



HUMANANA
PEOPLE TO PEOPLE INDIA



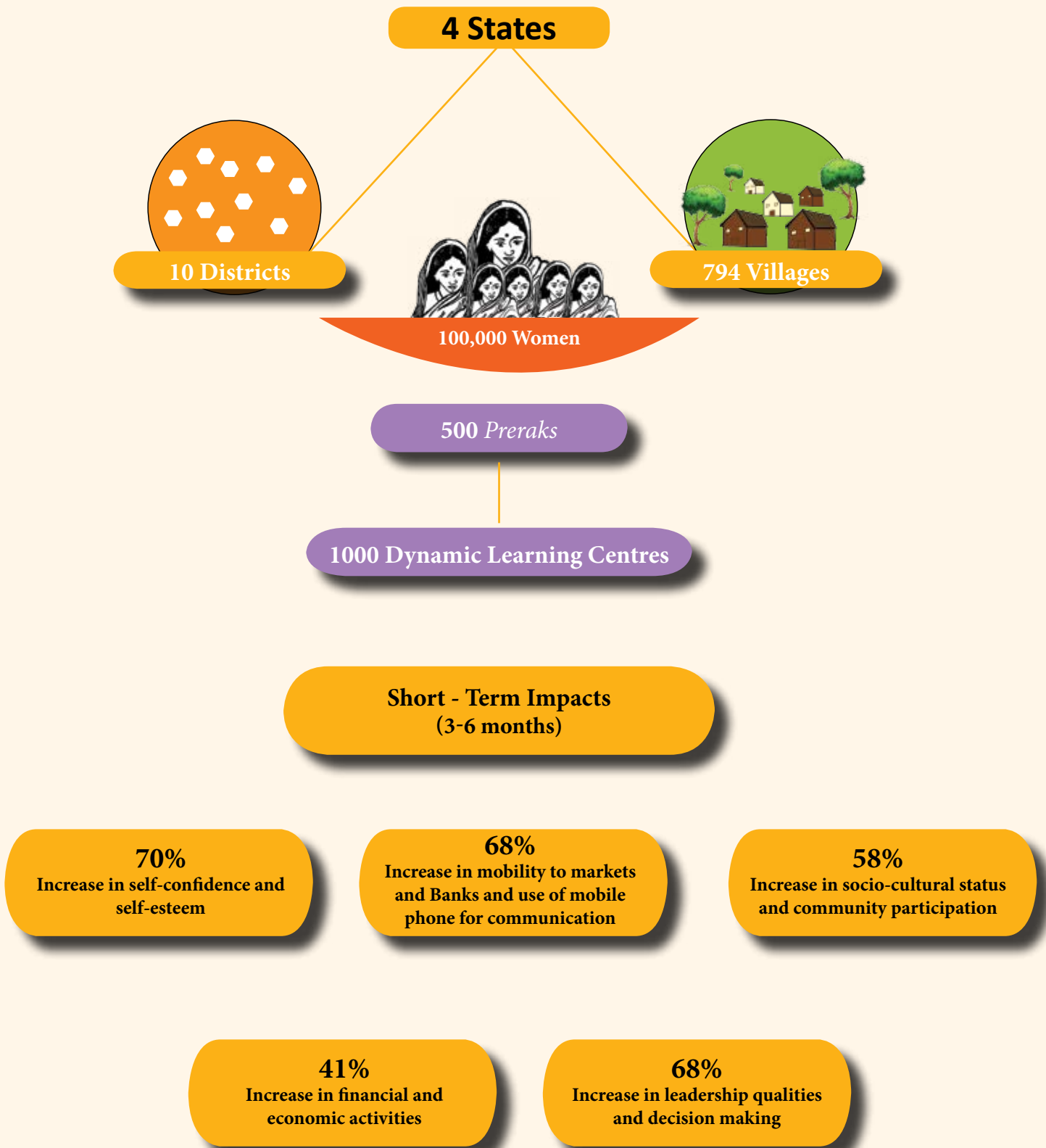
TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES



Nai Disha

Freedom through Literacy

Project at a Glance





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86	76	66	56
+36	+32	+28	+24
98	88	78	68
+48	+44	+40	+36
100	90	80	70
+58	+54	+50	+46
110	100	90	80
+68	+64	+60	+56
120	110	100	90
+78	+74	+70	+66
130	120	110	100
+88	+84	+80	+76
140	130	120	110
+98	+94	+90	+86
150	140	130	120
+108	+104	+100	+96



Introduction

Sākshara, the Hindi translation of the English word ‘Literate’, stems from the root *Akshara*, meaning ‘The Indestructible’.

With such profoundness inherent in the very meaning of the word, one is often left wondering as to why is it then that India has by far the largest population of illiterate adults in the world, amounting to nearly 40 per cent of the global total?¹ Why is it that even after more than 70 years of independence, one in every three women in India is still unlettered?²

The issue is further compounded by an increasing population of the country, which effectively offsets gains made through several progressive, country-wide interventions such as the National Literacy Mission, Mahila Samakhya Yojana and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Among the wider illiterate population of the country, a unique challenge is thrown up by the adult illiterates. Attitudinal issues, perceived and assumed adverse social reactions, high dropout rates are but some of the impediments in achieving literacy among the adult population in India. These issues are all the more prominent for women, who – as corroborated by successive census figures – continue to lag in terms of literacy and education in the country, relative to men.

¹ *The 2013/14 Education for All Global Monitoring Report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.*

² *Census of India, 2011.*

A multi-pronged issue of such magnitude requires comprehensive, accelerated learning solutions that can augment Government's efforts in achieving 80% literacy at national level.

The 2011 census figures and the more recent UN report from which the above assessment is derived, galvanised several resources to change this daunting reality. One such initiative has been the Tata Consultancy Services' (TCS) Computer-Based Functional Literacy (CBFL) programme for adults that makes innovative use of information technology to provide an accelerated learning environment to promote functional literacy.

In 2017, Humana People to People India (HPPI) joined hands with TCS to incorporate the CBFL (Computer-Based Functional Literacy) methodology in its *Nai Disha* project, aimed at empowering 100,000 women in 10 identified districts in four states in the first year of intervention to develop functional skills, so that, amongst the targeted adults, learning becomes relevant to living and working. The targeted women belong to 14+ years of age from the States of Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The project uses a mix of teaching software, multimedia presentations and printed material to teach to read, write and do functional arithmetic in a fraction of time used by conventional methods. The entire programme is delivered at scale by volunteer *Preraks*, who work with 50 women in 90 days delivering at least 50 hours of learning through 40 sessions that includes lessons, practice, formative and summative tests. All the 500 *Preraks* are equipped with a laptop, making them mobile, and together they run 1000 learning centres, each with 25 women every three months. The unique and innovative programme and its delivery mechanism has



seen over 100,000 women graduating from the programme as neo-literates as of 30th September 2018.

The efforts were further supported by GAIA-Movement Trust Living Earth Green World Action by providing Solar Lanterns for illuminating the evening classes, and for training and promoting the use of renewable energy among women.

The set of case studies compiled in this document present the story of transformation that the *Nai Disha* project has ushered in the lives of its project beneficiaries during the first year of the intervention. Covering the four project States, these stories, through the voices of various stakeholders involved in the project, aim to exemplify the power of literacy and how it truly transmutes women with a lifelong knowledge, self-confidence and economic freedom that, true to its name, remains indestructible.



Haryana

Districts under Nai Disha Project in Haryana



- Total number of districts: 22

- Female population: 11,856,728

- Total population: 25,351,462

- Female literacy rate: 65.94 %

Carved out of the erstwhile state of East Punjab in 1966, the north Indian state of Haryana surrounds the national capital from three sides. Close proximity to New Delhi has led to rapid development of certain parts of the state, with cities like Gurugram being home to a number of Fortune 500 companies and driving financial and industrial growth of the entire country.

This opulence, however, brings to high relief the abysmal conditions of certain other parts of the state that have not merely failed to keep pace with the growth story, but have repeatedly displayed lowest results across multiple indicators in the entire country. The district of Nuh (Mewat) is a case in point.

Nuh is located about 100 kilometres south of Delhi. With 88.6% of the district's population residing in the villages, Nuh is a rural society. According to the latest census figures, the literacy rate of the district is 54.08% which is the lowest in the country. Further, at 36.60%, Nuh also has one of the lowest female literacy in the country.

In Haryana, HPPI's *Nai Disha* project is being implemented in Nuh and Mahendragarh districts and the above-mentioned figures make it pertinent intervention areas for the project.



A bovine push to a literate future

While monsoon rains have been sparse in these parts this year and a curtailed crop yield is the hot topic of discussion in most of the Nuh district of Haryana, in a small rustic section of Malab village here, Sunita's buffalo is the talk of the town.

“We needed quick cash for a family emergency and decided the best way to achieve it was to sell our buffalo. My husband wanted to sell it for a minimum of Rs. 50,000 and I wanted to

use the opportunity to impress him with my entrepreneurial abilities. I told him I will sell it for at least Rs. 5,000 more,” recalls 40-year-old Sunita.

While her husband was away, a potential buyer approached Sunita. When asked what he would offer for the bovine, he said Rs. 60,000. Lack of education, inability to decipher numbers and with her mind set on the pre-decided figure, Sunita argued that the cattle will not be sold for anything less than Rs. 55,000 and if the gentleman was not interested he may well be on his way. Needless to say, the deal was quickly finalised and Sunita was ecstatic.

The happiness was, however, short-lived as Sunita’s husband returned the day after.

“When he learnt about the offered amount he was furious and started calling me names. Initially, I was shocked, but when I realised the blunder I had made, I felt very depressed,” she says, before quickly adding, “I challenge anyone to make a fool of me now. That old Sunita is now past.”

This newfound confidence is a result of Sunita’s training in functional literacy under the *Nai Disha* project. Basic understanding of digits is an integral part of the project and has helped many like Sunita in managing their household economy better.

“One of the first things I did after the training was to make a budget diary for my household expenses. This way, I get to practice my writing while also keep track of my spending and check unwanted expenditures,” she says.

“As an Accredited Social Health Activist of my village, literacy has also helped me in filling

up forms, an exercise for which I had to take help of others.”

For Sunita, the key approach of *Nai Disha* project that had maximum impact on her and her batch mates has been the use of the laptop in the classes.

“The programme starts with words such as makān (house) and other everyday words. This helps us to recognise and memorise the letters easily without the need of remembering the entire sequence. This method is much quicker and helps us retain what we learn better,” she says.

“Whenever we got stuck or had trouble in writing, our *Prerak*, Manisha, was always at hand to guide us along.”

When asked about her message for other unlettered women of her age who believe it is now too late to gain literacy, Sunita’s reply is explicit and emphatic.

“The first word we learn in *Nai Disha* is makān and the project literally came to our house to gift us literacy. I only request all the illiterate women I can reach to please open your doors to such an initiative and, if you have to, fight your way to be a part of it. There is no age for gaining literacy and the freedom that follows is unparalleled.”

As we leave her house it is clear that the buffalo banter in the bylanes of Sunita’s street is yet to subside, but her confidence makes it equally certain that this was the last time anyone got better of her in such matters.



Literacy and a will forged by fortitude

Although, in the 50 years of her life, Usha Devi has faced several ups and downs to be able to take the vicissitudes of time in her stride, it was the fateful day when her supervisor visited her Anganwadi Centre during a regular inspection that conclusively transformed this quinquagenarian widow's life.

“My record as an Anganwadi helper had been immaculate till that day. The work mostly involves keeping the Centre

clean and ensuring that things are in their proper place. But, on that day, the worker at my Centre was running late and she asked me to put up some information posters on the walls,” recalls Usha, a resident of Malab village in the Nuh district of Haryana.

Having never attended school, Usha, like most other rural Indian women of her generation, never had an opportunity to gain literacy. Consequently, when it came to putting up the information posters, she ended up displaying them the wrong side up.

“The supervisor was very upset and admonished me in front of all the Anganwadi staff and the village women. When she had finished I expressed my resolve to her that despite my age I will gain literacy and she will be able to see a different me shortly,” says Usha.

Traction of adversities nurtures fortitude and moulds conducive conditions for fruition of one’s latent abilities. In Usha’s case, her experience at the Anganwadi coincided with the launch of *Nai Disha* functional literacy project in Nuh, and before long, she was the most active student of her batch.

“My *Prerak*, Manisha, also happens to be my very dear neighbour. I would often go to her house after the class to get some extra practice in writing and to get my doubts cleared. She taught us all with utmost patience,” says Usha.

“Our *Nai Disha* classes were conducted through laptops and this added to the excitement of all the participants. Besides, the programme helps us learn the basics of reading through words we are already familiar with. This removes most of the anxiety of learning.”

Since completing her training under *Nai Disha*, Usha’s newfound abilities and dexterity in composing new poems on the theme of health were noticed by her supervisors. She has now started conducting morning assembly at the Anganwadi and on occasions when the worker is late, conducts classes in counting and poetry recitation for the children present at the Centre.

“Earlier my seniors at the Centre would ask me to bring the register by mentioning the colour of its binding. But now when they tell me that they want the immunisation register, I know what exactly to look for on the spine: Tee-Kā,” says a beaming Usha mentioning the syllables that make up the word ‘immunisation’ in Hindi.

Over the months since her training in *Nai Disha*, Usha’s experience of displaying upside down information posters has turned from a source of embarrassment to one of jocular repartee. But the profound and lasting impact it has had on her life is now a source of motivation for many from her village.

“Literacy is important for everyone – not just the young. I am immensely thankful to the *Nai Disha* project for choosing my village and helping older women like me experience the freedom and sense of self-worth that comes from being literate,” she says with a smile.



Literacy: The foundation of education

With overall literacy rate at nearly 80%, our village is one of the few villages of the Nuh district that can boast of sustained improvement in the field of literacy. Majority of the illiterate population in this village comprises of women from the older generations.

With the successful launch of many government schemes in our village, I have noticed that many of the older women have also expressed interest

in being able to sign their names on the registration forms than put their thumb impressions; be it to open a savings bank account or to register into an insurance scheme.

It was in this backdrop that the *Nai Disha* project commenced in my village about a couple of months ago. I have personally observed the project closely since it launched here and I have noticed that at least 75% of the participating women can now write their own names along with those of their family members.

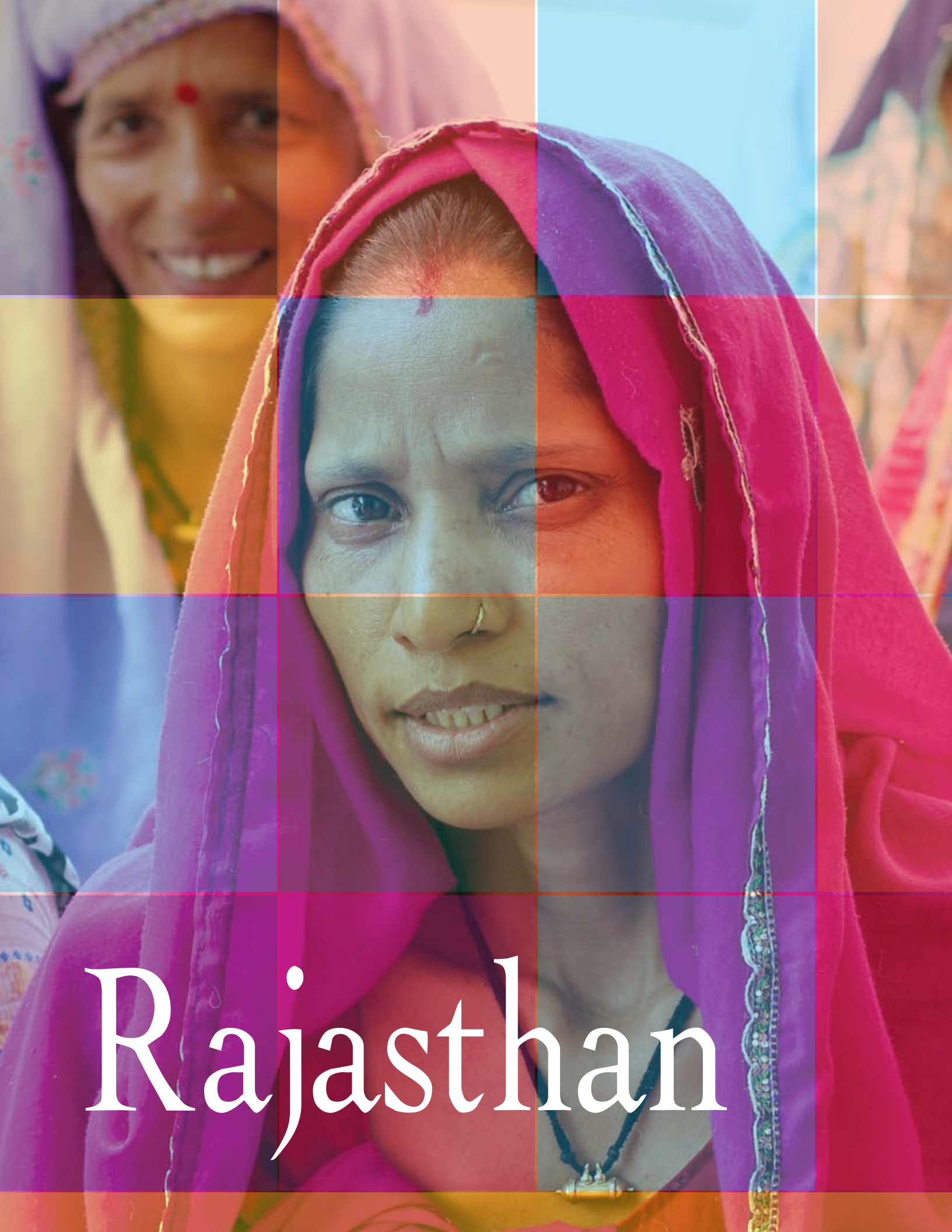
One of the direct impact of this empowerment has been a renewed boost in the self-esteem of these women. They now feel that they have moved on from being mere passive observers to active participants in the development of our village.

One of the elements that makes the *Nai Disha* project so effective is the use of the digital medium such as the laptop to conduct the training. The innovative programme and methodology helps women grasp elementary reading and writing skills at a very quick pace compared to the conventional methods of teaching through blackboards where a lot of stress is laid on the sequence of alphabets.

With the launch of the project, it has also been observed that the importance of imparting education to the girl child has become increasingly evident to the parents. Many women enrolled in the programme have personally told me that they can now clearly see that it's more important to teach the girls as that empowers two families.

Education is the only gift that increases the more we share it with others. It is an asset that stays with people for their entire life as an unparalleled source of knowledge and self-confidence. An educated person is equipped to face any challenge of life, in any part of the world. Education is the greatest of wealth and literacy is the foundation on which the edifice of such knowledge is built. I am very thankful to the *Nai Disha* project team for launching the project in my village and helping empower the women here with the gift of literacy. It is clearly visible that the project is true to its name and these women have set out on a new path of a literate future.

**Narayan Singh,
Sarpanch,
Kutubgarh
Gram Panchayat,
Village Mailawas,
Nuh district, Haryana**



Rajasthan

Districts under Nai Disha Project in Rajasthan



- Total number of districts: 33
- Total population: 68,548,437
- Female population: 32,997,440
- Female literacy rate: 52.12%

According to the 1961 census, the first census of India after Rajasthan gained statehood in 1956, the state had a literacy rate of 18%, the lowest in the country. The female literacy at the time stood at a dismal 7%.

Today, Rajasthan is the largest Indian state in terms of area and seventh largest in terms of population, with nearly 68.5 million people calling it home.

Although it has come a long way in terms of development since its formative years, literacy continues to be the state's Achilles' heel, impeding it and its peoples from realising its full potential. According to the latest census figures, in terms of overall literacy, of the 36 states and Union Territories of India, Rajasthan ranks 33rd at 67% literacy. The same report tells us that at 52.1%, the state has the lowest female literacy in India.

In Rajasthan, HPPI's *Nai Disha* project is being implemented in the districts of Jaipur and Alwar, with a female literacy rate of 64.02% and 56.25% respectively, according to the latest census figures. The selected districts have a lower female literacy rate than the corresponding national average of 65.46%.



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The light of literacy

How would you feel if you stepped out of blinding darkness and into the light? That is what the gift of literacy does to you,” says 45-year-old Asha Devi of Narayanpur village of Thanagazi block in the Alwar district of Rajasthan.

Surrounded by sewing machines and three of her tailoring students, a measuring tape explicitly hanging around her neck, Asha shares her journey of

gaining literacy at her age – a story that has today become the source of inspiration for many of her students and neighbours.

“As a young girl, I never paid much heed to my parents’ efforts to send me to school. I would constantly make one or the other excuse and never joined a school. But, as I grew older I started to perceive the handicap that illiteracy brings,” she recalls.

“I was always interested in stitching but since I could not take accurate measurements, clients would often complain of ill-fitting clothes and, hence, I could never really establish myself as a tailor.”

It was in this backdrop that Humana People to People India’s *Nai Disha* functional literacy project for women was launched in Asha’s village.

“Learning through the laptop was the most interesting part of the classes under *Nai Disha*. Everything is explained through audio-visual mode at an easy pace for even a slow learner to understand. There are pauses at the right moment for women like me to practice what was taught, and if any part was not clear or we wanted to be repeated, my *Prerak*, Sunita, was always at hand. She taught us writing with much patience, holding and guiding our hands,” says Asha.

“Now, I’m not dependent on anyone. I can take measurements and jot them down. At the bank, I can now easily make transactions. Earlier, I would take my daughters for filling up the forms and give my thumb impression as I could not sign. These are things of the past now,” she says with a bright smile.

Today Asha runs a tailoring centre at her house offering a course ranging up to two

months to interested women from the neighbourhood. The classes are conducted every day for a duration of 2-3 hours. She charges Rs. 1,000 per month from the enrolled students. With the present strength of five students, she has an assured monthly income of Rs. 5,000 which is over and above the profit she generates from stitching clothes for her regular clientele.

“The ability to understand digits, take measurements and write them down is a very liberating and empowering feeling and I wanted to use it to start my own business along with helping other women of the neighbourhood,” says Asha.

When asked about her message to other women of her age who are not able to read and write, Asha responds with a feverish zeal, “I have five daughters. I did not want them to suffer the same fate as mine due to lack of literacy and education. Today, I can proudly say that my daughters are more educated than an average boy of their age in the village.”

“To the women who are of my age and are ashamed of stepping out to attend literacy classes, I’d like to say that we were born unlettered, but we can choose not to die this way. Literacy is important,” she says.

As she finishes that sentence and turns to her waiting students, Asha’s beaming smile is a lustrous testimony of the confidence that literacy instils and helps light the path for others to follow.



An innovative approach to adult literacy

If you were to call out to all those men who discourage their wives or daughters from getting education today, what would you say?”

“I would call them mad, of course,” comes the quick retort from 25-year-old Seema Devi of Bhuriyawaas village in the Alwar district of Rajasthan to the question posed to her, as her group of friends burst into peals of laughter.

Seema is one of the several women who

recently completed a cycle of *Nai Disha* adult literacy project being implemented in this village and is eager to share her experience of being a part of the project for the last three months.

“Now that I think of it, it was very embarrassing seeking assistance from others to get a form filled or even to make a phone call. Before the *Nai Disha* project, I was completely at the mercy of others since I could not read or write,” she recalls.

Seema has never attended a formal school. After marriage she came to Bhuriyawaas, where her husband works as a dairy farmer.

“If he had to urgently go somewhere, the entire workload of the dairy was on my shoulders. I was comfortable with the work, but for writing down the records in the transaction diary, I had to constantly seek help of my neighbours,” she recalls.

Today, propelled by the *Nai Disha* classes, Seema actively contributes to her family's income. Not only is she capable of maintaining the records at the dairy by herself, but she also successfully monitors the progress of the school work of her two young children, aged six and eight.

“In the initial days of the classes, when my Prerak gave instructions verbally, most of us did not feel very motivated to come to the class. But, as soon as the laptop was introduced, we started grasping the lessons with much ease and even the classes became very interesting. Most of us had not even seen a laptop before,” says Seema.

Soon the excitement of gaining literacy would follow her home, where she would sit

with her children and continue her lessons together with them.

“During the first few days they were shocked, and laughed at me saying ‘mummy, are you really going to study with us?’ But, once I started learning from their books sitting together with them, even they started taking active interest in their studies,” she says.

“Today, I proudly say that I have used up more pages of the notebook, learning to write, than both my children combined,” says Seema through a hearty laugh.

Owing to the use of laptop technology and innovative software programme that teaches at an easy pace with focus on functional literacy as opposed to the conventional approach, the *Nai Disha* project has been able to achieve an expansive literacy reach in this region, with most women of the household participating in the project.

“My mother-in-law was even more enthusiastic than me about the classes. Due to her age, she could not grasp much of the lessons taught, but that did not dent her enthusiasm and she attended all the classes held in the cycle,” says Seema.

“In today's times, there, is no excuse for girls to not achieve the same level of education that has traditionally been considered only the right of the boys. And, there is no age for learning. I am thankful for the *Nai Disha* project and my *Prerak* for this valuable lesson,” she concludes.



Cutting through the caste lines

At 50-years of age, Narmada Devi's commanding voice and confident demeanour point to a life of relative opulence. A resident of Rajgarh village in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, she belongs to a region where caste plays a major role in defining the social standing of a family.

"I never went to a school. We are Zamindars, so, my father never sent the girls of the family to school," she

says while referring to the landowner title of the family, reminiscent of a colonial past that continues to persist in vast swathes of the country's social fabric.

“My brothers attended school till 7th or 8th grades and then got inducted into the family profession. Such was the norm when I was young,” says Narmada.

The scourge of illiteracy, however, is fundamentally the same for all, and having never attended school, Narmada felt the pangs of it the same way as any other member of the society would.

“You notice it during small, everyday tasks. I would have to ask people for the correct bus to my destination as I could not read the route markings on the vehicles. Then, there would be frequent altercations with the vegetable vendor as a way of haggling just to ensure that he is giving me the right quantity of vegetables, only because I could not read the markings on the weights,” she recalls.

“These petty episodes, that in retrospect are very embarrassing, come to high relief now that I am able to read and write.”

It has been about four months since Narmada completed her *Nai Disha* classes, and today, she is proud to display her abilities to read and write. She starts by reading out loudly the headlines of the day's newspaper and follows it up by writing the names of all her family members in a notebook, finishing the list by signing her name with much panache.

“When I went to open a bank account, the officials there filled my forms and I put my thumb impressions where they asked me to. Today, I sign my name on the forms whenever I visit the bank, much to their surprise,” she says with a laugh.

Narmada's story of transformation is, today, a source of inspiration for most women her age in Rajgarh and neighbouring villages. She attributes it all to the *Nai Disha* project and the patient approach of her *Prerak*, Suman.

“Before I joined *Nai Disha*, I had never seen a laptop being operated. It was a very good tool of learning for us as due to its novelty and interesting videos, all of us were very attentive to the lessons. Suman, my *Prerak*, helped me wherever anything was hard to grasp,” says Narmada.

When asked about the role of education today, Narmada is equally emphatic.

“I could not reap the benefits of being literate at a young age and had to struggle through my youth. Girls need not go through such hard times today when education is so easily accessible. Education is a great leveller and there is no difference between an educated girl and an educated boy, today,” she says.

Education, truly, is a great leveller and as exemplified by the life of Narmada, transcends gender parity to be a veritable panacea for entrenched social prejudices based on caste.



**Literacy
skills are
indispensable**

The *Nai Disha* project is being implemented in my village for the past three months. I was introduced to the project when the local project supervisor approached me and explained its goals and methodology. I immediately noticed the importance of the project and offered a part of my house to the *Preraks* to conduct classes.

Traditionally, there have been several reasons due to which girls were not

able to avail optimum education. Even though I understand the importance of education, being a woman, I can relate to those reasons as some of them are legitimate. Safety and security of a girl child, for example, is a primary concern for most parents and since a few years back, schools, particularly in the villages, were mostly at great distances from the homes, many parents were dissuaded from sending their daughters there.

Since the launch of the *Nai Disha* project in my village, there is a visible change in the self-confidence of the women. The most immediate impact that can now be seen is that women supervise their child's homework and are able to maintain basic expenditure records at their homes. There are also cases where slightly older children teaching their mother after returning from schools. Since the launch of the project, it has become common to find elderly women trying to read newspaper early in the morning or, during my visit to the local bank, slowly signing their names on the withdrawal forms. It is quite an unprecedented and pleasant sight.

During my interaction with the women, they have repeatedly said that for them literacy and education is a means to benefit from the various government schemes being implemented in the state and to gain financial independence by starting some home-based work. In order to start their own enterprise or to be able to assist in the family enterprise, basic reading and writing skills, and elementary calculations are important prerequisites. With growing competition, even in rural India, these skills are now indispensable.

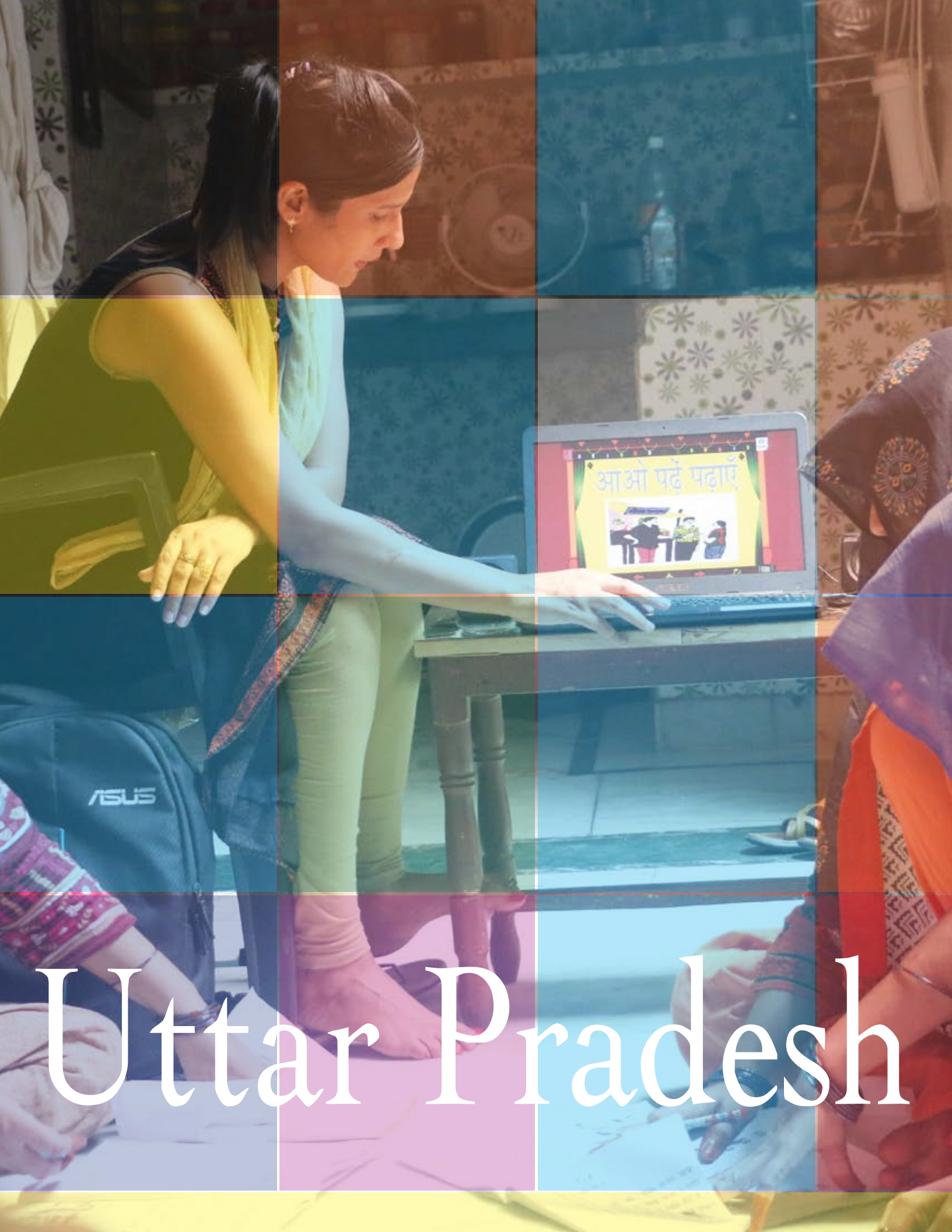
Further, even though miniscule, there remains a section of population, even in my village, which questions older women stepping out of the house to attend literacy classes, by sham-

ing them. Continued efforts are vital to completely transform such entrenched regressive mindsets in rural India. For women who are interested in gaining literacy skills but are not able to step out of their houses, the *Nai Disha Preraks*, at times, go a step further by visiting their homes and conducting sessions with other women of the neighbourhood there.

The *Preraks* themselves have received a confident boost by learning to operate the laptops and using it as an instrument to impart literacy. The use of laptops also works as a motivating factor to bring the women out of their homes and to the learning centres.

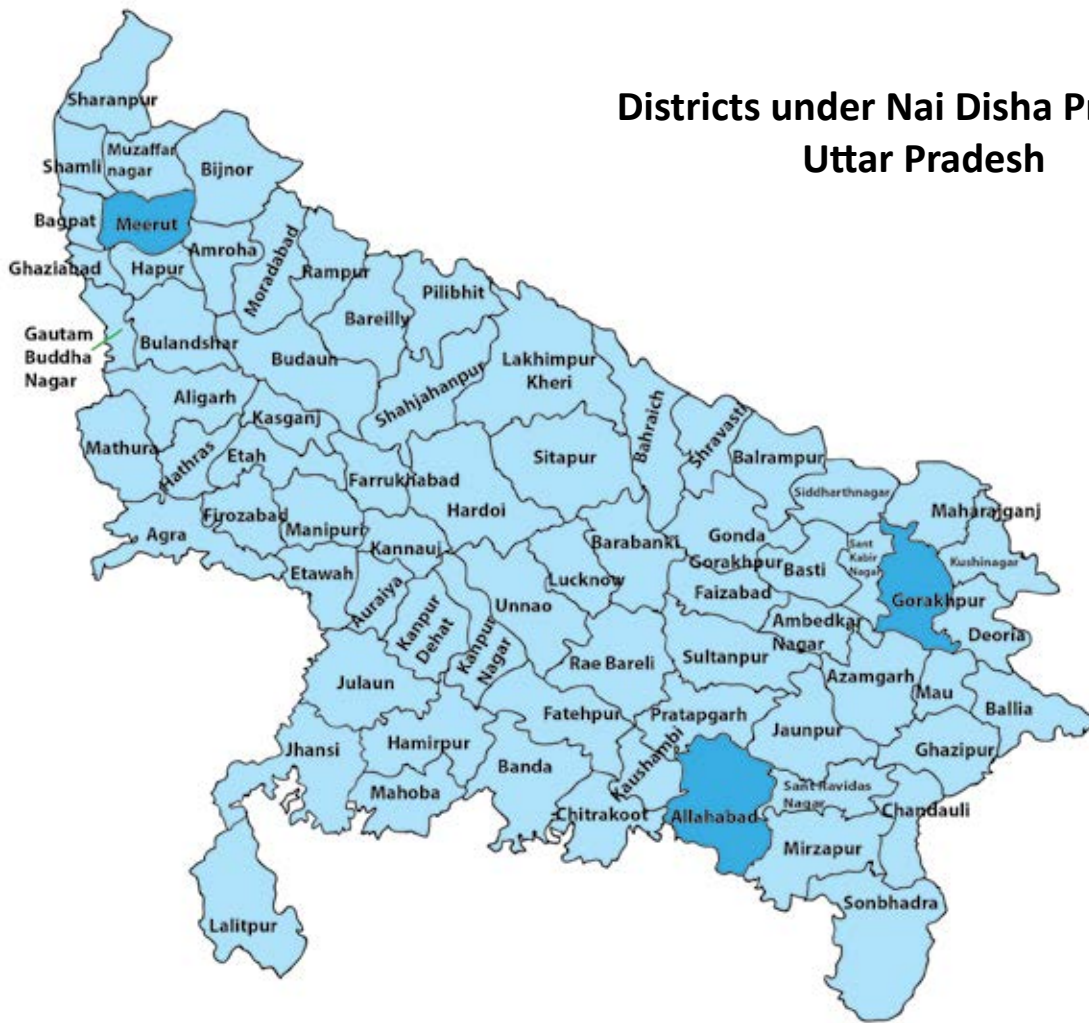
I would say functional literacy projects like *Nai Disha* are vital for most of rural India in order to break the continuing intergenerational cycles of illiteracy plaguing our country. Only literate, educated parents understand the importance of education and go on to enrol their children in schools, and initiatives like *Nai Disha* go a long way to promote this understanding among the older generation while nurturing the future of the younger lot.

**Anita Verma,
Sarpanch,
Village Kali Pahadi,
Thanagazi, Alwar, Rajasthan**



Uttar Pradesh

Districts under Nai Disha Project in Uttar Pradesh



- Total number of districts: 75
- Total population: 199,812,341
- Female population: 95,331,831
- Female literacy rate: 57.18 %

When the noted Indian author, Ruskin Bond, called Uttar Pradesh (UP) “a world in itself”, he was not exaggerating.

At 199 million, this northern Indian state is the largest state in the country by population. To put this in perspective, if UP were a country, it would be the fifth most populous country in the world, next only to China, India, the United States of America and Indonesia.

In terms of literacy, UP has shown a significant improvement in literacy rate since independence, registering a shift from 12.02% in 1951 to 69.72% in 2011. The female literacy rate for the state, however, remains abysmal. More than 50% of the UP’s 75 districts have a female literacy rate of less than 60% when the national average female literacy is 65.46%.

In Uttar Pradesh, HPPI’s *Nai Disha* project is being implemented in the districts of Meerut, Allahabad and Gorakhpur, with a female literacy rate of 63.98%, 60.97% and 59.36% respectively, according to the latest census figures. All the selected districts have a lower female literacy rate than the corresponding national average of 65.46%.

A decorative graphic at the bottom left of the page. It features a white laptop outline with an orange border. Above the laptop, there are five colored circles (red, blue, orange, green, yellow) connected to the laptop by lines. Each circle contains a Hindi character: 'इ', 'प', 'ह', 'ल', and 'र'. The background is white with faint Hindi characters scattered around.

The second shift

It was many years ago that 37-year-old Anita Chauhan planted a guava sapling in the central courtyard of her house, located in Rali Chauhan village in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. And today, the flamboyant, full-grown tree has become the closest metaphor that reflects the trials, tribulations and the eventual triumph of her life.

“Within a few weeks of planting it, the monkeys of this area pretty much

broke it in half. But, I didn't stop nurturing it and today its sweet fruits are popular across my entire locality. I just knew that it would survive," says Anita.

Married into an educated, affluent family, Anita had already completed her graduate degree in Sanskrit when she moved into her husband's house in Rali Chauhan. Repeated coaxing by her husband to enrol into a Bachelor of Education course did not yield much result as Anita nestled into her new role of being a wife.

It was only about a decade later, when her husband died unexpectedly of a massive heart attack, that the value of education became clear to her.

"The shock was overwhelming, and I took to bed for nearly a year. The support of my in-laws quickly waned, and it soon became clear that I had to rebuild my life anew to be able to sustain my two growing sons," recalls Anita.

Her resolve coincided with the launch of the *Nai Disha* project in Uttar Pradesh and Anita, who had some prior experience with the Government's adult literacy initiative, quickly took the opportunity to join the project as a *Prerak*.

"Earlier, I would get the details of the women from the village Anganwadi centre. It was for the first time in *Nai Disha* that I personally conducted door-to-door survey of my own village to ascertain the number of illiterate women," says Anita.

In the 20 years of living in Rali Chauhan, it was for the first time that Anita got to know her neighbours well and felt their love and admiration towards herself and for the noble initiative that she was a part of.

"All the illiterate women I met were eager to learn to read and write. It was heartening to learn that they particularly wanted to attend classes conducted by me as they felt safe coming to my house and had confidence in my ability to teach, owing to my educated background," says Anita.

Still, during the initial days of the project, Anita faced the usual issues of convincing older women to step out of their house to gain literacy skills. The biggest deterrent came from the group of men who are all too common in such villages, idling away their time at the village square.

"They would constantly harass the women coming to attend the class by mocking their age and asking them the benefits of studying, till one day, I accompanied the women to the village square and told the men that this is the second shift for these women after their household chores and that the men will do well by gaining some literacy themselves," says Anita.

"That was the last time they passed a comment," says Anita through a hearty laugh.

Much the same as the broken guava sapling that sprung back to life in her central courtyard, the 'second shift' classes under *Nai Disha* have given a new lease of life to Anita, while continuing to spread the light of literacy among many others.



Making the impossible possible

The *Nai Disha* project team approached me in August 2017 with the plan of launching the functional literacy project for the women of my village. I was quite happy to learn of this new initiative and welcomed the team to start the project that will help the women in the village with a gift of literacy.

A project promoting functional literacy amongst the women of the country is

vital for all the states, particularly for the rural areas. In most of the villages, we find women of older generations to be barely educated. Either they never got enrolled in a school, or if they did, they dropped out within a couple of years.

It can be observed that lack of education amongst the rural women continues to be a blight for our country. It is unfortunate that a country such as ours, which has produced women of exemplary calibre in the past, languishing in the field of women empowerment today.

In the first few weeks after the launch of the *Nai Disha* project, I would often accompany the *Preraks* to the houses and inform the women about this new initiative. Some women who were initially sceptical or too shy to step out to attend classes due to their age were gently encouraged by us. But generally, the project was received with a lot of enthusiasm in this village.

During one such visit, a lady, about 60 years in age, went on to say, “This is not the age for us to try and become doctors or engineers”. I asked her if anyone in her family is literate, to which she answered in negation. Then, I and the accompanying *Prerak*, citing real-life examples, informed her how being literate can help her in many tricky situations in life while also helping her and her family with several government schemes to which they are ignorant at present.

The most important factor due to which you can see women coming out in numbers to attend the *Nai Disha* programme has been the use of laptops to conduct the classes. Other than the novelty factor of technology-assisted learning, it

can also be observed that women understand the lessons taught very quickly due to the use of software. The audio helps them with proper pronunciation while the videos help them pick up writing at a fast pace.

A woman with a firm resolve can make the impossible possible. Literacy is the foundation of education and in turn, of civilised living. It is one of the major factors that separates us from brute animals. This is even more true for the women. An educated woman is the backbone of a family unit that holds it upright. The foremost impact of education on women is simultaneous financial independence that they come to experience. In this day and age, financial freedom is of utmost importance for women, for which literacy skills and education are vital prerequisites.

I constantly tell the women of my village that there is no age for learning and gaining education. I am happy to see a project like *Nai Disha* supporting this fact and making it evident to the residents of my village.

**Mamta Jatav,
Pradhan – Village Meghrajpur,
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh**



**My dear sisters,
learn to read
and write**

It was not that Leela Vati had never attended school. Just that, it was for two days; a day and a half, to be precise.

“I was never interested in going to school but my paternal uncle forcefully got me and his daughter enrolled in one. On the first day we sat through the class with the teacher paying attention only to the students sitting in the front row,” recalls Leela.

When this behaviour repeated the

second day, Leela and her cousin left the classroom in the middle of a class, never to join it again.

Leela is a feisty 60 years old woman. A resident of village Meghrajpur in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh, like many women her age, Leela was initially sceptical of joining the *Nai Disha* project when the *Prerak* approached her.

“Look at me. I’m old, have lost most of my teeth. Even though I was interested in learning to read and write, I could not motivate myself to go to attend the classes,” recalls Leela.

It was the continued coaxing of her *Prerak*, Uma, that eventually made Leela attend the memorable first class at the centre.

“I was absolutely exhausted by the time I reached the centre. You see I don’t move around much these days, so the walk to the centre itself was a task for me,” she says.

“That day, I could not understand much of anything that was told during the class. But, I noticed the laptop and that motivated me to come to the classes again.”

In the second class Leela’s granddaughter tagged along, hoping to help her granny in case she got stuck or found it hard to understand something.

“She held my hand and tried to make me write a few letters as they appeared on the laptop screen. But, I told her to let me be, as I found myself scribbling gibberish and knew that I could write much better with no one holding my hand. I think I ended up annoying her and she left saying that I will never be able to learn to read and write,” says Leela through her wide toothless laughter.

“Today, I can sign my name without anyone’s help. What she had said obviously did not come true.”

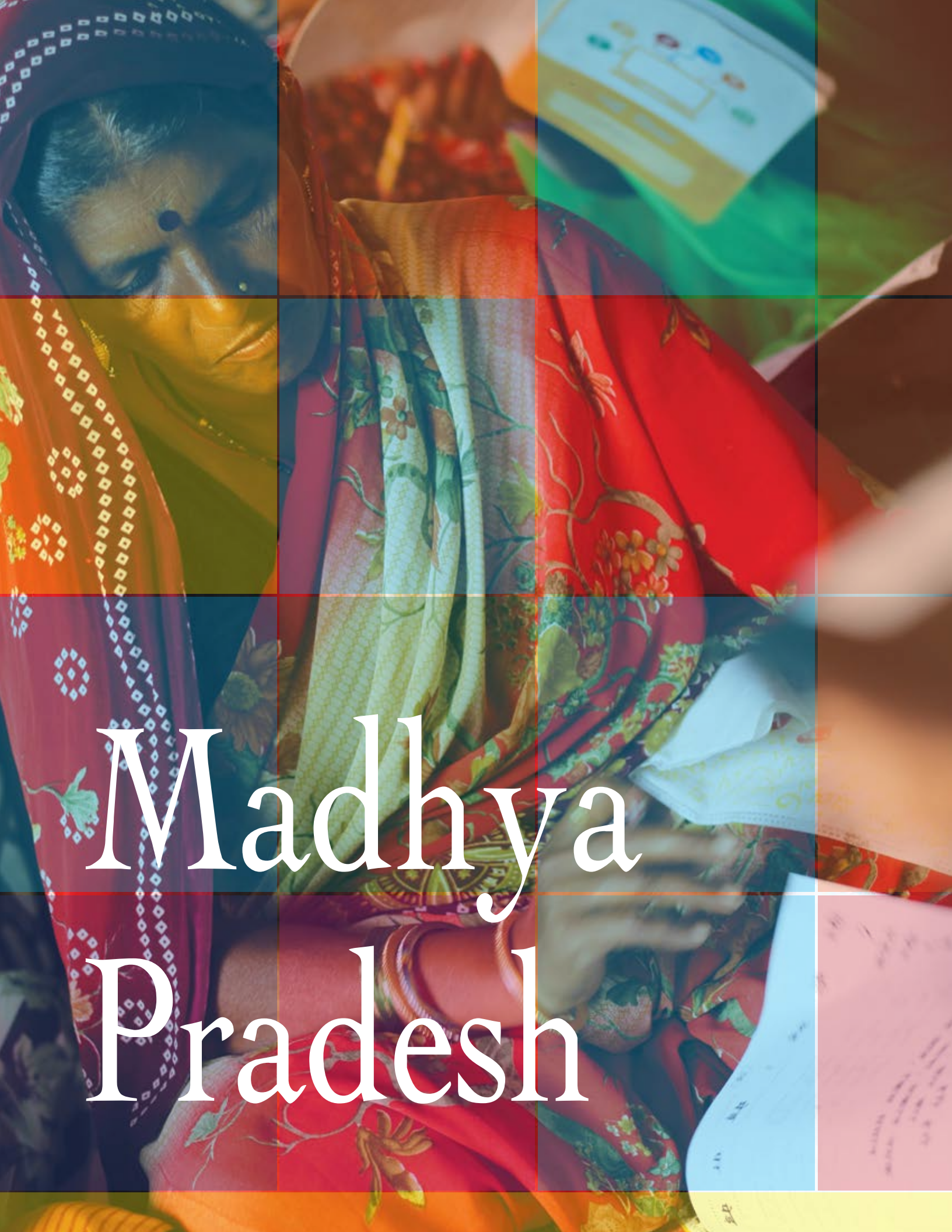
Leela has been attending the *Nai Disha* classes for a little over a month now. When asked the reason for her quick learning, she is quick to respond: “It is my motivation to learn and the hard work put in by my *Prerak*. Nothing else.”

In Leela’s village the classes are conducted at two centres on alternate days. With an unbridled enthusiasm, she attends classes at both the centres even though the lessons are always repeated.

“Previously I was sitting at home the entire day. Now, I sit at the centre for a couple of hours. So, in that manner not much has changed in my daily routine, other than the fact that I can read and write now,” she says with the widest of smiles.

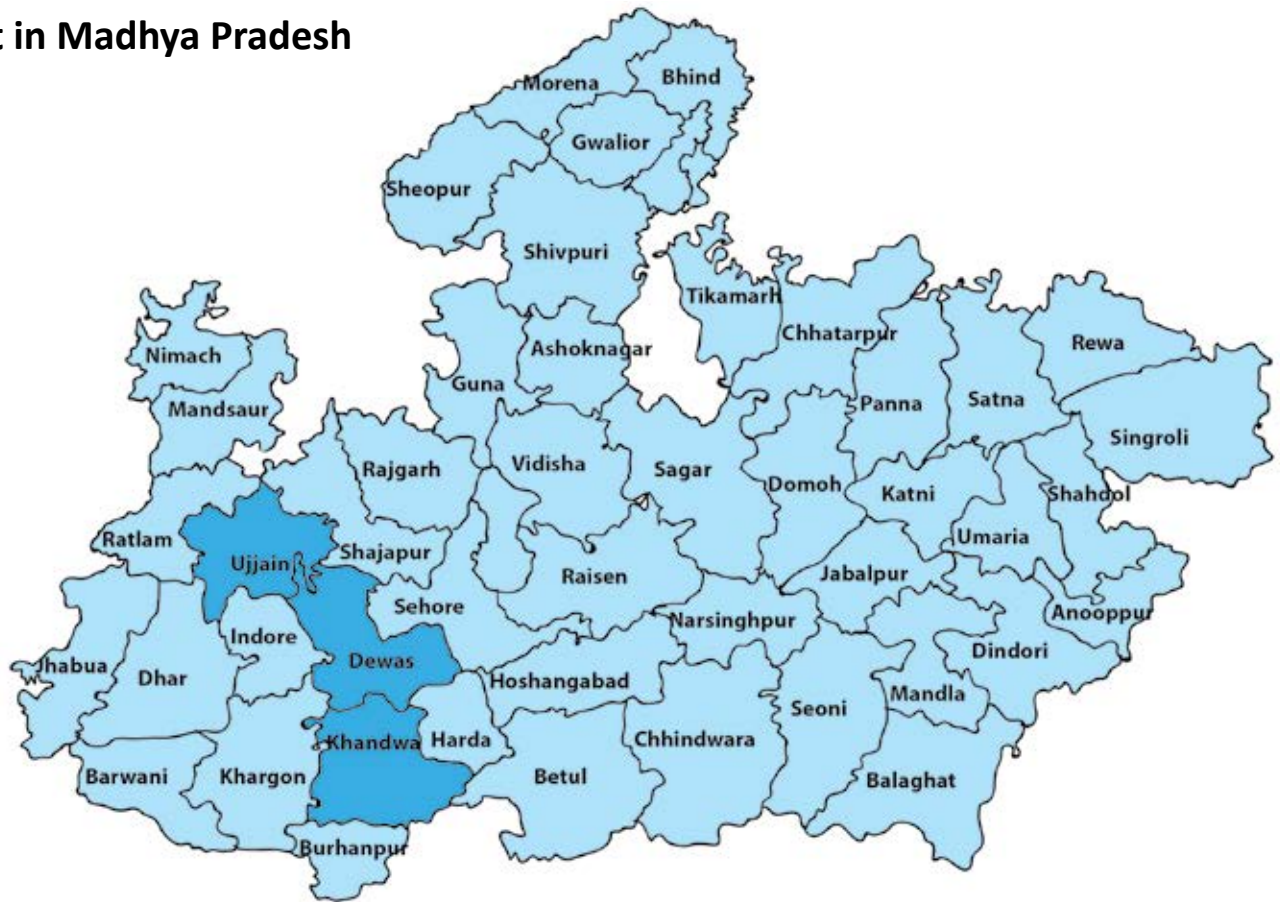
When asked about her message for other women of her age, Leela’s advice is perhaps as pragmatic as it gets.

“Illiterate women of my age ought to know that their pension is precariously placed unless they know how to read and write. Anyone can fool them to get their thumb print and take away their only source of bread and butter. So, my dear sisters, learn to read and write,” she concludes.



Madhya Pradesh

Districts under Nai Disha Project in Madhya Pradesh



- Total number of districts: 52
- Total population: 72,626,809

- Female population: 35,014,503
- Female literacy rate: 59.24 %

○wing to its location, the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh often goes with the sobriquet the 'Heart of India'. It is the second largest state in the country in terms of area, next only to Rajasthan. The state boasts immense cultural and historical significance, being the nerve centre of various important religious traditions, while also hosting several world heritage sites.

Starting from 13.16% in 1951, the state has made significant progress in terms of literacy rate with the latest census figures putting the figure at 70.60%. The sheer size and consequent diversity of the state, however, throws up its own challenge. Further, at 60%, the female literacy rate remains much below the national rate of 65.46%.

In Madhya Pradesh, HPPI's *Nai Disha* project is being implemented in the districts of Ujjain, Dewas and Khandwa, with a female literacy rate of 51.10%, 51.60% and 50.60% respectively, according to the latest census figures.



Economic freedom through gift of literacy

When Mamta Meher's husband denied her permission to step out of the house to attend a training course in tailoring, the 35-year-old came up with an ingenious plan to achieve what she had set her mind to.

"I undid the stitches of a blouse gifted by my brother on a *raksha bandhan* and decided to stitch it back as a way of learning how to stitch

clothes. I was determined to learn tailoring,” she says through a radiant smile, sitting poised in her modest house in Bijora Bhil village in the Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh.

She soon secured a needle and matching thread reel and, armed with the tools, set out to resuscitate her garment.

“I continued to wear it for the next four months. No other blouse had lasted that long and my neighbours were in awe of my handiwork,” she says through her unceasing smile.

Mamta and her husband get by on frugal means. While her husband works as a daily wagger, Mamta collects *tendu* leaves from nearby forests to sell in the market. In her spare time, she now stitches clothes for her neighbours and her skill with the fabric is quickly gaining fame across the village borders.

“Since I never attended school, I could not understand numbers on a tape measure and used knots tied to threads for measurements. But, this method is prone to errors and customers would often complain of ill-fitting clothes,” says Mamta.

“When the work started to grow, I had trouble memorising which fabric belonged to which customer. Since, I could not write, I assigned the fabric based on design and weight,” she adds.

It was in this backdrop that the *Nai Disha* project was launched in Mamta’s village.

“Most women in my village, including me, had never seen a laptop being operated before. Learning through the laptop has been the most interesting part of the *Nai Disha* programme,” she says.

“We would repeat after the voice in the

laptop and understood letters and alphabets through words that we use every day.

Being a practicing tailor, Mamta’s proclivity drifted towards understanding digits and she picked it up in no time.

“Now, I have a measuring tape in my hand or around my neck all through the day. It has become a part of me,” she says.

Beyond tailoring, the numeracy skill has also affected improvements in other aspects of Mamta’s economic life.

“On several occasions the dealer for *tendu* leaves would record and pay me only for 300 bundles of leaves when I delivered 330. At Rs. 2 per bundle, I was losing Rs. 60 of my earning per day,” she says.

“He was shocked to see that I could read the records in the register and immediately apologised and returned the amount he owed me,” she adds.

“When we were illiterate, anyone could take us for a ride. Now, I know how to hold them accountable.”

When asked about her views on adult education after *Nai Disha*, Mamta is equally vehement.

“There is no age for learning. Basic ability to read and make elementary calculations are important for everyone, be it a man or a woman. In this age, if we are unable to sign our names and are running around with our ink-smearred thumbs, it is indeed shameful,” she says with a proud smile.



Literacy: Panacea for entrenched social ills

Since nearly a month, a group of about thirty women that assembles every alternate evening in the narrow yet spacious veranda of a humble mud house in the Bijora Bhil village of the Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh is attracting special attention. Today, the women sit patiently, bathed in the slanting summer sunlight, amidst the quintessential mundane chatter of the countryside. The hum ceases only when 24-year-old Anita Gokhale en-

ters the premises, a laptop bag tightly hugging her back.

“The excitement of the women to learn from the laptop is something that I have never seen before,” says Anita.

“They are picking up basic reading skills at a fast pace and it is adding to their excitement while also motivating women from the neighbouring villages,” she says.

Anita is a *Prerak* imparting functional literacy to the women of the village under the *Nai Disha* project. Although she joined the project barely ten months back, the journey till now has already been an invigorating experience for the young mother of two.

“When I told my husband of the opportunity to work as a *Prerak* in the project, he right away said 'No!,'” recalls Anita.

He had his reasons.

Anita is a member of a scheduled tribe which inhabits a separate section of the village; more desolate and remote, a couple of kilometres away from where the majority of the village residents live. Working as a *Prerak* would mean frequenting this part of the village – an unprecedented prospect for her husband, due to a misplaced, assumed hostility of people in these parts.

“It was my mother-in-law who insisted that I must work since I am educated and this education should not be wasted. She somehow managed to convince my husband,” says Anita.

But challenges were only beginning to shape up and it soon became clear to her that uprooting entrenched social ills is a herculean task and takes heroic efforts.

“In the initial days there was a constant threat of physical attack by a few drunk men of the village who were not appreciative of their wives stepping out of the house to gain literacy. I was threatened with attack on two separate occasions in front of my class,” recalls Anita.

“On the first day, I tried to explain the importance of these classes to the man, but to no avail. On the second day, when he tried to repeat his threat, all the women of my class stood up for me and told the man that he would be beaten to a pulp unless he stops his pointless disturbances. That settled it quite conclusively,” says Anita through a hearty laugh.

Anita’s regular presence in this part of the village has brought a sea change in the views of the local residents towards the tribal population. As an educated tribal woman spreading the light of literacy, her actions challenged deep-rooted social prejudices and brought the women together to achieve the sole aim of becoming literate.

Today, Anita is a respected member of the community imparting literacy training to two batches of 25 members each.

“Now requests are pouring in from the tribal women of our village to start the project there as well. For me this is a biggest testimony of the success of the project,” concludes Anita with a smile before walking into her class.



Deliverance after decades

The diminutive figure of 52-year-old Parvati Bai of Kumthi village of the Khandwa district of MP belies her titanic image in the hearts and minds of other residents of the village. The sacrifices she made to secure a good education for her elder sister and a secure future for her family is known to most households of this small village.

“I was in the second grade at the village school when my father died. At

that time, my sister who is older than me by two years, was already a sharp student at the school and I did not want her education to suffer,” recalls Parvati.

But, someone had to contribute in their mother’s labour to put bread on the table and Parvati decided to quit school and be a helping hand to her mother, who at the time worked as a farm labourer.

“I’m happy that today my sister is a well-established teacher at a school in her village,” says Parvati with a broad smile.

Her own life, however, has witnessed little change in all these years. It’s been more than four decades since her father’s passing away and Parvati today continues to labour in other people’s farms to make ends meet for her family. She attributes her present condition directly to lack of education in the formative years.

“I did what was the right thing to do then. But, this is the price one has to pay for missing out on something as vital as education when young,” says Parvati.

“The *Nai Disha* project has come to me as a source of deliverance. The only thing lacking in my life was the ability to read and write which is now being fulfilled through this project.”

Like many other participants in the project, the innovative laptop-teaching methodology of the project is the most fascinating part for Parvati.

“Compared to blackboard-teaching and verbal lessons, this method of teaching is very

efficient. The laptop speaks out words in clear diction. It pauses and gives us time to repeat after it. And, most importantly, it teaches to write words and alphabets in very easy manner,” says Parvati.

Parvati has been attending the classes since little over a month now, but her grasp on reading and writing has been exponential and her enthusiasm about the class continues to increase.

“It is not only me, but all the women of the village attending the classes who are enthused by the launch of the project here. Like clockwork, we all complete our essential tasks by 5 pm and are present at the centre well before the *Prerak* madam comes,” she says.

Every night after dinner, when her family has gone to bed, Parvati spends half to one hour to practice writing all that she has learnt in the literacy classes.

When asked about the most intimate change she has experienced in her life through this project, Parvati doesn’t have to think long.

“We receive daily wages for our work. On most days, we have to stand in a queue and wait for the employers to fetch the stamp pad to put the thumb impression on the declaration sheet before they hand us the money, while the ones who can sign their names get their wages in a matter of minutes,” she says.

“The look on their face on the first day I signed my name after learning to write through the *Nai Disha* classes will never be forgotten by me,” says a beaming Parvati.

Illumination by Solar Lanterns in Literacy Centers





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