

She, the forest home gardener

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WRITTEN SPECIALLY FOR VIKALP SANGAM

Vanastree has now (Mar. 2018) won recognition from the Government of India - it is being awarded the NARI SHAKTI PURASKAR (women's power award) for its exemplary work on Women and Seeds.

The Awards ceremony took place on 8 March 2018, by President of India at Rashtrapati Bhavan (Presidential Residence in New Delhi). Watch the **Nari Shakti Puraskar** awarding ceremony (8 Mar. 2018) on video

All photos are from the Vansatree Bank Beyond the city, past the highway, and ahead of the Talaguppa Railway Station in the State of Karnataka, there's a revolution – silent, nurturing and green. A revolution nurtured by the women of the region towards the larger global goal of sustainable agriculture and food security. A revolution that tackles food politics with a smile and indigenous seed varieties. A revolution that brings us close to Naina Nayak, and people of her ilk... An Evening in Naina's World Naina Nayak tightens her saree palloo, and deftly ascends the slender ladder which departs from the balcony in her first floor home, stretches into an uncovered skylight, and beyond, into an open terrace. Within this open-to-the-sky space is a garden of vegetables and flowers, all vibrant to the spray of the Hingaaru Male ■ the Kannada term for the Retreating Monsoon. As I follow Naina up the ladder and around her world on her terrace, I am smitten by the variety of vegetation in resolute bloom, their stems deeply rooted in a farmyard two-storeys above the earth. Here, tomatoes and chillies grow in the soil bedding encased in used tyres, beans sprout from the cosy luxury of old rice and cement bags, and an amaranth plant resplendent in a pink accoutrement of sinuous flowers, breathes health and vitality down to its slender spine. Naina nurtures this garden seed by organic seed. Naina's home, replete with its organic ground and terrace gardens, is part of the landscape of Sirsi town, a settlement in the hub of Malnad ■ the mountainous region, which is an offshoot of the Sahyadri range of the Western Ghats in the State of Karnataka. In the heart of the Western Ghats, the sun hides behind a cumulonimbus cloud one more time, and Naina plucks a huge brinjal, then another, and makes me promise that I will carry these precious vegetables home to my mother. Precious these brinjals are for their taste and texture, also, importantly, for their chemical-free origins, the seeds of which have been carefully nurtured and passed from one woman's hand to another's, as part of a seed collective. Not too many months ago, Naina, who has let out the ground floor of her house to Vanya, has wittingly become part of Vanastree, a seed collective, which inherently aligns itself with the global food security system. In fact, Naina and I have just returned from a meeting at the Vanastree office in main-town Sirsi. Naina has brought back heirloom seeds and plant cuttings to enhance the diversity of her organic home garden, the yield of which serves the daily meals of her family in Sirsi, and also her daughter's home in Bangalore. A Morning with the Forest Gardeners of Malnad Much like Naina, a select group of thirty-odd members of Vanastree – a collective of forest home gardeners, had gathered at the office earlier that monsoon day in September 2017. While the sun shone delicately through moist clouds, the women who were arriving one by one at the Vanastree office bantered on about their homes and lives, and importantly, the organic heirloom seeds and plant cuttings they were carrying in their bags to share locally, and spread elsewhere, outside the perimeter of Malnad. These women were meeting for the first time post the Malnad Mela ■ the 'go-to' event in Sirsi, which took place on June 21, 2017. Just off the train, and an auto ride from Talaguppa Railway Station to Sirsi later, I eavesdropped on the conversations, and understood that these women were here to share their experiences, exchange seeds, discuss new ideas to further preserve the biodiversity of the region, and importantly, get up to date about what's happening in each other's lives.

A forest home gardener in her garden

In a participatory meeting facilitated by Sunita Rao -- ecologist and founder of Vanastree, and Manorama Joshi ■ the senior-most member, backbone and co-ordinator of this initiative, the thirty-odd women – all from farming backgrounds, had travelled from villages far and near to main town Sirsi to discuss their yields and seeds, also their learnings from the recently-concluded Malnad Mela.

The Malnad Mela

The Malnad Mela itself is seventeen years old. The brainchild of Sunita and Manorama, this Mela aka fair, is an endeavour to bring local and organic produce, which includes vegetables, tubers and seeds, as well as indigenous foods like pickles and **murukkoo** (a crisp fried munch), and other edibles to city dwellers in Bangalore and town-dwellers in Sirsi and its surrounding areas. After an exchange of hearty greetings, it's time to discuss the post-script of the Sirsi Malnad Mela with the present batch of forest gardeners who are at the tail-end of their year-long training. "The Mela itself," according to Sunita, "has just concluded its 17th year celebrations. We initiated it in the year 2001, with the objective of bringing awareness on the richness and fragility of this part of the Western Ghats, and to highlight the role of women who tend their forest home gardens, as also to provide for food security and seed sovereignty." **Vanastree's women selling their ware and interacting with customers at the 2017 Malnad Mela** The Mela, at its core, is a celebration, which inherently also spreads awareness on the pressing issues of our times. This year, as part of a pickle competition, the participants used a variety of wild plants with the Jeerige Appe Midi Uppinakai aka Cumin Baby Mango Pickle, winning the first prize. Participants used a variety of traditional flora including cultivated and wild mango, kokum (garcinia indica), citron, lemon, ginger, tomato, pineapple, wild gooseberry, bimbli (averrhoa biiimbi), bamboo shoot, pepper, kowlikai, mixed vegetables, tamarind, mango ginger, vatay and brinjal. This apart, the Land and Lens stall made a debut, with Vanastree members Lalita and Naina being the official photographers for their own Mela. The Land and Lens initiative 'mentors rural women and youth in advanced camera skills, encouraging them to fearlessly reveal their land, lives and creativity.' In an interview with Etv, Lalita said: 'the hands that held a knife and cut vegetables, are now holding a camera and taking pictures.' And Naina remarked that 'she and her camera played together – such was the rapport she shared with the lens.' "Each year, the Mela works around a theme. This year, the focus was on using water and land wisely," explains Sunita. "Around 2,000 people visited the Mela this year, and we had a turnover of approximately Rs. 80,000. We have gathered today to discuss the postscript of the Mela." Earlier, in June 2017, these forest home gardeners of Vanastree had participated in the Sirsi Malnad Mela. They set up stalls and sold organically-produced seeds, tubers, saplings, cuttings and other planting material, garden flora, fruits, vegetables, traditional foods and crafts, books and cotton clothes too. A sub-group of the same women are gathered at the Vanastree office this September 2017 morning to review what happened in the monsoon months in their gardens and homes. Manorama, as a forest gardener herself, greets her friends, and gets talking about optimising costs and resources. "Maintain your rates, buy from the Vanastree family, and sell your ware to its members at lower rates. Whether you make one kilo of a food item or ten, the travel costs are the same. Optimise, and buy in bulk. In fact, buy seeds at the end of each season – perhaps four times a year. And when you bring the profit margin down, you can sell 100 packs in place of 10! You should know the market rate, and understand who your buyers are," says Manorama, and smiles. "Why are Vanastree products special? It's because none of us here are in it to make great profits. Which is why, we hope to reach more people under the label of Vanya." Vanya Sunita and Manorama initiated Vanya in the year 2010 as an offshoot of Vanastree in an endeavour to initiate Seed Sovereignty in an India where packaged food is sought after. Helmed by Manorama, her son Vivek joined her and took over as proprietor of Vanya to further the micro enterprise of selling seeds and organic produce. Vanya has been a separate entity since 2016, and complies with all norms, including the recent GST guidelines, which the initiative is hoping to be exempted from. "Our main idea," says Manorama, "is to enable the women of this region to make the best of the yield from their backyards. Presently, our products are stocked in various outlets in Bangalore. Going ahead, we are planning on adding fresh products, and are looking at newer places in

Bangalore, Goa, Chennai and Mysore to distribute the seeds and traditional edibles prepared by our forest home gardeners. So, via our intensive training programme provided to the select twenty forest gardeners this year, our aim has been to equip them with a deeper understanding of seed saving, and further enable the participating women with leadership and financial skills. Our seed bank should be stronger, the variety should be better, and the message that the village seeds are available and ready for use, should be spread widely.” “Importantly,” adds Sunita, “we do not view seeds as a commodity. The age-old practice of exchange and gifting continue, and are strongly encouraged. Supplementary income is always welcome, and it has added value to seeds that were thrown away earlier after keeping some for one’s own garden. Now, these seeds can also be saved to allow for some honest extra income while making their way to hundreds and hundreds of food gardens.”

The Vanya office with products

The Seed Savers of Malnad

Nurturing her own organic forest home garden right here in the heart of Sirsi ■ which lies amidst the Malnad forest region, Sunita is integral to the land as the think-tank behind this seed saving mission. She migrated to the region with the core idea of bringing groups of women together to imbibe them with leadership skills and enhance the quality of their lives. An equal partner to this ideology, Manorama, for years since the birth of Vanastree, travelled from one village to another, meeting the women of Sirsi in an endeavour to preserve this pocket of the Malnad terrain. “I see the forest land depleting, even monkeys don’t get enough food from the forests now, and are eating what we grow. Vanastree’s endeavour is to enable our women to preserve our seed diversity as well as our forests. There are thousands of seeds here – we hope that some of them will go to different places in the world and bear fruit. In fact, several of the older women here can identify 80 to 100 species of medicinal plants, which the younger ones cannot. It is imperative to integrate the young and the old to spread this knowledge.”

Vansatree’s members creating a seed bank

“The practices are old, what’s new about the initiative is collectivism – we neither have a blue print, nor an organisational structure,” explains Sunita. “Here, the self is not an individual, but a collective self. Vanastree is small, quiet and subtle with an organic synergy. It is about building on the strengths of the women in the Malnad community.” Collectivism manifests to the extent that the forest gardeners gathered here, are like one big family. “We go on tours together, we visit places where we get inspiration, and figure out how to integrate this positivity into our lives. We have learnt that if we love others, they will love us,” beams Manorama. “As a result, Vanastree has brought what women used to do only in the kitchen to the fore.” Vanastree members at an outbound programme A Peek into Sirsi’s Backyards We see the truth in Manorama’s words, as we hear some of the forest gardeners who have gathered at the Vanastree office today take pride in their backyards. “I am growing veggies,” smiles Sukanya Hegde from village Koogila Kuli. “This year, I am growing different varieties of pepper, brinjal and pumpkin. I want to make a green house, and also use lesser water. I will do it soon,” says Ganga Hegde from Salkani village. Sucheta Hegde has a greenhouse back home in village Sannakere. “I have gained a lot of confidence thanks to Vanastree. I hope to grow a lot more organic veggies.” Revathi Bhatta is from Hoskere, and her family owns a nursery. “I am growing various veggies at home. We don’t buy any veggies,” she says. Survarna Hedge from village Shirgodu too, cultivates her own veggies. “I grow a lot of summer vegetables and want to increase my monsoon crop. I cultivate Dahlia flowers and now have people buying the yield from me. Thanks to Vanastree, I am elated that my hobby is now my livelihood,” she beams. Some others like Bhagya Bhata from village Sonda and Vinoda Naik from village Karkoli are facing water crises this year. Shamala Hegde who owns lands in Appikoppa too, has been hit by the dry spell. “Three acres of our land are lying dry. We harvest around 500 kilos of **kokum** a year. This year, we’ve had a yield of just 50 kilos,” she explains. Through their ups and downs, these forest gardeners smile and talk of sharing, encouraging and caring. “I have learnt a lot from my friends at Vanastree,” says Chandrakala Naik from Karkolli village. “Going forward, I want to give seeds to Vanya.” Annapurna Hedge, a senior member of Vanastree, lives in Yedali village, and is a great producer. She grows quality jackfruits and makes **papads** and chips. She nurtures her backyard and her relationships with equal finesse. Her daughter-in-law has found more freedom in her husband’s home – with encouragement from Annapurna, she now learns music. And Annapurna’s grandson, an eighth grader, has recently bagged a role in a Kannada film. Annapurna’s seeds are of top calibre, and she certainly is an inspiration to the younger members of Vanastree. Gayathri Joshi who lives in village Koogila Kuli and loves growing organic veggies in her food garden had been pretty homebound and shy until she joined Vanastree, and started interacting with the collective’s members. “My daughter recently secured admission into the Hubli Engineering College. For the first time in my life, I travelled alone with her, and completed all her admission formalities. I gained the confidence to do so through my training at Vanastree,” she smiles with pride. An entire day has passed since I started interacting with the team members, and back in Naina’s organic wonderland, we visit the ground floor, which the forest home gardener has let out to the Vanya office. Guiding me down the stairs, Naina reveals: “I was a prisoner within four walls. My life has changed for the better ever since Manorama and Vivek set up the Vanya office here.” The Vanya office is a treasure house of neatly-packaged seeds, jackfruit chips,

kokum

juice and balm, and a variety of other traditionally grown and hand-made products by the forest gardeners of Vanastree. As I enjoy another glass of

kokum

juice, which Manorama has lovingly made, she invites me home for a traditional Malnad lunch the following day. Waving goodbye to Naina and Manorama as I hold a bag of brinjals and organic goodies from Vanya, I return with Sunita to rest in her farmhouse. I sleep to dream of the forest gardeners, they, the children of this culturally and ecologically rich mountain valley. I wake up to a brand new day, and a joyride to the monsoon-kissed Nandihonda area in Sonda village. Here, Manorama and her family live in a bungalow on farmlands between not-so-distant mountains, and a front garden of dahlias in fresh bloom. **Seed Sovereignty** After a sumptuous Havyaka Oota – a traditional Malnad lunch, we thank Manorama for the healthy fare cooked from the ingredients that are all fresh out of her home garden, and settle down in the living room for a chat over chai. Manorama and Sunita reminisce about the days when the latter started Vanastree with a group of women in Neernali village, six kilometres from main-town Sirsi. “I met Sunita through my husband who had helped her with some electrical work, and got interested in Vanastree,” recalls Manorama. “In the initial days, our local postman Seshadri helped us by hand-delivering our newsletters to women in the villages around Sirsi. Seshadri was very good at heart and multi-talented too – he doubled up as cook and purohit, acting as the situation called for it. Through his able efforts, we had a group of women soon enough. That was in the year 2002. Earlier, in the year 2001, I had suggested to Sunita that we start a Mela. We went on to start with a biodiversity Mela for the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. By the year 2008, we replicated the Malnad Mela in Bangalore and ran it for ten years until 2017. We have now decided to continue the Mela here in Sirsi, and sell the seeds and produce via Vanya. We registered Vanastree formally in 2008, and now reach out to women in approximately 40 villages situated within a 40 kilometre radius around Sirsi. Our endeavour is to teach people to save seeds towards Seed Sovereignty.” *Vanya seeds* Back home in Bangalore, I watch the pots in my terrace garden everyday – I have brought back seeds from Vanya, and hope that these energies of sustainable agriculture from Malnad’s backyards will grow and spread far and wide. Contact [the author](#) Read about

[Vanastree in Hindi](#)

Grow a Garden: A Handy Guide for the Aspiring and Experienced Gardener

(botanical illustrations by Sushama Durve) published by Vanastree. It provides information on 38 vegetable, tuber and flower species - when and how to plant your organic, open pollinated seeds and tubers, transplanting details, harvesting, etc. (checked on 29 Dec. 2017)