



# The story of Digitally Empowered India

Demystifying the lives of digitally deprived people through technology





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Digital Empowerment Foundation

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*Free health camp in Barabanki to provide general health care services and counseling to people on basic healthcare and hygiene.*



# The story of Digitally Empowered India

New Delhi-based Digital Empowerment Foundation was founded by Osama Manzar and Shaifali Chikermane in 2002, out of the deep understanding that marginalised communities living in socio-economic rural areas could be empowered to improve their lives on their own, on giving them access to information and knowledge on using digital tools.

Mr. Manzar has a rich ex-

perience of running his own software firm and was heading the internet division of Hindustan Times for many years. It was his prior exposure to the digital-print media, internet technology, dotcom boom, etc., that at the age of 35, that Mr. Manzar felt the need to introduce the concept of digitalization to the masses, who were victims of the lack of current information at the right time. Research stated that information poverty was the

main reason behind rural poverty in real terms. Mr. Manzar saw some light at the end of the dark tunnel and concluded that proper access to information, knowledge, equitable rights and opportunities etc. needs to be restored to the rural masses with the help of digital technology. He decided to quit his highly-paid job to pursue his aspirations of being the information bearer in the society, with the establishment of his foundation named as 'Digital Empowerment Foundation.' Two decades back also, Mr Manzar was quite certain that digital is the approach to get progress for humankind. Identification of the root cause of the problem and providing solutions to the best extent feasible using di-

gitization led to the formation of DEF without any monetary investment. It was their dedication, conviction, commitment and perseverance to prove the essence of digitization in eradicating darkness, that did not seem futuristic rather it referred to the present at that point in time.

DEF aims to connect unreached and underserved communities of India in an effort to bring them out of the digital divide and equip them with access to information. With the belief 'Inform, Communicate and Empower,' DEF finds sustainable digital interventions to overcome information poverty in rural and remote locations of India, and empower communities with

# Relate technology to the masses due to its essence in human life



*Trainer in Ranchi teaching the importance of digital age to students*



# Developing better connectivity infrastructures

digital literacy, digital tools and last-mile connectivity.

The most important virtue of DEF has been to relate technology to the masses due to its essence in human life. How can technology help women empower in agriculture, job search, education etc. – is the main orientation on which DEF works. This notion was based on how does digital literacy in different fields become a bare necessity for humankind today. There were different branches of digital literacy, namely, digital agricultural literacy, media literacy, digital upskilling, digital women literacy, literacy to access one's biometrics etc., which were focussed upon with requisite customization.

The second developmental

vertical focussed on developing better connectivity infrastructures, fibre networks etc. by means of various programs like 'PMVani'. Better, frugal and cheaper access to internet was the main motive so that it could reach to the last mile in the most remote areas.

The third vertical where developmental work began was upskilling the classic, traditional weaver, artisan and craftsmen community, as they contributed to a huge chunk of the nano-micro entrepreneur cluster. Technology and internet connectivity was integrated with the grass root designers, workers and weavers, which enabled them to access the markets and products online, be well aware of the recent market trends

etc. This created a huge business impact on their daily lives according to the research conducted by several agencies. They concluded that a lot of asymmetrical information could be collated together to enable a proper knowledge flow about different perspectives. Hence the clusters like Bhagalpur, Kanchipuram, Murshidabad, Pochampalli etc, were convinced that all the funds should be invested to make it a digital city. Since digital medium was never given precedence in these clusters before, the MSMEs and the local weavers always worked in isolation.

Therefore digital intervention was initiated in these areas and more than 7,000 artisans

and weavers were given online classes on how to expand their business, social media marketing and business techniques especially during the COVID times.

The fourth vertical emphasized on the mechanism to work with women at the grass root level to make them become digital entrepreneurs. Women were the target population because working with women had a better impact output, are more responsible, accountable, economical to work and less to monitor, as they are very meticulous on reporting/finances/learnings etc. They carry their learning to the entire household which has created more than 1,000 digital women entrepreneurs

# Mechanism to work with women at the grass root level



*Distribution of free cooking gas cylinders under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana*

Community Engagement in Alwar (Rajasthan) to address local ideas, concerns and opportunities.

# Create an understanding of the local community by understanding their pain areas and opinion



across the country, with digital infrastructure using access and connectivity. They are so empowered with digital devices that they call themselves Internet Didi, Google Didi etc., posing a challenge to the patriarchal system.

The way DEF narrates the story, aesthetically improves the working of these groups in rural areas with technology amidst equity and inclusiveness. Every new village is a new story to be taken up one at a time as socio-economic structure is very different in each of these places.

There are three building blocks that are required to succeed in these areas. First and foremost, one has to understand each household with its own perspective as

every place is different from the other in terms of their socio-economic environment, socio-cultural environment etc. Therefore, it is important to create an understanding of the local community by understanding their pain areas and opinion. Technology has made this process easier only in terms of methodological adoption, not in terms of logistical application.

The second learning from working with the rural clusters is that no work should be done from a charitable perspective, instead they should be respectful of their contribution so that their self-respect is not jeopardized. They should be treated as independent individuals who will work and earn their own living, instead of being obliged to someone

else for a sustainable living.

Thirdly, its important to make them realise that digital revolution is indispensable for their convenient existence. Someone with a zeal to excel is chosen amongst them to lead the way and be a role model for the others in adopting technology for all of their endeavours.

The Covid-19 pandemic has unimaginably affected social, economic, institutional and governance settings worldwide. However for DEF, this pandemic was way different as they had a huge network of volunteers across the country, who had been technologically enabled to work at the grass root level. During this time,

physical interactions and engagements had come to a standstill, it is the digital resources and solutions that has been acting as a major support mechanism since then. DEF has launched an ICT-enabled and community specific relief programme through virtual community, which has connected all the beneficiaries globally. The 600+ digitally enabled information resource centres and 10,000+ foot soldiers across 25 states and union territories have been a great aid in:

- Public schemes, welfare measure information, entitlement facilitation and delivery
- Support Tele-health & Tele-medicine, Internet support;
- Alternate livelihood opportunities in times of distress

# Connected all the beneficiaries globally



*Local Administration engaging with community people in Guna (Madhya Pradesh)*

DEF working towards bridging the gender digital divide through its Community Information Resource Centres

‘Digital Daan’, fostered the donation of a second-hand digital device or phone to the needy so that they can attend their online classes



- Counselling for good mental health and well being

Though there were initial challenges of mobilization of resources and funds, lot of individual donors, corporates and philanthropists came forward to extend their support in serving almost 1 million beneficiaries during that period. Association with Ministry of Family Health and Welfare and UNICEF proved to be very helpful in addressing the plight of so many migrant workers. In the second phase, DEF has been working on the vaccination drive to be made available to all via digitally connected networks through digitally-enabled entrepreneurs and human resource. This huge network is becoming a service centre to serve the people affected by

COVID and is a great asset for serving the masses.

There are varied initiatives that DEF undertakes from time to time but there is one specific campaign, which needs to be specifically highlighted. It is important to understand how one works with an entire set of 320 million students, who are deprived of online schooling.

Hence, DEF initiated a program called ‘Digital Daan’, which fostered the donation of a second-hand digital device or phone to the needy so that they can attend their online classes. It was found that there were more seekers rather than donors, hence the corporates were approached for such donations. Recently, the Foundation has collated 5,000 such

devices which will be distributed to 200-300 education public access points at the rural and urban poor areas, where children can come and interact with their facilitators online at the pre-scheduled time. Their endeavor is to replicate this model across several villages to have community learning as individual learning cannot be tracked properly. This campaign is quite vital from the perspective of community-wide access, inclusion and widespread education in the nearby vicinity, which is a boon to the girl child as their movement is always restricted. Though this campaign was introduced during COVID, DEF hopes to continue this practice of setting up community-level access points under normal

circumstances too.

DEF has been involved in phenomenal community work where funding has been a major concern as they do not have any fund-raising or marketing unit. Their USP has been their capability to ideate, innovate, implement on the ground and narrate a good story out of it. Their good work has been doing rounds of word of mouth due to dissemination of information, which has attracted huge fund houses to donate funds to DEF, which keeps them going. Though they are interested to have a separate unit for raising funds, no initiative has been taken so far in that direction. Their successful operating model is based on 'Do the

Capability to ideate, innovate, implement  
on the ground and narrate a good story out of it

*Students in a Digital Age*



# Create a virtual safe world just like the physical world



work, tell the story, and wait for the call’.

The journey of DEF has been quite interesting and it has impacted the global scenario for digital ecosystem for connectivity too. The main vision is to ensure that the whole world gets connected especially for the deprived class, who are not yet connected. DEF aims to provide a comprehensive, frugal and fast solution to get them connected. Its important to ensure that digital information should not result in dissemination of excessive or undesired information. One should have the ability to filter out the right type of informa-

tion as it affects their mental and physical well-being. So the road map ahead would focus on means to create a virtual safe world just like the physical world. Digital penetration would happen in all the 730 districts in India in all the related spheres from the perspective of community participation rather than individual participation.

DEF’s contribution in empowering a Digital India has been phenomenal as millions of rural beneficiaries have been impacted till date, while many more digital entrepreneurs and businesses are in the making.



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