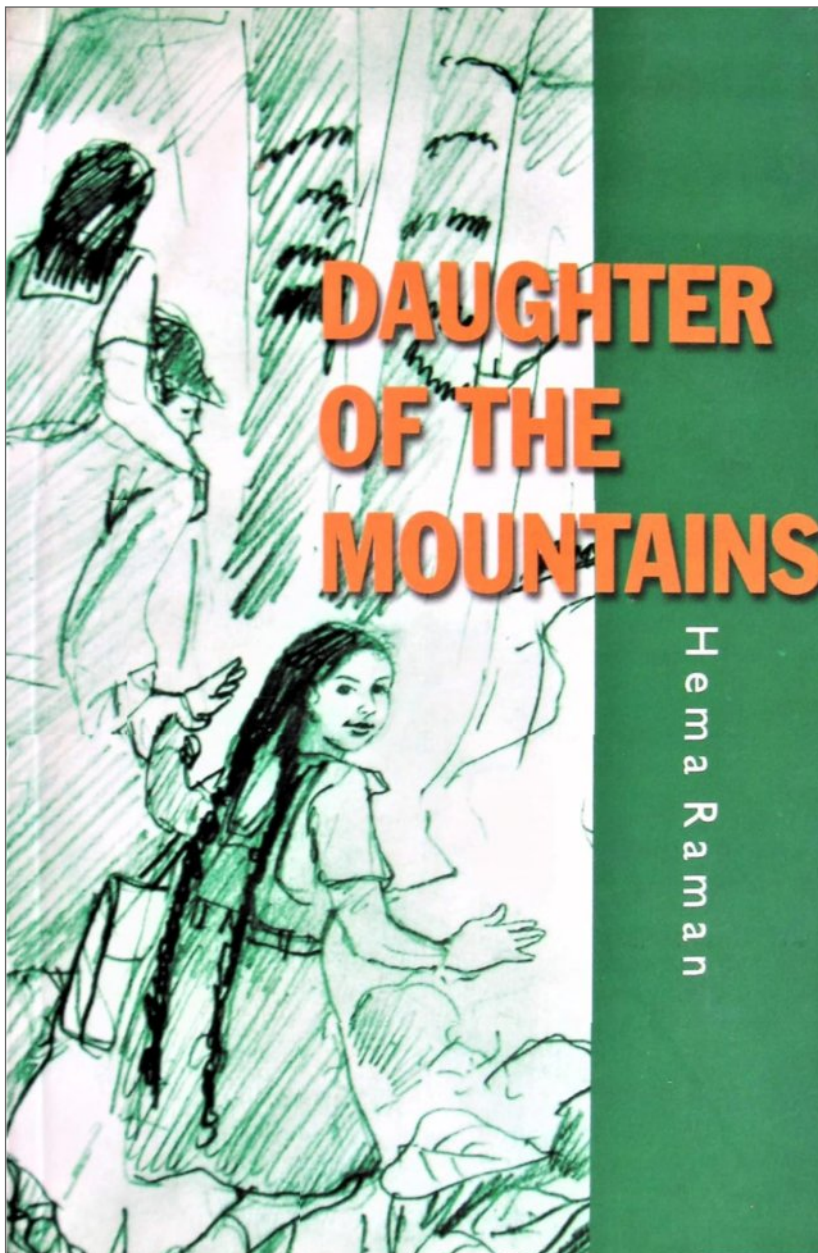
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The Trailblazer

***Prynck Prym Raman** recalls the life of a woman who was light years ahead of her time and who paved the way for other women to follow. Her history is the stuff of legends...*



In the serene hills of the Nilgiris, nestled amidst tea plantations and colonial heritage, lies a story of an extraordinary woman who defied all odds to become a symbol of perseverance and progress. Akkamma Devi, the first and only woman Member of Parliament from the Nilgiris constituency, was a trailblazer whose contributions to her community remain testament to her indomitable spirit. Yet, her legacy seems to have faded into obscurity, a poignant reminder of how history often forgets its pioneers.

Humble Beginnings

Born on September 5, 1918, in Bearhatti village, Akkamma Devi was the second of seven children in a Badaga family. Her parents, Motha Gowder and Subbi, lived modestly, and like many young girls of her time, Akkamma's life revolved around household chores and caring for her siblings. However, her father, who worked at the Pasteur Institute in Coonoor, was a liberal thinker influenced by his interactions with British officers. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he believed in the importance of educating women.

Despite the societal norms at the time, that discouraged formal education for girls, Akkamma showed an innate curiosity and a real hunger for learning. She would sit outside the village school, her younger brother on her lap, listening to rhymes and trying to learn whatever she could. Recognising her potential, her father took the bold step of enrolling her in St Joseph's Convent in Coonoor, a school that was traditionally reserved for British and Anglo-Indian children. With the help of Dr Cornwall, the director of the Pasteur Institute, Akkamma became the first Indian girl admitted to the school. Her journey to education was not an easy one—she walked five miles daily to attend classes—but her determination to study never wavered.

After completing her schooling, Akkamma pursued higher education at St Teresa's College in Ernakulam, majoring in economics. Her path to college coincided with her engagement to Joghi, a sportsman from Hubbathalai village and the son of Bellie Gowder, a pioneering figure in the Badaga community. Bellie Gowder, who was honoured with the title of Rao Bahadur, had built one of the first high schools in the district, a legacy of education that resonated deeply with Akkamma.

Time of Turmoil

The early 1940s were a tumultuous period in Indian history. The Quit India Movement had galvanized the nation against colonial rule, and young Akkamma found herself drawn to the freedom struggle. Alongside her friend Leela Menon, who later became a Rajya Sabha member, Akkamma actively participated in



protests and rallies. Her involvement led to her arrest, a moment that underscored her courage and commitment to the cause.

Amidst the challenges of war and political upheaval, Akkamma also faced personal adversity. During her

college years, she contracted filaria, a debilitating condition. Many urged her to return home, but Akkamma refused to let her illness dictate her future. She persevered, completing her education with commendable results, and became the first woman graduate of the Badaga community.

An Unexpected Political Journey

Akkamma's journey into politics was as unexpected as it was impactful. In the early 1950s, she met Sarojini Varadappan, a prominent political leader and the daughter of Madras state's last Congress Chief Minister, M Bhaktavatsalam. Impressed by Akkamma's accomplishments, Sarojini encouraged her to participate in government welfare programmes and this marked the beginning of Akkamma's involvement in public life.

In 1962, when the Congress party was scouting for a candidate to contest the Nilgiris parliamentary seat, Akkamma's name emerged as a promising choice. The party had traditionally chosen candidates from Coimbatore to represent the Nilgiris constituency, but this time, they decided to field a local candidate. Initially hesitant, Akkamma was stunned when the former Chief Minister of Madras state, K Kamaraj,

personally asked her to contest. For a woman who had never imagined venturing beyond her village, the prospect of representing her district in Delhi felt like a leap into another world.

Nevertheless, she accepted the challenge. The 1962 Lok Sabha election proved to be a turning point. Akkamma won by a thumping majority of 1,63,420 votes, becoming the first woman MP from the Nilgiris. Her victory was not just a personal achievement, but a milestone for her community and the district.

Transforming the Nilgiris

As an MP, Akkamma was a beacon of development and empowerment. She was instrumental in bringing transformative changes to the Nilgiris district. One of her most notable contributions was the establishment of Indco tea factories, which provided a livelihood to small-scale tea farmers. These cooperatives empowered local communities and boosted the district's economy.

She also played a pivotal role in diversifying the production capabilities of the Pasteur Institute in Coonoor. Under her influence, the institute began producing polio vaccines, marking a significant step in public health for the region. Furthermore, Akkamma's efforts led to the establishment of Providence College for Women, the first women's college in the district. Located in a palace that once belonged to the Maharaja of Cochin, the college has since educated generations of women, becoming a cornerstone of progress in the Nilgiris.

During her tenure, Akkamma served on the prestigious Public Accounts

Committee from 1964 to 1966, the only woman member at the time. Despite being in a male-dominated political landscape, she held her ground, advocating for transparency and accountability.

Life Beyond Politics

Akkamma's political career came to a halt in 1967 when the DMK swept to power in Tamil Nadu, marking the end of Congress dominance in the state. Although she never returned to active politics, Akkamma remained deeply committed to social service. She served on the Coffee Board and established a home for tribal people in Gudalur in memory of Mahatma Gandhi. This institution, for more than 50 years, continues to support marginalised communities.

Her dedication to breaking societal taboos was equally noteworthy. Akkamma defied many traditional customs of the Badaga community, such as avoiding the practice of staying in an olluvugudi, an enclosure for menstruating women, and choosing not to pierce her nose. Her choices reflected her progressive mindset and her belief in challenging regressive norms.

A Legacy Forgotten

Akkamma Devi passed away on November 23, 2012, at the age of 94. Despite her immense contributions, her legacy remains largely unacknowledged, even in her native village. On her centennial birth anniversary in 2018, there were no celebrations or tributes to honour her memory. For a woman who broke barriers and paved the way for countless others, this lack of recognition is both disheartening and reflective of how quickly history

forgets those who made the world a better place for others.

Her story, however, continues to inspire. Akkamma Devi was more than a politician; she was a change-maker, a role model, and a ray of hope for her community. Her life reminds us that the path to progress often begins with one individual's courage to challenge the status quo.

In Remembrance

Akkamma Devi's life is a testament to the transformative power of education, perseverance, and leadership. From a young girl who learned rhymes outside her village school to a Member of Parliament who transformed her district, Akkamma's journey is nothing short of extraordinary. As we reflect on her contributions, it is imperative to celebrate and preserve the stories of leaders like her, ensuring that their legacy continues to inspire future generations.

In the hills of the Nilgiris, her spirit endures, quietly urging us to remember that progress begins with the courage to dream and the determination to act. And to do the right thing whether or not it is remembered. ■



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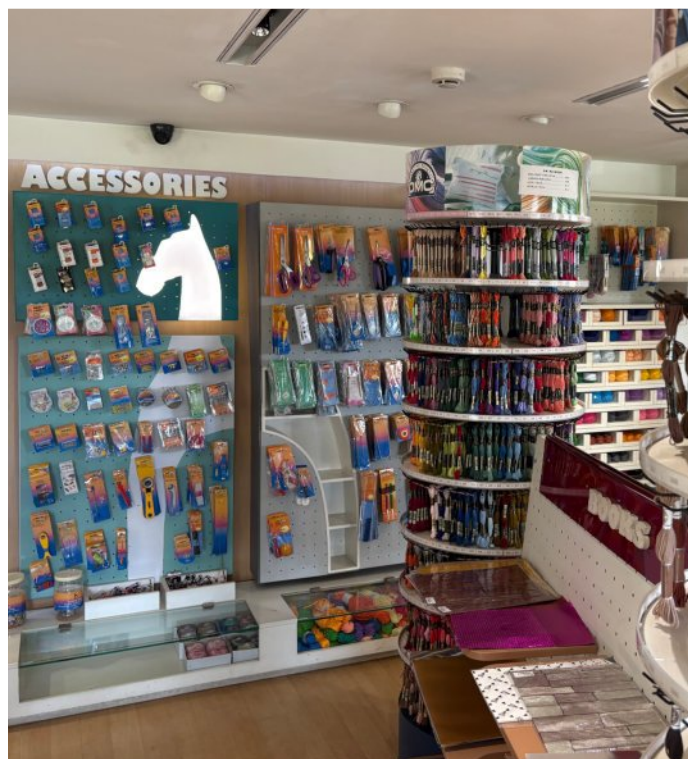
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In and Around



En Pointe

Nestled in Ketti, next door to The Culinarium (also a must visit), this store is a unique concept in the hills and offers the perfect opportunity to get in touch with your creative side.

Established in 2013, the **Pony Craft Store** is a haven for craft and hobby enthusiasts, offering a wide range of high-quality craft products. Founded by Pony Needles, the store was created with the vision of providing a space for individuals to not only purchase superior craft supplies but also to explore and learn various needle crafts. Located above the picturesque Ketti Valley, the Pony Craft Store is a home for creative minds.

With its diverse selection of products from leading global brands, the Pony Craft Store has become a one-stop destination for crafters. Whether you are looking for speciality yarn, threads, needles, or other essential craft tools, the store

*Pony Craft Store, 7/75b, NH67, Ooty-Coonoor Main Road,
Ketti 643243
☎ +91 423 251 8518*

has everything needed to fuel creativity. In addition to its expansive product range, the store also serves as a learning centre where enthusiasts can dive into the art of needle craft. It provides expert guidance, workshops, and classes for beginners and seasoned crafters alike, ensuring that everyone can expand their skills.

The Pony Craft Store's dedication to fostering a community of craft lovers has made it a cherished spot in the region. From hobbyists to professionals, it remains the go-to place for all things related to needle crafts. Whether you're a seasoned artist or just starting, the Pony Craft Store in Ketti is an ideal destination to explore and nurture your creative passions.

Drop in, and see for yourself...It's a must-visit for locals and visitors alike.

*Take a tour of the Nilgiris to explore the unusual
and discover things off the beaten track*



*Next to YWCA, off Figure of Eight Road,
Bedford, Coonoor*

A Delicious Mess

For a true taste of home fare, wander down to this little food joint in Coonoor that is staffed entirely by women.

It's known to those who know it. And in some circles it is legend and the best-kept local culinary secret. Tucked away in a cosy corner of Coonoor, Annai Mess has been a beloved institution for over three decades, dishing out hot, home-cooked South Indian meals with unwavering consistency to hungry hordes. This humble eatery is more than just a restaurant—it's a landmark for locals and visitors alike, known for its affordable yet flavourful offerings.

Lunchtime here is a bustling affair, with crowds flocking in for their signature fish fry and fish curry meals, prepared with traditional recipes that have stood the test of time. Their biryanis are not to be scoffed at either, prepared as they are with a delicate mix of spices and a recipe that was

formulated a long time ago and passed down through generations. The meals are mouth-wateringly good, cooked to perfection.

What sets Annai Mess apart, however, is not just its food, but the heart behind it. Run by women for the past decade, the establishment truly embodies the essence of its name - 'Annai' (mother) - with meals cooked and served with warmth and care. The women get together and prepare the food in a spirit of sisterhood, and the natural love and kinship between them seems to be the extra special spice that gets added to every dish that is served up, and makes it a must-visit for those who know it.

Affordable doesn't even begin to cover it, and you can eat here to your heart's content without emptying your wallet - making it a culinary reminder of simpler times.



Learning Curves

*These hills are not just a home but teachers of lessons that shape and define us, says **Reeba Cherian**, who has lived here for over four decades.*

We can all learn lessons from nature. To top what I had already learnt in my childhood and teenage years, the Nilgiris taught me, in my adulthood - to find the balance between the hills and its people. To accept, adjust and accommodate. And once I got that equation right, after years of tough practice, near misses and multiple tries, my life's journey became a beautiful path as I learnt to blend in without compromising myself.

These hills have taught me a deep appreciation for natural beauty, helped me to cope with inconsistent weather, taught me to respect plant and animal life and to live in harmony with our diverse communities. They taught me the importance of flowing with the seasons.

Four decades ago, I came to Coonoor as a young bride and the challenges I faced time and time again were compensated with values that I would not exchange for all the money in the world. I was welcomed with so much love, care and inclusiveness; by a community of old-timers who embraced my personality and talent and taught me to shine and rise above my challenges; to live

with grace and dignity. Today, I proudly consider myself a child of these hills. I do what I do, because those residents of long ago brought me in and brought me up. And now, it's payback time...

I hope I have passed down a combination of those values to my children and grandchildren with a clear message, "Leave the world a better place than you found it".

And to my sisterhood, I say...

Be the woman who doesn't stay down for too long, because the world needs your unique light. Be the woman who continues to be a beacon of hope and a source of inspiration to others. Be the woman who helps find beauty even in the darkest times. Be the woman who encourages talents, lifts others up and champions them on. Be the woman who battles for the right cause with courage, wisdom and integrity. Be the woman who believes in herself no matter what, and forges ahead exuding love, sensitivity, empathy and strength.

I love, and relate to, the quote of Alysha Waghorn who says, "Strong is she, who has love wrapped around her heart; courage knitted in her bones and fire running through her veins."

Some day, like those I knew and loved before, I too will no longer be here. But I hope I will have passed on the torch that was lit for me, by the generosity of others who came before me. I hope people will always remember to sustain the spirit of our hills, its vibrant energy, the earlier history of our communities merging with the new, the varied cultures and the diverse lifestyles.

In my 42 years in these hills, I have witnessed different phases and the amazing continuity of varied transitions. And we, as a community, especially the community of women, have all held it together only because of the openness and oneness of our people. I hope and pray that this guiding light and spirit of 'Namma Nilgiris' will never fade into oblivion. Its uniqueness must be passed on to our young ones and our new communities - so that the generations of the distant future find a home for their hearts, as we, and many before us, have done. ■

Reeba Cherian is a philanthropist, musician and choir director whose rich voice rings out in song at most of the musical celebrations in the district. As one person aptly put it, and as many agree, "she is the sound of our childhood".

CHERRIE BERRY - FARM TO TABLE



Your All-in-One Destination in Coonoor

Discover Cherrie Berry, a culinary gem in the scenic Highfield Estate, just minutes from Coonoor Town. Here, nature's beauty blends seamlessly with exceptional dining, creating a unique haven for food lovers and families. With a focus on vegetarian fine dining, we celebrate fresh, locally sourced ingredients, crafting dishes that are both vibrant and delicious. Our commitment to quality shines through in our carefully crafted meals and the tranquillity of our farm tours. We aim to provide not just a meal, but a memorable experience that fosters community and celebrates the joys of togetherness.

Unmatched Facilities for Every Visitor

Step into our supermarket, filled with a diverse selection of fresh produce, including our signature avocados, known for their rich flavour and creamy texture. Enjoy a leisurely stroll through our farm tours, where you can discover the origins of your food and appreciate the beauty of nature up close. For our younger guests, our dedicated soft play area promises hours of fun, while our café and party hall serve as ideal spaces for gatherings, celebrations, or a casual meal with loved ones.

Celebrate Farm-to-Table Living

At Cherrie Berry, we invite you to embrace a lifestyle centred around freshness and community. Whether you're enjoying a delicious meal, exploring our facilities, or making lasting memories with family and friends, we're here to provide an unforgettable experience. Join us at Cherrie Berry where every visit is a celebration of life, flavour, and togetherness!

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Nilgiris 643 101

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🌐 www.cherrieberry.com





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