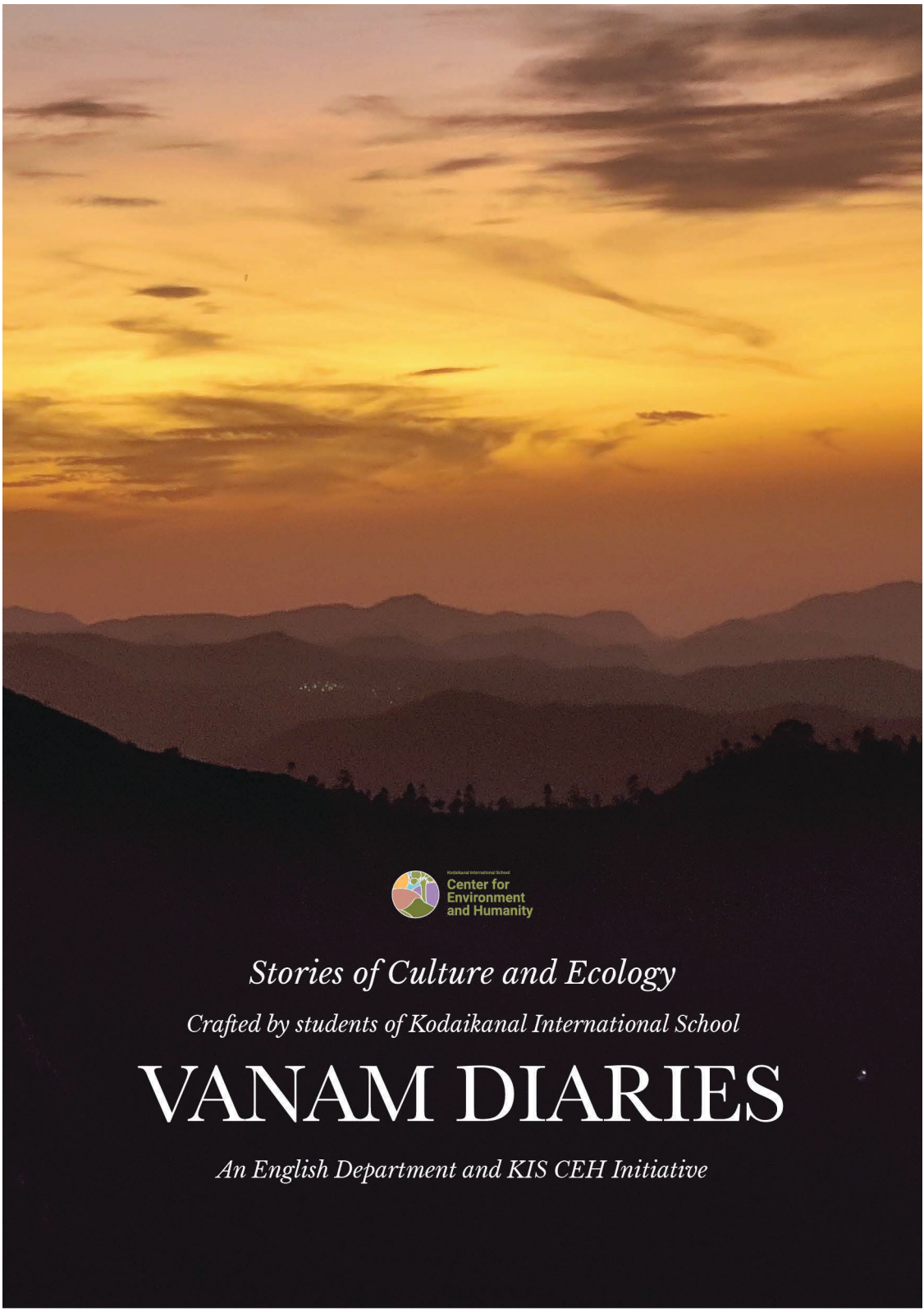


Stories of Culture and Ecology

Crafted by students of Kodaikanal International School

VANAM DIARIES

An English Department and KIS CEH Initiative

Kodaikanal International School

Center for Environment and Humanity

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AN INTRODUCTION

Vanam Diaries is the vibrant writing and storytelling club at our school. It serves as a platform to document the culture and environment that surrounds our town. Committed to the art of storytelling, students venture into the community to unearth tales that often go unnoticed.

Students not only hone their writing skills but also develop a deep understanding of the world around them. Vanam Diaries contributes to the preservation of local history and encourages students to become active and responsible members of society. Students use storytelling as a tool for connection, understanding, and positive change.

Flip through these pages to read our featured stories.

THE RAINBOW ASSOCIATION OF WELFARE

...THE STORY OF ANNA NAGAR

by Raya and Adil

Grade 11, KIS

The tawa radiates heat throughout the ramshackle little house, as Femina Rani squats over it, frying samosas to sell at the Sunday Market. This is how she, a single parent, earns enough to feed and house her family of two daughters and one son. ‘They usually sell out,’ she says proudly, earning her around 10,000 rupees a month, which while just about sufficient to survive on, is painstakingly little for a family of four.

However, others in Anna Nagar, the slum area where she resides, earn about the same or even less working as daily wage laborers in the town of Kodaikanal. With this amount of money, they struggle to buy enough groceries to last the month, let alone build safe and permanent homes.

Most houses in the area lack electricity, running water, or even proper latrine facilities, which leads to persistent ill health and diseases. These temporary shacks also provide no protection against the harsh Kodaikanal winters, and most people, like Femina Rani, must bundle themselves and their



children into layers and layers of clothing inside their homes in order to not catch severe cold.

With the amount of adversity and hardship this community has to deal with, it is no wonder that some people are tempted to turn to alcohol and substance abuse. A decade or two ago, most of the youth in the community were under the influence in some way or another.

In the midst of this crisis, a dedicated group of individuals began trying to make a difference, and the Rainbow Association of Welfare was created, acting as a beacon of hope for the underprivileged people in Anna Nagar.

The Rainbow Club came into existence multiple decades ago in fact, in the year 1962, as a football association. In those days, football matches were arranged between multiple local teams, some formed by groups of friends and some by the Church. The concept of penalties did not exist, and so matches could keep going for up to weeks at a time if there was a draw. After one such match that went on for 7 weeks, one of the local teams emerged victorious over the church team. The winning team however did not have a name, and the pastor of the church, seeing a rainbow in the sky after a rainy day, christened the team ‘The Rainbow Club.’

The Rainbow Club continued to play matches in and around Kodaikanal, but over the next few years as the



members became busy with their lives, the club dissolved. It only gained importance again 50 years later in 2016, as a fundraising venture, due to most members of the original club needing support for various illnesses and ailments. While doing this, the younger members operating the club realized that it did not solely have to exist for the benefit of the original Rainbow Club members, but could also work towards the welfare of the wider community in Anna Nagar.

As a result of this identified need in the local areas, the Rainbow Social Welfare club was registered with the municipality in 2018. The first obstacle to tackle was the increasing number of youth turning to substance abuse. The club members began introducing government based exams to the adolescents in the community, giving them an outlet for their time, and a sure path to a good future. They set up coaching centers, and used donations to hire professionally trained teachers in order to give their youth the best chance at success. Staying true to the origin of the Rainbow Club was important to the members, so they began encouraging the children to participate in sports competitions, engaging them in athletics and academics simultaneously to enrich their development.

As the club evolved into carrying more of the social responsibility of helping the community, the people also began to warm up to their efforts. They received immense



amounts of support from the locals, and were trusted to help them with any problems that arose in their lives. Between 1962 and 2018, Anna Nagar began developing and increasing in population as many people moved to the area as laborers. Through this club, they gained a sense of community, and were included in birthdays, marriages and funerals, bridging any sense of incongruity they might have felt in an unfamiliar place.

Living in such a densely populated area also means many injuries caused by wild animals, and many requirements for first aid. The club began working with the youngsters in the community, training them in primary response care in case of emergencies, which in a place like Kodaikanal, and especially Anna Nagar, could mean anything from a canine bite to a natural calamity. With a large number of the population in Anna Nagar being wage laborers, they found it very difficult to gain proper medical help when they required it.

Identifying this problem, the club partnered with the Madurai Meenakshi Mission and engineered a health program to take care of the locals' long term wellbeing. There were multiple components to this health programme, but the most significant was an organized blood camp, where they tested the blood types of all the residents in Anna Nagar, so potential donors could be identified quickly in case of an emergency.


KIS RECYCLI
UNIT

Over the next few years till now, the Rainbow Social Welfare Club has developed into the Rainbow Association of Welfare, or RAW club for short. Their ambitions have soared over time, and they are now looking at implementing the use of CCTV cameras in Anna Nagar to reduce the crime rate and ensure that the residents feel more secure in their homes.

Their main aim now is to establish Anna Nagar as a drug free environment, with a literate and fully employed populace. From its humble origins as a football club initiated in 1962, the Rainbow Association of Welfare has now become a source of hope and progress in Anna Nagar, empowering future generations to develop and prosper.







A BOVINE TRAGEDY

REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN HOME

by Saw Nanda, Grade 9

Yu & Andy Jang, Grade 10

KIS

I held her in my arms, soaked in red. She was losing blood every second... “She’s not going to make it”, said the lady holding a clipboard. My heart drops as I hear the worst news of my life. I have to try, I have to try.

“Please there has to be something I can do”, I say as salty tears roll down my cheeks.

“Right now your best option is Madurai” she says in a pitiful voice. I thought for a moment as I looked down at my daughter. Would she survive the three hour journey? I worried. She looked at me in a reassuring way trying to hide her tears.

It was five hours earlier that I had got a phone call, a breathless, shaky voice shocking me into a pale shivering state: “She fell off the building,” the man's voice said. My mouth went dry and I couldn't reply but my body told me to run home. That's when I saw my daughter covered under a white tarp. My wife’s eyes looked up at me, full of fear and

helpless agony. My daughter had been suffering for an hour as people watched helplessly. The hole in her head revealed that it had been an encounter with a bison.

The Madurai hospital was much bigger than the tiny Van Allan hospital that nurses Kodi's sick and injured. “She was attacked by a bison a few hours ago. The bison's horn had gone through her left eye and fractured her skull,” we sputtered out to a stunned nurse who was clearly horrified at the open wound. When a nurse is shocked, it is bound to be bad.



“It's a miracle she survived this long,” she says, still staring at the hole in her head. She is rushed to the operating room. In the waiting room I think about what I could've done differently. Glimpses of how the entire nightmare must have unfolded, flashed before my mind's eye.”

* *

When he stops speaking, the underlying sadness in his eyes remains. He seems to be struggling, holding something back. Dressed in his blue-grey overalls, he seems a little distracted and ill at ease on a sofa. Dr Rajamanikam had warned us about the sensitivity that this episode holds for him. His eyes are moist- a certain sense of guilt of not being there, of not being able to avert the event. When we ask him how this has affected his views on bisons, his response stuns us.

* *

“I don't blame the bison. It was diwali, the crackers must have triggered the bison into attacking my daughter who was wearing a flowing red shimmery dress that would have caught its eye. The rest of it was too much to picture. Maybe if us humans would have been more considerate of the bisons, this wouldn't have happened.”

* *



Unfortunately, this situation is not uncommon for many people, including the staff in our school. Many locals have their properties damaged, and their safety compromised. This problem affects many peoples day to day lives. Even walking home can be a hassle. However, this is a human and bison conflict and as is usual, we are the ones to blame.

The once rare beasts have now become as common as the domestic cow. The root of the problem stems from the invasive species of trees planted in the forests. When the Palani Hills Conservation Council (PHCC) first started in 1985, a member named George Roshan spent two months camping in forests surrounding Kodaikanal, collecting data and observing the forests.

In the midst of this project, the forest department had begun planting invasive species including wattle, eucalyptus and pine, oblivious of the tragedy that would follow. The PHCC had told the forest officials that the consequences would be felt in 40 years time. However the government, whose primary focus was profit, had neglected their warning.

Today, we face the problem that arises from the mistake that was made decades ago. The invasive species has spread into the grasslands, taking away nutrients from our local shola forests. The bison's habitat has been taken away from them and they are forced into our town in search of food.



The overflowing refuse and endless stream of garbage is a result of Kodi's poor waste management. When tourists come flooding in, the amount of trash is significantly increased, leading to one of the factors that seem to be luring these wild creatures into town. The forest department says that the high sodium content in this garbage is something that the bison have become addicted to. Despite best efforts to set up salt licks in more forested areas, the problem persists.

Tigers, panthers and leopards are the only natural predators of the bison. However, even these medium sized predators often avoid the bison who can weigh up to 1.5 tons unless they are desperate for food. The number of sightings of these predators have also significantly decreased compared to what they were 100 years ago. People estimate that there are only 1-2 leopards left in Kodaikanal, compared to the more than 2000 bisons.

In 1970, grasslands covered around 70% of the Palani hills In 2014 this number went down to 14%. The number of gated communities such as our school and vacation homes have slowly been carving out large segments of the remaining grasslands. These places are privately owned and are fenced off to discourage bison from entering. People buy these large amounts of land as their vacation homes and only end up visiting once or twice a year. Since these places are poorly

maintained, the grass ends up overgrowing and these bisons are lured by this vast amount of grass.

In 2012 there was a trial done with Vattakanal Conservation to try and eradicate the invasive species of trees. Bob and Tanya's grassland conservation took 30 farmers to a nearby village where they tried various methods, uprooting the saplings for the younger trees, and the ring bark method for the more mature trees. The ring bark method is a technique used to cut off the tree's supply of nutrients and water. They cut half a foot of bark around the tree, which ends up drying the tree out. It is harder to do larger trials since it needs a large amount of human labour and it's very expensive.

To try and prevent further conflict, the forest department has provided salt licks and created fencing and electric fences. They have also done multiple trials on removing the invasive species. However, the results have been limited for various economic and political reasons. Some things we can do as individuals are reducing the amount of trash produced, keeping our environment clean and even trying to understand the bisons instead of seeing them as a threat. As humans we could allow the bison to graze on our land and to even allow the farmers to cut grass.This would also be helpful for other grazing animals such as cattle.

Neither us nor the bisons are leaving Kodaikanal any time soon. We should learn to coexist and at the end of the day we should acknowledge our shared existence. In the words of Dr. Rajamanikam, “The human mindset is that you can either accept, coexist or avoid.

You shouldn't ever consider the bison a nuisance or a problem. We should understand there is always going to be human and bison conflict. Kodaikanal is not like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, or Chennai, it's a hill station... It's an unusual place filled with wildlife. We came here intentionally, and settled in, despite knowing the bison's nature.







HER SUNDAY MARKET

REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN HOME

by Navya

Grade 12, KIS

Femina Rani: a spirited South Indian-Snack vendor known for her Bhajji Vadas, Samosas and the fan-favorite Polis*. A single and unrelenting mother of three, Femina has been selling at the Sunday Market for almost 8 years now – accompanied by her 12 year old son and 2 fellow helpers. The market serves as a bastion of confidence for the breadwinner as she cultivates close-knit bonds with neighboring vendors and routine customers.

Starting her day at 7AM from the dunes of Theri Kaadu – about sixty kilometers away from Kodaikanal – and closing shop at 8.30PM, she often finds herself sacrificing meals amongst the crowded swarms of customers throughout the day. Even though her intention on Sunday Mornings is to sell what she makes – Femina is not a quitter: 'So what if everything isn't sold out? I have next week. It will be fine.'

A certified nurse, Femina found herself at a crossroads when her husband abruptly jilted their family: providing for her children or following her dreams. Femina chose sacrifice –



and this is the value that propels her through life's most pivotal moments as she shares, 'I can and will go to any extreme to protect my family'. With society's sympathetic whispers following her around as the sole earner of her household, Femina maintains, 'I don't need their concern, I value my self-respect.' Being a woman in the marketplace, she recounts, puts you in a vulnerable position with the potential intimidation at the hands of men. But at the end of the day, Femina affirms, 'I am only human. And I will fight back'.

Carrots, Radish, Cabbage, Butter Beans, Potatoes and Broccoli are just some of the vegetables you'd find Mary Ama enveloped by in her apple-pie ordered shop at the very entrance of the marketplace. Mary's preparations for the Sunday Market begin, in fact, on Saturday. Starting at 6am, Mary buys her vegetables from vendors spanning across the villages of Vilpatti, Tumati and Naidupuram.

She connects with local transporters who load her vegetables into a truck and back to her house in Vilpatti, where she finally washes the goods by hand. The thought of feeding her family beckons her to be in Kodaikanal by 4AM on Sundays; selling her stock from 6:30 in the morning to 7:30 pm when she catches the last bus back home. Whether she sells or doesn't sell anything, Mary is never too happy nor too upset.



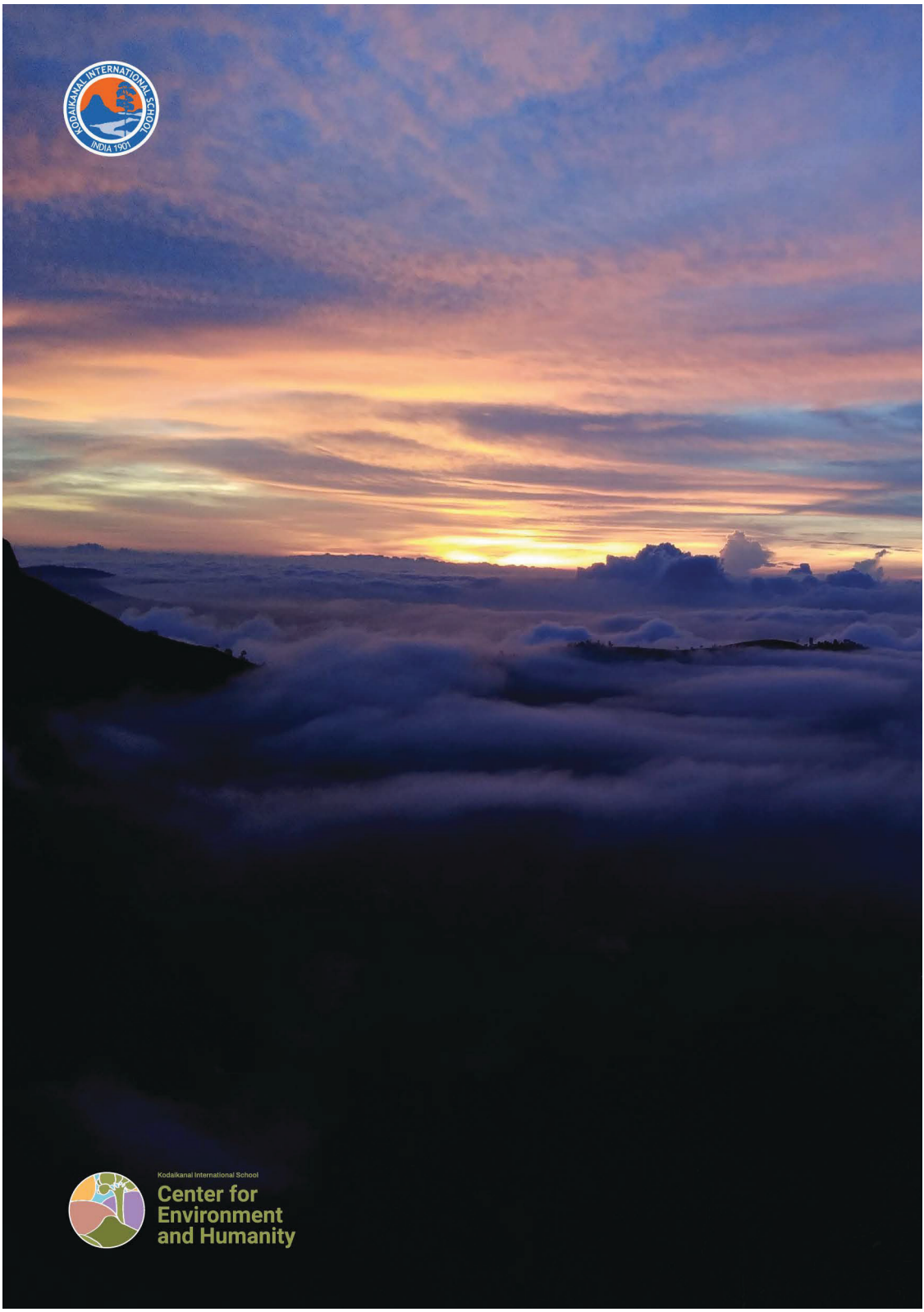
Both her children and grandchildren have watched her with proud, gleaming eyes as she commits herself to sustaining her shop – measuring success not by the means of money but by the rich friendships with neighboring sellers and frequent buyers.

Living in a village, she noted a widespread unease among her neighbors concerning the urban landscape. She saw the once-fertile farmlands turning into hotels and decided to, despite the lack of communal encouragement, take her first step. And she did just that. Twenty five years ago, Mary Ama came to Kodaikanal with a sack of vegetables in her hand and a willingness to succeed in her heart – needless to say, she's conquered the space ever since.








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