



INDO-INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVE FOR BILLIONS OF FRUIT TREES

The Dynamics of Establishing and Sustaining a Social Responsibility Initiative in a Management Institute - Experiences of Indo - International Initiative for Billions of Fruit Trees (IIIBFT) in LIBA, Chennai

Fresh with a Ph.D. degree in International Relations from Taiwan, Alagu Perumal Ramasamy joined LIBA as an Assistant Professor in 2008. A project to study the Development of Entrepreneurship among Rural Dalit Women saw him visiting five districts of Tamil Nadu. During the travels he saw the construction activity in agricultural lands. As he enquired with the local women he found that small landholding farmers were unable to sustain farming. Falling water tables, rising cost of inputs such as fertilizers, rising labour costs and volatile markets, poor connectivity with the urban markets among other factors were inhibiting small landholders from doing

agriculture. It was attractive to sell away the land as market prices were very tempting.

This bothered Alagu as he believed that if the trend of converting valuable fertile agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes continued, food shortage and food price surge could be a serious threat in the coming decades. Especially a country like India which would be ranked as the world's most populous country in a decade from now with 70% of the population below poverty line, could not afford a food crisis. He wanted to do something that would create an alternative and supplementary food source. He was looking for a food which required little or no workforce and whose yield would be regular.

The solution was right in his backyard. As he sat to eat the dishes made by his wife from the fresh mangoes, it occurred to him that if different fruit-bearing trees were grown in open lands, then these could provide food supplements to a large society.

A fruit tree is an ideal food supplement. Generally, fruit bearing trees require attention in the early years. Usually after two years the trees sustain themselves. Not much labour is required for maintenance and they can be grown in urban settings too. Eventually fruits grown will find a way to the market bringing prices down and would serve other forms of life that depend on fruit trees.

EXECUTING THE IDEA IN LIBA

Alagu started to learn to grow the fruit plants in his apartment terrace and in LIBA. He picked a few seeds and raised them in small plastic bags such as recycled milk covers in a two square feet space in front of his office. Soon as the saplings number increased, Director Fr. Christie helped by providing a new space behind the open air theatre in LIBA to raise them.

The students from both first and second years of the full time PGDM program formed the LIBA Enviro Club and began various initiatives. Preetham D.K. (2012 Batch) who showed a lot of interest became the President of the club and Jebin M.S. (2012 Batch) the secretary of the newly formed LIBA Enviro Club. The students created a logo for LIBA Enviro Club and started the "Seed Your Future" initiative. Every Sunday the students would come together for an hour and fill the covers with soil and seeds. As there was shortage of covers, an initiative by the name "Drop the plastics" was started and a box was kept near the faculty room to collect plastic covers. Similarly, "Drop the Seeds" was started to encourage collection of seeds from fruits consumed at homes in a box. These seeds were also planted in the covers during the Sunday "Seed Your Future" gatherings.

Parallel to the activity in LIBA, Alagu approached the Good Shepherd Convent to do the activity. The children enthusiastically participated in and nearly 1500 saplings were raised by them. Some of the saplings were planted on campus on Teacher's day. Infosys, a globally recognised Indian Information Technology Company, received the rest of the saplings to carry on its plantation drive that year.

In late 2011, Alagu formed the Indo - International Initiative for Billions of Fruit Trees (IIBFT). This NGO was formed with an objective of nurturing fruit nurseries through schools and other colleges. There were several reasons for forming the NGO. One of them was the sense of competition among institutions. It was seen that while the managements were not averse to the project, there was reservation to collaborate with LIBA or LIBA Enviro Club. There was feeling of brand identity that did not let the institutions to come together. It did not take root even in the parent institution, Loyola College. Along with the sense of competition and identity, religious beliefs and prejudices also came in the way. Sometimes permission was denied and one could sense hostility on religious grounds. Two, funding was an issue. Three, a NGO was essential if the initiative had to continue. In a situation where it did not get continued support from the LIBA management, the activity would never be able to make any con-

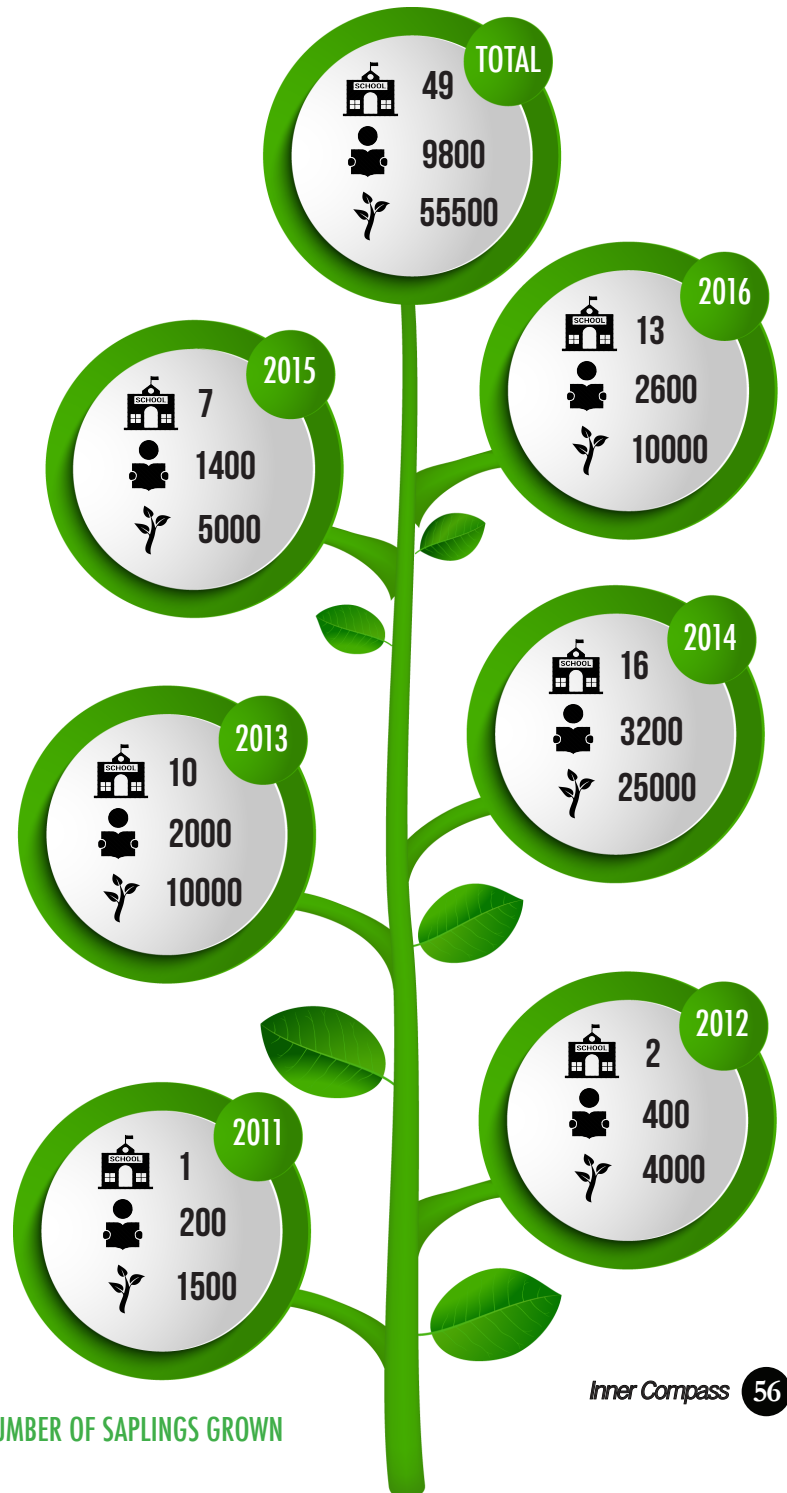
tribution to the larger society. The NGO had to be neutral, apolitical with the only objective of promoting green cover.

In the next several months, approximately 3000 saplings were growing in LIBA campus and LIBA Enviro Club members were in the process of identifying agencies to donate these saplings. The students started yet another Adopt a Tree initiative where students would adopt a sapling and take it home and plant them. But this was limited. Just about 100 saplings were taken. Through LIBA Outreach Program many saplings were planted in rural areas. IIBFT needed to find an organisation that had the capacity and the ambition to plant more.

This happened through coverage in The Hindu which covered the work done by the students. The article provided the visibility and people started calling LIBA for the saplings. Coincidentally, 2012 was celebrated as the year of the Cooperative Movement and the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Union (TNCU) had launched the drive to plant several lakhs of saplings that year all over the state of Tamil Nadu. The saplings were

2011 - PRESENT

GROWTH OF IIBFT ACTIVITY



NUMBER OF SCHOOLS



NUMBER OF STUDENTS



NUMBER OF SAPLINGS GROWN

donated to TNCU. The LIBA Green Summit 2012 was organised in LIBA premises to formally donate the saplings to TNCU. The then Minister for Social Welfare and Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme the Mayor of the City presided over the event and donated the saplings to TNCU. The Minister, on her own, urged LIBA to take up this initiative through children in schools and the Mayor gave the permission needed to do the activity in the schools run by Chennai Corporation.

CHANGING FORTUNES DUE TO CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP AT LIBA

In 2012, there was a change in management at LIBA. The new leadership did not share the vision and the initiative faced a lot of challenges. The space behind LIBA auditorium, approximately 300 square feet, in which the students were carrying out the activity was converted into an office building without any notice. Shortly thereafter the initiative shut down in LIBA.

In this environment, Alagu felt harassed and insecure. When he tried to explain the benefits of carrying out the project in Chennai Corporation schools, he was asked if he worked for the City Corporation or for LIBA. Two years passed and there was again a leadership change but to no avail. Alagu was very depressed and felt he was losing time. However, help came from the Rector of Loyola College, who stood by Alagu. He generously agreed to preside over an event as the Chief Guest in one of the schools sending a firm signal to all concerned and both Alagu and the initiative were protected.

IIIBFT FORAY INTO SCHOOLS

The initiative has continued in schools under the name of IIIBFT – about 50 schools in the past six years, impacting the lives of nearly ten thousand students. Since the year 2011 when the NGO was formed till date, nearly 55000 saplings have been grown which are given to NGOs such as Tree

Bank that are then planted all over state of Tamil Nadu.

The typical process of doing the IIIBFT activity involves identification of the school. It is seen that the word of mouth or references work best to identify the interested schools, especially those referred by teachers. After meeting the Principal and other decision makers, the volunteers of IIIBFT meet the teachers and the students. Usually they address the students in the morning Assembly. Having fixed a date for the activity, soil and other equipment needed are provided for. On the day of the activity, nearly two hundred children, typically from the age group of 11 to 14 assemble in a spot and they start filling the covers with soil. By the end of about three hours of work, usually 500 to 600 packets get completed. It is important to have them arranged in rectangles of 50 – 60 saplings with space in between for the children to walk freely for watering and removal of weeds. A group of children who show keen interest are identified in the weeks to come and they are encouraged to water the plants regularly. After about 8 to 10 months the saplings are removed and planted in different parts of the state with the help of NGOs and other organisations.

Over the years an understanding has emerged about the importance of management commitment and teachers support for the activity. The volunteers of IIIBFT stay in constant touch with the teachers and children. Every year an event called Love Our Earth is organised and the teachers and students are given certificates and medals for their good work. For teachers, Best Teacher Awards are given and children, who have been regularly watering and monitoring the plants, are given Green Champion Awards. In schools where a particular teacher has coordinated the activity for a period of three years receives Nammalvar – IIIBFT Award (named after a famous organic farming scientist Nammalvar who hailed from Tamil Nadu) and a cash prize. These awards and certificates motivate the children to do better and more children show interest to join the activity.

LOOKING FORWARD

Again with the return of Fr. Christie and favourable conditions for the initiative to be carried out in LIBA, the students of LIBA, the F 16 and F 17 batches have, under LIBA Enviro Club banner, again started the activity. At the moment, there are nearly 500 saplings growing in the campus, fully maintained by the students.

The NGO, IIIBFT looks forward to carrying out this activity in 200 schools in the state of Tamil Nadu annually. Assuming 500 saplings could be generated from a school, 100,000 saplings could be generated with the help of the children. Over a long period of time, it will contribute to the promotion of green environment. More important than the saplings, it is the impact on the children who are exposed to this activity that matters most. The children will carry with them the knowledge, skill and experience of raising saplings. That would mean the creation of a bunch of green warriors of the next generation. The students of LIBA would be the volunteers for executing the activity in the years to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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STUDENTS OF LIBA PLANTING THE SAPLINGS IN THE RURAL AREAS THROUGH THE LIBA OUTREACH PROGRAM



STUDENTS OF THE CHENNAI BOYS HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL, NUNGAMBAKKAM ARE SEEN MAKING SEED PACKETS.



SAPLINGS GIVEN FOR ADOPTION THROUGH ADOPT A TREE INITIATIVE

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