

Leading the movement

“Don’t fear machines or technology; embrace them to keep up with time. We don’t have the option of getting out of the bus”

– Arun Shourie

“I will sit down with the BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd) to improve connectivity in the country.” This statement by Shri Arun Shourie was perhaps the finest outcome of the third Baramati initiative on ICT for Development 2003. The third Baramati initiative showcased ICT initiatives that were taking place all across the globe to empower the poor. Information and Communication Technologies can exacerbate the divide between the haves and the have-nots of the world, if not brought to the common man. However, these very technologies also hold tremendous potential to bridge this divide by empowering the poor and the underprivileged of developing countries if used effectively on their behalf. The Third Annual Baramati Initiative on ICT and Development, held between

May 30 and June 2, 2003 and organised jointly by the Vidya Pratishthan’s Institute of Information and Technology (VIIT), Baramati, and the American non-profit organisation, Digital Partners was a platform for grassroots entrepreneurs to share experiences of how ICT has made a difference in their lives and that of their communities. It brought to the forefront the important contribution made by the youth of today in bridging the digital divide by e-enabling those less fortunate than themselves.

The conference was a meeting ground for social entrepreneurs from various parts of the country and the world, and a celebration of inspired individuals, governments and NGOs that have dedicated themselves to the cause of e-enabling the poor and the underprivileged.

It saw the convergence of more than 175 participants from more than a dozen countries. Social entrepreneurs from various developing nations as far as Latin America, Africa and Asia joined to share their experiences on ICT. It also ignited the discussion on new innovative models devised for easy technology access for the masses.

Day 1 started off with Dr. Akhtar Badshah, Executive Director, Digital Partners setting the motto of the conference by stating that, “I don’t know a thing about the technology and it is not important what I know. It is these social entrepreneurs and the young lives who will make a difference to the mankind.” That day’s discussion focused on finding options to make village information kiosks/telecentres economically viable. Prof Ken raised a relevant point stating that “No ICT project has done cost analysis to find the revenue source except Drishtee. We need to find out the real cost of running kiosks and sustainability.”

Anand Tawker, Director, Emerging Markets, Hewlett Packard shared the experience of Hewlett Packard’s Kuppam project—a major initiative to establish i-communities. These have gone beyond a telecenter model, becoming the hub of IT information and training for a par-



Sri Arun Shourie and Sri Sharad Pawar, launching i4d

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ticular community. In partnership with the State government of Andhra Pradesh and local NGOs, the Kuppam effort is already beginning to show some areas of not unremarkable success.

Social Enterprise Laboratory (SEL) awards were announced to provide financial funding to the ICT projects. Anand Tawker of HP (which provided

funding in support of projects in India) and Dr. Badshah acknowledged the value of each of the projects that were considered this year and announced that a total of US\$ 200,000 would be shared between four projects – Drishtee, Enabling Dimensions, Datamation (all from India) and Sateliffe and PDA’s from Uganda.

Shri Arun Shourie, Minister of Disinvestment, Communications and Information Technology, Government of India inaugurated the day two activities. The minister called for changing the prevalent attitude towards technology. “Don’t fear machines or technology; embrace them to keep up with time. We don’t have the option of getting out of the bus,” he remarked. He laid emphasis on developing and adapting technology for indigenous needs for success at the local level. “Whether it is smart cards to dairy farmers or a mobile lab which goes to villages to provide computer access, these stories are phenomenal,” he said. Shourie said ICT had changed the nature of complaints for people in places like Baramati. “Instead of complaining about no jobs in Mumbai, they now complain about poor Internet connectivity.” He also paid compliments to Sharad Pawar (Member of Parliament) for the ICT experiments conducted at the Vidya Pratishthan Institute of Information Technology (VIIT).

The guests of Honor included Jay Inslee – United States Member of Congress; Walter North – Director; USAID,

India; Naina Lal Kidwai – Vice Chairman and Managing Director, HSBC Securities and Capital Markets, India and Board Member, Digital Partners; Anand Tawker – Director, Emerging Markets, Hewlett Packard.

Social entrepreneurs from Asia, Africa and Latin America shared their experiences, insights and successes. Several of them have participated in the Digital Partners Social Enterprise Laboratory. The conference agenda addressed the viability of village information kiosks and tele-centres, problems of funding, opportunities and challenges confronting financial services in rural markets and the role of the government and development agencies. The conference also showcased path-breaking initiatives in creating enterprises for the poor using IT, social entrepreneurship in the domain of knowledge and education resources, empowering youth, gender and the disenfranchised, and healthcare technologies serving the poor.

Some interesting case studies were presented on e-learning, e-commerce, IT based training and economic empowerment, microcredit and health during the conference. Tamara Hernandez represented Mexico-based artisans that runs a project involving direct distribution model to sell handcrafted jewellery. Mitra Technologies is developing a handicrafts e-trade centre that would connect producers directly to wholesale and retail buyers, resulting in increased marketing and production efficiency. Akshaya, another ICT based project started by Kerala government has established 565 ICT centre each with 5 computers across Mallapuram district with the aim of familiarizing at least one person in every family with computers, besides providing e-content in the local language.

Ratanben, a salt-pan worker from Gujarat, is working in the area of healthcare and teaching women of her age the



Social Enterprise Laboratory (SEL) award participants

Session on Education and Information Resources

use of computers with the assistance of SEWA. Maitreyi Doshi a 19 year old from Pune represented a Canada based organization "Taking IT Global" planning to start a national youth campaign involving the tech-savvy youth to bridge the digital divide.

On the third day there was a remarkable presentation given by a blind person doing some outstanding work with EnableAll.org. They are providing web-based education and training courses customized for the disabled community to enhance their employability and quality of life. There was a session on Health Care Technologies serving the poor which showcased e-Swasthya launched by Bihar Institute of Economic Studies (BIES) in Madhubani district. The project allows the poor of this district to get access to health facilities at lower cost by providing them with smart health cards. These cards would contain their entire health history which can be accessed at local community health centres.

Vivek Chaudhry shared the World Bank's Development Gateway efforts that were then highlighted by presentations from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka showing what each country based effort is hoping to achieve. Other success stories included Azim Premji Foundation (IT in the education sphere), Youth for Technology Foundation, Nigeria (Techpreneurship program), Brazil (Lifelong learning for development), India/Sri Lanka (Smart card-based electronic passbook), SATELLIFE/Health-Net Uganda (PDAs for better healthcare in Uganda), Datamation Foundation, India (Putting ICTs in the hands of poor women), E-Academy, Tanzania (Demand-driven Kiswahili software), World Links, Doctor Anywhere, India.

The participants stressed the need to inculcate an intimate understanding of the end-users and beneficiaries of the application of such technologies and ac-



count for their perspective while developing newer and sustainable models. They felt it was important to digress from linear theories of development and collaborate more in initiating simultaneous development work in several segments. It was made clear that ICTs cannot be given a backseat until India can make available basic facilities such as water supply and healthcare in rural areas because technology alone could open newer realms of possibilities that can change the way a major section of society lives and works. Experts highlighted the need for systematic studies to measure the benefits of such initiatives and arrive at the best ways to spend time, energy and funds. The need to translate these initiatives into revenue resources to ensure their long-term sustainability was also emphasised.

Third Baramati initiative maintained the legacy of the past two years, attracting many projects and implementers sharing their experiences with others. Like the previous two years, it was able to launch various innovations, experiments, projects and had become the largest gathering and a focal point of discussions in using ICTs for the poor in India.

By choosing Baramati, attendees were also able to see and experience first-hand innovative initiatives such as VIIT's recently designed solar powered bus equipped with computers. This bus, part

of a World Bank project, is aimed to spread education to deep areas of rural India. Those participants who visited this bus were able to gain a better understanding of how innovative technology can leverage an area's natural resources to achieve a social goal: in this case, educating those without a means to attend a traditional school.

The conference served as an appropriate platform for information seeking & sharing besides exploring models that demonstrate social impact and financial sustainability as well. It provided participants opportunity not only to interact with individuals and organization that are financing these initiatives but also to learn more about innovative efforts in the field of ICT by way of exhibits and demonstration booths. The experts emphasized greater role for social entrepreneurs using ICT in opening new avenues for the poor in markets, e-commerce etc. The grassroot worker's sharing of first hand experience of the changes that ICT has brought in people's lives was one of the high moments of this conference. ■

If you have attended a conference or an event, which you think the readers of *i4d* should know about, drop us a line.

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