

# Finding the balance between entrepreneurship and Adivasi values in the Nilgiris

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A micro-enterprise 'builds capacity and skills of Adivasi women through sewing, embroidering, needle work, product design and business skills'.

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UDHAGAMANDALAM

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Adivasi women from Gudalur and Pandalur involved in the sewing of a story quilt in Ayyankolly. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

In the town of Ayyankolly, Pandalur, around 80 km from Udhagamandalam town, a small women's collective of Adivasi youth is working on knitting a quilt on which a story of the community and its reliance on the forest is

being told.

The community of youth, mostly from the Paniya, Kattunayakan and Kurumba Adivasi communities, are part of Urumala, a micro-enterprise that “builds capacity and skills of Adivasi women through sewing, embroidering, needle work, product design and business skills”.

Urumala is one of two micro-enterprise models functioning under the umbrella of the Adivasi Innovation Hub, launched by the Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD) to help generate livelihoods and develop entrepreneurship skills for Adivasi communities in the Gudalur and Pandalur regions of the Nilgiris.

## **Collectivism and sustainability**

“The goal of the Adivasi Innovation Hub is to incubate at least five Adivasi-run micro enterprises in the next five years, all driven by Adivasi values on collectivism and sustainability which can gradually be run by the Adivasi youth,” said Anil Misquith, an adviser with ACCORD.

The youth employed at Urumala, which is the name of a traditional cloth garment pouch around the waist worn by Paniya women, have been trained to produce reusable cloth sanitary pads, tote bags, laptop sleeves, travel bags, pillow covers, story quilts and wall mounts.

The story quilts and wall mounts in particular have managed to capture the imaginations of both the community members as well as prospective buyers, with the stories of the communities and their reliance on the forest being told through an ornamental needlework technique, known as “appliqué.”

“For instance, one such story is about how the Kattunayakan and Paniya honey gatherers always leave behind one portion of the hive for the bears of the forest, while keeping one portion of honey for themselves and only the remaining portion is sold to the outside world,” said Vaishnavi Sridhar, assistant programme manager at ACCORD, who helps the community design products for the market.

One of the few men workers at Urumula is B. Arun, a 19-year-old Paniya youth, who sketches the stories on paper before they are sewn into quilts and wall mounts. Mr. Arun said he had always been extremely interested in painting and drawing as a child, and was thrilled to have got a chance to do so for a living.

K. Kamini, a 21-year-old from the Paniya community in Ayyankolly, said she had been training at Urumula for the last four months. She had studied till Standard X, and was happy to be working with members of her community near her home town. “Many other young women, who see that I am working, are also wanting to now work in similar enterprises,” said Ms. Kamini.

Thangalakshmi, one of the founding team members', has been working at Urumula for three years. She said the initial training period, when they were making masks and reusable sanitary pads was difficult. "At the beginning, we were lucky if we made 10 sanitary pads a day, but now, with practice, I can make anywhere between 80–100 cloth pads," she said.

## **Two model units**

A total of 30 youth are actively involved employed in the two model units, one in Ayyankolly and the other in Srimadurai (Gudalur), which is partner-led. The second unit, Mudichalmala is supported by the Indian Yards Foundation, who provide the design and materials for the members to produce soft toys. The youth working in Mudichalmala are used solely for producing the products. The youth at Urumula meanwhile are trained and have a more hands-on approach towards designing the product, sourcing materials, accounting, marketing and other aspects of running an enterprise, which helps them understand the production and market-chains, said Mr. Misquith.

K.C. Krishnan, area-in-charge of Erumad for ACCORD, said the creation of jobs for Adivasi youths, which could eventually lead to full ownership of successful businesses, was extremely important. "The success of such micro-enterprises could stop the migration of

Adivasi youth away towards industrial centres in Coimbatore, Tirupur and other regions in search of work, ensuring the community and the forests they depend on remains protected,” said Mr. Krishnan.