

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

Annual report 2020-2021

The Covid-19 pandemic defined this period. In many ways, it reinforced our understanding that there is an urgent need for alternative human-land-nature relationships, to 're-think' several of our received ideas and paradigms, and for humankind to reverse many of its ways of living.

Adjusting to the unusual situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic taught us several lessons. It meant that we observed. understood and related to our immediate surroundings in ways that were different. The pandemic and the extant distress experienced by people, the disruption in life and livelihoods, and the overall multiple failures of our society and state enforced us to recognise more closely and in more nuanced ways those who were vulnerable and precarious. Key guestions that we confronted were: whose precarious livelihoods needed support? What were the coping measures, and what roles did the community. the state and civil society play? It also enforced us to draw on a stronger moral economy to initiate some basic relief activities so that the most vulnerable and the most deserving received some support for food and medical expenses. Strategizing in such a situation meant responding to the needs of people and rising up to meet larger challenges.

The year 2020 was also momentous in other ways: the Karnataka government promulgated four Farm Acts that were undemocratic and erosive of the earlier inclusive agendas of land reform. Closely following this were the national 'Farm Acts' which were as draconian and significant as the ones in Karnataka. These developments have led us to engage with the broader movements that seek to assert the need for alternative 'Agricultural Acts' and for the larger democratic structures and processes to be reclaimed. We have learned much through these engagements and are bracing ourselves for pathways in which such contestations and pro-active engagements must be under taken. Our collaboration with the 'Network for Rural and Agrarian Studies' and the subsequent finalisation of the report, 'State of Rural and Agrarian India, Report 2020' was the culmination of years of work on seeking comprehensive alternatives to the deeply problematic dominant structures and policies that mark rural India. Similarly, the report to the UNESCO on alternative higher education draws on Punarchith's experiences in developing alternative learning for rural youth.

We are extremely grateful to our friends and supporters who recognised the gravity of the Covid situation and lent us moral and monetary support. Many of our long-term well- wishers continued to be pillars of strength and sustained us during this difficult time. At a time when the dominant political system has sought to suppress civil society organisations and funding sources have largely dried out, it is exceptional persons and organisations such as ITW (or BISS. Bengaluru), YuvaLok Foundation, MoonFrog Labs, and Exotic Journeys who have lent us monetary support. We thank them all and hope that we measure up to the expectations and trust that they have reposed in us.

Programs & key activities

Since the Covid-19 situation prohibited us from conducting programs with large numbers of persons or in gatherings, we reconceptualised the work and the programs, especially the Integrated Learning Program, so as to engage in smaller modular formats so that the orientation, training and out-reach could be conducted in decentralised and small groups. The following were the key activities that were undertaken during this period. Since the Covid-19 situation prohibited us from conducting programs with large numbers of persons or in gatherings, we reconceptualised the work and the programs, especially the Integrated Learning Program, so as to engage in smaller modular formats so that the orientation, training and out-reach could be conducted in decentralised and small groups. The following were the key activities that were undertaken during this period.

- Relief and rehabilitation
- Land: Promoting land restoration and conservation
- Awareness and out-reach activities on climate emergency
- Sponsor a field
- Home garden: Nutrition, well-being and autonomy
- Graam Sethu: Youth as 'village bridges'
- Democracy: Workshop, hand-out, follow-up
- Honneru: Upgradation and new online sales
- Aniketana: Children's program
- Research and outreach
- Lectures, webinars and publications

Relief and rehabilitation

Food and support for medical expenses

Our 'relief and rehabilitation' work in the Nagavalli panchayat area entailed provisioning of food kits to 65 families who were unable to subsist on the amounts allocated by the public distribution system. The food kit consists of ragi (finger millet), pulses, and jaggery, and cooking oil. Soap and sanitisers were also given in the lockdown months. In addition, our team members facilitated several families to revise and update their ration cards and enabled some of the returned migrant families to renew and or re-direct their ration cards, Old Age Pension funds, and access government support for handicapped persons. We have also extended financial and food aid support to 28 elderly persons, especially women, who are either single residents or have been abandoned by their families. Based on a 'needs-based' survey, we identified 14 persons in Nagavalli who required medical support, including two young men who were physicallychallenged. Monthly monetary support and linkage to an agency that works with the physically challenged was also facilitated. As the Covid situation worsens, we are bracing ourselves to support more destitute women to enable them to tide over the crisis and to also support more young girls realise their dreams and aspirations.



Awareness and mobilising public employment work

By April 2020, the unemployment in the villages was clearly evident and Punarchith discussed with the administrative officer of the Zilla Panchavat the need to initiate MNREGA works. The CEO of the Zilla Panchayat, Mr. Bhullar Rao, facilitated this and the panchayats in Nagavalli, Aralipura, Doddmole, and Byadmudalu villages initiated public works program. Our team mobilised people in these four villages to participate in the public work and facilitated several of them to retrieve their pawned 'job cards' or to register for new ones. Several lakes were cleared and in the Nagavalli area alone 8 small lakes were dredged. In Doddmole village. some of our ILP learners took a lead and helped initiate work on their large lake and generated work of about 8 thousand man-hours. When the monsoons set in in June-July, all these lakes filled up and helped restore many of the old wells and tube-wells. This work needs to be sustained and the inadequate fund allocation from the government, the overall apathetic attitude of the elected representatives and the people's own diffidence in confronting the bureaucratic structures are key challenges.



Girls embroidery group

Several young girls met with us and indicated their interest in learning some new skill and earning some money for their families. Based on discussions with them, we had Ms. Misba Wadhera, a textile and tailoring specialist, came in as a resource person. She spent three days in Nagavalli and trained 12 girls in embroidery and thread work. After a month of training and practice, the girls have started to make products such as handkerchiefs, towels etc which are being sold through HONNERU.

The girls are now innovating on their own and attempting to copy designs from the internet or are developing their own. The overall quality of the work and the links to sales and marketing needs to improve.

Land: Promoting land restoration and conservation



The rains (from April 2020 to February 2021) were higher than average but were not aligned to the cultivation season. Our farm ponds came in handy and we collected significant amounts of water in them. For the first time, since 2015, when the land restoration and conservation work started, we noticed that colonies of bees were making their hives, weaver birds had made nests and a range of small creepers and grasses now populated the land. The cultivation for the 'rabi' season included millets, esp ragi (finger millet), horsegram, and beans. We were particularly happy to note that several tree saplings were now doing well. Based on this, we conducted one-day programs for different groups of people. These included one-day orientation and sharing visits for local farmers both men and women, a visit and picnic for children from Nagavalli village, and visits by the CEO of the Zilla panchayat, and one of the Zilla Panchayat elected members. All the visitors, including the ILP alumni, were given a round of the land, and the importance and processes of land restoration, seed and water conservation were highlighted.

We noticed that it is only this year that many people were able to identify key trends in climate change and were able to articulate their own concerns. The need to finetune agriculture to the changing climatic patterns, to prepare to harvest rain water, the importance of local seeds and their resilience, and the importance of preparing for drastic climate emergency events such as sudden and excessive rainfall, prolonged droughts etc were issues that were discussed with the visitors. The visits and discussions were heartening for us as some of the youth recognised, for the first time, that land restoration should precede cultivation. They were also more conscious about agro-biodiversity and some of our alumni indicated that they too would undertake similar restoration and conservation methods on their land/fields.

Restorative agriculture



Geeta's land under green manure crops



Re-wilding, grasslands and their significance

Over the past few years, we have noticed how a wide variety of grasses have started to inhabit Angarike Maala. Based on discussions with our ecology advisors, we are taking note of this ecological specificity and its linkage to the region as part of a local savanna or grassland. This classification diverges from the standard classification of the area as part of a dry deciduous forest or as stretches of a semi-arid plain. Angarike Maala provides us with an opportunity to document and study this process in detail. Bearing this in mind, we have cordoned a portion of Angarike Maala as a wildness/rewilding belt. Within this, one part will be left untouched where nature will be allowed to rule and to express its specificity and characteristics. The other part will involve some basic human intervention and will include soil restoration. replanting with native forest saplings, and some native medicinal plants and herbs.



Linked to this, and initiated by Dr. Samira Agnihotri, we invited a few Solega men to come and try out their method of setting litter fire (called tharagu benki) at Angarike Maala. The forest area was marked and details of plants in sample plots were documented. Another comparative plot was also identified and this will be used to assess the impact of the fire. The growth of plants in this patch will be documented closely and it will also form part of our efforts to revive traditional/indigenous and local methods of conservation and forest management.

Wild flowers at Angarike Maala













Landscape design and architecture



Although water, especially potable water, remains insufficient and is our biggest challenge, we decided that it was time to consider building some basic infrastructure on the land. Based on recommendations, we requested Mr. Mohan Rao, a well-known land restoration and landscape architect to advise us. He and his team (Nikhil Udupa, Namratha and Kadambari) Indesign, Bengaluru gave us several good suggestions and also drew up comprehensive plans and activities in order to restore the ecological bases of the land and to then undertake some basic infrastructure development. With their advice, we undertook some additional land bunding, started the production of 'amrit jal' and 'amrit mitti' and set up a nursery shed made of bamboo. A Solega man, who had made several such bamboo structures came and built the structure. Other plans and designs for water retention ponds, development of vegetable beds, afforestation in the forest zone, a drying yard, and some basic classroom, meeting and hospitality, and storage infrastructure are being designed.



Collection of forest tree seeds

The InDesign team also advised us to initiate a collection of native forest seeds and to establish a nursery where these saplings could be nurtured and then transplanted to the land. Accordingly, we sought forest tree seeds from the local Solega and by mid February 2021, we received 36 different varieties of forest tree seeds. These have been identified, documented and packed for safe conservation. They will be planted in the new nursery that is being designed and built, and then transferred to a transition zone, and later transplanted in the wilderness section.





New demonstration plots

This year, we also developed and cultivated a small patch as a demonstration site for 'permaculture' which Antonis Breskas, a friend visiting from Greece, had initiated. We noticed that the vegetables on this patch were much more healthy and larger than those on the regular fields. As a system, it seemed to work better but the beds require much more mulch and green matter (which are not easily available) and additional labour. We hope to grow some local vegetables in these plots and then conserve and 'bank' the seeds from these plots so that they have been shared or distributed to other farmers and kitchen gardeners.



Initiating a collaborative 'forest school'

Visits to Angarike Maala by members of the Solega tribe/an Adivasi group, that resides largely in the district, were facilitated by Samira Agnihotri (an ecologist with interests in indigenous knowledge systems and alternative learning) who works with them closely. Based on discussions with them, Samira is designing a 'forest school' program to be conducted at Angarike Maala for the Solega where the elderly Solegas (men and women) will share and disseminate knowledge and skills about their landscape (grasslands, horticulture and forests), life-skills, and knowledge with younger members of their community. Preliminary discussions and visits have been initiated and we are awaiting for the Covid-19 safety protocol to cease before initiating learning and sharing sessions.

Awareness and outreach activities on climate emergency



With Covid restrictions, we were not able to have presentations at the village level or at the district levels. We continued to update the data base with the secondary sources and research studies. To sustain interest and momentum in the issue, we made presentations of our action research to some of the visiting officials. These included the CEO of the district panchayat, the president of the taluk panchayat, and several visitors. Since the previous District Commissioner was transferred, we met with the new District Commissioner and appraised him of our work. On March 18th , 2021, we made a presentation at the District Forest Office at Chamarajanagar town and discussed issues pertaining

particularly to the B.R. Hills area. We continue to update the data base and review relevant literature on these issues. Ideas about formats and approaches for disseminating and sharing these studies continue. In the coming year, we hope to engage with more farmers, youth, civil society members, and administrative officials from various departments, and the state and elected representatives.

Sponsor a field



We continued with the program of sponsoring or providing monetary and technical support to those who were keen on implementing 'sustainable agriculture' practices on their fields. This year, we had six people who participated in this, including one woman. All of them worked with diligence on the various processes and methods required to conduct sustainable agriculture including making their own compost, manure, pesticides and liquid nutrients. We were happy to see that all six of them received a bounty of harvest esp of ragi (finger millet), niger, and a variety of beans. Most of them have retained these produces for their home consumption and only one person sold part of his produce to the organic market in Mysore. With this, we are happy to note that more people are

now requesting local seeds for cultivation, including millets, and are also keen on learning the new agricultural methods.

Home garden: Nutrition, well-being and autonomy



We continued to work on the home garden and this time there were 62 women and 6 children from Nagavalli village, 13 women from Aralipura village, 18 adults and 4 schools in Sira taluk (Tumkur), 6 women from Chandakwadi village, and 4 adults from Kullur village who took seeds from us and planted home gardens. The good rains ensured a bounty of harvest and the idea of food security, nutrition, and autonomy of households were issues that were discussed during the meetings. Visits to the home gardens and discussions with the participants were also conducted regularly. On October 16th, we had our annual 'seed sharing' program and apart from visiting

the gardens, the women also shared seeds among themselves. Two villages, Nagavalli and Aralipura, were actively engaged in this. Plans are to consolidate this program so that in the following year, some of the women emerge as seed savers and the seed conservation program will gain a decentralised and in-situ orientation.

'Graam Sethu': Youth as 'village bridges'



During the lock-down, and the July 'seal down' in the villages, we continued to be in contact with the youth via mobile phones. After August, we had them visit the centre once every six weeks and share their work among themselves. Several of the youth have now gathered courage and encouragement from the experience of mobilising village residents for the MNREGA during the lockdown. They have now continued to engage village residents on issues such as getting their PDS or ration cards, accessing public health services, and paying attention to the maintenance of the lakes that were desilted. Since January, when the dry season has set in, many of the residents are now appreciating the fact that the desilted lakes continue to have water and therefore this has enabled the surrounding fields to continue to maintain moisture. Members of 'graam sethu' will continue to work on a range of issues including preparing more households to undertake home gardens, to practice proper sanitation, conserve water, and participate in their local panchayats. This January 26th, we hosted a special Republic Day event and called it 'Farmers' Republic Day'. Fifty farmers and village residents attended the program and members of PUNARCHITH presented a range of issues about agriculture and the implications of the new Farm Acts and Land Reform Acts. Several persons also spoke up about the challenges that farmers are facing and requested for more such interactions.

Democracy: Workshop, handout, follow-up



A key program since October 2020, has been the attention given to issues of democracy. In our continued attempt to get the youth to be engaged citizens, we have held three training programs on understanding democracy in general with special attention to the structure and processes of decentralised democracy, or panchayat system. The state government, after several delays, announced the conduct of elections to the panchayats in October. We prepared handouts (Our village elections, what can we do?) and distributed these via our youth members. Based on the handout, several focused and casual group discussions were held at our learning centre and also in the villages. Our youth were also encouraged to contest the elections. One of them, Mahendra,

did contest the elections, but he lost by 62 votes. He now continues to work at the village level and is also learning more about the overall political system in the village. Members of the team and the youth are now attending the panchayat sessions held in various villages and calling attention to key issues that require addressal.

Honneru: Upgradation and new online sales



We took the covid situation as an opportunity to professionalise the HONNERU team and its work. Mr. Aroon Raman, an entrepreneur and writer, provided suggestions and inputs. Ms. Darshan Bawa, a food specialist, lend us support as a consultant. She redesigned the labels and packages, identified new sources for sales, and developed an online ordering and payment system for HONNERU products. She also coordinated with several outlets in Mysuru and Bengaluru for HONNERU to sell their products. Ms. Bawa also developed a training module for the team and oriented them towards becoming a collective or cooperative which they could run on their own. In addition to activating the online order process, Ms. Bawa also conceptualized and

worked out a special Deepawali package, in collaboration with Vanastree. The package sold well and also enabled the team to learn to process production for mail orders. The HONNERU team now has its own bank account and manages the online orders and all the production processes. In addition to the regular team members there are six women from Nagavalli village who have been trained in various production processes. Once the second wave of the Covid-19 eases off, we hope to revive the production and mail ordering system. A short video of the team has been completed and is on the website.

Aniketana: Children's program



This year the program was disrupted several times due to the covid protocol. From April to June 2020, we were not able to organize the Saturday children's program. We did initiate the program in July but found that the attendance was very irregular. In January 2021, we organized a two-day camp with Ms. Lakshmi Guruprasad as the resource person and the theme was 'Nature Learning' based on modules developed by members of the Nature Conservation Foundation. The children engaged in discussions about the importance of nature, recognizing ways to conserve natural resources and made several paper and seed-based items. They also learnt a few new songs. A book for children to use during the covid non-school days was developed by the organization, Children's Movement for Civic Awareness and they generously sent us some copies. We distributed these to the older children after conducting some introductory sessions with them. In addition to this, the children also visited Angarike Maala and engaged in sessions about the importance of land, water and seed conservation. They were also able to identify several species of trees and plants on the land. Seven children have also started their own vegetable gardens and have shared their produce with us. These children were given small awards as a way to encourage them. Although we recognize the stress and strain on children of being cooped up in congested homes and of older students who are struggling with on-line classes, we have not been able to cater to their needs. Over the coming months, we hope to initiate some sort of remedial classes especially for older students who need to be compensated for the learning losses.

Research and outreach

We continue with our research on themes related to agrarian, educational, and general issues related to rural India. A detailed study of the lives of Covid-19 returned migrants who are now in villages in our vicinity is also being made. In addition, a report of the impact of the second Covid-19 wave in the district and the need for future public health infrastructure will be undertaken over the year.

DOCUMENTATION OF THE REGION'S 'DRY GRAIN COMPLEX' :

We had proposed to undertake a detailed documentation of the 'dry grain complex'identified as the agricultural complex that was prevalent in this region. Joshua Lobo, a fresh graduate from Azim Premii University, spent three months on this work. He first conducted a literature review of the different kinds of agricultural complexes in various parts of India. Then, he spent a month in Nagavalli and undertook detailed study of the agricultural practices and interviewed various farmers about it. The essay has now been submitted to IRMA, Anand, as a case study and they will finalise it before it is released as a publication. This work indicated the need for us to understand the extent to which the local agricultural complexes have altered and how the new, chemical-based agricultural system and practices are marking rural worlds. Details of such an agricultural complex will form part of studies that are being made on various agricultural complexes across the country. These can be the bases on which alternative agricultural policies can be made.

Lectures, webinars and publications

The Covid situation induced us into the world of IT-based lectures and webinars. Many of the members of the team participated in various webinars and contributed as panelists, speakers, and key note lecturers. The themes were pertinent to the new agricultural Acts, the Covid situation and the condition of migrant workers, the state of rural India, discussions on youth and education during Covid lockdown, and on the political and social trends in India.

A range of essays in academic journals, newspapers (English and Kannada), and as theme papers have been published by various team members. These are listed against their names in the website. Two key publications have also emerged as a result of Punarchith's engagement with larger networks and organisations. These are: "Rethinking Mass Higher Education: Towards Community Integrated Learning Centres' (Published by UNESCO, Paris), and is one of the 30 reports from across the world which feed into UNESCO's 'Learning Futures' program. The second is the release of the Report, "State of Rural and Agrarian India, 2020: Rethinking Productivity and Populism through Alternative Approaches' which was released on November 30th, 2020 via a webinar release and discussion. A Kannada version of this report will be developed by Punarchith and its printing and distribution will be supported by Punarchith and Vanastree.

Monetary support

We acknowledge with gratitude the monetary support provided by:

- MoonFrog Pvt Ltd, Bengaluru
- YuvaLok Foundation
- Exotic Journeys Pvt Ltd (New Delhi)

In addition, several persons contributed to our endeavour and we thank them for their generosity and support.

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- Anna Joseph
- Aroon Raman
- Gayathri Arakere
- Ramachander Krishnamurthy
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Endowment funds at Punarchith

There are four endowment funds at PUNARCHITH and all of them are dedicated to the memory of four remarkable women, who in their own special ways contributed immensely to the larger society and to those around them. The women are: Dr. Meenakshi Tyagarajan, Smt. Vasantha L. Char, Smt. Smt. P.R. Javalakshamma Ramiah, and Smt. Pushpa Rani Rajsekhar. We are grateful to the persons and families who contributed these endowment funds and PUNARCHITH has utilized the interest accrued from these funds to support the education and special needs of elderly women and adolescent girls. In the year, 2020-21, we were able to provide scholarships to five young girls from deserving families. Two of the girls were returned migrants from Bengaluru, who had to discontinue their studies as their parents had lost their jobs due to the covid situation. Support from PUNARCHITH enabled these girls to enroll in new schools and to continue their education. One girl has received support over the past two years and is now about to graduate from a college with a degree in computer science, another girl is completing her third year of nursing, and one girl, whose mother lost her job and was unable to pay the school fees, is being supported to complete her high school.

Future: Work for 2021-2022

For 2021-22, we hope to continue work on the three key programs and to restart the 'Integrated Learning Program' which was not implemented (due to C19 restrictions) in 2020. We have continued to work on the materials and teaching methods for the course and now have a larger circle of contacts from whom we will select the new youth learners. Collaboration with other civil society organisations in the state, especially to host some of the sessions in their regions, is also being considered.

For the future, we hope to build on our existing body of knowledge, strengthen our network, and disseminate more information and knowledge about climate change in the district. We are currently in talks with the District Commissioner, the CEO of the Zilla Panchayat, District Forest officials, and with other officials so as to enable the administrative machinery to engage with us and to conduct more field and villagebased awareness workshops. In addition, we are seeking to establish links with the State Institute of Rural Development, Mysuru, to share our work on sustainable agriculture, settlement green cover, residential resource conservation etc. Plans are to extend our out-reach program to promote activities for enhancing green cover (trees, shrubs, et in villages and their vicinity) rather than only afforestation programs. The seed program will be strengthened with Sunita Rao lending more time and expertise to develop the seed bank at Nagavalli and to collaborate further with Vanastree, the seed savers network.

Linkages to all these programs will also strengthen the production unit (HONNERU) and we are currently scouting for new rental premises where the expanded unit can function from. Professionalising the team to manage the sourcing, production, processing, packing, sales and distribution, and accounts is also underway.

Punarchith team

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TRUSTEES:

Dr. R.S. Nagarjun, Chamarajanagar Mr. C. Balakrishnan, Mysuru Ms. Kala Sunder, Bengaluru Prof. A.R.Vasavi, Nagavalli.

We acknowledge with gratitude the specialised support that some persons and groups have lent to us:

Honneru Support: Darshan Bawa, Mysuru

Misba Wadehra, Bengaluru.

Auditors: Ananthavardhana and Associates, Mysuru

Website: Design and Maintenance: Cheluvaraj, Mysuru

Medical Support and Advice: Dr. R.S. Nagarjun, Chamarajanagar

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