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Food technologist Vidhya Parshuramkar, 24, wins 4th Rohini Nayyar Prize

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THE HINDU BUREAU



Vidhya Parshuramkar, a Pune-based agri-entrepreneur, receiving the fourth Rohini Nayyar Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Rural Development at the India International Centre in New Delhi on Thursday. | Photo Credit: Abhinay Lakshman

Pune-based Vidhya Parshuramkar, a 24-year-old food technologist and agri-entrepreneur whose start-up initiative Millets Now has created and distributes Nutri Dabbas, pearl millet and Vitamin C-rich meal packs, to lakhs of school children in rural India, was on Friday awarded the fourth Rohini Nayyar Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Rural Development at the India International Centre in New Delhi.

Ms. Parshuramkar is the first woman and youngest person to win the Rohini Nayyar Prize, given out by the Rohini Nayyar Foundation, to celebrate the pioneering economist's work in India's public policy sphere. Nayyar is credited with foundational work that led to the development of multi-dimensional indices for measuring poverty, and was one of the key architects of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) jobs scheme.

The Rohini Nayyar Prize involves a trophy, a cash prize of ₹10 lakh, and a citation, which was given to Ms. Parshuramkar on Friday by Professor S. Mahendra Dev, Chairperson of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, who recounted Nayyar's contribution to public policy before handing out the award, and spoke of their founding of the Institute of Human Development (IHD).

The winner was picked by a jury of civil society and academia, which included Dr. Ashok Khosla, Founder of Development Alternatives, Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder of PRIA, Ms. Renana Jhabwala, National Coordinator of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and Professor Seeta Prabhu, of TISS, Mumbai, and the Institute of Human Development, Delhi.

Accepting the award, Ms. Parshuramkar spoke of how her personal battle with iron deficiency in school life had shaped her work as a food technologist, which led her to develop a technology that increases the shelf life of pearl millet flour (bajra flour), rich in iron, from about 10 days to 6 months. This work has been central to her business, Agrozee Organics' flagship initiative, Millets Now.

Ms. Parshuramkar said that the initiative, piloted by serving 300 school children in a Pune village, had now grown to serve about four lakh children across rural India. The initiative rests on building relationships with small farmers, who they provide with quality seeds and from whom they buy back the grain that they grow. A statement from the Rohini Nayyar Foundation said the initiative supports over 7,000 small-holder farmers.

She added that these grains are then used to produce the Nutri Dabba product, with a variety of food items, built and packaged with the involvement of anganwadi workers and women through self-help groups, eventually ensuring that they are distributed to

school children across the country. She said that her future plans involve taking this initiative to countries across South Asia.

Ms. Parshuramkar spoke of the specific challenges women face when they “step out into the world”, like having to balance the emotions of people surrounding them and having to answer to everyone, from family to society. “But I will say that women will make very good entrepreneurs. That is because we carry a lot of emotions within us. That is the quality of women that needs to be in the start-up culture. I will say to all women, don’t wait for the right moment and just go for it,” Ms. Parshuramkar said.