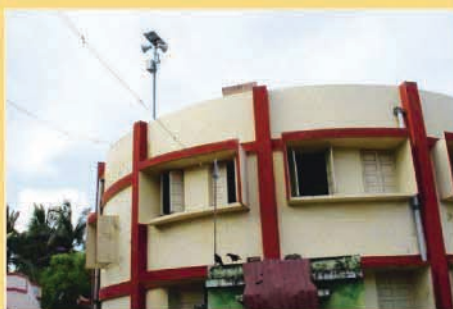


# EVOLUTION OF A VILLAGE KNOWLEDGE CENTRE UNDER EXTRAORDINARY CONDITIONS: Case Study of Tsunami Affected Akkaraipettai Village Process Document



**JAMSETJI TATA NATIONAL VIRTUAL ACADEMY (NVA)**  
**M.S. SWAMINATHAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION**

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VILLAGE KNOWLEDGE CENTRE  
UNDER EXTRAORDINARY CONDITIONS:  
*Case Study Of Tsunami Affected  
Akkaraipettai Village***

**Process Document**



**Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA)  
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## || Author's Note ||

Over the last few years I have been closely following the development of Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) established by the Foundation. The experiences associated with the establishment of VKC in Akkaraipettai are distinctly different from other experiences of MSSRF. It is different because it was established under extraordinary conditions in the post Tsunami period without adopting the usual pre-establishment phase procedures. A detailed study of Akkaraipettai VKC has provided us with some significant insights and lessons. Community based interventions cannot be effectively implemented without broad based support from all stakeholders. When support is not forthcoming from the required institutions and agencies, notwithstanding the commitment of the implementing agency and good will of members of the community, interventions have a high probability of failure. Tracking the development of the establishment and functioning of Akkaraipettai VKC has highlighted the issue of the need to execute on the basis of a proper plan as well as the importance of enjoying overall support and understanding from all stakeholders for the intervention to remain effective. The impact of the VRC/VKC programme in Akkaraipettai deserves special compliments. Despite having to face challenges during the various stages of its evolution since its inception, the programme has made remarkable contributions to improve the socio-economic conditions of the fishing community. The study has shown that access to information, skill development in computers, training and awareness programmes have played a significant role in improving the lives of villagers. It is heartening to find that social commitment of some youngsters has enhanced due to the exposure to various issues they received through the VRC/VKC. Although the VKC has been closed down, Akkaraipettai continues to be the ambit of Nagapattinam VRC which offers its services and organise training/awareness programmes to fishermen and women till date. If these nuances in the development process of Akkaraipettai VKC are captured sufficiently, then the purpose of this document is achieved.

L Vedavalli  
17 December, 2010

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L. Vedavalli

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This study is a modest attempt at analytical documentation of the various processes involved in setting up the Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) in Akkaraipettai, Tamil Nadu. Akkaraipettai is a fishing village in Nagapattinam district, which was severely affected by the Tsunami in 2004. As a post-Tsunami intervention this VKC was set up by M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), with the financial support of TATA Relief Committee (TRC), in early 2005. Setting up of this particular VKC during the stressful post-Tsunami period and the development of the VKC over the years have certain unique and interesting features and therefore this VKC has been chosen for a detailed study.

This study is organised in nine sections including the present one: Section 2 provides a general introduction to the Village Knowledge Centre /Village Resource Centre (VRC) programme of MSSRF. Section 3 provides background to the genesis of VKC/VRC programme in Nagapattinam district; also village/location profile and methodology adopted for the study is explained. Section 4 discusses the processes and setting up of a VKC in a private property\* (a rented house) as a post-Tsunami intervention at Akkaraipettai, the process of awareness-creation and mobilisation of the community and the challenges involved. At the end of this section, services and activities of the VKC in its first venue are briefly described. Section 5 talks about moving of the VKC from the rented house to another location namely Sastra building. The challenges confronted by the Centre and its services and activities in this venue are discussed. Section 6 deals with the shifting of the VKC from its second venue to a new location in TATA Community Hall. Activities of the VKC to address the various needs of the community are mentioned in brief. This section concludes with a significant development which ultimately resulted in the VKC being closed, and how, in spite of this, the VRC tries its best to disseminate daily important information using its various ICT tools and conduct training programmes for the fisherwomen and men. The major aspects discussed in Section 7 are the general views and perceptions of women and men on the uses and benefits of the services and activities of the VKC. This section also throws light on the impact of the programme on different sections of the community. Section 8 provides the views of the villagers about VKC and other NGOs in Akkaraipettai. Section 9 forms the concluding remarks.

## 2. JAMSETJI TATA NATIONAL VIRTUAL ACADEMY (NVA)

It has increasingly been recognised that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has great potential as a tool to promote social and economic development in rural areas. Information and knowledge empowerment is vital to improve the lives of the rural population particularly the poor. In this context, MSSRF, which is a non-governmental

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*\*It is the practice of MSSRF to set up VKCs in a public building identified by the respective community. However, given the unique condition under which the VKC was set up in Akkaraipettai the usual procedure could not be followed.*



organisation, has initiated Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs)/Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) programme in 1992 to promote and strengthen rural knowledge empowerment. In order to scale up the VKC programme, the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA) was created in 2003. 'To promote sustainable rural livelihoods through digital empowerment with a pro-poor and pro-women orientation towards choice and dissemination of technology, and human resource development', is the mission of the NVA. This programme envisages bringing together the experts and grassroots level communities in two-way communication with the objective that knowledge should reach every home and hut.

A Village Resource Centre is normally located at the block level, the commune level or the *mandal* level, or at the central point of a cluster of villages. Village Knowledge Centres are generally situated among a cluster of villages or at the *Panchayat* level. Infrastructure facilities such as space and electricity for the VKCs are likely to be provided by a variety of partners (for example, elected or traditional village administration, farmers and fishermen associations, milk societies, youth clubs, non- governmental organisations (NGOs), temples and churches, village development council, etc.).

### **Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy and ISRO–VRC Programme**

In 2003, the VRC and VKC programmes were further strengthened with the creation of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy and ISRO–VRC programme. This programme involves collaboration with several international and national partners (IDRC, Tata Trusts, CIDA, ISRO, SDC, Microsoft, telecentre.org, Qualcomm, IFFCO, IKSL, etc.) for content development and capacity building to embark on sustainable rural development.

VRCs are connected through Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) uplink and downlink satellite facilities. Users located at one node of this network can fully interact with others located at another node through video and audio links. Each node can further be expanded using different technologies such as notice boards, pamphlets, public address system (wired / wireless / GSM), community newspaper (vernacular), press releases, cable TV, audio / video conferencing through wireless, telephone, meetings, mobile phone, SMS server, internet radio server, fixed wireless loop telephone closed user group, pen drives and CDs through bus drivers, K YAN-PC (it contains PC, projector, TV tuner card, DVD player, amplified speakers and modem) and intranet web site for dissemination of useful and necessary information.

### **Three main aspects of the Programme**

The National Virtual Academy aims to provide need-based locale-specific, demand driven information content (both dynamic and static) based on a collection of several secondary data and a well-planned need assessment, organise training and awareness programmes and

build linkages with several leading institutions / organisations for translating the content into field-based applications.

### **Three-tier Knowledge Network**

In order to strengthen the management among VRCs, VKCs and strategic partners (data providers, generators, capacity building providers, etc.) the NVA developed a three-tier knowledge network. The First Tier comprises the following: MSSRF, Chennai has been connecting several data generators and data providers (universities, experts, financial institutions, corporate sector, technocrats, grassroots academicians, etc.) focussing primarily on content and capacity building. The Second-tier or Village Resource Centre comprises the following: The locale-specific, demand-driven information is disseminated from the VRCs through VKCs and vice-versa. The Third-tier or Village Knowledge Centres are the following: VKCs normally located among a cluster of villages or *Panchayat* level disseminate the information to the communities using various ICT and non-ICT tools.

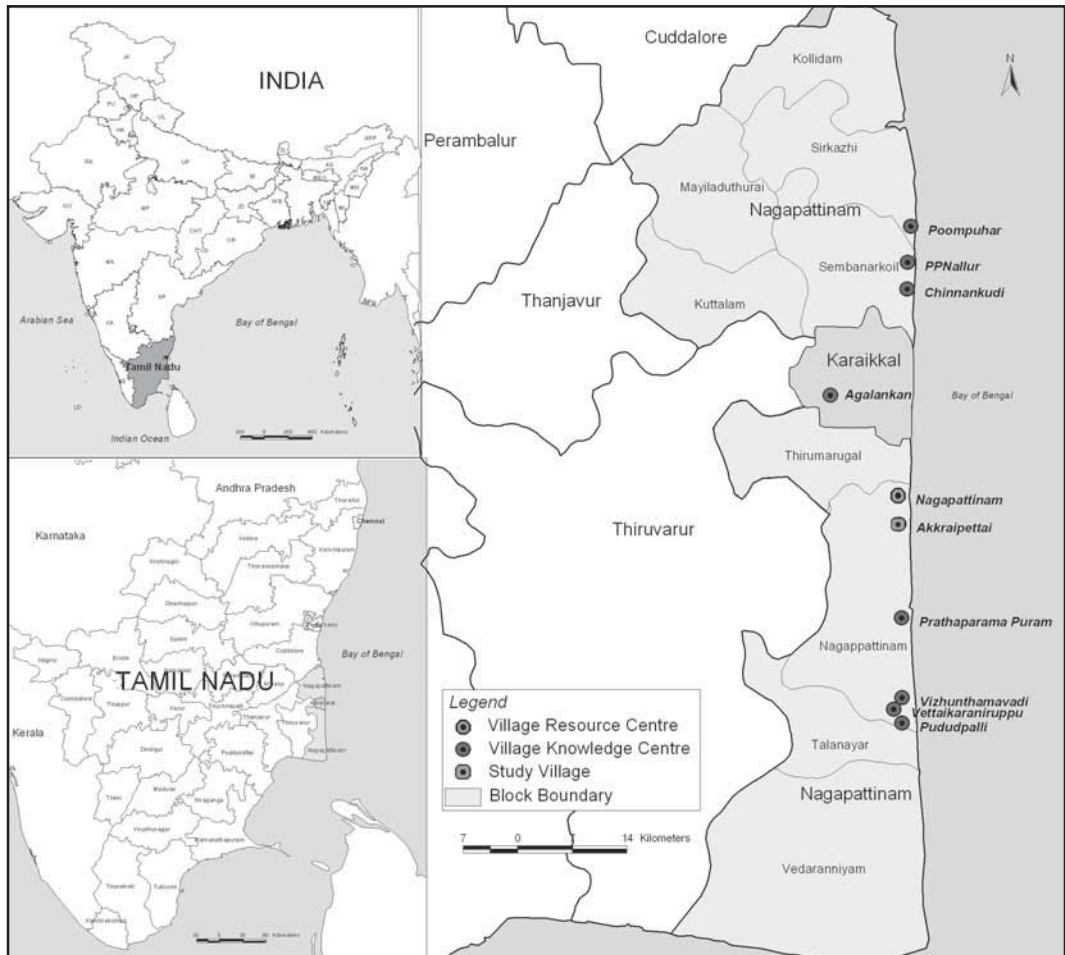
### **ICT-based curricula**

National Virtual Academy conducts three ICT-based curricula including (i) Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP), (ii) Computer-Aided Learning Programme (CALP) and (iii) Intel Learn Programme. They are addressed to the rural children and youth (both female and male members) to improve their IT skills and knowledge about sustainable development through IT literacy.

## **3. GENESIS OF VRC AND VKC PROGRAMME IN NAGAPATTINAM, A BACKGROUND**

MSSRF has been a pioneer in setting up VRCs and VKCs in the rural areas of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu; but setting up a Village Resource Centre (VRC) and VKCs in Nagapattinam district was not in the immediate agenda, though MSSRF's objective is to take the benefits of ICT for rural socio-economic development. The push came through the unfortunate Tsunami. It may be mentioned here that TATA Relief Committee (TRC) took the initiative in establishing the VRC/VKC programme as far as Nagapattinam district was concerned. TRC conceived of a project for Tsunami affected area; it is a separate project which aimed to set up two VRCs (one at Nagapattinam and another at Nagarkoil) and eight VKCs (three at Nagapattinam district, two at Nagarkoil, two at Chidambaram and one at Kovalam near Chennai). TRC approached and invited MSSRF to be a partner and implement the project. Akkaraipettai is one of the three areas identified by the TRC in Nagapattinam district to set up a VKC and the MSSRF became the implementing organisation. It may be mentioned here that presently, under the VRC of Nagapattinam eight VKCs are operating of which five villages are primarily agriculture-based, two are fisheries while one is involved in both fishing and agriculture.

## Location of VRC / VKCs



### Location

Akkaraipettai is one of the largest fishing villages in the Nagapattinam block and it comes under the Akkraipettai village *Panchayat* which consists of four hamlets/villages namely Akkraipettai, Keechankuppam, Kallar and Thideerkuppam. The newly constructed housing colony, TATA Nagar, which was set up in the post-Tsunami time, also comes under this *Panchayat*. This housing colony has been built by TRC as part of its relief and rehabilitation work for the disaster affected residents of Akkraipettai. It is said that more than 800 households from Akkraipettai have moved into this new resettlement colony. Traditional as well as elected *Panchayat* are found in this village. However the former consisting of twenty-four members including its president has a greater role to play at the village level. Important decisions concerning the village are taken by them. The tenure of office of the traditional *Panchayat* is for twelve months, and every year election is held to form a new *Panchayat*.

Akkaraipettai is a traditional fishing village. This village is situated on the sea coast of Bay of Bengal. It is situated roughly 10 km from the hub centre/VRC. It has a total population of 7,134 persons of which 3,623 are male and 3,511 are female. The total number of the households is 2,210. All but forty households belong to the fisher community. This village has frequent bus services to the nearby town Nagapattinam and share autos also ply between this village and the town. The main bus stand of Nagapattinam is 3 km from Akkaraipettai.

A great majority of the households are involved in fishing and fishing-related activities. Generally, since work activities take place at sea, men play a greater role in it while women are primarily involved in caring for the household and the children. The latter do play a very significant role in fish processing, marketing, and distribution. Four major forms of fishing found among the Akkaraipettai fishermen are day-and-night fishing, night fishing, day fishing and *Thangukadal* (Staying in the sea for one week and above). There are 280 trawler boats, 110 fibre boats and about 110 catamarans with sails are operated in this village. The fish catch is sold through auction, middle men and also through direct marketing with fish traders.

A big fishing harbour is located on the northern side of this village, where boats from several nearby fishing villages such as Keechankuppam, Nambiar Nagar, Samathan pettai, Nagur and Ariyanattu Street are landed, and it is one of the biggest fishing landing centres in Nagapattinam area. There are four government schools consisting of two primary schools, one middle school and one higher secondary school. Besides this there are also four private schools functioning in Akkaraipettai *Panchayat*. It has a Primary Health Centre (PHC) and Public Distribution System (PDS).

The impact of the Tsunami was severely felt on coastal communities in Tamil Nadu, destroying houses, boats, fishing gear, agricultural land and saltpans and wiping out the livelihoods of millions of people. Akkaraipettai was one of the worst-hit villages resulting in both human and economic loss of great magnitude. According to NGO Coordination and Resource Centre (NCRC), Nagapattinam, 791 (382 men, 291 women and 118 children of which 64 were male children and 54, female) lost their lives. More than 1,475 households were severely affected. Their fishing craft and gear either partially or totally have been damaged. Akkaraipettai was not accessible for few days as the bridge connecting this village and the town was blocked by the boats that were thrown by the Tsunami waves. For more than a month, the villagers stayed in the temporary shelters.



*Bridge connecting Akkaraipettai to Nagapattinam*

Schools at Akkaraipettai remained closed for more than two months. It took almost a year for fishermen to resume their fishing activities. Repair and building of boats and mending of fish nets took a longer time. Also, as the fishermen were badly shaken psychologically it took time for them to regain confidence to venture into deep sea fishing.

There was a spontaneous outpouring of help and assistance of various kinds reaching these affected areas and Akkaraipettai was no exception. While most of it was in the form of relief and rehabilitation aid/assistance consisting of housing, food, medical and so on TATA Relief Committee (TRC) in partnership with M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) came up with a unique but most useful idea of helping the villagers by setting up a Village Knowledge Centre in Akkaraipettai village and two other villages in Nagapattinam district.

### **Inspiration for the Study**

It may be mentioned here that the idea to carry out this study emerged during a casual chat in mid-2007 with the then Project Associate of Nagapattinam VRC. He was the earliest one to be posted as a staff of Nagapattinam VRC by MSSRF. As the conversation progressed, it soon got centred on the activities of the VKC at Akkaraipettai. The author found his narration of field experiences very interesting especially of the challenges to the staff's mobilisation of the villagers particularly the traditional village *Panchayat* members whose participation and support was crucial to the success of the programme. He said it was a time when more than forty nongovernmental organisations and other organisations were involved in relief and rehabilitation work. The villagers were not in a mood to appreciate the VKC concept. While the conversation was going on he suggested that it could be carried out as a small study on the setting up of the VKC and the process of awareness-creation and mobilisation of the community in Akkaraipettai as it would also result in useful learning for the VKC programme. We thought it was a good suggestion and were inspired to attempt such a study. When we discussed this with the Programme Director he also felt it would be a useful endeavour and encouraged us to proceed with the work. The idea thus conceived during the informal chat between the author and the VRC staff of Nagapattinam has developed into this present work.

### **Methodology**

As part of the study, a preliminary field trip was undertaken in the month of October, 2007 to Nagapattinam. During this trip the author visited Akkaraipettai and also other VKCs that come under the VRC of Nagapattinam. It so happened that this field trip to Akkaraipettai coincided with some specific programmes the VRC had arranged in those VKCs and the staff suggested the author to accompany them. Purpose of the visit of the VRC staff to each VKC was different: one concerned with awareness creation on the services and activities of the VKC to the school children, teachers and the general community using Kyan PC; another visit was to do with conducting a training programme on vermicomposting, to visit the paddy field under SRI (System Rice Intensification) method of cultivation, to get

feedback on the earlier training programmes on microenterprises for women, and also to use this opportunity to assess the needs of the community; another visit was to a newly setup VKC and yet another visit was related to meeting of *Panchayat* persons regarding setting up a new VKC in that village. These visits enabled the author to get a direct experience of various important aspects and process related to VKC programme: procedures involved in setting up of a VKC, creating programme awareness by mobilising the community and involving the important persons in the programme, conducting a training programme, getting feedback on the earlier programmes from the community, need assessment done using such programmes and several other important factors. During the preliminary visit, the author also got an opportunity to observe one of the Knowledge Workers' monthly meetings held at the VRC. This exposure helped the author later when she was involved in gathering information from the fishing community of Akkaraipettai and also from the staff of the MSSRF for the present work.

After the preliminary visit to Nagapattinam, field work focusing on the intended study was conducted for four days in the following month—November, 2007. Subsequent to this visit, it was planned to undertake one or two more visits to Akkaraipettai before February 2008. However, due to some unforeseen reason, the field work could not be carried out throughout 2008 as planned. But the author was in contact with the VRC staff and the Knowledge Workers and continued to receive updates on a broader level. When field work was resumed in the village in August 2009, the information updates from the staff formed the background. In all twelve days of field work spanning the months of August, September and October, 2009 was carried out in the village. When the report was nearing completion a brief visit was undertaken to the VRC of Nagapattinam during July 2010. Unfortunately, the field work in the village recommenced at a time when the VKC was unable to offer its services like skill development in computers and curriculum-based computer programmes for school students; access to information through Public Address System (PAS) and local data base. It was learnt that the Centre had to be locked because Electricity Board had cut the power supply to the building where the VKC was housed owing to nonpayment of electricity charges. We hoped like the villagers that the Centre would resume its services and activities soon before the study is completed. However, the status quo was maintained during the subsequent field visits to the village and continued for another six months before the VRC decided to finally close down the Centre in Akkaraipettai village in April, 2010.

As we have mentioned above, initially the idea was to focus on the process of setting up the VKC in Akkaraipettai and to make an effort to look into the challenges involved in the mobilisation of the community to be part of the programme. According to our original plan, the study should have been completed by the end of 2007. But it did not happen that way, as the field work could not be conducted for almost one year after the initial two brief visits to Akkaraipettai. In a way it proved to be useful in terms of gaining insights into the various issues involved in the process of evolution of the VKC and the challenges and difficulties

it encountered over the period of five years. It also provided the opportunity to know the positive side of the programme, the involvement and support of the children, youth, women and men of the community and the kind of impact it has created among them. We also get a glimpse of the present state of affairs.

As mentioned earlier, the preliminary visit to the Akkaraipettai VKC and other VKCs were helpful in getting an understanding of the various aspects involved in setting up a VKC and the role of the Knowledge Workers (Local Managers of VKC), the community participation and the various efforts taken by the VRC to improve and strengthen services and activities of a VKC. It provided a useful background for the study to be undertaken in Akkaraipettai. During subsequent field visits to the village and the VRC, the focus was to understand the details of setting up a VKC as a post-Tsunami intervention, the process involved, the challenges encountered and the community's participation during the various stages of its development or evolution. As the field visits extended up to October 2009, an attempt was made to know the perceptions of the various sections of the community about the VKC, its performance and the latest developments.

Since the primary objective of the study is to look into various issues involved in the process of establishment of the VKC in Akkaraipettai village and its evolution the attention was on gathering qualitative information from various stakeholders. In order to understand the process of the evolution and development of the VKC, conscious efforts were taken to meet and discuss with women and men of Akkaraipettai who played a key role in finding a place for the Centre and giving other necessary support crucial in the early days to the staff of TRC and MSSRF; the youth of Akkaraipettai who have shown great interest and commitment to the programme since early days to the present; Knowledge Workers of the VKC (except for two, we were able to talk to all the others, that is 10 persons) who rendered their services at various points of time to the community through the Centre and college/school students who have not only been users of the VKC and but also volunteered their services to the VRC/VKC programme right from the beginning. These persons from the village formed valuable sources of information. Special efforts have been taken to have detailed discussions with the MSSRF staff who were involved in this particular programme in its early days and most importantly the staff of Nagapattinam VRC. Interactions with the youth, Knowledge Workers, a few others in the village and the VRC staff have been very useful to get an overall understanding of the VKC programme at Akkaraipettai right from the beginning till the present day; these interactions throw light on various critical issues involved in the programme. These interactions proved useful to appreciate the potentials of the youth, the Knowledge Workers and the students and, most importantly, to understand how their involvement with the programme had cause them become committed to serve the community. An effort was made to meet the elected *Panchayat* president and few of the present and past traditional *Panchayat* members to know about their views and opinion about the VKC programme and the latest developments.

We have also attempted to talk to the persons present in the VKC during our field visits to the village, young school/college girls and boys, SHG women and fishermen who have participated in the training programmes conducted by the VRC and a few others who were present during the time of our interviews. It helped us to get their viewpoints about the usefulness and reach of the programme and the kind of socio-economic impact it had created on them and the other villagers. Besides interacting with the above persons a particular attempt has been made to interact with different sections of the society. This we did by going around the village whenever possible. We went around the village because we were curious to know of people's views on different aspects related to the VKC in the village. We picked up some conversation with whoever we came across and tried to probe and elicit information regarding the Centre. Primarily we had these interactions to assess the people's perception and impression about the VKC activities; we wished to know whether people are aware of the functioning of the VKC in their village. We were also keen to know the community's opinion about the closure of the VKC. We came across women chatting in a common place, men relaxing at home and young boys/girls going out to meet a friend, going to a nearby shop, returning from college/school and so on.

Major data were collected through twelve days of field work between the months of August and October, 2009, in addition to the information gathered during the initial two visits to Akkaraipettai during the later part of 2007. The necessary primary data were generated by the author through unstructured in-depth interviews and personal observation. Interviews were conducted in a very informal manner so as to make people feel comfortable during the interactions with the author. Monthly reports of the VRC and the VKC constituted an important source of secondary data to gain an overall understanding of the activities conducted and background for initiating certain activities and services to the community. Glancing through the User Register maintained at the Centre provided an idea of the kind of persons who used the services of the VKC, information sought by the women and men and also details of visitors and their comments on the functioning of the VKC.

The primary methodology used in the study were observation, unstructured in-depth interviews with subjects and case-study methods which provided the rich detail of the evolution of the VKC from its conception to its closure.

#### **4. EVOLUTION OF A VKC AT AKKARAIPETTAI**

The Village Knowledge Centre at Akkaraipettai was a sudden development. Both the funding agency and the implementers did not have even a slightest clue that they are going to take VRC/VKC programme to Nagapattinam district. The Tsunami was like a bombshell that stunned everyone. The havoc and the resultant social and economic distress have been such that the coastal people in the affected regions will not forget for years to come. Recognising the gravity of the situation many voluntary organisations, corporate institutions, individuals etc sprung into action to offer their services, aid and support to mitigate the sufferings of



the people in different ways through relief and rehabilitation programmes. In the same way, TRC of TATA Trust wanted to help the affected community; one such effort was setting up of Village Knowledge Centres in the worst-hit villages. So, the TRC with the help of the Nagapattinam District Administration identified Akkaraipettai and two more villages in the district for this purpose. The TRC as part of its corporate social responsibility in partnership with MSSRF took the initiative to set up a VKC in this village.

### **Establishment of VKC in a Private Rented House**

The TRC wanted to implement the project immediately; its objective was to set up a VKC at the earliest possible instance in the devastated village. The TRC in its urgency in implementing the VRC/VKC programme took the initiative and went ahead with the preliminary work of finding a place even before its partner-MSSRF could reach the area. When the TRC was thus searching for a location its staff came into contact with one Mr. Soundarapandiyam (a local fisherman) who offered his services for its housing project in the village as well as for the VKC programme. VRC/MSSRF staff and the volunteers speak highly of Soundarapandiyam for his support to the VRC/VKC programme. He volunteered his services to the TRC when most of the *Panchayat* members did not respond well. As he felt that TRC had come to the village with a good intention of helping the community, he believed that it was his duty to do his best to serve the people through the TRC. He spontaneously offered his services to TRC and later to MSSRF's activities. He helped fixing up a house owned by his cousin in which not only the VKC but also the offices of VRC and TRC functioned for nearly ten months. As Soundarapandiyam and his nephew, Senthil were involved in the work of TRC in the village, naturally, they were of the first few contacts MSSRF could get who spontaneously got involved in the VKC activities such as in mobilising people, identifying persons for computer training and later for microenterprise training for women. Soundarapandiyam told us that he was so impressed with the concept of the Knowledge Centre that he willingly gave his time and took effort for it to get recognition among the community. He was actively involved in all the activities of VKC until he resumed his fish trading. After that, he could not give much time both because of the nature of his work, which demands a lot of time, and also some misunderstanding with the village *Panchayat* ( as he mentioned).

When MSSRF decided to implement the VRC/VKC programme in Nagapattinam district, with TRC as the funding agency, the former took immediate steps to send a team from the head office to work on the basic requirements to set up a VKC. The team consisted of four persons of whom three were from the head office at Chennai and one was from Puducherry. The latter, Mr Arul Selvam had been associated with the VRC/VKC programme as a volunteer in Puducherry. The team contacted the TRC persons who showed them the house which was to become a VKC. There were no houses around the VKC building when the MSSRF staff went to install the computers and other auxiliaries. Arul Selvam pointed

out that they landed in the village when people were still gripped with fear and anxiety. There were rumours of Tsunami hitting the coastal belt once again. It is said that the houses were either fully or partially damaged by the Tsunami and that the people were housed in the temporary shelters which were situated nearly two km away from the VKC.

The VKC at Akkaraipettai was unique in several ways, and it stood out among the other VKCs. As mentioned earlier, setting up a VKC at Akkaraipettai was itself an unexpected act as far as Nagapattinam area was concerned. Under normal circumstances, first plans are made for establishing a hub centre, that is, a VRC, in a particular district; afterwards it is connected with VKCs set up in villages, with certain conditions put in. But the VRC at Nagapattinam was a later development. There was neither a MSSRF site office nor MSSRF office staff stationed at Nagapattinam. The Centre did not have any staff of its own in the initial stages; a volunteer from the other VRC took care of the Centre for the initial few months. The VRC also functioned from the same building. It took nearly ten months to find a suitable place to set up a VRC. The usual procedures adopted in setting up VKCs were not followed in this case. A set of procedures are adopted to study the feasibility prior to setting up such a Centre. Normally, setting up of a VKC is considered only when there is a demand or desire for one such Centre from the community. Since the VKC is essentially a community-based programme, it is important to have the community support and participation. Efforts are generally taken to carry out situation analysis to understand the local community through meetings and interactions with various sections of the population in a village. It is usually ensured that different sections of the villagers and interest groups are involved right from the beginning of planning and setting up of the VKC. Need assessment of the community, involving various tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and focus group discussion is conducted. Once the community's involvement is ensured, MSSRF enters into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the identified local partner, later came to be referred to as boundary partner (who could either be a traditional leader or an elected *Panchayat*, a NGO, youth group etc) and forms the village management committee of the VKC. Under normal circumstances, it is the local partner's responsibility to provide rent-free infrastructure with electricity supply; it is done to promote community ownership. A building common to all people, such as a school, *Panchayat* building, self-help group (SHG) building etc, is favoured by the implementing agency so as to ensure social inclusion. It is the responsibility of the community to identify local persons (commonly known as Knowledge Workers) to manage the day-to-day activities of the VKC. It may be pointed out here that the ICT-based infrastructure, connectivity and content necessary to serve the information/knowledge needs of the local community to improve their social and economic development are provided by the implementing agency—the MSSRF. Based on the community's needs, the respective VKCs in different localities plan programmes and activities, taking support and help from the community and networking with government/departments and NGOs, resource persons and departments so on. The circumstances were such that the procedures normally adopted

while setting up a VKC were never carried out at Akkaraipettai. When MSSRF approached the elected *Panchayat* President in this regard and explained to him about the concept of boundary partner and signing of MoU, he showed interest in the programme but advised the former to meet the traditional *Panchayat* as they are very strong and powerful at the village level. While the traditional *Panchayat* agreed to be the boundary partner, they were not ready to sign the MoU; they could not be convinced. Finally, MSSRF had to proceed with its activities with the informal arrangement of the traditional *Panchayat* as its boundary partner in Akkaraipettai.

The house identified by the TRC required lot of repair work. It had only four walls with a roof. There were neither doors nor windows. Flooring had to be done. The TRC entered into an agreement with the house owner that it will take the responsibility of flooring, fixing the door and windows. (As we have mentioned earlier, under normal circumstances, the responsibility to provide infrastructure such as rent-free common building with free electricity rests with the community; the village *Panchayat* or whoever is the boundary partner would take care of this.) The TRC's budget included the rent paid for the VKC building. It is said that TRC had a plan to allot space for the VKC in the TATA Community Hall which the former proposed to build for the Akkaraipettai fishing community besides its housing project. So, the VRC was under the impression that the VKC could be moved to the Community Hall once it was ready for occupation. But it was not as simple as they thought it to be. Setting up a VKC without any process and not having a permanent structure has had its repercussions, and these continued to exist throughout the five years of its presence in the village about which we will discuss in the course of this study.

The house fixed for the VKC did not have electricity facility. As Arul Selvam is basically an electrician he, with the assistance of others carried out wiring work, fixing extension box, switch board and other important electrical points. Since computers had to be installed and operated, the staff also installed earthing facility for necessary electricity supply. It took them nearly two weeks to complete the basic work of bringing into operation the VKC. While others from the Chennai office left after the preliminary work, Arul Selvam stayed back to take care of the VKC. But some one or the other from MSSRF kept visiting the village at frequent intervals of few days for the first five to six months, either in connection with the infrastructure work or to create awareness of the VKC activities among the community.

Thus the concept of the VKC came into practice in Akkaraipettai in a private rented house of a fisherman during February, 2005. But it was formally inaugurated on 2 March 2005 by the District Collector. Since then it has evolved/developed into a full fledged VKC undergoing several twists and turns in the process of its evolution. It has changed places and seen as many as twelve Knowledge Workers over the course of the four years of its functioning. Though the Centre had witnessed a turnover of Knowledge Workers, what is interesting is the way people stepped in and took over the responsibility from another person when he or she had to leave the Centre. There had been a fine set of dedicated young

women and men who had taken great interest to run the Centre with the effective support of MSSRF staff. Though the project was initiated during a period of uncertainty without any proper procedure it progressed facing many challenges and ups and downs. It has really been interesting and heartening to listen to various people (the villagers, Knowledge Workers, the staff) while trying to gather information about the process of development of the Centre and its activities.

The Centre set up when the situation had not come back to normalcy and people were still under the grip of fear and anxiety it proved very useful for the children of Akkaraipettai. The Centre attracted a large number of children who enjoyed playing games in the computers and still others to learn basic computer applications. Their schools remained closed for few months after the Tsunami. The VKC's presence would have helped the children psychologically. Children who have seen the Tsunami waves were traumatised and VKC perhaps acted as a Centre where children could play. Satish, who was ten years old when the disaster struck the village, said, 'Tsunami caused a lot of damage to our village and we were very horrified and depressed. The Knowledge Centre relieved us of our trauma and we felt peaceful and happy'.

Taking the VKC concept to the people was a great challenge to the MSSRF staff. But due to the untiring efforts of the staff, the youth and a few women and men of Akkaraipettai the VKC developed to such an extent that most of the villagers became aware of its existence and the kind of activities and services it renders to the people at large. They gradually began to participate in the training programmes, health camps and other activities. Arul Selvam was able to empathise with the Akkaraipettai people as he himself hails from a coastal village of Puducherry which also witnessed Nature's fury. In the course of a discussion he mentioned that he wondered why he had been given the responsibility of taking care of this VKC. Then he himself added, 'Perhaps because I, too, came from a fishing community, the head office at Chennai must have felt I would be a better choice in the initial period to interact and build up contacts with the people and understand their situation and gradually motivate them to participate in the VKC activities'. Arul Selvam mentioned that he was fortunate in receiving help from young women and men to work as volunteers in managing the Centre's activities.

### **Volunteers\*—A Spontaneous Gesture from Young Women and Men**

In the initial days and even after that VKC was fortunate to have efficient and enthusiastic volunteers to manage the Centre. They were volunteers in the true sense of the term because they worked with interest and commitment without taking a salary for their services. It was a voluntary service for nearly a year. After that, a nominal amount was paid as honorarium

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*\*The managers of the VKC were initially referred to as volunteers. Later they have come to be known as Knowledge Workers.*

to them for managing the Centre's activities. The volunteers later came to be called as Knowledge Workers. Almost all of them managed the Centre very efficiently and served their community with zeal and enthusiasm. Though the VKC witnessed the coming and going of many volunteers/Knowledge Workers, there has always been someone to fill up the gap immediately. Sometimes, a regular user of the Centre would occupy that position.

Identifying volunteers for the VKC was not a difficult task. Interestingly, in the beginning, casual visitors to the Centre and later users of the VKC turned into managers (volunteers). For instance, a young man, Mr Ramesh, 27 years old, who had come to the VKC as a casual visitor, out of curiosity when MSSRF staff were involved in getting the building ready with necessary initial ICT infrastructure for it to function as a VKC, became a volunteer and subsequently got greatly involved in the Centre's activities. Ms Satyavani, aged 26, wife of Soundarapandian, was inspired to take up voluntary work and wholeheartedly got involved in the Centre's activities. Satyavani along with her husband supported VKC programme from the beginning. The couple was able to grasp the concept and appreciate its usefulness to the community. She learnt basic lessons about the computers and served the Centre for nearly ten months. She was happy to say that she could teach these basic lessons on computers to others. Though Satyavani wished very much to continue to offer her services as a volunteer, she could not do so as she conceived her second child.

Till the formal inauguration of the VKC, Mr Ramesh and Ms Satyavani were almost like fulltime workers at the Centre. They were later joined by Ms Menaka, around 23 years of age, who had completed studying upto the twelfth standard and was at home. She had missed an opportunity to join a homeopathy course due to the postal delay in the post Tsunami time. Though some NGOs promised to help her continue her studies, no such thing materialised. She was disappointed. Though joining as a volunteer with the VKC was an unexpected eventuality, she says she cannot forget her life as a volunteer and it was a wonderful experience. Menaka who had come for the inauguration of the VKC like any other villager decided to become a volunteer when Arul Selvam suggested to her that she could help manage the Centre if she was willing. She did not hesitate; she at once agreed to help manage the Centre. She said she did not even think that she should consult her parents in this as her parents have a broad outlook; so, she was confident that they would not have any objections to it and would only encourage her. Menaka has already had some computer knowledge. Arul Selvam helped her to develop her computer skills further.

When Ramesh, Menaka and Satyavani were taking turns to manage the VKC, Ms Akila aged 23 years, a friend of Menaka, and now a M.Sc. Graduate, joined them as a volunteer. Inspired by Menaka, the latter joined as a volunteer when she was in her first year B.Sc and continued till she completed her course. She used to take tuition conducted at Suyam Charitable Trust (an NGO set up in the post-Tsunami period) for children and used to visit Menaka. Seeing her at work, Akila was also inspired to join and work at the VKC as a

volunteer; she had the support and encouragement of her father to serve as a volunteer. During her free time she wanted to help the VKC as she is fond of children. She says it was nice to be with the children. As she already had computer knowledge, it was easy for her to teach them. She said, 'I had to go to Thanjavur to do my post-graduation otherwise I would love to have continued to offer my services'.

Menaka left after serving the VKC for nearly eight months to resume her studies. It may be mentioned here that Menaka is, at present, doing her final year B.E computer science course. She says if she is able to do this it because of the motivation and the knowledge she got when she was a volunteer. Akila's friend, Ms Manju Bhargavi, 23 years old, who had joined computer classes after one month of the Centre's inception, also later worked as a volunteer when the former was still offering her services to the Centre. In the meantime, another young girl, Ms Punitha, 21-year-old, who had just completed the twelfth standard, came to the VKC to learn computers. She was encouraged by Menaka to join MUPP. Later she became a volunteer, but she could give her services only for three months as she had to go to college. But these three months proved very useful for Punitha who still values her association with the VKC. She used to visit the VKC after her college hours. She assisted the volunteers/Knowledge Workers to manage the children, to be an invigilator when MUPP tests were conducted at the Centre and so on. After completing the undergraduate course now she is teaching in a school where she finds her knowledge in computers very useful. The volunteers worked in proper coordination and cooperation. They took turns and divided responsibilities among them. For example in teaching computers, Ramesh taught the young boys; Menaka took care of college students and Satyavani taught the primary-school teachers and housewives.

It may be mentioned here that right from the beginning, Mr Arasan, a young boy, then studying in the eighth standard, has been very helpful to the volunteers and Knowledge Workers in managing the VKC until, years later, he joined an Engineering college in September 2009. Arasan did not have computer knowledge when the Centre was set up in his village but soon he became one of the master trainers to not only the young boys and girls but also to older women and the volunteers/Knowledge Workers. He has been a great source of inspiration for many students and youngsters to pursue studying computers. He was the topper in the twelfth final exams in Nagapattinam district. His family and others in the village give credit to VKC for his achievement. He received the appreciation of the former President of India, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam during his visit to Akkaraipettai VKC in the month of June, 2005. Arasan had developed a web page welcoming the President and ran it as flash news. The president was quite impressed with Arasan and congratulated him. Along with Arasan, the volunteers also received the support and assistance of other young students who were of great help in assisting the VKC activities, teaching computer courses to the newcomers, helping the CALP students, writing important information on the notice board and so on.

## **Developing Familiarity with the Community—How it Happened**

Implementation of any development activity involves effective participation of the community throughout. The staff were conscious of this. The situation was not very conducive to talk about the programme and develop acquaintances with the villagers. It was a time when there were as many as 40–45 NGOs involved in relief and rehabilitation work in the village. However, the staff used every opportunity to get acquainted with the community to build up and strengthen contacts so as to promote peoples' participation in the programme. It was interesting to know that the process of creating awareness about the VKC and its activities began from the first day that the MSSRF team reached the area. They took every opportunity that came their way to talk to people to get familiarised with the community and to create awareness about the VKC concept and its activities. When people came out of curiosity to watch the team installing the computers and carrying out wiring work, the MSSRF team used to develop conversation with the people which would often end up in explaining the Centre's activities. Thus, the process of creating awareness commenced with the explanation to the onlookers. It is important to mention here that one person who was in such an interaction and later became one of the volunteers was Mr Ramesh. He learnt basic lessons in computers; he used the Centre not only for his professional improvement but also worked hard, with interest and dedication, for the Centre's development. He encouraged children and adults to use the Centre and participate in the Centre's activities. He was a source of inspiration to his friends who subsequently along with the latter gave their wholehearted support to the staff of MSSRF in mobilising people and organising functions/meetings and so on. We may say that this youth group has been a major point of contact between the VRC and the community in general since early days of the VKC in Akkaraipettai.

## **TRC and the District Collector Helped**

As usual procedures were not adopted in Akkaraipettai prior to setting up of the VKC, the team did not have any acquaintances among the villagers. Since the TRC was involved with relief and rehabilitation work (For example, the TRC housing project in Akkaraipettai) in the village, it had developed reasonably good networks with the people. In order to develop familiarity with the villagers the MSSRF staff accompanied TRC persons wherever they went to meet people and conducted meetings concerning the housing project. The staff made use of such opportunities to talk and create awareness about VKC programme. During that time, the TRC took the lead in organising VRC/VKC related meetings/gatherings. The TRC staff used to speak in English and the MSSRF staff like Ms Velvizhi who was at that time the coordinator of VRC of Thangachimadam, in Ramanathapuram district, and Mr Rameswaran, from Chennai office, used to translate the talks into Tamil, the local language. For Rameswaran it was quite a new experience; for the first time he was talking to a group of people holding a microphone in his hand. He says it was a good experience for him, which later helped him in communicating with local people with confidence. It

may not be out of context to mention here that through the TRC, the MSSRF staff could gain easy access to the District Collector. The TRC's relief and rehabilitation coordinator in Nagapattinam was on good, communicative terms with the Collector of Nagapattinam who has been known for his efficiency, sincerity and commitment to his work. He was posted in Nagapattinam in the post-Tsunami period with additional charges. The TRC's networking with the District Collector helped the staff gain access to the latter. Within a few days of reaching the village, the VRC staff got an opportunity to meet the District Collector who was very friendly and encouraged the VKC concept. The District Collector gave his full support and encouragement as he had already been aware of the VRC/VKC activities of the MSSRF in Thiruvaiyaru, Thanjavur district. He instructed the local *Panchayat* and others in the village to invite the MSSRF for important village meetings so that the staff could explain about the VRC/VKC programme. He also sent many visitors to the Centre. Moreover, he spoke on VKC activities and issued a press release regarding this. It was very helpful for the staff to approach people and to widen their net work of contacts to an extent. Even today, the MSSRF staff fondly recollect the interest shown by the District Collector in the VKC programme.

### Mobilisation of the Community for the Formal Inauguration of the VKC

Though the VKC began to offer its services since February, 2005 it was formally inaugurated on 2 March 2005. The District Collector at the time, who has been a great supporter of the programme, was invited to inaugurate the VKC in Akkaraipettai. Since it was an important occasion, people had to be mobilised to participate in the function. The villagers

and the *Panchayat* members, traditional and the elected, had to be mobilised to attend and participate in the function. As the Centre had not yet developed any significant contacts with the community, the staff utilised the services of Mr Soundarapandiyan and Mr Senthil, two local persons, in mobilising the villagers and the *Panchayat* members, said one of the MSSRF staff. Velvizhi and Rameswaran were entrusted with the task of creating awareness about the VKC and mobilising the people for the formal inauguration of the VKC. Velvizhi was chosen to carry out this work primarily because she hails from Nagapattinam, and also she has had enough experience working among people in Rameswaram area in a similar project. Though her family, living in another village, had suffered heavy losses due to the



நாகை அக்கரைப்பேட்டையில் எம்.எஸ்.சுவாமிநாதன் ஆராய்ச்சி நிறுவனத்தின் மூலம் அமைக்கப்பட்டுள்ள ஊரக தகவல் மையத்தை கலெக்டர் ராதாகிருஷ்ணன் திறந்துவைத்த போது எடுத்த படம்.

**நாகை அக்கரைப்பேட்டையில்**

**ஊரக தகவல் மையம்**

**கலெக்டர் தொடங்கி வைத்தார்**

நாகப்பட்டினம், மார்ச் 4—  
நாகை அக்கரைப்பேட்டையில் அமைக்கப்பட்டுள்ள ஊரக தகவல் மையத்தை கலெக்டர் தொடங்கி

ஆராய்ச்சி நிறுவனத்தை சேர்ந்த ராமேஸ்வரன், ஏழுமலை அருட்செல்வம் ஆகியோர் கலந்து கொண்டனர்.

Inauguration of VKC by District Collector



natural calamity, just like many other coastal families in Nagapattinam district, she along with her colleague from Chennai undertook tremendous efforts to meet and mobilise the people. During our discussion with Velvizhi regarding the establishment of the VKC and mobilisation of the community, we learnt that in the absence of local contacts they used the existing forums like SHGs to gain entry into the community. In order to mobilise women, the staff made efforts to organise a meeting with SHG women prior to the formal inauguration of the VKC. The staff used this opportunity to apprise the members of the concept of the VKC and encouraged the women to attend the inauguration of the VKC. It was mentioned that the members appreciated the concept and some came for the inauguration.

### **Through Door-to-Door Visits**

As the VKC programme aims to benefit the community as a whole it was felt something should be done to create awareness about the programme apart from adopting the other methods mentioned above. After the inauguration of the VKC, Arul Selvam who was stationed at Akkaraipettai looking after the VRC/VKC programme during the early months thought of another strategy. He felt it would be better to meet people in their residences and explain them about the VKC concept and its activities. He used to take the students coming to the Centre to learn computers while visiting the houses. He went to the adjacent hamlet Keechang Kuppam also with the students. Ramesh and Menaka also sometimes accompanied Arul Selvam. With this approach, he tried to sensitise people about the VKC activities. As an outcome of this, 5-6 young women who had been educated up to the tenth or twelfth standard came to the Centre to learn computers; he says it was a pleasant surprise for him.

The process of building up a network of contacts, creating awareness and disseminating information about the VKC's activities began this way. Later, the staff with the help of the local youth gained entry into the community. Since then these contact networks have steadily been strengthened to reach more people in the village. It may be mentioned here that not only the youth but also the women later started taking active part in the Centre's activities, and many have been benefitted through the Centre.

### **Expectations of the Funding Agency**

Apart from its other difficulties, the VKC sometimes had tough time handling the TRC staff. This was mainly because they were not able to understand the difficulties and problems involved in the process of setting up a VKC. The TRC expected everything to happen the moment they gave instructions. The staff present there tried to explain to them it was not as easy as they thought it would be, but the officials could not be convinced easily. It was rather difficult to make them understand the process involved in it. It is said that TRC had a different perceptiveness altogether about the VRC and VKC concept. They probably looked at

it as more of commercial one. The TRC wanted to see immediate results. There was some administrative delay from the MSSRF Chennai's head office in sending the computers because of the procedures involved. The TRC wanted immediate net connection. Also, the person in charge of taking care of the VKC-related matters and coordinator of the relief and rehabilitation work of the TRC used to get angry when the fishermen came in their casual dress (as, for example, in lungis) and he felt they should come in trousers and shirts. Initially the people perceived the VKC as a computer centre so they used to refer it a computer centre. The TRC person would get upset about it and always would blame the staff of MSSRF for the fact that the community did not look upon the Centre as a Knowledge Centre. Also, he expected a large number of people to use the VKC. The relief and rehabilitation coordinator and others from TRC were not able to appreciate the difficulty involved in it. The hardship involved in getting the Internet connection and bringing people to the Centre had to be explained to them. They probably thought that once the VKC was set up people would automatically visit and use the Centre. They were upset because it did not happen that way. Arul Selvam often faced the wrath of those officials. 'I have to handle 6-7 persons from TRC. They were very authoritative in nature. They expected that no sooner than they said something it should be ready. Initially, it was a great and hard task for the staff to convince them. We have to explain to them several times like—"You cannot expect an instant result; we are not here for commercial purpose. The objective of the Centre is different and we cannot expect a quick result"'. He pointed out. '*Makkalai varavazhappadu enbadhu sadarana vishaya millai*'. Translated, this means, 'bringing people to the Centre was a challenging task, not easy'. Setting up of a VKC is different from other rehabilitation initiatives. It takes time; people need time to learn and assimilate. Some of the TRC members could not understand this aspect. However, the staff of MSSRF handled the TRC persons with great maturity and saw to it that they appreciated the problems involved in works like this. The TRC later gradually started understanding the whole process and the kind of work it involves in taking the concept of VKC to the people. The TRC which had in the beginning made complaints, later congratulated Arul Selvam and others for their untiring work in setting up the VKC and the manner they went about in creating awareness.

Arul Selvam was managing the Centre's activities single-handedly until another person, Mr Balakumar joined as a Project Associate of the Nagapattinam VRC during the second week of May, 2005. He was the first to be appointed as a MSSRF staff here. Arul Selvam said he felt relieved after Balakumar came to Nagapattinam VRC. Balakumar, who came to be called Bala, had played a significant role in developing this Centre. His friendly behaviour, commitment to work, positive attitude and perseverance inspired the youth and the Knowledge Workers. Many recalled the way he worked and motivated others in this endeavour. Bala and Arul Selvam worked together to mobilise and create awareness about the VKC among the community; and gradually, there was an improvement in the way things worked.

## Creation of Awareness and Mobilisation of the Community

Setting up a VKC involves several stages. Community involvement and participation are essential if the programme is to reach the intended audience. Developing the stamina to motivate the people who are involved in the process is really a challenging task. In fact, motivation is needed on both sides—on the part of the staff as well as the community. It requires a consistent effort to keep the motivation alive among the members of the community. Since it is a community-based project, it becomes very important to keep the motivational level high among the community.

After the inauguration of the VKC at Akkaraipettai there was a lot of work to be done which included creating awareness about the VKC among people; mobilising the *Panchayat* persons for their support in reaching out to the people with the activities of the VKC and finding a rentable building wherein to locate the VRC. Establishing a VKC seemed to involve hardly any effort, but later, getting people to understand its advantages and gaining local support in implementing its programmes required a great deal of commitment, fortitude, perseverance and the ability to change the strategy in tune with the local situations and people. We understand the kind of effort put in by the staff as we had the opportunity to meet and talk to various persons involved in this tremendous work. Their work is still much talked about by many youngsters and adults in the community.

When Balakumar joined MSSRF as the Project Associate of Nagapattinam VRC, he at once made it a priority to create awareness about the concept of the VKC, services/activities of the Centre and to the potential application of information among the people for their development. Since its inception, the VRC staff and the volunteers/Knowledge Workers of the VKC took sincere efforts to ensure the involvement and participation of all sections of the community like the children, youth, women and men to meet their needs. It may be mentioned here that awareness-creating programmes have been used also to assess community needs. In the early days of the VKC, when MSSRF staff tried to tell the community during their meetings about the activities of the VKC, people were least interested. At a time when people were shattered by calamities and were kept busy trying to get their relief assistance it was indeed difficult to approach people to take the concept of VKC among them. Most of them were interested to know what VKC will give them in the form of material aid, mentioned *Velvizhi*. When the purpose behind establishing the VKC was explained to them, the villagers apparently exclaimed, ‘our children are coming there!’ They felt saying this was sufficient. They probably thought that the programme was meant only for the children, and that there was nothing in it that adult could make use of.

On observing various organisations working in the villages, getting involved in various relief and rehabilitation-assistance programmes and activities, it was only natural that the people looked at the VKC as one such organisation. People were not receptive to the VKC programme. Arul Selvam justifies their attitude saying, ‘... the situation was like that. Their

mindset at the time was to receive some compensation in cash or kind. They scrutinised every organisation or department entering the village with respect to free distribution of something or the other for the household, assistance for shelter/boat or any form of material help. They could not relate to the idea of knowledge dissemination for their socio-economic development. Many gave us strange looks'. As one of the MSSRF staff pointed out, 'we do not know how far our message reached the people. Their priorities were something different because the situation was like that'.

Undeterred by the attitude of the community, Balakumar went ahead in creating awareness and mobilising the community to encourage them to participate in the VRC/VKC programme. He left no stone unturned. Along with the youth like Ramesh, Arul Mani, Shivaraj and the others, he met the SHG members, visited the playground where youngsters were playing cricket, spoke with the people who were playing cards and also went to the harbour. The staff spoke on the VRC/VKC programme whenever a meeting was organised in the village. Thus, whenever they got a chance, they pounced on the opportunity to explain their presence in the village. The women volunteers at the Centre also actively participated in the mobilisation programme, particularly, the women, to attend meetings and participate in the Centre's activities. Akila mentioned that since she had to go to college she used to cover the area near her house, while Menaka and Ramesh often accompanied by the VRC staff covered the other areas.

So, according to a staff member of the MSSRF, 'it took some time to make people appreciate the objective of VKC. It was a great and difficult task indeed. When others were distributing materials we were able to make the presence of VKC felt in the village by means of disseminating knowledge; it was be a great accomplishment'. He continued to say, 'Ours is a long project. We worked from a different angle. We had to go step by step to make the people understand the concept and its relevance to the population. We had to explain to them several times how we are different from others. We had to emphasise that we are here to give knowledge and it does not end after three-four months. Gradually people began to appreciate our objective. But it took a long time. It was indeed a Herculean task'.

The awareness programmes were conducted often among different sections, like the youth, women and men of the community whenever the staff got an opportunity to meet them. As we mentioned earlier, the staff used these programmes to assess the needs of the community. Because, like any other people-centric development programme, it is important to know the local context and information needs of the community so that the VKC can provide demand-driven services. Their persistent efforts in mobilising the people motivated some women to get trained in basic computer-application skills and some illiterate women to participate in the functional literacy programme. The SHG women gradually began to show interest and took active part in the microenterprise training programmes conducted in later days. They have also been helpful in mobilising the community whenever a programme

is conducted in the village by the VRC/VKC. The degree of participation of students and the youth has always been significant. Gradually, fishermen also started taking active part in the training programmes conducted for them based on the needs expressed by them on different occasions.

### **Mobilisation of the *Panchayat***

As VKC is community oriented, it is essential to have the support and encouragement of the local partner or the boundary partner and important persons in the community for the programme to sustain and be of use to the villagers. So, Balakumar and Arul Selvam decided to meet the village *Panchayat* and explain to them the objectives and activities of the Centre. The staff wanted to build up and strengthen the relationship with the traditional *Panchayat* (and also they are the local partners to the VKC programme) and as it is important because they are the local administrative body and also their support, cooperation and involvement is necessary for the successful functioning and reach of the VKC.

Balakumar was familiar with Nagapattinam area by virtue of his earlier work with another organisation. He was aware that the traditional *Panchayat* at Akkaraipettai was strong and it was important to bring them together to explain the concept and the activities of the VKC. But it was not as easy as he thought it would be. The *Panchayat* members were supervising the relief work—distribution of relief material to the villagers. ‘Mobilising the members was not an easy task,’ says Balakumar. It was a busy period because it was relief distribution time. There are about twenty four members in the traditional *Panchayat* and bringing them together was a difficult task. The staff attempted several times to organise a meeting with the *Panchayat* members. Whenever the staff approached the *Panchayat* regarding their wish to meet all the members, they would tell the former to come to the village main temple in the evening where all the members would assemble. Balakumar’s hope of meeting all the *Panchayat* members in one place at a time to describe the concept and activities of the VKC never materialised. He and Arul Selvam would wait for them to assemble at a common place, the village main temple, only to leave the place with disappointment. When Balakumar realised that bringing all the members in one particular place at a particular time would not work he decided to change his strategy. Balakumar along with Arul Selvam started to talk to the members when they were in a group of three to four persons. Then it stuck the staff to bring whoever, among the members, they were able get hold of to the VKC where the staff explained to them the concept and activities of the Centre. Like this they went around the village several times and contacted all the *Panchayat*



*Akkaraipettai Main temple-A meeting place for the villagers*

members. Bala narrates how they used to wait in the evenings with a hope of meeting the *Panchayat* members at the local temple, ‘Daily, Arul Selvam and I used to go to the temple to meet the *Panchayat* members with a great hope. After some time, looking at us one of those present would say, “Come tomorrow. Definitely you can meet all of them.” We continued to go with a hope of meeting them, only to return with disappointment. Realising it won’t work this way I decided to talk to the available members at the temple about the programme. Then it stuck me why can’t I take whoever is present at the temple to the VKC and show them? And I did that. We explained to them the services and the activities of the Centre. Similarly, whenever we saw a few of them engaged in a discussion we managed to talk to them and took them to the Centre. Our persistent efforts yielded results to a certain extent. They gradually began to understand our purpose of setting up a VKC as we frequently visited them and interacted with them’. He was happy to mention that it was a great experience for him. It helped him gain more clarity about the programme.

In spite of several efforts made by the MSSRF staff, the *Panchayat* though not indifferent showed little interest in the activities. They appreciated the programme but did not actively get involved in the activities. They would attend whenever there was any important occasion like inauguration of the VKC, during the visit of President of India, when Professor M. S. Swaminathan had visited the Centre during his visit to Nagapattinam as Chairman, National Commission on Farmers etc; but there was no perceptible involvement in the Centre’s activities. However, VRC has always been very particular to involve and consult the community on important and day-to-day decisions to ensure community ownership. For example, whenever a new Knowledge Worker was identified, the VRC would always inform the *Panchayat* to get their concurrence.

### **Expansion of VRC and VKC Programme—Exploring Potential Locations for the VKCs in and around Nagapattinam District**

While efforts were going on to improve the VKC and make headway in Akkaraipettai, the MSSRF staff started to look for suitable villages to setup new VKCs in Nagapattinam and adjoining areas as part of programme expansion. The possibilities of setting up VKC in some places were explored based on the inputs/suggestions provided by the experts/consultants and the District Collector. For instance, Prathaparama Puram a predominantly agricultural village was suggested by one of the advisors to the VRC at Thiruvaiyaru. So, the agenda at that time was strengthening of VKC at Akkaraipettai, to meet people at Prathaparama Puram to set up a VKC, and finding a building for the hub Centre. In Prathaparama Puram, the elected *Panchayat* plays a major role in the affairs of the village. Unlike in Akkaraipettai, the usual procedure adopted before the setting up of a VKC was carried out in Prathaparama Puram. The VRC meticulously followed the procedures in this village. With the elected *Panchayat* as the boundary partner, in June, 2005, a VKC was set up in that village with financial assistance from Rotary Club of Coimbatore.

The District Collector who evinced interest in the VRC/VKC programme suggested some places for setting up VKCs. It is mentioned that nearly 80 percent of the places recommended or suggested by him came under Town *Panchayat* and in few cases (for instance like Kodiakarai) distance was a problem. So the concept of VKC could not be implemented in those areas. 'The attempt to set up a VKC in Tharangambadi did not materialise as the Church Priest was not supportive; similarly our attempt at Poompuhar did not receive any support from the *Panchayat* President', said Balakumar. But nothing seemed to have deterred the efforts of the staff in identifying more places to put into practice the concept of a VKC. They continued their search for suitable places through various sources and on their own. They explored the possibilities in villages like Chinnankudi, a fishing village and Agalankan, an agricultural village in Kraikal district of Puducherry Union Territory. The latter was identified from the list provided by SLNSS (Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swami Seva) Trust. MSSRF's agenda was to set up VKCs in Tsunami-affected areas, but it was decided to set up one in Agalankan a non-Tsunami-affected village. The presence of a strong and highly motivated Youth Group in that village prompted MSSRF to set up a VKC at Agalankan as a model VKC; 'Though the Tsunami-affected area was our agenda, we decided to take it (Agalankan) as a model', pointed out Balakumar. Thus Agalankan was brought under the VRC of Nagapattinam on 13 August 2006. The efforts at Chinnankudi also materialised where a VKC came into existence on 9 October 2006. But, it did not come through at Thoduvai which was suggested by the District Collector during November 2006 where the response from the *Panchayat* was not encouraging. During the initial visit the staff could not meet any *Panchayat* member; during the following visit they could meet one person from the *Panchayat* who promised that he would organise a meeting with all the *Panchayat* members. On that particular day, the staff of MSSRF explained the programme using a video and PowerPoint presentation. The members present looked interested and said they would respond later. As they did not respond even after visiting the village four times, the idea of setting up a VKC was finally dropped. But, setting up a VKC at Poompuhar was in the agenda of MSSRF and it was not an easy task as it seemed to be. But VRC continued its efforts and what really seemed impossible became possible when a VKC came into existence on 22 February 2008 after persistent effort on behalf of the MSSRF staff.

During the process of creating awareness on the concept of the VKC in the above villages, the staff had difficulty in explaining to the people; so it was felt that instead of routine method of talking to people something should be done to create a positive impact on the people; if the villagers had to get clarity oral explanation would not yield the desired impact and it could be better achieved through the visual presentations. So they decided to show the functioning of Puducherry VRC/VKC by playing recorded CDs with the help of a Laptop. Valam (a local database) web site was also shown to them. To start with they tried this with the villages like Chinnankudi, Agalankan and it proved to be very effective in taking the concept among the people. In order to demonstrate the various activities and

services of the VRC/VKC they showed the Valam web site, collection of CDs and so on. In order to gather people, farmers' meetings and later SHG meetings were conducted.

Balakumar and few others from MSSRF were also given the responsibility of mobilising the Delta farmers in connection with the visit of National Commission on Farmers headed by Professor M. S. Swaminathan during June 21–22, 2005. Since Balakumar was familiar with the area, he with the help of other MSSRF staff from Thiruvaiyaru VRC could develop contacts with the farmers going as far as Vedaranyam. When Professor M. S. Swaminathan visited Prathaparama Puram, the farmers expressed that they did not get any clear strategy for soil reclamation. It was realised that there was no comprehensive package for land reclamation. In order to address farmers' grievances, Professor Swaminathan suggested a travelling workshop which was held from July 16–19 2005 involving about ten famous national and international research institutes. After assessing the affected soil in different areas along the coast, certain recommendations were made for reclamation activity. It was made mandatory to share those recommendations with the farmers of those villages where the researchers discussed. Hence a meeting was arranged on 2 and 3 September 2005 at Pushpavanam and Vellapallam villages to discuss the recommendations with the concerned farmers. While helping in identifying farmers for the Agronomy Rehabilitation Programme carried out by the Eco Technology Programme of the MSSRF, efforts were made to set up a VKC in one of the villages namely Vellapallam under the Pan MSSRF concept; but this did not work out for want of a suitable place. According to the Project Associate of Nagapattinam VRC at the time, it was a very good experience going around the disaster affected villages which in one way or the other helped them in the later days of their work.



*Professor M S Swaminathan interacting with villagers*

*Professor M S Swaminathan in the VKC*

During the visit of National Commission on Farmers to the Tsunami affected villages Professor M S Swaminathan made a visit to Akkaraipettai VKC. He was happy to see the enthusiasm of the volunteers in rendering their services to the village people and congratulated them. He interacted with the children and women SHG members and village *Panchayat* president and others present in the VKC. During our interaction with SHG women one of the SHG Federations leader said that the village felt honoured when Professor M S



Swaminathan visited their village and spoke to them freely. His visit had a great impact on the volunteers and the youth who were inspired to work more for the community.

### **Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's Visit to Akkaraipettai VKC**

Setting up of the VKC at Prathaparama Puram on June 22 2005 was followed by an important event in Akkaraipettai—the visit of former President of India, Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, which meant a lot of hectic activity for the staff of MSSRF and the volunteers of the Centre. He visited the Centre on 30 June 2005. Within the short period of five days they had to make arrangement for the President's visit. Balakumar explained how people from different departments used to visit in batches and give list of instructions to be carried out such as changing the wiring, cutting of a branch of a tree, painting the board and so on. Apart from government officials some



*Young Arasan showing a webpage display to Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam*

very important persons (VIPs) used to come to see the arrangements. 'Many visitors came and we had to deal with them and explain the activities of the Centre and that is how I got fully oriented towards the programme and in the process I got clarity about the work', stated Balakumar. It was encouraging to learn that the staff took everything in a positive sense; they viewed everything as a process of learning. We were told that Menaka, a young brilliant volunteer during that time managed the visitors very efficiently.

### **Finding a Building for VRC and its Inauguration**

Along with the various activities, search for a suitable building for VRC had been going on. It was mentioned that finding a building with certain specifications like having an open



*Village Resource Centre premises at Nagapattinam*

terrace was difficult. When the staff could not identify one to suit the VRC requirements, they sought brokers' assistance. Balakumar says that in this exercise he nearly contacted sixteen to seventeen brokers. Finally, they could fix a suitable building in June 2005 after the inauguration of Prathaparama Puram VKC. It may be mentioned here that VRC was set up in Nagapattinam only after two VKCs (Akkaraipettai and Prathaparama Puram) were established. Until 25 September 2005, for all practical

purposes Akkaraipettai VKC also functioned as the Office of the VRC. The full-fledged VRC (with all necessary connectivity and ICT infrastructure) came into operation only in December 2005. However, it was officially inaugurated only in January 2006 by Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam through video conferencing facility.

### **Strengthening VKC at Akkaraipettai**

After the inauguration of Prathaparama Puram VKC and fixing a building for the VRC, the staff concentrated on strengthening the VKC programme in Akkaraipettai by mobilising people through the process of meeting SHG members, youth and students. With the help of the youth the VRC staff along with the volunteers approached one SHG Federation and explained to them the VKC activities. Then, with the help of students who were already using the VKC, meetings were held with other students to encourage them to participate in MUPP. As a result of these meetings, many young girls and boys had enrolled their names for the course and some of them got their certificates on completion of the course. In the midst of several activities, Balakumar and Arul Selvam visited the Collector's Office and various block-level departments to discuss with concerned officials and collect data on existing government schemes, training programmes and their extension methodologies and other basic local specific details to develop local database. Information related to Tsunami, health, sanitation, school dropouts etc was also collected. The staff contacted important research institutions and banks. The staff have been in regular contact with the above-mentioned offices/institutions and also take efforts to build new contacts so as to improve and strengthen the VRC/VKC programme. It is said that the staff were often accompanied by the youth of Akkaraipettai like Ramesh and his friend Shivaraj while visiting various government departments/offices

By July 2005, the local specific data base namely *Valam* was developed for the benefit of the local community. It generally includes information on various aspects such as weather (precipitation, wave height, temperature and sunshine), water (supply augmentation, demand curtailment and monitoring and improvement of quality), health (HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria, etc.), agriculture (crop husbandry, horticulture, animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry and agro-processing), markets (domestic and export), government schemes and entitlements, local news, daily news, traditional knowledge information, employment news, community-based disaster management modules, internet radio, quality food literacy, bird study, education, recipes, video conference reports, flash news, village reports, energy and biodiversity and ecosystem management and other important details specific to the locality.

Nearly after four months of his stay at Nagapattinam, Arul Selvam left the place with a sense of fulfillment. As we have already mentioned, Arul Selvam was a volunteer from a VKC in Puducherry. Being a part of the team and having been involved in the process of setting up a VKC and managing the Centre for the first few months has had tremendous influence

on his personality development and skill improvement. The experience he gained helped him a lot when he was entrusted with a similar work in Nagar Kovil area another Tsunami-affected district of Tamil Nadu. Earlier, he was not aware of the mobilisation process; he was able to understand the process of social mobilisation. He had opportunity to learn about conducting PRA, need assessment and so on. 'In fact', he says, 'I started to interact freely with people only here. I was basically an introvert. This exposure changed my personality completely. I am a confident person now. I can handle any situation now. This exposure provided an opportunity to understand the VKC concept from top to bottom'. According to Arul Selvam, it was good experience going around the village and meeting people to create awareness of the programme. He was surprised at his own ability to carry out a lot of work individually. He admitted he did not even know what was mobilisation. Now he says he has gained the confidence and the skill to organise and conduct a programme. His self-esteem has been enhanced. He says he feels very good when he looks back on his experiences in Akkaraipettai. Though he had basic knowledge of computers, teaching others at Akkaraipettai VKC motivated him to get a good foundation in MS Office. His experience at Akkaraipettai had a positive impact on his personality. He says, '*VKC ennai valarthu vittadhu*' (meaning the Centre at Akkaraipettai helped improve his personality.)

### **VRC/VKC and other NGOs in Akkaraipettai**

We have already mentioned that there were many NGOs operating in Akkaraipettai in the post-Tsunami period. There was not much of a contact or association with any of them except Suyam Charitable Trust (SCT), a social voluntary organisation which has its head office in Chennai. It played a major role in the post-Tsunami period in organising and mobilising people to get various assistance provided by different NGOs and government. SCT is basically an activity centre focusing on children (particularly those children who lost their parents when Tsunami struck the village) and their education; it caters to school children studying from first to twelfth standard and tries to bring out their potentials. It runs a free tuition centre also. The activity centre provided counselling and learning support to children studying in this school and who were orphaned during the Tsunami onslaught. There were about 110 such children (10 lost both parents, 56 lost their mother and 44 their father) in the school. The SCT and VKC have been helpful to each other from the beginning. As SCT did not have a computer in the initial days it used the facility available at the VKC. Volunteers at the VKC and SCT were friends with similar interests. So, it was easy to cooperate and help each other. Arul Mani, Jayam and other youth from Akkaraipettai who were volunteers of SCT were impressed by the VKC programme and extended support whenever possible. On its part, VKC encouraged the Suyam volunteers to learn to operate and work on computers. Arul Mani and Jayam learnt to operate computers. Jayam, who lost her husband in the Tsunami and is presently one of the employees of SCT, finds her training in handling computers useful in her work at the SCT. According to Arul Mani VKC was helpful in getting the reports of Suyam Trust typed and get printouts

and to send email to the head office at Chennai. Also, the volunteers of VKC helped the SCT by sharing the educational CDs and installing software when the latter got its own computers. The VKC extended its help and support when SCT organised a summer camp for school dropouts. The local volunteers of Suyam Trust used to go along with MSSRF staff to meet the community and create awareness about the VRC/VKC programme. It may be mentioned here that STC which came in the post Tsunami period still continues to serve the students of this village.

The *MA. VE. SI. Manram*, a welfare club run by the local youngsters has also been very supportive to VRC/VKC programme. (It is located in South Street of Akkaraipettai). Some of its members take active role in VKC-related activities. They encourage the community to make use of the facilities available in the Centre. There has been good relationship between the two organisations which is seen at the community level activities also.

Some organisations like NGO Coordination and Resource Centre (NCRC), Nagapattinam and Red Cross found VKC useful for their work in the village. They contacted VKC to get Tsunami-related data about the village and other related information. We had an opportunity to interact with the Area Coordinator of the Red Cross who applauded the services of the VKC to Akkaraipettai fishing community. However, it is learnt that one or two NGOs working in the village were not in favour of MSSRF having any contact with the SHGs formed by the former. The staff mentioned that they found it difficult to handle such sensitive issues.

## **VKC in the Private Rented House: Services and Activities in the Initial Stages**

The villagers in general were under the impression that the VKC was a computer centre set up by the TATAs. So, in the initial days it was referred to as the TATA Centre. Persons like Kalai Selvi who is a National Virtual Academy (NVA) Fellow\* mentioned that she too thought it was a computer centre. Later she came to understand that it was a Centre where not only skill development in computers is given but also knowledge/information is disseminated for the villagers' socio-economic improvement. It is also a place where one can access information useful for their socio-economic betterment. Some, particularly women, hesitated to go because the Centre was always filled with students from schools and colleges. A few of them said that they did not feel like disturbing the children when they

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*\* National Virtual Academy for Food Security and Rural Prosperity also endeavours to identify socially committed grassroots experts in different thematic areas such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, health, education, disaster management, natural resource management etc. and have contributed to the good of the community in their respective field through various institutions and experts and awarding the NVA Fellowship. This Fellowship does not carry any monetary benefits. This is only a social recognition. NVA fellows are provided additional skills so they contribute even more to the society. These grassroots academicians would be torch bearers of the knowledge revolution and could be developed into managers of Knowledge Centres.*

see the latter working or playing on the computers with great enthusiasm. We came to know during our visit to the village that some middle-aged women and men wished to visit the Centre and even learn to work on computers but they were too inhibited to try, either owing to their age or lack of school education. However some women and men had come to the VKC to get addresses and phone numbers of government departments and also get details of subsidy schemes for fishermen. Conducting awareness creation programmes and training programmes helped to improve contacts with SHG members and other women and men.

The VKC was initially equipped with four computers, a printer and a telephone. It had Internet facility also. According to Ms Velvizhi, the site coordinator of Nagapattinam VRC there was no specific programme when the VKC was started in Akkaraipettai. The primary idea was to provide data pertaining to the weather, fish locations, local market conditions and auction updates. Wave height and weather details were downloaded and mikes were rented out to announce the same. This was done as a model demonstration. Adult literacy classes were also conducted. Also information was provided on various schemes related to relief and rehabilitation work. Also, registrations for the houses constructed by the TRC were also done at the Centre. One of the common traditional modes of communication, the notice board, was used to disseminate information. Daily newspapers were also made available in the Centre for the benefit of the community to become aware of the day-to-day affairs of the country. The Centre had a telephone. The practice of maintaining a user register has been there since the early times, mentioned Menaka, a volunteer of the VKC.

It took some time to develop and distribute *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, a local newsletter on a fortnightly basis. It has been a widely recognised newsletter, which plays a significant role in dissemination of local specific information on various aspects such as occupation, education, health, employment opportunity and other interesting and useful general information for the community. Also, a Public Address System (PAS) has been installed only after one-and-half years of VKC establishment in the village. Arul Selvam mentioned that there was no local database for nearly six months. Local web pages were later developed to provide database in fishing, agriculture, education, health and other local specific information after a project associate was posted for Nagapattinam VRC during May, 2005.

### **Skill Development in Basic Computer Applications**

The VKC encouraged the community to learn to use computers and develop their skill in using the computer application to better their lives. Training in basic computer applications drew youngsters and children. A majority of children and also adults particularly women had not seen the computer before. Many looked at the computer with awe. For them seeing the computer and working on a computer was like a dream. Persons like Punitha, Ramesh, Arul Mani and others said that they never ever thought that they would have an opportunity to learn computers. Adult women and men also joined computer classes and benefitted. School teachers came to learn to work computers.

The boys and girls who we met mentioned that to start with, the children were introduced to the computer through Paint so that one can get control over the mouse, followed gradually by an introduction to Windows. 'Later, a training for basic skill development was given like Word, Excel and in report writing', mentioned Arul Selvam. Since it was summer vacation, students from middle, secondary and higher secondary schools evinced interest in learning computers. It was common to hear from people whether young or middle-aged that the Centre always used to be filled with children. Raju, now doing his second year of B.C.A in college mentioned that they used to go the Centre much before the opening time and would wait for the volunteers to open it. Menaka said it was difficult to manage the children, and time was allotted for them so that everyone would get a chance to work on the computer. Though it was a quite difficult job to handle them it was also good to be with them and teach them; the children were quite fast in grasping, added Menaka.



*VKC in its first location in a private house*

### **Computer Aided Learning Programme (CALP)**

With the help of Azim Premji Foundation the CALP programme was launched and it was one of the earliest services provided by the VKC. This programme aims to harness the potential of computer technology for education and to make learning a play, assessment, a fun and equal opportunity for all students. It attracted a large number of children who could learn to use the computer through painting, playing games and watching educational CDs. The multimedia-based educational content CDs (story-based, animated cartoons, interactive games and riddles) provided by Azim Premji Foundation as part of CALP has had tremendous impact on the children. In the initial months, the curriculum part of the programme was not given any attention. The children were allowed to watch them in a casual manner. 'It was a positive and helpful diversion for fear-struck and psychologically affected children', mentioned several village youngsters. The children could forget and enjoy playing the CDs (The CDs covered different topics like the importance of conservation of energy, English vocabulary, investing in small business, exploring the flora and fauna of the different regions of India, learning about the decimals, explaining the external and internal organs of human body, etc.) Schools in Akkaraipettai area were closed for a long time as families were dislocated and stayed in the relief camps. Though the curriculum part was not stressed, the CDs directly or indirectly played a significant role among the young minds, both boys and girls, in the sense of creating interest in school lessons and making them wish to do well in their exams. It brought out their hidden potential. It created interest to improve and strengthen their computer skills.

## **Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP)**

It is curriculum-based educational programme training for the participants, both in theory and practical computer applications. It may be useful to mention briefly about this programme here; the objective of the programme is to provide opportunity for improving lifelong learning of underserved young and adult persons by giving training in technology skills. It is hoped that through this programme, people across all age-groups and social backgrounds can learn computer skills. It gives an opportunity for the course participants to develop their skills in communication, in gaining access to educational services and becoming skillfully employed. An important feature of this course is teaching technology skills in a hands-on manner that emphasises on real-life applications of technology. The course includes a wide range of applications such as basic computer skills, information literacy, digital photography, web page design and desktop productivity software. At the end of the course, an exam was conducted for the participants. Those who passed the examination were given a certificate. We came to know during our interaction that this certificate serves as an additional qualification when they apply for a job.

The participants were grateful to the Centre for providing such an opportunity to build up their computer knowledge and skills. It may be mentioned here that the earliest batch of the volunteers of the VKC became the first participants of this computer programme. The training was conducted in Chennai during April and May 2005 and the exam for the first set of MUPP students was held at Chennai office.

## **Internet Facility**

VKC had Internet facility since its inception. It helped and encouraged many to create e-mail IDs, access different websites and download required material. It was helpful for some to know the status of passport, educational and employment opportunities. Few students created webpages which was appreciated by the visitors. Many were motivated to go to browsing centres to surfing the Internet, sending and receiving e-mails, download information for their studies etc.

## **Adult Literacy Programme (ALP)**

After almost four months of its inception the VKC at Akkaraipettai in association with TATA Consultancy Service (TCS) initiated a useful programme—the Adult Literacy Programme. It was initiated during a time when women were relatively free as fishing had not been resumed until then. Balakumar and a person from TCS went around the village to encourage dropouts and adults to join in the adult literacy programme. Mobilising women for this programme required major effort from the volunteers and staff of the VRC. Akila, Menaka and Ramesh the then volunteers of the VKC took interest in this programme; encouraged the villagers, particularly, women to participate in this programme. They conducted this programme in the village using the laptop. Later, the participants were

encouraged to come to the Centre and CDs were used as learning aids. Though there was hesitation initially, some women joined the programme later and learnt to read and write in Tamil. Akila said that she used to go from door to door to mobilise women to participate in the programme. Her aunt was supportive and accompanied her to meet the women in their respective houses. Teaching through the CDs had great impact on them as it was visual. As women were too shy to attend the classes when students were in the VKC, a time was chosen in such a way that it was suitable for women to participate without any difficulty and hesitation. They started the programme by teaching the women the alphabet and followed it with words. When they learnt to read and write newspapers were given to practice reading. The participants were enthusiastic and learnt the lessons with interest. 'It gave a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment', said the instructors Menaka and Akila. Most of the participants were also enthusiastic to learn the lessons and were keen to complete the lessons, said Menaka. The volunteers were pleased when the women stated that the programme was useful and expressed their happiness about becoming literates. Akila says, 'I enjoyed teaching them through the CDs; the women also enjoyed. It gave me a lot of satisfaction and happiness to teach women who were like my elder sisters and aunts'.

### **Orientation and Training to Volunteers/Knowledge Workers**

As a usual practice of the VRC/VKC programme orientation was provided to the newly identified Knowledge Workers of Akkaraipettai in order to make them understand the VKC concept. During the initial programme conducted for five days from 14 June to 18 June 2005 the volunteers were given a background to the evolution of the Information Villages Programme, its historical growth, objectives and the VKC activities. Followed by the orientation, the Knowledge Workers were trained in computer basics and accessing the systems for their information needs. The Knowledge Workers are periodically given training on the management of the VKC. For the newcomers it serves as an orientation and for the others it serves as refresher training. Sometimes these training programmes (normally referred to as capacity building training) are conducted in a common place



*Capacity building training for Knowledge Workers*

(which is usually one of the field sites of MSSRF) for Knowledge Workers from the VKCs of different VRCs. And, sometimes the capacity building training programmes are organised just for VKCs of one particular VRC. Normally, the capacity building training coordinator from MSSRF Chennai office acts as a resource person. These training programmes help the Knowledge Workers to gain clarity regarding their role and responsibilities, to handle users, mobilise the community for various VKC



programmes and so on. This also provides opportunity for the Knowledge Workers to share their experiences and thus learn from each other. The Knowledge Workers were also given training on hardware part of the computers during October, 2005.

## **Community Need Assessment**

In order to initiate activities a need assessment was done among the community some time during September 2005. The need assessment programmes are usually conducted to assist and encourage the community to define its own information and training needs to develop their socio-economic conditions. During the first need assessment programme organised by the MSSRF many women and men participated. Some fishermen pointed out about their lack of awareness on government schemes for fishermen, Tsunami related government/nongovernmental organisations' announcements and schemes, bank loans and subsidy details etc. But it was obvious from a majority of persons' expression that they were least interested to know about the VKC's services and activities. It was not this kind of need assessment they anticipated. Balakumar mentioned that the people must have come anticipating some financial or material help. So, some people's reaction was, 'Won't you give anything else? Training is given by everybody!' In other words, this was not what they expected. The people initially did not show much interest in the VKC programme. Looking at this, it was felt by the staff that it won't work out this way. They changed strategy. In stead of the staff arranging for meeting of the villagers to explain the VKC's activities they took advantage whenever village meetings were conducted in the village to explain about the VKC programme. When there were several NGOs working in the area, it was quite a difficult task for the VKC to take its programme to the people. It was quite natural for the community to drawn towards material benefits. Though the community was not in a position to appreciate the longterm benefits of the functioning of a Knowledge Centre in the village, the VKC went ahead with conducting awareness programmes/need assessment of the community wherever possible. Gradually, the fishermen and women began to appreciate the VKC programme and articulate their needs.

## **Opening Programme-Awareness on Child Care**

Apart from programme awareness and need assessment carried out by the VKC, the first ever programme conducted in Akkaraipettai was awareness programme on childcare. The need for this was expressed by women during their one of the interactions with VRC/VKC persons. So, the VRC arranged for a programme on childcare during the third week of October 2005. A social worker from Karaikal Government Hospital was invited to be a resource person. Twenty-five women participated in this first programme which was conducted for two hours. According to Manju, one of the volunteers at that time, women were quite shy to participate but later they were encouraged and interact freely with the resource persons. Various aspects of reproductive health and childcare (on prenatal,

neonatal care and vaccinations to the newborn) were covered during this programme. The participants had questions regarding bed wet of children above 11 years old and whether eating papaya lead to abortion. This programme also turned out to be a need assessment programme where the women participants expressed a need for training in stuffed-doll making and other handicrafts items to earn income for the household. The VRC arranged for a demonstration cum training on making handicrafts in the following month. This initial programme in a way helped to penetrate into the community particularly women.

Since its inception, VKC continued to have a stream of visitors from different walks of life like people from government departments, civil society organisations, and spiritual organisations and so on mentioned, Menaka one of the volunteers. She was happy to say that they all congratulated the volunteers and highly commended the work carried out by the VKC to the community. They (the visitors) all pointed out that it was an effective and useful programme for the villagers. Their comments and appreciation motivated the volunteers to work with more enthusiasm, mentioned Menaka. She said with her limited knowledge in English, she used to explain to the visitors about the Centre's activities. She mentioned, 'if you see the visitor's note book you will find the compliments given by the visitors'.

## **5. RELOCATION OF VKC FROM THE RENTED HOUSE TO A PORTION OF SASTRA BUILDING**

While the staff of MSSRF was trying their best to mobilise people and implement the VKC programme, they had to encounter a new problem—finding a new place for the Centre. As we have mentioned earlier the VKC at Akkaraipettai was set up in a private rented house. The Centre functioned in the private house for nearly ten months without any hassle. The houseowner's son namely Senthil also extended his support to the VKC programme. But for some reason when the house owner said he needed the house for his use the TRC



*Front view of VKC in Sastra building*

told the MSSRF staff to look for a new place. 'How would be able find a suitable place? Who would help us in this regard?' wondered the staff. They had reasons to feel like that! The TATA Community Hall was still under construction. We have seen earlier that the TRC had planned to provide necessary space for VKC in the community hall. The TRC recommended shifting of the Centre to the Model House situated near the Nagapattinam Railway station, which was about two kilometres away from the village. However, this was also only a temporary

arrangement for a period of three months after which the Centre would have to be shifted to Community Rain Shelter situated at Akkaraipettai, very close to the private house where the VKC functioned. The VRC staff felt that shifting the Centre to the Model House would not serve the purpose as it was far away from the reach of the community of Akkaraipettai and also it was only for three months. As the Centre needed to be shifted again after three months, it was thought that continuity might be affected. More over, the volunteers of the VKC (who were mostly young girls) too were not in favour of Model house because of its distance from the village.

A common place accessible to all the villagers had to be found for which cooperation and support of the *Panchayat* was necessary. But the VRC's experience in mobilising and involving the *Panchayat* members in the VKC programme was not very encouraging. Left with no option, the staff approached both the traditional and elected *Panchayat* leaders and also the *Panchayat* Union Chairman in this regard. He suggested four–five places like private buildings that could be rented and few on the public land were shown to the staff but none of them found suitable. With the persistent efforts of the VRC, a temporary shelter built (in the post Tsunami period) by Sastra Deemed University on the Village Public land and handed over to the Village *Panchayat* for common usage was allotted. Since the Government Primary School was conducting classes in that temporary shelter the staff had to wait for some time till the Primary School was shifted to the newly built building for the school, construction of which was nearing completion. By 13 October, 2005 they got a place; however they had to wait for another week for getting the approval from TRC control room. All along the VRC kept the TRC staff informed who were locally looking after the site in Nagapattinam. Finally, with the approval of the TRC control room the Centre was shifted to the new venue on 18 October 2005. The staff stated that it took almost more than two weeks to fix a place for the Centre. This temporary shelter is commonly referred to as Sastra building.

It may be mentioned here that during May 2006 one more person namely Mugil Nilavan was appointed as a project associate to the VRC who has been committed to his work and does his best for the success of the programme. During the following month Velvizhi who had been with the Thangachimadam VRC was posted as a coordinator of Nagapattinam VRC during July 2006. We have seen that Velvizhi used to visit Nagapattinam VRC and Akkaraipettai VKC often even before she was posted here because of her experience in handling Thangachimadam VRC. Her marine biology background combined with her commitment, clarity in thinking has been a great asset to the VRC/VKC programmes not only in Thangachimadam and Nagapattinam but to all the coastal MSSRF VRCs/VKCs. Her job responsibilities have been increased after she has been posted at Nagapattinam but she sees to it that all the Centres get the necessary attention and support from the VRC. The staff in general are committed to the VKC programme and work enthusiastically to reach more people.

## **Traditional *Panchayat* as Boundary Partner**

The concept of boundary partner assumes great importance in setting up of VKCs in the rural areas. They have a vital role to play not only in establishing a VKC but also its proper functioning and overall management. The question of boundary partner did not assume much significance as long as the Centre functioned in the private house. The maintenance of the building and the electricity bill were taken care of by the TRC. As it has been pointed out earlier the TRC did not approach the *Panchayat* or any other NGOs to be the boundary partner, whose responsibility is to arrange for a rent-free building with free electricity, identifying the volunteers to work as Knowledge Workers and so on. The necessity to have a boundary partner emerged when a new place had to be identified to house the VKC. Finding a common rent free place where people can have access was important. So the need came to meet the *Panchayat* to seek their help. As we have pointed out earlier, the Centre at Akkaraipettai was an exception where no procedure was adopted because of the unexpected catastrophe and the resultant grim situation; and also TRC which took a lead role in the initial days was not familiar with the procedure. It might not have been possible to adopt the procedure during such a tense period. Setting up a VKC itself was a great effort and was launched with the support of few local people and the District Collector.

There was no involvement or participation of the local *Panchayat* until the VKC functioned in the private house. It became essential to encourage the traditional *Panchayat* to be the local partner/boundary partner in a more formal sense when the VKC had to be shifted to another building. This was when the question of paying the electricity charges arose. The situation was gradually returning to normalcy and the VRC felt that the traditional *Panchayat* members should be involved as boundary partner of MSSRF. Several meetings were convened and the concept of the VKC and its activities were explained in detail to the members of the *Panchayat* and other important village elders. While the traditional *Panchayat* appreciated the effort and the initiative of setting up a VKC, they expressed their inability to pay the rent. The VRC tried to convince the *Panchayat* that it should be community contribution but it was of no use. The VRC could not convince, force or pressurise the *Panchayat*; the VRC was left with no other alternative except to meet the electricity and maintenance charges for another year. That is, until the VKC was shifted to the TATA Community Hall built by the TRC as part of its relief and rehabilitation work.

Despite the *Panchayat* members' attitude towards the programme the VRC had always taken considerable efforts to consult and involve them in the day-to-day activities of the VKC to ensure community ownership. Because the VRC has always been aware of the fact that community ownership is very important for the sustainability of the programme. VRC would always make it a point to keep in touch with all the twenty-four members whenever a new activity is initiated and explain to them how they are planning to do it and seek their support and involvement in that. Handling the twenty-four members is very difficult and by the time VRC could achieve some rapport with them a new set of persons would replace

them. We have mentioned earlier that the tenure of the traditional *Panchayat* is just one year. Every year, the *Panchayat* is reconstituted with a new set of persons which means the entire process of explaining about the VRC/VKC concept, process of setting up and so on have to be repeated and make them understand. Divisions within the *Panchayat* are yet another aspect which obstructs the support of the entire *Panchayat*. But to the relief of the staff of the VRC and the Knowledge Workers there have always been few *Panchayat* members who appreciate the kind of work the VKC was doing for the community.

### **A Slight Change in the Attitude of the *Panchayat***

While narrating about the initial mobilisation process and strategies adopted, Balakumar was glad to point out that as the days passed by he could see a slight change in the attitude of the *Panchayat*. The *Panchayat* president appreciated the activities of the VKC and he extended his services and help, wherever and whenever possible. He came forward to identify and select fishermen to participate in Geographical Positioning System (GPS) training; when eye camps were conducted in the village he raised funds to provide spectacles for eight persons. And, he also promised to meet the transport expenses of persons if they had to go to Chennai for eye treatment. On a few occasions, when VRC staff requested him to announce some of the activities of the VKC like when eye camp was conducted in the village, the President complied by arranging an auto with a mike set to disseminate the same among the villagers. The VRC always tried its best to keep the *Panchayat* informed about each and every new activity or any changes brought in the activities. The VRC tried to get them involved in the entire process of any new initiative. For instance, prior to introducing Fisher Friend Mobile Application (FFMA) in Akkaraipettai the *Panchayat* was informed about the purpose of such an initiative and sought their help in identifying suitable fishermen to use the mobile phones in rotation basis and also entrusted the responsibility of distributing the instrument to the selected fishermen.

### **Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Notification and the Problems Faced by the VRC/VKC**

As it has already been mentioned that many NGOs were there and apart from Suyam Charitable Trust and a local welfare club, the VKC has not had any interaction with other NGOs in Akkaraipettai. Each was focusing on its own objective. None of the NGOs normally looked at the other NGO as a competitor. We learnt that they had planned their work for a shorter duration and left the village after some time. Most of them probably did not have long-term plans for the village. One after the other left the village on completing their relief and rehabilitation work.

Towards the end of 2006, the VKC in Akkaraipettai suddenly found itself facing a new problem from unexpected quarters—from one of the NGOs which has been working in the village even before the Tsunami and has established a reasonably good rapport with

the fishing community by forming SHGs. This organisation also had a special project to create awareness to fishermen, mostly measures related to livelihood security. The problem started when the Government of India proposed to issue a draft of the draft Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Notification 2006 based on The Coastal Zone Management Committee Report headed by Professor M. S. Swaminathan. It was generally perceived as being positioned against fishermen and a threat to their livelihoods. It was considered as a move to replace the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification of 1991. The NGO, like many others, believed that it was likely to facilitate greater commercialisation of the coastal zone and the CMZs would make coastal communities vulnerable and extinct. It created a lot of fear and apprehension among the *Panchayat* and members of the community. The VRC was confronted with a large number of queries from people. The NGO and also the fishing community were not able to differentiate between the activities of the MSSRF and the Coastal Zone Management Committee for which Professor M. S. Swaminathan was the Chairperson. The VRC staff had difficulty in making people understand that the proposed draft Notification of CZM 2006–07 was totally unconnected with the activities of MSSRF.

The concerned NGO tried to mobilise fishermen and create a negative mindset (that MSSRF is not sympathetic to fishermen) among the *Panchayat* and SHG members about MSSRF. Though some members of the *Panchayat* are aware that the MSSRF does not believe in jeopardising the livelihood and welfare of the fishing community, they could not voice it openly because that particular NGO has been working among the coastal fishing population for some years and has done a significant amount of work. The VRC staff convened a meeting of *Panchayat* members and explained to them in detail about the CZM Notification and the MSSRF activities. In order to remove the misgivings about the CZM, the VRC after discussing with the Head Office at Chennai took efforts to translate the whole document and a special edition of *Namma Ooru Seidhi* (the local newsletter brought out by the VRC) on the Notification was widely circulated. It is important to mention here that the VRC not only had to confront Akkaraipettai people, it also had to deal with other fishing villages where the MSSRF had set up VKCs. The VRC staff took great efforts and much patience to explain the details of the Notification and cleared the misgivings about the same. Fortunately, some SHG members (not belonging to that NGO), the youth and some others from Akkaraipettai were able to understand that there was no basis in the NGO's allegation against MSSRF. The SHG women, the Knowledge Workers and the youth made use of every opportunity to explain the meaning of the CZM Notification during casual interactions with relatives and friends, during SHG meetings and so on. The Knowledge Workers, young women from SHGs, and the youth mentioned that one of the major hurdles for the VKC for not getting the support it deserved from the *Panchayat* could also be due to the propaganda carried out by the above organisation which endeavoured to convince the community that MSSRF is anti-fishermen trying to deprive the fishermen of their sea-based livelihood.

## **Knowledge Workers in the New Venue**

Akila and Manju were volunteers when the VKC was shifted from the private house to the Sastra building. The first batch of the volunteers Ramesh, Satyavani, Menaka and Akila did not get cash remuneration for their services. After moving into the new venue, it was decided to pay the volunteers a nominal amount as honorarium. Akila was the first one to receive it. She got it for three months, then left to pursue her M. Sc. course. When Akila left for higher studies, another young woman by name Sundaravalli filled up that vacancy and in the place of Manju one Bhavya, 24 years of age stepped into that position. After Sundaravalli left, Roopa aged 20 years joined the Centre as a Knowledge Worker and Nitya, 22 years old came in to take Bhavya's place. Roopa and Nitya found their job interesting and carried out their task with great dedication. These two young girls as the other volunteers/Knowledge Workers had the support from the youth like Ramesh, Shivaraj, Arul Mani and Jeevanandam. They were great source of inspiration for the Knowledge Workers.

## **Knowledge Workers' Initiatives**

After the Centre was shifted to Sasthra Building, the Knowledge Workers, encouraged and guided by the VRC staff, paid great attention to improve the functioning of the VKC. In the initial months, the volunteers at the VKC were quite lenient with the children because of the situation that prevailed at the time. Their interest and concern was to draw more people to the VKC. Gradually, after the Centre was shifted to the present venue, the Knowledge Workers enforced rules and regulations in a friendly manner like signing the user register, leaving the slippers in order, politely insisting that school-going children use the VKC only after school hours and so on. The Knowledge Workers were happy to mention that the users cooperated with them. They were also pleased to say that the Centre came to be widely known as Arivu Maiyam, which is Tamil for Knowledge Centre. We had the opportunity on more than one occasion to visit the Centre and talk to the Knowledge Workers during that time. It was encouraging to learn from the latter how the community in general was gradually able to look at the VKC in a better perspective than before. During our interaction, one of the Knowledge Workers who was present pointed out, 'Previously many used to refer to the VKC as TATA Centre. Now by and large it is known as Arivu Maiyam (Knowledge Centre) among the community. There is a significant positive change in the attitude of the villagers about the Centre than the earlier times when the village had witnessed the presence and hectic activities of many voluntary organisations, NGOs, government machineries etc. People, both women and men, have slowly come to realise that it (the VKC) is not working in the village with short term objective like other relief and rehabilitation organisations and it has a different purpose. Now the people have clarity about the Centre's services and activities'.

Knowledge Workers did not look at their work as a pass time. They showed interest in developing the Centre. They understood the vision behind the programme, and they were

also inspired by the VRC staff to take the benefits of the Centre to more and more people. The Knowledge Workers realised that they have a major role to play in drawing more people to make use of the services offered by the Centre. Realising their responsibility and driven by their commitment to the community they took certain initiatives in this direction. To start with, on their own accompanied by no VRC staff they met the SHG members during their regular meetings and SHG Federation meetings.

One of the Knowledge Workers recalls how they used to meet the SHG members to motivate them to participate in the VKC activities. The women members were told how the Centre could be utilised for their development and also of their children. The women members understood the concept of the VKC and its importance to the society. The SHG members showed interest in the Centre's activities; they participated in training programmes, took advantage of awareness programmes on AIDS and eye camps. Interestingly, some of the SHG members helped in mobilising the people for some of the VKC's programmes. They encouraged other women and children, particularly girls, to participate in the VKC's activities. Knowledge Workers mentioned that they were happy to learn that the members shared the knowledge/information they gained through their participation in the VKC's activities. This came out clearly when we went around the village to interact with people to get an idea about the impact of the VKC on the community.

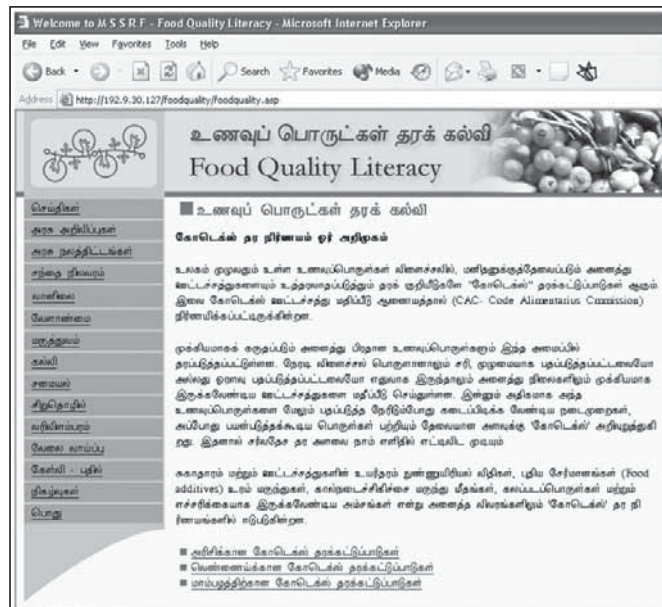
It was heartening to know from the VRC staff that the Knowledge Workers at Akkaraipettai became role models to their fellow workers working in other VKCs. During the regular monthly meetings held at VRC, the Knowledge Workers shared their experiences and work done at their respective villages through the VKC. When the Akkaraipettai Knowledge Workers shared their initiatives to promote the number of users coming to the Centre and utilise the services, others were inspired to emulate similar strategy in their villages also. VRC also encouraged the other Knowledge Workers to adopt the approach employed by their Akkaraipettai friends.

### **Services and Activities of the VKC in the Sastra Building**

The services provided by the Centre in its previous venue like MUPP and CALP were continued. These programmes are much favoured and liked by the youngsters and well received and encouraged by the elders too. The VKC continued to be a source of inspiration and attraction to the children and the students. We had an opportunity to visit the Centre then. We could see that children were not using the computers just to paint, we saw some college students working on their project and practicing their computer lessons. They were referring to their class notes from their note books. However, some students who moved into permanent houses in TATA Nagar could not come frequently and spend much time in the VKC. It was little far from the Centre. Traditional communication tools like the notice board were used and local Newspapers continued to be provided for the benefit of the community. The community also had access to various types of information through local



database namely Valam. Wave map and weather information were down loaded/accessed and disseminated through notice board. After the installation of PAS, it has become an important mode of dissemination of information such as government schemes, health tips, educational/ employment opportunities, weather forecasts and so on. People had



Local webpage-Valam

access to telephone and Internet services. These services proved very useful to them and were well appreciated by the young and old alike. Other than the services mentioned above, the VRC organised many training programmes on the latest fishing technologies to fishermen and microenterprises for women, which has had great impact on their lives, in particular, of the fishermen. We will be discussing this later, briefly. Eye camps were organised more than three times in different locations within the Akkaraipettai Village Panchayat.

One of the Knowledge Workers said that they had women and men coming to the Centre to enquire and get application forms, to get details about government schemes, GPS training, and to know market rates of vegetables etc. Some showed interest to learn computer fundamentals, came to take printouts and so on. The Internet facility was helpful to fishermen to get to know passport details and its issue status, create personal e-mail IDs and to browse the net.

## MUPP and CALP

Students continued to come for MUPP and CALP classes. MUPP exams were conducted for the first batch in this new venue. In the second batch, more than fifty persons participated in the course. Jeevanandam from the same village who developed his computer skills from the VKC became the technical staff of the VRC. While he taught the theory class, the Knowledge Workers handled the practical classes. School students



MUPP certificate distribution

like Arasan and Raju also helped the VKC in conducting the MUPP course and in assisting the others to develop their computer skills. In order to enable school and college students, the MUPP classes were conducted from 6.00 PM to 7.00 PM. Meetings were organised for students, the youth and SHG members to promote participation in the above-mentioned programmes. Details of the programme were also disseminated through notice board and *Namma Ooru Seidhi*. The VKC took great efforts to mobilise women to participate in the MUPP programme. We were told that nearly fifty women gave their names to participate in the programme but later only a few joined. This was mainly because many households shifted their residences to TATA Nagar.

Nitya mentioned that initially the CALP was conducted more as a game than as a learning tool or as curriculum (*padathittam*) based programme. Only after six months, this programme was taken seriously as a *padathittam*. It was also observed that some children



CALP students

showed interest in playing a specific CD as they found a particular game or treasure interesting rather than playing a CD dealing with working of a fan or a television or CDs explaining about human anatomy; however, this practice had been stopped after the Knowledge Workers and project staff's intervention. Tools for evaluating the children developed with the same strategy as developed by Azim Premji Foundation. As in the previous location, children from government and private schools and also school dropouts utilised this programme.

## Adult Literacy Programme

The ALP classes continued to be undertaken in the new premises also, but participation of women declined after the Centre was shifted from the private house as the new venue was little away from the main village. So, for two-to-three months the ALP classes could not be conducted. When these were resumed, the Knowledge Workers took earnest efforts to mobilise women for the programme.

The hard work done by the Knowledge Workers, particularly Nitya was well appreciated not only by the women who benefitted from this programme but also by the earlier set of volunteers. The ALP classes attracted women because of the encouragement given by the Knowledge Workers like Bhavya, Roopa and Nitya. The participants recall how these young women used to personally meet the women in their respective houses to talk to them about the importance of learning to read and write. The Knowledge Workers also took the help of SHG members to mobilise women. As in the previous location, here also a specific

time was allotted especially for them as they expressed their hesitation to go to the Centre when others were present. Ten women joined the programme and attended the classes for a month. They were able complete lessons to an extent. The women found this programme useful, and they were excited about their performance. This had a great impact on them. Gradually they learnt to read and write. Initially, they did not know to write or read. Earlier they had to depend on their children. However, participation of women in this programme declined as they resumed their fish marketing; it demanded their time and labour. Earlier they were at home. Moreover many residents moved to their newly built houses in TATA Nagar. One of the Knowledge Workers mentioned that nearly one-half of the village shifted to TATA Nagar.

### **Introduction of Intel Learn Programme**

Apart from CALP and MUPP, one more curriculum-based computer education programme, the Intel Learn Programme, was introduced to the school students of Akkaraipettai after the Centre moved to the second building. This programme helps students develop skills such as digital literacy, problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration. The Knowledge Workers mentioned that school students participated in this programme with great enthusiasm.

### **Launching of *Namma Ooru Seidhi***

The VRC, in its efforts to enhance and strengthen information empowerment, launched a powerful information/knowledge dissemination tool—a bi-monthly newsletter in Tamil, called *Namma Ooru Seidhi* (which translates into News from Our Village) in June 2006. It is an effective conventional medium and supplements the work of the VKC through its outreach. It has been well received by the community. It is a very important knowledge-based infrastructure which gained wider popularity. The local newspaper is made available only at the Centre, whereas this newsletter is distributed to the entire community free of



*Namma Ooru Seidhi* readers' meet

cost. This newsletter appeals to all people irrespective of age and sex because it contains information specific to their locality and covers a wider range of topics like occupation, traditional health, government schemes/programmes, cookery tips, education and employment opportunity and so on. It has short stories for children, puzzles and national/international news.

After few months of the launch of the newsletter, the VRC conducted a readers' feedback meeting (*vasagar vattam*) from

various sections to improve or modify the content or other related aspects. Many, including women and youth, participated in the meeting and gave their inputs. One of the suggestions was that paper should have information that can be learnt through pictorial depiction, which will enable them in grasping and retaining it better. There were also suggestions for adding specific content in the newsletter, such as technologies related to fishing, educational opportunities, marketing facilities for SHG products which could be learnt through training camps organised by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). The readers suggested publishing school students' essays, poems and general knowledge contribution in the newsletter. It may be mentioned that the project staff took care to incorporate most of the feedback/inputs that came up during *vasagar vattam* meeting.

### **Awareness Programme and Need Assessment**

We have seen earlier that creating awareness among the villagers about the programme has always been believed to be very crucial by the VRC/VKC to motivate the village women and men to make use of the Centres' services to improve their socio-economic conditions. So, after shifting the Centre to the new venue, VRC through the VKC, conducted awareness programmes for the general benefit of the community. Bhavya, the then Knowledge Worker mentioned that in order to encourage women to participate and use the services available in the Centre, SHG women were met and enlightened about the activities of the Centre. They were told how they can make use of the Centre for their social and economic improvement, and then this session was always followed by interaction between the women and the VRC/VKC persons. An overall picture about the objective of the VKC was presented to them. In the same way *Panchayat* members and other men were kept in touch by the VRC/VKC to promote their participation and involvement. Bhavya says that as a result of these efforts, gradually, people came to know of the activities and its relevance to the community's development.



*Velvizi and Knowledge Workers interacting with SHG women*

It may be mentioned here that as one of the strategies to encourage and increase number of users, programme awareness meetings are held in different locations at different periods of time within the same village. Similarly, awareness programmes are held focusing or targeting a particular section of the society like youth or SHG members. In the meeting, various services offered by the Centre are briefed. During one such meeting (focusing a particular place within the village), held in Thideerkuppam around April 2007, various products prepared by the SHG women trained through the VKC were displayed with the

intention of inspiring other women to utilise the services of VKC and participate more in the VKC activities

It is important to point out here that awareness-creating programmes also provide opportunity to assess community needs. Need assessment is a continuous process. Apart from specific need-assessment programmes being conducted, the community's needs are also assessed in various ways like during a training programme, one-to-one interaction, in a SHG group meeting and so on. According to Velvizhi, in order to reach out to more people, it is essential to know their needs. As it is difficult to conduct need-assessment programmes every now and then, whenever the VRC gets an opportunity to meet people in groups it uses the occasion to talk to people and elicit their needs (like during awareness creation programmes, while giving a particular training and so on). She pointed out that while addressing one need another need arises from the participants of a programme. For example when the VKC was shifted from the private house to the new premises, the VRC and VKC attended a SHG Federation meeting to use the opportunity to explain about the VRC and VKC activities. It led to a discussion with members who expressed that they would like to get training in preparing value-added fish products. Immediately the VRC arranged for a training programme for preparing fish/prawn pickle. Similarly, while talking to a different set of SHGs about the VRC/VKC programme the women members expressed their wish to learn to make handicraft, and while giving training in producing handicraft they expressed their need to get training in preparation of phenyl, soap water and washing powder. Similarly, during the above-mentioned awareness-creation programmes, focusing on a specific location and targeting a specific section of the community the participants placed some of their needs before the VRC such as PAS, INCOIS digital board and training programmes for fisherwomen and men to improve their economic conditions. It is mentioned that the needs are generally prioritized, and accordingly, initiatives are taken to address the needs of the community. Based on the nature of the requirement efforts are taken to address them through various means such as through a training programme, awareness programme, health camps, video conferencing etc. Some of the needs are addressed through creating linkages with government and non-governmental institutions, educational institutions and so on. For certain programmes, the VRC uses the expertise of MSSRF staff to be the resource persons. Otherwise VRC makes necessary arrangements for external experts to act as resource persons. If the VRC is unable to address the need of an individual or the community, it provides necessary guidance and directs them depending on the need. The following few pages will give us an idea as to how the VRC took efforts to address the needs of the community.

## **Public Address System**

The community's need for the Public Address System was placed before the Programme Director at Chennai. The need for such a facility was well received in view of its usefulness



*Public address system*

of communication and by staying at home they get information on government welfare schemes/subsidies, health tips, sanitation, employment opportunity, education and more importantly the weather forecast. As only two loud speakers are installed, the community feels two more could be provided so as to reach people living in different directions of the village.

After three months of installing the PAS facility, a feedback programme was conducted so as to know people's views about the content and clarity. It proved to be useful because it was found that content on agriculture and veterinary were not of much use to the fishermen



*Bhavya downloading weather information*

to the community at large. The process to install the facility was taken shortly and by 18 October 2006 PAS was installed in two main places in the village one at Cyclone Centre in Thideerkuppam and another at Fishermen Society. During the course of our interaction with different sections of the community many expressed their satisfaction and gratitude to the VKC for providing such a facility to the community.

Many mentioned that it is an important mode of information related to their occupation. The community felt that content, or information, of certain types, such as health tips, employment and education opportunities, weather forecast etc should be continued as they are useful in their day-to-day life. Based on the inputs from the villagers, the VKC focused on giving information relevant to the people at Akkaraipettai.

## **Marine-based Alternative Livelihood for Fishermen**

During the need assessment and interactions with the fishermen it came out that apart from becoming aware of government- as well as NGO-sponsored schemes, the fishermen showed keen interest to learn about alternative livelihood options; it was because the fishermen were anxious about decline in fish catch and also increase in the fuel price. Soon, the fishermen got an opportunity to interact with experts from Aqua Culture Forum and Fisheries department during the formal inauguration of the VRC. We have mentioned earlier that VRC at Nagapattinam was formally inaugurated by the President of India at the time through video conferencing facility on 5 January 2006. Mr Sakthivel



*Consultations on Alternative Livelihood Programme*

(Former Director, Marine Products Export Development Authority) from Aqua Culture Forum participated in the inauguration of the VRC. During the interaction with him and others, the fishermen from Akkaraipettai asked about alternative livelihood options. After the interaction with the experts, the fishermen requested for a face-to-face interaction with the former. So, the VRC arranged for a marine-based alternative livelihood consultation meeting specific to the local conditions during 21–22 February

2006 in the village. This meeting was also arranged with the objective of making people aware of various alternative livelihood options and to recommend a suitable programme. Mr Sakthivel from Aqua Culture Forum who participated in the inauguration of the VRC was the resource person in the consultation. Mr Iraniappan, expert in mud crab culture, and Mr Shanmugam, an expert in seaweed culture, from Pepsi Co. were also resource persons. The VRC felt that it would be helpful to go for a study than providing any training on alternative livelihoods. The VRC felt it should confine itself to conducting or organising marine-based training programme only by taking into account the locally available resources, feasibility and sustainability.

As part of the consultative meeting on alternative livelihood options, a survey was undertaken along the coast from Nagapattinam to Muthupet where the experts held meetings at different places and interacted with the local fishermen. Dr Sakthivel talked on seaweed culture. However, he pointed out that seaweeds are not viable in rough seas, and stated that he would explore the literature for some other methods that could make this viable even in rough seas. He also spoke about the places where seaweeds are grown on experimental basis; and based on the results it could be replicated. Mr Iraniappan elaborated on the scope for mud crab culture in Akkaraipettai. He mentioned two types of mud crab culture—Soft shell crab culture and Mud crab poly culture (milk fish, seaweed, mud crab in an integrated form) viable in Akkaraipettai. It may be mentioned here that Akkaraipettai had all the requirements for crab culture such as permanent intrusion of sea water into the river, waste lands (unutilised land) closer to the river and feed (trash fish, squids, etc.). During the interaction with the



*Consultations on Alternative Livelihood Programme –field survey*

fishermen who make their living catching crabs in the river, it was found that the mud crab is found in large numbers and hence the survival is not at all a problem. Marketing is also not a problem, since this has a vast export opportunity and can be sold for Rs300.00 per kg. During the expert group's visit to the port, it was found that almost 15–20 tonnes of trash fish are available on day-to-day basis at Nagapattinam port. Hence lack of feed is not a problem either. Also, it was learnt that large areas of wasteland are available. But, as the land belongs to government the community should get permission to get it on lease or rent. However, it was left to the *Panchayat* to negotiate with the government. It was obvious that the *Panchayat* did not make the necessary effort in this regard. When some of the fishermen still had doubts about viability of crab fattening, a video conferencing was arranged. Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture (CIBA) also provided resource material needed on crab fattening. This alternative livelihood consultation helped fishermen get an awareness and understanding about various livelihood options and their feasibility. This consultative meeting with fishermen of Akkaraipettai provided an opportunity for the staff to expand their contacts.

### **Session on Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA\*) and Related Subsidy Schemes**

The consultative meeting held at Akkaraipettai though did not prove useful for Akkaraipettai fishermen due to the reasons mentioned above, this meeting paved the way for furthering interactions between the VRC/VKC and the villagers. A significant and useful outcome of this meeting has been people getting to know about MPEDA and its activities; this is the best thing that could have happened for the fishing community, stated the staff and people like Shivaraj and Arul Mani.

Reflections from the need assessment study and interactions with the fishermen of Akkaraipettai particularly during the consultative meeting on alternative livelihood options revealed that most of them were unaware of the schemes provided by MPEDA. The fishermen were also unaware of the latest technological advancement in their field. It may be pointed out here that during the visit of the consultative group to



*Awareness programme on MPEDA-VRC staff introduces resource persons*

*\*Marine Products Export Development Authority, an autonomous government of India body under the Ministry of Commerce, is mainly involved in export promotion of marine products. In order to augment production they involve themselves in developing the production from sea. Besides they also work in the areas of processing and marketing aspects. As a part of their promotion they have introduced several schemes for equipping the fishing vessels for the fishermen with subsidy.*





*Awareness programme on MPEDA to fishermen of Nagapattinam*

the harbour near Akkaraipettai, Dr Sakhivel observing the fish species available remarked that some of the species which had great export opportunity were being sold at throwaway prices. The interaction with Dr Sakhivel helped the VRC know that a meeting with MPEDA would help to address the above aspects. The VRC without delay took steps to do the needful in this regard. Velvizhi who was then the project associate of the VRC at Thangachimadam was

very helpful in getting the details of MPEDA through her contacts with the Fisheries Department at Thuthukudi. Acting on Velvizhi's inputs, the VRC wrote a letter to MPEDA during September 2006 requesting their help in this and MPEDA also responded positively. For some reason, the meeting with MPEDA kept getting postponed. Finally the meeting was organised by the VRC in collaboration with MPEDA for two days—28 February upto 1 March 2007. Pricol Enterprises Limited, an electronic goods manufacturer who was at Nagapattinam at the time to launch GPS, Fish Finder and Radio Telephone was invited to join the programme and demonstrate the operation of GPS and other equipments. Initially, it was thought that the meeting could be conducted in Akkaraipettai village itself but it was decided to hold it in a hotel to enable four other non-VKC fishing villages to participate in the meeting. There were 130 participants. The first day of the meeting provided an opportunity for the participants to learn about various MPEDA subsidy schemes (for Fish Finder, Radio Telephone, Insulated/refrigerated fish hold, modifying existing fishing vessels for tuna long lining) and more importantly, the fishermen came to know that registration of a boat is a prerequisite to avail MPEDA schemes; they were not aware of this earlier. It was mentioned that though there were more than 300 trawler boats operating at that time only a few were registered with MPEDA.

After the introduction on the schemes, Pricol Enterprises Limited explained about the basic usage of GPS and fish finder equipments, and carried out a demonstration of the functioning of the equipments. On the same evening, on board demonstration of GPS application in deep sea fishing and functioning of fish finder equipment was conducted for the benefit of the fishermen. On the following day, the fishermen were taken to the sea for hands-on training on hygienic handling of fish products which was conducted in association with MPEDA.



*On board training in hygienic handling of marine products by MPEDA*

## **Hands-on Training about Hygienic Handling of Fish Products**

The training on hygienic handling of fish products was very useful for fishermen because it helped them improve the fish quality and thereby increase their income. About 26 fishermen who venture into deep sea were organised into two groups and went in two boats. The groups had separate resource persons. It may be mentioned here that Ms Velvizhi was one of the resource persons for the training on hygienic handling

of fish while Inspector of Fisheries from the Department of Fisheries of Nagapattinam was another resource person. Instructions and training were given to the fishermen on the proper method of storing the catch so that it remains fresh for much longer time. Alongside, it was explained to the fishermen how to operate GPS while fishing in the sea. MSSRF used this meeting as a base to reach out to more people from other areas also. This on-board training proved to be very useful for the fishermen in Akkaraipettai and other villages. They understood the importance of personal cleanliness, hygienic cleaning of the vessel and fish nets after every fish catch and storage mechanism and so on. The training has thus helped the participants give careful attention to the processing and preservation of the fish products.



*On board training*

It may be mentioned here that few fishermen at Akkaraipettai had the devices of fish finder and GPS before Tsunami but was not efficient in handling them. After the training they have come to know more about the GPS functioning and handling the device. Moreover, they came to know that registration of the boat was a prerequisite to availing any loan facility from MPEDA. As an outcome of the meeting around 42 participants registered their boats with MPEDA. Registration of the boat is a lengthy process—getting the application, boat verification by PRECOL, getting a Marine Chartered Engineer certificate, giving an undertaking and so on. The VRC was involved in the entire process and helped the fishermen get their boat registered. It was mentioned that later on some fishermen bought equipments like Fish Finder and GPS using the MPEDA subsidy scheme. Participation

of the boat owners in the GPS training provided an opportunity to draw them closer to the activities of the VKC. The meeting thus had the desired results.

It was mentioned that the participants are using the knowledge they gained through the hands-on training on hygienic handling of fish to a greater extent. While talking about on-board hands-on training, Velvizhi was happy to mention that fishermen find this training useful to them now. It was interesting to hear from her that a few participants of the hands-on training programme had mentioned to her recently (March 2010) that they realise the importance of the training now, particularly, in the case of Tuna fish. Earlier, the fishermen were not aware of the right process of preservation and the techniques. It is encouraging to know that the fishermen apply the knowledge they gained through the training. By adopting the right process techniques, the quality of the fish the fisher men are getting a much better market rate. It may be mentioned here that this fish which was sold at Rs20–25 per kilo is now being sold at the rate of Rs80–100 because of the quality improvement of the product.

The need to know more about the latest fishing technologies emerged in almost all the need assessments conducted among the community at various points of time. In one of the awareness-creation meetings conducted (after six–seven months of shifting the VKC to the Sastra building) focusing on men, particularly youth members of the South street, Akkaraipettai the participants showed interest in knowing whether information on the potential fishing zone (PFZ) could be provided at the landing centre, about department schemes, provision for usage of VHF set, information and exposure and training on crab fattening and other culture techniques, information on export companies in Tamil Nadu with respect to their main purchase, training on Global Positioning System and Fish Finder and certificate-based training and so on. It may be mentioned here that the VRC over a period of time could address some of their needs such as information on the potential fishing zone was provided by downloading the relevant information from INCOIS website and the same was disseminated through the notice board for few months and now it is being made available through Fishermen Friendly Mobile Application (FFMA) and PAS; content on crab fattening culture and the techniques was disseminated through *Namma Ooru Seidhi* and also through PowerPoint presentations by organising meetings with the community and facilitated building up linkages with two fishing export companies. Few of their other needs were met through video conferencing and training at Chennai

## **Video Conferencing with Fisheries Department**

As the fishermen felt that they were unable to use the schemes of the fisheries department due to their lack of awareness and clarity to avail the same the VRC arranged for video conferencing for fishermen with fishery experts from Chennai. It was an interactive session. The fishermen got useful information on various schemes for fishermen particularly details on scheme from the fisheries department for provision of life jackets at subsidised cost



*Fishermen participating in a videoconferencing in VRC*

related to the fishermen's livelihood in the Nagapattinam. The VRC took sincere efforts to build up contacts with organisations and institutions working for the development of fishing and rural communities to meet the local specific needs of the community. When the youth of Akkaraipettai expressed a need for certificate-based training programme, the VRC organised a programme to train fishermen of Akkaraipettai and few other fishing villages. This training was conducted at the Central Institute of Fisheries Nautical and Engineering Training Centre (CIFNET) in Chennai during July 2007. It is said that certificate-based training programmes are useful to get employment outside India and also avail subsidies. This training programme was given to twenty fishermen



*Group photo of fishermen and the resource persons after the training*

and others like provision for usage of VHF set for information. This interaction provided an opportunity for the fishermen of Akkaraipettai to become aware of the various schemes and relevant details. They got information regarding life jacket.

### **Training outside Nagapattinam**

The VRC did not miss any opportunity to improve the economic condition of the fishing community at Akkaraipettai. The VRC organised training programmes village itself and sometimes in and around



*Fishermen pay attention to the details and use of navigation map*

using trawlers, fibre boats and catamarans where six fishermen from Akkaraipettai participated. It was an advanced training in handling GPS. The training focused mainly on GPS, its types, applications, parts and functional keys available and technical aspects related to the device. Also details of a navigational map and its uses were covered in the training. After the training, a certificate was issued to the participants. The participants were able to learn to handle the equipment with more efficiency and could become skilled in using the options.

Some of the participants like Ramesh and five other youth from Akkaraipettai have become master trainers to the other fishermen; they willingly share their knowledge and skills to other fishermen in other villages of Nagapattinam and in neighbouring districts.

## **Fisher Friend Mobile Application**

The Fisher Friend Mobile Application (FFMA) Project is a joint venture between MSSRF, Qualcum, TATA Tele services (TTSL) and Astute System Technology; FFMA is a mobile-based software application developed for the rural fishing communities in the coastal areas using wireless connectivity; it provides real-time, location-specific information at mid-sea about wave height, weather conditions, location of potential fishing zones, availability of government schemes and possible market basis. It enables the fishermen (and women) access the latest livelihood related information related to fisheries whenever and wherever using their mobile phone. A fishermen interaction meeting was held in Akkaraipettai village during March 2007. In all, thirty fishermen participated in the meeting. The participants were a mixed group of fishermen including both traditional and mechanised fishing groups. This programme initiated during October 2007 has been under pilot research which aims to help the fishermen to improve their lives using FFMA device. The device is given on rotation basis to the fishermen. The feedback given by the fishermen is collected regularly to know the utility of the device and also to improve the application that adopts to the changing needs and demands of the fishermen.



*Traditional Panchayat leader distributes FFMA mobile to a fisherman*

## **Training Programmes on Microenterprises for Women**

Normally, the training programmes were demand driven. Based on the needs expressed by the SHG members and others, the VRC arranged for some training programmes such as making handicraft products, training on phenyl, soap, *neelam* (liquid blue used in white fabric), making *agarbathi* (incense sticks) and computer *sambirani* (incense powder), washing powder preparation and hands on training on fish and prawn pickle preparation. During the HIV/AIDS awareness programme conducted in Akkaraipettai, the SHG women participants expressed their need for training on preparation of incense powder and sticks (*sambirani* and *agarbathi*). Bhavya said that without much delay VRC arranged for the same as it would help women to earn some money. Resource persons for these training were usually either staff/animators of MSSRF from other VRCs or NVA Fellows from Puducherry.



a) Orientation and training of women in agarbathi making b) Hands-on training on agarbathi making  
 c) Training session in basket making d) Training in phenyl and soap oil making

There were instances when women expressing a need for repetition of a particular training programme. For instance, some women who had already undergone training on preparation of prawn pickles approached the VKC as they wanted to know more about pickle preparation. During October 2006 VRC conducted training on prawn/fish pickle preparation for women SHG members. They showed interest and said that to start with they would try to make these preparations for consumption at home and later try it as a microenterprise. After

nearly a year, five of the trained self-help group women members approached the Knowledge Workers of Akkaraipettai VKC and requested them to arrange for hands-on training on prawn/fish pickle for one more time; they wanted to market the pickles. So they wanted to get some inputs while preparing the pickles and hygienic handling. Based on their request, the training was arranged (during September 2007) at the VKC. This time around, the members bought all the necessary raw materials for



A training session in prawn pickle making

preparing the pickles. The VRC staff provided details on proportion of raw materials and hygienic handling while preparing pickle. The participants expressed that they had gained confidence to try this as a microenterprise. The group members were enthusiastic to start these enterprises within a week. They immediately started to prepare the pickle on a small scale and sold the product to their neighbours, friends and relatives. Based on demand, they took supplies to the local market also.

## **Awareness Programmes on Reproductive Health and HIV AIDS**

Based on the need expressed by women to know about problems associated with reproductive system during one of the awareness creation meetings, a programme to create awareness on reproductive health care was conducted with the help of a physician from the Nagapattinam Government Hospital and gynecologist from a private medical college (Vinayaha Medical College, Kasakudimedu). It is said that women found this programme useful and became aware of various aspects of reproductive health.

Similarly, the VRC arranged for a programme on HIV AIDS and its preventive measures for adolescent girls and women in Akkaraipettai in response to the need expressed by the Knowledge Workers during one of their meetings held at the VRC, Nagapattinam. This programme was conducted by the VRC staff of Nagapattinam using multimedia tools. With the help of Kyan PC a documentary film produced by the Tamilnadu AIDS Control Board, Chennai was shown to the participants. As the programme was conducted in an interactive mode, it helped the participants to talk and get clarifications. It was learnt that the women



*HIV Awareness programme*

participants felt that this type of documentary film would help people to get to know about the mode of transmission of AIDS and they said that they would share this with their other group members. They felt that more women should have participated in the programme. The Knowledge Workers were disappointed at the low turn out of women; they expected more women and adolescent girls to participate. But due to inherent inhibitions, the participation of female members was lesser than expected. Later, when the Knowledge Workers and VRC staff discussed it, they felt they should have organised separate programmes for married

women and the adolescent girls. The staff and the Knowledge Workers took this as learning and felt they should be careful and sensitive before organising any such programme.

## Eye Camp

After the VKC moved into the new venue, the VRC in collaboration with Sankara Nethralaya, a famous ophthalmology institute based at Chennai conducted eye camps twice (during April and May 2007) in different locations of Akkaraipettai village Panchayat.

More than 250 women and men participated in the camp. Nitya and Roopa who were Knowledge Workers then took great efforts to mobilise people to participate and benefit through the camp. They encouraged their relatives, friends and neighbours to use the opportunity to get their eyes checked. Ramesh, Shivaraj worked hard so as to reach as many people as possible. High-school students who were regular users of the Centre also contributed a lot in mobilising people and helping them during the camp in many ways. Many villagers



*Eye examination*

participated in the awareness programme on common eye diseases and preventive measures; the ophthalmologist from Sankara Nethralaya explained about eye care in detail using multimedia tools. The programme was well received by the people. It is stated that many were surprised to know that a problem in the eyes could cause head ache. Those who could not make use of the camp conducted in the village went to the VRC where the camp was conducted at regular intervals for six to seven months.

## Career Guidance Programme

In order to help school students who had completed tenth and twelfth standard, VRC organised a career guidance programme through video conferencing. Eleven students (six boys and five girls from Akkaraipettai) participated in the programme. It provided an opportunity to the young girls and boys to interact with the Principal, VRC College of Engineering and Technology, a Lecturer from Dr Dharmambal College for Women and Director, University Students Advisory



*Career guidance to Akkaraipettai students through video conferencing in VRC*





*Interaction of VRC staff and students of Akkaraipettai in VKC premises*

Bureau, University of Madras who served as resource persons. The students were glad that they participated in this video conferencing as they came to know various courses available for them in different educational institutions and employment opportunities. Before this, in order to interact with students and collect their views the VRC staff and the Knowledge Workers held a pre consultation meeting at Akkaraipettai VKC. Around 18 students (Nine girls and nine boys) participated in this meeting. This interaction

helped the students to prepare themselves well to interact with the resource persons during the videoconferencing held later at the VRC.

### **Orientation Programmes on Establishing a VKC for *Panchayat* Presidents**

We have seen that the participation and support of the local community is vital for the success and sustainability of the VRC/VKC programme. Keeping this in mind, a meeting was organised by the VRC for the *Panchayat* Presidents in Nagapattinam district in July 2006 where the traditional and elected presidents of Akkaraipettai *Panchayat* participated. When a meeting like this is organised to familiarise people with the VKC/VRC programme, and the formalities associated with its establishment in the rural areas the VRC adopts various tools to explain the process involved. Through the introductory lecture, the concepts of knowledge revolution and the VRC/VKC programme are explained briefly using a PowerPoint presentation. The participants are also given an idea about the programme through a video show on the functioning of VKCs in other areas. Gradually, the concept of boundary partner, their role and responsibilities and MSSRF's role are dealt with in detail. Some presidents showed interest in the concept and followed it up with the VRC.

### **Orientation Programme for Knowledge Workers**

In order to orient the Knowledge Workers in managing their respective VKCs, the VRC organised an orientation and capacity-building programme at Akkaraipettai VKC where Knowledge Workers of Akkaraipettai, Prathaparama Puram and Agalankan participated. It may be mentioned here that the capacity-building programmes for Knowledge Workers are conducted periodically at different MSSRF field sites where Knowledge Workers from different VRC field sites participate. Capacity-building training programmes are conducted for the Knowledge Workers depending on the emerging needs of the VKC. These programmes help them improve and strengthen their managerial skills and also to improve their personality.

## 6. SHIFTING OF VKC FROM SASTRA BUILDING TO TATA COMMUNITY HALL

For one year, the VKC activities were carried out from the Sastra building without much of a hassle. However, it did not last long. This time, the necessity to shift the Centre came due to rains. The building was surrounded by knee-deep water and did not drain even after the rains stopped. It was a hindrance for the users, mainly children, to access the VKC. By then, the TATA Community Hall was also ready, but there was some confusion while handing over the building. The TRC did not give it in writing nor had it handed over any written document to the MSSRF stating that a portion of the building was allotted for VKC. The TRC handed over the community hall to the district authority who in turn handed over it to the village. One of the staff members of the MSSRF who was involved in setting up the VKC in Akkaraipettai pointed out that when the community hall was designed, the first floor of the hall has been designed to house the VKC. One can see the number of plug points provided in the hall, which indicates that it was meant for the VKC. It is stated that there appeared to be some communication gap among the TRC persons which resulted in confusion and ultimately affected the programme.



*TATA Community Building*

*VKC in TATA Community Building*

When the VKC had to be shifted from the Sastra building, the VRC approached the traditional *Panchayat* and explained the need for a permanent place for the VKC. The *Panchayat* pointed out that they did not receive any written instruction to provide space in the TATA Community Hall for a VKC. Finally, after a series of meetings and discussions, the *Panchayat* agreed to allot a hall for the VKC in the Community Hall. This building is commonly referred to as TATA *kattidam* (building) by the people. Again there was some problem. The TATA Community Hall has a three-phase electricity line which would pose a problem in future when electricity charges would have to be paid. So the VRC brought it to the attention of the boundary partner, the traditional *Panchayat* and requested them to provide a separate line for the VKC. The *Panchayat* did not take it seriously and told the staff not to worry about it, and they (the *Panchayat*) would bear the electricity charges. For

nearly one-and-a-half year the VKC functioned without much of a problem in this venue. After moving into this new building, eye camps, training programme in GPS, Tuna Line fishing etc were conducted and facilities such as, The Indian National Coastal Information System (INCOIS) board were installed. Interestingly, the VRC also observed some slight improvement in the attitude of village *Panchayat* towards the VKC.

### **Knowledge Workers**

Roopa and Nitya were the Knowledge Workers when the Centre was shifted to the third venue. Soon Roopa had to leave much against her wishes when her marriage got fixed. Roopa expressed her unhappiness about the social system which restricts a girl's mobility within the village once the engagement takes place. Roopa expressed regret that she was not allowed by her parents even to visit the VKC. She said that she could not resist going to the Centre; she used to give some excuse or the other to her parents to go to the Centre. Nitya was a Knowledge Worker for a longer period than others and she also was forced to leave after she got engaged. Nitya managed the Centre alone for nearly one year but she had the help of Arasan and other school students like Manimaran, Satish and few others who owe a lot to the Centre for their progress not only in their studies but also in their overall development. Like Roopa, she had to leave when she got engaged. Malarkodi stepped in as a Knowledge Worker in Roopa's place; Malarkodi also continued to get the help and assistance of the youth and other students in managing the VKC and in mobilising people.

### **MUPP, CALP and INTEL Continued**

The above curriculum-based computer education programmes continued to be conducted and had good response from the children and students as usual. Those who have done these courses also regularly visited the Centre either to practice whatever they have learnt or to help the Knowledge Worker in handling the children. They also helped the youngsters in learning the computers and helped the Knowledge Workers when they faced with problems related to software and hardware.

### **Need-Assessment Programme**

After shifting to the new building, the VRC wanted to focus on those activities that would help the local community. In the venue, the VRC conducted awareness creation programmes (on the services and activities of the VRC/VKC) to women and men of Akkaraipettai. In order to assess the requirements and primary needs meetings were conducted with SHG federation, fishermen and youth group. For successful



*Awareness programme on VRC/VKC activities to fishermen of Akkaraipettai*

and effective implementation of the VKC programme, the involvement and participation of *Panchayat* was considered very essential. Keeping this in mind, a need assessment was conducted involving the *Panchayat* members and the youth group. Unlike the need assessment programmes conducted in the early months of VKC, this one was well received by the *Panchayat* and the community who responded in a mature manner.

This need assessment programme is a significant one; the needs expressed by the participants were common; many needs expressed were specific to their occupation. They stated that they were not aware of the latest fishing technologies; they wanted to learn the skills and



*Awareness programme for women*

gain a thorough knowledge to use GPS efficiently. We have seen earlier that VRC organised training in GPS where fishermen from other villages also participated. Akkaraipettai fishermen felt that they were using the instrument only to a limited extent due to lack of details of usage. They wanted to get trained well so that it could be used to an optimal degree. The fishermen also wanted to know about various schemes of the fisheries department. They pointed out that due to lack of knowledge they were

unable to make use of them. Apart from the above-mentioned needs they wanted to know whether students could be helped in their education field. This programme concluded to the satisfaction of both the VRC and the participants. In accordance with the needs expressed by the community, the VRC took steps to meet the same.

### **Training cum Awareness Programme on Hygienic Handling of Marine Products**

The above programme was conducted on board for the benefit of the fishermen of Akkaraipettai by the Network for Fish Quality Management and Sustainable Fishing (NETFISH\*) with MSSRF as its NGO partner. During this training, many important aspects of quality improvement of fishing, personal hygiene during fishing, hygienic handling of fish landing centres, precautions to be taken during the storage



*Knowledge dissemination on sustainable fishing and hygienic handling of marine products*

*\*NETFISH is a registered society under MPEDA working at grassroots level with an objective to improve and strengthen fish quality management, conservation of aquatic resources and sustainable fishing.*

process etc were covered. Also, the fishermen were also made aware of various schemes of MPEDA for deep-sea fishing such as the TUNA Long Liner. Boat registration procedures with the MPEDA and other schemes like getting ice-boxes were all also discussed during the training-cum-awareness programmes.



*Awareness creation for fisherwomen on hygienic handling of marine products*

A similar programme was also held for fisherwomen (the vendors) covering hygienic aspects of marine products, fish landing centres, during the process of icing and preservation marine products and personal hygiene during fish vending. The above programmes proved to be of great use to the fishing community. Many, both women and men, expressed their gratitude for being enlightened on all these important aspects which they were not aware of. The above-mentioned training programmes for the fisherwomen and men at Akkaraipettai

are being continued to be held at frequent intervals.

## Setting up the INCOIS Board

The *Panchayat* which expressed the need for the board did not make efforts towards finding a common place where a majority could see the information that would be displayed on the board. Many factors have to be taken into account before fixing the board: majority of persons concerned should be able to view the data being displayed; there should be uninterrupted power supply and some one should be regularly monitoring the information



*INCOIS display board*

displayed. As the *Panchayat* could not arrive at a consensus, it was finally decided to fix the board in the VKC itself. Persons from INCOIS also felt that VKC was a better choice than others. It was obvious during the course of our interaction with the villagers that many preferred another central location in the village. After fixing the INCOIS board, an orientation was given to the boundary partner and villagers regarding its uses to the fishermen.

## Adult Literacy Programme

Efforts were taken to revive the ALP during September 2009. Training in ALP was conducted to the Knowledge Workers in using the software provided by the TATA Consultative Service (TCS).

## VKC Services Stalled

VKC functioned in the TATA building for more than a year without any major problem. Though some felt it was a little far from the main village, many people, mainly school and college students, made use of the computer facility to improve their knowledge and skills. Adult women and men also used to visit the Centre to know about traditional medical remedies for minor ailments, nutritional properties of food/vegetable items using local database, to enquire about details of government schemes, employment opportunities, reading newspaper and so on.

When everything seemed going on well to a great extent, in August 2009 a new problem arose which almost stalled the services of the Centre. As the VRC feared, when the Centre was shifted to the TATA Community Hall the expected thing happened: a problem related to paying of electricity charges came up. Power supply to the TATA Community Hall (this was the building where the VKC also functioned in the first floor) was disconnected by the Electricity Board for non-payment of electricity charges. It was learnt that the *Panchayat* did not pay the electricity bill because it amounted to a large amount. It affected the VKC from providing its services to the community. Without power supply, the ICT infrastructure at the VKC could not be utilised; computers could not be operated, information dissemination using the PAS and INCOIS Board was rendered impossible. The VRC, the Knowledge Workers and the others hoped that it would be sorted out soon. It was heartening to know that Malarkodi, the Knowledge Worker at the time, did her best even without the power supply to offer the services of the Centre to the community in all possible ways and kept open the VKC for more than ten days. Important information was put up on the notice board and whenever there were enquiries from the community she contacted the VRC over the telephone and gave the details to the concerned persons. The community had access to the phone and local newspapers. There was a hope that the power supply would be restored soon; but it did not happen. So, having no other alternative, the VRC was compelled to keep the Centre under lock and key.

We have seen how the VKC had to handle various things since its inception, but there never was a day when it was closed, except on weekly holidays and other important occasions. Again, the VKC programme found itself confronting a new issue, rather, a difficult one that required meeting and discussing with the *Panchayat* so as to find a solution. We have seen earlier that mobilising and meeting the *Panchayat* members has always been a challenging task. The VRC staff supported and accompanied by the youth of the village tried to meet the members of the *Panchayat* as the management and maintenance of the TATA Community

Building is under the control of the traditional *Panchayat* (also the boundary partner of the VRC/VKC programme in Akkaraipettai). The staff and the youth were surprised to learn that the VKC was considered the main cause for this rise in electricity charges. The general opinion amongst the *Panchayat* was that the reason for rise in the electricity bill was due to the computers used in the VKC. We came to understand during the course of our discussion with the staff and some villagers that an accountant has been appointed previous year to look into the finances of the *Panchayat*. Apparently, the accountant raised this point (payment of electricity charges) in a meeting and suggested that it was not advisable to spend a lot of money on this. But the VRC staff and the youth confidently say that even if all the computers were to operate throughout the day the electricity bill would be much less. It had also been explained to the village *Panchayat* and other important persons that the VKC cannot be held responsible for the rise in the electricity bill. In the same building, apart from the VKC there is also a community hall where periodical SHG meetings, sometimes general village meetings and functions are held which consume a lot of electricity. It has been mentioned already that the TATA Community Hall has access to three-phase electricity supply; the VKC and the community hall get their power supply from the same line. So, only a single bill is made. Anticipating that a problem like this would come up in future, the staff prior to shifting of the VKC from the Sastra premises to its present location requested the *Panchayat* to get a separate line for the VKC, but the former did not take it seriously.

As usual meeting the *Panchayat* members to find a solution to the current problem had not been easy. The VRC and the youth from Akkaraipettai relentlessly pursued this matter with the *Panchayat* for nearly a year. Ever since the VKC was closed because of the electricity bill issue, something or the other was coming up in the village which required the *Panchayat's* attention. Initially it was the temple *Kumbabishekam* (consecration ceremony) held in September 2009. The *Panchayat* members told the VRC staff that they would talk to the Electricity Board to get a separate line for the VKC, but then they said that they would be able to take this up only after the ceremony was over as it was a major event concerning the entire village. The total attention was on making arrangements for the *Kovil Kumbabishekam*. So, the VRC was hopeful that they would be able find a solution; but it was not as simple as they thought it would be. After the village temple ceremony was over, the VRC tried to meet the *Panchayat* several times but the latter could never give a time. And, if they did, they would at the last minute say that something had suddenly cropped up and postpone the meeting. After the *Kovil Kumbabishekam* ceremony somehow, the staff could meet the important persons of the *Panchayat* in the last week of October 2009, and the author also had the opportunity to be present during that discussion. During the discussion, the staff politely pointed out that the VKC could not be kept locked for a long time, and a decision had to be taken on this immediately. So that the VRC could take a decision to either retain the VKC at Akkaraipettai or shift it to another village, as the VRC had been approached by a few other villages to have a Knowledge Centre in their respective villages.

The members said that having the Centre at the TATA Community Hall might not be feasible and that they were thinking of providing a rent-free suitable place in a common government building of the village, where the VKC will get free electricity supply; however, they then said that some more time was required as they were busy organising a protest rally against the atrocities committed on the Tamil Nadu fishermen by the Sri Lankan army. Later, we heard from the staff and few youth members that subsequent to the rally it became difficult to have a concrete discussion as the *Panchayat* happened to face a legal case filed against its few members in the law court.

As we mentioned earlier, there are a few old and new *Panchayat* members who are fully aware of the benefits of the programme; it may be pointed out here that we happened to meet one such person from the present *Panchayat*, around 65 years of age. According to him, the issue did not attract the attention it deserved from the village *Panchayat* because a majority of the *Panchayat* members was unable to understand the importance of the programme to the community. On the other hand, he was able to appreciate the fact because of his daughter who had worked as a volunteer of the VKC for nearly one year and also because of his sons who tell to him about the Centre and the kind of activities going on there. It was interesting to talk to the senior person who was of the view that there should be a separate group to look into the affairs of the VKC. Even if the *Panchayat* were not to be involved, this particular group should take care of the Centre and the group should include a few youngsters. He even suggested names of a few young people from the village. He was of the opinion that getting a separate electricity line to the Centre should not be an issue. 'It is finally a good cause, and spending for an important cause is not an issue', he added. Some of the *Panchayat* members whom we met also told us that they felt bad about it. They told us that they were aware that it cannot go on in its present state and soon a decision would have to be taken.

It is interesting to note that the *Panchayat* members wanted to retain the Centre in the village but yet were not able to take a firm decision regarding the matter. The youth did not give up hope and tried their best to find a permanent structure for the VKC in Akkaraipettai with the support of the *Panchayat* in order to avoid future problems. We came to know during our discussion with the youth that they would like to shift the Centre to the newly built housing colony known as TATA Nagar built by the TRC in the post-Tsunami period for the Akkaraipettai fishing families. TATA Nagar also comes under the Akkaraipettai *Panchayat*. Even if they had to shift the VKC to TATA Nagar they wanted to do it with the full support of the *Panchayat*. The youth group expressed their wish to take over the responsibility of running the VKC in the village without antagonising the *Panchayat*. Since one of the NVA fellows and a supportive youth lives in TATA Nagar, he took steps to find an appropriate rent-free place with free electricity service. But, unfortunately, the *Panchayat* was not in favour of that idea. There was a ray of hope that the *Panchayat* would find a suitable rent-free place with free electricity supply to run the VKC without any more hindrance. But considering the attitude of the *Panchayat*, it was unlikely to happen.



The VRC staff were very patient throughout, but a time came when they had to take a decision on the VKC at Akkaraipettai. A hard decision had to be taken, much against their wish. It is stated that in one of the review meetings\* with the staff of various VRCs, the Programme Director while appreciating fully the kind of efforts the VRC of Nagapattinam took suggested to close the VKC in Akkaraipettai and take the Centre to another village. But the VRC refrained from doing it. The staff gave sufficient time to the *Panchayat* to find a solution and take a decision on the VKC issue. However, when it seemed to prolong the issue endlessly, the VRC after informing the *Panchayat* moved the computers and other facilities such as the telephone to the VRC office during April 2010. The coordinator of the VRC mentioned that they had no alternative other than closing down the Centre. She added that they had certain limitations and there are certain rules and regulations to be followed by the VRC, and they must act accordingly.

## Present Scenario

It is really unfortunate that the community, particularly, the younger generation, has been deprived of access to computers. The community also misses having services like the local database or telephone. The children and students are a frustrated lot. They miss going to the VKC. They feel sad that they cannot practice their computer lessons and improve their skills. The INTEL students were eager to showcase their project work but they never got that opportunity. It is unfortunate that school/college students and few others miss participating in curriculum-based computer programmes like MUPP, CALP and INTEL.

However, it is refreshing to know that the contact between the VRC and the community is very much alive, despite the VKC being shut down. The VRC continues to provide its services to the community using the ICT tools and also passing information through staff members or the youth from the village. It is sad to know that computers and other infrastructure have been shifted to the VRC from the TATA community hall; however, the INCOIS board is in the village and the *Panchayat* members have promised to monitor it with the help of some responsible persons from the village. A basic orientation on the various services of INCOIS like ocean state forecast (OSF), weather, wave height, wind speed and direction, sea surface



*NETFISH Awareness Programme*

*\*Meetings are regularly held by the head quarters at Chennai with the staff from the various VRCs to review the progress of activities at the field. The need for additional resources or other aspects are discussed during these meetings. Strengths and weaknesses are presented. Feedbacks and comments are invited to incorporate into future planning.*



a) Information from INCOIS sent from VRC through SMS server. b) Raju from Akkaraipettai receives SMS in his mobile phone. c) On board NETFISH programme. d) Indian Coast Guard talking to fishermen on sea safety measures.

temperature and PFZ was given to these people in TATA Nagar during the month of May this year. The VRC continues to conduct training programmes on sustainable fishing and hygienic handling of fish products (in association with NETFISH) to fisherwomen and men and most importantly provide information on weather details like wind speed and wave height using the SMS (Short Message Service) facility with the help of fishermen and women or NVA fellows having mobile phones. When we had gone to the VRC during the month of July 2010 we heard that the VRC had organised a programme in the first week of that month in association with Indian Coast Guard (based on a need expressed by the fishermen on more than two occasions during the need assessment programmes) on sea safety measures, international borders and other important aspects related to fishing in the sea. Before doing this, the VRC had organised a career guidance programme for the high-school students of the Akkaraipettai School. The children and the youth are encouraged to come to the VRC to develop and strengthen their computer application skills. Since some of them are already familiar with VRC, they feel comfortable to visit the Centre and develop their computer skills and also get information necessary for them and for the family. During the author's latest visit to Nagapattinam in July 2010 it was encouraging

to see a college student from Akkaraipettai who had come to the VRC to participate in the Photoshop training offered by the latter. The staff mentioned that the community members, both women and men, continue to participate in the programmes organised by the VRC.

It is really encouraging to know that the VRC shows great interest in serving the Akkaraipettai fishing community in all possible ways. During our conversation, Velvizhi mentioned, 'the VRC will henceforth function like a mobile VKC at Akkaraipettai'. If only the boundary partners were supportive and had shown interest in this programme, this Centre would have been a model VKC for others to emulate.

## **7. A NOTE ON THE COMMUNITY'S PERCEPTIONS AND IMPACT**

Despite various challenges faced by the VKC, it has had positive impact on the community as a whole, particularly, the students and the youth. We went around the village because we were curious to know people's views on different aspects related to the VKC in the village. Whoever came across, we casually picked up some conversation with them and tried to probe and elicit information regarding the Centre. We primarily had these interactions to gauge people's perception about the VKC activities; we wished to know whether people were aware of the functioning of the VKC in their village.

We spoke with women chatting in a common place, men relaxing at home and young boys/girls going to meet a friend, going to a nearby shop, returning from college/school. It was heartening to listen to the women and the youth comment about the positive impacts of the project and the usefulness of the VKC. Testimonials of the people reflect the overall awareness of the community regarding the VKC's services and its activities and the impact of the same on the Akkaraipettai fishing community.

### **What VKC Stood For in the Eyes of the Community**

During the course of our field visits, it was interesting to come across many persons, both women and men, who have never gone to the VKC but seemed to be aware of its activities and acknowledge the useful services rendered by the Centre to the community. It was heartening to know that whoever we met had known about the Centre and its main services. We met a group of women sitting and chatting one afternoon in one of street corners. We approached them with an assumption that they may not know anything about the VKC. But to our pleasant surprise, though they had not visited the Centre, they gave us details of the activities carried out by the Centre. It was so amazing, the way they explained about the activities of the Centre. We really did not think that they would know so much about the VKC. We just asked them if they have any idea about the Centre. We thought if at all they said something it would be about skill development in using computers. To our surprise, they went beyond that and spoke to us of the different kinds of microenterprise training given to women, information disseminated through *Namma Ooru Seidhi* and PAS on traditional

health medicinal tips, weather forecast, educational and employment opportunities etc. They also said they know women gained benefits from the training in microenterprise. ‘The information disseminated through PAS is of great use to the community’, said these women.

We met a woman aged about 30 years in her house. We came to know from her that she had gone to the VKC on few occasions. She does not participate in the Centre’s activities, but is aware of the services and activities of the Centre. She admits that she does not go to the Centre but thinks the VKC is very useful to the community. She says, ‘The community in general knows about the services provided by the VKC’. We casually asked her in what way she thinks the Centre would be useful to the community. She did not hesitate even for a second. It was interesting to learn from her how information reaches the community through different communication technologies like the local newsletter, PAS and the notice board. She said, ‘Thagaval koduppadhu mukkiyam’, which means disseminating information is very important. As an example, she mentioned writing about employment opportunities on the notice board, and added, ‘It is useful to the community, is it not?’ Similarly she mentioned the health tips and information on nutritional diet that appear in the newsletter and information on weather, important announcements etc through PAS. She had participated in the prawn pickle preparation training organised by the Centre. She had wished to learn computer applications but could not make use of the opportunity as she has young children to take care at home. She was happy that she could hold the mouse and write her name. She had seen the computer for the first time in the Centre. She was confident that children who go to the Centre would definitely make progress in life.

We also had an opportunity to talk to a middle-aged woman namely Bhagyavathi, one of the SHG Federation leaders. She has been associated with the VKC’s activities since its inception. She has the clarity about the VKC concept and she recalled various important programmes like the inauguration of the Centre, the visit of Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who was at the time the President of India, and Professor M.S. Swaminathan to the village and other training programmes/health camps conducted in the village. She was able to see how the activities are organised to meet the needs of various sections of the community. She mentioned the GPS training and FFMA offered for the fishermen, training in prawn/fish pickle preparation, phenol etc for women and skill development for children/students in computer usage. Like many in the village, she was of the view that learning computers is very useful to the children and she said, ‘The children learn with great interest’. Bhagyavathi’s daughter aged around 25 years brought to our attention the efforts taken by the Centre in promoting literacy among the women in the village. ‘Most of the villagers did not have any idea about a computer; the VKC has enabled many to know what it is and develop interest in learning the computer applications’, she added.

We could meet and discuss with the elected *Panchayat* President about issues related to the VKC. He acknowledged the services rendered by the VKC. He pointed out how the Centre

through its various services/activities, such as computer - and educated - related aspects to children/students, microenterprises for women, GPS training and FFMA for fishermen and through PAS to the entire community catered to the different sections of the community. He is of the opinion that VKC guides people in gaining and using the knowledge/information. Giving information on the employment opportunities, weather forecast and government schemes is of great use to the community. He mentioned that the number of persons coming to him to enquire whether the government has announced any new schemes for the fishermen has reduced which shows that the VKC promptly disseminated the relevant information through its information and communication channels. He expressed concern about the Centre being locked for a long time and felt that something should be done to retain the Centre in the village.

### Information Dissemination

Information dissemination using ICT tools seemed to have reached a majority of the population. Announcing and disseminating information through various modes like PAS, notice board and *Namma Ooru Seidhi* have been of great use to the community. We had the opportunity to listen to many more persons like the SHG members, youth and the students talking positively about the Centre's contribution for the wellbeing of the village.



*Namma Ooru Seidhi, a local newsletter of VRC*

The VKC is appreciated for disseminating local specific information to the community. It was interesting and heartening to listen to women like Kalai Selvi, Mala and Mahesh in their late twenties talking about the importance of information empowerment for the development of an individual and the community. A middle-aged woman who was illiterate pointed out about the weather forecast announced through the PAS and how this information is crucial to enable fishermen to take decision before venturing into the sea for fishing. She feels getting timely information about the sea's behaviour helps to avoid trouble and anxious moments for the fishing families. She regrets how some fishermen having overconfidence in their own experience ignore this information. We happen to meet a young woman namely Mahendravalli who was on her way to a relative's house in another street in the same village. Though she was in a hurry, she stopped for a while to talk to us. After we explained our purpose of the visit, she instantly

said, ‘Had the Centre been there before Tsunami we could have averted human and other losses to an extent’. Though the Tsunami had taken everyone by surprise, what she felt was that the community would have got the information in advance had the VKC been there before the strike of the Tsunami and helped avert a great human loss. She added that more recently, the villagers were warned through the PAS about the cyclone Nisha.

A middle-aged man working as a daily wage labourer for a boat owner had never gone inside the VKC though he resides nearby. For most of the time, he is in the sea. He said that he could not grasp the details of the Centre’s activities, though his two sons talk to him about it. However, he strongly felt that it was doing great work in broadcasting weather forecast, daily news and disseminating other relevant information to the general public. He believed that being aware of important information and news is very essential. As the Centre was located on the main road, the people could get the news from the notice board. He said that if some one knows something he/she can share it with few others. He was happy for his two sons who had been able get an opportunity to learn and use computers. They were doing well in their studies after gaining exposure to the *maiya*m (VKC).



Notice board outside VKC

The VKC is remembered for providing updates on different government welfare schemes, details about subsidies and other government programmes. As a result of this, according to Vanitha, a frequent user of the VKC, the people’s dependency on *Panchayat* members and other important persons in the village to obtain details of the new schemes has reduced considerably. The news is shared and exchanged among the friends, neighbours and relatives. The local newsletter, *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, is well received by the community irrespective of age and sex as it covers a wide range of information such as occupation, education and employment opportunities, puzzle for children and traditional medicinal tips, local and national important news.

Information dissemination through PAS is widely recognised and appreciated by the community. We can say that the community identifies the services of the VKC through this important channel of communication. In most cases where we have tried to obtain peoples’ perceptions and views about the VKC, there has been a spontaneous mention of the advantages of the information/knowledge dissemination useful to the community. ‘Merely sitting at home, one is able to get the daily news and other important information’, said various men and women. While talking about the PAS facility, a young woman mentioned that one more loudspeaker could be fitted so as to reach the people living in Therku Theru (South Street) where it is not audible. It was gathered during our interactions



Information dissemination through PAS

(before a decision to close the VKC had not been taken) with the SHG women members, that the medical and nutritional tips are very useful to the community and the SHG members share the information during the meetings and also with their relatives and friends. The members were very much concerned about the Centre being closed for a long time. Just as we were planning to take leave, the women SHG Federation leader said, 'Please don't shift the VKC (from Akkaraipettai)'.

Talking to people like Asokan, age 34 years, we could gauge the usefulness of the PAS to the community. In his own words,

*'Through the Public Address System, news regarding Government subsidies and schemes for children and education-related announcements are made. This is very useful to the students. For students who have finished their education, the announcements about job opportunities in various sectors help them concentrate on getting employment without losing their focus. Irrespective of age group and sex, all of us benefit from announcements related to medicine, health and hygiene. They notify us not only about human health but also about the diseases affecting the animals like goats, cows and poultry.*

*They also broadcast news about the height of the waves, the condition of the sea, wind speed and rain which is very useful. Because of this system, we are able to protect ourselves in case of danger at night.*



GSM based Public address system

*The village administration also uses the system to announce the unexpected visits of officials to our village and administrative news without delay. Through this, the message reaches everyone at the same time. Earlier, a villager would have to go to every street to announce the news. Thanks to the PAS facility; it saves time, energy and conveys the message to everyone from a single place.*

*The PAS installed by the MSSRF is most certainly a boon to us'.*

According to some women and the youth, people in general are exposed to wide-ranging information. 'They may or may not use the information but the familiarity with important

information itself instills a kind of confidence and enhances self-esteem,' said one of the youth. A few women and men pointed out that the VKC has played a significant role in making people aware of the importance of information empowerment for their development. According to Soundarapandiyar, who is one of the people offering support to the VRC/VKC programme in Akkaraipettai, as people get more and more aware they are inspired to learn much more. The VKC has given the direction for the people to improve themselves socially and economically.

## **Women**

It has been encouraging to know that women, who form an important section of the society, are aware of the services and activities of the VKC. Members of SHGs have clarity about the concept of VKC and its various activities; it is primarily due to the concerted efforts of the staff and the Knowledge Workers. In the process of creating awareness and mobilisation of the community, they met and interacted with the women during the SHG meetings. These meetings proved useful in promoting the participation of women in the VKC's activities and also to facilitate expressing their needs for social and economic improvement. One of the Knowledge Workers mentioned that these women subsequently showed interest in the Centre's activities and came forward to help mobilise the community for the Centre's programmes. According to women like Vanitha age 31 years and Kalai Selvi, 33 years of age, interacting with the VRC/VKC persons helped them to think better and take the right decisions regarding their training and other requirements. It emerged during our interaction that women's confidence and self-esteem increase when they have greater knowledge and income-earning capacity.

We have seen earlier that the VKC arranged programmes on reproductive health and AIDS Awareness to disseminate health-related information. Motivated by the VKC, the SHG members and adolescent girls participated. Initially, though there was some inhibition towards participating in such programmes, later the women felt it was very educational and useful. Showing a movie on aspects of AIDS infection has had a desired impact on them. 'Through the visuals, it was easy for us to understand and appreciate various related issues', stated the participants. Some of them even mentioned that similar programmes should be conducted periodically to widen ones knowledge and to take corrective steps when confronted by health-related problems. We understand from talking to women that the exposure to the above subjects have given them some knowledge about AIDS and reproductive health and improved their general outlook.

Another significant aspect of the impact on women has been in converting atleast 30-40 some of the illiterate women to become literates. Several attempts of the VKC to promote functional literacy in the village may not have yielded the desired results. It is said that there was average-to-good response from women to attend the ALP though number of



women attending gradually decreased once normal life returned to the village. The women became busy with fishing-related activities and also many households shifted to TATA Nagar. If the programme was able to make around 30–40 women read and write it is purely due to the sincere efforts of the volunteers/Knowledge Workers. Learning to read and write has made a lot of difference among the women. It has improved their self-esteem and confidence level. One of them, Vanitha, mentioned that she is able to read the newspaper now, ‘I am also able to read now. I feel great and feel proud about it. I do not have to depend on my children. I can manage’, stated a proud Vanitha. We happened to meet one youngster studying in a college who said that his mother who had never gone to school is able to read and write after she participated in the ALP conducted by the VKC.

We have seen previously, how both the volunteers /Knowledge Workers and ALP participants enjoyed being part of the programme. The women appreciated the genuine interest of the volunteers /Knowledge Workers. It emerged clearly that the latter were committed when they recalled with happiness and sense of satisfaction their experiences in mobilising the women and teaching them to write and read. The women participants, who completed the course, admired their young teachers for their dedication, affection and patience. However, the volunteers /Knowledge Workers felt sad that not many took advantage of this programme.

## **Computer Literacy**

The VKC’s efforts to promote computer literacy among women have had little impact. They think it is for the educated and the students. This feeling has inhibited many from even making an attempt to use the opportunity. We came across a few women who have made an attempt to learn computers, but could not continue after few days. The common reason cited by them is that the Centre is mostly crowded with children and students. One of them said she is shy to go to the Centre; she feels uncomfortable in the presence of educated persons. A few women like Bagavathy age 46 years, and Vanitha said that they did not feel like disturbing the children working on the computers. They think computer knowledge is important for the younger generation’s education and their professional development. Another reason heard generally was that most of the women became busy with fishing-related activities and also some of the households shifted to TATA Nagar.

Jayam, a graduate who lost her husband in the Tsunami and presently working in Suyam Charitable Trust, mentioned that it was in the VKC that she for the first time sat in front of the computer. She had seen a computer earlier, but never thought she would one day get that opportunity. She learnt to operate the computer and came to know about using the Internet. With her training in basic computer applications, she teaches MS Word and PowerPoint to the children. Like Arul Mani, she has always been supportive of VKC activities. She extends her help for mobilising people for health camps, training programmes and so on.

## Capacity Development through Income-Generating Activities

Training on income-generating activities is another significant aspect which has gained the appreciation of women. It is heartening to find that these women did not attend the training programmes just for the sake of attending them. Most of the training programmes were hands-on training. So, women actively participated with enthusiasm, mentioned our respondents. They have been inspired to use the knowledge to improve their household income. Some women have taken up microenterprises as a group activity for income generation while few individuals doing on their own. It may be pointed out here that after trying with most of the microenterprises learnt through the training programmes the women sooner or later have been able to decide what economic enterprise they should pursue and what should be suspended or given up; some of the women we met and spoke to said that they did not want to risk losses because they could not afford it. However, the women are of the view that knowledge will never go waste; having the knowledge itself boosts ones morale and makes them feel secure.

We were pleased to know that a few small economic enterprises like preparation of phenyl, soap oil, liquid blue and prawn pickle have been undertaken by the participants. We came across a small group consisting of four women involved in preparing phenyl and few others carrying out a business individually. The group involved in this preparation is quite satisfied. Their customers are mostly their fellow SHG members. One of the group members, Mahesh, said that each one of them has been able to earn around Rs700.00 (after the expenses) per month. Mahesh confidently said that ‘this Rs700 could increase to Rs7000 one day and even to Rs70, 000. Is it not?’ The women pointed out that this microenterprise would be more profitable if they can find market outside the village. However, they are glad that they are able to use the knowledge even though finding market for the product seems difficult.

The enthusiasm of the same group of women dwindled with their attempt at making of washing powder as an income-generating activity. Not only they did not get any income, they incurred loss of money. Mahesh said the neighbours and relatives showed interest



*Training in washing powder making*

and took the soap powder, but most of them would not pay for it. They would give some excuse or the other for not paying them. The women’s group did not want to take any more risks with the washing powder preparation enterprise. Even individuals like Vanitha who attempted this soon gave up because people did not pay her money for the product supplied. However, Vanitha is not disheartened though she did not get any returns from her initial soap-powder venture. She thinks with her husband’s help

she will be able to take it up again as an income-generating activity once he returns from Singapore after the completion of his work contract.

While Mahesh and her team have been doing fairly good business by preparing and selling phenyl, Kalai Selvi, a confident person, around 35 years of age, is happy with herself for being able to supplement the household income by selling soap oil and liquid blue (used in white fabric to maintain the lustre/ colour) and use it for the family's wellbeing. She participated in all the income-generating programmes; she chose the above two



*Women with finished products after training in phenyl and soap oil making*

microenterprises when she found that no one else had opted for them. She is happy to say that she has been able to earn well by selling her homemade products, particularly, soap oil. If she invested Rs1000 on raw material to prepare soap oil, she would make a profit of nearly Rs800, stated Kalai Selvi. She is proud to mention that she has customers coming to her house to buy her product. There was a demand for it because it is a multipurpose product for it can be used in floor washing, clothes, cooking vessels, to wash bed sheets and so on. It is also widely

used in mechanic sheds. She was very proud to say that due to the quality of the product, she has been able to get hold of few shops in the nearby market as regular customers. She supplies to some shops on weekly basis and to some fortnightly.

Kalai Selvi has reached to a level where she is contemplating opening her own shop. She thinks that this move would definitely help not only to enhance her earning potential but also it would enable her provide jobs atleast to few people. Kalai Selvi owes a lot to the VRC/VKC for improving her economic position. The income she earns from her smallscale business has really contributed towards improving the family's well being. She could use the money for her children's education, for paying her electricity bill, giving cash gifts on occasions of marriage and other functions, to her relatives and friends. She said, sounding pleased, 'I earn as much money as my husband and the income is very useful for my children's educational expenses. Instead of me going in search of people to buy things, these days because of the training I received, people come in search of me to buy things. This makes me very happy and proud. I thank the VKC and MSSRF for leading me along the right path for a good future'. She said that she is fortunate to have a supporting husband who helps her in preparing and selling soap oil. Kalai Selvi faces little difficulty in selling liquid blue; unlike soap oil which can be supplied in one-to-five litre containers demand for liquid blue generally would be in small quantity. According to her, the constraint she faces in this is non-availability of small containers in the nearby market. Kalai Selvi has been one of the great supporters of the VKC since its early days.

Some women have been motivated to take up prawn/fish pickle preparation as an income generating activity though local demand, for this is not much and also it does not assure a regular flow of income for the persons concerned. Interestingly, the pickle has customers from abroad like Singapore and Malaysia. The pickle found its way to these places through spouses, relatives and neighbours of Akkaraipettai women. Like phenyl-making, manufacturing prawn pickle has been carried out by a group of SHG women and it is also being pursued independently by some more women. Though there is no steady income from this enterprise they get a reasonable profit when the product is sent abroad. One of the women involved in this activity said that women get more than half the money invested as profit, which they feel is pretty good. It may be pointed out here that most of the women involved in other smallscale enterprises (mentioned above) are also engaged in the prawn/fish pickle preparation to earn additional income for the household.

The women who participated in this training are full of admiration for the staff of the VRC particularly Velvizhi the coordinator of the VRC and who was also the resource person for the training programme. The women appreciated the VRC/VKC for arranging this programme just within a week after the women expressed a need for the same in meeting. They did not expect the VRC to respond to their need and act immediately!



*Use of ICT as a teaching aid in prawn pickle making*

One of the women, Bagavathy, said that they were taught even the minute details with care and interest. She went on to say how the participants were taught to select prawns for the pickle, prepare the pickle, maintenance of health standards by the person manufacturing the pickle and how to sell the products. All these were explained practically and also with the help of the computer. The participants do not have to worry if there is extra stock of the pickle

because the shelf life is good. According to Mahesh and Bagavathy the biggest plus point in this method of pickling is that the pickle does not spoil easily. Though in the training programme they were told that shelf life is six months, it is tasty and does not spoil even after one year. The women involved in this enterprise buy prawns and fish during the peak season for low price. Bagavathy is a fish vendor and buys fish through auctioning to sell it to the retail fish sellers in the town which fetches her a little income. In addition to her regular fish auctioning, she is preparing pickle for business purposes to augment her income. She is happy that she could earn additional income through the sale of fish/prawn pickle. On the days when the prices of fish and prawn are cheap she takes the fish/prawn in auction for her own purpose. She uses this to prepare pickle. She said proudly, 'people who live in my vicinity and people who travel abroad come in search of me and buy my products, as they find them tasty'.

Women feel that this enterprise would be profitable if they could create a local demand and create a market outside the village. The women admit they lack the time and the skill to improve the market for the prawn/fish pickle. However, they are glad that they are able to make some money selling it through their relatives and friends working abroad. A young woman of age 30 years said she is trying to sell her pickle through her mother-in-law who sells vegetables in the nearby market.

For women involved in a smallscale fish trade, the training imparted on processing and preservation of fish and prawn has fairly enhanced their earning. According to a middle-aged woman this training helped women to learn techniques involved in processing and preservation; the techniques enhanced the quality of the primary catch of fish/prawn and this naturally fetches more money than before. Another woman pointed out since she preserves the fish very carefully, she has earned a good reputation among her customers who are retail fish sellers. She is proud and happy to say she is able to give employment to few persons, as the demand from the fish vendors has increased as a result of the quality improvement. Like this woman, there are few others who have been able to increase their sale of fish, which in turn has raised their income.

We learnt that a few activities like *agarbatti* (incense sticks) and stuffed toys have never been attempted by the women, because they felt it would not be viable to practice them as microeconomic activity. One of the women mentioned that making incense sticks is time-consuming, and, moreover, there is not much demand for it. People would expect incense sticks carrying different fragrances which they might not be comfortable trying out.

It emerged clearly that women's confidence and self esteem increase when they have greater knowledge and capacity to improve their earnings. One of the women mentioned that she felt confident whenever her neighbours and relatives speak about her knowledge of preparing the items imparted through the training programme. They can utilise the knowledge to improve their economic condition. Women, generally, are realising that a limited knowledge hinders one's development. Vanitha said she felt more secure about the future as a result of having knowledge. She had gained knowledge by participating in the income-generating training programmes. On knowing that she could provide for the family, a sense of well being was created within her, said Vanitha. Many women echoed similar sentiments expressed by her. The women acknowledge the VRC/VKC efforts in encouraging women to improve themselves socially and economically. Women have gained confidence to start a business on a smallscale to improve their economic condition. The fact they know something well has given them a sense of security. One woman pointed out that she feels proud when her neighbours comment on her knowledge of preparing prawn pickle, surf and phenyl. Some of them mentioned that though they are not putting the knowledge into practice for commercial purposes, they can anyway make use of it if they want to. They know the proportion and the method so it should not be a problem to prepare pickles or start

any other microenterprises such as involving preparation of soap oil, surf, and phenyl and so on. Jayam from Suyam Trust complemented the VKC for giving training for women in microenterprises. She is of the opinion that on seeing one person take up the training, the other person also would be motivated to get trained. It would help women to be self-reliant. She also suggested that a brief writeup on successful stories would encourage other women to get benefitted by such training programmes.

It is encouraging to find that these women keep in touch with VRC persons. Some of the members like Kalai Selvi, Mahesh, Vanitha and Bhagyavathi give their time to the VRC/VKC-related activities in the village such as when FFMA was launched the women willingly agreed to identify the right fishermen to give the technology, thereafter to collect the feed back from those persons and so on. Getting involved in this kind of work, women become aware of the technology and its uses to fishermen. These women help in mobilising the community whenever required. The women mentioned that they feel happy and satisfied when they gained recognition from the society and the VKC for their role in some of the Centre's activities. Their association with the VRC/VKC and their participation in the SHG



*Mahesh receiving FFMA mobile*

activities has enhanced their self-confidence level. They have been exposed to the outside world. Going to the government offices and departments does not bother them much today. They can manage to go on their own without anyone accompanying them. They only wish they would be able to find a good market for the products they prepare. These women also motivate others to take up microenterprises such as making soap oil, phenol and prawn/fish pickle. Women like Kalai Selvi, Mahesh and Vanitha think that more and more women should come forward to take the risk of attempting a new income-generating activity, if they were able to prove themselves better. Another heartening aspect is that the women share their knowledge and experience with their group members and their relatives and neighbours. In this manner, they help other persons get familiar with many issues and inspire them to become more forthcoming in taking up new initiatives to improve their social and economic life. It may be mentioned here that two women namely Kalai Selvi and Mahesh have been awarded the National Virtual Academy Fellow for their services to the community's development.

These women feel that that somehow the Centre should be reopened soon not only for the benefit of the younger generation but also for the entire community. These women are able to see the indirect benefits of the Centre to the community in general. Being a member of a SHG, and exposure and association with the VKC, have both enhanced self esteem

of women and has given them confidence that one can earn income to supplement the household income, pointed out Mahesh. They have the confidence to meet a government person if necessity arose.

According to them, apart from children, particularly those coming from poor background, the VKC is of great help to fishermen going for deep sea fishing. It is not like any other NGO. It is prompt in responding to an individual's query or the community's need. In this context, Mahesh mentioned how within a week, the VRC arranged for prawn pickle training programme. Generally, people are confident that if they want to know something or need any clarification they can approach the VKC. Such is the confidence VKC has created among the community, added Mahesh.

## **Fishermen**

The VRC, through the VKCs, has been taking several steps to improve the primary occupation of the rural people whether it is sea-based or land-based. The VKC has played a very crucial role in imparting training on fishing technologies like GPS, FFMA and also in making aware of the schemes/training offered by MPEDA and government departments. The most talked-about training programme for fishermen is GPS followed by hygienic handling of fish. Participating in the training and applying the knowledge has certainly improved the quality of the primary fish catch and increased fishermen's income. We have seen earlier that the VRC organised training programmes on GPS and hygienic handling of fish resources more than two times for Akkaraipettai fishermen. It may be mentioned here that fishermen were not ignorant of GPS device; they were aware of it, and some of them had the device; they used to get GPS from abroad through their



*MPEDA Awareness Programme*

friends and relatives. But they were not aware of various details of using the technology. They did not know the various options available and how to apply them. So the fishermen could not exploit the device to maximise their benefits through it, pointed out some young fishermen.

Now, they are able to use the options available in the GPS. Talking to some fishermen, we got an idea as to how the training has helped the fishermen. We heard some of them mentioning the uses of Point Mark option; it helps to know how far they have travelled into the sea from the shore and by positioning the Point Mark, the fishermen can go to that particular spot again. The signal helps them to recognise that particular area. P.Muruganandam, age 30 years, says the training in GPS helps fishermen keep track of the route and not get lost in



*Akkaraipettai youth with GPS device*

the sea. The knowledge gained through the training has given him the confidence to improve the fish catch and also to avoid certain problems while at sea.

Another person by name N. Kanakaraj, age 40 years, appreciated the programme and says he has gained a lot through it to enhance his catch and avoid certain damages to the boat and net. He had very little knowledge as regards the use of GPS and the purpose it serves. He said, after attending the training, that he understood how to use the GPS. As an example he mentioned, 'There are rocks on the sea bed. The rocks damage the nets and the boats if they hit the rocks. If we know the presence of such a place we POINT MARK it through the GPS and this is shown on the GPS if we happen to be in the vicinity again. This training has helped us preserve our nets, boats and save lives. Now we make use of those methods to fish very easily'.

Ramesh, a 27-year-old boat owner said that he had wanted to use modern fishing devices like GPS for a long time. He had not got the opportunity until MSSRF organised a training programme on GPS. Later, he was fortunate to be selected for a trainers training programme conducted at Chennai. He said he had benefitted a lot personally by using the technology. According to Ramesh, apart from using the device for his economic development, as a trainer he is able to share the knowledge and train fishermen in other villages to use the device. Whenever there is any doubt, the fishermen in his village approach him for help. This is something which gives him a sense of satisfaction, added Ramesh.

Fishermen in general are aware that the MSSRF has played a major role in imparting GPS training to them. Youth like Ramesh, Shivaraj and Arul Mani asserted that the community has benefitted a lot through the VRC and VKC programme. They expressed their gratitude to the MSSRF for introducing MPEDA to fishermen. The training organised to demonstrate the operation of the GPS while fishing at sea was something the participants would never forget. They pointed out that through the training, they learnt to fish with modern fishing devices (like GPS) fixed to the motorboats and realised the importance of GPS in deep sea fishing.

The fishermen also shared with us the benefits and uses of hands-on training on hygienic handling of fish in enhancing the quality of fish and thereby increasing their income. There was a substantial increase in the income of the fishermen after participating in the training. This training is not just helpful in increasing the income of the boat owners but also the income of their labourers. If a boat owner gets one lakh the labourers get a minimum of Rs2000, mentioned one of the fishermen. Shivaraj, age 21 years, a great supporter of the VRC/VKC programme and one of the participants in the hands on training on hygienic handling of fish spoke to us in detail the advantages of this programme for fishermen. He



said that earlier fishermen had not been aware of the correct processing and preservation techniques. They used to preserve the fish in the ice but by the time they could come back to the shore with huge catch of fish they tend to rot. It would not last for more than a day. This was because the fishermen normally failed to freeze the catch in the ice properly. As a result they were forced to sell them at a throwaway price, mentioned one of the men of age around 35 years.

We met few participants who recalled going into two boats to the sea and how the VRC staff and MPEDA explained relevant procedures involved and demonstrated to the participants then and there. We were told how the fishermen never thought about the importance of personal hygienic during processing and preservation of fish. They became aware of certain important things like personal hygiene, to keep the motorboats, the nets and fish landing clean and neat. Shivaraj pointed out to us the benefits of undergoing the training. ‘These days we practice what we learnt in this training. We adopt right preservation techniques to enhance the quality of the catch. The fish catch can be kept for nearly 2–3 days with out getting spoilt. We clean the fish very well and freeze them properly. Our income from the sale of the fish has increased. We feel very happy about it. We also learnt that throwing plastic bags into the sea affects the marine life’.

During the GPS training programme, the fishermen came to know about MPEDA schemes and the necessity of boat registration to avail the schemes. The fishermen at Akkaraipettai were not aware of the fact that registration of their boats was a prerequisite to avail any loan facility from MPEDA. As an outcome of the meeting, around 42 participants registered their boats with MPEDA. Registration of a boat is a lengthy process—getting the application, boat verification by PRECOL, getting a Marine Charted Engineer certificate, giving an undertaking and so on. The VRC was involved in the entire process and helped the fishermen to get their boat registered.



*A facsimile of Certificate given by MPEDA after registration of fishing vessels*

Ramesh and Shivaraj are of the view that if the fishermen at Akkaraipettai are aware of MPEDA and able to improve their fishing techniques and get better income it is because of VRC. Getting the contacts with MPEDA has been possible only because of MSSRF which has been instrumental in introducing the former to the community in Akkaraipettai. ‘MPEDA vai arimugapaduthiadhe MSSRF dhan,’ meaning ‘it is only MSSRF who introduced MPEDA to us’, pointed out Ramesh. Arul Mani and Shivaraj felt sad that the people do not realise the benefits they are getting through the VKC. Many fishermen have undergone training in latest fishing technologies. Participation in the training has definitely improved their earning capacity. Except for a few, others do not know that MSSRF took the initiative and it was instrumental in arranging the training programmes for the fishermen. The youngsters pointed out that people take it for granted and perhaps they were not able to differentiate between a government-conducted training programme and other organisations like MSSRF.

Arul Mani and Shivaraj are glad to mention that atleast some of the fishermen recognise the significant role played by the VRC in training the fishermen in proper handling of GPS. Few *Panchayat* leaders who we met gratefully acknowledged the kind of efforts the VRC has taken to improve the lives of the fishing community. Even SHG leaders and members like Kalai Selvi, Mahesh and SHG Federation leader, Bhagyavathi corroborated this. It is through the training organised by the VRC/VKC that the fishermen came to realise the importance of hygienic handling of fish and improvement of the quality of fishing. Many are using the knowledge they acquired during the meeting and training from MPEDA, PRICOL and NETFISH to use the GPS efficiently and improve the quality of storing of fish. The youth pointed out that TUNA fish which was earlier sold for Rs26 now fetch them more than Rs80. The youngsters also share the information with women folk as to how important it is to handle the fish in a hygienic way. They also make them understand by giving the example of how Sri Lankan fishermen are able to sell fish for higher rate.

The FFMA is another important technology linked to the livelihood of the fishermen introduced to the Akkaraipettai fishermen. We have seen earlier that this particular technology is in the experimental phase and that a few individuals are identified to use the device and give their feed back. Though the device keeps changing hands after certain number of days the user has found it useful for his occupation, increase his income and avoid certain losses. The FFMA gives useful information not only on wave height, wind direction, potential fishing zone but also information on government schemes and other information related to fishermen. This FFMA



has been well received by the fishermen and they have also given feed back for further improvement in the device. One of the fishermen we met mentioned that on one day, based on the information on potential fishing zone displayed on the FFMA he could get a catch worth Rs5000 as against his normal fish catch for Rs2000.

We have given a short case study of one N.Kanakaraj, age 40 years, who had the opportunity to have FFMA with him for stipulated period. He narrates the uses of FFMA as given below:

*'Initially when (15 August 2008) I was given the meenava nanban (Fishermen Friend) telephone I thought the information being sent was ordinary and routine. Later one day I received a message on the meenava nanban telephone saying a sum of Rs10000 was being distributed as relief measures for fishermen affected by the Tsunami. I was surprised when I also received a call on the telephone giving the same details. Then I accessed the Menu provided in it. The rules and regulations to receive the benefits of the schemes were given very clearly. I spread the word about this scheme to my neighbours and my villagers. They all received money through this scheme. As a first installment a sum of Rs6000 was distributed and then when the invoice for the net was given to them the remaining amount of Rs4000 was also given. We would have also got the information from the Director of Fisheries office but they get tired of repeating the message. It is not easy to access information there. We cannot even understand what exactly they are saying. In case many persons happened to go there at a same time they tell only a few of them and they just leave without informing the others; the information through the meenava nanban reaches us very easily. Before venturing into the sea for fishing we always proceed only after ascertaining the height of the waves. If the tides are too high we do not go fishing. On 20 September 2008 when we went to fish the waves were too high, so we decided against going into the sea to fish. The next day, I thought the waves would still be too high. Then I used the meenava nanban to check on this. I accessed the menu regarding the height of the waves and came to know that it would be low. I went to the sea and checked it out myself and the wave height turned out to be low. Since I went to fish that day I made Rs2000. Just as we watch television everyday we check our information through the meenava nanban. The television news is broadcasted only at certain timings, but the meenava nanban is accessible at any time. We thank MSSRF who are of great help to us in many ways'.*

## **Computer Usage, Skill Development and Impact on Students/Children**

Having been set up at a time when the community was yet to return to normal life and as many, including *Panchayat* members, were not very interested in the VKC's activities, it attracted an important section of the population, namely, school children; thanks to the computers. From the very first day until the Centre was closed down (for nonpayment of the electricity bill) they were the regular and major users of the VKC. No doubt, a greater impact is seen on these young people, particularly the males. Interestingly, the community

also recognises this fact because the impact is visible; it has been able to see the positive changes in the school/college students as a result of learning to handle computers. They gave the example of Arasan who had topped the district in the twelfth standard final exams (1065 out of 1200). Arasan has become a household name now. The villagers told us that he has made the entire community feel proud.

‘The computer has always been something inaccessible,’ was the general feeling among the community before the VKC came to the village. Some of them had not heard of computers; many saw the computer for the first time in the VKC. It provided a great opportunity for the students and the youth coming from poor economic backgrounds to learn and strengthen their computer skills. Majority are not in a position to send their children to commercial computer centres, leave alone buying personal computers. It is something which people would remember and talk about for years to come, says Satyavani, one of the volunteers in the initial year of the Centre. ‘People who had never seen a computer earlier and did not have any idea about it, were rendered capable of learning related skills on their own and teach others’ remarked one of the Knowledge Workers’s brothers. He went on to say that the entire community recognises the VKC’s contribution in this. True to his statement many, irrespective of age and sex, felt it (skill development in computer usage) was among the best things that had happened to their village children.

Introducing computers to the villagers has had its great impact. The impact is such that many have developed a sense of attachment to the Centre. Those who started going to the Centre at an early age of 7 to 10 years, continue today to have contacts with the VRC members. As long as the VKC was functional, they regularly used to go to the Centre not just to do their work; they used to go there to assist their Knowledge Workers and to encourage and help the students and others in learning computer skills. If the Knowledge Worker was busy, the boys and sometimes the girls would help the users gain insight from the local web page, write important information/news on notice board, and distribute *Namma Ooru Seidhi* to the community and so on.

### **Improved Academic Performance and Self -Confidence**

We have seen earlier, that VKC used to be packed with children, particularly, when it functioned in the private house. Obviously, the reason for this was computer handling was being taught there. One of the boys, at that time in standard five (he has just completed Tenth standard), when the VKC was set up in his village, recollected that he and other children would go to the VKC everyday, well in advance, and wait for the volunteers to open the Centre. He recalled how they were introduced to the computers through software like Paint and CALP, and later they were given the freedom to learn more about the computers. He continued to say that the volunteers at the Centre were very patient and polite to them, which encouraged them to learn with confidence and interest. He and a few others have been inspired to do MUPP and complete the course successfully.

Curriculum-based programmes like CALP, INTEL and MUPP and skill development in computers furthered the interest in education and supported empowerment and capacity building among the children/students. It has helped them to bring out their potential. In this, CALP is primarily a tool for curriculum-based computer education for children. The lessons are devised in the form of games and presented in the CD format and this helped draw more children towards the Centre. They displayed a great interest in watching CALP CDs, which facilitated understanding and learning abilities among the children. It helped them to understand their lessons and inspired them to do well in their studies. The students, both girls and boys, presently in the age group 10–18 years and who enjoyed and benefitted a lot by this programme, fondly remembered the volunteers who encouraged them to make use of this programme. The Intel programme which was introduced much later had a great impact on the children in promoting creative thinking and to work as a team in proper coordination.

It has been learnt that consequent to CALP and gaining basic computer skills, there has been an overall improvement in the educational/academic performance of the students.

It enhanced their self-confidence and their attitude towards learning lessons changed, mentioned the girls and boys. For Manimaran (age, 15 years) who lost his mother during the Tsunami and his father at an early age, VKC has brought about a tremendous transformation both in his performance in education and personality development. According to himself, he was below average in performance as a student, and did not have any special interest in studies in any subject. But, as he started going to the Centre, he could realise that he



*Manimaran and his elder brother*

is developing interest in studies and his confidence level going up. He mentioned that his grasping level increased as he started to play and learn science, mathematics and Tamil through CALP CDs. He also mentioned that his general knowledge level increased and he could discuss with his friends about general issues. He has developed interest in national and international affairs.

When Satish (age, 15 years) was introduced to the CALP five years ago, he found the programme to be a novel one and easy to learn. Like many children, he was also inspired to study Tamil, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Science with the help of the CDs and tried to work out some lessons. He was pleased to find the programme to be useful to understand his class lessons better and enhance his general knowledge. According to him, 'In school, only the lesson part of the syllabus is taught, whereas in the VKC the syllabus is

taught as an activity-based learning which makes it very interesting. This computer-aided learning programme helps us study without getting tired’.

Soundarya, around 12 years old, had been going to the Centre ever since the Centre had been inaugurated in her village. She stated that participating in the CALP helped her understand her lessons in Science and Mathematics, because of which her performance in her exams/



*Monika and her brother Surendar*

tests improved. Apart from this, she could improve her general knowledge through playing the CDs. She was happy to say that these sessions always prepared her for the forthcoming classes in school. Monika, who is now in the ninth standard, corroborates what Soundarya had said and is thankful to the VKC for giving opportunity even to the girl students to access computers. We heard the students speak highly of the skills of another young school girl by name Bhuvaneswari. As an Intel student, she could display her computer skills and also her

creativity in preparing the project work. Monika also participated in the Intel programme, and her team also prepared a project on Handling Natural Disasters. She felt sad that the students could not exhibit their project once the Centre closed down.

Talking to CALP participants, the general understanding we could get was that this programme has played a crucial role in enhancing their grasping abilities, creating interest towards subjects taught in school, motivating them to improve computer application skills and so on. We heard a rather unusual comment from Vijit, a thirteen-year-old, eighth standard student who was inspired to learn computers when he saw lots of children playing and learning from the CDs. ‘In the CALP CD after I watched *puravin payanam* (Journey of Pigeon) in the Tamil language CD, I learnt all about friends, how to move with them and how one can achieve a lot when we are together as friends’. Also, watching this CD helped him develop a mindset to help others. It helped him become sensitive to others’ feelings and situations. Earlier, he never used to bother much when some one requested him to do some work or help. ‘Now, after watching the *Puravin Payanam* CD I have become quite sensitive to others’ feelings. These days I readily offer my help for people in need. If some old person asks me to get something from a shop I do it with pleasure. Earlier, it never used to occur to me to extend help to others. These days I do it spontaneously’.

## **Skill Development and Empowerment**

Once the children got exposed to computer usage, they were enthused to acquire more computer skills and enhance their knowledge. Students who went to the VKC when

they were six-to-nine-years old have gained knowledge and experience in computer applications. From having learnt basic computer skills, they have now progressed to learning much more advanced applications. Some of them have become very efficient in using computer applications like HTML, digital media, Photoshop, installing new software and creating and designing web page. The youth feel confident that computer knowledge assures a good future for them. The youngsters are very happy that they participated in the MUPP programme and feel proud about getting a certificate on completion of the course. According to Ranjitha, a 16-year-old girl, access to computers has helped and encouraged poor people like her to get computer skills. Prior to setting up of the VKC, she had seen the computers only in the books. She is of the view that irrespective of the field one chooses to study or work, computer knowledge is a must in the present-day scenario. 'It (capacity to operate a computer) offers great scope to get into the job market. For any job, at least a basic knowledge of computers is essential', feels Ranjitha. She has done the MUPP course. She is confident that the computer skills she obtained would be of use to her if she takes up medical line also. She is happy that she has an additional skill. 'Learning to handle computers has raised my self confidence', she added.

Gaining computer knowledge has made a lot of difference in the lives of the youngsters. It has added perceptible value to their lives. It enabled each one to recognise his or her strengths, aptitude and capabilities. They have been able to identify and decide their future course of action. They could decide independently and with clarity in choosing their special subjects in 10+2. Testimonials of the persons who have availed the opportunity to gain computer skills would throw light on the kind of impact it had created on them. Arasan, son of a daily wage labourer, became quite well known among the community and in his school much before he secured the first rank in his twelfth standard at the district level. He gained recognition when, at the age of 12 years, he developed a web page on his own, welcoming the then President of India Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam on his visit to the Centre. It was a moment of great pride for him when the President shook his hand and encouraged him to do well and study further. He was very happy when his name appeared in the local newspapers and the Head Master of his school, his teachers and friends congratulated him. This has motivated Arasan to train better in computer skills. He was in the eighth standard when he took hold of the computer mouse for the first time. He affirmed, 'I never even knew how to hold the mouse properly. Seeing that, the volunteer held my hand and helped me to draw using Paint. Starting from Paint, I have gone on to learn CALP, Windows, Basic MS Office, Browsing, Internet, Animation, Photoshop, Page maker, Nero software, CD writing, HTML, C, C++, Star office, Printing, Tamil and English typing. Not only I can send emails, exchange information, search the net, but I can also create new web pages. I can update the website and add new tools to the website I take great pride in saying that the credit for all this goes to the VRC/VKC programme conducted by MSSRF in our village'. Arasan humbly says, 'There was a time when I used to be scared of sitting in front of a computer, but now because of the VKC, the confidence I have gained motivated me to

take computer group in my higher secondary school, and I am very pleased to say that I am doing my Engineering course in one of the best educational institutes in Chennai. The credit for all this goes to the VRC/VKC programme in our village. I am grateful to each one of them who encouraged and supported me throughout. More importantly, the Centre has helped me and others learn a lot without the tension of having to spend money and learn within a timeframe'. Arasan became a role model for others and inspired them to develop their computer skill applications and take interest in their studies.

Development of skills in computer usage has helped many recognise their potential and build up capacity. Raju, as a school student never gave importance to his studies. He took it very lightly. But his regular visits to the VKC and gaining computer knowledge changed him immensely. He began to show interest in his studies. After completing the tenth standard, he was inspired to take Accounts group in eleventh standard, in which computer science formed one of the subjects. He proudly said that he taught computers to his classmates when he was in the eleventh and twelfth standards. 'It gave me confidence that I can do something. The feeling that I know one subject well gave me a great mental strength. When others used to ask doubts, I used to feel proud and happy to be able to clear their doubts. I was encouraged to learn more and strengthen my skills. I learnt about Internet from the VKC and I could teach my friends. I always think that had I not visited the VKC, I could never have learnt to apply computers'.

We got an opportunity to meet a boy studying in the eleventh standard. Coming from a humble background, he had never seen a computer nor heard about it before he saw one in the VKC. He did not think that he would take computer group in his 10+2 course (Higher Secondary School). As a student of CALP, he found he was developing interest in his studies. He was impressed with his own improvement in grasping the lessons and his ability to pick up computer basic lessons. He was very glad to share with us that when he was in eighth standard he completed the MUPP course and got a certificate. He stated 'I consider getting a certificate at a young age a big achievement. In order to strengthen my computer skills and know more about it I took Computer Group in my 10 +2 course'. He said that he was able understand computer lessons without any difficulty and that he was now in a position to help his classmates with the lessons. It might not have been possible for him to reach this level had he not had the opportunity of learning about computers at the VKC. He added, 'My parents would not have been able to send me to a commercial computer institute because of our economic condition'.

As a young boy of ten years, Manimaran learnt to use the computers with the software Paint. Today he has gained computer knowledge which has boosted his morale; his academic performance has improved significantly; he can use the Internet, download articles for his educational growth. He has decided to take up computer group in the twelfth standard. Now he is quite well versed in using MS Office, FrontPage and Photoshop. He said that the VKC has given him the knowledge that is useful in income-generation. He has become



confident that he can earn money through banner designing. He is aware of e-business and says that one can widen one's knowledge base by accessing Internet. He wants to improve his computer skills and expressed his desire to learn about Operating Systems (OS) related to computer hardware.

Youngsters have learnt to use Internet Explorer. They proudly pointed out that they can also type in Tamil and English. The youth are aware of the potential of the Internet in education and communication. The youth and the students are able to update themselves with useful information using the Internet facility available out side the village. They have learnt to download and upload information. A few of these youngsters have acquired knowledge related to hardware and are good in installing Mother Board, fixing important components like the RAM, or the Processor in the mother board. Their help is sought when a new computer is to be installed like in the village school. A few like Raju and Surender have been inspired to buy their own personal computers.

It was interesting to know that school teachers in Akkaraipettai were given training in computers by the school students who learnt from the VKC. Arasan taught in computer classes for school students at the time when he himself was a student in that school. The youngsters were proud to say that when the school got a new computer, they helped in installing the Mother Board and OS. A few necessary software were also installed. Raju was glad that he could help his relatives and friends if there is anything to be done using computers. He helped his cousin in her college project work in drawing Flow Charts, designing and page setting. He downloaded important articles for her.

### **Appreciating Capabilities of Peers**

It emerged very clearly that these youngsters has been looked upon the VKC with deference. We were impressed by the manner in which youngsters appreciated the capabilities of one another. No doubt Arasan topped all others. Talking individually with some boys and few girls below 15 years of age, we could assess to an extent the outreach of the skill development in computers among the children. It was refreshing to note that each one of them made references to 5–6 other persons (most of them coming from poor economic background) having no idea about computers till they saw it in the VKC are very good in using the computer applications.

According to Satish, the VKC had played a very critical role in the capacity building of the school children and the youth through skill development in computers. Satish mentioned names of such students (Arun Kumar, in the seventh standard; Sakthi Kumar and Vijay, in the eighth standard; Manimaran, in the tenth standard; Gopal and Saran, in the eleventh standard and Sukumar, in the twelfth standard) who are exceptionally good in computers. He pointed out that due to the presence of the VKC persons like Sukumar could enhance his computer skills and learn languages like C+ and C++. During our discussion, Satish

made particular reference to Arun Kumar's competence in computer skills. He was full of praise for the small boy Arun Kumar who went to the VKC as a third standard student. He said, 'Arun Kumar knows as much as I (Satish) did about the computers'. We were told that the boy, now studying in the seventh class, was very good with MS Office, HTML, Digital Media, Photoshop and Flash; he could also install new software. 'Coming from a fishing community, if we have been able to develop to this level it is undoubtedly due to the VKC', acknowledged Satish. He felt sad that boys and girls younger to him would be deprived of this if the VKC was not going to continue to function in his village.

It may be of interest to point out here about Manimaran's overall improvement from the point of view of Surender, a twelfth standard student. While discussing with Surender about the utility of the Centre, we heard him say that in rural areas where a majority cannot access computers and other important information something like the facility of VKC has a great role to play in improving the lives of the people in general, and particularly, the students, to open up. In this context, he spoke about Manimaran who resides in the street next to his. He said he had known Manimaran as a timid boy, not exhibiting much interest in his studies. He said that there had been a marked improvement in his studies and also in his personality. We could infer that Surender himself could not believe it when he heard that Manimaran was getting good marks in Science and Mathematics and also to know that his English had improved considerably. Surender was very happy to mention that Manimaran had told him that he would secure more than 400 marks (out of 500) in his tenth standard. The former attributed the positive change it has brought about on Manimaran to the VKC. He added, '...there are many others like Manimaran but at that moment I can only remember this boy who resides in the next street'.

## **Sense of Gratitude**

It was quite common to hear from the youngsters that they are indebted to the VKC for their personal and educational development. One of the college students mentioned, 'The VKC influenced my decision to take a computer-based course as I got my knowledge of computers from there only. Students in the college come to me to get their doubts cleared regarding their computer lessons. It gives me a great sense of satisfaction and happiness when I clarify their doubts. The extent of the knowledge I gained there is such that today I am able to teach others using that knowledge. Hence I try whenever possible to be of some service to the VKC'. Arasan echoed the above statements somewhat, 'I am forever indebted to the MSSRF for giving me such an opportunity to develop my computer skills and also to share the knowledge I gained and teach others. I will try to teach whatever skills I learnt to my fellow villagers. Wherever I go, I am determined that the knowledge I gained free of cost should be given free of cost to others. I used to be very timid and lacked direction. It will not be an exaggeration if I say that the VKC has transformed my life. I wish that this programme would groom more students like me and grow in stature by providing more unique opportunities'.

During one of our visits to the village (when the Centre functioning in the TATA building) we met a group of boys in the age group of 9–14 years in the VKC itself. We attempted to talk to them to know about their perception of the VKC. Though initially hesitated, later they interacted freely and responded spontaneously when we had a question or a doubt. They expressed their special gratitude to the Centre for offering computer education. They mentioned that apart from computer lessons, Knowledge Workers used to give them important information and encourage students to expand their knowledge base. The youngsters mentioned that the children were treated well here. It was nice to hear from them the various uses of the Centre to the community. They categorised and explained the services and activities of the VKC in the same manner that a Knowledge Worker or a VKC staff would explain to a visitor. They said they encouraged others to participate in VKC activities. They also added that, ‘people in the village may not be able to tell you clearly about the uses but surely by and large the community as a whole has been benefitting’.

VKC provided a great scope for children, youth and the Knowledge Workers to discuss about issues related to their village, computer lessons and general knowledge. One of the boys mentioned that the VKC was a place that encouraged a person to think clearly and independently. It provided a common platform for students to discuss about their class lessons/computers. Thus, the Centre promoted interactive learning among the peers and helped build friendships. If they had any doubt, they would approach Arasan for help. We heard from several persons including the Knowledge Workers that Arasan has helped many to create a Web Page and e-mail ID. In the discussion, even the Knowledge Workers used to take active part. One of the Knowledge Workers, Nitya, said that they used to discuss about DOS command, new software etc. In order to improve English vocabulary they used to find meaning for dictionary words. Satish and others said they got many friends now because VKC provided chances to move with many people. Some of the boys and girls mentioned that coming to the Centre and participating in its activities have made them overcome their inhibitions.

The young girls and boys fondly remembered the volunteers/Knowledge Workers who were very patient and taught computer lessons and provided other information in such a way that it could be understood by the children, young, old and women alike. A boy mentioned that volunteers looking at the local database provided useful information about health and cookery which he, in turn, passed on to his mother. He continued to say, ‘I am extremely happy that this Centre has been very beneficial to my studies. I will strive to make this centre a permanent fixture in our village’. Another girl stated that she used to give information on weather reports, height of tidal waves, areas rich in fish to her father who used to find it useful while fishing in the boats. The youngsters expressed their admiration for the Knowledge Workers commitment to their work. Looking at the Knowledge Workers working with great dedication and being service-oriented, one young school-going girl said that she was eager to emulate them in future. She conveyed her gratitude to MSSRF

for giving them the opportunity to learn to handle computers and the community with important information and training to improve their lives.

It is heartening to know that it is not just the computer skills the boys and girls have attained through the VKC; it has motivated them to take up responsibilities spontaneously and to work for the community. They volunteered their services to the VKC. Having realised that the VKC cannot be managed by one or two Knowledge Workers, the young boys, particularly Arasan, Sabari, Manimaran and Raju used to help those coming to the Centre to give the computer lessons, in teaching newcomers, clearing a doubt or assisting someone in their college or school work, by providing any particular information from a local database and sometimes announcing important information through PAS to the community and so on. Raju and the others used to help the Centre in giving MS Office and CALP classes. The boys used to help a new Knowledge Worker with computers and handling the users.

The Knowledge Workers and the staff of the VRC mentioned to us that the youngsters used to help the Centre during any function or in mobilising people or helping the Knowledge Worker. It was nice to know that students were coming forward on their own to serve the community through the VKC. They have been very helpful in mobilising people for eye camp and other VKC-related programmes. One of them, aged around 15 years, has spontaneously taken up the responsibility of distributing the local newsletter *Namma Ooru Seidhi*. He has been doing this for the past three years. That he has done a good job in this was evident when many turned out to participate in *vasagar vattam* or readers' meet of the newsletter organised by the VRC to get their feedback mentioned one of the staff of the VRC.

## **Youth**

The youth at Akkaraipettai have been a major force who played a significant role in the VKC programme. The VRC staff were fortunate to get acquainted with some of the youth who gradually developed a great bond with the VRC/VKC related work; they have been a great source of support and help to the staff in handling the various situations and reaching the programme to the community. These youngsters became so involved with the development of VKC that they used to spend a lot of time with the MSSRF staff in assisting them in mobilising people, organising and conducting awareness programmes, health camps, training for fisherwomen and men and so on. Whenever a meeting had to be organised with the *Panchayat* who were also the boundary partners of MSSRF, the latter always sought the help of the youth. The sincerity and the commitment displayed by the MSSRF staff to reach the community and to implement VRC/VKC programme effectively seemed to have had immense impact on the youth and also the Knowledge Workers. Participating in VKC's activities along with the staff influenced the youngsters to a large extent to commit themselves to the programme. Within a few days of getting to know the MSSRF staff, Ramesh was inspired to actively get involved with the Centre's activities. He was one

among the earliest two to become the volunteers of the VKC, the other being Satyavani, a young married woman.

The youth were happy to point out that the VKC contributed for their social and economic empowerment. Being associated with the VKC, the youth were encouraged to learn computers. Ramesh and Arul Mani who took to their traditional occupation of fishing before completing their tenth and eighth standard school education learnt and developed their computer skills. Skill development in computers was something that these young men had not even dreamt of acquiring. Now they are in a position to teach others. They were not aware of their capabilities and abilities. It has helped them to bring out their potentials. Ramesh did not know anything about the computers. When he sat before the computer for the first time he felt very happy. He soon learnt the skills and became very proficient in Photoshop. He became a master trainer. In the following section, we will be mentioning briefly about his skill development in computers and how it contributed for his social and economic empowerment. Another young man, namely Chakravarthi, equipped himself with various computer applications and is earning a good salary using the skill gained. At present, he is working in one of the software companies in another state. Another young man, Jeevanandam, who had knowledge of computers strengthened his skills; he served as an animator of MSSRF and took MUPP classes for the village people. He is presently working in a foreign country.

The youth who are practicing deep-sea fishing pointed out that the training programmes conducted by the VRC/VKC for the fishermen like in GPS handling and hygienic handling of fish have contributed for their knowledge empowerment and economic improvement. They stated that they have come to realise that information empowerment and application of the information/knowledge are very important in any field. They feel indebted to the VKC for enlightening them on various aspects.

The youth have gained confidence to approach government offices and departments due to their constant association with the VRC/VKC programme. It has enhanced their self-esteem. The youth sometimes accompany the VRC staff to District Collector's office or any organisation to arrange for a programme or get some details for the VKC. One of the youth asserted that earlier he would avoid meeting or getting into contact with any officer. But now he feels quite comfortable going to any government office to obtain information or in connection with anything else. He and his friends have built up a good rapport with the government offices and also their contacts widened. The VRC/VKC programme also introduced them to persons working in other projects funded by international funding agencies. One of them was proud to say that he taught Photoshop to a person working for an international project, and the latter calls him affectionately as, *guru*, meaning teacher. Ramesh mentioned proudly that though he has studied only up to tenth standard he was able to get jobs for few graduates. When one of his friends and also a relative lost a job in

a software company, with the help of the VRC, Ramesh could find a job for the latter for a reasonable salary near the village itself.

Involvement in the process of the development of the VKC and working for the reach of the programme has had positive impact on some individuals in terms of their behaviour, social outlook and overall personality development. It was also nice to learn the kind of transformation the Centre has brought on certain individuals. They youth were happy to mention that they have gained recognition among the community particularly among the *Panchayat*. We were told that some villagers raised their eyebrows in disbelief when they noticed the changes in the attitude of few youngsters like Ramesh and Shivaraj. The villagers were not able to believe themselves the kind of change they observed among them and their friends. In the course of our

discussion, Bala recalled how the villagers looking at Ramesh going with him asked him, '*ivanai eppadi mathineenga*', meaning 'how did you manage to change him?' It seems Ramesh used to show little interest in the village activities. As he himself expressed, he used to be very ordinary thinking person and he used to confine himself to his friends group, but today he is completely a new person. He became a totally changed person after he began to participate in the VKC programme. He has



*Ramesh and Shivaraj*

been inspired to take interest in community-related activities and became conscious of his social responsibilities. The villagers were happy to see Ramesh becoming concerned about the villagers' well being. So also his friend Shivaraj; he too gained the appreciation of the villagers when they noticed positive changes in his behaviour. Close association with Ramesh had tremendous influence on his friend Shivaraj too who otherwise used to be a materialistic person and very calculative. It is worth mentioning here that Ramesh who has been a source of inspiration to many of his friends has been awarded NVA Fellow for his contribution for the overall development of the village. 'After getting the award', he said, 'I have become more conscious of my responsibilities towards our village development'. The young men like Ramesh, Shivaraj and Arul Mani even today offer their support and time whenever there is any need for mobilising people or conducting programmes.

The youth have been the main contact persons for the VRC whenever a training programme or health camp is organised or whenever a meeting has to be arranged with the *Panchayat*. Since the youth have been able to appreciate the concept of the Knowledge Centre and its uses for the development of the community as a whole they were concerned that the people should make use of the services and participate in the activities. They sometimes would

miss going to deep-sea fishing if any VRC programme is to be organised or conducted in the village. It is said that the youth give their boats free whenever training is organised in the deep sea. They pointed out that this is the only way they can express their gratitude to the VRC for taking efforts to improve the socio-economic life of the fishing community in Akkaraipettai. The youth along with the Knowledge Workers took active part in organising eye camps in the village. When some of the villagers could not afford to buy spectacles the youth arranged for free spectacles through the local Lions Club. The youth also provided monetary assistance. During the camp, a few of the village women and men were diagnosed having complications; they were referred to the main hospital of Sankara Nethralaya at Chennai. Since the villagers were not familiar with Chennai, Shivaraj took them and brought them back to the village after the completion of the treatment. And on another occasion Shivaraj's friend took two teenaged boys and girl and a young woman to Chennai for treatment to rectify the squint in their eyes.

The youth were of great source of motivation to the students and the Knowledge Workers. Roopa and Nitya (the Knowledge Workers) pointed out that the youth group was great source of motivation to them. When Arul Mani was away for more than a year working abroad he frequently used to call the Knowledge Workers at the Centre to keep himself updated with Centre's activities. He would also keep reminding the Knowledge Workers of their role in helping the community through the Centre. 'Similarly', said Nitya, 'Ramesh is a great source of strength to us. He would visit the Centre during his leisure and enquire about the progress and encourage the Knowledge Workers to do their best to reach people'. It was heartening to know that like Arul Mani when he was abroad, Chakravarthi and Jeevanandam are in touch with the VRC staff and their friends at Akkaraipettai; they were upset to know about the latest developments and closing down the VKC. When the VKC had been functioning in the village they kept motivating the Knowledge Workers and other youngsters to improve the Centre and motivate the villagers to make best use of it. They used to call the VKC at least once a week and would enquire about the activities of the Centre.

It is heartening to mention here that parents of school/college students seek the help of the youth to guide their children in their higher studies. On some occasions, the parents request the youth to counsel their children who lack motivation to study well. The youth's opinion gets higher priority when decisions are taken about their children. Another interesting thing we learnt during our field work is that even the teacher request the youth to be present during parent-teachers' meet. It is interesting to know that the youth who lacked direction and wasted their time earlier today are in a position to give direction to others. The youth humbly submit that it is all due to their exposure to many issues through the VRC/VKC programme. They mentioned that they realise now that being aware of something itself gives confidence and encourage them knowing more and putting the knowledge into use. It is a matter of great pride for the youth because the villagers in general feel that the former

are well informed and can be depended upon if any need arises. 'Most importantly, we have gained recognition among the *Panchayat* which is something great', mentioned the youth.

We were very much pleased to know that the young men are role models who could inspire some of the women to open up and take part in the VKC activities to improve themselves. We have seen that awareness-creation programmes were regularly conducted to explain the VKC concept and promote the participation of the villagers in the activities. In some of the meetings the youth, as users of the VKC, used to talk about the advantages of VKC and how it had helped them to improve their general perceptions, attitude and could earn money using their computer skills learnt from the Centre. One of the women made a particular mention of Ramesh who created great impact on her. The woman mentioned that she was highly inspired after she heard him narrating his overall development that happened because of his association and participation with the Centre's activities. It gave her confidence that she can improve herself like Ramesh. She participated in the microeconomic enterprise training and presently earning reasonably well through selling prawn pickles and phenol. She has also been one of the women who helped in mobilising people when ever VRC/VKC conducts any programme in the village or to participate in videoconferencing in the VRC.

The youth felt that they should form a group so that they will be able to carry out activities in an organised and effective manner. Looking at the high motivational levels of the youth the VRC facilitated to form a youth group with men sharing common sentiments. Akkaraipettai youth group is introduced to another youth club functioning in another VKC village namely Agalankan. The latter group is in the forefront of the many activities of the village and they are the boundary partners of VKC programme in Agalankan. The youth from Akkaraipettai has highly been inspired after they visited Agalankan village; they want to do their best to promote the social and economic lives of the fishing community.

### **Volunteers/Knowledge Workers**

Volunteers/Knowledge Workers enjoyed their work at the VKC whether it was for three months or for one year. We could meet almost all of them; we could see from their expression they still greatly value their association with the VKC. They were a committed lot and rendered their services true to the designation as volunteers. One of the women volunteers said that working for the Centre gave her lot of pleasure and a sense of fulfillment; she did not expect any monetary benefits for her services. Knowledge Workers, who joined the VKC after the first batch of the volunteers, were quite contented with cash remuneration they received for managing the VKC. 'The remuneration may be less but nothing can be compared to the inner satisfaction one gets while working at the VKC. It is satisfying and interesting to work for the community' mentioned Roopa.

While the volunteers/Knowledge Workers were pleased to work for the VKC they also acknowledged the positive impact it created on them. Persons like Ramesh and Satyavani



did not think they would be able to operate computers. They were encouraged by the VRC staff to learn and develop their computer skills. Both have participated in the MUPP and got their certificate. Satyavani who had seen the computers only in the shops feels great that she got an opportunity to teach computers to her village children, housewives and the preschool teachers. She still treasures and preserves her computer notes. She is confident that this computer knowledge will be of use to her; it will help her earn higher income. We have seen earlier that she and her husband provided all the necessary support when the VRC/VKC programme was launched in Akkaraipettai.

Ramesh was able to acquire and apply efficiently various computer skills with ease. With the staff encouragement he learnt basic computer knowledge and as the days went by he developed great interest in computers and felt he should achieve something in life. He enhanced his computer skills. He became so proficient in Photoshop that within six months of the Centre's inception he could design digital boards for weddings and other functions. He was very happy to say that within three months he could earn Rs10,000. When everything



*Ramesh downloading weather information in VKC in TATA Community Building*

was uncertain (in the post-Tsunami period) as to when they were going to resume their fishing activity, this knowledge made him feel secure about his future. He was inspired to learn DTP on his own and to do DCA course. He was proud to say that he taught his teachers who took DCA classes for him. He has the credit of being the designer of the first page of the Tamil newsletter of Nagapattinam edition, *Namma Ooru Seidhi*. When he was apprehensive, the staff instilled the confidence in him that he would do the job well. It was a great experience for him. It took nearly four to five hours to

complete the work. He says he was not aware of his potential; He said that he was not able believe even now how he could achieve this. He added, 'I am deeply indebted to the VKC. It is not just the computer knowledge there are so many other things which I learnt from the VKC/VRC. If not for my association with the programme I would have been like any other fishermen of my village. It has earned me a special place among the people of my community'. Ramesh is very happy that he is able to understand English now; his cousin would ask him to check her mail and convey the message to her. He has taught his younger sister who is timid in nature and studying B.Com to check mail, to browse net, to download and so on using his cell phone. He also helps his relatives to apply for jobs and get application forms for entrance exams online. Among his relatives he has earned a good name and they look for his guidance in matters related to their children's education and employment.

The volunteers/Knowledge Workers who already had some knowledge of computers before they became volunteers of the Centre were able to improve their skills. (Akila and Menaka had taken Computer Science in their 10+2, Bhavya and Roopa had done DTP course while Nitya had done DCA). They are glad that in addition to strengthening their existing computer skills the Centre provided opportunity to learn new software like Front Page, Flash, and Photoshop. Interestingly, these young girls encouraged by their friends (serving as VKC volunteers) at the VKC went to the Centre as users with a purpose to practice their computer lessons and very soon they were motivated to serve as Knowledge Workers.

Some of the Knowledge Workers were humble when they said that after coming to the Centre they began to appreciate the importance of information/knowledge dissemination and empowerment. Bhavya who went to the VKC to practice her computer lessons as a user later joined as a volunteer realised that formal education alone is not sufficient to know everything and one could learn through informal methods also. She admitted that while working at the Centre, she had come to understand the significance of information empowerment for the people. Punitha who was a volunteer just for three months was frank enough to admit that she was not aware of the importance of reading a newspaper until she started going to the VKC. She realised its importance when she had to write daily on the notice board important news and information.

Bhavya is grateful to the VKC because it has helped her to improve her communication skills and how to interact with the people; it is helping her in various ways. After serving the VKC for one year she took up a job as data entry operator to work in a TNPSC project carried out by the District Administration. After completion of the project, she chose to work as a Knowledge Worker for six months before she got a job in a school as a computer teacher in a primary school. When she was working as a data entry operator she could do her job quite efficiently. It helped her in generating data, to contact governments departments, and so on. She recalled how as a volunteer of the VKC she was encouraged to contact government offices to collect information on schemes and other details needed for the local community. In her present job, as a teacher in a *Panchayat* Union Elementary school her experiences with CALP students at the VKC prove useful to approach and handle her class students well. Her typing knowledge in Tamil helped her with her work in school. The computer knowledge she gained through the VKC helped her progress in a way that, today, she can handle computer classes for fifth standard students. This has made her very happy. She said, 'I am happy to say that I have benefitted a lot, and, through me, many others have benefitted'.



Bhavya

Though Punitha was a volunteer for a short time, it seemed to have had great impact on her. She is thankful to the VKC for it was there she learnt to operate computers. She had seen a computer in one of her relative's houses but did not think she would be able to work on it soon. She is quite good in MS Office and Photoshop. It was here she learnt Tamil typing in the system. She feels that MUPP certificate would be useful in the development of her career. She mentioned that her knowledge in Tamil typing has



*Menaka in her house*

earned a good name from the school where she is presently working and her colleagues appreciate her for her work. For Nitya, presently who works as a Business Facilitator in a Bank her experience in mobilising people for the VKC is useful in handling the Bank customers. She helps in typing work and formatting typed document. She is a diploma holder in computers. Her work at the VKC enabled her to strengthen her skills. She has come to know more about the system. She said that her heart was in the VKC, but like Roopa she could not continue her services as she got married

When we asked Menaka how she the Centre contributed for her personality development she said, 'I have gained the ability to manage a Centre. I could manage the visitors. Managing the children was a good experience. This has given me the confidence that I can manage if I start something on my own. I have progressed well. I have got good friends'. She continued to say that she could improve her skills in computer application. She learnt to access net and download. She has realised that teaching is not easy. While teaching computers to others she learnt so much in the process. It has been easy for her to grasp the lessons in the college. She could easily pick up the minor details of the computer lessons and work on the computers. She acknowledged, 'It is very useful in my studies. I owe a lot to the Centre. It is the VKC which has inspired me to take BE in Computer Science'. Manju said she felt very proud other computer institutes like Man Power talk high of services provided by the VKC particularly in the field of education.

Nitya was a reserved person before she joined the VKC as a Knowledge Worker. She gained confidence to talk to people without hesitation. She recalled that the VRC staff like Velvizhi and Balakumar used to give lot of importance to the Knowledge Worker; they always used to stress that the Knowledge Worker should take a lead in organising the programmes in the village. Velvizhi would encourage the latter to share information /experiences among the Knowledge Workers from different Centres and conduct interviews with the users. 'Personally', said Menaka, 'I have benefitted greatly by the Centre. I have been able to interact with many people. I have gained confidence and clarity in my thinking and action'. She says



*Nitya*

When Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam visited the Centre Akila had the opportunity to interact with him. She said, ‘It was a great moment when the President of India talked to me and praised us for our good work. The whole village saw Dr Kalam talking to me. My college friends saw it in the TV. It was a great feeling’. Apart from strengthening her computer skills, Akila developed good contacts with the villagers and learnt how to conduct oneself in a formal meeting/gathering. She mentioned when the President of India visited the Centre she was given orientation as to how to conduct herself—the way she should stand and talk with the president. VKC used to have lot of visitors and it was nice sharing with them about the Centre’s activities. Menaka pointed out, ‘I cannot forget my life as a



*Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam talking to Akila*

volunteer of the VKC. I could improve my communication skills. We used to have lot of visitors. With my little knowledge I could explain to them about the Centre’s activities. I was happy when they appreciated our work’.

Bhavya displayed a sense of ownership towards the VKC. She used to go to the Centre during her lunch time (in the school) as she has developed some attachment towards the Centre. She said that she feels, ‘the VKC is ours’. Roopa said she used to take the help of Bhavya whenever she had doubts. Bhavya explained to her about down loading wave height information. Punitha could do her services for three months as she had to go to college for her degree course. But these three months proved useful for Punitha who values her association with the VKC. She used to visit the Centre after her college hours. She assisted the volunteers to manage the children, to be an invigilator when the MUPP exams were conducted and so on. ‘Time just flies off when you are with the children. It is a wonderful experience to be with the children’, says Punitha. Akila did not find it difficult to work at the VKC even though she had to attend to lot of household work and go to college.

It was because she enjoyed her work at the VKC. It gave her a sense of mental satisfaction. She said her father was very supportive and never used to object to her coming late home from the Centre. She said her father thinks that he is too old to learn computers but shows a lot of interest in the Centre's activities as it is beneficial to the community. She used to go to the Centre when ever she found time. She mentioned that she had visited the Centre to align her project work. Akila hoped that the Centre would soon be able resume it services to the community. Menaka felt sad about the Centre being closed. As we were preparing to leave her house she requested the VRC not to shift Knowledge Centre from Akkaraipettai.

The volunteers were unanimous when they said that they were happy about the opportunity they got through the VKC to teach their village women to read and write. Most of them said it was a memorable experience. Ramesh, Menaka, Akila, Bhavya, Roopa and Nitya were happy that they were part of the ALP conducted at the VKC. They were happy to see a lot of improvement in the ALP participants learning abilities. When the women had come they came knowing nothing even the alphabets, mentioned the volunteers. According to Akila and others, teaching adult women older to them gave them a sense of immense satisfaction. 'I enjoyed teaching the women through the CDs. They also enjoyed. It gave me a lot satisfaction and happiness to teach women who were like my older sisters', stated Akila.

While talking to the volunteers/Knowledge Workers, it was interesting to observe the kind of mutual respect and appreciation they had for one another. Manju spoke high of the mobilising skills of Nitya and Roopa and encouraging the women SHG members to participate in VKC activities, in mobilising the villagers to make use of the eye camp etc. Because of the persistent efforts of the Knowledge Workers the women showed interest in ALP, added Manju. She continued to say that more women should have come forward to learn computers since it was freely available.

Most of the volunteers/Knowledge Workers pointed out that the VKC gave opportunity to mingle with people and develop good contacts. Mobilising the community to participate in the Centre's programme gave them a lot of exposure to move with the villagers and to know the village better. It helped them to widen their friends circle and they were pleased to mention that they still have contacts with their friends.

The Knowledge Workers' services to the village through the VKC have gained recognition among the community. Barring one or two the others contribution to the community is remembered by the VRC staff and the users of the VKC. Satyavani, Ramesh and Mekala who were the volunteers for nearly eight to nine months since the inception of the VKC are still fondly remembered by the students and others. We have seen in the preceding pages that the social stature of Ramesh has improved significantly and the community respects him for his interest in the general welfare of the village. Women who participated in the ALP fondly recall the way Akila, Bhavya, Nitya, and Roopa took interest and efforts to

mobilise women and encouraged them to join ALP. Nitya and Roopa, who were Knowledge Workers when the Centre was functioning in the Sastra Building and for some months in the TATA Community Hall are remembered by the SHG members. These two young girls played a major role in mobilising the SHG members. They would attend all the SHG/Federation to explain about the VKC programme. Some women also mentioned that due to the encouragement of Nitya and Roopa they were able to make use of the eye camp to get their eyes tested and treated. Looking at their (Knowledge Workers’) active participation during the eye camps and other programmes the village women and men openly appreciated and congratulated them. The self-esteem of Knowledge Workers was enhanced when the community recognised them. One of the Knowledge Workers mentioned that she and her friend had a good feeling when they heard some villagers commenting positively during one of the eye camps, ‘It is nice to see our girls working like this’. They feel happy when some of the *Panchayat* members recognise them and enquire about their well being if happened to meet each other on any occasion in the village. When we met Nitya and Roopa in the VKC they were enthusiastic and had lot of plans to strengthen the activities and reach more people. But they could not continue their services as they got married.

The volunteers /Knowledge Workers at the VKC worked with great dedication and were very service oriented. They have been a source inspiration to children and students. Their efficiency and sincerity in managing the Centre and carrying out its activities have been well recognised by their counterparts from other VKCs in the district. They excelled in mobilising the community and organising programmes. It was pointed out that these young Knowledge Workers used to take interest in preparing action plan for their Centre and were very efficient in executing them. They were also able to articulate well and share their experiences in monthly Knowledge Workers meetings. This inspired others from different VKCs to develop interest and improve their capacity to work for the community. It was mentioned by one of the VRC staff that whenever a new Knowledge Worker was appointed to any other Centre he/she used to be sent to the Akkaraipettai VKC to get clarity of the concept, activities and functioning of the VKC and get oriented to work for the community. VRC found the strategy adopted by Nitya and Roopa as one of the best methods to mobilise women. We have mentioned earlier that by participating in the SHG meetings these Knowledge Workers created awareness of the programme and motivated the SHG women to make use of the services available at the Centre for their personal as well as their respective households’ socio-economic development. This proved very successful in reaching more people; so, the VRC guides the Knowledge Workers from other VKCs to follow similar approach to reach out more people and find out their needs.



*Knowledge Workers monthly meeting in VRC*

## Tribute to VRC Staff

The youth and the Knowledge Workers paid great tributes to the VRC staff for their perseverance, commitment and interest in their work. Few of them were visibly moved when they recalled contributions of the staff to the growth of the VRC in Akkaraipettai against many challenges. The youth and the Knowledge Workers looked upon them as their role models. They were inspired by their attitude and dedication towards their (staff) work.

According to Satyavani, the volunteers were motivated to work with involvement because they have always been guided and supported by the dedicated staff of MSSRF. She mentioned that the staff were keen that the programme should reach a greater audience. They always emphasised that the Knowledge Workers should have clarity of the concept because they are the bridge between the community and the VRC and motivated them to work with full involvement. She also mentioned that the VRC staff kept reminding the responsibilities of the Knowledge Workers in a very nice way. According to Satyavani, the point often stressed by the staff to them was, '*Nama thelivu adainthal pathadhu. marravargalum thelivu adaiyanum enbargal VRC staff*' ( 'VRC staff always used to emphasis that it is not sufficient if we alone have the clarity others also should get that').

Knowledge Workers and those who were involved in the initial year and also the following years like Nitya were full of praise and appreciation for the kind of work Balakumar did among the community and his contribution for the development of the Centre. He was dedicated to the work and had great tolerance. 'We are very lucky to have such wonderful persons from the MSSRF. They are real gift to us (*engalakku kidaiitha adirshtam*)' said Arasan and Raju. 'Because of our association with Bala Sir and Madam (Vel Vizhi) we have become sensitive to the various issues of our society. Madam always gives importance to the Knowledge Workers and makes us feel important. If there is any programme she would make us take a lead in organising it and talking about it to the community', mentioned one of the Knowledge Workers. 'The staff interacted with us as like local persons. They are very friendly', mentioned the youth. We may mention here that the volunteers and Knowledge Workers value their association with the VRC staff that they keep in touch with them even today.

The youth, the Knowledge Workers and others were all praise for the VRC staff who said they were fortunate to have them. They mentioned that the staff looked ordinary but as they started moving with them they came to realise their commitment to the work. The youth admired the way Balakumar approached and handled the young and old and most importantly the village *Panchayat*. 'Meeting the twenty-four members of the *Panchayat* and talking to them is not easy. Any one in his place would definitely have found it difficult' stated the young men and the Knowledge Workers. Sivaraj and Ramesh expressed their

gratitude to Balakumar. They said ‘...it is because of his association our outlook towards the world has changed. We had never shown interest in the affairs of our village before’. They added, ‘We are able understand and appreciate the social issues in proper perspective and our mind set has changed. Credit goes to Bala sir and to Madam (Vel Vizhi)’. Nitya said that the staff have been very considerate and inspired them with encouraging words when they became upset or get disappointed if something went wrong (concerning VKC) or did not happen the way they wanted it to be. She recalled an incident where she was upset over a very low turnout of women participants for a health programme conducted in the village. She took the trouble of meeting all the SHG leaders and members, school teachers and some householders. She was disappointed when only seventeen members turned out where she had expected more than fifty. On seeing Nitya getting upset about the poor turnout of women and girls, the VRC staff consoled her and recalled how he and others had to struggle in mobilising the people and creating awareness about the VKC programme and told her politely, ‘One needs to be very patient and persistent in reaching the people’.

It was interesting and nice to hear the complements each one paying to one another. During the course of the interactions with the staff and the youth, one could sense appreciation and gratitude for people like Balakumar, Velvizhi and others like Arul Selvam and Rameswaran of MSSRF in their persistent effort to reach out people through the VKC. Similarly, it was also quiet common listening from the staff the kind of commitment and sincerity the youth and the volunteers/Knowledge Workers displayed initial months and there after.

One middle-aged man commended the services of the VKC and the VRC to the community. He said he was touched by the sense of responsibility shown by the VRC staff. In this regard, he recalled one incident where one of the staff woke him up during mid night over the phone to alert him and the community when there was a news alert about the likelihood of Tsunami hitting again the Indian coast.

## **8. COMPARING THE VKC AND OTHER NGOs IN AKKARAIPETTAI—PEOPLE’S OBSERVATIONS**

We were quite eager to know how the villagers perceived the role played by different NGOs and VKC in the village in the post-Tsunami period. In order to elicit some information on this we had informal discussions with the volunteers/Knowledge Workers, students and few villagers. It was heartening to know that most of them had clarity about it and differentiate the contributions of VKC and other NGOs. The VKC’s contribution to the community came out clearly as being unique and different from others. They did not think even for a second when we posed this question to them. They were more or less unanimous in saying that MSSRF provided multifaceted knowledge/information based inputs (*arivupoorvamana vishayangal*) while others gave material help/assistance. A few examples of responses are given below.



### **Soundarapandiyan:**

‘The VKC has come to create awareness and impart/disseminate knowledge for community’s socio-economic improvement while others (NGOs) gave material help. The VKC is doing a yeomen service to improve the knowledge base and awareness among the community. Awareness is important for people to progress, develop and get clarity’.

### **Satyavani:**

‘Others gave material help and left the village whereas the VKC strives for socio-economic development through knowledge empowerment’.

### **Menaka:**

‘What others did not do VKC has done it. It catered to the needs right from children to sixty-year-old persons. It has different programmes/activities for different age groups of women and men. Earlier many were not aware of various government schemes for fishermen. Through VKC villagers came to know of them. VRC/VKC wants people to be aware of things that are important to improve their socio-economic lives. VKC aimed at holistic development of the community. It gave importance to information/knowledge empowerment. Other NGOs had helping mind to provide relief to the affected persons. They offered material help; they addressed only a section of the population’.

### **Shivaraj:**

‘The VKC has become part and parcel of the community (*makkaloda makkalaga kalandhu vittargal*). Others (NGOs) did have helping attitude and concern but mostly it was for immediate relief. The objective of VKC is different. It aims for the overall development of the entire community’.

### **Punitha:**

‘The VKC strives to empower people with knowledge/information while others focused on giving material assistance’.

### **Raju:**

‘All other NGOs have left. VKC and Suyam are still there in serving the community. Impact of the VKC is visible though there are still certain aspects where its impact is not visible to the community’.

### **Bhavya:**

‘Anything given in material form would perish but knowledge would stay forever’.

## **Vanitha:**

‘There were many NGOs in the village but today there is hardly anybody. The VKC is different in the sense that unlike others who came, gave something and left later, it is continuing to serve the community by giving knowledge related issues inputs. She continued to say that children are benefitting; the community is getting regular updates about schemes and welfare measures through PAS announcements for which earlier the people had to depend on the *Panchayat*. “We hope that the Centre would continue to help the community particularly for younger generation’s development”’.

## **Jayam and Asok kumar from Suyam Charitable Trust:**

‘When many NGOs and individuals gave clothing and cash to the Tsunami affected persons VKC contributed in a unique way by providing with useful information and knowledge-based inputs to the community as a whole. There were lot of children at the Centre. Women also used to visit the Centre’.

## **Area coordinator of the Red Cross Society**

The area coordinator of Red Cross Society appreciated the VKC concept. He said, ‘The VKC is totally different from other NGOs in its activities. The type of work—knowledge related—VKC is focusing has not been attempted by others. Knowledge empowerment of people and awareness creation is very important’.

## **9. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The VRC/VKC programme of MSSRF focuses on improving the socio-economic conditions of rural poor by means of information and knowledge empowerment. It strives to serve their needs using various ICT and non-ICT tools. The VRC/VKC programme in Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu, has been in operation since early 2005. The VKC at Akkaraipettai was the first to be set up in the post-Tsunami period in this district. As a post-Tsunami intervention, this programme was initiated by TATA Relief Committee, a non-governmental agency involved in relief and rehabilitation work in the Tsunami-hit Nagapattinam district. TATA Relief Committee, in coordination with the District Administration, identified three villages for setting up VKCs, and Akkaraipettai was one of them. On TRC’s invitation, MSSRF became the implementing agency of the VRC/VKC programme. Thus the illfated Tsunami happened to provide a fillip for the evolution of VRC and VKC programme in Nagapattinam district.

The VKC at Akkaraipettai was special and unique in several ways. It was set up under strange circumstances. It was the first ever VKC to be established in Nagapattinam district in response to the Tsunami. It came up during a time when coastal families were trying to recover from the terrible shock of the Tsunami that ravaged the coast on 26 December 2004.

People were still under the grip of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. This VKC was totally an unexpected development for the all the stake holders concerned in the programme. The common procedures usually adopted prior to setting up a VKC were not done in this village. Unlike most of the VKCs set up earlier, the Akkaraipettai VKC was not need-driven but rather supply driven. The usual practice of setting up the VKC in a common, rent-free building, with free electricity supply, was not followed, and the VKC was set up in a rented house owned by a local fisherman. The building was identified, not by the community, but by the funding agency with a help of a local person. The boundary partner/the local partner of the VKC programme was not identified when the programme was initiated in the village.

The concept and the role of boundary partner assume great significance in the VRC/VKC programme. More so because they are normally responsible for providing a rent-free building with free electricity supply, and identifying Knowledge Workers from the local community to manage the VKC. Boundary partners have the overall responsibility of monitoring the activities of the VKC. Unlike, our earlier experiences, the stakeholders of the VKC programme did not participate in the process of establishment of VKC in this village. Even the implementing agency entered the field of operation only after the building was fixed to house the Centre. The concept of Knowledge Centre came into practice without any formal commitment from the traditional *Panchayat*, who were identified by the VRC as the local partner or the boundary partner after establishment of the VKC in the village. The importance of the concept of boundary partner was explained to the traditional *Panchayat* much later, and the latter agreed to be the local partner but did not come forward to formalise the arrangement by signing an MoU with MSSRF. The only contact persons the MSSRF staff had when they went to the village were the TRC staff, and through them, a few villagers. The VRC and the VKC functioned from the same premises for nearly seven months before a separate building was fixed for the former in Nagapattinam. It is possible that the prevailing situation compelled the programme to be flexible and relax the normal procedural details when the programme was launched in Akkaraipettai. But it is learnt that skipping formalities and procedures had far reaching consequences for the first VKC that was set up in Nagapattinam district.

Since its inception, the VKC underwent several twists and turns in the process of its evolution. Of all the VKCs that came under the VRC of Nagapattinam, it was this VKC that received most attention and focus. A lot of time was spent on this Centre and maximum efforts were taken to reach people. Moreover, this was the VKC which posed great challenges to the programme. Most interestingly, it is the VKC that, despite challenges, difficulties and lack of necessary support from the boundary partner, functioned very well and reached out to different sections of the community. This Centre had seen a turnover of twelve Knowledge Workers over the course of the four years of its functioning. Interestingly, there was always someone who stepped into the position when somebody had to leave. There has been a fine

set of dedicated young women and men who have taken great interest to run the Centre with the effective support of MSSRF staff.

The MSSRF staff had to carry out the work under difficult circumstances. In the initial stages, the VKC programme had a very little support from the community. The process of setting up the VKC lacked crucial local participation. People were not able to differentiate between short-term relief and rehabilitation work and long-term institution building. There was confusion among the community. The community initially regarded VKC also as a relief agency. The community expected something in kind. Talking about information/knowledge empowerment for their socio-economic development did not make any sense to them. The situation was like that! Children and students were the only sections of the community that displayed great interest at the time in the VKC, and this was mainly due to the availability of computers. Their participation was spontaneous. The VKC did not have to take great efforts to promote their participation; they only needed continuous encouragement and support. On the other hand, mobilising other sections of the community took considerable time and effort.

While the staff members were very sensitive to the prevailing conditions, they made every possible attempt to promote community's participation and involvement in the VKC programme. Mobilising the community particularly the boundary partner of the VKC, demanded a lot of effort, patience and perseverance of the staff. Mobilising and organising meetings with the traditional *Panchayat* (consisting of twenty-four members) to involve them in the programme has always been difficult. It demanded a lot of time and energy from the VRC staff to conduct a meeting with the former. Involvement and commitment of the boundary partner is very important for the proper functioning and sustainability of the VKC. Also, participation and support of the community are very crucial for the success of any community-based project. It has to be ultimately managed and owned by the community. Keeping this in mind, the VKC programme took earnest efforts to make the community aware of the importance of information empowerment for their socio-economic development, to stimulate interest to access and use information, to get trained in computer application skills and so on. Priority was given to capacity building of the women, men, youth and children of the fishing community.

The VKC had set out to offer its services by giving information related to weather, entitlements, government schemes, relief and rehabilitation assistance provided by the government departments, NGOs and other organisations/agencies. During the initial months, skill development in computers to both women and men, computer based games and educational CDs for children/students, internet services, all these were provided. Through locally developed web pages, multiple stakeholders had access to information. The effort to develop this database was initiated three-to-four months after the inception of the VKC. Gradually, the VKC organised training/awareness programmes (related to their livelihood, health etc) for women, men and the students through forging appropriate linkages

and partnerships. The community has also received specialised information services from experts through video conferencing facility available at the VRC.

Young men from this village played a major role in developing the Centre. They were always spontaneous in helping the staff in mobilising the community. They were a great support in carrying out training/awareness programmes and other activities and source of encouragement to Knowledge Workers. If the staff were able to handle the pressure and face challenges during these four to five years, it is primarily because of the youth in the village.

The programme reached out to a greater audience, involving different age groups, of both women and men. The fisherwomen and men who earlier did not evince interest in the programme, later became receptive and appreciated the initiatives taken by the VRC/VKC for the development of the community. As the days progressed, even the women felt comfortable to go the VKC to get information or details of any programme. The youth (including some SHG women) have had a sense of ownership towards the VKC. One of the SHG members asserted that she had developed a great bond with the VKC and always has the feeling, 'It is ours'. She went on to say that she and others felt confident about approaching the Centre for anything that affect their lives. Even the *Panchayat* members began to take part in programmes organised by the VKC. Though the *Panchayat* did not show any particular interest initially, a few of the members started to offer help later when VRC/VKC organised training programmes and health camps related to fisher women and men. All this has been possible to a great extent because of the commitment of the MSSRF staff who were well supported by the youth group, volunteers/Knowledge Workers, enthusiastic SHG women members, several fishermen and also few persons from present and earlier traditional *Panchayat*. In spite of the encouragement given by the Knowledge Workers, many women and men hesitated to go to the Centre because they felt they were too old to learn any thing, or they thought that they (particularly women and elderly men) lacked education. The elderly men were too shy and diffident to go to the Centre.

Though the VRC was set up during a time of uncertainty, with little or no involvement of the local people, it was amazing to observe the manner in which it progressed and began to be appreciated by the various sections of the community. The study has shown that access to information, skill development in computers, and training/awareness programmes, have played a significant role in improving the lives of the villagers. Information concerning weather, health, sanitation, government schemes, employment and educational opportunities and other important and relevant information is made accessible and available in the local language database, as well as shared in a variety of channels—local newsletter, newspaper, computer, and announcements through Public Address System and also through the video conferencing facility. The community at large—irrespective of the sex and age group—has become aware of the importance of information empowerment in their day-to-day activities and also in improving their socio-economic conditions.

The impact of the VKC/VRC among various sections of the community deserves compliments. Despite the challenges faced by the VKC during the various stages of its evolution since its inception, it has done a wonderful job in helping the community, particularly the young boys and girls, in attaining and strengthening their skills in computers. Participating in computer-based programmes (MUPP and CALP, INTEL) has created vast opportunities for them. Further, boys and girls have been able to access alternative and informal educational activities that contributed to improve their learning abilities, develop interest in studies and widening their educational opportunities and so on. It is evident that school and also college students have been able to enhance their learning abilities, and build their self confidence and self esteem. Many of them would not have been able to access computers and VKC has done a wonderful job in this aspect. The VKC thus helped them to know their potentials to improve their capacities. Several students have made use of the basic training given in the computers to develop further and improve their lives. Skill enhancement and knowledge empowerment broadened their scope for further education and economic opportunity. More importantly, they have been able to take decisions about their choice of subjects in the higher education. Young children became a highly motivated lot and developed their computer skills and academic interests. These students/children have also been a great source of inspiration to their peers and others. The youngsters have been motivated to shoulder responsibilities and become committed to the society. They volunteered their services to the VKC in mobilising people for its programmes and helping the Knowledge Workers in their work. It is heartening to see these children who are socially conscious and have a sense of responsibility towards the society. We have seen that they care about their community and they want them to improve their social and economic development by using the various avenues of services offered by the VRC/VKC programme. They have been able to gain knowledge on general things and recognise their potentials. The level of their self-confidence and self-esteem has been enhanced. Because of their empowerment and commitment to the community, they are motivated to create change within their community, and what is more, they were convinced they could do it through the VRC/VKC programme.

VRC/VKC has played a significant role in building the capacities of women through various microenterprise training programmes, Adult Literacy Programme and other services. Women, particularly SHG members, have benefitted by getting training in microenterprises, while the men trained in latest fishing technologies. The community as a whole benefitted by activities such as health camp, eye camp, awareness programmes etc initiated by the VRC/VKC. These programmes play a vital role in educating and upgrading people's knowledge levels, and help to instill self confidence among them. The local people recognise the vital role played by the VKC in their socio-economic development. They are able to appreciate and acknowledge the services and activities of the VKC to the community and also able to see the difference between the VKC programme and most of the other NGOs operated in the village providing assistance as part of their relief and rehabilitation work in the post-Tsunami period.

The services and activities of the VKC for the socio-economic development of the villagers received appreciation and recognition of few NGOs like Suyam Charitable Trust and civil society organisations such as Red Cross operating in the same village. Suyam Charitable Trust and the VKC helped each others activities. While volunteers from the former helped the VKC in mobilising village people the latter helped the former in skill development in computers and installing educational software for the children. Some organisations like NGO Coordination and Resource Centre (NCRC), Nagapattinam and Red Cross found VKC useful for their work in the village.

The VKC, during the course of its development, found itself handling difficult and sensitive issues and situations on more than a few occasions, mainly due to the unfriendly attitude of certain NGOs operating in the village. One such occurrence was when some of the SHGs formed by the latter were discouraged from being a part of the VRC/VKC programme. The VRC/VKC also encountered difficult situations when the Government of India proposed to issue the draft Coastal Management Zone (CMZ) Notification in 2006. It is to the credit of the MSSRF staff and the VRC/VKC volunteers, and Knowledge Workers that all these unpleasant issues did not disrupt the services and activities of the programme.

There was a major issue that the VRC/VKC had to handle since the inception of the programme in Akkaraipettai. This related to a change in venue of the Centre, and fixing of a rent-free accommodation, with free electricity supply. Within a period of four years from its inception, the VKC had changed three places. When the VKC was set up in this Tsunami affected village the TRC committed to provide space for housing the VKC in the TATA Community Hall built by them (as part of its rehabilitation programme) for the villagers. The building plan also showed first floor of the building being marked for the VKC. The number of electrical plug points provided in many places of the hall clearly indicates that it was designed to house the VKC. But unfortunately the building document does not mention anything about the provision for the VKC in the TATA Community Hall. The TRC handed over the Community Hall to the District Administration, the members of which, in turn, handed it over to the traditional *Panchayat* which plays a dominant role in the village affairs. Major decisions concerning the village are taken up by this traditional *Panchayat*. While it was evident from the building plan that the first floor was marked for the VKC, as the document does not specifically mention about provision of space for the VKC, it was not easy for the VRC to shift the Centre to TATA Community Hall. MSSRF contacted TRC several times hoping that the latter would help to secure space for VKC as found in the building plan; however the TRC did not respond. After a series of discussions with the traditional *Panchayat*, VRC could shift the Centre to the TATA Community Hall. However, the Centre did not have a separate electricity line, and though the *Panchayat* agreed to pay the electricity bill, the VRC staff feared that the absence of a separate line would cause some problem in future. As feared by the staff, it did indeed cause a problem after one year, when the Electricity Board disconnected the power supply to the TATA Building for

non payment of bills, as the *Panchayat* felt this was too large an amount for it to pay. For nearly ten months there seemed to be no solution to the problem. Everyone at the VRC and the youth involved kept hoping that something positive would emerge, but nothing materialised! The commitment of the staff members and the young men of Akkaraipettai can be clearly seen from their earnest and persistent efforts to revive the VKC's services to the community. Mobilising and organising a meeting with the *Panchayat* has always been a difficult task. However, the staff and the youth looked for every possible opportunity to meet the local partner of the VKC programme to find a positive solution to the issue.

Interestingly, at no point of time during the discussions, did the *Panchayat* indicate categorically that they could not provide a rent-free building with free electricity supply. In fact, they were not happy when the VRC pointed out that it might have to close the Centre if a decision was not taken. The VRC waited for almost one year. They did their best and took maximum possible efforts to revive the functioning of the VKC. All their efforts were in vain. The former could not provide any alternative arrangement and this ultimately and unfortunately led to the closure of the Centre in Akkaraipettai, which was the first ever VKC set up in that district. Finally, the VRC was forced to take a hard decision, much against their wish to close down the Centre during April 2010 because it has its constraints. As the coordinator of the VRC pointed out, the VRC has procedures it ought to follow, as well as certain rules and regulations. It is accountable to the head office at Chennai. It is also answerable to the community which has the right to question why the Centre is kept under lock and key for a long time.

That the VKC functioned even without electricity vouches for the commitment and interest of the Knowledge Worker and the staff of the VRC. They did not give up easily. They tried every possible way to circumvent the problem. At one point the staff took the students to the *Panchayat* to explain to them the utility of the Centre, and thus hoped to convince the members about the usefulness of the VKC.

It is really unfortunate that the community, particularly the younger generation, has been deprived of the various services—especially, access to computers. The community also misses services like the local database and telephone. Children and students are the losers. They do not have access to computers and curriculum-based computer programmes like MUPP, CALP and INTEL. Students who studied INTEL were hopeful and eagerly looked forward to the reopening of the Centre so that they would be able to showcase their project work. It has been interesting to learn that they showed keen interest in subjects related to disaster management like earth quake, cyclone, fire accident etc. and were disappointed. Children and students miss going to the VKC. During our field visits to the village we were sad that some of them said that they could not practice their computer lessons, while others pointed out that they unable to learn new computer lessons. Whenever they encountered persons closely associated with the VKC, they would always enquire about the status.



Many also contacted the VRC through telephone. During the course of our field work, when some children saw us talking to the villagers, they eagerly enquired about the status of the Centre and when would it be opened.

The VRC staff took everything in a positive manner. They viewed the hurdles and the challenges as learning opportunities and have been cautious while planning to set up a new VKC and in identifying a right local partner to the VKC/VRC programme, which is vital for the community's participation and sustainability of the programme

It is encouraging to observe that even after the closure of the VKC, the VRC continues to offer its services which are relevant to the Akkaraipettai villagers. The VRC is of the view that it is important to strengthen the activities already taken to improve the socio-economic conditions of the fishing community at Akkaraipettai. The community, in general, has come to recognise the merits of the VRC/VKC programme, and the women and men are eager to participate in the training/awareness programmes organised for them. They are spontaneous in offering their support for conducting such programmes in the village. According to the staff of the VRC, Akkaraipettai is still their target village. They did not have the intention of leaving or closing the Centre at Akkaraipettai. The VRC is still carrying out its activities in the village. The staff are happy that they are able to serve the community. As Velvizhi says, '...the only difference is that now the VRC is directly conducting the programme, and not through the VKC'. It is nice to know that the villagers feel free to come for any assistance to the VRC. They have developed a special bond with the VRC, so that they say, 'It (VRC) is our office. We will continue to come here'.

The good contacts and the rapport which the VRC has built with the community over the four-to-five years of the VKC's existence in Akkaraipettai, is helping the VRC to address the needs of the community even now. The youth play a significant role till date. It is heartening to see that the youth are dynamic. They come forward to mobilise people for a training/awareness programme organised by the VRC. It is also interesting to see the women SHG members still working with great vigour and taking an active part in VRC related programmes conducted at the village level. The youth and these women are the main contacts for the VRC. Local specific and need-based training programmes continue to be organised for the villagers by creating linkages and partnership with concerned governmental and other institutions. The local data base is being constantly updated and continues its services in disseminating important information through GSM (Global System for Mobile Communication) based PAS. Details like weather, wind speed and wave height, PFZ are provided to the fishing community through those who have mobile phones, who in turn disseminate the information to their neighbours, friends and relatives. Any required local content is easily made available either through phone or during their visits to the VRC. One of the VRC staff mentioned that the VRC now is connected with the village in a virtual mode!

It is sad that the Centre has been closed in spite of the support it had received from the villagers, particularly the youth. It is unfortunate that when the community started appreciating the activities of the VKC and began to participate in the programme, it could not be accommodated because of lack of a proper system. Simultaneously the system did not develop in order to accommodate. If there had been a proper system, it would have been helpful in conflict resolution. The youth group of Akkaraipettai has a larger vision and commitment to the society; they would definitely have been the ideal choice as boundary partner of the VRC/VKC programme. But the youth could not bypass the powerful traditional *Panchayat*. The youth tried their best, along with the VRC staff, to convince the *Panchayat* to find a positive solution to the issue. Unfortunately, all their efforts were in vain.

If only the boundary partner were supportive and had participated in this programme, the VKC at Akkaraipettai would have been a model VKC for others to emulate. The students and the youth would have taken care that the Centre sustains itself, even after MSSRF withdraws. It is unfortunate that the local partner could not develop a sense of ownership towards the VKC programme even after seeing its positive impact on the villagers. Sadly enough, the most affected party in all of this is the community itself.

The traditional *Panchayat*, being very powerful in the village, could have easily found a lasting solution and revived the VKC in the village. The elected *Panchayat* had appreciated VKC services but having much less influence in the village, it could not be supportive to the programme. Though the traditional *Panchayat* wanted the Centre to continue to function in the village, they did not give the necessary support to revive the VKC. They were preoccupied with their own issues, such as preparing for the village temple consecration ceremony, organising a protest rally in support of the fishermen affected by the Sri Lankan navy, etc. It is also stated that the divisions within the traditional *Panchayat* (consisting of twenty-four members) has contributed towards their inaction regarding the issue concerning the VKC. Though few of the members recognise and appreciate the VKC programmes, they could not influence the other members probably due to the divisions amongst them. While the *Panchayat* did realise the benefits accruing to the village because of the VKC, it is unfortunate that this agency did not make any earnest efforts to find a suitable place for the VKC. The fragility of the support was the fundamental cause which unfortunately led to the closure of the Centre. Our study clearly shows it is not just the people's cooperation and support that is essential for the success of the VKC, but it is also essential to have the support and participation of those who have the authority to make crucial decisions. With careful planning from the beginning most challenges could have been handled and turned into opportunities.

The programme had all the support it needed, but lacked one more component of support for it to function well and sustain itself. This study has shown how critical it is to have the support and involvement of the community—particularly the local partner, the traditional

*Panchayat*. For a VKC to develop, it needs to be part of the community. The idea is that it should be self sustaining. It could have been easily run if only the local partner—an important component of the programme—had offered the necessary support and cooperation. The youth would have monitored the day today activities of the VKC.

Proper planning is necessary, particularly for a long term development project. It should not be influenced by emotional factors. It has become evident from this study how critical it is to involve and ensure the participation of all the stake holders for the success of any people-oriented development programme. The absence or lack of the support from one of the stake holders of the VKC programme has had its implications through out the entire process of development of the VKC. It is very critical to have the cooperation and involvement of the community in general and particularly the local partner (the traditional *Panchayat* in this case) for the success of any developmental programme.





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