

The Manis and their Cheese Factory

THE HINDU

Metroplus:



The intention was to get chatty about cheese. But the conversation veered off to reveal how Kodaikanal's best known family for producing cheese is famous for a lot more

You will never get it wrong while visiting the Manis in Kodaikanal. A visit to their home is invariably greeted with the 'eat cheese' welcome! The plate loaded with rusk and toasts topped with the 'Kodai Cheese', the brand they are reputed for, lay in front of me temptingly through the interview. And honestly, the 'cheese content' of the assignment remained restricted only to eating. For, when you are sitting with the two ladies of the family – Lalitha Mani and Janani Harisanker, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law duo – you can only hear and see how they share their homes, lives and hearts with animals, patients and people in general.

The business of cheese is of course managed by Lalitha's husband G.S.Mani and her son Harisanker. And both are mostly away at their newly established factory in Batlagundu (see box). But it is this dynamic pair of *saas-bahu* making news more often in Kodaikanal. They are either chasing tourists who make the Kodi roads dirty or rescuing stray animals from the streets or ensuring good medical care of patients in the hospital started by them.

And when they are not doing social service, they are either landscaping their gardens or playing golf. Lalitha and Janani connect so well that you fall in love with them when they say, you can drop the 'in-law' bit from our relationship. "We are like mother and daughter," they echo, asserting on the beautiful relationship.

When Chennai-bred Janani wedded into the Mani family seven years ago, she was not sure whether her in-laws would be happy with her role as a silent volunteer for the Blue Cross, the 55-year-old animal welfare organisation based out of Chennai. She was even more upset when her mother told her that her adopted stray dog Pebbles, was missing her and refusing to eat. With much trepidation she

checked with her mom-in-law if she could bring Pebbles over to Kodaikanal for a few days.

“Pebbles is your dowry we will happily accept,” Lalitha told her newly-wedded daughter-in-law. That one line not only changed the relationship between the two women forever but it also made Pebbles a permanent resident of Kodaikanal.

“Amma has an amazing way of dealing with people and is extremely supportive where she sees something good,” says Janani fondly about her mother-in-law. Lalitha returns it with, “And Janani is very friendly and caring”. But these are not just complimentary words for each other. They go much beyond in action.

Just a few days ago, says Lalitha, while returning from work we saw people in the car ahead of us throwing chips wrappers out of the window. “We stopped and picked up the empty packets, overtook the car, handed over the packets back to them with the request that they should properly dispose them off,” narrates Lalitha. “And we both are pretty well known in the town for doing this,” laughs Janani.

Though they are often referred to as the “dynamites of Kodi”, Lalitha worries about when people will ever learn to be responsible by themselves. The duo distributes garbage bins and bags to various agencies in the hill town and also places them at strategic locations in the heavily crowded tourist hotspot. But look at Kodi, rues Lalitha, how dirty it has become. She came post-marriage in the Seventies and finds it difficult to digest how the idyllic town with flowing streams has been reduced to such a trash spot.

For her own peace, she along with her husband does the landscaping of her properties and much to her delight has found her daughter-in-law sharing the same interest. Janani being the quintessential nature lover and environmentalist is a student of urban architecture and of late has been doing projects in Coimbatore and Kodaikanal, particularly the villa properties. "I never encourage any exotic species of flora or fauna but only promote and integrate the locally known birds, animals and trees for perfect harmony with the territory and environment," she says.

Both of them are now trying to work out a waste management proposal for Kodi in collaboration with Wasteless from Auroville. While Lalitha feels there is not much hope, Janani says, there is still a chance to save the township.

But it is her animal rescuing mission that sets Janani on a hyperactive schedule. In the last five years she has rescued 45 stray dogs and cats, all of whom have found a place either in her or Lalitha's home, or in friend's homes. She has attended 20-odd emergency calls and treated injured dogs, horses and cows. She practices reverse psychology with pony owners and makes them take care of their animals better.

Animal welfare works with care and compassion, not threat," she underlines.

Both the women have also been instrumental in reviving one of the oldest units of SPCA (Society for Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals) in Kodaikanal. It was established in 1929 by the Americans and continued to work with the help of senior citizens of Kodi. But the association went defunct in 2002 following diversion of Government funds to the Dindigul unit of SPCA. So now it has been

renamed Kodaikanal Protection and Care for Animals and Janani is in the forefront rescuing stray pups and kittens.

In the middle of all this when does she find time for golf? With my father-in-law laying the first organic golf course in Kodi, I could not stay away from it for long being a sportsperson, smiles Janani, already on a winning spree in various city tournaments.

Both her's and Lalitha's minds are cluttered with ideas to better the environment of their much loved town. "Recycling is the buzzword for everything now," they say.

The Kodai Cheese

For four decades the "Kodai Cheese" brand has been popular for its special range and nutritious value. "We believe in creating our own brand and identity with value-added quality," says Harisanker who now controls the business with his father G.S.Mani, who took over Kodi's famous Cheese Factory from his father in 1977.

The family has a word of mouth reputation to uphold and prides in producing boutique innovative cheese with techniques adopted from around the world.

What started from a rural village as a family-owned dairy with six suppliers in 1972 has grown in magnitude manufacturing 150 metric tonnes of cheese every year. In the beginning horse-drawn wagon collected 50 litres of milk per day, today 4,000 litres of milk goes into the making of Cheddar, Mozzarella, Ricotta, the Blue cheese and the latest handmade Cambrie. The entire line is made with fresh

antibiotic-free milk, experience and from authentic recipes in eco-friendly way, according to Harisanker. The whey created in the cheese making process is used for making organic compost for the entire vegetation, fodder, flowers, fruit and other trees grown on their property.

The KHMS Hospital

The Kodaikanal Health and Medical Services is a Trust formed by G.S.Mani with six other trustees to cater to the health and medical needs of the residents and visitors to Kodaikanal. The trust runs the 16-bed hospital established in 2009 and is equipped with a pathology lab for basic investigation facilities and essential facilities like the ICU, Operation Theatre, Ultrasound, X-ray machine, pharmacy and an ambulance. “The idea is to stabilise the patient here in case of an emergency before they can travel to a big hospital in Madurai or Dindigul,” says Lalitha Mani, who holds charge of administrative responsibilities. The hospital caters to 25,000 patients in a year and the treatment is highly subsidised.

Keywords: [Kodai Cheese](#), [Lalitha Mani](#), [Janani Harisanker](#)