

## **How Digital India minimised the Great Gender Divide?**

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**Abstract:** The digital technology has revolutionized the world. Post 1990s, with the advent of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in India, enumerable benefits have accrued to all because of the synergy of knowledge and ICT but these benefits need not be restricted to only some. Digital technology has proved to be a non-discriminating medium which provides equal help and opportunities to people, cutting across gender barriers. The digital technology has been used most efficiently and effectively by the government and the civil society alike to bridge the gender gap in India. This paper aims to explore the role of digital technology to bridge the gender gap by providing equal opportunities to rural women in India who had not yet enjoyed social and economic independence. Concisely, it is a descriptive study which looks at the role of digital technology in rural women empowerment.

**Keywords:** digital, empowerment, ICT, rural, schemes, women.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Empowerment is the process of enabling individual to think, decide, and take action and work in an autonomous way. One can gain control of one's destiny and circumstances of one's life. As per the UN Women, the term women's empowerment includes the following principles:

1. Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
2. Treat all women and men fairly at work—respect and support human rights and non-discrimination.
3. Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
4. Promote education, training and professional development for women.
5. Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
6. Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
7. Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

India, being a developing nation cannot afford to ignore capacity building and empowerment of women. Gender sensitivity is the prerequisite that must prevail and be strengthened at all levels. Thus, to promote women empowerment, technological intervention assumes a vital role, especially when viewed in the Indian context. The potential of digital media to sweep across social, political and economic barriers is just the leverage that women need to build for themselves a new identity and a more honourable place in society. ICTs are emerging as a powerful tool for gender empowerment in a developing country like India. With the advent of digital technology in India, there has been a rapid growth in the ICT sector since the late 1980s and the use of ICT has dramatically expanded since the 1990s, post-liberalisation and globalisation. The number of internet accounts is growing at a fast rate.

But as has been experienced the world over, women have had limited access to technologies in India. There is a huge gender divide when it comes to the Internet usage in India. Only 17% of women use the Internet in India, compared with 27% of men. More than 440 million, or 72%, of India's females don't have cellphones, according to GSMA, a global association of mobile service companies. Though, low incomes in the country may account to the lack of ownership, the figure is well above the 373 million men who don't have what has become a basic technology even in India. Even when women do have phones, they often don't use them for purpose other than making calls. The GSMA estimates that 55% of women with phones in India have never even sent a text message. That compares with the 33% of Indian men with phones who have never sent a text. This disparity deepens further as we move towards the rural India.

## II. WOMEN AND DIGITISATION

Women continue to play a significant and fundamental role in the Information Technology Revolution for creating social change. In spite of the enumerable instances of gender discrimination in India, the IT sector is considered to be non-discriminating for it provides equal opportunities to all. Post the New Economic Policy in the 1990s, the Indian polity and economy have witnessed a drastic change. Over the years, the country has made strides to incorporate the modern technology and use it to bridge gaps between the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, the male and the female. Undoubtedly, women have had limited access to technology but things are changing and digitization is bringing a change.

The Draft National Policy for Women 2016 stated that “efforts will be made to remove the disparities in access to and proficiency in information and communication technology (ICT), particularly between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged children, and between rural and urban schools as the use of ICT has now become pivotal for the entire education system. Public-private partnerships (PPP) will be adopted for building ICT infrastructure, developing applications and locally relevant content using gender-sensitive language, operations and maintenance and developing the capacity of teachers required for harnessing the full capacity of ICT productive tools.”

It further provided that “Since women greatly benefit from ICTs, mobile telephone applications will be proactively used as a tool for mass communication and dissemination of information on legal rights, payments under wage employment schemes, subsidies, pension payments, markets etc. Efforts will be made to collect gender based data through mobile phones to feed into policy prescriptions. Women participation will be ensured in the efficient use and spreading the use of solar energy, biogas, smokeless *chulas* and other technological applications to have positive influence on their life styles and a long-term impact on meeting sustainable development goals. Micro-enterprises based on environment friendly technologies, organically grown produce will be promoted to provide viable livelihoods options to women.”

With these goals, the policymakers envision to use the digital means of ICT to empower women by bridging the gender gap and making them financially independent and self-sufficient.

## III. DIGITAL INDIA AND RURAL WOMEN

In India, women comprise a half of the rural population and play a significant and substantial role in the rural sector economy. These women engage in economics activities such as handicrafts and sewing or rolling cigarettes, weaving of baskets and fabrics. The advent of digital technology in India has played a greater role for rural women empowerment. The women have been made aware about the world and more particularly, about India. Internet has helped them in assimilating information about variety, range and quality of products publicity and marketing of products and services. Apart from being used as a tool of information, application of IT has created avenues for women empowerment. IT has exposed these women to telecommunication services, media and broadcast services to create markets for their products and services. They have been provided following information for their further development: -

- a) Educational opportunities outside the village.
- b) Job opportunities in both formal and informal sector.
- c) Government assistance programs career advancement within the restrictions of traditions.
- d) Modern child care facilities.
- e) Legal provisions to counter sexual harassment, domestic violence & social injustice.

Digital administration and the use of ICT has helped the women in the following ways-

- (1) **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DIGITAL LITERACY-** Helping Women Go Online is an initiative to empower women from marginalised communities to become digitally literate and able to access the Internet.

This is a Google initiative that Digital Empowerment Foundation is implementing since August, 2014 through its CIRCAs. The programme seeks to empower women by guiding them on how to use the internet. The programme includes basic computer skills, Internet skills, Internet on mobile, chat and e-mail etc. It is through this scheme that the women in rural and semi-urban areas are now capable of obtaining childcare tips, cooking tips and recipes, financial tips and household tips by using the Internet.

- Similarly, under the **National e-Governance Plan**, the rural entrepreneurs are provided with citizen-centric services including access to land records and utility bill payments. Women have been educated in computer literacy, that's the only qualification needed. CSCs can be an effective vehicle to help women acquire digital literacy skills that enable them to further their education, gain employment, help build their own businesses, secure their livelihoods and become socially, economically and politically active. The scheme also aims to provide financial support both to these women who undergo training and the VLEs that will be providing this training.

- Women in rural India including Village Level Entrepreneurs and CSC operators are also being provided Courses on Computer Concepts by DOEACC under the Digital Literacy Training for Women Scheme.
- (2) **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP**-With the advent of internet facilities post 1990s, women across the country have been able to gain control over their business and use the digital opportunities to set up and propagate their businesses. There are many good practices for the use of IT's for women's empowerment. Some relevant cases would be-
  - a) India shop, an e-commerce website launched in 2005 in Tamil Nadu, designed to sell products made by rural women's co-operatives and NGO's. Another significant initiative is the setting up of ICT kiosks in rural areas with intermediation by private sector companies and civil society organisations. **Dairy Information System KIOSK (DISK)**-In Gujarat, women producers use the Dairy Information System KIOSK (DISK) which manages a database of all milk cattle and provides information about veterinary Service and other practical information about the dairy sector. In Himachal Pradesh, women mid-school dropouts repair water pumps and manage computer data for the maintenance of the pumps.
  - b) **SMILE (Savitri Marketing Institution for Ladies Empowerment)**- a voluntary organization in Pune, has increased literacy level of under privileged women through the usage of IT. Internet has helped them market their various products.

Through internet there is greater awareness and exposure and market reach for the products. These evidences prove that IT has empowered the women all over the country.
  - c) **SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)**- uses IT for women empowerment. The use of an Internet based training programme has helped to develop a cadre of barefoot managers among the poor women workers, focusing on women in panchayats, forests & soon. Through ICT, training is provided on issues as disaster management, leadership building, health and education, child development etc.
  - d) **"Networking Rural Women and Knowledge"**- a UNESCO project in Nabanna, India, initiated the innovative use of databases, intranet portals and web-based partnerships in the local language for the benefit of poor women. The project puts emphasis on building a framework for information sharing, content creation, off-line information dissemination and web-based partnership with organizations located outside the region. The project aims at building women's local information networks by providing simple facilities and training at five ICT centers in Baduria, Rudrapur, Taragunia, Arbelia and Punda.

Some of the important changes in women's agency after gaining access to information and communication through Nabanna were that learning to use a computer and accruing and distributing the Information to local people had resulted in greater family and community respect. Not only this, younger women felt they were able to approach the job market with greater confidence than before. ICT skills help them to find jobs and increase their income. Women have achieved an increase in income as well as enhancement of solidarity among women in the community.
  - e) **Aamagaon Soochna Kendra (My village's information centre)** is an initiative of Government of Orissa under which 73 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) kiosks in the rural areas of 12 districts of Orissa were set up and are run by Women SHGs/ Panchayats/ NGOs / CBOs / Youth Clubs and managed by the Community IT volunteers paid through user charges collected and managed by the local hosts. The government has partnered with Mission *Shakti*, an NGO and women SHG members are being trained on computer fundamentals and Internet. Access to IT training goes a long way in empowerment of women.
  - f) **The Warana "Wired Village" project** -was initiated in 1998 by the Prime Minister's Office Information Technology (IT) Task Force. The stated goal of the project is not only to increase the efficiency and productivity of the sugar cane co-operative, but also to provide a wide range of information and services to 70 villages around Warana. The project aims in fact at giving villagers access to information in local language about crops and agricultural market prices, employment schemes from the government of Maharashtra, and educational opportunities. A majority of women controlled enterprises play a significant role in the economy.
  - g) **Internet Saathi**- An initiative of Mr. Ratan Tata with Google and Intel to help women in rural India to access the internet in large number, this aims to go deep with the internet usage among rural women in India. Under the program, Google trains and educates women on how to use gadgets like smartphones and tablets thereby making them understand the Internet and its potential. These women then go to their villages and educate other women. They get access to information around healthcare, better farming techniques, cooking, entertainment, and more.
  - h) **Gyandoot**-was initiated in Madhya Pradesh to fund rural networked cyberkiosks through panchayats. The project was started in Dhar district, to offer villages multiple services through internet based project. Through this project, information is available about rural life and agricultural projects. The internet gives information about education and employment opportunities to both men and women which was earlier available through middlemen.

- i) **M.S. Swaminathan research project-** initiated in Pondicherry in Embalam district has led to creation of information villages. Ten villages are connected by a hybrid wired and wireless network, consisting of PCs, telephones, VHF duplex radio devices, and email connectivity through dial-up telephone lines that facilitates both voice and data transfer. This has enabled villagers to obtain the information that they need and use this information to make improvements. In the course of the last 20 years, MSSRF has consciously made its science and technology based interventions focusing on rural women, and supporting them for effectively managing their natural resource base, improving their livelihoods through skill, expertise and capacity enhancement, access to knowledge and information and opportunities for market linkages for the primary produces and value added products. **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)** is an initiative launched by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in the year 2007, under the Food Security Programme Area for empowering female farmers in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra using technological means of skill development.
- (3) **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH FINANCIAL INCLUSION-** Since the mid 2000s, mobile money transfers have been touted as a pathway to financial inclusion, especially to bring in the 'poor and unbanked sections' of a country's population, especially women, into the benefits of the global economy. Pre-2015, mobile money service M-PESA by Vodafone and ICICI Bank in Bihar, Jharkhand and Maharashtra were the main means of financial inclusion. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, another central government initiative launched in 2015 involves digital and financial inclusion of women, who constitute the half of the population providing them economic inclusion.
- (4) **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH E-HEALTH INITIATIVES-** The various healthcare initiatives implemented include the use of digital services for efficiency and effectiveness. The Mother and Child Health Tracking System, a country wide initiative launched under the National Rural Health Mission, has enabled the creation of a web-enabled system that will enable effective tracking of ante-natal care, post-natal care and immunisation of pregnant women and nursing mothers.
- The National Health Management Information System aims at tracking a number of health indicators across the country, to facilitate better planning of health care delivery.
  - Mobile-based applications for providing health information services to front-line health extension workers and the community, have been developed in partnership with civil society and the private sector.
  - Various e-health programmes in different states like E-Mamta in Gujarat and **Pregnancy, Child Tracking & Health Services Management System** have brought a new dimension in healthcare initiatives for women and have proved to be an effective planning & management tool for providing health services to the women of all strata of the society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION- THE WAY AHEAD

The advent of IT and digital technology has changed the concept of work for women, especially in the rural sector where till now there has existed a significant gender gap when it comes to the economic independence of the members of the two genders. Equitable access to ICT technology and the autonomy to receive and produce the information relevant to their concerns and perspectives are critical issues for women. It is therefore important to engender digital policy to ensure that women, particularly rural and poor women, benefit from ICT. Digital policies and projects should properly address the gender digital divide and further contribute to women's economic empowerment in both rural and urban sector. There have been a number of policy initiatives which seek to empower women, especially those in the rural sector digitally but what is required is a more regulated framework. It needs to be realized that information and communication technology by itself cannot answer all the problems facing women's development, but it does bring new information resources and can open new communication channels for marginalized communities. Last but not the least, when policies and programmes are in place to improve access, paucity of funds should not be a hindrance to establishing ICT access points or even implementing telecenter-type programmes. As UN studies have indicated, though the costs of using ICTs for development may be high, not using them at all may prove to be costlier.

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