KERALA

Laidlaw summer 2026





30th June - 8th Aug 2026

Second year of Laidlaw Scholarship

Maria Chow

An overview OF THE TRIP

Week 1

Welcome to Kerala!

Week full of upskilling! Exploring fort Kochi and Cochin, getting to know the girls!

Week 2

Forest Post

A social impact enterprise aiming to collectively bring indigenous tribes in Kerala, India, in order to provide a dignified source of income.

Week 3

SEWA - Self Employed Women's Centre

The largest trade union in India for women in informal sectors aiming to provide meaningful and dignified employment and self-reliance in a patriarchal society.

Week 4

Archana Women's Centre

An NGO committed to the holistic development of women, addressing their physical, mental, psychological, financial and spiritual well-being.

Week 5

Swara

An ethical fashion business ran by our awesome Asha, who runs this programme

Week 6

Personal project

Dedicated time to work on our personal projects



Food





























Favourite recipes



Ingredients

Chopped up mango
Arrow Root Powder
Milk
Jaggery
Cardamom





Alba enjoying the pudding

Erin looking very happy!

Forest 14/320,
Thaikkattussery,
Edakkunny, Thrissur,
680306, Kerala, India

Had this for the first time during our last day at forest post! Manju made this for us and I thought it was the best dessert

I tried on this trip. Date = 10th July. Paired with one of the best meals I had. Had chicken that tasted like some singaporean dish with curry leaves.

Over a stove, mix around 100g of arrowroot powder with milk until thick. Then stir in more milk once all dissolved (to avoid lumps!). Mix spices then top with chopped mango. Manju recommends refridgerating but I like it warm! My own suggestions: add cinnamon and warm spiced apples/pears



At SEWA!

Kashi Chocolate Cake



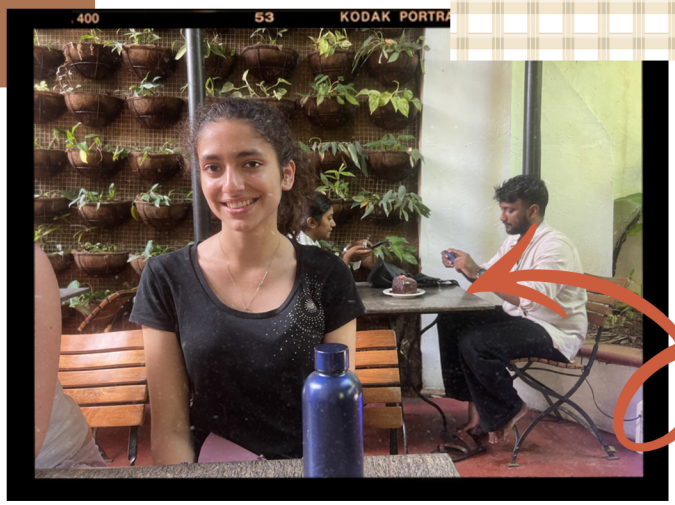
Ingredients

Cake:
Cocoa Powder
Milk
Sugar
Eggs
White flour

Sauce:
Cocoa Powder
Milk
Sugar



On our free day we went back just for the cake! (4th July Saturday)

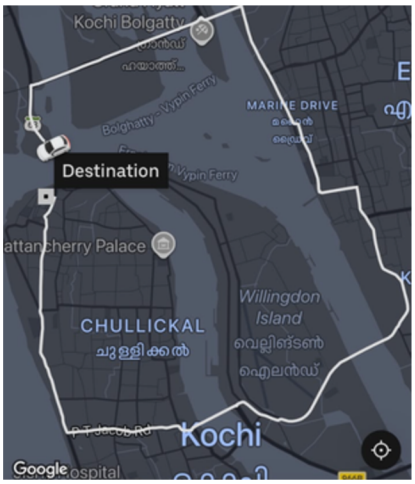


The only reason why we got this cake is because we saw it being delivered to this couple! The glistening shine of the chocolate sauce was too enticing to say no.

Kashi Art Cafe, Burgher Street, Fort Nagar, Fort Kochi, Kochi, Kerala 682001



It took us 2.5h to get to Kashi on the very last full day!! But so worth it, and had good chats. Went to Save the Loom for a complete circle.





WEEK 1

Main Cochin

31st June -5h July 2026

Elanjipra, Chowka, Kerala

680721










CERTIFICATE
CERTIFICATE
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CERTIFICATE
CERTIFICATE

WEEK 2

Forest Post



5th -12th July 2026

Elanjipra, Chowka, Kerala

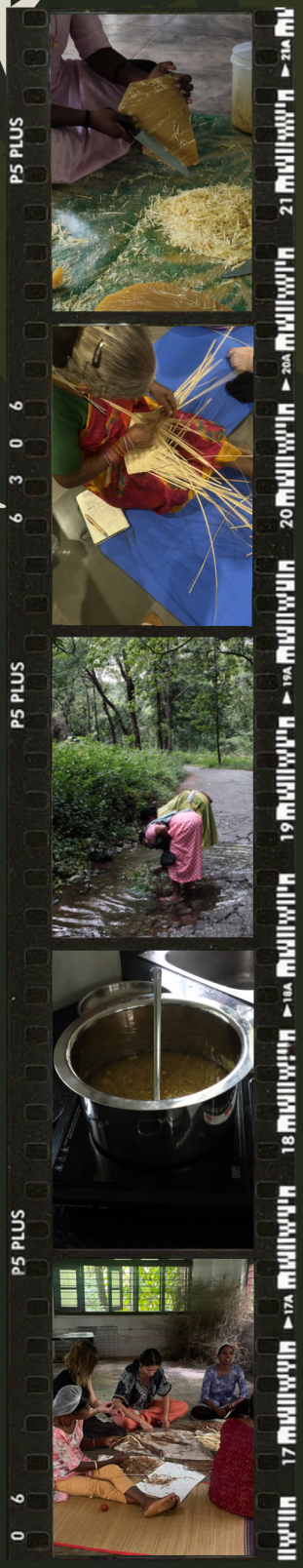
680721

Forest Post

Forest Post is an organisation whose mission is to provide income for indigeneous women by utilisng the skills they already have

















First consulting project















WITNESSING STEWARDSHIP IN PRACTICE

Holding onto nothing, grateful for everything

"Death isn't really a big deal to these people" . Rethinking attatchment and permenance through the indigenous forest people of Kerala

A piece I wrote for Forest Post's blog page

""Death is easily accepted in the Indigenous communities, almost in a stoic manner". Manju, the founder of Forest Post, explained to me. Having heard this for the first time I was taken aback as it contradicted my observation of the compassionate, loving women I had met from the indigenous tribes. Something didn't fit, so maybe it was a case of 'lost in translation'. How could all these stories of sister and brotherhood coexist with this statement, which could have been interpreted as an unsympathetic quality in the indigenous people?

Yet, when combined with the other stories I had heard, I was able to see a more holistic, 3-dimensional picture that was actually more consistent and provided explanations for other practices that seemed at first completely irrational to me from my most Western perspective.

In the unlikely business-focused discussion about jam making, I learnt of this unfamiliar philosophy of stewardship.

Manju recalled the time when she and the women planned a new jam product using a rare plant. Yet as they went searching for this fruit, one of the women spotted it germinating in some elephant poo.This far from appealing imagery told of a very important fact for the women. The elephants liked the same fruit. With this fact, Manju and the women decided to step back and ask themselves "do we really need this fruit?".

In the end, they made the decision to leave the fruit to the elephants. There was no immediate benefit from this decision. Just pure, generous and sacrificial awareness for another living creature.

Now, how is this related to an apparently apathetic view of death? 'Stewardship' was an alternative word that drifted into mind whilst absorbing all the complex stories.

The corporate definition claims it is the practice of "protecting stakeholder interests and building long-term economic value", and, strangely enough, I found that the local people's practice informally integrated this stewardship philosophy, though not explicitly stated.

Protecting stakeholder interests is the protection of the elephant's interests. **True long-term economic value** is taking care of the forest so it takes care of you back, instead of viewing resources as something to be extractive for personal consumption.

Concerning oneself with the welfare of the forest can directly feed into the welfare of the village and the people in it.

Having this view of stewardship reminded me of principles of circular economy, yet one that seems more personal… and so much richer.

Whilst giving up something that initially seems to be a shortcoming, ultimately, through a complex cycle of symbiotism, striving for a healthier system, rather than component, alleviates all the components in the system.

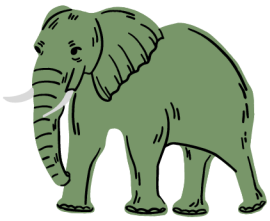
And so perhaps in the light of systems thinking, we are able to emphasise the view that death isn't the end.

Acknowledging that we are part of a greater circle of life releases the permanence of death, and sacrifice, something I personally hope to incorporate as I inevitably encounter setbacks.

Stewardship recognises that we don't have exclusive ownership right to natural resources but it is shared with other living creatures as equals rather than competitors, or something to extract resources from. They share the space of the rainforest together. This is why they have been able to live in harmony with elephants and tigers for such a long time.

Here in Kerala, I interpreted that the indigenous people don't create for permanence: they recognize that life, like resources, is a gift. From the tools they build to the unfamiliar acceptance of the birds picking at their millet harvest, the local people hold a strong view of resources as a privilege, rather than an entitlement.

As I go back home to the UK, every time I see the rain pour down, or hear the birds chirp in the morning, I am reminded of the women I met. Correction: the *friends* that taught me how to accept and freely give.





FREE DAY

Saturday 11th July
(day 11)

Shakthan Thampuran Palace,
Stadium Road, Chembukkav,
Thrissur, Kerala 680020,
India



MASSIVE chinese pot









We got scammed in this cafe, Loaves and Muffins :D



SPATULA!









Engravings in the wall
at the Palace!

WEEKLY REFLECTION

Greater self-awareness

The Laidlaw Foundation gives us weekly reflection prompts, and the first on the list asked, "What tangible outcomes were achieved?". Immediately, what jumped to mind was the physical output of completing my first consulting project. Yet dwelling on it more, and perhaps this couldn't even be defined as tangible, but the greatest achievement I felt was the acknowledgement of my narrow worldview. However, re-thinking and re-building my own worldview isn't new to me. In fact, I think I've become blasé about the sensation that comes with it. Rather, it was the fact that I believed I had a worldview that was less resistant to the temptations of generalisations.

I came across many instances that emphasised the familial love between the indigenous peoples, nourished by constant stories that fed into this narrative. Before I knew it, I generalised a worldview that all of the indigenous people had this utmost devotion to their husbands and wives. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it because it was based on consistent narratives from the women themselves that shaped my view. Yet it was only one instance, on meeting a group of women who were all divorced, and listening to their passionate opinions about female independence, that brought into light my 2 dimensional view that restricted the women to being self-sacrificial. Whilst they definitely hold this strong quality, meeting this other group of women showed me they also value independence. I saw the same empowered-strengthened stubbornness of the typical 'Western Feminism' shine through these women.

Conflict between curiousity and ambitiousness

Two Laidlaw change maker values I felt tension arise between were curiosity and tension. One of the deliverables we were asked to do was to write a blog piece reflecting on our experiences associated with our time at Forest Post.

I always struggled with the supposed divide of writing my raw and unfiltered thoughts versus what the brief asks me to. Writing for myself versus a corporation.

The Oxford bubble doesn't help with this. Behind the walls, ideas and opinions are freely shared without a second thought. Like iron sharpening iron, the most critical of ideas have been worn down by the opposing weapons. I am able to speak without consequences. This is how the world is meant to Two Laidlaw change maker values I felt tension arise between were curiosity and tension. One of the deliverables we were asked to do was to write a blog Piece reflecting on our experiences associated with our time at Forest Post.

I always struggled with the supposed divide of writing my raw and unfiltered thoughts versus what the brief asks me to. Writing for myself versus a corporation. Social enterprise or the largest financial corporations, I never found myself quite agreeing with every part of the organisation's philosophy.

The Oxford bubble doesn't help with this. Behind the walls, ideas and opinions are freely shared without a second thought. Like iron sharpening iron, the most critical of ideas have been worn down by the opposing weapons. I am able to speak without consequences. This is how the world is meant to be, right? The right to free speech is preached in a manner such that anything, at any time, should be said.

I realise, the free speech that is being exchanged within the safety of the bubble, isn't the free speech that should be released to the wider world. With tensions arising both between nations and within, it can be argued that words have equally as much power as the threat of destructive technologies. More than ever, with algorithms that push people into echo chambers and polarise groups more than ever, we must be careful in which thoughts we put out to the world. Or rather, how we put these thoughts out.

I initially thought that writing for an organisation or business meant that I had to sacrifice my personal authenticity and truth. But through writing my blog post, I realise I don't have to give up authenticity. Or be crafty in curating arguments for persuasion. Ultimately, I must acquire the wisdom to understand where and when to proclaim my often infantile thoughts, and when to let them mature.

Yet I realise, this bubble does not help in building up my tactfulness. Through writing my blog post, I realise I don't have to give up authenticity, or be crafty in curating arguments for persuasion, but I must acquire the wisom to understand where and when to proclaim my often infant thoughts, and when to let them mature.

Limiting the scope of my arguments/conversations

I was exposed to the indigenous people's "low attachment" philosophy. It was this fascinating way of thinking that was triggered by learning about the easy acceptance of death in the Indigenous communities. Now this philosophy catalysed all sorts of links to various stories that I had soaked up on this trip, but also through past lived experiences. I found I could talk about

- the critique of capitalism and the rat race of our current work culture
- sustainability
- self-centeredness

If you know me, you may pick up that I tend to spiral and ramble. I often see my mouth boldly (and also falsely) proclaiming numerous connections per second, yet my brain cannot keep up with the speed at which it does. This leads to messy and disorganised thoughts.
The many nodes and connections lazily thrown into the depths of my head are clearly unpruned. Whilst there may be beautiful flowers, their magnificence is veiled by the mass of untended weeds. For them to shine in the stage of the sun, I must be ready to cut the unnecessary thorns and overgrown weeds. Painful, but necessary.
This will be the one thing that I will work on for next week as I embark onto my next consulting project: to be intentional with each word, focusing on one idea only.

Next week:

- intentional with each word - focus on one idea

OUR INNATE HUMAN DESIRE TO RELENTLESSLY CONTROL FOR HAPPINESS:

LEARNING FROM THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF FOREST POST THAT LETTING GO LEADS TO TRUE SATISFACTION

Week 3 of CraftHER had the scholars and I residing in SEWA's Rural Centre in Thrivandrum. SEWA is India's largest trade union for informal workers, and would be quite confident to also say the largest home for insects too. Bugs were everywhere. In *our* bathrooms, *our* bedrooms. In *OUR* space. Naturally, we were all extremely uncomfortable. However, it was only when Erin unpacked why she felt so uncomfortable that it illuminated a fundamental realisation about our human nature. She concluded that her OCD had her frustrated because she wasn't able to control her surroundings. Thinking about this further made me realise, in all our strivings, we have an innate desire to relentlessly control things in a search for happiness and fulfillment.

I see this desire throughout my life constantly. One of the strongest urges I felt to control a situation, or rather my entire *future*, was through my academics . I thought that by getting good grades, I was able to go to a good university, and by doing so, secure a good future.

This made me wonder why us humans feel the need to control so much. We see this in the technology we build. We create A/C to control the exact temperature of our rooms, artificial lights so we can work whenever we want, and cars to get us to the exact place and the exact time for our exact needs.

We live in this illusion that because we have these technologies, we can somehow control the forces of nature. That time is a resource we can save and spend. But spending time with the Indigenous Women of Forest Post allowed me to realise that we are actually subject to the forces of nature. We live by Time's cycle, instead of our own. The Indigenous women's easy acceptance of death, sacrificial love and stewardship philosophy quite clearly show that they don't create for a life of permanence, but recognise that life, and all that comes with it, is a gift.

And so I think the emotion that lay beneath my endless striving was a desire for security. However, whilst the steps I took were perfectly reasonable, pursuing this path, and even succeeding, never provided me with the sense of security I craved. Ironically, it made me feel even more insecure.

Yet when I dwelt on the times where I felt the most at peace, they were actually the times I didn't control or plan anything. Think about the most precious of memories or relationships. That night out with your uni friends. That time you fell in love. Usually, they were unplanned, spontaneous, and off schedule. Unexpected.

Interestingly, this reminded me of December last year, where I read a book on 'knowing that you will die, shapes the way that you live'. I focused then on doing things for *what it is,* rather than viewing it as a means to an end. Surprisingly I actually did better in my academics, had more time to enjoy the things I wanted and feel fulfilled. My time at Forest Post has opened my eyes to the similarities in the two philosophies: that viewing life as a gift, something to take pleasure, than to control and conquer, leads to more fufillment than achievements could ever do. Appreciating things at *this moment*, instead of joining the endless rat race. When someone gives you a gift, you don't start planning on how they would look excellent on your CV, but appreaciate its beauty in the fact that its identity is a gift. Though it may not be useful in the practical sense, you cannot deny that it doesn't have a value or purpose.

So my takeaway is that we should take all of life in with two hands, but instead of clenching on tight when it's time to give, feeling the freedom in opening them back up, and offering it back. Learn to flow with life, rather than to control and conquer it.



WEEK 3

SEWA



5th -12th July 2026

Elanjipra, Chowka, Kerala

680721










WEEK 4



20th -26th July 2026
Ettumanoor, Kottayam District,
686631

Powered by passion, not profits

What profit-driven firms can learn from people-driven firms

"And she felt hurt that I couldn't invite her to my birthday party!", the secretary of Archana finished, explaining that one of the 6,000 members of Archana Women's Centre (AWC) strongly felt disappointed by this lack of invitation. It struck me that, despite 4 levels of formal corporate 'hierarchy', that one of the members felt such a strong disposition. Just this one narrative alone was enough to demonstrate the type of workplace culture that AWC fosters: there are such close relationships that transcend any formal title, that one can demand to go to the executive's birthday celebration.

Studying Economics in my IB diploma, scoring first in Singapore for iGCSE economics, and regularly winning school awards gave me the illusion that I thought I knew this subject well. All the buzz words: profits, cost-efficiency, capital, labour, all organised themselves in a distinct structural manner that any textbook would be pleased to see if they had a peep into my head.

However, after arriving at AWC, it seemed to me that this robust structure I knew so well, was built on shaky foundations. Here was an alternative way of looking at work. Of placing people, not profits, at the centre of it.



Omana Chechi
independent women carpenter



Archana Women's Centre
Vettimukal, near Punnathura Kavala, in Ettumanoor, Kottayam District, Kerala, India 686631

The Economics of Mutuality Framework (EOM) emerged from a multi-year research project from Oxford University's Saïd Business school, and is one of many business frameworks that places purpose into strategy, resisting the orthodox philosophy that 'doing good' and making profit is a zero sum game. This is what 'mutual' stands for: a centering around societal problems, whilst maintaining a healthy business.There are many proven case studies to show the outstanding resilience of purpose-driven firms, and even surpassing their profit-driven peers in financial reward! Whilst Archana is not explicitly following the EOM framework, I see some distinct similarities shine through, and definite benefits that traditionally corporate firms can learn from.

The 4 Mutual Value Components can be broken down into meaning, proximity, reciprocity and regeneratively.

Meaning

EOM defines meaning as being centered around a relevant societal problem, and AWC's purpose for existing could not be closer to this. AWC believes in the actual empowerment of women, in all dimensions of life. Physically, they train women in unconventional, male-dominated jobs such as masonry and carpentry. Mentally and psychologically, AWC puts in vast resources to tackle domestic abuse.

Having this meaning deeply ingrained into the organisation means that everything else is united under a common

purpose. And this is where value is created. Despite having a lean senior leadership team, meaning time and energy is never in excess, I felt the immense passion pour out from each and every individual *because* of this common purpose of empowering women.

Proximity

Close trust based relationships are necessary to facilitate co-creation and shared accountability. Shared accountability was something that struck me as one of the key components that allows Archana to be so resilient.

Archana employs a unique membership structure such that a single individual can't register on their own, but needs to register as a group. These are called Community Action Groups (CAGs), and serve as a small hub where women can share any troubles they are facing, feel the comfort of shared pressures, and ultimately create this amazing but invisible shield. I personally know this from my own experience, just the fact that someone is going through a similar situation, releases the burden off me significantly. A problem shared is a problem halved.

This cleverly tackles the mental and psychological dimensions, which are arguably the root causes for the barriers that women face in India's boldly patriarchal society. Whilst de jure factors are often easier to change, de facto factors are much tougher - real change comes from within. Providing a financial safety net from a job isn't enough: there are domestic and societal pressures that can only be overcome by strong mental resilience.

Reciprocity

Drawing back to the story of the birthday party, I see quite clearly how close-knitted relationships can actually serve for reciprocal benefits, and the ability for the senior leadership to gain unparalleled insights into the ecosystems of their members. It can only be possible to know the true wants and needs of your members if a sense of trust is felt, and therefore springboard off of these insights to improve the overall structure and goals of the organisation.

A real example from Archana was a surprising and difficult one. Archana's founding story is based on teaching women male-dominated jobs, one significant job being carpentry. AWC trained 600 women in this skill, however after listening to the women, they realised this wasn't actually in line with the wants of the women. The women preferred a laid back role, instead of the laborious job of carving. Whilst maintaining the origin story, Archana had to make the decision to stop carpentry training.

However, making this reciprocity between Archana and the broader Indian economy more explicit, i.e. something that my economics teacher would be happy about, is that AWC actually boosts economic activity. By providing dignity, recognition and work to women who either were overlooked by the gendered standards of 'labour', or lacked the confidence to do so, Archana brings in many more women into the formal economy.

Regenerative

Archana's vast network of skills training, awareness campaigns and strike prevention are clear contributions to a strengthening of interdependency between businesses and society. The simple presence of a woman carpenter, or loud shouts of advocacy against domestic violence creates a time-enduring, barrier-breaking impression that women *can* do male jobs. Women *should* be treated as equals. Women *are* as capable as men.












ARCHANA









The honest side to NGOs, charities and everything in between

Good motives don't always equal to meaningful change

I want to be clear: this is a reflection that many people may not want to read. The good people. Especially the determined ones. This reflection is brutal; it is blunt, but most importantly, it is honest.

Archana Women's Centre (AWC), an NGO founded upon the philosophy that women can do male-dominated jobs, has its origin story set on their success in training women in carpentry and masonry. It boasts of teaching 600 women carpentry skills and showcases the luxurious villas built by women alone. One cannot deny that this is monumental in advocating against the patriarchal Indian society, and AWC should hold its head up high in taking the step forward to boldly, but non violently, rebel against the long-reigning system.

Yet it was only when I went to the field that I realised that *NGOs may not always have the best interests of the people it is trying to serve.*

Going to visit the carpentry unit that upskilled 600 women in this difficult craft, aside from the owner of the unit, it shocked me to see that there were only men on the site. This didn't align with the narrative that we were told the day before.

After asking several confused questions, we discovered that women didn't actually enjoy carpentry, and that they preferred more relaxed work. I began to see a consistent story shine through. Just the day before, we saw a deserted brick-making unit at AWC's main office site, and its abandonment was also attributed to the lack of interest.

All the AWC posters that promoted women powerfully getting their hands messy were inconsistent with their true interests.Whilst I believe that showing society the equal, and in some cases even superior, traditionally male-dominated skills that women can do, it is also equally important to have open ears and flexible hands. The founding story is unarguably influential in shifting de facto attitudes, yet I believe clinging to the story, when there is a mismatch in interest, isn't always helpful in pushing its wider mission of providing secure incomes for women.

Many charities and NGOs, and even this Learning in Action Programme, are vulnerable to these mistakes. CraftHER, the leadership programme I am currently on, is focused on women's empowerment, as can be not-so-subtly deciphered by the name. For each organisation, we have to write a reflective blog, as well as regularly give TEDx-style speeches that share our introspective learning outcomes. I find that, perhaps because of the nature of the programme, we all gravitate to the same narrative of what feminism means to us. And then go on to push this narrative upon the women we are helping. Common themes of glorifying women for doing these laborious, male-dominated jobs permeate through everyone's blogs and speeches. Yet the harsh reality is that the women actually don't want to do these jobs. They would prefer a less strenuous job that allows them to spend time with their children. We are uncomfortable with this truth because it doesn't fit neatly into our own definitions of feminism. Women should be strong like men. Women shouldn't be housewives who take care of the children. But have we actually stopped to listen to what the receiving party wants?

This is not a criticism of AWC. I've seen so many women who enjoy cooking, and AWC has provided the seed funding for them to start their own food stalls from their homes. But why are they happier with this decision? Conversations have shown that they truly value the flexibility to rest when they want and take care of household tasks when they want.

We should rethink what feminism actually means. It isn't imposing our own patronising narratives of muscular women that spend all day contributing to the double-income household. It is seeing women as individual and autonomous humans that may have desires that don't fit neatly into our own view of what powerful females look like. **It is allowing women to have freedom to choose, even if it clashes with our definition of feminism.**

All of us are prone to this. Whilst it is commendable to have passionate advocacy for noble ideologies, we must build an image that *expects* inconsistencies, and *that* will bear more fruit in making meaningful change.

In the end, it is the mission that unites us all, not the way we get there.



RETREAT

Little Flower Farms

25th -26th July 2026

Erattupetta-Peermade Road,

Vagamon Hills














KL 34 6608



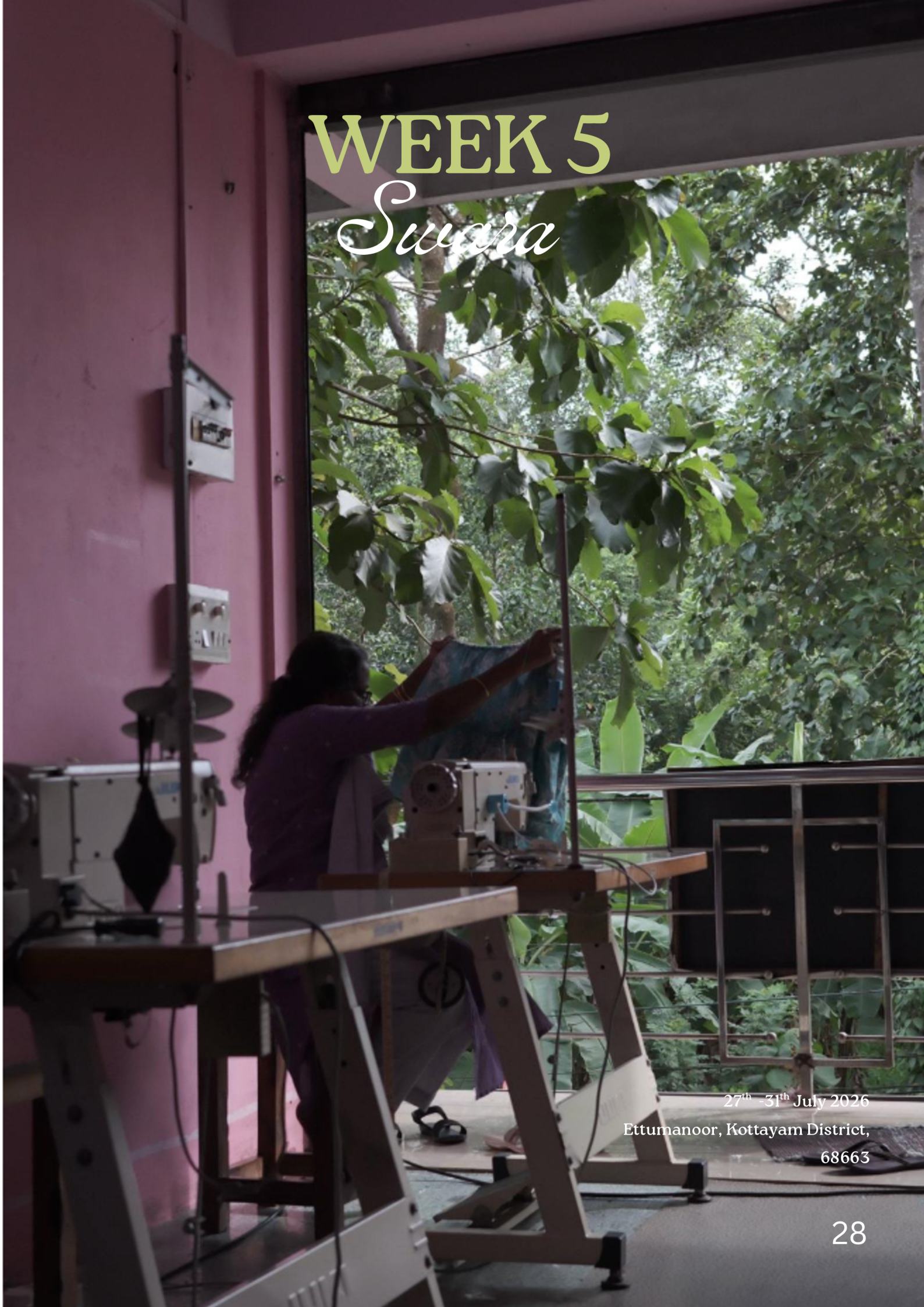
Jeep Adventures...











WEEK 5

Suvara

27th -31th July 2026

Ettumanoor, Kottayam District,
68663








JUKI











LIVELIHOODS WASHED AWAY?

BANG BANG BANG. Erin and I awoke to Lorelai's frantic rapping on our door at Akkara Homestay. My half-asleep self soon learnt that we were meant to evacuate all of our belongings in *45 minutes*. Glancing out onto the patio, I immediately understood why. The river, a good 100m away from where we peacefully resided the night before, had crept up stealthily in the night, such that it was uneasily right outside our bedrooms.



As someone who grew up in Asia, Monsoon season wasn't new to me. However gathering through the urgency of our usually calm supervisor, Asha, I finally understood the cliché that *time wasn't on our side.*

Yet, as we rushed out on our sturdy, rusty-looking red truck, battling the rough waters of Kerala, I wasn't prepared for what met my eyes. Or rather, the atmosphere I was engulfed in. Stillness. Quiet. Not in the eerie sense, but an incredible placidity. Suddenly, the urgency that had pushed our truck out of the gates of Akkara a few minutes ago mysteriously dissolved into a sense of calm.

Kerala, again, it seemed, was a land of contradictions. One that I still can't figure out. Sailing past various homes, never-ending sights of water-blocked homes overwhelmed me, and with it, all the stories of the past 5 weeks came flooding back.

Coming to the end of the programme, this strange and unsettling experience somehow conveniently allows me to tie up the fleeting thoughts, deeper reflections and comprehensive journal entries, altogether.



Two main themes stood out to me, which maybe contradict each other, or maybe don't. Either way, I don't think settling inconclusivity is the point, or even useful.

Building for loss as a form of resilience
Livelihoods built on homes

Again, back to my week's reflection from Forest Post, I've learnt to accept that things don't need to be packaged into neat boxes (while Minecraft is awesome, real life holds more beauty).

Building for Loss

Two instances where this theme of building for loss came from my interaction with *Forest Post* and *Save the Loom.* Firstly at Forest Post, Manju (founder) explained that houses were built from bamboo and mud, and must be replaced about every two years. This creates a form of resilience: people prepare for and accept loss, including events outside their control. Secondly at *Save the Loom,* all of us girls were shocked by the description of the aftermath of the 2018 Kerala floods. One can't even begin to imagine the loss of everything being taken away, in an instant. Yet when Ramesh (founder) describes his first interactions with the households, again, the same theme arises as when I sailed down the road-made-river: unruffled resilience.

I am hesitant to call it as such, and I fear I lack the vocabulary to adequately describe this 'undisturbedness'. This is because I sense that calling a community resilient can sometimes make suffering sound more acceptable than it is. Yet whilst it ruined all their looms, the source of their income and livelihood, they weren't weighed down with despair.

So perhaps, in some cases, it isn't just building for loss, but acknowledging the limitations of their control and the non-permanence of nature, that can shape a mentality that accepts hardships - a different form of sustainability.

Livelihoods built on homes

Yet with the other three organisations that we worked with, this non-discriminatory event seemed to tell a different narrative. All of their core missions were to provide work that was flexible, not just in terms of time, but to work from home. Take one good look at our itinerary and you'd find 'home' as the most frequent word. Home-based tailoring, home-based weaving, home-based food production. So gazing again at the water-blocked homes gave me discomfort in thinking all their tools and materials, foundational to their livelihood, were washed away.

So what now? Should the people of Kerala build an expectation that things follow the course of nature, or should they build to resist nature?

Clearly these questions are so broad, and have to be contextual, but it is worth one dwelling on. In my reflection on 'Our innate human desire to relentlessly control for happiness', I discussed the need for us to flow with life and nature. But what if our livelihoods depends on it? Alas again, I am always challenged by new outlooks. I guess the only thing I can say for certain is the Socratic saying "the only thing I know is that I know nothing". An unsatisfactory ending, but wholly captures my internal thoughts.









WEEK 6

Personal Projects



2th -8h August 2026

Port Muziris, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel, Kochi




Dear future Maria,
Lots of love,
Maria of the present









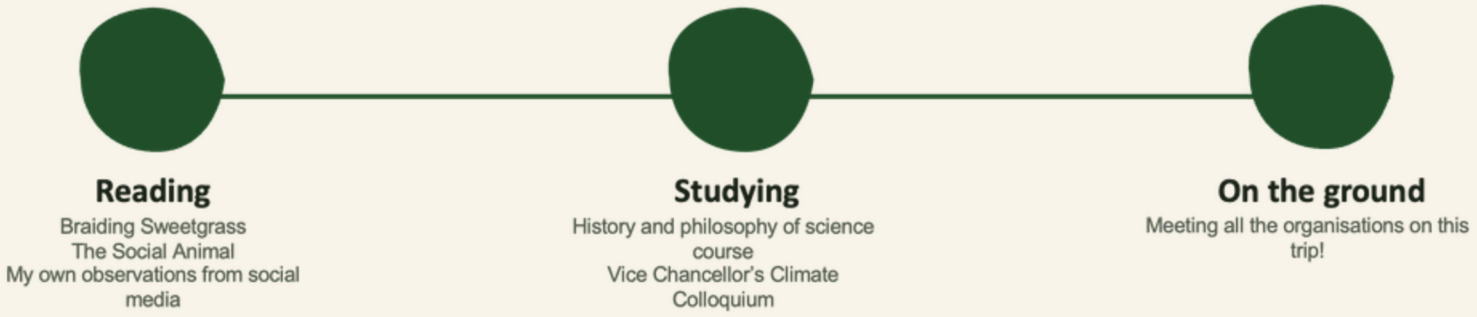




CONCLUSION

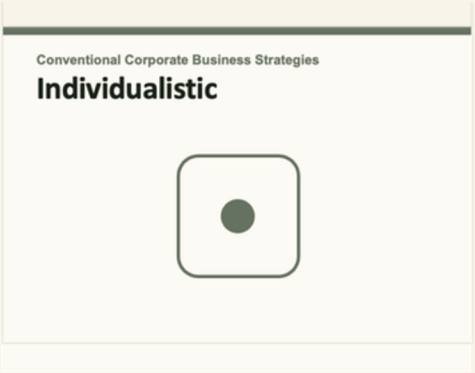
I am lucky to say that my concluding thoughts didn't just stop at intangible reflections on a piece of paper, but culminated in a proper project that I am proud of! At the end of the 5 weeks of consulting, I explored an alternative way of corporate sustainable business, inspired by all the organisations that I engaged with. This was manifested as a decision-making tool app: *Beyond Business as Usual.* It is an app that uses questions to help the user reflect on their current mindset towards sustainability and visually shows them their strengths and weaknesses in the form of a spider diagram.

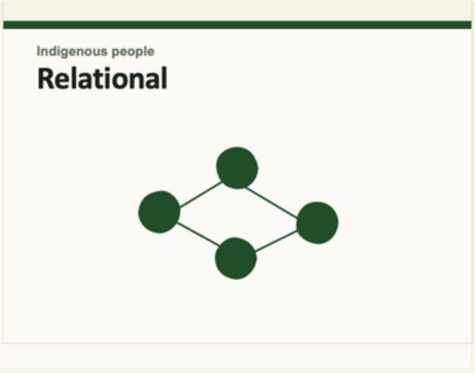
My three strands of inspiration that formed this project



Over the past few years, I have immersed myself in all sorts of formal and informal education that vaguely circulated around 'alternative'/ less corporate perspectives of looking at sustainability. This included reading various books, studying the History and Philosophy course at university, and competing in a climate colloquim. However, it is only through this trip to Kerala that I saw these abstract ideas/ideologies cement into something real, concrete and *personal*.

Pattern spotting: gap identification





The major difference I noticed between engaging in corporate culture, versus in the organisation in Kerala was this subtle difference of individualistic and relational nature. However, one must note that this is a broad generalization and meant to be a vague pattern, rather than a definitive.

Methodology: Turning field notes into questions

STORY
Writing down the stories
- Date
- Short description of the experience
- Location/organisation

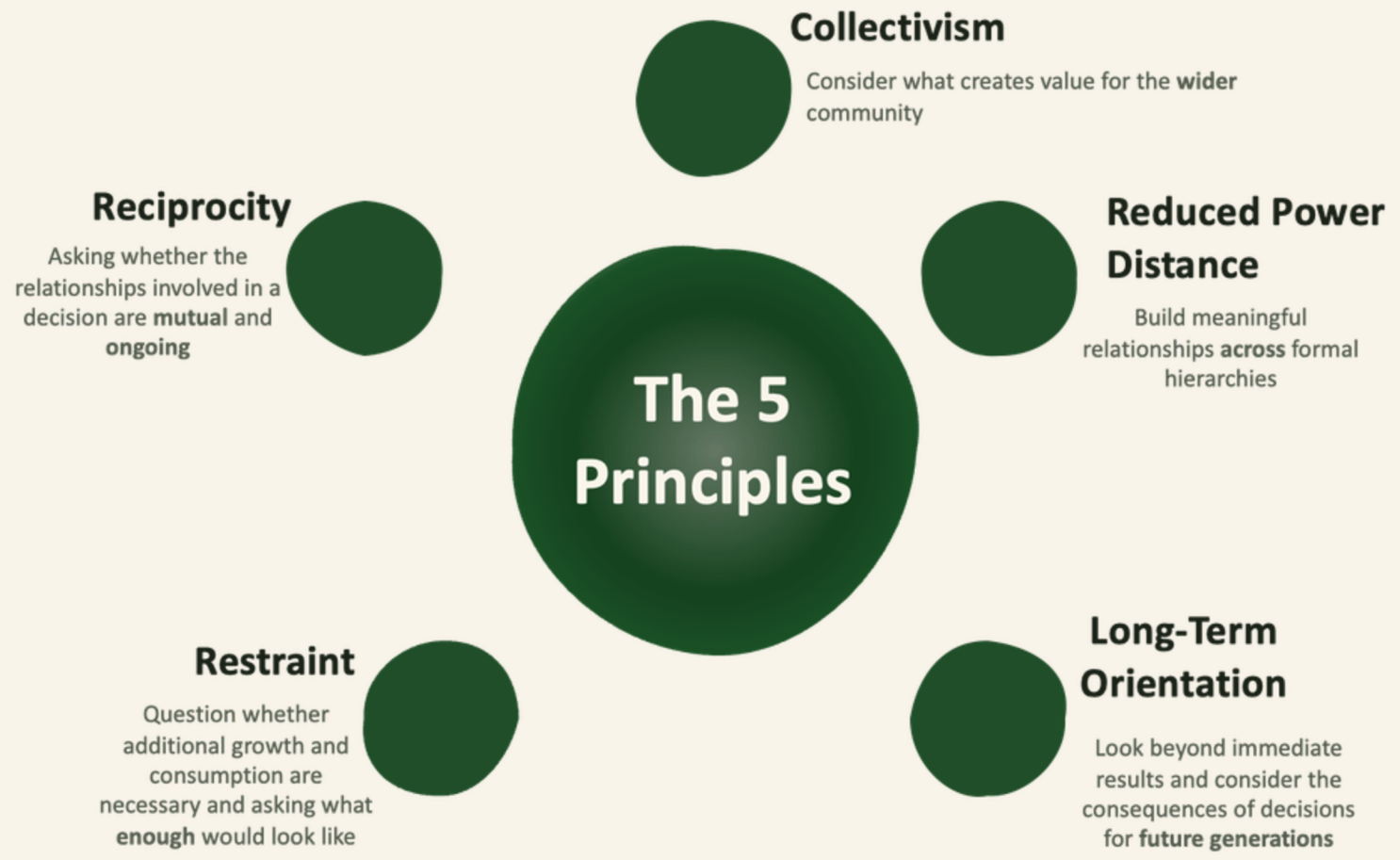
→

ABSTRACTION
Drawing out key themes
- Observing the key themes and principles
- Spotting patterns Eg. Two similar stories of resource shares (birds and elephants)

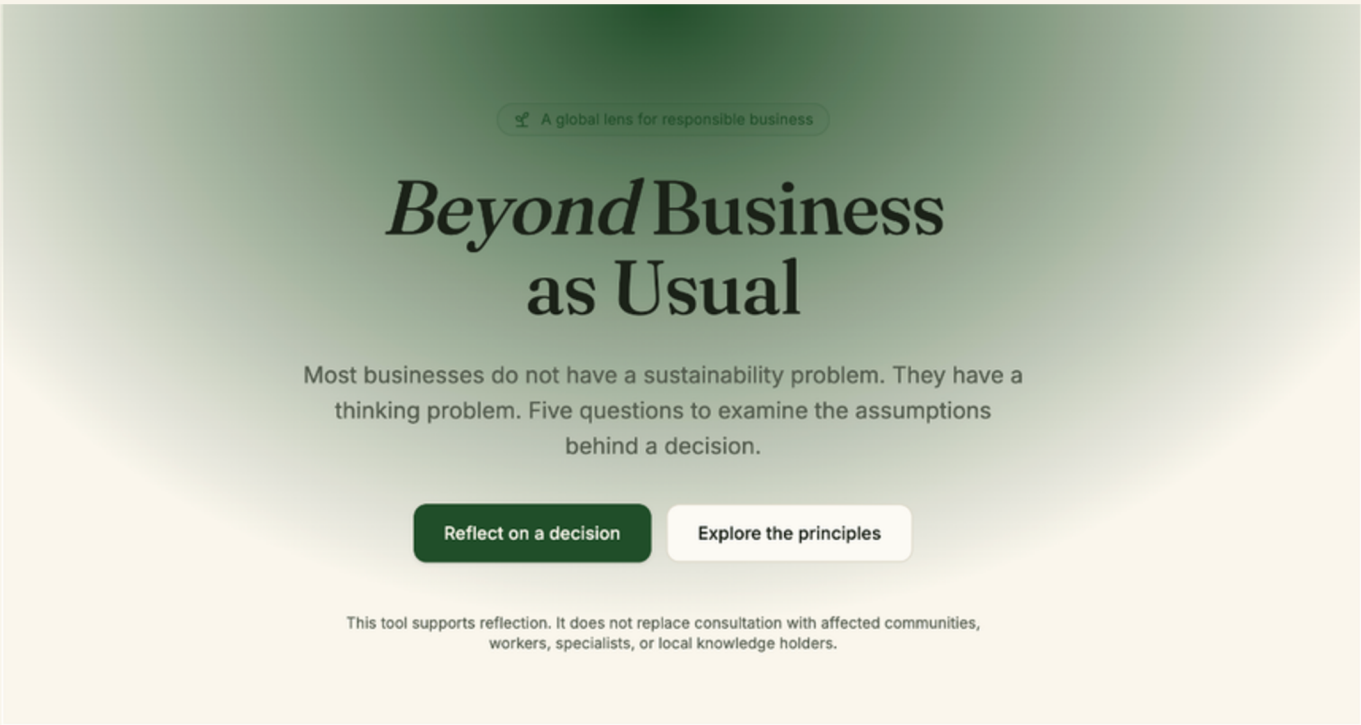
→

IMPLEMENTATION
Condensing them into 5 principles
- Reading literature (eg. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory)
- Grouping similar patterns

Once spotting this difference, I turned my field notes into questions to then draw out any other key themes and further condensed them into 5 principles.



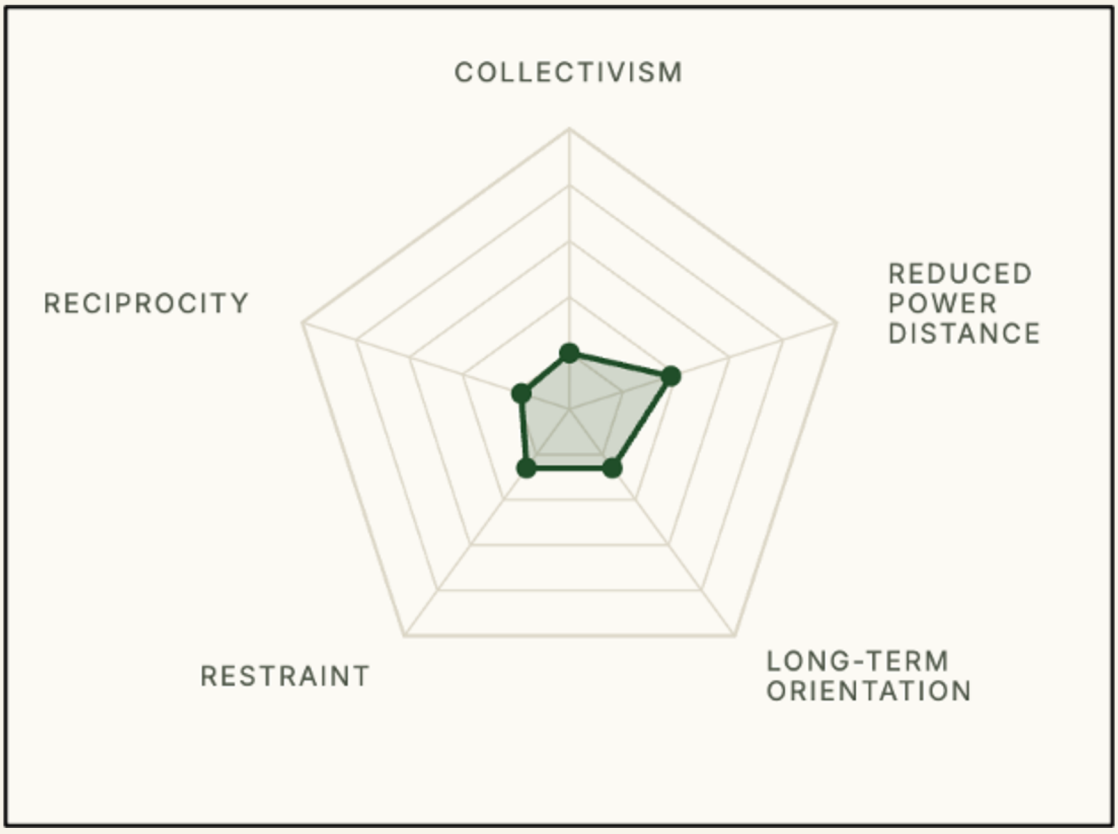
Final product



The final product can be found through this link: https://thinkingeastern.lovable.app/.

It works by 3 simple steps

1. Describing your decision
2. Answering 5 questions
3. Receiving a measure of your thinking principles



Some testimonials

Thresiamma Mathew, Founder & Director of Archana Women's Centre

"This website would bring to you the heartbeats of so many empowered women of Archana to the wider world, giving them a sense of pride and joy, as these women are able to perform in so many fields. You can see the decisions they made with enlightened decision-making that has totally changed their lives, making them stars in a world of unskilled labour. Here is a woman called Omana who has mastered the skills of woodwork and carpentry and is leading a workshop."

Asha Scaria, Founder of Swara, Voice of Women

"Beyond Business as Usual gave me a real framework to pause and think through decisions properly, not just rush to an outcome. The five questions and the spider diagram showed me blind spots in my own reasoning I didn't know were there. Every business leader should be using this."

Durgambika P Varma

What I appreciate most about this tool is that it shifts the conversation from simply asking 'Is this business successful?' to 'Is this business creating value in the right way?' The visual framework makes reflection tangible and encourages organisations to continuously improve rather than chase growth for its own sake. It's a thoughtful reflection tool for businesses that genuinely want to align their decisions with sustainability and community well-being.

Overall, the key principles that I will take forward as a leader is that it is not just one experience that is 'life-changing'. It is a slow accumulation of a variety of them, from all aspects of life. Formal, informal. Academic or for fun. Holiday or internship.

If a life is meant to be changed, it is to be 'change' all dimensions of life.



THE END