SAFA NETWORK
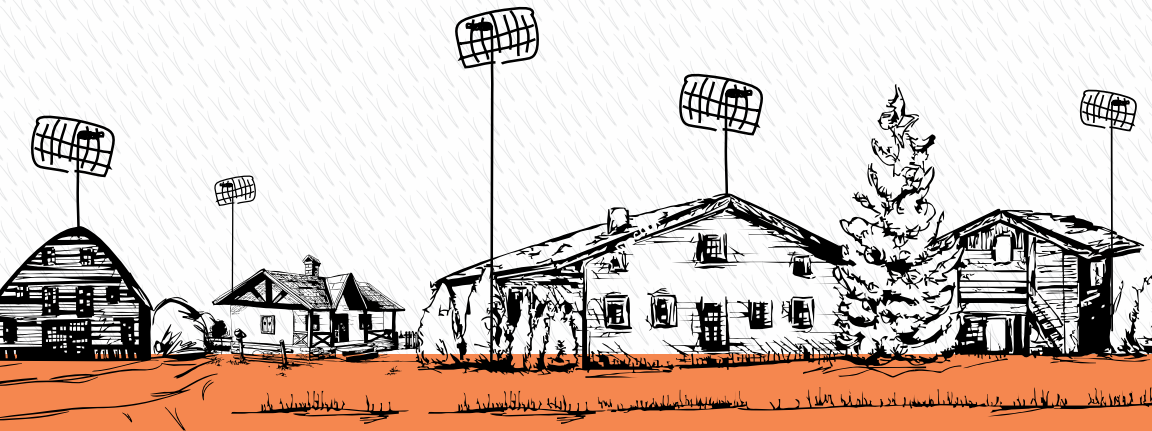
Internet access for urban poor living in Bhola Nagar slum of Banjara Hills, Hyderabad

WIRELESS FOR COMMUNITIES

Wireless for Communities

In developing countries, wireless connectivity has emerged as an inexpensive technology to bridge the connectivity gap in remote areas. This wireless technology has created much interest in the international development community. In India, even with mobile penetration, tele-density in rural areas is still less than 40 per cent. The reason has mostly been the issues around last-mile connectivity, which has the potential to resolve the issue of prohibitive cost of deploying conventional wired infrastructure in remotest areas of the country.

Wireless for Communities or W4C is an initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and the Internet Society (ISOC) that has been supported by various partners over the years. Launched in 2010, Wireless for Communities or W4C aims to connect marginalised communities in rural, remote and geographically difficult locations of India, where mainstream Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are not willing to provide Internet connectivity as they feel their operations would not be commercially viable.

W4C involves line-of-sight and low-cost Wi-Fi equipment, which utilise the unlicensed spectrum bands — 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz — to create community-owned and community-operated wireless networks.

Internet penetration levels in India are below world average and the penetration level in rural India is even worse. The combination of poor rural tele-density and Internet penetration further widens the divide between the haves and the have-nots, and therefore deploying traditional communications infrastructure may not be economically viable from both a service provider and subscriber point of view.

Besides improving access to information in rural and remote parts of the country, W4C also addresses the lack of content, products and services originating from rural areas, which inhibits economic development in the region.

Key Components of W4C

1 Train the trainers in wireless network technology and transform them into Barefoot Wireless Engineers to link rural populations to the Internet

2 Deploy wireless connectivity across rural communities, especially in clusters

3 Create an open forum to discuss best practices and lessons learned, and to educate on issues from both a technical and policy perspective

4 Advocate for social enterprises and NGOs to be rural Internet service providers, especially by opening new channels to decision-makers, regulators, government officials, the private sector, civil society, and the technical community

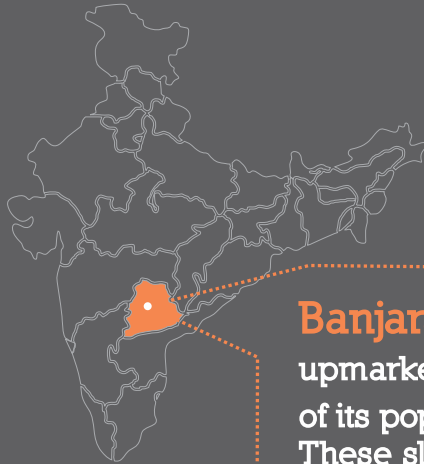**W4C services**

Digital Literacy

Digital Services

Information Services

Wireless Internet Connectivity

W4C Network

In the last six years, **DEF** has connected rural and remote locations in as many as **38 districts across 18 states** of India — and the numbers are only growing. One such location is Bhola Nagar in Banjara Hills, **Hyderabad**.

Bhola Nagar

Banjara Hills may have a largely upmarket image but over **45 per cent** of its population lives in **slums**. These slum pockets are home to over **24,000 people**. Bhola Nagar is a cluster of slums where families are unable to sustain themselves and their children. Women here are financially dependent on their husbands or father, and girl child education is a luxury.
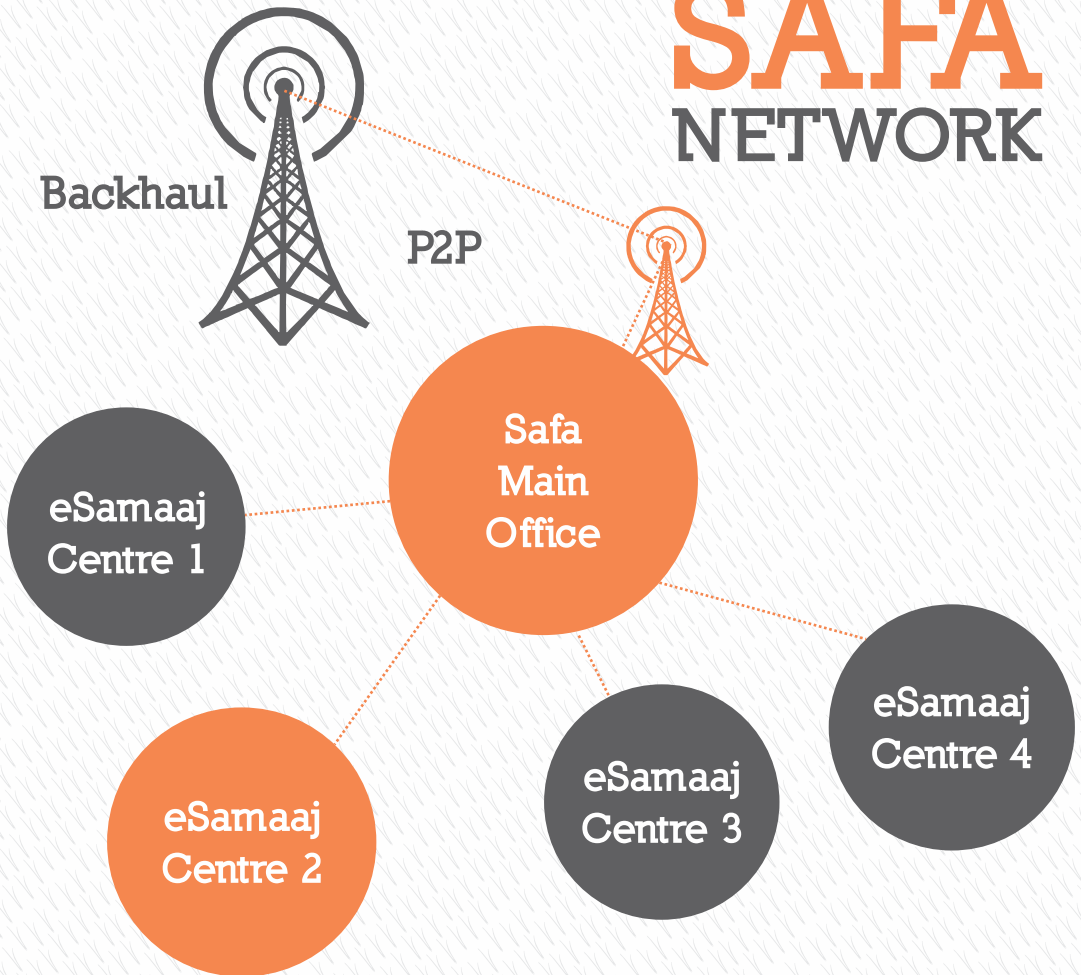
SAFA
Women

SAFA India works in this slum. SAFA India is a social venture that is committed to socio-economic empowerment of women. It introduces urban illiterate women to sustainable livelihoods and supports the education of their children through an area-based community model that retains the cultural and social identity of the women.

The organisation provides women in Bhola Nagar with trainings in tailoring and embroidery, and educates them about entrepreneurship opportunities and access to finance (micro savings). Further, Safa generates a source of income for the women by helping them produce and sell a range of handmade products with ethnic artwork like zardozi, shadow work, chain and crewel stitch work.

To support SAFA India's efforts and strengthen the livelihood of the women its serving, it partnered with DEF to initiate the Safa Network to establish Wi-Fi enabled SAFA eCentres in Bhola Nagar and provide its women with digital literacy so that they are empowered to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Barefoot Wireless Engineers testing the network feasibility of the site and establishing a point-to-point network.

DEF has provided Internet connectivity to the SAFA main office and four eSamaaj Centres where SAFA provides livelihoods trainings and awareness about entrepreneurship opportunities to women.

eSamaaj Centres offer a range of services like photocopying, printing, scanning, colour photo printing, Internet services, checking exam results, e-Ticketing, email service, online bill payments or recharges, submission of online applications and other related services. eSamaaj Centres also facilitate information related to government schemes available for the community.

İMPACT STORİES

Ameera
Begum

Ameena
Tabassum

Fathima
Begum

SAFA's
Digital Woman
Ameera Begum

Ameera Begum, 30, lives in Syed Nagar slum with her husband — who is a tailor and was the sole bread earner in the family until not long ago — and three children. Due to financial contraints and a society that does not believe strongly in girl child education, Ameera was forced to drop out of school after Grade III. This restricted her options of earning a livelihood. Though she tried to support her household with daily wage work, neither was the income sufficient nor was the work of her liking. Surviving on a monthly household income of Rs. 12,500 in an urban slum was becoming challenging for the family until she heard of the Rehbaar programme.

Rehbaar Programme is a digital training programme initiated in the area through a partnership between DEF and SAFA India. At the centre, women are trained in basic digital literacy, taught to surf the Internet, and carry out printing and scanning services. Soon enough, she was trained enough to manage an eSamaaj Centre as an entrepreneur, increasing her monthly household income to Rs. 21,000.

SAFA's
Digital Woman
Ameena Tabassum

Ameena Tabassum, 47, lives with a family of seven in Syed Nagar. Though Tabassum never worked, her husband and her eldest of five children, a daughter, contributed to the household income, earning about Rs. 14,000 every month. However, when the daughter was married off, Ameena and her husband lost an earning member of the family. To begin contributing to the family income, Ameena then joined a tailoring and stitching group, supported by SAFA, and even learnt some entrepreneurial skills.

These skills helped her after she completed her training under the Rehbaar programme and decided to start an eSamaaj Centre from her home. The centre helps her earn Rs. 250-300 daily through various digital and Internet services that she to offer to community members.

SAFA's
Digital Woman
Fathima Begum

Fathima Begum, 33, is a Class V dropout but she does not see that as a barrier. Along with her husband, she runs a small grocery store and also offers ironing services. However, despite running two units, their household income is not more than Rs. 10,000 a month, making it difficuly to sustain a family of six in an urban slum.

Always eager to learn as much as she can, Fathima joined the Rehbaar programme when some of her neighbours told her about it. Soon enough, she was trained in digital literacy and entrepreneurial to offer digital services. Today, she runs an eSamaaj Centre from her grocery store and has more than doubled her family income.

Access to the Internet and knowledge of the computers has helped women associated with SAFA India and other women in the community to improve their lives. In a short span of time, easy access to computers and Wi-Fi has increased awareness about the benefits of digital literacy, the Internet and education for improved livelihoods within the community.