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Phool: Implementing the Triple Bottom Line Through Circular Economy Innovation in India

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Introduction

From Sacred Offerings to Powerful Vision for Change

Every day across India, millions of people offer flowers at temples, shrines and sacred river as symbols of faith, gratitude and hope. These offerings carry deep spiritual meaning, representing prayers, devotion and connection with the divine. Yet, once the rituals are over, these sacred flowers often lose their purpose. They are thrown into rivers, canals and landfills turning symbols of reverence into a growing environmental problem. In cities like Kanpur, one of India's major industrial centers, this issue became especially severe. Heaps of discarded temple flowers floated in water bodies, many coated with harmful pesticides and mixed with plastic waste. Over time, this pollution contaminated water, degraded soil, harmed aquatic life and contributed to an unhealthy ecosystem. What began as an act of devotion was unintentionally contributing to environmental damage.

Amid this challenge, two entrepreneurs Ankit Agarwal and Prateek Kumar saw a possibility where others saw waste. They founded Phool, a startup built on the belief that sustainability, spirituality and business could coexist. Instead of allowing temple flowers to pollute the environment, Phool began collecting them and transforming them into meaningful, eco-friendly products. Guided by the **Triple Bottom Line Approach – People, Planet and Prosperity**. Phool embedded social responsibility into the core of its mission. The company converts discarded flowers into incense sticks, organic compost, biodegradable packaging materials and even innovative plant based vegan leather. At the same time, it creates dignified employment opportunities for marginalized communities, empowering women and supporting local livelihood.

The Problem: Why Phool Needed the Triple Bottom Line (TBL)

This approach emerged from a complex intersection of environmental, social and economic challenges.

Environmental Problem: In cities like Kanpur and Varanasi, discarded temple flowers are treated with chemical pesticides and contaminate the water bodies like Ganga. The decomposition of these flowers produce methane, a greenhouse gas, while toxins harms aquatic life. Rivers once considered sacred had become polluted pathways, threatening biodiversity, local fisheries and public health.

Social Problem: The women in these communities, particularly from marginalized or economically disadvantaged groups were largely excluded from stable and dignified employment. Many worked in unsafe, informal labor sectors, earning inconsistent wages, often without recognition or skills development. Temple flower waste collection or processing was sporadic, low paying and carried social stigma.

Economic Problem: The founders saw an untapped business opportunity. Global trends indicated increasing consumer demand for sustainable, ethical and premium products. By addressing the waste problem while empowering communities. Phool could build a brand that was socially responsible, environmentally sustainable and economically profitable.

The intersection of these problems such as polluted rivers, marginalized communities and untapped market potential created the need for a holistic strategy. Phool's founders realized that only by integrating People, Planet and Prosperity could create a system that was sustainable, scalable and meaningful.

Company Background: From Waste Collection to Circular Innovation

Phool was founded in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh in the year 2017, initially began by collecting floral waste from local temples. Unlike conventional recycling initiatives, Phool developed a systematic, scalable model. The collected flowers were disinfected, sorted and processed into various value added products like Charcoal free incense for domestic and international markets, organic compost to rejuvenate soil, Florafoam a biodegradable alternative for packaging and plant based vegan leather for fashion industry.

Phool's founders emphasized that sustainability could not be an afterthought. The business was built from the ground up with the Triple Bottom Line embedded in every decision, from supply chain logistics to products innovation and marketing. Over the years, they expanded their flower waste collection to various cities like Varanasi, Ayodhya and Badrinath, establishing itself as a nationally and internationally recognized social enterprise.

Understanding Triple Bottom Line

The Triple Bottom Line framework was introduced by John Elkington, where it argues that businesses should measure success not just by profits but also by their impact on society and environment.

The Three Pillars are

People – Empowering employees, communities and stakeholders through fair labor practices, equality and enhance skill development.

Planet – Reducing ecological footprints, preserving natural resources and contributing to ecosystem health.

Prosperity – Generating profit in ways that are ethical, scalable and aligned with social and environmental goals.

For Phool, the TBL was more than a reporting framework, it was the core strategy. Each product, process and partnership was evaluated for its impact on society, environment and profitability by ensuring that no decision were prioritized short term gain over long term sustainability.

People: Empowering Communities through Dignified Work

One of Phool's greatest achievements lies in social environment. The company primarily employs women from marginalized communities, providing them with structured and dignified employment. Previously these women were confined to low paying informal jobs with no proper recognition or opportunity for their growth. Through Phool, they became Flower cyclers, engaged in sorting flowers, rolling incense, producing feathers and managing compost processes. Employment at Phool comes with training, safety measures and fair wages. They also help in transforming the nature of their work from normal labor to skilled, respected and sustainable employment methods. This people's centric strategy also contributes to social mobility. Regular income allows women to invest in their children's education, improve household nutrition and participate in community development. Academically, this reflects the principles of inclusive growth and human capital development, demonstrating how far profit enterprises can function as instruments of social change, not just economic agents.

Planet: Healing Rivers and Building Circular Systems

Phool's environmental strategy addresses both the cause and consequence of temple flower waste. By diverting thousands of tons of flowers annually from rivers and landfills, they prevent water pollution, reduce greenhouse gas emission and minimize landfill pressure. The flowercycling process transforms waste into products that replace environmentally harmful alternatives. They exemplify industrial ecology, where outputs from one process serve as inputs for another. This not only reduces waste but creates loop system, a model of circular economic innovation that aligns with global sustainability goals.

Prosperity: Creating a Sustainable and Profitable Business

Their social and environmental contributions are significant its long-term impact depends on financial viability. The company positions its products as premium, ethically produced and environmentally conscious, appealing to consumers who value sustainability. By leveraging direct to consumer channels, e-commerce and strategic partnerships, Phool taps into a growing market segment willing to pay a premium for ethical products. Investment from impact funds and venture capital allows for scaling operations, technological innovation and global reach. They also demonstrate that profitability does not conflict with purpose. The company's economic success reinforces social and environmental impact as expanding operations increases job creation, waste diversion and circular product adoption. In essence, prosperity in Phool model is both financial and impact driven, illustrating the potential of triple bottom line entrepreneurship.

Challenges in Implementing TBL

Adopting the Triple Bottom Line was not without hurdles. Gaining permission from temples and authorities to collect flowers requires cultural sensitivity and persistent community engagement. Religious stakeholders were initially hesitant, fearing disruption of rituals or misuse of sacred offerings.

Operational challenges included the perishable nature of flowers, requiring efficient logistics and rapid processing to maintain quality. Products like Fleather demanded technological innovation, research, and financial investment, posing both operational and financial risks. Market challenges were also significant. Educating consumers about the value of premium, sustainable products required extensive

branding, storytelling, and marketing investment. Balancing fair wages, environmental compliance, and profitability often created strategic tension, testing the founders' ability to sustain their mission while remaining commercially viable. Despite these challenges, Phool persevered, showing that long-term commitment to sustainability and social impact can overcome short-term obstacles.

Conclusion

Phool's transformation of discarded temple flowers into valuable products demonstrates the power of Triple Bottom Line thinking in practice. By addressing environmental pollution, empowering marginalized women, and building a sustainable business model, Phool shows that purpose and profit are not mutually exclusive. This case study highlights that a holistic, ethically grounded strategy can create systemic impact: rivers are cleaner, communities are empowered and sustainable products reach global markets. Phool's story inspires entrepreneurs, academics, and policymakers, proving that faith, innovation, and strategy can converge to create meaningful, lasting change.