

inside43

Celebrating the Nilgiris

Summer 2025

Free Copy



Watching the Wasteline

Meet Dr Raees, the man who is transforming the sanitation industry

The Snake Whisperer

One of the Nilgiris' reptile experts on his life of purpose in the foothills

The Right Track

Preethick PJ tells us the inspiring story of his national racing success

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| where to shop

| things to learn

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Better Together

In a world often dominated by headlines of division, I am reminded daily of the quiet, powerful force that continues to bind us - a force we feel very keenly here in our hills. It is not merely a place, but a feeling: the neighbour who checks in when your lights go out, the teacher who stays late to help a struggling student, the stranger who offers a smile on a hard day, a collection raised to cover the medical bills of someone who needs it. Community thrives on connection, on the simple yet profound truth that we are stronger together. We share our joys, bear each other's burdens, and find purpose in lifting others. It is through connection that we heal, grow and endure. I have seen how small acts - organising a local clean-up, sharing food with someone in need, or simply listening, creates ripples that transform lives. In times of crisis, it is our bonds, not our differences, that sustain us.

At Inside43, this is our purpose. To showcase the power of community through each issue. Every story we bring you is testament to the thousands of lives that play out everyday, working together for the greater good, in deliberate and sustained action to build a place where we can all thrive. This issue brings you, for example, the work of Dr Raees, whose dedication to the cause of sanitation and sanitation workers has made a positive impact on so many. And the story of Snake Murali who helps catch and release our reptilian neighbours into safety. In a district

dotted with schools we show you the power of education through the stories of Laidlaw Memorial and the Lions Club schools that empowers our youth everyday via a team of dedicated supporters and educationists. We have showcased the incredible work of Suneha M who captures our environment through a brilliant art form. We bring you the tale of strength and perseverance of Shanthi, one of the many women we see dotting our landscapes, collecting the leaves to make the drink that powers so many, and so much. We share with you the incredible compassion of the driver and nurse who operate the Rotary Ambulance... a peek at our content pages will give you a better idea of what you are a living, breathing part of.

This issue, like every other, is about the impact of community. This includes Inside43 that is brought together by a team of volunteers and supporters who willingly give of time and resources to make it the living, breathing phenomenon it has become, showcasing all that matters in our community. Let us never underestimate the power we each hold to build together. Inside43 is proof of that.

Because, by showing up for one another, we do something so needed in today's world - we restore hope. May we never forget that the heart of any community is its people. And when we come together, there is nothing we cannot overcome. ■

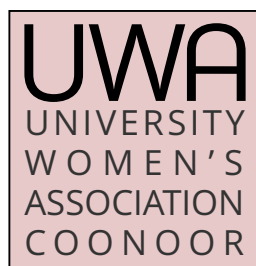
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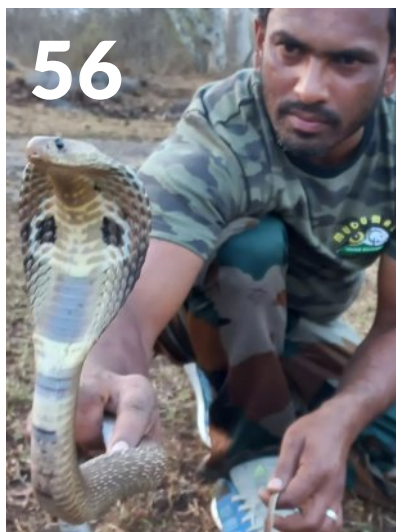
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Meet Dr Mugdha Kumar, a holistic eye-care specialist who proudly calls Nilgiris her home.

Meera Nair *meets the soft-spoken doctor who has conquered the challenges of adapting to a different geographical and cultural landscape, mastered a new language, and established strong trust within the local community*

There's more to her than meets the eye. Dr Mugdha Kumar, a renowned ophthalmologist and former Bharatanatyam dancer who has performed thousands of cataract surgeries, is the go-to expert for eye care in the Nilgiris. However, the Nilgiris would not have their beloved eye doctor today if not for two significant incidents in Mugdha life.

Bursting The Bubble

The first occurred when she was a teenager, and it motivated her to pursue a career in medicine. Although initially hesitant, and a self-confessed introvert, when coaxed, she opened up about her journey: "Funnily enough, being a doctor was never in my realm of consideration as a child. I grew up in a somewhat protected bubble, immersed in two very different cultures. I spent my formative years and teens in Africa, and later finished school in Goa. I think my trajectory and interests at the time were taking me toward a

career in literature and writing. Possibly even journalism. However, a major life event turned the rudder of my boat in a very different direction when I was 15. My father had a major road accident and the initial prognosis in the first 15 days was that he wouldn't survive."

As a young girl, she spent 45 excruciating days with her father in the hospital, followed by another year in and out of the hospital. Thankfully, her father made a complete recovery, but not before she was exposed to life's harsh realities. At that impressionable age it had an impact and she says, "I saw what a 'literal' life and death difference medical personnel made. I saw, first-hand, the impact on a patient's recovery by a doctor following a 'medical model', where the clinician is factual and objective, versus a doctor who views their patient first as a 'person', and then approaches their care holistically and empathetically, seeing the patient

as an unique individual. These caregivers were my first role models. I think this was what led me to choose medicine as a profession at the age of 17." The role models she refers to not only included doctors but also nurses, helpers, and relatives of other patients who all contributed with small gestures and words of kindness, leaving a significant impact on her young mind.

Meeting Her Soulmate

The second big life event occurred when she unexpectedly met her soulmate while on a holiday break, in a rare respite from her residency programme. She reminisces, "I met my husband, quite by chance, while I was completing my postgraduate studies. Fate, once again, steered me towards where I was meant to be. I was visiting family who were posted at the DSSC (Defence Services Staff College) in Wellington, and my husband-to-be, was at his family home for a holiday since he was

working overseas at the time, and we met at a lunch party. There was an immediate sense of connection, and we continued to stay in touch, and eventually decided to settle down in the Nilgiris three years later."

Fate And Destiny

So, does she believe in fate and destiny? She responds with conviction, "Yes, I do believe in destiny. I believe that there is a plan for every one of us. The course of my life, both personally and professionally, where I am today, and what brought me to the Nilgiris in the first place, are testament to that. I believe that there is a right and wrong time for everything and that things happen at a given time for a reason. We have to wait for that 'meant-to-be' moment to arrive. However, I don't think that you can sit back passively and expect fate to still run its course for you, either. Hard work, dedication, and a strong purpose go a long way."

Her journey from student to professional is proof of this. With an MS degree in Ophthalmic Surgery and a fellowship in Phacoemulsification (cataract surgery), and with more than 15 years of experience in the field, today Dr Mugdha still keeps herself updated by attending periodic and continued training, symposia, and conferences. These revolve around the latest technological advancements in terms of diagnostics and therapies in the field. She confesses, "Once I chose medicine, it became my main focus. I loved learning about the complexity of the human body and how it functions, as well as how every system is interconnected and dependent on numerous internal and external factors. I completed my

💡 Her approachability, her sense of humour and innate kindness give her the required capabilities as a doctor that no medical training can

undergraduate and postgraduate education in Goa at the only medical college in the region. I was fortunate to be a part of that elite university. It was the only go-to institution for speciality care in the State - as well as the border areas of Karnataka and Maharashtra - at the time. As a result, the clinical bouquet of work and exposure was immense and enlightening. That decade taught me physical and mental resilience on a different scale. How to face any emergency with composure and, at the same time, find the time and mind space to study and learn. One thing to note about medical colleges is that your teachers are busy doctors themselves; they will guide you and point you in a certain direction, but you will only learn and enrich your mind at your own pace, on your schedule, and with your motivation. Night duties in casualties, general surgery, and gynaecology deepened my love for using my hands with skill and made me realise that I wanted to be a surgeon."

Work-life Balance

When quizzed on why she became an eye surgeon, Dr Mugdha was honest enough to admit that she had an individual need and desire for family ties and how meaningful personal

relationships are to her. This is what led her to choose a professional line that involved surgery but with relatively predictable working hours, and hence she chose ophthalmology. When queried on whether she believes in a work-life balance she added, "Yes, I do, but I also believe that one has to WANT to bring that balance. One has to form one's priorities. However, if you do what you love and are passionate about it, I don't think that's very hard to do."

Treating patients is her passion, and it is no wonder that she has not forgotten the holistic approach she encountered as a 15-year-old, which she now applies to her present eye care for patients. She explains, "Providing access to speciality eye care, and awareness of it, not only as a single organ entity, the 'eye', per se, is very important to me. Its overall care and wellness encompasses lifestyle, diet and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, arthritis and autoimmune ailments, as they can all have an impact on eye health." Bringing about such awareness, making eye care more approachable and less intimidating, along with making it more accessible to all strata of society, is one of her purposes in life. She endeavours to provide care not only to the privileged and informed, but also to those "who are sometimes too frightened and intimidated to seek care and need a conducive environment."

Holistic Healing

So, does she believe in putting service above self? She responds, "In a busy clinic, I strive to give my full attention and focus to the patient in front of me. I aim to listen actively, generously, and empathetically to

help them heal in the best way possible.” She quotes Michelle Obama, saying, “Success isn’t about how much money you make; it’s about the difference you make in people’s lives.” Dr Mugdha believes that healing is so much more than just medicine and has to do with one’s overall demeanour, body language, and approachability as much as it does with one’s medical or surgical expertise.

Her most challenging case so far, etched into her memory, is that of a tribal family to whom they (the hospital) were providing care. Detailing their case, she explains, “There were three girls, all affected by the same genetic condition causing them to lose their sight in both eyes before the age of seven. We had treated and provided ambulatory and functional vision to the older two girls more than a decade ago, after a lot of chair-time and counselling, as the parents were reluctant to intervene surgically. A decade later, they came to me with their 3-year-old daughter, sadly afflicted by the same malady. Fortunately, this time around, they had come to me earlier in the child’s disease, so she was better rehabilitated than her sisters.”

Feather In Her Cap

Mugdha dons yet another hat as the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers Team Leader. She faces several challenges in this role, including striking a balance between delivering high-quality eye care while maintaining a strong focus on patient satisfaction and safety. Additionally, she has to consider employee satisfaction and their rights within the organisation. She states, “Leading the

hospitals in the Nilgiris constantly challenges me to provide surgical expertise while ensuring a positive patient experience, as well as addressing issues related to HR, safety and infrastructure.” It’s a tall order, but Mugdha seems to manage this role as well as she does all her other ones. With quiet grace, gentle strength and a natural-born understanding of human nature that puts her head and shoulders above most others.

In a world of medical practice driven by the bottom line, Dr Mugdha Kumar is a breath of fresh air. Her approachability, her sense of humour and innate kindness give her the required capabilities as a doctor that no medical training can. She states it very simply, “Strive to be a good person first - transparent, authentic, genuine and non-judgmental.



Everything else that is meant to be will fall into place.” And this lovely doctor, most certainly walks her talk, every single day, keeping her eye very firmly on all the things that truly matter, with a clear vision of what actually does. More power to her... ■



WATCHING



THE



WASTELINE

*He truly became the change he wanted to see. **Ashwini Tanwani** meets up with Dr Raees Mohammed who has taken sanitation services to the next level in the Nilgiris*

On a peaceful Sunday morning at a quaint eatery in Orange Grove, I awaited Dr Raees Mohammed. As the world around me moved at a tranquil pace, he arrived with an apologetic smile and after exchanging a few pleasantries, we began our conversation - one that would unravel the inspiring story of a man dedicated to social change, equality and justice.

A Tough Childhood

Raees was born and raised in Kotagiri, a small town in the Nilgiris District. His father, P Barathan, worked as a sanitary worker, sweeping the streets for the town Panchayat. His mother, Arukkani, was employed at St Mary's Home School, a renowned residential institution, where she cared for the children with dedication and warmth. Her kindness earned the trust and admiration of everyone at the school. Recognising her hard work, the school's Principal made special provisions for Raees to

study there - an opportunity that transformed his life. For a child like him, it was a rare and invaluable gift, opening doors that once seemed out of reach.

His childhood memories were filled with his parents' stories about their backbreaking work tasks that were essential to society, but received no respect. They worked tirelessly, cleaning filth, not just garbage, but also human waste, sometimes even unclaimed bodies. It was a job that no one acknowledged, let alone appreciated. The work was brutal, the stench unbearable, and there was no dignity attached to it - only the weight of necessity. His parents often spoke about how workers like them were forced to endure these conditions with no support or recognition. For many, the only way to get through the day was intoxication, which later became an addiction - an escape from the relentless humiliation, the

dehumanising stares, and the suffocating odour that clung to their skin long after the job was done. It was not just physical labour; it was emotional and psychological torment.

As the only surviving child after the loss of his brother, his parents' words carried a heavier weight. He felt that he was solely responsible for the change they longed to see. Their struggles and sacrifices became his purpose. He took education as his anchor and dedicated himself to his studies, knowing that it was his only path to transformation.

Student Life

After completing his primary education at St Mary's Home School and later at St Joseph's Boys High School in Barracks, Raees moved to Hyderabad with aspirations of becoming a civil servant. However, his academic journey took a different turn, leading him to earn a Ph.D. in Language, Caste, and Territory from

the English and Foreign Language University (EFLU). Later, as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Southampton, he worked on a paper titled 'Politics of Space and Caste', which allowed him to critically examine deeply embedded social inequalities and explore ways to challenge them.

Upon returning to India, he took up a position as an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Distance Education at the University of Madras. However, after six months, he realised that teaching was not his true calling. His passion extended beyond academics; it was about using education to uplift his community. As a member of the Dalit community, historically relegated to the lowest forms of labour, he had witnessed first-hand the weight of caste oppression. Many within the community had internalised this stigma, struggling to see their own worth or demand respect. And this was precisely what he wanted to change.

Touching On Change

In 2007, Raees launched a YouTube channel called *Dalit Camera: Through Un-Touchable Eyes*. This platform provided a space to highlight the struggles, stories, and perspectives of Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised communities. The channel gained significant traction, shedding light on critical social issues. However, over time, he began to feel that their efforts were caught in a cycle of merely documenting problems rather than driving real change. This realisation led him to take a more direct approach. Determined to make a tangible difference, Raees returned to Kotagiri

and started working on the ground. The journey was long and filled with obstacles, but his persistence paid off. Through continuous efforts in engaging with government offices and advocating for change, several significant improvements became the norm.

Sanitation workers in the Town Panchayat today have uniforms and better salaries.

Previously, sanitary workers had to sit outside the office, enduring harsh weather conditions until a higher officer arrived to take attendance. Today, they sit inside.

Panchayat staff have gained the confidence to voice their needs and fight for their rights.

One of the biggest challenges he tackled was the deep stigma associated with manual scavenging. While corporations from other cities profited from similar work, local sanitation workers remained in unsafe conditions without health insurance or safety precautions. Waste from manual scavenging was often irresponsibly dumped along roadsides and abandoned land. Over time, significant changes took place. Proper disposal sites were established, reducing environmental hazards. The cost of septic tank cleaning became more affordable, ensuring fair wages for workers while preventing exploitation. Additionally, people from the Dalit community were encouraged to start their own businesses in the field.

Love And Dedication

In 2014, Raees married A Karpagam Allimuthu, who shares his passion and commitment to their mission. Her dedication led her to contest in local elections, and she is now the

“For many, the only way to get through the day was intoxication, which later became an addiction - an escape from the relentless humiliation, the dehumanising stares, and the suffocating odour that clung to their skin long after the job was done



“One of the biggest challenges he tackled was the deep stigma associated with manual scavenging

Councillor of their ward in Kotagiri, an achievement that once seemed impossible. Together, they run a sanitation business called Kotagiri Septic Tank Cleaning.

Currently, they employ a team of four members who work under fair and dignified conditions - something unimaginable in the past. Their workers have proper health insurance and safety gear, receive fair wages, and adhere to a strict no-alcohol policy during work hours to ensure professionalism and respect while on the job. Additionally, they have taken on the responsibility of cleaning public cesspools in government hospitals, schools, police stations, and public toilets - often free of cost, or for minimal payment. In the absence of civic budgets for these essential services, Raees and his team have stepped in to fill the gap, giving back to society in the most impactful way

His dedication to social change was recognised when his article, 'The Many Omissions: A Concept – Discrimination Amongst Scheduled

Castes', was cited in a Supreme Court verdict, marking a significant milestone in his advocacy work. In 2020, he was honoured with the Dr Ambedkar International Award for his unwavering efforts in advocating for marginalised communities and promoting justice.

Legally Bound

Raees revealed that he was studying law, explaining that, while there's only so much a person can do with a doctorate, the knowledge of law would allow him to be even more useful to his community. "It will help me think better, fight better," he added.

As the conversation drew to a close, I thanked this remarkable person for his time and for sharing his powerful story of resilience, transformation, and dedication to the betterment of the world around him. It is abundantly clear his work was not only about shaping the future of his community, but also serving as a beacon of hope for those striving for equality and justice. With a final handshake and warm wishes for his continued success, Raees left, leaving me deeply moved by the profound impact one individual can have on society. A lesson for us all, perhaps... ■





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A Roaring Movement



Ashwini Tanwani gives us a close-up look at a school that went from near closure to 173 students, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the Lions Club of The Nilgiris

Imagine being part of a global movement dedicated to service and leadership. Lionism isn't just a philosophy. It is a way of life rooted in compassion, integrity, and a commitment to making the world a better place. As a member, you will take part in meaningful projects, connect with like-minded people, and help build stronger communities.

At The Start

Founded in 1917 by Melvin Jones, Lions Clubs International (LCI) is one of the world's largest service organisations, with 1.4 million members across more than 200 geographic areas around the world. Lionism was introduced to India on February 3, 1956, with the formation of the Lions Club of Bombay, followed by the Lions Club of Delhi on February 14, 1956. Sponsored by the Lions Club of Saxton, Pennsylvania, the movement grew rapidly, reaching 20 clubs with 900 members by 1957. By 1974, India was reorganised into 13 districts, and within 26 years, membership soared to 3,000 clubs and 100,000 members. Certainly, India's deep-rooted commitment to service has fuelled the remarkable growth of Lionism across the nation.

In The Nilgiris

The Lions Club of Nilgiris was established on January 12, 1960, following a visit by Lion Minoo JD Engineer (South Asian Secretary) and Lion Ratilal Shah, who convened a meeting of 25 individuals on January 8, 1960. The Club received its charter on February 12, 1960, with 33 members, granted by Lion Noshir N Pundole, the 'Father of Lionism in India'. It holds the distinction of being

the first Lions Club in the Nilgiris and the second-oldest in the multiple districts. The Lions Club of Nilgiris is also the proud mother club of the Ootacamund Lions Club (March 15, 1978), and the Kotagiri Lions Club (May 25, 1983).

Initially, the club focused on medical relief and educational assistance, launching projects such as a rural medical centre in Old Aruvankadu, free midday meals and medical aid in schools, cataract glasses for labourers, and support for maternity homes and hospitals as well as flood relief. The Club also built bus shelters and a children's park in Kotagiri, as part of its service operations.

The Lions Club of Nilgiris has continually evolved, growing in both scope and impact. Each year, a new leadership team assumes responsibility, bringing renewed enthusiasm, vision, and dedication to community service. Through this dynamic progression, the club has reached unprecedented heights, expanding its initiatives far beyond its initial focus on medical aid and education.

Today, the Club undertakes a diverse range of philanthropic activities, addressing critical social and healthcare needs. In addition to medical camps, such as diabetic and eye screening programmes, the Club actively engages in disaster relief efforts, supports tuberculosis patients with nutritional supplements, and provides essential aid to old-age homes. Contributions extend to the donation of wheelchairs, books, clothing, and vital school supplies to children in tribal communities.

Regular tree-planting initiatives are conducted, as well, reinforcing its commitment to ecological well-being. Moreover, the Club actively collaborates with the community in awareness rallies and organises food donation drives to support the underprivileged.

In Other Business

In the last 5 years, the Club has undertaken impactful community service projects to the tune of ₹20 lakh. Among its long-term initiatives, the Lions School, Coonoor remains a top priority. In 2020, as part of a twinning project with the Lions Club of Mumbai Ghatkopar, a retaining wall was built to improve school infrastructure. Additionally, the club has played a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of Bedford's Clock Tower and Houghton's Park, as well as Moore's Garden in Mount Pleasant and a check dam at Attadi. It also maintains bus shelters across Coonoor, ensuring better public amenities. Collaboration remains a cornerstone of the Lions Club's philosophy. By partnering with other clubs and NGOs, the organisation continuously expands its outreach, working collectively to uplift society.

The motto of the Lions Club is 'We Serve', but the Lions Club of Nilgiris embraces the ideology of 'Service with Fellowship'. More than just a service organisation, it fosters strong bonds among members and their families. The Club meets fortnightly, creating a warm and inclusive environment where members not only discuss service initiatives but also participate in potlucks, picnics,

and social gatherings, transforming routine meetings into delightful and memorable events. Once a year, the ladies of the Club host the much-anticipated Ladies Night Celebration, which marks the official visit of the Lions Club Governor. All Lions Clubs of the district, along with other social organisations, are invited to this grand event. Hosted by the Lions Club of Nilgiris and organised by the Lion Ladies, the night is filled with music, dance, games, food and fun. It is also the occasion when the yearly report of the Club is presented to all guests and members. The Club is now proudly witnessing its third-generation of members, a true testament to its enduring legacy and deep-rooted community values.

Catch Them Young

The Lions Club of Nilgiris marked the Golden Jubilee of Lions International with a remarkable act of service, taking over the management of a historic primary school that has been in existence since 1908. Originally founded by Miss Ling of the Church

of England Zanana Mission (CEZM), the school was initially meant only for girls. Over the years, it underwent several transformations. Until December 31, 1955, it functioned as an elementary school, after which it was restructured as a Junior Basic School on January 1, 1986 and the institution was handed over to the Church of South India (CSI) Management.

In June 1967, the school faced the threat of closure. Recognising its significance and the role it played in the community, the Lions Club of Nilgiris stepped in to prevent its shutdown, ensuring the continuation of education for many students. Among other issues, the school's rented premises were dilapidated, requiring urgent repairs. Simultaneously, plans were made to construct permanent buildings. With the support of key figures like Lion M Thangavel, Lion GT Pandiaraj and Lion SV Narayanan, the Club secured 30 cents of government land, free of cost, ensuring the stability of the school's future.

The foundation stone for the new school building was laid by AS Ahluwalia, then Collector of Nilgiris, on November 11, 1970, and the main school building was formally inaugurated by His Excellency Shri KK Shah, Governor of Tamil Nadu, at the time, on September 29, 1971. Additional facilities, including

living quarters for the Headmistress, an office room, a mid-day meal kitchen, and toilets, were later constructed. By 1985, the school had grown to accommodate 173 students, with five classes and five teachers.

One of the most influential figures in shaping the school was Lion Dr AA Devaraj, a prominent Club member. He took over as the first correspondent of the school in May 1967, dedicating himself to its growth and development. His commitment and leadership helped transform the school into a thriving institution that continues to serve the community. Over 65 years, the school has flourished under the guidance of several dedicated correspondents and teachers. The Club and its members have been a backbone of the school, providing unwavering support. Today, Lions School thrives, thanks to the unwavering dedication of Mr B Raman (MA, M.Ed), the School Correspondent, and Mrs Selvi (Secondary Grade Teacher), the Headmistress. Raman, after 30 years of dedicated service at Sadguru School, retired in 2005. However, his deep sense of duty led him to join Lions School at a challenging time, when it was struggling to sustain itself. Both Raman and Selvi had experience in managing schools with large student populations, but at that time, Lions School had only three students, with over 20 having graduated recently. Undeterred, they took on the challenge, counselling families in and around Coonoor, urging them to enrol their children. Their perseverance paid off and within just four months, student strength grew to 30.



The Upgrade

At this juncture, the school's infrastructure indeed needed a massive makeover. To transform the landscape, Silver Oak trees were planted on the barren land. Wash rooms were renovated. Over the years, with each newly elected Lions Club president, the school saw continuous development. This unwavering commitment led to the construction of a retaining wall, perimeter wall, cement flooring, a noon meal shelter, a playground, and a library, ensuring a well-rounded and nurturing environment for students.

In today's world, where English proficiency is essential, running a Tamil-medium school presents significant challenges. Many students come from Sidhi Vinayak Kovil Street and Rajaji Nagar, areas marked by economic hardship. Understanding the barriers these families face, the teachers take a proactive approach - visiting these neighbourhoods, engaging with parents, and counselling them on the importance of education. To ensure accessibility, teachers arrange auto-rickshaws to provide free pick-up and drop-off services for students every day. Their unwavering commitment ensures that education remains within reach for underprivileged children.

The Lions school conducts regular dental and eye check-ups which are provided by Lions Club. At the beginning of each academic year, students receive school uniforms, shoes, and stationery. The school also celebrates Independence Day and Republic Day with great enthusiasm. Teachers, students, parents and Club members look forward to these occasions. The

performance by the students is always exceptional, showcasing their talent and patriotism. Awards are distributed, motivating and encouraging them to stay the course. Graduated children also visit the school at such times, cherishing their fond memories and participating in the joyous event. This is followed by a sumptuous breakfast that turns the celebration into a festive occasion - the highlight of the school year.

Through the dedication and the support of the Lions Club of The

Nilgiris, the Lions School has evolved into a thriving institution, embodying the true spirit of service and education. In the work done by the founders and those who continue to sustain it, the school serves to fill a vital role in transforming the lives of children, creating a future for them that would otherwise perhaps not be possible. We can tip our hats at this commendable community undertaking and perhaps, lend a hand in adding to this praiseworthy community cause, run by a remarkable organisation. ■



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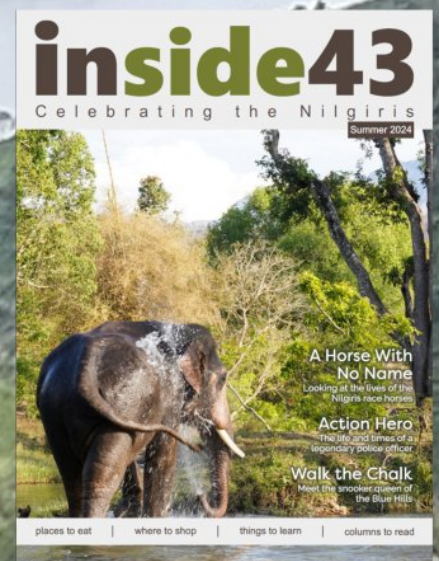
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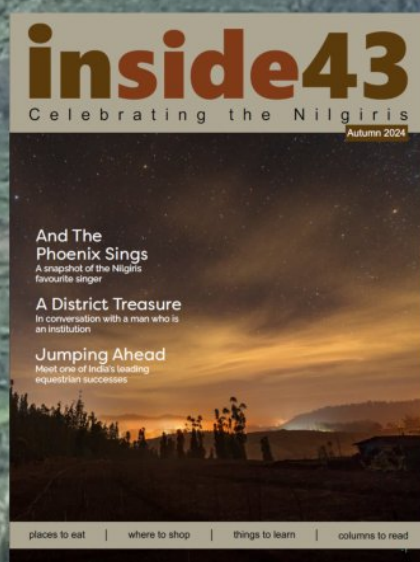
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A NOTEWORTHY INSTITUTION



*One may miss it quite easily, driving past the hedges that cover its imposing facade, but those that catch a glimpse of it are always impressed by its elegant, sprawling design. **Sharmatha Shankar** gives you a sneak peek at the interesting history of the iconic Lawley Institute in Ooty*

Picture this. It's the year 1911. You're an Indian in pre-Independence India. The Crown is still very much in charge. There is still monopolisation of trade, and difficult land revenue policies. There have been protests and calls for freedom, but it'll be a long while till the nation actually gets there.

You're well-read, intelligent and highly capable. You have varied interests and knowledge on a wide range of subjects. And yet, you're made to feel like a second class citizen by the British, or at least most of them. You are not allowed to enter certain institutions, because they are reserved only for the powers that be. The British keep whisking themselves away to the hills of Ooty in summers to watch the races, go boating, look at the flowers, read, play cards and just enjoy the gentle weather. They have buildings and institutions dedicated to the purposes of leisure and networking alone. And even if you are a government official, if you're Indian, you're not allowed into these places. But then, the Maharajah of Bobbili very generously donates a piece of land for such an institution to be set up for Indians alone. And that is how the Lawley Institute came about.

Back then, the parts of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Odisha were under the administration of the Madras Presidency of British-ruled India. Every six months, an assembly was held. One took place in Madras (now Chennai) and the second took place in Ooty. The Maharajahs who traversed to Ooty to participate in the assembly had properties and palaces to stay in Ooty, but they did not have a place to gather socially like the British did.

Path-breakers

The Maharajah of Bobbili, Sri VS Ranga Rao Bahadur Varu, who was once the Prime Minister of the Madras Presidency, was of the belief that a space where Indians could partake in recreations, networking and socialising was of the utmost importance. He set up a trust of ₹30,000 - was a very large amount at the time - on 15th September, 1911, for the formation of the Lawley Institute. It was named after Sir Arthur Lawley, who was the Governor of Madras at the time. Lawley was among those Britishers who was very supportive of such an initiative. He was a philanthropist, and he believed in equality, which really set him apart

from many of his fellow-members of the Raj. At the time of setting up the Trust, it was decided that no more than two trustees could be non-Indian.

The Lawley Institute is unique because it is one of the very few clubs, which is run by a trust. The Governor of Tamil Nadu is the patron of the club. The committee consists of five members, three of whom are nominated by the Governor and two of whom are elected during the Annual General Meeting held every year. It is much easier for government officials to get a membership here than in any other club.

Step In

When one enters the Lawley Institute, one finds themselves in a large, airy, well-lit hall. This is the Bobbili Hall, named after the Institute's founder. In similar institutions that have existed since the time of British rule, one expects to find mounted stag heads, or portraits and names of British officials. However at Lawley, you will find paintings of the Maharajah of Bobbili, Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

The Institute occupies about 2.75 acres of land, and the exteriors of the buildings are colonial in design. Sweeping white walls with tall

windows flank either side of the colonnaded porch. Most of the interior spaces have been renovated to keep up with the times. However, some spaces have been preserved to retain a certain old-world charm. The card room in particular stands out, courtesy the old-fashioned fireplace and the lingering fragrance of wood fire that permeates the room. The neatly chiselled wooden door and window frames have a quaint attraction to them. Lawley's also has a neat little library, a billiards room, a badminton court, a gymnasium, and one room set aside for viewing films with a large screen television and comfortable plush chairs.

The Institute has a beautiful tennis court where many tournaments took place, which is currently under renovation. There are forty rooms, which have also been largely renovated, but there are a few that still have old-fashioned little fireplaces that hark back to a time when life was very different to what it is today. There are expansive lawns where members can gather around

bonfires on summer evenings. Lawley currently does not see a lot of foot fall, especially out of season, but the committee hopes for that to change in the coming years, and that its once vibrant cultural and social nature will fall back in place.

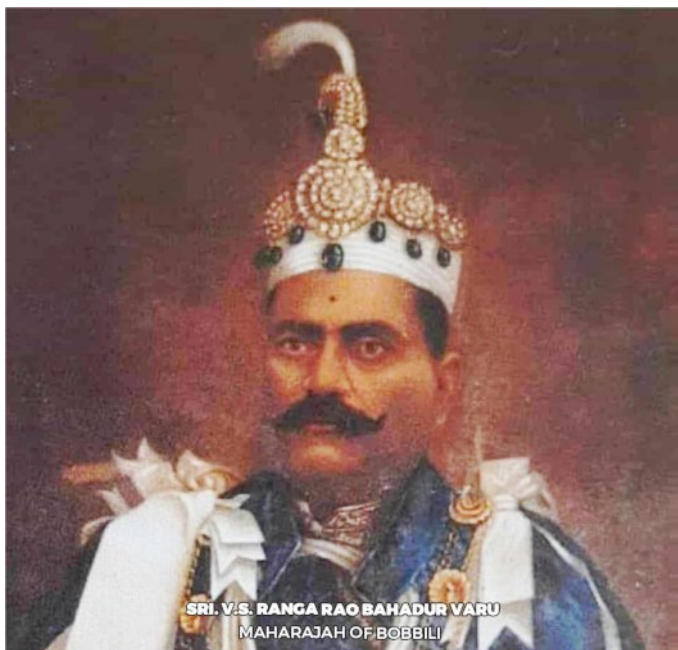
Lawley's kitchen is well-known for its South Indian meals served on banana leaves. The koottu, Chettinad-style chicken and filter coffee are especially delicious. It may be speculated that the food served is mainly South Indian, because the early members were predominantly South Indian.

Currently, there are 1200 members at Lawley and most are impressively big names in business, industry, textile and cinema. Actor Nambiar, who was well-known for his diabolical villain roles in old Tamil films, was a member of Lawley, as was PT Rajan, who was a minister in the Madras Presidency and grandfather to Palanivel Thiagarajan, the current IT Minister of Tamil Nadu. Other famous names include MAM Ramaswamy, the former Rajya Sabh member.

Wolf Hall

The logo of the Institution is a wolf standing tall with its tail raised. Wolves are remarkable creatures of nature with keen senses, great intelligence, and the ability to form strong bonds with each other and maintain strong packs. The motto of the club is '*Je Veux De Bonne Guerre*', which in French means 'I wish fair play.' What a very apt motto for an institution which was begun to ensure that Indians also enjoy the same luxuries as their British rulers.

Today, Lawley Institute stands as a reminder of a small step towards unity amongst Indians - symbolising equality, autonomy and freedom during a time when these things were not to be found easily. The committee hopes to uphold Lawley as a place where members of society can come forward and socialise, network and take pride in their history. A place that serves as a bridge between new and old, a binding force between communities and a place that is heir to a unique heritage and a singular time in our nation's history. ■





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The School of Happiness

Laidlaw Memorial School and Junior College has a legacy of self-reliance and excellence that has driven it from its very start. Here's a closer look at one of the Nilgiris' best-loved schools and its considerable achievements



Going up to Ooty from Coonoor, you peel off at Ketti to go down a long winding road that wends its way down to the picturesque Ketti Valley. Along this road, nestled in a wood of fir and eucalyptus sits a school that might have been lifted straight out of an Enid Blyton story - Whyteleafe school comes to mind. Beautiful white building with sloping red roofs lie scattered across the sprawling campus, and, as one enters the school gates, one is filled with a sense of peace and comfort.

“The bonds between teachers, students, and staff strengthen the foundation of this nurturing institution, making it a beacon of hope and security

Early Years

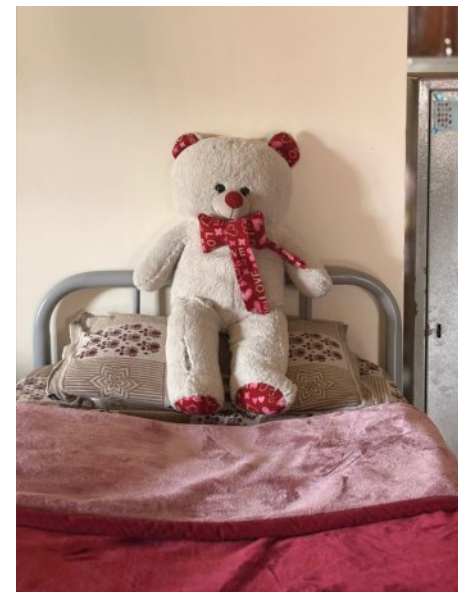
The Laidlaw Memorial School and Junior College (ISCE and ICS) was founded by Rev John Breeden with financial support from Sir Robert Laidlaw, a Scottish businessman and philanthropist. Rev Breeden, a missionary, was responsible for establishing and building the school to provide education to British and Anglo-Indian children in the Nilgiris. The school was named after Robert Laidlaw in recognition of his financial contributions. In the words of Sir Robert Laidlaw, “Orphanages and schools do not exist simply to help

children to reach manhood and womanhood; they aim at adding to the number of self-reliant, self-supporting citizens who are a credit to the race and can be reckoned among national assets.”

It is this principle of self-reliance that remains at the heart of Laidlaw Memorial School and Junior College to this day. Every lesson taught, every skill acquired, and every tradition upheld within the school walls is testament to this philosophy. The dedicated leadership and management team, comprising the Principal - Rutherford Alister Nelthropp, Headmaster - Mr R Vasu, Chairman - Norman Joseph Wood, and the esteemed Board of Management: Cristopher Hawkes, Deborah Fox (Vice-Chairman, ex-student, batch of 1978), Michael Hawkes, Lorraine Wood, AE Joseph (ex-student, batch of 1975), Leslye Whitbread, Gary Vernon Grubb, Ivan Enos, Dierdre E Issar (Secretary), Jennifer Grubb (Treasurer, ex-student, batch of 1969). The entire Board works tirelessly to ensure that every student who passes through Laidlaw's gates is prepared to stand on their own with confidence and resilience.

A Home Away From Home

The school is 100 percent residential and is far more than just an educational institution. It is a happy home away from home, where students, teachers, and staff form an extended family, supporting and guiding each other through every step of their journey. The school has consistently provided a nurturing and disciplined environment, fostering not only academic excellence but also personal growth and character development.



Situated on an expansive, rolling campus, the school provides ample space for various outdoor activities, including multiple sports fields and pitches named after benefactors or former Principals. The school's infrastructure includes a well-equipped clinic with a qualified nurse, daily visiting doctors and a dentist. Active music programmes encourage the students to take examinations from the Associated Board of the Royal School of Music, London and Trinity College, London.

As one steps into Laidlaw's expansive and beautiful campus, there is an unmistakable aura of joy and positivity. It is a lighthouse of learning, guiding young minds with wisdom and warmth. Laughter and camaraderie resonate through its corridors, playgrounds, and classrooms, symbolising the friendships and lifelong bonds formed here. Education at Laidlaw is not confined to textbooks. The institution believes in the holistic development of students, focusing equally on mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. With

“As schools go, few can match Laidlaw Memorial's absolute devotion to the things that truly matter

a strong emphasis on values and ethics, students are encouraged to become responsible, self-disciplined individuals who uphold the highest standards of integrity.

Geraldine, a 12th standard student, believes she speaks for her schoolmates when she says Laidlaw fosters all-round growth. “We are exposed to so many extra curricular activities, and both the teaching and non-teaching staff help us to realise our potential. While we love going home for holidays, we also love to come back to school as life here is happy.”

Laidlaw's academic framework is designed to equip students with the skills necessary for a rapidly evolving world. Critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills are nurtured, ensuring that students are not just prepared to compete, but to contribute meaningfully to society. Beyond academics, the school offers a diverse range of extracurricular activities - from music and dramatics to debates and sports. Leadership training, community service, and personal development programmes further enrich students' experiences, ensuring they leave the school as well-rounded individuals ready to embrace the future.

Academics And Beyond

One of Laidlaw's most revered traditions is its Cross-Country Race. More than just a test of athletic ability, this event symbolises discipline, perseverance, and endurance. Daily training for this race instils in students a deep sense of commitment and punctuality - values that remain with them long after they leave school. The race serves as a metaphor for life itself, teaching students that success is the reward of those who remain steadfast and determined. Laidlaw Memorial School is a sanctuary where every student feels valued, secure, and heard. It fosters an inclusive and supportive environment, ensuring that each child, regardless of background, finds a sense of belonging. The bonds between teachers, students, and staff strengthen the foundation of this nurturing institution, making it a beacon of hope and security.

Investing In Teachers

The strength of Laidlaw lies not only in its students but also in its





campus. The caring Board, headed by the gracious Norman Wood, and team of educationists strives to maintain an institution where learning is not just about textbooks, education goes beyond academic scores and where life is practised gently to produce able citizens for not just our nation, but the world. ■

Note to readers: Rohan Mathias, one of Inside43's Editorial Committee members, studied at Laidlaw Memorial School.

Written by Deepika Unni and Sangeetha Shinde.

dedicated teachers and staff. Recognising the pivotal role educators play, the school invests heavily in continuous professional development. Teachers are encouraged to learn, unlearn, and relearn, staying ahead of educational advancements to provide students with the best possible learning experience. This resilience was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic and other disruptions. Laidlaw embraced change with agility, ensuring that students adapted to new ways of learning while retaining their core values of self-reliance and perseverance.

Beyond Time

A cornerstone of Laidlaw's enduring legacy is its alumni network - the Old Georgians Association (OGA). More than just a community, the OGA represents the lifelong connection between former students and their alma mater. Spread across the world, Old Georgians continue to uphold the values, discipline, and knowledge imparted to them at Laidlaw, carrying

these lessons into their personal and professional lives. Their unwavering commitment to the school's growth and success is a testament to the deep-rooted influence of their education. By staying engaged and giving back, they embody the spirit of Laidlaw, ensuring that its legacy of excellence and integrity thrives across generations.

As schools go, few can match Laidlaw Memorial's absolute devotion to the things that truly matter. From its beautiful classrooms, to its home-made tea biscuits, to its clock tower, to the musicals it hosts, to its sporting achievements, to its academic prowess - this school is special. The dormitories are bright and one sees teddy bears and family pictures scattered around. The classrooms from those of the oldest to the youngest are filled with smiling faces, and teachers and students who genuinely care for each other. Cleanliness is the watchword, and joy is the predominant emotion one feels in these beautifully maintained

The Laidlaw School Song sums up the DNA of the school perfectly:

*We will hand down to future generations,
A past that in our presence has been made.
Traditions good and strong
whose first foundations
Had in those earlier stressful days been laid.
Now we are striving in the way they trod,
Our watchword 'Self-Reliance', thanks to God.
Now time has flown in Kodi's hills no longer,
Our school from Ketti's vale spreads influence wide.
We looking back will own its power the stronger;
And praise our founders with deep thanks and pride
That we like them with courage and renown
May follow George our Saint and win the Crown.*

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CAPTURING LIFE



*He is a talented
photographer and
videographer, a YouTube
influencer, a volunteer and
a son of the soil.*

Sharmatha Shankar

*speaks with Babu
Dharuman, an in-demand
photographer from Kotagiri
whose creative work speaks
for itself*

If you wake up in the morning anticipating doing something that you absolutely love, then that is a good day. If you wake up like that every day, you are luckier than you realise. If you make money out of doing something that you love, then you are truly blessed. And if you make money and create a positive impact doing something that you absolutely love, you are especially favoured by the higher powers and already living in your own version of Elysium.

The Call Of Art

Babu Dharuman was born in Ooty and finished his schooling there, before moving to Chennai for higher education. When asked how he discovered his passion for photography, he says "Growing up, I loved art. I used to love drawing, painting and creating things." He says that even though he was artistically inclined, he was never encouraged to pursue his talents in that direction. "I grew up in a time when academics were given more importance than the arts," he muses. "So, unfortunately, my artistic capabilities were not really nurtured."

After finishing an undergraduate programme at SRM University, he worked in the IT field for a long period in the early 2000s. He also worked in Malaysia for a while. But through it all, his artistic side could not be denied. "I was earning, so I bought my own camera," he says proudly, speaking about his younger self. "I was always able to express myself through paper, pen and anything I could find. But now I was able to channel all that creative energy through a digital medium." He studied professional photography at Life and Art Institute, Chennai, and then assisted on photo-shoots for big brands like Pothys and Kumaran Silks.

Self-driven

He eventually started a studio in Chennai during this time and regularly undertook photography and videography work. But the pressure and monotony that eventually sets in while working for large corporates finally caught up with him. In 2018, he finally quit his IT job and decided to take up full-time photography and videography as a profession.

He currently still works with well-known fashion brands in Chennai as a videographer and photographer. He now runs a studio called Story Frame and shoots events such as weddings and conferences, and also does real estate and food photography. He especially enjoys food and fashion photography. When asked why, he says "I am able to execute what I envision. It's an art form. I am able to choose the colours, the setting and the lighting. I can design the whole shoot, and have it come out exactly as I want." But there are times when factors like natural light may be different from what he imagined. In

those moments, he has to apply his creativity and adapt.

Babu Dharuman also works with an NGO that focusses on bringing awareness around sexual harassment and abuse of children. He documents cases of abused children, and the awareness events conducted by these NGOs. "There is so much to learn," he says. "I've learnt about the psychology of children, what sexual harassment means, the impact on the children, and what the government is actually doing about it. It was a whole new experience for me. The idea behind documenting these cases is to educate the public."

Tube Talk

A year and a half ago, Babu Dharuman started his own YouTube channel called 'Voice of Nilgiris'. The Nilgiri hills, home to so many tribes like the Badagas, Todas, Irulas, Kotas Kurumbas and Paniyars is a treasure trove of culture, tradition, history and food. But unfortunately, since the languages these tribes speak do not have a script, their history and culture have not been documented in a way that really captures what they're all about. 'Voice of Nilgiris' was started to document these tribes, their customs, their food, etc on video, which is something that has never been done before. "The purpose is to showcase these customs and traditions to the outside world," says Babu Dharuman eagerly. "Let's say a tribe follows a very specific ritual during funerals. I try to understand the meaning behind the ritual, if it's specific to that tribe alone, and why that particular tribe follows that particular ritual," he explains.

Babu Dharuman also adds that most youngsters who belong to local

“In 2018, he finally quit his IT job and decided to fully take up photography and videography as a profession

tribes and communities follow traditions and customs without quite realising the meaning behind them. He gives an example of the Jedayasomi Habba, a Badaga festival that takes place in Aravenu every year, with a tradition of running across hot coals. No one quite understands the meaning behind it, and where this custom came from to the Badagas - being usually practised by Tamilians. What's more, this festival has a connection with the Irulas, but it's not understood quite how. Babu Dharuman strongly believes in understanding one's roots and staying in touch with them. "Our ancestors never recorded anything in writing. So there's no evidence to explain and support our history, and that's why I started Voice of Nilgiris," he says. "These videos might help in research some day," he explains.

Business Of The Day

Babu Dharuman also happens to be an entrepreneur. He owns a company called Real Taste that specialises in locally-sourced products like hand-rolled tea and natural honey. The company is the brainchild of his father. When his father worked in Chennai in his early days, his friends and colleagues would constantly request him to bring back honey,

eucalyptus oil, varkey and other products from the Nilgiris. And from this, the idea to start sourcing and shipping local products was formed. Babu Dharuman says because of the flora and fauna specific to the Nilgiris, the soil is of a quality that endows his products with attributes like high antioxidant content and medicinal value. The kinds of plants bees collect nectar from to make honey also endow the honey with distinctive qualities. A specific grade of tea is sourced from local factories, whereas the honey is sourced from tribes like the Kurumbas. The idea is to promote local products, and in the process inspire locals who own land to start such initiatives of their own. This initiative hopes to prevent land from being sold to outsiders who might begin construction, or use it for other purposes not conducive to the ecosystem.

Babu Dharuman also owns a farm in Thengumarahada, a Badaga hatti (village), located near the Moyar River. What's so special about this hatti is that it has virtually no road access,

and is next to a tiger reserve forest. He primarily grows marigolds in his farm.

Babu Dharuman is an individual who firmly believes in following one's passion, rather than doing something purely for the sake of monetary gain. He hopes he can inspire his own children to find and follow their passion in the way that he has. "I grew up in a time when we went to school and college, purely so we could get good jobs. There wasn't space to explore anything else," he says. "There is no right and wrong. We must allow children to do the things they like, so that they find their calling."

In a world where most people are on a revolving treadmill in hopes of making more money or getting to a certain status, Babu Dharuman reminds us that if you take a step back, allow yourself to be yourself, and give yourself permission to do what you love, then you will find the passion, the purpose and all you need to sustain your ongoing happiness in this lifetime. ■



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Why The Caged Bird Sings



*The title of the best selling book by the incredible Maya Angelou aptly sums up her life. **Andrea Melissa**, daughter of these hills, tells us about her poignant search for identity, truth and spirituality in a life where music remained the guiding star leading her home*

Life is nothing if not unpredictable. It weaves a melody of its own - drifting between joy and sorrow, harmony and discord, always carrying us forward on currents unknown. Mine is a story of being uprooted and re-rooted. Of music that never left my side. Of losing my sense of belonging in the world - and finding it in my soul. Through song, stage, and a deep inner unfolding, I've journeyed through identity, uncertainty, and transformation - only to return to the truest parts of me.

The Music That Made Me

Music has been the one thread that never frayed. Before I understood loss or longing, I knew melody. My earliest creative influence was my mother - a Bharatanatyam dancer and Carnatic singer - who introduced me not only to the richness of Indian classical arts but also to pop icons like Cyndi Lauper, George Michael, Boyzone and Shania Twain. My father, a country music enthusiast, filled our home with the likes of Kenny Rogers and Don Williams, occasionally picking up his guitar or harmonica to add his own melodies to the mix. I moved to the rhythm of two worlds - dancing Bharatanatyam with my mum and jiving with my dad. That fusion of Indian and Western influences became the soundtrack of my childhood and the foundation of my creative journey.

At school, I was an academic high-achiever and thrived in extracurriculars. From debates and declamation contests to school plays and inter-school singing competitions, I jumped into everything, often bringing home medals. I co-composed our school anthem, led the choir, and even played table tennis at the district level. Outside school, I found community in the church choir and the Nilgiri Choral Society, performing for various events across the Nilgiris.

College opened up my world in ways I hadn't imagined. It was there that I truly stepped into my voice - leading choirs, performing solo, contributing vocals and songwriting to commercial projects, and pushing my own boundaries as an artist. Even while pursuing my creative passions, I thrived academically - graduating as a gold medallist in my Bachelor's and as Class Valedictorian in my Master's. I also served as Cultural Secretary of the student union.

In 2014, I began singing professionally at upscale hospitality venues, bringing music to elegant spaces and intimate audiences. Soon, I was also performing at live music venues and private events across South India - connecting with diverse audiences and adapting my sound to every kind of stage. Alongside, I explored roles that sparked my





creative spirit - working as a music teacher, radio jockey, NGO project coordinator, PR consultant, features writer, copywriting manager, and marketing and communications specialist. Each role nourished a different facet of my artistry, adding depth and nuance to my evolving creative identity. Through it all, music was always present, always calling.

A New Land, A New Tune

In my twenties, life took an unexpected turn, leading me to start over in a new country - one I had ancestral ties to, but no personal memories of. I left behind everything familiar, stepping into the unknown with only my voice and a quiet resilience. It was a turning point - one that reshaped my understanding of home, identity, and belonging.

Arriving in Sri Lanka felt like a complete reset. I didn't know a single soul, couldn't speak the language, and was carrying the emotional weight of starting from scratch. Uprooted and uncertain, I clung to the only constant I had - music.

Barely settled in, I decided - on a whim - to audition for a musical theatre production. I was cast in seven shows, including three lead roles - my favourite being Angelica Schuyler from *Hamilton*. Almost overnight, I found myself surrounded by incredible people who quickly became close friends. Around the same time, I entered TNL Onstage, Sri Lanka's premier music competition, where a last-minute original I composed won me the Best Original award and runner-up for Best Soloist.

That moment launched my music career in Sri Lanka. I began performing across the island - at concerts, corporate events, luxury venues - collaborating with some of the country's top musicians and theatre companies. Slowly, I built a life from scratch - one filled with song, stage, deep friendships, and unexpected joy. In a land I never chose, I found healing, purpose, and a new rhythm to call my own.

But even as my world began to bloom, the island around me was facing darkness. During my time there, Sri Lanka was shaken by a series of crises - beginning with the Easter Sunday terror attacks, followed closely by the Covid-19 pandemic, a crippling fuel shortage, and eventually, a devastating economic collapse. Amid the fear, uncertainty, and upheaval that marked those years, I continued to find rhythm in the chaos. Music remained my anchor.

Inner Harmony

Three years later, I briefly returned to India to see my family. But instead of comfort, I felt disoriented - like a stranger in a place that once felt like

“Music remains my anchor - a sacred thread weaving me back to my truest self”

home. The people, the rhythm, the conversations - all felt distant. Yet in Sri Lanka, I wasn't fully at home either. There, I was the Indian girl. Here, the Sri Lankan returnee. I drifted between identities, never fully belonging anywhere. And that quiet longing to belong grew too loud to ignore.

That ache sparked a deeper journey. I turned inward, diving into spiritual practice and personal growth. Slowly, something began to shift. I started uncovering what I'd been seeking all along. I had spent years chasing 'home' in places and identities - never realising I'd carried it within me the whole time. Now it all made sense.

Home was never a country or a place.

Home Is Where My Feet Are

This realisation ignited a journey of inner transformation and awakened a spiritual depth I never knew existed.

I had always been deeply rooted in religion, drawing a profound sense of identity and belonging from my faith. But then came my first 'dark night of the soul' - a sacred unravelling I didn't yet understand. My belief system crumbled. I questioned everything: God, truth, purpose, existence. It was painful, disorienting, and deeply uncomfortable. But from that void, new truths slowly began to emerge. I stepped away from rigid doctrines

and opened myself to the infinite. I turned to timeless wisdom and soul-expanding teachings - drawn from ancient texts, spiritual philosophy, and modern insights into consciousness. Through mindfulness and meditation, I turned inward. Slowly, I began to recognise the divine in everything around me. More importantly, I finally awakened to the divinity within.

My faith, once confined, gently outgrew the walls it was held in. And this beautiful journey continues to teach me how to let go - of identities and attachments - and to live more fully in the present. To trust the unfolding. To surrender. It is a path of seeking, healing, and rediscovering the truth of who I really am. A coming home to myself.

And as always, music moved with me - now not just as a passion, but as a prayer.

The land I once resisted - Sri Lanka - became the sacred ground of my rebirth. What began in darkness led me back to light. Now, I walk this path in peace.

The Next Verse

After five deeply transformative years in Sri Lanka, I felt a quiet knowing - it was time to return. So, I packed up my life there and moved back to India - but this time, I was more grounded in myself than ever before. It felt like life had come full circle - a quiet but purposeful nod from the universe that every detour had a purpose, and every chapter was leading me home to myself.

I've recently moved back to my childhood home in Coonoor - but I'm not the same girl who once walked these hills. I return as a fuller, softer, wiser version of myself - one who has shed old identities, found deeper truths, and carries a renewed sense

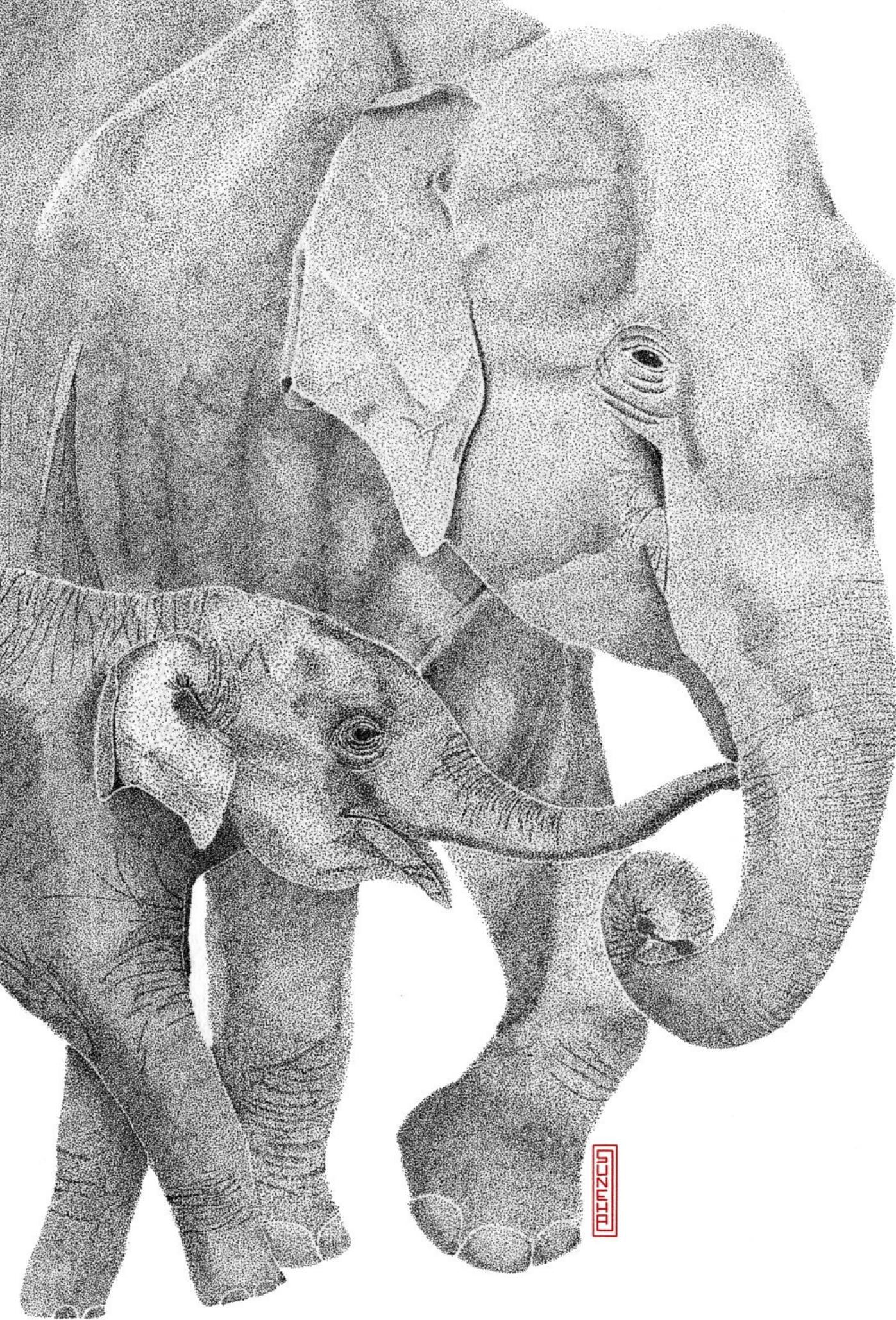
of purpose. It feels like a sacred homecoming. A powerful reset. The journey has been anything but linear, but it's led me right back to where I began - only now, with eyes wide open and a heart ready for what's next.

Music remains my anchor - a sacred thread weaving me back to my truest self. As I settle into this new chapter, I find myself reclaiming my voice in ways that feel more authentic than ever. I feel deeply called to walk the path of both music and healing - to help raise the collective consciousness through song, dance, and soul-led expression. This season feels different. More rooted. More reverent. Like a quiet return and a powerful beginning, all at once.

Something is unfolding, and I'm ready to follow where it leads...one note at a time. ■

“It was a turning point - one that reshaped my understanding of home, identity, and belonging

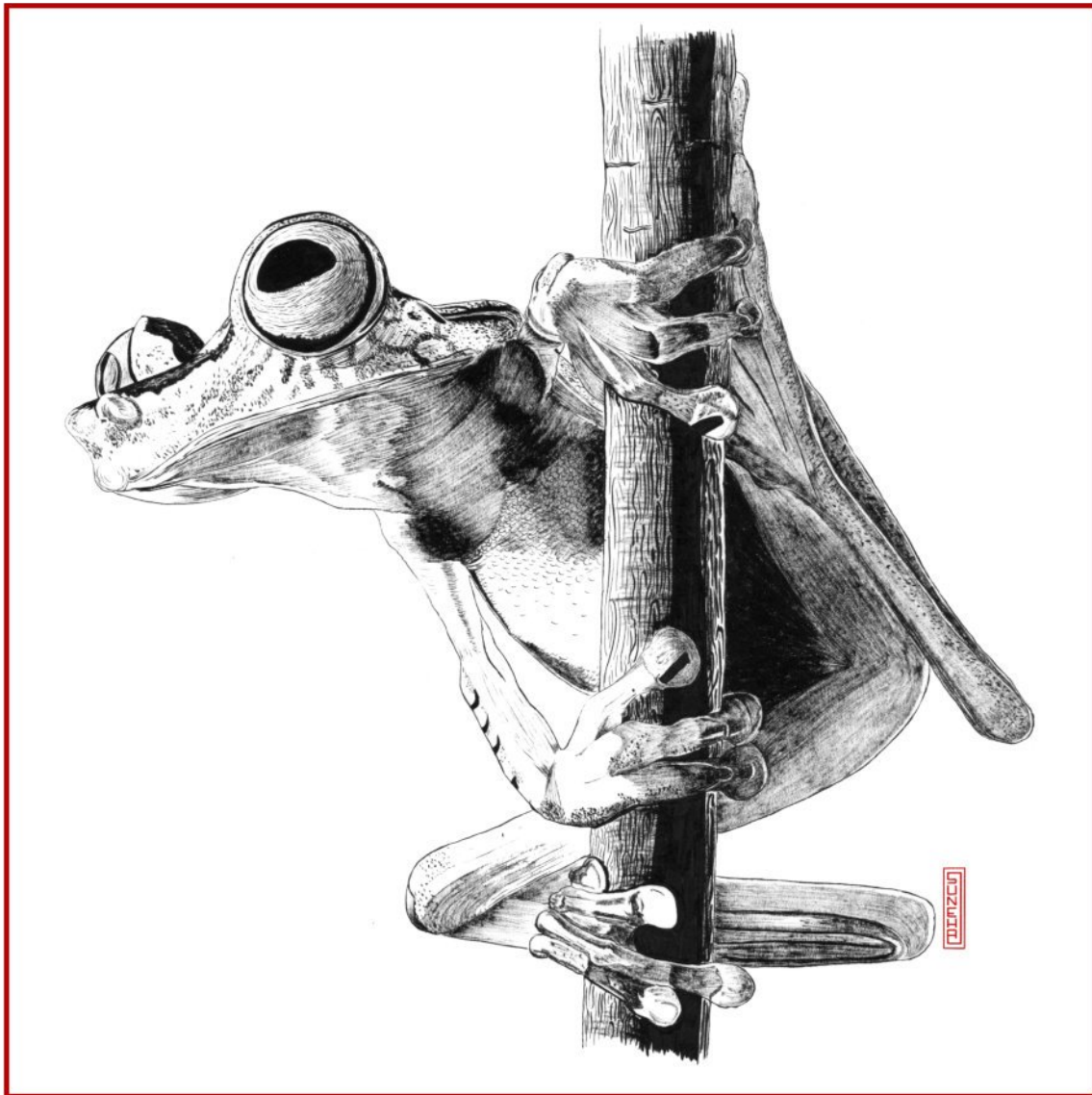




Spotting Wildlife



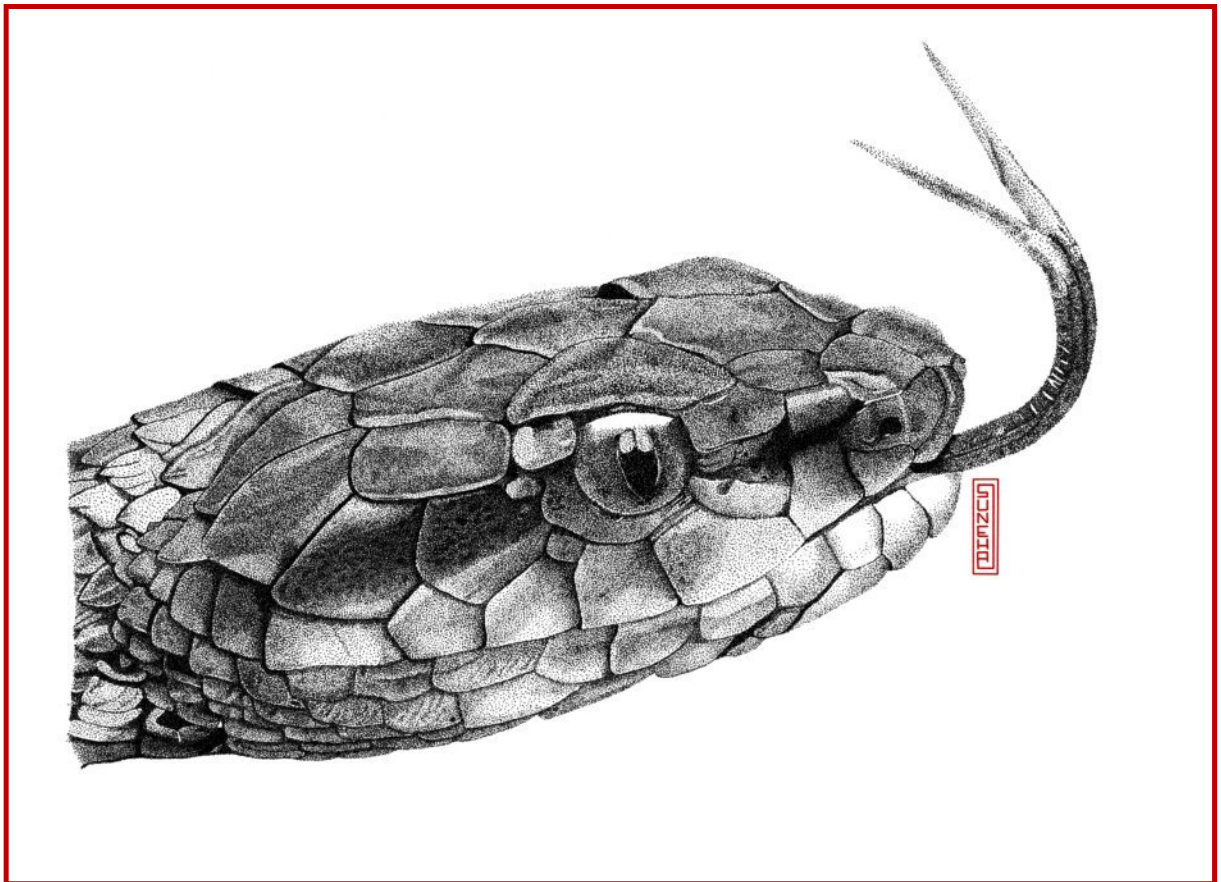
*Suneha M is a gifted artist living in Masinagudi
where she recreates the incredible biodiversity
around her, one dot at a time*

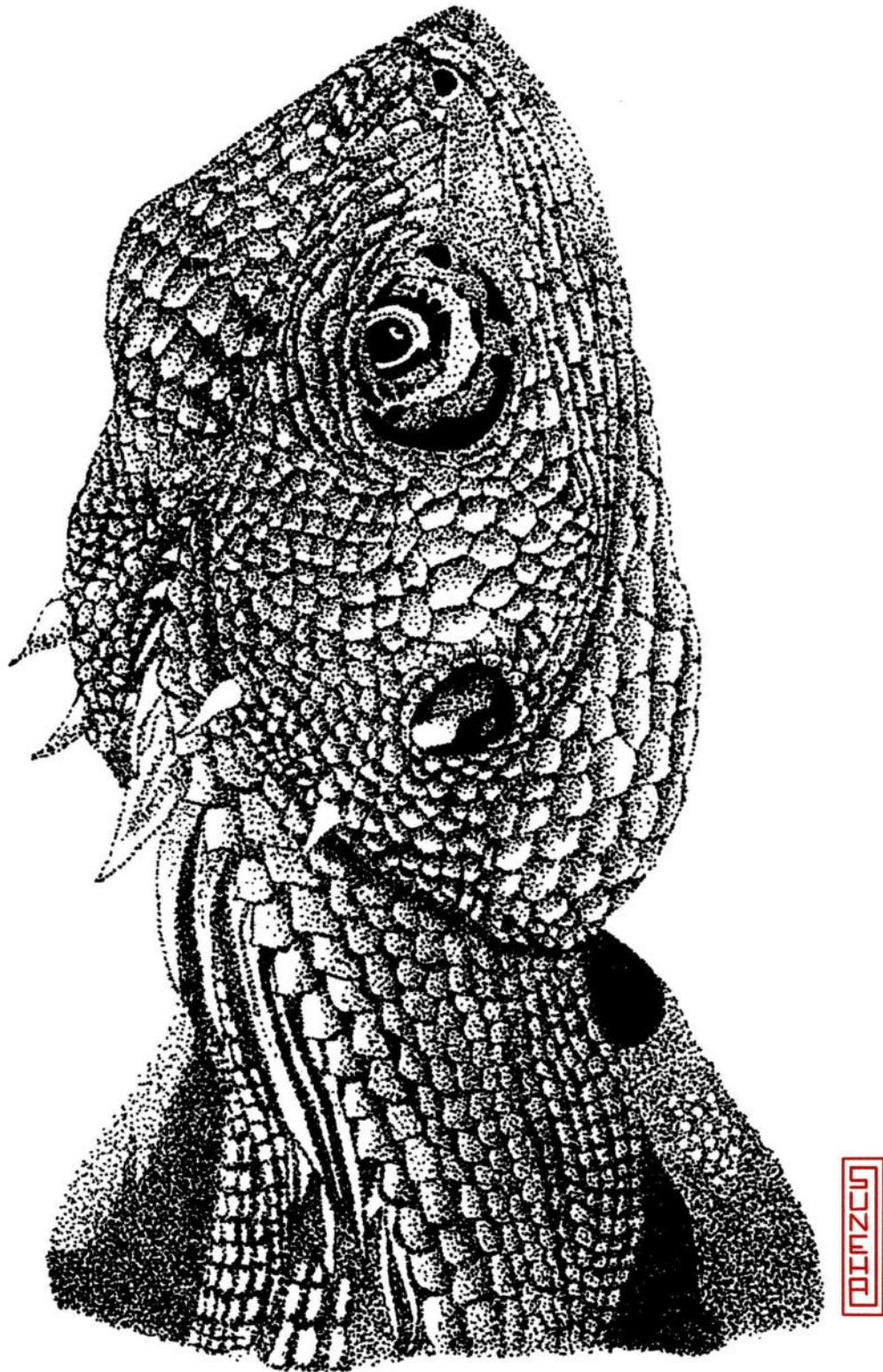




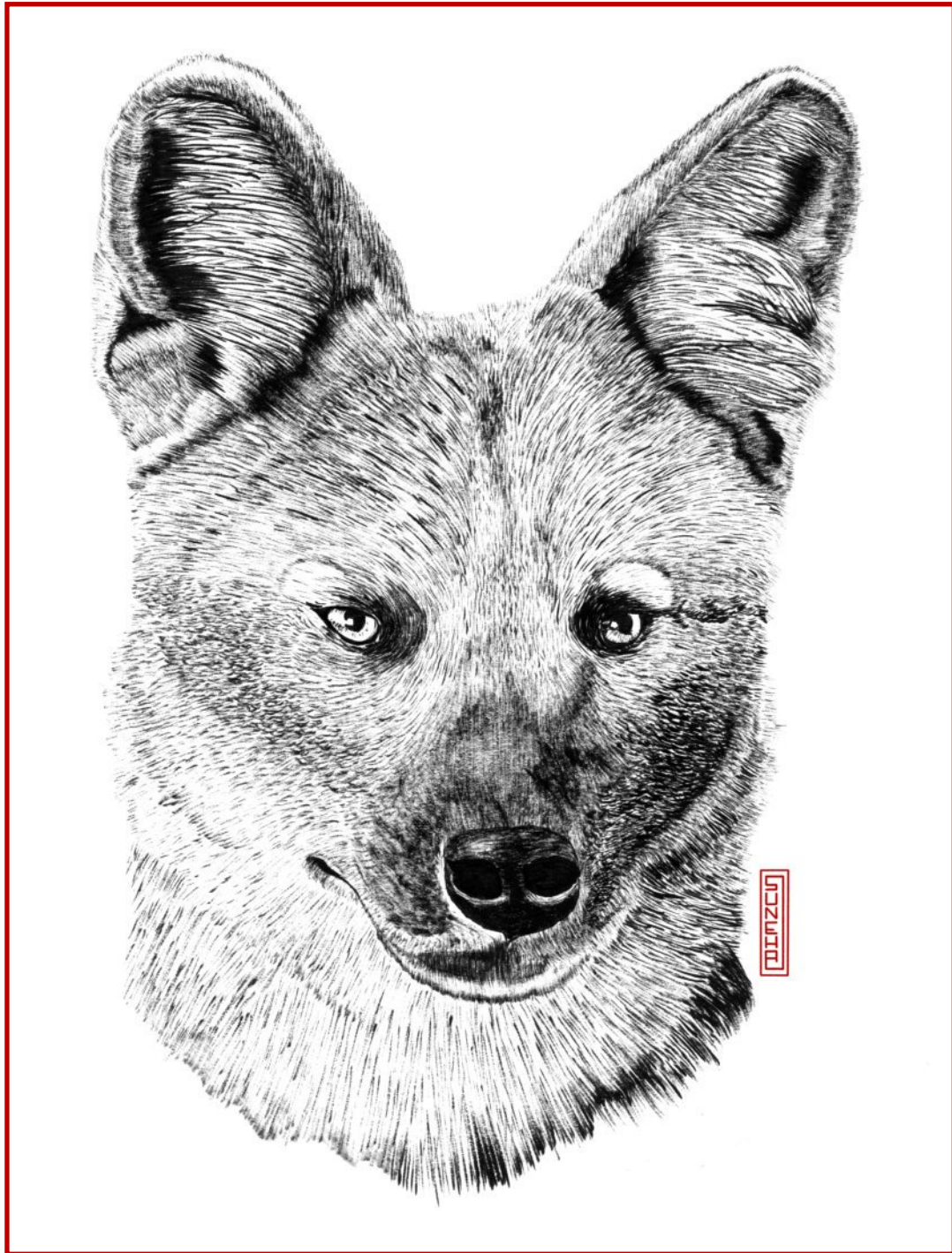


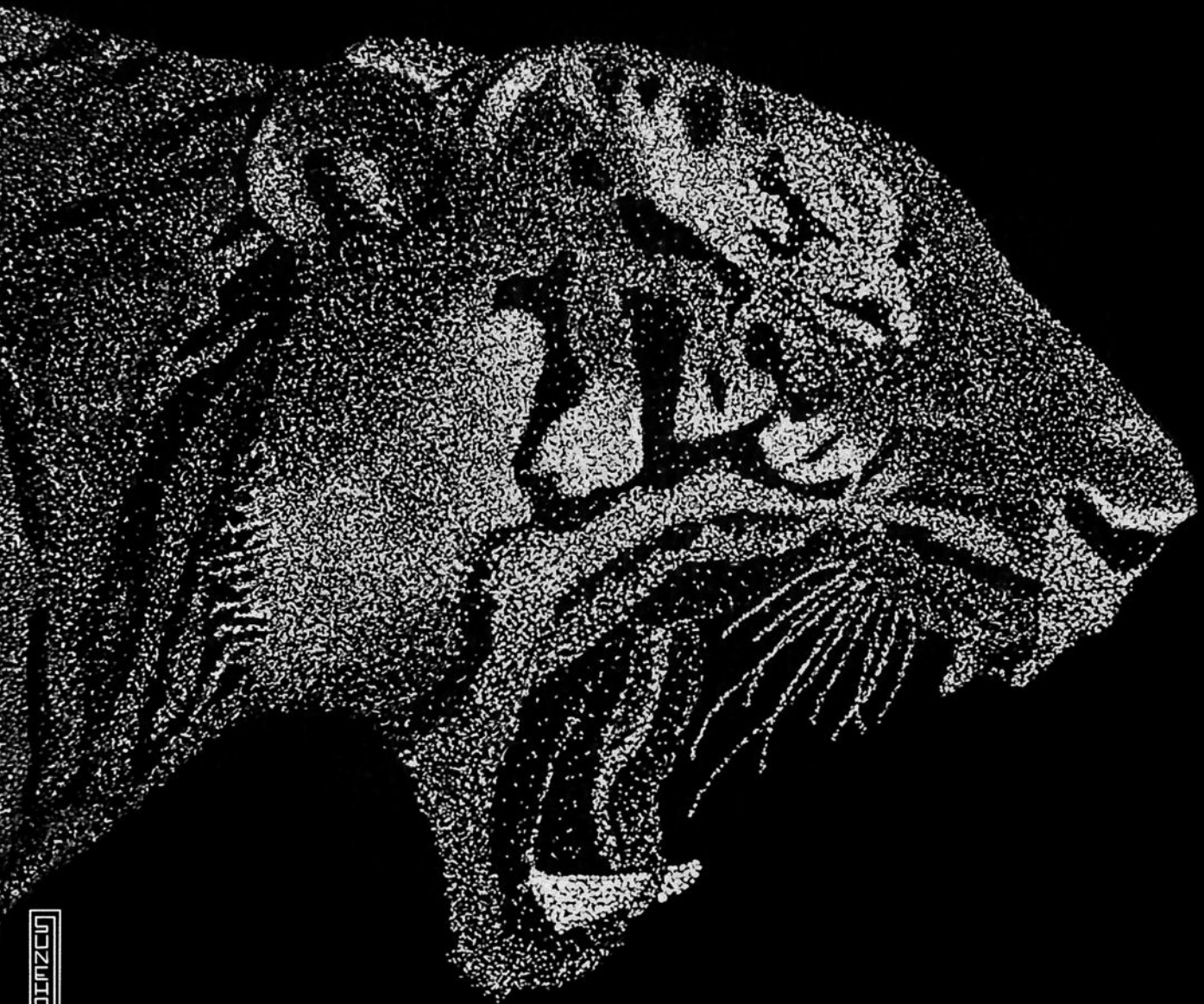














Suneha M is a biotech graduate by education, science writer by passion, graphic designer by chance, and artist by design. She started stippling (the art of putting one dot after another) as a way to slow down amidst the perpetual state of busyness.

About a decade ago she moved away from her job and the city and made Nilgiris her home. One dot at a time perhaps slowed down things more than expected! And dots transitioned into lines.

A brush, a bottle of ink and paper is all she needs to dive into the near-endless diversity of the animal kingdom.

For commissions and for more information see msuneha.com or contact the artist at suneha.mj@gmail.com



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The Snake Whisperer



*A trip to Masinagudi provided an enlightening conversation, as **Prynick Prym Raman** sat down to talk to a third-generation forest conservator, popularly known as 'Snake Murali'*

Babu Murali belongs to Masinagudi, that quaint hamlet nestled in the foothills of our serene Blue Mountains. His story is one of unwavering passion and dedication to wildlife conservation, a legacy passed

down through generations. His deep knowledge of the forest, honed through years of experience and inherited wisdom, makes him a trusted expert in handling reptiles and safeguarding wildlife.

Rooted In The Forest

Murali's grandfather, Hanumanthan, laid the foundation for the family's deep connection with the forest. A compounder working alongside the renowned forest veterinarian, Dr

Krishnamurthy, he specialised in elephant care. Hanumanthan played a crucial role in retrieving slugs from poached elephants during post-mortems and served as a forest department messenger, walking from Masinagudi to Gudalur to deliver messages. Joining the department in 1951, he was instrumental in building harnesses for camp elephants and constructing thatched shelters for them, earning a daily wage of one rupee and twenty paise - amounting to a modest sum each month. Despite his humble earnings, his commitment to wildlife never wavered, and he spent decades tending to the needs of the forest. His son, H Natarajan, was introduced to the world of conservation at the tender age of ten, assisting his father during school vacations. Witnessing the brutal aftermath of poaching, he developed a deep reverence for the forest, stating, "The forest existed even before humans did." This belief fuelled his lifelong commitment to protecting wildlife. In 1980, Natarajan joined the forest department, volunteering in post-mortem procedures, animal tracking, and anti-poaching operations. His relentless efforts against poaching led to a brutal attack by villagers benefiting from these illegal activities in 2006. Hospitalised and burdened with the responsibility of raising four sons, he reluctantly stepped back from active duty. However, he never truly left the forest, continuing to monitor activities and informing authorities of any suspicious movements. Even today, he reminisces about disappearing into the forest with tribal youth, finding solace in its tranquillity. The forest, to him, remains not just a

workplace but a sacred space where life thrives in its purest form.

The Snake Whisperer

Born in 1987, Murali inherited his ancestors' passion for conservation. Fascinated by snakes, he lacked access to formal education in herpetology but began rescuing small, non-venomous snakes in his early days. "I always used to pray that the snake should be non-venomous until I realised that venomous snakes were easier to rescue," he recalls with a chuckle.

In 2009, a turning point arrived when renowned herpetologist, Gerry Martin visited Mudumalai. Murali eagerly accompanied him, learning to identify, handle, and calm various snake species. "I went all over the forest with Gerry, serving as his guide while he taught me the nuances of handling reptiles," he shares. Impressed by Murali's quick learning and dedication, Martin gifted him a snake-handling hook - a symbol of his expertise. This not only enhanced his skill set but also gave him the confidence to work with a wider range of reptile species. His training sessions with Gerry allowed him to refine his techniques and understand the behaviour of different snakes, making him a more effective rescuer.

The Life Of A Rescuer

Over the past decade, Murali has rescued thousands of snakes and reptiles, earning the trust of the forest department and locals. Officers, even with diverse training, often call upon his expertise, even during odd hours. "You can never predict where a snake might hide," he explains. "I have rescued them from bathrooms, cupboards, roof tiles, and even

pillows." His work is not just limited to emergency rescues but also involves educating villagers on how to coexist with wildlife. By dispelling fears and misconceptions, he helps foster a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Murali emphasises that snakes generally avoid human encounters, often displaying warning postures or delivering dry bites rather than wasting venom. Having recorded over 6,000 rescues, he states, "Venomous



snakes are easier to handle because they stand their ground. Non-venomous ones, driven by their flight response, try to escape, making them harder to catch." His most challenging rescue involved a 20-foot-long rock python that had swallowed an adult deer. The python, entangled around a tree due to the deer's antlers wounding it mid-swallow, was treated at Sigur Beat Camp before being safely released. He recalls the effort it took to free the massive creature, ensuring both its safety and that of the surrounding environment.

Busting Myths And Spreading Awareness

Murali actively dispels misconceptions about snake bites and their treatment. He advises, "The first step is to stay calm and seek

medical help. Panic kills more than venom." Having survived a cobra bite himself, he recalls, "I remained calm, ate, and drank water normally, even as my vitals fluctuated." His experience serves as a testament to the importance of staying composed and seeking professional medical care rather than resorting to unreliable traditional remedies.

A devoted husband and father, Murali has trained his wife to handle non-venomous snakes. She assists in local rescues, and he is gradually introducing his three-year-old son to the world of reptiles, continuing the family legacy. His goal is to ensure that his child grows up with an innate respect for nature, just as he did.

A True Conservation Hero

Despite his invaluable contributions, Murali is yet to receive official recognition or benefits from the authorities. However, he remains undeterred, saying with a humble smile, "It's not about rewards but about the passion to safeguard our home - the forest."

With whatever little he earns from the department and rescue missions, he supports his family while educating youth at Ooty Government Arts College on the importance of snake conservation. His expertise is sought across South India, and he has even received job offers from European wildlife



experts. However, he has declined them all, choosing to stay rooted in the forest his ancestors protected. His dedication to the land of his forefathers is unwavering, and he hopes to pass on his knowledge to future generations.

Looking ahead, Murali dreams of encountering a King Cobra - an experience that eludes him and is on his bucket list. "My ancestors worshipped the forest that sustained them. I am proud to continue their work and protect it," he declares. His final words resonate with his unwavering commitment, "The forest will never abandon us, and we will not abandon it either."

A truly inspiring tale of passion and dedication, proving that every cog in this vast universe plays an essential role. His story is a testament to the unbreakable bond between humans and nature, and a reminder of how one individual's commitment can make a profound difference in the world. ■



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Let's Get Coffee!!



While tea and Ooty vegetables dominate our horizon, Rohan Mathias brings us a cupful of information on Kopi Luwak, the world's most expensive coffee and its presence in our hills

Brown Palm Civet © Anaga Devi

Kopi Luwak or wild and organic Indonesian civet coffee, was once regarded as the world's most expensive coffee, catapulting the Asian Palm Civet to global fame.

Here's the story that led to this bizarre discovery.

It is believed that when the Dutch colonised the islands of Java and Sumatra in the mid 18th century, they grew coffee for their own consumption and to be traded and shipped to their motherland, the Netherlands.

The locals who worked on the plantations were forbidden from enjoying the fruit of their labour. However the Dutch looked the other way when the locals brewed coffee from beans that passed through the digestive system of the Asian Palm Civet, which we now know was the cream of the crop - the ripest berries.

The locals sifted through the excreta of the Asian Palm Civet for coffee beans, washed, dried, roasted the beans and got their fix of coffee. It was only much later that they realised that the stomach juices of the Asian Palm Civet worked on the coffee bean to give it a far superior flavour. This revelation eventually spread like wildfire and created unprecedented demand for this new exotic type of coffee.

The Downside

The popularity of this drink, however, belied the dark side of its production. Greed quickly overshadowed erstwhile sustainable and ethical practices, leading to caged Civets being starved of any variety in their diet and fed only coffee berries on farms established on industrial levels. Such cruelty and exploitation was

soon brought to the attention of the markets by animal rights organisations, touching a nerve with conscious customers.

While this brought about a fair bit of correction, the politics of it all left local communities (who still followed principled practices) with the burden of having to prove that their produce was genuine. Another layer of controversy emerged when some strict vegetarian coffee connoisseurs were dismayed to learn that the Asian Palm Civet, which produces Kopi Luwak, is a voracious omnivore whose diet includes carrion, small mammals and insects. This knowledge left a bad taste in the mouths of this segment, shrinking the customer base.

Animals In Business

Considering the territory of the Asian Palm Civet spans across South and South-East Asia, it follows that the middle and lower reaches of the Nilgiris landscape lends itself to the right habitat for coffee and Civets. Balmaadi Estate situated on the

North West side of the Nilgiri massif is amongst the highest elevation coffee estates in India, and has pioneered the production of ethical Civet coffee in the Nilgiris. With a view to being as eco-friendly as possible, they have adopted least intrusive agricultural practices, and their coffee is grown under native Shola trees and other indigenous flora. After sundown, the estate is a sanctuary for wild animals, limiting human activity so that wildlife is not disturbed. This organic estate civet coffee has found an eager market in Japan.

Civets are not the only unusual processing units of coffee beans. Macaque monkeys and elephants are in the business too.

To gain insight into the unique flavour-profiles of civet and monkey coffee, I reached out to authorities on the subject, Mrs Unamali Thyagarajan from Balmaadi Estate in the Nilgiris and Ajay Mathulla from Kuppamudi Estate in the neighbouring district of Wayanad. According to Thyagarajan, "Civet Cat's Choice our brand of civet



Bonnet Macaque © Sameer Jain

parchment lends a pale honey tinge to the coffee flavour.” In contrast, Ajay Mathulla shared his experience with Bonnet Macaques, stating, “They consume approximately 2.5 tonnes of coffee annually on our estate. Keeping the beans in their mouth for a while, they target the sweet, sticky mucilage coating the coffee beans, which they suck dry before spitting out the seeds. Collecting Monkey Parchment is far more demanding on labour. This coffee has a distinctive complex, sweet flavour.”

When it comes to Kopi Luwak, the Toddy Cat or Asian Palm Civet feeds on the ripest berries as well. The enzymes in their digestive system reduce the coffee's harshness and acidity, resulting in a mellow cup of Robusta coffee.

Their monkey coffee product is retailed under the brand 'Monkey Business' by Nisha Dey Mathulla.

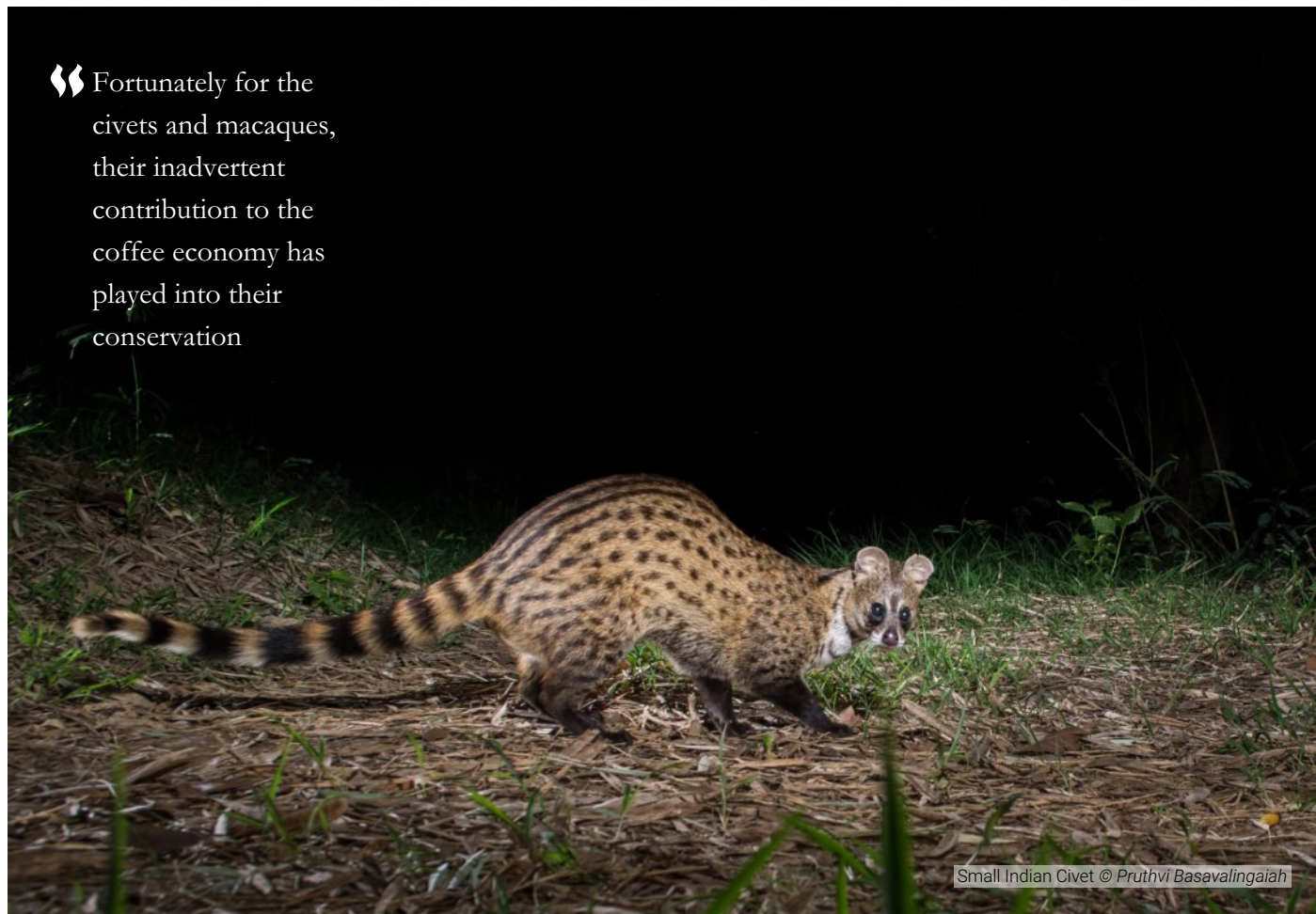
Capitalising on the trend has prompted some smaller planters to jump on the bandwagon, expanding their inventory to include this unconventional product.

Of the three species of civet found in the Nilgiris - the Asian Palm Civet, the Brown Civet and the Small Indian Civet - the Asian Palm Civet is the most common. While the Small Indian Civet and Asian Palm Civet are found in most of South and South-East Asia, the Brown Palm Civet is endemic to the Western Ghats of India. The numbers of all three species of civet are healthy and are classified as species of 'least concern' in the IUCN conservation status. As common as

they are, spotting them is still hard, as all three civet species are nocturnal for the most part.

The Brown Palm Civets spend most of their time in trees. During the day, they find themselves a quiet spot in a tree hollow or in a cluster of branches and vines, and become active at night. They do drop down to the ground to feed on fallen fruit and are seen commuting on the floor beneath the tea bushes on plantations. Their diet consists of fruits and berries, making them predominantly frugivores. They are celebrated for being seed dispersers of the forest as they feed on quite an array of wild fruits and berries and are known to have quite a large territory. At a glance, the Brown Palm Civet is easily distinguished by its stocky, robust tail.

☞ Fortunately for the civets and macaques, their inadvertent contribution to the coffee economy has played into their conservation



Small Indian Civet © Pruthvi Basavalingaiah

The Small Indian Civet gets its name from its relative size when compared to other civets. That apart, they are distinguishable by the symmetrical black markings on a beige coat as opposed to what looks like basic black and brown coats of the Asian Palm Civet and the Brown Palm Civet respectively. The Small Indian Civet are terrestrial and insectivorous, with a diet that includes mice and carrion among other creatures. Like the Asian Palm Civet, they have been seen scavenging at garbage dumps.

Elephant Trails

Fortunately for the civets and macaques, their inadvertent contribution to the coffee economy has played into their conservation. While wild elephants are known to

feed on coffee on private plantations in the Nilgiris and adjoining districts, planters find it unfeasible to collect elephant coffee for the sheer lack of quantity. A substantial amount of coffee beans are chewed by the elephant and rendered unrecoverable and only some make it through the digestive system unscathed. Besides, crop-raiding elephants head back to the forest during the day and are unwelcome on plantations.

In the north of Thailand however, some captive elephants have coffee berries added to their diet and churn out large quantities of Elephant coffee. This product is processed and sold under the brand Black Ivory Coffee, claiming to be the most expensive coffee in the world. ■



Elephant Droppings containing unscathed coffee beans © Jaishankar NCF



Asian Palm Civet Droppings © Ajay Mathulla



“ Such cruelty and exploitation was soon brought to the attention of the markets by animal rights organisations, touching a nerve with conscious customers

Asian Palm Civet © Pruthvi Basavalingaiah



Life Savers

A snapshot view of the vital role played by two dedicated citizens of the Nilgiris who make a life and death difference to the community they serve

Q: Who are you, and what is your role in emergency services?

A: I'm Ismail, an ambulance driver with over ten years of experience. I now drive the Rotary Mobile ICU ambulance. For me, this isn't just a job - it's a mission to save lives.

Q: What challenges do residents of the Nilgiris face in accessing emergency medical care?

A: In the Nilgiris, emergency care is often delayed due to long distances and winding roads. I've seen how those delays can cost lives - it's why our work matters so much.

Q: How did your perspective change after joining the Rotary ambulance team?

A: Earlier, I was just transporting patients. Now, I feel like I'm part of something bigger. With Rotary, I understand what service truly means - we're not just driving; we're giving people a second chance at life.

Q: What makes the Rotary Mobile ICU special?

A: Our ambulance is a mobile ICU with equipment like a ventilator, defibrillator, and cardiac monitor. We offer the same level of care as top hospitals - but at a much more reasonable cost than most private services.

Q: What challenges do you face on the road?

A: The hardest part is when other drivers ignore the siren or try to follow us to beat traffic. Tourists especially can be reckless, and it slows us down - which can be dangerous for the patient.

Q: What keeps you motivated despite the stress?

A: My family. I have two daughters, and their support keeps me going. They understand how emotionally taxing this job is, and they give me the strength to do it.

Q: Who is your teammate in the ambulance, and what's her role?

A: That's Archana, our nurse. She has over nine years of experience and has worked in emergency wards before joining our ambulance service. She's calm, skilled, and deeply committed.

Q: Archana, what makes this job different for you?

A: Working in a mobile ICU has changed me. I'm often the only medical person before we reach the hospital, and every decision matters. It's intense, but incredibly rewarding.

Q: Can you share a memorable incident?

A: Once, a patient had a massive heart attack mid-journey. He flatlined. I used the defibrillator, and we revived him. That moment will stay with me forever.

Q: How do you support families during emergencies?

A: Families are often panicked. I speak to them gently, offer reassurance, sometimes that's as important as the medical care.

Q: What happens once you reach the hospital?

A (Ismail): We don't just drop patients off. We stay until they're stable, help with paperwork, talk to doctors - we make sure no one feels abandoned.

Q: What would you like the public to understand?

A (Ismail): Please give way to ambulances. Respect traffic rules. We all have to share responsibility in saving lives.

A (Archana): Even basic CPR knowledge or understanding our role can make a difference. Awareness saves lives.

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© Karel Dobbels

BEFORE THE CUP

*We see them everyday as we go about our daily lives.
Prynick Prym Raman gets into conversation with one of
the tea pluckers that dot our hills, to find out her back
story. Say hello to Shanti...*

Amidst the rolling hills of the Nilgiris, where lush tea plantations stretch endlessly, an unsung group of artisans dedicate their lives to crafting the perfect cup. Often overlooked, these workers are the backbone of an industry that fuels millions each day. This is the story of Shanti, a woman whose life has been deeply intertwined with tea, shaping not only her destiny but the legacy of the trade itself.

The Journey Begins

Shanti's journey began as an infant when her family fled Ceylon and sought refuge in India. In search of stability, they moved across Tamil Nadu, working wherever opportunities arose. Yet, the Blue Hills always beckoned them back. "I was four when we moved between Nagapattinam, Madurai, and Kodaikanal every alternate year. But each time my parents struggled to find work, the Nilgiris offered sanctuary," she recalls.

Her parents endured backbreaking labour, toiling in fields under the relentless sun, their hands toughened by years of harvesting crops. With no financial security, they took whatever work they could find, often relocating at a moment's notice. Each move brought with it the hope of a better future, but it also meant uprooting their lives repeatedly. For young Shanti, the world seemed vast, yet uncertain, with home being wherever her family could earn a living.

Field Days

When her younger sister was born, frequent relocation became challenging. The family settled in Trichy, leaving Shanti in her uncle's care. With little guidance, school was merely a means to secure midday meals rather than an avenue for education. The concept of structured learning was foreign to her, and she spent most of her days playing or helping with chores. "We only went to school for the food. No one ever told

us education was important," she admits.

At ten, her family returned to Manjoor, where they found work as tea pluckers on a reputed estate. Too young to stay home alone, Shanti accompanied her parents to the fields, keenly observing the meticulous process of hand-harvesting tea. The scent of fresh leaves, the rhythmic motion of pluckers at work, and the camaraderie among workers fascinated her. By twelve, she had joined the workforce, earning an unofficial wage as child labour laws were taking effect. She recalls how estate managers discreetly paid her, recognising her skills despite the regulations.

By fourteen, she had mastered the craft, plucking up to 15 kilos a day. Her discipline and talent set her apart, making her a sought-after worker among estate owners. "I wasn't just chasing money; I could read people

well. No matter the pay, I refused to work under unfair supervisors,” she shares. Her dedication earned her a reputation, and she soon navigated the industry with confidence. She learned to distinguish different tea varieties, identify optimal harvesting times, and perfect techniques that protected the plant while ensuring high-quality yields. “Plucking isn’t just about filling a bag. Each bud must have the right colour and aroma for the best tea,” she explains.

Growing Into Independence

By twenty-one, Shanti gained financial independence and basic literacy, thanks to friends who taught her to read and count. Paydays were moments of joy, filled with shared treats and camaraderie. “We didn’t carry purses, so we worked only half-days to avoid losing our wages in the fields. I’d give every rupee to my mother for household expenses,” she reminisces. Her sense of responsibility grew as she got older, and she took pride in being able to contribute to the family’s livelihood.

As her skills improved, she started working for different estates and independent growers, selecting jobs based on work conditions and fair pay rather than necessity alone. Her name became well-known among plantation owners, and she was often called upon when high-quality pluckers were in demand.

Marriage And New Challenges

Marriage at twenty-two took her to Melur Hatti, a new world where she had to navigate cultural shifts and language barriers. “Life in labour colonies was familiar and communal. Moving to a Badaga settlement, where I didn’t speak the language, was daunting.” The Badaga

community had its own customs, and adapting to a structured household life after years of independence was difficult. However, she persevered, learning the dialect and adjusting to new expectations.

Within three years, she was a mother of two daughters. Her priorities shifted from that of a carefree young woman to those defined by financial security, ensuring her children had opportunities she never did. “A family is judged by how its children are treated, and I wanted mine to be raised like princesses,” she asserts. Despite her traditional surroundings, she held firm to her belief that her daughters should receive an education.

Determined to build a better future, she saved meticulously, balancing household responsibilities with work. She took up more selective assignments, ensuring that her income was stable while maintaining her integrity in the trade. Her husband supported her ambitions, and together they planned for a home of their own.

The Science Of Tea

Her focus on tea deepened, transforming from a worker into an expert. She sketched out the anatomy of tea bushes, explaining growth cycles and how precise nipping techniques could enhance yield without damaging plants. “Even if I pluck just a handful today, I won’t harm my bushes for short-term gain,” she declares. Her reverence for tea plants reflects her profound commitment - not just to her profession but to sustainable agriculture.

The nuances of tea-plucking fascinated her. She could tell by the

“Her discipline and talent set her apart, making her a sought-after worker among estate owners”

texture and scent of a bud whether it was ready to be harvested. “The real art is in touch - feeling the tenderness of the buds. Today, machines strip entire layers, sacrificing quality for quantity,” she laments. The commercialisation of the industry disturbed her, as mass production compromised the delicate balance of traditional harvesting techniques.

A Lasting Legacy

Even after forty years, Shanti can hand-pick 100 kilos in a day, a testament to her skill. Disheartened by modern methods, she chose independence, working selectively for estates that upheld traditional harvesting practices. Having built a home and secured her daughters’ education in Coimbatore, she now mentors young harvesters, ensuring that the artistry of tea picking is not lost.

Her wisdom extends beyond the fields. She has learned the value of networking, perseverance, and self-respect. Her parting advice is simple yet profound: “Always engage with those above you to grow. If you only socialise with those below, you may

feel superior, but that illusion will be your downfall.”

Her story is not just about tea but about resilience, determination, and the pursuit of excellence. In an industry driven by demand, Shanti remains a guardian of quality, ensuring that each leaf she touches is a reflection of her lifelong passion. She is true testimony of how, though we may be small in this vast world, dedication and passion can make us larger than life. In her humble ways and, some would call, humble calling, Shanti, I believe, walks taller than most. ■

Note to readers: The photographs used are generic images as Shanti did not want her photograph in the magazine to ensure her privacy.





ARTISANS OF LIQUID GOLD

Inside43 takes a sweeping look at the history of tea in the district, through the lens of one its key estates

Amid the serene hills of The Nilgiris lies a legacy shaped by determination and resilience - a story deeply intertwined with the history of the land and the passage of time. The Tuttapullum estate's origins trace back to 1884 when it was first established under British colonial rule as Tuttapullum, Boddanie, Lovehill, and Odayarhanni Estates. These lush lands, rich in agricultural potential, changed hands among British owners, with Mr JTF Wilson emerging as one of the last custodians before India's independence.

A Legacy Rooted in History

The Nilgiris have long been a region of strategic and economic significance. During the British colonial era, the district was transformed into a hub of plantation agriculture, with coffee, cinchona, and most notably, tea, becoming dominant crops. The cool climate, high altitude, and fertile soil made it an ideal location for tea cultivation, leading to the establishment of several estates, including those that would later form the foundation of this legacy.

The Nilgiris was not only a plantation hub but also a place of cultural convergence. The Todas, an indigenous pastoral community, coexisted with British settlers, traders and labourers from different parts of South India. This mix of cultures led to the region's unique identity, where colonial influence blended with indigenous traditions, shaping both the economy and lifestyle of the people.

The transformation of these estates into thriving Indian-owned enterprises began in the mid-20th century. The



Chidamabaram Pillai and estate workers

transition marked a significant shift from colonial ownership to indigenous stewardship, ensuring the preservation of the land's agricultural significance. With a keen understanding of the terrain and a vision for sustainable growth, new custodians embraced the challenge of nurturing the estate, integrating themselves into the rhythm of the Nilgiris.

The pivotal moment came in 1958, when a historic negotiation took place. Determined to secure a future in the tea industry, Chidamabaram Pillai, along with his co-brother, Mariya Pillai and the latter's son, M Thangavelu, gathered the necessary resources to acquire Havukal and Tuttipullum Estates from Sorab Ardeshir. This acquisition was not merely a transaction; it was a symbol of resilience and ambition. Tuttipullum, sprawling across 720

acres, and Havukal around 400 acres, became home to a thriving community of workers, whose dedication shaped their growth.

While Chidamabaram Pillai spearheaded Tuttipullum, Thangavelu Pillai took over the reins in Havukal. Under the stewardship of Chidamabaram Pillai, the estates were carefully nurtured, blending traditional knowledge with innovative techniques. He became known for his relentless work ethic, often walking miles across the estate's rugged terrain to oversee operations. The acquisition marked the beginning of an era where the land was no longer just a remnant of colonial enterprise but a testament to indigenous perseverance.

A Changing Landscape

During this period, The Nilgiris was experiencing rapid transformations.

As colonial rulers exited and Indian entrepreneurs took charge, there was an emergence of new economic and social structures. Roads were expanded, small townships flourished, and local communities became integral to the plantation economy. The influx of workers from various parts of South India brought about a cultural amalgamation, enriching the region with diverse traditions, languages, and ways of life.

The tea industry in the Nilgiris also played a crucial role in India's economy post-independence. The estates not only provided employment to thousands but also established trade connections that fuelled the growth of small businesses and ancillary industries. The rise of Nilgiri tea as a globally recognised brand further reinforced the region's economic importance.

“The transformation of these estates into thriving Indian-owned enterprises began in the mid-20th century

As the estate grew, so did its influence on the surrounding communities. The plantations became a home to many who were not originally from the Nilgiris, but found themselves embedded in its culture and traditions. Generations of workers and estate managers adapted to the region's unique way of life, creating a harmonious blend of past and present. Many of these workers, initially arriving as migrants, put down roots in the hills, their families becoming an intrinsic part of the Nilgiris' evolving social fabric.

The estate's role extended beyond cultivation; it became a centre for community development, providing livelihoods and fostering social structures that supported the families who depended on it. Schools were built to educate the children of estate workers, medical facilities were introduced, and local markets flourished, ensuring the self-sufficiency of these communities. The land's whispers carried stories of perseverance, resilience, and the unwavering commitment to sustaining its prosperity.

An Enduring Spirit

Over the years, Tuttapullum has stood as a testament to the power of dedication and adaptability. Under the

leadership of Sunderagopal (Mr Chidambaram Pillai's son), who carried forward this legacy for 50 years, the estate thrived. Known for his fairness and generosity, he ensured that workers were always treated with dignity and respect, further strengthening the bond between the land and its people. While the tea industry has faced challenges - from labour shortages to environmental concerns - the estate has continued to innovate, ensuring that tradition and modernity coexist. Advances in sustainable farming, reforestation efforts, and eco-friendly practices have reinforced its place as a leader in responsible agriculture.

Beyond the estate, the Nilgiris itself underwent remarkable transformations. The post-Independence era saw increasing conservation efforts aimed at preserving its biodiversity. The region, home to diverse flora and fauna, became a subject of environmental focus, with conservation programmes protecting its lush forests and water sources. Wildlife sanctuaries and national parks were established, highlighting the delicate balance between agriculture and ecological preservation.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the introduction of tea cooperatives and auction centres in places like Coonoor and Ooty helped small-scale tea growers gain direct market access, further revolutionising the industry. The emergence of Nilgiri tea in international markets brought recognition to estates like this, ensuring continued growth.

Tuttapullum's history is not merely a record of ownership or commerce; it is a reflection of the countless

individuals who have walked its paths, tended to its fields, and built their lives upon its soil. It is a legacy that transcends generations, bound by the deep connection between people and land.

The Future Of The Land

As time moves forward, the estate remains a beacon of heritage and progress. Its story is not just about tea - it is about the enduring relationship between humanity and nature, about those who have listened to the whispers of the land and shaped its future with care and commitment.

The Nilgiris continues to thrive, and with each passing season, both this estate, and others, stand as a reminder of this industry's remarkable journey through history - one that will carry forward for generations to come. As tea tourism grows and technology transforms agricultural practices, the estate remains steadfast in preserving its heritage while embracing the future. It is a living testament to the land's whispers, echoing through time and guiding those who call it home. ■



Andrew Penton, JTF Wilson's great grandson on a visit to the Nilgiris with Abhirami, granddaughter of Chidambaram Pillai

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The Kingmaker

Inside43 talks to Sagaynathan, fondly known as Mr Sagai, a revered Physical Director at St Joseph's College (SJC), Coonoor. With an illustrious career spanning over 33 years, his journey is about dedication, discipline and the pursuit of excellence

Most alumni still recall him as a fearsome figure who instilled discipline in them. He was known for his roaring voice, which could bring all the students to a standstill, maintaining pin-drop silence. His very presence commanded respect, and he was considered a star among the boys at school.

Born on October 26, 1961, in Coonoor, Sagai was raised in a close-knit family. His parents, Arokia Das and Francina, hailed from Kotagiri and Coonoor, respectively. Growing up with four sisters and an elder brother, he imbibed values of perseverance and responsibility early in life. Initially residing in Ann Villa, Appleby, the family later moved to College Road, and eventually to

Wellington in 2002, where he currently resides.

Academic And Athletic Journey

Sagai's educational path was deeply intertwined with his athletic aspirations. A proud Josephite, he studied at SJC from his primary school days until his 12th standard. He pursued a B.Com at Ooty Arts College and later completed his Master's degree at Annamalai University through correspondence. However, his true calling lay in sports education.

Determined to turn his passion into his profession, he obtained a B.P.Ed from YMCA college, Nandanam, followed by an M.P.Ed from YMCA, as well. Further enhancing his credentials, he completed an M.Phil

from Annamalai University. To hone his expertise, he took a six-month break from SJC to attend an athletics coach training SAI course in LNPV college Kariyavattam, Trivandrum, Kerala. During his college days he competed in athletics and football with prestigious institutions like MCC and Loyola in Chennai, making a name for himself in those circles too.

The Making Of A Mentor

Returning to SJC in 1988, Sagai became a regular staff member in 1991. By 2001, he had earned the position of Physical Director, a role he upheld with distinction. His tenure was marked by relentless commitment to moulding young athletes, setting them on the path to success.

He credits his formative years to Chinnaswamy and Manoharan, senior athletes at SJC, who inspired him to take an interest in sports, as well as his coaches, Mr Peter and Mr Beale. He acknowledges the unwavering support of Brother Francis and Brother Bosco, who gave him the opportunity to join the Josephite family, and encouraged him to impart his knowledge and skills to aspiring athletes.

A Champion's Legacy

An accomplished athlete himself, Sagai was a stalwart in interschool and intercollegiate competitions. Representing Azad House, he secured multiple athletic championships and set five records, one of which remains unbroken in interschool competitions since 1982. He also represented our district in athletics through the Gladiator Club and earned accolades for his achievements.

A versatile sportsman, he played football for his college team and even competed against MCC and Loyola in Open state-level championship meets in Chennai. His deep understanding of scientific training methods became instrumental in coaching students at SJC, ensuring victories for 28 consecutive years - a feat recognised with an Award of Excellence by Governor Rosiah. He not only produced numerous athletes, well-known figures in their time at school, but had the ability to make footballers and athletes kings among the boys; the ability earning him the affectionate title of 'King Maker'.

"Today, people are more focused on physical training, but the technique remains in the scientific understanding, which I learned during

my M.P.Ed days. This helped me mould the children according to their capabilities and make them champions."

Guiding The Future

Under his leadership, SJC's athletics team has garnered numerous district and state-level medals. In 2018 alone, his students won 15 gold medals at the state level. His football team has been state champions thrice, in 2006, 2015, and once more during his tenure, while consistently securing runner-up and third-place finishes. Several of his students have progressed to Khelo India and international competitions, carrying his mentorship onto larger platforms.

He still recalls how he used to spend his Saturdays in school with the children and play movies for them. "I loved my Saturdays in school, and I made it a point never to miss it, even if I had personal commitments." His fond memories include children hooting in the dark cinema hall and then behaving like innocent lambs when the lights came back on. He says, "I always see children run away and hide even if they didn't do anything wrong. Sometimes, children have to be naughty too - it is part and parcel of growing up."

A kind soul, he occasionally spoke Tamil in a funny way when talking to students caught in acts of naughtiness - something that still brings smiles to the faces of thousands of former students.

"I give all the credit to the children. It is their talent and hard work that have brought me to this level in this world."

Beyond sports, Mr Sagai has served as a coordinator for cultural fests and tourism, adding to the holistic

“For the countless lives he has touched, Sagai is more than a coach; he is a kingmaker, shaping the past, present, and future of the Nilgiris’ young athletes

development of students. Despite his rigorous schedule, he remains committed to fitness, frequenting the YMCA gym, inspired by gym masters Shanmugam and Guna.

He fondly recalls an incident when he was in charge of taking students to examinations at other schools. One student went missing - only to be found pretending to be injured after falling off a parapet wall, attempting to skip the exam. Sagai motivated the student to be strong and not be upset over trivial things, an act that changed the student's life. "Today, he is a big shot and still comes to visit me and gives me a hug for that day."

He still believes that being around children has helped him maintain his youth. "Children are one of the best creations of God, and the way they expect me to still be stylish and fit at the age of 63 keeps me going." Even after his retirement, Holy Innocents School brought him into their Physical Education department, where his

methods have taken the school's football team to state-level competitions for three years and gained recognition for the athletic team in interschool sports.

Beyond The Field

Sagai is a proud father to Ashwin Jude, who followed in his father's footsteps in high jump, excelling at district and divisional levels and competing at the state level.

It must be noted that Sagai was not just a strict disciplinarian, but a man of passion as well. A side that many people don't often get to see is his immense love for birds - he has a vast collection of finches, parakeets, and more, which he cherishes daily. As a dog lover, he has had many pets throughout his life and still has a loving Labrador. At home, he is a loving husband, father and pet owner.

Philosophy And Inspiration

For Sagai, teaching is more than a profession - it is a calling. He cherishes the bond with his students,

and considers them his 'treasures'. He firmly believes in the values instilled by SJC, reminding students to uphold the school's motto: 'Non Quam Non Paratus' meaning 'Never Unprepared' and live by their house mottos - 'Truth through triumph', 'Fight till the end', 'Forever faithful' and 'Never give in.'

"I always told the children that they were the best and that they could bring out more talent with hard work and dedication."

"Don't fall in love with the workplace, but love your work. There is no substitute for hard work, and the Almighty will always reward you," he often advises his students. For the countless lives he has touched, Sagai is more than a coach; he is a kingmaker, shaping the past, present, and future of the Nilgiris' young athletes.

His legacy stands as an inspiration, proving that true greatness lies not just in winning medals, but in creating champions for life. ■





Born and raised in the pristine mountains of the Nilgiris, I was a rather insecure child especially when it came to my dreams and goals. I believed my dreams were unachievable, and those around me reinforced this idea. Luckily, something inside me made me rebel against that perspective that was

thrust upon me. Racing was certainly the most cherished dream of mine. Growing up in the Nilgiri mountains, a friend and I used to spend all day discussing motorcycles and speed; on the back of which I started watching MotoGP, and spent a lot of money buying motor sports magazines. I would then cut pictures from the

magazine and stick them all over my room. I was fuelled by the roar of my father's old Yamaha RX135, a two-stroke four-speed machine on which I learnt to ride. It was a whole three years of asking and waiting before he agreed to teach me. And with that first lesson I understood the incredible complexity of motorcycles,

an activity where your entire body and mind has to be in perfect coordination to make the machine perform at its best.

Learning Curve

My passion grew quickly, and I was soon leaning towards a faster machine; I bought my first motorcycle in class 12 - a KTM RC390, a dream which I had held for more than five years. This bike was my pride and joy and every Sunday I used to take it out for a solo ride to understand the machine better. Within a few weeks I adapted to the bike, and it to me, as I tried to push my limits on the hill roads. I quickly understood that the streets were not the place to test a machine's fullest potential, and it was definitely not safe to attempt this. And on the back of this, one day, just like that, I made a decision that would change my life - to test my skills on a race track. While I was very excited about my decision, my parents were less enamoured by the idea. They were entirely unconvinced that this was a good route for me to take with my life. Speed and two-wheelers were viewed by them with considerable suspicion. I knew I had to figure out a way to take part in a racing academy session that would cost me forty thousand rupees for a two-day training. The only option I had at the time was to sell my brand new mobile phone that my parents had given me as I was going away to college. I sold the phone and told them somebody had stolen it on the bus, well-prepared for the punishments that would ensue on the back of my 'carelessness'.

The track days were held over weekends, and here I was suddenly... my dream, a reality at last. The very

first day my bike developed some problems and I ended up having to borrow a bike from a friend, one that was not quite suited to my needs. Surprisingly, I did far better than I expected, even on that borrowed bike, and I was the fastest in my batch of Level One students during that session - giving me a confidence boost I really needed. To progress, however, required further financial inputs, and luckily my mother's relatives and some friends came in with some help for my next two training courses. I also did a few part-time jobs to supplement my funding and, with the next levels done, I was now in the open category as a racer. The open category was slightly more economical, and I took a CBR 250R to ride along with professional racers and national champions, learning from the best, as it were. With each lap I felt myself being able to move faster (at the Kari Motor Speedway), and in the afternoon I raced against a rider on a RC390 - while I was faster on turns, he was faster on the straights, something that was noticed by the team owner of the RC390 who

ran one of the biggest racing teams in India. This gentleman encouraged me to participate in the national championships in the coming year - needless to say I was on cloud nine.

Of course, the challenge still lay in raising the capital to fund this - racing is an expensive business, and, as I do not come from privilege, I always knew I would have to make my own way in the world. The other hurdle was to convince my parents that I needed to do this with their blessing. I sat them down and explained the situation, and showed them some of the videos, which enabled them to see what my capabilities were; and they gave their grudging consent.

The First Big One

My first national race at the Madras Motor Race Track (MMRT) was exhilarating. I still remember stepping onto the MMRT for the first time. It felt surreal. The track was massive, smooth, and nothing like the stop-and-go corners I was used to at the Kari Motor Speedway. I had no idea what to expect, but I was ready to give it my all. During the morning track walk, my teammate casually



mentioned that riders take the first corner at 140 km/h. I thought he was joking. That was literally the top speed of my Yamaha R15, the bike I was set to race. How was this even possible? My heart pounded as I imagined tipping into a turn at full throttle. But there was no turning back now. Once I got on the bike and rolled onto the track, everything changed. The first lap was a blur - I was just trying to understand the layout, the flow, the braking zones. But soon the adrenaline kicked in. The track wasn't just fast; it was alive, pushing me to be better, sharper, and more in sync with my machine. By the end of my first practice, I clocked a two-minute, 15-second lap time. For a first-timer, that was actually a solid start. My team was impressed, and honestly, so was I. This was the moment I had been working so hard for, and it felt like I was finally where I was meant to be.

The Highs And The Lows

A month later, I was back at MMRT for my second track day, more confident than before. I had booked my bus tickets, packed my gear, and mentally prepared myself for another step forward. But racing has a way of humbling you when you least expect it. On my second lap, flying down the main straight at over 140 km/h, I grabbed the front brake a little too aggressively - and in an instant, I lost the front end. I don't remember the exact moment of impact. All I know is that one second, I was riding at full speed, and the next, I was tumbling across the asphalt, my body slamming into the ground. When I finally stopped rolling, everything hurt. My collarbone was broken, my hands were bruised, and my racing suit was

shredded, my helmet was broken. Lying there on the side of the track, I had only one thought: was this the end? And so on the back of this I was forced to take a break. The pain wasn't just physical - it was mental. Sitting at home, unable to ride, watching others progress while I was stuck in recovery...it was crushing. I had put everything into racing, and now, it felt like all that effort had come to a halt. But giving up was

“Within a few weeks I adapted to the bike, and it to me, as I tried to push my limits on the hill roads

never an option. Every single day, I pushed myself through recovery - physio, workouts, whatever it took to get back on the bike. And just when I was ready to return, Covid hit!

A Second Chance

While everything in the world shut down, somehow, racing events kept happening. That's when I got a call from my team owner. One of the registered riders had dropped out of the National Endurance Racing Championship. I had an opportunity to take his place - no time for practice, no preparation, just straight into the race. I said yes immediately. I

arrived at the track early in the morning, stomach twisting into nervous knots. This was the National Championship. More than 200 riders from all over India were competing. I couldn't afford to mess this up. The pressure was intense, and I was so anxious that I had to go to the restroom and throw up. But the moment I got on the bike, my concerns melted away. Lap after lap, I built my rhythm, pushing myself harder, faster. I clocked times between 2 minutes 13 seconds and 2 minutes 12 seconds, proving to myself that I still had it in me. Endurance racing is a team event, and after my first stint, I handed the bike over to my co-rider. But luck wasn't on our side and he crashed. The bike needed repairs, and we lost valuable time. When it was finally my turn again, the handling was off, the setup wasn't perfect, but I pushed through. We finished in the top 18 in our category. For someone with barely any track time, it felt like a victory. I came home exhausted but proud - I had stepped into the Nationals, faced my fears, and proved that I belonged.

A few months later, another opportunity knocked. This time, it was the National Drag Racing Championship. I entered the 300-400cc Pro Stock category and rode a KTM RC 390. It was an entirely different kind of racing - short, explosive, and all about reaction time and precision. I gave it everything I had and finished fifth in my category. Out of all the riders, I was the only one from the Nilgiris to achieve a top-five finish at a national event. Coming home as a national racer changed a lot and everything felt different. My

parents, once sceptical about my racing dreams, were now my biggest supporters. The same people who had worried about my future were now proudly talking about my achievements. News channels interviewed me, and for the first time, I felt like I had truly made a mark. The journey had never been easy - financial struggles, injuries, setbacks. But every time I'd been knocked down, I'd found a way to get back up. Because at the end of the day, racing isn't just about speed. It's about resilience. It's about fighting for what you love, no matter what the cost.

Racing To Resilience

I had a strong resolve to become a national champion. But I knew it wouldn't be easy. At 78 kg, I had to cut down to the 50s or 60s to be at my peak. I pushed myself to the extreme - training for 4-5 hours a day, running 10 km daily, cycling, and maintaining a strict diet with no sugar, oil, or spices. And of course, there was Covid. Financially, it was an incredibly tough time. I wasn't earning, and my family couldn't afford the expense of my racing. After dedicating so much to the sport, I had to step back due to a lack of funds. It was heartbreaking, but it also gave me clarity. I realised I needed financial stability to continue my passion. I pivoted to corporate sales and joined an edtech company. Despite the challenge of balancing work and racing - most races and practice sessions happened on weekends and the timings often clashed with my work - I persevered. Along side I also excelled in sales. In just two months, I became the youngest team leader, and within nine months, I generated over ₹1 crore in revenue.

As I climbed the corporate ladder, I suffered a broken collarbone, a major setback that affected my ability to function. But I pushed through, recovered, and continued performing at a high level. With my earnings, I finally bought my first 300cc motorcycle, a Yamaha R3, but had to sell it due to family circumstances. Despite these ups and downs, my passion for racing never faded. I slowly built up my gear, setting aside an Arai RX7 helmet and boots, hopeful that I'd return to the track one day. After 790 days, I finally did. On my fourth or fifth lap back, I clocked 2 minutes 12 seconds, proving to myself that I was still in the game. I went on to finish in the top 10 in one of the National Championship rounds, racing as an official rider for Team Gulf India - one of my proudest moments.

Changing Gears

However, tragedy struck during the last round when I lost a close friend in a racing accident. It forced me to step back and reassess my path. Through these experiences, I realised I always had an entrepreneurial spirit. After learning from two previous startup attempts, I finally co-founded OSC International with a friend. Our mission? To create an ecosystem for sustainability and wellness, solving even a small percentage of the world's problems - because every step toward a better future matters. And this is just the beginning.

Through our company, we are creating sustainability and wellness solutions for the world. And among our most special projects, we are building India's first holistic health and wellness platform for women - FEMSYNC. We are a holistic wellness

platform designed to align with women's natural rhythms, providing personalised solutions in fitness, nutrition, and mental well-being.

I suppose this is a different track, equally challenging, but equally satisfying. It gives me great peace to know that now, from living my dream life, I have moved to helping women live theirs. I do it to honour my mother who I watched struggle through her cycle. While my passion for motorcycle racing will take me back into that world, I hope until then I am able to serve, and level the racing track for others. I am shifting gears for now, but I'll be back in the saddle once again - of this I am certain.

Until then... the road is wide open. ■





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In & Around



Peak to Peak

Inside43 recently tied up with **Sky Islands**, for a content-share initiative. Sky Islands is a noteworthy environmental platform curated and launched by Rajni George to connect the vibrant districts of the Western Ghats under a common umbrella, through this one-of-a-kind online platform.

The team at Inside43 was invited to Kodaikanal on the 17th of April, 2025, which brought together people from diverse walks of life, all moving towards a shared destination: awareness, conservation, and connection. The evening was a celebration of culture and nature, filled with music, conversation, and a shared environmental consciousness.

The event kicked off with a captivating performance from the Dindigul Maavatam, Kodaikanal Poombarai Grama Kalai Kuzhu - an indigenous music ensemble that brought the beats of Kodai to life, lighting up the venue with their rhythms. The event officially began with a presentation on Sky Islands - its vision, purpose, and the stories it seeks to amplify. This

was followed by a mesmerising talk on The Sounds of Nature by Suprabha Seshan from Wayanad. Adding a critical environmental perspective, John Mathews from the Nilgiris shared his compelling insights on the rapid development of properties in the region and the consequent threats to its protected biosphere.

The evening continued with an immersive musical performance by Seema Ramchandani with her charismatic presence and captivating voice. This was followed by Suman Sridhar, who introduced her experimental project The Black Mamba, that fuses Indian classical, western, jazz and opera styles.

The Sky Islands launch was a reminder that all of us across the mountains are connected and share the same biosphere.

Inside43 invites you to explore their website: <https://skyislands.earth/>

Take a tour of the Nilgiris to discover all the wonderful things the district brings together



Next to Nilgiris Supermarket, Figure of Eight Road, Bedford, Coonoor

It's a Tuesday evening, and you're just craving a pizza. And it can't be any old pizza. You want the cheesy warmth and doughy comfort that comes from eating a well-made pie. Well, **Euphoria Pizzeria** by MindEscapes®, in Coonoor, is the place to go.

Situated near Nilgiris Supermarket, Euphoria offers a range of delectable pizzas made of fluffy, chewy, golden sourdough bread. The Garlic Butter Prawns Pizza and the Barbecue Meat Lover Pizza render the comfort, warmth and simple, but complete pleasure that come from eating your favourite comfort food. The Tropico Rosso Pizza is a well-curated version of an old favourite, with succulent ham and juicy, sweet pineapple.

However the crowning jewel is the Romana pizza. Topped with an assortment of vegetables, it is a medley of flavours and textures that melt in your mouth. From the sweetness of the capsicum, to the tanginess of the tomato sauce, to the

crunch from the freshly-sourced vegetables, to the gooey goodness of the mozzarella, this pizza is truly a treat. From the dessert menu, the creamy, decadent tiramisu and the light, tangy panna cotta are real delights. Try out their other mouth-watering desserts, as well.

You can also order off the Anma Menu, situated above Nilgiris supermarket, or even eat there. The ambience is restful, homely and peaceful, with views of Tiger Hill, the UPASI campus and the old Spencer's building. It is the perfect place to dine on a pleasantly chilly evening, with a glass of fragrant hot toddy to go with your pizza.

Centrally located in Coonoor, with ample parking, this eatery is a wonderful new addition to the culinary offerings that are now available in this district.

Euphoria is a little slice of global food favourites to be found right here in our hills. For the next time you're hungry, head here.

A Taste of Euphoria



A Burst of Flavours

*Spice Code, Trident Hotel - 94A, Ettines Road,
Main Bus Stand Junction, Ooty, Nilgiris 643001
☎ +91 94428 89111*

Spice Code, a fairly new venture by Trident Hotels, has brought a refreshing twist to the culinary scene of our quaint town. Nestled near the iconic St Thomas Church in Ooty, its prime location, easy accessibility, and ample parking make it a perfect pit stop for a quick yet memorable lunch in between sightseeing.

Helmed by Chef Sadam, a self-taught culinary artist, the menu here is a reflection of innovation and passion. We walked in with no expectations, only to be greeted with warm smiles, attentive service, and an experience that far exceeded our expectations.

We began our meal with one of their in-house specials - the Hawaiian Salad. Bursting with tropical flavours and a subtle sweetness, it was the perfect start. This was followed by a comforting Chicken Noodle Soup and an enticing array of entrées: Chatpatta Paneer, Chicken Shish Taouk, the ever-succulent Kalmi Kebab, and an off-the-menu delight - Bali Prawns.

For the main course, we were served a Chicken Biryani that beautifully blended the bold spices of Hyderabadi cuisine with the subtle richness of Lucknowi flavours. Just as we were about to call it a day, we were presented with tasting portions of their highly recommended Alfaham Chicken and Chicken BBQ - both looked irresistible and tasted even better.

To end this feast on a sweet note, we were served a Rose Tres Leches, lovingly made by the owner herself. Presented in an elegantly curated bowl, the flavours were nothing short of divine.

Spice Code isn't just a haven for non-vegetarians - it proudly offers a dedicated vegan and Jain-friendly section, making it inclusive and family-friendly. The spice levels are thoughtfully marked on the menu, helping diners choose dishes that match their palate.

Whether you're a local or just passing through Ooty, Spice Code is a must-visit for those seeking bold flavours, heart-warming service and a memorable meal.



Hebron School, Lushington Hall, Ootacamund - 643001

☎ +91 423 222 5820 ✉ poffice@hebronooty.org

🌐 www.hebronooty.org

Technicoloured Brilliance

In the final week of March 2025, Hebron School in Ooty was undoubtedly the place to be. This year, Hebron staged its production of the musical '**Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat**' to the wider community. Between the dress rehearsal and the final performances, an audience of nearly 1200 people from around the district were able to enjoy a sensational display of colour, music and theatrical talent.

With a cast of nearly 60, a live band of 26, and around 35 students helping to craft props and support backstage, this was truly a whole-school operation. Whilst the students were helped and encouraged by the school's teaching staff, the students did much of the work themselves. They helped to direct scenes and choreograph dances. They even added their own vocal harmonies to the existing Andrew Lloyd-Webber original score. They designed costumes, painted backdrops, organised props backstage and did each other's make up. Their ownership and personal investment in the

production was what made it so special and gave such immense energy and passion to their performances.

The students in the cast and band ranged in age from 11 to 18, and it was amazing to see how creativity and dedication came together, as this international group of students wowed audiences with their energy and charisma and some daring choreography. "I could not be prouder of all the students and staff whose dedication made this production possible. What joy to serve in a school that values the creative arts so highly," said Rachel Medhurst, the Director, and Head of Drama at Hebron.

The district looks forward to the next production.





Fried Tea. Anyone?

Oasis, Dolphin's Nose Road, Coonoor

The Nilgiris abounds with tea shops and cafes that dot its hilly roads. Each of these offer the traveller piping hot tea and a selection of mouth-watering fried comestibles that make any road trip in the hills complete. One of these however, truly stands out - **Oasis**, on the way to Dolphin's Nose.

Once a humble bungalow serving hot tea and bajjis to estate workers, this charming spot transformed into a beloved tourist hotspot nearly a decade ago. Nestled amidst rolling tea fields, it offers breathtaking views of Droog Fort and Mettupalayam, making it a true oasis for travellers seeking a refreshing break.

Visitors can savour a variety of spiced and flavoured teas, served in classic glass cups at the cosy gazebo. The café has also become a favourite getaway for locals, thanks to its inviting ambiance and delicious snacks. The menu features

an array of the usual crispy bajjis, including potato, plantain, and onion options. However, the star attraction is the unique tea leaf bajji - an in-house specialty. This crispy delight, made with freshly plucked tea leaves, coated in a flavourful batter, originated as an ingenious improvisation when the café once ran out of potatoes. It quickly became a local delicacy and a must-try recommendation. Its reputation has spread and people flock here to taste this unique culinary take on an old favourite.

For those visiting Coonoor's iconic Lamb's Rock or Dolphin's Nose, a stop at this café is highly recommended. Enjoy the signature crispy bajjis paired with a soothing cup of home-brewed tea for a truly memorable experience. All the while enjoying the sprawling view of the rolling plantations that spread across the hills.



For orders, contact +91 99432 59555

Entrepreneur Munira Hussain is the brains and dexterity behind **Mughal Kitchen**, running her business for 12 years from the comfort of her kitchen. Today this concept, being introduced as cloud kitchen, brings an unique amalgam of Erode and Salem to her cuisine.

Born and brought up in Salem and married into a family that hailed from Erode, Munira, like most women in India, was introduced to different styles of cooking. She decided to combine the recipes creating her own signature dish keeping both the traditional and authentic essence as her USP. She has a unique approach to preparing her signature biryani which brings out the fluffiness in the rice and the tenderness of the meat. The caramelised onion and the exceptional, gripping flavours of spices are some of the finer points that put Mughal Kitchen on every biryani connoisseur's list.

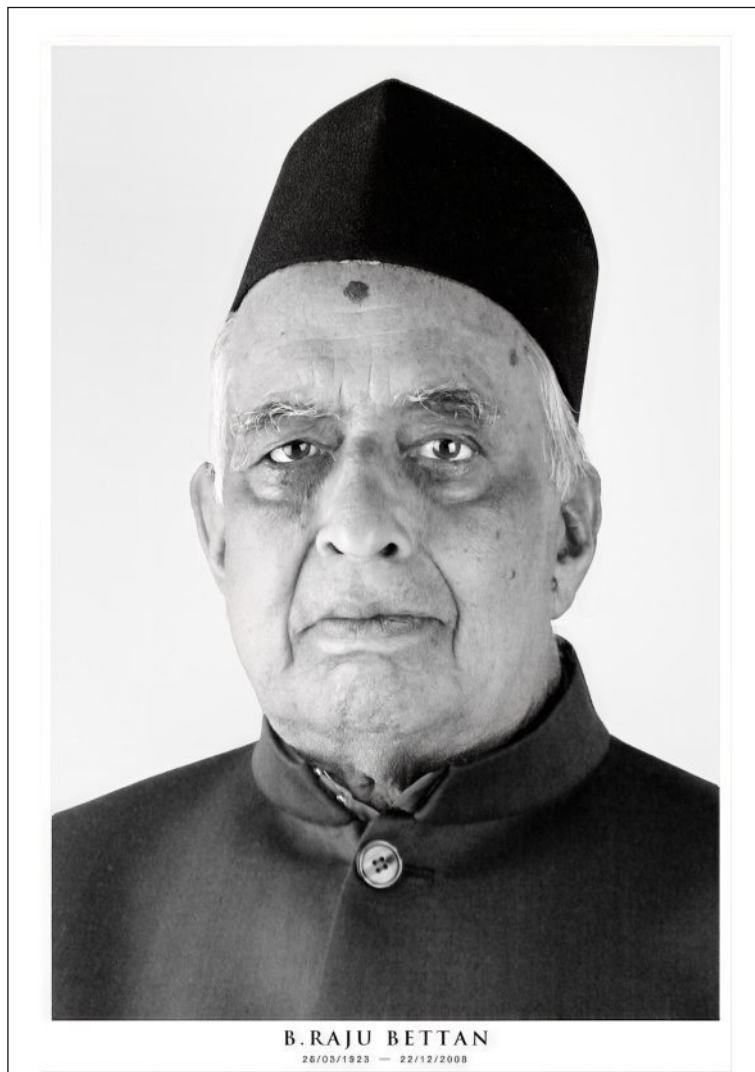
Mughal-e-Azam

Munira also serves 35 other vegetarian and non-vegetarian delicacies. Salem avi curry, shammi kebabs and apricot pudding are some of the most popular dishes on this delectable menu.

Mughal kitchen not only caters to customers in and around the Nilgiris, but has clients all the way from Bollywood too. Chikny Chameli girl, Katrina Kaif and Kattappa Satya Raj are frequenters and make it a point to order Munira's specialities whenever they are in town.

For a sumptuous meal which includes mouthwatering meat and veggies, aromatic spices, rich flavours that instil feelings of luxury and nostalgia with each bite. Every meal that tastes like delicacies from a fine dine but that comes from the cosiness of a home-run business, at an unbelievable price... place your order today....

NOT FORGOTTEN



Meet the incredible late B Rajubettan - a gentleman who left the most profound impact on the Nilgiris and whose legacy is seen in the lives of the family that live on to carry out his name and continue his good works.

Sharmatha Shankar *had the pleasure of sitting down with some members of his family to talk about his life and legacy*

The Formation

B Rajubettan was born on March 26th, 1923, to Belli Gowder and Sinigi in Adigarahatty. In his early years, he studied at a mission school in Adigarahatty, and then went on to complete his higher education in Ooty. His father was a school teacher who ran a small provisional store in the evenings in the village. When he wasn't helping in the store, Rajubettan would travel all the way to Karamadai to purchase goods for the shop before making the long trip back home. The two nights of hard work meant he had to make stops at Karamadai and Katteri to rest for the night. And perhaps it was on these trips, no mean feat back in the day, that the foundational blocks of his work and personal ethics were laid.

His young life was not without tragedy. His father passed away when he was only sixteen years, and Rajubettan, as the only child, had to take over the store. He expanded the scope of operations and went onto start his own movie theatre in Karamadai, supplying fertilisers to potato growers throughout the Nilgiris, and even started his own transport company called Gowder Union Transport Service.

He married his wife, Baby Rajubettan, the eldest daughter of

Nandi Gowder of Ketchigatty, when he was just nineteen. His father-in-law was greatly impressed by his enterprising nature and it was the driving force behind the alliance. The proud father-in-law encouraged Rajubettan to get into the tea industry, and that was the start of the family's involvement in this business. His determination to succeed was singular - he would travel by foot from Adigarahatty to Ooty and Coonoor for meetings and business, and made it a point to always arrive a little ahead of time. His strict adherence to punctuality lasted to the very end.

Tea Talk

At the time, Badaga growers would send the leaf harvested from their fields to the then established British factories. Often times those factories would not accept leaf brought in by Rajubettan as they already had plenty of their own. A problem Rajubettan solved by constructing his own factory in Selas, in 1943 for the benefit of small growers. Raja Plantation Pvt Ltd was the first bought-leaf factory in the Nilgiris to convert from Orthodox tea production to CTC tea production; at that time, all the factories produced only Orthodox tea. However, most of the leaf grown in Nilgiris in that era was most suited to being converted into CTC tea, so

Rajubettan went to Calcutta to learn about the methods and machinery required to produce CTC tea on a large scale. It would be the most lucrative way forward for local growers.

As a result, tea growers with estates and fields in Kotagiri were sending their leaf to Raja Plantation, and other manufacturers in Coonoor and Ooty, because there were no factories in Kotagiri. There was plenty of agriculture, but a dearth of tea processing units. Rajubettan generously provided a blueprint of his factory in Selas, and the plan was replicated in Crosshill Tea Factory, in 1945. And from thereon, the tea manufacturing industry in Kotagiri flourished.



Mr. Rajubettan was instrumental in starting the Small Tea Growers Association in 1969, and The Nilgiris Bought Leaf Manufacturers Association in 1972. He was also part of the Tea Board as a representative of the small growers. Importantly, he played a crucial role in acquiring the bungalow, where the current zonal office of the Tea Board operates out of, in Coonoor. He also chaired the Coonoor Tea Trade Association four times from 1969 to 1985. His other notable business ventures include coffee and pepper, and he was also a member of the Coffee Board.

Man Of Education

Rajubettan was also instrumental in the acquisition of the building that houses Providence College for Women, in Coonoor. The building was initially the palace of the Maharajah of Travancore. The Maharajah wanted to sell it, but there was a bit of a tussle over who would actually be able to buy it.

Back then, locals were afraid to send their daughters for higher education because of the distance, fearing for their safety, or simply because they could not afford it. Rajubettan played a pivotal role in ensuring that The Sisters of St Joseph's of Tarbes got the building. The Sisters then founded Providence College for Women in the year 1966.

Rajubettan was a forward thinking individual, and he strongly believed that young women deserved to be educated and given the same privileges and freedoms as young men. He fundamentally believed that they too had the potential to serve society ably, and therefore needed a place where their talents could be honed.

“The proud father-in-law encouraged Rajubettan to get into the tea industry, and that was the start of the family's involvement in this business

He was a charter member of the Lions Club of Nilgiris, which was established in 1962 and still continues to do significant social work. He also played a vital role in the preservation of the Coonoor Club. He believed that a space where members of society could gather was important for cultural exchange, broadening of minds, sharing of ideas as this, he believed, would lead to one's overall well-being. He was President of Coonoor Club from 1972-1974. He was also a very active member of the Masonic Lodge, Wellington, from the 1960s.

He introduced banking to Adigarahatty village by setting up the Adigarahatty Co-operative Urban Bank Limited in 1956, of which he was the first president. The idea behind setting up this bank was to ensure that the residents didn't have to travel all the way to Coonoor for basic banking needs. He also donated his land to set up the community hall in Adigarahatty. This hall is easily accessible to everyone in the village and is right opposite a Vinayagar temple, which makes it all the more convenient for weddings and religious ceremonies. He was dubbed as the President of the Adigarahatty Village Vigilance Committee by the District Superintendent of Police in 1947.

Personally Speaking

Rajubettan and his wife, Baby, had nine children and seventeen grandchildren. Unarguably, Baby was his greatest source of support, and when she passed away, the loss hit him, and the other family members hard. Those who knew her remember her as a kind, soft-natured lady who, along with her husband, was the



most wonderful host. Rajubettan was known to go all out with the catering during the Annual General Meetings at Raja Plantation. He would place large orders for confectioneries and other treats from Crown Bakery, Coonoor, and this is remembered even today.

He enjoyed his walks, and he believed in the importance of walking uphill. He would sometimes walk to visit his plantations, ensuring that he was able to assess things in detail. He was a strategist and not a lot escaped him. The family says that even when he had cars to take him wherever he needed to be, he preferred to walk. He was the picture of dignity in his impeccable Nehru jacket, when he set off walking through Coonoor, toting his umbrella.

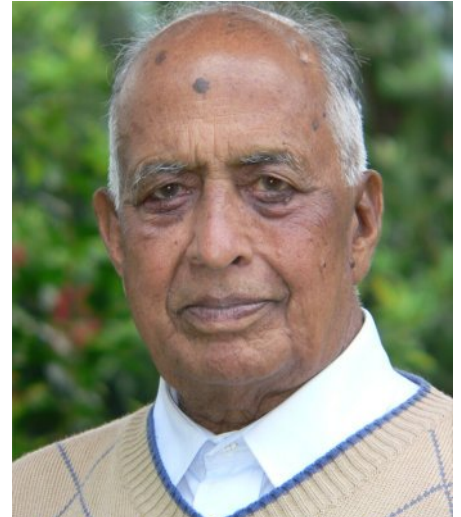
His grandchildren reminisce about the drives they would go on with Rajubettan, during which he would regale them with stories of his experiences, and the people that he had interacted with. He had a very witty sense of humour, enjoyed James Bond films and had a certain fascination with television commercials. Even in his old age, he looked forward to his Tuesday meetings at Coonoor Club with all his friends.

He retained much of his vitality to the very end. The family recalls how he would throw away his walking aid and walk around the house. Towards the tail end of his life he firmly told the postman that he was changing his address and to stop delivering letters to his house. It was almost like he knew his days were coming to a close, and some family members recall that it was like he was inviting his own demise with open arms. The

grand old gentleman breathed his last on 22nd December, 2008.

And so the district lost one of its finest. A man who believed in empowerment and equality. In a conservative society, he stood out as an advocate for feminism and liberalism. The Nilgiris lost a son of the soil who lived life to its fullest, embracing opportunities for himself and creating them for others. The family speaks of him with immense pride, and their affection for this, their intrepid ancestor is profound. Today they follow his advice diligently. To live large, to have fun and do the right and generous thing for others. From one of the great patron saints (so to speak) of modern Nilgiris, it's advice we should all live by. ■

Inside43 expresses its sincerest gratitude to the members of the Rajubettan family for their time and effort in narrating his story to us, and to V Ramaswamy who wrote on the subject for the Economic Times.





A COMMANDING PRESENCE

*As his time here draws to a close, **Lt Gen Virendra Vats** talks about the time he spent here, and why he is committed to preserving its ecological and cultural heritage*

Over the past three years I have had the privilege of not only serving this prestigious institution, DSSC, and its officers, but have also immersed myself in the captivating natural beauty and rich heritage of the Nilgiris. To me, this period has been a blend of professional duty, personal exploration and a deep appreciation for the environment. Through early morning runs, cycling expeditions, and exhilarating motorcycle rides, I have grown to love the region's pristine landscapes, and I have gained a first-hand understanding of why it is so important to preserve this ecological treasure.

The Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, a sanctuary of biodiversity, has been my backyard, so to speak. Every dawn, as I laced up my running shoes to tackle the rolling hills of Wellington, I felt like I was running through the pages of a nature book - alive with vibrant flora, chirping birds, and the occasional rustle of unseen wildlife. On several occasions, I was fortunate to witness these magnificent animals in their natural habitat, an experience that left me in awe of the delicate balance between man and nature.

The DSSC, where I have had the honour to serve, is not just a military institution; it also plays an active role in raising awareness about the importance of preserving the Nilgiris' wildlife and ecological balance. Our officers are educated about the biosphere not only via lectures, but we regularly organise hiking activities. These hikes are more than just physical excursions - they are learning journeys. One such hike led us to a Toda village, offering a glimpse into the traditions of one of the Nilgiris' indigenous tribes. The tribe's connection to the land is very deep and I have learned so much from their sustainable lifestyle and the reverence they have for nature.

I am proud that the DSSC actively collaborates with local forest officials and NGOs, ensuring our contribution toward conservation efforts. We have organised tree plantation drives, championed the 'No Plastic Usage' campaign, and supported eco-friendly initiatives. These actions, although small, reflect our collective responsibility towards preserving this biosphere reserve for future generations. I have had the pleasure of visiting the infrastructural heritage at MRC barracks, the Ooty Flower Festival, and iconic boarding schools. Each visit has revealed a layer of the Nilgiris' legacy, from its colonial charm to its vibrant local culture. The toy train ride through the hills of Ooty, in particular, was a step back in time,

for me. Of course, there are the culinary delights - be it the aromatic South Indian delicacies or local Badaga food, the region's cuisine is a sensory delight. And as for the tea varieties - each sip has told me a story of tradition, care, and history.

One of the most enriching aspects of my time here has been my involvement with the Wellington Gymkhana Club. As both President and a member, I had the privilege of interacting with local residents and learning about their customs, traditions, and way of life. These interactions have not only deepened my understanding of the Nilgiris, but also helped forge lifelong friendships with people who call this stunning region home. The memories I have gathered, fill me with gratitude, and will last me a lifetime. I will always carry a piece of the Nilgiris with me - both in my heart, and in my commitment to its preservation. ■

Lt Gen Virendra Vats, YSM, SM, VSM, commissioned into 19 Kumaon on 17 Dec 1988, has over 36 years of distinguished service. He has held key command, staff, and instructional roles across varied terrains and conflicts. Notably, he commanded brigades along the LAC and a multinational UN mission in Congo, and led the prestigious Dagger Division in Kashmir. Since 1 Sep 2022, he has served as the 34th Commandant of DSSC and President of Wellington Gymkhana Club.

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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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