

Where Gandhism is served hot

Asha Prakash



Manjunath

CLAD in a khadi kurta, Ambrose Kooliath hardly seems like the proprietor of a restaurant, let alone of a high-end one like 'Lumiere,' in Panampilly Nagar. "Principles by themselves are useless, unless they reach people," he says. At one point in my life, I realised that the only means by which my ideas could reach people, by which I could serve society was through a restaurant outlet.

Thus was born 'Lumiere' (which means light) run jointly by Ambrose and his friend Manjunath. Ambrose had never been an ordinary person. After dropping out of school after class 9, he worked as labourer in the fields before going into stone cutting.

He worked with a Gandhian movement for a while from where he picked up the idea of organic farming. Today he manages to stick to his principles and run a business at the same time. He doesn't send his children to school as he feels that it will only give them unnecessary knowledge and inflated 'egos.'

"However much the IT industry grows, can any of it put food on your plate? Can any of these thousand and one doctors and engineers feed themselves if rice stops coming from Tamil Nadu for a week?" he says. There is no anger in his voice, only concern. "I'm a person who believes that doing manual labour on a farm is the noblest thing in the world," he says. He is one who practices what he preaches, for as we search for a waste bin to dispose of some banana peels, Ambrose takes them from us, without giving it a thought.

Manjunath, Ambrose's friend and partner shares his views in many respects. Manjunath worked in the IT industry for 15 years, in Bangalore, Bombay, US etc. where he lived the life of any other NRI. It was during a break in Kerala that Manjunath happened to meet Ambrose.

"I had always been an ardent food lover, but starting a restaurant like this had never entered my mind until I met Ambrose. I was completely bowled over by his ideas, by his sheer sincerity to the cause," he says, smiling at Ambrose sitting nearby. Manjunath soon left his job in the US and the two started work on 'Lumiere.'

While Ambrose had the raw basics of farming, Manjunath complemented it with his intensive internet research and studies. Manjunath who once used to spend his days within snug office cubicles now spends half his time in their organic farm and half in the restaurant.

About leaving his high-paying job for something as risky as an organic restaurant, Manjunath says- "Of course, I'm not making the kind of money I used to in the US. But I derive satisfaction from providing others with this kind of food. Also, after seeing the long process through which food reaches your plate, I have come to value it more."

As with Ambrose, Manjunath also is more interested in talking about their dream restaurant and ideas than about himself. Every dish in the restaurant, says the two, has been prepared out of organically grown products including spices. Most of the vegetables are grown in the farm in Kanthalloore. The pesticides used are made of 'Panchagavyam,' a combination of cow dung, cow's urine, etc.

The manure used is also completely devoid of chemicals. "Only an insider knows the amount of harmful chemicals that are used in each and every process of modern farming. We are a people who make such a hue and cry about the pesticides in a cola. Just make a study of 10 items in your kitchen, from rice to vegetables and fruits to chilli powder and you will realize that they are a hundred times more dangerous," says Ambrose.

An interesting fact about the hotel is that you and I can be their vegetable suppliers. Lumiere accepts products from anyone, as long as it has been grown at home, without using chemicals. One Father George of CMI church, for example, who grows vegetables in his backyard is one of their regular suppliers. Ambrose and Manjunath is also keen on developing and encouraging organic farms in households as well as other centres through their venture.

"Of course, the dishes in our hotel will be a bit more expensive than in others. But once you get to know the process through which they have been made, you will realise that the cost is justified. The government gives support to all kinds of cottage industries, but zero to organic farming. In Kerala, we export our pure organic products to Western countries and happily consume our poisoned food."

Ambrose is also concerned about the fact that though everyone is vaguely aware that pesticides and other chemicals in food are the leading causes of the increasing

instances of cancer and other diseases, no systematic studies are being conducted on the subject.

But above all, the point he wants to emphasise is this- "A whole generation is coming up which doesn't have even a marginal knowledge of farming, which doesn't grow its own food. They grow up thinking that money can provide them with food any day. It is high time they grew wiser."

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