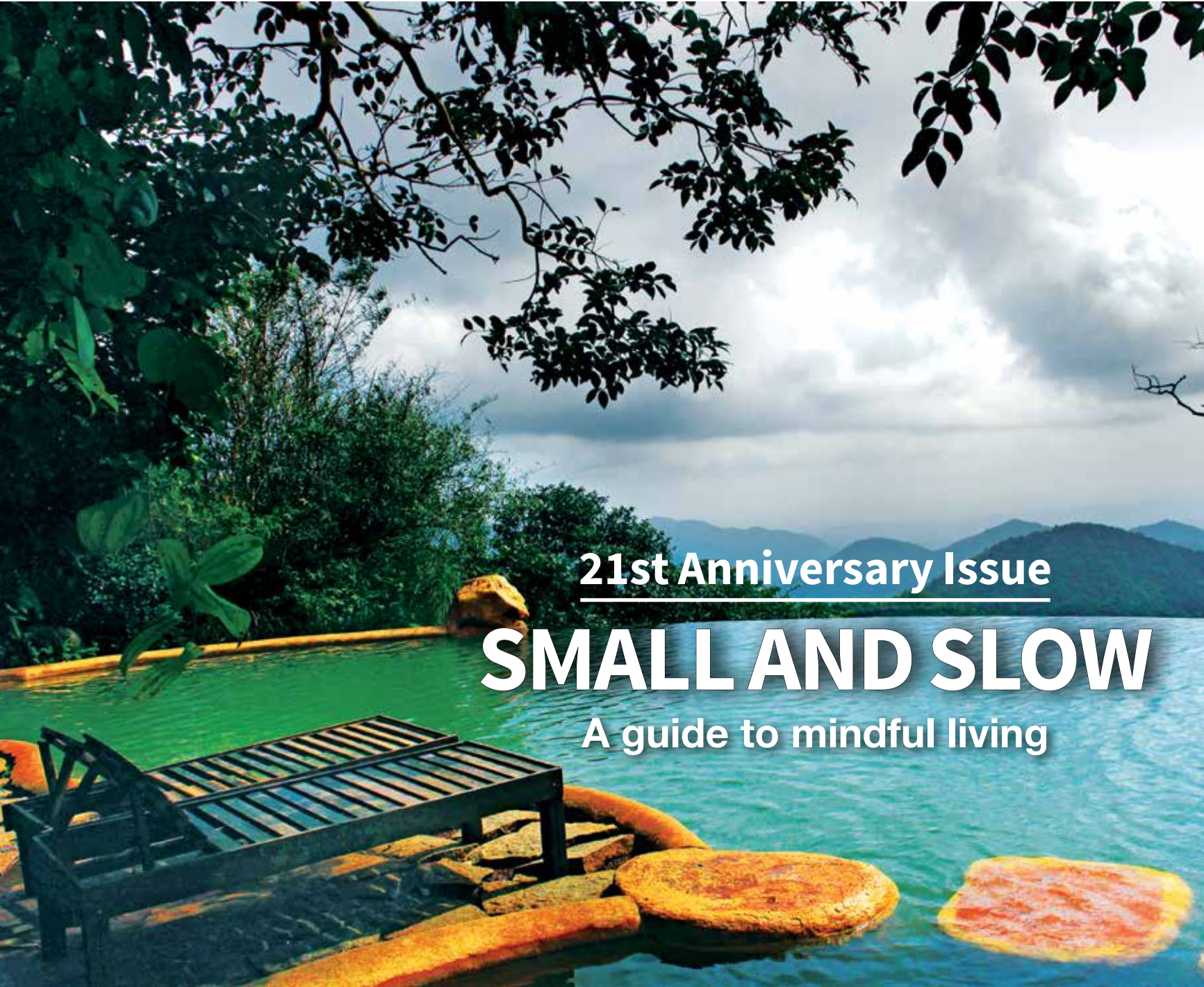


Civil Society



21st Anniversary Issue

SMALL AND SLOW

A guide to mindful living

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

A stressed-out world is learning how to be gentler and kinder.

Pages 12-14



PEOPLE AND PRODUCTS

Better choices made simple

Get the lowdown here on brilliant handicrafts, wholesome noodles, ancient rice, donkey milk, inclusive coffee, traditional toys, heritage dolls and more in a world of changing preferences.

Pages 15-44



ARTABILITY

Third Edition

Discover talented artists who have risen above their disabilities.

Pages 45-54

IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

21 years
of original
journalism

Discover
India in
stories of
change
from a
magazine
built on
trust.

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

21 years
of original
journalism

Faces you
would not
otherwise
see. Join
the dots
with us.

21 years and counting

BRINGING out a magazine for 21 years, month after month without missing an issue, rates as an achievement. It could easily become a slog, but we remain enthusiastic about our stories and truly invested in the mundane and less glamorous aspects of keeping a media business going.

Our priority is content. In a straightforward way, we give our readers what we find engaging, relevant and credible. Our readers are invited to see India through our eyes.

You could say we are not dissimilar to a gourmet restaurant. The tables are limited and the chef decides the menu. People show up because they like what they get. Over time they bring others along as well and a community grows. This has been our experience.

Do we make a difference? We think so because our stories are original and in spaces where the rest of the media doesn't tend to go. It has been borne out over time that our coverage of people, trends and events is unique to us.

A vibrant and responsible civil society is crucial at a time when economic growth is causing serious disparities. The voluntary sector is needed more than ever to ensure inclusion. For India to be a modern economy much remains to be done by way of healthcare, housing, education, transportation and creation of livelihoods. Better cities are needed as are villages. As journalists we see a role for ourselves in understanding the problems and looking beyond them for solutions. Our interest in this magazine has been in individuals and groups who have ways forward.

Being independent sets you free, even as it presents other challenges. In our book, there is no such thing as being 'big enough' or 'too small'. In a country of 1.3 billion, size will always be relative. People we cover gush about the visibility they get, particularly so in quarters that matter to them. We have no doubts about the impact of our coverage and the shelf-life of our content.

We are, of course, a business and need to earn to survive. But there is nothing we do as a business that influences what we publish. There is also nothing we publish that is intended to drive up business. We expect to keep it that way.

We are fortunate to have the support of friends and colleagues. Our columnists — Sanjaya Baru, Kiran Karnik, R.A. Mashelkar, Venkatesh Dutta, Arun Maira, Sumita Ghose — always find the time to write. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have placed faith in us — our advertisers and subscribers.

Sumita Ghose



ARTABILITY 3

Civil Society presents its third annual exploration of disability art with the works of eight inspiring artists. They are diverse in their styles, subjects, use of mediums and colours. They have each overcome their challenges to be special in their own way.

45-54

PERSPECTIVE

India is a brilliant mosaic of different identities. In the past 21 years, Civil Society magazine has opened up its pages to traditional crafts, skills, seeds, plants, cuisines, song, dance, attire and more. Rita & Umesh Anand on the importance of being rooted in a rapidly changing world.

12-14

PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

Introducing the people behind products with a difference. Get the lowdown on beautiful handicrafts from across India, ancient rice, good noodles, diversity coffee, traditional toys, heritage dolls, organic tableware, ghee, spices, mahua and more.

15-44

Cover photograph by Gautam Singh/Civil Society

ANNUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

This special double issue celebrates 21 years of our magazine and is for the months of January and February. Our next issue will be in March.



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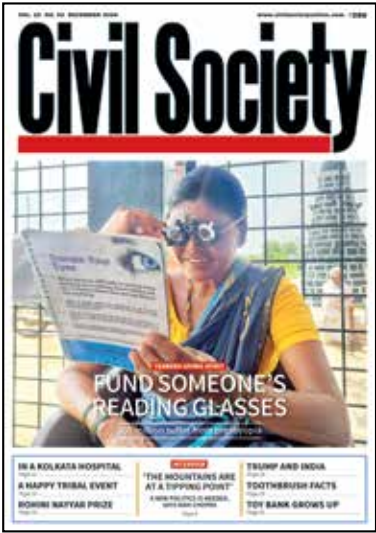
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LETTERS



Clear sight

Thanks to you and The/Nudge Institute for bringing an overlooked and out of sight issue to light with your cover story, ‘Fund someone’s reading glasses’. Presbyopia is an important actionable matter.

I did a little research to know more about it. An estimated 150 to 300 million Indians are suffering from presbyopia. Due to this eyesight defect India might be incurring a productivity loss of \$14 billion.

Another worrying issue for India’s eye health is the acute shortage of optometrists. There is only one for every 180,000 people. This demand, I feel, can be best met by mobile eye testing and spectacle distribution vans funded by the public and through philanthropic efforts. I have asked on X India’s two leading spectacle companies, Titan Eye Plus and Lenskart, to extend a helping hand.

Lenskart should volunteer to adopt rural areas, tea garden workers and urban slums to provide relief to workers suffering from presbyopia and increase productivity. Titan Eye Plus too can adopt rural areas and urban slums and give spectacles to presbyopia eye patients.

I have also solicited help from our prime minister and the Ministry of Health for action at the national level. I’ve reached out to Nita Ambani and the Tata Group. I have also requested Dharamvir Gandhi, MP from

Patiala, to raise this issue in Parliament.

Colonel Jasjit Gill

We rarely think of presbyopia as a healthcare crisis. After reading your cover story, I understood why. It is appalling that despite having such a large population suffering from presbyopia, the government doesn’t do much to raise awareness, create facilities or set aside funds to counter this crisis.

That means society has to come forward and help out. What makes The/Nudge Institute’s efforts more compelling is that presbyopia is a vision problem that can be easily resolved. Treating it as a livelihood issue is a good way of working out a solution.

Satya Dixit

Your cover story stood out, first, because of the headline and, second, because the heartening initiatives by The/Nudge Institute were brought to light. Also, the idea of ending the year by donating to the right healthcare set-ups and funding a patient was a nice touch.

Ratna Joshi

The figures given in the piece are staggering and, in spite of being in the medical fraternity, I was not aware of the sheer magnitude of uncorrected presbyopia in India. Diminishing vision is a part of normal ageing and affects the quality of life and earning capacity of affected patients. It is very unfortunate that lack of resources prevents people from adopting simple corrective measures like reading glasses, which can go a long way in making life more comfortable for them. The article inspired me to participate in advocacy measures and donate to this socially impactful cause.

Raju Sharma

Presbyopia is most definitely easy to treat and tackle, which makes it even more appalling that not enough is being done. Initiatives like The/Nudge Institute’s which connect the needy with those who have the resources, should be in the limelight more often. Healthcare overall is on the decline but the medical fraternity needs support from outside if any substantial change has to come about.

Harshvardhan Vohra

I didn’t know presbyopia was on the verge of becoming a public health crisis. Your cover story was an informative read. While initiatives like these are very helpful, I believe we must have many more that function in a similar manner.

Govind Menon

Your cover story on presbyopia was an excellent read. The information given was very relevant. I am sure it has increased awareness to a high degree on this issue. It is sad that lack of resources is a major reason in our country for this crisis and many other health issues. Diminishing vision affects not only work productivity but also the quality of life. Everyone has the right to be able to lead a decent productive life.

Sangeeta Salve

If prescriptions can be done away with, the process of acquiring reading glasses would become much simpler. A small step like this can greatly affect a poor person’s health journey with regard to vision. If people are free from simple vision problems, they can focus on work and live a life minus one less problem.

Piyush Jaiswal

This is the first time I have read about the unusual crisis of presbyopia in our country in such detail. Reading and understanding this problem made me ponder the plight of India’s poor. Reading glasses are something so many of us take for granted. And yet, there are scores of people who don’t have access to such a basic need. Congratulations to The/Nudge Institute which is working tirelessly to bridge this yawning gap in innovative and effective ways. I would really like to see more such efforts and will be happy to volunteer for them as well.

Naintara Tewari

Junior doctors

Your article ‘Doctors ask for hospital basics’ was an eye-opener. It is really sad to see the brightest minds in our country, those who work for ordinary people, being treated in this manner. It is depressing to see the deplorable conditions in which they work.

Akanksha Mishra

I have at least two friends in Kolkata who have been explaining

to me the sad state of government-run hospitals across the country. It hampers junior doctors especially. Thank you for shedding light on this issue continuously in the last two or three issues of your magazine.

Atul Jena

Tribal event

The Samvaad event organized by the Tata Steel Foundation is a great initiative. I have attended it many times and each time the experience is different.

Malavika

Events like Samvaad that celebrate and cherish tribal identity depict what the Tata Group stands for. Ratan Tata left behind an impressive legacy. It is good to see Tata Steel following in his footsteps with compassion and commitment.

Sangeeta Sharma

Samvaad is a vital platform for India’s tribal communities to showcase their rich cultural diversity and address pressing issues.

Dr Rahul Arya

Healing vaginismus

Aiema Tauheed’s article, ‘The way to cure vaginismus is to talk about it’ was very insightful. I had no idea that many women face this condition which is often misunderstood as a lack of desire or effort. Dr Taru Jindal’s own journey of overcoming vaginismus and her dedication to helping others was truly inspiring.

The article also shed light on the psychological and cultural factors that contribute to vaginismus, especially in conservative societies like India, where sex education is minimal. Discussing sexual problems is seen as shameful.

I was struck by how Dr Jindal’s healing program takes a holistic approach, addressing the physical and emotional aspects of this condition. It highlighted the importance of raising awareness and providing treatment, as many healthcare professionals aren’t trained to diagnose or treat vaginismus. It also emphasized the need for open conversations about sexual health and support for those affected.

Garima Sarria

The article is an excellent note on a lesser-known condition and good work by Dr Taru Jindal.

Vijay Anand Ismavel

I think as a society we really need to talk of women’s health, especially sexual dysfunctions and similar problems. Shunning such issues or treating them as shameful is regressive. It is saddening to note how health conditions pertaining to the female body are often reduced to matters of shameful stigma. This is why your heading stood out. The way to heal vaginismus really is to talk about it. Thank you, Civil Society, for starting and building the conversation around a disease that deeply affects so many women.

Shivranjini Kumar

Remembrance forest

Rakesh Agrawal’s story, ‘Doon’s forest of many memories’, made me realize how important emotional involvement is. The idea is simple yet innovative. It was wonderful to read how well it has worked. We need more such initiatives to redeem our environment.

Ritika Vohra

Doctors’ plight

Your interview with Dr Alexander Thomas, ‘Violence on doctors is rampant’, in the October issue of your magazine clearly told us how healthcare workers are treated. I found his statement that doctors don’t want to be worshipped like in the old times but just to be treated with respect, very distressful. Why do dedicated and public spirited doctors even need to make such a simple demand? The government should pay heed to such voices.

Mahima Chaudhary

“We realized that doctors and nurses are soft targets” — this line from your interview with Dr Alexander Thomas stayed with me. It is really a worrying statement. We must discuss issues pertaining to healthcare much more.

Lalit Jha

Model road

I discovered a second Janpath in Gurugram after I read your article, ‘Gurugram gets road

people can walk on’. It is heartening to see a road designed on the principles of inclusivity and safety for all users. A wonderful initiative by companies and government authorities working together.

Shalini Dubey

The revamped road in Gurugram caters to the needs of women effectively. I found it to be one of the best-lit roads I’ve travelled on in Delhi and Haryana. The cycling path is a useful addition and safety is its best USP.

Arun Verma

Traditional toys

I discovered Diyas Decoratives in your Products section and fell in love with their delightful toys. My daughter really liked playing with the ‘lattu’. The idea of bringing back toys from our childhood is commendable. Thank you for connecting me to this enterprise.

Sapna Mahajan

The toys are of wonderful quality. Took me back to my childhood. When I began my search for safe toys, I was quite disappointed but this collection closed that gap for me and my niece.

Mallika N.

Jaggery bliss

Your article on finding wholesome jaggery in the October issue was a lovely read. My family and I enjoy munching on jaggery after meals and we have now ordered from 24

Mantra. Everyone was impressed by the quality.

Purobi Bose

My elderly parents face health issues and finding the right jaggery has been a challenge. Your guide was very helpful. Dr Elsy’s insights on Marayoor jaggery were informative.

Radhika Mohan

South sojourn

Susheela Nair’s article on Thalassery, ‘Cricket, cake, circus’, in your November issue made me realize that it is a hidden gem in South India. The town has many wonderful attractions. It is also heavenly for food lovers across India and the world.

Praveesh M.V.

Nair’s article, ‘Looking for a getaway? Try Mysuru’, was a trip down memory lane. The charms of Mysuru are endless and Ibis Styles seems to stand out as an idyllic destination to unwind in.

Kavita R.

It was fascinating to read ‘Cricket, cake, circus’ in your November issue. I learnt about the Christmas cake tradition and the timing seemed apt as we are drawing to the end of the year! The food sounded scrumptious too, especially for the keen non-vegetarian foodie. What was most striking was how it is also the birthplace of Communism in Kerala.

Tanya Suri

The article on Thalassery made me long for a visit to Muzhappilangad beach, mostly because it is India’s only drive-in beach at low tide. To ride a bike or car on the beach is something one would love to have on their bucket list. The laterite cliffs protruding into the sea add to my reasons to visit this land of the three C’s.

Karan Vaidyanathan

Bengal boats

Your feature, ‘Get the drift: The saga of Bengal’s ancient boats’ in the October 2023 issue was very engaging and insightful. I learnt a lot reading about the craft and felt a sense of comfort knowing how some ancient traditions are still being carried on and are, in fact, flourishing due to such efforts.

Chandana D.

I was so intrigued while entering this world of Bengal’s boats and the idea of boat consciousness in Bengal. It was especially interesting to engage with the boat-football parallel drawn by Subir Roy in the article. The perspective was so new and yet so deep-rooted in reality. The point mentioned about how a child from Bengal can perhaps draw a boat but one from Punjab will most likely be unable to was very relatable too.

Nikhil Rathore

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ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

RITA & UMESH ANAND

IT is not ever so often that someone in a speck of a village in Bodoland, on the border with Bhutan, graduates from the National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad.

Kirat Brahma was fishing in the pond on his family's farm when he received the news that the premier design school would take him in as a student.

A networked world makes many things possible. It takes people places and, as in the case of Brahma, also brings them round full circle to where they began.

Having qualified as a designer, Brahma is back at his pond, but his catch this time is a great idea. He is designing heritage dolls, so that young Bodos remember how their ancestors looked and what they wore. He is also setting up community museums to create a record of village life.

Being small, slow and mindful helps communities have a sense of identity. They get to take pride in their customs and traditions. Having the same jeans, bikes, cars, sneakers and cell phones isn't good enough. People also like to be recognized for being different and special in their own ways.

India is a brilliant mosaic of such different identities all struggling to survive the onslaught of new technologies and expanding consumerism. So, in the past 21 years, *Civil Society* magazine has opened up its pages to traditional crafts, skills, seeds, plants, cuisines, song, dance, attire and more.

Many social enterprises and new-age companies have been the bridge between communities and the marketplace, creating ethical products with respect for sustainability, community rights, local knowledge and organic choices.

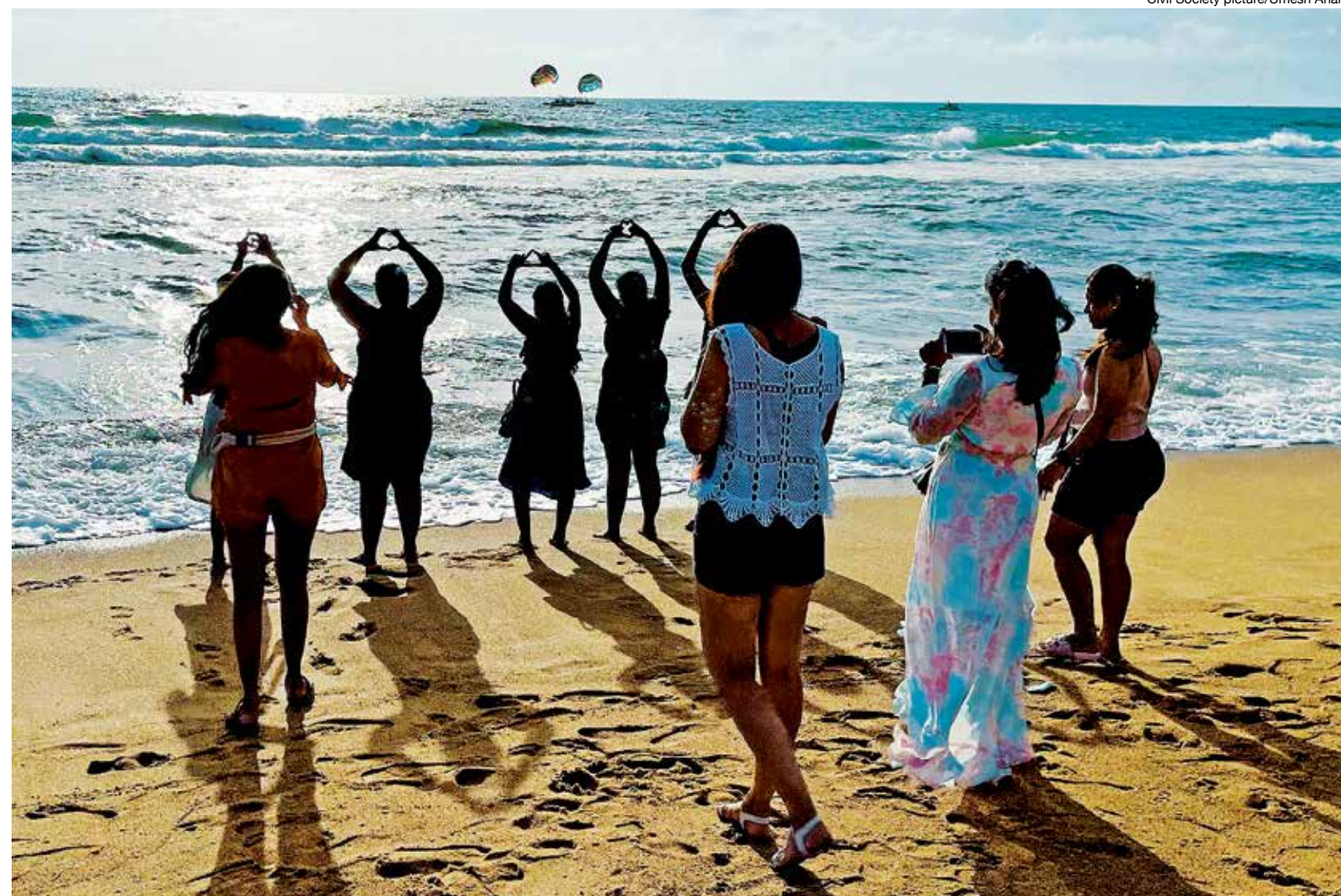
In such modern, future-ready businesses we have found young, self-defined, educated entrepreneurs raising the bar for fair trade practices, ownership and the interests of consumers.

Ours is a burgeoning compendium of uniquely branded products from coffee, cheese and noodles to jewellery, rugs and furniture and all that comes in between, which would include donkey milk. In addition, there are farmers now increasingly aware of their intellectual rights over what they produce — be it jaggery, bananas, mangoes, rice or jackfruit.

The new-age enterprise addresses the new-age consumer who seeks to heal the world with what is inclusive, wholesome and safe. It is not just the ingredients of a product, but also how growers are compensated, the production processes employed and, finally, integrity in the marketplace.

HEALTHY NOODLES Many a small business tends to score well on these counts because it is driven by ideas and personal conviction. Growth and profits matter but values take precedence, resulting in enduring relationships with consumers and producers. Could such businesses, we ask ourselves, be laying the foundations of a better market, a more responsible style of ownership?

Naturally Yours is our all-time favourite story of how new businesses get built and become valuable to the founders and society at large with inventiveness, goodwill and passion, and very little by way of investment.



On a beach one evening

Naturally Yours is the brand name for healthy noodles which has now garnered a community of customers who won't settle for anything else. These are noodles made from millets, red rice, black rice, quinoa and other healthy grains as opposed to the average noodle that is made from flour, is full of starch and comes preserved with chemicals.

The healthy noodle idea came to Vinod Kumar while he was retailing organic products in Mumbai from a store named Naturally Yours. People, he noticed, were ready to pay a little more to eat chemical-free products. They also chose millets over rice. Awareness of what would be a healthy diet was increasing and that wasn't just among the well-off, but ordinary folks as well.

He teamed up with his microbiologist wife, Priya Prakash, to start producing multi-millet noodles which they first sold to the customers who regularly bought the unprocessed millets from the store. The noodles were a runaway success because, unlike regular millets, they did not require much time to cook. They were also less boring as a dish.

Now they have launched instant noodles, which, through an

The new-age venture addresses the new-age consumer who wants to heal the world with what is wholesome, inclusive and safe.

innovation, are free of chemicals and not pre-fried in palm oil the way other instant noodles are. These are even easier to process.

Vinod speaks proudly of customers who go nowhere else for their noodles and even order them from the US. Based in Mumbai, he sources his grains from farmer-producer companies across the country, often paying a premium for the sake of high quality.

"I come from a farming family and though I haven't been farming myself I have some idea how difficult it is to grow something," he says.

IMMERSIVE COFFEE The Black Baza Coffee Co similarly has farmers' interests at heart. The Black Baza varieties are sourced from small farmers in the Western Ghats. These are more like homesteads employing traditional and organic practices.

The coffee grows intertwined with other plants and trees and is visited by birds and reptiles. It is a world far removed from coffee plantations and chemical agriculture.

Not surprisingly, Arshiya Bose, Black Baza's founder, calls her coffee 'diversity friendly'. Black Baza is itself a bird. There is a coffee called

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

Ficus, which of course is the fig tree. Other coffees go by names such as Draco, Whistling Schoolboy, Kaati, Otter, Luna.

As a Black Baza customer you contribute to preserving the intricate biodiversity of the Western Ghats and hopefully spreading some awareness about it. You also do your bit for protecting livelihoods. Bose gives the farmers she buys from 17 percent of the price she sells at, which is huge compared to the 2.8 percent that growers usually get.

Bose is an unlikely entrepreneur. She has a Ph.D. and was researching sustainability certifications for coffee when the small farmers sought her help to connect with markets. From one thing to the next, an ethical company was born.

ARTISANS WITH EQUITY How should producers be adequately rewarded for what they grow and make? Farmers and craftspeople tend to lose out in market equations, but they really don't have to. They can, in fact, be owners.

Rangсутra has shown how. Over several years of hard work and entrepreneurial effort, Rangсутra has become successful as a line of fashionwear supplying stores and also as a brand in its own right.

It draws on the talent of women in the villages of Rajasthan to weave, stitch and design its garments. But instead of merely being paid for their work, the women are also the shareholders of the company and sit on its board. This is a big leap forward from the disadvantaged status that artisans usually have.

Rangсутra is not just about the beautiful clothes it produces, but also the empowerment it provides. It has shown women how they can earn from their traditional skills. It has helped them work from their homes and then given them the confidence to move out to workplaces. But above all, it has given them ownership.

Sumita Ghose, who has been the guiding light of this rare initiative, will tell you how the Rangсутra company shares the women hold are just about the only thing they own in the patriarchal society to which they belong.

Ghose says crafts should be equated with fashion to succeed. But connecting rural talent with market demand is not so simple. Even as they earn from their own enterprise, craftspeople are wired differently. There are periods when they would rather be in their fields than working in production lines. There are also the social disadvantages that women face. Getting different worlds to coalesce is not easy.

Can platforms then be constructed to source and showcase different handicrafts? Is an alternative marketplace possible?

iTokri is one such online option created by Jia and Nitin Pamnani, she a microbiologist and he a filmmaker. It offers a wide range of crafts which it aggregates thanks to the efforts of its founders.

The iTokri kind of platform works well because, for the consumer it makes a selection and provides an easy transaction and for the producer it bridges the gap with the consumer with a technological solution.

But it is just a single enterprise and not enough. Craftspeople seasonally show up in cities to offer their products in challenging settings. The consumer becomes a bargain hunter and the producers try to make the best of trips. A happier space is needed to make such transactions better structured

and more wholesome.

Many of the finest products in India either languish or die because craftspeople lack the capacity to deal with market realities.

In West Bengal, the weavers of tussar silk, unique and much sought after for generations, couldn't survive the influx of cheaper materials. It was overtaken in the market and made redundant. It was a matter of chance that an NGO, Ahead Initiatives, stepped in and developed tussar into a modern-day brand in its own right under the name of Oikko.

There are much larger ramifications to such stories. Until Oikko happened, Tantipara's local economy had all but collapsed. Younger people were abandoning weaving as a skill. There was migration to other cities and once-talented people were opting for menial jobs just to get by.

Now, with Oikko being positioned as an organic brand, there has been a revival of vegetable dyes and associated sustainable practices. Tantipara is being represented in exhibitions and enquiries have been coming in. There is now hope among traditional weavers that they may be able to survive. Local talent in design and embroidery, long dormant, has begun to emerge.

NOT EASY For all the social and economic value that can be derived from traditional crafts, the recognition they need from the government eludes them. They get, at best, lip service from policymakers and elites.

Mostly, the work of craftspeople ends up being appropriated by more powerful market forces. They get left behind and not enough effort is

made to protect their interests and make them competitive.

When interventions do happen, it is by happenstance. The help the tussar weavers of Tantipara have got from Ahead Initiatives is an example. If the NGO hadn't been there on an after-school project, it might never have visualized the opportunity that the weavers and the rest of Tantipara were losing out on.

In much the same way, Rangсутra has had to cut its own path and devise an empowerment and ownership model for women in the villages of Rajasthan. Despite the potential, Rangсутra didn't receive the kind of handholding it could really have done with for creating a remarkable company. It had to muddle its way through rules and procedures.

People who set out to run rural enterprises realize how difficult it is to keep them going. Samuel Yonzon relocated to his father's farm 11 years ago to, among other things, produce Kalimpong cheese. We were thrilled to find him and the iconic cheese some months ago after searching on the internet.

But when we called Samuel for an update on his story for this anniversary issue, he informed us that he had given up after 11 years of trying and was heading back to a life in the city, being in debt and unable to cope with lack of infrastructure in Kalimpong.

But, despite the odds, it is in the unique diversity and array of skills and traditions that a treasure trove of opportunity lies. Keeping them alive and leveraging their value is important. The products we showcase month after month in our magazine is a step in this direction. We present some of them again in the pages that follow in this anniversary offering. ■

Many of the finest products in India either languish or die because craftspeople lack the capacity to deal with markets.

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

GOOD LIVING
MADE SIMPLE



CRAFTS | FOODS | DECOR | APPAREL
HERITAGE | INNOVATIONS | HEALING



Painting the jungle

Baiga art is bright and beautiful and looks fabulous on a wall. “It’s our traditional craft and we love doing it. But the money we earn is not enough,” rues Amar Baiga, looking lost amidst his paintings in the din of the Tribal Mela.

He and his brother, Sushil, live in a forest village on the outskirts of the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh. “We are a collective of 10 artists. Whatever we earn is divided amongst us,” says Amar. They need to find ways of earning more, he says. A new addition is attractive masks made of *papier mache* and wood. There are paintings of their village, animals, plants and trees. The Baigas worship nature. They wouldn’t like to paint the city landscape. It’s completely alien to them, explains Amar. The two brothers spend more than half the year working as agricultural labour.

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Terracotta beauties

Mansi Verma's stall sells a delightful jumble of things you'd love to take home. An attractive lamp glows gently behind her. There are more on her counter, along with planters with green leaves peeping out, pen-stands, bowls, a jamboree of jewellery, including bracelets for men and neckpieces for women.

It’s all made in terracotta, the material Verma likes working with. She started Banerii, her enterprise, four years ago after graduating in fine arts. Verma says she is inspired by nature, mythology, pop culture, Mughal art, traditional motifs and *jaali* work.

Everything is done by hand. “A lot of love and labour goes into all this,” she says. That is apparent. Each piece is a work of art. Colour, shape and design blend beautifully. Pick one beauty and take it home.

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Neem tableware

The wondrous neem tree is famous for its many medicinal qualities. While neem leaf and bark have been used for ages, neem wood is now gaining in popularity. It is being shaped into kitchenware. Since 2010, Tora Creations, a micro-enterprise in east Delhi, has been manufacturing spoons, spatulas, platters, bowls, coasters and other serve ware. Tora also sells razors, toothbrushes, tongue cleaners, combs and bottle cleaners made of neem wood.

“Ours is a family business,” says Siddharth Gola. “We never cut trees. We buy all our neem wood from Chhattisgarh from forests where trees have been sustainably harvested.” Neem products sold especially well during the coronavirus pandemic and exports have been picking up. You can buy online and for Delhi customers a home delivery option is available.

Contact: +91 8048983022; info@toracreation.in; www.toracreation.in



Rustic wool

India’s rich tradition in wool is fading from memory. For centuries pastoral communities sheared wool from sheep and sold it to spinners, creating a seamless cottage industry of dyers and weavers. Today, India spends ₹2,000 crore annually importing wool while local wool goes waste. No effort has been made to modernize local wool.

Desi Oon, an initiative by Rangсутra and the Centre for Pastoralism, is trying to reverse this decline. It brings together India’s best crafts organizations — Khamir in Gujarat, Avani from Uttarakhand, Aana-Jaana in Himachal Pradesh and others to revive the entire supply chain of traditional wool.

You can buy beautiful warm jackets, durries, coats, blankets from Desi Oon.

Contact: www.rangсутra.com; 011 2649 4145; contact@rangсутra.com



Hemp the superstar

Hemp or *cannabis sativa* is a tall plant with deep roots that has been serving humanity since time immemorial. Hempire, a micro-enterprise, is cashing in on the plant’s many benefits by packaging hemp seed oil, hemp protein and hemp hearts for interested consumers.

Hemp seeds are high in protein. “Hemp seeds are a whole food that’s vegan, and free of gluten, sugar, trans-fats or cholesterol,” says Aditya Bhalla, founder of Hempire. “These little seeds are one of the highest sources of complete protein in any plant-based food, containing all 20 amino acids and ideal for vegans.”

Hemp oil, extracted from hemp seeds, is a versatile essential oil with a perfect balance of Omega-3 and Omega-6 essential fatty acids. Layer it over your salad or pasta or include it in a pesto sauce. Or apply it on your skin. It makes an excellent moisturizer.

Hemp hearts are seeds that have had their shells removed. You can eat them plain or as a condiment. “Our Organic Hemp Seed Hearts are 33 percent digestible pure protein, rich in Vitamin E, magnesium, apart from essential fatty acids,” says Bhalla. Sprinkle over your fruit, yogurt or cereal or grind with your morning smoothie.

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Art and a story

Patachitra is Bengal’s traditional art of scroll painting, still largely done with natural colours. *Patuas* or *chitrakars* are a community of folk artists who are painters, lyricists and singers all rolled into one. While their paintings are called *patachitra*, the songs they sing that narrate the stories on the scrolls are called *poter gaan*. This vibrant and colourful oral-visual art form dates back to the 13th century.

Banglanatak.com, a social enterprise which works with traditional artistes, has organized the *chitrakars*, helped them make their artwork contemporary, found them markets and boosted their income. Pingla village in West Midnapore is the best-known *patachitra* hub. Incomes of the *chitrakars* living in Pingla have increased to ₹30,000- ₹40,000 per month. In the old days, the *chitrakars* painted scrolls on traditional themes like tales from the *Ramayana* and *Dashavatar* (the 10 incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu) and of Muslim saints. Now they produce their artwork on a range of products — coasters, bottles, saris, T-shirts and more. *Patachitra* is also being used by the government for social awareness campaigns.

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Golden spice

Aranyam Natural Options specializes in turmeric, the super spice that the West has fallen in love with. Meenakshi Bhardwaj, co-founder of this enterprise, says their Lakadong turmeric is special because it is sourced from interior villages in the rainforests of Mawsynram in Meghalaya. Aranyam turmeric has a curcumin content of seven to 10 percent as compared to ordinary turmeric which has a curcumin content of only one to two percent. “We surpass even government parameters in all respects,” she says. The turmeric is extracted from the plant’s rhizome and pounded carefully by hand into powder.

You can also opt for one of Aranyam’s turmeric mixes. For instance, for better absorption there is turmeric mixed with pepper, ginger, cardamom and cinnamon. It can be blended into buttermilk, *lassi* or milkshake. You can also make a warm latte or *haldi doodh*, ideal for keeping colds at bay during winter.

Bhardwaj is keen to export this special turmeric. She has received enquiries from the US and Europe. “The process of getting organic certification is tough, though,” she says. “Also, we want to maintain our brand name and not just sell our turmeric. We have built it up with difficulty.” Aranyam sources and sells pure forest honey as well.

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Mahua for health and wealth

The versatile mahua tree is a gift from nature. It yields wealth in many forms — as food, fodder, oil and medicine. It holds the soil together and is a home for birds and bees. No wonder it is revered by forest communities.

Making full use of mahua’s many uses is Wunder Greens, a micro-enterprise which works in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. The tree is being systematically axed, mostly to provide fuel for making bricks. To conserve the tree and provide an income to local people, Wunder Greens has made a range of food and personal care products from flowers and oil.

Mahua Cacao Bites is a nutrient-dense snack which contains natural sugars and minerals from mahua, plus flavanoids, antioxidants and tryptophan from cacao.

Another product, called *murka*, has its origin in traditional cuisine. It is made of mahua flowers and sesame seeds, and is rich in calcium, iron and omega acids. Wunder Greens also offers personal care products including cold-processed soaps, face oil, body lotion and salve — all containing mahua seed oil.

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A dollop of ancient ghee

A spoon of delectable ghee always uplifts the taste of Indian food. More so if it is made the traditional way from the milk of *desi* cows, slow-churned and filtered delicately to yield a smooth, aromatic ghee. Organik Singh, a micro-enterprise started by Sandhya Singh and her son, Siddharth, claims to make such ghee from a 112-year-old recipe, developed by Draupadi Devi, Siddharth’s great grandmother. “Ours is an A2 Gir Cow Bilona Ghee,” says Siddharth. “My grandmother used to make this in our village. It is our first product. Gir cow ghee is rich in Vitamins A, E, D and K, which boosts your body’s defensive mechanism against viruses and infections. A2 is a special protein which is found in mother’s milk.”

The ghee is made by first turning milk into curd and then slowly churning it to separate the butter which is then boiled to convert it into ghee. Cows on Organik Singh’s farm, near Aligarh, are free to graze and they can feed their calves too. The ghee is attractively packed in glass bottles. Organik Singh’s ghee is certified organic. It contains no preservatives, additives or colour. “Our mission is to revive lost traditional practices and make sure the raw materials used are chemical-free,” says Siddharth. His septuagenarian great grandmother is Organik Singh’s best brand ambassador.

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Dolls to remember

WHAT’s a doll with a past? A heritage doll. Meet queen Gowdung Rani, fearsome female warrior Gambari Sikla, the kingly Sikhona Joholaw, and more. They are mythical and historical characters from the folklore of the Bodo community in Assam. Lovingly handmade, the dolls have been designed by Kirat Brahma, a graduate of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad (NID).

There are contemporary and stylish dolls here too like Shillong Ni Alasi and Bodofa UN. Along with little girl dolls, pretty butterflies and other soft toys that would catch the fancy of any child.

“Children today are playing with Doraemon, Spiderman, and all kinds of Western toys. If they play with toys that come from their heritage, how educative that would be. The toys would engage them and they would also acquire knowledge about their culture,” says 32-year-old Brahma.

“The limitation of local content, especially for children, has resulted in the death of many rich cultural heritages,” he says, ruefully.

Brahma comes from a village close to the Bhutan border in the Bodo Territorial Region called Ranga Pani (red water). Its Bodo name is Gizwadwe, he emphasizes. Brahma’s father was a schoolteacher and farmer.

When he was three he was sent to Kokrajhar to live with his uncle and study at Sister Margaret Novel School. Brahma then joined the government’s Navodaya School. It was his art work that caught the attention of his teachers. He was catching fish, one day, when he came to know he’d been selected for NID. Brahma travelled to Ahmedabad. “It was a transformative experience,” he recalls.

He studied film and animation and then set up Free Folks Studio with a tribal from Jharkhand and a Wanchu tribal from Arunachal to focus on tribal art. The trio shifted to designing adult colouring books which did well but by then Brahma had decided to return to his roots and work for his people.

He set up Zankla Studio as a social enterprise. It works with weavers, artisans and storytellers to revive Bodo culture and make it contemporary and appealing. The dolls are made with local cloth woven by hand and fashioned into dolls by artisans.

“All the toys are made from locally sourced material, wherever possible. Using traditional fabrics/dresses woven in the traditional method by locals is an addition to these toys.”

The toys can also be decorative items, souvenirs, and collectibles. The dolls are also used for animation films with a storyline. “Instead of playing with a borrowed character from the mainstream, our kids can play with toys that come from our roots,” he says.

Brahma’s social enterprise helps the local economy by providing jobs. He also has plans to expand his business by making customized toys. Zankla Studio is located in a place called Simla, close to Brahma’s ancestral village which has no internet connectivity.

The dresses are traditional, the faces are all Bodo and so are the names. From deep within the forests of Assam, Brahma is igniting interest in Bodo culture and putting a smile on the faces of children.

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Touching lives of

1 out of 3 Indians

through innovative brands



Masters of healthy noodles

NOODLES come with irresistible charms. Children who won't eat their meals will happily slurp up a bowl of noodles. Working people find them easy to have on the go. There are eating places in the world where people will even queue up for a signature noodle recipe.

Noodles bring big problems as well. There is way too much starch in the rice and flour and wheat varieties. An energy boost is often welcome, but empty calories never did anyone much good. Chemicals, too, are cause for concern.

But noodle lovers need not despair. The good noodle is here, both tasty and nutritious and easy to serve as well. It is made from different varieties of millet, traditional red rice and even quinoa. In varying degrees, there are fewer carbs and more protein. Also, cultivation is chemical-free.

The idea came to Vinod Kumar when he was into retailing organic products at stores called Naturally Yours in Mumbai. He found that his customers preferred millets to rice. He also discerned a trend of ordinary folk, and not just wealthy people, being willing to spend more to eat healthy.

Kumar, 38, decided to go from retailing into production and marketing directly to customers. He began identifying farmers who were ready to cut out the use of chemicals and finally go organic.

Naturally Yours began putting out seeds, spices, healthy grains and flour from quinoa, among other such wholesome products. But it was with noodles made from a combination of millets that he struck a chord.

"Multi-millet noodles is hands down our top-selling product," says Kumar. "Either out of awareness or out of medical concerns people are trying to replace carbohydrates with protein in their diets."

There was a cultural reason as well. In past generations, how to cook millets was family knowledge and they were also more readily available. Now, when people wanted to eat millets, they could neither source them nor did they know how to turn them into tasty dishes. Also, there isn't time to spend in the kitchen.

Multi-millet noodles are a one-stop solution. They come in well-sealed packaging, can be stored and are ready to cook. They can be bought online and home delivered. In addition, farmers and consumers are being connected with each other.

Growing and consuming millets has been on a decline. Yet, in many rural areas, even peri-urban places, millets continue to have a place in local diets. In the northern states, there is *ragi*, *jowar* and *bajra*. In the southern states, there is foxtail millet, proso millet and kodo millet.

"We were not consuming just wheat and rice. We had all these millets also. All of them got wiped out because wheat is much easier to use," says 36-year-old Priya Prakash, a microbiologist who is Kumar's wife and partner in the business. "People don't know how to cook them anymore, and they don't have the time or the inclination to learn," she explains.

"Mixing all the millets together and making noodles from them was a blockbuster idea for us," adds Kumar. "It was a simple idea, really. With the noodles, the benefit of all the grains has become that much more accessible."

Demand has been growing every year since 2016, the year the multi-millet noodles were launched. It has emboldened Naturally Yours to come up with noodles from red rice, soya and quinoa, which are also growing in popularity.

The noodles are quite easy to make although they need to be boiled for longer than instant noodles. "Instant noodles are flash fried, that's why they cook in two minutes. Our noodles are dried instead," explains Prakash. "It is still just 10 minutes spent on cooking a much healthier meal."

Nine years into the business, there is a lot that Kumar and Prakash have learnt about the organic food industry. People are willing to pay and, in fact, seek out healthier food options. Customers tell Kumar why they buy their products and almost always, the stories surprise him. A struggling artist from Thane spends ₹2,000 every month to buy *ashwagandha* powder from Naturally Yours.

The noodles are priced at ₹125, which is nearly six times the price of a

packet of instant noodles. "The noodles are a top-seller. It wouldn't have been so if customers were looking at it from a price point of view," Kumar says.

At the same time it is not overly expensive. A packet serves three people, making the cost of a meal ₹40. A meal anywhere outside would

cost much more. Customers make these calculations. For those who live alone there is a smaller packet for just ₹35.

If the price is still a little higher than mass-produced brands of noodles, it is justified by the high quality. Their quinoa pasta has 45 percent quinoa, unlike some brands that have 1 to 2 percent quinoa and claim to be quinoa pasta.

Kumar has his own take on popularizing organic food. He says it won't do to be preachy because then people get put off. It is more important to meet the needs of consumers and allow them to make their own choices of what they want to consume and at what price.

Their approach has been to identify the customer's need instead of forcing organic products on them. This explains why they've been pruning their inventory from 500 products to 100 and now 45.

Kumar also treats his customers as a community which over the years has gained trust in him. Naturally Yours is a small business with a modest turnover. But since it was launched in 2016, it has nurtured customers as carefully as it has created its products. It has created a small but valuable identity for itself. Kumar says he would never chase size for the sake of size.

When we meet Kumar at Chembur in Mumbai, his office is



Priya Prakash and Vinod Kumar: 'Millets got wiped out because wheat is much easier to use'

really a godown. Everything happens from here with a small team of about 18. Kumar and Prakash often attend to online sales themselves.

Production and packaging of the noodles has been outsourced. But there is also packaging of other products which happens in the godown where we meet. Here too Kumar is hands-on.

When Kumar was at Cardiff Business School, where he did his Master's in Business Administration, he came to realize that organic food was a growing trend. On his return to India, he found that there were very few options for a customer looking for organic produce.

"I visited an organic farm run by a relative and he was doing a fantastic job. I thought it must be a profitable operation, but he told me that it was not the case. In fact, he was making losses."

Kumar then started Naturally Yours to bridge this disconnect between the consumer and the producer. Prakash was previously working as a research associate in Anthem Biosciences, Bengaluru and had a background in biotechnology.

"I had just had a child then and I wanted to eat healthy for my baby," she recalls. But she had to go to different stores for each product. In its earlier avatar as a store, Naturally Yours was meant to be a one-stop shop for the customer looking for healthier alternatives.

In 2010, their first store opened in Chembur on a family plot. They expanded to two more stores in Vile Parle and Bandra. When they saw that brands were manufacturing the same staples, organic pulses and organic spices, they found there was some uncharted space in the organic food industry.

With the shift to making their own products, Prakash took over product development and Kumar the finances and marketing.

They say the creation of real value is what matters to them. They believe that they are giving their customers good products and at the same time helping farmers get a slightly higher price for their produce.

Organic farming on a large scale is not always commercially viable. "We ask the farmer to give us a price in which he can keep the authenticity of the product intact as well as make some money for himself," Kumar explains.

Naturally Yours has a farmer-friendly approach. For any product to be certified as organic, it takes three years of continuous certification. "From the day farmers start converting to organic practices, we buy their products. We see them through the entire life cycle," says Kumar.

Till the products are certified organic, they are called natural products. Their products are certified under the Indian organic standards as well as the US standards. They work with farmers across the country —

Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, to name a few states.

Marketing has been the particularly tricky part. "The Indian retail landscape is very different in each city and we want to understand each city before we enter that space. We don't want to dump our products in the market," says Kumar.

No product stays in the warehouse for more than two months. They have contracts with individual vendors for different products. Small health food cafes in Delhi and Mumbai also buy some of their products. Organic Plate in Karkardooma, Delhi and Sequel in Bandra, Mumbai are a couple of them.

There are international orders too. They get orders from individual customers in Singapore and the UK, among other countries. Within the country, they receive orders from 23 states including remote locations in Nagaland and Sikkim. ■

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A gift of rice

FROM Onam to Pongal is the festive season when we meet and greet friends and families. We agonize over the right gift. Will it be this or that? A sari or a shirt? A tablet? Chocolates, maybe?

Instead of picking from a medley of typical stuff, opt for an unusual gift — a box of wondrous rice varieties, brimming with health and organic goodness. After all, the aroma and satiety which a plate of rice offers is still unmatched.

Choose from an assortment of beautifully packed gift boxes thoughtfully curated by Sempulam Sustainable Solutions, which works with small farmers who cultivate long forgotten rice varieties organically.

India once had millions of extraordinary varieties of rice which could survive drought and floods. Rice, it is said, originated in India. But over the years older rice strains have been ousted by a handful of varieties aggressively promoted by commercial interests. Reviving some of them has been a delicate and tough task for Sempulam and the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS).

The good news is that you now have a choice. You can look beyond Basmati and Sonamasuri and pick and choose the rice best suited to your health profile. Here is an array of interesting options on offer.

The Pride of Tamil Nadu Rice Gift Box has 38 sample varieties, each weighing 100 gm and unique to one of the 38 districts in the state. It costs ₹1,800. The box is emblematic of the rich biodiversity of Tamil Nadu and its hardworking farmers. The festival of Pongal in Tamil Nadu coincides with the harvesting season of rice. It is a celebration of rice, the state's staple food.

If you are a rice connoisseur, opt for the Luxury Collection Gift Box for ₹675. Rich in flavour, it comprises six varieties, each with a distinct taste. Kitchili Samba is an easily digestible and high energy rice. Kuzhiyadichan is calcium-rich and ideal for porridge and sweet Pongal, and Kulakar is a low glycemic variety which can be converted into idlis and is excellent for diabetics.

Or savour the fragrance of rice with the Aromatic Collection Rice Gift Box. It has six varieties with delicate flavours and is high in nutrition and medicinal value. Try a forbidden rice from the fields of Manipur. Sample a rare variety grown only in a single district in Kerala. Experience an aromatic rice that was enjoyed by the

Buddha himself, and carried by monks to remind them of the Enlightened One. For just ₹800.

The box includes the famed Kalanamak, a mineral-rich variety from the Gorakhpur region of Uttar Pradesh. Mullan Kaima is an aromatic variety, infused with Vitamin A and minerals, from the Wayanad region of Kerala. Chakhao Poireiton is an aromatic, exotic black sticky rice from Manipur, rich in antioxidants, anthocyanins and fibre. There is the famous Gobindobhog, a protein- and fibre-rich variety with aroma from West Bengal.

Also available is the Women's Special Gift Box for ₹750. It contains the deliciously aromatic Seeraga Samba Raw Rice, known to have a calming effect. It's high in iron and calcium. The other boiled rice,

Sivappu Kuruvikar, is an iron-rich variety. Also included are protein-rich amaranth seeds, that keep your bones healthy and prevent osteoporosis. And there are Salem Samba Rice Flakes along with a pack of organic jaggery.

Boost your resistance to illness with the Immunity Collection Rice Gift Box. It has six traditional varieties. Navara is high in iron and calcium, and builds immunity against respiratory disorders. Kattu Yanam has potassium, iron, calcium, magnesium, zinc and phosphorus. Soorankuruvai too has calcium, potassium, iron, magnesium and zinc and is well suited for diabetic patients. There is also Kaivara Samba, Kalanamak and Karuppu Kowni.

Also included is The Red Rice Collection, for ₹675, which has six red rice varieties with medicinal and nutritive properties that cleanse the blood, improve metabolism and fight aging.

Kuzhiyadichan is rich in antioxidants and calcium. Kullakar has iron and zinc. Mappillai Samba is a low glycemic index variety. Poovan Samba is protein-rich. Iravai Pandi has a high content of calcium, phosphorus and minerals.

The Mother and Child Collection contains a set of delicious, nutritious and easy to digest rice varieties ideally suited for children, young mothers, and mothers-to-be. It is priced at ₹675.

The Anudhinam Rice Box has 30 rice varieties, each with its own distinct aroma, taste, vitamin index, antioxidant properties, immunity builders, low glycemic index and much more. This collection, which costs ₹1,199, comes from the Northeast, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. All the packs are hygienically vacuum packed and meet food safety standards. ■

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Donkey's milk great for soap

WASIM has been earning from his donkeys for years by putting them out to work at construction sites and getting ₹300 to ₹350 a day. But now he has found that he can sell donkey milk for ₹2,000 a litre — a veritable windfall, considering that a female donkey yields 500 to 700 ml of milk a day and Wasim and his brothers together own 15 donkeys.

Organiko, a start-up, buys donkey milk to make soap which sells at ₹499 for a 100-gm cake and is supposed to possess several cosmetic and therapeutic benefits. The enterprise was founded in August 2017 and it is still early days for its branded soap. But 500 cakes have sold easily and the anticipation is that the demand will be big.

At 4.30 am team members of Organiko reach Dasna village, 11 km from Ghaziabad, to collect milk from Wasim. It is transported to their office-cum-production unit at Loni, also in Ghaziabad district, and made into Organiko branded donkey milk soap.

Organiko pays Wasim ₹2,000 on the spot for a litre of donkey's milk collected on alternate days. Collecting the milk every day would mean baby donkeys would lose out.

As a socially driven enterprise, it is important to Organiko to change the status of the donkey, an exploited and neglected beast of burden, and also provide a robust income to extremely poor nomadic communities who own donkeys.

The additional income has improved living standards for Wasim's 12-member joint family.

"The children go to school. We have bought five more donkeys with our earnings. We have improved the organic feed of our animals and take better care of them. Earlier, we regarded donkeys as a burden though they did back-breaking work at construction sites. They were let loose to wander around in search of food in the colony or fields but now they are seldom out of our sight. Life is good," says Wasim with a smile.

The soap claims to have anti-aging properties, vitamins and minerals. It moisturizes and alleviates skin ailments like eczema, psoriasis and acne, and protects against bacterial infections. The soap is wholly organic and comes in two variants, Donkey Milk Natural Ingredients and Donkey Milk Charcoal & Honey. Each cake is packaged attractively in arecanut leaves procured from a Self-Help Group (SHG) in Chennai.

"The motive behind Organiko is to create stable livelihoods for donkey owners by using their own, untapped resource of donkey's milk," says Pooja Kaul, the young founder of Organiko who is partnered by Rishabh Yash Tomar.

Both are postgraduates in social innovations and entrepreneurship from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) School of Rural Development in Tuljapur in

Osmanabad district of Maharashtra.

Wasim would like Organiko to buy the milk every day. But the new venture will only buy 150 to 200 ml per donkey and that too on alternate days so that young donkeys aren't deprived of their nutritional needs.

"If we deviate from this humane principle the donkey mothers and their babies will suffer. We do not want them to go the way of cows and buffaloes that are milked unnaturally. To get donkey owners like Wasim to understand this is an enormous challenge," says Kaul.

How did Kaul think up an idea that combines social purpose with profit? She says she has always been interested in the dairy sector. Her brother told her about a company in Switzerland that ran a donkey dairy farm and sold donkey's milk directly to consumers.

Kaul and Tomar began testing the waters. In 2016, as part of the TISS curriculum, they began a pilot project to check out the feasibility of starting a donkey dairy business in Solapur, Maharashtra.

A baseline survey of donkeys and their owners in Solapur, which is 50 km from the Tuljapur TISS campus, was undertaken. Kaul found that the donkey owners were mainly from denotified nomadic communities. Extremely poor and illiterate, they toiled, with their donkeys, for 12 to 14 hours in Solapur's brick kilns or at construction sites. They earned

just ₹150 to ₹300 per day for back-breaking work.

The donkey owners didn't know that their much maligned animals could be a rich resource. Kaul and Tomar discovered that some European companies in the donkey milk cosmetics business were flourishing. Their products tapped the premium segment and were picked up in a big way by consumers.

They decided to try their hand at soap-making. Kaul had already dabbled in making soap and later honed her skills at a workshop in Mumbai. By 4 am they would go off to Solapur, buy donkey's milk from the community, take it back to a rented room in Tuljapur and start making soap.

"The best part of our intervention is that donkey owners who used to abandon their donkeys after making them work for four or five months, now shelter and feed them," says Kaul. However, the status of the male donkey is still unclear. Kaul says that Organiko has wider impact since entire families benefit from the project. "It is a great achievement for a social start-up," says Kaul, "even though it may take time to grow volumes."

So it looks like the much derided donkey will finally have its day in the sun. ■



Pooja Kaul: 'We want to create stable livelihoods for donkey owners'

Published in January 2019/reported by Kavita Charanji

Putting heart into coffee

WHERE does really good coffee grow? Deep in the forest, on homesteads in the midst of nature in the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot. It is a collaborative effort of birds, bees, flowers, trees, butterflies, ants, pepper vines, fallen leaves — they all go to make that brilliant cup of coffee.

Since 2016, the Black Baza Coffee Company has been sourcing coffee from very small producers in the Western Ghats and marketing it to urban consumers.

A symbiotic relationship has been in the making. You don't just enjoy your coffee you also get to know those small growers who keep the biodiversity of the Western Ghats alive.

An annual Habba takes consumers to the BR Hills and growers. It is a coffee festival. This year on the itinerary was a Coffee Drinker's Selfie Wall. While Black Baza has been introducing growers to buyers, it is now time for growers to know where their coffee goes and who drinks it.

There are other introductions too such as to Kaati. A full-bodied medium dark roast coffee from the Palani Hills in Tamil Nadu, Kaati is aimed at creating awareness about the gaur or Indian bison and saving mammal species. We have been buying quite a lot of it and it is a wonderful coffee.

While getting familiar with Kaati you might just like to know a thing or two about the role ants play. Check out the Ant Loop Gift Box, which is a beautifully crafted set of brewing equipment made from brass with marching ants etched on it. The brass filter is the traditional South Asian way of brewing heavy bodied and strong coffee from a fine powder.

"To grow good coffee, you need ants. Ants are the reason coffee farms stay healthy and alive. They keep pest populations in check and contribute to soil richness. Plus, they are funny, cute little creatures with fascinating social structures," we are told.

So here we are in the dusty, polluted NCR intimately connected to the exotic biodiversity of the beautiful forested areas where the coffee we drink comes from. We have coffees called Ficus, Kaati,

Jumping Ant, Black Baza, Draco, Wanderoo, Chukki, Potter Wasp and more such to choose from.

The Black Baza is a bird of prey, Ficus is the beautiful fig tree, Chukki is in honour of the leopard. There is an ecological story to each coffee because when the consumer knows where it comes from justice is done to the small and anonymous grower and environment as well.

Black Baza has a motivational story to tell. Positioning itself as "diversity friendly", Black Baza works with small growers and community groups whose holdings are meagre in size,



Arshiya Bose: 'Our coffee is radical'

encouraging them to be organic in their practices and respectful of nature in the traditional ways they already know.

In doing so, it promotes livelihoods, which might otherwise have been trampled upon in the rush to cater to markets. Growers are not only reassured that they can survive, but Black Baza also helps them compete and sell when they would otherwise have been left out. In the coffee business, the grower gets a mere 2.8 percent of the final price. Black Baza gives growers 17 percent.

The invitation to the customer is to get on board this transformational effort. It is a personalized appeal. When you buy a pack of coffee from Black Baza, it comes with your name handwritten on it. The message is: "Your cup of coffee is kinder to the environment and the grower." You don't just get a good cup of coffee, but you also "secure livelihoods and strengthen coffee farming practices that conserve biodiversity. We invite you to participate in the process. This is a great step one. But we can do more".

Arshiya Bose is Black Baza's founder. She has a Ph.D on the political ecology of markets for



Ant Loop Gift Box



The Draco, poised for flight. Black Baza has named a coffee after it

biodiversity conservation from Cambridge University. She was researching sustainability certifications for coffee when small producers in the Kodagu area of Karnataka reached out for support.

Black Baza really came out of the need of farmers with small holdings to engage with markets. "It was they who took the initiative, not me," says Bose.

In her journeys through Coorg, Bose found that Indian farmers continued to largely grow coffee under trees, thereby preserving a rich biodiversity. This was unlike other parts of the world where forests have been felled for coffee plantations.

"They wanted to access fairer markets and to be recognized for the good farming practices that they were already doing. They wanted a support system to enable them to farm ecologically," says Bose.

In India, too, tree cover was being lost in keeping with the global trend. So, helping farmers retain the trees and ecology friendly practices while at the same time being profitable became a mission worth taking up.

Bose set up Black Baza Coffee Company as a private limited entity in 2016. It continues to be a business, but with well-structured ethical foundations. Its slogan reads: 'We are an activist company. Our coffee is radical.'

She now works with 650 producers, mostly indigenous and tribal communities, to bring to consumers 'the best of the diversity of coffee'.

Black Baza has a manifesto, which pledges the company to fair trade, authentic sourcing and ecological balance, whether it is preserving trees or eschewing use of chemicals. It is also an evolving manifesto as conversations happen.

Collaborations with farmers are defined by conservation agreements, which stipulate maintaining 100 trees per acre, protecting sources of water, reducing and abjuring use of chemicals and maintaining a certain percentage of shade so that the cutting of tree branches is restricted. Many growers have just an acre but preserving their forest cover enables them to access other produce like honey.

And what makes a good cup of coffee? Apart from forest cover and plant care, you have to pick the right beans at the right time, and ensure moisture levels are just right, explains Bose. Coffee beans then are roasted to perfection in a roastery.



Talking to small growers

Each step is micro-managed.

"We set up FPOs and we work with existing ones. In Kerala, we partner Fair Trade Alliance. Governing FPOs is challenging but democratic. All our decisions are participatory which makes the experience so much richer," says Bose.

For small farmers, Black Baza Coffee Co is a lifeline. It has been made possible by Bose's unique transition from academia to the marketplace. It helps them engage with the world at large in ways that preserve and promote their identities and traditional practices.

Black Baza's brand is built on its honesty and intellectual purpose. The farmers couldn't have hoped to do this without Bose. Equally important is Bose's market-savvy approach. Naming coffees the way she does, is being original and claiming space in a market where others spend large sums on brand building. Black Baza sells online, and to stores and top-end hotel chains.

In a networked world someone with a real message tends to be heard and followed. For Black Baza, the first steps on that journey have been taken. ■

First published in December 2020 and updated



Earthy skin

First Water Solutions offers a range of natural cosmetic products from solid perfumes and face scrubs to body lotions and serums. Their Pure 21 Face Serum is a non-greasy, water-based serum. It is a combination of 21 flowers, fruits and herbs. Also available is Pure 21 Face Oil for those with dry skin.

Their solid perfumes come in several unusual fragrances like musk, mint, pine and cedar. These formulations are a combination of ancient remedies and modern research.

First Water Solutions' products are plant-based and vegan. No artificial chemicals, parabens, alcohol, synthetic colours, petrochemicals or gluten are used. Their products are not tested on animals either. Their belief is that nature can provide for all personal care needs.

Contact: +91 9958211228; firstwaterindia@gmail.com <https://www.firstwatersolutions.com/>



Arty puzzles

FroggMag sells folk, tribal and miniature art jigsaw puzzles. Run by Shalini Ghosh, an alumnus of the National Institute of Design (NID), FroggMag promotes Indian art through engaging games. The toddler puzzles cost between ₹500 and ₹600 and come in a set of six. The puzzles in two or four pieces are easy for a child to put together.

FroggMag also has 63-piece puzzles, priced at ₹600, that include Santhal art, Kalighat Pat and Madhubani, among others. The games are designed by women folk artists who learnt the art forms from their families and tribes. There are other memory-based games like mix-and-match puzzles available as well. In the catalogue are also pretty and colourful scarves and earrings priced between ₹500 and ₹2,000.

Contact: <https://www.froggmag.com/>; +91 9811408313; froggmag@gmail.com

Goatskin guitar

Tsering Angchuk is a musician from Changtang in Ladakh. Sitting inside a stall at Dilli Haat, he strums a traditional tune on a colourful local guitar with six strings. Pleased with the small audience he has attracted, he plays another tune — this time with an instrument which has three strings and resembles a violin. Both instruments are made of goatskin and painted with bright floral motifs. "I learnt from a musician in another village around 20 years ago," he says. "I have played for All India Radio and I have a repertoire of around 70 songs."

Angchuk says he plays for all celebratory occasions. A traditional dance called *jabro* cannot begin without his guitar and violin, he says. Ladakh has a rich tradition of folk music played on very old indigenous instruments.

Contact: Tsering Angchuk – 9469360136



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A survey of Goa's unique old houses

GOA is practically littered with mesmerizing houses and government buildings that hark back to 450 years of colonial rule. So great was the dominance of western architecture in shaping urban and, to some extent, rural landscape that local architecture was completely overwhelmed. But thanks to the efforts of the Goa Heritage Action Group (GHAG), about 60 houses, known as Raj-Angonn or courtyard houses, with basic plans based on indigenous ideologies that predate the arrival of the Portuguese, have been listed.

Research conducted by GHAG focused on understanding the arrival of the courtyard in Goan architecture, documentation of these houses and creating awareness of the culture and heritage associated with them.

Elaborating on the survey of these houses, Raya Shankwalker, honorary secretary of GHAG, said: "There has been so much prominence of Indo-Portuguese architecture that in many ways we have lost track of vernacular heritage. The courtyard houses of Goa are a unique form of climate adaptive architecture. Our intention is to create a visiting circuit because locked up in these houses is a wealth of art and artifacts which have been relegated to the fringes for far too long."

Many of these houses may have been built during the Portuguese time while some of them may have a history that predates the arrival of the Portuguese. However, the basic plans could be centuries old even though the embellishments do have certain western influences.

"The key reasons for surveying and documenting these houses is that it is a part of Goa's heritage and we were keen to show how Goa has an indigenous architectural style that predates the Portuguese," said Shankwalker.

According to a study paper by Arpitha Shreedhara for GHAG, the houses surveyed are between 150 and 450 years old and a few of them have gun holes in their external walls. "In many houses, the attics are literally filled with old documents, furniture, weapons used during the wars, paintings and photographs depicting important historical events, etc."

The survey of the Raj-Angonn houses is one of the many efforts of GHAG to bring about awareness of heritage and the compelling need to protect it. Formed in 2000, at a time when it was difficult to get the required nine persons to form an NGO, the group has grown, and more importantly it has succeeded in creating awareness about the need to protect heritage.

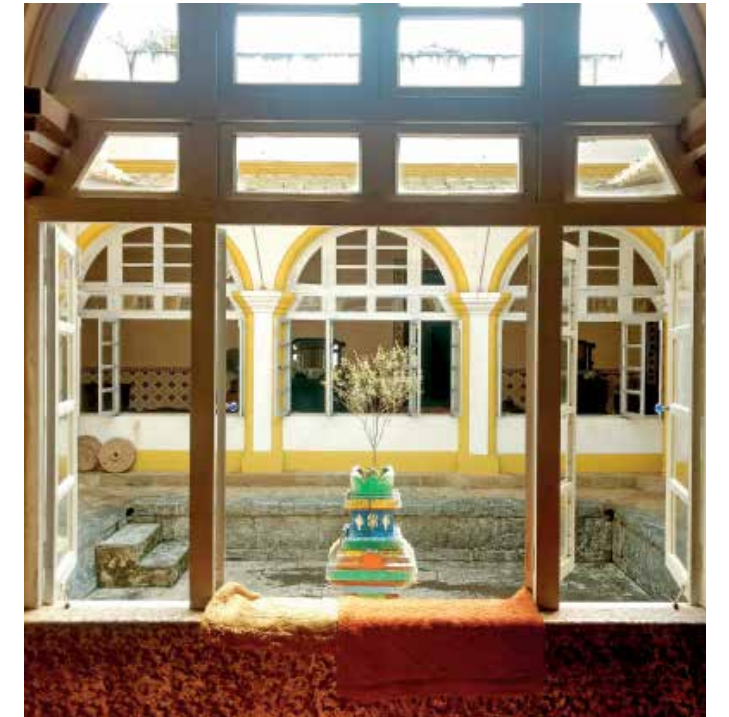
In 2005 the group published a book, *Walking in and around Panaji, Goa*, which listed heritage structures in the capital city. "One of the reasons for doing this was because the state government had not framed comprehensive regulations and one of the precursors for framing these regulations was listing of heritage structures across Goa."



Raya Shankwalker, honorary secretary of the Goa Heritage Action Group



A typical Goan courtyard home



Some courtyard houses predate the arrival of the Portuguese

At some time in the past, the Panjim corporation toyed with the idea of creating an amusement park in the main garden. The plan never saw the light of day thanks to the efforts of GHAG.

Explaining the *raison d'être* of the group, Shankwalker said, "What sets us apart is that we never believed in conventional activism. We believed in soft activism which meant engaging with the government, creating awareness through art festivals and filing public interest litigation when necessary. And the success rate of this position has been very high."

The key to heritage preservation is first understanding the main benefits. "Conservation of heirlooms or our history is the key responsibility of a civilized society. It is important to conserve what was built by previous generations and transmit it to future generations," says Shankwalker, adding, "today in Europe the core historic centres of cities are much sought after by tourists and this cannot be recreated."

Through the Fontainhas Art Festival, GHAG tried to push forward the idea of creating a development model for the heritage areas with people at the centre. "We need to enhance life in these areas so that people stop closing their houses and leaving or selling them to builders, because people are the soul of the place," he explained. Through this festival, the group generated more awareness and more hotels and restaurants opened in the area.

Recently, GHAG embarked on another research project on Kaavi art which adorns several places of worship and houses in Goa. It is a unique art form in which lime plaster on walls is etched and a red earth-based pigment is used to create art. Documentation is completed and publication of a book is expected to follow.

The past 18 years have not been smooth for the group. After the flurry of activity which marked the first seven years of its existence, it went into hibernation. "I personally had to take a break to drive personal growth which had taken a back seat," said Shankwalker. Since then, the organization had been shrinking and rebuilding started two years ago. But the original force which drove GHAG is still alive and ticking and the research projects on Kaavi art and Raj-Angonn houses is proof that it has not lost its soul. ■

Published in February 2019/reported by Derek Almeida

kirloskar

Oil Engines

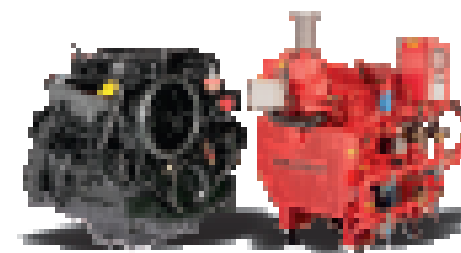
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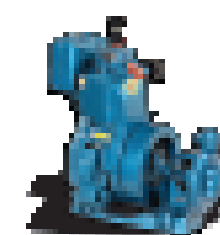
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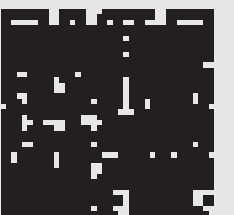
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Paper craft

There is life after death for old newspapers. Craft City, a social enterprise, turns discarded newspapers into attractive and durable baskets, lampshades and photo-frames. Take your pick from laundry baskets, cylindrical baskets, fruit baskets, pen holders, bowls and boxes. There are also table lamps, vertical lamps and round lamps which illuminate your room with a gentle light.

Craft City was started in 2017 by Eshaan Kamdar, a computer engineer and management graduate. He says it was his sister, Aditi, who was making products from newspapers after working out techniques and designs. Eshaan converted Aditi's hobby into a social enterprise, adding new products and marketing inventively through exhibitions, architects and event managers. Mumbai, Delhi, Raipur and Bengaluru have emerged as promising markets. "The lacquer we use is water resistant and gives our products strength and durability. The colours are organic. The process is eco-friendly," explains Kamdar.

His small unit employs 11 people. Part of the manufacturing process is outsourced to home-based workers in slums and a village on the outskirts of Nagpur. "If they work well we include them in our core team," says Kamdar. Craft City's products are recognized by the Ministry of Handicrafts.

Contact: +91 9588411415; craftcitystore@gmail.com



Sweet and healthy

Maakrit makes delectable jams, chutneys and craft chocolates. All their products are made with natural ingredients. No refined sugar, preservatives or artificial colouring and flavours are added. For sweetness in the chocolates, Priya Jain, founder of Maakrit, uses jaggery and fruits. On her catalogue you will find some unusual offerings like beetroot and amla jam, and raisin chutney. Maakrit's chocolate called Date with Cacao is made with rose, pomegranate and cacao. What's more, their chocolate gift packs are packed in braided palm leaf boxes.

Contact: +91 9210198013; <https://naturessoulshop.com/product-category/brand/maakrit/>



Fabric from plants and flowers

Anuradha Singh is an expert in eco-printing, a method by which she extracts natural dye from a plant and transfers it onto fabrics like silk and cotton. Wispy stoles, attractive cushions and table runners are made from the fabric Anuradha dyes.

She creates botanical or eco-prints, going on long walks in her neighbourhood and foraging for a variety of plants.

Dyes are extracted from those plants and then patterned onto fabric in her studio. So each piece is unique. All are prints of leaves and flowers, created by hand. Only natural fibres are used and there is zero waste.

"Each leaf, fabric or colour used has a journey attached to it. To create with natural resources adds a deeper connection to the art," she says.

Ecological dyeing is a process by which dyes are produced from fruits, flowers and plants for clothing, linen and even paper. "It's an alchemy of natural dyes," according to Anuradha.

Contact: +91 9910727527; mailbox4anuradha@gmail.com



THE BEST OF ARTISANAL FINDS

Reviving traditional crafts and empowering women





Weaves from the Northeast

The Nomi – Weavers Nest offers handcrafted jewellery, textiles and ethnic wear from the Northeast made by local artisans. Nomi was a talented girl from Assam who wanted to design and promote ethnic and fusion wear for women and men using the Northeast’s weaves. However, she passed away. So, to fulfil her dream, her brother, Sushant Phukan, founded The Nomi to boost the livelihoods of artisans and weavers from the Northeast. “We aspire to connect the rich heritage and creativity of the region to diverse markets across the globe with sustainable fashion,” he says.

Phukan is a former techie. He has now devoted himself full-time to promoting The Nomi. He has a stall at Dastkar’s Gali-e-Khas in Delhi’s Andheria Mor.

Contact: +91 97174 74959; nomiwn1@gmail.com



Attractive cloth bags

Paalaguttapalle Bags are produced by Dalitwada women from Paalaguttapalle, a small village in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. They stitch a range of different types of cloth bags and cushion covers. They also make hair accessories, and spicy traditional pickles. The enterprise was set up as a means of livelihood by the women to sustain their families after agricultural activities suffered due to drought.

A variety of designs is available. The women of Paalaguttapalle recently learnt mesh-screen printing, adding to their skills. Kalamkari art, a traditional block-printing technique from Andhra Pradesh, also features on their beautifully stitched bags. Drawstring bags, compartment bags, backpacks, tote bags, among other types, are available. They are open to bulk orders and custom orders, or you can choose from the many designs and types available on their website.

Contact: +91 938159808, paalaguttapalle@gmail.com; <http://paalaguttapalle.com/>



Natural soaps

Earthen Myrra offers natural and handmade skin-care products. Based in Bengaluru, they have soaps, scrubs and bath salts. Their soaps are unscented or carry the aroma of essential oils.

Any colouring they have is natural or comes from natural clay or plant-based colourants. Some of their soaps are completely plant-based or vegan without any animal products. Other soaps that may include goat milk or honey are labelled as such.

Their soaps are made in small batches. They offer pink clay and coffee soaps, lemongrass soaps, coconut milk soaps, and papaya soaps, all priced at ₹260. Madhushree Manjunath, the founder, started Earthen Myrra to create products that lead to no waste. Their packaging is reusable and biodegradable.

Contact: +91 9880233163; info@earthenmyrra.in; <https://www.earthenmyrra.in/>



When craft is a style statement

RANGSUTRA’s first store is in the midst of Saidulajab’s byzantine lanes in Delhi, jostling with cafes, offices and homes. In a store devoted to style, craft and colour there’s lots to browse. Try a gossamer sari with an embroidered blouse, or slip into a stylish kurta, or perhaps a dress. There is also a melange of home furnishing including bright cushions and cool *chikankari* curtains.

Rangsutra’s Delhi store now has a sibling with a sunny ceiling in Bikaner called Abhivyakti. If you happen to be in the vicinity, stop by. It’s just in front of the Urmul Dairy and Trust offices and ably supervised by manager Basanti.

So is Rangsutra on an expansion spree? “Our members have always wanted retail outlets,” says Sumita Ghose, founder and director of this unique company whose shareholders are rural artisans. Back in 2006, a thousand artisans, mostly women, put in ₹1,000 each and became angel investors of Rangsutra, India’s only crafts company.

“We have expanded our outreach to include artisans from Uttar Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir, thus growing in strength to over 2,000 artisans, 80 percent of whom are women,” says Ghose.

Rangsutra links artisans to markets, and builds their skills so that their incomes increase. Traditional skills are helped to upscale with new designs, fabrics, machines and quality checks. Artisans are organized into clusters. In Kashmir there is the Noorari producer company in Srinagar and in Bandipora there is a weavers’ cluster which is becoming famous for tweed and *kaani* weaving. In UP’s Hardoi, Rangsutra works with *chikankari* artisans, helping with design and marketing.

“Fab India came in as an investor and took



our handcrafted products to the market. We now have an enduring partnership with IKEA, thus enabling us to take Indian crafts to the world,” says Ghose.

A big believer in sustainability, Rangsutra encourages upcycling. It works with artisans of *ralli*, a traditional craft in which bits of leftover cloth are stitched together in geometric designs to make attractive quilts.

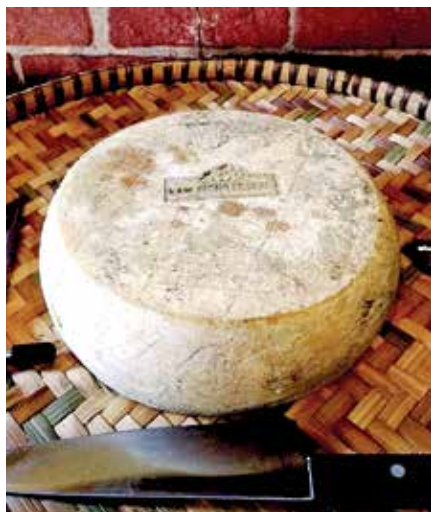
You’ll find upcycled products at the Bikaner store and artisanal products made by those learning a new craft skill. There are garments with embroidery, applique, and tie and dye prints like *bandhani*.

For Diwali new collections were introduced in stores and online. One is called Pardis and the other Kaanch. There’s also an assortment of garments to choose for the man in your life.

Rangsutra is also helping to revive India’s forgotten wool manufacturing tradition. It has two ‘*desi oon*’ clusters. One is in Rajasar in Bikaner and the other is in Bandipora. For the winter, jackets and coats made with traditional wool in spiffy designs can be bought online and an exhibition is organized every year in December in Delhi. Wrap yourself, this winter, in the warmth of a garment from Rangsutra.

Contact: +91 8432019901; www.rangsutra.com





A wheel of the cheese in Kalimpong



Our half-kg being weighed



Vacuum-packed cheese ready to be shipped

Who moved my cheese?

A rural life, as a traditional farmer, may sound good, but it is not without its challenges. Ask Samuel Yonzon, a sound engineer, who went back to his family's farm in Kalimpong. After 11 years he is looking once again to the big cities to make ends meet, pay off a loan and plan for the education of his kid.

Yonzon and his wife, together with some other families, have been producing Kalimpong cheese, trying to bring it back much after it had vanished from markets. Once a cherished product for its unique flavour and texture, the cheese has mostly faded from public memory, as has the small town of Kalimpong in north Bengal.

It was for the cheese that we sought Yonzon out and the story of how we bought Kalimpong cheese sitting in Delhi followed. Soon, our readers from all over were buying the cheese as well.

But when we spoke to Yonzon again recently for this special anniversary issue of *Civil Society*, we found him remorseful about the way things had been going.

Kalimpong cheese may well be valued, but lack of infrastructure, access to markets and finance make it tough to earn a living. So, while they will keep making the cheese, it is important also to look at other options.

Our cheese hunt began with an email we received from our friend and columnist, Kiran Karnik. Did we know where Kalimpong cheese could be found? He hadn't had it in years, but he wanted it now, and how! He was asking us because he knew we track rural foods and other products.

But, unknown to Kiran, there was another good reason to ask us. We grew up eating Kalimpong cheese in Calcutta. Like Kiran, we too hadn't had it in years. But this was a worthy cause to pursue.

A series of phone calls followed. A colleague who spends months hanging out in Darjeeling was asked, but he said



Cheese-making is a fine art

his wife had tried to buy the cheese there — without success. It wasn't in production anymore, they were told. Calls to Calcutta zeroed in on Keventers outside New Market as a possible store to buy it. But Keventers there and here in Delhi sells only bottled milk and such products. At Nature's Soul, an organic food store in Delhi, they said they hadn't heard of it.

Finally, searches on the internet threw up the name of Samuel Yonzon at the Makarios Bous Farm. He and a few others were making the cheese in a village outside Kalimpong — not just as a rural enterprise, but to keep the

cheese-making tradition alive.

When we called Yonzon he was tending to his cows and politely asked if he could call back later when he could address our query.

Yonzon did get back and it was agreed that he would sell us 500 gm of Kalimpong cheese for ₹800, inclusive of the courier charges. It would reach in two separate packs of 250 gm each, one for Kiran and one for us.

An invoice followed on WhatsApp and the payment was made over Google Pay. Then, at every stage Yonzon kept us updated with photos: Cheese packed, cheese being weighed, cheese labelled, cheese handed over to the courier with tracking number.

Days later, in Gurugram, we were all tucking into the cheese and planning to order more — which we did in much the same way. And it was even better than the first consignment.

Kiran's family recalls that a few drops of oil had formed around the edge which they attribute to the 1,500-km journey during the worst of the heat wave. It is for them a "comfort cheese" — not overly sharp or acidic, no overpowering aroma.

"Expect to get your fingers oily — a thick-butter feel — as you slice the cheese. That said, the texture is moderate: not flaky, but not creamy either. It is a mildly aromatic cheese, exuding a meadow-like, slightly milky, smell. The taste, too, is rustic, more earthy than sharp. Savour the cheese by itself, alternatively, atop bread or crackers that are not heavily flavoured," they say. ■

First published in August 2024 and updated

Tangy SHRAM foods

In 2008, Piyusha Abbhi, a young MBA graduate, decided to put her management skills to use at the grassroots by helping the women of Batamandi village in Himachal Pradesh become economically and socially independent. She organized them into a Self-Help Group (SHG) called SHRAM — Self Help — Recycling, Altering and Manufacturing Group. They began by making handcrafted items for sale. SHRAM has now ventured into food processing. The women make a range of healthy organic foods from traditional recipes passed down generations.

Place an order and buy pickles, candies, and chutneys. Fresh gooseberry, mangoes and strawberries are used in small batches so it's all freshly made. Try their peanut butter: it is solar roasted and ground. Also available are low-calorie dry roasted snacks and puffed snacks made from millets and forgotten grains.

Contact: +91 9318911011; piyusha4@gmail.com



Rakshak for girls

Vyomini sells biodegradable sanitary napkins called Rakshak. Made from cotton fabric, banana pulp and bamboo pulp, the napkins are free of chlorine, bleach or added fragrance. The napkins are inexpensive and marketed to girls from low-income families. Four sizes are available. There is a special pack of six napkins for only ₹20.

Founded by Prachi Kaushik, a social entrepreneur who graduated from Delhi University, Vyomini describes itself as a social organisation. The NGO carries out campaigns and workshops in rural areas to spread awareness of menstrual health and hygiene.

Vyomini has held such workshops in government schools for girls in Haryana. Vyomini also installs vending machines in schools so that girls can get sanitary pads free. The vending machines and napkins are subsidised by the state government.

An incinerator is also set up so that sanitary napkins don't turn up in landfill sites. Vyomini goes to construction sites to talk to women labourers and sell Rakshak sanitary napkins to them. They are working in 12 states. Their slogan is, Think Holistic.

Contact: +91 9716255564, +91 8178522714; info@vyomini.org; www.vyomini.org

Colourful carpets

In Mirzapur, India's oldest carpet weaving hub, generation after generation is trained to become gifted weavers. The Mirzapur Dari Weavers' Co-operative Society sells the handwoven carpets in Delhi's Dastkar Nature Bazaar.

In the large shop, carpets hang from the walls and are piled on the floor. They are available in a range of sizes, 10 feet by 14 feet being the largest and 2 feet by 3 feet being the smallest.

The carpets are made of wool and the base is of cotton. Even a medium-sized carpet of 3 feet by 5 feet takes nearly 15 days to make. The carpets are in lovely hues — blues, yellows, reds and browns.

Amit Baranwal, president of the society, started the co-operative so that weavers can reap the profits from the sale of their work, rather than going through exporters and intermediaries.

He laments that lack of opportunities for weavers is turning the younger generation away from the profession. "If there is a weavers service centre in Mirzapur, perhaps younger people will want to join the profession," he says. Some 30 weavers are part of this co-operative.

Contact: +91 9452080918, +91 7007437903





Jia and Nitin Pamnani (centre) with the iTokri team: 'We put up 200 to 300 products every day'

iTokri is in a sweet spot

IN 2012, when Jia and Nitin Pamnani moved back to Gwalior from New Delhi, they wondered what work they could do in their hometown. They loved the beauty and artistry of Indian craft and many of their friends were working with craft communities. So, they decided to set up iTokri, an online craft store. They pooled all their money, got friends and family to invest and took over Nitin's father's rice factory, converting it into a warehouse. Nitin jokes about how his father, probably sceptical of his venture, called iTokri another of his 'new ideas'.

Before he moved to Gwalior, Nitin was a documentary filmmaker, doing films on culture and politics. His documentary, *I am your poet*, on Ramashankar Vidrohi, JNU's campus poet, won an international award. Jia, a microbiologist, worked extensively with People Tree, a store that sells quirky T-shirts, art and offbeat books.

iTokri now works with over 10,000 artisans. It offers a vast array of sarees, fabrics, *dupattas*, stoles, and non-textile products like wooden and metallic jewellery, paintings, and home décor on its website.

"We are the only website that puts up 200 to 300 products every day," says Nitin. "While engaging with a craft community, we try to add all the crafts that their members make to our catalogue."

They have recently also started a 'Save the Craft' campaign to save 12 dying craft forms.

Travels across India, visits to craft festivals, *melas*, craft communities, and conversations with people working with these communities is what built their large network. COVID restricted travel, but word of mouth and an eight-year relationship with artisan communities has kept the business

going and now iTokri finds people approaching them with their craftwork.

The products are divided according to their craft names and categories. They offer a range of saris, including hand-painted, embroidered, woven and tie-dyed saris. Their handloom saris include Kantha, Tangliya and Ajrakh, priced from ₹1,800 to ₹15,000. The silk-weave saris have Shibori and Ikat art forms ranging from ₹4,500 to ₹15,000. *Dupattas* in Phulkari and Kalamkari are listed in many colours and styles. iTokri offers silver, metallic and wooden jewellery along with stationery and paintings.

Also available are fabrics from ₹200 per metre, in a variety of materials from cotton to wool. You can choose from Ikat fabrics, block-printed fabrics and naturally dyed fabrics, among others. And, if you want to be creative, you can buy hand-carved wooden blocks used for printing.

In home decor, there are pillow covers, bedsheets and bedcovers. Also in their catalogue are hand-painted coasters, wind chimes, tableware, utensils and decor items. A set of four coasters is priced at ₹850.

Beeswax solid perfumes and lip balms with uniquely painted lids can be bought at prices from ₹80 to ₹250. You can also find the perfect gift set of natural incense packed in wooden painted boxes, priced at ₹1,270.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, iTokri produced a range of pretty cloth masks which helped them tide over an especially bleak period.

GREEN BOX When you buy a product from iTokri it arrives in eco-friendly packaging with a handwritten note on recycled paper. The packaging has its own story. In their search for

ways to set themselves apart, Nitin and Jia came across box-makers in Gwalior who used to make cardboard boxes for local sweet shops. The sweet shops began buying factory-made laminated boxes, so the box-makers found themselves out of work. iTokri hired them to make hand-made boxes for their products which were unique and eco-friendly.

Each product lists which craft community or artisan made it and details its process, story and history. For some artisans, you can click on their name and find all the products they offer.

"A product becomes just a product when you don't know the people who made it and the labour that went into it," says Nitin. Connecting buyers to the process of production is important and this connection is being lost in big stores and malls, he points out. "When you know how communities get together to make some handicraft or the hours an individual has put in, *usme jaan aa jaati hai* (there is life in the product)."

Sufiyan Ismail Khatri is an artisan who makes aesthetically pleasing Ajrakh stoles in Kutch. You can find out all about his life and expertise by clicking on his name on the website. Sufiyan is a tenth-generation artisan whose family has been involved in the art of Ajrakh printing since the 15th century. He became an apprentice at the age of 14. The website also details the process of production. Sufiyan's Ajrakh, for instance, is made through a 16-step process.

iTokri works on an inventory-based model where they purchase directly from artisans before selling. "We work on a procurement model. The artisan does not have to worry about sales and stock, they can relax and be secure because their sale has taken place," explains Nitin. The artisans set their own prices for the products and iTokri buys from them.

CRAFT CAMPAIGN iTokri's 'Save the Craft' has shortlisted 12 dying craft forms from across India they want to support and revive. Each month, one craft will be the focus — starting with Ajrakh in February, followed by Sabai Grass from West Bengal, Chikankari from Uttar Pradesh, Kalamkari from Andhra Pradesh, Kasuti embroidery from Karnataka, Patachitra from Odisha, and six more handloom and craft styles.

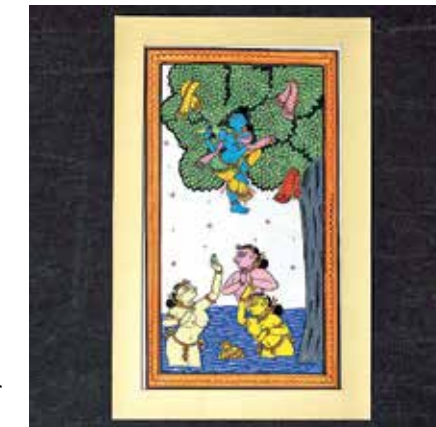
"Our goal is to preserve the legacy of all-natural handlooms and handicrafts that are dying and promote it at all possible levels. We aim to sustain the practice and prevent it from becoming extinct amidst fast fashion trends," says Nitin.

The idea struck them when they noticed an inflow of first-time customers who were new to the craft ecosystem. iTokri wanted to connect them to craft by providing information and seek their help in reviving dying crafts.

"At iTokri, we have a policy of selling the products in the name of the artisans, giving them due credit and recognition," says Nitin. "With this campaign, we hope that people will take notice of these artisans, support and encourage them to keep their efforts going." The campaign will include stories of artisans, live shows and collections.

The campaign is also a platform for deeper engagement with iTokri's long-term customers. iTokri has managed to create a loyal base of enthusiastic craft lovers. "Craft is a community-oriented product, so we are proud to have a consumer base which is also a close-knit family-like community," says Nitin. The consumers engage with the website through reviews and discuss the crafts in comments.

While adding stitched clothing to the catalogue was something iTokri wanted to offer for some time, the nudge from customers' requests and feedback helped get things into motion. They now offer kaftans, dresses, pants, *kurtas* and T-shirts, among other clothing, priced from ₹400 to ₹2,500.



Adding stitched clothing to the catalogue was something iTokri wanted to offer. They now offer kaftans, dresses, pants, *kurtas* and T-shirts among other items priced from ₹400 to ₹2,500.

Most consumers are women and a lot of them are repeat customers. "People come back for our products, packaging or just the experience. We have had some people buy from us 50 times over a period of time!" Nitin exclaims. They rely on word of mouth from their happy customers and do some online advertising on social media.

iTokri also ships globally and 20 percent of their sales come from outside India. While iTokri sells mostly to customers directly, they also sell to small businesses and small stores, boutiques across India and internationally. The idea of a brick-and-mortar store in the future excites the Pamnanis. ■

Published in March 2022/reported by Surmayi Khatana

Himachali fruit wine

FRUIT wines have their own charm, especially if they come from Himachal Pradesh and are made from the wonderful fruits grown in the upper reaches of the mountains there. Even better if the traditional ways of making wine in Himachali homes are followed.

So, if you come across a brand called Wonder Wyne we suggest you try it. It is a family initiative which comes from Minchy's, a company well-known in Chandigarh and other markets in the north.

Apple cider and apple wine and wines from grapes, strawberries, apricots, plums and peaches are some of Minchy's popular products. The apple cider comes with a fizz and is named Cidekick. Its popularity has been growing.

Himachal has a strong tradition of producing alcoholic beverages from fruits. Fruit-based alcoholic beverages are served to guests and at community gatherings. These include *angoori* (from grapes), *ghanti* (from apples), and *chulli* (from apricots).

"Traditionally wines are made in homes, but notwithstanding that our Wonder Wyne brand is very popular in the market," says Girish Minocha, Minchy's CEO and founder.

Minchy's Food Products, which is the company's full name, has been exceptionally successful in making use of Himachal's abundant agricultural and horticultural produce plus its exotic wild fruits to produce a range of foodstuff.

"The idea is to maintain a sustainable link between entrepreneurship, nature, and society," says Minchy's CEO, Girish Minocha. The company is one of the few food-processing units in the state to evolve a successful business model.

Minchy's makes fruit juices, fruit drinks, pickles, squashes, crushes and jams among other products. It has introduced therapeutic food products such as apple cider vinegar, wild apricot kernel oil, raw turmeric pickle, sea buckthorn oil and bitter gourd pickle.

"Nature has its own way of curing ailments. We provide you nature's bounty in a bottle so that you can get easy access," says Minocha. Some of its lesser-known raw produce like sea buckthorn, *brahmi* and hazelnut are sourced from the tribal areas of Pangi,



Wonder Wyne produces fruit wines, a fizzy apple cider named Cidekick and more

Kinnaur and Spiti.

Many products are organic and, apart from honey, all others are vegan and gluten-free (except the sauces).

"We procure apples from organic growers in Himachal and Uttarakhand. We get white honey, acacia honey and multiflora honey from different regions of the Himalayas such as Kinnaur and the low-lying Shivalik hills. No animal

three full-time food technology professionals. It has a close-knit management team. "Primarily it's me, my wife, my son and my daughter. We helm the innovation part, identify new products, then the R&D team looks into the feasibility part. We develop a product, some of them click and some just fizzle out. But we keep moving forward," he says.

The company's pickles division is handled by Minocha's wife, Sonia. "It's entirely traditional. Each recipe has been handed down by my grandmother and my wife's grandmother to her. Quality is the hallmark of every pickle," says Minocha.

"Last year we launched our apple cider. My son played a major role in developing the product and it has grown tremendously. It's a big hit even in smaller towns and has come to be known as Mucchad Cider," he says. The health products are handled by Minocha's daughter.

He says that he was lucky to have the full support of his family in the initial years when survival is critical. He and Sonia established the company in 1992 with an initial investment of ₹1 lakh.

At present, Minchy's products are sold at over 5,000 retail outlets across the country. The company has two manufacturing units, at Solan and Shoghi. "Despite our countrywide presence, Himachal remains our main market," says Minocha. With the setting up of a warehouse in the coming months, the company is now all set to take its business online. ■

Published in January-February 2021/reported by Raj Machhan



product is used at any stage," says Minocha.

What is the secret of their success?

"A lot of food processing companies in Himachal have started well, made good progress and then somehow floundered along the way. In my experience, if a sense of complacency gets into the system, then the company slowly fizzles out. It's like riding a bicycle, either you move forward or you fall down. My approach is to keep moving, to keep up with the times," says Minocha.

Minchy's has an R&D set-up with

The goodness of nut milk

IF you are lactose intolerant, have dietary restrictions or are just vegan by choice, chances are you are looking out for non-dairy milk and can't find it. So, we did some searching for you and this is what we came up with online.

But first, for the uninitiated, non-dairy is what you get from plants and nuts. It could be extracted from almonds, cashews, soy or oats, among other options.

There is actually a growing variety of non-dairy milk in India and though you will get it in shops, the best place to look is really the internet because small producers ensure quality and freshness. Often called 'Mylk', replacing the 'i' with a 'y', it puts a 'why' on the manner in which one consumes dairy.

We decided to test the market by buying almond milk from SAIN, a small producer in Gurugram who delivers quickly within the National Capital Region (NCR).

Fresh almond milk arrived in sleek black packaging and glass bottles with SAIN stamped on the side. 'Cacao Story', the chocolate and hazelnut almond milk, rivals fancy milkshakes at coffee shops, with the benefit of having no added sugars and a boost of magnesium.

SAIN's journey began in a non-dairy milk aisle, when founder Sheena Jain could only find very limited options for plant or nut-based milk. Concerned about the health impacts and unethical nature of dairy milk, for "purely selfish reasons, I did not want to feed that to my children," in 2017 SAIN was set up by Sheena and Tarun, her husband.

The great thing with SAIN is that you can customize your order. With a diverse range of options in nut milks, they offer milk made from oats, coconut, macadamia, hazelnut, and cashew. But they specialize in almond milk.

In almond milk they offer a variety of flavours apart from their unflavoured original milk. Uniquely called 'stories', the almond milk includes the Cardamom Story with a strong flavour profile, a kick of caffeine in the Kaffecchino Story and there is also the Vanillin Story and the Cacao Story, which we went for. Each has a rich, creamy taste and comes in a 210-ml bottle.

SAIN prides itself on 'fresh' almond milk. "The milk is manufactured and delivered on the same day," says Sheena. One can place orders through WhatsApp, like we did ours, and be greeted with an enthusiastic and cheerful voice, ready to get your milk delivered in a hassle-free manner to your doorstep.

As with any innovative business, communication and information are important and extremely tricky. "People would sometimes think it is 'badam milk', or dairy milk with almonds in it and not milk made from almonds," explains Sheena, recounting her visit to an organic market in Gurugram in the initial days of her business.

Informing people about the benefits of almond milk in terms of the protein it provides and how it differs from (or is similar to) dairy milk has been a challenge. "Communication is an ongoing journey," she says.

The almonds are well-soaked to combat the hot weather of



Sheena and Tarun Jain

Delhi-NCR. Most of the milk production is done mechanically, avoiding touch, especially due to COVID-19.

"The product that comes out of our unit is something that will come to my home as well for my children," says Sheena.

A large percentage of Indians are lactose intolerant, which in a dairy-heavy country leaves individuals with very few mainstream options.

Ravi Kumar, co-founder of Bevry, realized the need for and potential of alternative milks like oat milk while searching for options for his lactose intolerant nephew. He got together with Pradeep Sanker and Avinash Jain to create an oat milk brand.

"We source our oats from Australia. We soak the oats for an hour and the enzymification process follows. After that the grinding of oats takes place," explains Sanker.

With the founders themselves functioning out of the three cities of Chennai, Delhi and Gurugram, Bevry delivers vanilla-cinnamon and choco-

hazelnut oat milks pan-India. They also offer cold-brew coffees in a variety of flavours.

One can place orders online on their website. The oat milk company is glad to have consolidated a loyal consumer base in two years of functioning, "Almost 75 percent of our customers are repeat customers," says Sanker.

An outfit from Bengaluru called Goodmylk offers cashew and oat 'mylk', with the aim of making plant-based dairy accessible and affordable. Set up by Abhay Rangan, a vegan activist, Goodmylk started from his mother, Veena's kitchen. She would make peanut curd that Abhay would deliver.

They now include vegan alternatives to paneer, butter and mayo. Their cashew and oat mylks come in an unsweetened original form, a sweetened variety and a chocolate flavour. And they deliver in different cities across India.

There are imported options too, like walnut and hazelnut in a rice base from Borges, which is a company with a hundred years behind it. You can find it on Big Basket or Vegan Dukan.

But if you want our advice, go for the products from the smaller outfits, preferably in your own city. They are produced with passion and care and can be customized to your taste. ■

Published in July 2021/reported by Surmayi Khatana



Winter knits

Kilmora's sweaters and mufflers evoke memories of woollens knitted by grandmothers and aunts. The woollens are made by rural women in Uttarakhand. In an age when machine-made clothes dominate the market, the homely feel of Kilmora's handwoven products is comforting. Kilmora's stall at Dastkar's Nature Bazaar was full of vibrant woollens including mufflers, socks, caps and gloves. There were also beautiful handwoven shawls and scarves as well as Nehru jackets for men and women. Kilmora is a brand promoted by Kumaun Grameen Udyog (KGU), a non-profit company established by the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group.

KGU works in Uttarakhand to give a fair deal to rural producers and consumers. The non-profit provides a steady source of income to women for their products, enabling them to have greater control over their lives and better status within the community.

Contact: +91 7055218976; www.kilmora.in

Brick art

Make wall art, coconut trees, turtles, crabs, castles, trees or whatever else your mind desires with Kattoos' miniature eco-friendly terracotta bricks. Kattoos has a range of handcrafted do-it-yourself hobby resources, including puzzles, made from natural materials to de-stress and improve mental well-being. The Kattoos bricks come in five shapes and bind together with glue.

Kattoos is a livelihood initiative by Headstreams, a 12-year-old NGO working in urban and rural Karnataka with women and youth from social and economically vulnerable communities. The terracotta building blocks are made by women's groups in Kolar district of Karnataka.

Kattoos is suitable for all ages and brings young and old together. Smaller boxes of bricks cost between ₹200 and ₹300 while larger boxes are priced between ₹1,000 and ₹1,200.

Contact: contact@headstreams.org; <https://headstreams.org/kattoos/>



Village weaves and Kaziranga Haat

Rupjyoti Saikia Gogoi lives in the vicinity of the Kaziranga National Park. For a long time she noted the huge amount of plastic discarded in the park by tourists and decided to do something about it. In 2004 she founded Village Weaves, an enterprise that upcycles plastic waste and converts it into handbags, doormats and table mats.

Plastic waste is integrated with cotton threads on a primitive handloom to weave different products. Gogoi's venture provided a means of livelihood to around 2,000 women. She has skilled 35 villages in her method of weaving plastic and cotton. She also set up a Kaziranga Haat to sell rural products made in Assam.

Village Weaves' products come in beautiful colours and patterns and are glossy. You can post a message on Gogoi's Facebook page or you can send her an email if you'd like to buy a product from Village Weaves.

Contact: rupjyoti.saikia5@gmail.com

GALLERY



ARTABILITY
Third Edition

For several years now, *Civil Society* has tracked the work of artists with disabilities. We began out of curiosity, but very soon our curiosity turned to respect.

These are artists in their own right, using mediums and techniques over which they exercise complete control. They come with their own sophistications and styles.

They choose their subjects and settings from the world as everyone knows it to be. They don't shy away from representing life as it is whether in nature or urban settings or in vignettes of rural life.

So it is that we call our annual collection Artability. This is the third year and we are presenting eight artists. What we offer is but a glimpse. You could, however, follow them from here and undoubtedly discover much more of their work.

Artability builds on the Beyond Limits exhibition held by Preeti Johar of the Family of Disabled. We covered it as an event for a long time. The exhibition takes forward the work of Preeti's father, Dr Rajinder Johar, who suffered from quadriplegia after an accident and founded Family of Disabled.





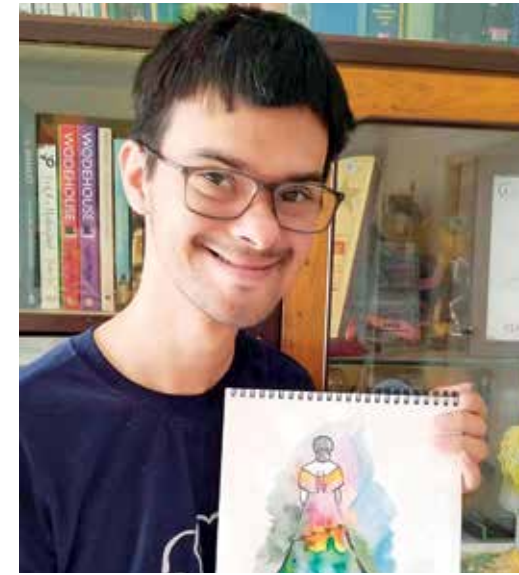
Pictures of despair

ANJUM MALIK

Anjum Malik, 37, is an artist of deep despair. Her style is characterized by an ability to weave dark narratives. These are marked by the symbolic presence of crutches in many of her works. In one of her paintings, she uses two crutches to depict oars on either side of a boat that is placed precariously in a surreal setting.

Her subjects are usually people, especially women and their bodies that lack agency in a man's world. Drowning in despair, the tragedy of warfare and struggles of womanhood are some themes and images that come through in her art.

Her chosen medium is oil on canvas, which she has used to create more than 50 paintings. She has a master's degree in fine arts from Jamia Millia Islamia and lives in New Delhi with her mother and sister.



Inspired by nature

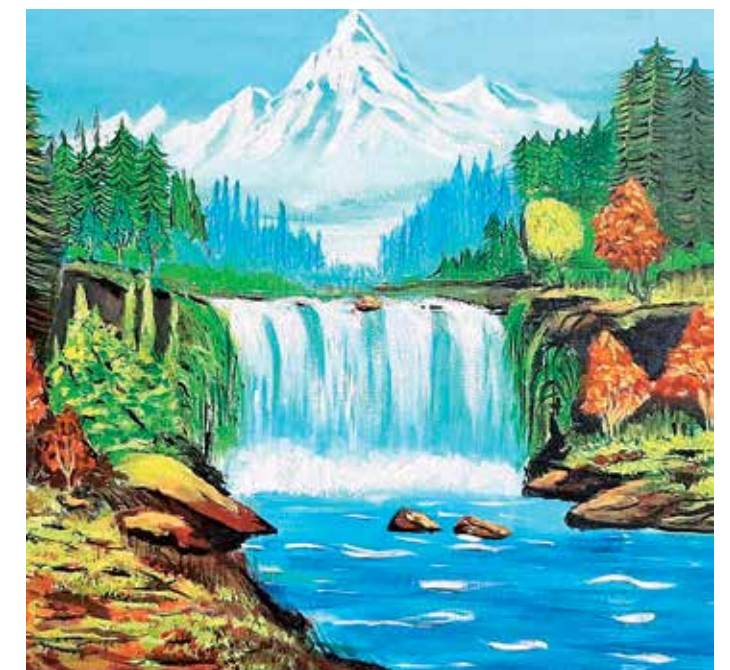
RISHI DATTA

Taking a look at Rishi Datta's artwork is like stepping into a world of all things bright and wonderful. He draws his inspiration from nature and it shines through in his landscape paintings which have been his constant companions since the age of six.

His choice of vibrant and lively colours attracts immediate attention and is typical of his style. He is skilled in detailing.

His work, *Tree of Life*, shows his love for nature. He specializes in acrylic and watercolour but also goes beyond paper and canvas with his ability to work well with glass, clay and wooden blocks. Rishi also dabbles in abstract art and a bit of folk painting that represents diverse cultures from across the world.

Rishi, 26, has Down's Syndrome and lives with his parents in Noida, Uttar Pradesh.





Images of rural life

R. VENKATESH

R. Venkatesh’s art is like a window to scenes of rural India. It is a celebration of realism. His focus is on rural life, where simplicity and spirituality intertwine. Bold strokes and outlines create depth and dimension in all his subjects — temple architecture, women, children and the rural marketplace.

One of his most striking paintings depicts a typical monsoon scene where a smiling mother shields her children from the rain with her sari. Detailed strokes bring out the effect of a sheet of pouring rain covering the three smiling figures.

He works with oil, watercolour and acrylic but his main medium is oil.

Venkatesh has been affected by speech and hearing impairment since birth. He has a diploma in fine arts from Mysore University.



A queer vision

RITIKA GUPTA

Ritika Gupta,28, is a queer artist with disabilities whose work reflects her situation.

She primarily uses digital as a medium and is an illustrator with Revival Disability India, an online platform dedicated to people of the LGBTQ+ community who also have disabilities. Ritika is autistic.

While Ritika does use acrylic, ink and watercolours as well, her principal offerings are in digital where homosexuality is her main theme.

Women kissing, men holding hands, lovers in the city are themes that come through in her work. There is an underlying defiance in all her creations.





Scenes from Rajasthan

MURARI SONI

For Murari Soni, art is a way of connecting with his Rajasthani roots. He was only eight years old when he began sketching and drawing. His subjects were either the traditional *matka* or the *khilonewali* — scenes typical of his village.

Years later, his skill as an artist has grown but his subjects have remained the same. A good example of this is his work titled *Khilonewali*, where she is the focus of his painting, standing out against the backdrop of a lively village setting.

Murari is mostly a self-taught artist even though he did seek training for a year. His chosen medium is acrylic on canvas.

Murari, 43, is speech and hearing impaired since birth. He lives with his wife and two children in Nawalgarh, Rajasthan.



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Spiritual symbols

DEVANSHEE SRIVASTAVA

For Devanshee Srivastava, mandala art informs her identity. It is also her biggest strength and perhaps her friend too. Mandalas are spiritual symbols that represent the universe and are also used as a tool to establish a safe space that supports meditation. This is exactly what it does for Devanshee.

Her chosen medium is Staedtler pencils for theme-based patterns typical of mandala art. She also dabbles in oil on canvas occasionally, in which case she draws inspiration from nature or chooses to focus on contemporary, abstract themes.

Devanshee, 20, has been diagnosed with 85 percent intellectual disability. She lives with her parents and elder brother. She is sitting for the NIOS exams at Tamana Study Centre in New Delhi.



An eye for the abstract

SOHAM DAS

A blend of abstract designs and bright colours defines Soham Das's work. His first encounter with art was when, out of curiosity, he picked up a box of *rangoli* watercolours at the age of nine and painted a tree. There was no looking back.

He taught himself, starting by using the small tags attached to the price tags of new clothes or soft cardboard boxes, dipping them into paint and pressing them down with precision to create his kind of art.

He always starts by applying a base colour to his canvas or 300 GSM paper, letting it dry and then continuing painting. He paints every day at the same time for 90-120 minutes, while listening to music — he likes all kinds of music from Rabindrasangeet to rock.

Soham, 14, was diagnosed with autism and ADHD at the age of four. He is based in Kolkata.





Everyday
reality

SHWETA SINGH ARYA

Bold strokes that display depth are typical of Shweta Singh Arya’s style of art. She has the unique ability to weave mundane details of everyday scenes into her creations, giving them a life-like appeal and leaving a lasting impact on the viewer’s mind.

She works with oil on canvas and also loves to sketch, making her collection a balanced mix of black and white bracketed by regular splashes of colour, depending on her choice of theme.

She often ponders the many roles that women are required to play in society.

Shweta is 33 years old and has speech and hearing impairment since birth. Based in New Delhi, the artist has a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from College of Art, University of Delhi.



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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



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