

This timeline illustrates the origins and evolution of the SoochnaPreneur model, conceptualised by the Digital Empowerment Foundation as a framework for digital development at the village level through Phygital, Social, Entrepreneurial, Feministic and Hyper-Local Meaningful Digital Access.

2023

Amongst Farmers and Fact-checkers

DEF launched the Krisarthak programme for financial inclusion and counselling of 250,000 farmers in Assam. 130 SoochnaPreneurs have also been trained as fact-checkers to combat mis and disinformation, with support from HP and Aspen.

Information Nano Networks

DEF established a network of 480 nano women entrepreneurs. This initiative fights misinformation and enhances critical thinking by empowering women to lead digital literacy and information campaigns in their communities.

SoochnaPreneur Business Mitras

DEF launched Udhyanini program with 200 SoochnaPreneur Business Mitras in West Bengal and Assam. The SBMs introduce rural women entrepreneurs to digital platforms and e-services, helping them convert their livelihood initiatives into flourishing micro and small enterprises.

2021

SoochnaPreneurs Become Entrepreneurs

With USAID support, DEF trained 15,000 Digital Sarthaks – women digital entrepreneurs – across seven Indian states. These women drove digital inclusion, entrepreneurship, and community development in their regions.

Frontline Covid Misinformation Fighters

With UNICEF support, SoochnaPreneurs provided critical health and wellbeing information during Covid-19 pandemic. SoochnaPreneurs also became frontline service providers during the pandemic and were given special permission to provide other services.

2019

PWDs as SoochnaPreneurs

DEF, supported by EquallyAble Foundation, launched Samarth SoochnaPreneur Program to enable 100 persons with disabilities as digital entrepreneurs.

Indigenous Community Girls

Partnering with Facebook, DEF launched Going Online As Leaders (GOAL), an initiative to create a cohort of girls from the tribal community and connect them with women mentors via video calls on weekends. The GOAL initiative was later adopted by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs as a national programme for girls from the tribal community.

2016

SoochnaPreneur Launched

Through Qualcomm's Wireless Reach programme, DEF deployed the SoochnaPreneur Model in 100 locations with 100 women entrepreneurs. The programme quickly expanded, doubling its reach and empowering even more women as digital entrepreneurs over the following years.

2014

SoochnaSeva and RTI

DEF, with support from the European Union and a consortium of 12 organisations, launched a five-year SoochnaSeva program. Taking advantage of RTI in India, the initiative enabled access to vital information and entitlements for underserved communities across India. SoochnaPreneur Seva Kendras (SSKs), together with CIRCs enabled a rural digital information ecosystem.

Digital Literacy a National Mission

In 2014, DEF worked with Intel, Nasscom, and Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to launch the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM), where the government allocated dedicated funds for National Digital Literacy Mission to spread digital literacy skills. The NDLM continues as a national mission.

2009

Panchayat goes Digital

DEF launched the Digital Panchayat programme to focus on elected leaders at the grassroots level and local governance. The initiative provided digital training to Panchayat bodies and established the WWW of Panchayats, enhancing the effectiveness and transparency of the Panchayati Raj system. The NIC recognized the initiative as a way forward under the Panchayati Raj Ministry and governance system.

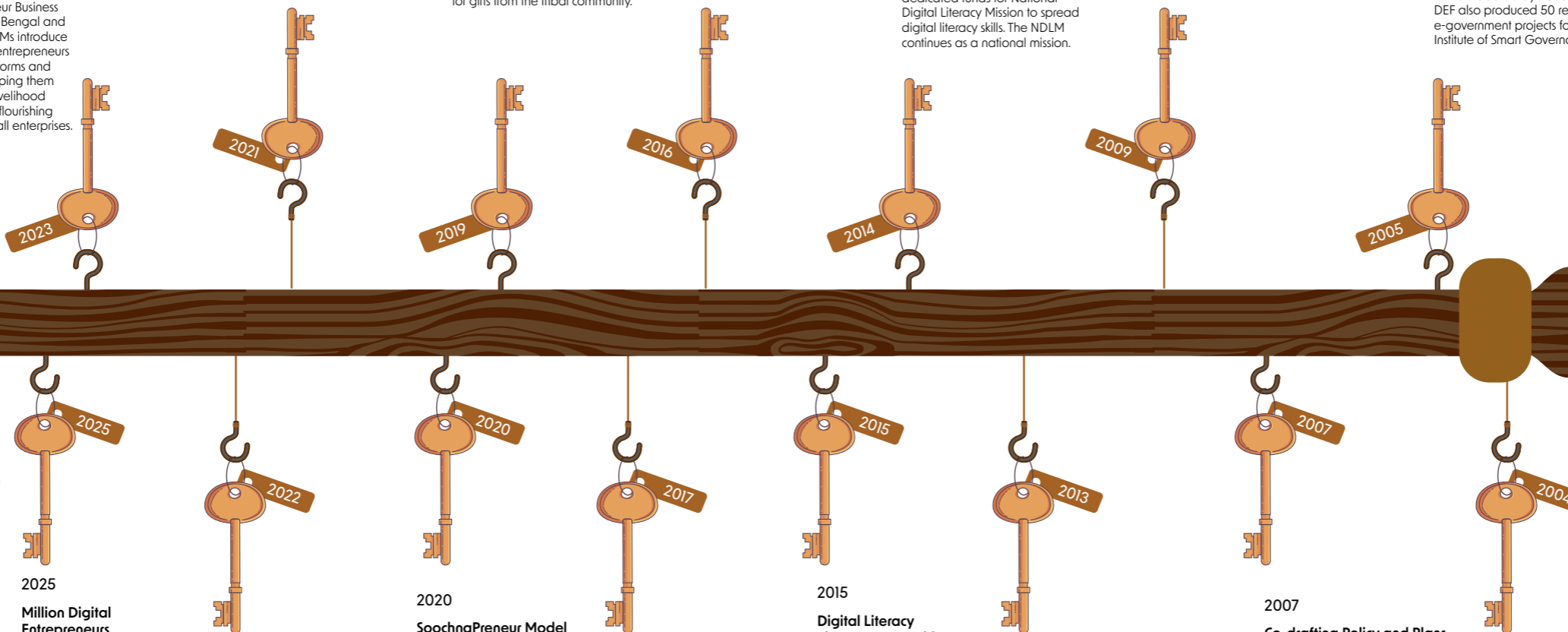
Focus on Artisan Clusters

DEF partnered with Media Lab Asia and the Ministry of Information Technology & Communications in India, and implemented an innovative digital integration project in Chanderi, a GI tagged location famous for its silk saris. The Chanderiyaan project helped more than 5000 weaving communities of Chanderi to become digitally literate and further integrated the digital infrastructure to health, education, market, finance, and governance.

2005

Highlighting Best Practices

Manthan Awards is launched to spotlight ICT4D projects and initiatives. In partnership with Media Lab Asia, DEF developed the Gyanpedia project, showcasing digital content created by students of rural schools. DEF also produced 50 research articles about e-government projects for the National Institute of Smart Governance.



2025

Million Digital Entrepreneurs

With over 2,400 SoochnaPreneurs across 26 states and 250+ districts, DEF has reached 10,000+ villages and impacted 35 million people. This community-driven model tailors digital empowerment to local needs. DEF plans to expand the SoochnaPreneur model to 1 million entrepreneurs—one per village—promoting universal digital literacy and strengthening a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem to strengthen local economies and drive meaningful social change.

2022

SoochnaPreneur in Tea Plantations

With the support of Internet Society Foundation, DEF launched Internet Roshni, establishing digital library centres in 150 Assam tea plantations. SoochnaPreneurs from various tribal communities living in the plantations, manage these centres and operate last-mile wireless networks for community access.

2020

SoochnaPreneur Model Recognized

DEF wins the World Bank's Global Tech Challenge for SoochnaPreneur.

SoochnaPreneurs as Frontline COVID Warriors

During the COVID-19 pandemic, DEF in partnership with UNICEF launched the Digital Emergency Relief Programme, deploying 900 SoochnaPreneurs as frontline digital health workers in rural communities impacting several millions lives

2017

SoochnaPreneur and Smartpur

In partnership with Nokia, DEF launched the Smartpur project at 100 locations using a hub-and-spoke model. Each centre operates as a digital social enterprise, led by a SoochnaPreneur and serving as a community resource hub.

2015

Digital Literacy via Internet Saathi

DEF partnered with Google India and Tata Trusts to launch Internet Saathi, training 10,000 Internet Saathis. These women trainers empowered nearly 2 million girls with digital literacy and internet skills in rural areas.

2013

Discovering Digital Divides & Information Gaps

Recognizing the digital divide, DEF set up 50 CIRC as public access points with the support of the Vodafone Foundation. These centers provided DEF with important insights into rural information gaps, highlighting the need for hyperlocal digital solutions and knowledge resources to empower rural communities. The CIRC coordinators were paid an honorarium to run the centers.

Women Lead Better Centres

Data collected from the ground revealed that women-led digital centres performed better, operated more efficiently, impacted more people, and built community trust.

2007

Co-drafting Policy and Plans

The Ministry of Information Technology and Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services (IL&FS) invited DEF to co-draft the Common Services Center (CSC) Content & Services pillar focusing on citizens' information needs. DEF's expertise shaped policy, and partnerships, and IL&FS helped develop professional training for village level entrepreneurs (VLEs).

CIRC Launches

DEF received an Intel Foundation grant to establish three rural digital centers. DEF also developed a framework for the Community Information Resource Centers (CIRC). The CIRC were located in Thakurgaon near Ranchi, and in Mamoni in Baran. The centers prioritized digital literacy and skilling, as opposed to just services, emphasizing the importance of awareness and learning with digital tools.

2004

Foundational Research

Osama Manzar, co-founder of DEF, traveled across India, researching existing ICT initiatives (eg, Akshaya in Kerala, Bhoomi in Karnataka, e-Seva in Andhra Pradesh, e-Choupal in Madhya Pradesh, Srishti in Assam, etc.) and engaging in conversations with communities to understand the diversity of digital initiatives and their local impact.



soochnapreur.in

SoochnaPreneur (n.)

The SoochnaPreneur model is a community-driven, hyperlocal approach to bridging the digital divide in the last mile. It empowers local women, trained as "Information Entrepreneurs", with digital tools, skills, and infrastructure to provide access to information, services, and digital literacy. These SoochnaPreneurs deliver essential services in e-governance, welfare, health, education, livelihood, and finance, tailored to community needs with empathy and transparency. Operating at the village level, the model advances decentralized, affordable digital solutions and cultivates a self-sustaining entrepreneurial ecosystem where women lead digital and economic transformation in their communities, promoting meaningful access, digital equity and lasting socioeconomic empowerment.