

EDITORIAL



Ved Arya
Founder, Buddha Institute

Dear Readers, *All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony...*

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing...
These two lines from Tagore's Gitanjali inspire us to continue our journey through myriad challenges, as we recruit the fourth cohort of Buddha Fellows, while having completed six years of Buddha Institute.

What is the impact of Buddha Institute's work on the lives of the people at the last mile? You will be elated to read the heartwarming story of Ashwini Tai and Supriya Tai. They set up an oil extraction machine in Vadapuri village of Maharashtra, following the advice of Sarojini Phadtare, a Buddha Fellow. They now sell groundnut cold-pressed oil rather than raw groundnut, coconut cold-pressed oil rather than raw coconut. What's more, other village women can also use the machine. Sarojini buys the cold-pressed oil made by these rural women entrepreneurs and markets it under the Gud2Eat brand.

Does mentorship work for entrepreneurs? Do entrepreneurs care to seek advice? We often struggle to find a "good" answer to this question at the Institute. Sanjay Guha, mentor to two development entrepreneurs (aka Buddha Fellows), lets you inside his brain as to how he approaches the problem. He customizes advice to suit the needs of people behind the wheel. "I do my homework," he says, including visiting the production facilities to see the operations firsthand.

Research tells us that peer-to-peer learning is the best for entrepreneurs. Buddha Entrepreneurship Clinic is a 3-day residential program for Buddha Fellows to come together and learn from each other. We organize four quarterly BECs in a year. You will read about two such BECs - one held at Panchgani in June and the other at Manesar in September.

We also bring you the news about recruitment of a new cohort of Buddha Fellows and the website that we are renewing.

We are happy to tell you about the meetings of the Indian Board and the US Board - that means someone is keeping us on our toes.

Further, please join me in welcoming Arvind and Ananya to the Buddha Institute team. Arvind Kumar brings 17 plus years of experience in the development sector, a decade at the grassroots in Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh. Ananya Srivastava, freshly minted at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, is closely working with Buddha Fellows in Maharashtra, learning the vital details of entrepreneurial life.

I am happy to introduce Ananya as a sub-editor of the Buddha Institute. She has a great way to communicate - her thoughts flow like a river. She has edited, she has written two articles on her own, and she has interviewed people for the pieces that appear in this issue. All in all, a great job! Last but not least, we bring you cheer in terms of the groundbreaking ceremony of the BI campus.

Do not hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions or concerns or if you have any suggestions to improve our work at Buddha Institute - please write to communications@buddhainstitute.org

Wishing you well!
Ved

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Cold Pressed Success: The Rise of Rural Women Entrepreneurs



In the small, unassuming village of Vadapuri, in Pune district of rural Maharashtra, the story of Ashwini Tai and Supriya Tai is one of quiet yet powerful transformation. Daughters-in-law of a family of eight—with aging in-laws and young children—money was tight, and opportunities were few and far in between. Their family's primary income came from cultivating groundnut on a small land parcel owned by the men, supplemented by produce from a few coconut trees within their compound. In the non-harvest months, they worked as farm laborers to make ends meet. Despite being educated, Ashwini and Supriya struggled to find a way to use their knowledge to rise above these hurdles in a patriarchal setup that offered women few chances. Yet, their spirits remained unbroken. With the unwavering support of Sarojini Phadtare, a Buddha Fellow from the 2023-25 cohort, they found their way to a future no one saw coming.

Sarojini recognized the family's hardships and the untapped potential of these two women. True entrepreneurs at heart, they transformed an obstacle into an opportunity. It began with a single idea: what if they could add value to the crops they were already growing? Convincing Ashwini, Supriya, and their family to make a partial investment and connecting them to institutions providing financial aid, they proposed setting up an oil mill—a solution to their prayers. Sarojini even offered a buyback agreement for the oil produced, instilling confidence in the women and their family. Taking a leap of faith, they set up a cold-pressed oil extraction machine, a modest tool that would prove to be their lifeline. With Ashwini and Supriya managing the oil mill, the groundnuts they once sold for ₹95-100/Kg were transformed into cold-pressed oil, fetching ₹280/Liter. Similarly, coconuts purchased at ₹110/Kg were turned into oil that sold for ₹380/Liter. For Ashwini and Supriya, this did more than just increase the family's income—it gave them the self-belief and a sense of ownership that they had been lacking. But their story does not end with themselves. In a beautiful display of community spirit, they found ways to give back. Rather than keeping the benefits of their oil mill to themselves,

Ashwini and Supriya decided to offer free oil extraction services to their neighbors, in exchange for keeping the leftover residue, which they sold as cattle feed and manure to other farmers at a profitable ₹50-60/kg. This initiative not only earned them extra income but also wove them deeper into the fabric of their community, strengthening bonds and fostering a culture of mutual support.

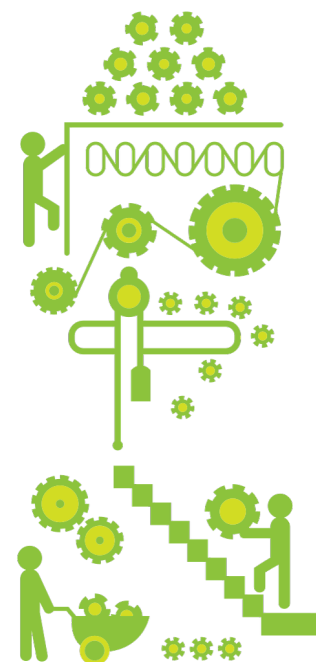
Today, they earn a steady ₹10,000-12,000 in monthly profits. With pride, Supriya Tai shares that she no longer needs to work in other people's fields. "We have our own oil mill now," she says with a smile, her voice filled with the quiet pride of someone who has taken charge of her destiny. The income from their venture ensures their children receive an education and that the family's needs are met without compromise. Ashwini and Supriya's partnership with Gud2Eat has flourished, bringing their products to a wider range of customers by supplying cold-pressed oil under the brand's name. Their oils now contribute to healthier, more sustainable food choices for consumers while supporting the livelihoods of dryland farmers like themselves. Sarojini continues to support Ashwini and Supriya's oil mill, helping them acquire more clients who can purchase in bulk, ensuring their mill never goes idle.

Sarojini has been the wind in Ashwini and Supriya's sails, providing support every step of the way—from conceptualization and connections to market linkage and effective utilization of the facility, its products and byproducts. This story is one of resilience, of women finding their voices in a world that often works against them. It is a story of empowerment, showing how even the smallest innovation, when fueled by determination and the support of a caring community, can create waves of change. It is equally a story of Buddha Fellows who continue to be drivers of social change, going above and beyond self-interest to serve others. Ashwini and Supriya Tai are not just entrepreneurs, and neither is Sarojini — they are symbols of hope and the power of local enterprise, lighting the way for others who long for a better future and for those who want to help create it.



Mentorship in Action: Sanjay Guha

In the fast-paced and often unpredictable world of startups, mentorship can be the invisible hand that turns potential into progress. For VR Subba Reddy, founder of Mibbles, and Suhas Ramegowda, founder of The Good Doll, that guiding force has come in the form of Sanjay Guha—a seasoned business leader with a wealth of global experience. Over the course of their association, Sanjay’s mentorship has not only shaped their enterprises but also profoundly impacted their personal growth as leaders. Their journey together paints a vivid picture of how the right mentor can empower entrepreneurs to unlock new levels of success.



Sanjay Guha: The Architect of Transformation



Sanjay Guha’s career is a masterclass in leadership and global business strategy. His professional path has spanned continents and industries, from his early days at Hindustan Unilever in India to senior leadership roles with Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Indonesia, the Nordics, and the UK & Ireland. Today, while consulting for Coca-Cola and other international companies, Sanjay dedicates much of his time to mentoring startups—focusing on sectors that drive both economic and social impact.

For Sanjay, mentoring isn’t just about business; it’s about the people behind the business.

“Entrepreneurship is tough, but social entrepreneurship is even harder. You’re building a business while trying to uplift an entire ecosystem,” Sanjay explains. His motivation comes from the lives transformed by these enterprises—women who achieve financial freedom, farmers who gain dignity through their work. “Seeing the joy and empowerment of these individuals is what makes all the effort worthwhile.”

Mibbles: Leading a Millet Movement



Mibbles, led by VR Subba Reddy, is on a mission to revolutionize the way we think about sustainable food. Based in Andhra Pradesh, Mibbles is at the forefront of India’s millet movement, working across the entire value chain—from farming and processing to marketing and sales. But Mibbles is more than just a business; it’s a movement that empowers over 1,500 farmers by offering them guaranteed buy-back deals even before they sow their crops. This commitment to fair trade ensures a stable livelihood for farmers and strengthens agricultural communities.

The enterprise’s product range spans millet grains, ravas, flours, and processed snacks like ladus and biscuits. Additionally, their cloud kitchen offers freshly prepared millet-based meals, serving nutritionally dense food to sectors like healthcare. Mibbles’ commitment to promoting the benefits of this ancient grain is not only transforming India’s agricultural landscape but also contributing to the health and wellness of its consumers.

The Good Doll: Crafting Livelihoods through Empowerment

In a world of fast fashion and disposable toys, The Good Doll stands out as a beacon of sustainability and tradition. Suhas Ramegowda's enterprise brings back the timeless charm of handcrafted fabric dolls—each one lovingly made by women from underserved communities in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. But these dolls are more than toys; they're symbols of empowerment. Each doll is crafted using upcycled materials, reducing waste, while providing artisans with a sustainable livelihood.

The Good Doll doesn't just offer a product; it offers a story. Each doll comes with a maker card, introducing the buyer to the woman who handcrafted it. For the 36 women involved in this initiative, the impact is life-changing. They earn a stable income while balancing household responsibilities, and 100% of their children now attend school. Suhas's belief that "economic freedom is a fundamental human right" fuels his drive to ensure that these women not only earn a living but gain the dignity and independence they deserve.



The Power of Personalized Mentorship

What sets Sanjay apart as a mentor is his deep, personalized approach. He invests time not only in understanding the businesses he supports but also in truly knowing the people behind them. "I do my homework," Sanjay says, describing how he immerses himself in the industries of his mentees. He visits stores where The Good Doll is sold, learns about the millet supply chain for Mibbles, and even visits production facilities to see the operations firsthand. This level of involvement ensures that his guidance is grounded in real-world insights.

Sanjay's mentorship approach is not one-size-fits-all; it's tailored to the individual needs of his mentees. For Suhas, a self-aware entrepreneur with a clear sense of direction, Sanjay focuses on asking the right questions—nudging him toward finding his own solutions. "With Suhas, I pose questions that allow him to step back and view the problem from a new perspective," Sanjay explains.

In contrast, his work with VR Subba Reddy often requires a more hands-on approach. With Mibbles operating on a larger scale, Sanjay frequently draws on his own experience to offer direct answers and actionable advice. "Reddy's enterprise is at a stage where quick, decisive solutions are needed. I give him the benefit of my experience, making it relevant to his journey."

This flexibility and understanding of different mentorship styles have enabled Sanjay to create lasting impact across both businesses.



Achievements through Mentorship: A Roadmap to Growth

Under Sanjay's mentorship, both Mibbles and The Good Doll have flourished. Monthly reviews, project-based meetings, and in-depth operational discussions have become the backbone of their strategic planning. Sanjay's guidance has been instrumental in recruiting talent, crafting compelling pitch decks for investors, and navigating the often complex world of equity and debt offers.

But Sanjay's influence goes beyond numbers and balance sheets. He has helped both founders evolve as leaders, providing real-time feedback on their personal and professional development. His advice on brand building and organizational structure has laid the groundwork for future growth, positioning both enterprises for scalability.

Overcoming Challenges with Sanjay's Support

Of course, no entrepreneurial journey is without its challenges. For VR Subba Reddy, the biggest hurdles have been fundraising and attracting top talent. Suhas has faced his own set of obstacles, particularly in brand building and supply chain development. Sanjay's mentorship has been crucial in helping both entrepreneurs tackle these issues head-on. For Reddy, he offered strategic insights into securing the right mix of equity and debt, ensuring Mibbles can scale sustainably. For Suhas, Sanjay provided hands-on advice on creating a strong, memorable brand and building a reliable team to support future growth.

The Road Ahead: Areas for Continued Focus

As Mibbles and The Good Doll continue to grow, Sanjay has identified several areas for further development. Strengthening their brand identity, enhancing leadership capabilities, and refining long-term strategic planning will be critical as both enterprises scale. Additionally, improving operational efficiency will help streamline day-to-day functions, allowing both businesses to meet the increasing demands of their markets.

The Buddha Institute: A Catalyst for Success

Sanjay also recognizes the pivotal role of The Buddha Institute (BI) in supporting these entrepreneurs on their journey. BI, with its vast network and resources, can help open doors to potential investors, facilitate learning forums, and share best practices across its ecosystem of social enterprises. With BI's support, Sanjay believes Mibbles and The Good Doll can achieve even greater heights, scaling their impact while remaining true to their core values.

In Sanjay's words, "We're building the foundation for great things to come." And with the combination of visionary leadership, dedicated mentorship, and institutional support, the future certainly looks bright for both Mibbles and The Good Doll.



BEC in Focus:

Panchgani and Manesar

Buddha Entrepreneurship Clinic Panchgani

The Buddha Entrepreneurship Clinic (BEC), held from June 10-12, 2024, in the scenic town of Panchgani, brought together 27 diverse entrepreneurs for a transformative experience. As the second event for the 2023-25 cohort, the clinic focused on deepening trust and fostering collaboration, with the goal of driving social and economic impact.



Day 1: Fostering Connections

The clinic began with an ice-breaker, "What keeps you going?", encouraging participants to share personal motivations and engage on a deeper level. Gauri Singh, Deputy Director General of IRENA, delivered the keynote address, emphasizing perseverance and inner resolve. Her message, "Your competition is with yourself, not others," resonated with the group, inspiring reflection and setting the tone for the days ahead.

Mentors like Amitabha Sinha and Megha Jain facilitated discussions that naturally led participants to form smaller interest-based groups. Key themes, including millets, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and innovation, emerged, laying the foundation for future partnerships.



Day 2: Strengthening Bonds

On the second day, participants embarked on a two-hour hike up one of Panchgani's table-top mountains. Forming a human chain to support each other on the slippery paths, the hike became a metaphor for their entrepreneurial journeys, where collective success is vital. The shared experience fostered a deep sense of unity.

Later, 10 community members, including 8 women who work with Fellows like Mahesh Londhe, Rajesh Tarate, and Sarojini Phadtare, shared their journeys of financial independence. Their stories of resilience and determination, particularly in overcoming barriers like accessing collateral-free loans, inspired everyone present. Megha Jain led a session on the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), explaining how entrepreneurs could leverage government-backed digital ecosystems. Ved Mitra Arya, founder of Srijan, shared defining moments from his career, prompting an intimate group discussion where Fellows and their co-founders opened up about their own life journeys.



Day 3: Building a Community

The final day focused on personal storytelling, where Fellows and their co-founders shared experiences, creating a close-knit and supportive community. Playful activities, shayari, and reflection helped the group solidify bonds. By the end of the event, Fellows had a clear roadmap for collaboration, along with specific action items to pursue together.

Reflections and Takeaways

The BEC was a success in fostering trust, collaboration, and community-building. While some participants appreciated the unstructured Day 1, others felt the need for more organization. Key challenges, like funding and market access, remain and will require ongoing support. Nonetheless, the BEC highlighted the power of collective action, leaving Fellows energized and united in their mission to create lasting social impact.



Buddha Entrepreneurship Clinic, Manesar

The Buddha Entrepreneurship Clinic (BEC) held in Manesar from September 19th to 21st, 2024 - gathered 19 dynamic development entrepreneurs for three days of immersive learning. In a residential setting, Buddha Fellows sharpened their skills through expert-led sessions, interactive discussions, and peer-driven insights. Focused on high-performance teams, strategic business management, and operational challenges, the clinic provided a holistic approach to entrepreneurship. A Unique Learning Experience BEC's intimate, in-person setup fostered deep engagement. Mentors and resource persons, present throughout, encouraged informal discussions, morning walks, and late-night brainstorming, helping Fellows and mentors build lasting connections beyond structured sessions.



Enhancing Business Acumen Through Expert Insights

The clinic featured impactful sessions by industry experts across key domains:

- **Working Capital Needs** by Dinesh Goel explored liquidity management for scaling operations.
- **Strategic Business Management** by Romesh Kaul focused on crafting business strategies.
- **Seven Pillars of Impact Entrepreneurship** by Shridhar Sethuraman highlighted resilience and multi-tasking for sustaining impact ventures.
- **Building High-Performance Teams** by Sushil Ramola covered recruitment, motivation, and collective responsibility, helping Fellows address team challenges.
- **Marketing & Branding** by Indranil Gupta and Chitrnanjan Dar combined theory with a case study on Satyam's mustard oil brand.
- **Unit Economic Analysis** by Ashok Juneja used Ziaur's business to illustrate cost optimization and profitability management.
- **Understanding NRLM** by Jawed Quamar, Vaibhav Mishra, and Kashi Metya, offered insights into government support for rural entrepreneurs through SHGs and FPOs.
- **Entrepreneurship Stories** by Rakesh Gupta and Satendra Singh shared their social impact journeys, stressing perseverance and lessons learned.

"The BEC was an experience beyond business training; it felt like a retreat where we could freely exchange ideas and build trust,"

– Pranjal, participating Buddha Fellows

Keynote Sessions

- Prof. Chintan Vaishnav, Mission Director, Atal Innovation Mission, discussed how Fellows can engage with India's entrepreneurial ecosystem through government collaboration.
- Charanjit Singh, Additional Secretary, MoRD, emphasized partnerships with SHGs, Producer Groups, and FPOs to boost local economies.



"This was a much-needed conversation. It helped us see how we can leverage these platforms to expand our businesses and impact."

– Kusum, on the keynote sessions.



Case Study Method: A Game Changer

One of the standout features of this BEC was the introduction of the case study method. Moving beyond traditional lectures, this approach turned learning into an interactive and relatable experience. Buddha Fellows like Satyam and Ziaur became protagonists in these sessions, allowing peers to engage deeply with real-life scenarios, challenges, and solutions.

“Using actual businesses run by Buddha Fellows as case studies made the sessions feel practical and applicable,”

– shared Rishabh, reflecting on the branding and unit economics sessions.



Buddha Institute Campus Groundbreaking Ceremony:

A Milestone towards a Shared Vision



On August 25th, 2024, a historic moment unfolded as the groundbreaking ceremony (Bhoomi Poojan) for the new Buddha Institute campus at Raikheda, Tijara, took place. This event marked the beginning of a journey to create a space dedicated to community, sustainability, and social entrepreneurship. The emotions and thoughts of the team reflected the depth of this shared vision and the significance of this momentous occasion.

In the days leading up to the ceremony, there was a quiet yet palpable excitement. For many, the groundbreaking represented more than just laying the foundation of a physical structure—it symbolized hope, solidarity, and the potential for transformative impact.

For others, the event sparked visions of a future far beyond the immediate project. “We could set up a world-class institute like Sevagram, Shanti Niketan, or even the Golden Temple. This place could become a Mahatma Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King International Centre for peace and development,” envisioned Ved, underscoring the profound potential of the Buddha Institute campus.

As the Bhoomi Poojan ceremony unfolded, the atmosphere became filled with a mix of reverence, pride, and deep connection. It was an intimate setting, with participants sharing in the moment, bound by a collective purpose. “I felt a deep sense of divinity as we extended our hands to offer the fire, amidst the vedic chants. It was a moment of pure joy,” shared Rupsa, recalling the powerful emotions she experienced.

Indranil described the poignancy of walking through the land, which stretched out like a blank canvas waiting to be filled with purpose: “The size of the land was awe-inspiring, and the feeling of trudging through the vacant field, knowing what it could become, was humbling.” For the team this was not just about witnessing the ceremony but about being fully

immersed in the collective effort of building something meaningful. Arvind reflected, “It was wonderful to see everyone sharing their thoughts and feelings over this historic ceremony. It gave me a deep sense of purpose.”

In the wake of the ceremony, the overwhelming sentiment was one of pride and determination to carry forward the vision that had been set in motion. Standing amidst that vast expanse of fertile land, we sowed seeds for a hopeful future. The future now holds immense possibilities. “We’ve achieved much already—bringing in diverse people who now feel part of our journey. It’s a milestone for the Buddha Institute and shows what we can accomplish together,” shared Ved, whose vision for the campus continues to inspire those around him. The campus has the potential to transform the lives of millions, becoming a training and mentoring hub for rural women entrepreneurs, an incubator for Buddha Fellows, and a center for social impact.

Nirmalendu’s reflections mirrored the broader aspirations for the project: “It will be a mixture of modern and traditional architecture, addressing sustainability and showcasing environmentally friendly structures. This will become a hub for entrepreneurship and social development.”

As the Buddha Institute campus takes shape, the spirit of collaboration and hope that defined the groundbreaking ceremony will continue to guide its growth. This is not just the start of a physical space but the beginning of a journey toward creating a centre dedicated to empowering communities, fostering entrepreneurship, and building a better future for millions.

With the groundbreaking behind them, the team remains united in their goal to make the Buddha Institute a beacon of hope, learning, and social change.

Government Partnerships

On July 22, 2024, the Buddha Institute team, led by Ved Arya, met with Shri Charanjit Singh, Additional Secretary, NRLM, to explore collaboration opportunities aimed at enhancing rural entrepreneurship. The discussion focused on leveraging the expertise of Buddha Fellows to provide marketing and technical support to SRLMs, as well as the potential for collaboration with the SVEP program to scale women entrepreneurs' businesses. Action points included developing strategies for joint initiatives with the RCRC team and creating a concept note for a national-level Development Entrepreneurs Workshop. The meeting concluded with plans for a field visit by NRLM officials to observe the impactful work of Buddha Fellows in Pune, further solidifying the partnership between the two organizations.

On August 5, 2024, the Buddha Institute (BI) team, led by Ved Arya and Gauri Singh, met with Shri Atul Tiwari, Secretary, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), to explore opportunities for collaboration. Discussions centered around aligning BI's entrepreneurship programs with MSDE's initiatives like the PM Vishwakarma scheme and the National Institute for Entrepreneurship & Small Business Development (NIESBUD). The partnership aims to support rural entrepreneurs through skill development, mentorship, and access to funding. Key next steps include a BI visit to NIESBUD to explore their training programs, exposure visits for NIESBUD trainees to Buddha Fellows' enterprises, and the development of a formal collaboration plan through an MoU. Both sides agreed this partnership would enhance efforts to nurture rural entrepreneurs and expand their impact.

Board Meeting - BI India

On September 25, 2024, the Education for Employability Foundation (E2F) convened a successful Board of Trustees meeting, chaired by Mr. Ved Mitra Arya. The board approved the audited financial report for FY 2023-24 and addressed key issues, including compliance with FCRA regulations and potential modifications to the Trust deed. E2F reaffirmed its commitment to its partnership with RCRC, deciding to serve as a host agency for five years. The meeting also spotlighted the recruitment process for the 2024-26 cohort of Buddha Fellows, which attracted over 450 applications, with in-person interviews scheduled to take place soon. Additionally, the recently conducted Buddha Entrepreneurial Clinic in Manesar and New Delhi received praise for its significant impact on the current cohort, empowering them as development entrepreneurs.

Board Meeting - Friends of Buddha Fellowship, USA

The Friends of Buddha Fellows (FoBF) USA Board meeting on July 11, 2024, concentrated on expanding fundraising efforts and planning for the organization's growth. Key updates included progress in setting up a solid support base in Texas, where Dallas and Houston showed strong donor potential. The board emphasized hosting intimate gatherings and one-on-one meetings to deepen engagement. A strategic approach to involve foundations was discussed, aiming to secure \$4 million in funding over three years. Additionally, the board explored adding new members and establishing annual funding commitments for both board members and supporters. The board reaffirmed its focus on growing the network of Fellows, with special attention to increasing female representation and enhancing mentorship opportunities.

BI Website 2.0

The Buddha Institute will soon unveil version 2.0 of its website. The new website, currently under development, will showcase BI's work more effectively both from an emotional and rational perspective. Our focus is to make the website interactive and create reasons for stakeholders to co-own the website. We have also developed our own in-house admission software and dashboard which will be integrated with the 2.0 website. The BI has partnered with Indore-based agency, Blacksof, who cleared the selection after a thorough due-diligence process of which two other agencies were a part. The new website is expected to go live by the end of December. Watch this space for more.

Vyomesh's Business Planning Crash Course

Some of our Fellows from the current cohort benefited from a deep one-on-one engagement session with Vyomesh Joshi. Vyomesh initiated a Business Planning discussion with a couple of Fellows during his visit to India. The first lot is Rama Reddy (Mibbles) and Kusum Tiwari (Mura Collective). He did a deep-dive with each of them for their specific businesses to help them optimize or scale up. He then met Sarojini-Tatyasaheb (Good2Eat) and Rajesh Tarate (MyFarmer Naturals) in Mumbai for the second leg of his workshop.

"Vyomesh brings in amazing expertise and wisdom. We had the opportunity to work with him and it was a game changer for us." Kusum Tiwari on the Workshop

Recruitment Process:

2024-26 Cohort of Buddha Fellows

The recruitment process for the 2024-26 cohort of Buddha Fellows has seen notable progress, marked by an increase in geographical diversity and a growing pool of candidates working in transformative rural enterprises. This year, the Buddha Institute's dedicated efforts in reaching out to previously underrepresented regions, such as Northeast India, bore fruit, leading to a broader and more inclusive applicant pool. The recruitment team effectively leveraged multiple outreach channels—emails, WhatsApp messages, calls to past Buddha Fellows, brochures, flyers, and personal references from mentors and entrepreneurs—to ensure comprehensive coverage across various regions.

Application Overview and Filtering Process

With outreach to several hundred entrepreneurs, the team received 450 applications, out of which 118 were shortlisted. A positive response to their call for change-makers. A total of 22 candidates were filtered out through the technical and reading-based review stages, resulting in 88 e-interviews conducted with entrepreneurs working in diverse fields, such as farming, handicrafts, food production, forest produce, education, agro-tech, and low-cost agricultural equipment. These interviews provided deeper insights into the types of enterprises being developed in rural India and the challenges these entrepreneurs face in scaling their initiatives. Notably, the virtual interviews served as a vital tool for reaching candidates from remote villages. However, technological challenges, especially unstable internet connections, forced the team to reschedule several interviews.

Despite these minor hurdles, the entrepreneurs showcased a wealth of creativity and determination, with many employing local materials, traditional methods, and eco-friendly practices in their businesses. This emphasis on sustainability and community impact was a key trend observed across interviews, with many candidates focused on providing employment opportunities or addressing pressing local issues.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Several challenges emerged throughout the recruitment process. One significant issue was the gap between initial candidate sourcing and final selection, leading to delays.

Additionally, some candidates expressed hesitation over the returnable grant component of the Buddha Fellowship, which may require further clarification and transparency. The team also acknowledged the need for a more streamlined and dedicated setup for conducting e-interviews, as the logistics of the current process required significant time and coordination.

Moreover, the lack of widespread awareness about the Buddha Institute was another factor that potentially limited the number of applications. However, this gap is being addressed through continuous efforts in networking and marketing to raise the institution's profile among social entrepreneurs and rural enterprises.

Commitment and Potential

Despite the challenges, the recruitment process offered the Buddha Institute team a rare glimpse into the resilience and innovation present in rural entrepreneurship. Many of the fellows interviewed demonstrated a commitment to building enterprises that not only generate income but also address vital social issues—whether by creating jobs, improving education, or providing access to sustainable agricultural solutions. The challenges faced by these entrepreneurs, such as limited access to finance, markets, and infrastructure, were discussed candidly during the interviews. Yet, their passion and dedication left the team optimistic about the potential of these enterprises to thrive with the right mentorship and support.

Next Steps: Face-to-Face Interviews

Having completed the virtual interview phase, the Buddha Institute is preparing for the next step in the selection process—face-to-face interviews with the most promising fellows in different regions. This phase will further solidify the team's understanding of the entrepreneurs' challenges and vision, setting the stage for final selection.

The Buddha Institute remains committed to selecting a cohort that can drive meaningful social and economic change, and this recruitment phase has only reinforced the critical role rural enterprises play in strengthening local economies and communities. As the team moves into the next phase, the future of development entrepreneurship through the Buddha Fellowship looks bright.