

THE  
**POLESTAR  
FOUNDATION**



**19th ANNUAL POLESTAR AWARDS  
WINNERS DOSSIER**

# 19th Annual PoleStar Awards

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## Celebrating Excellence in Journalism

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The PoleStar Awards recognize outstanding talent among Indian media professionals and celebrate stupendous contributions from media citizens who have acted as catalysts in disseminating quality information to the world.

The PoleStar Foundation conceptualized the PoleStar Awards back in 1998 to mark excellence in IT and Business Journalism. This year, the foundation has instituted one more award - the Good News Feature.

## BEST GOOD NEWS FEATURE



### Ms. Durba Ghosh

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***Durba Ghosh won the PoleStar Award for her article, 'They learn from YouTube and pay via PayTM. Meet the Google girls of rural India', which appeared in Tech in Asia***

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A business journalist with over a decade of experience, Durba Ghosh has gained ample expertise in covering the tech and startup industry over the years. She likes to fold in her knack for feature writing in long-form business stories, which is her forte. She has closely tracked corporate and thought leaders in the tech industry to put out effective storytelling. Durba is an expert at networking and communication mediums – including new age digital platforms as well as social media. A graduate from Delhi University, she also holds a post-graduate diploma in Journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communications, Delhi.

# They learn from YouTube and pay via PayTM. Meet the Google girls of rural India

Durba Ghosh



Women in Sirasapalli show off their smartphones. Photo credit: Tech in Asia.

I have been flaunting a pair of handmade red earrings all day long. I bought it from a young girl in a tiny village in India, who fought against her family's objection to being a working woman, and learned the ropes of the internet.

Saira quietly sneaks up behind me to see what I am scribbling in my notebook. She is hoping to catch my attention to show me the beautiful earrings, bobble heads, and hair bands she has made using skills she picked up from Youtube videos. Saira is also curious to know why I am writing with a pen, and not using a laptop or a phone. She offers me her smartphone.

I set my notebook aside, because her craftwork catches my eye. The finishing on them can rival any piece of jewelry I have seen in popular department stores.

"Learning to use the internet has changed my life," she tells me in Telugu, the third most widely spoken language in southern India.

Frankly, Saira's proclamation sounded a bit over the top to my city-bred mind, but I quickly realized that Saira wasn't playing to the gallery. She meant what she said.

## Youtube skills

For Saira, the internet brings a source of income that is helping her family of five in a big way.

The teenager, like many other women in her village, has been learning new skill sets like bangle making, sewing and stitching,

and other crafts from online videos, then translating those skills into a business. Saira and her friends sell their wares to people in nearby villages, earning about US\$3 a day. That's double the income of her father, a tailor by profession.

A daily wage earner in a construction site earns nearly US\$4 a day. Saira has finally been able to set aside funds for a new smartphone for herself from the money she earns.

**"Armed with a tablet and a smartphone, they google how to breed cows, or how to set up a toilet in the village."**

I am in a small village called Sirasapalli near the coastal city of Vishakhapatnam in the southern part of India. Saira is part of Google's initiative Internet Sathi (Hindi for friend), which trains women in rural Indian villages on how to access the internet and search for information on the web. Started in 2015, Google's program gives a select number of women in remote villages access to the internet. They in turn become an internet-savvy mentor, or Internet Saathi, who goes from house to house convincing other women to learn how to be on the World Wide Web.



SairaBano inspects her creations. She learned to make these watching YouTube videos. Photo credit: Tech in Asia.

### Learning by example

Saira has travelled 7 kilometers every day for the past 6 months to reach Sirasapalli. She, along with a bunch of other women, gathers at the village center to learn using YouTube, how to transact via mobile wallets, and other things like creating Gmail addresses or applying for a new bank account.

Just like Saira, there are more than a dozen women in this village who say they have found a new sense of importance in their homes and in the village as they become business women. Take Syamala for instance, who was the first internet evangelist of Sirasapalli.

“I couldn’t talk to a soul before. Now I am more confident. People come to me for advice, if they want guidance or want to know something, they contact me. It feels good to be needed,” Syamala says.

I could tell Syamala’s assessment about her status in the village wasn’t misplaced. The women would usually crowd around her, diligently peeping into her tablet, to see how things are done. Not just women – you can also see that Syamala’s knowledge has piqued the interest of the male elders of the village.

That she single-handedly registered her mates for new Aadhaar cards (biometrics identification system) and then got all of them a bank account linked to it is proof enough of her impact. Today, the village has its own bank, so residents don’t have to travel to the nearest city to get their finances in order.

And believe it or not, India’s demonetization move that many city dwellers have been sulking about for so long, has actually come as a boon to this settlement. The move left the villagers without any means to withdraw or deposit cash. Tata Trusts, the philanthropic arm of the Tata Group, and Google then created a module to teach them about online transactions and how to use mobile wallets. That’s why, when I had to pay Saira for the earrings and didn’t have change, she simply asked me to Paytm it to her!

## “India’s demonetization didn’t hurt villagers, contrary to popular belief.”

Over a million women across 60,000 Indian villages have turned into small entrepreneurs and bread winners for their families with this initiative. These women bicycle to nearby villages armed with a tablet and a smartphone. They teach other women how to use the technology and they log in to find answers to all their questions on how to breed cows, or how to set up a toilet in the village, or how to get a loan.

“I never thought I will ever use the internet. My son used to tell me in bits and pieces, but it was never for me. Now I teach my son how to do it if he gets stuck,” Syamala says.



*Sirasapalli’s first internet evangelist Syamala with her husband and two kids. Photo credit: Tech in Asia.*

### What Google wants

The program also seeks to bridge the gender divide that exists in our internet world, especially in the low-income strata. According to the Inclusive Internet Index by The Economist’s Economic Intelligence Unit, about 94 percent of the female population in the low-income group have never gone online, and 41 percent do not have access to a mobile phone.

The statistics are not very encouraging for the social-networking-savvy population of India either. The country has over 462 million internet users, of which 191 million are on Facebook. But only 24 percent of these 191 million Facebook users are female. Globally, Facebook’s ratio is 56 percent male and 44 percent female, a report by social media marketing agencies We Are Social and Hootsuite states.

In India, the divide is only growing. In 2016, the internet usage rate among women was 12 percent lower than that among men. In 2013, that gap stood at 11 percent.

Google’s program is trying to narrow this gap, but the positive impact isn’t just for women. The entire village has seen a transformation with better hygiene, banks, toilets, representation of women in the council, and so on, villagers tell me.

But of course, Google isn’t changing rural India only out of the goodness of its heart. Hooking first time users to the internet creates a fresh user base for the company, which is actively looking for its next billion users.

“Asia has for long been our focus to find the next billion users and India has a huge market that is not yet addressed. Google has tried to customize several apps to suit peculiar problems in India’s hinterland,” a Google spokesperson said.

The company has been steadily working towards it. In 2014, Google released Android One with an aim to provide a platform for phone makers to make affordable smartphones. It was launched first in India. The tech giant has also come out with a lot of vernacular content and voice search features in different Indian languages.

One can also download directions on Google Maps or videos on YouTube. That means they can be viewed later without any internet connection – quite useful for villages and towns like Sirasapalli, where internet connection is sketchy at best.



*An Internet \*Saathi\* off for her daily ritual of bicycling to nearby villages. Photo credit: Google*

### Hits and misses

The Internet Sathi initiative is an extension of Google’s earlier campaign – Helping Women Go Online (HWGO) – which was launched in 2013. HWGO created a website where women could find relevant content in four major Indian languages – Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, besides English. It also created a toll-free phone number providing technical help to women logging on to the Web. That initial campaign saw notable success, reaching more than 1.5 million women in five states.

But its success was restricted to urban India. “We realized that reaching out to the rural areas was a huge challenge, especially with the dogma associated with women going out and working,” a Google spokesperson says.

**“The prospect of being a smarter mother to their kids was motivation enough.”**

So Google launched internet carts, a kiosk-on-wheels concept in Bhilwara, Rajasthan. The cart was operated by a trained local resident – male or female. These kiosks would search and answer queries for women on tablets and smartphones.

“But that didn’t quite impact the lives of women. Sometimes they were shy to approach a man, other times, families had an objection to them stepping out at all. Also, we couldn’t reach the remote villages,” the Google spokesperson says.

That’s when Google tied up with Tata Trusts – and launched the Internet Sathi program in 2015. Tata Trusts has been working on community-level development projects for the last 30 years. The initiative has trained over 12,000 women to date. These women in turn have reached out to over a million other women.

Google provides Android hardware for the project and pays for data packages to access the internet. Tata Trusts also organizes bicycles and individual trainers for women in over 60,000 villages across 10 states.



*Young girls learning to access the Internet. Photo credit: Google*

### Challenges

As Google creates its next cohort of users, the journey is far from smooth.

It has had to face several major challenges in implementing the program. The first hurdle was convincing families to let the women of their village come out and learn. When Syamala was selected to be the internet Saathi of Sirasapalli, her husband refused to let her go. Wanting to keep their women at home, or at least nearby, parents and husbands have been hesitant to let them cycle to neighboring villages on their own.

To address that, Tata Trusts has engaged with local self-help groups to first understand the areas where internet can help them. The answer was livelihood. The next step was to tell villagers how the internet can help them earn that livelihood. But for some women, the prospect of being a smarter mother to their kids was enough motivation.

Today, Syamala works out her day around her husband’s work schedule. In turn, Syamala’s husband ferries her around to other villages, and takes her to night school.

The second challenge that the internet Saathi team had to face was the problem of illiteracy. Varying levels of literacy in a single village made it hard to create a one-size-fits-all curriculum. The solution to this was simple – Google’s voice search feature. This allows the trainers to teach these women using voice command in their native language.

**“Google wants to extend this program to half of the 600,000 villages in India.”**

The third, and the most crucial hurdle, was to address the lack of high-speed internet connectivity across rural India. Sirasapalli is a privileged settlement from that point of view. It's the only village in a radius of about 20 kilometers that can boast of decent connectivity. That's why women from nearby villages have to travel all the way to Sirasapalli's village center to access the internet. They will come, search for information and videos, pull it offline, and access it back home.

The solution to this hasn't quite been cracked yet. Google and Tata Trusts are helping these villagers apply for a new cell tower, but until that happens, Sirasapalli will continue to be the point of confluence.

However, there is one crucial issue that persists – scaling up. All the women who I spent time with at the village have just one more milestone to cover – they want to take their craft to the market. But they have no means to do it.

“We are talking to Tata Trusts to find a way to address this issue. But it is too soon. First we will scale up the program, and only then we will go for the next step. One thing at a time,” the Google spokesperson said. By the end of this year, Google wants to extend this program to 50 percent of the 600,000 villages in India.

This article resulted from a trip to the village of Sirasapalli arranged by Google India.

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