

Empowering Rural Women Through Digital Literacy: **Internet Saathi**

OVERVIEW: Google and Tata Trusts came together to increase digital literacy among rural women. Their initiative, Internet Saathi, develops local women trainers (Internet Saathis) to train other women on how to use the internet, which in turn helps them improve their income and overall quality of life. Now, Internet Saathi is rolling out the initiative's second phase: expanding from digital literacy to digitally enabled livelihoods, by empowering women to become entrepreneurs and service providers in their communities.

ESTABLISHED: 2015

PRIMARY PHILANTHROPISTS:

Tata Trusts
(in partnership with Google)



GRANT AMOUNT:

> **INR 68 crores**¹
(> USD 10 million)



PRIMARY FOCUS:

Rural Livelihoods—
women and girls

ARCHETYPE: Build innovative solutions

Internet Saathi adopts an innovative model (training of community members) and unique approach (tapping into technology to promote livelihoods) to bridge the digital divide and empower rural women.

KEY PARTNERS:

- Tata Water Mission
- Nonprofits working at the grassroots level

QUICK FACTS

WHY BOLD?

Internet Saathi adopts a novel approach to addressing a white space in internet literacy and usage for rural women in India. This approach empowers rural women to serve as trainers and helps to break down social barriers facing women in these areas. The initiative has expanded to more than 15 million women across 150,000 villages; over 80 percent of the women who have been trained by Saathis say they have a better understanding of the internet. Finally, Internet Saathi has grown out of a unique partnership between the social and private sectors.

KEY LEARNINGS



Channel philanthropy to test high potential but risky solutions that others would not consider



As on-the-ground conditions change, evolve the initiative's approaches for deeper impact



Build partnerships based on common values and goals but distinctive capabilities



Engage champions in the community to increase the initiative's scale and deepen its impact

¹ Conversion rates (INR to USD) reflect rates available during the April 2018 to June 2018 time period.

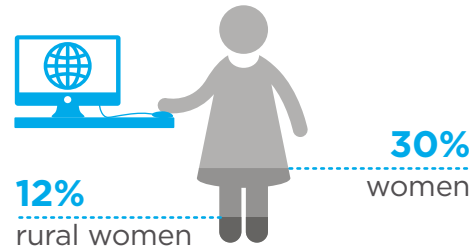
THE OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT

Very few women have access to the internet in India, especially women living in rural areas. With over 500 million internet users, India has the world's second largest online population.² However, only 30 percent of India's online users are women,³ considerably less than other developing countries such as China and Indonesia, which have greater than 40 percent female internet users.⁴ In India's rural areas, the proportion of female internet users drops to 12 percent.⁵

Several social factors contribute to this equity gap among rural women. Despite being the backbone of rural communities and producing between 60 and 80 percent of all food in India,⁶ women face social hurdles when it comes to gaining access to education, health, land rights, as well as technology. Culturally, rural communities are often suspicious of technology. In fact, women themselves question whether the digital realm is right for them, often dismissing it as a man's terrain. Low literacy rates also prevent women from comfortably texting on phones and using the internet. In some households, elders or husbands often expect women to seek permission for basic tasks, such as using technology.



500 million online internet users in India



By limiting their use of technology, women are not able to access the benefits it brings. Using a mobile phone to seek advice for farming or trade ideas for building a micro-business can help women secure a better economic life.

Nowadays, with more and more social services becoming available online, the consequences of India's digital gap loom even larger for women. For instance, [Digital India](#), a government-led initiative launched in 2015, aims to put all government forms and identification documents online. When rural women cannot connect to the internet, they miss out on services that would improve their lives.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals have elevated this issue of internet access for women. Specifically, its goals that address gender equality and the need to build infrastructure in least developed countries highlight the importance of bridging the digital divide.⁷

2 Shruthi Mohan, "12 million women across 110,000 Indian villages are becoming tech savvy, thanks to Internet Saathi," *Your Story*, January 22, 2018.

3 Ibid.

4 *Doubling Digital Opportunities: Enhancing the Inclusion of Women & Girls in the Information Society*, The Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender, September 2013.

5 "12 million women across 110,000 Indian villages are becoming tech savvy, thanks to Internet Saathi."

6 Mrinal Pande, "Empower Women Farmers," *Pragati*, July 18, 2017.

7 SDG Goal #5 (Gender Equality) includes the target: "Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women." SDG #9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) includes the target: "Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020."

A BOLD APPROACH TO DIGITAL LITERACY FOR RURAL WOMEN

Google and Tata Trusts recognized this gap and decided to address it. For Google, it was part of a strategic goal to expand people’s digital skills in a high-priority country and build its [Womenwill initiative](#), which works to create economic opportunity for women by connecting them to the online world. Google also recognized the heightened need in rural parts of India compared to urban areas. For Tata Trusts, bridging the online gender divide is in line with its larger mission: to catalyze transformational change in India by focusing on sustainable development through innovation. The initiative also aligns with the Trusts’ belief that in the 21st century, digital skills are essential for truly empowered livelihoods.

Hence, the two organizations came together to launch [Internet Saathi](#), a digital literacy initiative for rural women. The work grew from Google’s [Helping Women Get Online](#) effort to expand women’s ability to use the internet. Google and Tata Trusts then led a set of pilot projects coupled with an extensive on-ground study, to understand how best to help rural women living in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat become digitally literate. Through experimenting and testing, Google and Tata Trusts refined the model and scaled it across 17 states in India.

Internet Saathi’s goal is to promote gender equity in internet usage across rural India by expanding opportunities for women to take more ownership of their lives and improve their economic well-being. In turn, this helps generate access to new income streams and boost women’s social status. In fact, according to a 2012 [report](#) by Dalberg and Intel, more than 30 percent of mobile-only female internet users surveyed globally are able to earn additional income through the internet,⁸ and more than 50 percent of Indian women believe the internet gives them greater freedom.⁹

HOW THE INITIATIVE WORKS

Google and Tata Trusts have deployed an innovative model, where they collaborate with local nonprofits to train rural women on how best to use smartphones to access the internet. These women attend a two-day intensive, hands-on training on how to use smart devices. After this training, the women become “Saathis,” the Hindi word for “friend.” The nonprofits assign each Saathi to her own and three nearby villages, where she acts as an internet literacy trainer. For six months, Saathis travel across villages carrying smart devices, which they use to teach women about the benefits of the internet and how to embrace it in their daily lives.

Sustainable Development Goals



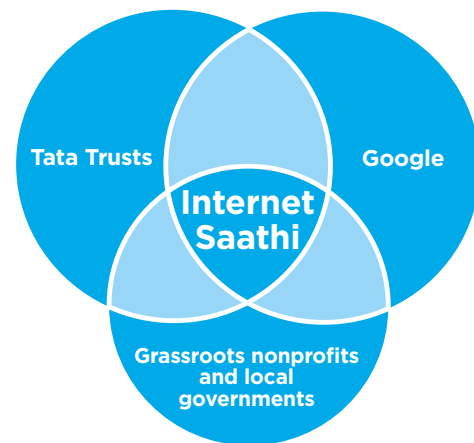
8 *Women and the Web: Bridging the Internet gap and creating new global opportunities in low and middle-income countries*, Intel, 2012, page 76.

9 *Ibid*: 42.

A Saathi not only teaches women how to access the internet and thereby leverage opportunities to improve their livelihoods, but she also contributes to her own economic well-being. She is paid a monthly stipend, which covers her costs and acts as an incentive to do this work on a month-to-month basis.

Digital access helps women refine vocational skills (by taking online classes in agriculture, textile design, beautician training, and more), improve financial literacy, keep up with government programs that benefit their families, and learn about nutrition. (Google’s [Helping Women Get Online](#) website, available in various languages, provides the technical support for women as they cross the digital divide for the first time.)

An innovative model to empower rural women



The two organizations behind Internet Saathi, Google and Tata Trusts, contribute specific capabilities and assets. Google brings its deep technological knowledge to bear, including approaches to training the Saathis and designing the initiative’s digital underpinnings. Tata Trusts, on the other hand, shares an extensive understanding of and experience in building partnerships with local governments and nonprofits in rural areas, as well as a mutual trust with local populations. Additionally, the Trusts’ experience in managing large-scale field projects helps ensure that managers are well-positioned to implement the initiative. Partnerships with local nonprofits bolster the organization’s work. For example, Internet Saathi’s partner Jagriti Sewa Sansthan provides field-level planning, interviews job applicants, and lends day-to-day support to Saathis. The nonprofit is the initiative’s “eyes and ears” at the grassroots level.

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

In the three years since Internet Saathi’s launch, over 15 million women have benefitted from the resources and education provided by 48,000 Saathis, who work across 150,000 villages. These numbers will grow, as the initiative is on track to cover almost half of India’s 600,000 villages in the next few years.

A [2017 study by Ipsos](#), a global market research firm, revealed that over 80 percent of the women who attended Saathis’ trainings said they had a better understanding of the internet. Consequently, 25 percent of the respondents stated that they continued to use the internet five times a week on average. In addition, one-third believe that their economic well-being had improved by learning new skills on the internet.

The positive results extend beyond the initiative’s participants; local governments and stakeholders have supported the initiative, such as by providing community spaces for women to convene and interact with Saathis.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Going forward, Internet Saathi faces some challenges, such as how to translate gains in digital literacy to sustain improved livelihoods. To help address this challenge, Google and Tata Trusts added an extra dimension to Internet Saathi in December 2017, where they aim to empower Saathis to extend the initiative's impact beyond their digital literacy engagement period. After acting as trainers for the internet, Internet Saathis can form a powerful network to understand rural India and drive positive change. Given the knowledge and credibility they have gained in their communities, Saathis can both disseminate and gather valuable information that can help strengthen socio-economic conditions in rural areas. For example, Saathis have helped other women to access government services through the [Haqdarshak](#) mobile platform. For the Tata Water Mission, Saathis were engaged as digitally equipped behavior change communication agents, promoting toilet usage, hand washing, and clean storage and use of drinking water. The Tata Water Mission aims to provide potable water to 7,000 villages within the next three years.

Tata Trusts set up the Foundation for Rural Entrepreneurship Development (FREND) to support the Saathis in their transition to this next phase of their entrepreneurial lives. The Foundation is supported by Google. An extension of the Internet Saathi initiative, FREND's primary role is to identify opportunities for the Saathis to secure better livelihoods and thereby sustain the digital momentum that has been created in the rural areas of the country.

The initiative is also working to address two other challenges to maximize its impact. Interviews with staff and beneficiaries reveal that over the long term, some women forget what they learn from the Saathis if they do not have continued access to personal smartphones. The initiative is exploring solutions to ensure that women who have undergone training have access to smartphones.

In addition, the initiative still encounters logistical challenges. At times, Saathis struggle to manage their schedules and meet with local women. As Internet Saathi scales and expands its reach to thousands of more villages across India, the key operating partners face challenges in ensuring that the initiative is working at its optimal level in all locales.

LEARNINGS TO DATE

Channel philanthropy to test high potential, but risky solutions that others would not consider. Philanthropic funding has the capacity to serve as “risk capital,” testing innovative but unproven ideas that might lead to transformative impact, particularly those approaches that government and the private sector would likely deem to be too daring. There is little doubt that Internet Saathi took some risks. To the best of our knowledge, no other initiative in India has sought to improve digital literacy and rural livelihoods at this scale by training female community members. The effort was particularly risky because it tackled social taboos, requiring village communities to modify their behavior and change their mindsets as women received technological guidance from trained women. Still, launching the effort was a worthwhile risk, as rural women have thus far embraced the technology and local governments have expressed their support.

As on-the-ground conditions change, evolve the initiative's approaches for deeper impact. Knowing something is not the same as doing something. Although it is helpful to have a blueprint and stay focused on that outlined plan, a willingness to make mid-flight corrections can help evolve the initiative's approach and potentially increase the level of impact. For instance, Internet Saathi's primary focus was to drive digital literacy rates among rural women. The initiative's first phase, built on an innovative community trainer model, has made real progress toward that goal. However, as the initiative's leaders thought more deeply about how to sustain impact over the long term, they realized a second phase was needed. They introduced an initiative that aims to build digitally enabled livelihoods, to better ensure that former Saathis can create new income streams for themselves.

Internet Saathi has also updated its approach in other smaller ways. When some women struggled to type out searches on a keypad, Saathis were taught how to train participants to do voice searches. The initiative also incorporates feedback from Saathis through regular monthly meetings, a forum for sharing ideas and insights. By staying operationally agile, organizers can refine an initiative to cater to the participants' actual needs, rather than needs conceived by donors.

Build partnerships based on common values and goals, but distinctive capabilities.

Internet Saathi took advantage of two organizations with specific strengths. Since launching the initiative, each partner focused on its unique capabilities. Collectively, however, their values were fully aligned around promoting digitally enabled empowerment for rural women. Ensuring that the mission is the same for both parties is a nontrivial issue, especially when the partnership, as in this case, cuts across the corporate and social sectors.

Google drew on Tata Trusts' understanding of rural India and its significant social sector expertise. Similarly, Tata Trusts respected Google's extensive resources and its capacity to serve vast populations with technology.

Engage champions in the community to increase the initiative's scale and deepen its impact. Instead of viewing the target population as passive beneficiaries, Internet Saathi drew on women from that population to increase the initiative's scale and deepen its impact. Saathis played a pivotal role in getting other women excited about the internet's possibilities: the push for digital literacy came from a trusted local voice, a Saathi, not from an imposing outsider.

Because Saathis served as catalysts for the model, the initiative scaled rapidly, spreading from village to village. Saathis became powerful change-makers in their communities, channeling their time, effort, and passion to train other women. In fact, when Google piloted the work using professional external trainers, the trainers attracted only a small number of participants. The initiative took off only when rural women themselves

served as trainers. Internet Saathi invested in local women, and they reciprocated by helping the initiative gain the trust of local communities. Lastly, the initiative invested time and resources to secure buy-in from local governments, which Saathis also helped initiate.

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