Greener Grass

During the second part of our South India trip where we spent three or so days with Ragu and Nisha on their farm near Coimbatore. I’ve been dreading writing this post because there is so much I want to capture about the experience, and I’m a bit at a loss on how to organize my thoughts and give it all the justice it deserves. The best I can muster is to break my reflections into mini-blogs (blogbites? bloggets? blots?) on particular topics. So here we go:

Ragu and Nisha

I am so inspired by the path they have taken in their lives. Both were high-flying professionals in Silicon Valley (Ragu a marketing whiz, Nisha a hardcore software engineer). They had their son Aum and promptly sold everything off and moved to rural Tamil Nadu. They wanted to farm, but had no experience in it. They jumped in with the intention of living and being in a way better aligned with their inner voices, and learning what they needed along the way. Many people talk about such a shift, very few actually do it. By my count, I only know these two.

Over two days of rest, reflection, and farmwork, Ragu and Nisha shared many stories on the ups and downs of establishing their new life. Ragu related how he had to gather Lakhs of cash from acquaintances they’d never met to pay for a piece of land he had hardly seen to sellers he hardly knew, facilitated by a local guy he had only recently met. They wanted to create a permaculture system, but how to do it? They read the books, but needed local help. Early on Ragu was in town chatting with the locals, and he just mentioned the term "organic farming". Someone perked up and connected him to a local org which eventually connected him to his farm guide, who was instrumental in setting up the farm system (more on that below). Later Ragu was at a book store and again just mentioned the term organic, and someone from way back in the store perked up and said he could help; that was Ananth who became a close companion and inspiration for other later community projects.

Like that little by little opportunities and ways forward manifested. What impressed me is how they built a life for themselves from scratch, in an environment where there was little to work with in terms of support and resources. The soil they started with was barren (pun intended). But they stayed true to their intention and attracted the right resources of the right quality. Not to say they also didn’t have ample bumps along the way (as we’ll get into below), but they treated those as growth and gut tests. And soon their soil started to gain fertility and all kinds of wonderful things bloomed.
Ragu is visionary, brave, creative. He is a leader and organizer. Nisha is patient, reliable, nurturing, and very wise. She is the foundation of everything. They are a great combination.

The Farm

Every farm should have a name. Ragu and Nisha’s is called “Ikarai Pachai”. It is Tamil for “This side is greener.” When they first decided to start a farm, they put their intelligence to work and started reading and planning. They read that every good organic farm should have animals, so by God they would keep animals. And that the first thing they should do is get their soil tested, so they boned up on the best soil test to apply.

Then they met their farm guide, who had 15 years of experience farming holistically in their area. We never met him, but Farmer V’s stories make him seem like an eccentric agri-Mr. Miagi to Ragu’s eager Daniel LaRusso. He told Ragu to put all the bookishness aside and go stand in the middle of his farm. Now, tell me what you see and feel. Ragu said he saw a whole lot of parched land with nothing growing on it. And how do you feel? I feel hot, the sun is beating straight onto me.

The guide said, don’t think about what *you* want to do to the farm, think about what *the farm* needs. And your answer is right there if you just stand and observe. It is parched up, it needs moisture. So you will need to restore moisture to the soil. How do you do that? Well, start by covering it up from the blazing sun. How do you do that? Plant trees, they will provide shade. How do you do that? Now you’re thinking!

The first thing they did was to go about planting trees all over their 9 acres. Thousands and thousands of them, 8,000 to be exact. They waited for the next rains when the soil softened. They immediately plowed and then broadcast-planted a layer of local hearty grains that would grow with minimal soil nutrients. Those grew then they mulched that layer back into the soil. Now it was ready for trees. But there are different types of trees. You have to start with “giving trees”, ones that consume minimal resources but give lots in the way of shade, fruit, wood, and/or fodder. Fodder is key because mulch and ground cover is essential to restoring the fertility back to the soil. Provide the organic humic content for the soil organisms to feed and break down the soil nutrients to in turn grow more healthy plants. After giving trees, plant taking trees in between. They planted many, but the one we fell in love with is the banana tree. These are tremendous trees. They produce fruit regularly with very little input requirements, just keep the soil moist and mulched. They propagate on their own through shoots. Every part of the tree, from leaf to stem, can be used for food or other material purpose. We cut one and peeled layer after layer of the trunk, which was soft white and spongy, like that flat packing material (in fact we thought banana branch would make nice organic packing material) . In the center layer was the stem, which we ate for lunch.

So basically the farm is a forest. There is no other farm in the area like it. Neighboring farmers laugh and admonish Ragu because he doesn’t keep his farm neat and tidy. It is just a jungle. But that is the point, it is a full ecosystem of lush vegetation out of which springs layers of abundance from top to bottom. The bananas are one, lower down they recently harvested organic turmeric, which was planted in the midst of the trees. Can anything grow between trees? Yes, you just control how much sunlight you want by pruning away branches. Same theory behind aperture in photography. Also, Ragu purposely planted only 1/4 acre to get a good deal on labor. The harvest yielded him many-fold more profit than his neighbor doing the same crop conventionally, selling to various organic retailers in Tamil Nadu.
Ragu said something interesting about farming organically: Although you may only see 80% of the yield as you would using chemical fertilizers for any single crop, the fact that you can grow greater variety of things more than makes up for it. No single product of the system is optimal, but the system’s whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The House
Ragu and Nisha built their home on the farm themselves. From design to implementation, they were hands-on. And no, they didn’t have prior experience in architecture, construction, carpentry, plumbing, or any of the other basic requisites to build a home. But they ended up with something extraordinary.

Ragu was inspired by the green home visionary Laurie Baker and had the home designed in his style. This required special materials and special construction workers, both of which were in short supply. So every step in getting the house built was a trying experience. It took 2 years, of which one year was actually spent building. In the middle, Ragu’s chief foreman bolted and Ragu had to literally cross mountains to his village to personally ask him to come back and finish the work. Nisha says those two years took 10 years out of their lives, it was so stressful. Lot of it had to do with the back-and-forth they were doing from the farm to their home in the city near the farm. Ragu taking his morotcycle into town to the hardware store for this or that supply, Nisha needing help with Aum, Nisha arranging food for the laborers, etc. All normal activities were complicated by the travel distance. Their two big regrets with the farm are that they didn’t start by putting a smaller area under cultivation, and not living on the farm while they built the house.

But the house eventually got finished, and it is gorgeous. It is big and spacious. Inside it is open and centers around a winding staircase centers around an open courtyard. There is Internet, solar heated water, washing machine, and a biogas tank. The middle of the living room has a step-down courtyard and that functions as Aum’s classroom/playroom. The kitchen and dining area overlook it. It is tall and the bedrooms upstairs have high ceilings. There are lovely views from balconies scattered around both 2nd and 3rd stories. A guest house is next-door. Overall a majestic home. Nisha says sometimes she questions whether they built it too big, but whenever guests are over and it fills up she feels re-assured. Recently they had spillover from the bedrooms and people were sleeping in the kitchen. That made her very happy.

From an outsider’s vantage point the house looks amazing inside and out. But the most memorable comment about the house came from Nisha, who said that she could stand anywhere in the house and point out 100 mistakes that were made. Speaks to the perfectionism of these two people, but also to something else. This is *their* home in the most intimate way possible. They built it, they know it like a family member. Yes it’s imperfect, but there is something beautiful about your own experiences being so interwoven with the building in which you live. How many have that kind of relationship with their physical spaces?

Life Natural
A big chunk of our time at the farm was spent listening to a presentation by Ragu on the "Life Natural" diet. After they had gotten to the farm, Ragu and Nisha became involved in Naturopathy through Ananth and Shri.Balakrishnan, a guru on the subject in the tradition of one of the fathers of Naturopathy in India. Shri.Balakrishnan teaches a week-long residential course that combines science, spirituality, folklore, classic tamil literature, songs and lots of real life case studies. It was all wholesome to Ragu and Nisha so they
began by following the diet, to great benefit. Then they teamed up with Ananth and Aravind who had started organizing courses. The courses grew in popularity, starting with 20-30 participants to the seventh and latest course having over 100 participants. The courses are conducted in gift economy format, which was met with skepticism initially. But through a combination of mindful management and genuine value-creation for participants, the volunteer team started to see magic happening. Aravind and his whole family jumped into offering their home, kitchen, utensils and labor, Ananth did not think twice before arranging for all the computer, audio and video equipment, and around 25 volunteers came together to make the courses possible. In one course, there was a miscommunication and the accommodations that were arranged wouldn’t be able to take all of the women attendees. So a local farmer and previous course participant volunteered his place to host all the 30+ women and children. The same venue where the course was held did not have proper toilets, so Ragu had to scramble to have some built at significant expense. Without explicitly mentioning it, the attendees caught on and the donations from that course went a long way towards covering their costs. After seven courses they are running an overall surplus. But ever mindful of how to create the most wholesome value, the organizing team has put a pause on more courses to reflect on how to migrate Life Natural from the format of an event to distributed leaderless movement.

We got a 2-day crash course in Life Naturals, and it made a deep impression on all of us. For me, it changed my mental model of food and how it relates to my body. The key teaching in the diet is to have eating habits that make it as easy as possible for your body to digest food. Your body expends lots of effort to break down food so it can be absorbed as nutrition for your cells. That’s actually what makes you tired; you feel sleepy after meals because your body is working. And when you sleep, digestion is just one of many important body maintenance processes that go on. The key hours for other background processes to happen is 10pm-3am. If during that time your body is busy digesting food (or not sleeping), it leaves little time to do the other important chores. This is why fasting is prescribed as a cure for many ailments. When you’re sick, the body needs to concentrate on healing itself. Giving it food during that time distracts. So fast and let your body pass the illness. According to Life Naturals, the majority of disease is rooted in improper digestion.

You help your body digest by eating easily digestible foods and eating them with good habits. This frees up our energy that would otherwise be spent on digestion for better and higher purposes. Chew food well. The rule of thumb is “eat water, drink food”. Eating water refers to swishing it around the mouth so glands in the back get wet, alerting your brain so you don’t over-drink to quench thirst. Don’t mix foods that take different times to digest; the fast digesting foods sit in your stomach rotting while the other food breaks down. Eliminate regularly (as soon as you go from horizontal to vertical in the morning) and monitor your poop to make sure it is of the right texture, color, and odor. You can learn a lot about the state of your body by your poo and pooping habits.

One recommendation that makes a big difference even if you did nothing else is to eat fruit for dinner. Fruit digests in an hour, while full meal of cooked food takes 4 hours. So go with fruit, which according to Life Naturals is at the top of the food pyramid. Fruit, vegetables, sprouts, and cooked food, in that order. Meat is out, and so is dairy. Dairy is not necessary for the human body whatsoever. It was a paradigm-breaker for me to think of fruit as the superfood, but it is. A phrase we learned was, "Fruits clean, vegetables build".

Another paradigm shift was disassociating food from energy. According to the Life Natural, food is not the same as energy. Energy is a phenomenon still not fully explained by
science, it is life force. Imagine metal wires, one copper, one gold, one platinum. When electricity passes through them, they conduct the energy. The degree to which they conduct depends on the resistance in the material. Copper has more resistance, gold slightly less, platinum less still. Platinum is the best conduit of the energy because it has the least resistance. According to Life Natural, our bodies are the wires; energy passes through, we determine the level of resistance by keeping our bodies more or less pure. Healthy food produces pure bodies, which are made of cells. In metabolism, digestive enzymes break down complex food matter (catabolism), and these broken down molecules are synthesized to build the body (anabolism). In essence, says Life Natural, food is the building block of the body and is not the building block of energy. In fact, body requires energy to digest food and hence food is a tax on energy.

There are lots of other lessons we learned, but suffice it to say we took in a lot and it really changed us. Since we've been back to Ahmedabad, Jay, MAM and I have been evangelizing the diet like crazy (some people have begun to think we are crazy). Everyone and anyone we talk to gets a lecture on "eat fruit dinners, cut dairy". That's our main message to folks. Just doing that goes a long way. I talked to Dr. Sri to get his (western/allopathic) medical opinion on the whole thing, since Ragu had also given him the spiel. Sri said that though there isn't hard evidence to back up lot of what Ragu says, it doesn't mean it's not true. Personally, Sri thinks most of it is correct. And you definitely can't go wrong with fruit dinners and less dairy.

Ragu explained that Life Naturals isn't so much a diet with strict rules as it is an attitude. Basically be kind to your body by making it easier for it to digest food and give a boost for mental and spiritual growth. So I've started by splitting one cooked food meal into two, and adding a fruit meal. I drink water 20 min before or after meals in order to not dilute the digestive juices. And I continue to exercise, which Ragu said is the great forgiver. If you exercise regularly, you can afford to eat worse. Which is probably why I've stayed healthy in my 20s.

Ragu and Nisha's 5-year-old. This topic deserves its own post (UPDATE: It's here; Also a DailyGood feature on him.)

Pace of Life/Interconnectedness of Life

This is what I wrote to a friend after coming back from the farm, it stands as one of my biggest aha's:

Life is so busy for all of us. There is this meeting, that project, this function, that achievement. After being with Ragu and Nisha and living their life on the farm, there are two properties of this lifestyle that stick out in contrast. First, our lives are very fast-paced. And this pace is neither healthy nor desirable for me. It is not in harmony with internal or external nature. It is like a whirlwind that speeds up into a tornado.

Second, life is very disjointed. We are pulled constantly in different directions. One thing after the next jumping around. A small handful of things you prioritize quickly raises back up with so many sub-things. It is a constant battle to keep a lid on it and keep it from overwhelming you.

Ragu and Nisha live at a natural pace. This is purely subjective, but I felt that things moved more appropriately there. Not that it wasn't busy or even crammed, it just felt more even-keeled. That's the best I can describe it. And also, their activities were very integrated. Everything was oriented toward being on the farm, that's all.
Ragu’s vantage point on rural life is very authentic. No duh, he lives in rural India. But still, talking with him made me very aware of the gaps in understanding I have myself of rural people. We were discussing the Stuart Brand book I’m reading and he proceeded to tear apart the arguments Brand was making from the root level. The basis was that Brand had second-hand knowledge of a village, Ragu has first-hand. In response to Brand’s discussion on the plight of rural women as oppressed and disempowered, Ragu told me about one of his farm laborer’s wives, who displayed incredible knowing and proactive confidence in an episode to get her husband out of a jam. He told me another story about a local youth he and Nisha were trying to put through college as he refused to become a farm worker like his Dad. They had taken the responsibility on as a “development” project. They got him into a long-distance undergrad degree in computer science (as the boy was good at math) and even tutored him for a semester. The boy started with great enthusiasm and promise, but later tailed off in his commitment and could not pass one of the six subjects. Ragu at fist felt upset, but later learned that the boy lived in a one room hut with a sick father to tend to and no light to read at night. He could not continue to the next semester. So they dropped the idea of “educating” him. Later Ragu helped the boy get a job as a local gardener to support his family, which he excelled at. Meanwhile Ragu randomly spotted an ad in the paper for certified computer accounting training and informed the boy. He completed it and his boss added accounting responsibilities to his gardening job. A year later his boss gave him a scholarship to pursue the same long-distance undergrad degree and freed him from his job responsibilities. If there are all of these unexpected twists to "develop" one village boy, how much reality is really behind pundits who talk about "scalable solutions"?

Important teachers in Ragu’s education on rural life are his neighbors, two farming brothers on the east side. They used to be laborers for local farmers, but they were extremely hard workers and earned their own land. Ragu talks about how they work with such strength and discipline, day in and day out. They teach what hard work really means, with ripped muscles carrying 50 kg bags of produce or fertilizer hour after hour. They are relatively good farmers, though not organic. But they saw Ragu’s organic turmeric and without needing any explanation saw the reasoning behind his way. Maybe they’ll adopt his approach, maybe not. But they have the sensibility to understand. Hearing Ragu share these stories made me feel that there is something very rich and real and right we miss when we sit in A/C offices in cities trying to imagine rural life.

Building community

Several times in several conversations Ragu and Nisha talked about how often and how egregiously they have been cheated by people. They are easy targets as outsiders. But also cheating is institutionalized, there is no effort to even hide it. When someone makes a deal with Ragu, they say up front that they are keeping a little for themselves. A neighbor needed some emergency money for a medical procedure, which ended up saving his life. When Ragu asked that same neighbor to help him with some important work that he would pay him for, he refused. The degree of exploitation can wear on you if you are trying to live in the way Ragu and Nisha strive to. They have to meet each episode with re-opened mind and tolerance.

When Ragu was buying bricks for the house, he had very specific instructions for the brick maker because he was using the bricks in a non-traditional way. They should not have cracked edges and should remain whole. Ragu assured the brick maker he would pay a premium, but this was absolutely compulsory. The brick maker understood fully and agreed. The bricks showed up to the farm with 40% broken bricks. Ragu was furious, and went to the brick maker, who said there was nothing he could do. You will still have to pay
the full amount. Ragu replied, "I will pay you the money, but you have to do one thing. Look me in the eye right now and tell me that you have cheated me. You have promised something you have not delivered on, and are accepting this money on work you have not done as agreed upon. Just let those words come out of your mouth, and I will give you the money." And the guy couldn’t do it. He couldn’t utter those words. To Ragu it was an indicator that there was still integrity in this person who has blatantly cheated him. He couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge it explicitly. The next day he returned 40% of the payment to Ragu.

And like that Ragu and Nisha have found and nurtured small cracks of goodness which are starting to coalesce into a budding ecosystem. They are literally and figuratively planting seeds all around them and they are blooming. Life Natural is one example; it has attracted a core group of like-hearted people who are ready to practice good values in meaningful ways. Ragu was taking us for a walk and ran into some local youth who brightly chattered about a tree-planting event they were organizing together. Ragu had cleverly weaved in astrological significance to the specific date and type of tree they would be planting, and that was enough to get the town excited. Thousands of trees would be planted.

To me this is the most moving aspect of Ragu and Nisha’s life on their farm. They are slowly but slowly cultivating an ecosystem of people and activities that breath the values they are trying to instill in themselves. Ragu calls it living a life of response. He is relatively free from ambition; he just works with what is there to respond in a wholesome and aligned manner. Lots of people draw inspiration from the ecosystem created by ServiceSpace posse in the Bay, and Manav Sadhna family in Ahmedabad. But in a corner of rural Tamil Nadu, this family has left those cozy bubbles and starting planting seeds in virgin territory, birthing a new ecosystem. To me this is the ultimate work, test, and responsibility of anyone who has been in contact with these spaces.