

Conversations Today

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In recent years, women entrepreneurs have emerged as powerful drivers of economic growth and development, challenging traditional norms and reshaping industries. Historically, women have faced significant barriers in the business world, from societal expectations to limited access to financial resources. Yet, despite these challenges, women around the globe are increasingly starting and leading businesses, contributing not only to the economy but to the social fabric of their communities.

The rise of women entrepreneurs signals a transformative shift in the global economic landscape. As education, technology, and social policies evolve, women are making strides across diverse sectors, from technology and healthcare to agriculture and manufacturing. These businesses, which range from small enterprises to large corporations, are becoming essential to local economies, particularly in emerging markets. Women often start businesses to support their families and communities, creating economic opportunities in regions where formal job markets are insufficient.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions women entrepreneurs make is in job creation. In developing countries, where formal employment opportunities are scarce, women's businesses provide employment for not only women but also for men and marginalized communities. Many women entrepreneurs focus on social enterprises that prioritize gender equality, environmental sustainability, and community development.

Women entrepreneurs also bring a fresh perspective to the business world, often prioritizing social impact alongside profit. Many female-led businesses are built around the desire to address unmet social needs—whether by developing health products for women, promoting sustainable practices, or advocating for gender equality. These businesses offer innovative solutions that not only contribute to economic growth but also advance social good, ensuring that their success is shared by the broader community.

The cover story of this issue highlights the incredible work of women artisans—an often-overlooked but vital segment of the entrepreneurial landscape. These women, rooted in tradition, are revolutionizing the craft sector, combining age-old skills with contemporary designs to create products that resonate with global markets. Their work is not only a form of artistic expression but a significant contributor to local economies, preserving cultural heritage while driving innovation.

The future holds immense potential for women entrepreneurs, especially as global awareness of their role in economic development grows. By addressing existing inequalities and fostering a more inclusive ecosystem, we can ensure that women continue to play an integral role in economic development.

Marie Banu Rodriguez

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu Rodriguez

MOBILE ADDICTION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION: A GROWING CONCERN AMONG YOUTH



In today's hyper-connected world, where a notification buzz feels like a lifeline, it's easy to believe that we're more connected than ever, especially in social media. But are we truly building meaningful relationships, or are we isolating ourselves behind screens?

In this digital era, children, teenagers and youngsters are becoming increasingly dependent on mobile devices, often leading to addiction and social isolation. The term "mobile addiction" refers to excessive and compulsive use of smartphones, resulting in behavioural, emotional, and social issues. Studies published in Pub Med Central (PMC), 2023 mentioned that the addictive design of apps, including instant notifications, endless scrolling, and gamified rewards, traps young users in a cycle of dependency. This dependency, coupled with reduced offline interactions, fosters feelings of loneliness and detachment.

Mobile devices are engineered to keep users engaged. Features such as push notifications, algorithm-driven content, and immersive apps stimulate the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine—a chemical associated with pleasure. This phenomenon, described in studies from ScienceDirect (2021), highlights how frequent usage reinforces the habit, making it difficult for young users to disengage. Over time, this addiction interferes with daily routines, including school performance, sleep, and interpersonal relationships. This ends in isolating themselves from family, workplace and society. Here, Everyone should ask a question, Are we using technology as a bridge to connect, or as a wall to isolate?

Social isolation, defined as a lack of meaningful interactions, is a growing byproduct of mobile addiction. Teenagers increasingly prefer virtual connections over real-world relationships. They may spend hours engaging with social media yet feel emotionally unfulfilled. Zhang, R. et al. published their research in SpringerOpen (2024) points to a phenomenon known as the "illusion of connectivity," where online interactions appear fulfilling and even satisfying but fail to provide the depth and support of face-to-face communication.

This isolation is further complicated by the fear of

missing out (FOMO), a common experience among social media users. Teenagers often feel pressure to stay updated with online trends or maintain an updated online image, which detached from meaningful offline engagement. Cyberbullying and online harassment increase their feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

The psychological effects of mobile addiction and isolation are deeply connected. Excessive screen time has been linked to anxiety, depression, and attention deficits. Studies cited in PMC (2023) reveal that constant exposure to digital content overstimulates the brain, impacting cognitive functions like decision-making and emotional regulation. Additionally, disrupted sleep patterns caused by late-night screen use weaken resilience, making it harder for young people to cope with stress.

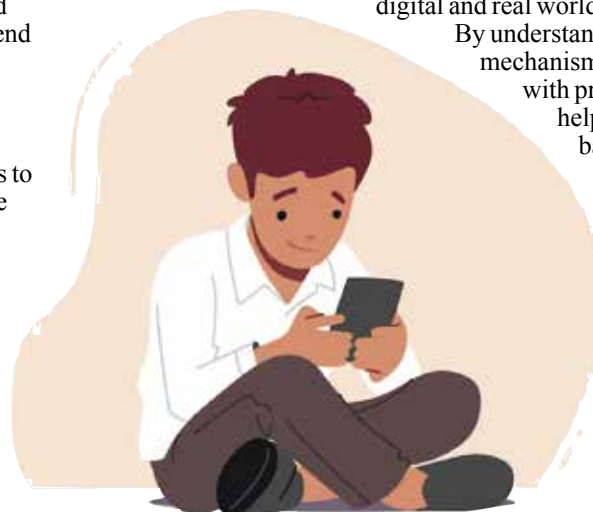
One alarming trend is the normalization of dependency on digital devices for emotional comfort. Instead of seeking support from family or peers, many youngsters turn to their phones for distraction or a relief, further damaging their real-world relationships.

On addressing this issue, a collective effort from families, schools, and communities are needed. Setting boundaries, such as device-free meals or limited screen time, encourages healthier habits. Schools can introduce digital literacy programs to educate students on the risks of overuse and promote offline activities like sports and group projects to rebuild social connections.

Therapeutic interventions like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) offer targeted support for severe cases, teaching adolescents to manage their emotions and develop healthier adopting mechanisms. Encouraging shared family activities and promoting open communication about online experiences can also help bridge the gap between the digital and real worlds.

By understanding the underlying mechanisms and addressing the issue with proactive measures, we can help young individuals find balance in their digital and social lives. The challenge lies not in eliminating technology but in teaching its mindful and purposeful use, ensuring that connections—both online and offline—are meaningful and enriching.

Arulselvi Azhagiri



EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

N. Apong, a passionate social entrepreneur, shares his inspiring journey of blending entrepreneurial ambition with the desire to create a positive social impact. From working in the corporate sector to running an initiative that uplifts local communities, Apong's story reflects resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to his community. Founded in 2024, Whumi Enterprise is dedicated to the social and economic empowerment of rural communities. Their mission is to uplift local communities in the Kiphire District through comprehensive training and sustainable business

development in livestock farming, with a particular focus on reviving the traditional practice of Piggery. By combining modern techniques with indigenous knowledge, they aim to foster economic growth and preserve cultural heritage while creating lasting benefits for the community.

After spending three and a half years gaining valuable experience, he returned to Delhi and later to his home state, Madhya Pradesh, to pursue a more meaningful path. His transition into the nonprofit sector marked a turning point, where he realized his passion for helping the community. While working for a nonprofit organization, he discovered the concept of social entrepreneurship—a perfect confluence of his desire to address social issues and his ambition to build something of his own. This revelation inspired him to create a venture that contributes to his community while providing a sustainable livelihood.

One of the central goals of his organization is to help farmers engaged in piggery tackle challenges like the African Swine Flu (ASF) and improve the quality of meat available in the market. Apong emphasizes the importance of ensuring both healthy food production and sustainable farming practices. His organization is also dedicated to empowering youth and local entrepreneurs, providing them with opportunities to grow and scale their businesses.

Piggery has been an integral part of the cultural and economic fabric of the Kiphire District. Whumi Enterprise recognizes its significance and aims to modernize this traditional practice. Through their programs, they provide specialized training on improved pig farming techniques, including breed selection, housing, feeding, and health management. Educate farmers on disease prevention and

veterinary care to ensure the well-being of livestock, introduce sustainable practices that minimize environmental impact and optimize resources.

They support the development of livestock farming to enhance economic resilience. They facilitate training on livestock, to broaden income streams for rural families and promote integrated farming systems that combine

livestock rearing with agriculture to improve productivity and sustainability, provide guidance on value addition, such as processing and marketing of livestock products.

"We want to give an opportunity to the youth and local people to reach the next level of entrepreneurship," Apong explains, highlighting the transformative vision behind his work. Apong's journey has been enriched by collaborations with various individuals and organizations. One of his most notable partnerships is with Royal Enfield, working on an agroforestry project aimed at promoting sustainable food farming in Cordova Village. Through this collaboration, he has gained insights into resource management and expanded his network across the North-east region.

For Apong, partnerships are invaluable learning opportunities that foster innovation and community impact. He credits these collaborations with enhancing his entrepreneurial capabilities and enabling him to address pressing local challenges.

As he reflects on his journey, Apong shares insights into how his work impacts the community in the long term, the challenges he has faced, and the lessons he has learned along the way. He believes that the key to sustainable community development lies in education and knowledge sharing. His organization conducts training programs and provides information that local communities can apply in their practices. He emphasizes that learning is a continuous process that contributes to both individual growth and the collective sustainability of the community. "What we are doing is learning ourselves and sharing whatever we learn with the community. If you learn something and apply it in your life and practices, it helps you achieve long-term goals and sustain along the way," Apong explains.

For Apong, the journey of a social entrepreneur has been fraught with challenges, ranging from financial constraints to limited resources and government support. Hailing from a remote village near the Myanmar border, Apong faced significant hurdles due to lack of economic opportunities in the region. One of the most pressing challenges has been financial instability. Apong recalls, "I come from a humble



development in livestock farming, with a particular focus on reviving the traditional practice of Piggery. By combining modern techniques with indigenous knowledge, they aim to foster economic growth and preserve cultural heritage while creating lasting benefits for the community.

Apong's professional journey began in 2002 in the





background, from one of the most remote places in the state. Our village has limited resources with little government assistance. Financial challenges have been my toughest hurdle."

Support from initiatives like the Youth Involve Fellowship provided Apong with the fund needed to develop his enterprise and address these challenges. This assistance became a turning point, enabling him to grow his organization and extend its impact. He attributes much of his success to his optimistic outlook. Despite the obstacles, he believes that positivity and perseverance are essential for overcoming adversity. "I've always had this positivity in my mind that things will be okay if you just keep going. That mindset has kept me moving forward," he says. Apong's optimism fuels his determination to address the socio-economic issues faced by his community and inspire others to do the same.

When reflecting on failures, Apong views them as stepping stones rather than setbacks. While he acknowledges having experienced numerous failures, he sees them as opportunities for growth and improvement. "I don't recall any failure that devastated me. Small failures have built me, and I learn from them every day," he shares. This perspective highlights his resilience and ability to adapt, which have been instrumental in his journey as a social



entrepreneur.

Apong's vision for the future revolves around creating opportunities for youth and local entrepreneurs, helping them scale their efforts, and fostering sustainable development. Through his work, he aims to impart knowledge, provide resources, and empower communities to thrive in the face of challenges. His story is a testament to how determination, optimism, and a commitment to learning can overcome even the most significant obstacles. By sharing his experiences, Apong inspires others to embrace the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship and work toward a better future for all.

Reflecting on the qualities necessary for social entrepreneurship, Apong identifies leadership and information as the cornerstones. "Leadership and access to the right information are crucial for anyone aspiring to be an entrepreneur," he

asserts. These qualities, combined with his passion for community service, have guided his work and helped him navigate challenges.

When asked about measuring the social impact of his work, Apong admits it is difficult to quantify. However, he gauges success through the enthusiasm and progress of the people he works with. Witnessing farmers adopting better practices and youth scaling up their entrepreneurial ventures gives him a sense of accomplishment. Apong's mission is clear: to create opportunities for others, support local entrepreneurship, and address community challenges with innovative solutions. Through his initiative, he hopes to foster a self-reliant, thriving community that inspires others to follow in his footsteps.

His journey as a social entrepreneur reflects his unwavering commitment to fostering growth and resilience in his

community. A key aspect of his leadership lies in his approach to feedback—both positive and negative. For Apong, every critique is an opportunity to improve, refine, and address challenges constructively. "Negative feedback is a positive challenge that helps us grow," he explains. This mindset not only bolsters his personal growth but also strengthens the impact of his organization on the community.

Looking toward the future, Apong envisions a legacy where local communities are empowered with knowledge, tools, and confidence to excel in entrepreneurship and business. "I want to ensure that they access the best information, scale their practices, and dominate the market as competitive entrepreneurs," he states with conviction. His dream is to bridge the gap between traditional farming practices and modern market dynamics, allowing local farmers to thrive in an ever-evolving economic landscape.

Apong recognizes the transformative potential of technology in advancing farming practices and entrepreneurship. While he acknowledges that technology may pose challenges, he remains focused on leveraging its advantages to enhance productivity and scale operations. "If used effectively, technology can multiply our efforts and accelerate our journey," he asserts.

When asked about advice for aspiring social entrepreneurs, Apong emphasizes two foundational principles: love for one's community and optimism. "If you don't love your community, social entrepreneurship will not be fruitful," he advises. For him, genuine care for the community fuels resilience, helping one navigate failures and challenges. Coupled with a positive outlook, this love becomes the driving force that sustains efforts toward meaningful change.

Through his work, Apong exemplifies how love for community, innovation, and adaptability can spark transformative change. His legacy is one of empowerment—a testament to the potential of social entrepreneurship to uplift even the most remote and underserved regions. With visionaries like him leading the way, the future of grassroots development looks brighter than ever.

Bhavadharani K



Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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Centre for Social Initiative and Management

A SANCTUARY FOR CREATIVITY, EXPRESSION, AND MENTAL HEALTH



The name “In Lehkha” holds dual significance: “Your Book” and “Paper House.” This duality captures its purpose of supporting writers.

In a world where storytelling and creativity often take a backseat amidst life's demands, In Lehkha stands as a beacon for aspiring writers and creatives, particularly in the Mizo community. Established in 2018 and opened to the public in 2022, this unique organization bridges the gap between talent and opportunity by offering a platform for individuals to share their stories and ideas with the world. With its innovative approach to publishing, community-building, and education, In Lehkha has become more than just a literary initiative—it is a safe space for growth, belonging, and expression. The journey to establish the foundation was not without its hurdles. As the founder Anita

recounts, financial constraints, lack of support, and scepticism from the community were significant obstacles. Initially misunderstood as a religious or societal venture, the foundation struggled to gain traction. However, Anita's unwavering belief in her vision and support from close friends and well-wishers propelled the initiative forward.

The foundation has also faced logistical and operational challenges. From quitting a stable government job to dedicating herself entirely to this cause, Anita has navigated a delicate balance between personal and professional commitments. Today, with a full-time team

and a strong sense of community, the foundation thrives, offering much-needed resources to aspiring writers and readers in the region. One of the foundation's standout features is its innovative approach. Its bookshop-cum-café is not only a repository of local and international literature but also a cozy space where people can connect over a cup of coffee and pastries. The concept emerged from years of dreaming and meticulous planning, blending her love for books and a desire to create a welcoming space for the community.

Participants often praise the foundation for its warm and inclusive environment. Many share stories of how the space encouraged them to step out of their comfort zones and embrace their creativity. From hosting cultural events to facilitating interactions between young writers and established professionals, the foundation has become a vibrant hub of activity. A core mission of the foundation is to promote local authors and provide them with opportunities to publish and share their work. "Many young writers are not taken seriously or face difficulties in publishing their books with established houses," she explains. The foundation addresses this gap by assisting with quality publishing and offering a platform to showcase their work.

Through workshops, book discussions, and collaborative events, the foundation fosters critical thinking and a love for literature. It also aims to expand its publishing arm across North-Eastern India, supporting writers from underrepresented regions. Balancing the demands of running a foundation with personal life is no small feat. However, for Anita, this endeavour is more a labour of love than work. Surrounded by a supportive community of friends, writers, and artists, she finds joy in every aspect of her role. "I don't feel like it's work. It's something I love," she shares.

As the foundation continues to grow, she

dreams of expanding its reach across India, particularly in the Northeast, to nurture more talent and create a robust literary community. With a vision deeply rooted in the love for books and the power of storytelling, this initiative is set to inspire countless others to embrace the written word and the freedom of expression it brings.

The name “In Lehkha” holds dual significance: “Your Book” and “Paper House.” This duality captures its purpose of supporting aspiring writers by providing the resources, mentorship, and environment needed to bring their visions to life.

In Lehkha serves as a safe space for creative minds, fostering a sense of belonging and freedom. It encourages young people, especially those in the artistic and creative communities, to express themselves, embrace authenticity, and grow both as individuals and as contributors to society. They assist writers who face challenges such as limited financial resources, time constraints, or lack of knowledge about the publishing process. By offering guidance and prioritizing the author's ideas and vision, the organization ensures the production of high-quality books that reflect each writer's unique voice.

They even host readings, discussions, and meetups to foster connections and mutual inspiration among participants. These events create an inclusive platform where individuals can share their passions, grow together, and develop a sense of belonging and empathy. They conduct seminars and workshops on various topics, including writing, mental health, life skills, and social issues. These sessions, held at schools, cafés, and In Lehkha's own premises, aim to address subjects often overlooked in traditional settings, equipping young people with valuable insights and skills. Their ambitions extend beyond fostering creativity. As the organization grows, it aims to generate employment opportunities while promoting values like hard work, sincerity, and perseverance. These principles inspire individuals to become dependable contributors to their communities.

By turning challenges into opportunities and fostering a culture of support and creativity, this foundation serves as a shining example of what can be achieved with passion, determination, and a love for community. With a focus on nurturing young Mizo talent, the organization has successfully published 10 books, all written by emerging Mizo authors.

In Lehkha is not just a publishing house or a book café; it's a movement that champions storytelling and the power of shared experiences. By providing spaces for dialogue, connection, and growth, the organization helps individuals discover their potential and make meaningful contributions to their communities. With its unwavering commitment to creativity and empowerment, In Lehkha is redefining the literary and cultural landscape of the Mizo community, leaving an indelible impact on the lives it touches.

Bhavadharani K





The Power of the Unreasonable handcraft creators

Kula Conclave, a unique networking forum, aims to bridge the inclusive capital and networks gap for India's many creative, cultural, and craft-led enterprises. Meet the global and local leaders co-creating at Kula in Goa on 2nd December 2024. Get ready to engage, collaborate, and build new ideas alongside our delegates and speakers! Visit www.200millionartisans.org for more information.



“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” This line from George Bernard Shaw was pressed into my hands by my cerebral manager just as I was setting out from the cobbled streets of Oxford to the sweltering lanes of Bengaluru. The book was more than a gift; it was a manifesto for my work with the Centre for Social Markets in India—a guide for an unlikely adventure that would unearth the unreasonable in me.

The journey that followed was one defined by relentless curiosity and wild experimentation. We were determined to shake things up, crashing conferences with shameless opportunism, selecting studies at random, and seeing where chance would lead us. Out of this glorious chaos emerged *Made in Bangalore*, a book that began as a question: Can business be a force for good? It ended as a vibrant collection of stories, chronicling the work of fierce social

entrepreneurs—those “unreasonable” people whose persistence was reshaping the world for the better. I had the privilege of leading this effort alongside a brilliant team, including the indomitable Viva Kermani.

In the eight weeks that followed, traversing through South India in the heat of August, September, and October, I found myself immersed in a paradox. The weather was as erratic as the innovators I met—searing heat one day, unprecedented rain and thunderstorms the next, wild winds battering the countryside. And yet, everywhere I went, I met champions of India’s handcraft and handloom ecosystems. These creators—stubborn, relentless, deeply rooted in tradition—were preserving ancient crafts while breathing new life into them. Their works weren’t museum relics; they were living, breathing artifacts of Indian heritage, worn and used by people across the country and beyond.

Their world was a swirl of beguiling sarees, hypnotic blouses, and intricately crafted icons

made from wood, metal, silk, and new-age vegan materials. Masters of their art, these artisans passed down their expertise to younger generations, mentoring apprentices in skills sponsored by both state and national governments. Their products, relying entirely on sustainable, nature-based practices, were largely the work of women—though men too had their place in this vast creative tapestry.

Consider the Prime Minister, recently seen in a silk shawl crafted from waste materials by a women’s collective in Bhagalpur. It was a bold statement of intent from the government, signaling a desire to recapture the magic and markets of India’s handicrafts and handlooms. This is an industry that accounts for \$4.5 billion annually and employs around 10 million people—roughly 40% of Australia’s population! It’s the second-largest source of employment after agriculture in India.

And yet, it’s the individuals who soldier on, despite immense hurdles, that truly stagger the

imagination. Like the so-called Green Revolution that unchained India from its dependence on food imports, the handicraft sector has the potential to spark its own revolution—one that doesn’t rely on toxic side effects or unsustainable practices.

As K.L. Radharaman of the Angadi empire aptly put it, “The entire luxury goods industry of Europe traces its roots back to the craft guilds of the medieval age. India has that same potential to create a unique advantage, empowering a new generation of craftspeople and entrepreneurs in rural India. For those seeking an economic miracle, this is one success story hidden in plain sight.”

Indeed, organizations like 200 Million Artisans argue that the handcrafted economy could grow into a trillion-dollar ecosystem, supporting 200 million artisans and craftspeople. Events like the Kula Conclave, which brings together stakeholders from all corners of the industry, are setting the stage for this fertile landscape of craft and creativity to flourish.

Here, amidst this rich tapestry of resilience, I’ll capture just a glimpse—a distilled essence—of those valiant artisans who are, quite literally, reshaping the world one stitch, one carving, and one thread at a time.

The climate changes impacts each of them—extreme heat resulting in shortened work time by handloomers—often suffering too with many skin related ailment and exhaustion. Production decreases costs go up resulting in acute loss.

Floods have destroyed many handcraft homes. Range of diseases including Malaria dengue and diara impacting massively low income families and women especially pregnant women and children. Loss and damage is serious.

But amidst all this breakdown -the entrepreneurs, craft makers keep bouncing back reimagining with hope-hope is the spark and the spark is HOPE.

Pushpanath Krishnamurthy

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS NATURAL FARMING

My path to embracing natural farming has been a transformative journey, deeply rooted in reflection and learning. It was not an overnight change but a gradual awakening influenced by decades of experience, observation, and a realization of the impact of modern agricultural practices.

The Green Revolution: A Necessary but Costly Change

In the 1960s, India was on the brink of crisis. Between 1964 and 1966, severe droughts and famines struck the nation, and food security became an urgent priority. The Green Revolution emerged as the solution, introducing high-yielding crop varieties, chemical pesticides, and fertilizers. It was a necessity of the time, ensuring survival and feeding a rapidly growing population.

As a child, I witnessed a different environment. The soil was fertile, water was pure, and the air was fresh. Farming was harmonious with nature, and food production felt organic and untainted. However, the Green Revolution shifted focus to maximizing outputs. Chemical farming became the norm, and its adverse effects were not questioned. At the time, the excitement about increased yields and food security overshadowed any concern for environmental and health impacts.

Awakening to the Damage

By my 50s, the picture had changed dramatically. I began to see the consequences of indiscriminate chemical usage in agriculture—degraded soils, polluted water sources, and a rise in

down alcohol to "counter the mess." The long-term health effects and unknown diseases this practice caused were alarming.

I started educating myself about these harmful chemicals and their impact. This quest for knowledge ignited my desire to explore natural farming methods.

The Influence of a Guru and the Start of Change

sustainable farming was not just a choice but an imperative for the future. For the past eight years, I have been fully committed to practicing regenerative natural farming.

From Terrace to Farmlands: A Journey of Experimentation

My first steps were small. In Thorapakkam, I utilized 3000 square feet



unknown health conditions. Many of the pesticides and fertilizers we used were banned in Western countries due to their harmful effects, yet they continued to be a staple in Indian farming.

The sight of farmers spraying toxic chemicals without proper protection stayed with me. Their faces covered with cloth masks, they would return exhausted and rationalize their exposure by gulping

I owe much of my early learning to Dr. Gurumurthy, who served as my mentor during the initial phase of this journey. His insights and guidance were invaluable in helping me transition from conventional farming to natural and regenerative practices.

My chemical farming stint lasted less than two years, but it left a lasting impression. It made me realize that

of terrace space to grow crops. Initially, I relied on chemicals, as I was still unacquainted with natural farming practices. Gradually, I shifted to sustainable methods and experimented with hydroponics and aquaponics. The joy of growing vegetables like tomatoes, okra, eggplants, and ridge gourds naturally was unmatched.

Encouraged by this success, I expanded

to farmlands. Initially, I grew commercial crops like sugarcane, paddy, BT cotton, sesame, and groundnuts using chemicals, as the scale required it. I leased lands and aimed to cultivate up to 100 acres. The commercial farming system revealed its harsh realities—the exploitation of farmers by middlemen and mills. Most farmers are forced to sell immediately at low prices to repay debts, but I was fortunate to hold my produce until prices improved.

However, I felt increasingly uneasy. Chemical farming was stripping the soil of its vitality and eroding my sense of purpose.

The Philosophy Behind Natural Farming

What struck me most was the mindset of farmers in their 60s and 70s who encouraged the indiscriminate use of harmful chemicals. These were people who had witnessed the degradation yet continued the practice out of habit or necessity. Their philosophy contrasted sharply with my growing awareness.

The realization that we were not just feeding ourselves but also the soil, the ecosystem, and future generations shifted my perspective. Farming became more than a livelihood—it became a responsibility.

Rediscovering Traditional Wisdom

Walking through my farmhouse in Mudaliyar Kuppam one day, I was struck by the wisdom of our ancestors. The so-called "weeds" we often uproot and discard are, in fact, medicinal plants used in Ayurveda and Siddha practices. Using Google Lens, I identified several plants growing naturally, such as Kuppaimeni, Oodha Mulli, Kundu Mani, and Thazhuthazhai.

This exercise reinforced my belief in natural farming and the ancient wisdom of using nature's gifts for health and sustainability. These plants, which we label as weeds, are a reminder of the interconnectedness of life and the need to respect our environment.

A Commitment to Regenerative Farming

Today, I am proud to be practicing regenerative natural farming, which goes beyond avoiding chemicals. It focuses on replenishing the soil, restoring biodiversity, and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature.

The journey has been filled with challenges, but it has also brought immense satisfaction. Every crop I grow naturally is a step toward healing the land and leaving a better legacy for the next generation.

Natural farming is not just about techniques; it is about philosophy. It is about respecting the earth, understanding its rhythms, and embracing sustainable practices that benefit both humans and the planet.

As I look back, I am grateful for the guidance of mentors like Dr. Gurumurthy and the lessons from my experiences. The journey toward natural farming is ongoing, but the path is clear. It is a path of hope, resilience, and reconnection with the roots of agriculture.

P.N. Subramanian

SMALL DIFFERENCES AND BIG IMPACT



Many families indulge in community service or pro bono work as they find a deep sense of purpose in giving back to the society. It often becomes a legacy, shaping values across generations. Engaging in such work not only impacts the community but also enriches family bonds by fostering shared goals and empathy. “Social work has been an integral part of our lives. I have seen this empathy for more than three generations in my family and I got drawn to it, naturally,” says Ms Shobhana Kumar, Founder and Managing Trustee of Small Differences in Coimbatore.

A poet, translator and chronicler, Shobhana has worn many hats. Yet, she prioritises her social activities in a way that seamlessly complements her diverse roles. “As a poet I was drawn to simple things. There is a tendency to explore darkness from new perspectives and that exploration in the mind ends in writing, which to me is the starting point of any action,” she reminisces.

In 2012, Shobhana and her core volunteer team started buying food from hotels and distributing it to abandoned elderly people whom they found on the streets. “It all started with a discussion on a Facebook page between my husband, a friend and me,” she says with a smile, emphasizing that great things can begin from the most unexpected places. “We began to distribute food every Saturday. Two years later, another friend suggested that this activity can also benefit few transwomen who can be engaged in cooking the food. While it was the same effort from Small Differences, it has now benefitted two groups – the transwomen and the abandoned elderly. “One of them, Taslima Nasreen continues to cook for us even today,” she adds.

This opportunity allowed her team of volunteers to move closely with the transgender community and learn their lives from the inside. Attempts to secure employment opportunities for them were futile, but provoked the team to look into



what the community actually expected from them. “We first thought of helping them with our own understanding and ideas. But the moment we sat down with them and asked how we could help them, the answers were simple and straight forward,” she says. Shobhana reminds us that transgender community cannot be seen as a homogenous community in every context.

From their experience, it was seen that while some were interested in education, some of them were wanting to learn new skills. Few wanted to be entrepreneurs and many wanted to manage their survival and enjoy their lives. Thus, Small Differences initiated the new vertical that focussed on funding the education of transgender persons. Very soon, it also introduced the support for formal skill training programs. “One of our students underwent the dry cleaning training program offered by Cooperative Weavers’ Society and established her own dry cleaning centre. Another student is about to graduate as an

electrical engineer,” recalls Shobhana. Alongside education, Small Differences also introduced sustenance and mentorship programs for the community.

Gradually, the network of volunteers also engaged transmen and transwomen who actively participated in all initiatives. They also began to manage the distribution of food every Saturday. “Today we have three of them enrolled in the ‘Home Guards’. They are seen with respect and hope and are proud of themselves,” she says. The transformation of the ten bedded ortho ward in Coimbatore Government Hospital was a transcendent experience to all those who were involved. “With the intent to be useful, any individual can be the medium of change,” says Shobhana, acknowledging the committed engagement of all volunteers, especially the transpersons who managed the ward during the intervention.

In the last two years, Small Differences has also been running the education



support program for orphan children across Chennai and Coimbatore. The program financially supports their education and has also mapped them with individual mentors online. Over 40 students have benefitted from this program, with most of them in class eleven. With their own network of volunteers and organisations, Small Differences has taken one leap at a time, reaching out to a vulnerable group.

Shobhana expresses her gratitude to the board members and dedicated volunteers, whom she considers the true driving force behind this impactful initiative. With every community they engage with, Small Differences ensures a deep understanding of local needs from an insider’s perspective. “It’s our metrics and networks, combined with the efforts of our volunteers, that have brought this vision to life. We are committed to continuing our efforts to the best of our abilities,” she affirms.

Shanmuga Priya.T

HEALTH, HABITS AND HEALING:

HOW TO HARNESS THE POSITIVE POWER OF HABITS FOR GOOD HEALTH

*'Little Drops of Water
Tiny Grains of Sand,
Make the Mighty Ocean,
And the Beauteous Land'
is how the saying goes.*

This truth - that small and seemingly insignificant increments eventually add up to make a formidable impact - is what makes habits so powerful. Everyday, habitual, routine actions are the heroes of this edition of Vital Wellness - let's look at our habits, past, current and future, and see how they work, and how best we can tweak them to our advantage.

So here goes: what are some of the things we all do every single day? I guess the list would go something like this for most of us:

- Have some hot beverage in the morning
- Drive/Commute
- Charge our phones/tabs/laptops
- Spend some time texting
- Fall asleep at night

Each such habit has a deep cumulative impact upon our health, work and life. Take the morning coffee for instance. Those of us who have it everyday know not only the joys of that first cup of morning coffee but also how much power it has - if we don't have it for some reason, its not only a 10-minute allotted coffee-drinking time that gets impacted, but a whole chain of events after that! This is where the power of habits lies - each one has a three-fold impact - an immediate one, like the irritation we feel when we have to skip that cuppa, a short-term one (like the headache some people get if they don't have their tea/coffee on time) and a long-term one, like a full-blown caffeine addiction, possibly acidity, and all its associated problems.

But the advantage of habitual actions is that they tend to get repeated no matter what, so they act as anchor points scattered throughout our day. It is easier to build in some associated actions beneficial for our health around each of these anchor points, than it would be to start a brand new action without the help of this sort of association or anchor.

For instance, many of us tend to drink lesser water per day than is good for us. To get over this tendency, if you were to have a small water-dispenser or water-bottle near your phone charging point, then every time you charge your phone, it would be a visible reminder to you to drink water, and would definitely add a minimum of 1 glass of water per day to your intake. Often, that 1 glass of water will bring your hydration levels into balance, and you will reap all kinds of benefits from it.

You can work on similar add-on habits on to your existing ones and enjoy all the benefits of this piggy-backing. You could listen to whichever song you would like to learn while on the way to work, and if you play it on loop everyday, soon you will have every nuance of the song in



your memory. If you suffer from back issues, just before going to sleep, in a lying position, you could do a few stretches everyday, even if it is a small number of repetitions. Since the stretches are going to be repeated every single day if you tie in this habit to the act of falling asleep, they will give you much better benefits than a full hour of exercises done randomly at irregular intervals. Of course, the prerequisite is that you must tightly bind the new habit to the old one, and never once let them come apart - you must make yourself not fall asleep, unless and until you have done your stretches.

This way of adding on a new habit to an established one has been called habit-stacking by James Clear, author of 'Atomic Habits', and is a good strategy to harness to promote good health and wellbeing.

You could also bind a new habit to an established one in a way that makes it very difficult for you to not do it - supposing you decided that you wouldn't get on with your day and wouldn't get ready for work, until after you have had warm honey-lemon water. Then there's a high chance that you would quickly make yourself that glass of warm honey-lemon, just so that you could get on with your day on time. What you're doing, in effect, is that you're making it very unattractive for you to skip the new good-health habit.

Our bodies are creatures of habit too -

the circadian rhythm, the menstrual cycle, even digestion, all happen in a very beautifully smooth and routine way. The same internal actions like hormone secretion, enzyme production, repair and replacement of cells, keep repeating themselves at intervals. Much as if our cells are habituated to work in a certain way, at certain times. This is why external as well as internal habits also hold the key to good health. Externally, you could add some healthy nuts and seeds to your diet, to be had at a certain time every single day. You could also sleep and rise at the same time each day. Both these habits, and indeed any regularly followed diet and exercise habits, pack a punch that seems unbelievably disproportionate to the 'size' of the action and the time it takes to perform....

So as the end of 2024 approaches, and you start thinking about the past year, and what you would like to achieve in the forthcoming one, do think in terms of including seemingly small but incredibly powerful habits into your day, rather than in terms of something that looks larger and flashier, but is likely to become unsustainable soon....

Like the small, beautiful and gentle light of the lamps of Karthigai Deepam, may each small but regular habit pave your path to good health and wellbeing!

A. Ramashree



The author Ramashree Paranandi is a teacher, and a partner in The Organic Farm, Nedumaram, TN. She consults on applications of yoga, natural therapies and music for good health, and often stays over at the farm to recharge herself with pollution-free days spent amidst natural surroundings. An MA in Yogashastra enables her to apply the knowledge of the ancient texts to contemporary situations.



SANGATNA - NEW LIFELINE FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Balancing modern professional aspirations with a family's traditional values can be challenging, yet it often serves as a powerful catalyst for meaningful transformation. "I come from a joint family set up where elders have a strong say in the all decisions - personal and professional. I've grown accustomed to seeing boys receive preferential treatment, with their aspirations readily validated and encouraged. Fortunately, my father was a rebel who understood very early on that women need to be independent in all aspects of life, including financial. That fuelled my career and cause choices. I was not only charting less trodden paths for myself, but also felt the need to enable other women to do the same. The notion of women's treatment as second class citizens stayed with me," shares Ms Vaishali James, Co-Founder of Sangatna, a for profit private limited company in Chennai.

After graduating in Botany Vaishali completed her MBA from The Open University of London. After working for nineteen years in the ITES sector, Vaishali continued to feel a sense of vacuum within. "It was like a treadmill run. I was going ahead vainly, but nowhere. At a point, I decided to step off. As I was evaluating my choices, I knew I had to do something in the impact sector. That's how my second job came about - in the FinTech industry, serving underserved, blue-collared workers to bring about financial inclusion," she says. Given the disparities she saw in her growing years and the disparities she continued to see, the need to work with women stayed with her and she found fulfilment in volunteering with two NGOs working exclusively with women. This is where she met her co-founders and very quickly saw that they shared common thinking and passion when it came to women in the workplace - employees and entrepreneurs alike. The trio (Gayatri, Maragathavalli and Vaishali) decided to join forces and set up an organization to enable and empower women to stay in the workplace.

A break in job due to the COVID pandemic led her to do an extensive research on issues faced by women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs in India face unique challenges shaped by societal norms, systemic barriers and structural issues. Deep-rooted stereotypes often question women's leadership capabilities, making it harder to gain trust and respect in the business ecosystem. Women often faced challenges securing loans or investments, as financial institutions perceived them as high-risk borrowers. Women mostly lacked access to

informal financial support systems or investor networks that are dominated by men. Women entrepreneurs often found it difficult to access mentorship programs or business networks that can guide them in scaling their ventures. Limited representation of women in leadership roles within industries exacerbates this gap. "I strongly felt that whatever I initiated must somehow respond to these challenges. With like-minded friends on board, Sangatna finally became a reality in April 2024," she says proudly.

Sangatna's primary objective is to demonstrate respect for women's efforts and with that, they identified different focus points to build a support system that can nurture women entrepreneurs, irrespective of their socio

economic background. "We are a match making platform helping women entrepreneurs connect with angel investors. In the process, we have our slew of services to nurture women and mentor them," Vaishali adds. Alongside the access to investment, Sangatna has also built a mentor cohort of senior industry leaders across different realms like marketing, finance, human resources, product development, etc. who can be available as mentors for the women entrepreneurs. "We still have women from tier 2 and tier 3 cities who don't even know that they can approach investors with their ideas. Therefore, it is not just about their idea but a multitude of factors that determines their perseverance and success. Sangatna wants to be there in every step. That is the reason we have a group of mentors who can educate and prepare the women to survive in the competitive business environment," she justifies.

The investment and mentorship support played a pivotal role in fostering a community and peer group for women entrepreneurs. This space provides them with the opportunity to share their fears, anxieties, excitement and challenges, while also offering support and insights to one another. It is not only about learning and giving back, but the journey of growing together that can encourage more women to come forward. "As they grow bigger in number, their representation at the policy level will be a natural outcome of this process. We have a long path ahead of us, but we have begun with the right pulse," says Vaishali with determination.

Since inception, Sangatna is in active conversations with 12 women entrepreneurs and 5 of them are ready to discuss their projects with investors. All due diligence and idea validation has been carried out by Sangatna. It is only after this initial thorough scrutiny and analysis of the potential for scaling, the projects are prepared for conversation with investors.

Sangatna's first investor connect event is coming up in December 2024 and Vaishali believes in the rationale and processes followed at Sangatna. "We are also prepared to launch new support services on a short/long term basis if women justify the need for them. Sangatna's success lies in the success of these women entrepreneurs. Their enterprises must be able to survive with the support systems we create for them. We are very excited to see this unfold," she adds.

Shanmuga Priya.T



"My dream is to ensure water conservation, promote bio-diversity and agricultural development in my panchayat."

Mr.G. Selvaraj shares with Marie Banu his initiatives as the Panchayat President aimed at uplifting and empowering his community

Mr. G. Selvaraj is the Panchayat President of Kulur, Erode District. He has launched various green initiatives and has been recognised by the State Government with several awards.

In an exclusive interview, Mr. G. Selvaraj shares with Marie Banu his initiatives as the Panchayat President of Kulur, aimed at uplifting and empowering his community.

Tell us about yourself and your family.

I live with My wife Mrs. Sathya and my children S.S.Isai Aadhini and S. Ilanvel Aadiyan in Govindan Naicken Palayam. I studied at a Primary School in Modakkurichi and the Government Higher Secondary School until my Plus 2. Later, I pursued my BA in English literature at Chikkaiah Naicker College, Erode. After completing my degree, I tried my hand at various businesses. I first looked into the hotel industry in Modakkurichi, where I stayed in a hotel for some time. I later started a cone factory business related to the spinning mills.

My niece Ms. SS Nandashri works in the rocket launch sector in Sriharikota. My younger brother, after completing his MBA, decided to take up farming and has started a paper mill. He is now fully involved in agriculture.

What motivated you to get involved in the panchayat elections?

It was a combination of my personal interests and the need to contribute to my community. My family has always been supportive of my endeavours. My father's side was more focused on farming, but I always felt a responsibility towards the village. During an election for local leadership, my neighbours gathered and asked me to stand for the panchayat election. I hesitated at first, but I ultimately decided to contest. There were seven candidates in total, and I was fortunate enough to win the election. Once elected, my first initiative was to plant 500 trees in the village as a part of our environmental efforts.

I started my term on January 6, 2020, and the next elections are scheduled for December 2024. I was recognised by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister for Best Panchayat and received the "Green and Clean Village award". I also received appreciation from Hon'ble Governor on 26.9.23.

We are preparing for the next round of leadership, and I hope to continue the work we've started.

How has your family supported your decision to enter politics and lead the panchayat?

My family had mixed feelings initially. While my father was hesitant about my decision to run for the panchayat, fearing it would disrupt our family life, my mother was very supportive. After I won the election, I made sure to show my family the positive impact of my leadership on the village. Over time, they have come to understand the significance of my role, and now they fully support my efforts.

What are some of the key initiatives you have undertaken as the Panchayat President?

One of the first things I did was to focus on environmental sustainability. I spearheaded a tree-planting campaign in the village and we have planted over 8,000 trees so far. We targeted empty spaces for planting trees, and the local people have actively

participated in this effort. It has transformed the landscape of our panchayat, which is now greener and cooler. Additionally, we identified the need for water conservation and have worked to build three new ponds to store water for irrigation. The ponds also help store wastewater from the lower channel of Bhavani river, which is then used to recharge nearby open wells and borewells. We've also built several check dams, which have been very beneficial for irrigation.

How effective is the plastic-free initiative in your panchayat?

We have worked hard to reduce plastic usage in the village. Initially, we distributed waste segregation boxes to every household to ensure that plastic waste is properly sorted. We also launched awareness campaigns to educate people on the harmful impact of plastic, and we made sure no plastic was used in public places or thrown into water bodies. We are gradually seeing a reduction in plastic use, and the community is becoming more conscious of its environmental responsibilities.

How do you manage the waste disposal system and the control of pests in your panchayat?

Managing waste and controlling pests is an ongoing challenge, but we've made significant strides. We took action against pesticide misuse and have been actively promoting organic farming techniques. Over the past three years, our efforts have led to a reduction in the use of chemical pesticides. In fact, our village is now known for being pesticide-free. This shift has not only helped the environment but has also resulted in better agricultural yields. I believe our initiative can serve as a model for other villages.

What support do you receive from the district collector?

The district collector has been incredibly supportive of our initiatives. The previous collector, Mr. Krishnan Unni IAS and Mr. Madhusudhan IAS, was especially helpful in fostering the growth of rural areas. Thanks to the support from the district, we've been able to implement our ideas more effectively, such as creating better roads that connect villages to main roads in just a few minutes, reducing travel time significantly. Current district officials, including Mr. Rajagopal Sunkara IAS, continue to offer his support as well, which helps us push forward with our development plans.

As a panchayat leader, have you faced any challenges, particularly related to corruption or resistance?

Thankfully, I have not encountered major issues with corruption or resistance. The community and local leaders have been very supportive of my work. However, there have been some challenges in terms of support from certain sectors or individuals. For instance, there was an instance where people were dumping garbage in a vacant plot of land. We took quick action and filled the site with sand to prevent further misuse. Some of these issues, while small, do require constant vigilance.

What are the plans for your panchayat in the near future?

We have many ongoing projects. I am especially focused on environmental sustainability. We are



working on expanding the tree plantation program and creating more green spaces. Additionally, we plan to improve education in the village. We are offering special courses to students and encouraging them to pursue higher education. We are also exploring the possibility of setting up a soap production business and solar power plants to provide sustainable livelihoods for the community. We want to create an environment where people don't feel the need to leave the village to earn a living.

My dream is to ensure water conservation, promote bio-diversity and agricultural development in my panchayat. We are actively looking for funds to desilt ponds and promote tourism. I also plan to continue promoting the Vetiver method, which involves sustainable farming practices without harming the environment. We are already seeing positive results, and I am hopeful that this will bring about a lasting change.

Can you elaborate on how you plan to promote vetiver farming in your panchayat?

The use of vetiver grass, is one of the key sustainable practices we are promoting in our panchayat. Vetiver grass has numerous benefits, especially for soil conservation, water retention, and erosion control. It's an indigenous plant that requires minimal water and can thrive in poor soil conditions, which makes it perfect for our region. We are focusing on educating farmers about the benefits of vetiver, especially its ability to retain moisture in the soil and improve its fertility.

We have already planted vetiver along several roadsides and on the edges of our farms, and we've started to see significant improvements in soil quality and water conservation. Our plan is to expand this initiative by offering training programs for farmers, particularly on how to harvest and use vetiver for commercial purposes, such as making aromatic products or using the grass for building materials.

Additionally, we are working with agricultural universities and NGOs to provide more technical support, as well as financial incentives, for farmers who adopt vetiver farming. Our ultimate goal is to make vetiver farming a viable and profitable option for farmers in the panchayat, creating a model for others in the district to follow. We're also hoping to integrate it into our environmental sustainability programs to address both water conservation and soil health.