

LOVE & TOIL

A Celebration Of Women's Entrepreneurship

Sinal Shah

Nisha Jaiswal

Vanshika Goenka

Anusha Bhushan

Priyadharshini Krishnan



MOMPREENEUR: Priyadharshini Krishnan started natural-healthcare brand Root and Soil while raising a newborn daughter; here, she takes her young one for a walk on the company's coconut farm near Coimbatore

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A celebration of women's entrepreneurship

What does it take to chase a dream? To leave behind a world of comfort and walk into the unknown. To persist in the face of failure.

We ask five women entrepreneurs to tell us their stories. Of joy and hardship. Of faith in a plan and the struggle to nurture it. Of love for an idea and the toil behind its success.

Our five entrepreneurs hail from places as diverse as Perth, Mumbai, Coimbatore, Hazaribagh and Bengaluru and operate in domains ranging from e-commerce and education to healthcare and F&B. But they are united in their passion, their willingness to take risks, and their appetite for hard work.

It is this love and toil we seek to celebrate.



OUT OF THE BOX



Sinal Shah

mind behind

Petsy

A pet dog strolled into Sinal Shah's structured life in Australia. And sparked her pursuit of fulfillment in faraway Mumbai, through storms natural and man-made

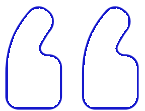
Sinal Shah thought she had everything mapped out. She had quit a thriving career as a tax consultant with a 'big-four' firm in Perth for a new life in India. She and husband Veer Shah had toiled for months, studying the market, meeting potential suppliers and customers, building a website, and setting up a warehouse. Everything was in place for their online pet care business to begin operations.

And then the rains came, lashing Mumbai with a fury Sinal had no conception of. A week from the launch, the warehouse in Santa Cruz was flooded. "I remember walking through knee-deep water on the road, trying to enter the warehouse," she recalls. "Boxes were just floating everywhere. Products were hanging off the shelves. **It was a shock of every kind: emotional, mental, and physical. It was devastating.**"

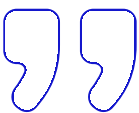
Sinal video-called her mother. 'Everything is ruined,' she sobbed. 'I have no idea what to do.' It turns out that she did know what to do. In the weeks, months and (three) years that have followed that August morning, Sinal has built Petsy with the same furious work ethic that guided her that day.



Caring for strays is a big part of Petsy's mission



“So often we get stuck in the idea because we are waiting for the perfect business. But the perfect business does not exist. Just get started.”

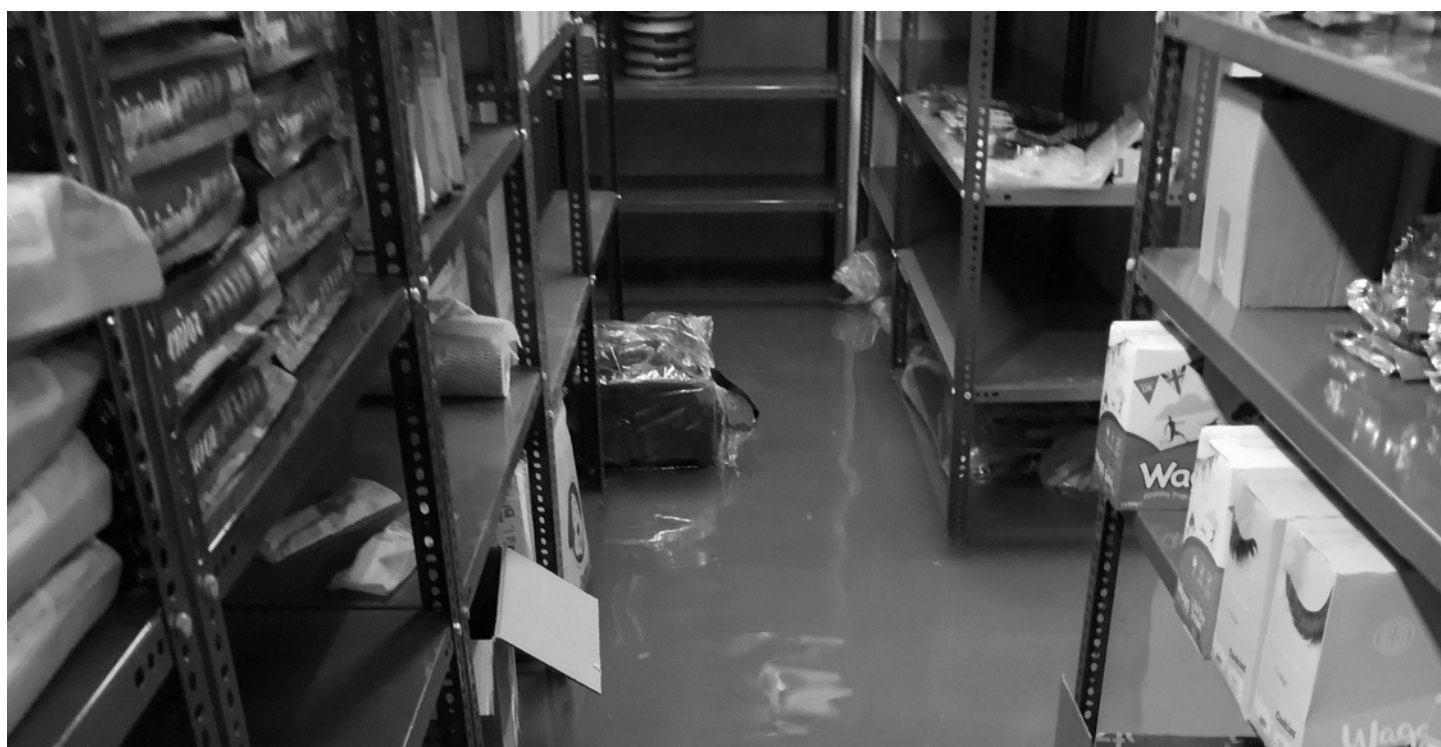


“Take a moment, let the tears flow, do whatever you have to do. Then get straight back to business. Think. Work out ways of fixing that problem. If you believe in your idea, your passion, don't ever give up.”

Sinal, who spent her childhood in Kenya before emigrating with her Gujarati family to Australia, had discovered that passion when a white Bichon Frise, Baxter, walked into her life. “When you have a pet of your own, you start noticing other animals around you. Veer and I were visiting India and we saw a drastic difference in the standard of pet care compared to Australia. It gave us this idea that we could make a difference to pet care here. That we could truly have an impact.”

And so the bright, young chartered accountant who'd always dreamt of making partner resigned from PwC to walk into the unknown. **“Somewhere deep within me, I had this feeling that I'm sitting behind a desk and all I'm doing is saving another client a million dollars.** My team, my job was amazing. But there was that nagging feeling deep down that I need something a little more fulfilling.”

But the move to India was far from straightforward. Although Sinal and Veer spoke Hindi and Gujarati, adapting to a new culture was going to take time. Their Australian background had equipped the Shahs with a strong DIY mindset. So they set up the warehouse by themselves, taking delivery of cargo, unpacking boxes, and stacking shelves.



The flooded Petsy warehouse in Santa Cruz, Mumbai

“We’d unload boxes at the warehouse during the day. Then at night we’d go home and work on the website. We had some very long days. But ask any entrepreneur – you have to put in those hours.”

There was plenty of discouragement, from suppliers or acquaintances or even people they barely knew. “I’d get these comments: ‘Oh, you guys are NRIs, are you going to adjust to India? Why are you here? You are out of your mind. India is a very difficult place to do business.’ And that’s literally how the meeting would start,” Sinal laughs.

“But one thing I’ve always believed in is my ability to work through anything. I never let that negativity get in the way.”

Petsy has grown rapidly since its launch in September 2019. The company stocks over 5000 products (up from 2000 two years ago) and the customer base has swelled to over 50,000 pet-parents. But to Sinal, “the main thing is how much Petsy has grown as a brand and how much we mean to pet parents. We want to become a partner to them. We’re not just a product or supplies’ brand.”

Has her journey as an entrepreneur been any harder because she is a woman? “Absolutely not. **At the start, people would say, 'Oh Sinal, you're helping Veer in the business.'** And I'd be quick to say, **'No I'm not helping him. We're working on it together.'** From the start I was very sure about what role I played. Nobody has treated me any differently because I'm a woman.”

Sinal looks at entrepreneurship with an uncomplicated clarity. “So often we get stuck in the idea because we are waiting for the perfect business,” she says. “But the perfect business does not exist. If you believe in your idea, just get started.”



With Baxter back home in Australia

**NO
CHILD
LEFT
BEHIND**



Nisha Jaiswal

mind behind

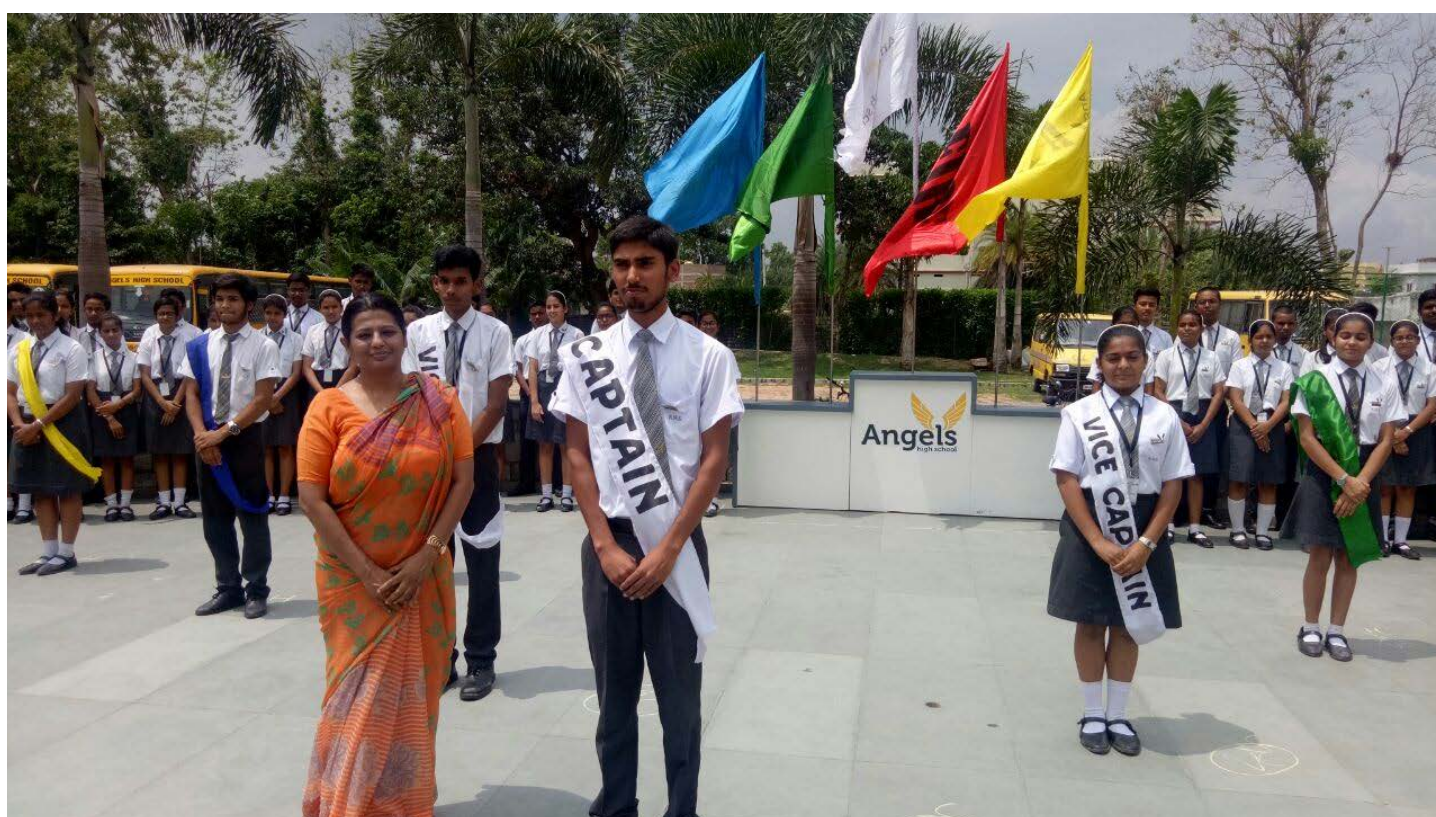
Little Angels

Nisha Jaiswal believed no student deserved to be branded weak. She would not let anything stand in the way of her mission, not even the skepticism of a small Bihar town in the nineties

The day after she had thrown the school doors open, Nisha Jaiswal wondered if she'd made a mistake. Little Angels Montessori School was eager to welcome the children of Hazaribagh, but the little angels themselves did not seem particularly interested. Nisha had waited that first day with her admission forms, but not one had been sold.

"I was very apprehensive. I thought I'd made a mistake, and should've stuck to being a teacher rather than take this risk," she recalls. There was no luck on the second morning either. It wasn't until the third day that Nisha was finally able to find any takers for her project.

"Our first admission form was picked up after three days. The next day, two more were sold." More parents trickled in eventually, and Little Angels commenced operations with a first batch of 25 students.



Nisha at Angels High School, one of Hazaribagh's finest

It was the summer of 1998: M.S. Dhoni was still a teenager awaiting his Ranji Trophy debut, the state of Jharkhand did not exist, and women in Hazaribagh – a mining town some 100km north of Ranchi – were not exactly renowned for their entrepreneurial vision.

Some two decades later, Nisha does not doubt her abilities as an educator. She is a director of four schools in Jharkhand – three, including Little Angels Montessori, in Hazaribagh and a fourth in Koderma – and watches over 8000 students and a team of 300 faculty.



“When I started out, it was very rare that a woman did something here. I had to put up with a lot of comments. I believed things had to be done a certain way, and I was firm about it.”

“Education is something that comes only with passion. If you don't have the passion for it you shouldn't enter the field at all. Because you are affecting so many lives,” she says. Nisha discovered her passion for teaching soon after marriage. She was married young, at 18, and graduated afterwards, with the full support of her family. She found teaching her kids a joy and when an opportunity to teach opened up at Wonderland – a little Montessori school run out of a garage – she jumped at it.

“I was always branded an average student. So when I taught, I could relate to students who did not understand things immediately. When I sat down with children branded weak or average, I tried to see how to make them understand better. It had to be practical, it had to be a two-way interaction.

“Other teachers soon started coming up to me. ‘I couldn't work with that student, how could you do it?’ they’d ask. I could because I had that passion.”

After two years as a teacher at Wonderland, Nisha felt it was time to open a school of her own. Her husband, Manish Jaiswal – the current Hazaribagh MLA – and her parents-in-law were wholly encouraging.

Not everyone was, though. **“People dismissed me when I opened Little Angels. They thought, ‘Here’s this woman from this wealthy family. She’s not doing this for a living. She’s not serious.’ A lot of people wrote me off. ‘Achha kholo...chhe mahine mein to band karke vaapas aana hain,’ they said.”**



Nisha Jaiswal during her early days at Little Angels

But she kept at it, with a strong belief in her interactive method of instruction. “I did not want anyone to push children to go to school. I wanted them to come on their own. I wanted kids to have fun. Once they start having fun, you won't have to push anyone to study.”

As academic performance at Little Angels peaked, interest soared. “Our children got into all the reputed schools in town. That gave me confidence.”

Nisha completed her B.Ed. programme and eight years after her first venture, opened Angels High School. “Our students now top the district nearly every year. Nobody will believe that in such a small town we have a school like this.”



Nisha awards a medal at a prize ceremony

The public skepticism of the early years has evaporated. **“When I started out, it was very rare that a woman did something here,”** she says. **“People said a lot of things. They said I was arrogant because I had money. I believed things had to be done a certain way, and I was firm about it.”**

The results speak for themselves. Every academic year.

WOMEN IN THE ROOM



Vanshika Goenka

mind behind

Kool Kanya

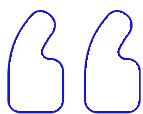
An all-male design meeting for feminine hygiene products got Vanshika Goenka thinking about women in conference rooms; she set about building one just for them

Growing up as one of two daughters, Vanshika Goenka had always heard it asked: 'Who's going to work for the family? You have no sons.' So she had always been passionate, she says, about women's rights.

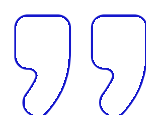
But the seed for Kool Kanya was firmly planted the day Vanshika, as a young manager engaged in market research for her company, found herself in a conference room full of men. They were gathered there to discuss design improvements to their product: a sanitary pad. **"And that's when I started asking the question, 'Where are the women in the room?' If for a feminine hygiene product you have only men in charge, then what's the state elsewhere?"** That's when I felt we needed more women in the workplace." And so was born Kool Kanya, a women-only community for career support, a 'safe space' – as the company calls itself – for aspiring women professionals to ask questions.



'Where are the women in the room?' asks Vanshika



“If a man meets 80% of the criteria for a job, he will apply for it, whereas a woman with the same skill-set will think she doesn’t meet the requirements.”



“In our culture women grow up to have lower self-esteem and self-confidence than their male counterparts. **If a man meets 80% of the criteria for a job, he will apply for it, whereas a woman with the same skill-set will think she doesn’t meet the requirements.** We see this time and again,” says Vanshika.

“With women, work is also closely intermingled with personal lives. Women go through so many changes with marriage and having children. They will need more help, advice and support through those phases. That is why I wanted to create Kool Kanya – a place to ask questions, a place they did not have earlier.”

Vanshika only had the germ of an idea in her head. She knew she wanted to create an online community but there was much that needed fleshing out. She knew little about the operational parts of running a website; nor was she certain how the venture would generate revenue.

“Getting people to buy into this idea was very hard at that point. **When you say you want to do something for women, they say, 'Achha tum NGO chala raheen ho.'** Which this really isn't. Doing something for a cause does not make it a non-profit.”

But Vanshika pressed on, convinced her idea had merit. She started with a blog and a group on Facebook, and then hired freelancers to build the platform. The business was bootstrapped before family and friends pitched in.

In the three years since it was founded, Kool Kanya has grown to a community of 300,000 users, and has reached over a million women. The platform now also hosts live learning programmes and a marketplace for freelancers. “I’m still working on a lot of things: how to monetize the community better, how to make it sustainable,” Vanshika admits. **“As a sole founder, building the right team – someone to stick with you through all the ups and downs – is a challenge. It takes time to show results. But you don’t need to figure it all out on day one. You just have to take the first step.”**



The company's first 'gamechangers' networking night

It is apparent to Vanshika, from her own experience and the stories she hears, that women entrepreneurs need support. **“When I was trying to raise funds, one investor asked me when I intended to get married. Would he have asked a man the same question?”** A friend from the community had to be accompanied by her husband as she built her honey business. “Because the farmers she had to deal with refused to talk to a woman. You hear these stories. It’s challenging for women but it is getting a lot better.”

But then there are the positive stories that convince her that her work is making an impact. **“That’s what keeps me going. When someone has done a course and then gone on to start something, or when someone has found a job through the community. I want to impact their lives.”**



Impacting lives of other women is what keeps Vanshika going

Vanshika’s vision for Kool Kanya is to make it the one destination for any support women need: to build a career, to learn something new or simply to find a friend. “Becoming an entrepreneur requires a degree of risk and self-confidence,” she says. “A lot of studies say women are less risk-taking in general. You also need mentors and role-models. Women need to see other women who have made it.”

TRUTH IN A BOTTLE



Anusha Bhushan

mind behind

Smoodies

Anusha Bhushan was determined to go where few in the packaged foods industry had dared to venture: creating something sincerely healthy. Even if it came with extraordinary challenges

Last summer, Anusha Bhushan found herself in a bit of a predicament. As the country reeled under the impact of the second wave of the pandemic, Smoodies' CEO and co-founder wrestled with a nasty problem. Demand for the company's juices and smoothies was at its peak – given the time of year – but half the workforce at her manufacturing facility had been diagnosed with Covid. Anusha was happy none of them needed hospitalisation, but she worried about fulfilling the growing pile of orders.

And so she decided to lend her workers a hand. Anusha and her co-founder Siddhartha Deb set off for the factory, where for 10 days they filled and capped bottles, printed and applied labels, ran quality-checks, and shipped products out. “We wore three masks all the time,” she laughs. “It was funny. It was a frenzy. It was panic.”



Anusha examines bottles at her facility; Smoodies will not outsource manufacturing, she says

This was not a scene Anusha had probably envisioned when she quit her management consulting job to start up on her own. She had developed a keen interest in packaged foods – having come to rely on them during a relentless stint as a banking analyst in London some years before – and had studied the industry.

Packaged food in India simply did not tick all the boxes she thought necessary, she found. So Anusha decided she'd solve this problem, creating something that was healthy, minimally processed (but shelf-stable), tasty, and yet delivered value for money. She studied the Indian market and settled on the idea of selling fruit in a bottle – a beverage with no sugar or additives of any sort.



“

“Will you even be able to do it? Manufacturing is hard, food is hard. How are you going to manage labour? How will you do this alone?” they asked me. I don't like showing off my credentials but I got used to doing that.”

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The early days were tough. Anusha's husband was building a start-up of his own – their dates of incorporation are a day apart – and both teams spent the first few months working feverishly out of the couple's apartment in Bengaluru.

“We had two dining tables – one for Smoodies and the other for his start-up,” she recalls. “I just sat down and said, ‘What all do I have to learn?’ I spent weeks connecting with people on LinkedIn, trying to talk to experts like food technologists.”

Anusha was clear that she did not want to outsource manufacturing to a vendor: she did not want to lose control over the process if it meant any compromise on her 'zero additives' philosophy. Being honest with her customers was central to her enterprise; she was not going to hide behind a fog of information on a back-label. Even if it meant working out of her 60 sq. ft. kitchen.

"We literally started in my kitchen, developing products and trying out recipes. Once we were confident of selling, we rented a slightly larger manufacturing space."



'Fruit in a bottle' is how Anusha describes the Smoodies concept

For the first five months – until she was joined by her co-founder – Anusha worked alone, spending half her time on the road, taking her products to retailers, asking them for shelf space. Being a woman made that entrepreneurial journey harder in the early stages. "I'm in the food industry. **And when people hear I make juice for a living there can be all sorts of scales that they can imagine. They think, 'Maybe she's planning to run a home kitchen.' Whereas my vision was to establish an FMCG brand,**" she says.

There was general scepticism all around. "'Will you even be able to do it? Manufacturing is hard, food is hard. How are you going to manage labour? How will you do this alone?' they asked me. I don't like showing off my credentials (IIM Calcutta, Bain & Company) but I got used to doing that, just so there was some credibility there."

It is harder being a woman entrepreneur, she believes, if you are just starting out. “Women in general have slightly lower confidence and in general take fewer risks. **So in their early days it's harder for women to put themselves out there, network, meet people and get the answers. But it's not all women, and it's changing.**”

Smoodies is nearly six years old now and although Covid forced the business into a painful transition (to a chiefly-D2C model), revenues are back up again. The drinks are manufactured in a 3000 sq. ft. facility, and production capacity has grown by a factor of 20 since they started.

“In a way the pandemic was a bit of a blessing,” Anusha says. **“Covid helped us build a more efficient business model. We know what our consumer wants and we are able to deliver it. We have established our brand now.”**



Anusha Bhushan with co-founder Siddhartha Deb

MOTHERS ON A FARM



Priyadharshini Krishnan

mind behind

Root and Soil

Priyadharshini Krishnan strove to find the best natural oil for her baby; she realised she was not the only one on that quest

When the patches of dry skin on her infant daughter's cheeks refused to go away, Priyadharshini Krishnan dialled her friend in Pollachi. She had tried a bunch of commercially available baby products without much success; it was now time for a natural remedy.

“Megala had her coconut farm there. She had learnt the traditional methods of making oil. So I asked her for some,” she says. Megala duly extracted a bottle of coconut oil by hand, and sent it over to Coimbatore, an hour's drive north. The allergy disappeared.

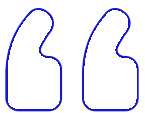
The two women marvelled at the magical impact the oil had had. Megala had only recently given birth to a daughter herself, and they decided it would not be too bad an idea to keep more of the oil ready for use. A few bottles were sent out to friends and family; they phoned back with gushing reviews.



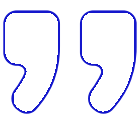
The founders with their all-woman workforce

As word spread and demand for this oil – with seemingly miraculous properties – grew, Priyadharshini and Megala wondered if there was a business opportunity here. And so early in 2020, just as the pandemic was making itself known to the world, the two friends got down to work.

“Even simple products from nature were having a tremendous impact on baby skin. We were awestruck. It just made us pause and think about what we were using every day and what was around us,” says Priyadharshini.



“It’s not wrong to ask for support. You don’t have to be a superwoman. You don’t have to try to do everything on your own. It’s not something to be proud of.”



Root and Soil – as the business was formally named – was initially marketed among a small network of friends and new mothers, offering fully natural oils and creams for babies. Today, the brand sells over 35 products. “We started off with three simple varieties of coconut oil. It was pure, natural. Our friends loved the smell and texture. We wanted to sell something we actually used on our own babies at home.”

But jumping full-time into a new venture was not an easy decision to make. A textile engineer (with a postgraduate degree), Priyadharshini foresaw a steady career path at the apparel firm that employed her in Coimbatore. “It was hard to decide. **My career was different and Megala as an agriculturist was doing something entirely different. But we had to do it. We followed our hearts. We thought, ‘Let’s see how it goes.’”**

Growth was gradual and organic, and came with no marketing spend. “We started the business with Rs.5000 in hand. We could not afford to go to a marketing agency or a freelancer. I taught myself everything, watching videos on filing GST and registering as an MSME. Mothers who liked our products spread the word. That changed the game for us,” says Priyadharshini.

Production and research took place on the farm in Pollachi, with an all-woman cast of workers developing new products as the demand for them arose. “One mother requested a diaper rash balm. We worked on it and launched it; it’s now one of our bestsellers.”



Megala poses with her daughter at the coconut farm in Pollachi; Megala grew up on the farm

Running a business is hard enough; doing it while tending to an infant can be a battle. **“We were two mothers with young babies. It was the pandemic; daycare was not an option. So our families stepped in; my father-in-law would pack our orders at times,”** Priyadharshini smiles. “It’s not wrong to ask for support. You don’t have to be a superwoman. You don’t have to try to do everything on your own. It’s not something to be proud of.”

Root and Soil is a women-only enterprise; the founders prefer it that way. “We want to keep it that way. Because we feel that connection. When we leave our children on the farm and head out for work, the women know how to take care of them. It’s like a family here.”

The founders’ daughters are now three years old; they’ve grown up with the business. “It’s nice that they grow up seeing us working and running a business,” says Priyadharshini. “It’s so empowering.”