

BIRLA FELLOWS UPDATE

A Newsletter of the GP Birla Fellowship for Women Leaders

The GP Birla Fellowship for Women Leaders is a unique programme that helps young women from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities begin their leadership journey. It is different in that besides helping women connect with their core values, it also intends to create a network of Fellows to act as a growth ecosystem for each other. The programme also has a strong mentorship component.

FEATURED INITIATIVES

Chocolates from the land of chillies: how a young woman from Manipur is promoting sustainable entrepreneurship

Zeniron Stephens is a Class 2 Fellow of the GP Birla Fellowship for Women Leaders.



mint LOUNGE

ISSUE OUT TOMORROW

Made in
MANIPUR

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is emerging across the North-East. Lounge takes a closer look at the new wave in Manipur, where a young generation of resourceful and determined residents is changing the narrative.

+ Rush: A new dawn for Indian football

French Open: Simona Halep all set to defend her crown

Local: Mumbai's storied Bohri Mohalla

Vantage: Inside India's mental health helplines

Stepping into Zeniron Stephens' café in Ukhrul, Manipur, is a bit like walking into Willie Wonka's chocolate factory. There are chocolates with plum wine and wild nuts, pumpkin seeds and hodgsonia, with whiskey truffles and raisins. For those with fire in their bellies, she has a variety with the Naga King Chilli as well. Like Juliet Binoche's character in *Chocolat*, she infuses magic into her creation; people just get drawn in.

Zeniron credits the magic to the hills. She believes that the local ingredients that she puts into her chocolates, transfer some of their purity to her creations.

In 2017, Zeniron and a friend Leiyolan Vashum were two youngsters keen to build an economically sustainable community through entrepreneurship. Not one to engage with the ordinary, Zeniron knew that whatever she did had to be magical like the land that made her. So, when a friend who was a pastry chef, offered to teach her how to make chocolates, she jumped right in. Armed with the know-how, Zeniron and her friend started Hill Wild.

Today, Hill Wild has a dedicated team of four that works with 13 women to make their products. Apart from crafting artisanal chocolates that have a loyal clientele across the country, the two also empower their community. They have encouraged 90 people in Ukhrul to become entrepreneurs, and created 15 farmer groups, helping them get certified as organic.

So, what lies ahead?

Hill Wild aims to come up with more edible products that use similar sustainable methods and contribute to local livelihood. By 2030, Zeniron hopes to see Ukhrul as a completely organic district known for its entrepreneurial spirit.

No house of cards: how a young girl from Gorakhpur is shattering the glass ceiling when it comes to construction

Shriti Pandey is a Class 2 Fellow of the GP Birla Fellowship for Women Leaders.



After getting a Master degree in construction management in the US, Shriti Pandey chose to stay on and work with a consultancy firm in New York. But her heart was at home and home was Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. In 2016, Shriti decided to move back to India. She won the SBI Youth Fellowship that took her to remote villages.

These trips were immersive experiences. After completing her fellowship, Shriti decided to work in an area where she could use her skills to the fullest and also do something meaningful. In 2017 she set up Strawcture Eco, a start-up dedicated to making living spaces aesthetic, environment-friendly and durable. Strawcture homes are made using compressed agri-fibre panels and steel structures. The panels are made of 100 percent rice straw and can be built in four weeks. In the long run, Shriti hopes such houses will help address the issue of both affordable housing and stubble burning.

Strawcture Eco is currently bootstrapped. Being a woman founder Shriti faces quite a few challenges. Potential investors and industry members are often skeptical about a woman leading a construction company.

Not that any of this deters Shriti, the only direction she chooses to move is forward. She plans to manufacture the insulated compressed panels out of straw to provide an additional source of income to farmers. With this project, a farmer can make Rs 25,000 from an acre plot of straw, and reduce the carbon emission caused by stubble burning.

The organisation is also working towards a big pilot in one of the developing states in the country to showcase a new alternative model of social and affordable housing. It hopes that the government will recognise the technology so that the organisation can contribute to the government's mission of providing housing for all by 2022.

It's all about playing: how a young IIT graduate is changing the game when it comes to playing areas.

Pooja Rai is a Class 2 fellow of the GP Birla Fellowship for Women Leaders.



Pooja Rai and her group of architect friends at IIT loved to play. So much that, for a college project they decided to put their architectural training to good use by building slides, swings and jungle gyms using discarded tyres. The group was so excited about the project that two of the original five, Pooja and her friend Nancy, decided to make an enterprise of it. Thus, was born Anthill Creations - an organisation that works to create safe and accessible play areas for children. They call these areas Playscapes: safe interactive social space that is a part of the community landscape. Playscapes give children the opportunity to learn, spread their wings and understand the significance of the environment.

Anthill also wants to revitalise public spaces for the whole community by turning unused spaces, streetscapes, parks, public plazas into hubs for community interactions. Public and green spaces have been encroached by traffic and communities. Anthill wants to reclaim these spaces and create sustainable community experiences.

Anthill Creations is looking for a way to monetise the projects better. They are trying to contact private builders and set up play areas in their condominium projects. The plan is to use the money they make from these private projects to fund the playgrounds for underprivileged kids. The organisation has managed to raise a grant for 1.2 crore for building 120 playgrounds.

OTHERS IN THE NEWS

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP BOOTCAMP

SPEAKER



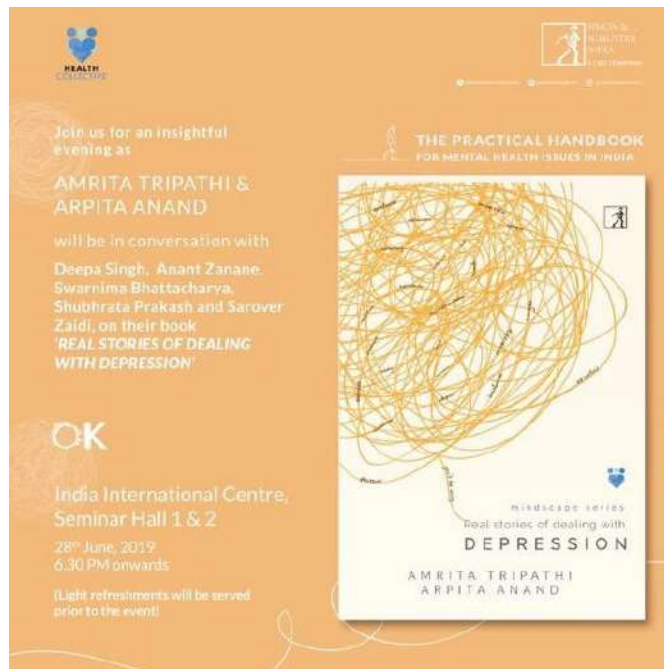
Anu Meena
Founder AgroWave | Forbes 30 under 30 Asia | IIT Delhi

5-9 July, Delhi NCR

Rishihood School of Entrepreneurship | Vision India Foundation

www.rishihood.edu.in

Anu Meena of Class 2 was invited to speak at the social entrepreneurship boot camp at Rishihood School of entrepreneurship, Vision India Foundation



Amrita Tripathi of Class 2 launched her book on “Real stories of dealing with Depression”.

Knitting a livelihood

A design studio in Almorá is helping women become self-reliant while reviving the art of handmade and naturally-dyed traditions, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Sushila Thwait of Uttarabhand used to work with a pharmaceutical company coating medicine bottles, day in and day out. It was not something that interested her particularly but an economic necessity—the sheer pressure of supporting her family.

But Thwait sought opportunities that both earned her an income and also gave her job satisfaction.

Accidentally, the solution was something that she had never considered: a vacation—the job of a knitter with a design studio in Almorá, Uttarabhand. Like all women who have grown up in the hill areas, Sushila was taught knitting when she was a little girl and had been knitting for hours for her family.

That was a chore because a vacation for her, there are many like her in Almorá, who are unaware of the monetary potential of their skill. And that is what Profé — a design studio that produces handmade, hand-knitted, hand-sewn garments from Almorá — is trying to bridge. An initiative of two textile designers, Abhinav Dhowndyal and Vasanti Veluri, the studio has been working with women in the hill towns, upskilling them, and helping them earn a livelihood.

The name Profé comes from a Marathi folk tale. Profé was a young maiden who lived in the forest. She spent her days tending to the plants and trees of the forest with whom she shared a deep bond of love. One day, a prince who came to the forest for hunting, saw her and fell in love with the girl. In local language, they got married and she led the forest to live with him in the palace. Life at the palace, away from nature

gradually made it sick and she eventually died. She was buried at a spot from where a plant with yellow flowers sprouted (Profé flowers). The sprig yellow coloured flower was named Profé, in memory of the girl.

“The philosophy at Profé has emerged from this love for nature: a strong belief in celebrating indigenous textile traditions from the basis of our work approach. Simple, functional and aesthetic products have been derived from the local craft vocabulary using natural materials and dyes, for consumers who are sensitive about the resources used in the making of the items they purchase,” says 31-year-old Veluri.

Veluri and Dhowndyal were in the north-east in 2013, documenting craft, textile and natural dye traditions there when they had an epiphany: “There was a sense of reviving what’s lost in time,” says Veluri. Dhowndyal, being from Almorá, was familiar with the potential market. “There was also the realisation that such traditional set-ups require less infrastructural investments,” Veluri adds. That the women in hills were already knitting and coming a little through their sales, nudged Veluri and Dhowndyal to bring them on board.

However, setting up a studio in a hill town has its own set of challenges. The weather can hinder the process of natural dyeing. Accessibility can be cumbersome and can cause delays in shipping orders or sourcing materials from outside the town. Getting women out of their homes and into the discipline of a workplace was another major challenge. “To work up a year to discipline them, make them understand unfor-



Through Profé, Veluri and Dhowndyal are helping to give machines work to people, build a readiness for naturally-dyed, handcrafted products and also make people mindful and conscious about how and what they produce.

What started with two to three women working together in the workshop now has over 20 working women. Their earnings range from 1,500-21,000 a month depending on the number of orders and amount of work they put in. While it makes Veluri happy that their studio is able to provide an opportunity to earn, there have been times when they have had to refuse work for lack of space.

Proposing a locally inspired model of sustainable development, Profé sources traditional raw materials like Hand wool, Tibetan wool, cotton, and hemp from local farming communities. Ethically sourced materials like felt silk, organic, Soia cotton, Nagaland hill cotton and Merino wool imported from New Zealand are combined with indigenous materials to enhance their comfort and aesthetic appeal.

“Every activity at Profé is a conscious effort towards conservation of natural resources and leaving a light carbon footprint in the process,” says Veluri. For instance, harvested rain water heated with solar energy is used for natural dyeing. Hand-dyed processes like hand stitching, hand spinning, etc. are used whenever possible to utilise the unlimited human energy and reduce dependence upon machines and non-renewable sources of energy. Earth-friendly chemicals and materials are used for the processing of textile materials.

Through Profé, Veluri and Dhowndyal are hoping to give maximum work to people, build a readiness for naturally-dyed, handcrafted products and also make people mindful and conscious about how and what they produce. “We are not in the chase for fashion trends. We are only looking at processing these slow processes,” says Veluri.

Vasanti Veluri was featured in Business Standard for making the women of Almorá become self-reliant while reviving the art of hand made and naturally-dyed traditions.



Ambika Satpathy's Zoo Fresh was picked for the HDFC Bank Parivartan Grant that identifies social sector startups from tier 2 and 3 cities to foster sustainable change and innovation. Hers is one of the 25 startups to have been awarded Rs 10 crore.