

IT for Emancipation of Women in India

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INTRODUCTION

At “One Village One Computer Campaign” (1VIC) in India we are resolved to tackle the gender question using information technology. The strategic slogan is “Age old problems, Youthful movement”. Gender equality is sought in the context of the fight against a digital divide that is expressed through the problems of underdevelopment and exclusion. The approach is based on introduction of organizational innovations to raise human capital and social capital in the rural communities and connect them with each other and the world over through a knowledge network. In the hands of women, this becomes a weapon to fight against gender inequality and discrimination.

Through the use of information technology, a community centric approach can help rural India to combat social problems. In contemporary times where information, knowledge is the key to development and progress, IT can be used to combat the development concerns of rural India, while keeping local communities and their involvement and empowerment at the forefront of the process. As a technology IT is best suited for the “gendered” sex to empower themselves with education, information, knowledge, skills and so forth, and connect themselves with other rural communities and overcome physical isolation through IT network.

For resolution of gender problem, individualized IT empowerment has extremely marginal relevance, whereas tele-center like models based on private proprietorship has also very little success. IT Enabled Women’s Social Network can be a solution in bridging the digital divide and gender problem. 1VIC campaign shows that it is possible to build such networks in remote villages and reach the most downtrodden and even illiterate women.

BACKGROUND

One Village One Computer started its work in village Mod, District Nandurbar of the state of Maharashtra in India, in the year 2000. A database of 3,000 landless laborers was created. The problems confronting destitute senior citizens, women, and patients were identified during the collection of this data and its processing. This led the laborers to organize agitation and make structured presentation of their specific health problems related to women, old people’s pension entitlements, to the local health and development authorities. Thus, the problems were resolved immediately.

In the same year, this method was used in case of tribal women from Thane and Pune districts of the state of Maharashtra. Extensive data regarding ration cards for public distribution system (PDS), availability of food grains, functioning of ration shops under PDS, distribution of kerosene, black marketing of rations goods etc was collected. This concrete information could ensure that all deserving families obtained ration cards. This also helped in restoration of over 2500 ration cards, which had been arbitrarily cancelled by the authority.

1VIC project is in operation in 18 districts in the state of Maharashtra. Plans are drawn to ensure the spread of 1VIC in all the districts of the state of Maharashtra. 1VIC is collaborating with active people’s organizations formed by peasants, landless laborers, women, students, and youth.

1VIC is supported by the USA based organizations of people of Indian origin, such as Maharashtra Foundation and Asha for education. Ashoka Innovators for the public is supporting the project through the social entrepreneur fellowship program. People from IT, management, social research, media background from India and abroad contribute resources, knowledge inputs, and voluntary efforts.

A STRUGGLE FOR BRIDGING DIGITAL AND GENDER DIVIDES

An Overview of 1V1C

In this increasingly unequal world, one need not talk of the spread of hi-tech technology and expensive investments, like most IT providers do. Instead we can think of taking to rural India the very basic core IT applications, which urban educated people often take for granted, thereby making a positive impact on the many lives of rural India through the use of very basic techniques and inputs of the IT that are enough to assist rural India to develop.

1V1C uses readily available applications such as graphic designing, word processor, spreadsheet, presentation, e-mail, Web pages. 1V1C has developed Indian languages solutions through its technology partner Akruti Software. In most of the Indian villages connectivity is not available, so 1V1C depends on inexpensive stand-alone computers instead of heavily investing on connectivity technologies as is done by most of the IT for development projects. Hence 1V1C model is adopted to the existing level of technology, as well as it is adaptable to variety of social and geographic situations. Reliance on existing technologies and alliance with ongoing social movements makes 1V1C village centers cost effective, community supported and immediately beneficial to the villagers.

Philosophy

1V1C is a development strategy for introducing IT in rural areas as a tool for finding solutions for simple problems faced by rural communities. 1V1C has developed new methods of mass IT education and training for village youth and formation of community owned IT Centers. 1V1C strives to facilitate the vertical knowledge flows. It is the flow of subject knowledge held by experts (located at a distance) to the contextual knowledge held by people and vice versa, that can lead to development. 1V1C networks with existing social movements, non-government organizations (NGO) and community-based organizations (CBO). The activities of 1V1C lead to the development of sufficient social capital assets in a given locality making possible the formation of IT

Center through community resources. This opens the window of the world to the local community while keeping their basic characteristics intact. It offers them access to the world level cutting age knowledge, which they can use, after appropriate contextualization, for their development. This also facilitates transmission of their traditional as well as and newly developed knowledge to the world community. 1V1C enables the social processes through creation of developmental software. This software is made available in the public domain through as free software.

Methodology

1V1C's efforts have been towards teaching and organizing of village communities to collect information and data relevant to their issues and concerns. The communities where 1V1C works have effectively tackled problems such as rural unemployment through organized and systematic data collection. The information regarding extent and prevalence of unemployment in the villages is used to demand more work under the government's employment guarantee scheme. Local communities have also been taught the value of the principles and techniques of IT such as systematic and reliable data collection and fact finding on their core issues like the below poverty line (BPL) numbers in villages, and demographic information which in turn when used effectively have accelerated people's struggles on issues such as rationing, accessing housing schemes, and old farmer pension schemes.

Another issue was addressed in one of the 1V1C operating villages, where the health of the women and children was badly affected. Here too, the team of people trained by 1V1C engaged in systematic data collection on the occurrence of the problem, which when analyzed and presented to the local health authorities was evidence enough to convince the state health department to organize health camps and check ups and ensure the right to health of community. Such demonstrated attempts have proved the value of reliable data collection and the science of information technology to the local community.

1V1C's work comprises organizing training camps where basic computer skills are taught and it is also used to generate an interest among the local communities on the various uses of IT to benefit their

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