AKSHAYA PROJECT

Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala
INDIA

Research Support:
NORMA SOCIAL AND MARKET RESEARCH
The Nodal Agency for Town Twinning in Kerala
AKSHAYA: Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala

Contents:

1. INTRODUCTION
   1.2 The Kerala Scenario

2. THE BACK GROUND
   2.1 The local scenario
   2.2 The partners

3. ‘AKSHAYA’ PROJECT
   3.1 The objectives
   3.2 Operational activities
   3.3 Problems encountered
   3.4 Results
   3.5 Assessment of performance

4. CONCLUSION
1. Introduction

A project for e-literacy and mass-employment generation.

Initiated in the district of Malappuram on the 25th of November, 2002 with a planning workshop.
1.2 The Kerala Scenario

**Highlights:**

- Highest Physical Quality Life Index.
- 1st state in India to achieve 100 percent literacy.
- Strong and vibrant Local-Self Government (Panchayati Raj).
- Strong infrastructure with almost 100 percent digitised telephone exchanges
- Highest telecom density in the country of 8 percent (Twice national average).
- Complete Governmental & political Support for innovative IT initiatives.

AKSHAYA Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala
Paradoxically:

- Large sections of the community - the poor, farmers, agricultural workers, fishermen, women, tribals – are excluded from the benefits of ICT.

- Although Kerala has high telecom density, internet penetration is estimated to be merely 1.5 percent. This also is concentrated primarily in the Cities. Here it is largely limited to the students’ circle.

AKSHAYA Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala
2. The Back Ground

2.1 The local scenario

Malappuram district is

- One of the most under-developed areas of the state.
- Has a very low literacy level when compared to the state average of 90.4.
- A highly conservative area where women are being oppressed even in this modern age.
Almost each family has a person working overseas consequently leading to a significant portion of family budget being spent on telecommunication.

This project was seen as a method to popularize cheap internet-based communication facilities.
2.2 The Partners

**STED**

- A project under the Department of Science and Technology, Govt. of India.
- Functioning with dual objectives of Entrepreneurship Development and Employment Generation.

**Kerala State IT Mission**

- The autonomous nodal IT implementation agency for the Department of IT, Government of Kerala
- Provides managerial support to the Department's various initiatives.

AKSHAYA Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala
3. ‘Akshaya’ Project

- It is important because of its five-fanged approach.
- It aims at both:
  - The short term education of the people and
  - The long-term benefits like sustenance of the e-literacy campaign and mass employment generation.
3.1 Objectives

**Broad Objective**

To dilute the gap existing between the laymen in the society and the applications of Information Technology, the most important tool for development

**Specific Objectives**

- Make all families (9 lac) in Malappuram district e-literate
- Develop infrastructure to provide sustained e-literacy and facilities like e-mail and internet telephony to the layman.
- Create mass employment through the setting up of Multipurpose Technology Centres (M-CTCs)
- Make available need-based training and service at lower rates to the trainees

AKSHAYA Bridging the Digital Divide in Malappuram, Kerala
3.2 Operational Activities

The activities envisioned can be outlined specifically as follows:

- Hundred percent e-literacy
- Awareness campaign
- Sustained e-literacy
- Need-based training at concession rates
- Mass employment generation
- Assistance to the Akshaya centreentrepreneurs

We will discuss these in detail now.
This implies to

◆ Make all families in Malappuram e-literate by providing computer literacy training to one member from each family having no computer literate person

◆ The beneficiaries would be in the age-group of 20-50.

◆ Mobilize women to avail of the training.
3.2.2 Awareness Campaign

A massive campaign to sensitize the people about the benefits of IT.

The events were to include

- Articles on the need of the programme by eminent personalities in leading dailies and other publications
- Advertisements/publicity through both print and electronic media,
- Brochures and posters highlighting the benefits,
- IT yatras, road shows, seminars, discussions, exhibitions, etc.
3.2.3 Sustained e-literacy

The benefits of the initial task of spreading e-literacy among the masses were to be augmented by providing need-based trainings.

It would help the beneficiaries to attain sufficient knowledge and practical skills in special packages/areas.

- The packages to be included in the curriculum were MS Office suite, C++, Computer animation packages etc.
The Akshaya Centres were to provide facilities like:

- Continued e-learning program
- Data entry under E-governance program
- DTP and Job work
- Other computer training for public
- Design of invitation cards, visiting cards, banners, posters, paper bags etc and Screen Printing
- Data Bank Services
- Telemedicine applications
3.2.4 Mass Employment Generation

By setting up Multipurpose Community Technology Centers, Akshaya centers, at the rate of at least one centre in a cluster of two wards.

- Each center: to be started by an entrepreneur in the region itself.
- Investment: almost Rs. 2,00,000 in the initial stage.
- Trainers required: average of 4 to 5 trainers.
- No. of centres: 600 in the district.
- Implied employment: around 30,000 people in the first phase of the project itself.
3.2.5 Need-based Training at Concession Rates

After completing the initial training in the 1st phase, the beneficiaries were to be grouped into different categories such as students, housewives, professionals etc. and were to be allowed to undergo need-based trainings at the respective centres.

- The training duration: 2-3 months
- Training fee to the public: Rs. 500 per program.
- Concession to the participants of first phase: Rs. 200 per month.
- The Govt. pays to the Akshaya Centre: Rs. 200 per trainee per program.
- Subsidy assistance period: first 2 years from the start of the project.
3.2.6 Assistance to the Akshaya Centre Entrepreneurs

The entrepreneurs earmarked for the project are usually locals who have no experience of this sort. Being new in such a venture they would require follow up assistance as well. Therefore the project also provided for the setting up of a District level Entrepreneur Support System (ESS) to provide them with

- Entrepreneurship Management Development Program
- Marketing Support
- Technical guidance for continuous improvements
- Content generation related assistances etc.
3.3 Problems Encountered

- Low literacy levels made identification of able entrepreneurs very difficult.

- Making the people realize the benefits of computer and related facilities and mobilize them to come for training at the Akshaya centers was another problem.

- The society being highly conservative it required a lot of pursuance to bring the women of the households to the training centers.
3.4 Results

- The project completes its first phase of the 100 percent e-literacy target on Nov.30th, 2003.
- Initial number of Akshaya centres aimed at: 600.
- Actual number at present: 618 centers operating in the district.
- No. of computers in each centre: 5 computers
- Employment: three to four trainers in each centre.
Contd:

- Total employment generated: almost 3000 jobs
- The investment attracted in the area: almost 30 crores.
- Percentage of women among trainees: 55 percent
- Entrepreneurs have in most cases reaped almost half their investment even before the completion of the first phase.
- The success of the project has led the Chamber of Municipal Chairmen to support the extension of the project throughout the state.
3.5 Assessment of Performance

- The implementers had **foreseen most of the problems** faced during implementation.

- A **low turnout of women trainees was feared**. But the project trainees had 55% of women.

- The **financial viability of the Akshaya centers** was also an issue of major concern. It could not aim at making a profit from its commercial activities, like internet and DTP, alone. Today a higher number of such centers are operating than was actually planned and have recovered half their investments.

- A professional assessment of its performance is still to be done. In fact, **NORMA Social and Market Research** - the biggest research house in Kerala – is conducting an extensive study on the impact of the implementation of Akshaya in the district of Malappuram.
4. Conclusion

Malappuram district being the most rural and conservative area of the state, the success of Akshaya only goes to prove its strength.

As the first phase of the project is drawing to a close, the earlier misgivings about the project have given way to a sense of jubilation.

The district is fast clicking its way towards become 100 percent e-literate.
Thank You