

OSAMA MANZAR and DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION

The journey and the making of a social entrepreneur and a social enterprise

Conversation with Ashoka Fellowship during late 2020 and early 2021

Would you share the narrative of your journey from the beginning? How did you grow up?

It's interesting that we must share and narrate this story with so many friends throughout time. It is hard to begin with describing who I am, especially when there has been an evolution of thinking and applying and a growth of consciousness over time. One is never the same person they were yesterday, and they will never be the same person tomorrow, in a mixed manner. It could be good or bad. But interestingly, people are very kind when you are evolving under twenty or under thirty years of age, people are still kind, they don't blame you and tend to take it easy and refrain from judging. If the same thing happens beyond thirty or so, then there are questions and expectations.

I am about fifty-three years old, and the journey has been very interesting. I come from a humble background, belonging to a minority community, if you are aware of what that means in India. That means I am a muslim in a majoritarian country. I did not grow up as if I were affiliated to a minority community but in the current political scenario, it is of contextual importance to mention that. It's also a psyche-- how has one grown? Have they grown as a minority? Have they not grown as a minority? What type of minority, educational, cultural, religious, etc?

If you know India, I come from the eastern part of the country from a place called Bihar which is one of the poorest of the poor states in India. I also come from a family where my father was the first high school graduate, who made himself an

engineer and drew himself out. He was very strict and is still strict but perhaps we have figured out how to manoeuvre it. I grew up with a very strict paternal side and an extremely friendly maternal side. I always consider my mother as a friend and an uninhibited, unforceful mentor, and also an unimposing entrepreneur because she allowed me to be an entrepreneur, to test the waters, do whatever one wanted. She had this eternal faith in all of her children, and I feel it more than anyone else.

I am a person who grew up in a school meant for a minority, for underserved communities and slum communities that my father himself had set up with his friends to serve these communities. He decided that I shouldn't be sent to a convent school, but I should be sent to this school where there were five mandatory languages, English, Hindi, Urdu, Arabic and Persian! So we were supposed to study all of these languages till the tenth grade. Simultaneously, parallel to this experience, every summer vacation we would have the opportunity to go to our maternal village.

My maternal and paternal village were close by but they were divided because of the lack of a proper road. My maternal side and my maternal grandfather were better off and had better facilities and perhaps that was the reason why we would end up there every summer. I always consider that the place where I grew up in the manner that I wanted to grow up because that really made me. Those two months of summer vacation was when my father was not around me and we really would just do what we wanted to! When I grew up I realised that that experience really made me grow and pushed me to try out new experiences and adventures like hunting, fishing, roaming around, driving, tree planting, swimming and even innovating bullock carts of my own, going into someone else's gardens and mischievously taking away their fruits, hiding, experiments! One experiment I always recall is that there used to be a leaf that would turn milk into yogurt in ten minutes when placed in it. All those experiments were very oriented towards nature. Like how does one catch fish when it floods, when the water is flowing from one direction to another, how to divert the water and get them to jump into the saree of my mother where we would catch them! Or when the fish from my pond would run out, we would go to the neighbours pond at night with lanterns and try to catch their fish while the neighbours were asleep. So, all kinds of things really, it was a free world where you are answerable to nobody, watched by nobody, monitored by nobody and allowed you to grow. You are free to do all the experiments you want to do, be it social, scientific or just experiments in daily life. So that, I believe, somehow got entrenched deeper inside me.

Fast forward to the time I finished my schooling and move on to Aligarh Muslim University, I took eight years to graduate. Nobody takes eight years to graduate, maybe it was because I did not want to become an engineer, but there was a social

pressure to become an engineer. So I kept on trying and failing, dropping classes, was unable to succeed in clearing engineering and eventually leaving the university and joining the air force. I didn't like the air force, but I had to clear even more exams than I had taken to enter the military to leave it because once one joins the military, they are not supposed to leave, that's a rule. So all of these experiments were in the domain of how to get out of someplace you are stuck in, so I left the air force, I didn't run away but I left officially. I spent three months there and I didn't like it.

So all these unsuccessful experiments are now formative to the personality in hindsight, they have formed resilience, perseverance, something in me that I can now talk about, more analytically. At that point of time of course I was passing through a deeply disturbing time. I was fifteen years old when I left Ranchi, the place where we used to live and at twenty seven I got my first job. So for twelve years, it was an extremely bad patch. For all the parameters of success, I was being counted as unsuccessful-- I didn't do graduation properly, I didn't study well, I didn't get engineering, I left the air force, I didn't get a job and the years kept passing.

I divide my life into parts, and while I did not enjoy most of that period, only for one year did I get to do what I liked, which was journalism. That was the only year I enjoyed, I worked and studied and did all of my experiments of doing photography and reporting online. That is when I realised that if you don't like something, you will not succeed. If you like something then you don't have to work hard at all, it is part of you and you are part of that. And that perhaps was always in my mind. In 1989, I finished my graduation and went to Delhi to find a job and I wasn't getting one. Instead, what I got was a girlfriend and she was five years younger than I was and it was a huge phase of learning what is called an emotional relationship, a partnership. She was doing her undergraduate degree at that time and I was looking for a job, without a penny in hand, getting nasty letters from my father calling me unsuccessful, regretful of the fact that he had a son like me. To avoid receiving those letters, I went back to my parents to ask them to stop sending me money. He asked me how I would survive and I said that I would figure it out and that in any case they were financially constrained and were sending me this money with much hardship. My rationale was that I did not want to receive those letters that came with the money, which used to carry a lot of expectations and things you do not want to read about. So, for four years, I lived in Delhi without so much as a penny in hand, moving from one slum to another, from one servant's quarter to another, from one loan to another. It was very interesting how my wife, and I am thankful she chose to marry me, would go and do a part time job to support me, bring her hostel food to feed me. For four years, she did not give up on her trust in me, that ultimately I would be able to go ahead and do something.

Despite the fact that for four years I did not have a job and did not succeed in my education, I did not develop a harshness in me, I would never go and complain to anyone. I always used to think that I have to work harder, learn the language better and write better. Simultaneously, I never used to feel extremely disappointed or ever feel that there is darkness at the end of the tunnel. I never gave up on looking for a job in the journalism stream or the media stream. People would say that I am consistently unsuccessful in this area so I should go ahead and try other things, but I was adamant. I started doing freelance work, writing here and there, gathering money through some payment or the other. Here is where destiny had something in store for me, I finally got a job in a computer magazine, Computer World. It is an IDG publication from the US, they had a branch in India and that is where I got the job. Although I didn't know anything about hardware, software, or any of that, I started as a journalist and built myself up from there. This was at the end of 1994 or 95 and then came the internet in August, I latched on to the internet. I started living and breathing the internet day in and day out, I would work eighteen hour days at the time. After a day of work, I would spend hours and hours listening to the sound of the dial that would allow me to hop on to the internet back in those days. Then I would explore the internet, download software, plugins and freebies, and just keep at it. Within two to two and a half years, I had done a massive amount of reportage, there was nobody in the IT industry that I hadn't interviewed or written about. That helped me get into new media, and I joined one of the largest newspapers as their internet head and built their website, their online version, in a sense I created their double identity-- a second entity which got 9 million dollar funding and split up as a separate company that needed their separate CEO.

I started my own software company and that company I ran for three four years after which I wrote my first book, The Internet Economy of India which was an analysis of the internet and the role that it was playing in India. That prompted me to study the digital divide and prod more into what it is. This made a very strong impact in my mind, leading me to ask questions surrounding fighting poverty with the internet and how to solve the information divide or the digital divide that pervades through society. This was a deep realisation for me, that the very basis of all poverty is information poverty. Be it health inequality or education inequality or food inequality, all of this is impacted by access to information and the ability to produce it and this is what finally led to the creation of Digital Empowerment Foundation or DEF in 2003 and 04.

When we started working on DEF, we started applying my new media skills, my IT skills, my entrepreneurship skills running a software company, fundraising abilities, articulation and communication abilities to be able to finally tell people what it is that we are doing. Fast forward eighteen years, we are about 300 people strong as

an organisation, we are a two to three million dollar organisation as per receipt, and have affected about 20 million people.

Before engaging with Journalism, what would be your proudest moment?

From the ages 15 to 26, I did not have a moment I would be proud of because there was expectation management, and I was exploring my opportunities and capabilities. I defined my struggles and accomplishments during a life-mapping session, and then the phase of success or my idea of success. What I believe is success is abstract and it differs for each individual. Once, I asked my father, “Why did you start respecting me more when I got a job, when I was compensated for my work, or when I grew within the job?” To my belief, I never violated any virtues taught by my father and yet, why was that not considered as success? I’m not sure if there was a conclusive debate on the topic, but I observed the role of materialism to bring balance to life and be defined as success. My learning from the experiences was that the definition of success is unique to each social class.

Who inspired or influenced you the most in your profession?

There were two or three people that influenced me with my work, but in terms of personality, I was awed by Mahatma Gandhi. Some of the people I was around me such as Bunker Roy, who worked at the Barefoot College, his wife, Aruna Roy, and Professor Anil Gupta who is known as the ‘father of grassroots innovation.’ My primary learnings from these influences were ‘what not to do’ instead of ‘what to do.’

From Bunker Roy — I learned to practice what you preach; from Anil Gupta — I learned to institutionalise your thoughts, and there was another influence — Peter Brook, he taught the approach to create best practice awards, the methodology, maintenance of transparency while ensuring effective functionality. Moreover, working with him on the board of the World Summit Award, I learned what not to do.

Despite all the work influences, I was personally inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. His teachings taught me to pursue vigorously. He once said, “A social entrepreneur will never be satisfied until the problem is eradicated not for one, but for everyone.”

While studying Journalism, how did you trace the problem that is now the work of your life? Share the detailed process to the discovery path.

I believe that I was driven to destiny rather than creating my own destiny. The key involved was the milestones that drove me to see the problem and the second was my approach. During a keynote I was to speak at, I realised that I have experienced over 5 enterprises throughout my life. The enterprise of struggle — I was building up to this moment because the first step to being an entrepreneur is to take the risk, and every stage, I was risking it all. After that risk, I was jobless for four years in Delhi, and to my knowledge, I believed I was not good enough rather than knowing it was discrimination. During those four years, I got through living where feasible, I took loans since every time my father sent me money it came with a list of disappointments written in the Persian dialect. At the same time, I was in an interfaith relationship with a girl who was five years younger to me. By my family, I was seen as an unsuccessful man who was in a frivolous relationship. Yet in Delhi, I was applying at every publication house I possibly could and was rejected. I made it through with money I received every few months via freelancing jobs.

Somehow, despite all the obstacles, I was convinced that journalism is the field for me. Even if I was not hired, I would find a way to report any incident I could cover. On the other hand, I had a strong relationship with my partner who brought food for me from the hostel and she would work part time jobs to help me survive. It was days after weeks after months, I finally got a job with one of the most prestigious magazines — Down to Earth. There, I was thrown out in two months since my boss did not like me. For the same reason, I built relationships with everyone else in the magazine business as they thought their colleagues' action was unnecessary. Those relationships guided me to work with other publication houses in Delhi. However, my partner was offered the job of a sub-editor instead of me for which she dropped out in her final year of post-graduate to support me.

These were the struggles of the relationship, finances, expectation, performance, and also, the phase of growing resilience. There was an unknown light guiding me. Going back to the journey, after losing the job at Down to Earth, I joined SOS Children's Villages of India as an editor of their in-house newsletter. While it wasn't an ideal job for a journalist, I compromised since I had the need for money. Within 4 months, I was offered to join a computer magazine known as Computer World in 1995. In my initial stages, I only knew two worlds in relation to computers — hardware and software. It was my employer who said, "the emphasis is on bringing the information from the market." For two and a half years, while the IT industry

was at a boom, I had interviewed and published articles on almost all organisations and individuals involved in the boom.

However, I noted all my reports were edited deeply. When questioned by the editor, I was told that not everything I write can be published since it is her job to write the last copy and my job was to bring in the information. Without any effort, she was a great mentor. It was also 1995 and India had just been introduced to the internet on its Independence Day. I borrowed some money to buy a computer and spent about 18 hours a day browsing the web. The setup was at my mother-in-law's house since she had a telephone line allowing me to access the internet. For about a decade or more, I slept only 4 hours a day since I was addicted to exploring the internet. It was there onwards I could think from the perspective of access, the opportunities, the information, etc.

Between the years 1995 to 2002, the internet evolved to play a key role in our lives. How did you experience it from the perspective of relating it to people's lives?

While I was working at Computer World, the experience with the tasks at hand described connectivity and network for the corporate world. Going back, everything that factored into my attachment with the internet is parallel to everything that I was experiencing. In the process, the learning too became parallel because of my intervention within the subject to resolve a personal curiosity. At that point, I was paying a bill of 100USD for the internet connection each month for speeds in kbps. I observed the content being produced, the consumption, the evolution of interaction, development of web pages, and more. Another important point to notice is, there was no assistance whatsoever, operating a computer was learned by exploring.

After spending two and a half years with Computer World, I was offered a job from Hindustan Times to manage their digital presence. They reached out through my wife since she was already working in the web world with Indian Express. While Hindustan Times offered her the job, she chose to refer them to me. As I was writing about the digital world in print media, I gradually began the adaptation of new media with the organisation. The first challenge was to reproduce the content published in print media onto the digital platforms without compromising on the quality and without any assistance since it was my task to establish the department. In the following months, I developed their website with the help of third-party vendors and published it only to realise the consumer of digital media is not the

same as the consumer of print media. The users of new media are interacting via email and I was redeeming my opportunity to explore the internet culture in the United States. I offered my perspective of contrasting web cultures in India and the United States to international publishers who offered to compensate me with one dollar for one word.

As I ponder upon my years, in both professional and personal aspects, I was doing more than required. My job at Hindustan Times progressed me to adapt to the nuances and the globalisation of new media. However, I still was not satisfied. I suggested to my employer, “Your job is to create the content and my task is to upload the content. This is nothing new, just a different medium.” Somehow he was convinced and moved the proposal to the higher management requesting 1.7million INR for a new website. Then we moved to the recruiting process. I hired 25 individuals to build a new website similar to ‘Yahoo!’ named — DigitalHT.com. It was a web page of curated news information. Hindustan Times being one of the largest print media houses in the country, published a front page advertisement launching the web page to the nation. Within the following 24 hours, Chase Capital offered the organisation 9million USD to invest in DigitalHT.com. I drew up the business plan and they were able to receive the funding. However, they then hired a new employee of Citibank Malaysia to join as the CEO. I then chose to leave since I realised the new CEO is not sustainable for the task at hand, and I will be starved of the independence directly impacting my functionality.

All of these events were during the ‘dot com’ boom. The higher management agreed to allow me to leave in ease, yet choose to hire me as a consultant offering me twice the pay for an hour each day. I, once again, dove in to start a software company without knowing how to code, but with a partner who happens to be the vendor I recruited at Hindustan Times. The purpose of the startup would be to develop websites and content management systems. I proclaimed, I did not have any knowledge about either. My task with the organisation was to network and develop a clientele, while my business partner would manage the technical aspects. He agreed to invest 1 million INR and did not ask me for an investment since his decision of partnership was the trust in my ability to communicate.

In the first year and a half, the company was able to generate a revenue of INR 15 million. Our clientele included the majority of print publishing houses of India such as, Tehlka, Hindustan Times, Times of India, Midday, Outlook, and many more. During my time there, I had an itch to exercise my knowledge of journalism and so, I started a new organisation to write a monthly newsletter — Inomy, an abbreviation of ‘internet economy.’ I learned about the internet economy while working for Industry Standard magazine as I wrote reports about internet development. This information was not yet available to everyone in the country, and

so, I wrote a book in 2001 with some friends known as — Internet Economy of India. That was the final seed amongst numerous other seeds that brought to me view the problem I have worked to solve.

While writing the book, I explored the meaning of the internet economy in India and what is new money in India. I learned about the digital divide through my reference material and eventually related the subject with poverty. From there, I questioned why poverty was in abundance leading to the realisation — people are not poor, people do not have access to information, and digital is the new medium of democratically disseminating and receiving information. The concept that developed within me suggested connecting the poorest of the poor with the digital and providing them with a choice. For instance, I gave you a road and if you choose to not use the road to walk, it is your choice.

Now I had a solution which led me to dread my present job at the time. I was constantly mapping the technicalities in my head. One night, I decided to quit the job, and updated my business partner. The urge to be free was tenacious to the extent I left without my half of the share from the organisation since they did not have any cash-in-hand.

The second bit was the question — ‘am I born to take or give?’ I stumbled upon the learning that when an individual is nurtured or mentored, they are only seeking in all aspects. There are not many who aspire to give without a reward. For the same, giving does not have to be defined in monetary terms, it can be tangible or intangible commodity. The economic rotation is based upon the same — the more you give the more you gain.

The two were fused and embedded in my head leading me to decide to give, and the purpose will be to connect people and enable them to be equal individuals to exercise their rights. And that is the idea that DEF was built on in 2002 and became operational in 2003.

Were you familiar with the how-to's in the beginning? What level of assurance did you have?

The motivation was the problem and its magnitude. I approached by focusing on two things: my task will be to ease the access of information, and assist in consumption and dissemination. The poorer population are not provided the agency to speak while the other bit of the population are. For example, a clothing

accessory weaved by a woman in a village will be her speciality yet, she cannot directly sell it to the consumer since she does not have the resources to do so. Thus, connectivity and access were what I considered as primary armour of resources.

It was finally during the pandemic that I was questioned about foresight to reduce the digital divide. I believe — digital access in rural India will resolve issues with efficiency that policy makers have been working on for decades. In the past and in the present, I have always viewed the intention as the challenge to bring change where required.

My journey has been difficult before taking the decision, not after. When we began, there was no business plan to follow stating what is to be done next. First few years of engagement were about the research, data-based development, and evaluating best practices in the market. I travelled across the country to evaluate best on-ground practice and observe ICT for development initiatives. In the following months, Peter Brooks contacted me to share the announcement of the Information Society by the United Nations. They were introducing a World Summit Award to reward the best social innovations across the world and offered me to participate as a jury member. My role, as an expert of social innovation in India was to choose the best practices out of 130 nominees.

During the World Summit Award in Dubai, there was a sufficient amount of learning and additionally, I thought about interviewing the jury members, who also happen to be the digital content experts of their respective countries, to compile and create the status of digital content around the world. I proposed the idea at the closing discussion of the World Summit Award and Prof. Peter Brook insisted on contributing his resources for the book. The deadline was three months in Geneva since that is where the final award ceremony was to take place and the summit was held with all the winners. My wife contributed by working on the publishing design, I with the assistance of a third-party edited the interviews, and carried 300 compilations to Geneva. All the copies were sold generating revenue for Digital Empowerment Foundation.

The opportunity allowed me to be established within the books of the United Nations, it allowed me to network with Information Society, fraternise with the ICT developers, the learnings were global, and after compiling it all, I believed it was important to launch a similar award system in India. It was an achievable task, required minimum investment, and created a knowledge repository. It was an outright success. DEF was suddenly viewed as the preferred information bank for best ICT practices across South East Asia. The organisation was offered a higher pedestal for knowledge and responsibility. Furthermore, we become a regular

consultant and collaborator with major policy makers including the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

The first three or four years were spent travelling, writing, and researching but the ground work began in 2007 when Intel offered a grant to establish an information resource centre in rural India. DEF consulted on policy implementing the resource centre across the nation and Intel wanted the same at a smaller scale. The organisation established its first information resource centre ensuring it is a safe space for the community to explore and learn about the possibilities of the internet. Today, the Information centre is at 750 locations across the country. Through these resource centres, we executed our initial objective to penetrate information to the grassroots.

While establishing the infrastructure to provide access, there were new learnings such as, the reliability of network and connectivity, the reach of the network since numerous rural areas have no connectivity, how to bring connectivity, and many more such reasons. We then learned how to approach community network, frugal network, utilisation of the free spectrum, reusing existing infrastructure, and also its maintenance without any assistance of qualified staff. In the following engagement, the methodology ensured inclusion of community efforts to maintain the connectivity hoping to inspire a sense of need for information.

In policy papers published by the government, it was declared – ‘in order to be digital literate, you first need to be literate’ yet, that was not the ground reality. As soon as we put computers in the hands of the rural community, they were able to access YouTube despite not knowing English, the language imprinted on the keyboard. By observing the efforts of the community to operate the device, we noted – an individual does not require literacy since they were able to learn through oral and visual communication, peer communication, experiential learning, and learning without establishing a fixed curriculum. Thus, DEF developed a visual based curriculum for digital learning, it developed photography skills amongst the community through experiential learning and using the skills to produce content.

Since your approach focuses on how people leverage the tools, how did you create the module in such a fashion that inspired self-learning?

I can trace it back to a domestic issue. My wife and I came to the realisation that we were not exercising any knowledge taught to us in school and we would not want the same for our children. Our aspiration was to ensure our children are independent learners and we will provide an unstructured schooling space for the same. Initially, my children first learned to read and write, and later, they learned the alphabet. One of the definitions I strongly believe and preach is – nobody is illiterate, they are only unaware of their agency. For instance, the ability to not use a pencil with a piece of paper does not make one illiterate since one is always able to curate their thoughts through another medium such as orally, visually, art, and various more.

While I consider everyone to be orally literate, human beings chose to invent multiple mediums to communicate. Ever since the formalisation of oral communication, the urge to write has decreased. Written mediums have too existed since the longest of times and there is a potential debate to choose the most common form of communication. Through these realisations, we discovered – digital technology is embedded with innovation waiting to be utilised as a medium of communication and the rural population of India is able to achieve that through the digital medium. It is the access that leads to deprivation of an equal lifestyle.

How were you able to shift the focus to scaling the access through policy interventions?

There were three things. First was the belief, the opportunity to explore, and through the information we were able to persuade for access scalability. For example, National Digital Literacy Mission, formed by DEF in collaboration with the NASSCOM Foundation India. It was later the government realised the need of the mass to be digitally literate. Our level of influence is not sufficient for a large-scale operation, however, we were able to provide the information and on-ground reality to the government generating a policy level impact.

Similarly, the experimentation with frugal connectivity or DIY connectivity lead to the trial of unlicensed spectrum. The success of unlicensed spectrum was followed by expanding and eventually, TRAI noticed the potential in the idea and published to push the concept. A month ago, the purchase and sales of connectivity without a license was legalised at the policy level. Hence, the need for an Internet Service Provider was eliminated allowing the distributor or receiver to establish a private connection by only paying the regular subscription fee.

Since most of the tasks require constant innovation, how did you structure your organisation to achieve your objectives?

For sustained resources in terms of human resources, the organisation spends time resources to identify – an intention to learn and a passion to create something. Post that, each experience is a learning. For instance, in the last decade we noted, working with women creates a dip in expenses with a higher output. Moreover, the on-ground reality suggests that men are less reliable in comparison and their sense of accountability and responsibility is not as sincere. Thus, making it economically wise to work with women as compared to men. The programs conducted by DEF gradually recruited more women to make the work more effective and efficient.

Going back to the original question, there are some specialties the organisation provides training for such as finance and advocacy, research writing and dissemination, yet the most challenging task is to establish infrastructure and create a local force to manage, maintain and further disseminate. Therefore, the recruiting technique relies on never sourcing individuals from outside but rather, depending on local solutions.

How many individuals enable the functioning of the information resource centre?

One entrepreneur is the requirement of one centre however, the managing entrepreneur frequently recruits a friend or another entrepreneur to share the revenue due to the large footfall.

There are 750 such centres and DEF is responsible for training 25,000 entrepreneurs. The 750 centres report to the organisation without being on the payroll since we only provide the infrastructure and training. Moreover, the total number of individuals trained to be entrepreneurs are 25,000. Certain conditions are set prior to beginning of the training programs such as ethical norms, rules to be exercised, and social responsibility. For example, they cannot charge more than the price mentioned on the chart provided by DEF to avoid exploitation of the community members. There is also an established grievance system to listen to the issues of the community members.

The first steps of the training program are rudimentary entrepreneurial skills, followed by access to applications containing the information, then introducing the information hubs, and finally, teaching reporting and maintenance mechanisms. Although the above mentioned are basic requirements to operate the centre, it is the application of entrepreneurial skills that produces development. For example, there exists a facility of reaching the doctor through telecommunication services and the community members can take an appointment for consultation. One of the entrepreneurs reached out to the public health centre, and redeemed the community's entitlement of purchasing medicine free of cost.

How many people are in your central payroll and what is their job?

DEF currently has almost 300 people on its payroll and 750 to 1,000 entrepreneurs that it's involved with but only transacts with them when prescribing service oriented targets. For example, Ashoka entrusts us to present the opportunity for e-agriculture in India. The mechanism to collect the information produces a questionnaire, and shares the questionnaire with the entrepreneurs in exchange for a small amount for each answer.

There is a definite emphasis on innovation in the organisation. How do you encourage the learning process amongst the team?

There is a lot that goes into the system in terms of approach and contextualisation. Each approach holds the stance that there is no other alternative and that allows to overcome the shortcomings in an easier manner. Since the normal approach is expensive, through contextualising, our approach furthers the frugal methods by separating the access system with technology and present is a solution.

Why did you choose to be non-profit as opposed to a business?

As you know, I worked as a journalist moving from one publishing house to another. It was during that time I realised, I have strong reservations in my heart while

asking for money for commercial reasons. I am inoperable in the scenario since it is only taking and not giving. However, once the selfish purpose is extracted, I find myself working enthusiastically with the challenges. Digital Empowerment Foundation is one of the few organisations that ensures sustainable impact whether its policy level or on-ground.

At the same time, I believe in the value of transactions. Charitable donations are not a sustainable model for any organisation and creates a power dynamic while transactions, a common phenomena, enables the person to earn the amount or work for it ensuring a power balance.

With your two decades of experience, by choosing to be non-profit, do you believe to have a deeper impact that you would otherwise?

Yes, I believe I have created an impact that I wouldn't have otherwise. For instance, although there are established institutions who provide digital literacy for money, they have not been able to inspire policy level change for the whole nation. Multiple telcos provide internet service since the introduction of internet in India yet, if I were to provide access in rural areas, I would've not relied on frugal methods also leading to no policy level intervention.

Does India still have the digital divide and what will be your next effort in the area?

I was recently discussing the tag line of Digital Empowerment Foundation which is "empowering people at the edge of information." The Bible and other multiple scriptures note, "as long as there is humanity, there will be poverty, there will be inequality." Similarly, I personally feel that as long as there are people, there will exist a digital divide.

More importantly, referring to the same tagline 20 years ago, the edge of the information was due to access, however today, the same edge is due to the reliability of information. In the last three years, DEF while working to reduce the digital divide through connectivity access has had to simultaneously train to identify misinformation, learn technology helping to combat fake information, etc.

Hence, it can be concluded, the era of digital desire has transformed to digital necessity and dependence.

Today, the same information that was an enabler is now also a disabler. Thus, the organisation's efforts have to include not only those who are not connected, but also ensure dissemination of only legitimate information.

In the context of your work and rural India, how would you go about safeguarding and empowering the appropriate connectivity?

The Ministry of Planning Commission of Kerala conducted a conference about “Kerala looking ahead for Ideas” and I happen to be one of the guest speakers. My answer to “what does Kerala look for ” was, create a policy document or toolkit on how to live life as a country, as a society, and as community in a connected world encapsulating both the unconnected and overcorrected. To move forward, it is important to view digital access as a fundamental right.

The challenge for DEF is to continue to work at the edge of the information but also, brace ourselves to establish sanity of governance to live in a connected world while inviting more to the connected world with fewer violations of human rights.

To what extent, the ecosystem DEF has created and information it is generating, for the good of all?

I do not have a proper answer but I will give an example. Near Kolkata, some trainers were conducting sessions on mobile based digital literacy. The objective was to empower one woman with the ability to learn herself through the phone and she further disseminates her learning amongst more women. At the end of the disseminating session, she collects data including the number of hours spent, the learnings, etc.

In 2019, there was agitation in the country regarding the CAA and NRC bills being passed. There was a cloud of fear amongst the people, especially minorities, to be excluded from being registered as citizens of the country. One evening, while

conducting the digital literacy sessions, the woman conducting the sessions was captured and beaten by a local woman due to the assumption that she is an agent of the government passing information regarding whether the residents are Bangladeshi or true citizens of the country.

I observed, suddenly the resident is concerned about her privacy and its importance. The incident suggested the concern of privacy of data, leakage of data, and surveillance of citizens amongst the people. The organisation asked the local authorities to protect the trainers and they did so by holding the trainers at the police station since the agitated crowd could potentially harm the trainers. Therefore, each digital task performed by the organisation concerns data privacy, surveillance, rights and identification.

Why do you want to be an Ashoka Fellow?

The mutual asset for both Ashoka and us could be the fact that Ashoka has an international fraternity facilitating social work, being inclusive, focusing on empowerment, and more. Since it is an international network of similar work conducted by DEF, it seems like a natural spread of our models without compromising since digital is at the centre. Since the recent developments, Digital Empowerment Foundation is aspiring to spread itself across the world in terms of its models and values. Furthermore, the third value added is the free flow of knowledge.

We are human beings, we all like human beings, communities and cohorts and being able to sit around together and discuss ideas and share knowledge. After observing Ashoka for a long period of time and reading David Bornstein's book about Ashoka's journey so far, I still remember the definition he provides for who an entrepreneur is. An entrepreneur is someone who does not rest until everyone he has targeted to make a change has actually been transformed or overcome the identified problems which is impossible which also makes it impossible for the social entrepreneur to ever be satisfied. So you can never cease to be a social entrepreneur, the process is constant. I always looked at Ashoka as a network of do-gooders and changemakers who are dedicated to diverse forms of learning that are resilient and innovative. Everyone teaches everyone in this network. I thought it would be unwise not to be associated with this for knowledge to flow both ways: for me to be able to share my learnings and spread it to other communities and networks and also to learn more from like-minded people in other parts of the world. There's nothing like it. And also to see how we can contribute everything we have developed in our own cocoon and take it to other sections of the world. I always think it's a pity that we had not come together at an earlier point in time.

These are my primary motivations, especially given that the network has diversified and evolved, including new faces, new cohorts. That is very inspiring.

Digital Empowerment Foundation is very hands-on and is on the ground in its approach across sectors to enable the use of learning as an advocacy tool such as the National Digital Literacy Mission of India, which we gave to the government. There are many programmes the government has adopted that were contributed by us. So, I was thinking of using social sector approaches to digitise a revolutionary toolkit. Why not bring the huge cohort of the Ashoka network to see where, in general, digitisation can contribute to development, socially and sustainably. It is of immense importance today to become non-charitable and actually move towards sustainability. By always giving, we can actually snatch away the self respect of a person. We always discourage efforts that would go in for a year or so and then leave the field. We want to make sure all efforts can sustain themselves. We have an internal decision that we would never end a project. Even if there is a lack of funding, we can continue work in any area that we reach out to as we have created an entrepreneurial, self-sustaining model.

Where do your revenues come from?

We are a not-for-profit organisation but we run it like a social enterprise and most of our grants and funding come from international donors and CSR. Initially, the government used to participate with us but not anymore. But you name it, from Google, Samsung, Facebook, WhatsApp to Intel, Nokia, Microsoft, USAID, BMGF, EU, all these organisations fund us.

Tell me a little about the work itself. What is your strategy around your work?

Actually, we have created a situation of understanding wherein information is considered a commodity that is of crucial significance to human life and rights. From any perspective really, be it a right's perspective, a daily life perspective, an opportunity perspective etc. This information that we speak of, we realised twenty years ago, was only going to flow through the digital medium. If you don't have access to infrastructure, tools or media that can enable you, you are bound to suffer. Let me give you three examples. The first is that, assuming I am the poorest person in a village, my immediate needs are food, water, sanitation, shelter, not the internet. If I am a little more privileged, then I need education for my children. I also have the basic right to food, however I cannot access this food that I am entitled to without a basic internet connection because without the internet, the essential machine that authenticates my unique identity or my biometrics, that is

something I am dependent on, is not something that will be accessible to me. Without that machine, I will be deprived of food which is my right. So, many people say that why give the internet to the poor when there are immediate concerns such as access to food, healthcare, shelter? To that I say, all of these things are dependent on connectivity.

Is your strategy then connectivity? Will connectivity make people more enabled to advocate for their rights?

Connectivity is definitely an issue, though what we are approaching is very layered. Even though a person may be connected, they may not know how to use the connectivity. So they may need a little bit of literacy, some awareness surrounding what their rights are, how life may be dependent on accessible rights. Therein lies the question of education, awareness, advocacy, that could help a person to figure out what their rights are and feel entitled to them. All these rights are around us, ephemeral, abstract and yet cannot be accessed without the knowledge necessary. We also need to do capacity building in this domain as ownership of connectivity or digital infrastructure is non-necessary, but once the knowledge of these aspects is gathered then one is able to access and avail these rights and identify the correct pathways to do that.

How do you pick where to work next?

As you know, universally, half the world is connected and half the world is not. So there are always poor, remote, tribal, inaccessible, patriarchal areas that all inform the parameters that poverty is based on. India has about 722 districts and more than half of them are classified as backward, poor and underserved. Assuming, you give me a hundred thousand dollars to fight gender disbalance and gender based digital inequality with the goal of creating about 10000 new employees and they must all be indigenous. So, my first parameter in choosing where to work would be backwardness, once I locate a backward area, I will locate the indigenous population, in this population I will identify who is the most unconnected and disadvantaged. Based on all these parameters, we will go there and start talking to communities and with them we shall decide what is the space that they can share. Our relationship should not be transactional or payment oriented but should allow for a long term sustainability.

What are the markers you are looking for when you identify a community?

Based on these parameters, the other things that we look for are changemakers—people who are proactive at that level, who are taking initiative when we are at the early stages. Then we identify this person, who is typically female. We have over the last eighteen years shifted to a more women-centric approach because it is observable on ground that when you work with women, the digital impact generated is much higher. There is less money spent on monitoring and evaluation. The impact is higher because the money goes directly to the family.

Empirically and through experiments and experience on the field, we have realised that a dollar spent on women transforms into more available funds because in that situation, we have lowered expenditure on the wherewithal, monitoring and evaluation and have made direct impacts. Our model is based on entrepreneurship. We identify a local woman who can take the responsibility of providing all the services that can be identified as lacking and she becomes an entrepreneur in and of herself.

What is your strategy in finding that woman?

We have a very strong map of first doing the groundwork. We learn the geography and visit 100 to 200 households to gauge the situation, clarifying things such as what is the base income, local infrastructure, the status of facilities like internet, electricity, etc. We do this baseline inquiry to understand exactly where this woman will come out of, what is the context of her upbringing. We may find about five such women or ten, then we place other parameters such as emotional quotient, proactiveness, outgoingness, and based on these parameters we go forward and identify our entrepreneur. Then we hand over the infrastructure, the tools for connectivity.

How long does this woman stay committed?

So there have been instances where this woman is working very well, she is utilising the infrastructure provided to serve people, etc, but she gets married or some obstacle or the other comes up and she is unable to continue. In that event, it is often herself who creates the pipeline to locate a replacement through cousins,

sisters, and neighbours who have assisted her through her tenure. We evaluate these candidates and identify if they are reliable, sustainable and proactive. We also follow the former woman entrepreneur to the place where she may be going and try to start a centre there, so that she can continue her work and a new locale can be reached. That creates a new entry point for us in a new location.

What local institutions are there? Where is the union or the cooperative? Is there any institutionalised gathering that you see from place to place?

There are five to ten such institutions that are supposed to have cohorts of women such as working women, across education, livelihood, occupation, financial inclusion, health and governance. The most important cohort is the panchayat which is the village council. While it is very political, it is also where people gather and share their issues, discuss their demands, etc. It is also very crucial because at the grassroots level village council, it is also mandatory to have thirty-five percent women's representation on this governing body. Most of these women are proxies, but it is useful for us to identify these women and empower them to come out of their shells and start using their seat of power for their community.

Is there funding for the village council?

No its not funding as such, but this body has the power to disburse governmental funds into various development areas in the community and also has the responsibility of levying taxes and generating a revenue stream. All these village councils have great infrastructure, mostly unused. So for us, tying up with them to work locally means we firstly have the local mandate allowing us to work smoothly without any blockages as such. Not having a bottleneck in the first place is already a success, the absence of forces trying to stop our work is a good thing in and of itself. Sometimes, this village council doesn't work, so we enter self-help groups. Self-help groups are another institution that exists in rural India which allows women to come together, form a cohort and start generating their own savings and open bank accounts. So these are also women who are proactive in thinking about how to save money, how to be entrepreneurial and that is also a good place to start for us.

Is this somehow linked to the ideas of BRAC?

It is interesting that you bring up BRAC because BRAC is a good friend of ours, and our model is something BRAC is trying to implement in Bangladesh. It was also presented with an award by the World Bank's Tech Challenge. It's called Soochnapreneurs-- all these women that I am talking to you about are actually called Soochnapreneurs. Soochna means information in Hindi. The word Soochnapreneur means information-entrepreneur. So about 70 to 80 percent of all our centres and our reach comprises women Soochnapreneurs.

Are they connected to any associations? Where does the money come from?

They are connected to each other in their own areas. They have a local whatsapp group, organise local meetings by themselves. They offer everything at a service charge. The infrastructure that they use is provided by the grant that we get. So our involvement with them is threefold. We primarily select these entrepreneurs and then provide them with the infrastructure required. Finally, we train them and provide them with the knowledge required to use this infrastructure for the social good, for social delivery of these services and how to make money at the same time without compromising on the delivery. We also constantly monitor factors such as their performance, ability to deliver services, if there is an increase in the strength of the cohort, and that they are able to generate income for themselves.

In the digital age there are a certain number of strategies available to us to organise and build communities. Once they have been identified, they have to be built up depending on what country they are being set up in. So it is fascinating to hear what you are doing and it has got a beautiful pattern set up.

So interestingly, two new components are being added now to our strategy. We reached 1000 such locations, with each location catering to five or ten villages around them, reaching about five hundred families over the course of one year. At

this point, it is interesting to think about how we can create more and how we can create unions of ourselves and share knowledge resources. This year, with a grant from the US, we have started getting one Soochnapreneur to train one hundred more. We are also paying them for their time alongside their regular earnings. This is the first new component we are adding.

Secondly, we are going to create a national or a local arm and a union or association for each one of them and ask new members to pay a nominal fee of 100 rupees every year to gather together to share knowledge resources and content, how to help each other more, earn more, serve more.

I can easily see the spark in my eyes when I can tangibly visualise these digitally empowered women respecting the need for social good relying on correct information to form networks. That is very crucial since there is a huge wave of misinformation out there right now. So our Soochnapreneurs have now gained the ability to fact-check themselves and how to safeguard their community from misinformation. So now, we will have a safeguard against misinformation and be able to protect communities from its effects because of the network formed by all of these women.

Digitalisation of covid would be an interesting aspect to talk about. During covid everything went digital unlike ever before. How did DEF centres change into spaces that would provide access to all basic needs?

Covid was a very tough time and it actually brought two things: isolation, lockdown and insecurity was one aspect but there was also an exacerbation of the necessity and dependence on the digital world unlike ever before. For people like you and me, it was an object of ease, it was something we use to make our lives more efficient. But for others who did not have the knowledge required to access the digital it became tougher, all of a sudden these people were expected to meet their basic banking requirements through Google Pay for instance, or were expected to access their food by sharing fingerprints. Online classes became mandatory for 320 million students in India out of whom 90 per cent do not possess the requisite digital infrastructure or connectivity required. How do you access education then?

We actually went ahead and did a massive amount of transformation for our hundreds and thousands of Soochnapreneurs, and digital foot soldiers who were already connected and trying to do things digitally. So for every household around them, they became the contact point for access to ration, banking and education. For every necessity, our people became the focal point, their roles were previously those of providing a service but in covid times that turned into a necessity. Therefore, we were grateful that we were in at least 1000 locations where we could be of service. And since they were entrepreneurs, there was already the spark of taking initiative in them and they went on to get e-passes, do relief work and fundraising locally, turning into resource people for locals. It really moved us to see the resiliency they developed without our direct training, since our model was already entrepreneurial, they were already automatically prepared for such a time of crisis and willing to stay resilient.

In these times, mutual aid groups rose all over the world and what you are describing sounds exactly like that now.

Yes, one of the centres actually went on to raise twenty five lakhs, which is about 35000 USD locally, using facebook. By just representing the people from their communities, they started gathering direct funding. The other aspect of course here is, how does one move education completely online given that corporations were not subsidising prices of devices and governments were not announcing free connectivity or even making schools community access points? So what we did in response to this was asking for donations of usable second hand devices and we actually got millions of requests for requirements of devices but not enough were donated. At that point some corporations donated five to ten thousand devices each, and now as we speak, 300 more access points are being created from the donations that campaign garnered. That is, 300 more connected villages that the youth of these villages will be able to access as per their own convenience at a community centre that is no longer family centric but relies on community cooperation in terms of scheduling, utilisation, etc. This allowed people to set their own timeframes for utilisation, complete their online classes and coursework as per schedule. We would like to create more such access points where the schedule enables us to serve more people and not individualise the service. This turned into a larger model of deployment. We are hoping that the government too will come forward and create such access points for the 320 million people in need of these resources.

What is unique to DEF's model is the empowerment and upliftment afforded to women entrepreneurs as they become responsible for connectivity and digital infrastructure. Can you speak more about this model?

We have a monitoring system in place. In one of the centres that we visited we noticed that one woman was earning about twenty dollars a month, so we enquired what exactly was the reason for this performance. She said that she was not very concerned about her earnings as her entire social status was uplifted owing to her being the access point for digital infrastructure, people were calling her Google-sister, tablet-sister, and now even her husband was identified by her name. Her whole status had changed, that is why she was not focused on earning money but was focused on helping other women. She had a choice of earning money, but she chose to increase her social equity and uplift others in the process. She is fighting patriarchy without fighting head on. I have kept insisting that digital infrastructure is one of the most vital tools in the fight against patriarchy once placed in the hands of women. Women do not use digital equipment for unnecessary reasons, they use it for upliftment, education, entrepreneurship, etc.

DEF's model demonstrates the use of a community based model as opposed to an individualistic one.

We are fighting a traditional institution such as the patriarchy, India is extremely patriarchal and this can also lead to faith based issues, feudalism, hierarchy etc. One cannot take this head on without the backlash of the men of the community, therefore what we do is a quiet process. We enter the community and the homes of these people very quietly, and these women we enable in the name of development, connectivity, prosperity actually end up empowered. Eventually, men begin to appreciate the independence they see in the women of their family. Telling a man to change the conditions of the women around him directly can be counterproductive. The second thing that we do is harness 50 per cent of the strength of the country, which is women. This model by being women-centric creates an equalising effect

on the society at large. The third thing is, fighting the gender digital divide. We don't need a separate programme to fight this because our programme gives women smartphones directly in their hands.