

KRISHNA P S

WHEN the pandemic broke out and the world came to a standstill, three friends, Indu Shaji, Neethi Joseph and Naeema Ali, got stuck in their respective apartments in three corners of the world — India, the US and Netherlands. Naeema was doing her master's in landscape architecture, while Neethi was hunting for a job in the USA after completing her studies. Indu was struggling with the stress of a new job in India, as Covid was gripping the country. The friends spent their time speaking to each other online and sharing their thoughts and that is when they came up with the idea to illustrate children's books.

In just four months, the idea materialised into a full-blown venture — FolkSnFables. The trio worked with illustrators, writers and artists to help publish various books. In January, they completed their 50th book. As soon as they started making a profit from the business, they started organising monthly workshops at children's homes in Kerala, trying to instil reading habits in children.

"When we started working together on the illustrations and content, it was a lot of fun. Despite the stress of the pandemic and distance separating us, we kept in touch online and the work kept us busy," says Naeema, who now handles the marketing and PR for FolkSnFables from Dubai.

"It was quite difficult to arrange meetings due to the difference in time zones. One of us also has to stay up late to discuss work," quips Neethi, who manages clients from the US. "We learned everything on the go, including digital painting," chimes in Indu from Bengaluru. She manages hiring and operations for the venture.

Story nook

The trio met at the National Institute of Technology in Kozhikode while they were undergraduate architecture students. Their common love for art and social work helped them connect with each other fast. After graduating in 2017, they all moved away to differ-



STORIES THAT MATTER

Three 27-year-old Malayalis living in three different corners of the world came together to create a children's book in 2020.

Their hit venture is now helping underprivileged children in the state find their flair for reading



ent parts of the world.

"We used to do volunteer work for underprivileged children in Kozhikode. Naeema used to write well and Indu and I used to draw. This is why we zeroed in on children's books," says Neethi.

Initially, they were just planning to find some freelance work to get them through the pandemic. "But we ended up enjoying the process so much. By August, we had over three clients, and their work was fairly regular. Though Neethi and Indu got new jobs by then, we were determined to contin-



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Naeema Ali, cofounder

ue our little project. Soon, we created an Instagram page for FolkSnFables and we hired freelance illustrators to keep up with the demand," says Naeema.

"We completed around 18 books in 2020. After finishing

our day jobs, we would spend the nights planning out how to run FolkSnFables over zoom or WhatsApp meetings. We realised things are much more enjoyable when you work with your friends," says Naeema.

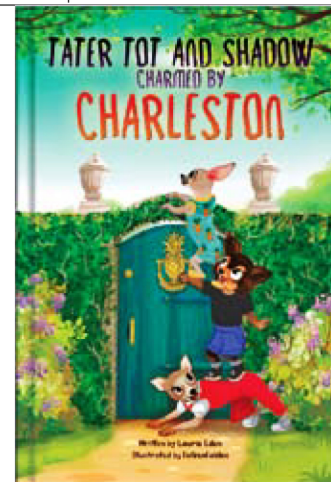
Diverse and inclusive

All FolkSnFables books have a few things in common — mainly their diverse characters. In their stories, people come together from all backgrounds and ethnicities and talk about everything from the mental health of children to light-hearted situational tales. Most of their clients are from the US. Few belong to the UK, Dubai and India.

"Having clients from around the world also diversified our topics. We also had to learn to think like kids, especially with the illustrations," says Neethi.

Moulding little minds

As FolkSnFables started earning profits, the trio wanted to do something for the children back home in Kerala. "Initially, we donated books to a children's home in the state, both books illustrated by FolkSnFables and other essential works. But we also wanted to make



sure they made a difference," says Indu.

So, the trio contacted the home to find out if the books were being used. That's when they figured out just donating books won't work unless children were encouraged to read.

"In February 2021, we started to research ways to motivate the children creatively. We talked to child psychologists, the authorities of the home and T V Anupama, the then director of the Women and Child Department. So, we decided to concentrate on children between the age of six and 12, since that is the right age for them to develop creative habits," says the trio.

With the help of volunteers — school teachers to college students — they developed 'Kathayil Alparam Karyamund (facts in Stories)'. "After six months of research, we launched the programme in September. Children's author N P Hafiz Mohammad also joined our initiative as a volunteer and advisor," says Naeema.

Ever since they have been conducting two-day workshops monthly under Kathayil Alparam Karyamund. Indu, who is the only one in India, attends most of them to understand if the workshops are effective. "We get someone from WCD or the home to check the curriculum for each workshop," says Naeema.

Now, after holding six successful workshops, some jointly with Kanal, an NGO in Kerala, the trio wants to expand the programme to other children's homes in the state. "These children are at a disadvantage compared to other kids of their age. But the right exposure to books and reading might change that. All they need is people to care," says the trio. Their workshops are aimed at anger issues among children, mental health and gender sensitisation.