

# Climate activism on the write track

TNN | Oct 25, 2021, 02.22 PM IST



CHENNAI: On a warm July afternoon this year, a bunch of children put on headsets and sat before their laptops to join a curious boy named Samrat and his mother and marine biologist Seema, on a journey to the island of Tarmugli in the Andamans. Then, they went looking for nesting sea turtles. As Pankaj Sekhsaria, an IIT Bombay professor and activist, read out Samrat's story from his first children's book 'Waiting for Turtles' (illustrated by Vipin Sketchplore), at the virtual launch by Chennai publishers Karadi Tales, the kids learned about the seven different types of sea turtles, 300 species of freshwater turtles, and the quirks that made ghost crabs and sea snakes special.

Pankaj has been a veteran researcher of the Andaman Islands for more than two decades and fought long and hard for the rights of its native Jarawa tribals. This is his second work of fiction after 'The Last Wave', another story of a rover who finds himself ignited by the ecology, culture and a community's struggle for survival on these islands.

## Congratulations!

You have successfully cast your vote

[Login to view result](#)

In less than half a decade that passed, the world has witnessed raging fires torching Amazon's rainforests, hurricanes wrecking nations and angry protestors taking to the world's streets demanding course correction. But to drive home the point in a way that could incite prudence and empathy, eco-warriors are employing the power of stories, art and poetry to tell people across

generations that change begins with them. While the movement pioneered by those like Amitav Ghosh, this tribe is growing.

For Pankaj, 'The Last Wave' was "a response to the disappointment and limitations of activism I faced in the Andamans." "We had reached a painful deadlock after some key orders of the Supreme Court favouring tribals and their environment failed to be implemented, and then the Tsunami hit in 2004. That's when I felt that I wanted to tell the stories of these people and their land in a way that even those not familiar with them could understand," he says.

In 2019, Chennai writer and storyteller Shilpa Krishnan, who had spent a whole year volunteering at Cuckoo, a forest school for rural children in Tiruvannamalai's Jawadhu Hills, decided to document the marvels of the clear night sky that she spent hours gazing at while there. She wrote 'Muthu's Sky', a bilingual (English and Tamil) picture book illustrated by city artist Parvathy Subramanian, which follows Muthu a young boy from Jawadhu Hills on his visit to the city, where he enjoys video games and beaches, but misses the stars and the meteor showers back home.

"In Vermont, a nine-year-old single-handedly started the plastic straw ban in his neighbourhood. Children view life through a simple lens, comprehend solutions and are eager to bring about change. This was the faith I wrote this book in," says Shilpa.

But it isn't just vast fields of daffodils or lonely clouds that can evoke the romance of the written word, as a whole generation of 'eco-poets' are discovering. It's also melting glaciers, expanding wastelands and rising temperatures.

"Eco poetry is a relatively new form of poetry and different from nature poetry, which explored the earth's magnificence and beauty," says poet and writer Vinita Agarwal, also the editor of 'Open Your Eyes: An Anthology On Climate Change: Poetry and Prose' that came out in August last year and features poets like Jayanta Mahapatra and Arundhati Subramaniam. "Climate change isn't just carbon emissions and water depletion, it's also delicate things like species extinction and harmful research activities; and eco poetry draws our attention to these issues," she says.

Professor of creative writing at IIT Madras, K Srilata, is one of the contributors to the anthology. She says the slow form of poetry has the power to shift deep-rooted perspectives. "It's a very mindful activity, which pushes you to look at what's happening to the world around you," she says.

Srilata's poem, 'Reading at One Remove', looks at the bioregionalism of the ancient Tamil Sangam poetry from 'Tholkappiyam',

that spoke of different kinds of landscapes presided over by different flowers and different emotions – attributing that one’s well being depended on their living environment.

Using the power of creative thinking to compel change has also been seen in art movements across the world. After learning that despite the International Whaling Commission’s 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling, Japan and Norway were hunting whales, American skateboarder and activist Peggy Oki displayed a curtain of 3,000 handstitched origami whales created from public participation, at the Alaska Oceans Festival (Anchorage, AK) in 2007.

In India, those like comic artist Rohan Chakravarty (@green\_humour) and Parvathy Nayar have constantly raised this bar through their work. Parvathy, Chennaiite, has always used water as a theme in her work; she collected trash from the mouth of the Adyar river over a course of two months and created a kolam as part of her series called ‘Invite/Refuse’. She has also explored the striking beauty and variety of diatoms - (a photosynthesising algae in aquatic bodies) as inspirations in her work.

“You only respond to what you see and hear. Through my work, I want to provoke people to become curious, learn more and make a change,” she says.