SOOCHNA
MERA HAQ HAI
INTRODUCTION

There are 650,000 villages in India that are governed under almost 250,000 Panchayats or village councils, which further come under 6,000 blocks and 672 district — 250 of which have been classified by the government as backward districts — across 36 provinces, including Union Territories of India. Every village council is made up of five to 17 members, adding up to about three million village councillors. Of these, about one million are expected to be women.

The village councils act as local self-governance bodies at the lowest level of governance. These village councils are responsible for their jurisdiction for as many as 29 subjects, ranging from agriculture, land reforms, irrigation and husbandry to cottage industries, rural housing, roads, education and social welfare. If an institutional approach to connectivity is adopted by the government in India, it would be able to benefit a larger population — and holistically — rather than an individual-centric approach. Take, for example, the village councils. Delivery of government services should be efficient to ensure that the maximum number of citizens in a region is able to avail benefits and entitlements. At a village level, a good majority of citizens are dependent on government infrastructure and schemes. These village councils are also the source of communication between the government (state and central) and the citizens. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to have an efficient, transparent and accountable service delivery system.

These quarter of a million village councils and its councillors represent the poorest of the poor in India — the more than 300 million identified individuals who fall under the category of below poverty line (BPL) who, by definition, earn less than a dollar a day. This is the same share of population that directly depends on access to government schemes or entitlements for some of their most basic rights.

However, what happens when this population is deprived of the digital infrastructure that is required to access critical or timely information to access their rights and entitlements?

As per the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), 3.5 billion people have access to the Internet. This means, that there are still 3.5 billion people in the world with no access to the Internet — broadband or mobile. One billion of these unconnected individuals reside in India, a country where 67 per cent of the population lives in rural areas.

Soochna Mera Haq Hai: Empowering Lives with Critical Information is a collection of stories from rural and remote India where access to information, facilitated by the availability of digital tools and technologies, has significantly impacted lives of people. With the help of digital interventions, beneficiaries of Digital Empowerment Foundation’s Soochna Seva project are now living a different life.

An initiative aimed at facilitating information about government schemes and entitlements to a vast section of people living in information darkness, the Soochna Seva (which translates to Information Service) project aims at enhancing capacities at the grassroots level. Soochna Seva is an effort at empowering communities with access and information about entitlements in critical areas of health, education, social & financial inclusion, livelihood and employment. Soochna Seva was initiated with an intention of strengthening the Right to Information Act and to address larger issues of poverty, rural development, social exclusion and inequity of marginalised groups through information empowerment.

Through this project, we have touched over 3,000,000 lives across 25 blocks in five Indian states. With the help of Soochna Sevaks (Information Service Providers) or SoochnaPreneurs (Information + Entrepreneurs), community members are made aware of various government schemes and entitlements in six key areas of education, health, livelihood, employment, financial inclusion and social security.

Initiated in 2014, Soochna Seva is a joint initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation and the European Union with a three-fold mission: To aggregate information on all kinds of central and state government schemes and entitlements, to create awareness among community members about the welfare schemes they are entitled to, and to improve access to welfare schemes and entitlements for communities living in backward districts of India.

With a network of 1,200 public scheme information delivery and access points called Soochna Seva Kendra (Information Service Centre) and a Soochna Vahan (Information Van), a team of Soochna Sevaks or SoochnaPreneurs in their respective communities disseminate information about public schemes on-the-go. The prime objective of the project is to address the larger issues of poverty, social exclusion and inequity among marginalised groups through information empowerment on public schemes towards entitlement gains and, thereby, promote and strengthen good governance practices by the local administration.

In 2017, the project was further strengthened by equipping the Soochna Sevaks or SoochnaPreneurs with a multilingual Android app called MeraApp that holds a catalogue of welfare schemes, with comprehensive information on entitlements. Users, assisted by Soochnapreneurs, could now view the information categorised by provinces and welfare area or enter their socio-economic details to allow the app to display a list of schemes that suits the information fed into it.
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THIS MAP SHOWS THE GEOGRAPHICAL PRESENCE OF THE SOOCHNA SEVA PROJECT.
Access to timely and relevant information is the first step towards empowerment of communities.
In Madhya Pradesh, nearly 71% of the population is directly involved in agriculture. Every year farmers face crop failure due to various reasons like unproductive seeds, climate change, etc.
Soochna Preneur invited a government officer to the village and had the villagers enrolled under relevant schemes on the spot.

Each farmer can avail up to 80kg of seeds. The scheme also covers pesticides for the crops.

Let me give you more information about some important schemes.

Empowering people at the edge of information.
In Madhya Pradesh, nearly 71% of the population is directly involved in agriculture. Every year farmers face crop failure due to various reasons like unproductive seeds, climate change, etc. The government schemes for farmers are in place but the beneficiaries, mostly illiterate, do not know about them.

Rastriya Dalhan Utpaad Yojana, is such a scheme under the umbrella of 'Rashtriya Kirshi Vikas Yojana' by agriculture department. The main objective of this yojana is to improve the crop production by distributing good quality seeds that are pre-tested in the laboratories. Rajaram Dhakkad, Soochna Sevak (Guna) came to know about this benefit so he paid a visit to Bhidra village and had a discussion with some of the farmers.

He informed them about the benefits of the Yojana. The farmers agreed to the benefits of subscribing to this scheme and came to the decision that they will form a group and take the seeds of chickpeas and distribute among themselves on temporary basis.

Gradually farmers learned about other benefits of the scheme so as to have holistic understanding of the programme. They got to know that each farmer can avail 80kg of seeds, pesticides for the crops. Soochna Sevak collected all the required documents from the farmers. Rajaram Dhakkad met BL Jatav (Krishi Vikas Vistas Adhikari), agriculture department officer and inquired about the remaining criteria of the yojana so as to enrol the group of farmers from Bhidra village. On the same day, Rajaram Dhakkad along with the Agriculture Development Officer visited the village and registered all the farmers on the spot.

On 2nd November, 2015 seeds and pesticides were collected from ‘Nanakheda Maal Godown’ of Agriculture Department and dispensed equally among all the farmers on next day. Later on, the agriculture officer conducted a small training with the farmers regarding the process of seed sowing and proper use of pesticides. Information of other schemes was also explained in the training.

He also appreciated the efforts of Soochna Seva as he stepped up for the welfare of the farmers by empowering them with relevant information.

The government has initiated various schemes and policies in order to provide sustainability to the underprivileged people but the majority of the rural population are devoid of the benefits earned from these schemes. The Soochna Seva team came across many such cases when they conducted a camp in an Uttarakhand village.

Purushottam Singh’s story is one of many such instances. A resident of Sivir village in Tehri Garhwal, he was a farmer and also worked as a manual labourer during offseason. But he never received money on time. The situation would get so worse at times that he thought of migrating to other states in order to earn more. However, he stayed back on his family’s insistence.

The veil of ignorance lifted from his face when he learned about National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) during the Soochna Seva awareness camp. The said scheme guarantees unskilled work to the labourers in their hometown by providing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer.

The team also explained the importance of a job card and the procedure to fill up the form for NREGA. After a week, with the team’s help, Singh was able to fill the form to apply for a job card. It was Soochna Sevaks persistent efforts that helped expedite the issuance process.

Now, a NREGA beneficiary, Purushottom receives money directly in his bank account. He is gets sufficient money and on time. He thanked the Soochna Seva team and appreciated their efforts in reaching out the most marginalised sections of the society and empowering them.
A FEW STEPS TOWARDS A DIGITAL ECONOMY

Working as a migrant labourer is difficult but Balkishan Khawaas was facing problem of a different kind. A resident of Phachkahar village in Bihar, Khawaas migrated to Punjab in search of better work opportunity. In the distant state, he survived on a paltry income only to save some money to send back home.

He is the only earning head in a family of six. His family in Bihar depends on his income for their survival. But Khawaas struggled to find a safe passage to get money home.

“I have no bank account. How do I get money home?” he asked Soochna Seva team during one of his visit home. In the absence of a bank account, every time he travelled home, he carried all the hard earned money in form of cash. “Many a times, I was robbed during the train journey,” he lamented.

Soochna Seva Kendra informed him about a government scheme Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) that would solve his problem. PMJDY is part of the government’s financial inclusion programme to bring facilities like banking available to all Indian households. The plan envisages universal access to banking facilities with at least one basic bank account for every household to facilitate financial literacy, access to credit, insurance, pension and other benefits.

With assistance from the Soochna Seva team, he completed the registration process for opening a bank account for both himself and wife. Within few days they had a bank account at the nearest branch. Opening a bank account was not it. The team also told taught him how to safely transfer money directly to his wife’s account through online and offline banking facilities. The family is now happy and grateful to the Soochna Seva Kendra. “We encourage everyone to reach out to Soochna Seva in case of any confusion.”

FROM DIGITAL DARKNESS TO INFORMATION LIGHT

In the age of digitalisation, Bolo and his family of four were living in complete information darkness. Can you imagine a day without internet? Well this family didn’t even own a personal mailing address; let alone knowing about digital connectivity. The family resides in a remote Jharkhand village and is struggling on a daily basis for a handful of rice. Bolo’s meagre earning of Rs 2,000 a month as labourer is insufficient to sustain his family.

Nobody in the family had any of the government approved identity, preventing them to avail benefits of various welfare schemes. They were not even eligible to cast vote, a basic democratic right. To top it all, the family was deceived by a certain individual who charged them Rs 150 and two photos for creating their photo identification cards. Uneducated, the family was duped again when they went to provide names at the Anganwadi camp.

Having lost money twice, they felt utterly dejected and stopped even trying to register themselves. During this time, they came in touch with the Soochna Seva team. The team not only helped the family registering for Voter ID but they also assisted Bolo to receive his Labour Card as well as opening his bank account under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY).

The family can now vote and enjoy government welfare schemes.
A FAIR STEP TO ENSURE ENTITLEMENT

They say home is where the heart is. Housing is a fundamental human need. Everyone desires a home that provides a sense of ownership and identity. With the dream of a pucca house, Phoolkumari Devi and Ranjendra Mahto enrolled for Indira Awas Yojana in a Bihar village.

The centralised government scheme aims at providing monetary assistance to build a house for families living below the poverty line (BPL) and do not have any residential property registered under their name. The beneficiary of this yojana receives money in three instalments—first instalment is given for the construction upto lintel level followed by second installment for the completion of the entire house. The remaining amount is given after the completion of the house.

As per the process, Mahto and his wife initiated the construction of his house shortly after receiving the first installment. The couple made a make-shift house within the premises to keep a closer eye on the procedures. But things did not go as they had planned and construction was stalled shortly after.

During a door-to-door visit in the village, Soochna Seva team came across Mahto’s house. It was not the most pleasant scene: piles of wooden logs, a heap of sand and cement bags were laying brazenly on the ground. The constructed walls were drenched with fresh rainfall and mosses grew on them. On inquiring about the poor condition of half-completed house, the team found out that their second installment was delayed.

“We already finished the construction of walls. Now we were waiting for the second installment under the yojna,” Mahto informed Soochna Sevak team, “But the Block Development Office would not move our application. He said kharcha paani lagega.” Mahto’s family was forced to bribe the government officials for processing the installment.

The Soochna Seva team consoled the grieving couple and took some photos of the house. Along with the required identification proofs, one of the Soochna Sevak submitted the photos and request application form at the BDO. The team assured that this application will be taken into consideration without giving bribery to any official.

Mahto thanked Soochna Seva team and wished to receive his installment soon so that he could finish the roof and give final shape to the house.
Access to social and economic opportunities helps marginalised families break the cycles of poverty.
Hospital staff is always absent. What do we do?"

Locked doors and deserted corridors were usual at Bakhri villages PHC.

Soochna Sevak mentors the locals in drafting a complaint.

DM visits PHC without any notice to find almost half of the staff missing.
Locked doors, jammed windows, empty corridors and a vast stretch of pastures spread inside the premises of the Primary Health Centre (PHC) in Bakhri village in West Champaran, Bihar narrates a sorry tale of public health services in the region.

The villagers who visited the government-run health centre were facing abject apathy as the administration too turned deaf ear towards their repeated complaints. The group then complained to a Soochna Sevak detailing how they face difficulty as the PHC remained close most of the time. “Even if it opens, it is of no use to us. It lacks basic amenities like beds, medicines and ambulance service,” lamented one of the villagers.

Soochna Sevak mentored the locals in drafting a complaint detailing their problems to the District Magistrate of West Champaran district and forwarded a copy of the letter to other concerned departments. Taking prompt cognisance of the matter, the DM visited PHC without any notice and found almost half of the staff missing while patients waited outside. After further investigation, he found the hospital staff rarely covered their shifts. They forged their attendance and collected salaries for doing nothing worthwhile.

The Sevak questioned concerned officials and requested them to arrange required amenities at the health centre. The intervention soon bore effective result. The PHC is now in its pink of health and the villagers’ belief in the system has been restored once again.
A small town girl from Uttarakhand’s Tehri Garhwal, Neeta dreamt of making it big. But her aspirations had to take a backseat because of her family’s poor situation. Her father is a truck driver and works hard to keep the household running. She could not spare any money to enroll herself in any technical programme, leave higher education.

Apart from helping her mother with the household chores, she also took care of three younger siblings. Since she could not pursue her dream due to lack of funds, she took special interest in their education. Very early in her life, she understood that if she wanted her family to break the clutches of poverty then quality education might be the only way out. But she did not know in which direction to move.

At a minimal fee, the Soochna Seva team was providing elaborate computer learning programmes. Soon, Neeta came to know about Soochna Seva Kendra and its digital literacy programme. She immediately grabbed the opportunity. Gradually days passed and Neeta became proficient in computer operations. With the team’s help, she became an expert in Microsoft office and comfortable in data management. As talent never goes unnoticed, Neeta too was spotted by the principal of the school where her younger sister studies. She was immediately recruited as a computer faculty there.

Neeta has just finished her school and with the help of a job, she is now financially supporting the family to live a comfortable life.

Nitika and her brother Himanshu attend a government school in Uttarakhand’s Tipli village. Both are very good at studies but at times their future looks shady to them. Poor financial condition at home makes it difficult for them to concentrate and they often think of dropping out to help the family financially.

Their father Kushal Singh is dependent on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) for income. His daily wage feeds the family of four. The rural employment scheme provides a legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household at the statutory minimum wage of Rs 60 per day. It was through the Soochna Seva team that he got registered under MGNREGA at the Labour Department a few months back. A provision of financial assistance for the education of beneficiary’s children is among many supporting benefits for the registered construction labourers. At present, the benefit extended is of Rs. 200 for wards between Class 6th-8th and Rs 250 for Class 9th-10th.

Nitika approached the local Soochna Sevaks to find out more about it. To her surprise, the team took the initiative to fill their forms and sent it to the concerned department. After a few days, the scholarship claim for both of them was approved. This has also lessened the number of responsibilities on their father. Kudos to the Soochna Seva team as their help has granted the family knowledge, prosperity and happiness! “Now we can study further without worrying about expenses,” said Nitika. They thanked Soochna Seva team for their efforts and guidance.
Rajesh Singh, a permanent resident of Kangsali village, dreamt of pursuing hotel management after senior secondary. But his family’s poor financial conditions barred him from applying to colleges. A farmer, Rajesh’s father could not spare Rs 50,000 for his tuition. After all, he had to raise his family of five on that agricultural income.

His friend Manjeet too shared similar fate. His aspirations for higher education were crushed due to financial constraints. After finishing school education, children would either loiter around the village all day long or start working with their families on farms. Despite willingness to send them to colleges, their parents couldn’t afford to do that.

Soochna Seva team came to know about the village’s situation and organised a meeting for village youth where they spoke about various career opportunities. They also spoke about hotel management. Rajesh heard about it and requested the team for further guidance in pursuing his dream career. With the guidance of the Soochna Seva team, Rajesh and Manjeet were selected on merit basis for a hotel management course. Their fee is nil and parents extremely happy. They are highly obliged to the Soochna Seva team for their consistent efforts to benefit the village people.
Access to rights and entitlements not only empowers an individual but an entire family’s socio-economic status.

Promising the rights
Prem Ahirwara opened a bank account under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna & applied for Aadhar card.

3 months have passed but nobody in the village received card yet.

Ahirwara others took up the matter with Soochna Sevak.

Soochna Sevak then confronted the concerned authority.

Government Officer
Prem Ahirwara, a resident of Meriyakhedi village in Chanchoura successfully opened a bank account under ‘Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna’ with help of village Soochna Seva Kendra. With team’s assistance, he applied for an Aadhaar card too along with other villagers.

Three months have already passed since they applied but nobody in the village received card yet.

Ahirwar then took up the matter with Soochna Sevaks. Soochna Seva team was under the impression that more than hundred cards that reached Murela Post office have already been distributed.

The team then looked into the case and called the postman Deepchand Gupta and inquired about the delay. He notified that the cards have been already given to BLO, Beeram Singh for distribution. When confronted about non-distribution of cards, BLO Singh accepted his mistake and promised to distribute the cards as soon as possible.

After few days, on their next visit to the village Soochna Seva team found that the villagers had still not received the cards. The matter was again taken up with the BLO and only after repeated requests the BLO sent one of his assistant to the village and the Aadhar cards were distributed.

With the help of regular check and support of Soochna Seva team the villagers finally got their Aadhar cards.
A SERVICE FOR SENIOR CITIZEN'S BETTER LIFE

Like several others in India, Uttarakhand’s Ram Singh was under the perception that he would never be able to open a bank account. He thought that no bank would open an account with less than Rs 1000 balance. However, his misconceptions were clarified by Soochna Seva team members, when the team was on a door-to-door visit in Dabri village.

The Soochna Sevak explained to him about the importance of government schemes and its benefits. "And if there is no bank account under your name, how will you receive benefits of any scheme?" Soochna Sevak told him. He was elated to know that he too could apply for various schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Bima Yojna, Vridha Pension Scheme etc. To avail the benefits of these schemes he had to open a bank account.

The Soochna Sevak, after clearing all his doubts, convinced him to open an account under Pradhan Matri Jan Dhan Yojna with zero balance.

Soochna Sevak collected all the necessary documents from him and deposited in the bank. Since Ram Singh lived below the poverty line and had a BPL card, the account was opened easily. After a few days, the Soochna Sevak returned with a passbook and handed over to him. He was happy to have an account and also requested the team to revisit so that he could apply for other schemes also and make a promise to keep his documents ready beforehand so that the application processes can proceed smoothly. He thanked the Soochna Seva team for helping and sharing vital information about government schemes with him.

ENABLING THE DISABLED

Reena Devi, in her early 30s, lives in Selur Patti Juva village of Uttarakhand with her husband and two sons. She suffers from a disability in legs leaving her unfit for laborious tasks. “I feel like a liability on the family. I am of no use, cannot even help with the household chores properly," she told the Soochna Sevak team.

Her husband, a daily wage earner, is the sole bread winner in the family. His paltry income always fell short for a decent lifestyle. The family could barely manage two square meals a day. Reena felt uncomfortable about the fact that she couldn’t do anything to contribute in family’s income. “If my legs would have been in good condition, I would have contributed something to the family income. I wouldn’t have been sitting at home like this,” she said as tears welled up in her eyes.

The Soochna Seva team did not limit themselves in just providing information but also helped her with the application form. She was also illiterate and had sparse or no access to information. Soochna Sevaks informed her that government schemes were there in place that could be of some help to her. She is eligible to apply for several schemes including the Divyang Pension Yojana. This news immediately brought some smile on her face.

The Soochna Seva team did not limit themselves in just providing information but also helped her with the application form. They collected all necessary documents from her place and submitted it to the government office. The team also followed it up with the Gram Pradhan, tehsildar and welfare department who were to verify documents then.

Reena’s application was soon approved and now she gets regular pension.
Sunita Bhandari, a resident of Uttarakhand's Pipleth village, is a graduate but lacked computer education which restricted her job prospects. Due to her poor financial condition, she could not even afford expensive computer classes.

Widowed at an early age, Sunita worked very hard to raise her children but lack of opportunities and other societal constraints made it impossible for her to save any money. Whatever little money she earned would go in running the household and putting a decent meal on table. She gradually became dependant on her parents for money. Her financial situation was in doldrums, no matter how much she wanted to improve her living condition all her earnings would get exhausted in no time. Taking computer classes seemed like a distant dream to her.

Soochna Seva team came as a beacon of hope for her. The team had once organised an awareness camp in her village. At this camp, she met the team and came to know about their digital literacy programme. Digital literacy programme—an initiative by the Soochna Seva team—provides basic computer training to people from rural areas at minimum cost. “When Soochna Seva team informed me that they provide computer education at only Rs 150 per month for people living below the poverty line, I was overjoyed and decided to join immediately,” she said.

She soon visited the centre to start her computer training. “Thank you team for your information and help,” she said. Several women and men like Sunita can now use digital media because of Soochna Seva team’s digital literacy programme.

Rukma Devi, a resident of Dabri village in Tehri, Uttarakhand takes care of her family while her husband works in a Pune hotel. He migrated years ago in search of better employment opportunities. Though her husband sends money in time of need, she still finds it difficult to raise both the children alone.

She worries about the future of her children because they hardly manage to save any money. Her 5-year-old daughter Radhika is eligible for the Nanda Devi Kanya Dhan Yojana but due to lack of information she did not know about any of the government schemes. Under the said scheme, a girl child born on or after January 1, 2009, to parents living under below poverty line will receive an amount of Rs 5,000 as the fixed deposit which is to be utilized on the condition that the girl completes 18 years of age and also finishes her secondary education.

The Soochna Seva team working in her village met Rukma Devi. They explained to her the details of Yojana and the kind of documents required to avail the benefits. Suresh Singh, a Soochna Seva fellow helped her by filling her form and started collecting the required documents.

A few days later, he submitted the set of endorsed documents in the Social Welfare Department. It took almost two months but her application got approved. Rukma Devi’s joy knew no bound when she received a cheque of Rs. 5,000 on behalf of her daughter Radhika. She was very thankful to the Soochna Seva team for providing her help and guidance as now the received money can be used in the education of her daughter.
Access to reliable support and care provides an extra lease of life to those who may be isolated or on the fringes.
Dhan Lal Pita’s pension was still on hold, even after completing formalities.

“I have not received pension since three years.”

Soochna Sevaks check his documents.

To Dhan’s surprise, within few days he got his pension deposited in account.
It’s an unusual day for me.

Dhan Lal Pita’s pension was still on hold, even after completing all the formalities three years ago. Now a daily wage labourer, Pita was finding it difficult to meet ends meet and lack of pension benefits added to his troubles.

He got to know about the Soochna Seva camp organized in the village and decided to pay a visit in hope of a resolution. “I have not received pension since three years, despite being eligible for one,” Pita told the Sevaks. On checking his identity card and ration card, the team was surprised to discover what he said was true and even after being eligible for pension, he has not received it yet.

The Soochna Seva team contacted the Sarpanch and the Secretary of the village panchayat and requested them to submit Pita’s documents in district panchayat.

The team kept a regular check on the proceedings and followed up with the district panchayat. To Dhan Lal Pita’s surprise, within few days he got his pension deposited in account.

He immediately rushed to the Soochna Seva Kendra and thanked the team for their support throughout. “It is an unusual day for me,” he said.
Living in a remote village in Rajasthan’s Barmer, Bhikaram and his wife faced severe hardships due to old-age problems and almost no resources to deal with it. In their early 60s, he hardly knew about his rights and lived in information darkness.

His village also falls in one the worst drought-affected districts. Due to extreme water scarcity, Barmer’s geographical features consist of just barren land and sand dunes. Survival with limited resources and almost no money at all, the couple felt helpless. As if the financial woes were not enough, Bhikaram was operated for kidney stones thrice. The medical bills exhausted all their savings.

The elderly couple looked every corner for help but nothing worked out in their favour. After told by some people in their village, they also went to the government camp to apply for the Old Age Pension Scheme but their application was put on hold citing no reason.

However, their life took a U-turn for better when Shankar Lal, a Soochna Sevak met the couple. It was with Lal’s dogged efforts that the Pension office took up their application. He followed the status every now and then and after two months, Bhikaram’s pension was finally generated. Now every month Rs 500 gets credited to his account.

“I am so thankful to the Soochna Sevak who came and helped us out. I cannot thank you enough. We would have broken down if not for his timely intervention,” Bhikaram eyes well up as he hugs Soochna Sevak.

A ROCK OF SUPPORT

Husband and wife Nakhataram and Haua Devi both in their early 60, live in a village called Rani Gaon in Barmer district of Rajasthan. While the man is no longer fit to work as a labourer, the woman strives hard at a rock mine. The elderly couple faces difficulties in lack of any sustainable source of income.

Their children are married and live with their respective families away from the village, leaving the duo alone and helpless. The frail bodies of both the husband and wife cannot take up any more physical labour. On suggestion of fellow villagers, Nakhatram did apply for Old Age Pension but received no response from the authorities.

“We filed the application almost a year ago. Not once but thrice,” he informed the Soochna Sevak team. “Till now, even after multiple follow-ups with the Village Secretary, we have not received any response,” he added.

After listening to their problem, the Soochna Seva team examined all documents. Aligned with the mission of the project, the fellows invited the elderly couple to the Soochan Seva Kendra the next day. After gathering all relevant details their application was submitted to the authorities once again.

This time, the Soochna Sevaks followed-up with the authorities on a weekly basis, and within the next couple of weeks the application was approved by the Block Development Officer and soon after the couple started receiving their pension. Now Haua Devi doesn’t have to break her back at labourious job anymore.
Narayan Singh, a resident of Tehri, Uttarakhand, is in his mid-70s. Owning to old-age problems and a frail body, Singh finds it difficult to step out of the house on days, leave aside indulging in any physical work. He lived in extreme poverty. There were days when he had to sleep empty stomach. He felt helpless at times as financial woes would never leave his side.

“I am already very old, don’t know how will I survive my old age,” he lamented.

He has nobody to look after him; wife was long dead and children’s whereabouts were unknown. Thanks to close-knit society that villages are, Singh would often get stray help from neighbours.

He neither had a bank account nor any knowledge about government schemes for old and elderly. His regular visits to bank did not help either. He hoped for some kind of aid but would often end up just sitting in a corner waiting for somebody to come and explain things to him.

It was during one of his bank visiting rituals that he was spotted by a Soochna Sevak. Sevak who was there to submit form saw a puzzled Singh in the corner and tried striking a conversation with him. After a little probing, he learnt about Singh’s hardships and informed him about the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana. This government scheme that aims at financial inclusion lets people open account without any minimum balance. It also provides accidental insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh. Moreover, it’s a biometric-based account which helps illiterate people avail banking facility with ease.

Sevak explained in detail about the benefits and entitlements of the scheme. Narayan Singh immediately agreed to open an account. With the help of Soochna Sevak, he completed all the formalities and successfully opened an account under PMJDY. He was also registered for the old age pension scheme.

Tears of joy trickled down his cheek when he received his first pension. “I am thankful to the Soochna Seva team. This would not have been possible without their efforts,” he says.
A COUPLE OF EFFORTS

Budhu, a resident of Mandna Toli village in Ranchi district of Jharkhand lives with his wife. The elderly couple has nobody to take care of them. Budhu is too old to work while his wife is completely paralysed. Due to lack of any financial assistance, the couple is living a life of despair and helplessness.

In hope of some basic income, he had applied many times for Old Age Pension Scheme but all his efforts went in vain.

One of their sons is married and lives separately while the other one passed away a few years ago. He does not get any financial support from his son and is devoid of any other source of income. “Even my fate mocks me! If only, I had the strength and physical ability to work”, Budhu sighs looking at his disabled body.

Living below the poverty line, sustaining his daily life had become very difficult for him. His ration card only gets him two square meals a day which was not enough for the couple. In hope of some basic income, he had applied many times for Old Age Pension Scheme but all his efforts went in vain.

During a field visit of Soochna Seva team, Budhu met and conveyed the struggles he had been going through. The team immediately took notice of his situation and decided to resolve the issue by filing a fresh application on behalf of the elderly couple. Forms for disability and old age pension were put in motion, so they can receive government benefits and entitlements. Awaiting the benefits, Budhu is hopeful that things are going to get better in the future.
Access to gender equity in all aspects of life is critical to the development and peace of every ecosystem.
Anju does not know about various government schemes

The very thought of feeding my daughter kept me awake whole night.

She met the Soochna Seva in her village.

She got to know about government schemes for girl child.

Nanada devi Kanya dhan yojna
My daughter’s future is secure now. It is all possible because of the efforts and selfless support of the Soochna Seva team.

She soon received a cheque of Rs. 5,000/- on behalf of her daughter.

STAND FOR RIGHTS & HOPE FOR HEIGHTS

Anju Devi, from Dabri village, Uttarakhand, has been practically ignorant about benefits provided by government. She has faced terrible financial woes and struggled to make ends meet. Anju is a proud parent of a 3-year-old girl and tries her best to provide her daughter but sometimes failure grips her in. “The very thought of feeding my daughter kept me awake whole night”, says Anju.

Anju met the Soochna Seva team who reached her village to deliver information about government schemes to the community. The team inquired about Anju’s family and suggested her to apply for Nanda Devi Kanya Dhan Yojna. Under this government scheme, a family in Below Poverty Line (BPL) having a girl child born after January 01 2009, is given an amount of Rs.5000. This amount is payable to maximum two girl children of a family.

During this period, Anju met the Soochna Seva team who reached her village to deliver information about government schemes to the community. The team inquired about Anju’s family and suggested her to apply for Nanda Devi Kanya Dhan Yojna. Under this government scheme, a family in Below Poverty Line (BPL) having a girl child born after January 01 2009, is given an amount of Rs.5000. This amount is payable to maximum two girl children of a family.

Next day, Suresh Singh, a Soochna Seva mitra guided Anju Devi to fill the scheme form and submit all necessary documents. After a month, she received a cheque of Rs. 5000/- on behalf of her daughter. With a grin on her face, she signed off by saying, “my daughter’s future is secure now. It is all possible because of the efforts and selfless support of the Soochna Seva team. Thank you is all I can manage right now”.

Anju’s future is secure now. It is all possible because of the efforts and selfless support of the Soochna Seva team.
CHANGING ONE FAMILY AT A TIME

Akshara, a 5-year-old jovial young girl from Dabri village in Tehri, Uttarakhand loves to spend time playing with her younger brother Vansh. Her parents dream of giving Akshara a proper education but the financial woes keep the family from thinking of anything else but their survival.

Since there aren’t many work opportunities in their village, Akshara’s father had to migrate to Delhi where he is working as a labourer. However, his meagre income always falls short for a family of four. “The thought of tremendous financial constraint often gives me sleepless nights. All I want is for my children to have a better future”, says Akshara’s mother Meena Devi.

The family stays in a small village and had limited or no information about government schemes and policies. For them Soochna Seva team came as a ray of hope. The team went to every household and educated its residents about various government schemes. “It was a chance encounter with the Soochna Seva team and I got to know that Akshara is eligible for the Nanda Devi Kanya Dhan Yojna. It came as a big relief”, recalls Meena.

The team also went one step ahead and explained to her the process to access the scheme so that in future she can avail other benefits.

Within two months she received a cheque of Rs. 5,000 on behalf of Akshara issued by the Social Welfare Department of Thauldhar block. “This wouldn’t have been possible without the Soochna Seva team. Thank you for all that you did for us”, signs off a teary-eyed Meena Devi.

TAKING AN ESCAPE ROUTE

Guddi Devi, a poverty-stricken woman from Uttarakhand’s Koti village, lived a tough life with her two dependent sons. Desperate to find work, she has also seen days when begging in front of contractors used to be her only option. For this family of three, prospect of a good life was not in sight because nobody would agree to employ her. Without a fixed daily earning, she remained stuck in the cloak of poverty and unemployment.

Despite government schemes for rural employment, the villages in Koti were refused jobs. “The biggest problem our team observed was that of not getting enough work or timely labour wages,” found the team of Soochna Sevaks after they conducted a field visit to her village.

The team observed that villagers hardly knew of any government schemes. They conducted an awareness camp to let everyone know of their rights. Villagers were informed about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that assures at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Also, one-third participation is of women.

This programme has been implemented in the rural areas of all districts. Moreover, the government has launched the National Electronic Fund Management System (NeFMS) which enables direct and immediate credit of wages into the accounts of the MGNREGA beneficiaries. The new platform ensures transfer of wages to the workers’ accounts within 48 hours of the issue of the order.

After getting this information, Guddi Devi immediately applied for MGNREGA benefits and now she is financially equipped to raise her children well. After this service of Soochna Seva, Guddi Devi will never again have to stoop and beg in front of contractors for work or the money she has a right over!

SM Post: Despite government schemes for rural employment, the villages in Koti were refused jobs. Read the story of Guddi Devi – how she beat the trap of poverty and unemployment with unrelenting support of Soochna Sevaks.
**EASIER THAN BEFORE**

Losing someone close is always difficult. But for Barmer’s Anand Kanwar, death of her husband brought a heap of responsibilities leaving her no time to grieve. A doting mother of three young children, now Anand was tasked with raising them all on her own. She also had to take care of her aging mother-in-law.

Her husband was the sole breadwinner in the family, now the onus to support it lied on her shoulders. Life was getting rough every passing day and she had no idea how to turn it around. There came a point when arranging for a square meal seemed difficult.

The only help she received during these testing times was the financial support her mother-in-law received from Aganwadi Widow Pension Scheme. Kanwar although was fully aware of the benefits of the Widow Pension Scheme, wasn’t able to apply for it. The village they live in still has a very conservative environment. The patriarchs barred her from going out without being accompanied by a close male member of the family. As no male member was alive in her family, she had no scope to pursue the scheme document, application and registration related paper work. She felt helpless.

But, when everything seemed down and broken, life showed her some hope by introducing to the Soochna Seva team. The team had organised an awareness camp in her village when she first got in touch with them. She narrated her predicament to the team. Understanding the gravity of her situation, Soochna Seva team prompted to action.

The team helped her obtain a widow certificate. Later, with the help of all the documents as proofs, she applied for the pension scheme. Today, Kanwar is receiving her entitlement benefits regularly. Life is not a cakewalk for her, but pension benefits make it a tad easier.

**INFORMING THE UNINFORMED**

Vimla’s life changed overnight after her husband went missing 16 years ago. She made several rounds to police station and filed missing person report. But it yielded no result. She had to brace the reality and move forward with life, her only son needed care too. Suddenly the responsibility to feed both the souls fell on her shoulders.

Unskilled and illiterate, Vimla had to face several hurdles to find even a labourer’s job in her village Kothga in Uttarakhand. There were days when she could make enough money to put a square meal on table, on other days she would be helpless. She had to work as a farm labourer to raise her son. They went through several hardships and had to face critical financial constraints.

There were government schemes at place to ease her efforts, but she did not know about them. Once, while Soochna Seva team was doing a field survey, she came across them and narrated her story. The team then informed her about the 50% grant aid on agriculture tools by the government to support income generation from self-employment.

Later, the team assisted her in procuring relevant forms and requisite documents for her scheme application. Today, Vimla runs her own business and is empowered in truest sense. “The Soochna Seva team has given me a new life. Now I can afford a better standard of living and can provide my son access to education” says Vimla.
Soochna Seva is an initiative aimed at empowering communities with access and information about entitlements in critical areas of health, education, social & financial inclusion, livelihood and employment.