

The Araku story

By Rohini Mukherjee

www.arakucoffee.in

www.arakucoffee.com

The opening of Araku café in Paris in 2017, marked India's arrival on the world map of speciality coffee. It was the tribal farmers of Araku Valley, a rich biodiverse region on the borders of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha that have placed India there.

The story of Araku Coffee dates back to the year 2000, when the Naandi Foundation started interacting with the local community there. Conscious of the unique cultural and historical heritage of *adivasi* (tribal) communities, Naandi Foundation focused on developing a deeper understanding of their culture and the environment they lived in. The tribal farmers who had been relying on the traditional shifting cultivation were slowly introduced to regenerative agriculture practices. By 2005, these farmers had started working with Naandi Foundation on growing and improving the quality of their coffee crops. Coffee plantation not only provides better income but also helps in afforestation since it is grown under shade. It provides round the year employment to the local inhabitants and their family members.

The entire valley witnessed a turned around in a short span of 10-15 years. Now it boasts of the world's largest tribal organic coffee farmers' cooperative, massive annual forest festivals resulting in the planting of 49 million trees, a world-class organic coffee brand with a flagship store in Paris and exports to more than 12 countries. The tribal farmers and their families are now in the coffee and pepper business, some have their own orchards; they are also growing paddy, pulses and millets using organic regenerative agriculture and are living testimony to the efficacy of a model that ensures economic and ecological security. Araku stands as a testimony to the power of democratic participation in the form of the tribal farmers' cooperative, which now boasts a 40,000+ membership, regularly conducts democratic elections, and has a current executive body with 50% women.

Araku is an example of how globalisation can be leveraged to benefit the smallest farmer in a remote corner of the world – innovative financing models introduced by European companies; international coffee experts frequenting the valley to support the adoption of the 19 steps to world-class coffee; a flagship store in Paris and a score of gourmet partner stores in Paris selling the premium speciality coffee grown here. Buoyed by the success in Paris, a first-of-its-kind large format Araku Cafe was opened in Bengaluru, India, in 2021. This not only serves the best coffee and food but has also become an interactive cultural space to spread the new food vision guided by

Arakunomics. Signature coffee equipment borne out of a landmark collaboration with Norwegian design duo Anderssen & Voll – the first of its kind for Indian coffee – was launched first in France and then in India in 2018. Araku opened a restaurant in South Mumbai.

Araku Coffee is now a premium luxury social enterprise with high socio-economic and ecological impact that has demonstrated how India can excel globally across the entire value chain from soil to foil. It is a matter of pride for the Naandi team that Araku coffee was included as one of the prized items in the Government of India's gift hamper presented to visiting heads of state at the G20 Summit in 2023.

Gems of Araku is an annual harvest festival that celebrates the seasons' speciality coffee micro-lots and the farms and farmers of Araku for their contribution to creating this world-class coffee. The event brings together over 20,000 farmer families and coffee experts from across the globe to discover extraordinary coffee lots. Over 1800 micro-lots each season are put through a rigorous evaluation by professional coffee cuppers following international cupping protocols.

Since 2009, the event has helped unite over 40 coveted international jurors and Araku farmers to perfect coffee quality. These stimulating interactions have helped incorporate the best farm and processing practices and raise the coffee to international standards by improving the quality of the beans year after year.

In the pursuit of excellence, Araku farmers are continuously learning about and honing their coffee terroirs to enhance coffee bush health, build soil organic carbon, and regenerate the Araku Coffee landscape. And the proof is in the cup. As the soils get richer and coffee flavour notes more complex, Gems of Araku, currently in its 16th edition, top micro-lots score ratings as high as 94 out of 100 from professional cuppers.

Internationally acclaimed for their quality, the 'Gems' of Araku has now reached over 42 countries including - Korea, Japan, France, the UK, Germany, and the USA. The event has helped nurture an Indian-origin international coffee brand produced by small and marginal tribal farmer families of Araku by taking it to the global buyer and consumer.

The biodiverse, carbon-rich, wealth-creating model for agriculture, christened Arakunomics by Naandi, was awarded the Food System Vision Prize by the Rockefeller Foundation in 2020 and the Seeding the Future Prize by the Institute of Food Technologists in 2023. It is now being replicated in other geographies of India with complex agrarian realities, such as the Vidarbha

region in Maharashtra, ground-water-depleted districts in Punjab and forgotten border districts in northern Uttar Pradesh.

The next stop for Araku Coffee could be either in North America or the Middle East.

This is an India Rise story, an Atma Nirbhar Bharat story.