# Empowering Rural Youth with Digital Literacy and Life Skills Education

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Young people, aged 15 to 29, comprise 28% of India's total population (National Youth Policy 2014). That is a crucial period in life when one creates an identity outside one's family and constantly faces numerous physical, social, and emotional challenges. Channeling young people in the right direction during this sensitive and adaptable age can lead to positive social transformation. This age range includes adolescents who "can make an immense contribution to society if they are given proper support and space through handholding and informed interaction. In this connection, life skills education plays a vital role in creating awareness and providing guidance and direction to them. (Dinesh, et al., 2014)

Young people play an integral and essential role in the development process in rural India. Many have an important place in local self-government as elected members of panchayats. However, their limited knowledge and understanding about different aspects of village governance can restrict them from effectively addressing the grassroots problems. Life skills education that includes governance training serves as an important tool to create and expand their awareness on various government schemes and programmes and impart useful skills for accessing them.

Bringing transparency and accountability in effective service delivery is another major challenge in rural governance in India. Digital literacy education is one promising solution to overcome this challenge. However, there is a huge gap between urban and rural youth in access to information and communication technology (ICT). As per the National Sample Survey, 71st Round, only 7.8% of the rural population is able to use a computer for word processing/typing vs. 28% of the urban population. The percentage of the rural population using the internet for searching desired information is far below (7.3%) compared to the urban population (27%) (NSS, 25th Round). Further, the gap intensifies considering parameters such as gender, age and social power structures. "Digital divide relates to the different opportunities and uses of communicative and informational resources, which depend on traditional sociological variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, and age." (Scarcelli, C.M, et al., 2016).

S M Sehgal Foundation (Sehgal Foundation) implements Digital Literacy and Life Skills Education programme for rural youth against the above backdrop. The programme provides a platform for youth to come together, gain knowledge, and collectively address problems related to village governance. Youth are trained on life

skills education and awareness of various government schemes and programmes. They have an opportunity to use the internet as a tool to access information on government programmes. This forum instills a spark for individual and collective action and young people are able to use the knowledge gained in the classes in their practical lives to avail government services or participate in government programmes.

This paper describes the project components of digital literacy and life skills education programme at Sehgal Foundation, and elucidates the successes and outcomes of the five-month curriculum used with the young boys and girls in villages of Nuh and Alwar districts of Haryana and Rajasthan.

## About the programme

The digital literacy and life skills programme has three main components: digital and internet literacy training, life skills education, and generating awareness of good village governance. The specific objectives of the programme are:

- The empowerment of young girls and boys to be able to make their own choices.
- The development and enhancement of leadership qualities among young girls and boys using participatory methodologies.
- The bridging of the digital knowledge divide between rural and urban youth.
- Creation of increased awareness about local governance issues that lead to greater participation of young people in local governance.

- Program components

    - *Life skills education*
    - *Awareness of rural governance*
    - *Digital literacy*

The digital literacy and life skills education centers started in a village enroll 25–30 young people in each. The centers are typically set-up in government schools and operate after school hours, or they are held in a common location that is accessible to all participants. Before the creation of a center, a dialogue is held with the gatekeepers, consisting of meetings with teachers and parents. A discussion with the intended beneficiaries helps to understand their needs and gauge their interest in the programme. After receiving consent from the community and completing a needs assessment, enrollment takes place. The pre-designed curriculum for the course includes three components - life skills education, digital literacy training and rural governance awareness training. Participants fill out a pre-evaluation questionnaire before starting the classes. After completion of a five-month course, participants fill out a post-evaluation questionnaire, which helps to assess the outcomes of the programme.

**Importance of Life Skills Education: Findings and evidences from the field**

"Youth-centered programmes make an effort to build strengths so that they respond to diverse interests, talents, and circumstances." (Hamilton, S.F., et al., 2004). The programme designed by Sehgal Foundation covers the modules including life skills education topics such as self-identity, value identification, goals setting, communication skills, interpersonal relationships, community engagement, and gender equity.

Center facilitators share these modules in experiential interactive sessions where the participants explore their own world, reflect, and make decisions about their own lives. "Life skills education programme is a series of self-building sessions consisting of basic skills for personal and social development, which will help young people in coping with the challenges they face." (Nasheeda, A., 2008).

> Tarmeen, a student enrolled in one of the centers shared, "I am seventeen years old, and my parents had chosen a boy for my marriage. When I learned at the center that the legal age of marriage is eighteen, I convinced my parents to wait until I am older. My friends from the center coached and helped me greatly, and I feel very happy."

Data from two time periods established that participants' perceptions about the maximum education limits for boys and girls have changed. After completing the five-month curriculum in 2017, one baseline survey finding was that 20% of the boys and 32% of the girls said that there is no limitation on the education of girls; this percentage increased to 100 percent for boys and 96 percent for girls post evaluation." (Guru, S.,2017). The training widened the perspective of enrolled students and changed their perceptions about education and other areas of life. This course also enhanced their decision-making abilities and empowered them to make informed decisions and choices about their lives. At the same time, their awareness level about the legal marriage age for girls increased to 15% for girls and 46% points for boys. (Saxena, R., 2018).

Awareness about the legal age of marriage of girls increased from 84 to 99% and awareness about legal age of marriage of boys went 53 to 99%. (Saxena, R., 2018). The training programme made a significant impact in building the confidence of participants in sharing their opinions; 99% participants were confident in sharing their views with their parents vs. 72% during the baseline. (Ibid)

"A relevant and proper implementation of life skills education is a need of the hour. Imparting life skills education helps in motivating, providing practical, cognitive, emotional, social, and self-management skills for life adjustments." (Prajapati, R,et al.,2017). The centers established by Sehgal Foundation provide the necessary skills required by adolescent girls and boys to gain a new perspective about their lives and how to manage themselves by making informed choices.

**Awareness on Rural Governance over a period**

A "huge gap exists between users and non-users of e-government services." (Nagaraja, K., 2016) The Government of India has digitized many services, and many departments are providing information on various government programmes using online platforms. However, rural communities are not accessing this information, as they do not have the digital skills required to avail these services.

"Young people are at the forefront of the technology revolution, which is the driving force behind global emergence and evolution of the information and knowledge based society. Youth are often the leading innovators in the development, use, and spread of ICT." (World UN Report, 2015) However, a large number of rural youth remain excluded from the ICT revolution due to a lack of opportunities to gain digital skills. Digital literacy and life skills centers enhance their digital skills so they can access information online. This leads to involvement of young citizens in governance, which leads to transparent and accountable governance.

The curriculum includes information on the functioning of various village-level institutions such as *panchayats* (village councils), School Management Committees (SMCs) and Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs). Information on various government programmes such as Public Distribution System (PDS), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), pensions, Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan (SBA), Right to Education (RTE) and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) helps youth to know about their entitlements. The young boys and girls use this increased awareness to participate in their development and create synergies with different government departments to avail benefits.

After completion of the five-month programme, the following findings emerged in the study conducted in 2017:

"The knowledge about existence of VHSNCs has significantly improved from 6 to 90%; knowledge about existence of SMC has improved significantly from 27 to 96%; knowledge about reservation of women in Panchayati Raj has significantly improved from 24 to 91%." (Guru, S., 2017) The knowledge about existence of ICDS has improved by 31%; MDM awareness has improved by 13%; existence of pension schemes has improved by 13%; awareness about SBA has improved by 49%, and awareness about RTE has improved from 65 to 98%. (Ibid)

Another study conducted in 2018 after completion of the five-month curriculum, found the following about the knowledge on village governance (Saxena, R., 2018):

"No participant was aware about functioning of VHSNCs; after the completion of the course 95% participants became aware. Awareness about SMCs improved from 1 to 97% while awareness on responsibilities of SMCs increased significantly from

nil to 99%. All respondents became aware about RTE against 27% at baseline. Awareness about Panchayati Raj increased from 68 to 96%; awareness on reservations of women in Panchayati Raj increased from 12 to 96% and on panchayat elections increased from 68 to 99%; awareness of Gram Sabha was 83% post evaluation while no one was aware about this before the training. With regard to pension 78% were aware before training which increased to 100% after completion of the course; awareness on SBA increased from 17 to 93% and on ICDS improved from 69 to 95%."

> Sukhiram Prajpat from village Kalsada, Alwar, used his digital knowledge to check his family's PDS status online. Knowing about the gaps in service delivery, he mobilized his parents to ask for the right amount of grains from the PDS depot holder and was able to get the full ration entitlement.

Increased awareness of government programmes and schemes has empowered the youth to share this awareness with their family members and within the community, and they are able to use this information in accessing benefits.

"A clear and purposeful programme of youth education is essential if the youth are to be made useful and responsible members of the society. Their education should include instruction in skills and values." (Murty, B.S.,1989). The digital literacy and life skills education programme tries to address the various facets of life affecting rural youth; creating awareness on village governance is an important aspect of this programme. The increase in awareness level translates into micro plans taken up by the youth that lead to positive outcomes.

### Digital Literacy: a Key priority area for rural youth

ICTs are vital to a knowledge economy and are the cornerstone of many development processes across the world. ICTs can be effective in providing alternative opportunities for education and providing knowledge-based support to children. ICT-enabled interventions have the potential to extend education delivery even to the most marginalized population." (Handoo, A., 2007). The initiative of Sehgal Foundation to impart digital literacy to boys and girls belonging to marginalized communities has provided knowledge and skills that have opened doors to a plethora of opportunities and has mainstreamed them to an exciting alternate system of education, which they can explore on their own using their digital literacy skills.

After imparting digital and internet literacy to a group of students for five months, the following findings emerged:

"Knowledge about internet improved from 17 to 84%; about internet banking improved from 14 to 85%; about ecommerce improved from 7 to 79%." (Guru, S., 2017) "Very few students knew how to operate a computer before joining the course;

almost all participants said that the course gave them a chance to operate a computer." (Ibid)

> Having learnt about computers and internet at the digital literacy and life skills education center, Mubarak helped his brother set-up a Common Service Center in the village. This center has helped to supplement the family's income.

In another study, "almost all the respondents reported to have operated a computer against a baseline figure of 5%; awareness on internet increased from 11 to 93%, knowledge of internet banking improved from 3 to 84%; awareness on social media improved by 75%." (Saxena, R., 2018) "At the time of initiation of the course, none of the respondents had an email account; post training 97% had email account." (Ibid)

"The Government of India is adopting e-governance strategies to achieve good governance through ICT. This concomitantly leads to the need to provide citizens with digital skills so that they have the capacities to digitally access the information." (Nagaraja, K., 2016) In the programme run by Sehgal Foundation, many boys and girls have started using digital skills to access services, gain employment, or start an enterprise. The use of digital technology has led to collective transformation and this has a potential to provide an impetus for social change.

## Conclusion

The Digital Literacy and Life Skills Education programme has thus met its intended outcomes. "Digital India Programme has paved way to myriad educational and occupational opportunities for the country's youth." (Makhija, A., et al., 2018). These opportunities for rural youth have provided essential skills so that the young boys and girls are able to make decisions about their lives. It is recommended that both digital literacy skills and life skills education be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. The information on good rural governance is also imperative although the content designed for governance curriculum will depend on the environment and socioeconomic context of the areas where the youth reside.

"Youth today are not mere passive spectators of various social-cultural changes facilitated by modernization in society but are accelerating such changes by active participation. They are inclined to accept new ideas with eagerness to effectively play a role as active citizens of the Indian Republic." (Jayaswal, R.,1992). The Indian Constitution gives a right to vote at the age of eighteen. This bestows the youth with a greater responsibility to exercise their vote by making informed choices. They therefore need to be more aware about the socioeconomic and political environments in their villages and in the country. The Digital Literacy and Life Skills programme by Sehgal Foundation creates this awareness in youth.

India has a large population of young people, and their most burning need is employment. While the government and private sector are working and functioning assiduously to create jobs or enterprises, many youth still lack a purpose in life. In the absence of satisfactory livelihoods, they might go astray and factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender can affect them adversely. Therefore, a well-designed youth programme can build a strong peer culture and create a surrounding environment that positively influences the youth and addresses various facets of their lives. This includes their knowledge and use of technology.

"A vast majority of youth in our country lack proper awareness and direction and are not involved in any development activity. They can play a significant role in bringing about socio-economic and political transformation in the villages." (Kennedy, J.J., 2011) Once informed, involved, and empowered, youth have the key to our country's bright future. It is our responsibility to instill in them the right values and provide them avenues so that they bloom and become effective citizens of India.

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