

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 |

## Building resilient education systems outside of a school

♦ KHUSHBOO AWASTHI's Mantra4Change takes the pandemic challenge head on



The Schooling and education for a large percentage of children in our country is defined by the physical space, called school. In 2020, the pandemic struck and in the blink of an eye, there were more uncertainties than solutions. Schools across the country shut down and children were forced to either learn from home or drop out of the formal education process.

At Mantra4Change, we focused our efforts on conceptualising and building a resilient education system that ensured enriching learning experiences for every child beyond the physical boundaries of schools. We supported the Department of School Education, Punjab in quickly setting up a state-level task force that created engaging digital learning resources for children to for sharing over radio, TV and Diksha mobile app. We also conceptualized one-of-a-kind state-wide Virtual Parent-Teacher Meetings (V-PTMs) to ensure that parents stayed informed and engaged in child's learning journey.

Over 20 lakhs parents were reached in an innovative, decentralised manner; today, V-PTMs have become a recurring quarterly activity and have gained positive response from parents and teachers alike. Our analysis clearly reveals that these were instrumental in retaining children in formal education system and preventing them from getting into child labour or early marriage.

The progression from anxiety to hope to accomplishment - that's what 2020 was for my team and me at Mantra4Change. We embarked on a journey of reflection, rapid pivots and growth, signing MoUs with Department of School Education in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for two new large-scale programs - Statewide School Leadership Development Program in Uttar Pradesh and Systemic Strengthening of DIETs in Bihar.

## If you cannot play outside, Play in a Box

♦ POOJA RAI's Anthill designs a play-based self-learning kit



290 million children in India, especially those from low income communities without access to digital devices, have been affected by the closing down of schools due to the pandemic. 6 millions children have dropped out of school and the number is increasing due to fear of virus or due to economic issues in their families. Importantly, many children are displaying PTSD and anxiety symptoms.

To address this situation, we at Anthill put our heads together to design a play based learning kit called 'Play in a Box'. Each box contains games helping children in their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. These games are open ended and have many play variations so that the child will remain engaged for the next 6 months with just one set of boxes. We have also customised the games in local languages and regional context. This makes it very scalable and yet personalised.

Over the years, Anthill has been using play as an important tool for holistic development. It has impacted over 150,000 children by building interactive and upcycled playgrounds in government schools and public spaces. The Play in Box is merely a natural extension of our belief that play is not a luxury, it is a necessity for the holistic development of every child.

## Reaching the world in the times of Covid

♦ Covid nudges VASANTHI VELURI's Peoli line of clothing into world of online marketing



The pandemic induced lockdown brought us to a complete halt and we managed to allay the anxieties of our artisans by taking care of them during the period. However, the uncertainties of the pandemic had us worried because we knew we had to take care of our women. We needed to ensure some form of cashflow and work for them inspite of no incoming money.

Crowd funding from our existing customer base helped meet some of our needs but clearly we needed to have a strategy in place to tide through the times. We had started B2C to a B2B model pre-covid itself; following the lockdown we decided to move into the online space in order to reach buyers across the world. And what a move that was! We observed a stark spike in interest from all over the world for sustainable artisan-made products. It seems as if everything we have stood for till now is aligning with what the world is beginning to lean towards.

We received enquiries from buyers and organizations from the US, Korea, Middle East, even Australia to our delight! We have always emphasized on the critical need for developing alternative methods of production in the fashion industry and the past year has been a wake-up call for everyone. While not the best way to get here, we are relieved nevertheless about these shifts in the mindsets of people.

In October 2020, our brand won DesignIndia magazine's India's Best Design Award and were also honoured to be one of the 20 organizations from India selected at the Industry Disruptor Bootcamp organized by the WeEmpowerAsia, UN Women and the DO School Berlin where we worked with large organizations like H&M and Tchibo to help find sustainable alternatives for their production practices.

These are positive shifts we are observing in the apparel industry - accelerated by the challenges we were faced with this year. While it is a relief to see this happen, it is still as critical and imperative that we all work towards replicating as well as creating many such models to reverse the effects of climate change in whichever fields we may be in.

## A livelihood venture for the rural women that plays by the book

♦ AYESHNA KALYAN's livelihood venture Varitra starts a community library



Varitra has kickstarted its Community Library program with village Rasulpur Kalan (Karnal).

The initiative aims at digitalising current rural school libraries to create a reading and learning space for 21st-century learners. It will help rural teachers and children use digital content - an essential skill for 21st-century learning. The first library shall be unveiled by late March 2021 in association with Shiv Nadar School, Gurugram.

## Empowerment through entrepreneurship for Her

♦ OVI K YEPHTO leads the implementation of the GHZ Project Her&amp;Now



Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH is implementing the project 'Economic Empowerment of Women Entrepreneurs and Start-ups by Women' on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and in partnership with the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), Govt of India, to support aspiring and existing women entrepreneurs in India.

Under the name of 'Her&Now', the project aims to contribute to a more enabling environment for women-led enterprises in India. Dhriti - The Courage Within is the implementation partner in North East Region of India. Ovi K Yephtho has been leading the implementation of Project at Dhriti.

Through this project, she has been working closely with women entrepreneurs from across the eight states of North East, providing structured incubation and acceleration support. The project is in its 2nd cohort of implementation and will be open to accepting 3rd cohort by March 2021.

Ovi has also helped in setting up helpline, WeTalk! to provide business-related and mental well-being support to women entrepreneurs. Another recent initiative is Rise Up North East which is a campaign to provide financial access to women entrepreneurs through social lending platform.

## Sowing a new vision during the pandemic

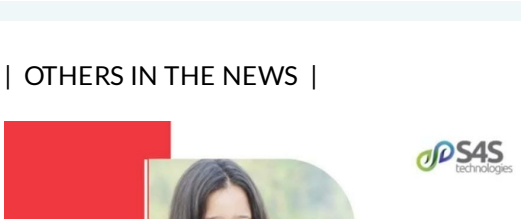
♦ ZEINORIN STEPHEN's venture Hill Wild diversifies into spices during the pandemic



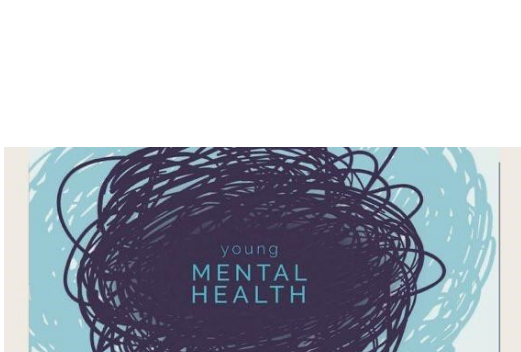
Hill Wild took a leap of faith, during the lockdown, collaborating with more Indigenous farmers to plant crops such as King chillies, turmeric, ginger, perilla seeds promising them that they would buy all the produce.

When lockdown approached the year end, the produce purchased provided Hill Wild the opportunity to diversify from chocolates into spices. This diversification has benefitted the farmers the most and the spices are being exported to US, Switzerland and are also selling locally. More indigenous farmers now share the same vision of organic farming and are collaborating with Hill Wild.

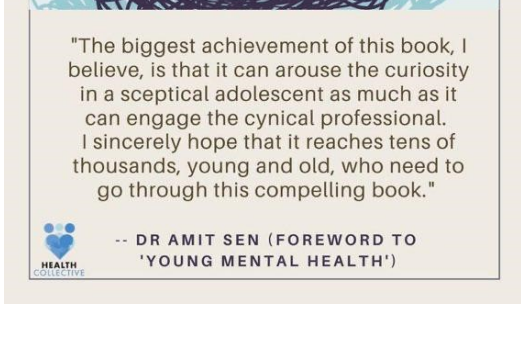
## | OTHERS IN THE NEWS |



**NIDHI PANT's** S4S Technologies uses innovative technology to restore and add value to India's inefficient agricultural supply chain. The company closed a \$1.75 Million pre-series A round on October 16, 2020 led by Acumen Fund and joined by return investor Factor[e] Ventures and (C-SAW) to expand into new markets and improve their technology and consumable product offerings.



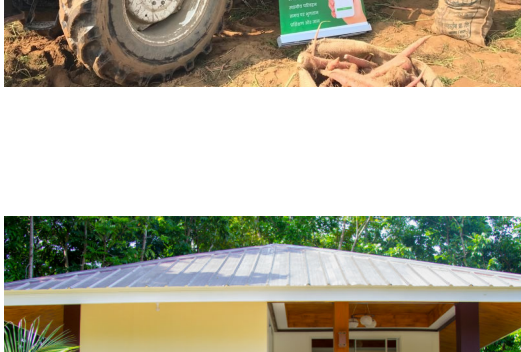
**AMRITA TRIPATHI's** book *Young Mental Health* was launched virtually. It earned a foreword and high praise from leading Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist Dr. Amit Sen; some art postcards shared with patrons thanks to artist and young mental health advocate Ishita Mehra.



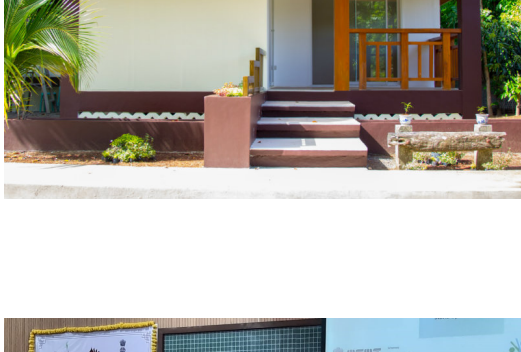
**ANU MEENA's** Agrowave has raised \$500K in Pre-Series A funding from US-based angel investor Sekhar Puli to create an integrated supply network of mobile pickup stations. Agrowave is working with 3.5K farmers in Delhi, Haryana and Punjab, using mobile pickup stations to reach farmers at the farm gate instead of bringing them to mandis and other markets.



**SHRUTI PANDEY's** Strawcture is a part of the IIM-Calcutta Innovation program and also received 30 Lac funding as OGD. Strawcture Eco is also one of the 5 startups selected for Brigade Reap Accelerator program which is the 1st Real Estate Accelerator program.



**SHUBHA KHADE** held dialogues with civil society organisations and grassroots entrepreneurs across India to understand their challenges and needs. Based on this assessment, ISEED designed and prototyped a training module for grassroots entrepreneurs and CSO staff in the vernacular.



**AYESHNA KALYAN** has been named as a co-founding member at WISEN (Women in Indian Social Entrepreneurs Network) by Amani Institute in association with US Consulate Chennai and Ananta Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE) Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs.