

“Wow, I can read more”: Field Interviews in Tamil Nadu on the impact of affordable eyeglasses

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Hi, my name is Rollo Romig. I'm from the US, and I'm studying the eyeglasses program. What's your name?

Bhavani: Bhavani.

Rollo Romig: What is your work?

Bhavani: Housewife.

Rollo Romig: You bought glasses today, yes?

Bhavani: Yes.


Rollo Romig: How do you think it will be helpful for you?

Bhavani: It will be helpful for me to read.

Rollo Romig: What do you like to read?

Bhavani: Mostly notebooks, newspaper, and phone. Phone is the most important. It's very difficult for me to strain and check numbers. Also Aadhaar card [government ID] number.

Rollo Romig: Did you feel a difference in reading when you wore the glasses?

 **Bhavani:** When I was just doing the testing, I really felt the difference, especially while I read the newspaper. Mageswari [The/Nudge's lead entrepreneur in Tamil Nadu state] gave me a newspaper to read.

Rollo Romig: Have you ever had glasses before?

Bhavani: No. First time.

Rollo Romig: Did you feel that you were having trouble reading before you had the screening, or was it a surprise to you that it made a difference?

Bhavani: I had trouble. My eyes used to strain when I wanted to read something or use mobile.

Rollo Romig: Do you live in this house or do you live nearby?

Bhavani: Andhra [Pradesh, the neighboring state]. Near Tirupati temple.

Henna T.: Mageswari enters the data into KoboToolbox, which is the data collection [smartphone] tool. Then, after checking her eye health and her details and all that, she'll start testing. This is the second stage. We start with distant vision testing, then we do near vision. Distant vision, if there's a problem, we just refer them, because we cannot provide prescription glasses.

Rollo Romig: What data is she collecting in Kobo?

Henna T.: First, basic information like name, age, gender, mobile number, location, all that. Then, regarding her previous difficulties, like watery eyes. Then, if she has already been using glasses, if yes, then what type of glasses have been used.

Rollo Romig: How did you hear about the screening? Were the neighbors talking about it?

Bhavani: Mageswari informed a few local people, and through them I got to know that this screening is happening here, and then I came here.

Henna T. [Tamil Nadu lead for The/Nudge's Insight program]: This area is on the border with Andhra Pradesh. That's why there are many people who speak Telugu but are actually Tamilians.

Deepan: This is my mom.

Rollo Romig: Yes, hello.


Deepan: She's already using glasses. But these new glasses are much better than those.

Rollo Romig: This is your home place?

Deepan: Yes. My house is nearby. She is my neighbor. That's why I came here.

Rollo Romig: You heard about it from the neighbor?

Deepan: Yes. She gave me a call, then I came here.

 **Henna T.:** We suggest changing the glasses every two years. There is one set of people who want to make use of this opportunity to change their glasses. They're not first-time users. They want to see if their power has changed with age.

Ankur Sanghai [The/Nudge Institute]: You organize a camp, or you go door to door, and you give the first glasses for free. The problem is, in two or three years, that's the life of the glass as well, or

the glasses are lost or broken. Now there is no one to offer the second pair of glasses. Unless you build a local supply chain network. In the entrepreneur model, that problem gets solved. Because in two or three years you'll saturate the area, and now the business of second glasses will start. This lady, she already has a bifocal reading glass, but she was given that three years ago.

Now she's not very comfortable reading with that. She found our glasses and the current power, which is detected, much better than the old one. She wants to purchase the glasses which we are offering her. If we wouldn't be here, she doesn't have an option. She has to look for an optometrist, which optical shop is probably not over here, in and around. This is a big benefit of having an entrepreneur model.

Rollo Romig: My name is Rollo Romig. I'm from the US and I'm making a study of the eyeglass distribution. What's your name?

Nagma [Deepan's mother]: Nagma.


Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Nagma: Housework.

Rollo Romig: You already had reading glasses?

Nagma: Yes.

Rollo Romig: Why did you get them? What have they helped you with?

 **Nagma:** Three years ago, I was finding it difficult to see nearby objects, especially tying flowers [for decorating hair]. Then, also, whenever I need to look at some numbers or anything like that. And also when cooking, I faced difficulties. I had to strain a lot to see nearby objects. That's why I chose to wear glasses three years ago.

Ankur Sanghai: Where did she get the glasses from?

Henna T.: In this block, there is a place known as Sri City, which is an industrial hub. There are many manufacturing companies and other companies there. Most of the people in Gummidipundi block are laborers there. They have frequent camps and programs where they provide free glasses or glasses at low cost there. Three years before, she went there, to Sri City, which is very far from here, and got the glasses from there.

Rollo Romig: I see. Were they free, or did you pay for them?

Ankur Sanghai: They were free.

Rollo Romig: But then you started to notice that the glasses weren't working as well anymore?

Nagma: It's been three years. I have faced that difference.

Rollo Romig: You're interested in buying them, but you're not going to buy them today?

Nagma: Not today, but I will buy one day.

Henna T.: They are not prepared with the money today, so they'll be buying it soon, like this week.

Rollo Romig: You knew Mageswari before?

Nagma: Yes. We are neighbors.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much.

Nagma: Thank you, sir.

Ankur Sanghai: Because Mageswari took on the role of lead entrepreneur, she hasn't been able to saturate her catchment area. Because now she focuses more on the training part and less on screening. That's why her catchment is still not saturated.

Rollo Romig: Yes. It seems like there's a lot of people around here.

Ankur Sanghai: Yes. We may put one more entrepreneur over here, because Mageswari is full-time into the lead entrepreneur role. She may not have time to cover this area.

Rollo Romig: Yes. But it's an advantage that she knows people, because they know they can trust her and all that.

My name is Rollo Romig. I'm from the US and I'm making a study of the eyeglasses distribution. What is your name?

Renuka Devi: Renuka Devi.

Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Renuka Devi: 54.

Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Renuka Devi: Tailor.

Rollo Romig: Is this the first time that you've had glasses?

Renuka Devi: Second glasses.

Rollo Romig: What happened to the old glasses?

Renuka Devi: They got lost. That's why I bought another one.

Rollo Romig: Where did you get the first pair?

Renuka Devi: Agarwal Hospital.

Rollo Romig: Do you remember how much that one cost?

Interpreter: I don't remember.

Rollo Romig: When did you buy this new pair?

Renuka Devi: Beginning of June.

Rollo Romig: Almost two months. How long was it in between glasses? When did you lose the other pair?

Renuka Devi: After one year.

Rollo Romig: I see. Was it difficult when you didn't have the glass?

Renuka Devi: Since then, I had eye watering, and also it was difficult in bright light for me, especially while working.

Henna T.: If you had difficulty, why did you not choose to buy a new pair?

Renuka Devi: In between my husband passed away. Then I left it for next time, next time. Later, later.

Rollo Romig: Of course. I'm sorry about your loss. Has it been helpful to have the glasses these past two months?

Renuka Devi: For reading and for tailoring, it's very helpful.

Rollo Romig: Are you able to do more tailoring? Are you able to get more work done?

Renuka Devi: Yes.

Rollo Romig: How would you describe the benefit of having the glasses? How would you sum it up?



Renuka Devi: It is helping me a lot with tailoring and reading. I've really benefited. And if Mageswari hadn't brought these new glasses to my home, it would have delayed me further in buying new glasses. Mageswari made it very convenient. She explained a lot, and it was really easy.

Rollo Romig: What was the cost of the glasses?

Renuka Devi: ₹300 [nearly 4 USD].

Rollo Romig: That cost was okay?

Renuka Devi: It's very affordable.

Rollo Romig: Good. Thank you so much.

Hi, my name is Rollo Romig. I'm from the US. What is your name?

Muneeswari: Muneeswari.

Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Muneeswari: 50.

Rollo Romig: Me too. Was this your first time getting glasses?

Muneeswari: Fourth time. 15 years back, I bought my first glasses at some camp. I remember it was around ₹300 back then. Then, after that, I got them two other times. Once I bought reading glasses at some random shop for ₹800. Now, after two years, I bought it from Mageswari. This is my fourth spectacle.

Rollo Romig: Why did you need new ones now?

Muneeswari: They weren't powerful enough any more, because it's already been two years.

Rollo Romig: What power are these?

Muneeswari: +2.

Rollo Romig: What is your work?

Muneeswari: We have [a social welfare program] called 100 days' work [MGNREGA]. I work in auditing and managing those workers.

Rollo Romig: For you, what is the benefit of having the glasses?

Muneeswari: In the office, we have xerox copies with different information of different people who are working. I need to write down the phone numbers and all that. The glasses are very helpful in helping me read small text, especially on xerox copies. It's very difficult to see if it's not very clear. In that way, it helps.

Rollo Romig: I'm sure.

Muneeswari: My husband bought glasses. He is a tailor.

Rollo Romig: Did he have glasses before, or was it his first time?

Muneeswari: It's his second glasses. First time he bought some was 9, 10 months ago. He bought it from outside. He was using that, but then recently, two months ago, he bought another one from Mageswari. He's feeling that this is a little better. He tried doing thread and needle. He felt a little bit more comfortable with the new spectacles that Mageswari offered, and then he bought that.

Rollo Romig: What did he say when he got the new glasses?

Muneeswari: He has very good feedback. He always keeps it in his shop. He runs a tailoring shop, so he uses the glasses while he's doing tailoring.

Rollo Romig: Well, great. Thank you so much.

Munishwari: Thank you.

Rollo Romig: Hello. My name is Rollo Romig.

Vyjayanthimala: Vyjayanthimala.


Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Vyjayanthimala: 48.

Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Vyjayanthimala: I tie flower garlands. I give them to temples and also to people who have functions. I do that as part-time work. It is not a fixed time. If anybody asks for that, I will give it. For that, it's very helpful. Otherwise I am a homemaker.

Rollo Romig: Is this the first time you've had glasses?

 **Vyjayanthimala:** Yes. Also, my husband had open-heart surgery. He has a lot of medicines, so the glasses will help me give the correct medicines on time.

Rollo Romig: When you put them on for the first time and you found the right ones, what was your reaction? How did that feel?

Vyjayanthimala: I was very happy. I could do my work very easily now, because the work requires tying knots with needles and thread.

Also, I want to say, before Mageswari came to me, I wanted to go to the hospital to get my eyes checked, but I was afraid. I have some kind of inhibition. And second thing, I have to travel all the way to Chennai for a good hospital. Thirdly, I need support from somebody to go to hospital. I had been waiting for my son to go to the hospital with me. That's why it was getting delayed. The main reason was that I was afraid to go to the hospital. But then I felt really comfortable when Mageswari was testing my vision in a very simple manner, with just the vision chart and nothing else.

Rollo Romig: It didn't feel like a big medical procedure.

Vyjayanthimala: Yes.

Rollo Romig: That makes sense. When did you get the glasses?

Vyjayanthimala: In June.

Rollo Romig: How have things been different for you since you got the glasses?

Vyjayanthimala: I only wear them when I'm preparing the flower garlands.

Rollo Romig: Have you gotten faster at making them?

Vyjayanthimala: I'm finding it very beneficial.

Rollo Romig: How was the price for the glasses? Was Rs. 300 okay?

Vyjayanthimala: This is very affordable for me. And even if I had to go outside and buy them, then anyway the cost would be higher than this.

Rollo Romig: How did you hear about the glasses?

Vyjayanthimala: I got to know about the distribution of glasses through my self-help group [SHG].

Henna T.: It's a community of maybe 20, 25 women. In one panchayat, there are around 70 self-help groups of around 20 women each.

Rollo Romig: That's a really useful way to spread the word.

Henna T.: Mageswari had previously been spreading word about different government schemes to help reach the grassroots. This is why people trust her. She has also worked on providing insurance cards and so on. In that way, Mageswari is very popular.

Vyjayanthimala: In Tiruvallur district, Gummidipoondi has 61 panchayats.

Henna T.: This is the largest block.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much.

Hi, I'm Rollo Romig. Good to meet you. What is your name?

Sigamani: I am Sigamani.

Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Sigamani: 57.

Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Sigamani: Business. Tea supply company.

Rollo Romig: Was this the first time that you had glasses, or did you ever have glasses before?

Sigamani: First time.

Rollo Romig: What was your reaction when you put the glasses on for the first time and had the right glasses?

Sigamani: Before wearing glasses, it was difficult for me to read small letters, but after wearing glasses, it is better. I am able to read the small letters. It helps in work. Mostly for account-keeping. Writing bills, daily accounting, and all that.

Rollo Romig: When did you realize that your near vision needed help?

Sigamani: I have been facing difficulty for one year, but I am very much occupied with my work. Eight o'clock in the morning I go to work, and then I come back around 6:00. So I do not have enough time to go to the hospital, and it was getting delayed because of that. Since Mageswari came to my home, I felt it was very convenient.

Rollo Romig: How was the price?

Sigamani: Good price. Definitely a good price. Otherwise, the frame itself is Rs. 2,000 or Rs. 1,500. This is Rs. 300.

Rollo Romig: How did you hear that Mageswari was selling the glasses?

Sigamani: Mageswari has previously been very much involved in general social work, so she is quite popular in that way. Somebody told me about this program that Mageswari has been doing.

Rollo Romig: Well, thank you so much.

Sigamani: Welcome.

Rollo Romig: Hello, I'm Rollo Romig. What's your name?

Tripura Sundari: Tripura Sundari.

Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Tripura Sundari: 65.

Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Tripura Sundari: I am a homemaker, and I take care of my grandchildren.

Rollo Romig: How many grandchildren?

Tripura Sundari: Six.

Rollo Romig: Is this the first time you had glasses?

Tripura Sundari: Yes.

Rollo Romig: What is the strength, the diopter?

Tripura Sundari: It is +3.0.

Rollo Romig: How are the glasses useful to you?

Tripura Sundari: I read the newspaper every day. That is the only thing I use it for.

Rollo Romig: Has it helped with reading the newspaper?

Tripura Sundari: Yes.

Ankur Sanghai: What about with cooking? Does she feel the need for glasses while she's cooking?

Tripura Sundari: For cooking, I'm not using the glasses.

Rollo Romig: What did it feel like to look at a newspaper for the first time after you put the glasses on?

Tripura Sundari: I was able to read very well. Before the glasses, when I used to read the newspaper, I couldn't do it for long.

Rollo Romig: Why didn't you get glasses sooner?

Tripura Sundari: I didn't consider it to be something that needs to be considered. I just ignored it. I felt there was no need for buying glasses. Also, one time I tried wearing my spouse's glasses, and that was a frightening experience. After that I did not try. I didn't think of buying glasses.

Rollo Romig: Now are you glad that you did get them?

Tripura Sundari: After buying the glasses, I thought, "Wow, I can read more."

Rollo Romig: How was the price? Okay?

Tripura Sundari: Rs. 300 is affordable.

Rollo Romig: Okay, well, thank you so much.

My name is Rollo Romig. What's your name?

Thukira: Thukira.

Rollo Romig: What is your age?

Thukira: 53.

Rollo Romig: What do you do for work?

Thukira: Housewife. I also do tailoring.

Rollo Romig: I see you have two pairs of glasses here. Are they both yours?

Thukira: This is the one I used previously. These are the new ones. I thought of buying new glasses because it's been a while now. Five years is a long time.

Rollo Romig: How has it helped having the glasses? How is it useful?

Thukira: I am an SHG leader, so I am taking care of the accounts related to the SHG. This particular SHG which I am part of is providing small loans among members. That requires a lot of account keeping. That's my duty as a leader. For that especially I require glasses, and for using mobile.

Ankur Sanghai: She's from the same SHG as Mageswari, or from a different one?

Thukira: I am from a different SHG.

Ankur Sanghai: How did the SHG come to know about Mageswari and this business?

Henna T.: These SHGs basically cooperate with each other. The kind of work this SHG is doing would not be the same that the other SHG would be doing. Like they give small loans. Mageswari's SHG is taking care of providing insurance card. So they cooperate with each other.

Ankur Sanghai: They complement each other. How many SHGs are there in Gummidipoondi?

Hennat T.: In this Panchayat alone, 70 SHG are there.

Ankur Sanghai: There are 61 Panchayats, so it will be around 5,000 SHGs.

ICON LEGEND



Advocacy



Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*