

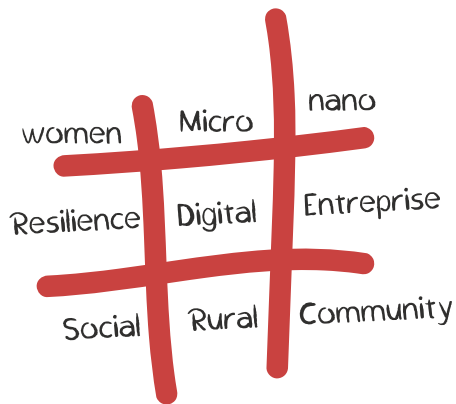


Soochna Preneurs

The New Age Entrepreneurs

By Malavika S





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Written by Malavika S

Design, layout & Illustration by
M Yuvasree

Soochna preneur
Information, Entitlements & Empowerment

SoochnaPreneur is an initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation.
Aimed at empowering youth in Indian villages to sustain their livelihood
by providing information and access to government entitlements.



SoochnaPreneurs: The New Age Entrepreneurs

Year of publication 2022

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Written by Malavika S

Design, Layout & Illustrations by
M Yuvasree

Concept and Review by
Osama Manzar

Published & distributed by
Digital Empowerment Foundation

You can read the web version at www.defindia.org/publication-2

Contact
Digital Empowerment Foundation
House No. 44, 2nd Floor
Kalu Sarai, New Delhi - 110016
Tel: 91-11-42233100
Email: def@defindia.net | URL: www.defindia.org

Introduction

In the journey of Digital Empowerment Foundation's main objective to eradicate information poverty, the foot soldiers located in numerous villages across India play a significant role. Majority of these foot soldiers who have been creating change in their communities are women entrepreneurs. Apart from looking after the house, children, farm and themselves, they haven't hesitated to add more to their plate in the hope to improve their way of living. Although being termed as entrepreneurs, these women don different hats, sometimes multiple, with the primary goal of providing service to the community. As SoochnaPreneurs (Digital Information Providers), digitally trained women share the responsibility of providing right information to their communities through an entrepreneurship model that ensures a sustainable flow of information. In most cases, they are the leaders in their communities who along with providing digital services also play the role of being teachers, mentors, guides, advisors and fact checkers. Based on the same entrepreneurship model, many women play the role of a Digital Sarthak (Companion) who is responsible for imparting digital training to 100 women entrepreneurs in their community so that women in rural areas become more independent by using digital tools to get their work done.

In an effort to avoid the digital exclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), women with disabilities are trained to become digital entrepreneurs, Samarth SoochnaPreneurs, who take on the additional responsibility of fighting the stigma around PwDs, especially in rural areas. Although they cope with some disabilities, these women contribute further with an additional ability to empathise with those in need as many reflect on their own lives where they had to rely on the assistance of others in their day to day lives. Owing to the pandemic, another recent addition to their roles is that of a Risk Communication & Community Engagement (RCCE) volunteer who is entrusted to debunk the myths and fake news associated with COVID-19 and help in creating awareness to stay safe by following precautions. They are also tasked with the challenging aspect of getting people from their communities to get vaccinated by fighting against the false rumours around it on an everyday basis. These roles have made these women better informed, aware and upskilled. Furthermore, the stories of these women who have created a change in their own lives and that of the many within their communities reflect the potential of digital empowerment in transforming livelihood, especially in rural areas.

|Foot Soldiers of DEF

SP is SoochnaPreneur, our flagship program. DEF has digitally trained and equipped 1,500 people under this program who have now become Digital Information Entrepreneurs and in most cases leaders in their communities who along with providing digital services also play the role of being teachers, mentors, guides, advisors and fact checkers. They have the responsibility of providing the right information (Soochna) to their communities and they do this through an entre(preneur)ship model to ensure that the flow of information remains sustainable. Hence SoochnaPreneurs are much more than digital service providers; they are community leaders.

SSP is Samarth SoochnaPreneur. Seeing the success of the SoochnaPreneur program DEF launched the Samarth SoochnaPreneur program that aims to empower PwDs (Persons with Disabilities) to become SoochnaPreneurs. Oftentimes PwDs are discriminated against, especially in rural parts of the country where DEF is most active. This program aims to fight the stigma that comes with a disability that proves to be a bigger handicap than any physical handicap. By empowering PwDs we are able to empower the entire community because a person who needs most help and support understands and empathises with the problems and challenges of all. Today there are about 500 SSPs across the country.

DS is Digital Sarthak- it is a program that aims to empower WEs i.e. Women Entrepreneurs digitally. There are 200 Digital Sarthaks across 25 districts who have taken the responsibility of training 20,000 women entrepreneurs in digital tools. Each has taken the responsibility of training 100 women.

RCCE is Risk Communication & Community Engagement. It is a program that aims to spread awareness amongst the masses about the threat of COVID-19; it also aims to debunk all the rumours and fake news that have come with the pandemic, especially about vaccines. Currently there are 885 volunteers working across 90 districts and 18 states to fight rumours, fake news and misinformation about the pandemic.

| SoochnaPreneur

All of DEF's foot soldiers are known as SoochnaPreneurs (SPs) whether they are Digital Sarthaks, Samarth SoochnaPreneurs or RCCE volunteers; they all work on the SoochnaPreneur model.

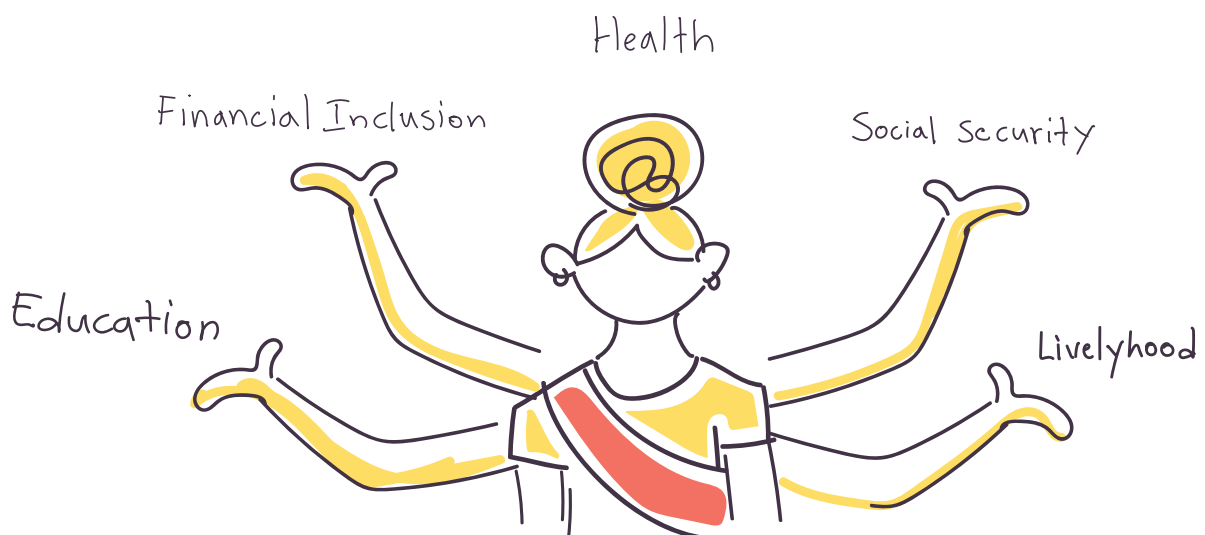
SoochnaPreneur is a rural entrepreneurship-based project aimed at empowering youth in Indian villages to sustain their livelihood by providing information and access to government entitlements to those living in information darkness.

SoochnaPreneur is an initiative aimed at supporting, strengthening and enhancing the capacities of grassroots communities to access and avail information and entitlements in critical areas of health, education, social and financial inclusion, livelihood and employment.

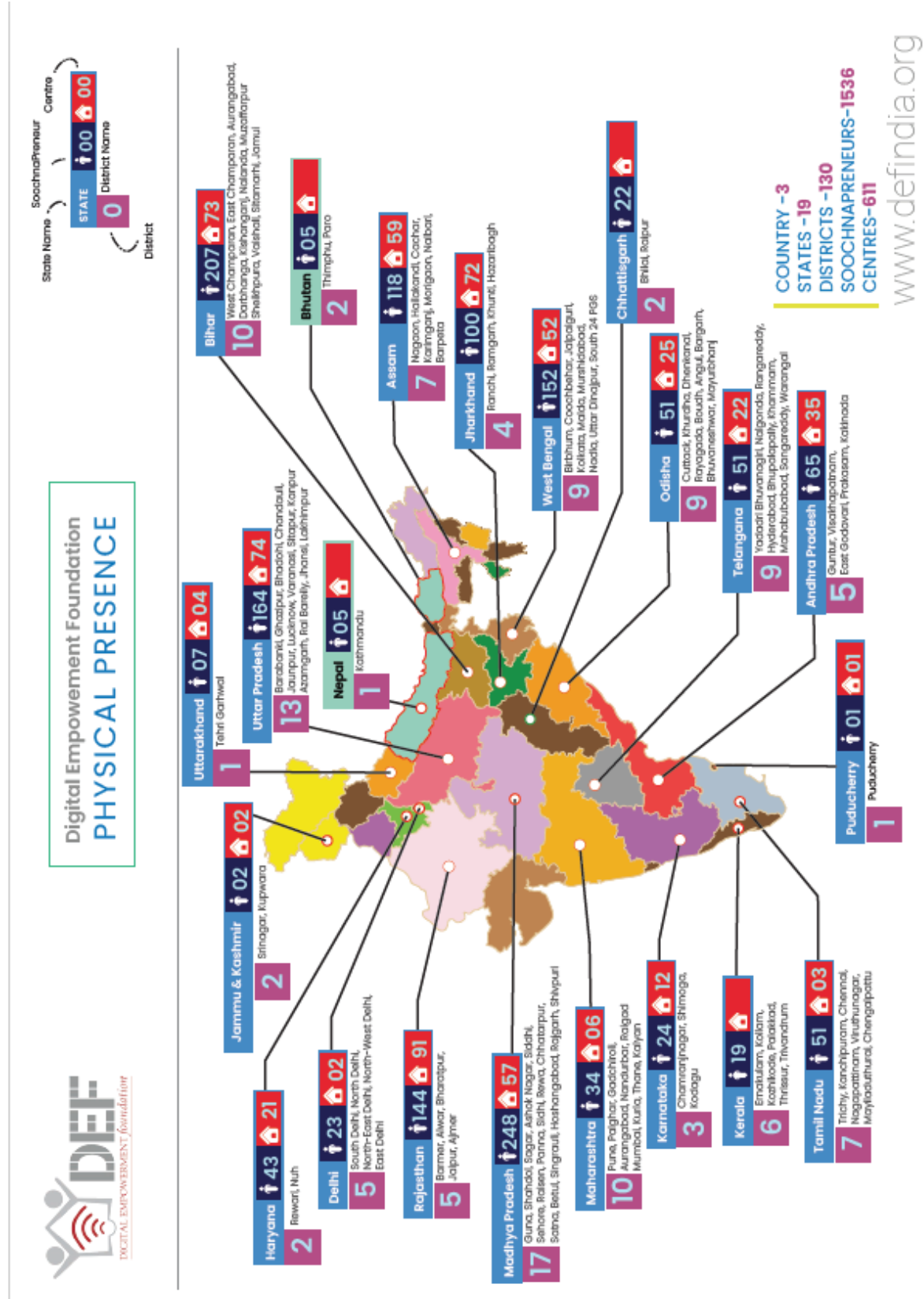
Under this project, enterprising youth from the community are identified and trained to become SoochnaPreneurs (Information Entrepreneurs), following which they are equipped with an Android tablet and Meera App, a mobile application that holds a catalogue of welfare schemes with comprehensive information on entitlements. The SoochnaPreneurs then visit door-to-door, aspiring families of the welfare schemes they are eligible for and helping them file applications for the same

Ecosystem

The project stands resilient on 6 pillars that ensures inclusivity and community centric implementation.



Geographic spread





With the new identity that she has formed in her village, she wishes to take it further and provide better education to children of her village who cannot afford it.

Bandna Kumari



A 30-year-old Samarth SoochnaPreneur from Dhamaura village, Bihar

A widow and a young differently abled mother of two, she lives with her parents and brother while looking after herself and her children by providing services like printing, photocopying, laminating and other government schemes at her home with the help of SoochnaPreneur program.

Valuing education and considering the public education provided in government schools to be of poor quality, she started looking for better opportunities so that she could provide better education to her children and was introduced to this program. From being a school teacher to a SoochnaPreneur, her income has doubled from 3,000 rupees to 6,000 rupees per month. Although her village struggles with stable supply of electricity and connectivity issues, she has set up a centre at her home with the help of a smartphone and printer that were provided to her. Through her savings, she bought a colour printer and a lamination machine through which she is growing her business



Alpana Sharma

A 37-year-old Samarth SoochnaPreneur from Kumbhraj village of Madhya Pradesh

"I had to rely on help from others all my life because of my disability, but I feel very good helping others for a change through my work"

Although being an MA graduate through family's support, she struggled to find a job that would sustain her living. She got interested to get trained as a SoochnaPreneur by DEF and currently earns 4,000 rupees per month that supports her and her farming based family of four. She recalls that being handicapped and walking door to door to convince people about the kind of work she was doing posed challenges initially, but now she finds it easier to gain their trust because of the work she has been doing that has given her a new identity. She aspires to contribute more by training young people and teaching people from her village to function in a digital world



Earlier I was just a housewife, I wasn't allowed to go out by my family because the people in the village used to humiliate them for letting me go out. Looking at the opportunity, I convinced my family. Today, I am an independent woman and people respect me. During my work I also realised the value of education and decided to pursue my graduation as I had only studied till class 12. Now I have a Master's degree in social work."

Hemlata Sharma

A 38-year-old from Pipradamaina village in Guna district has been working as a SoochnaPreneur for the last five years

Her first contact with DEF came when she visited the Community Information Resource Center near her village to get some official work done. She said "when I went there I saw how nicely they were helping people. Back then I was a housewife but I had a very deep longing to help people. I asked them how I could do that and seeing my enthusiasm they took my number and contacted me a few days later." She was provided training in digital tools and then provided digital infrastructure- a printer and a tablet. She has since been using the digital devices to serve the people in her village. Hemlata has not just been serving people, she is also earning money by providing these services, she said "for people who are extremely poor I don't charge them because I don't think it's right to do that. But for all others I charge a minimum fee for the services I provide photocopy, Aadhar updation, applications for government schemes or financial services. All this adds to an income of about 10,000 rupees per month. Working in this program has allowed me to become financially independent and now my family and the society actually give me all the support that I need for anything that I choose to do."



She has found a good balance in working, running the centre, learning about new programs, managing the household chores and helping out her husband with his travel agency based business.

Kanta

A 37-year-old Samarth SochnaPreneur from Chawan Padi village, Rajasthan

Kanta has always enjoyed working in the social service sector and chose to get trained under DEF to continue providing services and earn income at the same time. She has been associated with DEF for about 2 and a half years and currently runs a digital service centre at home with the help of a printer and smartphone that was provided to her.

An MA BEd graduate, she earns an income of about 2,500 rupees per month but counts on many blessings showered by the elders of the village who rely on her to get a lot of their schemes related problems solved. She aspires to help the community further by working for the government.





Being the youngest in the house, she is looking forward to learning to provide many more services at her centre like net banking and put her free time to good use.

Kavita Dhakad



A 23-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Jaamner village of Madhya Pradesh

Kavita Dhakad is a double graduate completing BSc and BEd. Prior to this, she was a school teacher in a private school which fetched her an income of about two to three thousand rupees a month. Along with this, she is also working as a volunteer for RCCE and Poshan Abhiyan program.

As a volunteer, she has been helping in debunking some of the myths around the pandemic and visiting door-to-door to create awareness about getting vaccinated. With her income, she has bought a printer and computer to expand her digital service centre through which she earns about 2,500 rupees per month.



Rani Kushwaha

A 32-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Mata Mudra village of Madhya Pradesh

She has completed BCom and attended a computer course. Being one of the 1,500 SoochnaPreneurs, she is not only an information provider, but also a community leader.

She is glad that since she has started her centre, she and the people in the villages are more aware about the beneficial programs.

She has been running her centre for about 4 years with a photocopying machine, laptop and a tablet along with a mobile phone that she bought. Her monthly income is about 2,000 rupees per month. She contributes to the major chunk of the household expenses as her husband is a vegetable seller.



I know what it is to be poor, I have been there so I want to do everything in my power to help people get out of it. Working as a SoochnaPreneur gives me the unique opportunity to serve the needy and at the same time earn enough money to run the house. When people go outside they spend money on travel and they are also exploited. "

Kirti Sharma

A 35-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Arnya village, Madhya Pradesh

A mother of two, she realised the importance of being independent when her family was on the verge of poverty. She said "we were almost on the streets when I was approached by Abhinav sir (DEF's District Coordinator). He asked me if I wanted to become an entrepreneur and of course I said yes." Kirti had no idea that with just one printer and one tablet she would become an independent woman, she said "I was given digital training, a printer, a tablet and a lot of guidance from the DEF team. I never thought that a printer and a tablet could change my life completely. These two digital devices brought my family out of the financial crisis we were going through." Along with digital training Kirti was also given entrepreneurship training and with the experience and income of running her SoochnaPreneur centre she also opened a grocery store. Now she sits at the store with her husband providing digital services to those in need. She is earning 7,000 rupees per month on an average. She mentioned that when the government launches a new scheme her income increases to about 20,000 rupees that month. From being in a financially vulnerable position she is now serving those in need by providing government entitlements, digital financial services and other basic digital services like photocopy and scanning for which earlier people had to travel outside the village



Manju Rani

A 40-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Murlipura village, Alwar district of Rajasthan

She recollects that she started with a phone that had keypads, learnt to use smartphones, tablet and printer and became a SoochnaPreneur whom the village appreciates for providing services like paying their electricity bills, withdrawing cash, printing, photocopying and issuing E-shram cards

Prior to this, she was working at the Anganwadi that fetched her an income of Rs. 250 while her husband worked as a teacher. As a family of four, she was finding other ways to make ends meet when she was introduced to this model from another SoochnaPreneur. With a tablet and printer that was provided to her, she learnt to use the smartphone and improved her skills. Apart from being able to educate her children through her income which now amounts to 3,800 rupees per month, she is happy that through this program, she could gain a lot more knowledge that she was completely unaware of. She is improving on her entrepreneurial skills as she owns a colour printer which she bought through her savings to improve her income by providing more services. She has also been helping her community by volunteering to create awareness about COVID through the RCCE program and hopes to be more involved through more programs and training which would help her community.



Reena is quite pleased with her work as a Digital Sarthak that allows her to step out of the house, converse with other women and provide necessary information and services to the people of her village which she thoroughly enjoys.

Reena Rajput



A 30-year-old Digital Sarthak from Hodahli village, Alwar district of Rajasthan

A Although she is an MA graduate in Sanskrit, she shares that she missed out on her further education even though she had the opportunity to study BEd and nursing because of being a girl born in a Rajput family who are usually not allowed to go out of the house. She is sometimes stuck in an ironic situation where she gets to hear a lot about not stepping out of the house from her in-laws, but because of the kind of work she has been doing, the people in her community praise her and say that every household should have a daughter-in-law like her. Through the centre that she has set up that has a laptop, computer and a photocopying machine that she has gathered over the period of time, she earns an income of about 7000 to 8000 rupees per month. She is happy to see that through her work many other women in the village have learnt to use smartphones and are more aware about their entitlements.



With no father or brother in the house, she was married at the age of 16, about to be divorced now, she understands the value of being independent which she advocates in her village to other women.

Nidhi Chauhan

A 25-year-old Digital Sarthak from Myana village of Madhya Pradesh

With a BEd degree, she was a private school teacher and a tutor through which she earned 3000-4000 rupees a month. She switched to the role of Digital Sarthak 4 years ago as she could earn an income by working online and have her own business set up. She has seen a change in her village as women are more aware and skilled these days. She has personally trained many women to do online payments, learn stitching, form their own self help groups and help each other out. She wishes that more women are aware and independent so that they take care of themselves and she enjoys engaging with them.



She is glad that her education has helped her gain a new identity in the village and her family supports her to run the only such centre in her village that has helped many.

Shivani Lodha

A 29-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Puraposhar village of Madhya Pradesh

As a BA graduate, she couldn't find the right kind of work that could put her education to good use after getting married. She used to work on the farm and take care of farm animals before she was introduced to the SoochnaPreneur program 3 years ago. Using the photocopying machine and a laptop, she earns a monthly income of 3,500 rupees per month and also sells milk, trains other women and looks after the household chores.

She shares that she is being appreciated by many women for the work she has been doing and that they would always be ready to help her out if a work demands some assistance.



Being the only centre that caters to women customers in her district, she has ended up working until 11:30 pm at times even though she was pregnant so that the women from her village receive the necessary services at any time of the day.

Ombati

A 29-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Khandewla village of Rajasthan

Prior to being trained digitally, she used to occupy herself only with household chores and found it hard to get upskilled as her parents would not allow her to step out. She convinced her parents to let her attend training and trained other women too. Currently, she runs her household solely on the income of about 15,000 rupees per month she gets from cosmetics shop and E-mitra centre set up by her in a room at her husband's house with a laptop, printer, lamination machine and phone which she has managed to buy on her own. She recalls that she had to face some resistance in taking up this business as it is not common to see women working outside their homes on their own. She is grateful for her father who was convinced that she had to learn new things so that she can stand on her own feet that has allowed her to lead an independent life now. She mentions that her husband has been supportive and helps around with her chores and running the centre. She adds that she has seen a lot of changes in the mindset since she began her role as a SoochnaPreneur.



She points to the fact that it is always very hard for the differently abled to withdraw money or get banking services, especially in crowded places. She dreams that all women become independent and watching them grow over the years, she looks for more opportunities to help them grow further.

Pappu Kanwar

A 31-year-old Samarth SoochnaPreneur from Dhanji Ki Hodi village of Rajasthan

Her inclination to service got her interested in DEF. Looking at the poor conditions in which some women from her village lived, she started teaching them to stitch for free so that they could earn some money through their work. Considering these challenges, she is extremely delighted that most of the work can now be done online through the training provided to her by DEF and helps others who face these difficulties on a daily basis by training them to be independent too. She talks about the changes in her community where it is hard for women to step out of the house. She sees them communicating well now as they are empowered to use digital tools. Being surprised at what one device could provide, she has two centres in her village of which she looks after one and has trained another young woman to take care of the other. She spends the income she receives from this work on fuel so that she helps other women in either training or taking them personally on her scooter to get their official work done.



From not being noticed under the heap of household chores to being an advisor to the Sarpanch (Village Headman), she has fought for her village on many issues. With the help of digital empowerment, today she is empowered by the people of the village and by her husband who readily supports her even if the rest of the village goes against her.

Poonam

A 30-year-old Digital Sarthak from Khedla village of Rajasthan

Since 4 years, she has been part of DEF by getting trained as a Digital Sarthak, helping to fight Covid and fake news, assisting women from the village to use a smartphone, WhatsApp, online bank transfers etc. Apart from the printer and tablet provided to her, she runs an Emitra service center with a lamination machine, colour printer, computer and a laptop that she bought herself partly using her savings and the rest on loan. She earns about 5,000 to 7,000 rupees per month with mostly old citizens and women visiting the center for services. She recalls that when she started out, her husband questioned the value of digital skills, but now he has left his job, which demanded physical labor irrespective of his physical pain owing to injuries, to help her at the center. Many in the village rely on her to get help which has given her a new identity. She has fought on issues like ensuring job opportunities under the MGNREGA Employment scheme, getting borewell set up in one of the villages where drinking water was unavailable by standing against the local government officials. Today, she is a celebrated social woman in her village and whenever she needs about 50 women to get some work done, she is sure that they will turn up immediately. She wishes that her children are educated and fight for their rights as well as women have a strong voice in the village.



She enjoys helping other women to improve their business using smart-phones with the help of the training she has received. She mentions that earlier these women, mostly illiterate, struggled to find relevant information. But now with the help of google assistant, they are able to use their phones to their own benefit without the need to learn how to read or write.

Poonam Bai

A 29-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Untwal village of Rajasthan

Poonam Bai is a graduate in BA and BEd. Despite her interest to pursue further training in her field, she was not allowed to do so. While she was busy taking care of the family after getting married, DEF was looking for potential SoochnaPreneurs. When most women from the village refused, given that they had to step out of the houses, Poonam took up the role and got trained with a printer and a tablet five years ago. When she started surveying with the tablets, many in the village thought she was doing a lot more than she should have and started talking about her with her family, because of which her husband asked her to stop doing her work. It took some convincing from DEF's team which later allowed her to continue her work which now allows her to earn about 30,000 rupees on a monthly basis. She has seen a change in the mindset as people from her village are grateful for extending her services and shower blessings to her and her family. With the laptop, colour printer, lamination machine and an inverter, she has been able to help many at her centre.



She mentions that people in the village are happier knowing that they can rely on the centre to know about new programs.

Heera Sahu

A 36-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Savra Modi village of Madhya Pradesh

She was educated until 10th grade and occupied herself with stitching and household chores before getting trained by DEF. She got interested in the SoochnaPreneur program when she visited other centres. With the income generated using a tablet and a printer that were provided for her, she expanded her centre which now additionally has a laptop and colour printer. That fetches her a monthly income of about 3000 rupees. The centre has also helped her to set up a grocery store and a tailoring shop. Her husband is a farmer and he was the one who supported her to take up this new opportunity that has made her grow. She has also trained women to use digital tools and wishes to include Emitra services at her center.



She also mentions that even though she gets income from running the centre, people also consider it to be a social service because of which she earns their respect too.

Seema Bhil

A 30-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Samarth
SoochnaPreneur from Tandi village of Madhya Pradesh

She has been involved with women groups before she started her centre that got her an income of about 2,000 rupees per month with a tablet and a photocopying machine. With the support of her husband who is a farmer, she has been able to run the centre through which her financial conditions have improved, she has more knowledge regarding the schemes and has a new identity in the village. Along with this, she has learnt the art of developing good communication skills that lets her convince the people from the village to trust her to help them and conduct surveys. Through her work, she has been able to fight the stigma around a Person with Disabilities (PwDs) which often proves to be a greater handicap compared to physical disability.



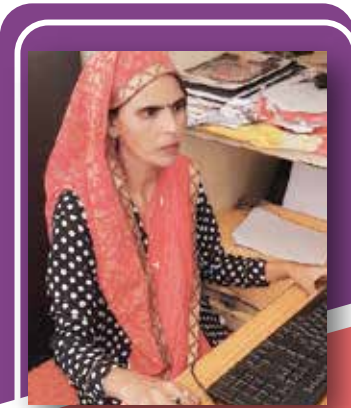
She feels more confident in using digital devices and wishes to expand her centre so that she can train many other students.

Neha Kumari



A 18-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Dabhatu village of Jharkhand

As a student pursuing a BA degree, she was introduced to the training and started working on online transactions. Although she did not have a clear idea about the program initially, with the help of two laptops, a printer and a mobile she received, she has been able to set up a centre which has been running for over two years and she earns about 6,000 rupees per month that helps her in getting additional tuition. She recalls that prior to this, she was not aware about so many schemes and now she is much aware. She is glad that because of a centre in her village, other women do not have to travel much to get their work done and she enjoys teaching them to be independent in paying their own bills, recharging their phones and doing other work online.



She shares that people in her village have a sense of relief knowing that most of their problems get resolved at the centre which has given her and her husband a good recognition within the community.

Sangeeta

A 36-year-old Digital Sarthak from Berla village of Rajasthan

With an intention of helping out poor people, she has been associated with SoochnaPreneur, Digital Sarthak and RCCE programs of DEF for almost 6 years. She has set up a centre at her home with a colour printer and lamination machine which she has bought on her own. She provides Emitra services and her income is about 7,000 rupees per month. Although she has studied until 11th grade, she has learnt to use digital tools after being quite hesitant and scared initially. She says that she was quite determined to learn so that she could grow. Her family has always been supportive even though her husband continues to work as a labourer and finds it hard to handle digital devices. She wishes to expand her centre and has been training other women to become independent.





She saw the potential to help by learning how to use the smart-phones and started using the tablet and printer provided to her.

Shivkumari Dhakad



A 25-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Peepalkhedi village of Madhya Pradesh

Her background in education has been in the field of Polytechnique. When she heard about DEF's SoochnaPreneur program, she found it to be different. As SoochnaPreneurs also serve as the leaders in their communities who along with providing digital services also play the role of being teachers, mentors, guides, advisors and fact checkers. In the span of five years, she has bought a computer and helped more than 500 women to receive benefits from government schemes. She earns about 12,000 rupees per month in total and wishes to expand further so that she can teach more girls.



She wishes to become the Sarpanch (Village Head) of the village soon. She adds that as a Sarpanch, she would want to address the schools in the village first as she sees no education being provided there. As children are the future generation, she wants to ensure they are well educated.

Tarana Nazmi



A 28-year-old SoochnaPreneur from Ranikhatanga village of Jharkhand

She has graduated from a degree in Psychology along with a BCA and MA in computers. She has learnt stitching and used to teach in a private school. After getting married, she was a housewife and because of the encouragement from her husband to take up a job instead of just looking after household chores, she attended some more computer classes through which she got to know about the SoochnaPreneur program. She started her centre with a computer, printer and tablet that was given to her. Over the last four years, she has bought a lamination machine and she has been learning 2,000 rupees per month. She shares that apart from her centre, there is no photocopying machine in a 5 kilometre radius. Surveying the houses in her village has allowed her to understand the needs of the people. With this understanding and the support of many women whom she has helped become more aware and trained to use computers. She says that, "Even after filling out the forms myself, have to travel a kilometre to get them signed. Instead, I would prefer to sign them myself and continue providing the services without them stopping me from doing more work. They ask me to do little work and create many obstacles to ensure that I don't do much".



She has seen some changes in the way women are being more open to learn digital skills as they are beginning to see the value of such skills when compared to a few years back. .

Usha

A 25-year-old Digital Sarthak from Erinya village of Rajasthan

She studied until 12th grade and wanted to grow in life which is why she took up the role of a SoochnaPreneur three years ago. She earns around 3,000 rupees per month with the help of a photocopying machine and a computer provided to her. Her family has been very supportive and encourages her to attend group meetings while they look after her children and the house. Her family values the kind of work she does as she works in a social sector as well. She is happy being a Digital Sarthak without which she would be limited to her home.





To make the interaction more comfortable, Poonam visits the houses of these women to provide Emitra services and assists them to resolve their issues.

Poonam

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During the program, she has learned basic life and moral skills, how to help people, how to be honest, how to become self-reliant, and how we can become the service provider instead of being a service seeker.

Sushma Kumari



A 23-year-old Samarth SoochnaPreneur from Khoka Beyang, District Ramgarh, Jharkhand

Sushma's vision is genetically impaired. She was excellent in academics and graduated from high school with good grades. Later she found it difficult to convince her family to continue her higher education. Sushma's teacher heard her ordeal and helped her to write the electronic communication engineering polytechnic competition exam. Fortunately, she received a scholarship and finished her graduation without being a burden on her family. She studied in a government school, received a scholarship for her under-graduation, and was presented with an opportunity in a company that she was forced to deny due to a disagreement within the family. She returned to the village. She again tried to prepare for the competition exam but was unable to pass as the daily chores with work did not provide her with enough time. Recently, she contacted the DEF supervisor to discuss the Samarth SoochnaPreneur Programme. She has been supported with basic digital infrastructure to help her become an entrepreneur using the training.



Now she is vocal about girls rights Dalima's new source of income acts as a financial support to her family and along with that, she is also able to continue her higher education.

Dalima Kumari



A 29-year-old Samarth SoochnaPreneur from a village of Bihar

She grew up as an ambitious girl who wanted to work. Her disability was not the only hurdle to cross; being a girl had its challenges. When she wanted to complete her education, she was burdened with household work. When she wanted to be independent, she was bounded by the tie of marriage but, her destiny had something else planned for her. One day, she visited a workshop organized by DEF. She showed her interest in volunteering for the Samarth SoochnaPreneur programme after listening to the beneficiaries speaking about how their lives changed because of the program. Today she is running a digital information centre and helping people access their rights and entitlements.

Conclusion

In the age where right to internet is debated to be one of the fundamental rights, these women have helped in digital empowerment of many more around them in rural areas, inclusion of people from all age groups and abilities into the digital world and reducing the gender gap in contributing to the livelihood of a household. It is interesting to note the change in dynamics when the responsibilities are placed in the hands of women. Owing to unnecessary baggage of conventional gender bias that many rural parts of India have been carrying for generations, a sense of need to step out of such a framework drives many women to step up and take bold actions.

This combined with the wisdom and strong determination commonly noticed in these women along with the opportunities provided by DEF has allowed the society on the whole to be open to changes, thus justifying the women centric entrepreneurship model ideated by DEF. The model has also proved to be sustainable which is seen in many cases where women have continued to provide the services on their own accord. Apart from meeting the intended outcomes, these women have validated the value of education and pinned hopes on self reliance. The stories of these women are not just a reflection of the enhanced livelihood, they are the stories of courage that made them step out and be the catalyst for change, of patience and resilience in gaining the trust of people through their work, of openness to learn new skills in order to grow and of empathy that has pushed them to serve those in need. Their testimonials express their confidence in taking up challenging tasks. They provide a hopeful projection of the younger generation being more prepared and included in the digital age and help them steer away from being the victims of the digital divide.



Author



Malavika S, is a content writer at Digital Empowerment Foundation who enjoys sharing stories of change and of lives of people who are seeking change. Through this book she narrates the stories of 25 women who are serving their communities and feeling fulfilled about the progress seen so far.

These stories were collected by having a one-on-one conversation with these 25 SoochnaPreneurs who narrated about their roles, challenges, achievements and the impact of the entrepreneurship based model on their lives.

Some had a lot to talk about, narrating their journey and success stories, while some had very little to share as they were extremely busy attending to the needs of the people at their centres along with taking care of their children and families. This book tries to capture the essence of SoochnaPreneurship with a glimpse into their personal day-to-day lives that provides a perspective of the kind of shoes they fill in.



Notes





Soochna Preneurs

SoochnaPreneurs, information entrepreneurs, play the crucial role of getting people from rural areas out of information darkness by supporting their communities to access information and avail entitlements in the areas of health, education, social and financial inclusions, livelihood and employment. SoochnaPreneurs sustain their enterprise by setting up service centres with the support of Digital Empowerment Foundation that charges nominal fees in exchange for information and services provided in the villages.

Of 1,500 such centres set up across India, almost 1,000 are solely run by women whose roles and challenges vary from place to place.

They tend to take up other informal roles of busting some social myths, fighting patriarchy and injustice, helping other women to be independent by introducing digital literacy, constantly creating awareness about health related issues, etc.

This book shares interesting stories of 25 such women SoochnaPreneurs and helps one understand the environment around these women working in the rural backdrop to drive change.



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