Digital Literacy: A window to a new world

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"I use a laptop at home because I have learned now how to use one. In fact, I told my mom that we will start paying our bills from home rather than standing in long queues." ~Afsana, age 12, village Sohanpur, block Ramgarh, Alwar

"I like learning computers. I have learned tailoring too. Now I want to achieve something in life and know that I am equipped for it." ~Muskan, age 12, village Thekda, block Ramgarh, Alwar

"I can easily find answers on the internet to questions pertaining to reapplication of Aadhar Cards, the Right to Information Act, application for pensions, etc. This would not have been possible without being computer literate." ~Insar, class 7, village Thekda, block Ramgarh, Alwar

Literacy is a valuable tool for the development of a person, and digital literacy plays an increasingly significant role in overall literacy. However, for some, understanding even the basics of computer technology is an elusive task. Almost 70 percent of India's population resides in rural areas, so the critical components of their development must include education and literacy training. Sehgal Foundation teacher trainer, Manisha, notes, "Conducting courses in the village is important for girls because parents are reluctant to send their girls out of the villages."

Jetender, a digital literacy trainer at a school in Kalsera village, Alwar, explains, "Many villagers are not aware of their entitlements as per different government schemes. If the current generation of schoolchildren, the decision makers of tomorrow, become computer literate, they are more likely to pass on their knowledge to their parents, family, and community. I remember a student who helped his family avail their entitled rations under the Public Distribution System—imagine the boost in confidence this child must have received! Learning computers also improves career prospects."

Sehgal Foundation's Digital Literacy initiative, launched in Nuh District, Haryana in 2016 and Alwar in Rajasthan in 2017, has grown like a movement. The program, for adolescents age fifteen and above, has three major training components: computer and internet literacy basics, life skills education, and good rural governance. Students' participation in these trainings makes them more aware, motivated, and enthusiastic citizens who will be able to bring about change at the grassroots.

A Life Skills Education module called "Who am I?" helps with basics as simple as how students introduce themselves in front of an audience. Including aspects pertaining to governance makes students more aware of government schemes

and provisions like the Public Distribution System, Mid-Day Meal program, as well as the functions and roles of village-level institutions such as Gram Panchayats and school management committees. In addition, the course facilitates awareness pertaining to personal health, nutrition, and sanitation. A survey conducted among students showed that computer literacy helped children access a wide array of support and information such as railway schedule updates, sample/model papers for schoolwork, application status of ration card/pension, etc., online shopping, video calling, using *paytm*, and sending emails.

There are separate classes for boys and girls. The teacher-student ratio averages 1:25 (in a typical classroom of 25–30 students), which enables "learning by doing"—a vital learning model for understanding the nuances of the computer and internet.

The three course components, life skills, governance, and computer literacy, assist in the important all-round development of schoolchildren. However, challenges are galore: Maintaining a balance between school, tuitions, and the course is tough for students. Factors such as absenteeism, irregular electricity supply, reluctance of female students to attend due to long distances, security issues, etc., are some other obstacles. To encourage schoolchildren to be change initiators, participation in the change-making process is vital. Life skills education assists them in personality development, and a conducive environment makes it possible to cultivate confident voices for change, irrespective of barriers and challenges.

A girl student, Muskina says, "I stood up to my mother because she was serving me milk diluted with water, while my brother was being served pure milk. Why the disparity?" Mohina, age twelve, is an active School Management Committee member.

Jamsheda, a girl enrolled at the center having intellectual impairment, attends school level meetings and assists in maintenance of the school property—a remarkable achievement in its own right!

Manisha teaches the course to two groups of students in the village of Dhauli Dhoop, district Ramgarh. One is an all-girl, while the other is a mix of boys and girls with an average age of fourteen. She says, "I took this job because I have always enjoyed teaching, plus I wanted to support my family financially. I have learned a lot in the process of imparting the knowledge I received via the trainings held by Sehgal Foundation. The process continues, which ensures the continuous development of all involved."

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