



With the Internet and digital age, women today have an opportunity that wasn't available to them before, and digital literacy will equip them to help them function effectively.

HARRIET VIDYASAGAR
Talking about her work within the area of digital literacy for women. Her upcoming project, Saree Conversations, aims to generate employment for rural weavers while preserving traditional styles and designs

'Going online will help pass the benefits of the digital age to the artisan

3 questions for Dr Rajani Kant, General Secretary, Human Welfare Association

Tell us about your work with the DEF.

We first interacted with Osama Manzar four years ago on the issue of livelihood promotion of handloom weavers and artisans. Since then, we have partnered to promote and develop local village panchayats. Banaras is famous for its handwoven silk sarees, brocades and handicraft products, but the rural artisans here and in surrounding districts are facing a threat from Chinese machine-made products. To promote village products, we have joined hands with DEF.



Why the need to go online?

HWA has been working in the developmental sector for 18 years, mainly for the economic empowerment of women and child rights through community-based education programmes and promotion of handloom weavers and young girls through vocational training activities in rural areas. Putting these villages on the web is essential for passing on the benefits of the digital age. Today, 30 village panchayat websites are functional. It is a way to reach out to people across the world, who are introduced to the village and its activities, including agriculture crops, and the process of creating handwoven products. This will also help rural tourism, stop migration, and increase employment.

How many villages have been covered, and what next?

A total of 30 villages, from Chiraigaon Block to Cholapur Block (Varanasi district) now have websites. We are planning to go up to 100 by March 2012, and 200 by March 2013 in Varanasi district, apart from 200 additional websites in five nearby districts.

HWA is a Varanasi-based organisation set up in 1991 that works to address the needs of women and children of minority communities in the area. The HWA, along with the DEF, worked to create 30 digital panchayats in Varanasi within a year.



A poster for the Digital panchayat programme



The ultimate target is a scenario where they should be able to access information about government schemes, write to the PMO or chat with a government representative on Skype.

OSAMA MANZAR
Founder and Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation

"where do flowers get their colour from?" and "who is the richest man in the world?" At the time, it was Bill Gates."

Putting a sarpanch on the net

For Osama Manzar, Founder and Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation, a Delhi-based non-profit organisation, the only way ahead for development is to introduce the power of information technology to those who need it the most — India's villagers. To this end, DEF has, in partnership with the government of India, helped set up digital panchayats across Indian villages, a little over a year ago.



Medhavi Gandhi, Director, Happy Hands Foundation, Delhi, at her Hauz Khas studio-cum-store, which hosts meetings with artisans, as well as stocks products made by them. PIC/ RAJEEV TYAGI

"Panchayats function and carry out governance at the bottom of the pyramid, and are responsible for the implementation of government projects. But 80 per cent of them are digitally illiterate, and disconnected from the urban world. They, therefore, don't contribute as much as they could to the system and their own welfare," he explains, over a late night telephone conversation conducted after many interrupted efforts. DEF, therefore, works bottom up, by making the lowest level of governance IT-savvy.

Manzar presents the facts. "Only 50,000 out of 2.5 lakh panchayats in India have computers, according to

government figures. But a DEF survey at the ground level has found that of these, almost 80 per cent of those that exist, do not work. Our objective, supported by the National Internet Exchange of India (responsible for the .in domain) is to reach out to at least 500 to 1,000 panchayats, and train them to be connected via laptops available through a local computer centre."

Today, in partnership with local NGOs, DEF has reached out to 300 such villages across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, among others. "We put up netbooks in a campus envi-

ronment and conduct awareness workshops about how panchayats can create websites for themselves." The ultimate goal is to bring them online, and give them access to new-age tools that can aid governance and information-sharing.

There is no medium more permanent than the web, says Manzar. "The morning's newspaper turns stale by evening, and there is no way of retrieving yesterday's TV news byte to watch it again. But the Internet is permanent. As long as India's villagers are not part of this new world, as a country we will be moving backwards."