

# A Nation Evolves



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***From the empowerment of women to managing their health — information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed the lives of thousands of Indian villagers.***



“Look at my eyes – I can see now,” exclaims A. Vallathan. Fifty years old and a mother of three, she lives in Veerampattinam, a coastal village located a few kilometres from Pondicherry, in southeast India. Veerampattinam’s 6 500 impoverished inhabitants depend mainly on fishing for their livelihood. A few months ago, A. Vallathan went to the Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry to have her cataracts removed. At the time, she was almost completely blind.

A few metres from her on the beach, about 20 women chat noisily as they sort and clean the fish brought in by the fishermen. Among them is A. Sarojini, a 55-year-old businesswoman. A few weeks ago, she received a grant of 25 000 rupees (about CA \$650) from the Indian government in order to buy a catamaran. What they call a “catamaran” here is actually seven or eight large pieces of wood with slightly curved ends, bound together with rope. A. Sarojini does not fish; she rents her shaky little craft to the fishermen. On a good day, she makes as much as 200 rupees.

What these two women have in common is that they have both had their lives transformed by the arrival of ICTs in Veerampattinam. The village knowledge centre (VKC) is located on the main street, a hundred metres from the sea. This is where A. Sarojini learned that the government



offered grants for buying fishing boats. It is also where A. Vallathan had her eyes examined by a volunteer who diagnosed her cataracts. She was immediately referred to the hospital.

Since 1998, the knowledge centre has been run by six volunteers, four of whom are women.

Inside the small space lent by the municipality are five computers, a large blackboard covered in Tamil writing, children playing, and men and women trading information on the compensation offered after the tsunami hit in December 2004. One wall sports the inscription IDRC/CRDI.

This knowledge centre exists thanks to IDRC grants. Outside, large, primitive speakers have been set up. They are used to make regular announcements relevant to the lives of the villagers, many of whom are illiterate.

ICTs have radically changed the lives of the inhabitants of 33 villages in the Pondicherry region and the State of Tamil Nadu. In 1992, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) and IDRC conducted research and surveys on the population of rural India to determine its needs in terms of information and communication technology. Professor M.S. Swaminathan's vision was that everyone, no matter what their education level, should have access to modern technology.

An idea was born. The first village knowledge centres opened in 1997 in Pondicherry. The concept was simple: The municipality manages and loans a space that contains a few computers hooked up to the Internet and connected to a mainframe.

Volunteers with computer training run the VKCs. At least half of them must be women. The volunteers then train people in the village and respond to the various requests of their fellow villagers. For example, here in Veerampattinam, the safety of the fishermen is a top priority.

Therefore, volunteers must go on to the US Navy's website to check tidal schedules. They relay this information to the fishermen, either personally or over the speaker system.



The VKCs meet the needs of each individual by providing a large amount of information on a wide variety of topics: hygiene, public health, the price of fruits and vegetables, first aid for treating snake bites, traditional plant medicine, the weather, grants, organic farming, livestock care, support groups, access to micro-credit, legal aid, human rights, news, and so on.

The knowledge centre is also the village meeting place. Everyone comes for different reasons. The inhabitants of Embalam, for example, depend on agriculture for their livelihood.

At the VKC, a group of women happily discuss their rights and empowerment. They proudly show off the community newspaper to which they contribute regularly. They speak enthusiastically about the positive change in their lives since the arrival of ICTs.

"Six years ago, my husband refused to let me leave the house," says K. Soudhary. "Now, he worries if I don't go out anymore." This 35-year-old housewife is a volunteer at the VKC. She and other women from the village have taken on a leadership role in their community.

Elsewhere in the village, R. Dhanalakshimi lives in a modest and spotless house. Inside, a little girl washes her hands. Since the tsunami hit in December 2004, there has been an increase in malaria cases. The volunteers searched on the Internet for information on malaria prevention, and now hold



training session for the villagers. In Embalam, personal hygiene and cleanliness at home have improved.

Watching these thriving women and these children who are now computer experts, it is hard not to feel a wave of hope sweep across India. Professor Swaminathan's objectives have been achieved: He wanted women to have an active role in the community and prove that

the poor could master ICTs if given the opportunity.

This is certainly an important victory, but there are still many battles to be won in the war on poverty. Now, Professor Swaminathan's goal is that all Indians live above the poverty line by the year 2015, and to give villagers in all 600 000 Indian villages access to ICTs. The distinguished professor will not rest until he can raise his arms in victory!

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