Digital Empowerment Foundation

Name of the Project: Digital Literacy-West Bengal Phase-4

Reporting Year: 2019-20

Report No : End Report-2020

Internet Saathi is an initiative to introduce women to digital tools, information and opportunities that the internet holds. Under this project, women volunteers (or Internet Saathis) have been trained in and equipped with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) tools and knowledge to connect remote communities to the mainstream world, thus bringing them out of information darkness. ICTs have accelerated economic growth and propelled a wave of engagements that have touched human lives; changing the way communities interact, increasing opportunities for livelihood and crossing the barriers of inequitable growth. ICTs have also taken up such pre-eminence in our everyday lives, that we now have access to a bank of knowledge and services at our fingertips. As a result, people in tune with ICTs are no longer isolated and are part of the fast-changing global platform. However, there are still millions who are yet to gain access to ICT platforms to access knowledge and opportunities, especially women from rural India. Google and Tata Trust's joint initiative 'Internet Saathi' has empowered thousands of rural women across the country to access digital tools and connect with the online world. As part of this initiative, Google and Tata Trust teamed up with Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) as an implementation partner to reach out to women living in rural parts of West Bengal in an effort to train them in digital literacy and further digitally empower more than twelve lakh women and girls. The project was implemented in five districts of West Bengal and a total of 1885 women leaders were given training to spearhead the digital revolution in rural India. This report outlines the outcome and challenges of the project and highlights the success stories of the Internet Saathis, their experiences and learning from the project. Outreach: In the fourth phase we covered 6597 villages in 100 blocks across five districts of West Bengal.

Project Overview:

The mission of Internet Saathi was to train rural women (Internet Saathis) to provide digital and internet literacy to lakhs of rural women. These trained Internet Saathis were enabled to train women in functional mobile usage and spread awareness about digital and financial literacy to enhance their ICT skills and expose others like them to digital tools and the internet. The training modules included basic operating functions of mobile phone, digital literacy, and digital financial literacy. The project was rolled out in West Bengal to cover twelve lakh rural women and girls between June-19 to January in 2020. A cadre of 1885 Internet Saathi's trained a cumulative of 1214048 beneficiaries under this project. The beneficiaries ranged from varying backgrounds of caste, economic status, educational qualifications and occupations but most of them were first-time digital users. Every Internet Saathi, equipped with two smart phones each, targeted 3-4 villages. They travelled for six months from door-to-door to train and impart literacy. The project successfully completed its target and established a strong foundation of women leaders driven to change and contribute to the society.

Outcomes:

The main aim of the project was to create a large-scale impact in the area of women empowerment through access and awareness of digital tools and connectivity among the female population in the targeted areas. The outcome, both quantitative and qualitative, can be witnessed among various stakeholders of the project. The project achieved a target of training total 1214048 beneficiaries of the backward communities of rural areas.

Sr.No	District	Blocks	Villages	Total Saathis	Responses Received
1	Murshidabad	26	1573	450	264320
2	Nadia	17	873	250	151635
3	Maldah	15	1051	300	196802
4	Birbhum	19	1525	435	289985
5	South Twenty-Four Parganas	23	1575	450	311306
		100	6597	1885	1214048

Activities and Implementation process: The following are the activities and process that had been done during the implementation of the project.

- **District and Village mapping**

- **Village network identification**

- **Identification and selection of District and Block Coordinator**

- **Organized day long orientation session for Implementation Team (State, District and Block Coordinator)**

- **Selection of interested and potential Internet Saathi (Female) as per village mapping**

- **Conducted two-day training/workshop for selected Internet Saathis**

- **Launch of digital literacy program/ activity in the village by trained Internet Saathis**

- **Bi-Monthly Meeting conducted with Internet Saathis by District and Block Coordinator at block level**

- **Meeting conducted with Implementation Team**

Key Highlights of the Programme:

➢ **Though the primary focus of the project was to impart digital literacy to women and girls (ages 14 and above) of the backward communities of rural areas.**

➢ **One of the key achievements of the project has been the extensive outreach across the villages to mobilize women and young girls to participate in the rural digital revolution. The project was a success in empowering women from marginalized and low-economic and social backgrounds, in areas with low access of digital tools and its awareness.**

➢ **Education was not a barrier for this project. It managed to benefit more persons who F were illiterates than those who had a little or higher education. The Internet Saathi project was based on hands-on training under which reading ability was minimized for operating a device. To use the internet, voice commands were prioritized for search over a phone or tablet. However, illiterate beneficiaries took more time to learn to operate a mobile phone or tablet as compared to literate beneficiaries. Yet their operational performances were at par as per information from Internet Saathis or trainers.**

➢ **Basic mobile literacy was the first step towards Digital Education. It included the use of offline applications and maneuvering through the basic function of smart phone.**

➢ **Internet literacy was one of the key focus areas of the trainings, given its value in accessing and sharing information. It is also one of the main media 'techniques' to access various citizen-centric government applications that provide easy access to government schemes and entitlements to citizens. Since most of the beneficiaries belonged to poor rural areas with limited connectivity, a high number of projects beneficiaries were first-time internet users. Starting this training from the scratch, beneficiaries were first trained to switch on and switch off mobile data on the phone.**

➢ **In today's time, digital literacy is incomplete without digital financial literacy. F Therefore, keeping up with the time and its needs, trainings of beneficiaries focused on providing awareness about digital financial tools and accessing banking services through a mobile**

device. The Saathis were made to watch a video film on online banking and financial literacy for this purpose, besides including them in discussions about the same. The video covered topics like USSD, UPI, mobile wallets and debit/credit cards among others.

Challenges:

The Internet Saathi project was a great opportunity for DEF to interact with thousands of rural women and introduce them to technology on the road towards its mission of providing digital access, connectivity and digital literacy to the marginalized sections of the society. This project also gave DEF a platform to experiment with new ideas and tackle several challenges that came its way.

The challenges were diverse and ranged from technical issues, social issues, cultural issues till geographical barriers. Some of the key challenges from the project were:

- ✓ Frequent technical defects in the devices provided to the Saathis, especially battery backup of smartphones

- ✓ Tedious procedures and delays in the servicing of the devices

- ✓ Poor network connectivity in certain tribal belts

- ✓ Frequent technical glitches affected the monitoring mechanism

- ✓ Long distances between villages with poor road transportation and connectivity led to delay in on-field problem resolution

- ✓ Illiteracy and lack of awareness among the communities created suspicion about the intention of the Internet Saathis and the program

- ✓ Caste politics often led to demotivation and jealousy among local women and the Internet Saathis

- ✓ Saathi Honorarium were very less because the Saathis' travel cost and target were high

- ✓ In the middle of the programme, activity has been stopped by local administration and also by villagers due to CAA & NRC. Many Saathi's, coordinator detained by police and also FIR longed against 4 BC & SC.

- ✓ Local people were reluctant to interact with coordinators and Politics had a lot of influence on local people.

- ✓ Disturbance and interference from media house are another barrier in their work.

Social Impact:

Overall, social impact was brought by this project, it made women self-reliant and increased their status in the society, empowered them to have a say in the family matters, it fostered gender equality between men and women, instils confidence in women and spreads digital literacy and positive outlook. The IS have connected with the FREND project and is aligned for future upcoming programmes, some of the girls are also encouraged to take up further education from Open University to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Impact Story

Agomani Pal is a respected and well-informed woman in her village. Resident of Agna village in Birbhum district, she lives with her husband and two children.

She has always been intense woman who wanted to significantly impact the society. Internet Saathi gave her the opportunity to do just that.

She came across a motivational video that inspired her to work towards digital empowerment and creating a women inclusive society. She started watching videos about various subjects, ranging from health, education, finance to self-defense.

She formed a group with women from four nearby villages who together started organizing entertaining interactive sessions for older women. With the help of digital literacy programs, she organized health camps, counseling sessions, career and education fairs for girls and women of her community to expand their horizons.

A fighter in the truest sense, Anomani strives to encourage and empower girls and women to not only focus on overall skill development, but also be able to protect themselves from any harm.

Probably the first in her community, she plans to start self-defense classes for women by showing them videos on YouTube. The Saathi program has given shape to her vision of making an impact on her community.

Rina Halder:

Rina Halder is a resident of West Bengal's Gharulia village in South 24 Parganas district. Coming from a low-income family, she started her journey with Internet Saathi with the aim of contributing to her in-law's finances. Earlier, Rina would access smartphone data only for entertainment purposes, but after becoming a Saathi, she started using the internet for self-development.

While trying to recharge her father's phone, Rina came across a tutorial about the same. On exploring more as a part of the Internet Saathi program, she was able to learn about digital payment applications like Google Pay and reap the benefits of its cashback policy. This motivated her to use the power of internet and she was able to provide internet access and a platform for bills payment to the community.

The Saathi program gave Rina the confidence to harness her skills and use the internet to empower herself through financial independence.

Rebeka Khatun:

Rebeka Khatun, resident of Dastura village in South 24 Parganas district lives with her husband and two lovely children. She comes from a low-income family and her husband is a daily wage worker. Rebeka completed her schooling and became a homemaker, but she always wanted to be financially independent and do something for the society.

Eventually, she became a Saathi and empowered herself through a digital literacy course. She gathered information via internet watching videos and leaning applications. She applied her newly acquired knowledge for skill building and self-development. Being a fast-learner she grasped new techniques and software like photoshop, photocopy, bill payments, filling online forms and other online activities etc.

Support from the Internet Saathi initiative helped her be aware of multiple uses of internet. Now, she has finally opened her own cybercafé called, 'Rebeka Digital Services'. The café provides various kinds of digital services which have led her to earn a decent income.

She has also been actively working with girls and has helped them develop their technical and creative skills.

Conclusion: The Internet Saathi project was a major success in terms of its scale and innovation in design. The project successfully achieved a target of over twelve lakh beneficiaries to include men, women and girls to become 'Digitally Internet, Basic Mobile literate and financially aware'. The community trainings of the twelve-lakh people in West Bengal through digitally empowered rural women was one of the greatest achievements of the project as it exposed the information-dark communities to the power of technology and the internet. At the same time, qualitatively, the project created self-confidence and an entrepreneurial attitude among the Internet Saathis to use technology as a means to enhance their livelihood opportunities while serving the needs of their community members. The project, thus, achieved scale by reaching out to communities of more than 6597 village and depth by creating women digital leaders to drive and lead the rural digital revolution.