

# Thenga Coco: the incredible voice of sustainable shells

Hemverna Dwivedi, Rohit Kushwaha and Pradeep Joshi

## The tableau

Thenga was a home-grown brand from Kerala [1] that aimed at repurposing coconut waste into durable, sustainable and handmade home products with absolutely zero toxins. The inception of the brand dated to August 2019 by Ms Maria Kuriakose, a native of Kerala. As a native, Kuriakose felt that coconut was far beyond than just a source of coconut oil and water. The creation of Thenga was Kuriakose's vision of emerging as an ecopreneur while increasing the agricultural economy of Kerala and empowering the local women of the region. Kuriakose's way of looking at the by-products of coconuts was the foremost idea of creating something which was grown on the earth and should go back to the earth when discarded without disturbing the nature. She made up her mind what she had to do and first tried her hands on a coconut shell bowl, which came out perfectly well. Thereafter, she reached out to a few outlets in the city to sell those products and got an overwhelmingly positive response. It was at that point of time, when she realized to escalate the brand further. Eventually, Thenga started receiving national as well as international orders in bulk. The brand continued to receive a good number of orders. However, the principal dilemma confronted by the brand was the variations in the shapes and sizes of the coconut shells, especially in bulk orders where maintaining uniformity was essential. In January 2021, when the brand was at its progression stage, the clientele based in India as well as abroad started complaining about the differences in the sizes and durability of the products. Being natural products, it was troublesome getting 100 or 200 shells of a specific size at a time. Moreover, it was challenging to find out the specific shells which had been exposed to sun for long from the entire lot of rescued shells. Catering to these issues became onerous because the shells were nature's creations. As an entrepreneur, Kuriakose felt crestfallen, but she had to find a way out in the long term. The question that arose in front of Kuriakose was not a common managerial issue, because the coconut fruits were naturally grown. How could Kuriakose address the rising complexities, or would she start losing orders because of the increasing complaints of the customers, especially from clientele abroad?

## Kuriakose's life sketch

Kuriakose was born and brought up in the city of Thrissur [2]. She completed her bachelor's in economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and Master in Business Administration from ICADE University, Spain, in the year 2017. After gaining an experience of four years from a multinational company and a Mumbai-based start-up, it dawned on her to establish her own business at her hometown to enhance the agricultural economy of Kerala. Kuriakose mentioned that:

Even during her stay at Mumbai, she refrained from using plastic products owing to the negative impact on the planet.

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It was in August 2019 when Thenga originated. It was a tough decision-making for Kuriakose from resigning from a full-time job and getting hands onto Thenga permanently. Several people questioned her that why was she quitting a well-paid corporate job. But Kuriakose had a different mindset which created Thenga.

### A rundown of the sustainable market in India

From the clothes worn to the products we applied, or from the carpet of our drawing room to our breakfast milk, every choice had the power to impact the planet. Therefore, a crop of brands mushroomed in India stepped onto acing sustainability in their products (Money Control). Indian sustainable fashion market was projected to reach a value of \$9.81bn by 2025, with an approximate CAGR [3] of 9.81% between 2020 and 2025. The context of sustainable literature remained fragmented and had a dicey path towards the future of sustainable fashion (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b). Considerably, eco-friendly materials, primarily cotton and denim had been amongst the most popular choices of Indian consumers. These brands had leveraged e-commerce channels and social media platforms for expanding their reach (The India Story, 2023). Due to the rapid economic growth and increased consumer awareness in the region, the Asia Pacific market (Exhibit 1) was expected to be the fastest growing market for global sustainable fashion market with a CAGR of over 16.5% during the forecast period (Coherent Market Insights, 2023). The marketing trend in the emerging economy of India was witnessing a constant shift and was constantly evolving by adaption of the new norms (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b).

### Voice of Thenga's creations

The term "Thenga" in Malayalam [4] meant coconuts! The state of Kerala derived its name from the coconut tree. Coconut was known as the tree of life because each part of it was essential to sustain life whether it was food, storage, shelter or fuel. Coconut held an important place in the life of each Keralite [5]. However, since centuries the coconut shells were seen as useless by-products and were tossed. Only a small ratio of them were converted and used as activated charcoal, majority of the chunk went as waste (Edex Live, 2021). It was Thenga which gave them a new life altogether by painstakingly handcrafting them into aesthetic products, thereby turning trash into treasure. Each practical creation of Thenga spoke of the hands of women of Kerala who created it. The women artisans underneath the brand's umbrella hailed from different cities of Kerala, such as Thrissur, Kottayam, Wayanad, Kodungallur and Alappuzha. During the formative years of the brand, specifically, till January 2021, they were skilled at making customary shell-based kitchenware, but gradually they moved their hands onto sustainable jewellery and other home decor products (Jacob, 2021). Kuriakose added that:

She loved spending time and ideating with the women artisans who created Thenga products and were the backbone of the brand's initiative!

The foundation of Thenga was associated with Kuriakose's love for nature. It all began when one fine noon, she naturally started gazing at the by-products of coconut processing units. Kuriakose's outlook for coconuts changed that day. Without procrastinating further, she started spending time with some expert artisans in understanding the sorting of the shells and making of the final products; which continued for a few months. She realized that specific machinery was required to scrub the outer and inner parts of the shells to give them a smoother finish (Muthukumar, 2021). Her father, who was a retired engineer, assisted her in developing a machine for polishing the shells. They also designed a low-cost machinery for drying the coconut fibre using fan paper in November 2019 which eased their work. Kuriakose tried reaching out to a few investors, but unfortunately none agreed. Thus, Thenga started as a self-funded startup. Kuriakose crafted the first sample of bowls with her mother and reached out to a few outlets selling sustainable and handcrafted products. Eventually, the brand's bowls became famous around the entire state of Kerala. She got an overwhelming positive response

from the stores all around the city by the end of 2019. This was a turning point which marked a first step in her journey of eco-preneurship [6]. With the success of the initial orders, Kuriakose thought of setting up proper channels and sources for the extraction of raw materials. Thereafter, she reached out to a coconut shell artisan from her hometown who was using the shells to make decorative items such as flowers and shared her idea with him. Kuriakose's vision also aimed at reviving the dying tradition or art of Kerala. Eventually, in a few meetings, the artisan completely understood her intent and gave her valuable insights for the execution of her idea. Kuriakose then reached out to the oil mills for purchasing shells which were being discarded after extraction of oil from the coconut flesh. The oil was extracted from *copra* (mature coconut kernel), and the *exocarp* [7] was being discarded (Anand, 2021). Kuriakose knew that she needed more hands for crafting the products due to the increasing demand and thus, approached experienced artisans who were well-versed in the craft of manufacturing coconut shells (Madhav, 2021). With the increase in the number of artisans, Thenga specialized in crafting around different products including bowls, teacups, spoons, tiles, carved candle holders, plant hangers, pots, tiles and soap dishes, thereby expanding their product portfolio (Exhibit 2). Kuriakose further mentioned that:

The team at Thenga constantly ponders over what other products can be developed for not only improving their existing catalogue but also the utility of their entities. They are also working on the creation of coconut shell furniture, toys and packaging containers in the coming years.

The expansion of product portfolio was a result of Kuriakose's dedication, hard work and a sustainable mindset. The world was witnessing certain sagacious businesses, and 26-years-old Kuriakose was one such name in the gamut of doing great things (Singh, 2021). Kuriakose's Thenga was all about reusing and recrafting what was traditionally considered as "wastage" and maintained a zero-waste policy by ensuring that nothing was left unused at their unit. Within a few months, Kuriakose started printing business logos on the products as an added advantage of customisation thereby, creating a USP [8] for the brand. The process of laser printing was outsourced to a company that used to print on wooden products. With the increasing demand of the products, Kuriakose added local women for the creation of products. Ever since its inception, Thenga had transformed more than 140,000 shells into fine-crafted useful products thereby saving them from being dumped. This waste was either dumped at landfills or a fraction of it was burnt to be used as rudimentary household fuel or activated charcoal. Due to the tough and inherently hard nature of the coconut shells, they were supposed to last for decades and were thus, a perfect substitute for plastic, steel and glass products. Thenga's products were a perfect blend of ethics and aesthetics, natural and chemical-free. The conversion process involved two essential steps of "sanding": for smoothening the shells and "buffing": for cleaning the shells (Molshree, 2022). Kuriakose also briefed that:

She trained her staff to use coconut oil as a substitute of varnish for final coating of polish into the finished products. The brand also advised the customers to make use of coconut oil for the maintenance of these products to make them appear newer and lustrous for years.

Unlike plastic or aluminium utensils, Thenga's products were completely toxin-free because of not using colour or varnish on the products. In an interview, Kuriakose highlighted that:

Thenga's products retained the deep shade of brown due to the buffing and sanding process; and if one wanted to discard these products, one may simply break them into smaller pieces which would mix with the soil and go back to the planet without posing any negative impact.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the globe, but Kuriakose continued her work along with her father, and the products were being delivered by Amazon [9].

### **Modus operandi: turning trash into treasure**

The making of Thenga's products was a complex process (Exhibit 3), but the women artisans put in their heart and soul for creation of beautiful pieces. A young female entrepreneur of

India had set her sights set on promoting sustainability. With the increasing demand of the products, Thenga Coco reached beyond the boundaries of Kerala. Over the time, the brand was a huge success in India. But with each stepping stone in her journey of ecopreneurship, Kuriakose worked even harder. Eventually, the organisation tree of Thenga grew ([Exhibit 4](#)) with a total of 25 employees, which included 14 women coconut artisans for sourcing and production of different materials and 11 full time women employees along with Kuriakose for managing the brand's operations. Thenga was primarily sourcing the raw materials from four oil mills with whom they had agreements. The revival of this dying art of Kerala entered beyond India; and the brand started exporting their products to the USA, UK and United Arab Emirates. With the exceptional utilisation of coconut shells, Kuriakose's idea added to the importance of coconuts in increasing the global economy in association to the annual observance of World Coconut Day, September 2 [10] ([Daily Sabah, 2021](#)). Thenga also started participating in various exhibitions ([Table 1](#)) in India to gain visibility, build relationships and learn about industry trends. In the year 2023, Thenga was selected as one of the top 65 start-ups in the country to be mentored and supported by IIM [11] Bangalore ([Exhibit 5](#)). The shells which were discarded without a second thought were now creating employment and were benefitting the farm sector of the economy of India. The diversified portfolio of the brand attracted the customers all across the globe. Kuriakose knew that the approach of omnichannel marketing would scale the name of Thenga. Gradually, the brand began selling its products via its website, Instagram, Amazon and various other platforms with an intent of reaching every corner of the planet for creating a seamless shopping experience.

### Landscaping the social side of Thenga

Thenga was a venture led by women and a labour-intensive brand (<https://thengacoco.com/>). Apart from designing the products from coconut shells, the brand also generated employment for many women ([Exhibit 6](#)) across the rural district of Palakkad at Kerala. Kuriakose realized that these artisans did not have any full-time work and were working in an odd manner to sustain their livelihood. In June 2021, Thenga had employed more than 16 women on a permanent basis while paying steady amount to others in this business. Henceforth, these women artisans started devoting their 60% time in creating Thenga's products and were paid fair wages. Kuriakose stated that:

Each time, an individual buying a product from Thenga Coco, saved a shell! And with the brand's growth, it would try to discover more artisans to join her group.

Being the founder of the “business with a cause”, Kuriakose understood the challenges faced by the artisans and realized that they formed an essential part of what Thenga was! Therefore, she ensured that even the artisans who missed out on certain parameters were paid quite well for their efforts and were constantly trained in the workshops to ensure quality work. It was difficult to navigate the twofold vision of maintaining the profitability of the business as well as scaling the business with a cause by generating more employment for women artisans. Kuriakose believed in maintaining the exceptional product quality to charge good prices from the clients thereby, considerably sharing a good part of the profits with the creative artisans. Instead of just

**Table 1** List of exhibitions participated by Thenga Coco

| <i>SN</i> | <i>Names</i>                          | <i>Geographical region</i> |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1         | Indian Handicraft & Gift Fair (IHGF)  | Noida                      |
| 2         | India International Trade Fair (IITF) | New Delhi                  |
| 3         | HGH India Expo                        | Greater Noida              |
| 4         | Summerfest                            | Kochi                      |
| 5         | Avidaram Angadi Expo                  | Telangana                  |

**Source:** Created by authors after telephonic conversation with Kuriakose

helping the people by giving things to them, Kuriakose wanted to teach them to live on their own and Thenga was one such helping hand.

### From roadway to runway and beyond

Kuriakose's journey of establishing her own brand name was not easy. Thenga was not just a product, but the futuristic vision of a young woman entrepreneur of India. Each creation of Thenga, handcrafted with perfection became a part of many homes across the globe. These products were also purchased by tourists from India and abroad as the souvenirs (Dwivedi & Kumar, 2023). The souvenirs help tourists remember and treasure the history and traditions of the travel place while also embracing the artisans and the art form associated with that place. Thenga was awarded by various organisations and featured in several newspapers which added another milestone in the ecopreneurial journey of young Kuriakose (Exhibit 7). Within a few months of global expansion, the brand started fetching international orders in bulk. The brand was at its progression stage. In the mid of 2020, Kuriakose started forming a network of artisans. For instance, if she required 1,000 shells, the number was uniformly distributed for five artisans, wherein each was supposed to collect 200 shells and all five of them collected the shells from different areas. By this time, the brand had received bulk orders from Reliance, Microsoft and other corporates for gifting. However, with the rising bulk orders, the brand began witnessing some issues in terms of the size variations and the durability of the products in January 2021. At the first note, the underlying dilemma confronted by the brand was the variations in the shapes and sizes of the coconut shells. It primarily meant that while preparing the products for bulk orders, maintaining the uniformity of the products was essential so that while gifting, the products looked identical. Especially, the international clientele complained that there was no uniformity in the size of the products, they wanted all the products to look alike. And it was difficult getting 100 or 200 shells of a specific size at a time. Another key complexity was selecting the stringent quality shells because the ones exposed to sun for a very long time were not ideal for crafting the products due to the cracking of the shells, thereby affecting their durability. It was difficult to find out from the rescued shells that which one had been exposed to sun for long. If a customer highlighted any breakage issues, Kuriakose ensured that the product was immediately replaced, free of cost. But this issue could be resolved for Indian customers. Contrarily, when it was an international client, she had to refund the amount which affected the brand's revenues. As an Entrepreneur, Kuriakose felt crestfallen, but she had to find a way out in the long-term. The question that arose in front of Kuriakose was not a common managerial issue, because the coconut fruits were naturally grown. How could Kuriakose address the rising complexities, or would she start losing orders because of the increasing complaints of the customers; especially from clientele abroad?

**Keywords:**  
Environmental  
management,  
Sustainability,  
Strategy,  
Green marketing,  
Entrepreneurship,  
Product life cycle

### Notes

1. Kerala is a southern state in India. Due to the abundance of coconut trees in the state, it became to be naturally known as Kerala.
2. A city in the state of Kerala.
3. CAGR: Compound annual growth rate.
4. Malayalam is the native language of Southern Indian state of Kerala, closely related to Tamil.
5. Resident of Kerala.
6. Ecopreneurship is a term coined to define the development of new opportunities that assist in the protection of the planet in the pursuit of environmental sustainability (Entrepreneurs Data, 2024).
7. The outer layer of a fruit.
8. USP: Unique selling proposition.
9. Amazon is an American multinational technology company, engaged in e-commerce, cloud computing and online advertising.

10. September 2 was observed as the World Coconut Day to highlight the significance of the coconut industry to the global economy and its benefits in alleviating a few concerns of our lives.
11. Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, founded in 1973 is one of the top B-schools in India.

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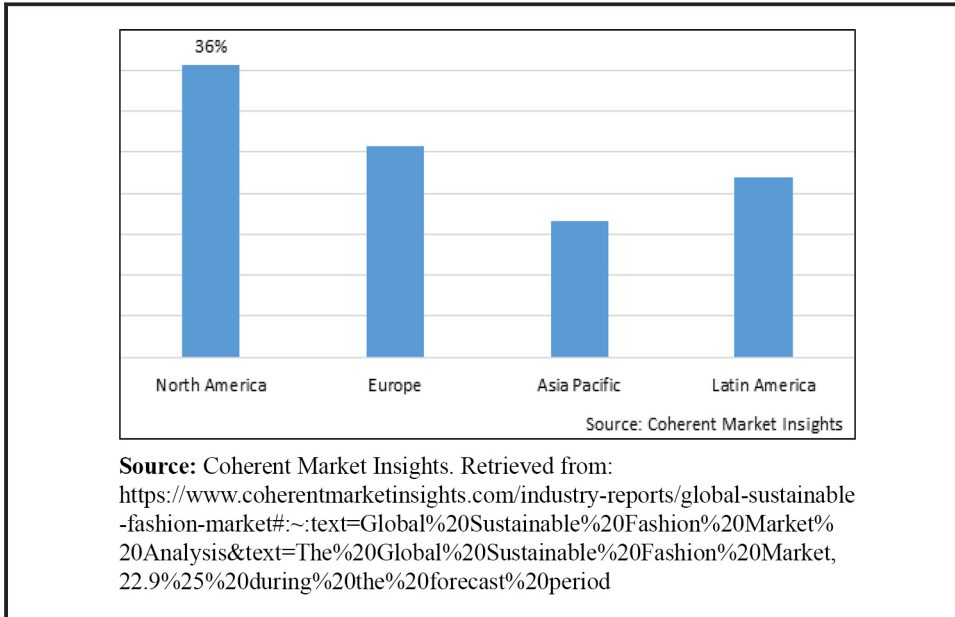
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Exhibit 1

**Figure E1** Global share of sustainable fashion market (%), by region, 2023



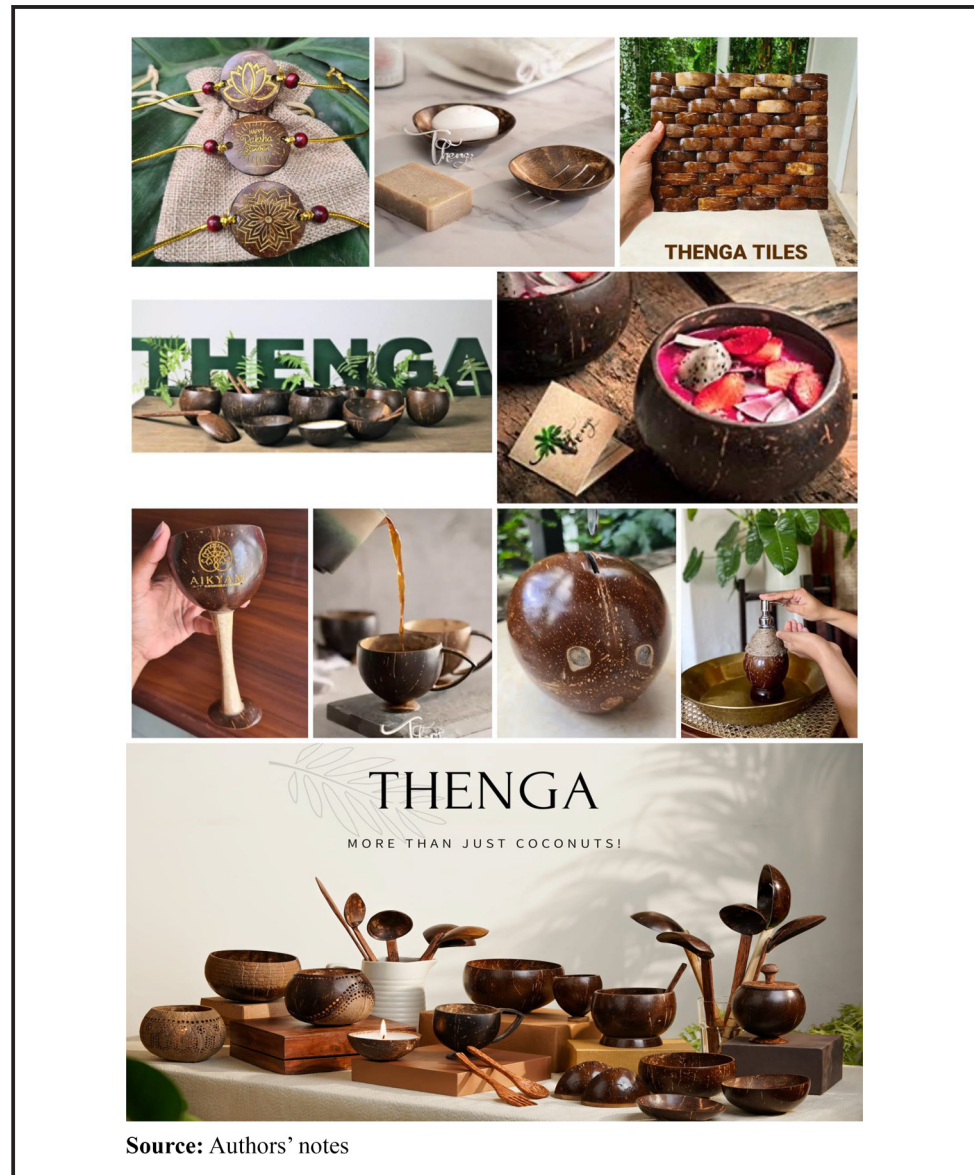
Description: The table below describes [Exhibit 1](#).

**Table E1** Global share of sustainable fashion market (in percentage) during the year 2023

| SN | Geographical regions   | Global sustainable fashion market (in %) | Growth drivers   |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1  | North America (USA and Canada)   | 35.6                                     | Increased awareness about sustainable fashion, regulations promoting sustainability and high expenditure power     |
| 2  | Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and rest of Latin America)                            | 22.9                                     | Wealth of raw materials such as cotton and camel hair, highly qualified labour and artisans.                       |
| 3  | European market (Germany, UK, Spain, France, Italy, Russia and rest of Europe)                 | 25.8                                     | Rising demand for premium sustainable fashion brands and stringent regulations by European Union on sustainability |
| 4  | Asia Pacific (China, India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN and the rest of Asia Pacific) | 16.5                                     | Increase in consumer awareness and rapid economic growth in the region   |

Exhibit 2. Product portfolio of Thenga Coco

Figure E2



Source: Authors' notes

Figure E3

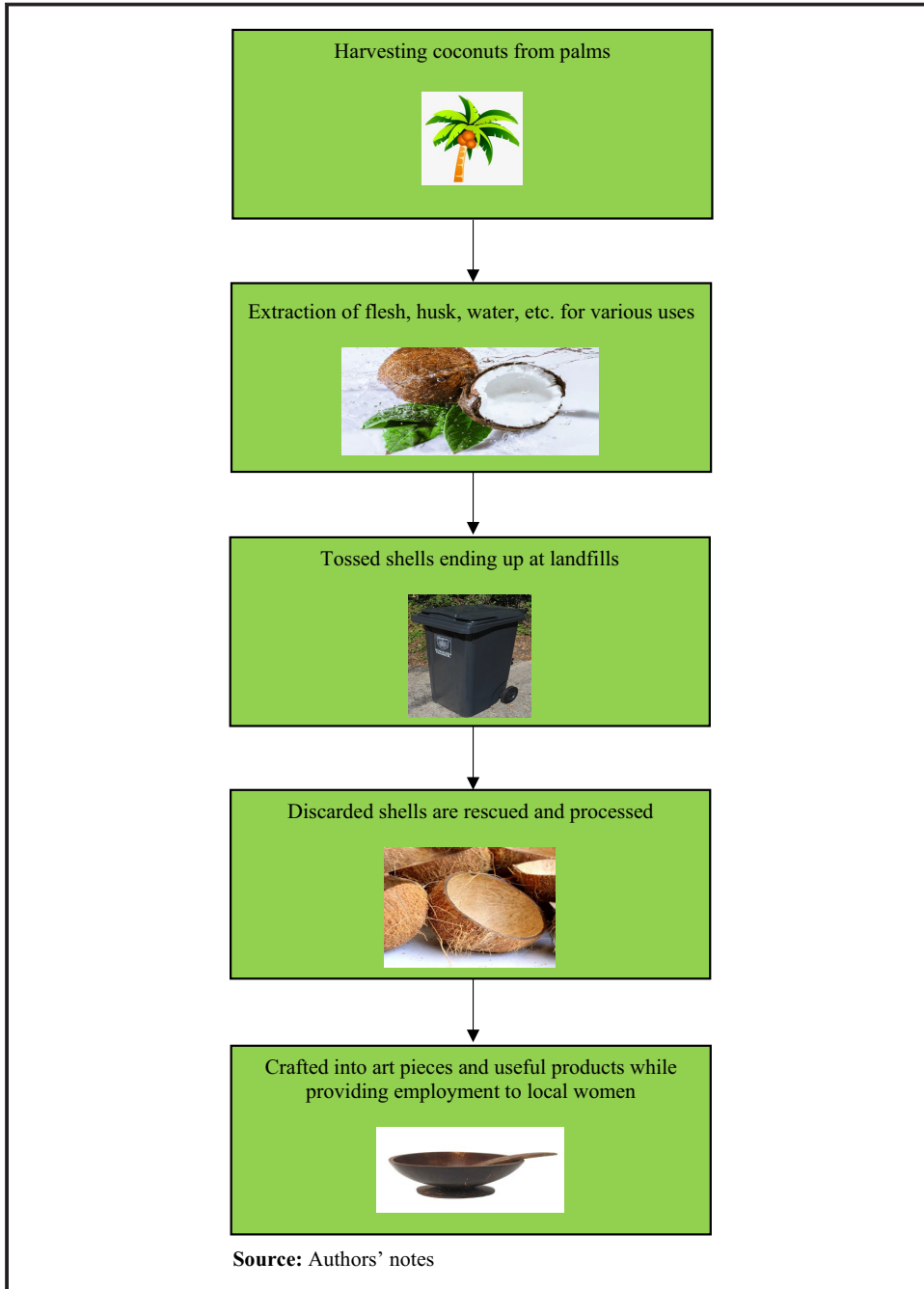


Exhibit 4. Organisation tree of Thenga Coco

Figure E4

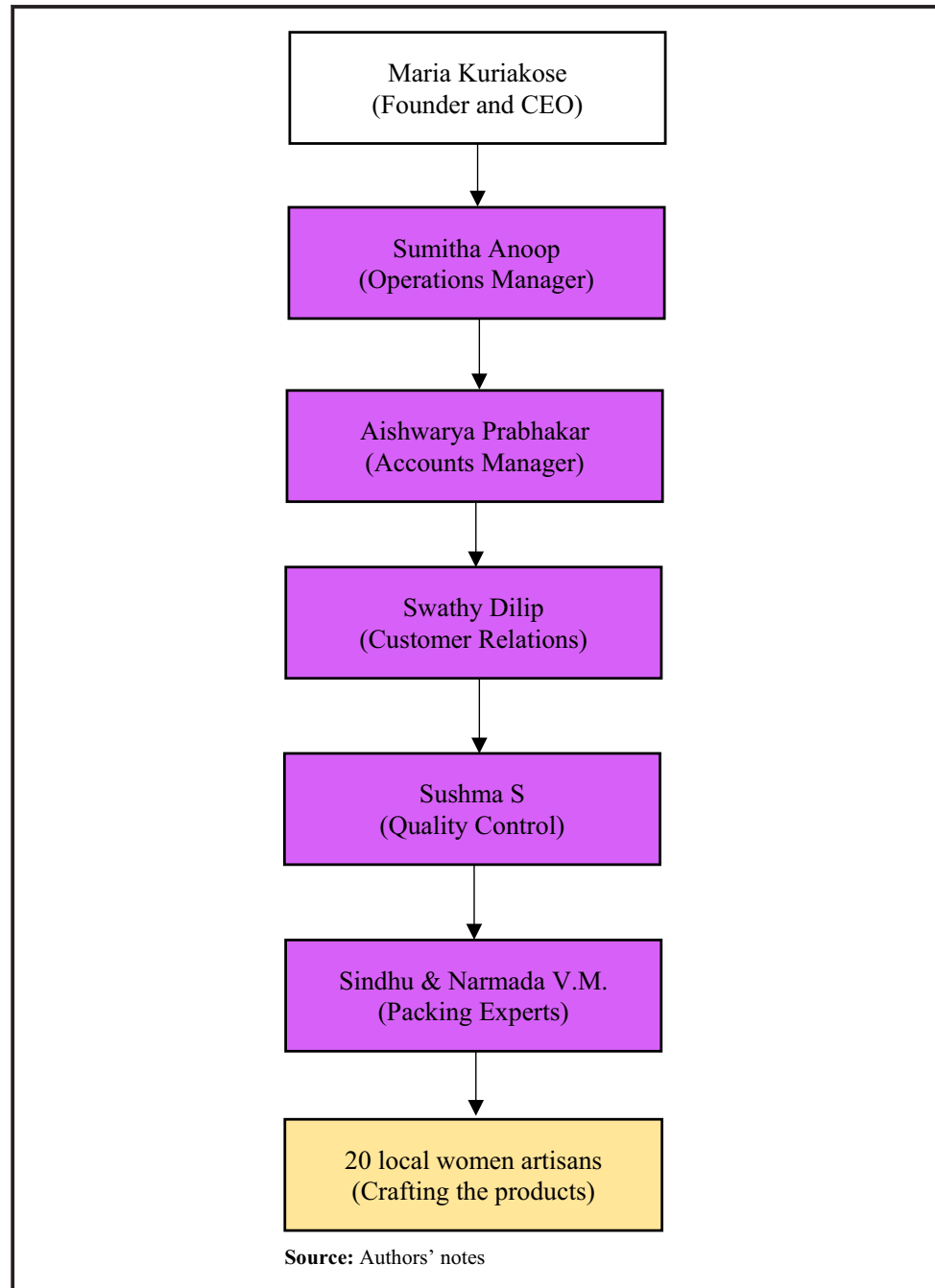


Exhibit 5. Maria representing Thenga at IIM Bangalore

Figure E5



Source: Extracted from Instagram page of the brand

Exhibit 6. Women artisans crafting the products at Thenga Coco

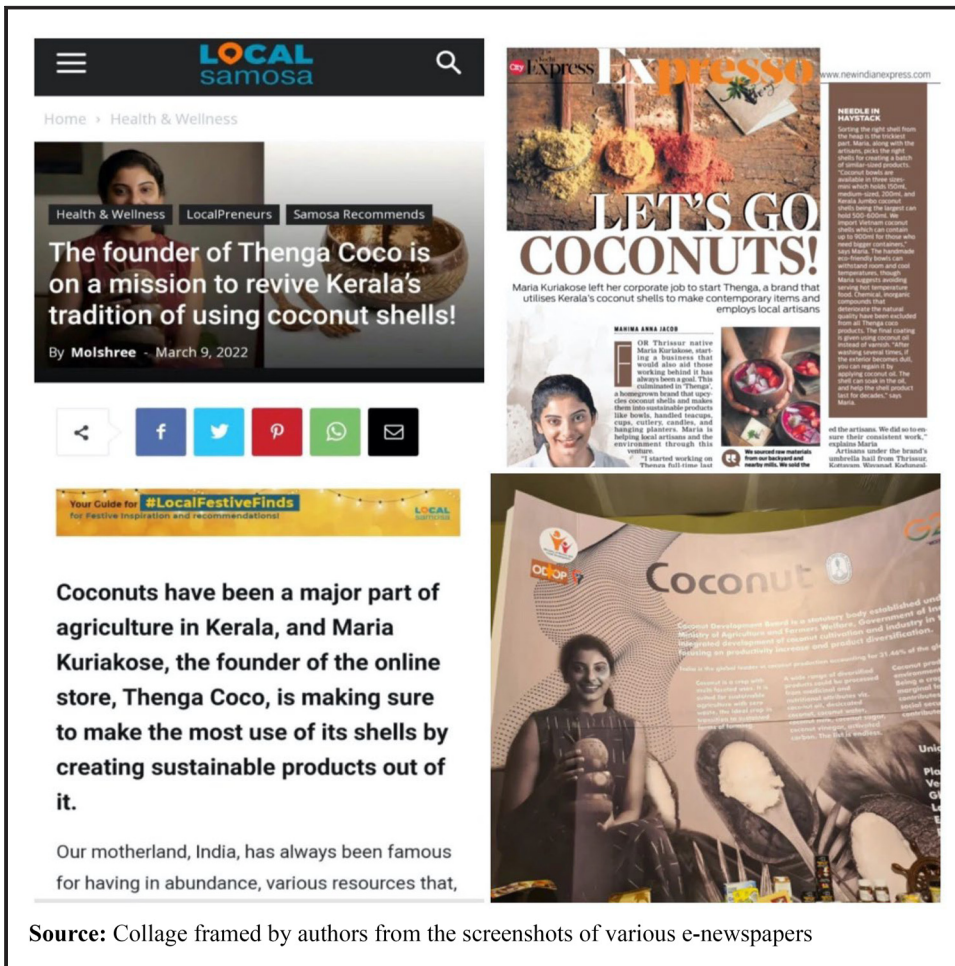
Figure E6



Source: Authors' notes

Exhibit 7. Mass media coverage of Thenga and Kuriakose’s story

Figure E7



Source: Collage framed by authors from the screenshots of various e-newspapers

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