

Eco startup Forest Post celebrates traditional knowledge of Adivasis



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Manju Vasaudevan (right) says Forest Post values the knowledge of the forest dwellers. Photo: Special arrangement

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Kochi: Manju Vasaudevan calls herself an accidental entrepreneur. She is one, for she was trained to be an ecologist – a profession that is likely to look at the world of business with caution since profit often comes at the cost of the environment.

That said, Manju's business is something only a person familiar with the nuances of ecology can pursue. Forest Post, essentially a social startup, is engaged in making and selling value-added products from minor forest produces (MFP).

MFP denotes produce from various forest species in the form of fruits, seeds, leaves, barks, roots, flowers, grasses and so on.



The product categories of the company include beeswax soaps & rubs, oils & scrubs, wild food, bamboo weaves & crafts and macramé accessories. Photo: Special arrangement

Forest Post follows a cooperative model of enterprise-building, with Adivasi communities at its centre.

The company works with mainly three indigenous groups – Kadar, Malayar and Muthuvans – of central Kerala's Western Ghats. The company aims to secure sustainable livelihoods for forest-dwelling communities enabling them to find a livelihood from their traditional knowledge, according to Manju, who is based at Oorakam near Irinjalakuda in Thrissur.

Since its incorporation in 2021, Forest Post has been associating with five communities – Kadar, Muthuvar, Malayar, Hill Pulaya, Mannan and Irula -- in eight villages in Thrissur, Idukki, and Ernakulam districts. The product categories of the company include beeswax soaps & rubs, oils & scrubs, wild food, bamboo weaves & crafts and macramé accessories.

The basic raw materials are collected from the forests while additional resources for value-added products are sourced from organic markets. The company imparts necessary training to the community people for manufacturing the products. The production units, often informal ones, are set up in the Adivasi hamlets while the most active unit is at Thrissur's Kodakara. Seven people find 15 days of employment in a month there. Training is given to bamboo weavers - in treatment methods and design while youths are trained in tailoring and macramé skills.



Women at Karikkadav, the beeswax and wild food production unit, of Forest Post. Photo: Special arrangement

The sales are done mostly through the company's e-commerce platform, and expos and events. The Kochi Biennale 2023 had curated a store showcasing the products from Forest Post. Forest Post also has retailer networks in Kochi, Bengaluru and Thiruvananthapuram. Kozhikode and Chennai are set to be added to the network. The members of the manufacturing units and those involved in the collection of MFPs are paid on the basis of the work they do. In addition, the units are paid 20 per cent of the credit share.

The idea of the social startup struck Manju back in 2017 when she was working with the Livelihoods Team at River Research Centre, a grassroots NGO. She is still a board member of the NGO. The NGO had initiated discussions with indigenous Kadar and Malayar communities for building women's enterprises around the collection of MFPs and their value addition. Manju along with Sreeja K G, an agricultural economist, formed Forest Post as a limited liability partnership (LLP) when the UNDP-India's IHRML project extended support to the initiative to help streamline production, build a globally competitive brand, and strategise market linkages.

As a business Forest Post is still taking baby steps, but Manju and Sreeja have a solid sense of the philosophy behind their company. "The people who are dependent on forests often are forced to do menial jobs which don't earn them much money or dignity. At Forest Post, we value their knowledge and incentivise it," said Manju.

The company is looking for an overall scale-up that will cover the development of tools, technology, and infrastructure and market outreach. It is expecting funds and grants for the expansion.

Forest Post won the Outlook Traveller Sustainable Leadership Award GOLD category in 2022. The company also has ties with the forest department, traditional governance structures in Adivasi communities, local governments, sustainable food businesses and responsible tourism operators.

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