

STORY IN PANDEMIC: "I Am Online Teacher Now!"

Year 2020 was welcomed with hope and ambition without realising of the fact that world was entering into black hole called covid-19. Life got locked down and villages faced curfews. Never heard word 'Lock Down' became new normal. People jailed themselves at home. Workers flocked to return back. Reverse migration back to rural India created exodus of city workers. It was devastating situation beyond imagination particularly in April and May 2020. Summer heat made situation worse.

State and Central government probably wasn't completely ready for this civic crisis. Government machinery was almost dysfunctional. Many voluntary organisations, NGOs, like-minded social reformers & committed agencies extended their support. This support wasn't sufficient. India first announced Janata curfew – voluntary lock down considered as mock drill on 22nd March 2020. People thought life will be back to normal within a month. Something that started as temporary situation, turned into crisis and prolonged for months. People were stressed and in-secured. Health, hygiene and livelihood was definitely at stake. Our volunteers were equally stressed and concerned.

Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MRA) campaign has been active and functional through regular visits to villages, meetings with village based women leaders, trainings and sessions for local representatives. Regular workshops, training programs, discussion forums were active and important sources of information dissemination. But all these face to face sources of communication and interaction were dysfunctional. By May 2020, our activists started looking for alternatives to start the work. April, May and June were the months to get ready for election of those women who were completing their tenure. Election was due and our Election team was ready with pre-election workshops for 1000 representatives. It was not question of 'what to focus', it was question of 'how to reach out'.

But, major focus during covid-19 months has been on issue of 'food supplies', health care, education and employment opportunities. Many villages had announced complete shutdown with curfew on movement. This automatically halted all face to face communication channels with women workers, activists and volunteers. Campaign leaders were exploring ways to reach out to grassroot level. 'Work from Home' practices started catching up at all levels. It was realised that many activists are educated but were digitally not very active. Online work practices were still new and unheard for many. Volunteers in this situation, started exploring new ways and avenues. Reality check showed that women leaders and volunteers use techniques like group phone calls & whatsapp calls. But use of zoom or google meet apps as part of work was a total new concept in rural settings. It was an unheard tool available to embrace and start the work. Grassroot leaders had to resort to learning online media to change from 'pause' to 're-start'.

New normal situations created new training needs which was 'use of digital media'. Tech Guru of MRA campaign Chetan bhau Wagh came to rescue with plans to create digital citizens. Under his guidance, 20 women leaders started skill up-gradation as online training of trainers.

Baseline status of these 20 women leaders was – some of the members knew ways to operate smart phone (not all), some members were aware about ways to connect with others through conference call. Use of whatsapp was wide and easy for messaging. Email communication was carried out by some. Sending and transmitting photos and videos for campaign management.

It was also observed that many women were unaware of basic use of digital and social media. It was need of the hour to learn and get trained on techniques of virtual communication.

On the first day of online training, our member (technical) explained in detail but that too appeared complicated. First session was a zoom session. Everyone was super happy to see each other

(though virtually) after a long gap. The first ever zoom meeting made us realise that regular communication and dialogue can take place even during lock down.

Online workshops were focusing on new techniques of connecting with people. All agreed that young generation is smarter and well versed with new technology and can guide us better. I took help of my son to log in to zoom, create an id and password and send and receive calls. Topic of first virtual meeting was 'covid-19 and its impact'. This session gave us joy of meeting our near and dear ones. At times meeting these near and dear ones has been very special than meeting your relatives. The joy of meeting fellow members washed out all stress and we felt rejuvenated. One meeting was planned to discuss covid-19 and its impact, changing situations and challenges. One issue that got focused was 'food security through public distribution system'. Locked down had impacted availability and delivery of food supply through fair price shops. Reverse migration has made the situation worse. It was important that people must get the food stock. Government has introduced changes and had passed new resolutions. Need was to take this information to grass root and help people out.

Our training sessions were based on very basic steps – developing digital literacy as effective tool for online work practices. Thus Downloading app like zoom and google meet, Creating personal account, Familiarize with techniques of using these apps for work practices, Conducting workshops, trainings and webinars through these apps. Conducting zoom meetings, scheduling meetings, controlling large crowd, managing agenda points – all these aspects were important as volunteers were gearing up with actual work.

Technical training sessions were very helpful. At every step, we struggled, faced problems and made lot of mistakes. But we learnt interesting technical aspects. Raising hand, messaging on chat box, inviting speaker – were some of the key aspects learnt. At every loggerhead, we used to call our mentor and he was always ready to support us. For every small aspects, Chetan Bhau was consulted and he truly became out Tech Guru.

One of the meetings was scheduled to meet state activists from different parts of Maharashtra but we could not connect with two co-workers from Duttapur and Kalam. We used this challenge for our learning during session, technical aspects were further enhanced. Taking screen shot and using it for evidence purpose was explained. We took baby steps. We tumbled upon but rose up. Thus we stepped into the new digital world!

We discussed the impact of covid-19 on our lives, basic needs in this pandemic & all other related issues. This promoted the need of a workshop regarding activating panchayats on food supplies which happened in due course. We discussed the new changes Govt brought in after the outbreak of covid-19 in food supplies which helped us to understand the situations & facts on grass roots.

To begin with our technical mentor gave us the PDS rules & lessons on mobile as how to download Zoom app and then further as how to create a zoom account. And all these lessons through practicals.. Zoom app was downloaded, Zoom accounts were created .. Now the next step, how to organise the online zoom meetings. The real task had begun & we learned how to arrange an online meeting, how to schedule it, how to send an invitation for a meeting. Many such workshops were held across the villages. But initially we came across with many difficulties such as no information about the topics, scheduled time etc. And then again Chetan bhau, our tech guru, came to rescue through his mobile and that too many number of times, without a single complaint!

Covid-19 pandemic taught us how to work online & actually this Online Work is a future of this world. May be many of us wouldn't have opted to learn this or many of us couldn't but this Pandemic situation is like blessing in disguise. After learning about Zoom meetings, we initially practised it within our families. Created WhatsApp groups, scheduled a meeting, sent them invitation.. this was boosting our

confidence. "We can do it, yes We Can..." and then we started the actual field work. Scheduled meetings, held online workshops.. our practice with families gave us a helping hand.

Many women didn't have the smartphones. We had to plan accordingly & organised our workshops. Women used to come together for such online meetings. We ask them to follow the safety rules such as safe distance, use of masks & sanitisers. In many villages Data operators & Gramsevaks gave us a helping hand.

A large gathering of women was not possible even for online workshops. Our female volunteers had technical training of Zoom meetings but women in villages were totally unaware of all these new technologies. But they were very keen. They took all required guidance from their young generation and followed our instructions and joined Online Zoom Meetings. Their efforts deserves a loads of appreciation, hats off to them! We volunteers had the proper training and then only we can adapt it but these women learned on their own, with just a little guidance & helping hand. Empowerment of Rural Women Leader has been the Most Important & Valuable outcome of these online workshops.!! There were no seating arrangements, no gathering halls, whatever is situation, we tried to arrange these workshops where there was a good network connection. All these women attended the workshops from their homes. They didn't have plan for more expenses but to pay a little more for better mobile network connection. 7 to 10 could attend the workshop on 1 mobile. Not a single female volunteer raised a question about expenses. They just had to manage time but that too in a different manner. Normally we conduct our workshops between 11am to 5pm but these online workshops were scheduled as per women's own priorities and according to their availability. At some places these workshops were held from 8pm to 11pm. Normally during day time physical workshops; women used to reached by 12 instead of 11am & were in a hurry to return home by 3pm instead of 5pm but these online workshops didn't have such hassles as they were scheduled as per their convenience.

Rainy days were causing a problem in mobile range. The women who had lost their connections due to this issue, were eagerly attending the next workshops. People in villages were surprised to see that women were conducting these online workshops from home & at home. Even my kids were teasing at me as I use to shout them being online for 24 hours & now even I am taking online workshops & arranging all necessary requirements. People were watching us! The Women are progressing has been the visual impact of virtual skill.

We really from bottom of our hearts want to learn this new technology. Though this covid-19 situation is worse, lot of casualties have taken place, worst situations are occurred; but still so many creative things also have taken place. This situation has taught us digital skills. A person can change according to the changing situation. This is how even I learned to teach online. This situation gave us a lot, to become digital and to be online.

Written by

Ms. Archana Jatkar

Panchayat Representative &

Online Trainer, Yavatmal

Translated by

Ms. Nilambari Gokhale

Head of Pastoral Secondary Girls, (UAE)