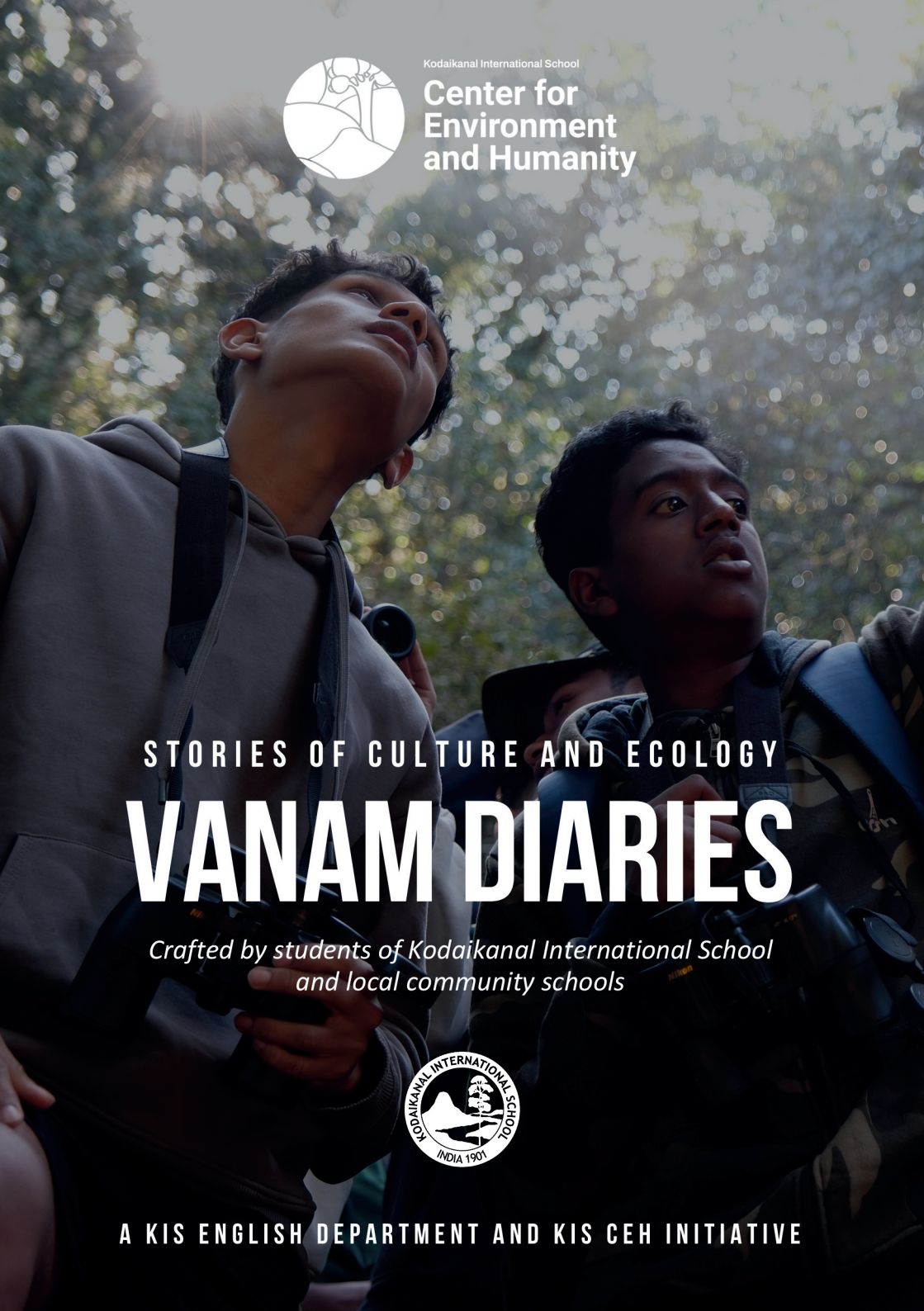


Kodaikanal International School

Center for Environment and Humanity

STORIES OF CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

VANAM DIARIES

Crafted by students of Kodaikanal International School and local community schools

KODAIKANAL INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL INDIA 1901

A KIS ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND KIS CEH INITIATIVE

AN INTRODUCTION

By Maahi Patel
Grade 10

Vanam Diaries is a club at Kodaikanal International School (KIS) for students to enhance their knowledge about the community they live in. It presents a platform where we, KIS students, can explore and understand the stories of the people in our town, and learn more about the struggles and adventures of other people's lives. In the process, we not only sharpen our writing skills but also gain experience in the field conducting interviews and studying the local environment, people, and culture closely. Vanam Diaries gives us a chance to step out of our comfort zone and interact with many new people outside the small bubble of KIS.

This club is for students who are ready to put effort into making everyone's voice heard. It is a place where amazing stories and experiences are preserved. The accounts that you are about to read are an attempt at framing the emotions and values of the people that we interacted with, into the beautiful art of storytelling.



CATTLE OWNERS OF KODAIKANAL

By Vansh Jain
Grade 10

Mani is a cattle owner who lives on Observatory Road. He currently works as a waiter at a restaurant to earn daily wages, but he continues his passion for owning cattle on the side. Mani's family has owned cattle for three generations, and he is eager to carry the tradition forward. Mani's grandfather had around 120 cows, but the family now has just 40. The main reason for the decrease in the number of cows among most cattle owners in Kodaikanal is the rapidly shrinking grazing areas.

Mani had to sell most of the native breed cattle he owned and bought several Holstein Friesian (HF) cows instead. HF cattle give more milk—up to 15-20 liters—with comparatively less food and do not need much grazing area. He says they take really good care of their cows, feeding them three meals a day with water. However, competition with dairy companies is stiff, and competing with low-cost packaged milk has turned his ancestral occupation into a dying industry. The walk is uphill as they also face the challenge of finding grazing land for their cows. He says, "If we witness the cow eating anything harmful, we take care of it by taking it to the vet. Sadly, the old vet has retired." Due to unfavorable natural circumstances and the unavailability of any veterinarian, Mani and his family are witnessing a declining number of cows in their shed. These situations have now forced him to take up a different profession. The selling of dairy products from each cow makes Mani Rs 600-800 every day. "It is still not enough for our daily expenses. Now we realize it is a dying business. We are facing financial problems," he sighs.



Kodaikanal faces a conflict between cattle owners and dairy product consumers, and in some way, we all play a role in this issue. The roaming cows on the city streets eat plastic, sanitary pads, diapers, trash, and many other waste materials that are harmful to them and the consumers of dairy products. It is important for all of us to prevent harm to the cows by avoiding littering on the streets. This also contributes to the quality of milk that is supplied locally in Kodaikanal. Can we pave a path for the cattle owners of the Palanis to thrive in their traditional occupation?

The story of Manimala closely mirrors that of Mani. She lives in Pambarpuram, and her sole means of livelihood comes from the ten cows she owns. Unfortunately, after losing her husband and her son, Manimala does not have a helping hand. Years ago, when Manimala stepped into the village of her in-laws, her father-in-law had 60 cows. After her husband passed away, she took upon the responsibility of taking care of these cattle. Unfortunately, they had to sell most of the cows as they were not able to take care of so many daily. She says her cow milk is pure and healthy, and she feeds her cows with grass bought from the market. “Our cow gives us 10-12 liters of milk every day, and the milk is not diluted.” She has dedicated customers in the neighborhood who buy milk from her daily. “If we have excess milk, we make curd or paneer.” She doesn’t face much competition as she has regular customers, but she acknowledges that other cattle owners may face a lot of competition. One of her main challenges is the struggle to find grazing land. She used to cut grass with her son on a nearby farm where their cows were allowed to graze. This is no longer possible. She now feeds her cows market-bought grass. Manimala never worked another job and was a full-time homemaker when her son and husband were still alive. After their passing, she had to take the business upon herself.

Cattle owners feel that they are fighting a losing battle and cannot compete with national dairy companies. They also struggle with too many rules and regulations on how to maintain their cows. Despite their appeals for support, no one seems to understand the ground reality of their situation. The cattle community wants understanding and moral support.

It matters, and it matters to us! As a consequence of these conflicts, we consume poor-quality milk, which may have detrimental effects on community health. The declining number of domesticated cattle and families who depend on cattle rearing may have adverse socio-cultural effects on the Kodaikanal community.

As I investigated the issue, I found two sides to the conflict.

One interviewee I spoke to owns a cheese factory. The company was established in 1972 and is a second-generation business. They own about 36 cows and 36 goats on a farm near Batlagundu, and their cows provide 1,000-2,000 liters of milk every day. They feed their cows natural fodder and dry mineral mix, and water is available for the cows to drink at any time. The cattle stay in an open pasture for a certain period. The food is grown on their farms. Their farm is at Kodaikanal's foothills, allowing the cattle to graze freely in a fenced area. The company generates employment in the locality as they need labor to help with grazing, maintaining hygiene, and even composting the cow dung. The milk is checked for acidity to ensure it is pure, and if it is not up to standards, they reject it. Initially, the cheese company supplemented their milk production by purchasing milk from Kodaikanal cattle owners, but the practice was discontinued as it was not sustainable and the quality of the milk was also not up to standards.

Some say that cattle owners need to take responsibility for their cows or not own them at all. They argue that cattle owners must follow the rules set by the municipality and other regulations. If cattle owners leave the cows astray,



the municipality should give them warnings, and after the third warning, they should auction the cow or keep it in a cowshed where they will be taken care of and vaccinated frequently to keep them disease-free.

On the other hand, cattle owners who need grazing land are looking for solutions, such as renting grazing areas on private land, like the Solar Observatory, which is a large campus, or other educational institution grounds and government-owned spaces where the grass grows abundantly. Negotiating contracts through a broker, or directly with local authorities such as the Kodaikanal Municipality or the Department of Animal Husbandry, could secure long-term grazing rights on these lands. Without much success in their efforts, small cattle owners are left with no option but to allow their cows to graze on open roads. The practice of leaving the cows astray continues.

Systematic action and the ability to work in coordination with all stakeholders are necessary to find a solution, where small cattle owners can have access to unused land or land with unwanted grass. The benefits would include sustainable livestock management, opportunities for integrated farming techniques, high-quality milk, fewer diseases among cattle, and better land use beneficial for all parties. With such a solution, our hill station will be on its way to a sustainable future, provided we think unconventionally!





FUTURE OF FARMING IN KODAIKANAL

By Preity Bhattarai and Soei Mukherjee
Grade 9

Farming is a profession which is extremely discriminated against as people, especially in our generation, do not value and give it the importance it deserves. As a result, the future of farming seems bleak. In the mountains of Kodaikanal in the Palani range, a location thriving with biodiversity and home to unique species which have evolved into the habitat, there are farmers who suffer in multiple ways. Some of these are natural while others, human induced. These farmers are encountering lots of challenges and difficulties that are proving to be existential threats to their very survival and sustenance. Many no longer want their children to inherit their skills and sustain their profession. The threat that looms over the farmers in Kodaikanal is concerning.

The farmers we spoke to talked of how they expected equity, not equality in the treatment meted out to them. They seek support so as to be able to sustain themselves in their profession in a more comfortable manner without having to face problems which are completely out of their control. The farmers desire more compensation for losses. This is particularly relevant to crops which are high in demand in the market and are cultivated in more complex ways, requiring farmers to rely more on chemicals which are a risk to their health. The farmers primarily wish for rights not regarding their health, but instead for the education of their children. They want students to learn about agriculture in school, and they wish to see farming a more common and appreciated subject, both in and outside of school. In this way, they say, there will be more people interested in contributing to one of the most crucial and ancient professions on our planet.

Even though the farmers face severe health risks, they are trying their best to incorporate organic matter in their practices, to produce better and safer food for people. The use of chemical pesticides seems to be a vicious cycle, with farmers claiming to be under pressure to use them in order to produce sufficient amounts and qualities of crops - if everyone else is using them, then the ones who don't, fall behind.

In the changing seasons of Kodaikanal, it is an extremely common issue for the farmers to face the challenge of rain, or rather, the lack of it. Dry spells cause water shortages which leads to damage to the crops as they are deprived of water. It also causes the build up of dust and debris on the leaves.

Pests are a major problem to most farmers as they spoil the crops and even make them visually unappealing to the eye of the buyers. In one interview a farmer spoke of how "white flies cause 18% of the economic loss" which is only one of many species which wreak havoc in the fields around Kodaikanal. Because of pests, the farmers are forced to use more pesticides in their fields, which in turn contaminates the soil causing mounting challenges in subsequent seasons.

Another major problem in plants are diseases. In the humid and damp weather that predominates here, the threat of damage by fungus looms large. Potatoes are commonly infected with late blight and early blight which are both fungal infections which cause the potatoes to become moldy and inedible.

Imagine a world where fewer and fewer people remain invested in agriculture. In a world where each day, the sun rises with more mouths to feed. This is going to be catastrophic. The farmers of Kodaikanal do not ask for the world. They merely seek some form of financial cushioning for their seasonal losses. They require greater support for the education of their children. They express the need to have easier access to organic inputs. This is what we learnt and hope to convey to the larger community.





MOTHERS TILING THE SOIL

By Saw Nanda Yu, Hannah Blessy Vignesh Kumaran
and Devarakkshithaa Kamalakannan
Grade 9

The onset of harsh, wet weather brings fresh challenges, particularly for female farmers who tend to the terraced farmlands of Kodaikanal. Anita, one such farmer, shares her struggles during an interview, highlighting the difficulties she faces. Despite her efforts to make a living from her own farm, she finds herself selling the produce of another farmer or a middle man at the Kodaikanal Lake. The woman stands in the hot sun, fighting against her age as she hopes to attract the odd tourist looking for a few fresh veggies. Although she has signed a contract for her land, the shift in climate has marred her progress, making it difficult for her to continue being the breadwinner. This forces her to purchase goods from others, making little to no profit in the process.

The wrinkles around her eyes smile, though the stress is clearly seen on her face. The constant need to buy produce decreases her chances of repaying her debt. Her soft smile turns into anger and guilt as she proceeds to talk about her family and debt. She explains her imprisoning debt. Being the family's breadwinner is exhausting for her as she has to farm, sell produce, and do household work. She carries these burdens alone because her husband is handicapped. Anita's husband lost his fingers in a brawl with a drunken man several years ago.

Competition among farmers in Kodai is high. This causes them to compete for the lowest price. Anita struggles to keep up with the competition as she reduces the price of her crops. Anita also owns many farm animals such

as rabbits, pigeons, dogs, cows, and goats, but they contribute little to her income. Husky and German Shepherd puppies playing in the grass by her hut seem incongruous in this space - luxurious, purebred canines amidst such destitution. This is a clear indication of the failure of farming to provide for herself and her family. She can't fall back on her education, as she only completed up to 3rd grade. This denies her access to other, better-paying employment.

Anita must live each day as it comes, as her burden increases. Each day brings with it a promise of dry skies, dry earth, cracking in the unusual heat and the heat of her burdens. Anita smiled at the thought of a better future, wondering if the cracks in her hands would eventually become smooth.

Many farmers in the region are currently experiencing loss and suffering. According to a survey done in 2011, Kodaikanal has a population of 115,250, with 24,665 farmers, out of which 11,281 are female farmers. Many farmers have resorted to breeding farm animals for money, as pesticides have started destroying their soil and crops. The harsh weather, especially during summer, causes water scarcity. Anita faces a similar problem. The increase in the use of pesticides compounds problems - but pesticides fuel controversial opinions among the local farmers. Lavanya, another female we interviewed, shared her story describing her non-organic approach.

On Kodai's gentle slopes lives a woman who has been carefully looking after a stepped farm for more than 20 years. Despite the usual challenges, Lavanya resides peacefully on her farm, embracing a calm life. As a female farmer, she does every task with a strong sense of responsibility, from preparing the soil, sowing seeds, fertilizing, and watering to nurturing the plants through every step of their growth. Having spent her whole life exploring the field of farming, she has even acquired the skills to handle machines. Although she doesn't own any machines or mechanized pesticide and fertilizer equipment, she claims that she borrows machinery from her neighbors.



Though she leads a peaceful life, she finds it difficult to manage farming along with household chores. Her husband lends a hand in farming but his other job keeps him busy. Lavanya studied in school only to grade 2, but beams happily when she mentions that her husband finished grade 10. Despite her limited education, she takes pride in having educated her children well.

Lavanya has to work for long hours and she believes that the farm work has to be done quickly so she can get on with her household chores. As an alternative job, she works as a maid in a bungalow. Due to the seasonal nature of her farming, it is not a steady and reliable profession. The harvest from her farm finds keen buyers among her neighborhood, though she partially consumes her produce too. Lavanya is planning to open her shop in Kodai where she will sell vegetables and fruits that she procures from other farmers or middlemen. Many farmers relate to this, and it is a common scenario unless a farmer owns acres of land, ample manpower, and can afford high-quality inputs. The time Lavanya spends farming varies depending on the situation, ranging from long shifts such as 9 am to 5 pm, or shorter periods such as 8 am to 11 am. Her shifts depend on her alternative job, household chores, and caretaking of her grandchildren.

A few things we learned from these interactions: the environment of Kodaikanal makes it difficult for female farmers to farm as a profession. Many have debts and families to take care of. The general lack of education among these women results in them being tied to the profession with little or no alternatives. Furthermore, being in a hill-station, Kodai lacks large swathes of flat land - this causes farmers to struggle to attain economies of scale. Finally, women are expected to undertake the majority of household chores, and it becomes impossible for them to take on the burden of both tilling the land and tending to domestic work.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF RAVI: THE HEART AND SOUL BEHIND OUR CLEAN STREETS

By Raya Alam
Grade 11

By the time the first rays of sunlight reach Kodaikanal, Mr. Ravi is already up, bracing himself for another day of hard work. He wakes up at 6:00 a.m. every single day, not to the smell of freshly brewed coffee or the morning news, but to the weight of the responsibility that comes with managing the waste of an entire community.

Mr. Ravi's life journey brought him to the tiny, bustling town of Kodaikanal when he was just four years old. He was forced to leave school after finishing 10th grade due to his family's worsening finances, and tried his hand at a job selling spices and chocolates in Kodaikanal's famous chocolate stores; before finally finding his calling in the sanitation sector in 2015.

"I worked in different sectors even after joining KIS," Mr. Ravi recalls. "I was part of the team that managed construction materials during the renovation of Solvik and even worked in the gardening team and distributed firewood. It was in 2017 that I started with solid waste collection, and ended up learning how to drive the waste pickup truck in 2019."

By 7:30 a.m, Mr. Ravi is out of his home and on his way to KIS, aiming to reach the school by 7:40 a.m. Once he arrives, he checks in with his supervisor and gets his daily assignments and responsibilities. His team consists of three women and two other men, and together, they tackle the day's tasks, ranging from waste collection to emergency waste pickup calls.

“The hardest part of my job is when people don’t segregate the waste properly,” Mr. Ravi shares with us, wringing his hands nervously. “I have to manually segregate the waste, and it’s not easy. People call me ‘a garbage man,’ and even my colleagues don’t treat me with respect. They won’t let me use the common staff toilets or shake hands with me.”

This unfortunately, is a common stigma associated with Mr. Ravi’s profession. Although he and his team are the ones cleaning up the waste generated by the community, they are given the degrading monikers of ‘garbage men’ and are continually considered by society to be unclean and impure.

Despite the challenges he faces, Mr. Ravi remains committed to his work and takes pride in his job. However, the emotional and physical toll it takes on him sometimes is evident from the way he speaks.

“Sometimes, I don’t feel like eating food after touching the waste. Even though I have the necessary safety equipment, it’s hard to eat in those conditions,” he admitted, his voice filled with emotion. “I also suffer from back pain due to driving and manually segregating the waste, and the stress can be overwhelming.”

Mr. Ravi’s day doesn’t end when he leaves work. He is the sole breadwinner for his family, which includes his wife, who is a homemaker, and their three-year-old son. He also supports his parents, his wife’s parents and an elder brother who is currently out of town. With a meager monthly salary for his position as a sanitation worker, Mr. Ravi has been forced to take up an additional job as a night watchman at a temple to make ends meet.

“My family is very happy that I have a respectable job at KIS and can provide for us,” he mentions. “But the issue of my co-workers looking down on me for being a waste-collector takes a toll on my mind. My community is proud of me, but I face inequality in my own workplace.”

Despite the challenges and the emotional toll of his job, Mr. Ravi remains hopeful for the future. “I once aspired to become an ambulance driver,” he shares. “But for now, I am content with my job, and I hope that one day, people will recognize and appreciate the hard work that we do.”

In a world that often overlooks the contributions of sanitation workers like Mr. Ravi, it is our duty to remember that their work is essential to maintaining the health and hygiene of our communities. It’s time we recognize their efforts, treat them with respect, and provide them with the support, appreciation and fair compensation that they truly deserve. Behind the title of ‘garbage man’ is a human being with hopes, dreams and aspirations; and a story worth sharing.





ROOTS OF RESILIENCE: THE JOURNEY OF PAKIADAS

By Ngawang Yangdroen Phunrab and Navya Hariharan
Grade 10

In the tranquil expanse of the Palani Hills, where the Earth spreads its flora and fauna and the clouds cleanse the skies with its fresh breeze, resides a man named Pakiadas, whose story interweaves tradition with modernity and education with sustainability. Father, husband, and local resident of Kodaikanal, Pakiadas was born into a family deeply rooted in farming for the past four generations. Pakiadas, however, had different ideas, pursuing a formal education and subsequently working as an independent contractor for the Tamil Nadu Electric Board (EB). He successfully completed his higher studies by not only majoring in information technology, a field that offers a stable income but also starting a master's degree in this subject. Yet, deep down, his heart remained anchored to agriculture, a generational endeavor tracing back to his ancestors.

Pakiadas's journey into the world of farming was not a smooth and effortless path. During his time working for the EB, as he traversed several farming communities to build electrical connections. This, he says, reignited his affinity for agriculture. Despite the mundane comfort of his job, he found himself drawn to the soil beneath him, where Mother Earth breathed life into existence.

However, Pakiadas came to the realization that conventional farming practices prevailing in his local community were not sustainable for soil health. During his day job, Pakiadas understood how the quality of soil was being diminished as a result of the exhaustive use of chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers. Pakiadas experienced a strong urge to be a part of

the solution to this problem and chose long-term sustainability over the gain of short-term profit.

In order to achieve the goal of sustainable farming, Pakiadas understood that he required education and enlightenment on this concept of farming. Thus, for about the next seven or eight years, he wandered the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu, seeking insight from farmers, delving into farming practices, governmental workshops, seminars, and agricultural institutions. His quest for knowledge led him to the teachings of Nam Azhvar, the admired father of farming in Tamil Nadu, whose philosophy molded the principles of Pakiadas as a farmer.

An interesting fact about Pakiadas is that he is not a landowner. Rather, he pays a 'zamindar' or land owner rent, showing that he goes above and beyond to pursue sustainable farming. Despite not owning a land of his own, Pakiadas's passion and determination knew no bounds. Wherever he laid his home, he sowed seeds of change, establishing fruit orchards and nurseries across the land. His rental home became a sanctuary of greenery. He is known for his generosity in distributing saplings among those around him.

After gathering valuable knowledge about sustainable and organic farming, Pakiadas began his journey of experimentation. He delved into the intricate processes of solving small-scale problems prevalent in his local community. For instance, there was a huge issue with the growth and development of avocado trees. Through his research, Pakiadas found out that after five to six years of fruiting, they would die as a result of pests or diseases. By observing and analyzing the problem, he realized that the pests were feeding on the bark of the avocado trees, causing their decay. So, instead of eliminating the pests by chemical means such as fertilizers, he simply applied tape on the bark so that it could not be infiltrated by pests. This posed as an organic, sustainable solution, preventing this disease as opposed to resorting to the quick and easy solution of using toxic fertilizers. Pakiadas's insights didn't just enrich his understanding but also became beacons of hope for his



neighbors and fellow farmers in Kodaikanal. He is not only a pioneer and a reliable source of information for sustainable agricultural practices but also a resounding voice spreading the word of eco-friendly farming in the local community.

Another challenge that saw the simple, practical approach of Pakiadas, was the shortfall between the cost of hill bananas and cost of input into cultivating the crop that was plaguing local Kodaikanal farmers. Pakiadas possessed a great amount of banana harvest but did not wish to undergo a loss with the state of the present market of hill bananas in Kodaikanal. To solve this issue, he simply carried the banana harvest on his motorbike, down the hill to Madurai, and sold it there for a higher price - Rs. 15 per banana as opposed to selling an entire bunch of 10-12 bananas for the same price. This increase in selling price was due to the fact that hill bananas were distinct and not typically found in the plains of Madurai. In total, he made a profit of Rs. 2000 which served as an awakening moment for him making him question why farmers should be at the mercy of the local markets when they can get ahold of an entire world of customers to market to. Therefore, by performing a wide range of small-scale experiments with his produce, Pakiadas evolved and became a farmer who consistently remained loyal to sustainable practices without losing out on practicality. He has been involved in agriculture for approximately 30 years out of which 10 years have been solely dedicated to subsistence farming.

As Pakiadas reflects on his journey, he visualizes a future in which he buys and owns land such that he can practice sustainable farming in a stable environment. His dreams involve empowering and educating fellow farmers about the entire lifecycle of produce and transforming them to take care of future generations, not just tomorrow's harvest. He wishes to teach farmers about selling, marketing, and preserving products such that they can practice sustainable farming and make a profit. Pakiadas's future does not solely involve the harvesting of crops but practicing a holistic approach to farming, encouraging cultivation, marketing, and sustainability.

At the end of the day, the life of a subsistence farmer is not merely about survival, but living a life of harmony, simplicity, all the while displaying an undying commitment towards the Palani Hills. The occupation of a subsistence farmer teaches us that true wealth is not contained within materialistic possessions, but in the abundance of the soil we step foot in and the connections between communities that sustain life.





A STORY OF PERSONAL POWER

By Aarna Panigrahi and Maahi Patel
Grade 10

Women's empowerment and equality are quite the buzz words of today but it is ironic and sad that there are still places where it is so hard for girls to even ask for a sanitary napkin or to educate themselves and strive to be independent.

At the KIS CEH Junior Naturalist Action Network program, girls are given the confidence and courage to step up for themselves, and the education they receive will work towards encouraging students to become independent thinkers. The girls are from conservative families who have always restricted them from pursuing an education and acting independently and with agency.

This is the story of two girls of Perumalmalai and how they brought about change in their community and in their own lives. Late last year, a JNAN student named Priya noticed a lot of trash lying by the roadside and strewn about within the wooded areas in and around her village. Massive numbers of passing tourists coupled with a lack of local knowledge surrounding waste segregation seemed to be fueling this crisis. Priya was deeply disturbed and decided to take action against it. She and Dani, a classmate of hers, came up with an idea to tackle this. They sought to raise awareness against littering and help people in the community learn about how to sort and separate trash in order to dispose of it correctly.

The girls started the journey of this initiative in their village, with the support of their parents, village elders, and their school. They decided to carry out a demonstration at the Addukam checkpost, a spot where many tourists

pass to enter Kodaikanal. The students approached the government officials at the checkpost, and requested permission to put up their posters and run a campaign about waste segregation. Their work was not just limited to displaying posters but also included one-on-one communication and interactions. This was a huge step for Priya and Dani as they got out of their comfort zone, exercised their independence and initiative, and spoke to strangers throughout the day about waste management.

They also spread this message at their school and conducted trainings on responsible waste segregation and promoting the use of plastic alternatives. They worked to separate community waste bins and hand out educational pamphlets about waste segregation.

The girls say that they were inspired to take action because of what they learned in JNAN. According to them, every kid who has walked into JNAN has come with the hope of becoming a change-maker. However, they acknowledged that what is crucial in this mix is having the right information and knowledge on best practices for waste management and environmental conservation.

Things were not always smooth. The two girls faced many people attempting to stop or mock their efforts simply because they were girls. While Dani's family was supportive of her participation in the initiative, Priya's family was reluctant to let her take part. She was discouraged because her family did not want her to appear as "problematic" or "difficult" within their community and they were scared as to what others from the local community might think of a young grade 9 girl leaving the house to take on issues like this. It was only after receiving support from her school and JNAN that Priya's parents agreed to let her pursue her ideas.

Their backgrounds have an impact on the work they are so eager to do. It is not easy to break the boundaries that come with their milieu and convincing their parents to let them engage in such matters is another



palpable challenge. After they came to JNAN they were able to study and gain vast amounts of knowledge that they would otherwise be insulated from in an average classroom. What they have learnt here is what's helping them improve their initiative on spreading awareness on waste segregation. These girls were able to make an impact on their local community and work to create a real change of which they feel incredibly proud. What is even more heartwarming, is that they plan on expanding their initiative to more neighboring villages. Doing so much selfless work at such a young age is truly inspirational. This is an astounding feat that surely needs to be recognised and celebrated. Kudos to Priya and Dani, two young trailblazers in a realm where few others choose to toil.



THE GARDENER

By Andy Jang
Grade 10

KIS is a school that had been a second home to Mr. M. Joseph for nearly three decades. As the school's main gardener, he nurtured the school's greenery with a tender hand and a heart full of dedication. His connection with this school runs deep; a familial bond passed on from generation to generation. His father had tended these same gardens before him, instilling a love for the land and a sense of pride in his work. Now, even after his retirement, his son carries on the tradition, making sure that their family's legacy would survive.

Each day, Mr. Joseph would arrive at the school, greeted by the familiar sights and sounds of campus life. With weathered hands, he set to work, tending to the flowers and vegetation that he had carefully planted months ago. Through scorching summers and monsoon rains, he labored tirelessly, simply as an act of love for the place he called home. But it was not just passion and skill that kept Mr. Joseph coming back day after day. It was the sense of community and respect that he found within the school's walls. He says one of the best parts of his job is that whenever our school had special functions, he always made bouquets. He felt very proud and happy when he saw people admiring his flowers and gifting them to others.

When asked, "Why KIS?" he answered with his story. "Many people avoid hugging me or even shaking my hand because of what I do. They don't think my job is very important and they don't give me that much attention. One thing I will never forget about KIS is how even the principal and vice principal always used to greet me and ask how my work is going. I used to never get any handshakes but the vice principal always shook my hand and

made conversation with him. I never found people this kind anywhere else." Whether it was a friendly greeting from the Vice Principal or a warm smile from the Principal, Mr. Joseph always felt valued and appreciated for his contributions.

He says that even after his retirement, he doesn't feel like he is actually retired. Many of the current KIS staff still ask him to take care of their own gardens and he still gets private requests to this day. Most people don't earn after their retirement, but because of the skills he learned from our school, he can continue earning even after retirement. He says that KIS not only gave him a job, but gave the skills to continue earning even after his retirement.

One of his fondest memories was the time when he was offered a government job. In India, having a government job is a really big deal as it offers a position of stability and prestige. Despite having such an opportunity, he decided to stay with KIS because people here actually respected him. "When I was still working here, whenever the flowers bloomed and the grass was freshly cut, many students approached me and appreciated my efforts. After such thoughtfulness how could I decide to leave?" Mr. Joseph turned the offer down without hesitation, choosing instead to remain at the school that had become like family to him.

Today, as he looks upon the school grounds with a heart full of gratitude and a smile on his lips, "This school is my home. It supported me so much and helped so many others. I wish that this school exists forever. This school gave many people a second chance at life and lifted them up a lot. I think that so long as life exists on this planet, so should this school."



ALPHONSO

By Fia Inamdar
Grade 10

Alphonso, a remarkable man of resilience, initially set foot in the tranquil hills of Kodaikanal many years ago. Alphonso's journey began in the early 1990s when he joined KIS as a skilled maintenance worker under the guidance of Johnson, an American carpenter. Johnson's expertise provided the groundwork for Alphonso's remarkable career progression. He commenced his journey in skilled labor, maintenance, and the construction department. It was a tiny flicker; Johnson was the breeze, and a raging inferno transpired. Alphonso worked his way up from carpenter to chief carpenter and then overseer. Over the course of four decades, Alphonso has risen from a senior carpenter to the esteemed position of head carpenter and supervisor, overseeing a team of skilled operational personnel.

Alphonso dedicated his entire adult life to KIS, starting at age 18. He faced personal difficulties, including health issues, in 1980. Nevertheless, he was warmly received back into the KIS community by Neel Stixrud, which demonstrates the close-knit, familial nature of the school. Through his unwavering commitment, Alphonso strengthened the school's infrastructure and built a legacy of pride and integrity. This was evident in his exceptional artistry and steadfast pursuit of excellence.

For Alphonso, KIS became more than just a workplace. It became a sanctuary, providing support as he navigated his wife's health struggles with cardiac problems. The school's steadfast assistance, which ranged from offering medical resources to financial aid, highlighted the deep sense of community and camaraderie that characterized Alphonso's experience at KIS. During

these difficult times, he indeed came to appreciate the strength and solidarity of the KIS community.

In 2001, a catastrophic incident dramatically impacted Alphonso's life, leaving him hospitalized and struggling with debilitating injuries as well as escalating medical bills. Despite this challenging situation, KIS remained steadfast in its support, shouldering a substantial portion of the expenses related to his medical treatment. This unwavering commitment from the school underscored Alphonso's profound and enduring bond with KIS.

Alphonso's strong connection with KIS persisted even after he retired from his position there. He seamlessly transitioned into independent carpentry work for the housing department, utilizing his exceptional skills and experience to ensure that the school's legacy would endure for many generations to come. Alphonso's deep pride and contentment are evident as he reflects on his remarkable journey, which has been deeply intertwined with the institution he holds in such high regard. KIS has not only been an educational establishment for Alphonso but as "My Mother is My School," in Alphonso's words – a beacon of stability and unwavering support that has guided him through the various stages of his life. Alphonso's steadfast dedication and lasting impact on the school's legacy testify to the profound and enduring bond he shares with this esteemed institution.



THE YOUNG MINDS OF THE FUTURE: THE JUNIOR NATURALIST PROGRAM IN KODAIKANAL

By Anusha Kumar and Preethi Raghu
Grade 10

Kodaikanal is a unique and diverse sky island in the Western Ghats, with protected forest and uniquely tropical biodiversity. These forests and grasslands are threatened due to invasive species, climate change, and human incursions. As an initiative to preserve Kodaikanal's natural riches, The Junior Naturalist Action Network (JNAN) was founded for young minds passionate about bringing change. JNAN is designed to cultivate a new generation of environmentally-minded individuals. This program empowers young, aspiring naturalists to positively impact their community by fostering a deep connection with their local environment. Through engaging in activities and hands-on experiences, JNAN equips these young minds with the knowledge, skills, and passion to become the future guardians of this ancient rain-fed forest.

What is this program about? Each school selects 2-3 students who demonstrate a strong interest in their community through written tests and interviews. The program does not just focus on academic skills; it increases enthusiasm, aspiration to make positive change, and a willingness to learn and explore. Students in this program come from a variety of backgrounds, and it is their interests that bring them together. JNAN is the vast blue sky of possibilities by these boys and girls of the Palani Hills. Through the birds' songs and the rustle of leaves, they learn to sing with the forest and discover the hidden ways to keep the groves living and breathing.

JNAN students know that the secrets of this unique ecology are not recorded in textbooks but in the stories of grandma, the lifestyle of the tribes who have been living here for centuries, and the adaptation skills of its winged and tailed residents. It's about building deeper relationships with their communities. Through their weekend walks across the meandering trails, these young minds gain a deeper understanding of the complex social threads that keep our communities going. Through this experience, they become the future of Kodaikanal's change, using their skills to help the ecosystem and the community.

But why is this so important? With its diverse and unique ecosystem, Kodaikanal thrives in a balanced environment. JNAN provides future leaders with the knowledge and passion to meet the challenges that Kodaikanal faces in the future. They are the voice of their generation, advocating for sustainable practices and environmental protection.

These students explore and learn about their local communities, which are not generally taught in school. They cover topics like the history of Kodaikanal, the unique wildlife and ecosystems, and, more importantly, how to protect them. Interactive and hands-on learning is an excellent experience for these kids. Learning for themselves and others in the community, raising awareness, and spreading knowledge can make a difference.

The skills they learn prepare them for the future. Many children aim to do work that positively changes the environment and community. This program opened up unique career paths for these students, opportunities they had never heard of before. These young minds also have plans to give back to their communities, not quitting the program but making it a success. The life experiences students gain from this experience include:



- Fostering Passion and Purpose: JNAN prioritizes students' interest in the environment. This stimulates participation and motivates positive change.

- Collaboration and Communication: JNAN brings together students from diverse backgrounds. As they work together on projects and discussions, they improve their communication skills and learn to collaborate effectively.

- Creativity and Innovation: JNAN allows students to explore new ideas and think creatively, encouraging them to find innovative solutions to environmental problems.

The JNAN program serves as a beacon of hope for Kodaikanal's future. Nurturing a generation of passionate environmental advocates who will pave the way for a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between the community and its surroundings. This program's impact extends beyond the participating students, as they actively raise awareness and inspire positive change within the community. As these "Young Minds of the Future" graduate from the program, their dedication and knowledge will undoubtedly develop tangible solutions for Kodaikanal's environmental well-being.
By inspiring local action, the program contributes to global conservation efforts. The project's success could serve as a model for other communities worldwide, amplifying environmental education. The Junior Naturalist Program's commitment to environmental education paves the way for future generations of knowledgeable global citizens.





RETHINKING THE MERITS OF WESTERN SCIENCE

By Shalini Muttemwar and Aadil Ali Khan
Grade 9 and 11

The Palani Hills, home to some of nature's best offerings, is a testament to India's rich natural resources and heritage. But as the environment faces threats, conservation has become a much-needed practice, even in this area. We visited Mr. Madhu Ramnath, an ethnobotanist who spent 40 years living alongside indigenous communities, mostly in Central India to understand their traditions and relationship with nature. He is also a founding member of the Palani Hills Conservation Council (PHCC). Speaking with him helped us understand just how connected indigenous communities are to nature and how their practices are far more sustainable than what modern science regularly promotes.

As we trudged down the narrow path near his house, Mr. Ramnath spoke of his learning from his time spent living in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, among the Duruwa people. For indigenous communities, the forest is their home and they do not want to harm it or destroy it. They actively work to prevent any damage. The increasingly pervasive reliance on modern Western science has led to an erosion of traditional knowledge - the roots of indigenous practices and the people of our land need to be cherished. Much of this can be attributed to the British colonization of India. Britain exploited science as an instrument of colonization and control in India and therefore delegitimized several indigenous pre-colonial practices.

Traditional Eastern practices often carry the stigma of being unreliable and or spiritual, but indigenous communities' ways of doing things are not to

cater to customers and promote consumerism. Mr. Ramnath highlighted that their link to the forest is an organic one – they do not view it as a resource to be plundered but rather something to live in, rely on, and co-exist with. This ideology is fast disappearing. The capitalist system in place today leaves people with no choice but to resort to commercialism and consumerism for a livelihood. But even in these cases, indigenous communities are often handed the short end of the stick as they sell their produce for the lowest prices, and companies make even larger profits. They are forced to do this to survive in the capitalist system in place today. A clear example of this is the use of the almanac. The farmer's almanac includes weather forecasts, planting charts, harvesting dates, and more for the coming year. Adhering to the almanac does not always guarantee the best results as nature never strictly follows the same patterns and it is impossible to control environmental variables. The use of the almanac has led to fixed harvesting times which do not follow traditional practices. The same crop may require harvest at a later time than it did the previous year – but markets and consumers don't allow for this flexibility.

A large number of plants have medicinal properties that are used to produce modern-day drugs. Indigenous populations rely on many medicinal plants to heal themselves. This practice has also been commercialized by large companies using phrases like "all-natural" and "ayurvedic" in their advertising, but at the end of the day, they are exploiting communities for their knowledge and natural resources for profit... When harvesting any plant for a specific use, in this case, for medicinal purposes, there are certain protocols to follow including not harvesting the entire plant with the root, and not harvesting a species that there is not enough of in the wild. Large companies do not follow these protocols which are rooted in sustainability. Therefore, in the long run, in the name of natural medicine and "Ayurveda", commercial entities are damaging the environment, proving the true extent of capitalism, and the short-sighted and greedy nature of many companies. However, these companies keep raking in large profits because they cut costs by disregarding environmental protocols, and through false advertisement.



One specific event that Mr. Ramnath shared with us involved a large Indian food and drug company. During a visit to Orissa, Mr. Ramnath noticed that almost all flora was harvested from the sand stream in one specific area. It was clearly overharvested. He went downstream and inquired with local residents about any changes they noticed regarding water supply or water quality. They informed him that recently, there had been sudden flash floods that they had never experienced before. Mr. Ramnath then decided to intervene by communicating with the company to close down this sourcing method. While medicinal plants can serve people, harvesting them incorrectly results in an unsustainable use of natural resources, and it also doesn't follow traditional Ayurvedic principles.

Indigenous communities have wide knowledge about the environment, as they consider the wild their home. They have to know what they can harvest, how to harvest, what time to harvest, and the plan's purpose for their own survival. For them, it is a matter of life or death. Mr. Ramnath provides an interesting analogy to understand their traditions. He said that scientists can afford to make mistakes in a lab, but these indigenous communities have to know the truth to be able to survive and live their daily lives. Their knowledge is so ancient and deep that they rarely face any challenges in distinguishing toxic plants from non-toxic ones, edible plants from non-edible ones, etc. Mr. Ramnath mentions that he learned more from these communities when he spent time with them than what he imparted. This proves that Eastern traditions possess the necessary knowledge about peoples' relationship with the environment that Western science still struggles to conceptualize.





VOICES OF VATTAKANAL

By Palash Mitra and Kanishka Chandrasekaran
Grade 10

Vattakanal is a picturesque village 7 kilometers from Kodaikanal. The village rests at a height of 6600 feet above sea level, making it a popular getaway secluded from the rest of the world. Visitors are presented with a calm and peaceful environment, with tiny village houses scattered around the place. There is only one road to access Vattakanal, and it is full of hairpin bends. This narrow road is a boon for the community, as it brings hundreds of tourists every weekend who support the livelihoods of the majority of residents.

One can expect to encounter a lot of friendly locals when they visit. Vattakanal offers breathtaking views of the surrounding hills, forests, and valleys, making it one of the best spots for nature lovers. There are many trails that visitors can take for a short hike – Dolphin's Nose being the most famous, but there are other short treks dispersed across the hills surrounded by tall trees, waterfalls, and the enriching smell of eucalyptus. The locals expect rain from September to December, making it the perfect temperature and time for tourists and locals alike to enjoy the hill village to the fullest. The tranquil village is also often mentioned as Little Israel due to the number of Israeli tourists that visit during this time.

During our visit and interactions with the local community, we learned that Vattakanal's harmony and beauty are the outcome of a visionary couple, the late Bob and Tanya, founders of the Vattakanal Conservation Trust. They worked with local residents for three decades, building trust, and implementing community-driven environmental projects such as seed collection for a nursery and waste management practices. Before Bob and

Tanya got involved, crawling pathways meant to soothe the senses were garbage heaps!

In today's Vattakanal, the local residents take partial responsibility for managing waste disposal, demonstrating commendable commitment to environmental stewardship. Shopkeepers and other community members play pivotal roles in educating both tourists about the ramifications of improper waste disposal in an area renowned for its lush greenery. Central to their efforts is a simple saying that resonates with any common person: 'Keep the environment as clean as you would keep your house.' This mantra encapsulates the essence of responsible waste management and underscores the interconnectedness between environmental preservation and personal hygiene.

Despite these efforts by the local community, waste management challenges persist, primarily stemming from poor tourist behavior who disregard local directives and dispose of their garbage haphazardly. With Kodaikanal attracting a diverse influx of tourists for brief periods, many visitors don't form a deep connection with the environment during their short stay. Residents say that over the past two generations, Vattakanal has evolved into a bustling tourist hub exacerbating the waste management dilemma and residents feel the need to exercise greater vigilance.

Mischievous monkeys bring even more trouble to the neighborhood. Adept at scavenging, they often raid trash cans and scatter refuse. Interactions with wild animals can lead to harm, so residents and shopkeepers are hesitant to deal with the issue through confrontation. Instead, they use avoidance as a tactic – many shopkeepers don't place dustbins outside their shop. They keep a bin behind the counter where it would be inaccessible to monkeys.

The Vattakanal community remains steadfast in its commitment to preserving its natural heritage, even with challenges of waste management and wildlife interactions. VOICE is a local organization that aims to help the environment



in and around Vattakanal in many direct and indirect ways. The members each provide a contribution to the organization to fund projects like spreading awareness through billboards. They have also initiated forest clean-up drives and collected waste for the Kodaikanal Municipality to segregate.

How VOICE came to be is an interesting and unique story. One day, Saletan (a founding member of VOICE) and his friends were invited to meet Bob and Tanya. The British couple served them warm cups of tea almost every day as they talked and got to know each other. The couple taught them various ways through which they could take care of native plants in a nursery. One of the couple's main goals was to revive the rare and endangered Elaeocarpus blasco shola tree species. The founding members of VOICE carry the fire that the couple had sparked, and they continue to make Bob and Tanya's dream come true today. The impact that Bob and Tanya made on the local youth over the past three decades is what inspired the founding of VOICE, which is now dedicated to spreading the same teachings to today's local youth and tourists.

The members of VOICE that we interviewed were all middle-aged or elderly men. The younger generation exhibits limited interest in these initiatives, and this poses a significant obstacle to the continuity and expansion of their efforts. Moreover, the demands of everyday life weigh heavily on the members as they are now older and have more responsibilities. Balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations leaves little time for dedicated environmental activism. Understanding this, members strive to adapt their approaches to better resonate with the younger generation, employing creative outreach strategies and leveraging social media platforms to raise awareness and inspire involvement.

VOICE represents a grassroots movement fueled by concern for the environment and a shared determination to effect meaningful change. Their reliance on personal resources, coupled with the diverse expertise of its members, empowers them to address environmental challenges

with resilience and ingenuity. While challenges persist, their dedication and collaborative spirit propel them forward, inspiring hope for a more sustainable future.

The members have noticed that slowly but surely, visitors have been showing more and more interest in the environment around Vattakanal. Tourists sometimes assist and participate in forest clean-up drives, where they encounter the problem of littering firsthand. Tourists are gradually becoming more self-aware. As for the younger generation, the members can only hope that their children will eventually realize the importance of the Vattakanal forests and join their ranks. But until then, preserving the pristine beauty of this quaint village, nestled in the hills of the Western Ghats, will remain the responsibility of the founding members of VOICE.





POEM

By Yazhini Sri
Grade 7

On a cold morning, as the sun arose
Breeze of fresh air touched us,
In a beautiful thick dense forest at Vattakanal,
The soil was fertile and moist,
There were eye-catching leaves in the trees
We saw a king sparrow singing a beautiful song to attract a female
On the same tree we saw Red vented bulbul,Velvet fronted nuthatch, Yellow tit and Oriental white eye making their calls.
While keeping a keen eye on this scenic view,
We suddenly heard a threatening noise and,
Assumed it was a terrible wild animal,
But to our shocking surprise, it was a beautiful brown fish owl,
From the moment we saw it, we were able to see other magnificent birds too.

This text was originally written in Tamil and has been translated into English.



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