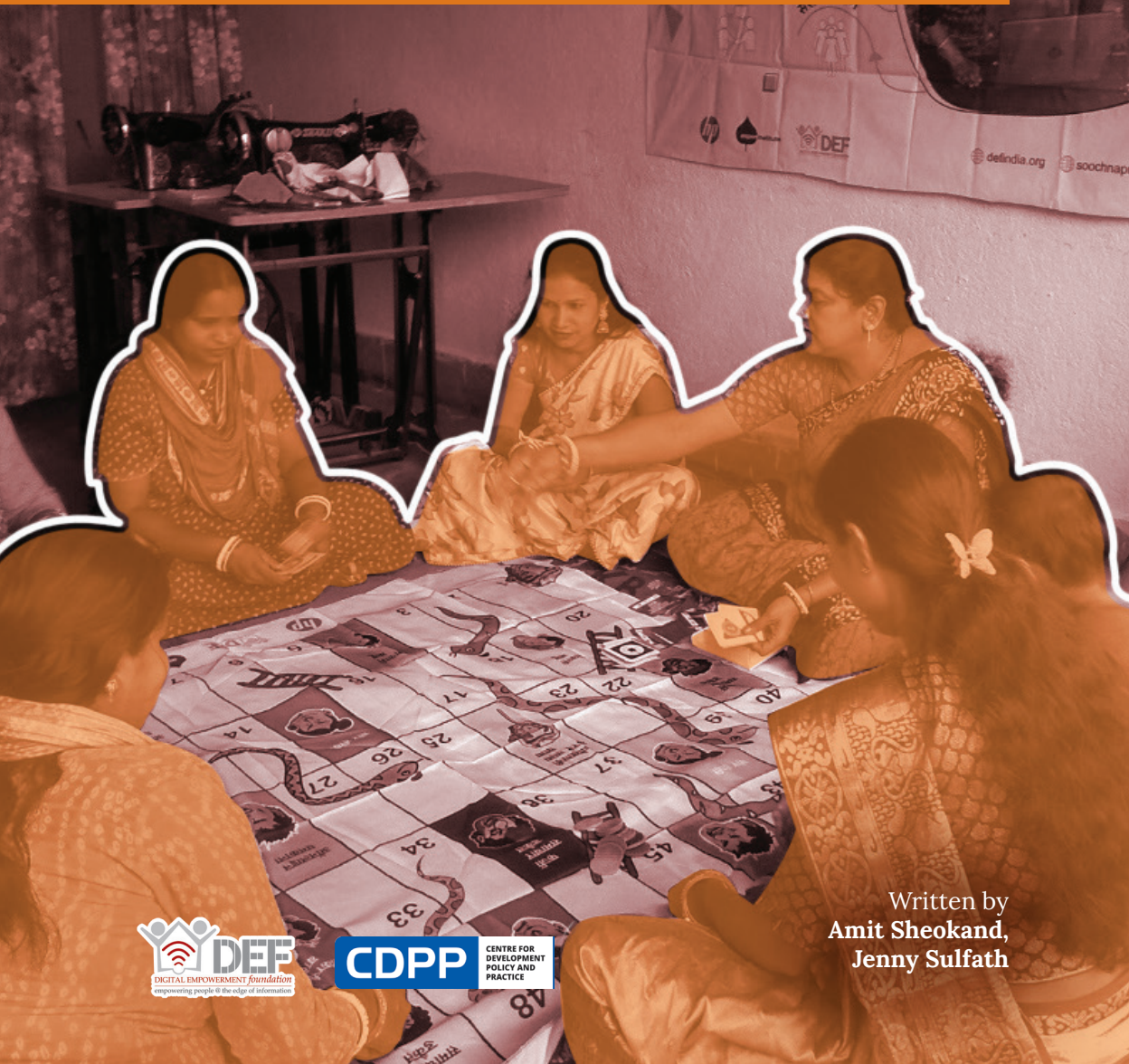


# *I Made Pickle on my Periods, and it Didn't go Stale*

A Conversation on Building Resiliency  
Through Critical Digital Literacy



Written by  
Amit Sheokand,  
Jenny Sulfath



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Lightening Talk on Media Information Literacy in Chiang Mai at the APC Community Gathering

***I Made Pickle on my Periods, and it Didn't go Stale***  
A Conversation on Building Resiliency Through  
Critical Digital Literacy

**Disclaimer:** In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of respondents in this sensitive study, names have been altered.

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**DOI No:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11206954>



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Published by Centre for Development Policy and Practice



Supported by:  
Digital Empowerment Foundation  
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## Introduction



*Rural India has been increasingly falling victim to the pervasive misinformation disinformation campaigns and influence operations that target people who do not have the skills to fact-check accurately. While several initiatives in India fact-check and expose these coordinated misinformation campaigns, the programs' beneficiaries remain an educated urban population. Further, the technology-oriented tools for fact-checking and learning often lack an approach grounded in rural realities. It is in this context that the Digital Empowerment Foundation approached misinformation and disinformation differently- through a critical digital literacy training program in rural India. The following report summarises the context and learnings from the program based on in-depth, focused group discussions with the participants.*



There is a considerable difference in the consumption of digital information between rural and urban India. The access to the digital world is limited, in the case of rural India, by the digital divide. As per a study by the Internet and Mobile Association of India, only 29% of rural India can access the internet, compared to 64% of the urban population.<sup>1</sup> The latest National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data place this figure at 24% for rural Indian households.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, only 14% of rural citizens “actively use the internet, in contrast to 59% of urban adoption.” The report cites affordability issues, patchy network coverage, and a lack of localised vernacular internet content as possible reasons for this disparity.

This disconnect prevents a rural population from accessing opportunities, entitlements and rights. For instance, “only 27% of beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM Kisan) scheme receive Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) payments digitally.”<sup>3</sup> Due to the digital divide, there is a lack of credible mechanisms to tackle misinformation and disinformation and influence operations. The increased emphasis on urban narratives can be seen in how fact-checking websites operate in the country.

A cursory look at prominent fact-checkers such as AltNews, BoomLive and Quint showed that a significant chunk of their coverage was devoted to debunking events/news emerging from urban India. Additionally, their focus was impeded by a limited understanding of “national” narratives. These narratives often get fixated on prominent political parties in India. The fact-checking websites tend to focus more on wrong information

<sup>1</sup> Ganesan, Ramprashanth. “Digital Inclusion in Rural India: The Key to Unlocking India's Economic Potential.” Times of India Blog. Times of India, May 23, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/digital-inclusion-in-rural-india-the-key-to-unlocking-indias-economic-potential/>.

<sup>2</sup> Malhotra, Arjun. “Bridging the Urban-Rural Digital Divide in India.” Inc42 Media. Inc42 Media, March 16, 2024. <https://inc42.com/resources/bridging-the-urban-rural-digital-divide-in-india/>.

<sup>3</sup> Malhotra, Arjun. “Bridging the Urban-Rural Digital Divide in India.” Inc42 Media. Inc42 Media, March 16, 2024. <https://inc42.com/resources/bridging-the-urban-rural-digital-divide-in-india/>.

unintentionally/deliberately spread by “national” leaders rather than instances of misinformation and disinformation harming people in rural India. This could be attributed to a lack of resources and a workforce available to fact-check websites. However, the focus on rural India is critical due to the unique nature of challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in such regions.

The advent of the digital age also meant that social media platforms are increasingly used to spread misinformation and disinformation. A BBC study in 2019 showed that WhatsApp was extensively used in India to spread misinformation, even leading to incidents of mob lynching and violence.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, digital platforms are used for cyber fraud, online harassment, and various other scams. A study by Oxford University Press reveals that 54% of Indians rely on social media for factual information, with 87% of content sharers expressing confidence in its accuracy, highlighting the urgent need for critical digital literacy.<sup>5</sup> The rural population is more susceptible to scam messages and cyber fraud than the cities, especially using fake Unified Payment Systems (UPI) screenshots. Another key aspect is the gender digital gap. A study by the Observer Research Foundation indicates that Indian women are 15% less likely to own mobile phones and 33% less likely to use internet services than men.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, rural women face even greater challenges due to the urban-rural digital disparity.

It was in this context of the persisting gendered digital divide and a simultaneous spread of misinformation and disinformation that the “Safeguarding Rural India

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<sup>4</sup> Ponniah, Kevin. “WhatsApp: The ‘Black Hole’ of Fake News in India’s Election.” Bbc.com. BBC News, April 5, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47797151>.

<sup>5</sup> Livemint. “Despite Misinformation Concern, 54% Indians Derive Factual Info from Social Media, Reveals OUP Study | Mint.”, June 28, 2022. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/despite-misinformation-concern-54-indians-derive-factual-information-from-social-media-reveals-oup-study-11656420664780.html#:~:text=The%20OUP%20study%20has%20shown,trust%20highest%20in%20emerging%20economies>.

<sup>6</sup> orfonline.org. “India’s Gendered Digital Divide: How the Absence of Digital Access Is Leaving Women Behind,” 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-gendered-digital-divide>.



Through Critical Digital Literacy” was envisioned and implemented. The following report is based on the insights from the women Infopreneurs from four states, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, on their experience of tackling uncritical consumption of information, which is often entangled with gender rhetorics, gendered narratives and regressive social norms. The project focused on empowering rural women with both skills and digital devices. Our goal through this initiative was to enhance the skills of individuals and communities in rural India to analyse digital content and platforms effectively.



*Our Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with rural women who took the Critical Digital Literacy training helped us understand essential themes concerning misinformation, disinformation and influence operations that are unique to the experiences of women in rural regions.*



Through the program, 30 rural women from the districts of Bhadohi, Chandauli, Jaunpur, West Champaran, Nalanda, Darbhanga, Kishangarh, Ranchi, Ramgarh, Khunti, Raipur and Bhilai received laptops and printers to broaden their digital services. They, in turn, trained 450 rural women to become information entrepreneurs, focusing on functional digital literacy, digital financial literacy, and critical digital literacy. Basic digital and financial literacy is vital due to cyber fraud concerns in rural India. We aimed to cultivate a group of rural women skilled in critical digital literacy, forming a fact-checking network. Additionally, 90 exceptional candidates from this group of 450 women received digital devices to establish their centres.

The training included modules on Functional Digital Literacy, Digital Financial Literacy, Facilitating Access to Citizen Service and Critical Digital Literacy. The Functional Digital Literacy module has been designed to support women in various parts of India to learn the skills that will enable them to use digital technologies, including mobile phones, social media, and the internet. The Digital Financial Literacy module aided the participants with skills that would enable them to manage their finances better. The third module provided an overview of various digital solutions that can be used to facilitate access to citizen services.

The fourth module, the main focus of the project, focussed on critical digital literacy, which was also supplemented by a Media Information Literacy Toolkit. This module defines critical digital literacy as

the “ability to produce and consume digital content critically.”<sup>7</sup> The module focuses on three categories of fake news: disinformation, misinformation and influence operations. Disinformation is defined as the deliberate invention of stories designed “to make people believe something false, to buy a certain product, or to visit a certain website.”<sup>8</sup> Misinformation includes stories that are partially true but are never 100% accurate. Influence operations are “organised attempts to achieve a specific effect among a target audience.”<sup>9</sup> These could be targeted WhatsApp forwards to influence voters’ choices during an election or propaganda aimed at a certain group/ community.

Our Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with rural women who took the Critical Digital Literacy training helped us understand essential themes concerning misinformation, disinformation and influence operations that are unique to the experiences of women in rural regions. The narratives from DEF Infopreneurs include incidents of misinformation and cyber frauds specifically targeted at women. We also learned how social practices form the top layer of misinformation in rural India, with women having to spend a considerable amount of energy and resources fighting these beliefs in their families and communities. The FGDs brought about narratives that focus on the implementation of learning from the critical digital literacy module. They include stories of DEF Infopreneurs fighting misinformation and disinformation in their communities.

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*There are different sets of bodily and mobility restrictions on women during the festival, which vary from not being allowed to open their hair to being present in the public spaces where the celebrations are taking place.*

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<sup>7</sup> Digital Empowerment Foundation, “Module 4: Critical Digital Literacy,” Available here: [https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4\\_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf](https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Digital Empowerment Foundation, “Module 4: Critical Digital Literacy,” Available here: [https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4\\_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf](https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Digital Empowerment Foundation, “Module 4: Critical Digital Literacy,” Available here: [https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4\\_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf](https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Module-4_Critical-Digital-Literacy-ENG.pdf)





Showcase of the Humaara MIL Toolkit at Talking Data Workshop with 50 Journalists from India

## The Interplay Between Gender Norms, Stigmas and Misinformation

The discussion with our Infopreneurs revealed that misinformation is not just passed on via social media. The traditional community network itself is part of an apparatus of social taboos and beliefs that target women. The focus on cognitive biases and logical fallacies within the critical digital literacy curriculum was an important component to not limit the training to fact-checking and address these complex and hyperlocal eco-systems of gendered norms and information. It is also important to emphasise social practices in rural regions because, more than general instances of misinformation and disinformation, they target public participation and mobility of rural women.

For example, a common incident cited by multiple women across the states was on Holi celebrations, a traditional festival celebrated in Northern India. At the end of the festival, a statue of *Holika*, is burnt down (known as *Holika Dahan*). There are different sets of bodily and mobility restrictions on women during the festival, which vary from not being allowed to open their hair to being present in the public spaces where the celebrations are taking place. Different narratives appear as warnings and posters digitally while simultaneously following a norm. “Women are not allowed to leave their homes during *Holika Dahan*, and no woman should go near or look at the fire when the *Holika Dahan* fire is lit at night,” says Devyani Kumari<sup>1</sup>, one of the Infopreneurs from Chhattisgarh. Premlata Devi, a DEF Infopreneur from Chhattisgarh, says that elders in her family consider widows bad luck during weddings. The situation is such that widows are prevented from attending the wedding ceremonies of their own children.

While some Infopreneurs we talked to displayed a degree of optimism that the situation is changing, such beliefs continue to shape the lives of rural women. For

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<sup>1</sup> Assumed names have been assigned to maintain the anonymity of participants.

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*This consumption is different from how men consume misinformation in rural India. A chief reason for this difference is the patriarchal markers that have confined large sections of rural women to domestic settings while men remain free to go out in public.*

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instance, widows are often stopped from coming closer to a mother and a newborn; people believe that they may bring bad luck to the newborn. A similar perception of “bad luck” is there in beliefs around activities that a woman on her period can or can not do. In some regions, these women are prevented from entering their kitchens, temples, or public places of any sort. There is a considerable restriction on what they can eat. Moreover, they can not help with household chores or work in the field during their periods. Suman Devi, a 30-year-old Infopreneur from the Khunti district of Jharkhand, says, “In my panchayat, these beliefs have decreased. However, in Dugdugia village, these things are still believed. For instance, women are asked not to get involved in the harvesting of the crop if they are on their periods. Women are asked not to touch pickles. Some women believe that their pickles turned stale because they touched them when they were on their periods.” Women on their periods are also prevented from visiting the newborn. Kavita Devi says, “When a child is born, the mother and the child are asked to live in a room for the first six days before the child is given the first bath. If a woman is on their period, they are stopped from visiting the mother and the child. It is believed that the child’s ears would go bad if a woman on period visits the mother and the child. Many women still believe it. I had my child two months ago. This aunt had come to visit but did not enter the room. I asked her to come and see my child, but she told me that she was on period and would not come near the child. I insisted that she can, but she did not. She kept her distance and left.” Devyani Kumari also narrated how when a girl’s marriage is fixed, she is prohibited from leaving her house. “She can’t talk to anyone until she gets married. She has to pack her own bags. No one else is allowed to pack her bags. People believe that others may cast an evil eye out of jealousy. Even after marriage, the new couple aren’t allowed to go out together much, especially in the afternoons,” Devyani Kumari says.

In some cases, people followed what their ancestors did without questioning or finding any logic in such beliefs. Suman Devi says, “There is a story related to a cat and a wedding. Earlier, during a wedding, a cat was trying to

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A common incident narrated by multiple women included the Babas, who visit villages during the day. These Babas usually target rural women who often fall prey, fearing that if they do not do what the Babas tell them, their families may be harmed, get sick or even die. This imagined eventuality makes rural women not only offer rice/grains to Babas but, in some cases, thousands of rupees.

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eat the food prepared for the guests. The groom’s mother sees the cat and tries to shoo it away. However, when it does not go away, the mother covers the cat with a box and forgets about it. When the bride is about to enter the house, the mother remembers the cat and immediately lifts the box. The cat runs away. The bride sees the whole thing. She does not know the backstory. She just believes that the mother-in-law does this when a bride enters the house. Rather than asking for the reasons, she just believes it and does the same when her son gets married, and the bride comes to their place. From one random incident, it became a ritual because people started doing it without asking any questions.”

Our discussions with women Infopreneurs also brought out narratives around the consumption of misinformation by rural women. This consumption is different from how men consume misinformation in rural India. A chief reason for this difference is the patriarchal markers that have confined large sections of rural women to domestic settings while men remain free to go out in public. Due to this difference between the ‘domestic’ and ‘public’ layers, the misinformation among rural women travels unbeknownst to men. Every day, rural women gather in groups to discuss their issues and talk with each other. This understanding is critical to looking at the consumption of misinformation by rural women and developing digital solutions that can help them fight misinformation and cyber fraud, among other things.

A common incident narrated by multiple women included the Babas<sup>2</sup>, who visit villages during the day. These Babas usually target rural women who often fall prey, fearing that if they do not do what the Babas tell them, their families may be harmed, get sick or even die. This imagined eventuality makes rural women not only offer rice/grains to Babas but, in some cases, thousands of rupees. Geeta Yadav, a DEF Infopreneur since 2023, narrates how rural women fall for the lies of Babas. “Babas would visit and tell us that something is going

<sup>2</sup> Babas here refer to scammers who visit villages dressed as ascetics. Since ascetics have a faith-value attached to them in rural regions, it becomes easier for these scammers to fool rural people.

on in our house or something will happen to one of the family members if we do not do what we say. They would ask for money, usually Rs 1,000-1,500, and say they would handle the problem. Multiple women would even give these *Babas* the money, thinking everything would be fine now. Since men do not stay at home during the day, women become prey for the *Babas*.” Nalini, a DEF Infopreneur from the Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh, also has a similar story of a Baba who would sip water and vomit milk, showcasing a magic trick to make women believe in his powers. In a typical scenario, the *Babas* usually make women believe these tales.

All such incidents happen during the day when men of the family are usually out for work. In another incident, Nalini narrates an incident about a person who came to her neighbourhood and promised sewing kits. To get those sewing kits, every woman must pay Rs 1,000 for registration. As per Nalini, around five to six women paid the amount for the registration and gave their personal details without ever checking the credentials of the person. Before he could be caught, he had vanished, scamming people of thousands of rupees. Anita, a DEF Infopreneur from the Chandauli district of Uttar Pradesh, narrated how a woman collected jewellery and utensils from women in her village, saying she would return them twofold in a few days. Instead of giving the returns, she took all the gold jewellery, earrings, bangles and big utensils and never returned.

Women in rural regions have an internalised perception of why they fall for such scams compared to men in their families. While it may be true that men could have equally fallen for misinformation, there is a belief among women that because men go out in public, they know better. Compared to that, women often perceive each other as naive and uneducated, unaware of the ways of the world. This is true even in how rural women consume social beliefs/taboo. In a number of instances, DEF Infopreneurs informed us that these beliefs travel from elderly women to younger women. The fact that a lot of elderly women are uneducated means that the transfer of knowledge happens dogmatically, with a blind belief in the authority of the senior or the elder. However,



it must be noted that across generations, the primary target of certain practices is the mobility of women. It does not matter if they are young, married, widowed or elderly; they may be pregnant, on their periods, or may have had a newborn baby; there is a whole list of social practices that define how women must exist in society. The majority of our respondents explained how access to information through the curriculum and being active agents of information in the community has helped them subvert this power dynamic.



Critical Digital Literacy Module Training, Raipur district, Chhattisgarh



# WOMENCONNECT CHALLENGE OF INDIA

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- LITERACY >>
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## Navigating Financial Scams, Common Misinformation and Influence Operations

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Rural women have increasingly been targeted by cyber frauds and scams related to rights and entitlements, especially those offered by the governments. In the stories we heard from our Infopreneurs, in some instances, we learned of a pattern where scammers try to utilise the lack of digital knowledge and awareness amongst rural women. As per the NSSO survey, only 14% of rural citizens actively use the internet.<sup>1</sup> This figure is significantly lower among rural women. It means that people have to visit digital service centres far from their homes to access various online services. Divya, a DEF Infopreneur from Chandauli district in Uttar Pradesh, shares a story about her maternal aunt who went to a digital shop with her Aadhaar card to withdraw money. “They took Rs 11,000 from her and told her that the server was down and to come later. After 2-3 days, when she went to the shop, they told her that her account didn’t have the money. So we asked her what happened. We went to the shop later and investigated the whole incident and, after doing several formalities got her money back.” Priti, a DEF Infopreneur from Chattisgarh, narrated how she received the wrong information about a government scheme. “Someone had spread misinformation that if the beneficiaries of the Mahtari Vandana scheme did not withdraw the money they received in their bank accounts, the government would take it back,” Priti said.<sup>2</sup> When she verified the information, it proved to be false; however, it created panic among female beneficiaries of the scheme.

In another instance, Kiran Kumari, a DEF Infopreneur from the West Champaran district of Bihar, shared a story about examination paper leaks. She received disinformation on paper leaks through WhatsApp. When she verified the

<sup>1</sup> Malhotra, Arjun. “Bridging the Urban-Rural Digital Divide in India.” Inc42 Media. Inc42 Media, March 16, 2024. <https://inc42.com/resources/bridging-the-urban-rural-digital-divide-in-india/>.

<sup>2</sup> Under the scheme, Rs 1,000 per month is given to eligible married women in Chattisgarh as a monthly direct benefit transfer.

information, she found that there was no leak. She cited incidents in which she received messages on WhatsApp asking her to pay a certain amount of money in lieu of getting marks in examinations without even appearing in the exam. The examination leak disinformation network is common, and it effectively spreads disinformation across various parts of the country.

The Critical Digital Literacy module explains how state and non-state actors continue to use sophisticated, well-resourced strategies to influence the communication and information landscapes. Some Infopreneurs also discussed incidents involving disinformation, which led to serious issues in their regions. Geetika, a DEF Infopreneur from Bihar, discussed how a fake video caused a riot in her area. “A fake video said that a group of Muslims shattered a Hanuman idol. It happened during the Nag Panchmi processions in 2023 and led to a disturbing situation. The administration had to impose a 48-hour curfew to prevent communal violence. However, the region saw serious tension and incidents of violence before the administration could categorically say that the video was fake.”

In another incident, Rekha, a DEF Infopreneur from the Ramgarh district in Jharkhand, shared an incident of communal tension in her area close to the Ramgarh district of Jharkhand. “There was a Muslim man who was a regular in the goat business. He told an elderly person that the latter’s son was in hospital and had asked for Rs 50,000. The elderly man hurriedly arranged the money. Later, he wondered why his son did not call him. He made someone contact his son, and they learned that all this was fake. The villagers caught the scammer and beat him to death. However, it was presented as a Hindu mob killing a Muslim man. It created a lot of tension. Even our minister visited to sort out the matter. After investigation, it was found that the man had indulged in similar scams previously,” Rekha explained.

# समीक्षात्मक डिजिटल साक्षरता द्वारा ग्रामीण महिलाओं का सशक्तिकरण

कार्यात्मक डिजिटल साक्षरता



डिजिटल साक्षरता



समीक्षात्मक डिजिटल साक्षरता



नागरिक सेवाओं की जानकारी एवं पहुंच



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सूचना के न्योर

## Integrating Learnings From the Training

A significant outcome of the critical digital literacy training given to rural women can be seen in how they have learned to respond to instances of misinformation and disinformation in their communities. This was seen in our FGDs across all the four states. These instances vary from financial scams, online misinformation and social practices, among other things, where women have readily been able to verify the information they have been receiving and share the correct version of information/events/incidents with their community members.

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Anjali Kumari, a DEF Infopreneur from Chhattisgarh, narrates how, after receiving the training, she has started warning people around her about misinformation and financial scams. As per Anjali Kumari, “With the help of the training on Critical Digital Literacy, I and 14 other women from the village have learned much about misinformation. We have learned misinformation spreads through social media like wildfire. Disinformation by politicians is common, too. Everyone is targeted: males, females, politicians, everyone. Fairness creams are sold to women for Rs 500-1000. The cream advertisements keep running all day, and even poor women want to buy fairness creams, and they end up investing in these scams because they easily fall for them. Even a lot of men fall for scams that target them. We have been trying to make people aware of all these things and look them up on the internet before believing in them. We have even made children aware of the scams people do through phones nowadays. We have taught them not to believe if someone calls them through unknown numbers. We have explained to our fellow villagers that scam and fraud calls are always about luring and offering many things free and would ultimately ask you for OTP numbers. The training from DEF has helped us a lot, and there has been a significant difference before and after the training.”

Devyani Kumari, a DEF Infopreneur from Chhattisgarh, tells us about how she was able to help prevent a financial scam in her village after the training. “Some people

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*The Critical Digital Literacy module explains how state and non-state actors continue to use sophisticated, well-resourced strategies to influence the communication and information landscapes. Some Infopreneurs also discussed incidents involving disinformation, which led to serious issues in their regions.*

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received links to pay money to get a job. They came to me for the transaction. Initially, they didn't inform me about why they were making that transaction. When they told me later, I informed them that they were falling for misinformation. Those people had borrowed money from someone else to pay for the job. Had they told me sooner, I would have warned sooner. I immediately stopped their payments. There were men, too, who were scammed and lost Rs 35,000. People get fooled because of unemployment, illiteracy and greed. In another incident, around 25 people had taken loans from private financial companies. The company made them sign some papers and gave them ATM cards. Their monthly payments for MGNREGA, pension, and gas subsidy were now credited to another source. They came to me to check their bank accounts, and I told them their money had not been deposited. Only after joining DEF, I learned what happened to all of their money. We checked that those financial companies were the direct beneficiaries, and these people had no knowledge of it," Devyani Kumari says.

Rekha, a DEF Infopreneur from the Ramgarh district in Jharkhand, shared a similar experience in which she stopped rural women around us from getting financially scammed. "A few days ago, a woman received a message that she would receive a tractor if she sent Rs 8,500. She visited me and asked me to send the money. I told her I didn't have the money. When I asked her about the details, she explained the whole thing. I told her it was fake because no government department asks for money through Google Pay. They do it either through draft or banking channels. She told me that another woman had already paid Rs 8,500. I called that woman. She told me it was true. I told them the elections were underway, and in any case, they wouldn't benefit from government schemes during elections. I saved one woman, but another one had already paid."

Kavita Devi, a 29-year-old DEF Infopreneur from the Ramgarh district in Jharkhand, shared an incident of misinformation about *Gojam* that was spread across villages. In *Gojam*, daughters were asked to give sarees to their mothers.<sup>1</sup> People told Kavita Devi that if she did

<sup>1</sup> The social practice of *Gojam* is prevalent in rural regions of Jharkhand,



not do it, her mother could fall ill or die. “My sister-in-law told me that the whole village believes it, and I should also send clothes. I told her the whole village believes it does not make it true. My sister-in-law later agreed. I told her to let us see if something happens to my parents now that I am not sending clothes. I even asked my sister not to do this. I called my sister-in-law after Holi to ask whether *Gojam* has ended or is still going on. She said it has ended for now. I asked whether my parents had fallen sick. She said no.” In another incident, Kavita Devi says she could argue with her grandmother-in-law that eating/preparing pickles during periods does not make the former go bad/sour. When her grandmother-in-law did not believe it, Kavita Devi demonstrated it by secretly preparing pickles. A lot of confidence to do such things for Kavita Devi has come after she joined DEF and saw for herself in the training how such beliefs could be fake and should not be believed just because an elderly person they respect is saying so.

Moreover, after receiving the training, DEF Infopreneurs have started using online services like Google to verify the information they receive. Geetika, a DEF Infopreneur from Bihar, said that she uses Google to search online if anything is true. This is in contrast to the time before they received the Critical Digital Literacy training. For instance, Kashish Shrivastava, a DEF Infopreneur from the Prayagraj district of Uttar Pradesh, said that she primarily used YouTube to search for new songs, cooking recipes, etc. Nalini, a DEF Infopreneur from the Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh, used YouTube and Instagram. However, that changed when they learned how to verify information online. Much of this learning was transferred to other women in their network.

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which occur in various forms every year. A few years ago, sisters in a family participated in a procession wearing new clothes given by their brothers. This year, the daughters of the family had to send new clothes for their parents. People believe that if they do not follow it, their family members can fall sick or die.

## Conclusion

We learned in our FGDs how rural women are especially targeted- both digitally and locally. They get visited by *Babas* in their villages, who scam them for thousands of rupees and induce fear. They have been heavily targeted by financial scams. On top of that, the existence of a wide array of social practices targeting the mobility and independence of women has only made the situation worse. In a digital world, these beliefs are often strengthened using logical fallacies or “scientific” inputs; they spread like wildfire across villages. The incident of *Gojam* was shared by women from different districts in Jharkhand. It may originate in one place; however, it takes the narratives a matter of hours/days to spread across regions. Our Infopreneurs tackled multiple instances of misinformation after receiving their critical digital literacy training.

Our objective with this project was to nurture a cadre of grassroots rural women entrepreneurs who can provide digital service to their local communities and help people around them be aware of the dangers of misinformation and disinformation. In our efforts, we successfully trained rural women in four districts of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. The first phase included 30 women trained in all four digital literacy modules, including the critical digital literacy module. These 30 women trained 15 women each. Of the 450 who received the training, 90 women were chosen in the second phase. From both phases, 120 women were provided equipment such as laptops and printers to start their digital centres in their respective communities.

In a scenario where independent fact-checkers are limited to urban narratives, the existence of rural women fact-checkers is extremely vital. On the one hand, they understand their local contexts better than anyone else. On the other hand, they can utilise their networks within their communities to adequately disseminate correct information, prevent cyber frauds and raise digital awareness among women around them.



# ***I Made Pickle on my Periods, and it Didn't go Stale***

**A Conversation on Building Resiliency  
Through Critical Digital Literacy**

Rural India has been increasingly falling victim to the pervasive misinformation disinformation campaigns and influence operations that target people who do not have the skills to fact-check accurately. While several initiatives in India fact-check and expose these coordinated misinformation campaigns, the programs' beneficiaries remain an educated urban population. Further, the technology-oriented tools for fact-checking and learning often lack an approach grounded in rural realities. It is in this context that the Digital Empowerment Foundation approached misinformation and disinformation differently- through a critical digital literacy training program in rural India. The following report summarises the context and learnings from the program based on in-depth, focused group discussions with the participants.



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