



Tamil Nadu



Digital Swaraj

FELLOWSHIP



Delhi



Bokaro



# IMPRINTS OF CHANGE: THE DIGITAL JOURNEY TO SWARAJ



Delhi



Mysuru







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**Imprints of Change: The Digital Journey to Swaraj**



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# The Digital

## Society Talisman

Imagine standing at the crossroads of a new dawn, where the digital world and the essence of Swaraj - self-governance - intertwine in a harmonious interplay. In this digital age, we are called to revisit the timeless wisdom of Gandhi's talisman. His words whisper across the years, urging us to focus our gaze on the most vulnerable, those for whom the promise of a just society is still a distant dream. What good is progress if it fails to touch the lives of the marginalised, if it does not restore them to the dignity of self-governance, of Swaraj?

A Digital Society, in its truest sense, is more than just a connected world. It is a society where the digital realm serves as an equaliser, a bridge that closes the chasm between the privileged and the marginalised. It is a space where technology is harnessed not just for convenience or profit but for empowerment, where every click, every byte, carries the potential to uplift the forgotten and the forsaken.

As we envision this Digital Society, let us first think of those who remain on the fringes - the poorest of the poor, the unconnected communities in remote villages, the women and girls, the queer and transgender communities, the indigenous, the Dalits and Bahujans, and the countless others referred to as 'illiterate' and 'uneducated'. They are actually "We The People", who are still excluded from the digital ecosystem, left behind as the world races ahead.

The Digital Swaraj Fellowship, rooted in the philosophy of Swaraj and constitutional democracy, seeks to address this very exclusion. It is a call to action for those who dare to dream of a society where digital inclusion is not a privilege but a right. The fellowship embodies the journey of learning-by-doing, an immersive experience where fellows engage with the real-world challenges faced by diverse communities. They are not just passive observers but active participants, learning from the grassroots, understanding the deep-rooted barriers that keep people from accessing the digital world in a meaningful way, and working to dismantle several of those social and traditional barriers.



Through this fellowship, the idea of Swaraj is given a digital dimension. It empowers the fellows with the tools and skills needed to build a fair and just “digital society” - a society where technology is not a gatekeeper but a gateway to self-governance. The fellows become the torchbearers of a new kind of Swaraj, one that is not just about political independence but about digital sovereignty, where every individual, no matter how marginalised, has control over their own digital identity and destiny.

As we walk this path together, let us hold fast to Gandhi’s talisman. Let it guide our steps as we build a Digital Society that is inclusive, just, and equitable. Let us remember that true progress is measured not by the speed at which we advance but by the breadth of our reach, by how many lives we touch, uplift, and restore to the dignity of self-governance. In this, we will find the true essence of Digital Swaraj - a society where the digital world is a force for good, for empowerment, and for the realisation of a just and equitable world.

**Osama Manzar**

Founder & Director, Digital Empowerment  
Foundation

## Message from

## the Fellowship Team

Drawing on over twenty years of experience in addressing the digital divide in India, DEF recognised a significant gap: the absence of institutions offering fellowships, courses, or specialised training for youth in the digital field, particularly for tackling obstacles to rural development. To address this need and cultivate a new generation of digital and development experts, DEF introduced the Digital Swaraj Fellowship.

This programme aims to develop young leaders by providing them with the skills and knowledge required to advance digital empowerment in rural and underserved areas. Through hands-on experience, skill development, and mentorship from project leaders, fellows are encouraged to take charge of their projects, linking learning with real-world application, employment, and entrepreneurship, thus preparing them for careers in the digital and development sectors. Aligned with DEF's mission to empower marginalised communities through digital capacity building and sustainable development, the Digital Swaraj Fellowship strives to train youth to become proficient and influential leaders in the digital space. The programme helps them effectively engage with communities, create impactful success stories, and nurture meaningful learning experiences.

Throughout the year-long programme, fellows engaged deeply with various communities, gaining firsthand insight into their social realities and how they navigate the challenges posed by digital technology, including issues related to integration, control, and access. The fellows explored diverse digital interventions aimed at overcoming socio-economic barriers, improving financial services, and advancing poverty alleviation efforts. The fellowship successfully achieved its goal by enabling fellows to contribute significantly to Digital Empowerment Foundation's grassroots initiatives, preparing them to become future leaders in digital transformation.

It was encouraging to see that the fellows appreciated the opportunity to work directly in rural areas, immersing themselves in the community's daily life. This fellowship stands out for its commitment to active learning, where fellows are constantly engaged with the communities, focusing on tangible outcomes. Looking ahead, we hope that the second cohort will expand significantly, benefiting a larger number of fellows and positively impacting the broader digital ecosystem. This will help create a well-rounded group of young professionals equipped to influence and guide strategies related to digital inclusion and societal development.

## About

# Digital Swaraj Fellowship

Founded in 2002, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) has been committed to enhancing the digital capacity, access, and rights of marginalised and unconnected communities. DEF's initiatives span diverse sectors including education, entertainment, livelihood, finance, health, agriculture, culture, and heritage, with a particular focus on advancing digital rights for women and adolescents. Through a network of 10,000 digital grassroots leaders, DEF has made a significant impact across 2,000 locations in over 200 districts and 26 states in India.

Despite the advances in digital technology, many communities continue to face challenges such as marginalisation, affordability issues, lack of connectivity, digital illiteracy, and limited access to digital resources.

Recognising a crucial gap in the availability of fellowships, courses, and specialised training for youth in the digital domain, particularly for

addressing barriers to rural development, DEF launched the Digital Swaraj Fellowship. This initiative aims to cultivate a new generation of digital leaders by providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to drive digital empowerment in rural and underserved areas.

The fellowship offers grassroots exposure, skill-building, and mentorship from project leads, encouraging fellows to take ownership of their projects. It bridges learning, experience, employment, and entrepreneurship, preparing them for impactful careers in the digital and development sectors.

Aligned with DEF's vision of empowering communities through digital capacity building and sustainable development, the Digital Swaraj Fellowship seeks to facilitate learning-by-doing and on-the-job training to develop youth into experts and leaders. This programme enables them to integrate with and support communities effectively, promoting success stories and deep learning in the process.

**PART ONE**  
**Digital Swaraj**  
**in Action**



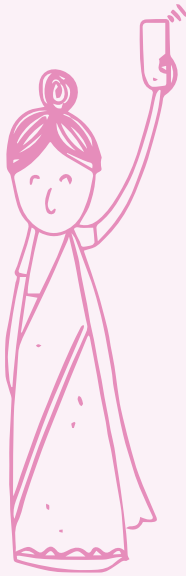
# maitri singh



Maitri Singh, Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh



“ Before the fellowship, I had some idea of the digital gap in India, but witnessing it firsthand was a different experience altogether. My conversations with children, women and the elderly made me realise that their concerns were distinct: in urban centres, it’s about digital rights and data protection, whereas in rural areas, it’s about lack of access to phones and awareness of government schemes designed for their benefit. Internet accessibility is also a significant challenge. ”



Maitri Singh, born in Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, and raised in Delhi, is a postgraduate in English Literature from Ambedkar University, Delhi. As a founding member of the non-profit organisation 'Association for Parivartan of Nation,' she has significant experience in education and social work. Driven by a profound desire to create a lasting impact, Maitri aspires to utilise the power of technology and digital platforms as catalysts for social transformation.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, Maitri worked on a research project focused on economic diversification and alternative livelihood opportunities in the coal-dependent areas of Bokaro and Ramgarh districts in Jharkhand. She monitored and implemented the project on the ground, using various research methods to provide valuable insights and practical solutions. The aim of the project was to explore alternate livelihood opportunities in Jharkhand to facilitate a Just Transition during coal phase down, which will ensure that the communities, local stakeholders and businesses dependent on coal should not be left out or suffer loss of employment or income in India's pursuit of reaching Net zero

and reducing carbon emissions. Maitri has played an instrumental role in research, writing, data cleaning, analysis, and documentation of the project.

Maitri's journey began in Sultanpur, a quiet district in Uttar Pradesh. Her early years were spent in Gujarat and then in Delhi, where she grew up. With a Master's degree in English Literature, Maitri began a new adventure as a Digital Swaraj Fellow.

Before this, Maitri had never imagined working in rural India. She was used to the comfort of city life and academic pursuits. However, her four years with the Association for Parivartan of Nation had

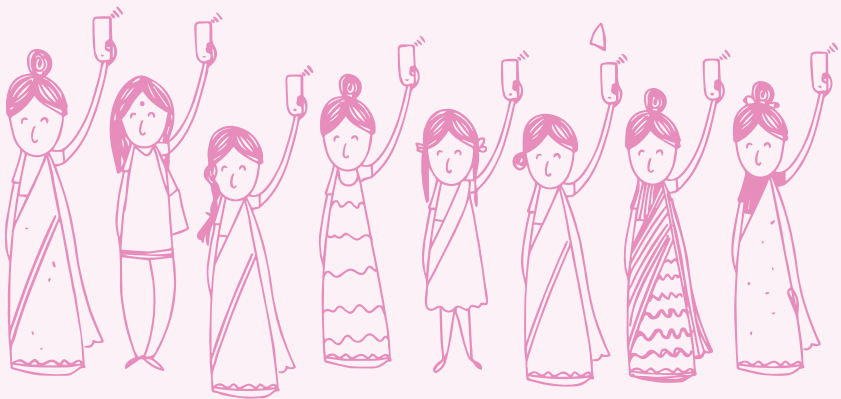


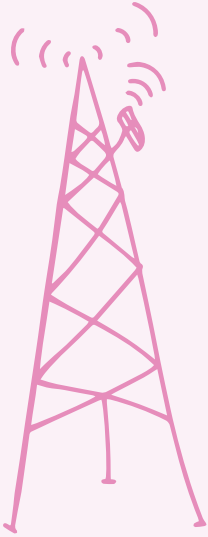


ignited a passion within her. She had worked hard advocating for the Right to Education and saw firsthand the struggles people faced due to digital illiteracy. Many daily wage workers and migrants could not access education for their children because they lacked the time and resources. Maitri believed the answer was in digital empowerment. So, when the chance to become a Digital Swaraj Fellow came, she took it, ready to turn her beliefs into action.

Barabanki, a rural area in Uttar Pradesh, became her new workplace. The rural immersion programme showed her a world different from what she knew. Here, she faced challenges that tested her determination. The monsoon rains disrupted the work of MGNREGA workers, making it hard to interview them for her project on the scheme's gaps. Many were scared to speak openly due to fear of local authorities. "That was a challenging moment, but soon, I figured out how to conduct my interviews in ways that would make them feel less threatened. I used to go there and get their consent, but I would take their interviews in a separate space where their main stakeholders would not be around," Maitri says.

One visit during her field trip left a strong impression on Maitri. She and her colleague, Shrishti, visited weavers' homes in Barabanki. They saw families working long hours for just Rs 60. The small, humble homes reflected their hard lives. This visit reinforced her purpose. She realised her role was more than just collecting data; it was about finding ways to uplift these communities. Meeting Siraj, a weaver who had worked with DEF and now earned Rs 500 a day, showed her the difference digital empowerment could make.





Amidst the challenges, there were moments of joy and bonding. The fellowship was not just about work; it was about building relationships. Maitri enjoyed evenings of “Chai pe Charcha,” discussing various topics over tea. Visiting golgappa stalls with her District Coordinator (DC) became a fun ritual. Weekends at the homes of Digital Didis combined critical thinking with laughter, thanks to Irfan sir’s humour. Even during Muharram, the hospitality of Muslim households, inviting her to share their festive meals, left a lasting impression.

As she delved deeper, Maitri was intrigued by DEF’s initiatives, especially those creating jobs for marginalised communities, particularly women and persons with disabilities. She saw how women, through DEF and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) like National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), were leading change in their villages. These women, whom Maitri deeply admired, were not just participants but leaders, inspiring others to step out of their comfort zones. Pammi ji, a Digital Didi, stood out to Maitri. Despite personal struggles and societal resistance, her passion for her work earned her respect and admiration.

Maitri's view of the digital world changed significantly during her fellowship. She saw that the digital divide in rural areas was not just about technology but about access to basic information and opportunities. In Barabanki, she met children and women who lacked not only digital devices but also the means to connect with their loved ones or access government schemes. In Jharkhand, she saw people viewing digital platforms as a way to earn a living. This broadened her perspective, showing the potential of digital tools to empower communities.





In Jharkhand, Maitri faced her greatest challenge: conducting a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with informal coal workers, a marginalised section seldom heard in policy circles. Advised against going alone due to the sensitivity of the topic, she pressed forward. “We were able to earn the trust of the people... they shared a lot of details,” she recounted proudly. This FGD became a milestone, breaking barriers and shedding light on issues ignored for too long.

Yet, challenges persisted. Convincing communities dependent on coal to participate in her study posed a delicate task. “Questions concerning coal were tricky...people did not want to answer in politically dominant areas,” she explained. Sensitivity and perseverance were key. Retraining surveyors and adapting approaches, Maitri navigated the complexities tactfully, ensuring voices were heard without fear of repercussion.

Migration, another sensitive topic in Jharkhand, added another layer of complexity. “We had to convince people... it was a large study,” she reflected on the painstaking efforts to gather data



ethically and comprehensively. Each interview and each survey conducted with care and respect was a step towards understanding and advocacy.

Reflecting on her journey, Maitri saw beyond the challenges to the profound impact of her work. Her understanding of digital empowerment deepened, and she saw firsthand its transformative potential in marginalised communities. Through DEF's initiatives, particularly empowering women through digital literacy and economic opportunities, she witnessed resilience and determination.

Looking back, Maitri felt the deep impact of her experiences. She gained skills in crisis management, patience, and self-confidence. She discovered a strong desire to continue working in the development sector, using her skills to address societal issues. She learned that real change starts at the grassroots, where policies and theories meet in real life.

To future fellows and anyone passionate about making a difference in India's digital landscape,

Maitri advises, “Start from the ground up.” “It will expand your existing knowledge and perspective. It will make a huge difference regarding what you think is important and how you think about this world. It will help you identify the real gaps because, on paper, everything looks good and comprehensive, but when it works, you experience many different challenges,” Maitri says.





# mili dangwal



Mili Dangwal, Srinagar, Uttarakhand

“

As I engaged deeper with rural communities, I discovered multiple layers of how digital impacts society. It became evident that digital literacy and training can significantly benefit them, such as educating about online safety to prevent falling prey to frauds and scams, and keeping oneself safe in the digital space. Another crucial aspect I learned was the importance of policymaking to empower rural communities in digital spaces. The fellowship has broadened my perspective and understanding in these areas.

”

Mili Dangwal, hailing from Uttarakhand, is a graduate with a BA (Hons) in Political Science from Delhi University. Having a keen interest in the social sector, she has been part of many projects related to education, and women rights and welfare.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, she has been actively involved in the 'DiGI: Digital Cluster Development Programme', a project operating in three districts of Tamil Nadu; Salem, Tirunelveli, and Ooty. This initiative aims to digitally empower communities by enhancing access, connectivity, and services. A significant focus of the project is to support artisans involved in creating GI-tagged



products such as Salem silk sarees, Pattamadai Pai, and Toda embroidery.

Throughout her fellowship, she has gained substantial experience in project implementation. She has been engaged in various stages, from establishing centres to understanding the socio-economic landscapes of the communities and actively involving them in the services provided. For the artisans, Mili's role involves raising digital awareness among them, helping them to elevate their businesses online, and facilitating collaborations to enhance their art, reach a broader audience.

Additionally, Mili has worked on documenting the history, current status, and challenges surrounding these traditional products. She has also utilised social media platforms to promote and share these insights, significantly contributing to the project's outreach and impact.

Mili from Srinagar, Uttarakhand is learning a new language in a rural artisan cluster far from her home - Tamil. "The biggest challenge initially started with the language barrier because most

people here are Tamil-speaking people, and I used to lean on the people around me initially for translation. But with time, I understood that language is still a barrier when travelling alone. But that is the beauty of language; so much expression is attached to it that I am communicating and understanding most of the time, or maybe they understand me based on my expression. It is going well,” says Mili with a big, confident smile. Mili had never lived in a village before this fellowship; her grandparents were her only exposure to village life. But she now coordinates the Digital Cluster Development Programme in three locations in Tamil Nadu, where rural artisans are given digital skills and training to find newer markets for their products.

Mili considers herself lucky because she was able to get involved in a programme from the start in a new location. This experience taught her what it means to establish rapport with the community and what it means to be patient while working with them. “So it is challenging to make people understand your vision and get them on board with you because it is obvious that they cannot trust somebody who just came from outside.



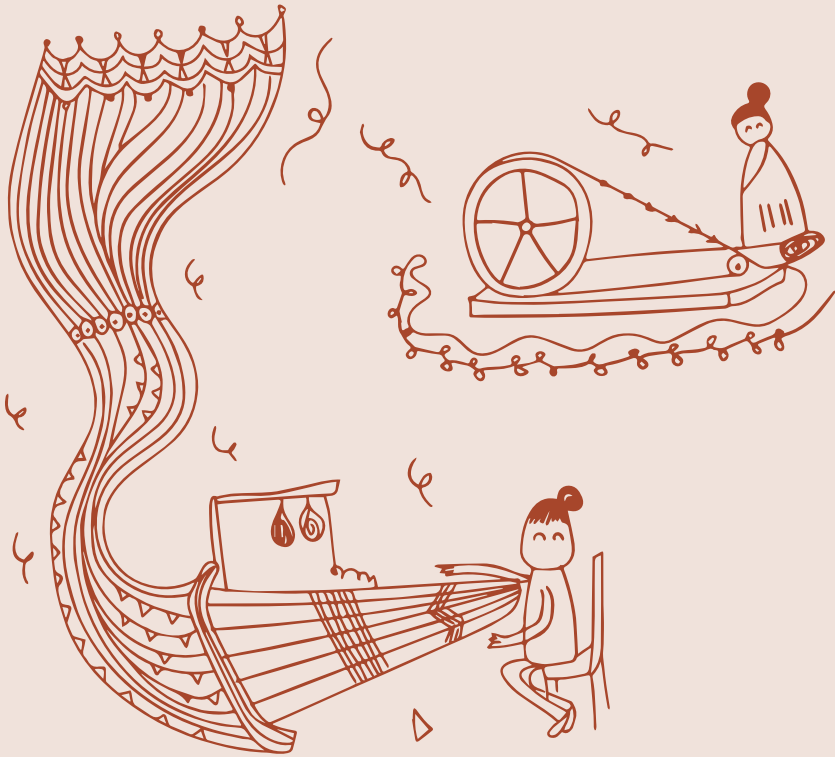
That is a process of how you hold patience and work with communities daily or try to make them comfortable. So that was a challenge initially, but now it is a smooth ride,” says Mili, reflecting on her journey to coordinate between three centres in three locations - Salem, Pattamadai and Ooty, where hundreds of women come to learn digital skills. The first part of her work involved understanding the underlying social and economic



factors that necessitate a project like this, the local relations of power and the history of the community that keeps the market and profit of the artisan product so limited. Once this was done, she had to find a suitable space to establish a digital capacity-building centre where the organisation could collaboratively operate with the local artisan community. “This includes a lot of challenges”, she notes, denoting the multitude of negotiations she had to make to open one centre. “Still, finally overcoming all of them, setting up centres and then progressing towards involving the communities, gaining their trust, communicating our messages and then moving forward to facilitate services, workshops, awareness and other benefits,” Mili shares the happiness of finally implementing a project that now serves the artisans and weavers in these locations digitally. The fellowship enabled Mili to understand the spectrum of exclusions and the possibilities digital tools can provide to rural communities.

Reflecting on her fellowship experience, she admits her initial understanding of digital technology was basic. Now, having worked in both rural Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu, she sees a whole new world

of possibilities for using technology as a tool. Witnessing the limitations faced by unconnected communities has further solidified this perspective. “My understanding of digital technology before the fellowship was quite limited. However, after the fellowship, I can say that it has a whole new spectrum where you can use digital technology as a tool,” she adds. Initially, she thought access to



digital equipment and the internet alone would be sufficient to make a community tech-enabled. Eventually, she learned that the on-ground experience goes far beyond just basic access to infrastructure.

The fellowship programme gave her exposure to context based digital literacy training. She learned how to tailor training sessions to the specific needs and existing knowledge of the communities. One particular challenge she encountered was the prevalence of online scams targeting these communities. This experience solidified her belief

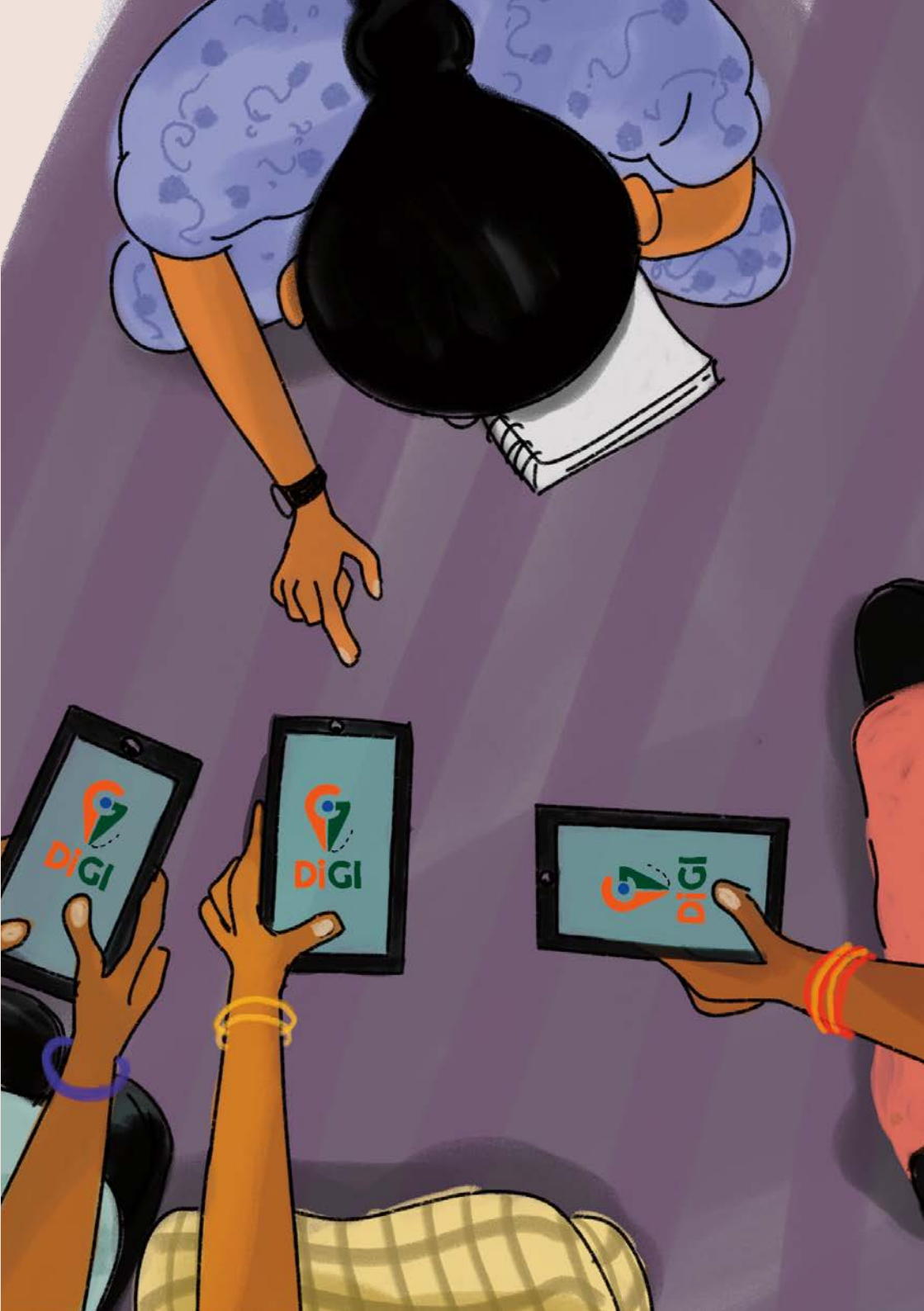


in the importance of advocating for policies that promote digital safety and awareness in rural areas.

She shares an example of how the fellowship broadened her perceptions about digital training: “In many places, we see people getting trapped in online fraud. For them, that is such hard-earned money. This indicated the need for a whole new dimension of how one should work towards building policies for digital space to make it safe for vulnerable communities. My understanding has broadened with the fellowship.” Now, she is determined to use her experience to develop training programmes that not only equip communities with technical skills, but also empower them to navigate the digital world in a safe and secure manner.

The fellowship was not all about work; a great part was also about exploring the world through a different lens and having the confidence to navigate it more joyfully. As Mili herself noted, “Beyond the technical aspects of the fellowship, the experience transformed me on a personal level...”. Her encounters shattered preconceived notions and revealed a world rich in kindness, patience,

and empathy. The communities she visited demonstrated an incredible generosity of spirit, even with limited resources. This deeply ingrained a sense of giving, leaving an indelible mark on Mili. “I have learned that these people carry a sense of kindness, patience, and empathy. I have travelled to rural communities, and the sense of giving is great even when you do not have enough.” She says, “I have imbibed that and want to take it forward and implement it in my life.”



# pratiksha kamble



Pratiksha Kamble, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra



“ There are immense challenges related to digital access on the ground, starting from family constraints to transportation hurdles and the difficulty of reaching a cyber cafe. Individual, social, and cultural barriers also exist—preconceived notions, especially regarding female gender and associated prejudices. Despite these challenges, people are keen to optimised digital tools to become independent and self-reliant, promoting growth and learning.”

Pratiksha Kamble is a dedicated professional with a postgraduate degree in Biotechnology and a focus on working in the social sector. With an educational background in Biotechnology, she brings a unique blend of scientific expertise and social advocacy to her work. She has always been open to learning new things to upskill herself at every stage of her life. Additionally, she is an enthusiastic traveler and explorer. She loves exploring off-beat places. Moreover, her interest areas include reading books, meeting new people, and trying new technologies for the best use.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, she led impactful projects to understand and enhance the socio-economic empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) through digital initiatives. She spearheaded an extensive impact study involving over 350 PwDs across India. She supervised a team of 22 surveyors and pioneered innovative solutions to address real-time challenges, ensuring the smooth execution of the research study.

As part of the 'DigitABLE' project under the Digital Swaraj Fellowship, she played an instrumental role in shaping the comprehensive research report

elucidating the transformative potential of digital enablement for PwDs. Additionally, she played crucial roles in organising teams and executing events such as the Digital Green Prakriya Event (Hyderabad) and the Rural Entrepreneurship Digital Empowerment Fest (West Bengal), where she collaborated with diverse stakeholders to promote rural entrepreneurship and digital literacy.

Pratiksha's journey in DEFs Digital Swaraj Fellowship presents impressive numbers. During



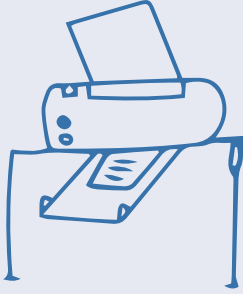


her rural immersion programme, Pratiksha visited 28 community members in the Alwar district of Rajasthan. When she was engaged with the Samarth SoochnaPrenuers, Pratiksha engaged with more than 350 Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). Moreover, she managed a team of 22 surveyors from more than 17 states of India. However impressive, numbers cannot capture the nitty-gritty, the hardship, the periods of toil and the joyful moments one goes through on such a journey. For that, we need to hear stories and narratives that underline the changing perspective and the broadening of the mind.

Pratiksha comes from the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. Before joining the fellowship, she completed her Master's in Marine Biotechnology from Goa University. In her orientation workshop, Pratiksha was fascinated by things that DEF had worked on, including education, health, and research. "As a Science student, I am interested in research. When I go to the ground level and meet new people, it would give me an opportunity to learn something new," Pratiksha says, explaining her reason for joining the fellowship.

From the onset, Pratiksha strove to go beyond the theoretical approach; she insisted on learning how such approaches are actualised on the ground and how technology gets used to make a real difference in people's lives. While her highlights include





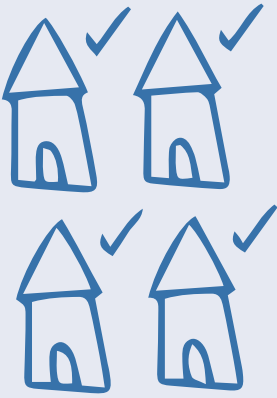
organising events like a Technical Workshop & Consultation on 'Tackling Harms of Digital Tech on Environment and Climate' in Hyderabad and the Rural Entrepreneurship and Digital Empowerment Fest 2024 in West Bengal, she understood the change that digital can bring in people's lives through human stories.

Among these stories, Pratiksha repeatedly talks about Pratap Ji, a Samarth SoochnaPreneur she met in Alwar. "Pratap Ji runs a boarding school for disabled children in his area; he has been running the school for around 17 years. Alongside, he has a Samarth SoochnaPreneur centre with DEF. In his school, Pratap Ji provides food and accommodation for disabled children. When I met him, I realised that despite not having adequate resources, people are still passionate about doing social good. That made me think I must also do something with my life," Pratiksha says.

A key theme that the fellows discovered during their fellowship is the remoteness of Indian villages. This remoteness presents severe challenges when it comes to accessing digital technologies. In an urban space, digital

technologies have evolved to include access to Wi-Fi, digital payments and social media platforms, among others. We are used to the speed of the internet. Even a 4G internet connection can sometimes feel slow, and we eagerly wait for the signal to display 5G so that we can keep streaming our YouTube videos and OTT shows in high-





definition quality. However, rural India is a different world altogether. Villagers often travel kilometres to get a photocopy. With the lack of transport facilities, this becomes even more difficult. Pratiksha witnessed such a scenario in Kareeriya, a remote village in Alwar.

Unlike other remote areas, Kareeriya has its own hero in the form of Khushi Ram ji. Pratiksha talks about how his Samarth SoochnaPreneur centre helped provide doorstep access to digital for Kareeriya villagers. “Khushi Ram ji’s centre is on a roadside in the village. However, that village is very remote. There is no direct transport from Alwar to that village. Khushi Ram ji is a disabled person and walks with the help of a stick. Despite that, he eagerly informs his fellow villagers about every government scheme. The village has elderly people who are unable to visit the centre. Khushi Ram ji visits these elderly people at their homes and helps them prepare their documents. His eagerness to help people inspires me,” Pratiksha says.

Along with inspirational stories, Pratiksha also discovered concerning developments in rural regions through the digital medium. One of these



developments is the increase in cybercrime. As per Pratiksha, Alwar has emerged as a hub of cybercrime. She saw children engaged in such activities. Along with that, she also observed the effects of misinformation and fake news on the ground. Misinformation has emerged as a significant challenge to increasing access to digital in rural areas.

“Such is the extent of misinformation in Alwar that girls who study outside the region are also affected. People spread fake news about girls turning towards bad ways after getting educated. It has had a harsh impact on Alwar. Rural girls living in Alwar and completing their education were called back by their families and made to marry. The age of marriage is quite low there. Young adults get married when they are in the first year of their graduation. It does not affect financially stable families, but it affects poor families,” Pratiksha narrates. The existing patriarchal beliefs are so rigid that families refrain from providing smartphones to girls, thinking that they may turn towards the wrong path. On the other hand, she heard several stories of young boys leaving school to indulge in cybercrime. “They get paid Rs. 1000-

1500 to spread fake news and scam people. It was quite stark. Youth is the future of the country. If they are doing such things and damaging their future, it will be an issue for the country,” Pratiksha worryingly says.

However, despite seeing these adverse effects of digital technologies, Pratiksha firmly believes that the solution also lies in digitalisation. One of her reasons for continuing to work at the grassroots level is to make people aware of how digital technologies can be used for good things. As she finishes her fellowship with DEF, Pratiksha advises the next batch of fellows to focus on “learning and innovation” if they want to work in the digital landscape. For Pratiksha, by staying committed, building relationships and working with people and communities, one can make a real impact at the grassroots level.



DIGITAL  
EMPOWERMENT  
OF  
PWDS

# punti kumari

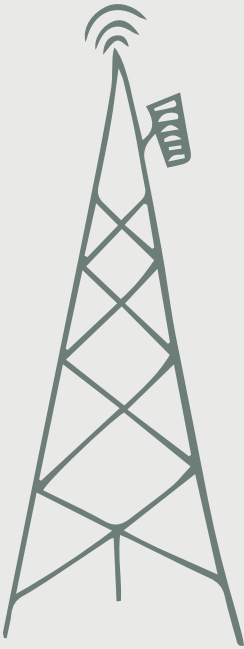


Punti Kumari, Tarwan Village, Bihar

“

Previously, I considered digital to be primarily about social media. However, the fellowship experience has broadened my perception and understanding of what digital entails. I can now effectively leverage digital tools for community empowerment. During my field visits, I encountered many instances of digital fraud. This underscored the importance of digital literacy and awareness. Knowing about digital threats and how to counter them is crucial.

”



Punti belongs to the Tarwan village in the Patna district of Bihar. She was keen on pursuing education since childhood, but her schooling started late due to the poor financial condition of her family. Along with her education, she has worked with many social organisations, which helped develop her understanding of the issues prevailing in society. She has overcome many pressures from society and family to complete her graduation and make a mark for herself. She works as a social activist and is rooted on the ground.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow, she has worked in Neemuch district in Madhya Pradesh focussing on establishing multiple SoochnaPreneur centres. She opened one SoochnaPreneur centre as part of Tata Power Project and two Samarth SoochnaPreneur centres as part of the project 'Hope 1000', an initiative aimed at providing digital assets such as computers and printers to 1000 PwDs across the country. In both the projects, she has worked from ground level, mobilising individuals to become SoochnaPreneurs, training them in basics of computer, digital services, centre management, and establishing the centres. Her efforts have created a strong trust with the locals, with the organisation

looking forward to opening more centres there in the near future.

Punti, a young woman from Tarwan village in Patna district, Bihar, embarked on a transformative journey after finishing her graduation. Joining the Digital Swaraj Fellowship with DEF was a big step for her. Before joining the fellowship, Puntti worked with organisations like Gaurav Gramin Mahila Vikas Manch (GGMVM), Dr. Ambedkar Student Front of India, Eva Foundation, and Love Matters.





Punti believes that villages need more attention compared to cities. Having lived in a village, she knows there is a lot of work to do, especially in education. She wants to help villages develop by sharing her knowledge and guiding their progress.

The fellowship took her to Alwar district, Rajasthan, where she immersed herself in the lives of rural communities across 28 villages. “Conversing in different languages during field visits allowed me to grow and learn. I could grow my conversational skills because I had mostly spoken to girls before, not women. In Alwar, I saw many centres run by women.



I spoke to them and tried to adapt to their culture, which I did. So, I developed good conversational skills through that,” Punti recalled, reflecting on her engagement with a new community.

Among the many lessons she learned, digital technology emerged as a powerful tool. “I did not know much about digital, but when I went for my field visits, I noticed that the village women were very active. The way that they worked in the field, the way that they provided their services to the people, like informing them about the new schemes and policies, teaching them how to use their phones and a lot of other training that they gave through digital, I learned all of it through them. I also learned how digital technology can benefit us,” she noted, expanding her understanding beyond social media to see its potential in rural development.

However, her journey had challenges, too. The sudden passing of her best friend during a crucial phase of her fellowship was deeply upsetting. “It was very shattering and challenging for me because here I was, far from home, just starting a new journey, and suddenly this had happened,” she



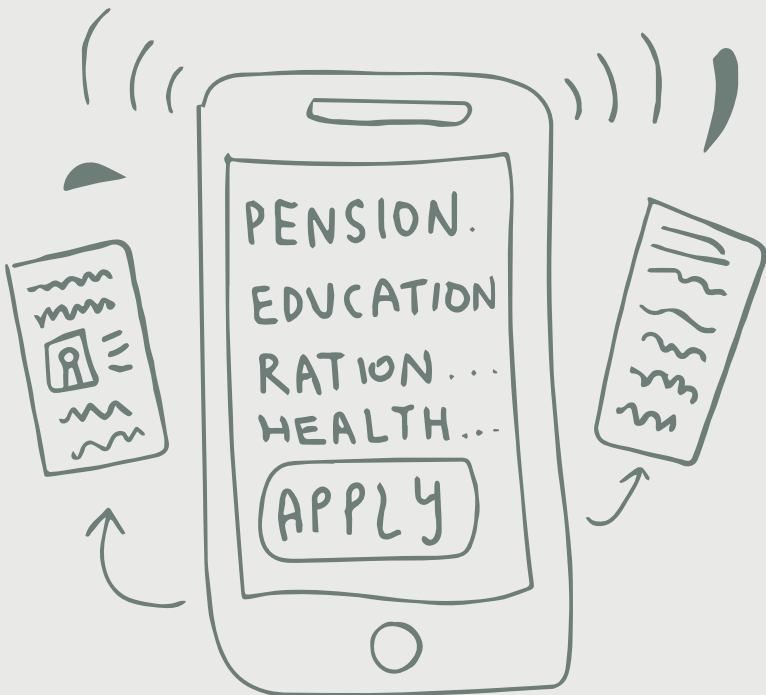
shared, her voice conveying the pain of loss and distance.

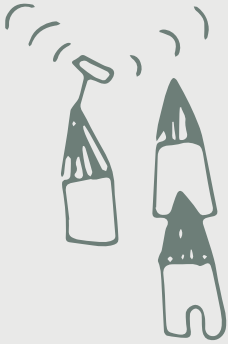
Despite personal hardships, Puntti found strength in the stories of resilience from rural life. “There was a moment during one of my field visits where I met many women. There was an old woman around 85 years old. Listening to the journey of her life firsthand was a great experience. The old woman told us that when she was newly married and went to her in-law’s house, she learned there was a tradition in the village to send the newlywed wives to the landlords for sexual favors. This was statedly prevalent in the region. Her husband used to torture her. She does not feel bad about the death of her husband.” she recalled the old woman’s words.

Meeting Ashok ji, a disabled man who started a centre for children with disabilities, was a highlight of her fellowship. “Meeting him was one of the best parts of the journey,” Puntti said admiringly, remembering his determination despite physical challenges.

More than anything else, Puntti felt strongly about the struggles of villagers who had to travel far

to access essential digital services. These are the regions without proper transportation and communication channels. Seeing DEF's work in such areas filled her with hope and pride. "The elderly had trouble accessing government schemes because they had to travel far to photocopy documents. With DEF opening centres in their village, it is much easier for everyone. DEF provides training, services, and support for basic digital needs, which is truly inspiring," Puntti says.





Reflecting on her journey, Puntí found inspiration in Monika ji, her District Coordinator (DC) in Alwar, Rajasthan. “Her story impacted me a lot. I am inspired by her raising two kids alone while pursuing a full-time job,” Puntí shared, impressed by Monica’s ability to overcome challenges and lead by example.

Moving to the Neemuch district in Madhya Pradesh, her field experience was initially full of challenges. The main challenge was travelling to remote areas. “There were times when I struggled with getting a bus. There are bus timings in villages, and even when you get a bus, it does not drop you to the destination. It drops you on the main road; the village could be 3-5 kms further away. This distance had to be covered by walk most times. There were no other transport services. Sometimes, I had to ask for a lift from strangers, which was a challenge. It was a new environment,” Puntí said.

Having learned from her experience in Alwar, Puntí paved the way towards establishing multiple SoचनाPreneur centres in the Neemuch district. The villagers in one of the centres, mainly from the tribal community, had to travel miles to avail

themselves of digital services. Her efforts led to the establishment of a Soochna Adhikaar Kendra.

As her fellowship ended, Puntí looked ahead with a sense of purpose. “I want to tell future fellows to approach digital like they approach their other educational pursuits,” she advised, eager to share her knowledge and passion for digital literacy gained through her DEF experience.



# shrishti sinha



Shrishti Sinha, Ranchi, Jharkhand

“ Earlier, I had only understood the digital realm in mainly urban contexts, like e-governance, which is convenient and quick. On the other side, never understood or thought about how, for rural communities, this means strategic exclusion because of less alternatives to e-governance. The digital realm is dependent on so many other factors like infrastructure, electricity, and connectivity, which are often challenging in rural parts of the country. ”

Shrishti Sinha graduated from Azim Premji University with a Bachelors in Humanities. She holds a combined Humanities degree from Azim Premji University, where she developed a passion for exploring the intersection between digital technology and socio-economic inequalities. She enjoys writing on a variety of topics, creative and academic. She was also a part of the Youth Internet Governance Forum and India School on Internet Governance.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, her focus has been on last mile connectivity and digital governance. She was an integral part of the Digital Citizen Summit team, wherein she coordinated with various organisations, and helped develop the themes of individual talks and the overall summit. In the conference, she presented her paper titled, 'Social Engineering Attacks Among the Rural Populace.' She also produced the documentation report that detailed each session and outlined the major recommendations of the summit.

She has conducted Focus Group Discussions and interviews for a 'Cost of Exclusions' study in collaboration with Global Digital Inclusion



Partnership. She has also led communications for a project centered on rural women entrepreneurship and developed a guidebook for the project that details the ecosystem of the entire project. She has also contributed for DEF TypeWright Newsletter writing pieces on satellite internet, shadowbanning palestine voices on social media, mental health and social media: development around the US Senate judgment.

When we asked Shrishti about a person, she found the most inspiring in her fellowship period, she spoke about Mala Yadav, a SoochnaPreneur



of DEF she met during her rural immersion in Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh. “One of the most inspiring conversations I had was with Mala Yadav,” she shared. Mala, a Digital Didi, was not just a champion for digital literacy; she was also actively involved with government organisations like the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC). Shrishti recounted her story, a story of resilience and determination. “Mala told me about how she once dreamt of becoming a police cadet in Uttar Pradesh, a dream seemingly dashed when she was denied the opportunity to leave her house and eventually get married.”

Life, however, had other plans. Financial hardships forced her to find work after marriage, which eventually led her to become a SoochnaPreneur. “The most incredible part was seeing other women in the community join her, venturing out to contribute financially. Mala was already doing the work I had always wanted to do!”. Shrishti, a young graduate from Azim Premji University, joined the fellowship hoping to work on more projects at the intersections of society and technology. Through her work, she listened, understood and wrote about many women like Mala and their resilience.

Shrishti's work, however, was not restricted to merely becoming a listener; she was one of the leading members of a team that organised the Digital Citizenship Summit (DCS), an important platform that discussed and deliberated the policy challenges in the digital realm in India. She also worked on Type Right, a bi-monthly curation of the policy developments in the digital field published by DEF, two research projects and a project on integrating rural women entrepreneurs in North-East India.



Reflecting on her journey, Shrishti highlights that one of the biggest challenges she faced was navigating the gap between the policies and their implementation. However, the opportunity to chronicle these experiences in a written paper on various topics has been a rewarding experience for her. What she shared about learning all about the digital ecosystem despite being from a humanities



background offers a new perspective for fellows who aspire to join a new cohort and venture into the emerging field of digital humanities. “I am from a very strict humanities background, but I still studied the technical aspects of the internet and understood how the internet works. I do not think a lot of us know that. This is a good feeling to get into if you want to expand your horizons,” Shrishti emphasises.

Shrishti credits the fellowship with helping her overcome the hesitancy of talking to new people and come out of her shell in a positive way. “When I initially went for the rural immersion, I was worried how to initiate a conversation; or even getting them to talk to me because I felt like I was constantly bothering them,” she recollected. “Gradually, I started striking up conversations, and to my surprise, I was often warmly welcomed. I was even invited into homes for meals, creating genuine connections that would not have been possible without stepping outside my comfort zone”. She says that apart from engaging with research during the fellowship, she also learned several key skills, like communication, in her journey with DEF. “Apart from learning about

the digital ecosystem, I also understood how a fast-paced NGO works in the country. How do you connect with people, how do you make connections, and how do you work in a field? Overall, it has given me a lot of hard and soft skills,” she shares.

For Shrishti, stepping into the rural immersion programme was not just about meeting new people; it was about encountering a whole new reality when it came to technology. Previously, Shrishti had viewed advancements like e-governance and e-finance as universally positive developments. However, she soon realised the impact of the digital divide. For rural communities with limited access, these initiatives could create exclusion. Further, her initial perception of data privacy concerns being limited to urban social media use was shattered. Living with the communities, she witnessed how data breaches and misuse were a real threat to rural citizens.

Shrishti entered the fellowship programme eager to delve into the technical aspects of digital empowerment. However, she also shared that the introspective aspect of the fellowship about

her own identity left a lasting impression on her. Prior to the programme, Shrishti's world had been confined to the bustling streets and elite circles of urban life. Stepping into the rural immersion programme shattered those comfortable limitations. Here, she encountered people from all walks of life, like Mala ji, whose stories were woven from vastly different economic and social threads. This stark contrast to her own experiences forced her to confront her own place within the larger social hierarchy. "As much as I got to learn the technical side of it, I think it was also a very introspective journey where I got to learn my place in society and think about my identity," she reflects. "Before this, I had always been in urban and elite contexts. When I went for rural immersion, I got to know people from every walk of life. Like the economic context, the social context completely differed from what I had experienced. So that made me reflect a lot on where I stand in society and what my place in the world is, and I just thought about the larger structures in the place," she added, reflecting on her one-year journey. But throughout her journey, she was happy to spend time in rural India where she could star gaze and stare at constellations, which was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for her.

# swati tiwari



Swati Tiwari, Kapashera, Delhi



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The digital divide between the rural and urban has become quite evident for me, after the fellowship experience. As an urban user, I am constantly updated about the latest trends around technology. Whereas in a village, accessing basic services through technology is in itself a challenge, as it involves navigating numerous challenges. Even though technology enables better connections with the outside world fostering knowledge and interaction, there is still a lot of gap in accessing this in the rural areas.

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Swati Tiwari comes from Amethi, Uttar Pradesh. However, she moved to Delhi with her parents in early childhood. She is a postgraduate student in the Women and Gender Studies programme at IGNOU. She is one of the founding members of the organisation “Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes,” which primarily works with youth and



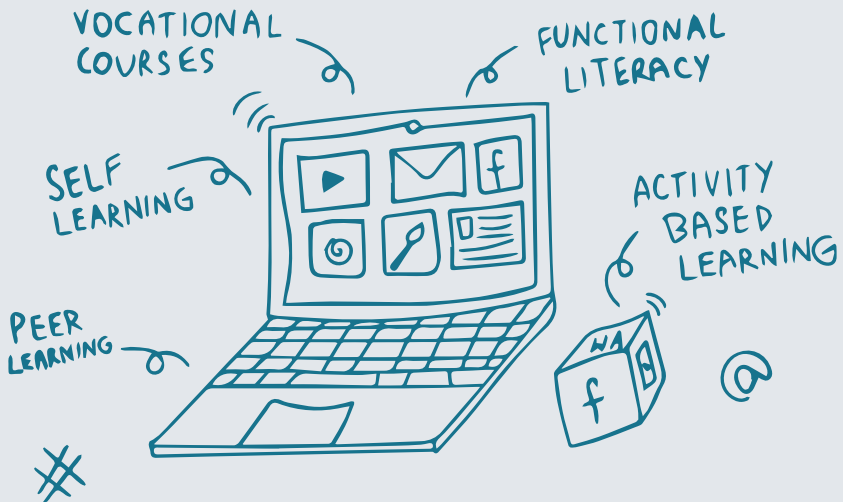
adolescents. She has facilitated several sessions of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) with adolescents. She comes from an art background, and has been using forum theater as a tool for creating social awareness.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, she has played a key role in setting up a digital school in the Savariya Digar village of the Nandurbar district in Maharashtra. This digital school initiative focused on both the physical and mental development of children among the tribal community of Savariya Digar, through the integration of digital tools. She developed a curriculum tailored for Marathi-medium students from classes 5th to 10th and conducted training sessions on digital literacy in the village.

Swati was also a key member of the final phase of the 'Samartpur' project, a rural entrepreneurship-based model designed to create ideal smart villages in India. She managed data from nine states and more than 100 villages. She worked with the team and learned about different phases of project management, training and monitoring, and data analysis.

Swati was born in Uttar Pradesh and moved to Delhi with her father, who had to migrate to Delhi for work, where she spent a considerable part of her life. Growing up in the capital city of Delhi, like many of her contemporaries, she took some part of digital services for granted, and photocopy shops and internet cafes were always an aspect of her own urban life. However, her own initiation into the digital world was not so privileged. The computer was still considered a prized possession a few years back when she was in high school. “When I first joined a computer class in 12th grade, Wi-Fi and laptops were entirely new concepts to me. The mere notion of them seemed futuristic, a world away from the familiar pen and paper. Even the humble mouse became a source of apprehension. My well-meaning teacher, perhaps overzealous in his explanation, warned me of potential electric shocks from the mouse”. Swati was so cautious about using the mouse that her computer teacher had to reassure her that it was not as dangerous as he initially presented it to be. It was only after this reassurance that she dared to touch it. “That simple act of holding the mouse was a pivotal moment. It shattered my limited perception of technology and opened my eyes to a world

where the digital realm permeated far beyond mobile phones. It was a universe brimming with possibilities, waiting to be explored.” she explained. Swati’s experience, though initially a city-based one, hinted at a starker reality for many in rural India. The fellowship programme soon revealed to her the true depth of the digital divide, a divide her own urban upbringing had previously masked partially. Here, even the most basic digital services Swati took for granted were a distant dream for countless communities. The contrast between her own initial trepidation and the struggles faced by rural populations became a defining aspect of her journey.



Swati's fellowship journey involved her engagement with Smartpur project, where she managed data, allowing her to understand the ways of measuring the impact of digital intervention in rural India. The project addressed the need to ensure easy access to essential services like banking, internet, and Aadhaar enrollment, which are services many digitally privileged sections take for granted. Swati recounted a particularly moving experience with an elderly woman in the village. This encounter highlighted the complex challenges rural communities face in navigating the digital world, particularly regarding grievance redressal.

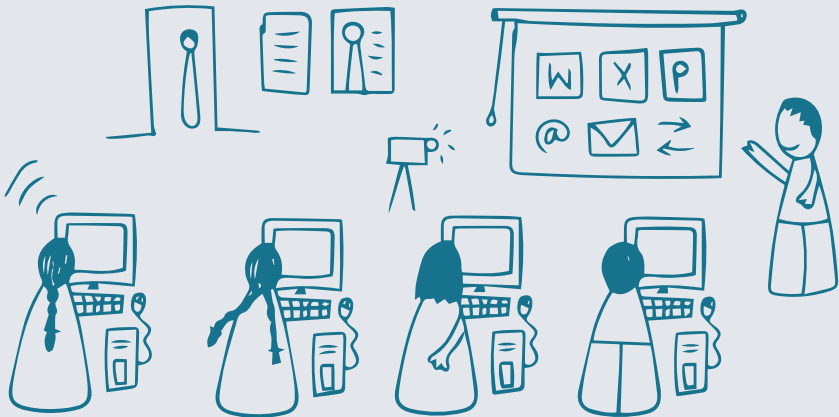
“There was a family with a 70-year-old mother whose Aadhaar card mistakenly showed her age as 30. Her voter ID correctly reflected her age, but this mismatch prevented her from receiving her pension. I visited her home and explained I was working on the Smartpur project. She welcomed me in and presented all her documents, pleading, ‘Look, my Aadhaar card says this, and my voter ID says this. Please come with me and help me get my pension.’ Witnessing her desperation and the trust she placed in us was a defining moment. I

had to gently explain the error in her documents, a concept she initially struggled to grasp. Eventually, with patience, she understood the situation. This experience underscored the critical need for accessible and inclusive grievance redressal mechanisms within the digital ecosystem.”



Swati's fellowship was not limited to government initiatives. She also visited a school for disabled children run by Ashok ji, a disabled individual himself.

“Witnessing Ashok ji's dedication to running a school for disabled children, where they could learn, interact, and find support, was truly inspiring,” Swati said. “Seeing how disability affects people's lives firsthand left a lasting impression on me. Ashok ji's resilience and commitment to his students served as a powerful lesson in empathy and social responsibility,” she added.





Swati's fellowship journey was also about peeling back the layers of the digital divide. Her second project, running a digital school in the remote tribal village of Nandurbar, exposed her to a whole new level of digital exclusion. Imagine a place without mobile network coverage, a reality Swati could not fathom until she arrived in a tribal village, Nandurbar, which had only one school, and that too, for primary education. She faced the challenge of running a digital school without the internet. Educational content pre-loaded onto a television became the unexpected solution. Not only did the children flock to her training, but even adults, eager to learn, joined the sessions. "We take the internet for granted, assuming it is synonymous with network connectivity," Swati reflected. "The fellowship opened my eyes to this crucial distinction. In Nandurbar, with no network access, and electricity arriving as recently as 2018, it felt like stepping back in time. Their reality is far removed from the digital world enjoyed by urban India. The gap is vast," she adds. Swati narrated a simple yet powerful anecdote: "One day, I was listening to music with earbuds. People were fascinated, asking questions and marvelling at the 'magic' of these small devices.

This encounter highlighted the vast gap in digital awareness, not just with internet access, but with basic technology itself.”

Her time in Nuh and Nandurbar presented a stark contrast – one grappling with a temporary internet shutdown, the other devoid of internet altogether. In Nuh, Swati witnessed the ripple effects of a communal conflict leading to an internet shutdown. “I was right there when the violence escalated,” she recalled. “The news of an internet shutdown came the next evening. It was a reality I had not considered - life without the internet.”

Suddenly, the constant connectivity Swati took for granted vanished. “Survival became a challenge,” she admitted. “Connecting with people, sharing information - the very tasks that seemed effortless were now hurdles. Witnessing the rapid spread of fake news during this period was another eye-opener. While some managed to access information through alternative means, many in the community fell prey to manipulated narratives. It highlighted the power of misinformation in a disconnected environment.”

Swati's experience in Nuh, coupled with her knowledge of internet shutdowns in places like Manipur and Kashmir, fueled her desire for a more nuanced approach. "Is shutting down the internet truly the answer? Are there alternative solutions? Have we considered the collateral damage caused by these shutdowns—the disruption of communication, education, and essential services? What other options can be explored?" she asks towards the end of her fellowship, reflecting on a year of observations, experiences, and stories she had learned through this journey.

# vikas chinchkar



Vikas Chinchkar, Beed, Maharashtra

“ Providing access to digital services to vulnerable sections is also an important parameter for poverty alleviation. It can significantly change lives, uplifting them by improving access to essential services. The digital divide is quite evident even within the rural communities. Those who know how to use digital also know which cryptocurrency to buy. And those who do not know about digital are unable to even get access to government entitlements. ”

Vikas Chinchkar, hailing from the Beed district of Maharashtra, has been exposed to grassroots-level issues since his early days. He completed his Masters degree in Urban and Rural Community Development from CSRD-ISWR institute in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra in 2023. During his academic years, Vikas volunteered in the



Sanjaynagar slum area and Grampanchayat Kapurwadi in Ahmednagar District. This gave him the opportunity to interact with farmers, and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of women and children in the village. With a strong conviction towards becoming a development sector professional, he worked on various areas such as education, gender differences, and health. Vikas is particularly passionate about digital literacy, environmental sustainability, and social work interventions.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow at DEF, he has worked on project 'Hope 1000', an initiative aimed at providing digital assets such as computers and printers to 1000 PwDs across the country in Beed district. As part of the project, he successfully started eight centres, identifying and providing support to PwDs, empowering them to become independent service providers within their communities. He also played an active role in Sewa Data Project leading a survey on women's empowerment in Maharashtra, rallying a team of survey coordinators.

Vikas grew up in Bedukwadi village in the Beed district of Maharashtra. Hailing from a

rural background, Vikas understands the stark inequalities between India's urban and rural areas. Early in his life, he started developing a resolve to help mitigate the challenges faced by people in his community, which was gripped by poverty, educational disparities, and gender inequalities, among other issues. After a Master's degree in Social Work, his journey eventually led him to the Digital Swaraj Fellowship, where he embarked on a path to leverage technology for social empowerment.

“After completing my Master's, I came across the opportunity of Digital Swaraj Fellowship. It resonated with my aspirations to bridge the gap in rural education and empower marginalised communities through technology,” Vikas recalled.

The fellowship opened doors to diverse projects for Vikas; these projects are aimed at harnessing digital tools for social good. Among them, the Seva Data Project was a pivotal initiative where Vikas led efforts to collect crucial socio-economic data. “Conducting online training for 10 people in Delhi for the Seva Data Project was a defining moment for me. It marked my first step into digital project



management,” Vikas reminisced. He took immense pride in guiding others through that process.

One of the most impactful initiatives Vikas worked on was in Nandurbar, a tribal district with limited educational resources. Here, he witnessed the transformative power of digital education firsthand. “Implementing digital education initiatives in Nandurbar was truly impactful. We developed



digital content that brought education to children who had never experienced formal schooling,” he recalled, a smile spreading across his face as he remembered the eager faces of children illuminated by the glow of LED screens. “The happiness on their faces made me feel proud. Where there was no source of education, many children started getting education through an LED. It was a joy to see them learning and growing.”

Yet, Vikas’s journey was not without its challenges. “Forming a survey team for the Seva Data Project posed significant challenges initially. Meeting deadlines seemed insurmountable,” he confessed, recalling the initial setbacks. Despite the obstacles, Vikas persevered and made his mark. “During that time, I faced some difficulties in forming a team and completing it on time. How could I complete it by the deadline? With the support of Abhishek ji, I formed a team of 10 people and completed the survey successfully.”

“If a person needed any online document or a print, they had to go 4-5 kilometres away,” said Vikas. Through the fellowship, Vikas’s understanding of digital empowerment deepened significantly.

“When we were in Madhya Pradesh, while doing the visits, we understood that if we provide adequate digital infrastructure to one Person with Disability (PWD), we could facilitate empowerment of many PwDs as well as the larger community,” he explained. This realisation underscored the broader impact of the DEF’s work.



One of the most memorable and gratifying moments for Vikas was when he saw the tangible benefits of their work. “When we worked on the Hope Thousand Project, the delivery of computer or a desktop had a waiting period. I still remember one PwD person calling me to share his joy of receiving digital equipment. They felt supported, which led them to do something for themselves and the community.” These experiences reinforced Vikas’s belief in the power of digital tools to transform lives.

Throughout his journey, Vikas remained inspired by the resilience and determination of the people he worked with. “Visiting DEF centres in Madhya Pradesh was eye-opening. I witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of providing digital equipment to Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). It was not just about technology; it was about empowering individuals to lead independent lives,” he noted.

Looking ahead, Vikas had a clear message for future fellows eager to make a difference. “To those passionate about deploying technology for social change, I urge you to embrace the

Digital Swaraj Fellowship. It is a platform where innovation meets impact, where ideas turn into action,” he encouraged, envisioning a future where digital solutions catalyse widespread social transformation. “For aspiring changemakers looking to make a difference in communities through digital tools, this fellowship offers a transformative opportunity. Whether in gender equality, education, or healthcare, it equips you with the basics to implement impactful solutions,” said Vikas.

In retrospect, Vikas’s journey with DEF’s Digital Swaraj Fellowship was more than a professional milestone; it involved growth, resilience, and unwavering commitment to community upliftment.

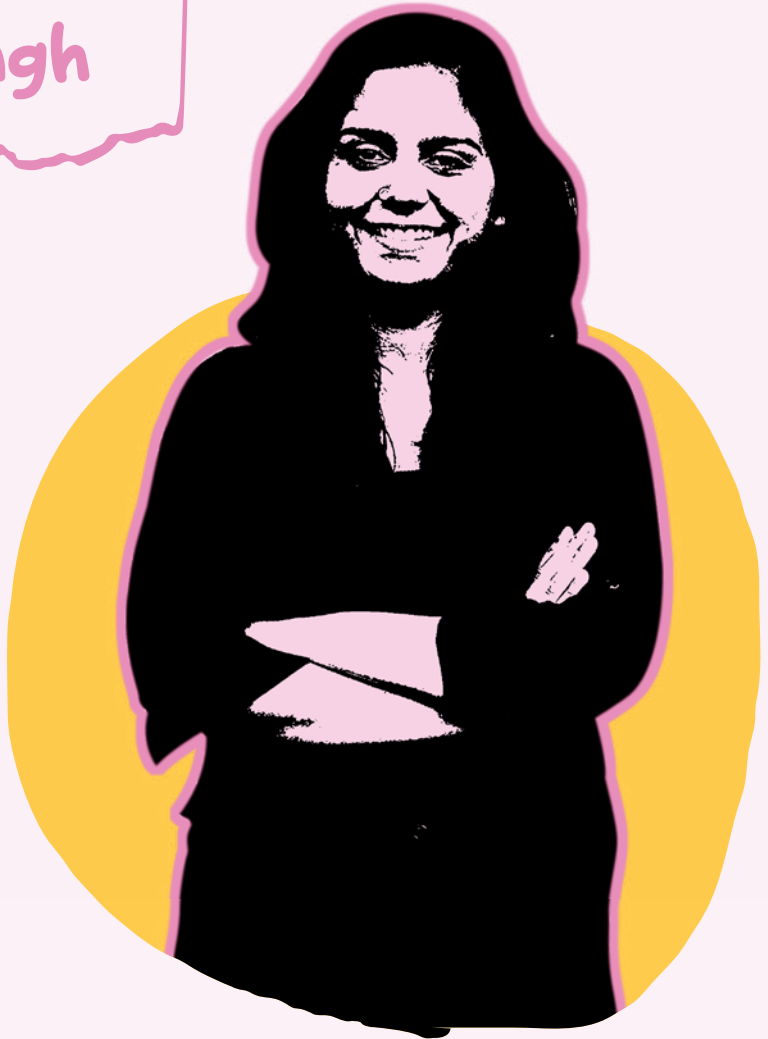


**PART TWO**  
**Fellows ki**  
**Duniya: Notes**  
**from the Field**



## Found in Transition: My Digital Odyssey

Maitri  
Singh





Hailing from Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh, and raised in Delhi, I pursued my post-graduation in English literature from Ambedkar University, Delhi. Before joining the Digital Swaraj Fellowship programme, I co-founded a non-profit organisation 'Association for Parivartan of Nation,' which facilitates



admissions of underprivileged children in private schools under the Right to Education Act 12 (1) (C) and facilitate support in receiving equal and quality education.

“In the Experiential Learning Phase of the fellowship, the main project on which I worked on for almost ten months was a research project that focused on economic diversification and alternative livelihood opportunities in the coal-dependent areas of Bokaro and Ramgarh districts in Jharkhand.”

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow hosted by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), I visited Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh for rural immersion and worked on my research assignment ‘Assessing Gaps and Challenges in Implementation of MGNREGA’. In the Experiential Learning Phase of the fellowship, the main project on which I worked on for almost ten months was a research project that focused on economic diversification and alternative livelihood opportunities in the coal-dependent areas of Bokaro and Ramgarh districts in Jharkhand. In this research project co-run by DEF and the Swaniti Initiative, my role included monitoring and implementing the project on the ground, using various research and field methods. The aim of the project was to explore alternate livelihood opportunities in Jharkhand to facilitate a Just Transition during coal phase down, which will ensure that the communities, local



stakeholders and businesses dependent on coal should not be left out or suffer loss of employment or income in India's pursuit of reaching Net zero and reducing carbon emissions.

The fellowship journey began in Mysuru, where the historic and charming Heritage House served as our base. In its courtyards and halls, we s local delicacies, engaged in lively dance and theatre games, attended many enriching sessions, and forged meaningful connections with other selected fellows, fellowship team and the broader team of DEF. Our adventures extended beyond the Heritage



House as we explored nearby lakes, vibrant markets, significant historical sites, cozy cafes, enjoyed a captivating local play, and as well as a movie screening.

After the Orientation Workshop at Mysuru, I traveled to Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh, for Rural Immersion, a one-month hands-on engagement with DEF's work on the ground. In Barabanki, I stayed in Saidanpur, also known as the weaver's

“The goals and objectives of the project aimed at gathering inputs on potential economic diversification pathways including understanding potential ways for Jharkhand to diversify its economy away from coal, assessing the range of economic activities pursued in the region, available natural resources, potential new industries and the skill sets of the local population.”

town. During my stay, I visited over 20 centres where projects and initiatives such as Smartpur, Digital Didi, Digital Sarthak, Digikargha, Digital Safety and Security, and RCCE were actively underway. I had the opportunity to meet many SoochnaPreneurs, Samarth SoochnaPreneurs, children, elderly individuals, workers, women, panchayat members, and Common Service Centre (CSC) employees to understand how digital initiatives impact and affect their lives, and the pivotal role played by DEF in helping them navigate the digital world.

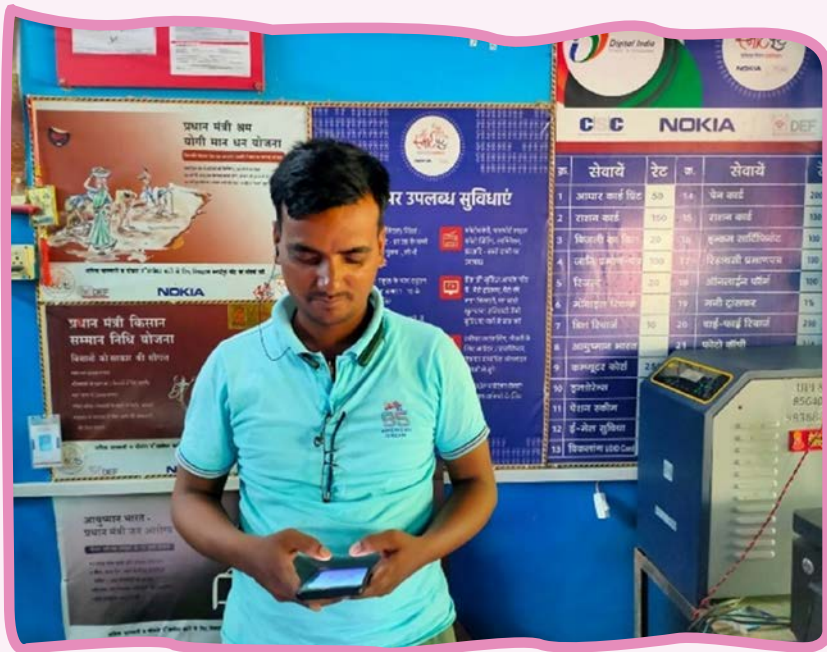
Additionally, I conducted a comprehensive study involving 50 MGNREGA workers. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, I collected primary data through a questionnaire from 50 participants in the Barabanki District over a span of three weeks. I employed exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method for referrals. The research included engaging demographically similar participants in guided focus group discussions and conducting semi-structured interviews with pre-decided questions that

allowed for open-ended responses within a predetermined framework. The key focus areas were digital resource awareness among MGNREGA workers, digital accessibility and the digital divide, the alignment of the online monitoring system with ground realities, and the impact of digital interventions on the success of MGNREGA.

While the assignment had its limitations, it helped me understand how 'digital' operates in rural areas and the challenges faced by communities still far from accessing digital infrastructure and tools. I observed a significant digital divide between male and female workers. Male workers, especially the younger ones, had mobile phones and sometimes internet services, whereas these resources were far less common and nearly non-existent among female workers. Moreover, while biometric authentication was mostly effective, there were instances where panchayats did not have the necessary devices, or workers' fingerprints were unrecognisable due to fieldwork. Consequently, these workers had to travel long distances to withdraw

“This experience proved that while the country claims to be becoming truly digital, marginalised communities are left to navigate the digital world on their own with little or no resources.”

their money from banks. Additionally, wage gaps between men and women were evident in certain villages, and there was variation in wage distribution across different villages. This highlighted the limited knowledge people had regarding schemes and government initiatives, as well as the infrequency of social audits and the inadequacy of grievance and monitoring systems. Furthermore, the online data regarding payment delays, available work, and other information often



differed from the ground reality. This experience proved that while the country claims to be becoming truly digital, marginalised communities are left to navigate the digital world on their own with little or no resources. However, hope shines as the people within these communities tirelessly strive to improve the situation, and consistently try to bridge the digital gap.

Post completion of the rural immersion, the project I undertook in Jharkhand focused on addressing the socioeconomic dependency on coal by exploring economic diversification options in districts of Ramgarh and Bokaro. Jharkhand has a long history of coal mining and





“Most importantly, we incorporated additional questions concerning digital infrastructure and accessibility as well, to examine the role that digital can play in aiding ‘Just Transition’.”

coal-based industries, which has provided revenue and employment, but, however, poses severe challenges for sustainable development and climate change mitigation. With India aiming for net-zero emissions by 2070, transitioning away from fossil fuels is essential. The goals and objectives of the project aimed at gathering inputs on potential economic diversification pathways including understanding potential ways for Jharkhand to diversify its economy away from coal, assessing the range of economic activities pursued in the region, available natural resources, potential new industries and the skill sets of the local population, identifying and engaging key stakeholders, including local officials, businesses, community leaders, and NGOs.

Using the findings of the study through household surveys, enterprise surveys, focus group discussions, semi-formal interviews and multi-stakeholder engagement, the study aimed at creating a blueprint for economic diversification and the necessary interventions required to make it sustainable. The primary stakeholders in the study included

communities and other stakeholders in Jharkhand's coal-dependent districts, including local public officials, businesses, community leaders, and NGOs. It further aims to support social dialogue around a just transition and engage these groups in planning and activities related to economic diversification.

“Being part of the research team, I regularly monitored the data using research methods such as back checks, spot checks, and high-frequency checks. Furthermore, we maintained regular coordination with surveyors to ensure data quality and accuracy.”

For the full-fledged household survey among local communities in Ramgarh and Bokaro, we used the stratified sampling method to map the mining clusters. We created buffers of 0-5 km, 5-10 km, and 10+ km (up to the district boundary) radius, considering the population percentage and coal dependencies of the area. These divisions were made based on their distance from the nearest coal mines. We surveyed 835 households in the Ramgarh district, and 960 households in the Bokaro district.

Similar distance buffers were used for the enterprise survey as well. We categorised the enterprises into small, medium, and large industries based on the number of employees/workers in each enterprise. To ensure inclusivity, we surveyed both registered and unregistered

enterprises. According to the sampling method, we covered a total of 150 registered enterprises and 50 unregistered enterprises in both districts. These enterprises were further classified into primary coal, primary non-coal, secondary coal, secondary non-coal, tertiary coal, and tertiary non-coal industries. This sampling method was designed to reflect the existing enterprises in both districts and their contributions to the district's GDP. The survey instrument used to collect quantitative and qualitative data for the study was the "SurveyMan App."

For the project implementation on field, we organised digital training sessions for interested surveyors of the full-fledged survey. This session not only introduced the research project and detailed the survey questions but also trained surveyors to use the survey instrument i.e. SurveyMan App on their smartphones. This was followed by detailed discussions between the field team and research team to align with the survey's objectives and decide on the list of villages for the pilot survey. The crucial aspect of this study involved digital training, followed by fieldwork demos, where surveyors visited selected villages

under the guidance of the research team to carry out the pilot survey.

This was followed by a detailed review meeting with surveyors that focused on questionnaire and app-related discussions based on observations from the demo survey. While the pilot survey was underway, permission was sought from the local administration to conduct the survey in both districts. Insights from the pilot study led us to revisit and revise the questionnaire as it played an instrumental role in ensuring accurate data collection. Most importantly, we incorporated additional questions concerning digital infrastructure and accessibility as well, to examine the role that digital can play in aiding 'Just Transition'. Additionally, we developed a detailed Survey Manual with two components: field-related protocol and questionnaire-related protocol.

The DEF field team simultaneously undertook the planning and coordination required for implementing the full-fledged survey. This involved field demo exercises, the selection process, and digital training and orientation about the survey in both districts, both online and offline. After this

“The primary objective was to understand the extent of enterprises’ dependencies on coal and the impacts of coal mine closures on electricity, water, and customer availability.”

process, we selected 10 surveyors in Bokaro and 8 in Ramgarh for the full-fledged survey. The number of surveyors required for the survey was determined by factors such as the size of the districts and the distance between villages. The research team also decided to increase the sample size to collect data from coal-dependent areas effectively. This expansion helped meet the study’s objectives and improved data quality. Before starting the full-fledged survey, we conducted thorough Survey Manual Training for all surveyors. Being part of the research team, I regularly monitored the data using research methods such as back checks, spot checks, and high-frequency checks. Furthermore, we maintained regular coordination with surveyors to ensure data quality and accuracy. By the month of November in 2023, we completed the survey of a total of 1,735 households in Ramgarh and Bokaro districts.

After the completion of the household surveys, the field and research team initiated establishing contacts to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholders,

including members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), trade unions, informal coal workers, and various workers associated with the coal industry.

“The study provided a significant platform for individuals, enterprises, and stakeholders to engage in discussions encompassing a wide spectrum of issues, including employment, water access, housing, migration, bureaucratic hurdles, and aspirations.”

For the preparation of the Enterprise Survey, the research team participated in an expert discussion on ‘Just Transition and Enterprise Survey’ to understand the intricacies of the Enterprise Survey and develop the survey plan specific to the concerned regions. This session, facilitated by experts from the coal industry and researchers, aimed to refine the survey instrument and overall survey plan.

Subsequently, we held several meetings with government officials in Bokaro, including the District Collector (DC), Deputy Development Commissioner (DDC), and District Industry Centre (DIC), to secure official permissions and initiate data collection from enterprises in Bokaro. A similar process was followed in the Ramgarh district.

The survey commenced in both districts, with the field and research teams visiting to understand the dynamics and the opinions and

aspirations of enterprises. The primary objective was to understand the extent of enterprises' dependencies on coal and the impacts of coal mine closures on electricity, water, and customer availability. To maintain data accuracy and quality, we shared a list of enterprises in both districts with surveyors daily, including details such as enterprise name, address, size, production, and sector. This facilitated surveyors in establishing contact with enterprises and arranging survey appointments. Backend checks, high-frequency checks, and regular coordination with surveyors through meetings, calls, and WhatsApp were ensured. The enterprise survey continued until the election's code of conduct was announced, and we successfully completed 95% of the survey before the elections. During field operations, I maintained regular coordination, conducted multiple feedback sessions, and arranged transportation whenever necessary in coordination with the field team.

In March 2024, I attended a workshop organised by the Bokaro Industrial Area Development Authority (BIADA), where stakeholders, including journalists, the General Manager of State Bank of India, entrepreneurs, associations, and BIADA

members, gathered. This workshop aimed to create awareness about energy transition and its impact on the evolving market economy, especially for Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The workshop offered me a platform to introduce our ongoing project and discuss its relevance, which facilitated networking and collaboration opportunities for our larger team.

Additionally, as part of the fellowship programme, I participated in a workshop organised by Swaniti Global and Coal India on 'Just Transition' in Kolkata, West Bengal. This workshop featured presentations of initial findings from both household and enterprise surveys, with members associated with Coal India discussing the continued relevance of coal. The workshop concluded with a discussion on the future of Just Transition and alternative diversification options, particularly involving the recommendations of the Coal India workers.

Moving ahead, we conducted 12 focus group discussions and completed surveys of registered and unregistered enterprises in coal-dependent areas of both districts. I also did Data cleaning work of the collected data simultaneously.



All these efforts contributed to the successful implementation of the project. The study provided a significant platform for individuals, enterprises, and stakeholders to engage in discussions encompassing a wide spectrum of issues, including employment, water access, housing, migration, bureaucratic hurdles, and aspirations. This qualitative aspect of the study facilitated a deep understanding of the socioeconomic landscape and the multifaceted challenges faced by communities dependent on coal. Particularly noteworthy is the uniqueness of this study, being one of the first of its kind in India, focusing on conducting an enterprise survey in the context of coal dependency. In terms of quantitative analysis, the preliminary findings offer crucial insights into the socio-economic dynamics of the surveyed regions. It reveals that employment dependency is notably higher in areas closer to the coal mines. Additionally, it was

found that coal companies supply electricity to approximately one in four households in Ramgarh and one in five households in Bokaro. Furthermore, an overwhelming two-thirds of the sampled households rely on coal as their primary cooking fuel.

The study also sheds light on the diversification options considered by the local population. Interestingly, while three in ten respondents expressed a desire for their children to pursue employment in the coal sector, an equally significant proportion believed that digital employment opportunities could be generated. Moreover, the research identified textile, non-coal transport, agro-based industries, IT, and tourism as the most common alternatives for economic diversification. In terms of government support for diversification, the findings indicate varied preferences among respondents. Nearly half of the households sought financial assistance, while a significant portion expressed the need for the creation of more local job opportunities. Additionally, a notable proportion favored migration as a means of coping with economic transitions. These preliminary insights showed us the intricate socio-economic dependencies on coal and highlighted the diverse aspirations and needs of the local population as they contemplate diversification and transition options.

During the project, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the coal ecosystem in Jharkhand,

discerning the nuances that distinguish the dynamics between the two districts. This involved delving into the intricacies of coal mining, its impact on local communities, and the socio-economic dependencies it engenders. Through research and on-the-ground interactions, I was able to grasp the subtle yet significant disparities between the coal ecosystems of Ramgarh and Bokaro. Moreover, the project provided me with invaluable opportunities to communicate with individuals from diverse professional and personal backgrounds. For instance, I learned to create a safe and professional communication space when engaging with informal coal workers, ensuring their voices were heard and respected. Simultaneously, I honed my networking skills, and established communication with journalists, coal and just transition experts, enterprises, associations, and bureaucrats, when necessary.

Furthermore, the project necessitated crisis management skills, which intertwined both professional and personal aspects. Working closely with surveyors, predominantly women, I learned to understand their concerns, doubts, and difficulties, fostering an environment of support

and flexibility to facilitate their work effectively. Additionally, I developed a keen awareness of the importance of aligning project activities with the local community's calendars, festivals, harvesting seasons, and socio-political scenarios. This contextual understanding enabled us to engage with the community more effectively.

Throughout project implementation, I have also had the privilege of engaging in diverse collaborations and partnerships that significantly enriched my experience. One crucial collaboration was with a partner organisation Swaniti Initiative, enabling me to closely collaborate with both the research and field teams simultaneously. This collaboration helped me in conducting research, gathering data, and executing project activities more effectively. Moreover, the success of the project also hinged on collaboration with various stakeholders, including local administration officials, surveyors, and community representatives. Working closely with these key stakeholders demanded effective communication, coordination, and cooperation to ensure alignment with project objectives and seamless execution of activities.

As far as the digital ecosystem is concerned, I have come to understand the vast digital divide between urban and rural populations. The pervasive lack of awareness regarding digital technologies, along with inadequate infrastructure, becomes an impediment to their overall development. In the households we surveyed, it was evident that many had limited to no access to mobile phones or the internet, highlighting the stark disparity in digital connectivity. Furthermore, there was a notable lack of knowledge concerning their rights and available government schemes. This highlighted the urgent need for interventions aimed at bridging this digital gap and empowering these communities with the tools and knowledge necessary for their advancement. While the digital infrastructure fell short of expectations, it was intriguing to note that many individuals viewed digital platforms as potential avenues for alternative livelihood options. In this regard, the Redef Event 24 hosted by DEF in Kolkata significantly expanded my understanding of the digital landscape and the vast network of people involved in this ecosystem. Participants from across India gathered to share their stories, and showed how digital technology,

when used wisely and with the right knowledge, can simplify and enhance our lives.

From the perspective of sustainability and scalability of this study, the study not only offers a model and a research tool for others to explore but is also empowering local communities and stakeholders through training and dialogue to take ownership and ensure support for just transition efforts. We have also collaborated with grassroots-level unions, activists and associations to enhance decentralised ownership of the subject. In terms of long-term impact, the project holds potential to influence policy decisions, facilitate knowledge transfer, and lay the groundwork for long-term economic resilience through diversification of coal dependent areas across India.

Overall, the fellowship experience has been transformative on both personal and professional levels for me. One significant aspect of this journey has been the cultivation of self-confidence and patience. Interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds and walks of life has been transformative. It has instilled in me a deep sense of empathy and fostered a strong feeling of

community with my fellow participants and the people involved in our collective journey. Through check-in sessions and discussions, I have had the opportunity to delve into my own life experiences, failures, lessons learned, and sources of motivation. Equally important has been the chance to learn from the experiences of others, which has contributed to a sense of belonging and mutual support within the fellowship community.

# From Hills to Plains: The Journey of Digital Braincation

Mili  
Dangwal





Hey! I am Mili Dangwal, hailing from the picturesque Srinagar, Uttarakhand. With a BA (Hons) in Political Science from the University of Delhi, I embarked on an exhilarating journey as part of the inaugural cohort of the Digital Swaraj Fellowship 2023-24.

My journey began with the orientation in Mysore, and let me tell you, it was an emotional roller coaster. Deciding to join the fellowship was tough,





especially when I learned the orientation was in Mysore—a place far from home and my comfort zone. I remember calling my friends and guardian, seeking reassurance, as I had never travelled alone this far. My professor's words, urging me to go ahead and assuring me I would not regret it, echoed in my mind. Now, I can confidently say that she was right.

The city of Mysore welcomed me warmly. The orientation not only introduced me to fellows from various corners of the country, but also offered a

rich tapestry of cultures and backgrounds, making every interaction incredibly interesting. We quickly bonded over our shared experiences, creating a chill and fun atmosphere. The office colleagues who organised the orientation curated everything perfectly, making us feel at home.

Our days were filled with food gatherings, explorations around the town, and sessions ranging from photography and art to social issues, all of which I found quite intriguing. The Heritage House in Mysore, our venue, was the cherry on top. Nestled amidst lush greenery and brimming with historic significance, the location was nothing short of therapeutic. The serene environment, combined with the wholesome vibes of the people around, made every moment special.

Wrapping up my orientation in Mysore with a sense of excitement, I embarked on my one-month rural immersion programme in Jharkhand. The journey there was an adventure, involving local commutes through vast fields and bustling rural landscapes. When I finally arrived in Gola, my home for the month, I was greeted by a town that radiated agrarian charm and vibrancy.

Settling into Gola, I was guided by our district coordinator, Suresh ji and Anzar ji. Together, we delved into the heart of Jharkhand, meeting rural communities and immersing myself in the daily lives of farmers. It was an eye-opening experience as I witnessed firsthand the challenges they face, from unreliable electricity supplies to limited educational opportunities.

Despite these challenges, I discovered a community filled with resilience and determination. I had the privilege of meeting incredible women Soचनाpreneurs who stood as beacons of digital empowerment within their communities. These women, through their dedication and hard work, were transforming their villages, bridging the digital divide, and inspiring many along the way.

Throughout my stay, I was captivated by the raw beauty and authenticity of village life. I documented my experiences through photos and write-ups, capturing the essence of the villages and the spirit of the people. The humble nature and generosity of the villagers, who often shared their farm-grown meals with me, left a lasting impression

Every day was a new adventure, traveling to distant places, hearing stories of resilience, and witnessing the vibrant and diverse life in rural Jharkhand. This immersion was not just a part of my journey; it was a profound personal experience that deepened my understanding and appreciation of the incredible strength and spirit of rural communities. It gave me an awareness and a service-oriented environment created by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) over the last two decades. Villages like Barlong and Baxidih, which are located at considerable distances from digital centres—often more than 10





kilometers away—face significant gaps in access to technology. In response, SoochnaPreneurs are bridging these gaps by providing vital digital services to their communities. This initiative not only saves time and money but also encourages individuals to step out of their homes and achieve financial empowerment.

I was particularly inspired by the women I met, who, despite facing orthodox backgrounds,

“ I left Jharkhand, carrying with me a treasure trove of memories and experiences. My next destination was Delhi, where I would attend workshops to reflect on and share my rural immersion journey. It was truly fulfilling to hear the stories and experiences of other fellows who had been to different locations, each one unique and inspiring.”

physical disabilities, and societal stereotypes, prioritised their service to the community. Their determination and the community's growing adaptability to technology underscored the transformative potential of digitalisation in rural areas. It was a profound experience witnessing how these efforts are empowering rural communities and connecting them to the broader world. With my bags packed once again, I left Jharkhand, carrying with me a treasure trove of memories and experiences. My next destination was Delhi, where I would attend workshops to reflect on and share my rural immersion journey. It was truly fulfilling to hear the stories and experiences of other fellows who had been to different locations, each one unique and inspiring.

As the workshops concluded, I received my next assignment: the Digital Cluster Development Programme in Tamil Nadu. To prepare for this, I spent a month in Delhi, getting to know the team and understanding the project's intricacies. This groundwork was essential, but to truly contribute and make a difference, I needed to be on the ground. And

so, this mountain girl made the move to the beaches of Pondicherry.

“The awaited chapter of my journey was the DiGI project, an initiative aimed at promoting digital inclusion and empowering rural communities and artisans involved in creating GI-tagged products. Pondicherry’s proximity to the project locations - Salem, Pattamadai, and Ooty - made it an ideal base for my travels.”

Excited? Absolutely! The serene beaches and the enchanting beauty of the town were legendary. Although it was far from home, the journey so far had taught me to embrace new experiences with enthusiasm. I was ready to dive into this new chapter, eager to face whatever came my way, armed with the perspective of growth and the promise of creating more unforgettable memories.

Pondicherry welcomed me with a fresh breath of air, a harmonious blend of nature, and the experimental township of Auroville. The cultural fusion of French and Tamil influences was evident in the architecture, clothing, food, and communities, offering a vibrant and eclectic experience. My stay in Pondicherry brought a sense of calm and a deeper connection to the present moment. The slow pace of life here taught me to embrace life as it is and inspired me to work towards making it better. This tranquil and enriching environment was truly a gift.



After working in Delhi for a month, I shifted to Pondicherry as it has a better proximity to the designated project locations. Despite being born and raised in the hills, with a heart that belongs to the mountains, I was thrilled to move to Pondicherry. This cosy town, an exceptional blend of French charm and South Indian culture, offers a warmth and richness that is hard to resist. The architecture, the food, and the vibrant community reflect this unique fusion, creating a welcoming atmosphere with countless opportunities for exploration.

From charming cafes and intriguing museums to the serene beaches and bustling local markets,





Pondicherry is a treasure trove of experiences. Auroville, with its inclusive community, adds to the allure, offering a chance to connect with nature and people from all walks of life. I relished every moment of exploring the town, savoring new cuisines, and witnessing the harmonious blend of cultures. The calm beach provided a perfect backdrop for reflection, allowing me to cherish every small experience.

“The slow, relaxed pace of life in Pondicherry gave me the space to reflect deeply on personal matters, soothing my senses and grounding me in the present. This experience ignited a newfound passion for travel and exploration within me, highlighting the joys and necessities of venturing into the unknown, even if it means traveling solo!”

The awaited chapter of my journey was the DiGI project, an initiative aimed at promoting digital inclusion and empowering rural communities and artisans involved in creating GI-tagged products. Pondicherry's proximity to the project locations - Salem, Pattamadai, and Ooty - made it an ideal base for my travels. I embarked on my journeys via bustling local buses, each trip an adventure filled with vibrant sights and sounds. Along the way, I savoured halts for fragrant filter coffee, indulging in the rich aromas that mingled with the scent of jasmine and roses beautifully adorning the hair of local women. These experiences encapsulated the essence of the South, enriching my travels with cultural immersion and sensory delights and the culture of all these localities in terms of architecture, practices and art was a force that motivated me.

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exploration within me, highlighting the joys and necessities of venturing into the unknown, even if it means traveling solo!

Join me as I share insights and adventures from my transformative journey!

My initial travel was with the team, where I witnessed the entire process of establishing the project from the very beginning, including the challenges and possibilities attached to it. Being part of a project with dual visions was an enlightening experience. First and foremost, it aimed at fostering digital inclusion and empowering rural communities in various locations. Through mobilisation efforts, resource allocation, and engaging activities, I along with the DEF team team strived to uplift these communities digitally. Simultaneously, our project also focused on digitally empowering artisanal communities, renowned for their craftsmanship in GI tagged products like Salem Silk, Pattamadai Pai, and Toda Embroidery. We utilised social media advocacy, conducted design workshops, and implemented various other activities to promote their GI-tagged products.

“Addressing the gap in digital understanding and awareness was the cornerstone of my project. It was meticulously designed to bring everyone on board and empower the local communities digitally.”

During my visits to these communities and my interaction with the locals, I could not help but notice a significant gap in understanding and awareness concerning the digital space. This void encompassed areas like online safety, digital literacy, and skills development, which are crucial for enhancing employability, and ensuring a secure online presence.

Moreover, artisans, the custodians of centuries-old handwoven art, seemed unaware of the vast opportunities presented by the online world. By





sticking to traditional marketing methods, they inadvertently limited their reach. They were yet to explore the vast expanse of the worldwide web, which could potentially amplify their market opportunities and preserve their legacy by sharing their craft with the global audience. Bridging this digital divide is not just about embracing modernity; it is about preserving heritage while ensuring sustainable growth and prosperity for these communities.

Addressing the gap in digital understanding and awareness was the cornerstone of my project. It

“To overcome this barrier, I adopted various strategies, such as memorising key words and phrases, and seeking translations in Tamil, which proved to be invaluable aid. I mean come on, a smile and saying “nandri”(‘Thank you’ in Tamil language) is not that hard!

was meticulously designed to bring everyone on board and empower the local communities digitally. Our strategy centred around establishing digital clusters in the heart of rural areas, acting as hubs for various age groups to benefit from the resources we provided. These resources encompassed a wide array of offerings, including digital literacy classes, entrepreneurial skills training, social media advocacy workshops, and digital design sessions.

In addition to educational initiatives, we also offered practical digital services like printing, photocopying, and facilitating online bookings. Over time, these clusters have become integral parts of the community, earning their trust, and garnering significant traction. Daily routines now include active participation in classes and workshops, reflecting the growing enthusiasm for digital empowerment.

Through these efforts, we are not just bridging the gap in digital knowledge, but also fostering a sense of ownership and capability within these communities. Witnessing the transformation firsthand reaffirms my belief in

the power of education and collective action to effect positive change.

Navigating the challenges of language barriers has been one of the most daunting aspects of this journey. Effective communication is paramount when immersing oneself in new environments, yet the diversity of languages often posed a significant hurdle. However, I soon came to realise that language transcends mere words; it is about expression and connection.

“Through these initiatives, we aspired not only to empower communities with valuable skills and knowledge but also to cultivate a sustainable ecosystem that celebrates and preserves their heritage.”

To overcome this barrier, I adopted various strategies, such as memorising key words and phrases, and seeking translations in Tamil, which proved to be invaluable aid. I mean come on, a smile and saying “nandri” (“Thank you” in Tamil language) is not that hard! By the end of my fellowship, I found myself traversing through different locations, engaging with people of diverse linguistic backgrounds. What initially seemed like an obstacle evolved into an enriching experience of learning new languages and delving deeper into the vibrant tapestry of culture.



Introducing a novel project in unfamiliar territories presented its own set of challenges. Convincing the locals about our vision, securing suitable locations for cluster establishments, and mobilising community participation demanded extensive research and unwavering determination. Gradually, through transparent communication and demonstrating the tangible benefits of our initiative, we succeeded in establishing thriving clusters.





This journey has taught me the importance of patience and respect when operating in unfamiliar environments. As newcomers to these communities, it is essential to honour their worldviews and allow space for mutual understanding to flourish. Every challenge encountered has only reinforced my belief in the transformative power of empathy, perseverance, and cross-cultural collaboration.

Over time, we meticulously crafted a series of activities and workshops aimed at deeply engaging community members. Our repertoire

“Priya’s journey took a transformative turn when she began attending the DiGI centre during her children’s school hours. Here, she received training in tailoring and weaving, honing valuable skills that sparked newfound confidence. With each stitch, Priya envisioned a future where her talents could sustain her family.”

included a diverse range of offerings, from essential digital literacy classes to hands-on entrepreneurial skills workshops. We delved into traditional crafts with weaving and tailoring sessions, preserving age-old techniques while fostering creativity.

Furthermore, we organised workshops focused on modern tools like social media advocacy, product photography, and functional digital design. These immersive experiences not only piqued the community’s curiosity but also catalysed active learning. I gave a social media workshop in Ooty to the tribal ladies of Toda tribes introducing concept of digital marketing, and how to keep oneself safe while creating their presence in the digital space. In our endeavor to enhance rural tourism and uplift community livelihoods, we ventured into establishing homestays. These spaces serve as more than just accommodations; they offer a unique opportunity for experiential living amidst the cultural and artisanal richness of our project locations. By seamlessly blending traditional hospitality with contemporary comforts, these homestays provide visitors

with an authentic glimpse into the vibrant tapestry of local life.

Through these initiatives, we aspired not only to empower communities with valuable skills and knowledge but also to cultivate a sustainable ecosystem that celebrates and preserves their heritage. Our project has succeeded in fostering a deep sense of trust within the communities across all locations. The tangible impact is evident in the increasing flow of beneficiaries and the growing attendance in our centres. As more people flock to our facilities for various reasons, there is a palpable transformation taking place, particularly among the students.

One such inspiring story comes from the Mettupatti cluster in Salem. Priya, a determined 28-year-old housewife and mother of three, had always yearned to learn something new and become financially independent. Despite her modest educational background, her drive for self-sufficiency remained unwavering. However, she encountered obstacles on her path to empowerment.

“I now see the digital ecosystem as a powerful force for community welfare. My experiences have shaped my approach to future projects, emphasising the importance of understanding community needs and creating practical, empathetic solutions.”

Priya's journey took a transformative turn when she began attending the DiGI centre during her children's school hours. Here, she received training in tailoring and weaving, honing valuable skills that sparked newfound confidence. With each stitch, Priya envisioned a future where her talents could sustain her family.

Beyond mastering traditional crafts, Priya recognised the significance of digital literacy for herself and her children. Bringing her kids to the





centre, she ensured they learned the basics of computer use, underscoring the intergenerational impact of our project. This image of Priya diligently working on her handloom outside while her children absorbed knowledge inside epitomises the holistic empowerment our initiative strives to achieve.

When I reflect on my personal growth journey, I realise how much I have evolved in many areas of my life. Most importantly, I have developed a sense of understanding and acceptance, choosing to understand situations rather than react impulsively.

Patience and stability of thought have become integral parts of my character, and I have learned to appreciate what I have. This transformation has been fuelled by my travels and keen observation of the world around me.

Through my fellowship, I discovered the profound impact one can make when coming from a place of privilege and opportunity. The journey has taught me the power of empathy, sharing, and community spirit, qualities I aspire to embody in my personal and professional life. The digital realm, I have learned, is a powerful tool that connects various aspects of social causes, offering immense potential for positive change.

Awareness of digital spaces might seem basic, but its importance cannot be overstated. Misuse or lack of knowledge can lead to significant personal and financial repercussions. Thus, educating communities about digital literacy can be a crucial safeguard. Additionally, the ease with which rural communities can access government schemes and benefits online brings significant

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relief, supporting their livelihoods and enhancing their quality of life.

I now see the digital ecosystem as a powerful force for community welfare. My experiences have shaped my approach to future projects, emphasising the importance of understanding community needs and creating practical, empathetic solutions. Keeping the beneficiary in mind helps articulate and address their situation more effectively, ensuring that the solutions



implemented are both practical and impactful. Through all my endeavours, I strive to blend empathy with practicality, always aiming to serve the larger audience and make a meaningful difference.

As part of our project, going forward, we plan to collaborate with design colleges like NIFT to engage design students as interns. They will assist artisans in enhancing their designs and approach towards the modern market while preserving traditional touches. In Ooty, Mr. Mathimaran, a National Award-winning photographer, has initiated an effort to help us exhibit the rich history of the Toda tribe through his works. This collaboration beautifully barter his talent with our community's spirit, showcasing the unique cultural heritage and fostering a deep sense of community connection.

'Sustainability' of the cluster has been a crucial part of our project. While we provide foundational support in terms of resources, our goal is to make the SoochnaPreneur self-sufficient, enabling her to manage the cluster independently without service disruptions. This not only ensures sustainability

but also empowers rural individuals to develop their capacities fully, fostering entrepreneurship in the rural landscape. Personally, I believe more community mobilisation can be achieved by promoting activities and maintaining the cluster's quality. For future scaling, these elements are vital. This project envisions a long-term impact, creating numerous beneficiaries who maintain thriving businesses /livelihood and learnings through digital means.

My biggest learnings during my fellowship journey have come from navigating the digital ecosystem, the unique challenges it poses, especially when considering its impact on other social spaces. Issues like lack of electricity or poverty hinder its penetration at grassroots levels. Understanding and respecting these realities are essential for introducing our vision effectively. Communication is key; demonstrating how digital initiatives can enhance livelihoods or ensure online safety resonates with rural communities. Tailoring solutions through thorough research ensures relevance and effectiveness. Recognising the audience's needs and bridging existing gaps is fundamental. By addressing individual concerns

and showcasing tangible benefits, we pave the way for broader acceptance and adoption. Preparing adequately, understanding the context, and empathising with the community are vital steps in leveraging the potential of the digital ecosystem to empower and uplift rural India.

Apart from being involved in DiGI, I had the privilege of participating in other significant DEF events, such as the Rural Entrepreneurship and Digital Empowerment Festival (ReDEF) organised in West Bengal. For this event, I worked on curating stories from SoochnaPreneurs across the country



for a book titled, “Bytes to Rights: 22 Years of Digital Entrepreneurship and Inclusion in Rural India.” This task allowed me to delve deep into the impactful narratives of these digital leaders at the grassroots.

Another notable event was the 5th Digital Citizen Summit, where I played a key role in coordinating the event and workshops. These experiences provided me with the opportunity to interact with a diverse array of individuals, attend intellectually enriching workshops, and gain invaluable exposure. These events were not just professional engagements, but also personal growth experiences, broadening my horizons and enhancing my understanding of digital empowerment and entrepreneurship.

My fellowship journey, overall, provided me with a truly enriching and wholesome experience, marked by extensive travel and the opportunity to meet countless individuals and communities. I savored local cuisines, absorbed fascinating stories from the ground, and immersed myself in diverse cultural landscapes. On one hand, I delved deep into understanding the challenges and

realities faced by these communities, learning how, with the right resources and strategies, effective solutions can be planned and implemented. On the other hand, I rediscovered myself, uncovering new facets of personal growth. This journey has been transformative, contributing significantly to my development. As I look forward to future adventures, I carry these invaluable experiences with gratitude; with a heartfelt “sirippu” (‘smile’ in Tamil language) and a *nandri!*

# Waves of Change: Sowing Seeds of Digital Inclusion and Empowering Communities

Pratiksha  
Kamble



My story begins in the small village of Maharashtra, Loni Pravara of of the Ahmednagar district district. I have pursued my postgraduate degree in Marine Biotechnology from Goa University. I was in a dilemma of working for the science sector or the social science sector. I accidentally came across the Digital Swaraj fellowship opportunity, and I decided to give it a chance to learn and explore the social sector for one year. Therefore, I call my year-long journey a wave of changes, as it has changed my personal as well as professional life.



I would not exaggerate if I said the train which I took to Mysore from Ahmednagar was life-changing! This was the first time I had taken such a long train ride alone. This was just the beginning of my adventure ride!

My journey as a Digital Swaraj Fellow began in Mysore, a beautiful and serene city, where the historic Heritage House became the backdrop of our orientation. The place's grandeur, with its old-world charm, echoed the importance of the mission we were about to embark on.





“ Meeting my fellow participants, each one brought unique experiences and perspectives, added to the rich and diverse composition of our cohort. The sense of camaraderie was immediate, and it set a collaborative tone for the months to follow. ”

In Heritage house, we, the fellows, were introduced to the various programmes and projects undertaken by Digital Empowerment Foundation in the last two decades, and the extensive network of changemakers and leaders from the grassroots that gave us an understanding of the working model of a non-profit NGO, dedicated towards digitally empowering the underserved and marginalised communities across the country. The mentors also conducted different group activities and sessions, which was new and interesting for me. This immersive experience was not just about learning DEF's work, fellowship programme, and the logistical aspects, but also gave us a deeper understanding of the ethos of the organisation and the importance of community building.

Meeting my fellow participants, each one brought unique experiences and perspectives, added to the rich and diverse composition of our cohort. The sense of camaraderie was immediate, and it set a collaborative tone for the months to follow.

## Rural Immersion in Alwar, Rajasthan

“ I met farmers, artisans, and local entrepreneurs, each sharing stories that highlighted the community’s strength and potential. These interactions were not just enlightening, but deeply humbling. They provided insights into the challenges and triumphs of rural life, far removed from the conveniences of urban living.”

Me, my co fellow and Monika Ji, we used to visit different villages on Vicky bike.

After Mysore, a month-long immersion in the rural district of Alwar, Rajasthan, was where theory met reality. Under the mentorship of Monika Ji, the District Coordinator, I began understanding the intricate layers of rural life and digital inclusion at the grassroots level. The journey from the bustling city to a calm village life was both refreshing and transformative. The initial nervousness I felt soon gave way to curiosity and eagerness to learn.

The warmth of the villagers was palpable from the moment I arrived. From early morning bike rides to different villages, amidst lush green fields to evenings spent under the starlit sky, every moment was a lesson in simplicity and resilience.

I met farmers, artisans, and local entrepreneurs, each sharing stories that highlighted the



community's strength and potential. These interactions were not just enlightening, but deeply humbling. They provided insights into the challenges and triumphs of rural life, far removed from the conveniences of urban living.

The biodiversity of Alwar was astounding. I witnessed the sunrise from the hills and farms, peacocks dancing in the fields, and the rustle of

leaves that whispered tales of the farmers. The landscape was a living, breathing entity, full of life and beauty. That was a fresh breath for me!

This proximity to nature was a stark contrast to my urban existence and offered a refreshing perspective on living harmoniously with the environment.

Cultural immersion was a revelation. The traditional Rajasthani attire, the folk songs that echoed in the air, and the aroma of local cuisine



“As a Digital Swaraj Fellow, I focused on addressing the question of digital divide. I documented my work meticulously, capturing data on levels of digital literacy and internet accessibility. Interactions with a Samarth Soochna Preneur, who manages the local Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) children’s school was particularly impactful.”

cooking on wood-fired chulha, and Tandoor were all new and fascinating.

I met Samarth SoochnaPreneurs and SoochnaPreneurs who invited me to participate in local festivals. They also gave me the taste of traditional dishes like Dal Bati Churma, and even tried my hand at folk dances.

Visits to historical sites like the Moti Doongri (Moosi Maharani Ki Chhatri), Tomb of Fateh Jang, the ancient temples in Garbaji Falls, Government Museum of Alwar provided me with a deep dive into the region’s rich history. These experiences were not just enjoyable, but also educational, offering a window into the cultural richness of Rajasthan.

As a Digital Swaraj Fellow, I focused on addressing the question of digital divide. I documented my work meticulously, capturing data on levels of digital literacy and internet accessibility. Interactions with a Samarth SoochnaPreneur, who manages the local Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) children’s school was particularly impactful. Samarth

“The rural immersion workshop provided a safe space to share our experiences. The exchange of stories and insights was enriching, reinforcing the sense of purpose and community among us fellows. Each story was a testament to the diverse challenges and innovative digital solutions encountered across different regions.”

SoochnaPreneur Ashok ji manages this school with the help of other PWD Sathi.

Engaging with the children there, I realised the profound impact that empathy and inclusivity can have on the education system. Their resilience and joy, despite their challenges, were inspiring. This experience underscored the importance of digital tools in providing equal opportunities for education and empowerment. Monika ji's mentorship was fundamental in shaping my approach to work in the social sector. Her dedication to the community and her continuous guidance helped me understand the intricate workings and complexities of rural development.

Our discussions ranged from strategic planning of the visit to the SoochnaPreneur centres to personal growth. Her support was a cornerstone of my journey. She emphasised the importance of patience, active listening, and understanding the unique needs of the community. Her mentorship nourished my roots in the social sector, providing a strong foundation for my future endeavors.



Returning to Delhi from rural immersion the workshop provided a safe space to share our rural immersion experiences. The exchange of stories and insights was enriching, reinforcing the sense of purpose and community among us fellows. Each story was a testament to the diverse challenges and innovative digital solutions encountered across different regions. These sessions were not just about sharing, but also learning from each other's experiences, which fostered a spirit of collective growth and a larger perspective toward the social sector.

## The Experiential Learning Journey

I worked on the DigitABLE project. It seeks to analyse the Samarth SoochnaPreneur Model and the Social Return of Investment (SROI) in the lives of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). It is a collaborative research initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and Broadband India Forum (BIF).

In this project, I worked with more than 350 Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) from 18 states of India. I along with my team at DEF formed





“Participating in the Digital Green Prakriya event was a highlight of my fellowship. This event focused on promoting sustainable environmental practices through digital tools and community engagement. It brought together various stakeholders, including environmentalists, technologists, and community leaders, to discuss and implement green initiatives.”

a team of 22 surveyors who are also the District Coordinators, most of whom have been connected to the ground for more than a decade. We initiated the research survey and managed every step of project management such as planning, organising, and execution.

To assess and understand the socioeconomic impact of the Samarth SoochnaPreneur (SSP) Model on the lives of PwDs, I developed a questionnaire and I planned a pilot study to understand the accessibility of questionnaire, relevance of questions, difficulties and challenges that may hinder the large-scale implementation of the DigitABLE project.

In Alwar, I implemented the pilot study, guided by Monika Ji at different villages. In short, meeting the SP and SSP of Alwar, preparing questionnaires, and integrating data into DEF's in-house application KoBo Collect, were all part of the rigorous process. With the combined efforts of the DEF staff and feedback from my team, I planned and executed the research survey on the ground.

“Visiting the centre in Chanchalguda that offered STEM education, and organising the event in coordination with them, provided practical insights into not only environmental sustainability, but also in how digital education can play a crucial role in empowering and uplifting local communities.”

After the pilot survey, I implemented the DigitABLE project on a large scale. The survey spanned multiple states and Union Territories, including West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Assam, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Haryana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jammu, and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Karnataka. To ensure the credibility of data, I conducted training sessions for the surveyors for smooth implementation and monitoring. After training, I monitored the survey over the next three months, and honed my skills in data collection, checking data accuracy and analysis, ensuring that our approach was both methodical and impactful.

## Digital Green Prakriya and the Hyderabad Visit

Participating in the Digital Green Prakriya event was a highlight of my fellowship. This event focused on promoting sustainable environmental practices through digital tools and community engagement. It



brought together various stakeholders, including environmentalists, technologists, and community leaders, to discuss and implement green initiatives. I got the opportunity to engage with the ground team in Hyderabad, who run the SoochnaPreneur centre in Chanchalguda.

The event included workshops, panel discussions, and hands-on activities aimed at fostering environmental awareness and action. It was an eye-opening experience that demonstrated the power of digital platforms in driving sustainable practices.

Visiting the centre in Chanchalguda that offered STEM education, and organising the event in coordination with them, provided practical insights into not only environmental sustainability, but also in how digital education can play a crucial role in empowering and uplifting local communities. The centre was a hub of innovation, equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and an enthusiastic community of students, women and youth. My first flight journey added a personal milestone to this professional experience, symbolising the new heights we were reaching in our fellowship journey.



## Back to DigitABLE Project and Digikargha

Returning to the DigitABLE project, data cleaning and draft documentation became the focus. This phase required meticulous attention to detail, ensuring that our findings were accurate and comprehensive. The data collected during our field visits was analysed to draw meaningful insights and formulate actionable recommendations.

“The fellowship provided a research opportunity and honed my personality, offering diverse cultural and demographic exposure. It widened my thinking and deepened my commitment to social change.”

Simultaneously, I worked with Digikargha, an initiative promoting sustainable textiles. Digikargha is dedicated to reviving traditional handloom practices while incorporating modern design sensibilities. It is an initiative of the DEF, which supports clusters of artisans under the Digital Cluster Development Programme (DCDP). It supports weavers by providing them with the tools and resources needed to sustain their craft and reach a broader market.

I participated in the Dastakar Exhibition and represented the stall of Digikargha. This

“Small business and entrepreneurship models such as Samarth SoochnaPre-neers and SoochnaPre-neers provide digital marketplace and create income generating opportunities. Training in digital skills helped small business owners to manage and grow their business more effectively.”

engagement was a revelation, showcasing the richness of Indian craftsmanship. Further, volunteering for the photoshoot of products and understanding different textile clusters deepened my appreciation for sustainable fashion. It was inspiring to see how digital platforms were helping artisans preserve their heritage and connect with global audiences.

The final draft report of the research survey I had been working on was a culmination of months of hard work. The process involved synthesising data, drawing conclusions, and presenting our findings in a coherent and impactful manner. It was a labour of love, reflecting the collective efforts of our team and the communities we worked with.

## Two Days at ReDEF2024, West Bengal

At the Rural Entrepreneurship Digital Empowerment Fest (ReDEF), I worked with community members and managed stalls representing different Indian states.



The fest celebrated diversity and promoted cultural exchange. It featured traditional crafts, music, and dance performances, offering a vibrant display of India's rich cultural heritage.

The research survey was published as a book and launched at the event, marking a significant achievement for me and my team, capturing the essence of the PwD journeys and the change they encountered through digital enablement. It was a

moment of pride and accomplishment for me to see my work come to life in such a meaningful way.

In the final phase of the project, I met with our partners and discussed the findings and impact of the DigitABLE research survey, and the relevance and importance of the Samarth SochnaPreneur programme. The fellowship provided a research opportunity and honed my personality, offering diverse cultural and demographic exposure. It widened my thinking and deepened my commitment to social change.





“This fellowship was a great opportunity for me personally and professionally. Personally, it gave me understanding of different perspectives of people, built community engagement skills and encouraged me to push my working limits. Professionally, I understand the importance and inclusion of digital in the lives of people. Digital is great power which is now integrating in every sector.”

## Impact of Digital Inclusion

Throughout my fellowship, I observed the profound impact of digital inclusion on communities. Access to digital tools and the internet transformed lives in several ways. When I visited Alwar, Rajasthan, I observed that there are very small steps that are important for empowerment in the lives of people from ground. They face different challenges ranging from personal level to community level. To break these barriers, digital platform is a great opportunity to access them freedom.

Digital platform is a sowing seed that nurtures plant of empowerment- Empowerment in terms of education, knowledge, freedom, economic opportunities, healthcare access, and more important create web of social connectivity.

In the rural area, digital inclusion is fundamentally empowering the different members of community by providing access to educational resources, which enables them to

“Digital provides different ways of empowerment, but we should also keep in mind to learn about its cons also.”

learn, educate and grow irrespective of their geographical location. Online learning services such as online classes, educational videos and e-books became invaluable tools of learning for them.

Small business and entrepreneurship models such as Samarth SoochnaPreneurs and SoochnaPreneurs provide digital marketplace and create income generating opportunities.



Training in digital skills helped small business owners to manage and grow their business more effectively.

In the healthcare sector, telecommunication and health information apps provide essential healthcare services to remote areas. Using these mobile applications, people could consult doctors, access medical information and receive timely advice.

Digitalisation brings people close to each other. Different digital tools help to bridge social gaps, which allows people to stay connected with each other. Social connection with different social media platforms also became channels for raising awareness and mobilising support for different community issues, which brings power in the hand of every person.

## Community Engagement and Personal Growth

Community interaction was the central part of my journey. Engaging with different individuals and understanding their perspectives enriched my experience in several ways. Meeting people from different backgrounds and listening to their stories broadened my understanding of social issues. It highlighted the uniqueness of everyone's experience and the importance of tailored solutions. Travelling and meeting new people is always a mirthful experience for me. It gives a different perspective and helps me to broaden my knowledge. In my fellowship journey, I connected with different people from different locations and personally got in touch with them. So, this was a journey of connectivity, connecting people from heart to heart and keeping their stories in my mind always and forever. Further, these community dynamics give me insights about understanding different challenges which honed my problem-solving skills.

When I understood the challenges faced by the community, I felt empathy and compassion which reinforces the significance of an empathetic approach in addressing social issues and strengthens my will to work in the social sector.

## Conclusion

This fellowship was a great opportunity for me personally and professionally. Personally, it gave me understanding of different perspectives of people, built community engagement skills and encouraged me to push my working limits. Professionally, I understand the importance and inclusion of digital in the lives of people. Digital is a great power which is now being integrated in every sector. Currently, apart from Roti, Kapda and Makaan, being digitally-abled is a basic human need for survival.

Digital provides different ways of empowerment, but we should also keep in mind to learn about its cons also. During my rural immersion, I came across an incident of cybercrime. Cyberbullying is also a topic of great concern. How a digital power can convert into weapon if it is used for crime, is a troubled question. So, further I am going to work on the topic of digital literacy and inclusion of misinformation in Maharashtra.

In short, I can relate my experience of working in social sector with the one of the quotes of Arthur Ashe, “What we get, we can make a living: what we give, however, makes a life.”



# Footprints of a Digital Journey from Patna to Neemuch

Punti  
Kumari





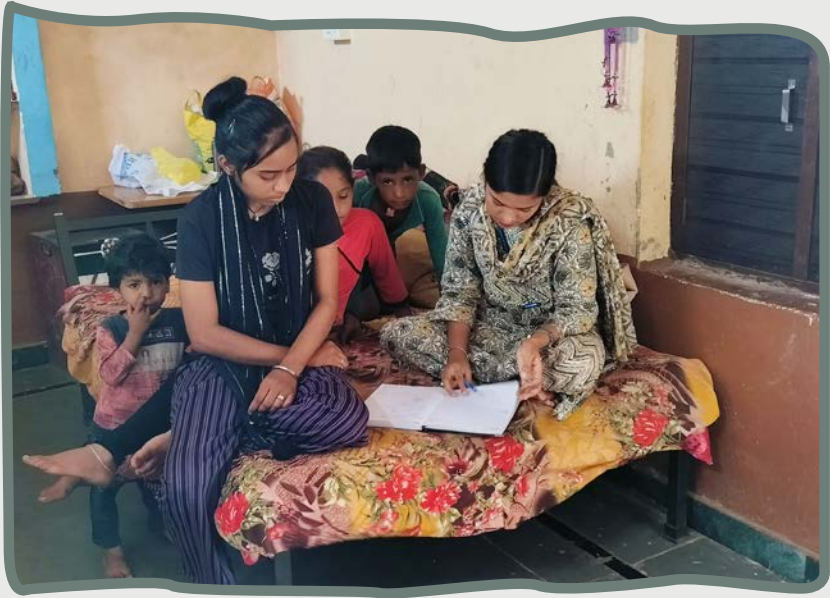
“Keep moving forward, and the path to the destination will automatically meet you.” This line has always been my source of hope and determination, guiding me through a lot of challenges I have faced in my life. My journey has been anything but easy, yet it has been these very challenges that have shaped me into the person I am today.

My name is Punti Kumari, and I hail from a small village in Patna, Bihar. I belong to the Dalit community, a section of society that has historically been marginalised and oppressed. Despite the odds



stacked against me, I have managed to complete my graduation - a milestone that feels monumental considering the journey I have had. The credit for my education goes entirely to me as I pushed myself at each step and moved forward in life. Had I not taken that first step towards securing my future, I would not be where I am today.

In my family, there are 12 members, including my father, who worked as a labourer at a brick kiln. None of us were educated because all our





resources were channelled towards ensuring we had enough to eat. However, from a very young age, I harbored a deep passion for learning. I knew I had to study, no matter the cost.

At the age of 11, I enrolled myself in the first class of a primary school with Rs. 25, which I had saved up in instalments of 50 paise each. This was the start of my educational journey, a path filled with obstacles, but one that I was determined to walk. My family constantly pressured me to get married, but I remained resolute in my decision to continue



my education. I knew I was alone in this endeavour, so I collected every scholarship I could from the government schools and used that money to pay for my studies.

Over time, I became good at my studies and was promoted two classes ahead of time so that I could appear for board exams at the right age. When some organisations learned about my progress, they praised my perseverance and even started a fellowship of Rs. 1500 for me. This marked the beginning of my association with various organisations. I participated in football, took a lot

“In 2023, I got selected for the Digital Swaraj Fellowship. I soon realised that this became a turning point in my life, giving me a lens to understand the digital world.”

of training, honed my skills, and eventually became the captain of the football team. Breaking the barriers of gender discrimination, I brought teenage girls out of their homes, helping them dream bigger and brighter. This was how I completed my education up to the 12th grade.

However, further education required money, so I took up a job in an organisation working on women's empowerment, legal education, child marriage, and caste-based discrimination. I continued my studies while making my mark in society. Along the way, I also became a member of the International Human Rights community.



## Digital Start: Rural Immersion in Alwar

In 2023, I got selected for the Digital Swaraj Fellowship. I soon realised that this became a turning point in my life, giving me a lens to understand the digital world. Our training took place in Mysore, Karnataka, where we delved deep into the digital landscape. After that, we were





“The impact of DEF’s work was evident in the community. The Soचना-Preneurs were well-known figures, with many of them having generated employment, bought land, and even constructed their own houses.”

sent to Alwar district in Rajasthan for rural immersion, a programme designed to help us understand and connect with the grassroots.

In Alwar, we met Monika ji, the District Coordinator of DEF. She took us to visit 32 DEF centres, where we learned about the incredible initiatives like Digital Didi, SoचनाPreneur, and Samarth SoचनाPreneur programme. We saw firsthand how DEF was making a difference at the rural level, providing essential digital services to the people. Through the Mera Digital application, villagers received information about various government schemes, solving their digital problems and



bringing services to their doorsteps at a lower cost. This exposure was eye-opening. It showed me the immense potential of digital technology in transforming lives, especially in rural areas.

The impact of DEF's work was evident in the community. The SochnaPreneurs were well-known figures, with many of them having generated employment, bought land, and even constructed their own houses. For a full month, I immersed myself in learning and observing, preparing for the next phase of my journey. Eventually, I started playing the key role of a digital service provider in the Neemuch district, Madhya Pradesh.



## Setting SoochnaPreneur Centres in Neemuch, Madhya Pradesh

My assignment in the Neemuch district was challenging but rewarding. DEF had initiated a project to work on livelihood and digital literacy in Bhagwanpura village, a place so backward that even in today's world, the people there were deprived of basic education. The situation was worse for the Dalit and Tribal communities. My task



was to set up a SoochnaPreneur centre and make digital literacy accessible to the villagers.

In Bhagwanpura, I met two women from the OBC community, Seema Gujjar and Jashodha Gujjar. They had studied up to the 10th and 12th standards, respectively, but had no computer education. I provided them with basic computer training, teaching them skills like sending emails, using MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, conducting research on Google, and making online money transactions. My goal was to empower them so that they could, in turn, empower others in their community.





The journey was fraught with challenges. The village was so remote that there was no vehicle available to travel to nearby places, forcing me to walk 4-5 km just to access basic services. I often had to rely on strangers for a lift, which was far from safe. The villagers, busy with farm work during the day, would only meet me in the evenings, which meant returning home alone at night. The lack of interest among women in learning digital skills because they did not own phones was another hurdle. Many refused to be photographed during meetings, fearing their images might be misused. Some people tried to exert their influence, insisting that only those from their caste should benefit from the centre.



Despite these difficulties, I pressed on. We found two Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in the village, both of whom were 80% handicapped in their legs. They had completed their education up to the 9th grade and had basic computer knowledge. I encouraged them to take a special course to enhance their skills further.

Field visits in Bhagwanpura revealed the extent of the challenges. The village had 350 houses, with a population of 1500, mostly comprising the Gujjar (OBC) community, with a few tribal families. The

literacy rate was abysmally low, especially among women. The village had basic facilities like an Anganwadi, an E-Mitra cyber cafe, and a Common Service Centre (CSC), but there was no one who knew how to operate a computer. When I visited the village, the men were out working in the fields, and the women were reluctant to engage, some even being suspicious of my intentions. Nevertheless, progress was made. We provided basic computer knowledge to Seema and Jashodha, who, despite the challenges, traveled 6 km daily to attend a two-month computer course.



## Work at the Grassroots Level

Working at the grassroots level was an enriching experience. I coordinated with teams in Rajasthan's Chittorgarh and Bikaner districts and in Gujarat. One of my most memorable experiences was visiting five villages in Chittorgarh, where I met several inspiring women.

In Chapri village, I met Laxmi Bunkar, a woman determined to bring digital services to her community. Despite having to travel 5 km even for a simple photocopy, she was eager to work with DEF to provide these services at a lower cost. Laxmi had learned computers through Rajasthan State Certificate in Information Technology (RSCIT) and was ready to take on the challenge.

In Modakheda village, I met Ratna Regar, a divorced woman who had studied up to the

“The path to the destination may be long and arduous, but as long as we keep moving forward, the path will indeed meet us.”

12th standard and was fluent in Hindi and English. Ratna was highly motivated, and her proposal for the centre reflected her need and desire to bring about change in her community.

In Jupdia village, I met Sonia Kharol, who had become a SoochnaPreneur just a month prior. She had been given an HP laptop and a printer and was eager to make a difference.

Lastly, I met Jyoti Maheshwari, a resident of Banakiya village. She had been running a SoochnaPreneur centre for a year and was doing an excellent job. Jyoti had added 1200 beneficiaries and helped them access government schemes. Her work had earned her a good reputation in the community, and she was a shining example of what could be achieved with determination and the right support.

## Conclusion

My fellowship journey has been one of growth, learning, and empowerment. From a small village in Bihar to the remote corners of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, I have seen firsthand the transformative power of digital technology. The challenges have been immense, but the rewards have been greater. Through this journey, I have not only empowered others but also discovered my own strength and resilience.

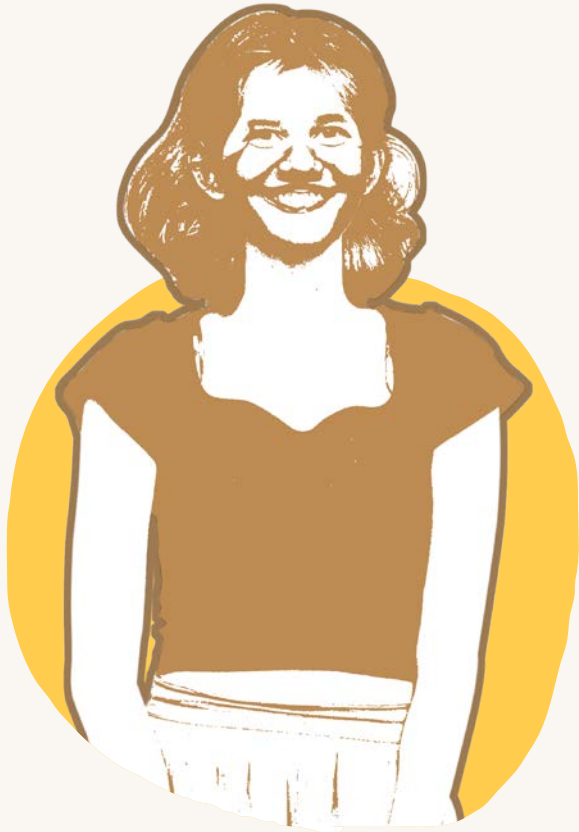
The path to the destination may be long and arduous, but as long as we keep moving forward, the path will indeed meet us. And with every step I take, I am reminded of the importance of this journey - not just for me, but for every person whose life I have the privilege to touch through the work I do.





## Unpeeling the Digital Onion

Shrishti  
Sinha



It is now common knowledge that 'digital' is 'our' future. However, it remains unclear who the 'our' is. Is it the developed nations? The upper class? Men?

I joined the Digital Swaraj Fellowship almost a year ago to answer this question. Now, my answer is nothing novel; it's what we all already know. When there is a resource that has to be accessed, our socio-economic standing in society is going to determine the extent of access we can enjoy, and



the digital ecosystem follows the same principle. However, in the past year, I have been able to develop some nuances around the question of access and have attempted to approach it from multiple dimensions, combining my experience at Digital Empowerment Foundation with a fair amount of self-study. In this experiential blog, I would like to share them.

My journey started at Saidanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where I was stationed for a month. During this



“Through these conversations and experiences, I learnt how digital governance unfolds at the grassroots level. For people who have access, digital governance has made enrolling into various schemes and receiving the benefits efficient and simple.”

time, I interacted with the local communities to understand what the digital world looked like from this vantage point. I worked closely with the District co-ordinator and the main Smartpur centre, hence, I interacted with various DEF projects that were running on the ground. Digital literacy classes were conducted at the centre, which trained students in basic computer literacy and additionally had advanced modules on Microsoft Excel. I also visited centres in other villages to meet people who were working in various dimensions of digital empowerment.

In the Digital Didi project, women worked to empower other women in their communities by conducting training on digital entrepreneurship and basic digital literacy as well. In that duration, I also attended various Self-Help Group (SHG) meetings and met with beneficiaries of digital governance schemes and people who deliver it. Through these conversations and experiences, I learnt how digital governance unfolds at the grassroots level. For people who have access, digital governance has made enrolling into various

“The RWE programme focuses on female entrepreneurs in West Bengal and the North-East who are engaged in rural industries like dairy, food products, and handloom. The model employs a trickle-down approach where we prepare training material, locate suitable areas, and provide all the required support while the entrepreneurs take the stage to become efficient business owners.”

schemes and receiving the benefits efficient and simple. However, in this light, a new set of challenges have emerged, for example, it can be difficult to correct a mismatch in documents. Data has become readily available, and social engineering attacks have become easier to execute.

Saidanpur hosted a vibrant but impoverished weaver community. A few of the weavers were part of DEF's DigiKargha programme, which provides a brand and platform for the weavers to sell their handloom products.

During another stay, in the latter half of the year, I met with the handloom communities of Assam who were part of DEF's Rural Women Entrepreneurship (RWE) programme. In these interactions, I tried to understand their work and daily routines to help build capacity-building programmes for the women in our RWE programme.

The RWE programme focuses on female entrepreneurs in West Bengal and the North-East who are engaged in rural industries like



dairy, food products, and handloom. The model employs a trickle-down approach where we prepare training material, locate suitable areas, and provide all the required support while the entrepreneurs take the stage to become efficient business owners. With the help of our north-east team, we located a few women who were established in their community and wanted to start their own businesses. We helped these women become leaders in the Rural Women Entrepreneurs project who will act as mentors for other women

in their community. The vision was that we could slowly integrate the entrepreneurs into the digital economy by creating a model that allows them to aid each other.

As someone who designed the first-stage curriculum for entrepreneurs, the challenges were immense. Women do not have the luxury to be just entrepreneurs; they are mothers and wives who have to maintain functional homes. Keeping all these challenges in mind, the foundation of





the curriculum focused on the necessary and basic tools like building familiarity with Google Workspace and setting up WhatsApp for business. The idea was that at this level, the entrepreneurs would not have to learn any new applications. The other reason was that, unlike my smartphone on which I have more space than I know what to do with, the phones used by the entrepreneurs were constrained in terms of storage, and downloading a new application came at the cost of deleting another.

“In the summit, we heard from policy experts as well as beneficiaries of government schemes. This provided a wider understanding of the internet through the people who experience it every day.”

Along with this, I also handled the communication tasks for the project. My field visit also helped me understand the business ecosystem as a whole and the tools required. For this specific project, we had partners who assisted in other dimensions like solar energy, indirect financing, and linkages to procure raw materials. This provided great insight into the local governance as well, and I took some time to contrast the decentralised governance of Panchayati states, Schedule V, and Schedule VI areas. With the entire experience, I prepared the guidebook for the project with a two-

pronged motive: (a) for an outsider to refer to and understand the project, and (b) for the entrepreneurs to refer to and use as a tool to explain the programme to other entrepreneurs as well. I also made a small brochure for the programme to be displayed at the 5th Digital Citizen Summit co-hosted by Digital Empowerment Foundation and Government of Telangana in Hyderabad in the exhibition section. The exhibition displayed various initiatives and projects of DEF.

“In rural India, social engineering attacks primarily target people’s lower digital literacy rates. The paper analysed the people’s lived experiences and assessed how effective the Digital Personal Data Protection Act would be in protecting their interests.”

The Digital Citizen Summit, as the name suggests, is an international summit annually held to build discourse on what it means to be a digital citizen. I was on the organising committee for the Digital Citizen Summit, which was held at T-Hub, Hyderabad. This was my first time handling an international conference, and the experience gave me a strong grasp on planning, coordinating logistics, and becoming a Microsoft Office whiz (I used to be on the Google Workspace team before). In the summit, we heard from policy experts as well as beneficiaries of government schemes. This provided a wider understanding



of the internet through the people who experience it every day.

I coordinated with various organisations working at the intersection of the digital, including the Internet Freedom Foundation, Digital Futures Lab, Campbell South Asia, and more. Each organisation/person had their own areas of expertise and hence one of my main tasks was to ensure that their experience was presented through a format that would be accessible and help them best

demonstrate their ideas. Hence, we chose from a mix of lighting talks, masterclasses, exhibitions and open discussions. As a result the attendees were able to benefit from practical skills, debates, and others' experiences.

On the first day of the summit, we had an academic conference. In the conference, I presented my paper titled, 'Social Engineering Attacks Among the Rural Populace.' The research question was inspired by the first-hand interactions I had had in Saidanpur



during my rural immersion. In rural India, social engineering attacks primarily target people's lower digital literacy rates. The paper analysed the people's lived experiences and assessed how effective the Digital Personal Data Protection Act would be in protecting their interests.

“The socio-economic inequalities of our non-virtual world translate into the virtual world as well, and lately, the boundary has become blurrier. Our ‘real’ lives leave us vulnerable to harm in our virtual lives, and our virtual lives can translate into various risks in the physical world.”

As DEF's primary focus is last-mile connectivity, at different stages, I reflected on how I take a decent internet connection for granted and what factors enable a good internet connection. In Saidanpur, heavy rainfall would mean a poor internet connection that could last for days. Having Wi-fi at home felt like a distant dream because electricity was a luxury. This meant living on limited data (around 1 or 1.5 GB/day) that you would only get in certain corners of the home. Being able to attend online classes, do office work, and use it for entertainment is simply out of reach and very expensive. While the world is moving to 6G, this is the reality of India with a majority of the population living in rural areas. Because of this, I studied different internet solutions. I wrote a short paper on satellite internet and

its possibility of providing stable and cheap internet to all, especially catering to those in underserved demographics. With India's new, more liberal space policy, relaxations on FDI, and recent partnerships with SpaceX, satellite internet might not be distant.

“As a fellow, I had the opportunity to work both in the office and at different field locations. This helped me learn how to adapt to different surroundings, mingle with people from various cultures, and do meaningful work in different contexts.”

Even people like me who have decent internet connections suffer from challenges around internet access that go beyond just connectivity. From my experiences, I can best highlight this using another research project that I worked on. This was in collaboration with the Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP), which is an international coalition of public, private, and civil society that works on providing meaningful connectivity to everyone by 2030. In this project, I worked on the challenges that online women entrepreneurs face. In my report, I highlighted that even in urban areas, the internet can be unaffordable because people have to purchase multiple plans. Women often have difficulty promoting their businesses on social media because the algorithm prefers real faces, which often brings unwelcome comments and harassment.



Further, for small businesses, the entire process of delivery may not be digitised; this often acts as a deterrent for women. For example, one of the interviewees highlighted that to deliver business orders, she would often have to go out at night or meet with male clients, which was unacceptable to her parents as it raised safety concerns.

The socio-economic inequalities of our non-virtual world translate into the virtual world as well, and lately, the boundary has become blurrier. Our 'real'



lives leave us vulnerable to harm in our virtual lives, and our virtual lives can translate into various risks in the physical world. I wrote in detail about this in a piece titled ‘Social Media: Who Was I Made For?’ which is available on TypeRight - The Digital Nukkad, a conversational bulletin and platform for DEF’s blogs. The piece discusses how social media is designed, who profits off of it, and who the victims are in the transaction.

Through social media’s design and algorithms, we have essentially handed over our natural rights to corporations whose primary goal is profit. While there was a period when social media was hailed



as the savior of our freedom of expression, that myth is bursting as we understand that we do not collectively own and control social media. For example, when Palestine supporters flooded Instagram to raise awareness, various social media sites shadowbanned them. I have further elaborated on this in another piece on TypeRight titled 'How Meta Shadowbans Palestine into Silence.' It makes me question whether social media can bring a revolution as I had originally believed or if it has just become another tool of power and control. I can extend the same question to the entire digital ecosystem.



In one year of my fellowship, I have gained a combination of both soft and hard skills. DEF's work extends far beyond one city to almost the entire country, with a few centres even being outside India. As a fellow, I had the opportunity to work both in the office and at different field locations. This helped me learn how to adapt to different surroundings, mingle with people from various cultures, and do meaningful work in different contexts. In the office space, multi-tasking presented completely different challenges that I have been able to learn from. Along with working on a large-scale project that involves coordination in various regions, I had to work on different projects simultaneously. Through this, I learned how to conduct ethnographic research, focus group discussions, and write collaborative reports.

I also benefited from the mentorship of my seniors at the workplace, gaining an understanding of how project management is carried out on such a large scale, which I was able to apply in my role as the communications lead for the 'Rural Women Entrepreneurship (RWE)' project. Personally, understanding the digital landscape in India was particularly important to me because I want to

pursue higher education in the field. The fellowship provided exposure to different organisations that work in the same field, helping me better understand which roles I am suited for, what skills I possess, and what I should further study.

The 'digital' is empowering and dehumanising, a tool to educate and misinform, a place of free expression and censorship. It is definitely a post-structuralist's goldmine. The regulations that we make today and how well we are able to account for people's diverse needs will determine if digital is going to bring more harm than good. These contradictions and the immense potential of the field have made my journey exciting and multi-dimensional.

Digital is the future, regardless of whether it can be an achievable reality for all. I want to work on the latter part of the statement to try to make the ecosystem 'for all,' and my next step is to pursue higher education to supplement my qualitative skills with quantitative tools so that I can help make more informed policies.

# DIGICaravan: Bridging Digital Divides Between Urban and Rural India

Swati  
Tiwari



“Life is a beautiful journey; who knows what will happen tomorrow.”

I feel very connected to this one line because my journey has been something like this.

My name is Swati Tiwari, and I come from Amethi district in Uttar Pradesh. Many years ago, we migrated to Delhi. I grew up here and am currently pursuing my postgraduate degree in Women and



Gender Studies. I have experienced firsthand what it meant to be a migrant and to make a life of our own in a city like Delhi. This inspired me to do something for fellow community members who have had to face similar challenges and create a safe place with them. I started working with my community after completing high school. Some of us started the Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes (IYRC) organisation, a non-profit initiative focusing on the upliftment of the migrant community in the Delhi-NCR region. The caravan of learning has been going on since then.





I was inspired to join the Digital Swaraj Fellowship seeing the work done by Digital Empowerment Foundation in villages and at the grassroots. DEF's UDYAMINI initiative particularly drew my attention as it helped build an entrepreneurial ecosystem by imparting digital training and the required skillset to 20,000 rural women entrepreneurs in Assam and West Bengal.

It started in Mysore where I met the other fellows and the fellowship team. For rural immersion, I was sent to the Nuh district district of Haryana where I visited all the Smartpur centres, understood the work being done at the centres,



how digitalisation efforts are underway in rural areas, what challenges people face in villages, and how problems can be resolved through digital means. After staying there for a few days, I moved to Alwar for 10 days and learned about the Digital Didi Project that was launched to create awareness among adolescent girls and women in rural and semi-urban India about misconceptions and misinformation surrounding menstruation and the Samarth SoochnaPreneur programme, which caters to digitally empowering PwD population.



## Internet Shutdown in Nuh

Nuh is a district in Haryana. It was a completely different place for me. Before I reached Nuh, many people warned me saying that Nuh is a very ‘dangerous’ place., and that I should not go there. My curiosity grew from that point, and I thought I must go and see what it is like to be living there. I took a bus to Nuh, and after reaching my destination, I felt I had landed in a different world. There was a lot of hustle and bustle. There were



“Smartpur brought a lot of changes to the villages. Women used to say that to get a photocopy, they had to travel 10 kms. They could not avail themselves of the benefits of any government scheme earlier.”

markets. Ghevar sweets were available. The locals were looking at me and my friend, who was also a fellow. Somehow, we reached our destination, and met a person by the name, Aftari Baazi, who left no stone unturned in hospitality. The next day, we had to go to the places where the Smartpur project was running.

What is Smartpur, why is it, and what does it do? I came to know about it only after going to the field. I met many people. I talked with women in the village. Many women made fun of me. They used to tease me saying that





my shoes looked like men's shoes. They used to ask me to grow my hair longer and talk about getting me married. Smartpur brought a lot of changes to the villages. Women used to say that to get a photocopy, they had to travel 10 kms. They could not avail themselves of the benefits of any government scheme earlier. After the setting up of Smartpur centres they were relieved as the facility was available in their villages.

I stayed in Nuh for 22 days. One day, while I was returning from the field, I came to know suddenly that due to protest, there were riots all over Nuh.



There was a lot of commotion. I was unable to understand what was going on. The family, who I lived with, was also very scared. Evening onwards, the internet was shut down, and I stopped getting news or any information about the riots. This was a big challenge because I had never lived without the internet. The internet did not work for ten days. Prior to this experience, living without the internet was like a dream. After that day, for the first time, I realised the significance of the digital world. What would the world be like if there was no internet? How would we connect with each other? Many questions came to my mind. Was shutting down the internet a solution to mitigate the crisis, or

“ I met many Didis, talked to them about their experiences, and understood how they go to work alongside running their household, and use digital devices efficiently.”

whether there could be another solution? Why is the government not looking for any other solution? Many such questions were troubling my mind. The market was not set up for many days; there was no ration. The men were not at home, and the women were united. All these circumstances made me very brave. Then, one day, I had to leave because the conditions were not improving, but I did not give up and kept standing firm. I continued my rural immersion and moved to Alwar in Rajasthan, close to Nuh.



“Smartpur adopts a social enterprise model run by rural youth and supported by community members, government bodies, private institutions, and other concerned people.”

## My 10 Days in Alwar

I had to go to Alwar suddenly. Two of my friends were already there. They were also fellows in the program. I stayed with them. I gave myself some time and started going to work. I learned about the projects, Digital Didi and Samarth SoochnaPreneur, and about the SoochnaPreneur model in Alwar. I met many Didis, talked to them about their experiences, and understood how they go to work alongside running their household, and use digital





devices efficiently. They have become an inspiration for many girls and women in their communities. I learned a lot from them.

After the completion of the rural immersion, I worked on two projects in the next phase of my fellowship. My experiences in both projects were very different. I completed one project from the office, and the other in the field.

Smartpur Project is a model that presents the concept of smart villages in a new way. It emphasises bringing social, environmental and economic improvements by incorporating digital facilities into everyday life. Smartpur adopts a



social enterprise model run by rural youth and supported by community members, government bodies, private institutions, and other concerned people. All of them are trained with digital tools and knowledge resources to form a strong group of digital citizens and strengthen the village ecosystem. Smartpur works with youth, women, men and disabled populations in at least 100 villages spread across nine states. For six months, I worked on “Smartpur Data Monitoring and



“The Digital School Project is an initiative of tribal youth and teens that aims to provide education facilities to children in rural areas. between rural and urban India.”

Analytics” and learned how one can support the ground team from the office. I participated in field activity in the last phase of the Smartpur project and learned how a project works on the ground. I also learned how to work with a large team. Sometimes, it was challenging to make reports, but the team members supported me a lot.

## Digital Workshop in Tijara

I visited many centres in Tijara, Rajasthan and saw the work of Smartpur. Tijara is adjacent to Mewat, where communities are still struggling to access basic resources and entitlements. We



conducted a training workshop in a school in Tijara, where the students were told what cybercrime is, how to keep ourselves safe, how to use digital tools, and how to use the internet meaningfully. We talked about what problems they might have to face, and in response, many young adults shared that they get many scam calls or messages asking for OTP. Their Instagram and Facebook IDs were often hacked. What would they do to secure their digital space? How could they get help from the Smartpur centre? My experience was that the girls are distant from accessing digital devices. Even now, they are not allowed to use a phone, or talk.





“During my stay, I organised a Mahila Panchayat for the first time in Sawariyan Digar. I called the women, talked to them, understood their issues, and encouraged them to collectivise and learn new things together.”

Very few girls used a phone, but they could only talk; they did not know how to use social media. While they understood the discourse around gender inequality, there was a lot of diversity among this demographic that needed a lot of work, awareness, and counselling.

## Setting up a Digital School in Sawariyan Digar, Nandurbar

The Digital School Project is an initiative of tribal youth and teens that aims to provide education facilities to children in rural areas.



From introducing new activities and games to promoting digital education, the initiative aims to bridge the gap in education that is persisting between rural and urban India.

I worked as a Digital Education Facilitator in a small village called Sawariyan Digar in the Nandurbar district of Maharashtra. To reach the village, one had to travel 30 kilometres by bike followed by a boat ride. There are two schools in the village. Education is offered up to the fifth grade. To pursue studies after that, the students are compelled to go outside the village. Many

“ I have never lived alone in so far a place before. In these three months, I have overcome many of my fears and learned to live alone.”

times, they walk three kilometres to get there, and often times, because the school is far away, many students end up dropping out and working to sustain themselves.

Houses are on top of mountains and on the banks of the Narmada River, making them very beautiful to look at, however, due to the lack of facilities, people migrate as well. Most of the villagers are engaged in boating, farming, and fishing.



“ReDEF became an important milestone because before joining the fellowship, I had been nominated through IYRC for the Information Preneur Award by DEF.”

I used to focus on their mental and physical development by bringing children to digital school, explaining to them about digital devices, and teaching them in a playful way. Along with that, I made the school colorful and beautiful by putting up some posters that people could see and learn from. I also tried to make a creative classroom. With the support of the village women, I painted the classroom

During my stay, I organised a Mahila Panchayat for the first time in Sawariyan Digar. I called the women, talked to them, understood their





issues, and encouraged them to collectivise and learn new things together. Along with studies, sessions were given to the village people to help them understand digital devices and issues like fake news, cyber-crime, etc. There is no network or internet in Sawariyan Digar and its surrounding villages. People have to walk long distances to talk on the phone. While we talk about tools like AI, there is no network in Nandurbar, and we do not even know the difference between a network and the Internet.

Many challenges came up. There was a language barrier as their language was Pawri. It took some time to understand and explain, but with time,



“Digital villages are necessary because not getting the benefits of many government schemes they are entitled to, is a big issue. Therefore, it is essential to have a better and stable network everywhere. It is crucial to have internet.”

everything went fine, and people were very supportive.

Another organisation was working with DEF in Nandurbar. When two organisations work together, I learned what obstacles can arise, what facilities can be provided, and how better work can be done for the community in collaboration. Leaders can be made and nurtured by the community who can work for their own community.

The opportunity to perform and learn theatre was a different experience for the NCC youth. They performed theatre on the issue of elections in their language and created awareness among the people of their village.



I have never lived alone in so far a place before. In these three months, I have overcome many of my fears and learned to live alone. I had to face many problems due to the lack of network, like being unable to talk to my family or contact anyone in the office. For many days, it felt like I was completely disconnected from the world and could not speak to many friends. My biggest learning was that I understood that life is not the same every day. We must keep improving ourselves, face whatever situation we are confronted with, and keep moving forward.

## Digital Entrepreneur Mela in West Bengal

Rural Entrepreneurship & Digital Empowerment Fest (ReDEF) was a significant event for me. It took place in West Bengal, and around 1200 people from different communities associated with the DEF ecosystem participated in the event. There was a lot of diversity from across the country, and the event was a huge success. I was working as a volunteer. I also conducted workshops along with the team from the Smartpur project. ReDEF became

an important milestone because before joining the fellowship, I had been nominated through IYRC for the InformationPreneur Award by DEF. I was selected and honoured with the Girl Icon Award; many of my friends were also honoured. Through this event, I got to meet people from many communities, see and learn about different arts, culture, languages and dialects.

This year's journey revolved around digital empowerment. I have been able to understand why it is essential to go digital. What are the differences between urban and rural India, and how beautiful are villages compared to cities? People in villages continue to live very simple lives. They readily welcome people and make them a part of their family. People from different communities live together in brotherhood. They help each other. But even today, they are far away from accessing and availing many basic facilities. There is a need to connect villages to cities and create a path between the two, so villages can develop along with cities. Digital villages are necessary because not getting the benefits of many government schemes they are entitled to, is a big issue. Therefore, it is essential to have a better and stable

network everywhere. It is crucial to have internet. Wherever I found network and the internet, the people were a step ahead. They were aware of the schemes. Many people are also taking advantage of them. Women and girls are still seemingly lagging in accessing digital gadgets and the internet. They also need to be taken along, and work needs to be done with a reflective approach. It is vital to have digitally empowered communities, and we are doing excellent work in the villages. My entire one-year journey has been quite exciting.



Building Digital Commons through  
Empowerment and Innovation

Vikas  
Chinchkar



Hello, I am Vikas Chinchkar from the Beed district, Maharashtra. I completed my Master's in Social Work and then joined DEF as a Digital Swaraj Fellow. Before that, I worked with Shantiwan, a shelter for the homeless, and Kanyaka Foundation, which focuses on girls' education in the Beed district. During my Master's, I also undertook fieldwork in slum areas and villages in Ahmednagar. I grew up in Beed, a place known for its diverse culture and close communities.



Living there, I realised the importance of caring for others who struggle to care for themselves. This is primarily why I chose to pursue Social Work for my Master's degree.

The exposure from my education helped me understand the many challenges and difficulties faced by marginalised communities, like access to resources and facing unfair systems that continue to hold them in poverty. Despite these obstacles, I was inspired by how strong and resilient the





“As a Digital Swaraj Fellow, I was tasked with driving initiatives for bridging the digital divide and enabling digital literacy among underserved populations.”

people living there have been. It continued to determine me to be more aspirational in my endeavours to work for community and social welfare.

Upon completing my postgraduation, my journey took an exciting turn when I joined Digital Empowerment Foundation as a Digital Swaraj Fellow. This opportunity marked a milestone in my career, offering me a platform to leverage technology for social good and



empower communities at the grassroots level. As a Digital Swaraj Fellow, I was tasked with driving initiatives for bridging the digital divide and enabling digital literacy among underserved populations.

One of the most significant milestones in my fellowship was my placement in the Guna district, Madhya Pradesh, where I spent a month immersing myself in rural communities and gaining firsthand experience of the work of DEF. This immersive



experience not only deepened my understanding of the challenges faced by rural communities but also ignited my passion for driving change at the grassroots level.

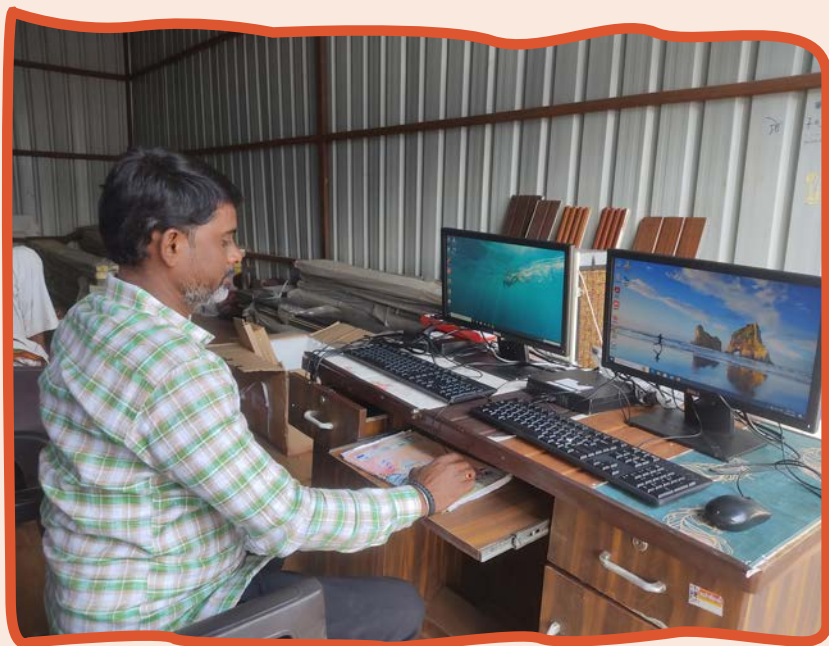
After completing the rural immersion programme, I evaluated applications for DEF SoochnaPreneur Award. Alongside my colleagues, our task was to assess and assign marks to the SoochnaPreneurs based on their stories and uploaded videos. Given our recent experience with the rural immersion programme, we were well-acquainted with the SoochnaPreneurs centres and adept at evaluating



“Despite the initial hurdles, I rose to the occasion with unwavering resolve, rallying a team of survey coordinators and navigating various obstacles through effective leadership and coordination.”

their performance based on the data provided.

After the assignment, I went to Maharashtra for a planned visit to the state’s old centres. As per the itinerary, I visited several districts where DEF operates, which was like my previous rural immersion activities. These visits allowed me to gain insights into the operations and progress of the centres in Maharashtra.





However, it was my involvement in the Sewa Data Project that truly put my skills and determination to the test. Tasked with leading a survey on women's empowerment in Maharashtra, I found myself grappling with the complexities of managing a large-scale project with tight deadlines and limited resources. Despite the initial hurdles, I rose to the occasion with unwavering resolve, rallying a team of survey coordinators and navigating various obstacles through effective leadership and coordination.



As part of the survey, I conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDS) with women from a block in the Nandurbar district of Maharashtra. The experience of leading the Sewa Data Project not only honed my project management skills but also instilled in me a newfound sense of confidence and resilience. Through perseverance and dedication, I successfully completed the survey, surpassing expectations and making a tangible impact on women's empowerment in Maharashtra.

“DEF’s initiative represents a commendable step towards bridging the gap and empowering the community through digital education.”

During the visit to the tribal area of the Nandurbar district, we observed that the community faces significant challenges due to the lack of transportation, healthcare, education, and livelihood facilities. One of the most pressing issues identified was the absence of a reliable telecommunication network, making communication difficult for the residents.



“ Inspired by the impactful work of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and Soochna-Preneurs during my fellowship, I was motivated to contribute further to community empowerment.”

In response to these challenges, DEF had initiated efforts to educate the local population. A key initiative involves setting up LED screens where students can gather to access education resources collectively. Due to transportation constraints, teachers are reluctant to travel to the area. To address this, DEF devised a solution wherein educational videos are recorded in classrooms from more developed areas and subsequently uploaded onto the LED screens in the tribal area. This innovative approach enables children in





remote regions to access online education despite the lack of physical presence of teachers.

The visit shows the urgent need for comprehensive support in the areas where tribal communities live, particularly in terms of infrastructure and educational opportunities. DEF's initiatives represent a commendable



step towards bridging the gap and empowering the community through digital education. This project has given me an understanding of the need for such a project along with how to implement the project.

Upon completion of these visits, I began working on the Hope 1000 project in the Beed District, in



“Without incurring extra costs, which is much easier for people from their communities, our Soochna-preneurs help them reduce time - consuming processes and transportation costs.”

line with the predetermined plan. Inspired by the impactful work of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and Soochnapreneurs during my fellowship, I was motivated to contribute further to community empowerment. This led me back to my hometown of Beed, where I embarked on Project Hope 1000, an ambitious goal to provide digital assets such as computers and printers to 1000 PwDs across India.

Working on Project Hope 1000 presented its own set of challenges for me, from the time-consuming process of identifying beneficiaries



to building trust with PwDs. However, with each challenge came an opportunity for growth and learning. Through perseverance and dedication, I successfully identified and provided support to several PwDs in the Beed district, empowering them to become independent service providers within their communities. I identified and provided digital assets for eight Persons with Disability (PwDs) from Beed district. These individuals are



the change makers in their respective communities and continue to support community work.

In addition to my work with PwDs, I also played a crucial role in translating state and central government schemes into Marathi, making vital information more accessible to the local community. My efforts not only helped bridge the communication gap but also empowered individuals to access government services and resources more effectively, thereby promoting greater inclusion and equity.

I started working in the Beed district in November 2023. Now, we have eight centres in the Beed district, all run by our Samarth SoochnaPreneurs, who are Persons with Disabilities. They are dedicated to serving the community, and their work has a significant impact as they provide essential services within their communities. Without incurring extra costs, which is much easier for people from their communities, our SoochnaPreneurs help them reduce time - consuming processes and transportation costs.

Throughout my journey, I have demonstrated resilience, leadership, and a deep-seated commitment to serving marginalised communities. From my early experiences in fieldwork to my impactful work as a Digital Swaraj Fellow and beyond, my journey serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative power of community empowerment and the indomitable spirit of those who dedicate their lives to making a difference.



# Glimpses from the Fellowship Journey of the Cohort 2023-2024







## IMPRINTS OF CHANGE: THE DIGITAL JOURNEY TO SWARAJ

*Imprints of Change: The Digital Journey to Swaraj* is a testament to the transformative impact of the Digital Swaraj Fellowship. The book is an anthology of experiences, learnings and insights shared by Fellows of Cohort 2023-2024, who have been at the forefront of digital inclusion and empowerment across India's diverse landscapes. The book captures the essence of the Fellowship program into two parts: In *Part One: Digital Swaraj in Action*, stories of grassroots change unfold through the narratives of Maitri Singh, Mili Dangwal, Pratiksha Kamble, Puntti Kumari, Shrishti Sinha, Swati Tiwari, and Vikas Chinchkar. Each chapter highlights unique initiatives that reflect the power of digital tools in promoting a citizen and community-centric development, and building an inclusive and resilient digital ecosystem. *Part Two: Fellows ki Duniya: Notes from the Field* offers deeper insights into the Fellows' personal journeys. From digital odysseys to bridging urban-rural divides, the one-year fellowship journey showcases the challenges and triumphs of nurturing and creating a generation of digital changemakers, leaders and experts in the digital and development sector.



Neemuch



Nandurbar



Pondy

