

Digital awareness goes 'mobile' amid pandemic

ASHA RAMACHANDRAN
NEW DELHI, 17 NOVEMBER

Many families around the world are struggling with remote working and schooling, but for Priyanka, a young girl of Nadoti block of Alwar district, attending digital awareness classes was no less than a battle won. Her parents used their meager agricultural earnings to pay for the education of Priyanka and her two younger siblings, leaving nothing to spare. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 proved to be another stumbling block. As classes went online, the young girl was unable to access the lessons as the family did not have a smartphone.

Though Priyanka's mother, believing education is the key to do well in life, was determined to ensure her daughter continued her schooling, there was little she could do. When Priyanka heard about online digital classes conducted by a community-led programme, she immediately got in touch with neighbourhood friends and arranged to attend classes with them, sitting apart to maintain social distancing, with one shared smartphone in the middle. "There were instances when the parents sat beside their children to see what was being taught,"



remarked one instructor.

When the COVID-19 outbreak hit, nearly everything in villages, including education, ground to a halt. Despite being sparsely populated, rural areas have faced unique challenges during the pandemic because of poverty and an overall lack of support compared to their urban counterparts. Even charging a mobile phone can be tricky.

Technological marvels - computers, the Internet, and social media - have connected the world and creat-

ed possibilities and opportunities scarcely imaginable a few decades ago. But this high-tech landscape can be challenging, even for those in the most well-connected and well-funded communities. The question is, how do those on the other side of the digital divide - in poor and isolated areas - acquire the necessary tech skills and knowledge?

In the villages of rural India, where resources and opportunities are generally scarce, information technology could be profoundly

transformative. Understanding this potential, a public charitable trust with a mission to strengthen community development initiatives, Sehgal Foundation, created a digital and life skills awareness programme in 2006 for children in government schools. This initiative has steadily expanded with support of the foundation's philanthropic partners. Digital awareness training in smart classrooms is a key component of the "Transform Lives" one school at a time programme, which has

made a positive difference and created a brighter future for thousands of rural schoolchildren, especially girls, and continues to expand to more and more villages.

"Through digital and life skills awareness training we focus on rural youth as they lack exposure and access to digital devices along with their operational skills. With this initiative, our objective is to bridge the urban-rural digital divide, so far, we have transformed over 70 schools and have impacted 21,785 students," said Navneet Narwal, Associate Lead, Transform Lives.

Teaching digital awareness in a poor, rural setting is a complex process. Working closely with the community, the foundation teams draw on years of experience to overcome obstacles involving connectivity, infrastructure deficiencies and cultural limitations to put together a practical, robust curriculum taught by hand-picked, tech-savvy local residents.

Students who have completed the course have used their newfound skills to access government services, assist in village projects, seek out opportunities for themselves, their families, and fellow residents, and to simply explore and enjoy the online world

that many take for granted. Students report being more self-confident and motivated to pursue avenues that had previously been closed to them.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, acting on the urgency felt by students and instructors of the digital awareness classes, the Sehgal Foundation team devised a way to arrange online classes, made possible by students using an older family member's smartphones at home or sharing a device in small, socially-distanced groups. By the end of the spring session, 85 students in Alwar district and 53 in Nuh district successfully completed the digital awareness training course.

Digital awareness trainers recorded the audio lessons for radio broadcast. Digital audio-modules, called "Udaan" (flight), were made available to a mass audience through Sehgal Foundation's community radio Alfaraz-e-Mewat in Nuh and to community radio Alwar Ki Awaaz (an initiative of Sunrise University). Even in the face of the disruption caused by a global pandemic, the determination shown by the students, parents and instructors kept the dream of digital awareness alive in these communities.

