

« THE HANDS RESTORING THE EARTH »

ESCHEWING TECHNICAL JARGON, THIS IS THE LIVING, BREATHING STORY OF THE LIVELIHOODS FUNDS AND THEIR PARTNERS, AVAILABLE IN EBOOK FORMAT AS OF OCTOBER 15, 2020

One might imagine that major international companies and isolated villages in Africa, Asia and Latin America have nothing in common. That there is a yawning gulf between NGOs driven by ideals and businesses driven by profit, between the so-called private sector and the public interest. But in practice, the ongoing adventure of Livelihoods is proof positive that this apparent gulf can be bridged to form productive and beneficial alliances to reach an ambitious but necessary goal: restore living ecosystems, build a more sustainable agriculture to reconcile man with nature.



"THE HANDS RESTORING THE EARTH" is the story of a collective, committed and singular adventure: the story of the Livelihoods Investment Funds, which unite private companies committed to fighting against global warming and rural communities, who act daily on the ground, to restore natural ecosystems, reinvent an agricultural model that is respectful of the living world and provide for these communities' vital needs.

Written by Bernard Giraud, Co-Founder and President of the Livelihoods Funds, the book is a testimony of the experience, the successes but also the challenges of an alliance committed to achieve an ecological transformation and fight against poverty. Published by book editor "Les ateliers henry dougier", it will be available as of October 15th, in eBook format in English and French.

A SINCERE ACCOUNT OF THE EXPERIENCE, SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN THE FIELD

From Sumatra island to Senegal, from Madagascar to the Ganges Delta, Livelihoods and its partners work daily with rural communities whose lives are directly dependent on climate, soil, water, plant, and animal diversity. Is it possible to restore damaged ecosystems while combating rural poverty? The book provides the living evidence of Livelihoods' experience in the field: solutions that have brought real benefits to communities, agriculture, and biodiversity. But also, the

challenges and pitfalls related to confronting natural disasters or difficult political and social contexts.

The story allows the reader to accompany the women who have planted millions of mangroves in the Ganges delta to fight against the violence of cyclones, the efforts of smallholder vanilla producers in Madagascar, the life in the villages of the Andean Mountains or Burkina Faso and families equipped with wood-burning stoves that are effective against deforestation. The reader can observe the efforts of what transforming the coconut value chain in the Philippines really accounts for, to ensure better incomes for farmers of Mindanao island. The reader travels through the text and image thanks to a QR code accessible at the end of each chapter, to view online the photo album of the 10 chapters dedicated to Livelihoods projects.

A QUESTIONING ON THE ECOLOGICAL STRUGGLE OF OUR TIME, THE TRANSFORMATION OF OUR GLOBAL AGRICULTURAL MODELS, THE ROLE THAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR CAN PLAY TO ACHIEVE THIS TRANSITION

“THE HANDS RESTORING THE EARTH” also raises the questions from a veteran advocate who has been acting committedly for the ecological transition for decades. Is it too late to slow down global warming? Will the earth be able to support a population that is expected to reach 9 billion people in 2050? What are the limits and difficulties that the private companies are facing in their efforts to transform their value chains?

Bernard Giraud sets the debate and raises the questionings and contradictions of our time, the individual and collective role that our societies and companies can play to repair natural ecosystems and reinvent an agricultural model that regenerates the soil. With a conviction and evidence that it is urgent to rethink the way we live on Earth, to continue to look for solutions that come with concrete results. Transforming the agricultural models that have been built up over the last few decades is a long, complex but necessary struggle, in which companies have a key role to play.

“Asked what had left the biggest impression on them in recent years in their village and what they were especially proud of, almost all of them answered: the planting of the mangrove swamp, ‘their’ mangrove swamp. They were proud to have collectively achieved something that everyone had thought impossible: planting millions of mangroves one by one in the mud. And they were determined to take care of it and protect it, having come to appreciate its immense value. After reading the findings of the report, I concluded that though the battle was far from being won, we had already come an awfully long way”.

“Beyond a financial investment, it is a human investment that will make the difference. And this is precisely where the problem is. What is being done to prepare, to train a new generation of farmers who will be able to produce intelligently and sustainably in the context of climate change?”

“How can you motivate smallholder producers to adopt environmental-friendly practices if they do not benefit from these and have to work even harder?”

“What is the incentive to act or not to act? Why isn't there more commitment? The fear of having to face an ecological disaster certainly helps to raise awareness, but no solutions are built upon fear. Nor upon the past.”

Bernard Giraud, extracts from « THE HANDS RESTORING THE EARTH »

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WHO IS LIVELIHOODS?

Livelihoods was born out of the recognition that the fight against climate change and for the preservation of natural resources is inseparable from the fight for the dignity of the men and women who care for and live off the land. And that coalitions involving local communities, private and public actors can enable us to achieve the necessary and urgent transformations.

Livelihoods is also based on the conviction that nothing can succeed without the direct involvement of the communities who are directly concerned by this transformation. Instead of a logic of aid and assistance from the strong to the weak, it is preferable to substitute a logic of investment and shared responsibility.

The companies that have invested in and supported the Livelihoods funds to date: Danone, Eurofins, Firmenich, Caisse des Dépôts Group, Hermès, Crédit Agricole Group, La Poste Group, Mars Incorporated, Michelin, SAP, Schneider Electric, Veolia, Voyageurs du Monde. The Livelihoods funds mobilize an investment capacity of €300 million. Since their creation, they have made it possible to improve the lives of around one million people, restore 100,000 hectares of land and plant 200 million trees.

LES ATELIERS HENRY DOUGIER:

Created in 2014, les ateliers henry dougier is a French book editor that tells the story of contemporary society in the world, and gives voice to often invisible witnesses to break down walls and clichés: <http://ateliershenrydougier.com> and on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

TWO CHAPTERS FROM THE BOOK:

The Song of the Bolongs

All collective adventures need a founding narrative – a point of anchorage to which we can cling when the coastal winds start to blow too hard. Our own story could be said to date back to 2009 near Ziguinchor in Casamance. It was a dark winter's month in France, but a fine, warm and clear-skied month on this large estuary that flows between Gambia and Guinea-Bissau in West Africa. We flew over this vast natural expanse on our way from Dakar. We could see hundreds of silvery water channels, or 'bolongs', which snake towards the ocean through stretches of barren earth and corridors of green which are all that remains of the mangrove swamp which once covered most of the delta. We could also clearly make out amid the bolongs a complex patchwork of countless small fields. These were the paddy fields which, as we were to later learn, had mostly been abandoned on account of the incursion of seawater. What was once Senegal's rice-growing heartland was now swamped in brackish water and mud. The mangroves that used to silently absorb the salt like a gigantic filtering system and thereby protect the paddy fields had disappeared and given way to what the people of Casamance call the tanne – arid soil baked hard by the sun as the tidal water recedes.

To be frank, when we first arrived in Casamance our ignorance was matched only by our inexperience as we embarked on a new professional venture and a new stage in our lives. My accomplice Jean-Pierre Renaud and I have a background in industry. He is used to running large agribusiness plants while my speciality is corporate strategy – all seemingly a world away from the villages of Casamance. And yet we were both guided by the intuition that these two worlds were distinct on the surface only and that a network of invisible threads bound them together. Our challenge was to come up with solutions that would create a visible bridge between them. We also shared the firm conviction that nothing gets done without people, and that people are the true heroes of their own story. The years we had spent at Danone, a company that began life as a glassworks and went on to become an agribusiness giant, had taught us that change can only be brought about successfully 'with and by' the men and women concerned. 'With and by' was a familiar refrain at a company which had successfully developed a new vision and innovative management methods at the end of the last century under the guidance of its founder, Antoine Riboud.

Greeted on our arrival by our future Senegalese partners, we set off directly for a village several hours distant along unkept roads, arriving after dark. The whole village was gathered in front of a flag hung over the top of a truck tarpaulin. This was their improvised cinema screen. A hundred or so children were sitting on the sand surrounded by a circle of animated women, while the village dignitaries and elders were seated on plastic chairs. The young men from the local football club were larking around in their colourful jerseys and nudging each other in the ribs with their elbows. A small generator supplied the energy to work the projector, and the 'cinema and Q&A' session could begin. I was impressed by how attentive the villagers were to the slightly shaky images of the mangroves with their stilt roots and the close-ups of sand fiddler crabs and frogfishes. Jean Goepf from the NGO Océanium, sporting his bush hat, gave a running commentary on the images in Wolof, explaining what an important breeding ground mangrove swamps are for fish. Then he invited a fisherman from the village to speak, followed by an elderly farmer and the president of the women's association that collects the oysters attached to the mangrove roots. They all had the same story to tell: the disappearance of the mangrove swamps had resulted in a sharp drop in biodiversity and the resources that are essential to village life. Jean then drew a simple graph on the sand and invited people to take shells from a bucket and fill out the graph to visually represent the catches of an elderly fisherman in the bolong when he was young compared to his catches of the present day. At the sight of the steadily descending curve, everyone could visualise the disaster that would befall them if nothing were done. There ensued a lively discussion about what steps ought to be taken. The deep-seated belief at the time was that mangroves could not be planted any more than the trees of the forest could be planted – they were a gift from God. It took all the persuasive talents of Haidar El Ali, the founder and head of Oceanium, to convince people that resurrecting a vanished mangrove swamp was possible. He explained that several villages had already succeeded in doing so and that, to protect what remained, people needed to stop using mangrove roots for firewood and stop building roads without considering their impact on the circulation of the water. It was a long evening and the little ones started to get tired. Some were carried off in their mothers' arms to the nearby huts. But the gathering concluded with a clear commitment. The answer to the question posed by Océanium – 'Does your village want to replant the mangrove swamp?' – was a resounding yes. And when asked how many villagers would volunteer to help with the planting, after much discussion a consensus emerged: around a hundred people. We agreed to meet again to identify which areas to replant and to schedule the planting dates.

On our return to Ziguinchor after several days in the field, we had discussions with the team at Océanium about undertaking a major joint project. Jean-Pierre cross-checked the data gathered and went over his calculations one more time. But what clinched it for us was the NGO's obvious capacity for motivating and mobilising the local population to rebuild the foundations of the ecosystem on which their livelihood depended. Every local lever was exploited to generate a genuine momentum for planting and even a friendly competitive spirit between villages. Villagers went on local radio to talk about their dedication to the cause, schoolchildren filled their exercise books with drawings of the efforts to protect the mangrove swamps, and shopkeepers and even policemen put up colourful cartoon posters on the walls of their premises. But we were also struck by the method that Océanium had perfected, which reminded us of the approach that we knew so well from our industry days: identify what's essential, focus on the key actions, simplify so that the model can be reproduced, and organise the logistics so that it can be significantly scaled up. From the gathering of millions of propagules (the elongated pods of germinated seeds) from healthy mangrove swamps to the transporting of them to the villages that would replant them, the NGO had successfully broken the replanting process down into simple steps that each village could follow with ease. Such an approach stands in sharp contrast to so many other development projects, which may be wonderful in theory but are so complex in practice that they never get beyond the pilot stage.

By the time we arrived, the team at Océanium had already planted 300 hectares using this method and were convinced that they could achieve much more, were it not for their limited resources amounting to just a few thousand euros a year. Crews had to be deployed on the ground and the gathering of propagules needed to be funded, as did the trucks to transport them into the heart of bolongs, the motorbikes, and the telephones to coordinate the challenging logistics. And everything needed to be done in the space of a few months to take advantage of the rainy season. Money was needed too for monitoring the quality of the plantations and ensuring that conditions were conducive to their growth. Without significant funding over several years, this project would not have the hoped-for impact. We therefore decided that this would be our first carbon offset project as it precisely matched what we were looking for: mangroves growing in a humid tropical environment capture significant quantities of carbon and help to slow down climate change. As they grow, they recreate a sustainable ecosystem on which the livelihoods of local people depend. Investment would thus have a dual ecological and social impact.

Over the course of four years, a huge replanting programme was rolled out in Casamance and in the Sine-Saloum region further north. 400 villages managed to plant 80 million propagules across 10,000 hectares, an area the size of Paris. Despite all the difficulties encountered – the trucks bogged down to their axles in mud, the occasional lightning strikes, the minor dramas and the major ones – I was struck by the amazing energy and enthusiasm of the planting crews. Village bands would accompany the singing women as they advanced in unison across the mudflats. When I went out with a group of young villagers one day, they planted so quickly that I was left exhausted, whereas they did not even get short of breath as they waded knee-deep through the poto-poto, that black mud of the mangrove swamp. And each village would try to outdo its neighbour. However, one day we received worrying news: a small orange spider was spreading through the young plantations and spinning its web on the terminal buds, thereby suffocating the young mangroves. If we failed to halt the advance of this little arachnid, there was a huge risk that the young saplings would die, but our partners reacted with impressive sang-froid. Within weeks, schools, youth clubs and volunteers were kitted out with tin cans and set off at low tide to tend to the infested mangroves one by one. The invasion was rapidly stopped in its tracks – a further indication, if any were needed, that the local population was entirely committed to this project.

In 2018, nearly a decade after the project got under way, we decided to assess its impact. Evaluating the carbon impact posed no difficulties – using internationally recognised methodologies, experts are able to measure very precisely the carbon stored as a function of tree growth and density. Every three years, plots of land mapped by GPS were audited using rigorous sampling methods, with drones being deployed if the mangrove swamp was too large or too dense for field measurements to be conducted. This meant that we were able to monitor with precision how many tonnes of CO₂ the project had succeeded in storing. But what did the men and women who did all the hard work resurrecting the mangrove swamp think about it all a decade on? Did they feel that their efforts had served a purpose and had concretely improved their family's lives? To find out, we turned to La Tour du Valat, a scientific research institute based in the Camargue in the south of France that has done a lot of work on coastal ecosystems in various countries. Their experts suggested using a method developed by DFID, the British government's international development agency, which involved field measurements and the conducting of 800 interviews with villagers from across the whole region covered by the project. When the results came in a few months later, they exceeded even our best expectations: the study reported that fish had returned in large numbers, and the fishermen confirmed that they were catching larger fish and a greater diversity of species. The experts at La Tour du Valat estimated that the restored mangrove swamp was producing an additional 5,000 tonnes of fish in Casamance. Their study also confirmed that the mangroves were once again playing their essential role of 'salt pump', protecting the paddy fields from the incursion of salt water. On account of this, they estimated that it would be possible to restore several thousand hectares of paddy fields in the grand delta. I found myself dreaming of an ambitious new rice cultivation project using smart farming methods that were both productive and sustainable, giving a new lease of life to those vast spaces in the heart of the bolongs that are currently abandoned. But what was most striking and moving about the interviews with the villagers was the enormous sense of pride that shone through. Asked what had left the biggest impression on them in recent years in their village and what they were especially proud of, almost all of them answered: the planting of the mangrove swamp, 'their' mangrove swamp. They were proud to have collectively achieved something that everyone had thought impossible: planting millions of mangroves one by one in the mud. And they were determined to take care of it and protect it, having come to appreciate its immense value. After reading the findings of the report, I concluded that though the battle was far from being won, we had already come an awfully long way.

The Gems of Araku

When my friends call me from Calcutta or Hyderabad, I don't need to look at the number that flashes up. The din of the horns in the background is enough to transport me straight back to the hubbub of India's burgeoning cities, where everyone knows that a horn is an essential component of any vehicle. Urban India is an extraordinary cauldron of energy: new construction sites are popping up everywhere, hoardings are advertising the latest smartphone or beauty product to make you stand out from the crowd, tuk-tuks are pumping out exhaust fumes that make your throat tingle, and dense crowds are milling around the countless stalls.

In autumn 2009, we touched down in Vishakaptnam, a major port on the eastern coast located in the state of Andhra Pradesh. We were there at the invitation of the Naandi Foundation, who were keen to show us their project in an isolated valley a few hours' drive away. Our driver turned out to be a virtuoso at slaloming his way through the traffic jams of the city centre and we were soon in the suburbs. The disparate urban sprawl gradually gave way to the trees and fields

and then a hairpin road winding up the Eastern Ghats, a mountain range that dominates India's eastern coast. It was slow going in the many villages that we passed through as we threaded our way through the market day crowds, overtook groups of children on their way to school, and negotiated our way around cows lying peacefully in the road. Amid the trees, we saw a family of monkeys observing the passing cars from a lofty parapet, but our driver had to keep his eyes on the road and the countless rickety old trucks and buses piled high with merchandise and passengers descending from the upper valleys.

And then suddenly the landscape opened up and stretching out before us was a wide valley illuminated by the late autumn sun. It looked incredibly peaceful. For as far as the eye could see, there were rolling fields and trees on the blue-tinted sides of the valley, which were still partially shrouded in mist. A river snaked between the terraced paddy fields where the local farmers were already beginning to harvest. We were finally in the Araku Valley. There were no man-made constructions in sight, and we had the feeling that we were in a Constable painting. We later learnt that this land enjoys the special status of a scheduled area because the Araku Valley is populated by the Adivasi, a tribal group considered to be the original inhabitants of India. Every family enjoys the usufruct of the land - they can plant and cultivate it and pass it on to their children, but they cannot sell it. No individual or property developer, no matter how rich, has the right to acquire the land or to build on it. The villages nestling at the foot of the hills blend into the landscape. On the slopes in the shade of the large silvery oaks, we could make out the dark green of the coffee plants which have come to symbolise the remarkable story unfolding here: the challenge of successfully transitioning to the modern world without the community losing its cultural identity. The crux of the matter is this: to what extent is cultural identity an asset (or alternatively an impediment) for historically marginalised men and women when they attempt to build a new future for themselves?

On hand to guide us through the learning process were two remarkable individuals who have since become very dear friends: Manoj Kumar, the head of the Naandi Foundation, and David Hogg, its chief agricultural advisor. I had first met Manoj several years earlier when we were accompanying our respective bosses to the board meeting of a large international organisation. We immediately hit it off and promised each other that one day we would work together, and that is how I came to be in the Araku Valley one November's day. Manoj's eyes sparkle with intelligence and humour, but beneath his light-hearted demeanour you sense a man with a great capacity for reflection and action. For a few years he worked for a merchant bank where a fine career beckoned for him, but he chose instead to join Naandi, a foundation set up by an Indian entrepreneur who was convinced that the efficiency of the business world could be harnessed to combat poverty and social exclusion. In Sanskrit, Naandi means 'new beginning'. In the space of just a few years, the foundation rolled out a series of programmes across India to provide education for girls, school meals for children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, access to safe drinking water, and the tools for sustainable farming in tribal areas.

In Araku, the authorities turned to the Naandi Foundation to help them with a tricky problem. The Adivasi are an indigenous people with a long history of being marginalised and driven up into the highlands. Sometimes they have rebelled against the powers that be, and at other times they have retreated into the forests. These days, there are 80 million of them, mainly living in a belt that stretches from the north-west of India to the north-east. The Adivasi of Araku used to be hunter-gatherers but the forests disappeared under British colonial rule amid high demand for wood for construction and railway sleepers. Coffee plants were first planted some years ago but the venture was abandoned – the villagers lacked the necessary expertise and the coffee turned out to be of mediocre quality. So what did the future hold for the young people of these isolated tribes in an India in the midst of upheaval? Would they be recruited by the Naxalites, the Maoist guerilla group still active in the region today, and face a future of violence and despair?

The forests that once nourished them are deeply anchored in the collective memory of the Adivasi of Araku, but those forests are gone and have been replaced by bare hills where herds of goats and cows now graze. The soil has been eroded away and bare patches of rock glint in the sun. There is a traditional rite of passage into manhood which used to involve the boys of the valley heading off into nature for several days and only returning to the village when they had bagged some game. Though the rite is sometimes still observed, these days the boys apparently hunt in vain, so impoverished has the local fauna become, and they end up returning with just a few paltry rodents. When we met the villagers, many of them expressed a desire to restore the forest, though they appreciated that it couldn't be like the forests of the past – the farmers were well aware that the outside world and the market economy offered them the chance of a decent standard of living. Wholesalers, middlemen and a whole variety of merchants are a common sight in the valley, their

trucks and motorbikes criss-crossing the landscape to procure produce known for its quality, including fruit, rice and the foxtail millet with its remarkable nutritional qualities.

Together with our partners at Naandi, we decided to sound out several villages to see what they thought of various 'functional' forest scenarios, which combine the planting of fruit trees with the growing of trees for timber and firewood, as well as intercropping. And so it was that we found ourselves in the shade of a large mango tree with a colour-coded sketch showing the plots of land belonging to one of the villages. At first, as we outlined the uses to which these plots could be put, the villagers listened in attentive silence, but then some of the leaders began to speak up and soon enough everyone was chipping in. One woman asked how they were going to protect the young trees from the unwanted attentions of the goats. There ensued an animated debate on the various options, such as creating enclosures or posting villagers to keep guard. One young farmer announced that he wanted to plant mango trees and nothing else. The team from Naandi heard him out, but sought to explain that planting several species of trees is a way of diversifying revenues and also an insurance policy against the vagaries of the climate and the market. By the end of the session, we had come to a decision as to which plots would be planted on, and what planting methods would be deployed.

The same story repeated itself over the following weeks, village by village, and all of sudden there was a vast planting project in the pipeline. Jean-Pierre Renaud and I sensed very early on that all the prerequisites were in place for us to succeed in this venture in conjunction with our partners. We calculated the budgets for planting and managing the plantations over a twenty-year period and assessed how much carbon would be stored by the trees, the extent to which the soil would be restored, and the fruit tonnages that would be produced. The Livelihoods funding committee then decided to invest €2.5 million in planting six million trees on degraded land, which will ultimately be able to store 1.3 million tonnes of carbon. Mahindra, a large Indian company, teamed up with Livelihoods and contributed additional financing so that the project could go ahead. Naandi created a large tree nursery in the centre of the valley where the saplings are grown, and then further nurseries in several villages to facilitate the process. Each village takes care of transporting their saplings and digging the holes for them, which is no mean task in itself – most things are done on foot in the region, the plots of land are often quite a distance from the village, and machinery is a rare commodity. On top of this, there is a window of just two to three months for the trees to bed in as the monsoon arrives. The planting programme includes intensive training on fertilising the soil using elaborate composting techniques. I've visited a number of these small compost centres and been shown around by local farmers who take an obvious pride in them. The organic material keeps mortality rates down by nourishing and protecting the saplings and retaining a certain degree of humidity during the dry season.

David Hogg is one of the central cogs in this venture. Born into a family of New Zealand farmers, he first pitched up in India as an idealistic young student some forty years ago and has since become an Indian in heart and soul. 'More Indian than the Indians', as our friends like to say. After spending several years at an ashram, David became a farmer in southern India, growing fruit, making cheese and breeding racehorses. He knows what making a living from the land entails. In his time on the farm, which is regularly frequented by herds of elephants, he has acquired an extraordinary knowledge of life-cycles, plants and the complex alchemy associated with micro-organisms living in the soil. One of my great pleasures is accompanying David on a walk along the little paths that criss-cross the fields and woods of Araku, listening to him talk about the landscape around us and describing the properties of the plants that he picks along the way. He joined Naandi a few years ago and is their advisor on agricultural programmes in several Indian states. He has spent a lot of time observing, listening and providing technical training for Naandi's field teams of passionate young people, who hail both from the valley and the cities. Together with committed local farmers he has developed solutions which work and has thereby won the trust of villagers, who are only too familiar with unkept promises and understandably believe in deeds rather than words. Manoj, David and their field team have transformed Araku into a sort of laboratory for social, cultural and technical innovation, combining an ambitious vision with great attention to practical detail and effective implementation – in other words, precisely what we look for in a project.

Four years later, the trees had been planted and the project's aims achieved. The coffee plants had been planted on the most suitable plots, the first mango trees had already grown to an impressive size, and the farmers were eager to have photographs taken of them standing next to their favorite trees. I noticed how much care everyone was taking over the upkeep of the replanted plots of land. One farming couple showed us the hut they had built on a distant plot: 'we prefer to sleep here, close to our trees, to stop the animals coming and harming them'. Little stories like this are hugely encouraging, but of course we have had our stressful times too.

One October day in 2015, we received some alarming news: a cyclone had hit India's eastern coast and the Araku Valley. There were no details on the scale of the damage, but we knew the plantations had taken a battering. We feared the worst – so much effort undone in the space of just a few hours... When I visited the valley two weeks later, I could see that some plots had been badly damaged but that others, just a few hundred metres away, were intact. It seemed the wind had gusted along certain corridors, and it turned out that only 10% of the plantations had been affected. The villagers lost no time in clearing away the fallen trees and erecting structures to provide shade for the coffee plants exposed to the harsh sunlight, and the Naandi Foundation and the local farmers decided to replant the damaged plantations. A few years on, there is now no trace of the cyclone damage and the project is very much back on track.

The Naandi team have been active in the Araku Valley for several years and over that time a dream had gradually taken shape: to establish coffee as the valley's flagship product and a symbol of its revival. What was to stop this magnificent and still unspoilt valley becoming the poster boy for conservation, supplying to the urban world coffee of outstanding quality grown with respect for the land and nature's cycles? Could the Araku Valley not become a byword for purity and excellence? Given their difficult history and the poverty that still pervades the valley, such a stark reversal in the Adivasi's fortunes may have struck many as unlikely. And yet, step by step, Naandi started to turn this dream into an economic reality with concrete human benefits by setting up a cooperative which nowadays boasts a membership of 10,000 small-scale producers.

Every year, farmers are being trained in how to tend to the coffee plants, enrich the soil using biodynamic techniques, and create the conditions of shade and humidity required for growing the best-quality coffee. The plots of land have been selected with the help of a French expert who has applied his knowledge of wine and vineyards to the business of coffee planting. Part of Naandi's success derives from the fact that it has not only managed to inspire local producers but has also engendered a healthy spirit of competition between them, with each farmer striving to grow the very best coffee. They have achieved this through a simple but effective expedient: every year, the foundation organises the Gems of Araku competition featuring an international panel of coffee experts from all five continents who judge the entries and award prizes to the best producers in the valley. The highest-quality beans are collected by a now-famous and highly visible red truck, whose progress around the valley from village to village is attentively tracked by the locals. Everyone knows that the cooperative will pay double the usual price for the coffee that it collects. And there is a clever guiding principle: red truck status is not awarded individually but rather to a group of farmers who have collectively attained the required quality standard. This gives the most dynamic farmers the incentive to encourage their neighbours to greater heights.

The whole approach is underpinned by a marketing strategy targeted at discerning coffee lovers. With the support of Indian and French business leaders, the very first Araku store was opened in the trendy Marais district of Paris. The packaging, the colours used, and the layout of the shop have all been designed to reflect the values that the young Araku brand wishes to convey. Several large French retailers now stock Araku coffee and companies are also serving it at their head offices in the French capital. A little after the Paris shop was opened, the brand was made available online in India and a tasting and sales outlet was opened in Bangalore. Other shop openings in major foreign cities are planned. A fragile but genuine connection has been established between two seemingly disparate worlds: the comfortably-off clientele of the big urban centres with their perhaps somewhat idealistic notions of the natural world, and the inhabitants of Araku who are striving to carve out a niche for themselves to avoid being swallowed up by an increasingly urban world.

In 2018, encouraged by the success of the initial planting programme, we and Naandi came up with an idea for an even more ambitious second phase: instead of just replanting certain plots of land here and there, why not attempt to restore the whole landscape? At the scale of a village, this involves organising how the land is used from the tops of the hills all the way down to the floor of the valley. The sunlit upper levels are conducive to coffee growing, pastureland and orchards, while the lower levels are better suited to growing rice. Reforesting the hills to create shade and humidity for coffee involves rethinking livestock practices, preventing cattle from wandering, and growing fodder on certain plots of land. A number of villages have already embarked on the process and are always proud to show us around their reforested slopes. The Livelihoods investment committee was approached with a proposal for a major agroforestry project, and we have agreed to become involved in an initiative to restore 18,000 hectares in 300 villages. In order to scale up operations to this degree, relying on compost made by the farms would not have been feasible, and so a new mechanical compost production facility has been set up in the valley. Using the abundant local biomass, it produces

natural fertiliser in large quantities which is then commercialised by the cooperative. The aim of this latest project is to recreate a productive ecosystem that is underpinned by smart soil, water and biodiversity management and is in harmony with the natural cycles of the living world. The idea is to stop wrestling against the natural world and instead to work with it, much as a practitioner of judo uses the strength of their sparring partner to their advantage.

A few months later, I attended a meeting of the cooperative. A small and colourful crowd had squeezed into the large hall where the sacks of coffee are stored after the beans have been harvested and dried. The ochre-red walls were decorated with those elegant Adivasi motifs featuring groups of small geometric figures rendered in black ink against an ochre-brown background and depicting scenes of village life. There were no portraits or paeans to a providential figure – in this setting, the collective is more important than the individual. The participants were sitting on floor, silent but by no means passive. I could read in their attentive faces part of the story that is being written here in this valley. A man of slender build, the president of the cooperative, began to speak. He went through the results achieved and set out some of the problems encountered. His colleagues from the cooperative office chipped in with their own observations.

Then an older woman stood up to speak. Like most of the women in the valley, her ears and nose were adorned with rings – in the Araku Valley, you display your wealth through the gold that you wear. This lady had had to contend with losing her husband a few years back, and she was proud of how well she had succeeded. A few feet away from her in the middle of the group, I spotted a woman who must have been about forty and a girl sitting next to her who must have been her daughter. They were both listening in silence, but their posture and gaze reflected how things are changing in this region. The girl was following the discussions very closely and you could tell that she was actively engaged – she was not casting her eyes down like most of the older women, and her gaze was lively and direct. My friends at Naandi later told me that the girl had enrolled onto the Nanhi Kali programme that the foundation set up a few years ago for girls of school age. Several girls have had the chance to study outside the valley and they could have decided, like many children from rural areas, to stay on in the city and choose a different path in life. But instead they have decided to return to the valley and some of them are starting to take on positions of responsibility. Are they a tangible sign of revival, or am I being overly optimistic?

Will the Adivasi of Araku suffer the same fate as most other indigenous peoples, whose cultural identity has been eclipsed by the implacable forward march of the so-called modern world? Or will they manage to hold on to that identity and in so doing carve themselves out a place – their place – in the India of tomorrow? Could their very marginalisation help them to trace out a path which will force us to question our own certainties?

