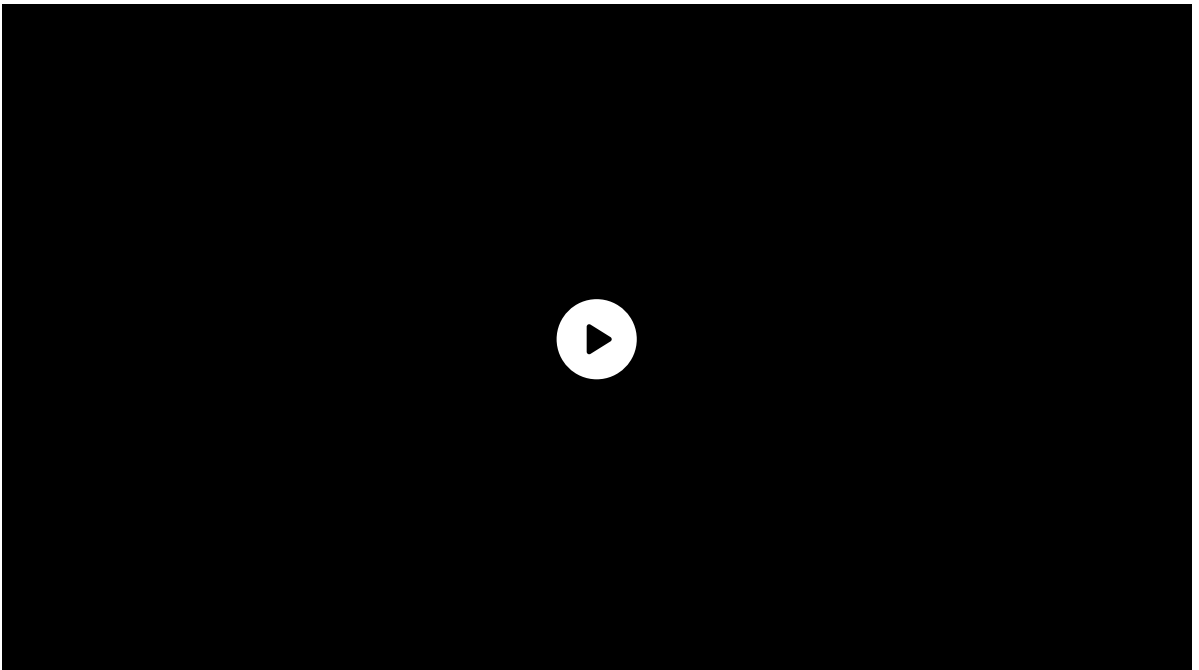


Ramesh Kotharvayal, a Paniya tribal man from Kotharvayal village near Gudalur in the Nilgiri Hills Biosphere Reserve, Tamil Nadu, is a happy and contented person. For the past five years, he has been part of a unique project that aims “to kill three birds with one stone”.

“The work is good and has provided us with a steady income. This was not the case earlier,” Kotharvayal told *Down To Earth (DTE)*.

Everyday, Ramesh and his team work to create life-sized elephants from lantana, a plant that was brought to India by colonial British foresters.



Lantana has become an invasive species in India’s forests and protected areas. It has taken over 40 per cent of Indian forests according to some estimates, displacing native flora and increasing human-wildlife conflict.

There is increasing consensus in the scientific community that there is an urgent need to get rid of it quickly, in an ecologically-sensitive manner, and by working closely.

“We work from 9 am to 5 pm. But the timings are flexible,” Ramesh told *DTE*.

“The Adivasi way of working is very resilient. All of them have multiple livelihoods: As migrant labour. As workers collecting minor forest produce. As workers in tea plantations. We did not want to disrupt that. So, in a group 10 people, half may give 4-5 hours to working on making the Lantana elephants while the other five may be doing something else,” Tarsh Thekaekara, director of The Real Elephant Collective (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_W2bG0Z6m4&feature=youtu.be) (TREC), a non-profit, social enterprise, and the driving force behind the project, told *DTE*.

Old Blighty

Adivasis making life-sized elephants from lantana provides them with employment besides decreasing lantana in the forest and raising awareness about human-wildlife coexistence.

The idea occurred to Thekaekara while he was in London. His wife Shubhra Nayar was a theatre designer with experience of making larger than life puppets. And a colleague Subhash Gautam had extensive experience in improving livelihoods. Together, they setup TREC.

“Through an NGO, we were already making furniture with lantana. But it was on a very small scale and the quality was not good. Only dedicated conservationists were buying it. It was never going to be mainstream,” said Subhash.

There was also too much risk for the tribal people making the furniture. They had to take orders from a city-based person and complete them. They then got to sell 15 pieces of furniture for Rs one lakh a month later, and then it may get rejected.

“We changed the model from low value, high volume products to high value, low volume ones,” Subhash Gautam said.

In 2015, Tarsh was in Oxford, and had partnered with an organisation called the Elephant Family. “They made 5 feet tall elephant figures from fibre reinforced plastic, got famous people to paint them, displayed them around London and auctioned them at high prices to raise money for conservation. I was very impressed with their model since it was a city-wide event. Otherwise, conservation is very niche. You have some small fundraiser somewhere. But their elephants were throughout London.”

He talked with Ruth Ganesh, the founder of the Elephant Family, and she was also on the lookout for more sustainable ways of making elephants, and was also thinking about lantana elephants.

“We started in 2015. Initially, we were making only for London. Then Covid-19 happened and there was great concern about the project. But when the exhibitions happened in London after a year-long delay in 2021, people really loved the elephants and everyone from the British Royal Family downwards bought them,” Tarsh recalled.

There are multiple components to the project: It removes lantana from the forest. It provides employment to over a 100 people.

The elephant replicas travel around the world in high-profile exhibitions which talk about human-wildlife coexistence because each elephant is a life-sized replica of a living elephant in the Nilgiris that is living alongside people.

Finally, the elephants are auctioned to create a fund that will support human-wildlife coexistence. “The elephants are sold for a huge sum and the Elephant Family create a fund for conservation that is governed by Indians and is spent in India,” he added.

Peer-to-peer

“This happened in the UK. But moving forward, it was challenging to keep funding the work. That is where Rang De’s innovative model (<https://rangde.in/the-real-elephant>) appeared to work well for us,” Subhash said.

Rang De is India's first peer-to-peer

(<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/Rang+De/FMfcgzGsmqzschbSTNJNcCDIzRxRdwXw?projector=1&messagePartId=0.1>) online micro-lending platform founded in 2008 by Smita Ramakrishna and Ramakrishna NK and is based in Bengaluru.

"We were already acquainted with Tarsh. He reached out some time back. TREC had a lot of orders coming in from the United States. And they needed working capital. What brought him and us together is the model of Rang De. It is designed ground up to work with communities at the last mile," Ramakrishna told *DTE*.

Thekaekara asked Ramakrishna and Smita to design the loan in such a way that it could be given to community representatives of tribal artisans as not all of them were very comfortable taking a loan since it was a big responsibility.

"They also wanted half-yearly repayment cycles. That is what we have done. The money goes to TREC so that it is easier to manage and the Collective will then repay the loan on behalf of the artisans," Ramakrishna said.

For Thekaekara, Rang De's model was good since going to regular banks would require collateral and the rate of interest would be much higher.

"Getting a grant is really not possible because the elephants are finally sold. That is how we got in touch with Ram and he was very interested."

So how does all this work on the ground?

"We take an authorisation from the community saying that we can transfer the loan to a third party, in this case, TREC. They can access or withdraw the money and give it to the communities whenever they have to pay them. Our partners continue to play a very important role for last mile financial access to credit," Ram noted.

Smita told *DTE*: "What we have basically done is used the peer-to-peer lending construct and repurpose it as a social lending platform to address the credit need. So, this model is definitely very unique."

TREC has created around 10 Adivasi self-help groups around Kaveri Wildlife Sanctuary, Biligiriranga Hills Sanctuary, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. These groups have 8-10 people each.

Shubhra Nayar had some interesting insights from designing the elephants. "Working with Adivasis who have such a deep knowledge of elephants has been very rewarding. With furniture, they were making an unknown product being pushed to make exactly to plan. With elephants, this dynamic is reversed. They are the experts – they were teaching us about the forms. We design the frames that give the overall shape, but it is really their skill and flow of the sticks that brings them to life.

"In every group, there are seniors and juniors. The seniors are more qualified and it is they who do most of the work," Kotharvayal told *DTE*.

The project aims to make and keep at least 200 elephants ready by next year. "By the end of this year, we are trying to organise some exhibitions in Bengaluru and other cities," according to Tarsh.

And it is not just elephant models that they make. "Lantana does not lend itself to making small things. It works well with large forms. A tiger replica the size of an elephant may be possible but one that is the size of a tiger is not. We are, however, working on making models of gaur in addition to elephants," Shubhra said.

What about other tribal communities?

"It basically depends on finding partners in different locations. Somebody from Corbett is coming next month and wants to start something similar there. But all this will need a lot of handholding and support to work," according to Thekaekara.

"We are agnostic when it comes to locations and geographies but we seek out financing gaps in the current system and see how we can create community-centric loan products so that it becomes really impactful," Smita told *DTE*.

Read more:

- Study offers clues on ecological gain of weeding out Lantana (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/study-offers-clues-on-ecological-gain-of-weeding-out-lantana-87113>)
- Alien plants growing together threatening tiger habitats: Study (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/alien-plants-growing-together-threatening-tiger-habitats-study-87247>)
- Elephant Whisperers: It can promote a nuanced understanding of the pachyderm-human relationship, say experts (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/elephant-whisperers-it-can-promote-a-nuanced-understanding-of-the-pachyderm-human-relationship-say-experts-88208>)

वन्य जीव एवं जैव विविधता (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/hindistory/wildlife-biodiversity>) से जुड़ी सभी खबरें हिंदी (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/hindistory>) में पढ़ें।

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