PROFILE: JAI HARAVU

by John Eberlee

Jai Haravu, a man with over 30 years' experience in the information field, believes professional librarians have a critical role in promoting the benefits of new information technologies in developing countries.

Although developing countries have limited financial resources for information infrastructure, many information specialists fail to demonstrate the potential impact of good information systems, says Haravu. He heads library and documentation services at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Patancheru, India.

One problem, according to Haravu, is that most people in the information business in developing countries tend to view themselves too narrowly -- for example, as acquisitions librarians or cataloguers.

"I think this trend is wrong," he said. "We need to widen our horizons and market ourselves as people who communicate information. We need to develop skills that make us more effective as information providers, not just as people who write abstracts or index articles."

Since 1964, Mr. Haravu has been designing and implementing computer-based tools to improve information services for scientific and technical users of libraries in India and globally. A mathematician by training, Haravu entered the information field at the National Scientific Documentation Centre in New Delhi. He has since collaborated in many IDRC projects and held senior positions at the Indian Institute of Technology, the National Small Industry Extension Training Institute, an Indian utility, and at ICRISAT -- with a one-year secondment to the International Livestock Centre for Africa in Addis Ababa.

At ICRISAT, Haravu coordinates the Semi-Arid Tropical Crops Information Service (SATCRIS), an innovative program that applies computer-based tools to provide information retrieval and dissemination services both to users within ICRISAT and in the national agricultural research systems (NARS) of the semi-arid tropics.

The program, partially funded by IDRC, provides information on five crops -- sorghum, millets, chickpea, pigeonpea and groundnut. From the outset, Haravu and his colleagues adopted a marketing approach to identify appropriate services for SATCRIS clients. Based on the needs of different users, the ICRISAT team developed various information products.

Chief among these is an automated SDI (selective dissemination of information) service. Clients can receive a steady stream of the latest information on a topic of their choice. SATCRIS also offers a sophisticated information retrieval service that allows access to external databases, document delivery services, and information analysis services.

Haravu and his colleagues recently began creating an expert advisory system for groundnut crop protection. When complete, the system will combine the expertise of plant disease authorities in a format
suited to agricultural extension workers. "We are very excited because here is one application that has significant potential for use in the Third World," he says.

The ICRISAT team actively promotes SATCRIS products and services at travelling workshops and seminars -- an approach that pays off in higher visibility. According to Haravu, "we are seen as something of a role model" by other research centres.

Although he is proud of SATCRIS, Haravu sees the service as a short-term solution to meeting information needs in developing countries. "Sooner or later, we have to decentralize these services." Accordingly, the ICRISAT team has developed products -- including information storage and retrieval software, specialized databases, and locational tools -- to help libraries in the institutions of the NARS expand their roles.

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