



AJVC SLACK CHANNEL

**AMA#8 WITH SAIREE CHAHAL DATED 23RD
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Thanks so much for doing this. Would love to understand what plans you have for SHEROES going forward?

Well the dream is to build SHEROES into a layer of women's internet. Internet has much a life changing hack for as many women as it is for all of us and enabling things that make it happen - monetization, user success, enabling ecosystem for others to use what we have built as an infra. 100 million women in next 3-4 years. But most importantly dent the narrative around women's aspirations. And bridge the gender gap using technology as an enabler.

I wanted to know what led you towards this amazing initiative, any particular lessons you learnt through the process that you might want to share with us today?

I am a small town girl, who always dreamt of having my own identity and my own path - much like millions and somehow I got away early from the shackles of patriarchy and a big fat Punjabi family (think Jab we met) - and I was lucky to stumble upon technology, internet, start-ups much early in my career and over a period of time I came to believe that amazing consumer tech and bridging

the gender gap can be visualised in same line and that's what SHEROES is. My biggest lesson is to get over my damn fears - everyday - and never say never - I am a fighter and I have worked my a** off every single day of my career last so many years - and I do believe when odds are against you - you can outwork them all and when people believe in what you do - you show them how it is done. But you got to give things you believe in a real honest shot. I also learnt that we got to learn and evolve constantly - I am a Russian Literature grad and International Relations doctoral candidate who though she can build a tech company, it sounded foolish to many including myself but then if you don't try you fail right there.

What would be your suggestions regarding guidelines or principles to someone trying to build/scale online communities?

Communities at the end of the day are people - who want to be treated well - so we apply the most basics - no judgement, acceptance, growth, good vibe and freshness.

What were your biggest challenges and learnings while onboarding women from tier-2 and tier-3 cities?

Most women in Tier 1 and 2 towns are simple ladies who are afraid of using tech and internet - a lot like my mom - who till 3 years ago was using a feature phone - because she was scared. But also, a lot of women are new to this world - of internet - which is judgemental, abusive, or plain vain. It is not like their life - a different universe. So building trust was core and building safety was key but also simplicity - acceptance of who they are - whether they like celebrating Ganesh festival or want to keep families together or dream of building their own brand - being non-judgemental of their choices - all women get judged for their choices - when you take that away, their real self emerges - their own identities minus the mom, wife, daughter persona and that's sacred to them - if you guys have watched Bareilly Ki Barfi or Shakuntala Devi - a bit like that - "me space" and that is what we created. Internet platforms can be confidence inducing or confidence reducing - like insta is confidence reducing - I am questioning my choices or my life looking at it and that's what we choose to work on - accepting space for all - and everyone's dreams.

What are the typical challenges (financial, social etc.) you see faced by women entrepreneurs?

You are judged all the time - and you don't have allies in the room - if you like me didn't go to IIT or didn't come from Big 4, it was a poor chance of someone banking on you or sponsoring you - the fight is harder - a little like Rocket Singh or like Mary Kom - the barriers are invisible - personal cost of doing anything is really high - basically you are forever in fighter mode. Women are written off for weird reasons - looks, attitude, not enough data - women founders don't get the mind space and empathy they deserve. If one did a study you will see

much less failure rate for women founders but almost no one would look at it. Also, women still have to own a job at home - almost everyone has a societal expectation to match - you will see that is why women icons are mould breakers. Shakuntala Devi, Hillary Clinton, Oprah, Maya Angelou, Marie Curie - so many. You can't be successful inside the mould. Unless it is a family business.

I was studying an article today where it was mentioned that number of females are decreasing in Indian work force YOY and hence gap is increasing compared to other countries like China and USA. What's your view on it and how is it going to change in coming years?

This is a double whammy - India has a high number of educated women but low women in work - and our economy is not producing enough jobs for almost a decade now. A lot of this is manifesting in entrepreneurship and micro entrepreneurship because state actors or agencies have failed. India needs women to have financial prowess-independence - to add to GDP, consumer growth and overall growth as well - so it is not women's problem only - it is a macro economic issues but we don't have anyone looking at it - Women's ministry looks at things like health and children, ROC looks at overall business- so women's economic contribution to jobs and GDP is a lost cause.

You have navigated through various career paths, what was that internal thought that kept you going against the wind?

I always felt, and ask myself to this day, what if I give up - what message will go to all the women and girls who dream. Starting from my young cousins and nieces to women in my community - we got to pace up against adversity - it is like gaming - the best gamers get the top challenges - and not everyone can handle them. It is alright to fail but it is not alright to be timid. I always feel that so much had to happen for me to find the path I did - lot of universe conspiring to make it happen - and I think I could try better or at least not take it easy.

What would be the set of questions that you ask yourself before venturing out to pursue any new idea?

It depends on who you are - my first instinct is to jump off the cliff and go! and then see what happens not the best but it's me - I am not an all logic and all figured out person - I rather get my hands dirty and see what it feels like and I try to not have an ego to say - hey this is not for me. We are free as human beings and we should be able to make choices - but one thing is important - ask yourself - Why - your why and your motivation to do something matters. Know your WHY!

What was your motivation behind your business. Do you think having a personal element to the motivation is more important than simply identifying and problem and trying to bridge it?

I am my own demographic - small town woman, average Indian woman, aspirational woman with 'me' dreams - so I resonate with our network - and I have had a journey so I can zoom out a bit too. Personal element helps but maybe not for everything - all business is personal but sometimes

we got to also see the connect with us and why we are interested in it.

How difficult is fundraising for women entrepreneurs today especially in India? And what according to you, can be done to overcome them?

Most women founders get s**** treatment when fund raising - it is a landmine over there - if a few founders make it big then there would be role models but in India or even in the valley Start-ups and VC are old boys club. Lot of cut copy paste. But hope is that this will change - women's internet, women VC's, women online, and then it will change rather quickly.

Would be interesting to know how you look at the competition. which start-up/organization do you keep a look at from the corner of your eyes to track progress?

We are very inward looking - some people jokingly call us an NGO but to name look are challenging the big boys of consumer internet - with a new thesis - it is David vs Goliath for lack of any female references - but most of our competition is women not being online or lack of phones. Other companies on our list are FB - not WhatsApp which we see as an enabler.

What's your take on Access to Credit for Women in the Indian FinTech Sector? Do you think the industry discriminates a person's chances based on factors like Gender, Age etc?

Less than 10 percent credit cards go to women and 20 percent loans - since women don't own property, move homes from family to in-laws or don't have salaried incomes - their access to credit is poor. But they are the best borrowers - 99 percent return rate in micro finance and they are awesome and loyal.

What were some of the core principles you kept close to your mind and heart to see your vision become a reality? In your opinion, how can we promote an equitable environment at work? (subtle bias which is even more harmful than overt, affects all involved irrespective of the gender in the long-run)

The core principal at SHEROES is - Be a net giver not a net taker, everything we do benefits women and #takecharge - also our tagline - I think bringing your voice to the table every single time matters even if you risk being unpopular. Bring your voice.

What do you think are the first steps one should take to build a winning product and tech team?

My biggest learning is to find people who share your WHY and are not hands for hire - find resonance - Dreams need teams and find ones that will not get scared on a dark day. It's like practising for Olympics -you play every day - you win sometimes. Most building is just blood, sweat, tears - find people who know this.

What were the setbacks and issues you faced while going for this particular company and how do you plan to create a monopoly in future?

Tons of setbacks - this isn't an easy road but more than a monopoly we wish to create a company that has a lot of community love and respect - think AMUL - very connected to source - big but not biggest -Monopolies need a** h**** - we are not those.

How you got first 1000 members on SHEROES what was the strategy / approach ?

Offline meet ups - they were called community meets. Mostly to seed trust. As most women hadn't seen anything like this.

How did you go about building your initial core team?

First set of people came from my previous start-ups - almost like my start-up family and then we added via acquisitions, we have a concept of 'hang out with us' - see what we are building and if you want to be a part of it and some usual hiring - which did not work much.

I've heard that right hiring is crucial for any new venture. Were there any difficulties in hiring for you? How did you handle it?

Let me begin by saying if there are any hiring mistakes, I have made them all and anyone who tells you they know it all are lying. It is like dating - unless yours is a made in heaven - we all are going to be set up with misfit matches - and weird situations. But the best you can do is - practice openness, honesty and most importantly - check the other person's motivation - if someone wants to join a start-up because their designation is going to be big one - then maybe that is not a good idea or someone who has less questions about the job but more about the package isn't a good fit either. Find people you wouldn't mind leaving your pets or children with - you will spend tons of time with your team and if you have to like and trust them -I don't buy the 'selling in market resumes' - it is low trust - most of our hires comes from our network or people who love what we do - and want to be a part of it.
