

BRIDGING Hopes

AN INITIATIVE OF ROMSHA PRODUCTIONS

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BECKONING YOUNG MINDS
WITH NATURE'S BECKON.
A PHOTOESSAY.

A TRIBUTE TO LATE RAJIV SINGH,
FORMER SECRETARY, SAPNA

IN CONVERSATION WITH
GOVIND SINGH RATHORE,
FOUNDER, SAMBHALI TRUST

RECLAIMING DIGNITY
FOR WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN
WITH MAITRI FOUNDATION

DIVING INTO CORAL RESTORATION
WITH COASTAL IMPACT

SPINNING EMPOWERMENT WITH
RESHAM SUTRA

SAVING CAMEL PASTORALISM AND
COASTLINES WITH SAHJEEVAN.
A PHOTOESSAY

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bridging Hopes

Documenting stories of change in the social sector convinced me in the Dalai Lama's philosophy, "It is not enough to be compassionate—you must act." Bridging Hopes is a social magazine that aims to bring about acts of compassion that underlie change. The stories on these pages do not bring about transformation in a single moment, but over time through people, places, and everyday work.

The organisations and individuals featured here may be small or large, local or widely known, but together they affirm a simple truth expressed by Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Living during a time of shortened attention spans, what is gained in speed is often lost in depth. Bridging Hopes is an attempt to stay with that missing depth.

Across this issue are different ways of understanding change. There are practices shaped into guiding mantras of care, as seen in SAPNA's work and the reflections of the late Shri Rajiv Singh. There are organisational philosophies that evolve through experience, such as Coastal Impact. And there are journeys of challenge and growth, as in Sambhali Trust, where transformation has unfolded across years of work.

Maitri's story looks closely at widowhood, tracing its historical weight, layered stigma, and present-day gaps. What emerges is not only a portrait of exclusion, but also of reclamation, where structured support begins to restore visibility, dignity, and belonging.

Moreover, initiatives like Nature's Beckon work with younger generations to deepen the idea of shared environmental stewardship, which is central to sustainability in a time of ecological strain.

Resham Sutra presents a commercial model that empowers women while sustaining an ancestral legacy, adapting it to contemporary needs through the use of solar energy. It links livelihood, innovation, and improved quality of life.

Sahjeevan's story, presented as a photo feature, reflects an activism that brings attention to camel biodiversity and their role in sustaining pastoral life as well as ecological landscapes.

In this issue, we bring two photo stories, an in-depth interview, and a series of long-form pieces showcasing the different ways of storytelling for solution journalism.

We are grateful to all the contributors and communities who made this issue possible.

Avantika Vijay Singh, Editor, Bridging Hopes.

CONNECTING
COMMUNITIES

INSPIRING CHANGE

NURTURING HOPE

CONTENT

●	Nature's Beckon	2
	Rainforests, Resistance, and Renewal in Assam A Photo Essay	
●	Coastal Impact	10
	Restoring Coral Reefs	
●	Sapna	18
	Transforming Lives and Landscapes	
●	Maitri Foundation	26
	Restoring Dignity to the Widows of Vrindavan	
●	Resham Sutra	32
	Preserving Legacy, Empowering Women	
●	Sambhali Trust	38
	In conversation with Govind Singh Rathore	
●	Sahjeevan	46
	Restoring Camels	

NATURE'S BECKON

Rainforests, Resistance, and Renewal in Assam

A Photo Essay

Nature's Beckon, a grassroots environmental group in Assam, led a landmark rainforest conservation movement that culminated in the Dehing Patkai National Park. Their ongoing Mind Movement now empowers a new generation of mindful conservationists.

Upper Assam is home to a contiguous stretch of 500 square kilometres of rainforests, spread across the Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts. Rainforests in Assam serve as vital ecological buffers, regulating the climate, storing carbon, and sustaining regional rainfall patterns, which necessitate their preservation.

The rainforests are home to a rich diversity of flora and fauna, including the iconic hollong tree (*Dipterocarpus retusus*), the state tree of both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. A symbol of ecological resilience and cultural heritage, its canopy soars up to 50 meters, supporting rich arboreal life, including primates, squirrels, birds, and reptiles.



Ancient and resilient rainforests of upper Assam, sustaining the ecological balance. A photo by Dhritiman Mukherjee.



The Hoolock Gibbon is a critically endangered, specialised canopy-dweller, swinging across treetops using its long arms to cover up to six meters in a single swing. The only ape species in India, they are known for their loud, early-morning "hook-o, hook-o" calls. These small fruit-eating, tailless apes are key seed dispersers and play a crucial role in forest regeneration. Their presence reflects a healthy ecosystem, and so protecting them means protecting the entire rainforest.

The Hoolock Gibbon: India's only ape swinging through rainforests. A photo by Sanjib Hazarica.



Soumyadeep Datta, Founder, Nature's Beckon

Once contiguous, Assam's rainforests were fragmented by coal mining, oil exploration, and expanding tea gardens. In the 1980s, Nature's Beckon—founded by Soumyadeep Datta—emerged as a grassroots force, bringing these forests into public focus.

In 1992, Nature's Beckon ignited Assam's rainforest conservation movement through grassroots participation, using creative methods like slide shows, street theatre, and radio. This was strengthened by Prakriti Sahitya, Assamese nature writing that blended ecological thought with cultural expression. Rooted in cultural memory and traditional wisdom, this local-language literature united a diverse community across professions and society into a powerful voice for nature.



This photo gained fame for symbolising grassroots indigenous resistance during the rainforest conservation movement.

From 1989 to 1992, Nature's Beckon surveyed Upper Assam's forests entirely on foot, without GPS or internet, uncovering a continuous 500 sq. km stretch of rich rainforest amidst widespread fragmentation. Recognising its extraordinary biodiversity and vulnerability, they petitioned the government to grant it Wildlife Sanctuary status for stronger legal protection.

With increasing public support, the movement reached its peak with the 2001 International Rainforest Festival, drawing global attention to Assam’s forests. The decade-long campaign culminated in the declaration of 111.19 sq. km as Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary on the banks of the Burhi Dihing River and the western foothills of the Patkai Hills in 2004—a landmark victory in Assam’s environmental history. It was upgraded to a national park in 2021.



The Namsang stream flows along the National Park, reflecting its rich biodiversity before joining the Burhi Dihing, a tributary of the Brahmaputra.



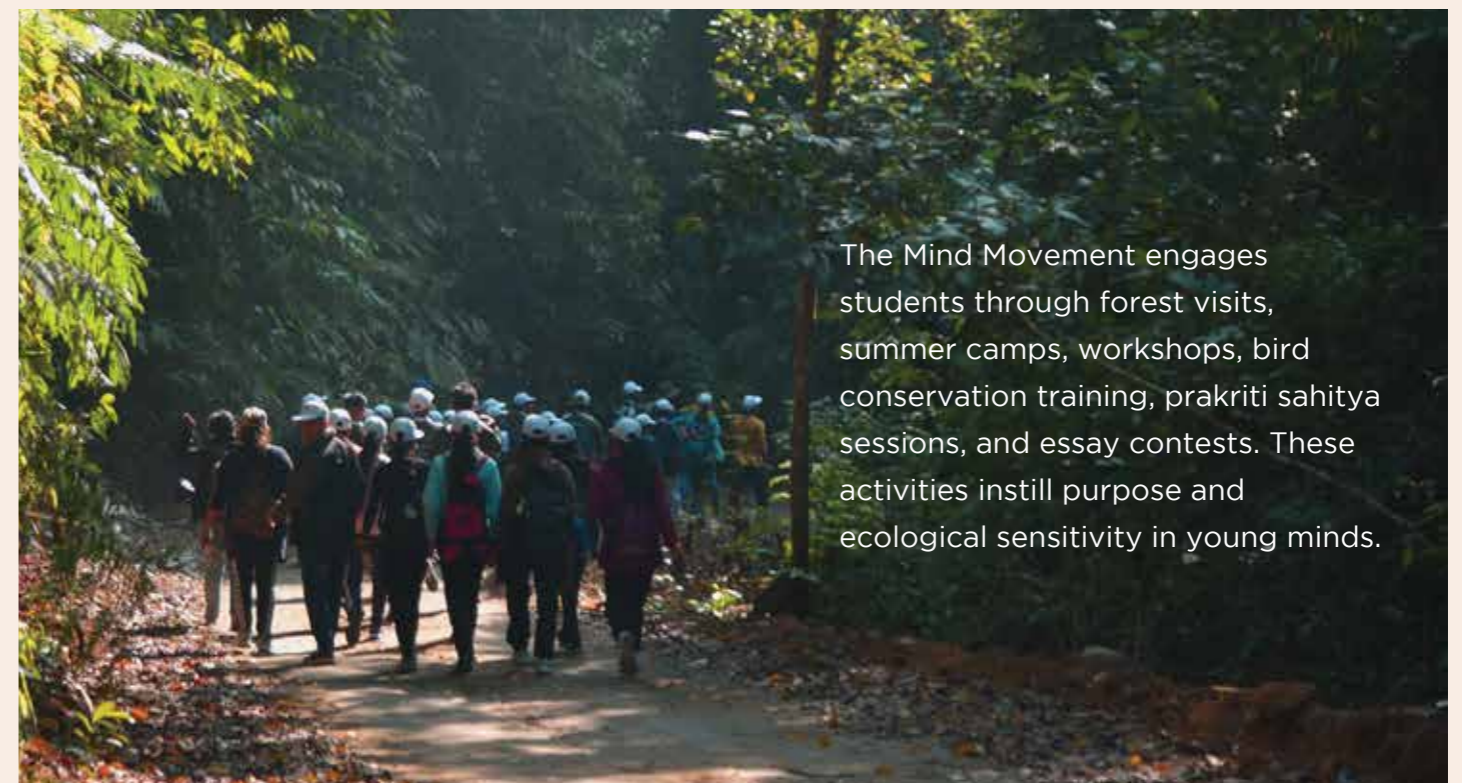
Students pledge lifelong commitment to protect India’s forests, wildlife, and environment with the oath “Ahum Basudhame Krite Mangaljanak/ Moi prithivir babeiy mangaljanak”, which translates as “I am beneficial/prosperous for the Earth.” This practice of mind-training encourages compassion, diligence, and perseverance, linking personal growth with environmental stewardship and national progress.

Students pledging support to be lifelong environmental stewards.



The Mind Movement empowering young minds.

In 2022, marking its 40th year, Nature’s Beckon launched the Mind Movement, which aims to nurture ecological responsibility and inner transformation in young citizens. Over 100 schools across Assam have already joined the initiative.



The Mind Movement engages students through forest visits, summer camps, workshops, bird conservation training, prakriti sahitya sessions, and essay contests. These activities instill purpose and ecological sensitivity in young minds.

Students visiting the forests, witnessing firsthand the living landscapes they are learning to protect.

On 12 June 2025, the 'Ahum Basudhame Krite Mangaljanak' Mind Movement expanded into West Bengal through a new partnership between Nature's Beckon and the Eastern Dooars Tourism Development Association. Launched among school students in Madarihat and Kalchini (Alipurduar district), the campaign now resonates in Bengali as 'Ami Prithivir Janye Mangaljanak'—"I am beneficial for the Earth."

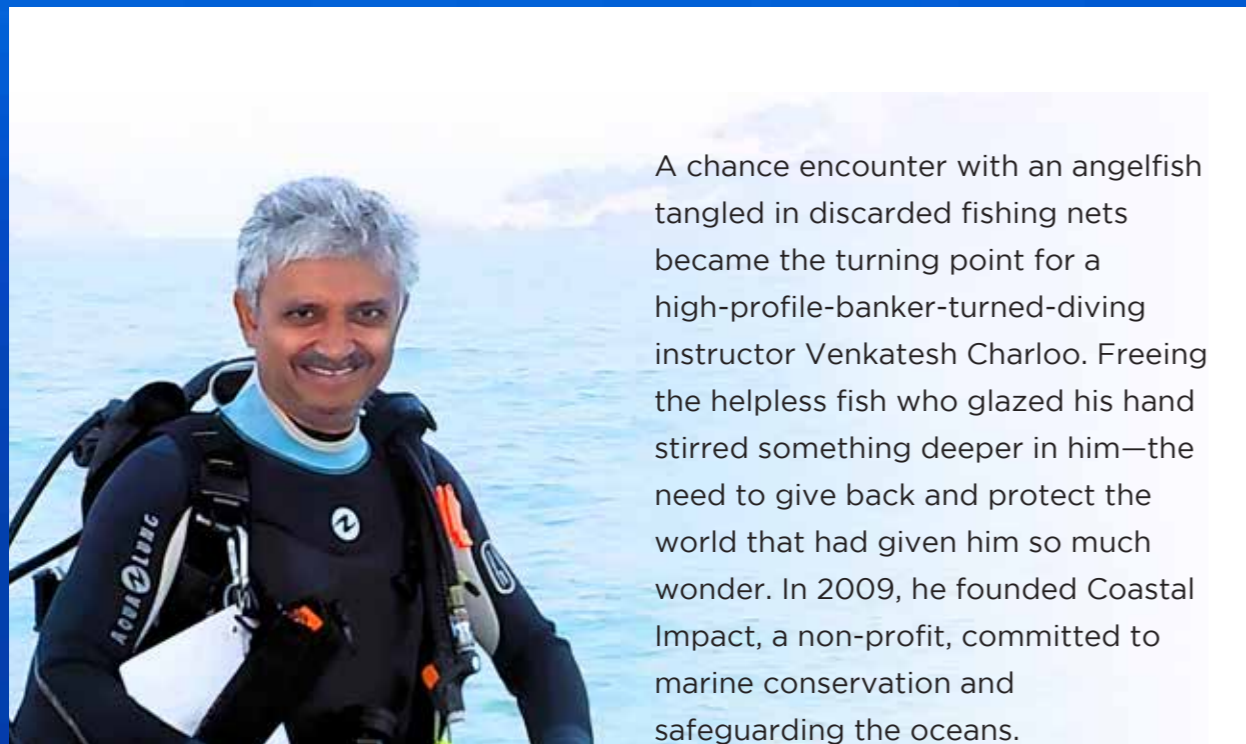


By building environmental awareness and leadership through hands-on experiences and reflection, Nature's Beckon is shaping a new generation of mindful, empowered conservationists ready to lead India's green future.

“ We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Dhritiman Mukherjee, acclaimed nature, wildlife, and conservation photographer, for generously contributing photographs to this article. Additional photos and valuable inputs were provided by Novanita Sharma, Editor, The Seed, Nature's Beckon. ”

COASTAL IMPACT: RESTORING CORAL REEFS

Coastal Impact is reviving coral reefs in Goa, crucial for ocean health, using innovative artificial reefs, AI tools, and community-led conservation. This is a story of scientific innovation as a tool for ecological restoration and shared stewardship.



A chance encounter with an angelfish tangled in discarded fishing nets became the turning point for a high-profile-banker-turned-diving instructor Venkatesh Charloo. Freeing the helpless fish who glazed his hand stirred something deeper in him—the need to give back and protect the world that had given him so much wonder. In 2009, he founded Coastal Impact, a non-profit, committed to marine conservation and safeguarding the oceans.

Ocean Warrior, Venkatesh Charloo, Founder of Coastal Impact

In the shimmering waters off Goa, sunlit waves dance, casting a mesmerising spell on the surface. But deep beneath this tranquil scene lies a secret—resilient coral reefs thriving against all odds.

The Earth's Blue Heart

Did you know that every two out of three breaths you take are thanks to the oceans?" says Venkatesh. The oceans generate over half our oxygen, and regulate global temperatures by absorbing and redistributing solar heat. They also absorb nearly 30% of all human-made carbon dioxide emissions, acting as the Earth's largest carbon sink, and help fight climate change. Ocean resources sustain the livelihoods of about 3 billion people worldwide.

Corals—Tiny Architects with Giant Impact

At the heart of ocean health and Venkatesh's mission are coral reefs, described by oceanographer Sylvia Earle as "jewelled belts around the middle of the planet."

Though coral reefs cover less than 1% of the ocean floor, they support nearly 25% of all marine life. These vibrant underwater cities shelter thousands of species, protect coastlines from erosion and tidal surges, and are even vital for medical research holding promise for treatments such as cancer.

Corals themselves are tiny, sedentary animals living together in colonies of individual polyps. They share a special partnership with microscopic algae that live inside them. While the corals provide shelter to the algae, the algae make food using sunlight, and release oxygen in the process. Together, they help keep the ocean healthy and full of life.

The Coral Reefs of Goa

Encrusting corals like *Turbinaria*, especially near Grande Island, are highly resilient. Yet they face mounting threats. Sedimentation from mining runoff in the Mandovi and Zuari Rivers smothers coral beds, while rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification cause bleaching and weaken reef structures. As these fragile ecosystems are threatened, so are fish populations, including commercially important species like snappers. Despite the challenges, the corals survive. Their resilience moved Venkatesh, who had explored reefs across the globe, to take action.



Turbinaria Coral, Goa's grand old resident, crucial to Reef Ecosystems



Divers tending to a coral nursery, supporting the fragile process of reef restoration.

According to Venkatesh, despite a growth rate of 100 to 600% per year, depending on the species, the mortality rate is about 65%, making the process very fragile. Backed by a ₹20 lakh grant from The Habitats Trust in 2019, over 192 coral fragments were transplanted. As of 2023, over 500 coral fragments have been nurtured on 10 tables.

Adopt a Coral

Through the Coral Crusaders campaign, popular among schools and young ocean enthusiasts, coral lovers can adopt a coral fragment and help it grow into a thriving colony for ₹5,500 a year. To date, 145 coral fragments have been adopted, raising ₹7 lakhs for coral conservation.



Out-planted Corals: new life on natural reefs

Rebuilding Reefs: One Tile at a Time

Encrusting corals are known to stick and grow on hard rocky surfaces. To mimic the natural process of coral regeneration, Venkatesh and his team began collecting broken coral fragments and transplanting them onto floor tiles using marine-grade epoxy. These "coral babies" are nurtured on coral nursery tables underwater until they are ready to be replanted onto permanent reef sites.

Volunteers clean the coral tiles monthly to remove algae and invasive species, promoting faster growth. Each fragment is photographed and measured using in-house AI tools. Regular updates and tax receipts are sent to adopters, making conservation both personal and participatory.



A diver installs an Artificial Reef structure for coral restoration

Artificial Reef Engineering—Taking Cues from Nature

In 2023, Coastal Impact launched a transformative Artificial Reef project at Grande Island, supported by Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL). They installed a total of 50 artificial reef structures across four distinct underwater sites around the island.

Designed to mimic natural reefs, each iron pyramid (1.5 m tall, 3 m base width) holds eight floor tiles. Four of these tiles are seeded with coral fragments using special marine-grade epoxy glue, while four are left blank to encourage natural recruitment

While monsoon waves damaged some early transplants, the structures stayed intact and were reinforced. Mesh was added to shelter fish, enhancing biodiversity. This blend of corporate support and community action showcases a replicable model for marine restoration in India.

The Challenges

Coral restoration is no easy task. Divers require extensive training, marine technology know-how, and physical endurance to plant each coral while braving ocean currents, pressure, and limited visibility. Inclement weather and the cost of hiring boats add to the logistical and financial challenges. However, funding remains the biggest challenge



It's difficult to explain the importance of coral restoration to someone who can't see it with their own eyes. While CSR does allow for funding Environmental projects, the marine space often gets overlooked in CSR funding because it is invisible, losing out to more visible causes like education or healthcare. While all these areas are important, saving the oceans is critical as they underpin life. It should take top priority, not be an afterthought!"

-Venkatesh Charloo



Coastal Impact's Philosophy of Care



A. Aiding the Next Generation

Coastal Impact supports postgraduate and PhD students with field access and mentorship from resident marine biologist Jeremy. Hands-on learning fosters a new generation of marine scientists passionate about ocean biodiversity conservation.

A diver conducts a marine survey, documenting underwater biodiversity.

B. Building Smart Solutions



A diver secures anchor-free mooring buoys to protect fragile seafloors and prevent damage to coral reefs.

While working closely with local fisherfolk, whom he recognises as vital custodians of the sea, Venkatesh observed that traditional anchors, often dragged across the seabed, were damaging fragile coral reefs. In response, Coastal Impact introduced anchor-free mooring systems using buoys tethered to fixed underwater points. These mooring buoys allow boats to dock safely without harming the seafloor and are now used by both tourism operators and local fisherfolk.

C. Collaborating for Change

Believing in a shared stewardship of the vast oceans, Coastal Impact has built a wide network of partners, including scientists, government bodies, local communities, and other NGOs. These collaborations aren't top-down initiatives. They are grounded in real-world needs and practical solutions, creating a strong support system for marine conservation.

[Testimonial from Dr Sujitha Thomas, Principal Scientist & Head, Mangalore Regional Centre of ICAR–CMFRI, Karnataka](#)

"Our collaboration with Barracuda Diving (led by the Founder of Coastal Impact) has been instrumental in advancing marine conservation along the coasts of Karnataka and Goa. The research yielded invaluable data on diverse coral species and associated marine life, enhancing our understanding and informing conservation strategies. We were profoundly impressed by their dedication to conserving marine resources. Our discussions led to the formation of Coastal Impact, which focuses on driving actionable solutions for ocean sustainability and community awareness. We are happy to witness their positive impact."



D. Data Collection

Coastal Impact believes that good conservation begins with good information from ecological monitoring, data collection, and underwater assessments. Over the years, they've tracked coral growth in nurseries, monitored artificial reefs, and photographed over 140 fish species, which now appear on fish charts published by the Goa Forest Department. This careful documentation is helping build an invaluable first baseline in the region.

A Lionfish in focus

E. Engaging the Community

This spirit of collaboration extends to Coastal Impact's volunteer movement, too. Building a community of over 40 passionate ocean lovers, equipped with basic marine science knowledge and deep respect for the sea, it has turned enthusiasm into stewardship.



Volunteers driving marine conservation, supporting care for fragile coastal ecosystems.

During non-diving months, they conduct school visits and digital campaigns, bringing the underwater world to classrooms. Their Marine Awareness Program has reached over 3,000 students, many from fishing communities.

A Volunteer Speaks

"I wanted to be a part of Coastal Impact's team because it combined my passion for diving with that for environmental conservation. I love that volunteering with Coastal Impact gives me an opportunity to do my bit for the environment in my free time and try to leave this world a slightly better place for our next generation."

— Sharvani Pinge



Nurturing the next generation of ocean stewards.



An Educator Speaks

Many of our students come from traditional fishing communities like the Betim-Ramnagar area and instinctively understand the impact of a low catch. The Coastal Impact sessions helped them make the connection between marine pollution, especially plastics, and the struggles their families face. The vivid underwater visuals opened their eyes to a world beneath the surface and the realisation that the sea is not infinite. What they absorb now will shape how they care for the ocean in the future.

**Sheela Jaywant, Administrator,
The Dona Leonor Memorial School**



Why This Story Matters

Venkatesh refrains from making grand claims, trusting time and nature to show the impact. Coastal Impact reminds us that invisible, marine ecosystems deserve equal care and compassion especially as the future of our oceans is inseparable from the future of our own lives.

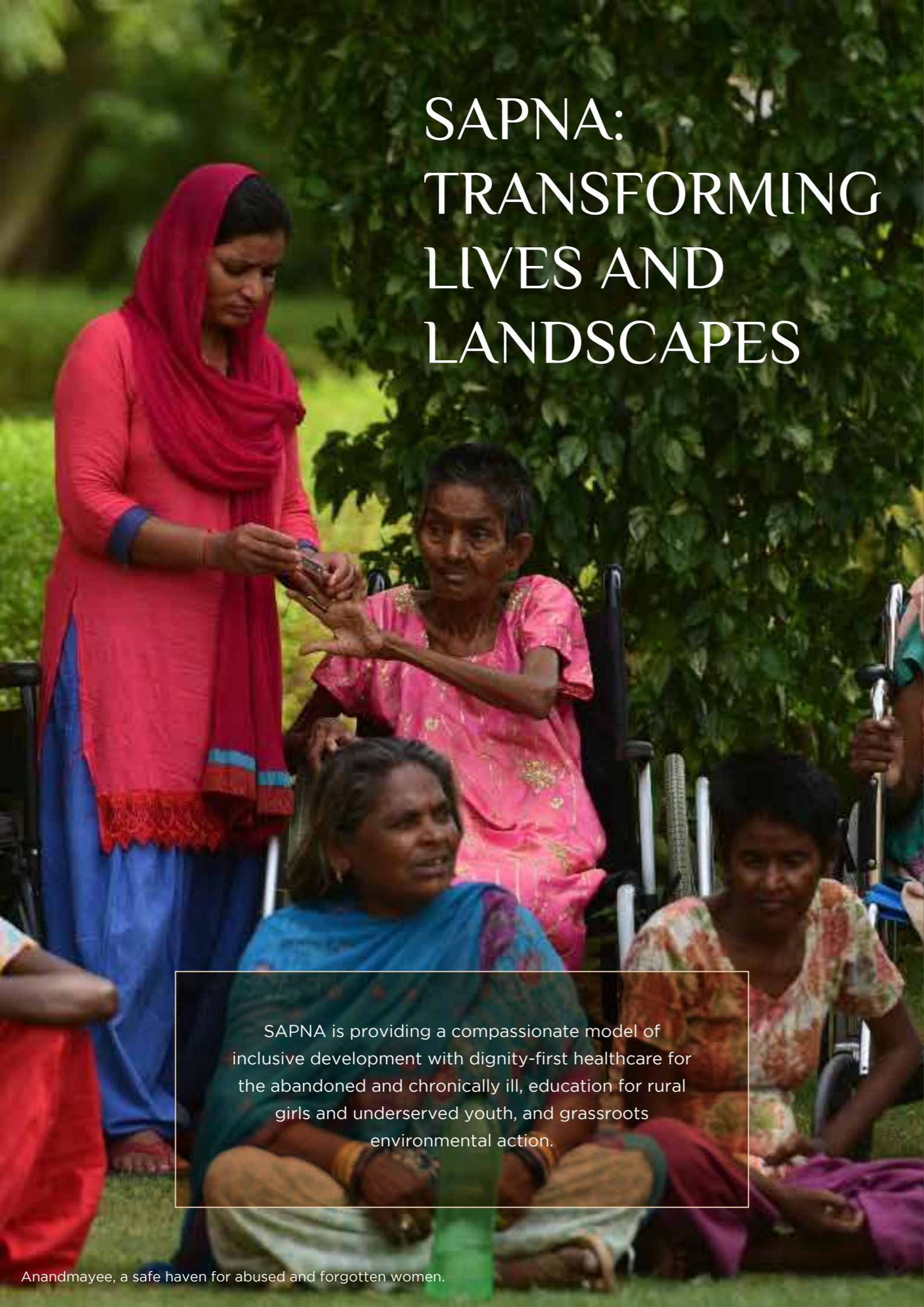
Learn more at www.coastalimpact.in



We are grateful to Venkatesh Charloo for providing the inputs and photographs for this story.



SAPNA: TRANSFORMING LIVES AND LANDSCAPES



SAPNA is providing a compassionate model of inclusive development with dignity-first healthcare for the abandoned and chronically ill, education for rural girls and underserved youth, and grassroots environmental action.



Sudhir Pratap Singh, Founder of SAPNA, architect of a dignity-first model of care.

Where Healing Begins: SAPNA

A 60-year-old man, deaf and mute, is brought to AIIMS Trauma Centre after a road accident—unknown, unclaimed, unable to speak, and unable to remember who he is, with memory loss. After emergency care, where does he go? The hospital sends him to SAPNA. At their healing home, he is cared for with compassion. One day, in a moment of lucidity, he scribbles the name of a *dhaba*. SAPNA follows the thread, traces his past, and reunites him with his life and friends at the *dhaba*. SAPNA, an Alwar-based NGO with branches in Delhi and Noida, was founded in 2003 by Sudhir Pratap Singh, a senior IPS officer (1983 batch). A chance encounter with *jhuggis* being dismantled outside Safdarjung Hospital stirred his compassion-in-action ethos, planting the seeds of SAPNA's dignity-first model of care.



Anandam, a healing home for the destitute

Started in 2007 in the rent-free outhouse of Alwar's Vijay Mandir Palace it has grown into a network of refuge for those society often forgets—the abandoned elderly, destitute men and women, trafficked survivors, and long-term patients with nowhere to return.

Today, Anandmayee at Vijay Mandir shelters 46 elderly and abused women, Dadikar houses a 60-bed old age home supported by Hindustan Zinc Ltd., and Kaduki has a 140-bed male care home for destitute men supported by REC. A short-stay home in Noida supports trauma patients needing repeated hospital care. Across these spaces, healing goes beyond shelter with many residents who arrived seeking care gradually become caregivers themselves, finding dignity, purpose, and belonging once again.

Sheltering the Unclaimed

As Safdarjung Hospital and All India Institute of Medical Sciences' Jai Prakash Narayan Apex Trauma Center began referring long-term palliative cases, SAPNA responded by creating Anandam: Homes for Healing.

Reuniting the Forgotten

SAPNA has transformed countless lives by combining healthcare, nutrition, and emotional support within a community-rooted framework. Through empathetic care and patient sleuthing, unclaimed patients are often identified and reunited with their families. Clues as small as a scribbled word or a half-remembered landmark are pursued using tools like Google Street View, phone outreach, and local networks.

Stories of Hope

Rambha, a highly educated woman suffering from psychiatric challenges, was found wandering in Alwar. Helpful locals tipped off SAPNA to her presence, who treated her, traced her family to Bihar, and reunited them.

Shobha, also struggling with psychosis and unfamiliar with Hindi, came from Hyderabad. In a lucid moment, she mentioned a Sai Baba Mandir. Using Google Street View, SAPNA found the temple, spoke to the pujari, and located her son, who came to take her home.

SAPNA's Scale of Compassion

SAPNA manages the social services desk at All India Institute of Medical Sciences' Jai Prakash Narayan Apex Trauma Center and provides ongoing support to destitute patients at Safdarjung Dharamsala—individuals often overwhelmed by medical costs far beyond their means. By reaching the most vulnerable, SAPNA plays a vital role in India's overstretched public healthcare system.

Their approach to healing is holistic, attending not only to physical needs but also to emotional and social well-being. More than 55,000 disadvantaged people have been treated at their institutional facility in Alwar, while over 1,000 homeless patients have been rehabilitated and more than 300 reunited with their families. Every day, nearly 125 meals are distributed at Safdarjung Hospital and the Trauma Center, ensuring care reaches even those waiting in uncertainty.

Other interventions include nutritional support, medical follow-ups, dialysis assistance for more than 15 kidney patients every month, facilitation of heart surgeries, and over 15,500 cataract surgeries that have restored sight and independence to countless individuals. Guided by Mahatma Gandhi's enduring talisman—"Recall the face of the poorest and weakest"—SAPNA continues to serve the most vulnerable with dignity and compassion.

Communities as Co-Creators of Change

SAPNA's work is deeply woven into the lives of 16 villages across Alwar, where every intervention begins with listening. Whether it is an eye hospital, a girls' school, or an IT college, the needs of community shapes SAPNA's response, ensuring that the people are not passive recipients, but active partners in change.

One such need was of rural eye care. What began as mobile eye camps grew into the Mahatma Gandhi Netralaya at Katuki, a fully functional eye hospital established in 2017 with support from Coal India and the late Ms. Prabha Singh. Today, it performs 15–20 free surgeries twice a week.

Lives Transformed

For Rani Bai, a 60-year-old housewife and wife of a daily wage labourer, cataract had reduced vision in her left eye to barely a metre. Through SAPNA's support, she underwent surgery and regained her eyesight that restored not just her vision, but her independence and quality of life.

Education became another natural response. To ensure that the daughters of caregivers—cooks, drivers, and support staff—were not denied opportunity, SAPNA established Sapna Shikshalaya exclusively for underprivileged girls. What began with just 19 students now supports more than 300 girls across 19 villages, receiving access to learning, opportunity, and the possibility of a different future. The holistic education is worth ₹25,000 per child annually and offers the chance to break barriers of caste, class, and gender.

To bridge the digital divide, SAPNA also runs the RS-CIT (Rajasthan State Certificate Course in Information Technology) programme, a three-month course in information technology that has empowered rural youth since 2007. Many graduates now work in SAPNA's rural BPO, serving clients like Infosys and India Post, creating a cycle of empowerment where learning leads to livelihood, and community strength drives lasting change.

Lives Transformed

Neelam, daughter of a labourer and a homemaker, is one such example. After completing her B.Com, she joined SAPNA's IT College, trained in GST, and interned with a chartered accountant. Today, she handles GST and income tax work for two companies and supports her family, reflecting the transformative power of opportunity and determination.

Restoring the Land, Restoring Lives

In Dadikar, what was once a barren hill now stands as a thriving green valley, transformed by compassion and care for the environment.

Through the construction of four check dams across two reservoirs, SAPNA helped capture rainwater that once flowed away unused. Slowly, the land began to respond. Borewells and ponds refilled, groundwater levels rose, and fields that had long lain dry returned to cultivation.

Farmers who once watched their land remain barren now grow wheat, barley, and mustard again—reviving not only agriculture, but livelihoods and local confidence.

This ecological vision extends beyond water conservation. Since 2017, SAPNA has planted more than 5,500 saplings through community forestry and its nursery initiatives. With support from the Forest Department and SAPNA's sustained care, native species like neem, peepal, and eucalyptus have taken root. Today, the DRI Forest at Vijay Mandir and the Bry-Air Forest in Dadikar offer vital green cover across a dry landscape.

These forests are more than plantations. They are living proof of the transformative power of community-led environmental stewardship showing that when communities care for the land, the land gives back.



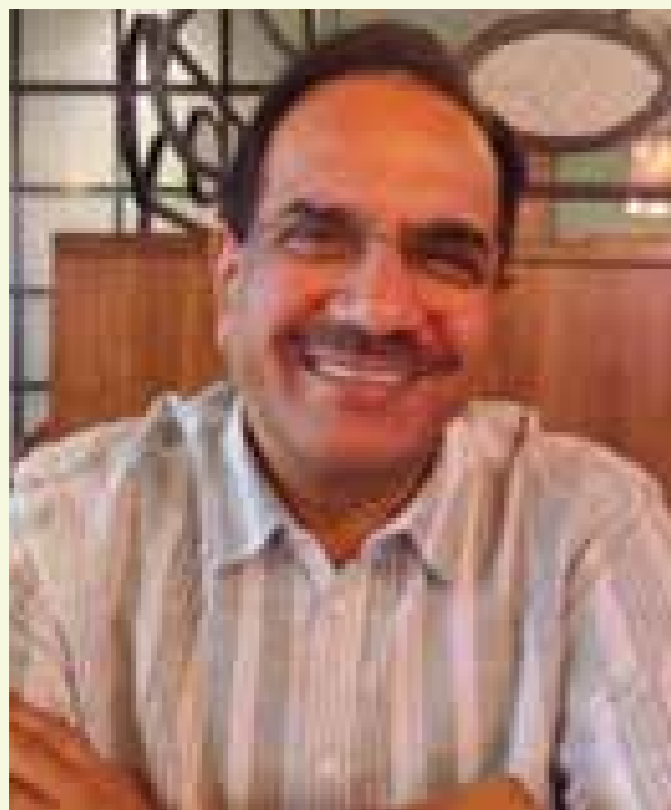
Barren reservoir in Dadikar, Alwar, before SAPNA's watershed intervention.



Once barren, now greened through check dams built by SAPNA and forest revival.

In Tribute: Insights from Late Shri Rajiv Singh

This feature draws upon conversations with late Shri Rajiv Singh, whose vision, compassion, and lifelong commitment shaped SAPNA's journey. His words continue to guide the work he built, and this section stands as a quiet tribute to his enduring legacy.



Shri Rajiv Singh, Former Secretary SAPNA

The Magic Mantra for Growth

- **Transparency:** From a modest budget of ₹41 lakh to ₹6 crore, supported by 140 staff, every rupee is accounted for and shared through detailed annual reports.
- **Donor Trust:** Trust with both Institutional and individual donors backing built on authentic, visible impact.
- **Proof of Work:** Small, well-executed projects often led to larger funding, like the TATAs expanding support for an entire computer centre after seeing the work.

- **Systems and Processes:** A deliberate move away from ad hoc methods and informal practices. Trust is built by keeping promises through consistent delivery powered by clear, structured systems that ensure results can be replicated, time and again.
- **Data-Driven Credibility:** Meticulous record-keeping and compelling visuals lend legitimacy and build donor confidence.
- **Start Small, Grow Big:** SAPNA began with personal donors—friends and family—who were the hardest to convince. But this core group of 300-400 supporters created a ripple effect, drawing in others who witnessed the sincerity and impact.
- **Building Despite Funding Gaps:** Projects often begin without confirmed funding, relying on faith that “funds follow the work.” SAPNA moves forward with faith in its mission, relying on long-standing donors and incremental growth to scale programmes as resources flow in.
- **Sustained Community Engagement:** Change doesn't occur through quick fixes. It requires sustained presence, active listening, and relationships built on mutual respect. The members of SAPNA's team spend time in the villages, understanding their rhythms and realities before taking action.

Overcoming Challenges on the Ground

- **Reaching the Most Vulnerable:** Reaching the poorest involves meticulous community profiling, vulnerability mapping, and field-level assessments in the 16 villages that SAPNA works in. SAPNA has identified families living in extreme conditions, such as forest edges, who are prone to leopard attacks, by providing homes and livestock. They have supported them with homes worth ₹3 lakh each, and livestock—three sheep per family—to help initiate a pathway toward economic self-reliance and stability.
- **Solutions Shaped by Lived Realities:** By living among the communities, SAPNA gains insight into genuine needs and tailors programmes from first-hand experience.
- **Fostering Behavioural Change and Ownership:** Infrastructure alone isn't enough. Lasting transformation comes from shifting behaviours around hygiene, water use, forest management, and civic participation. This takes patience, dialogue, and long-term trust-building.

Why This Story Matters

What began as one man's response to a moment of displacement has grown into a network of care across health, education, livelihoods, and the environment. SAPNA's work sits in those silent spaces where systems often fail to reach, where care is not an intervention, but a continuous practice of listening and response. Why this story matters is because it shows what sustained attention can achieve over time. It offers a way of seeing human and ecological dignity not as outcomes, but as something rebuilt step by step through everyday care, service, and trust.

Thanks

Though Late Shri Rajiv Singh is no longer with us, the homes he built, the lives he touched, and the hope he nurtured continue to speak for him. His legacy lives on in every life that found dignity and belonging through SAPNA. We remain grateful for his insights, and to Abhishek Kumar for his support in shaping this story.

MAITRI FOUNDATION: RESTORING DIGNITY TO THE WIDOWS OF VRINDAVAN

MaitriGhar, a sanctuary in Vrindavan founded by Winnie Singh, restores dignity, care, and belonging to widowed women who have long faced social exclusion and abandonment.

Introduction

In an ashram on the outskirts of Vrindavan, elderly women dressed in white sing bhajans and celebrate Holi with flowers and colour. For most, this is a simple joy. For the widows of Vrindavan, it is an act of reclamation.

Traditionally, widows were considered inauspicious, excluded from festivals, rituals, and even ordinary celebrations of life. In a deeply patriarchal social order, a woman's identity was seen as inseparable from her husband's; with his death, she endured a kind of social death herself—stripped of dignity, belonging, and economic security.

To dance during Holi, then, is not merely a celebration and nor has it come easily. It is the assertion of life, identity, and self-worth. This restoration of dignity has been made possible by the compassion and determination of Winnie Singh, founder of MaitriGhar, a home for the widows of Vrindavan.



Winnie Singh, Founder of Maitri Foundation, carries both strength and compassion in equal measure.

The Indignity of a Lost Identity

A study in 1996, estimated that there were more than 5,000 widows and destitute women living in 'pitiable and pathetic conditions' with no 'financial, social or emotional support'.

Winnie first visited Vrindavan in 2008 through Rotary International to distribute rations, the sight left her shaken.

"There were more than 2,000 impoverished women like frail shadows on the wall in their torn, tattered, and patched-up half-sarees, fighting for food. So weak that they were barely able to carry even a 1.5 kg packet of atta."

Voices from Vrindavan

Jamuna Dassi, now 70, became a child bride at seven and a widow only a few years later. "I was sent back to my parental home, where I lived for 13 years, but felt humiliated as I was forced to beg for food.

To flee that indignity, I fled to RadhaKund, where I begged for 40 years and worked as a domestic help, which was no less humiliating for me.

Finally, Maitri found me, and I found myself and peace in devotion to Krishna. Maitri gave me and other widows respect and dignity. I am so grateful that I do not have to spend my last years begging and can die in peace."

Her story reflects the reality of thousands of widows who arrive in Vrindavan after being abandoned, neglected, or abused by their families.

Ripples of Hope Feed Dignity

Winnie realised that restoring dignity had to begin with addressing hunger and approached Akshaya Patra for the same though they primarily served children. Moved by her conviction, they agreed to provide subsidised meals, co-funded by both sides. The added benefit being the meals were hygienic, nutritious, and designed for elderly women.



Widows receiving non-residential care and support through the meals at Radhakund.

“Akshaypatra has had a 15-year long association with Maitri in Vrindavan and Radhakund, serving lunch and dinner to the Matajis at MaitriGhar from the start of the program. Winnie mataji and General Bhopinder Singh are making a difference in the lives of the matajis living in the ashrams. Akshaypatra is proud to partner with Maitri for the nutrition needs of Mataji’s.”

—Prem Das Gaur, Vrindavan Chandroday Mandir

The Journey to MaitriGhar

Government-run ashrams in Vrindavan were often overcrowded, unhygienic, and severely underfunded. A 2009-10 study found poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, lack of trained caregivers, and no opportunities for skill development. Winnie was directed by the District Magistrate (DM) to the ashram at Chaitanya Vihar under the Swadhar Scheme where she found “poor lived here in pitiable health and deplorable living conditions—leaking roof, fans not working, and bathrooms dirty. One woman, pushed by a monkey, fractured her leg, but could not reach a hospital as she did not even have the rickshaw money to get there.” They started addressing their immediate needs and organising medical camps.

In 2012, following an episode of Satyamev Jayate featuring their work, along with support from her late father’s inheritance, Winnie established two centres: MaitriGhar and RadhaKund.

Today, they support more than 350 widow mothers. MaitriGhar offers residential care, while RadhaKund provides non-residential support including food, milk, medicines, blankets, and healthcare.

Life in the Ashram

Each morning begins with walks, yoga, and badminton, followed by a simple nutritious breakfast of milk, fruits, makhana, and chewda. Bhajans, Ramayana readings, and spiritual gatherings shape the day. Visitors often throng the ashram seeking blessings from the same women who were once rejected by society.

But MaitriGhar is not only about shelter—it is about rebuilding identity. “We have counsellors who speak to the mothers about dignity, womanhood, and self-worth,” Winnie explains. “We help them understand that begging diminishes their sense of self.” The organisation also ensures access to citizenship rights by helping them obtain Aadhaar cards, voter IDs, ration cards, pensions, and Ayushman health cards.

Women are encouraged to regain a sense of purpose through livelihood activities such as making agarbattis, tulsi beads, and mantra-printed bags and stoles that are sold locally. The ashram reflects the philosophy of clean, disciplined, and community-driven with residents encouraged to take responsibility for maintaining their spaces. There is zero tolerance for violence with dignity focussed not on passive care but active participation.



Residents of MaitriGhar engaged in livelihood activities giving them a sense of purpose.

Healing with Dignity

Despite their age—one recently turned 104—the widowed mothers here show remarkable fitness. Common ailments like joint pain or diabetes are rare. Meals are taken in a common hall, where they sit cross-legged on the floor, a testament to their agility at an age when most struggle with such a posture. Winnie credits this to regular morning yoga, noting that no one has required a knee replacement to date.

However, medical challenges persist. Vrindavan lacks advanced healthcare facilities, and for specialised treatments, women are taken to Agra or Delhi. “We recently got a mother treated for cancer at RK Mission,” says Winnie, “and I’m deeply grateful to my staff for their unwavering support.” All residents now have Ayushman health cards.

Preventive care is a priority. Daily yoga, regular medical camps, monthly checks for diabetes, dental and eye care, and routine monitoring by an in-house doctor form the backbone of a system that values wellness over treatment.

The Weight of Tradition

For generations, widowhood in many parts of India carried not only grief, but deep social stigma. Child marriage often meant girls were widowed before they were old enough to understand marriage itself. Research by Sarah Lamb notes child widows as young as eight—girls pushed into widowhood before childhood had even ended.

Once widowed, many were stripped of colour, celebration, inheritance, and often, a place within their own families.

Vrindavan, long associated with devotion and refuge, became a destination for women seeking survival as much as spirituality. The bhakti movement of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu strengthened this connection, drawing many Bengali widows to the holy town in search of religious belonging and social shelter.

Many arrived after being abandoned, displaced, or quietly pushed out of their homes, carrying little more than memory and resilience.

Though much has changed over time, the shadow of that exclusion still remains. For many women, the journey to Vrindavan is still shaped less by faith than by the search for dignity, safety, and belonging.

Beyond Welfare: The Need for Belonging

For many widows, Vrindavan has become less a place of pilgrimage and more a last refuge—a place reached not by choice, but by abandonment, loneliness, and the search for dignity.

As Winnie reflects, earlier most widows came from West Bengal; today they arrive from Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Maharashtra.

Lakshmi was widowed young and later abused by her daughters-in-law, often denied food and beaten. Unable to endure it any longer, she fled to Vrindavan and survived by begging and singing bhajans. For many women, survival meant domestic labour, begging, or singing in bhajan ashrams for exploitative wages. “They received barely ₹3 for four hours of continuous singing,” Winnie says.



Standing tall after seeing a century turn.

With nuclear families becoming the norm, elderly parents are often seen as burdens. “It is often not poverty, but humiliation, that drives these mothers to Vrindavan,” she says.

Government support does exist through schemes such as the Indira Gandhi Widow Pension Scheme, Old Age Pension Scheme, and Annapurna Scheme. The Centre provides monthly assistance, with states expected to add matching support. Yet in reality, state support remains uneven, implementation is often weak, and the amount is rarely enough to ensure independence. Many women are also unaware of their rights or unable to navigate the process. A 2024 study found that while 70% of widows were aware of pension schemes, only about 25% actually received support due to lack of information and procedural barriers.

At Maitri, every mother is helped to access her pension and basic entitlements. But the work goes beyond welfare because dignity cannot be measured in monthly assistance alone. What these women need most is companionship, respect, and the reassurance that they have not been forgotten.

Real security must begin much earlier in the homes and communities these women are leaving behind. Widows need not only pensions, but rightful access to property, legal protection, and family support where they belong. Above all, the approach must move beyond charity and toward dignity, rights, and recognition.

Why This Story Matters

The crisis of widowhood is not only of poverty or policy but it is also a crisis of belonging. Behind every woman who arrives in Vrindavan is a story of silence, grief, displacement, and the loss of home, rights, and identity.

Maitri Ghar stands as a powerful reminder of what dignity looks like when compassion meets action. It is a place where widows are no longer abandoned shadows, but women seen, respected, and allowed to live fully again.

This story matters because it shows how to care for those who have been abandoned.



We are grateful to Winnie Singh for providing the inputs and photographs for this story.



1 National Commission for Women (1996). Widows of Vrindavan.
2 National Commission for Women (2009-10). Study on the Widows of Vrindavan.
3 Dimensions of Deprivation: Report on the poverty levels of the Widows of Vrindavan. Survey conducted by the Guild for Service. Supported by UNIFEM.

RESHAM SUTRA: PRESERVING LEGACY, EMPOWERING WOMEN

Resham Sutra, a social enterprise born out of grassroots empathy and engineering innovation, empowers women engaged in traditional silk reeling with clean, efficient technology. These solar-powered silk reeling machines eliminate health issues associated with traditional reeling and increase productivity and income.

The Hidden Cost

"I saw women reeling silk thread manually, by rolling raw silk around their bare thighs and twisting by hand. They were producing luxury yarn, but the method caused wounds on their legs and joint pain. They also earned less than ₹100 a day," recalls Kunal Vaid, Founder, Resham Sutra.



From Classroom to Coastline:
Inspiring the Next Generation of Ocean Stewards

In 2012, on his first visit to the villages of Jharkhand to investigate delays in silk production for his family’s apparel business, Delhi engineer Kunal Vaid was deeply shocked, seeing the challenges that rural women faced while eking out their traditional livelihood. “I determined to invent a machine that made their lives easy, increased their productivity, and restored their dignity,” says Kunal.

Birth of Resham Sutra

Thus, Resham Sutra was born. In 2015, Unnati, a sustainable, solar-powered, pedal-operated reeling machine, was launched that improved efficiency, safeguarded health, and restored dignity. It was ideal for the reeling of Tassar Silk, practiced in central India.

Resham Sutra developed more than 12 renewable energy-based machines targeting a specific stage in the silk production process (like reeling, pe-weaving with winding yarn onto bobbins, spinning, weaving) or addressing different user needs (e.g., manual vs solar, eri vs tasar silk, beginner vs advanced).



Advantages of Resham Sutra’s Machines

Safeguard Health

No more joint pain or injuries for women, who now spin with safety, comfort, and dignity.

Boosts Productivity and Income

Spin 5 X more silk in the same time. Monthly earnings have tripled, lifting families out of poverty.

Solar Powered and Eco-friendly

Clean energy, no emissions make them perfect for off-grid rural homes—a win-win for both women and the planet.

Preserves Rich Heritage

Ancient artisanal skills find new life as machines help artisans thrive in today’s market without losing touch with their roots.

Voices from the Ground

Kunny Dehury, a 35-year-old tribal woman from Keonjhar in Odisha, says, “I used to produce 50 gm of yarn and earn ₹ 100 per day. With the machine, I now produce five times the amount of silk (250 gm) in the same time. Traders now offer me ₹ 8,000 for the silk I produce with the machine.”

With the solar-powered machine, Kunny’s income increased over 3 times—from ₹2,500 to ₹8,000 per month.

“Previously, I had a lot of back pain from sitting on the floor and thigh-rolling silk. I had cuts on my hands and the skin on my thigh. My right leg was sore from the wooden spindle resting on it, and my arm hurt from turning it. I feel so much better now that I am using the Buniyaad [reeling machine].” —Gitanjali Das, silk weaver, Fakirpur, Odisha.

Building Financial Mindsets

Women are also connected to several government subsidies and micro-financing institutions for loans. Kunal Vaid says, “It usually takes them less than one year to repay the loan. The spinner earns anywhere between ₹6,000 and ₹15,000 per month, depending on the number of hours she does spinning activity. We also educate them financially and help build an entrepreneurial mindset.”





Bodo women from Assam spinning Eri silk using traditional techniques, now enhanced with clean energy access.

Bridging Energy Gaps

The northwestern plains of Assam, cradled between the Himalayas and the Brahmaputra, are home to the Bodos—one of the state’s largest indigenous communities. For generations, Bodo women have spun Eri silk using the traditional takli, passing down this craft as both cultural heritage and informal education.

Though takli spinning is manual, power cuts disrupt essential ancillary tasks, straining Budhari Goyari’s eyes in Kokrajhar and limiting her output. “I could produce only 100 grams of silk and earn ₹100 a day,” she recalls. But now, she now spins 250 grams daily, earning ₹250, reclaiming control over her ancestral craft.

With solar-powered technologies, Resham Sutra is transforming the lives of many textile-based workers in the Northeast, which faces a significant energy gap, supported by Powering Livelihoods, a joint initiative of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) and Villgro Innovations Foundation.



“Our work has impacted over 25,000 rural producers, of them 90% being women. Harvesting local resources with renewable energy-based processing machines offers a sustainable and inclusive model of development in which no one is left behind,” says Kunal Vaid.

Scaling Clean Energy in Textile Livelihoods

A. Affiliating with Partner Organisations

Resham Sutra scaled its impact by partnering with grassroots NGOs like Sanjog, leveraging their community trust to reach women artisans needing the technology most. Village-based Experience Centres offer live demos and training, enabling women to test machines and access financing.

Support from Powering Livelihoods (CEEW and Villgro) provided strategic guidance, market exposure, and financial linkages.



Demonstration session at a Learning Centre to help artisans transition to efficient practices

B. Building a Self-reliant Silk Ecosystem

To build a self-reliant silk ecosystem, Resham Sutra now works with state governments and local partners. In Kokrajhar, the Silk Park—developed with the Bodoland Territorial Council—hosts end-to-end production from cocoon banking to digital printing. In Nalbari (Assam), Gramiya Vikas Samiti trains women on solar machines to produce Eri silk. In Changlang (Arunachal Pradesh), over 1,200 women have been trained to operate solar looms.

C. Creating an app for improved market access

To improve market access, GramSootra—a B2B platform—connects farmers, spinners, weavers, and buyers, offering better price discovery and up to 40% higher value for producers.

“The player at each stage can buy inputs and sell outputs on the app. This app will be a B2B marketplace. It offers better market access and price discovery, and 40% higher value for producers (farmers, spinners, weavers),” says Garima Vaid.



Bridging tradition and technology with the GramSootra App

Why This Story Matters

Resham Sutra has shown how empowering rural artisans through a complete silk value chain can create lasting livelihoods and preserve tradition. This model offers a hopeful path for inclusive, sustainable rural development.

We are grateful to Upasana Jain and Garima Vaid for the inputs and photographs.

IN CONVERSATION WITH GOVIND SINGH RATHORE, SAMBHALI TRUST

In the heart of Rajasthan, where entrenched inequalities and generational silences persist, one man is building pathways to inclusion. Govind Singh Rathore, founder of Sambhali Trust, is leading a quiet revolution—restoring dignity, expanding opportunity, and building inclusive futures for communities long pushed to the margins.

BH

Govindji, welcome to Bridging Hopes. Please tell us a little about yourself and what first inspired the journey of Sambhali Trust?

GSR

Khamagani. My family has lived in Jodhpur for generations. My grandfather was a disciplined Army man, and my grandmother ran a dairy. My mother managed our guesthouse. From these women, I learned what strength and perseverance could achieve, even in difficult circumstances.



Figure 1. Govind Singh Rathore, Founder, Sambhali Trust, powering grassroots change for women and LGBTQI+ in Rajasthan.

In the 1990s, as tourism grew in Jodhpur, I converted our guesthouse into a hotel. But I couldn't ignore the stories I heard daily—women arriving late to work, bearing bruises, silently enduring abuse. These women kept their households running but remained unheard and undervalued. I realised that unless women had education and financial independence, nothing would change. That became the foundation of Sambhali Trust.

BH: What were the first steps in building Sambhali?

GSR: It all began on my rooftop. I invited local women to learn embroidery, block-printing, and stitching, taught by local artisans. We also offered basic education, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship training. Every woman who completed our one-year programme received a sewing machine, enabling her to earn at home. But more than income, they gained agency and a voice to make decisions at home.



Women at Sambhali Trust's Empowerment Centre learning sewing skills for economic independence

We also introduced them to local markets to establish real, sustainable market linkages so that their skills translate into real economic opportunities. This small initiative bloomed into a movement.

BH: From rooftops to 40+ centres. How did Sambhali grow into a movement?

GSR: We started with 18 women. Today, we've impacted over 65,000 women, children, and gender-diverse individuals through Empowerment Centres in Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, and Setrawa, a helpline for survivors of violence, and hostels for girls from marginalised communities.

We ensure every woman understands her legal rights, can access government benefits, and above all, knows her worth. In communities where women can't leave their homes, we bring the classroom to them. We are homemakers, not home-breakers.

BH: Please share a story that captures the impact Sambhali has had on such a life

GSR: One of our earliest success stories is Praveen Bano. Widowed at 25 in 2011, with three young boys and abandoned by her in-laws, she returned to the struggling household of her father, an autorickshaw driver. She had no formal education, no skills, or income.

She began rebuilding her life after studying with and then joining Sambhali. She now works in housekeeping, creates handcrafted toys, popular with international tourists, and has built her own home through the savings kitty for all staff. Her sons are educated and employed. Today, she lives with strength — the essence of Sambhali.

Praveen Bano Speaks

"I learned silai (sewing) and padhai (education), and gained awareness through the Trust's workshops on topics such as menstruation, gender violence, and financial literacy, which help me break social taboos.

I taught Hindi to the international travellers while they taught me English. Now I speak like an educated woman. At Sambhali, we all eat together, regardless of caste or religion. There is a feeling of apnapan (belonging) here."



Praveen Bano, a Sambhali alumna, rebuilding her life

BH: How did her story deepen your understanding of caste oppression?

GSR: I learned that historically marginalised groups face oppression that is social, institutional, generational, and internalised. Despite constitutional safeguards, segregation in mohallas and taboo around inter-caste marriage persist. Women face the double burden of caste and gender. At Sambhali, we offer a safe, inclusive space with community-based informal education reaching marginalised homes, filling gaps where formal systems fail. Our board includes SC/ST members because representation matters.

BH: What is the solution for the upliftment of marginalised communities?

GSR: I truly believe education is the only lasting solution. It's the first step toward breaking cycles of discrimination and poverty. When people are educated, they learn to stand up for their rights, reclaim their dignity, and move beyond mere survival. But education must be more than schooling. It's about nurturing a shift in social consciousness—starting early. Children must grow up learning empathy and inclusivity, so no one feels left out for being "different." Those of us who've made it through the cracks of this system must speak up. Silence helps no one.

We also need to understand the cultures of marginalised communities—their traditions, struggles, values. Respect begins with listening. When we listen with empathy, we begin to heal centuries of erasure. And lastly, we must foster economic independence through ownership, training, and enterprise, not dependency. True empowerment is when people can create value on their own terms.

Oppression ends when the oppressed stop believing they were meant to suffer.



Sambhali artisans participating in the global #IMadeYourClothes campaign to promote ethical fashion and artisan visibility.

BH: Sambhali also has a strong presence in ethical fashion. Could you tell us about that?

Absolutely. Nearly 46% of our women learners have taken up stitching as a livelihood. To support them, we launched Sambhali Boutique, Jodhpur’s first ethical store, where women can sell their work with pride and dignity. It champions slow fashion over fast fashion, fair wages and labour practices, and every product has a story. We even participated in the #IMadeYourClothes campaign, part of the Fashion Revolution movement, to bring visibility to the artisans behind the clothes.



Sambhali Boutique - Jodhpur's first ethical fashion store promoting slow fashion, sustainability, and handcrafted products.

BH: How did your background in hospitality complement these initiatives?

GSR: Working in hospitality connected me with a global network of socially conscious travellers, many of whom became interns and volunteers in our centres and adopted village schools. They worked with children—especially those labelled as “slow learners”—who are often dismissed by formal systems and pushed toward marginal livelihoods.

More importantly, the cultural exchange helped us fuse global ideas with local values. This confluence led to the creation of transformative spaces like the Sambhali Café and Heritage Walks. These are safe and inclusive spaces where our LGBTQI+ youth can work, train, and feel accepted.



An international volunteer teaching at a Sambhali-supported village school—bridging global compassion with local learning.

BH: How did you start supporting the LGBTQI+ communities, and what is the support you provide?

GSR: I have closely seen how painful rejection can be and how it can destroy lives. While “coming out of the closet” may be celebrated elsewhere, in India, it often means “walking a path of thorns” or being ostracised. Families reject them, society marginalises them, and employment opportunities are rare. Even the LGBTQI+ community often doesn’t accept those who fit into specific norms. At Sambhali, we offer them a life of dignity and opportunities. From legal assistance through our e-Mitra programme, to employment opportunities at the café, and even shelter at Sambhali Sarai, we ensure they aren’t left to fend for themselves. The Sarai offers them and women escaping gender violence a temporary shelter for up to three months as well as help in finding jobs or starting small businesses. We also organise Sunday meet-ups for peer support and pride parades.

Success Story – Sufiya Khan: Rewriting Her Future

Born as Sarfarash into a middle-class family, Sufiya Khan always knew she was different. Though bullied at school, she found strength in her parents' acceptance and support. At 17, she joined Sambhali Trust, where she learned to accept her identity. Through the e-Mitra program, she legally changed her name and began working at Sambhali Café, gaining skills and confidence. Later, she was selected for a paid internship with Marriott seeking to diversify its workforce, and eventually became an Associate. Today, she's independent, employed, and a regular at Sambhali's Sunday meet-ups with the LGBTQI+ community. "Sambhali taught me that clapping isn't our only identity," she says. "We must work hard and live a life of dignity and opportunity as who we are. I am extremely grateful to Sambhali for changing my life."



Sufiya Khan, a gender-diverse individual and Sambhali trainee, now employed at Marriott—proof that dignity and opportunity can coexist

BH: What are the other initiatives of Sambhali Trust that you are proud of?

GSR: In 2014, we launched a toll-free Nirbhaya Helpline (1800 1200 020), led by Dr Deepti and Advocate Shivani, to support survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, harassment, rape, and acid attacks. We provide legal guidance, emotional counselling, and link survivors to medical services. Through vocational training, many survivors have rebuilt their lives, gaining independence and self-worth.

We also have a dedicated E-Mitra operator who helps community members obtain ID cards, pay bills, and access government schemes across all project sites.

Since 2012, Sambhali has run a residential hostel for underprivileged girls. Today, it houses 85 students—60 of whom belong to SC/ST communities. We support their full education, board, and lodging. Many are first-generation learners—some now in college, others married and back in their communities as trainers and role models or socially aware and responsible citizens passing on the values and confidence they gained at Sambhali.

BH: What are the personal challenges that you have faced?

GSR: You can imagine the challenges I must have faced and still continuing to face. I am a man who stands for women's and transgender individuals' rights. I am a Hindu who works for the progress of the Muslim community. I'm a Rajput working for the upliftment of the historically marginalised communities. That alone invites backlash from my community, and often, relatives refuse to drink water in my home. And, of course, funding is an issue we all grapple with. Each step is a challenge to centuries of embedded stigma, inequality, and social norms. But still, we have made it this far. I believe we're not alone. The divine force helps us walk this path.



BH: What is the message you would like to give to our readers?

GSR: At Sambhali, we're not doing charity. We're working for justice. We are restoring dignity where it was denied. We're creating a space for voices once silenced. These are not faraway stories. These are people from our own towns and villages, our neighbours, our fellow citizens. Their struggles may be different from yours, but their dreams are the same: to be seen, heard, and valued.

You can walk with us. In your own way. Listen. Speak up. Share. Stand alongside. Visit us at <https://www.sambhali.org/>



We are grateful to Govind Singh Rathore for providing the photographs accompanying this interview.



SAHJEEVAN: RESTORING CAMELS

The Paradox of Kutch

In the wild and windswept landscape of Kutch, in the northwestern edge of Gujarat, stories are carried in salt, sand, and hoofprints.

In this region, the land lies low, flooding with seawater during the rains and baking under a searing sun. As the water evaporates, salt seeps deep, leaving the soil brittle and bare. Here lies the paradox of Kutch: blazing summers and pouring monsoons, tidal creeks and freshwater bets, thorn forests and mangroves, scarcity and survival.



In Gujarat's Kachchh region, Sahjeevan is revitalising camel pastoralism by supporting herders, restoring mangroves, and protecting both the terrestrial Kachchi camels and the unique sea-swimming Kharai camels. This endangered pastoral way of life offers a vital climate-resilient model for living in harmony with both land and sea.

Pastoral Wisdom: Following the Land's Ancient Signs

In Kutch's extremes, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities such as the Rabaris and Fakirani Jats have lived in harmony. They migrate seasonally along ancestral grazing routes that stretch for hundreds of kilometres, looking for pastures. They are guided not by maps but by memory of the land and climate and the resilience of their animals.

For generations, they have known when the first grass will sprout, where freshwater pools lie hidden beneath salt crusts, and what the shifting winds and clouds foretell. Such intimate knowledge of the land and climate, carried in songs and proverbs, forms a living library of ecological wisdom. It is now under threat from climate change and modern pressures.

A Bond Written in Sand

To the pastoralists, camels have long been lifelines—carrying goods, sustaining families, and anchoring the pastoral way of life. Among Rabari elders, a saying endures: “A camel never forgets the road once walked, even if the sands erase every sign.”

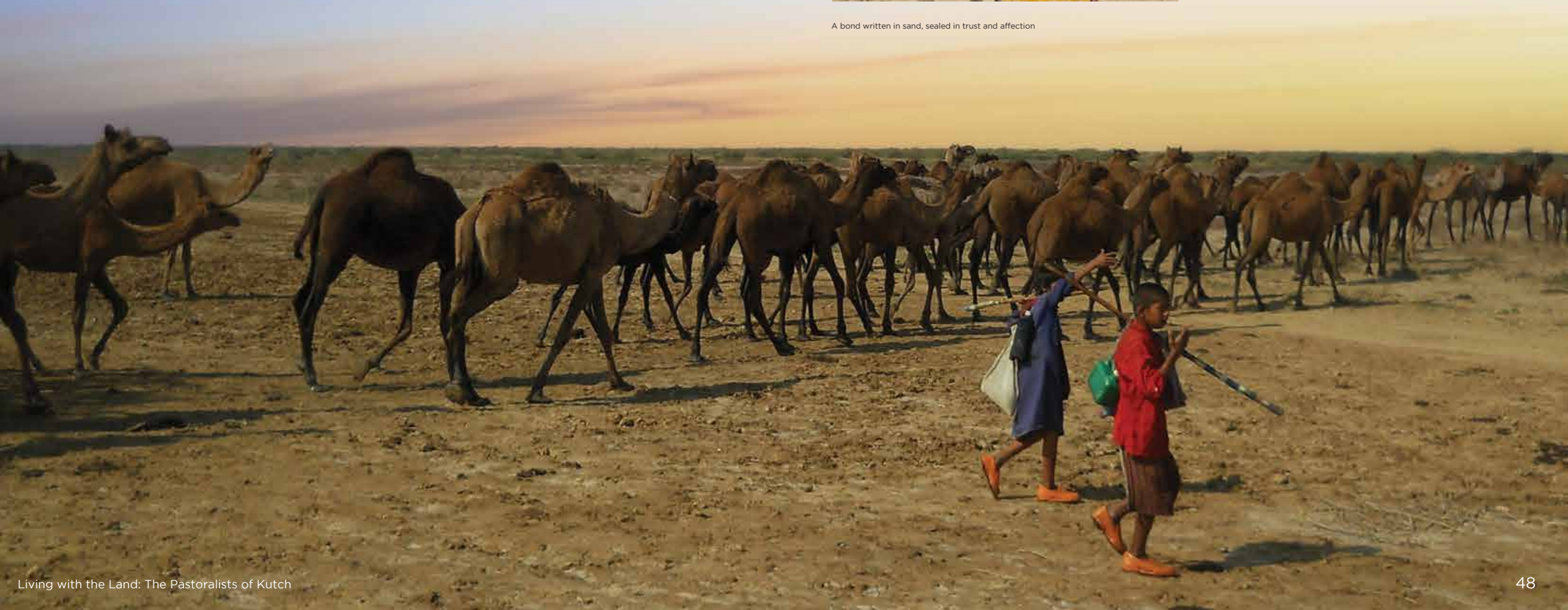
One story captures this bond. During the drought of 2000, a female camel named Dhradki was lost at a fair in Patan where she was to be sold.



Months later, her owner spotted a lone trail of hoofprints on a grazing route. He knew they were hers. True enough, Dhradki returned home a few weeks later.

Her journey speaks not only of the camel's knowledge of the land but also of the pastoralist's ability to recognise her hoofprints, among thousands, and their bond of trust.

A bond written in sand, sealed in trust and affection



Living Lightly

The Fakirani Jats follow ancestral grazing routes shaped by rain, grass, and tide. Their homes—lightweight huts woven from wild grass—are carried on a camel's back, allowing them to live lightly, move freely, and leave almost no carbon footprint on the land. Their way of life holds lessons in sustainability for sustaining the fragile desert ecosystem today.



The Fakirani Jat carry their homes on camelback, read the rains like maps, and leave no carbon footprint behind.



A sustainable way of life under threat

Yet moments like this—where a mother carefully introduces her child to a camel—hold deep significance. They symbolize hope, resilience, and the determination to preserve ancestral bonds and knowledge, passing the legacy of camel pastoralism gently to the next generation.



Passing on the legacy of camel pastoralism

Sahjeevan plants the seeds of survival

The Kachchhi camel was classified as a threatened breed after its decline as per the census data in 2007. Gujarat's Department of Animal Husbandry invited Sahjeevan, a grassroots organisation dedicated to ecological justice in Kachchh, to collaborate with camel herders and lead conservation. Sahjeevan helped form Kachchh Unt Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan (KUUMS), a collective with now 509 camel breeders (41% women), giving herders a united voice and purpose.



KUUMS members chart a new course for the camel economy.

The game-changer? Camel milk.

Long valued by herders for its healing properties—especially for diabetes, autism, and TB—camel milk had little commercial value because it lacked legal recognition by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Most herders sold it informally for just ₹15–25 per litre.

Sahjeevan documented indigenous knowledge, promoted traditional recipes, and collaborated with Amul, Sarhad Dairy, and the National Research Centre on Camel and camel milk finally gained recognition as a food article in 2015, opening formal markets, cold-chain logistics, and better prices. By 2017, over 5,000 litres flowed daily into dairies at double the earlier rate, enabling herders to earn up to ₹30,000 a month.

KUUMS organised cooperative societies, improved hygiene and milk collection systems, and ensured timely payments. Camel milk entered the market under the Amul brand, private players like Advik Foods joined in. Camel population revived with state-supported health camps.



Camel milk—the game changer.

The Kharai — The Ship of the Sea, Sand, and Salt

During one of its workshops in 2010, Sahjeevan uncovered another unique breed of camel—the Kharai—thanks to a tip from a camel herder. Found only along Gujarat’s coast, the Kharai is the world’s only camel capable of swimming through seawater and thriving on land. Guided by their herders, these camels swim for miles through tidal creeks to graze on saline mangrove forests in the Gulf of Kutch. Feeding on plants rejected by other animals and drinking water with high Total Dissolved Solids (up to 10,000 ppm), they stand as living symbols of climate adaptability. Sahjeevan surveyed this population and highlighted the significance of protecting this extraordinary breed.

Ecological Ally

The Kharai restores ecosystems as they move through the creeks, mangrove seeds cling to their fur and hooves, dispersing across degraded coastal forests—restoring mangroves at no cost.

Coastal pastoralists often wade alongside their animals, steering them through shifting tides, protecting them from deep mud and currents, and guiding young camels still learning the routes. In this partnership, both share in the ancient rhythm of coastal life with its blazing summers and drenching monsoons.

With low resource needs and remarkable endurance, the Kharai camel—and the communities like the Fakirani Jats who care for it—embody climate-resilient farming and low-carbon pastoralism, carrying forward a living archive of ecological intelligence.



The Kharai Camel: The Ship of the Sea, Sand, and Salt

Mangroves or Salt? A Fight for Survival

Kharai camels face a new threat: illegal salt pans.

In places like Hadkiya Creek, salt mining has destroyed over 4 sq. km of mangroves. Heavy machinery blocks tidal flow, starving mangroves and threatening the very habitat Kharai camels depend on.

Sahjeevan and KUUMS launched a campaign, filed a petition with the National Green Tribunal in 2015, and won a ruling for restoration in 2017. But the implementation remained slow.



The herders warned:

“If the mangroves go, so do our camels. It’s not just our livelihood—it’s the coastline’s shield against natural disasters.”

In 2024, they have again moved to the courts.

Kharai camels grazing mangrove fields cleared by salt-making industries: Without mangroves, there’s no camel. Without camels, no coast.

Why This Story Matters

In the heart of Kutch’s desert, a fire still burns at night. Around it sit people who know how to read the sky, share the land, and walk in step with nature. The Fakirani Jats, Rabaris, and other pastoralists may not hold land deeds, but they carry something far older: a legacy of listening to the land, moving with the seasons, and living in deep relationship with nature. Their knowledge is not a relic of the past—it is a guide for the future. As per Sahjeevan’s 2025 survey, the total Kachchhi and Kharai camel population in Kachchh stands at 11,369, marking a 32.51% increase from 2007 and a 25% rise since the 2019 census. This revival reflects not only the return of the camel, but also the resilience of the communities who protect it. In these glowing circles of fire and silence lie blueprints for climate resilience, ecological justice, and hope.



We are grateful to Sahjeevan members for their inputs: Mahesh Garva, Jabhar Sama, Ramesh Bhatti, and Kavita Mehta. All photographs are courtesy Sahjeevan.



Under the stars, the camel herders rest in peaceful coexistence with the land.



This issue has been curated and written by Avantika Vijay Singh, Editor, Bridging Hopes. We would love to hear your thoughts on this issue. For partnerships, editorial collaborations, media opportunities, or general enquiries, please feel free to connect with us on our website www.bridginghopes.org

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