

Organic theatre, conceptualised by SN Sudheer, is breaking new ground in Kerala

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The novel idea puts emphasis on reviving ties between farming and culture

Swirling around in his splendid costume fashioned out of reed mats, coir and strands of dried grass, Kadampan Moothan stamps on the ground, claps his hands and raises his voice in a song of the soil: of sowing, reaping and harvesting and of a resilient people who have taken on a virus and a flood without being defeated by either. Exhorting his audience to work with him to sow seeds of change, he enthuses them with stories of his origin and his mission till the audience comprising farmers gives him the rousing response he expects.

The awe-inspiring Moothan has reached Chengal, a picturesque agrarian village to the south of Thiruvananthapuram, after making his presence felt in Vellarada in Thiruvananthapuram district, and Idukki. Fifty-five acres of paddy fields in Chengal have been set aside for organic cultivation and already many of the fields are clothed in tender green. Along with the weeding and planting, the farmers and villagers of Chengal are participating in theatre workshops and discussions to give shape to a play that would be staged during the harvest.

It is the fruition of a dream for SN Sudheer, a veteran television producer-turned-theatre activist, who conceptualised and nurtured the idea of organic theatre in Kerala, and Moothan is a creation of organic theatre, a catalyst for the promotion of the same.

"Perturbed by rampant use of pesticides and rapid decline of farming in many places in Kerala, I felt that we were destroying the ecology and our environment because many of us had snapped our ties with the land and farming. Our water sources, the soil and the ecology should be protected and preserved. And for that, our children should know where their food is coming from," he explains.

He wanted to revive people's links with the soil and culture. "I like to define it as agri plus culture, a seamless fusion of agrarian activities that went hand in hand with theatre, music and other cultural activities," explains Sudheer.



To practise what he believed in, he, along with a few like-minded people, formed Wide Inspiration, Wide Aspiration (WIWA) in 2010 and got it registered in 2014.

"In addition to practising organic farming, we envisaged farmers reviving folk songs and folk theatre that was part of their culture instead of us imposing something from outside," says Geetha Jayadas, a volunteer of WIWA.

The first such experiment was conducted at Kathippara in Vellarada grama panchayat, 40 km from Thiruvananthapuram, in April 2016 where two acres of land were taken on lease. Simultaneously, residents and stakeholders around the selected fields were invited to participate in get-togethers and discussions that went together with farming activities. Although the first one did not really yield the harvest expected due to a flood, the activists persisted and in December 2016, began farming in the village with the help of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and panchayat officials.

"While agricultural officers and experts in organic farming took classes and workshops, simultaneously we had cultural activists talking about folk songs and theatre and interacting with the villagers to find out what was it that they wanted to participate in. Pratheep Prabhakar and Sanal Dalumukham were some of our resource persons," elaborates Sudheer.

The second phase lived up to their hopes and by the time, the harvest was ready, the villagers had come up with a play that centred on their concerns about land, prospects of farming, gender, society and so on. On May 11, 2017, the farmers and WIWA volunteers organised a harvest festival and also staged a play. That was when the Moothan was born.



"Moothan arose from discussions we had with the farmers in Vellarada," explains Sudheer. "It was their imagination, beliefs and traditions that created Moothan, a farmer himself. Since he is a creation of the villagers, by the villagers and for the farmers, they were ready to accept him with open arms. It is through him and more such characters that we hope to carry forward the message of empowerment and organic cultivation," adds Sudheer.

By then, they were confident that they were on to a productive idea. In the meantime, in July 2016, WIWA was invited to repeat the same process with 20 villages in Thiruvananthapuram. Through sessions on organic farming and theatre, the volunteers performed [Jaiva](#), a one-act play that emphasised the importance of nurturing natural resources.

In March 2017, in Vamanapuram panchayat, WIWA worked it in association with Bharat Bhavan, Thiruvananthapuram. They have also been tasked by the Department for Welfare of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes with implementing the project among five tribal communities in Idukki. Instead of telling the tribals how to go about it or holding classes for them, the volunteers had lengthy discussions with them on their beliefs, myths and rituals.

"It was a learning process for us as well. Their knowledge of nature and their surroundings is phenomenal. Most workshops on gender, health and education do not take off after an initial success because the tribals don't feel a connect with it. To avoid that, we are involving them in each step.



SN Sudheer and Geetha Jayadas with Kadampan Moothan | Photo Credit: Ajayan Aruvi

"Veteran theatreperson Shereef Pangode, who donned the role of Moothan the very first time, is giving shape to a play composed of matter that has been gleaned from these workshops and discussions. That will be given to the communities to transpose it in their language and dialect, so that they can own the play," explains Sanatha SN, a WIWA volunteer.

Simultaneously, their latest and biggest project is at Chengal, where organic theatre is being implemented with the support of the panchayat, Krishi Bhavan and Hariitha Kerala Mission. The vision is to empower the farmers and stakeholders in the panchayat and make them aware of the importance of protecting their water bodies and environment.

"A village that has outlived the floods, Chengal's farmers are now busy with the sowing in their fields. I hope to see Chengal transformed as a green village that is completely into organic farming," says TN Seema, vice-president of Hariitha Kerala Mission, while inaugurating organic theatre in Chengal.



Kadampan Moothan enthuses school children on a visit to Chengal panchayat for the inauguration of organic theatre | Photo Credit: *Ajayan Aruvi*

Sudheer and his volunteers are already at work. "While the fields were being prepared, we were holding theatre workshops on the sidelines. By the time of the harvest, we would be ready with our play as well," he says with a smile.

Factfile

Kadampan means farmer and Moothan means protector. "During our discussions with the farmers, they said they wished they had a celestial being who understood the woes and worries of farmers, someone who was one among them," explains Sudheer.

"Moothan is a harbinger of change. He energises the people and inspires them to revive their links with the soil and nature. I could feel the energy when I donned the costume for the first time," says Shereef.

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