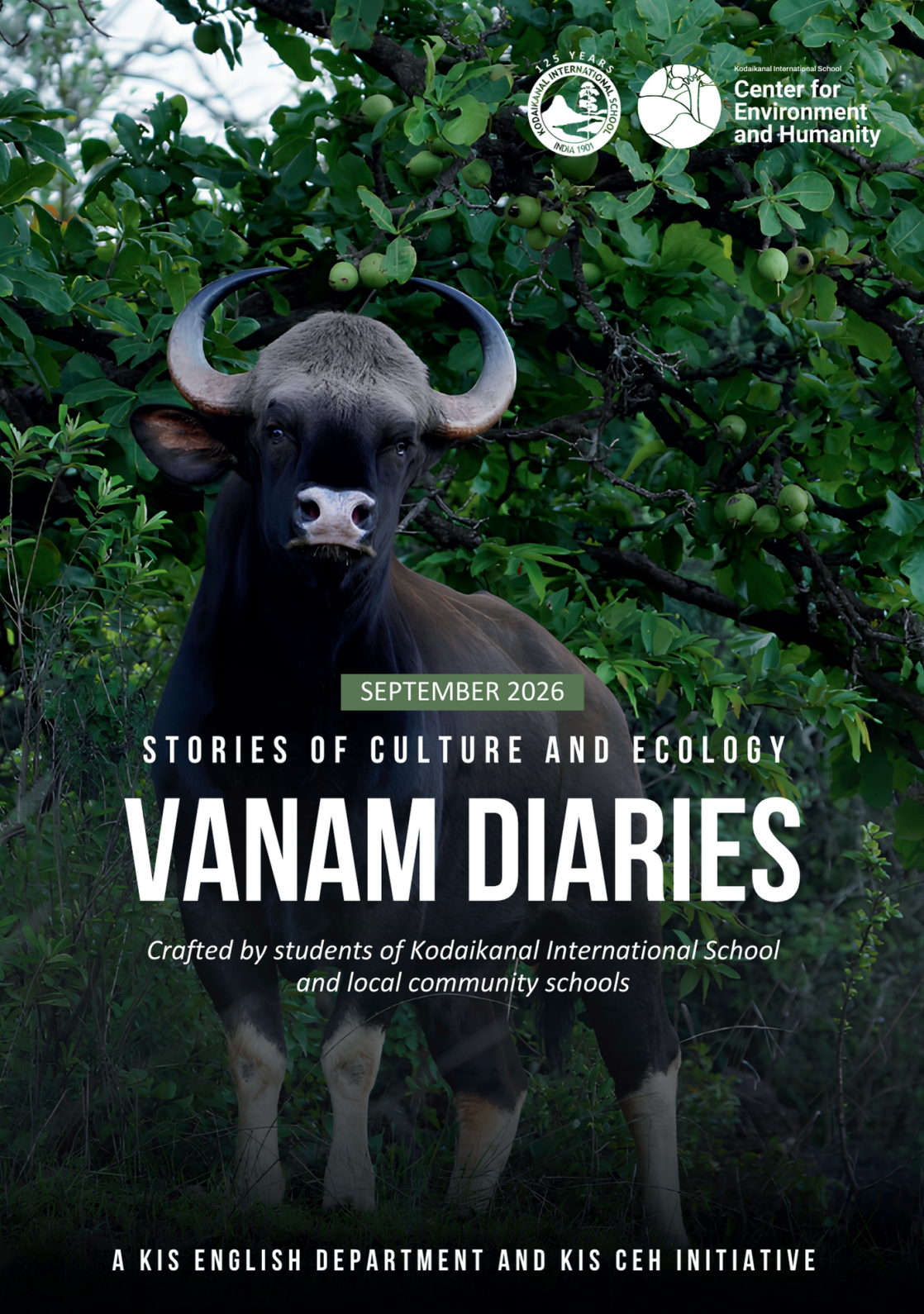

125 YEARS
KODAIKANAL INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL
INDIA 1901
Kodaikanal International School
Center for Environment and Humanity
SEPTEMBER 2026
STORIES OF CULTURE AND ECOLOGY
VANAM DIARIES
Crafted by students of Kodaikanal International School and local community schools
A KIS ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND KIS CEH INITIATIVE

Foreword

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

From “Inversnaid” by Gerald Manely Hopkins

Vanam Diaries was conceived of as a way to bring the voices of school students from around Kodaikanal together to celebrate, to document, and sometimes, to even lament, and warn. The question at the heart of this anthology, if there can be a single question, is: What does it mean to coexist within a natural sanctuary?

In a few Indian languages, Vanam, means forest or woods—the characteristic association with Kodaikanal. But despite this strong association, there prevails a feeling that the forests, its inhabitants, and the local communities that form part of Kodaikanal are vulnerable, and may be “all changed, changed utterly”, if we do not intervene in some fashion. This anthology might be thought of as a quiet and unobtrusive call to action, while celebrating the splendid creativity of the students of Kodaikanal International School, and the students of partner schools, across a variety of forms and styles. This is clearly a “local” book to the extent that its subject matter is derived from the Palani hills, but it is universal in its ideas, its themes, and its hope for the future.

The Centre for the Environment and Humanity (CEH) and the Department of English at Kodaikanal International school work together to create Vanam Diaries. Thanks are due to Dr Rajamanikam, Dr Uma, Ruth Godwin, Dalia Ghosh, Dr. Farshid Arhestani, Colin Kelman, with a special mention of Leandre D’Souza, and Rocky Richardson from KISCO. Importantly, we are grateful to the students who wrote for Vanam Diaries, and to the members of the local community that shaped this anthology.

We invite you to read, enjoy, and, then, perhaps, to pledge your own talents in safeguarding these hills that are home to so many of us.

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My Journey (Perungkadu)

By: **M. Gopika (Grade 9)**
St Xavier's Higher Secondary School

Children skipping in bursts of laughter,
Birds winging the sky with restless joy,
A living tapestry of creatures entwined—
Rich earth rising into silent hills—
All of these come together
To shape the quiet wonder of Perungkadu.

Raindrops blooming into gentle smiles,
Homes breathing in harmony with the land,
A village where unity is a heartbeat,
And love flows softly through every path.

In the warmth of new friendships,
I discovered unfamiliar worlds;
A life of simplicity—
Not merely to behold,
But one that asks to be lived, and felt, and understood.

The healing grace of nature's touch,
The tender music of the wild—
Wove themselves into memory,
Becoming a journey of quiet delight.

And in that stillness, I realised—
It was never poverty,
But a beauty shaped by simplicity.

Carrying each moment within me,
I returned changed—
My life gently rewritten.

What I Carry, What I Choose

By: **Saw Nanda Yu and Preity Battarai (Grade 11)**
Kodaikanal International School

I stand here, in the middle of nowhere. My baby cries—her screams echo until they feel like they are tearing through me. I am guilty, I am exhausted, I am a mother left alone. There is no sign of him, no help, no promise that anything will get better. Only the wind listens, but it never answers. Still, I remain—held in a world that refuses to pause.

I look at my trembling hands—one holding a baby, the other guiding a child. Hunger shakes my body, but I cannot think of myself. My thoughts begin and end with them. I force myself forward, one step at a time. The ground feels unstable, as if it resists carrying me. But I cannot stop—not like this. I must keep moving. For my girls. They are my world, my reason, my everything.

2026.

The room is dimly lit, yet alive with anticipation. I walk in slowly; each step aches through my ankles. I am tired, but I am here. I glance at the green couch and see two familiar faces waiting for us. Mr. Rajamanikum gestures toward a chair. I understand and sit down. My daughters follow. They know him—he is their teacher.

I almost smile, ready to ask how they are doing in class. Then I stop. That is not why I am here today. Today, I have come with purpose. Today, we will be heard—my daughters, and I.

The oak door opens. Two girls walk in, composed, prepared—as though they belong to a different world. They greet him, then sit across from me. I watch them quietly, taking in every detail. Suddenly, I feel a nervousness I cannot explain. My fingers tighten around the edge of my dupatta, wrapped around

my faded yellow sari—worn thin with time, stripped of the shine it once held.

There was a time I, too, looked put together. Draped in gold. Someone's bride. Someone's pride.

That time did not last.

My in-laws stripped me—not just of jewelry, but of dignity—while my husband stood in silence. Their words cut deeper than anything I had known. The gold meant nothing as it left my hands. It was his silence that broke me. I stood there, waiting for him to speak. He never did.
But I am no longer waiting.

I have moved beyond them. I am more than what they left behind.

I return to the present. The girls smile, then turn toward me. I glance at my daughters—their quiet confidence, their light. I feel a surge of pride. I fought for them. Every battle, every tear—it was all worth it.

My husband is not a bad man, but he is not a good one either. And yet, I do not blame him. How could he have been different? He grew up in the same system that shaped him. I remember his mother's words—how I was never enough, how my daughters were never enough, simply because they were girls.

I do not blame her either. She, too, was shaped by what she was taught to accept.

I pause.

The room feels smaller now, as though my memories have filled every corner. Mr. Rajamanikum waits. One girl shifts in her seat. The other looks at me, expectant.

And then I understand. They are not here to hear my past. They are here to understand what I have become. My grip loosens on my sari. I stop thinking about what was taken from me. I begin to think about what I still hold.

Ecofeminism.

When I first heard the word, it felt distant—something academic, something not meant for someone like me. But now, I understand. The way land is taken, used, and abandoned. The way women are silenced, controlled, and forgotten. It is not separate. It is the same story.

I was never allowed to explore—to step into the forests of Kodaikanal, to experience the world beyond the boundaries set for me. I once thought it was about safety. Now I know—it was about control. About gender.

I fought that battle. I argued, I cried, I refused to give up. And this time, I won. My daughters will not inherit that silence. They will choose their own paths, and I will stand beside them—every step of the way.

Ecofeminism.

It is not just a concept. It is something I have lived. It is the unequal chances we are given, the spaces we are denied, the voices we are asked to quiet. It is the reason there are so few women in places like the forest department.

But my younger daughter dreams of being part of it. And my elder daughter dreams of teaching others about sustainability.

The forest has become a part of us. We carry it within us.

I glance at the grandfather clock in the corner. Time has moved faster than I realised. I catch myself nodding, though I have barely absorbed the conversation. My mind is elsewhere. It has not even begun.

I turn to my elder daughter. She clutches her bag, filled with awareness posters she has made. She plans to go door to door across the town—to begin now, not later.

They have taught me more than I ever taught them.

All I want is for them to reach their dreams—even if that dream takes them as far as Korea. Kodaikanal teaches people to live sustainably—to separate waste, to give back to the land.

And somewhere beyond this room, my husband waits—impatient, expecting me to return home, to finish the chores, to prepare dinner.

But I am no longer just returning.

I am choosing.

A Village with a Lesson for the World

By: **V. Rubadharshini (Grade 6)**
St. Joseph's High School

Greetings. My name is V. Rubadharshini, and I am a proud daughter of Perumalmalai.

As one journeys from Genguvarpatti along the Ghat road—passing through villages like Oothu and Pannaikadu—a quiet, indescribable feeling begins to rise. The moment one reaches Perumalmalai, that feeling becomes clear: *we have arrived at the threshold of Kodaikanal.* Travelers from Periyakulam and Palani often share this same sense of anticipation and joy. It is no surprise, then, that Perumalmalai is fondly known as the *"Gateway to Kodaikanal."* To belong to this land, where my family has lived for four generations, fills me with deep pride and gratitude.

I am currently a sixth-grade student at St. Joseph's High School, and I completed my primary education at the CSI Primary School—both located within my village. Growing up and learning here has given me the rare privilege of experiencing village life in its fullest sense—close to nature, culture, and community.

Through the stories shared by my grandfather and father, I have come to understand the rich heritage and unique character of my village. Yet, it was the field visits organized through the JNAN programme that truly broadened my perspective. One experience that left a lasting impression on me was my visit to the tribal settlement of Thamaraikulam near our village. Observing their way of life inspired me to document their traditions and history, and I have since begun writing a small book about their community.

When I think of Perumalmalai, the first word that comes to mind is *unity*. People of different faiths live here in harmony, preserving their traditions while embracing mutual respect and equality. A temple, a church, and a mosque

stand side by side—symbols not just of faith, but of coexistence. Festivals here are not confined by religion; they are shared celebrations of community.

The vibrant festivals of the Mariamman and Perumal temples, the solemn chariot procession and the Way of the Cross at the church, and the observance of Ramadan at the mosque—all reflect a spirit of shared humanity. The moments of breaking the fast, when people gather together to share *nombu kanji*, are especially moving; they embody the warmth and togetherness that define our village.

At the shrine of Vanaththu Chinnappar, where deities of multiple faiths are placed together, one sees a powerful, living expression of religious harmony. In some places, streets are divided and named by caste, but in my village, such divisions do not exist. Perumalmalai stands as a quiet yet powerful example to the world—that people can live simply and peacefully as human beings, beyond all barriers.

Nature, too, has blessed our land abundantly. Pure streams that rise from the heights of Perumalmalai flow down to become rivers, nourishing regions far beyond, including the Manjalar and Palaaru dams. Agriculture continues to thrive here, sustaining both livelihoods and traditions. Crops such as potatoes, beans, chow-chow, and avocados are cultivated with care and sent across South India. Among them, the *hill banana* is especially cherished for its unique flavor, reaching sacred destinations like Palani and Tirupati, as well as bustling cities like Chennai.

In earlier times, when villages such as Adukkam and Palamalai lacked proper roads, people would walk long distances along mountain paths to reach Perumalmalai. Carrying their produce, they would come here to trade, sell, and purchase essential goods before returning home. Even today, many continue to depend on our village for agricultural supplies, making Perumalmalai not only a cultural center but also an important hub of the local economy.



The forests surrounding our village—Tiger Sholai and Elephant valley—whisper stories of a time when elephants and tigers roamed freely. Today, however, increasing construction, traffic, and poor waste management are beginning to disturb this delicate balance. The thought that wildlife is being pushed away from its natural habitat fills me with concern.

During my visits to other villages, I have seen the challenges they face—water scarcity, human-wildlife conflict, and lack of employment driving people to

migrate to cities. Unregulated tourism and the rise of unauthorized resorts are further straining local resources, especially sanitation and drinking water. I sincerely hope that such changes never overshadow the beauty and balance of my village.

This is why I feel a strong responsibility to tell the story of Perumalmalai. I share these stories with my friends and relatives, hoping to create awareness and pride. My dream is to publish a book by the time I reach eighth grade—one that captures the history, culture, and significance of my village and its neighboring communities.

Through the JNAN programme, I have explored other villages and come to better understand my own. It has helped me see both the strengths we must cherish and the challenges we must prepare for. I sincerely hope that such programmes continue to provide rural students with opportunities to learn, explore, and grow.

The village that sustains us also depends on us. It is our duty to protect, preserve, and nurture it with care and responsibility.

Let us rise to that responsibility.

Between Soil and Survival

By: **Arfeen Najeeb Mulla and Dina Medeuova (Grade 11)**
Kodaikanal International School

Every meal carries a long story—one that begins far before it reaches the plates we eat from. Before a carrot is chopped for a salad, before potatoes are bought at a Sunday market, before a handful of beans is placed on bread, someone has already spent long months tending to the soil, watching the weather, and caring deliberately for these crops. For most of us, food appears as something readily available—ripe and appealing.

But for a farmer—the one who nurtures vegetables and fruits almost like children—these products are the result of perseverance, risk, and sacrifice.

In the hills, where the weather is as unpredictable as fate and the roads turn to mud, farming is far from the romanticized lifestyle often portrayed in the media. It is a craft—one that blends practical skill, knowledge, intuition, and experience. In many families, this craft is passed down through generations, sustaining not only crops but entire ways of life.

For a farmer, every crop is an investment—one that may bring reward or erase months of effort in mere days. And yet, he always returns to the field. For twenty years, his life has been surrounded by crops. The carrots and potatoes we eat may be the result of his labor. The beans and peas in a curry might have taken over fifty days of careful tending. Each crop demands its own time, attention, and conditions.

But farming is not only about tending plants—it is about anticipating the future. When the Manathakkali tomatoes ripen, their seeds fall naturally to the ground. Many of us might assume they will grow again on their own. But the farmer knows better. He collects the seeds carefully, treats them with ash,

dries them in the sun, and stores them with precision. For him, farming is not left to chance—it is built on planning and control.



What seems like tedious work to others is, for him, preparation for the year ahead. In his hands, seeds are not just seeds—they are next season's crop, income, and hope.

But this season, hope has slipped away. A failure in preserving seeds has left him facing a shortage. The diversity of crops he once grew has diminished. Yet, he cannot pause to grieve. A farmer always returns to the field.

This time, he adapts. Potatoes become his only viable option. Life does not stop, and the land continues to call. People depend on him. So he sighs, adjusts his plans, and begins again from scratch.

When the harvest is complete, his challenges are far from over. He must sell what he has grown. Offering beans at ₹50–60 per kilogram, he is met with a trader's calm response: ₹8 per kilogram.

The choice before him is hardly a choice. Refuse, and the produce may rot unsold. Accept, and months of labor are reduced to an unjust price. Crops cannot wait indefinitely—they must be sold before they spoil. So he negotiates, hiding his frustration, bargaining until sunset.

Afterward, he returns—not to rest, but to prepare for the next season. Though his family owns three plots of land, he does not overuse them. Some are left to rest, ensuring better yield in the future. To him, a crop is almost like a child. From the eighth or ninth day, it requires constant care—protection from pests, monitoring of soil conditions, and attentive nurturing. Both farming and parenting demand patience, responsibility, and a quiet fear for the well-being of something fragile.

And just as life shapes parenting, climate shapes farming. Despite providing everything within his control—fertilizers, water, care—the farmer cannot control the sky. One season, the weather may support growth; another, it may destroy everything without warning.

This unpredictability lingers constantly. Each day carries the possibility of loss. And yet, he returns to the field. He returns knowing the future is uncertain. He returns knowing many depend on his work. He returns carrying the burden of feeding lives beyond his own. To those who consume the food, a potato or a handful of peas may seem ordinary. But to the farmer, each one is a testament to months of labor, risk, and resilience.

In harvesting food, he also harvests something deeper—the outcome of perseverance. Perhaps that is what it truly means to harvest hope: to return, again and again, despite uncertainty. Because only through such resilience can life continue to grow.

Then… and Now: A Village Transformed

By: **M. Shivathmika (Grade 8), Government High School, Vilpatti**
D.Hariakash (Grade 6), Government High School, Vilpatti
T. Vanisha (Grade 8), St Xavier's Higher Secondary School

I am M. Shivathmika, an eighth-grade student from Pallangi, a small village nestled in the hills of Kodaikanal. I study at the Government High School in Vilpatty.

My curiosity about nature began in early childhood, but it found deeper meaning over the past two years through my participation in the weekend sessions of the *Junior Naturalists Action Network (JNAN)* program at Kodaikanal International School. These sessions opened my eyes to the richness and complexity of the landscapes around me.

Through these classes, I came to understand the geography of hill villages, the rhythms of rural life, traditional agricultural practices, local festivals, and food cultures. As I listened, I often found myself thinking of my own village—Pallangi.

In many ways, Pallangi reflects the very essence of what I was learning. Here, people still live in close harmony with the land. Agriculture continues to shape daily life, and festivals are celebrated with simplicity and sincerity. Sharing these aspects of my village in class filled me with a quiet sense of pride.

There was a time when I viewed village life as difficult—defined by the absence of proper roads, healthcare, and quality education. But these perceptions began to change. Gradually, I came to realize that living in a village is not a limitation, but a privilege.

My interest in birds grew stronger as I learned that rural landscapes provide vital habitats for diverse species. Two years ago, I visited a small stream in our village with friends. In just a short while, we observed a remarkable variety of birds.



Pallangi village

I later learned that this modest stream begins as a narrow flow in the hills, gradually gathering strength, transforming into a river that travels all the way to Palani, sustaining countless lives along its path. This realization filled me with a profound sense of wonder.

One particular moment remains vivid in my memory. Standing by the stream, I heard a melodious bird call. With the help of binoculars, I identified it as the “Seegara Poonguruvi - Malabar Whistling Thrush .” That fleeting encounter became a lasting imprint on my heart.

Those walks along the stream became journeys of discovery. I observed native trees, insects, and small creatures, learning to notice the delicate relationships that sustain life. Nature, I realized, is the most open and generous classroom.

Yet, over the past two years, I have also witnessed unsettling changes.

The face of my village is slowly transforming. New constructions are emerging at a rapid pace. As agriculture becomes less profitable, many families have sold their lands to outsiders. Unfamiliar with the ecological sensitivity of this region, new settlers are altering forests and streams to build houses and resorts.

Recently, I returned to the same stream that once inspired me.

What I saw was deeply distressing.

The space that once resonated with birdsong was now silent. Garbage had replaced greenery. Stray dogs and rats roamed where birds once thrived. The “Seegara Poonguruvi” was nowhere to be seen—only crows and mynas remained.

In that moment, I understood with painful clarity that the natural wealth of my village is being steadily eroded.

Streams are turning into dumping grounds. Clean water is being replaced by wastewater. The village I once spoke of with pride now fills me with concern.

I often find myself asking: *Why does this change affect me so deeply? Why is it not seen by others?*

The JNAN program has given me more than knowledge—it has given me awareness. It has taught me to recognize both the beauty we inherit and the loss we risk.

With that awareness comes responsibility.

This summer, I hope to take students from my village school on a walk along the stream. I want them to see for themselves—the beauty that remains, and the damage that is unfolding. I want them to understand, as I have begun to, that change is happening around us.

Because feeling concerned is not enough.

We must act.

Protecting nature is not solely the responsibility of governments or institutions—it is a shared duty that belongs to each one of us.

To everyone reading this, I offer a simple request:
Visit your village. Reflect on what it once was, and what it has become.

If you see signs of decline, begin—however small—to make a difference.

Because the beauty of village life that we experienced yesterday
deserves to be experienced by the generations of tomorrow.

That responsibility is ours.

Saturday Afternoons at Stake

By: **Tara Tsering Rai and Shruti Mathema (Grade 11)**
Kodaikanal International School

We weren't entirely sure what to expect when we walked into that room on the day we interviewed the children from JNAN. It was not merely an interview, but an entry point into someone else's world—into their lived realities. As the conversation unfolded, it became clear that climate change and carbon footprint were not just abstract concepts they had studied, but ideas they had consciously woven into their everyday lives.

One of the first things we asked was how their classes at JNAN had shaped their understanding of climate change. A young boy described a carbon footprint in the simplest terms: the mark we leave on the Earth. It was not a textbook definition, yet it carried far greater weight than any we had encountered before. What stayed with us even more was what followed. He shared that he had begun walking home from school every day—not because he was told to, but because something within him resisted contributing to the problem, even in small ways.

Initially, he had tried walking both ways, but found that the morning journey left him too tired to concentrate in school. So, he adapted. He chose to walk home instead. In doing so, he discovered something unexpected: birds and butterflies along the way, a sense of calm, and a growing love for the walk itself. His story reminds us that being a climate-conscious individual does not require extremes—it calls for choices that are honest, sustainable, and personally meaningful.

What began as an individual habit gradually became collective. A friend asked to join him, and he agreed. Soon, others followed. Together, they walked, held one another accountable, and made deliberate choices each day. One boy began bringing a stainless steel bowl to the meat shop every weekend, eliminating the need for plastic bags. Another started choosing where to

eat—not based on cost or taste, but on whether the shop used leaf plates. These were not grand gestures. They were quiet, intentional actions, repeated consistently, without recognition—driven purely by care for the environment.



We also spoke with a mother, whose perspective added a different layer of tenderness to the conversation. She had learned about climate change through her children—through what they brought home from JNAN. She did not rely on complex terminology or policy discussions. Instead, she expressed a simple, profound truth: what she had once taken for granted, her children might never experience. It was perhaps the most honest articulation of the climate crisis we heard that day—not delivered from a stage, but from the quiet concern of a parent hoping her children would inherit a livable world.

When we asked the students how they felt about the future, one boy's response lingered with us. Referring to cities like Delhi, where the air has become difficult to breathe, he said he feared a future where he might not be able to play football on a Saturday afternoon. It was a simple, almost innocent concern—but it made the crisis feel immediate and real. Because that is what is at stake: not distant abstractions, but everyday freedoms, childhood moments, and the ability to simply exist outdoors.

The students also shared, with a clarity that challenged many adult assumptions, that people are not indifferent—only uninformed. Given the right awareness, they believed, most people would choose differently. They spoke of solutions such as ecotourism in Kodaikanal, shared transport systems to reduce congestion, and policies that reward environmentally responsible choices. Their ideas were not complex; they were practical, humane, and rooted in hope.

As we left the room, something had shifted within us. These were not children repeating lessons. They were individuals who had observed the world with honesty, recognised its challenges, and chosen to act—quietly, consistently, and with intention. There were no cameras, no platforms, no recognition. Just a walk home, a steel bowl, and an unshakeable belief that their actions matter.

The Mountains and the Mountain People

By: **M. Yashica (Grade 8)**
PCK Matriculation Higher Secondary School

We prayed to Lord Kannan—
sang songs to soothe His heart…
By His gentle grace,
we found our place
in Mannavanur.

For the whispering chill of wind,
for springs that never run dry,
the mountains rise—
tall, eternal,
draped in a mantle of green.

At times, the clouds descend,
embracing the hills,
slipping through our fingers
like fleeting dreams.

Ever-flowing streams murmur softly,
the air remains untouched, pure—
the heart drifts, spellbound:
What divine wonder is this?

For a meagre meal,
to boil and drink,
with trembling feet,
we walk, burdened with firewood—
Yet within, our hearts grow wings.

There are moments
when the heart knots in silence,
when eyes brim over—
and unseen hands
wipe away those quiet tears.

When we go to claim an Aadhaar,
the hands that gather grass
bear no visible lines—
will they return?
Will the course of our lives ever change?

Today, our village is a place of travel—
crowds arrive, crowds depart…
They marvel at our beauty,
mourn the hardship of our days,
and leave us behind
with eyes full of pity.

They capture nature in their frames—
but will anyone
capture our lives,
and show them to the world,
to the village, to those in power?

In that yearning,
our days slip away…

We tell ourselves—this too shall change.
For everything changes…
everything—
except our lives.

Wings and Wonder: Seeing the Forest Through Young Eyes

By: **Maya Tsering Rai and Abhilasha Shrestha (Grade 11)**
Kodaikanal International School

Before joining the Junior Naturalist Action Network (JNAN), Raghavdev S, a Grade 7 student at Sankara Vidyalaya, had little awareness of the remarkable diversity of bird species in Kodaikanal. Nestled in the Palani Hills of Tamil Nadu, the region is home to nearly 130 species of birds, spread across varied landscapes—shola forests, grasslands, marshlands, and farmland—each sustaining its own unique ecosystem. Yet, for many children growing up here, this richness remains largely unseen. For Raghavdev, however, one programme changed that entirely.

Alongside two other students who shared his curiosity, Raghavdev became part of a learning journey that extended far beyond the classroom. JNAN offers a structured 23-Saturday curriculum, guiding students through the natural history of Kodaikanal in deliberate, layered stages. Early sessions introduce foundational concepts such as ecology, biodiversity, and ecosystems. As the programme progresses, learning moves into the field—into forests, grasslands, and marshlands that span elevations from 600 to 2,500 metres, each revealing a distinct composition of birdlife.

Students also explore reptiles, mammals, indigenous communities, climate change, farming, and waste management. Yet, among all these areas, birds consistently capture their imagination. As Dr. Rajamanikam explains, the forest is alive with constant discovery—one bird appears, and within moments, another, more striking than the last. For students encountering this world for the first time, the excitement is immediate and overwhelming.

For Raghavdev, that excitement soon evolved into disciplined observation. When he spots a bird, his attention instinctively turns to its tail, feathers, colour, and, importantly, its habitat. Where a bird chooses to exist reveals as

much about it as its appearance. Together with his peers, he documents his observations meticulously—drawing birds by hand, collecting shed feathers, and recording species names with care. This practice, though simple, reflects a deep engagement with the natural world.

So far, Raghavdev can independently identify over 50 of Kodaikanal's bird species. His limitations are not of ability, but of access. Most of the birds he knows are those found in the high-elevation forests near his home. Without reliable transport, wetlands and lower-altitude habitats remain largely inaccessible.

Two birds, however, stand out in his memory. The first is the long-tailed shrike—a loud, unmistakable presence that his teacher affectionately describes as *kichan kichan*. Long before he knew its name, Raghavdev had observed it perched on a rock near his family's farmland. When its photograph appeared during his first JNAN class, recognition brought a moment of clarity and connection.

The second is the Nilgiri pipit—one of the rarest birds in the region, classified as near-threatened by the IUCN. It is also an indicator species of Kodaikanal's rapidly disappearing grasslands, which have shrunk from covering nearly 80 percent of the landscape fifty years ago to less than ten percent today. Raghavdev has seen it only once. That single sighting remains unforgettable.

The second is the Nilgiri pipit—one of the rarest birds in the region, classified as near-threatened by the IUCN. It is also an indicator species of Kodaikanal's rapidly disappearing grasslands, which have shrunk from covering nearly 80 percent of the landscape fifty years ago to less than ten percent today. Raghavdev has seen it only once. That single sighting remains unforgettable.

Birdwatching has transformed how he understands the world beyond birds. A visit to a tribal settlement, where elders spoke of trees as sacred, offered language to what he had already begun to feel. He no longer discards waste casually in the forest. He thinks carefully about his choices. Nature, for him, is no longer a passive backdrop—it is alive, interconnected, and in urgent need of care.



Long-tailed shrike

He also recognises the value of his observations. His field notes, he believes, can contribute meaningfully to conservation efforts—and he is not wrong. Consistent documentation by young naturalists carries genuine scientific significance.

When asked about the future, his response is immediate and certain: he wants to become an ornithologist. His advice to others is practical and grounded—use a field guide, carry binoculars, dress appropriately, go to the right places, and, above all, observe carefully. Do not stop at excitement; record what you see.

Yet, this aspiration brings into focus a critical challenge. Binoculars cost approximately ₹14,000—nearly a month's income for many families. For every child like Raghavdev, whose world has expanded through these experiences, there are many others who remain on the margins, simply because they lack access to these tools.

If this work is to grow—if more children are to encounter the same sense of wonder, curiosity, and transformation—the programme must be supported with greater resources. Because every child who looks up into the trees with a question deserves the opportunity to find an answer.

Nature Comes Alive In My Journal

By: **M. Rahul (Grade 8)**
Sri Sankara Vidyalaya Matriculation Higher Secondary School

I am M. Rahul, a Class 8 student of Sri Sankara Vidyalaya Higher Secondary School. Over the past year, I have been a part of the “Junior Naturalists Action Network (JNAN)” programme conducted by the Kodaikanal International School’s Center for Environment and Humanity—an enriching experience that has profoundly transformed the way I perceive and understand the natural world around me.

Through this programme, I have learned about the rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystems of Kodaikanal. Beyond classroom sessions, we explored forests, fields, and village landscapes, where I had the rare opportunity to closely observe the region’s unique plants and wildlife. These field experiences made learning lively, meaningful, and memorable.

At the beginning of the course, we were provided with essential materials, including a bag, a water bottle, a uniform, and a specially designed notebook. Among these, the notebook—introduced to us as a *journal*—became the most valuable tool in my learning journey. Its thoughtful design immediately inspired me to use it with care and curiosity.

Our teacher guided us on how to maintain the journal. We were encouraged to draw and document birds, insects, and other living organisms we encountered in forests, farms, or even our home gardens. Alongside our sketches, we recorded details such as the date, time, location, and behaviour of each observation.

This practice opened a new world for me. Drawing helped me observe more closely, and each illustration stayed etched in my memory. I also realised that these personal records could one day serve as valuable references for others.

From then on, my journal became my constant companion. One memorable day, I noticed a ‘Kondalathi - Common hoopoe’ bird in my garden. It had shed a delicate feather, which I carefully collected. Using it as a reference, I sketched the bird in my journal—an experience that deepened my appreciation for even the smallest details in nature.

Gradually, I began observing other visitors to my garden—sparrows, parakeets, and long-tailed shrike birds. I collected fallen feathers, sketched them, and recorded my observations with growing enthusiasm. Each page of my journal began to reflect my journey as a young observer of nature.

I often shared my journal with my mother and my friends from the JNAN group. Their encouragement motivated me to continue. When I once showed it to my teacher, he advised me to expand my focus—not just birds, but also trees, flowers, and seeds. His words inspired me to look at nature more holistically.

I aspire to become a forest officer in the future. Protecting India’s forests and wildlife is my dream. I believe that this journal, filled with my childhood observations, will one day help me inspire and teach others.

In the years ahead, I plan to begin a new journal each year—recording new species, new experiences, and new learnings. With every page, I hope to deepen my connection with nature and continue expanding my understanding of the living world.

The G.O.A.T - The Nilgiri tahr

By: **Hannah Blessy Vignesh Kumaran and Devarakkshithaa Kamalakannan (Grade 11)**
Kodaikanal International School

As the mountains are still wrapped by mist and the sunrise brushes the hills of Kodaikanal. The strong survivor of Western Ghats, moves quietly between the slippery rocks, the Nilgiri tahr. Strong footed and unshaken, it navigates the hills where everyone else hesitates to stand. With its curved horn and brown goat coat, this remarkable goat stands as the state animal of Tamil Nadu. Once roamed freely across these ranges, they now need protection and every single one matters.

The Nilgiri tahr count is a wildlife census conducted to estimate the population of this endangered species found only in the Western Ghats. In Kodaikanal, the count takes place on the slopes of Palani Hills under the protection of Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary. Before the town wakes up to tourists, forest guards begin their climb with notebooks open.

The process is simple: the hills are divided into sections and small teams are spread out across specific areas. They wait patiently in hope for movement. When a group is spotted, the observers carefully record it. Every single sighting matters, as counting the same animal twice gives false hope and missing one is loss.

Somewhere in the mountain range of the larger Western Ghats, from the high-altitude regions of the Palani hills, the Nilgiri tahr count is done. The ecosystems have become fragile due to the presence of endangered animals and loss in biodiversity which led to the declaration of the government to protect the ecosystems of the Kodaikanal Wildlife Sanctuary. The nigiri tahr find the grassy slopes, shola forests, and rocky cliffs ideal to use as a habitat.



Nilgiri tahr (Credit*:* Davidvraju, CC BY-SA 4.0 via *Wikimedia Commons*)

In order to take measures to conserve the ecosystem, the Nilgiri tahr count is extremely important. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Nilgiri tahr is facing threats due to climate change, habitat loss, poaching, and species of invasive plants. Regular population counts help keep track of trends in population that can help higher authorities take action towards preserving and protecting the environment, and planning how habitats can be restored. They can also make poaching and wildlife protection policies stricter. The census also happens among the public which helps spread awareness among the locals and makes them understand the value of biodiversity. It emphasizes the significance of protecting the ecosystems of Western Ghats.

During the British colonial period, the tahr were excessively hunted and reduced to few hundreds by the twentieth century. Large areas of their habitat

were also converted to tea plantations and other commercial crops. During the past years, the government has introduced a 5-year project to protect the tahr by surveillance, reintroduction and radio collaring.

Ultimately, the Nilgiri tahr count is not just a survey, it symbolizes responsibility. Each count in the misty-covered cliffs represents hope and each recorded number is a story of survival, growth, and a commitment to preserve the unique components of the Western Ghats that make it memorable for the upcoming generations.

Two Years in Paradise

By: **V. Dikeshwar Sarath (Grade 9)**
Zion Matriculation Higher Secondary School

To most visitors, the mist of Kodaikanal appears merely as drifting clouds. However, through my journey in this programme, I have come to understand it as the very lifeline of the shola forests.

When I first joined, I was an ordinary student, equipped with a notebook and pen, prepared to take notes. Yet, through regular weekend field visits, I was exposed to a wide range of subjects, including birds, animals, reptiles, insects, indigenous communities, waste management, sustainable living practices, agriculture, global warming, and climate change. These experiences enabled me to learn directly from the environment rather than solely from textbooks.

Over time, this exposure deepened my understanding of Kodaikanal's unique natural heritage. More importantly, it brought about a meaningful transformation in my outlook and way of life.

By the end of the first year, my perspective had profoundly changed:

The forest was no longer a mere collection of trees, but a vibrant and living ecosystem.

Birds became the gentle heartbeat of this world, each call resonating with life.

Kodaikanal was no longer just a place to visit, but a fragile and precious ecosystem to be protected.

I gradually began to incorporate these learnings into my daily life. Although it was initially challenging, a growing sense of environmental responsibility motivated me to persist.

The second year of the JNAN programme proved to be a significant turning point. It was during this period that I began to perceive myself as a true nature activist. The learning extended beyond identifying species to understanding the ecological balance of mountain ecosystems. Each field visit not only reinforced prior knowledge but also highlighted the environmental changes occurring within a short span of time.



These experiences made us increasingly aware of the rapid ecological degradation affecting Kodaikanal. More importantly, they instilled in us a strong sense of responsibility—that we are not merely visitors, but custodians of these fragile landscapes.

Many of my fellow participants began engaging in discussions about environmental issues with their families and peers. I realized that such conversations form the foundation for meaningful change. Raising awareness and encouraging dialogue within local communities are essential first steps toward environmental conservation.

At the conclusion of the second year, our teacher expressed confidence in our abilities by encouraging us to undertake independent field visits. Motivated by this trust, my friends and I organized our first such visit.

We commenced our journey early in the morning, travelling by government bus to a village, where a friend received us. Two first-year students accompanied me, and I assumed responsibility for ensuring both their safety and learning experience. At that moment, I reflected upon my teacher's guidance and dedication. Inspired by his example, I endeavoured to provide a meaningful experience for my peers.

During our visit, we observed local wildlife and gained insights into the lifestyle of the village community. We shared a meal at my friend's home and interacted with the residents, which allowed us to understand their lives more closely.

Later, I participated in a game of kabaddi with the village children—an entirely new experience for me. This interaction brought me immense joy, as it enabled me to connect not only with nature but also with people.

Upon returning home, I shared my experiences with my mother. Her words, expressing confidence in my ability to travel independently, provided me with great encouragement and strengthened my self-belief.

These two years have enriched me not only with knowledge of the natural world but also with self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, a spirit of inquiry, and meaningful friendships.

I describe this experience as "paradise" because it was here that I first experienced the true serenity and beauty of nature; here that I encountered

wildlife beyond the pages of books; and here that I developed a deep commitment to environmental conservation.

Thus, these two years have instilled in me a lasting sense of ecological awareness and responsibility toward all living beings. For me, they truly represent a period of profound learning and transformation.

My Village – Memories of My Grandmother

By: **J. Sivani (Grade 8)**
Government High School, Vilpatti

The stories of a village do not always live in books. Sometimes, they rest quietly in the memories of those who have lived through its seasons.

As part of our JNAN classes, our teacher encouraged us to explore the history of our villages—not through records alone, but through conversations with the people who remember them best. That is how I found myself sitting beside my grandmother, listening.

I have lived in Vilpatti all my life, yet I had never truly known it.

My grandmother began her story not with the village, but with our family. My father, she said, was born in Nilakottai. When he was in the sixth standard, my grandfather's government job brought the family up the winding hills to Kodaikanal. Years later, after my father completed his college education, they chose to make Vilpatti their home. And that is where my story begins.

"In those days," my grandmother said, her eyes lighting up, "Vilpatti was full of life."

The village was rich, not in money, but in the abundance of its soil. Potatoes, beans, radish, peas, cabbage, cauliflower, carrots, beetroot—everything grew in plenty. "We never bought vegetables from shops," she said with quiet pride. The land provided, and the people trusted it.

She paused for a moment before speaking again, this time with a hint of sadness. "Even the garlic was different then—big, spicy, and full of taste." Today, she said, it has lost its flavor and spoils quickly. I could sense what she meant without her saying it—the fertile soil itself has changed.



Vilpatti Village

Her stories carried me further into a time I had never seen.

She told me how farmers, after harvesting potatoes, would wash them in the flowing stream, gather some firewood, and roast them right there under the open sky. They would share the warm, smoky potatoes with others nearby. “You cannot taste that anymore,” she said softly. “Even if you cook it at home, it is not the same.”

Back then, every home had cattle. Fresh milk was boiled every morning, and curd and buttermilk were prepared in the kitchen, just as naturally as breathing. Today, many homes no longer keep cattle, and even milk feels like something that has lost its purity along the way.

The houses, she said, were small and built with mud—simple, but beautiful. They were coated with red earth instead of paint, giving them a warm, natural glow. Since all the houses looked alike, there was no sense of difference or division—only equality. Festivals were not just events, but shared experiences. People gathered together, stacking firewood into great heaps, laughing, working, and celebrating as one. During those nights, no one wore footwear. They walked barefoot, feeling the earth beneath them, staying awake together under the sky until dawn.

And then, she spoke of the stream.

“It used to flow all the time,” she said. “We depended on it for everything.” For bathing, washing, farming, and drinking—the stream was the lifeline of the village. Today, it flows only rarely, and when it does, the water is polluted and unusable. “If we clean it,” she added with hope, “it can still give life again.”

As she spoke, I realized that her memories were not just stories—they were pieces of a world that is slowly disappearing.

Vilpatti, the village I thought I knew, is changing. Its rhythms are shifting, its ways of life quietly moving closer to that of towns and cities. But through my grandmother’s words, I caught a glimpse of what it once was—a place where people lived with nature, not apart from it.

There are many like my grandmother, carrying within them such stories. I want to listen to them, to record their voices, and to understand the truths they hold.

Because perhaps the future of our villages does not lie in changing them—but in remembering them, and choosing to protect what still remains.





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