



BY SWETA ANUNDI

Miss S (name changed to protect privacy) had been a difficult patient for 25 years. Dr Kalyanasundaram, honorary CEO of Richmond Fellowship Society in Bengaluru, an NGO that works with people with mental-health issues, had been helping her deal with schizophrenia. Until a year ago, she was still prone to bouts of screaming without any recognisable trigger.

Things changed after the NGO introduced the Green Skilling Project last year, that saw patients make their own kolam powder out of dried flowers. After months of watching from the sidelines, one day, the 58-year-old Miss S came forward from her usual vantage point at the vocation training hall, and said, "Nanna burtina" ("I, too, will join"). "She has been with this project for a year now, and her family says that she is much calmer now," says Dr Kalyanasundaram.

Miss S' story, and the story of the Green Skilling Project, won Dr Kalyanasundaram many accolades – even a prize at the British Medical Journal awards of 2018. The project helps people with mental health problems – mainly schizo-

phrenia, but also bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, and those on the autism spectrum – to work through their symptoms with the vocation of kolam powder-making, using only discarded flowers.

It started in 2016, when Craftzani, an organisation that provides crafts skill training and livelihoods for the unemployed, approached the NGO with the idea of producing eco-friendly and natural powder to be used for Holi. Dr Kalyanasundaram figured that working on this project would not only provide his patients with incentive but also engage their faculties.

How it works

"India has a huge amount of flowers used in temples, wedding halls, birthdays, mega-events for politicians, that, at the end of the day, are thrown out, adding to the pollution and garbage," he says. "We approached these venues and asked them if they could instead donate all their flowers to us after use. They were very eager to help!"

In the mornings, Dr Kalyanasundaram's team collects the previous day's

Flower pow(d)er

This NGO transforms discarded flowers into colours you can make your kolams with, for the Pongal season



discarded flowers and brings them back to the NGO. The patients de-petal the flowers, separating them according to their colour, and dry them. "The petals have to be dried in the shade; they lose their colour in sunlight," he explains.

Each type of flower collected gives a different colour: roses for the red, pink, and the rare white; marigolds for yellow and orange; chrysanthemum for white and yellow, sometimes even lavender;

and tulsi for the green. "The colours we get after powdering the dry petals are similar to the colour of the flowers, just a shade lighter," he says. For powdering, the petals of each colour are separately taken to a pulveriser that, with the help of the patients, is operated by the staff. The resulting flower powder is mixed with arrowroot powder, which, "helps retain colour," he says, and packaged for sale.



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On now

After the success of the Holi powder, the NGO started dabbling in making powder for kolam as well, adding kolam starch to the packages. They are up for sale this Pongal. "Ours is a training unit, not a production facility. So our patients get incentives for their work, but they do it at their own pace," he emphasises. The patients work around two hours daily for five days a week. Ever since this project, he says, patients have improved attention spans, those sitting in isolation started speaking to each other, and learned how to work as a community. For him, the explanation is simple: "This is the power of nature."

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