

Transforming Lives with ICTs

Vignettes from Villages in Thiruvaiyaru, Tamil Nadu

Microsoft
Unlimited
Potential **UP**



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M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

MSSRF/MG/07/25

Fieldwork in the villages of Thiruvaiyaru and this publication have been made possible with the generous support of the Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP).

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Design and Printing by: **AMM Prints**, Chennai.

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FOREWORD

Modern information and communication technologies have opened up uncommon opportunities in taking location-specific and dynamic information to villages at the right time. The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation has been working on taking the power of ICT to villages since 1997. The strategy of MSSRF in bridging the urban-rural digital divide consists of the following three initiatives.

- Establishment of Village Resource Centres (VRCs) at the block level in partnership with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO); VRCs will have tele-conferencing facilities and satellite connectivity.
- Establishment of Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) or Gyan Chaupals at the village level. These will have internet connection and will provide demand driven and dynamic information.
- Last mile and last person connectivity through an integrated application of the internet and community radio or cellphone

It is hoped that by August 15, 2007 a major effort would have been made to take ICT to rural India through mobilising the power of partnership among Government, industry, academia and civil society organisations. It is very important to ensure that ICT really enables the underprivileged to overcome their economic and social handicaps. Similarly, ICT should help to bridge the gender divide.

In order to ensure that the programme achieves its desired goals, there is need for a proper assessment of its impact on a continuing basis. The present publication provides information on the feedback received during such assessment. I am grateful to Dr L Vedavalli for her painstaking efforts to interview the participants and get their feedback. The material gathered by her will help to further improve the methodologies adopted in establishing VRCs and VKCs and in making the movement user-driven. We also express our gratitude to IDRC, Microsoft, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Tata Education Trust, CIDA, ISRO and Intel for their support.



M S Swaminathan

Preface

M S Swaminathan Research Foundation has developed the concept of *Village Knowledge Centre* in the early 1990s, to bridge the information gap prevailing among rural communities. Underlying this concept is the understanding that access to information and communication technologies (ICT) is crucial for poverty reduction, empowerment of rural communities and overall rural development.

In 1997, Information Village Research Project was started on an experimental basis in the Union Territory of Pondicherry (now Puducherry), with the financial support of International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Since then, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) expanded the Village Resource Centre (VRC) and Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) programmes to other States. The VRC and VKC programmes were further strengthened by the launch of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity (NVA) in August 2003. NVA seeks to reach people through VRCs and VKCs by using ICT as an empowering tool for poverty reduction. NVA links a network of experts and grassroots communities through collaboration with several national and international partners: Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and Tata Education Trust, IDRC, CIDA, ISRO, Microsoft, Intel, etc. Contributions from the partners cover various aspects of the programme such as resources, connectivity, capacity building and content.

VRC/ VKC initiatives across Tamil Nadu have emerged with a State-level hub in Chennai and seven Block-level hubs at Thiruvaiyaru (Thanjavur District), Sempatti (Dindigul District), Annasaval (Pudukkottai District), Nagercoil (**Kanyakumari** District), Chidambaram (**Cuddalore** District), Pallpannaichery (Nagapattinam District) Thangachimadam (Ramanathapuram District). In recent times, VKC/VRC programmes have been extended to Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Orissa and Kerala. The State-level hub is the knowledge resource base. It creates and maintains websites and databases in collaboration with national and international agencies. The State hub is linked to the Block-level hubs, the VRCs; the VRCs in turn are linked to VKCs that serve a cluster of villages.

NVA has become a nodal point for MSSRF's ICT led development initiatives. NVA strives to empower people with information. In addition to dissemination of information, the NVA programme also offers opportunities for skill development for entrepreneurship and livelihood enhancement. VRCs and VKCs give a lot of opportunities by creating a supportive atmosphere and facilitating access and use of ICT for livelihood improvement, health, education, farming, and veterinary purposes, to promote entrepreneurship and so on. These Centres provide an enabling environment to facilitate greater participation of young men and women.

Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP)

It has been mentioned earlier that various services are being provided to the community through the use of ICT, with the help of partner organisations. Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP) is one such service provided at the VRCs and VKCs or Community Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs). The focus 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. This programme is 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 software¹. Significantly, this course emphasises practical hands-on training, unlike similar courses offered in other institutions. However, teaching of theory is also an important component of the curriculum.

The programme opens out to individuals who have limited prospect of gaining access to technology and skill development. It generally aims to target self-help group members, women and men from farming and fishing communities, unemployed youth, school teachers, and students. Information about this course is disseminated to the community by using different tools such as cable TV, community newspaper, public address system, notices, notice boards, and VRC and VKC meetings and during school prayers. The information also reaches people through word of mouth.

In our attempt to assess the efficacy of the MUPP course, we conducted detailed interviews with more than 30 course participants in the VRC and VKC of Thiruvaiyaru. Those interviewed comprised men and women across different age groups, and from various social groups.

From these interviews, we present here, ten case studies (collected during October 2006 and January 2007) that sharply bring out the various dimensions of social and economic empowerment experienced by the participants as a consequence of the MUPP course. Feedback of this programme from the students/participants and their family members has been encouraging. There is tangible progress among the participants, which they themselves acknowledge quite sincerely. Learning IT skills seem to be useful and beneficial in diverse ways for the participants. It has helped many to overcome their socio-cultural inhibitions or disadvantages. Avenues of

employment have increased for the course participants. MUPP has inspired some participants to strengthen skills by opting for computer based groups in the higher secondary education level, or choosing undergraduation, with computer as a major subject. Few have also undertaken additional courses in computer applications offered by other institutions.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to Professor M.S.Swaminathan for his inspiring encouragement. I sincerely thank our staff at the VRC, Thiruvaiyaru, for making logistic arrangements and extending their full support during the course of the field work in the villages of Thiruvaiyaru. I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the valuable help provided by the MUPP participants and their family members who gave their valuable time. Their spontaneity and patience have helped this study immensely. I give my warmest thanks to each and every one of them. My sincere thanks are due to Ms. Asha Ramani for editing this report. I am grateful to AMM Prints for printing this work.

L. Vedavalli

¹ *Appendix provides the MUPP curriculum.*

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Vignettes from the Villages- Focus on Thiruvaiyaru, Thanjavur District

A Facet of Rural Simplicity

Towns and villages in the deep south of Tamil Nadu have a quaint appeal. The lush green paddy fields sometimes do belie the stark and simple nature of life in the rural areas. The area in and around Thanjavur is often called the Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu.

Thiruvaiyaru is the land of 'five holy rivers' - a small town, situated about 13 kilometres north of Thanjavur. It is the home of revered musicians like Tyagaraja and Shyama Sastri, who have enriched current day Carnatic music. South India's most famous river Kaveri runs through Thiruvaiyaru, and is almost synonymous with its glorious past.

Thiruvaiyaru still bears the mark of its ancient heritage: cultural and historical legacy of its past dynasties. The architecture and designs of the temples, tanks and buildings date from the periods of Chola, Pandya, Mahratta and Nayak rulers.

Around the town there are many small villages, where agriculture is the main occupation of the people. Thiruvaiyaru has two Senior Secondary Schools. It also has an Arts College and a Music College. The administrative duties are under a Taluk Office, with Civil and Municipal Courts, and a Police Station. Bus transport facilities are available to and from Thanjavur.

However, in spite of such an infrastructure, the daily life of the people in the town and villages is one of simplicity and frugality. The townsfolk bear the open attitude of simple villagers. Only the educated among them send their children away to colleges in Thanjavur. Girls from poor families are seldom encouraged to study beyond Middle or Higher Secondary School.

There are always social constraints for girls, so they are not sent far out of the homes for any training or education. However they are allowed to attend tailoring classes, and often earn some money by working from their homes. If they are not married, they take up employment in small shops for an income of Rs 500 to Rs 600, where the work is usually from 8 am to 8 pm. The married girls confine themselves to household chores and child rearing. Some educated girls are able to seek employment, but mostly in nearby Thanjavur.

Nowadays a basic knowledge in computer applications is essential even for a job as a shop assistant. Provision stores and textile shops expect their employees to have a minimum knowledge of computers. A computer course in the institutes will prove very expensive; most of the families cannot

afford this. The families are reluctant to send their children particularly girls to the institutes so far away as in Thanjavur in order to learn some basic skills in computer usage.

The Village Resource Centre (VRC) at Thiruvaiyaru, established by MSSRF in 2004 and the Village Knowledge Centres (VKC) in nearby villages are a timely introduction. Many facilities can be availed of by young and old alike. The enthusiasm among the people is indeed heartening to witness. This is clear from the personal experience of a few young adult and adult women and men who have been able to change the course of their lives and gain confidence, courage and enterprise through the facilities, training programmes, workshops, and their interaction with the Centre and its staff, and the Knowledge Workers at the VKCs.

The case studies presented in the following pages are about women and men who have had the opportunity to attend MUPP course and have benefited by it in diverse ways. These studies prove a testimonial to the transformation in the lives of these course participants. Interaction with MUPP students and their family members help us to assess how this computer knowledge actually facilitates in improving social and economic conditions of the recipients and how it has empowered the women and men.

The case studies include seven women and three men. Social background of these people is more or less similar, except for two boys who come from

socially deprived sections of the society. While four women are from Thiruvaiyaru, the rest are from the nearby villages. Apart from one young boy who did his MUPP course in the Village Knowledge Centre of Rajendiram, the others underwent the training in the VRC, Thiruvaiyaru.

The Table below gives us the details of age, education, marital status and occupation of respondents.

A majority of the respondents belong to low income group households. They depend on different occupations for their livelihood. Primary occupation of two households is agriculture; one depends on agriculture wages for the livelihood. Other households are engaged in occupations such as edible oil business on a smaller scale, lending money for interest to individuals, gold smithy, photocopier service; two are sales persons in a cloth shop and in a chocolate company respectively. It is noteworthy that out of ten households, five receive supplementary income today through the daughters / son / wife who were able to get employment after completing the MUPP course at the VRC.

What is remarkable indeed is that much has been achieved by children in households where parents had no basic school education. However, only Ranjit Kumar's father has had a college education. Ratna's parents have never been to school. In the case of both Arun and Deepa, their mothers never attended school. Among other parents, most of them have had school education

Table: Details of Selected Respondents

Name of Persons	Sex	Age	Education	Marital Status	Present Occupation
Arun	M	16 years	11 th Standard	Unmarried	Student
Chitra	F	35	B. Sc	Married	Helps husband in Photocopier Service
Deepa	F	26	B.A.	Unmarried	Computer Operator & Scan Reporter in a Hospital
Jeevitha	F	20	12 th Standard	Unmarried	Knowledge Worker
Kavitha	F	31	B. Sc.	Married	Data entry in accounts
Kannan	M	21	B.C.A.	Unmarried	Panchayat Office Clerk and KW
Pradeepa	F	27	M. A.	Unmarried	Voice Mail Reporter in a Hospital
Ranjit Kumar	M	19	B.C.A(First year)	Unmarried	Student
Rathna	F	21	M.A.(first year)	Unmarried	Student
Santhana Lakshmi	F	20	M.A.(First Year)	Unmarried	Student and KW

Note: K W - Knowledge Worker, M - Male, F - Female

ranging from primary to higher secondary level only.

These are stories of transformation and impacts, where efforts have been made to create enabling environment and supportive facilitation for rural people - particularly women. Participating in the MUPP course helped many realise their potential, boost the morale, gain confidence, motivate to strengthen their computer skills, to take employment in computer related fields, and so on.

Many informants, and their relatives and friends, felt that this facility is doing a lot of good to the rural population, who otherwise would not have had this opportunity to train themselves in computer applications. More importantly, it has provided the opportunity for girls and women to learn computer skills and apply them for their development.

The individual case studies are presented below.



Pradeepa with her parents, brother and grandmother

“Since I had computer knowledge, I was immediately given a job...”

Pradeepa

Pradeepa, a timid and shy girl, was very nervous even to touch the computer’s mouse when she joined the MUPP course at the Village Resource Centre (VRC) in Thiruvaiyaru. It was surprising that she had a Master’s degree in Sociology; she would hesitate even to talk to her batch mates in the computer class. Fear of being ridiculed by others in class, particularly the boys, would restrain her from asking any questions to clear her doubts on the lessons. She always kept to herself and seldom spoke to others. But gradually attending the MUPP course brought about a transformation, and she has now become self-assured and quite bold. Today she works at the Government Hospital, Ariyalur, in Tiruchy District, Tamil Nadu.

Pradeepa, 27 years of age, comes from a lower middle class family. She hails from a village called Kandiyur, a few kilometres from Thiruvaiyaru. Her father had to sell their house, which was the only ancestral property he inherited, to meet his children’s educational

expenses. The family now lives in a rented house in Thiruvaiyaru. Both her parents, who are in their early fifties, had education up to higher secondary school. Her father was away in Saudi Arabia for nearly 20 years, working as a welder. Pradeepa’s maternal grandmother, who moved in with them, was extremely supportive and helpful in the household activities.

Pradeepa has a twin sister who was married at an early age of 17. Due to financial constraints, plans for Pradeepa’s early marriage did not materialise. Even so, Pradeepa was not keen on getting married at a young age. After completing her higher secondary school, she continued her studies, graduating with a B.A. in Social Work from the Arts College, and an M.A. through correspondence course. One of her younger brothers has an M. Sc. degree in Microbiology and is currently working in a browsing centre. The other brother, an Engineering graduate, has recently secured employment abroad.

After completing M.A., Pradeepa worked in Thanjavur Multipurpose Service Society as a supervisor, for a salary of Rs 800 per month. She had to quit after working for a year, as she could not handle the job assigned to her. For two years during 2002-2005, she worked as a teacher in a primary school in her native village. Her salary was Rs 400 per month. She had to resign when the family decided to move to Thiruvaiyaru, when their house had to be sold. Through her friend she learnt about the MUPP course conducted at the local VRC, and joined the course. She completed her course in April 2006, and within six months she got employment at the Government Hospital, Ariyalur. She is confident that she would soon be made a permanent employee.

Pradeepa enjoys her work, which is related to mother and child care. She said that she finds the MUPP course very useful now. Her work involves sending regular reports to the Comprehensive Emergency Newborn Care Centre on various aspects related to mother and child care. For instance, basic data on the number of children born (both normal and otherwise), number of cases referred to Thanjavur Medical College Hospital, from Ariyalur Government Hospital, number of women diagnosed HIV positive, and so on. In this context she mentioned that since she had knowledge of computers, she was told how to send reports using Voice Mail. Otherwise, she would have had to undergo three months training. Her knowledge of PowerPoint helps her



to write reports clearly. She is glad that she uses her IT skills and technology in her work. She says, *“I am able to work with great efficiency and my output is good.”* She fondly remembers her teachers, who had very patiently and clearly taught her how to make an effective PowerPoint presentation. She is quite sure that the computer training received in the MUPP course has been very useful in preparing detailed reports. Pradeepa has come a long way, from being a timid girl who was afraid to touch the computer mouse for fear of corrupting or deleting any files, to one who uses the computer extensively in her work. She plans to take further lessons, which she believes would be useful for her future

Pradeepa says, *“I owe a great deal to the VRC, which conducted this MUPP course, and to my teachers, for getting this post in a Government Hospital. **Since I had computer knowledge, I was immediately given a job, and this indicates the value of my MUPP Certificate. My mother did not***

believe me when I told her I got the job. Only when I showed her the appointment letter did she believe it." She also mentioned that a friend and classmate, who attended the interview for the same post, on the same day, did not get appointed due to lack of computer knowledge, which she was fortunate to have.

It was heartening to learn from Pradeepa that the MUPP not only helped her gain computer knowledge, but also helped her acquire a set of new friends. During her college days, as well as in her earlier employment, she generally moved with young women and children. This course gave her the opportunity to interact with boys. She feels her circle of friends now consists only of her MUPP friends, both boys and girls. She keeps in touch with her MUPP friends through the telephone, and they meet each other whenever possible, at their homes. She is fortunate to have found more "thambigal" (younger brothers) in addition to her own two brothers, she added.

Pradeepa expressed her gratitude to her teachers, since they always gave the encouragement and motivation to bring about a positive change in her. She said that they always insisted that she be bold, courageous and faces any queries put across to her by anyone. They also used to tell the students to interact with each other in a healthy manner, without inhibitions, as this would help them handle themselves better in future. *"Those words of my teachers are very useful and helpful to me. The nature of my job is such that I need to work with doctors (both female and male) most of the time. There are*

many male members with whom I have to interact every day. I am able to talk to them without any hesitation. I am not afraid of facing the men these days," said Pradeepa. She was happy that she had the opportunity to participate in other programmes of the VRC such as livelihood training programme, AIDS Awareness Camp and several craft workshops.

When we went to Pradeepa's house, she was away at work and we could talk to her mother and grandmother. They were very friendly and spontaneous in giving information. They were so impressed with Pradeepa's personal development - from a shy person to a very confident girl; they kept appreciating the MUPP course. They firmly believe that the course had a great positive impact on Pradeepa's personality. According to Pradeepa's mother, who was very concerned about her daughter's diffident nature, *"There is generally an overall improvement in my daughter's personality after she underwent the MUPP training. It has enabled her to develop confidence in herself. She has been*



inspired to further strengthen her computer knowledge. She got an opportunity to move with others of her own age during the course. Her exposure to the outside world improved. Today she is in a position to face anything alone. Her vocabulary in English has improved, as her teachers encouraged her to take down notes in English, along with Tamil. She is able to mingle with people, and is able to converse and report to the doctors at the hospital with confidence."

During our conversation with Pradeepa's mother and grandmother, their repeated reference to the MUPP course revealed their sense of gratitude for the change it has brought about in Pradeepa's overall development. Her mother mentioned that Pradeepa attended several interviews in the last seven years before she joined the computer course at the local VRC, but she could not get a job even though she was a post graduate. Now she has succeeded in getting a good job, with a salary of Rs 5,000. This has been possible only because of the MUPP Certificate. Both women appreciated and acknowledged the several services and facilities rendered by the VRC to the rural people. *"It is a great boon to those*

parents who cannot afford to send their children, especially the girls, for specialised courses in the private educational centres. I could send my daughter for a computer course because it was free of cost, and moreover it was in Thiruvaiyaru," added Pradeepa's mother.

Pradeepa enjoys cooking, and being a responsible young woman, she shares the household chores with her mother and grandmother. Her mother pointed out with pride that Pradeepa does not want to get married for another year or two, as she wants to clear the debts incurred for her brother's education. Later when we met Pradeepa, she also said it is her duty to support her family, and to reduce the burden on her father at least to some extent, before she got married.

Pradeepa's mother is very happy that her daughter is as equally qualified as her sons. She is optimistic about her daughter's future. She wants Pradeepa to further improve her computer knowledge. Later, if Pradeepa wishes, she could start a computer centre on her own, and work independently, the mother added.



With her father at home

***“Computer Kathukita
Piragu nalla matram.”
(There is a remarkable
change after learning
computers)***

Rathna

Punavasal is a village situated on the banks of river Kollidam, six kilometres from Thiruvaiyaru town. Here, agriculture is the chief livelihood, and we find both the large and small landholdings. Waters of river Kaveri take care of the irrigation needs of the farmers. The village also has two tanks. In the village there are tiled, thatch roofed and terraced houses. A majority of the households rear cattle and sheep/ goat There are five main streets that are broad, and the village has some 458 households. We were informed by one of the educated women residents that the facilities here are much better when compared to neighbouring villages. The village has a *Panchyat* Union Middle School, a Higher Secondary School, Primary Health Centre, a Public Distribution System, a Public Library, and also a Cooperative Society.

Here, Rathna lives in her family home, which is the traditional type of east-facing tiled house with two *thinnaish* (pyols) at the entrance. There is a

spacious hall, a kitchen and a backyard. It is an old house, plastered with lime and cement. Firewood is used for cooking. There is a television set, and a steel bureau in one corner. On the other side of the hall, a cot without a mattress is seen. On the whole, this is a simple, but comfortable house, with very few modern appurtenances.

We met Rathna, a thin, frail looking 21 year old young woman, with a very



One of the roads in Punavasal village

bright and cheerful look. She is a postgraduate student – and is a first generation learner, and the first one to go to the college. Rathna’s father is over sixty years old, and he takes care of the agricultural activities; her mother, in her mid-forties, looks after the cattle. At the time we visited Rathna, her mother was away in Chennai.



Rathna in the kitchen

Rathna is the youngest of the four children. Her older sister was married while in the 8th Standard, after which she gave up her studies. Her two brothers have studied up to 12th Standard. One of them helps their father in farming activities, while the other is a milk vendor. They also work as daily wage labourers. The family owns 1.70 acres of wetland, and has a pair of oxen, two cows and a few sheep.

Rathna, till recently, was a very timid and shy girl, even afraid to go alone to her college. Yet today she has become confident, and greeted us with a smile, and enthusiastically ushered us into her house. We were unexpected guests that day. We met her father, and also her

uncle, a progressive farmer, who lives next door. Rathna considers her uncle a guiding light and a source of encouragement for her in her work. Her father, although a man of few words, was an attentive listener

During our conversation, we learned that Rathna joined college for an M.A. degree in Tamil, after a break of one year. Even though she had completed her B.A. degree, she could not muster enough courage and confidence to take up the post graduate studies. Rathna’s reluctance to pursue her education was only because of her needing someone to accompany her to college. It was not a case of lack of support or encouragement from the family. She said, *“From our village, I had to travel alone to the college. As all my classmates have got married, they have not continued their education. I did not have the courage even to go alone to the bus stop. I dreaded the very thought of going without anyone.”* One of her friends and a junior in the college, who was present during our discussions, mentioned that she was a *‘bayangara kozhai’* - meaning very nervous and panicky – and that she dreaded to board bus even if her friends were with her. *“She would always insist that she get into the bus first. She would not lift her head also,”* added her friend. At such a juncture, Rathna came to know about this free computer course through her uncle, and enrolled for the MUPP computer course at the Village Resource Centre (VRC), Thiruvaiyaru.

From then on, there was no looking back for Rathna. Her personality underwent a positive change, and she was no longer

the panic driven bundle of nerves. She became a confident and outgoing individual, who was not afraid to face anything new. It was also a blessing in disguise. Fortunately two other girls were willing to join. Realising the value of such an opportunity, she did not want to let it go. She wanted to gain knowledge in computers, but she never imagined that this course would be a forerunner of a major change in her life. Her father said, "Padichi dairiyama nalla vandam podum!" – let her study and gain confidence that is enough. He is happy that she could go alone to Thiruvaiyaru without expecting anyone to accompany her. It was a pleasant surprise for the family and her friends to see Rathna going to the college and to other places without depending on others. "It's a welcome change," mentioned her uncle and her friend. Her uncle remarked that

she had wasted a year, merely in the hope that she would have some company from the village to attend college. Now she is confident enough to go alone to college. He said, " Adhu (Rathna) collegekku pogum. Varum. Piragu than undu veedu undunnu irukkum. Romba bhayanda subhavam. Computer kathukitta piragu Ippa Nalla matram theriyudhu." – meaning that before the computer course, Rathna's world revolved only around college and home, and seldom did she venture anywhere else due to her hesitation and diffidence. Now she has changed so much.

According to Rathna, the teachers at the VRC were exceptional and dedicated. They were courteous, caring and patient with the students. They would explain everything in simple terms, and this has



Rathna helps the household with the livestock

helped her emulate them when it was her role to teach others. She was able to teach MS Office to a woman who had completed her Diploma in Civil Engineering. The woman, who was soon going abroad to join her husband, sought advice from Rathna for taking up a computer course, as she was keen on getting a job. Rathna suggested the basic course in computer applications. *"It was a moment of joy for me when that akka (sister) said, "Nee solli tharuvadhu purigiradhu" – meaning "The way you teach, is easy to grasp!"* Rathna was very happy to receive such an exclusive compliment from her and said that she felt very proud when people sought her for help. The teachers at the VRC remarked on Rathna's excellent memory that made her an exceptional student. *"Rathna would always help others, whenever it was required,"* they said.

Rathna was glad that she could check out her examination results over the Internet. She proudly said, *"I could show my MUPP certificate at the time of my interview for the M.A., when they asked me if I had any other qualification."* The person on the interview board was very appreciative, and mentioned that it is always better to have additional qualifications, besides the post graduation in Tamil Literature.

Rathna is confident that she would be able to get a decent job with her M.A degree and computer knowledge. Rathna also told us about her ambition to study for a Ph.D in Tamil literature. Earlier, though she had the desire, she was worried that the intensive study

required for a doctoral course would involve coming home late, and she could not have been able to handle it; she did not think it would work out.

Today however, the situation is different. She has overcome her anxieties and emerged courageous and confident. *"Now I am confident I would get doctorate in Tamil. Thanks to MUPP course, which provided an opportunity to equip myself with computer skills, and more importantly - it gave me a lot of exposure. I could interact with persons from different backgrounds. It served as a platform to interact with people, to share our knowledge, to help one another and get our doubts cleared."* She said her parents and brothers are very supportive. Her brothers are prepared to bear the expenses; they give utmost importance to their sister's education.

Rathna proudly observes that her village people are good in keeping their surroundings clean; she wishes that her villagers came forward to take responsibilities. She wants to create awareness among them that each one has to contribute for the welfare of the society. *"They should not remain silent spectators, being indifferent to the difficulties of others,"* averred Rathna.

Before we took leave of her, she said she had a request. She politely mentioned that it would be very useful and beneficial to the rural people to provide another course besides M.S office. Rural people have the interest, but do not have the means to do computer courses, added Rathna.



Jeevitha's (Jeevitha in centre) family

"I am amazed at my own improvement. I have grown more confident and self-assured."

Jeevitha

Kaduveli is a small hamlet about five kilometres from Thiruvaiyaru. The chief occupation here is farming; paddy, banana and betel are the common crops.

Kaduveli is famous for its Siva temple. In this sleepy little hamlet, there is an elementary school, a Home for the Aged, a Veterinary Hospital and a Ration Shop. But day to day village life is full of hurdles and hardship. Although water is available, it is not clean or potable. Even the vegetables, groceries and medicines are available only far outside the village.



A street view from Jeevitha's house

Here, children who wish to study beyond the 5th Standard have to travel to schools in Thillaisthanam (four kilometres from Kaduveli) or Thiruvaiyaru. It is only for the past five years that girls have been allowed to go out of the village to pursue their higher education. Girls often feel more shackled as the parents are anxious to avoid any adverse remarks from others in the society who still have old-fashioned ideas that a girl should not step out of her home and hearth. Transport facilities were not available, and women had to use a bicycle if they wanted to go any place.

Jeevitha is a thin, slightly built girl; usually shy, soft-spoken and not assertive. She would not generally go alone out of her village. Her parents also did not encourage this. Jeevitha's ambition was to become a computer engineer. This would have involved a lot of expenditure to the parents. Their economic condition would not permit such expensive education for the

children. After completing her 12th Standard, she took a course in tailoring.



Jeevitha at her sewing machine

Her mother encouraged her to get trained in tailoring as she felt that would help Jeevitha earn some money in future. Tailoring classes are common, and popularly attended by girls in the village community because they seldom venture out of their villages to seek either education or employment, and tailoring is an occupation that can be carried out from the home.

Jeevitha lives with her parents. Her father, who is 45 years old, works in a cloth store. Her mother, aged 39, is an articulate and energetic person. Both her mother and her father have studied till the 10th Standard. Her mother, who is bold and articulate, is an active member of the Self-help Groups, and is keenly involved in all the welfare and education work concerned with her village. She says, *“Jeevitha has taken after her father. She is calm and quiet, and a little shy.”*

Through a friend Mr. Muruganandam, Jeevitha heard about the computer classes under the MUPP scheme, which was offered at the Village Resource Centre. As she had interest in learning computers she lost no time in joining this course.

It brought about a huge transformation in her personality and outlook. Slowly her diffidence vanished, and she was able to interact freely with others, and overcome her reserve. Her MUPP teachers were surprised at her progress. One of the teachers at the VRC remarked that initially Jeevitha was too timid even to ask questions when in doubt, and soon she became bold, and took the initiative to seek clarification and interact during the classes. Her typing speed and skill has improved. She quickly mastered the computer applications. Jeevitha mentioned that though she opted for a computer group at school she did not even know how to boot the system or operate it in the right way. She learnt the operation only after attending the MUPP course.

Jeevitha's personality improved and she became more outgoing and interactive. She took a keen interest in the activities of the youth forum called *Nehru Yuva Kendra* in her village. Gradually she enthusiastically took part in its activities concerning her village. The positive development in her behaviour and attitude gave her father the confidence that Jeevitha would be able to manage her life well. These days he does not worry if Jeevitha has to travel alone to Thanjavur or Thiruvaiyaru.

Like other participants, Jeevitha too has great admiration and regard for her MUPP teachers. Her teacher, Ms Angel, was very encouraging, and advised Jeevitha on some job opportunities. There was a vacancy for a Computer Operator and Accountant at Sri Amman Agencies. She appeared for the interview and was selected for a salary of Rs 1200. She was happy she could supplement the family income. Even as she was working for Sri Amman Agencies, the *Nehru Yuva Kendra* organised a DTP course at Thanjavur. As Jeevitha's interest has always been in learning more about computers, she joined the course to strengthen her skills further.

After the DTP course, she secured a job in Science and Technology Development Centre, a private organisation in Thanjavur, as a Computer Operator, for a salary of Rs

2000. When the office shifted to a far away place, she found that she could not manage the tedious travel involving a change of three buses from her village. She was constrained to resign from her job. Her mother feels that as Jeevitha is physically not strong enough, she may not have the stamina to work far away from home. However it is only a matter of time when Jeevitha gains strength, and becomes more confident and self-assured.

In the meantime Jeevitha had the opportunity to work on a temporary basis for three months in the Child Development Project Office in Kandiyur, seven kilometres from her village. Besides looking after the accounts, she took classes in basic computer lessons to *Balavadi* teachers. She feels that she has been a competent teacher. She says, "I am confident that they grasped my teaching well." Her mother,



who initially did not expect her to learn so much about computers, says, *"She has gained confidence only after the MUPP course. Earlier she would not speak at all. She would be afraid to ask questions, and would wait for the teacher to ask her."* She continued to say *"Enakku Kavalai illai. En pillai pizhaithu kollum, Kaiyil vidhai ulladu"* (*"I am not worried about my daughter. Now she is equipped to make a living on her own"*).

Jeevitha has a school going sister, studying in the Plus One level. Her father Arumugam is a quiet person. Coming from an economically backward family, he could not study beyond 10th Standard. Yet his daughter has today learned computer skills and earns an income herself. From her own savings, Jeevitha has bought herself a gold chain, a fan for the house, and books for her younger sister. With her teacher's help at the VRC, she has enrolled for a B.Sc. in Computer Science in the Annamalai Open University programme. She is able to pay for her study from her own earnings. With the arrears of salary received from the Science and Technology Centre, she bought herself a mobile phone in November 2006. Jeevitha said that a phone is essential because it is important to contact and communicate with others, and it is also very useful to keep in touch with the staff at the VRC, Thiruvaiyaru. She also feels that it was not proper to disturb the neighbours every time they wanted to make a call. *"I am happy I am able to contribute to the family's income. Our family is not solely dependent on my father's income,"* stated a confident Jeevitha.

Once diffident and reserved, Jeevitha has now grown to be a more courageous and can even address large gatherings. In August 2006, Jeevitha travelled out of Tamil Nadu for the first time. She attended a Microsoft Retreat held at Hyderabad, where she delivered a presentation on her own socioeconomic development after her MUPP training. Her father was initially reluctant to send her, but he later agreed. The next time she had to go to New Delhi to participate in one of the Microsoft's programmes (Announcement of new Microsoft Unlimited Potential grants), her father was more reassured about her travel. She says she was excited to travel for the first time by air, and was also overwhelmed by the vast venue and audience at the meetings.

Jeevitha is now a full-fledged Knowledge Worker in a VKC near her village. She teaches the MUPP curriculum to the fresh batch of students - who are mostly married women. Initially she had some difficulty in teaching the MUPP curriculum, but now she has become more adept at it. When ever she has difficulty in handling a particular lesson, she immediately gets in touch with her teachers at the VRC who are always willing to help. Jeevitha says she is very strict with students, particularly the youngsters, but at the same time she is kind as well. She would insist that everyone comes on time to the class and attends regularly without any disruption or distraction. *"I am amazed at my own improvement. I have grown more confident and self-assured,"* said a polite Jeevitha. As a Knowledge Worker,

she is able to talk and interact freely with the students and other villagers, and help them in various ways through the VKC.

Jeevitha feels that the VRC has been a guiding light for her. She can now look forward to a new dawn when she can fulfill her ambitions and help her family. She says, "My wish is that my sister, who is interested in medicine, should at least become a qualified nurse, if not a doctor.

I consider myself fortunate to have acquired knowledge and skill in computer fundamentals, even though I could not become a computer engineer." Jeevitha, though soft-spoken, now is sure of her goals. She wants to be independent. She has greater focus and clarity, and now has enough confidence to start an independent enterprise of her own.



Ranjit Kumar with his mother

“Having taken History as a core subject in my higher secondary, I did not, in my faintest dreams, imagine I would do a course related to computers during my undergraduation.”

Ranjit Kumar

Kattukottai is a small interior hamlet in Thirupandhurithi Panchayat, Thiruvaiyaru Taluk of Thanjavur District. It is in the midst of agricultural fields. As one approaches this hamlet, the natural beauty of the place captures one’s eyes. Glimpses of the hamlet can be had through the surrounding trees. It is a scenic view of rural charm. The road leading to the village is very narrow, with ups and downs. This small hamlet consists of about 100 households, distributed in two narrow streets. Of these, only a few are concrete structures, while the rest are either thatched or tiled houses. Cement and mud coating on the walls of houses have peeled away.

As it is an interior hamlet, it lacks facilities such as a primary school, ration shop and so on. There is no proper bus service passing through the hamlet. The inhabitants have to walk one kilometre to board buses to go to other villages. Similarly, they walk one kilometre to buy things from the Public Distribution System. Children are sent to a primary

school in a neighbouring village. For middle and higher secondary school, they either go to Ammanpettai, a village four kilometres away, or to Thiruvaiyaru or Thanjavur. There is a government threshing yard, and an overhead water tank which fulfills the household water requirement. There are no proper cowsheds and the cattle are tethered in front of the houses in unhygienic conditions. Since the hamlet is on elevated levels on the northern and southern sides, and also because it is



The street where Ranjit Kumar lives

located on the northern side of river Vettaru, we were told that the hamlet gets flooded whenever there is heavy downpour of rain or when the river overflows. All the households belong to underprivileged sections of the society. There are only a few government employees. A great majority of the people depends on agriculture and work either as agricultural labourers or owner cultivators/labourers for their livelihood.

Ranjit is a calm, confident person. He is a first year B.C.A. student, and hails from this small hamlet of Kattukottai. His family lives in a recently constructed concrete house. The house is comfortable, and has a small and beautiful backyard garden. Their rice fields are situated behind the house. The household uses both firewood and gas for cooking.

Coming from an agricultural family, Ranjit is the eldest of three children. One of his sisters is in the 10th Standard, while the other is in the final year of higher secondary school. His father, a B.A. graduate, is 45 years old, and works as a clerk in a Municipality Office at Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District. He commutes every day to his office from the village. Ranjit's mother, who is 42 years old, has studied up to the 8th Standard. She takes care of the household work and also does most of the farming activities. Ranjit's family was in Kumbakonam for five years before they decided to shift to Kattukottai, their native place, three years ago, because his grandfather fell



ill.

We had the opportunity to meet Ranjit at the VRC, Thiruvaiyaru, and later we visited his house. Only his mother was at home. His two sisters were at school, and his father had gone to Kumbakonam. Ranjit's mother is sociable and seemed happy to receive us. During our interaction and discussion, she was very responsive and expressive, and talked about her son's improvement and development during the past year.

Ranjit has grown from a shy and introverted boy to a very self assured person. He attributes his growth to the MUPP course; it has helped him discover his own latent potential, of which he had been unaware till then. According to Ranjit, he had not been a bright student in the school. He had failed in his higher secondary school exam. His father did not want Ranjit to waste his time, and so sent him for typing classes at Thiruvaiyaru. It was during this time that Ranjit came to

know of the MUPP course conducted at the VRC, Thiruvaiyaru, through the local newsletter, *Namma Ooru Seidhi* (brought out by the VRC).

Being a very reserved and quiet person, Ranjit did not imagine he would be doing B.C.A. in college. He took Arts group (taking up subjects like History) in his school! He was familiar with computers, and while he was in the middle school he used to play or use the Word file at his father's office. He mentioned that he used to go to his father's office during his school holidays and type whatever he liked when his father opened the Word file. He did not know how to open a file or use applications in the computer until he joined the MUPP course. Ranjit remarked that even though he had an interest in computers, it never occurred to him that he must take up a computer course. Yet when he learnt that the computer course was conducted at the VRC, he did not hesitate to make use of the opportunity. His father also encouraged him to attend the computer classes.

"Having taken History as a core subject in my higher secondary, I did not, in my faintest dreams, imagine I would do a course related to computers during my under graduation. Particularly because I was unable to clear one of my subjects in the final exams," admitted Ranjit. He acknowledged, during our conversation, that he was quite surprised to learn that he could grasp the lessons quickly. He did not realise his potential till then. He has a flair for

computer practical and programming. He was happy to help his teammates when they had any doubts or sought his help for any clarification. It may be mentioned here that during the course of our conversation, two women (who were Ranjit's classmates in the MUPP) interrupted with their observations that



Ranjit was indeed smart in picking up lessons, and that he always helped others during the computer practice sessions (hands on training sessions). The teachers also mentioned that he was one of the bright students, and they were quite pleased with his performance in the class, and also in the exam. They said that he was very regular in attending classes. He also feels proud that he is able to help his father in using Excel. His father would take down the points in a notebook and work in his office, mentioned a confident Ranjit.

Ranjit is interested in sharing his knowledge and helping others. He says, "*There has been a sense of fulfillment when I taught other akkas (older sisters) much older to me, as I was able to grasp the*

concepts quickly, and as I was good in practical (hands on training)." Ranjit, who never used to ask any questions during his school days, is now quick to clarify his doubts as they arise. He has developed a thirst for knowledge. According to Ranjit, *"I would have still remained an introvert had I not joined MUPP."* He mentioned that MUPP played a big role in helping him overcome his reserve. It provided the opportunity to interact and mingle with women.

As his interest in practical lessons increased, Ranjit began to explore further on his own, even before the teachers took the lessons in class. This interest encouraged him to opt for a B.C.A. course. He also felt that this would prove useful in future. As he had the experience of working on LOOP while learning Excel during the MUPP course, he was able to execute work related to some programmes using LOOP. He says he is so proud of himself and feels very confident because he has acquired computer knowledge, and is able to do programming as efficiently as those who had taken the Computer Science group in higher secondary school.

This is what Ranjit's mother had to say when we asked her how acquiring computer knowledge has helped her son, *"Previously my son used to always*

spend his time with television or radio and other such things. Even when I used to switch it off telling him to study, he would turn it on later and continue to watch. He was generally an introvert. Nowadays he has opened up, and interacts with people more comfortably. I could see a lot of change in him. He spends a lot of time studying his lessons, that too without any prompting on my part. His preoccupation with television and radio has reduced considerably. Instead, he spends time reading or writing. His father himself says it is only now that Ranjit has developed a sense of responsibility. Whenever he gets time, he goes to the Centre (VRC) at Thiruvaiyaru to work on the computer. He says that sometimes he helps the other students also. I am no longer worried about my son." On coming to learn that he had successfully passed the MUPP exam, his elation knew no bounds, and he went around the hamlet proudly showing off his results published in *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, added his mother.

Ranjit is grateful to his computer teachers, who were very patient in clearing his doubts. He has the satisfaction of learning something new and useful, without wasting his time. He wishes there were more computers in the VRC. But he is quick to add that what has been accomplished so far is commendable indeed.



At the hospital – Deepa

Deepa too, like Rathna, was once a very shy, reticent and nervous young woman, lacking the confidence to do anything on her own. But after she attended the MUPP computer training programme at the Village Resource Centre in Thiruvaiyaru, she emerged a bold and enterprising woman, confidently taking up a job in a private hospital. Her parents and her neighbours were amazed at the change, and proud to see that she was now a working woman.

Deepa is 26 years old and a graduate in Tamil Literature. A woman of slight build and medium height, she is the youngest of five children. She converses well, and is very friendly. Deepa's father, who is around 64 years, is an oil merchant. He had been educated till the 8th Standard, and her mother, aged 55, is illiterate. The mother takes care of all the household activities. Deepa has two married sisters, who have studied up to the 10th Standard, and another sister who is studying for an M.A. degree

***“Naan velaiku poven
endru ninaithu parthadhu
kidaiyadhu suddamaga!”***

***(“I had never imagined
myself as a working girl!”)***

Deepa

through correspondence, and has also taken up one year of computer training. Her brother is pursuing his engineering studies at Annamalai University.

We first met Deepa at the hospital where she works. After that we visited her at home. Her house is an old type of terraced building. This house is also rented out as a marriage hall. Since the business at the oil shop has declined over the years, her father bought the present house, which would serve both the purposes - to live and also to use as a source of income for the household.

When we visited Deepa's house, her parents and her two sisters were at home. Her mother is a very quiet person. Deepa's father and one of her sisters were very friendly and willing to talk to us. The family mentioned that Deepa was initially diffident, and did not know how to interact with others. Apart from going to college, she spent her spare time mainly at home. But after she attended the MUPP course at the Village Resource

Centre, Thiruvaiyaru, they noticed a great change in her. To their surprise and that of her neighbours, Deepa has now become a bold woman, no longer afraid to talk to anyone. She is more friendly and outgoing.

We learned that Deepa's older sister was at first keen on the MUPP course. But she could not do the course as she was concentrating on her M.A. lessons. She then persuaded Deepa to attend the programme. The teaching was in Tamil and her teachers instilled courage and confidence in her. *"They were very understanding and kind,"* says Deepa. Fear and shyness disappeared, and Deepa soon learned to communicate and interact comfortably with others.

Deepa's parents added, *"We never dreamt that our daughter would go for a job. She used to be very nervous and would not talk even to our neighbours. She was always confined to the house. Only with us she used to talk "pada pada venru" (talkatively). She*



Deepa at her work table

would not respond and talk to others. We thought our third daughter - who had completed one year Special High Level Computer Course with a stipend - would be the one to go for work. We were proved wrong. Deepa, who had undergone the MUPP course, has been working for the past five months. It is heartening to see that Deepa has gained confidence and the courage to go for work without any inhibitions"

Deepa's sister, who studied the one year computer Impact Course at SSI, Thanjavur, lauded the MUPP Course, which has transformed her sister's outlook and behaviour. She also expressed her appreciation for the teaching staff at the Centre. She is surprised that subjects were taught in detail in a short duration. She herself had learnt from Deepa's class notes, which are clear and detailed. She remarked that through this course, the quiet and diffident Deepa had an opportunity to interact with other people. Deepa's approach towards others had changed totally. These days she boldly approaches others if she needed any clarification or details about something, added Deepa's sister.

Deepa says, *"I am working in a private hospital as a Computer Operator & Scan Reporter. I owe it all to the Microsoft MUPP course, which I had an opportunity to attend at VRC, Thiruvaiyaru. I used to be very nervous. I would not have spoken a word to you if I had been the 'old' Deepa (if it had been before she attended the MUPP course). Learning computer skills has really improved my confidence. I do not doubt my ability to work at the hospital-using the scan machine,*

entering data and preparing patients' case reports. I have gained so much confidence and courage that people in my street are surprised that I am going for work."

Deepa earns a salary of Rs 1200 per month, and she and her family are extremely satisfied. In fact, Deepa expected a lesser salary than this. Such a good starting salary is very rare in her place. The hospital is only walking distance from her house. She says her parents do not depend on her income and her father encourages her to save it for herself. She also says that she is planning to open a bank account soon. Apart from spending on a handbag, the balance amount is in the safe custody of her mother. Her mother is proud that Deepa is very clever and prudent in spending money.

Deepa mentioned that without her family's encouragement, she would not have joined the MUPP course. Later on, she was also hesitant to apply for the job at the hospital when the vacancy arose. Her teachers at the VRC motivated and encouraged her to do so. She said, "*Naan*

velaiiku poven endru ninaitu parthadhu kidaiyadhu suddamaga" meaning "I had never imagined myself as a working girl!!"

Deepa is happy to have found new friends while studying in the MUPP course. This has helped her improve her perception and attitude. The job at the hospital has also given her more exposure and widened her awareness. She likes the work, and the friendly environment at the hospital. She is more confident now and wishes to improve herself and carry out her work efficiently, and interact with the staff and the patients in a positive and friendly manner.

Deepa likes her job. She feels happy when the patients come to her before getting discharged from the hospital. At the hospital there were several women and children waiting for her to perform the scans. We watched her proceed with her work, dedicated and caring. We were happy to have met such a woman who has brought forth her inner potential with the help of the MUPP course.



Chitra and her husband

“This will go a long way in helping us enhance our economic capabilities.”

Chitra

Chitra, a mother of two, is a sociable and lively woman. She comes from Tiruvanaikaval in Trichy District, Tamil Nadu. After her marriage, she moved to her husband’s place. The financial circumstances of the household were such that her parents arranged her marriage soon after she completed her B. Sc. in Geography, in 1991. Her wish to pursue further studies could not materialise. She said that when her father-in-law heard about her ambition, he encouraged her to study a course in computers, even though he was not in favour of women going for work. But as a married woman, she was too shy to make use of the opportunity.

Chitra’s father is a retired Checking Inspector of the Transport Department. Her mother, like most women at that time, took care of the household activities. Chitra is the youngest of three children. Her sister was married after completing the 10th Standard. Her brother has a diploma in I. T. I and runs his own mechanic shop. Chitra has a 12

year old son studying in the 7th Standard, and a daughter in the 1st Standard.

Chitra’s husband, a B.A. graduate, did not have a job when they were married. Being confident and optimistic, she did not mind marrying someone who was unemployed. After marriage, she suggested that they start any small business, like a dealership in fertilisers, but her husband lacked the courage to start a new enterprise. Though her husband comes from a reasonably comfortable family, she felt he could be motivated by the prospect of economic independence. To help them, her father-in-law bought two acres of agricultural land in Thiruvaiyaru, which happened to be Chitra’s mother-in-law’s native place. After two years of experience in agriculture, her husband found that it was not profitable, so he had to look for an alternative economic activity. He set up a photocopier shop, after leasing out the agricultural lands. Chitra has always been of great help and support to her husband in running the business.

Initially the business picked up in the photocopier shop, but after some time, it declined. Many customers suggested that they additionally offer DTP services also. Chitra's husband is good in typing, and he encouraged her to undertake training in DTP, which would be useful in expanding the business. Chitra said that even though she was interested in learning, the fear of ridicule was very dominant in her mind, and so she was not prepared to try. Earlier she had reservations in pursuing the computer course because she was married woman. More so now; her inhibitions were because she was a mother of two children, and balked at the thought of learning together with younger people. She regretted that she had not attended the course when she got an opportunity soon after her marriage.

A fortunate change occurred in Chitra's life. Where once she was hesitant even

to attempt a computer course, she is today very competent in using the computer applications. This happened quite unexpectedly. As Chitra's house and shop are both within walking distance of the Village Resource Centre (VRC), they would notice groups of students regularly visiting the Centre at the same time every day. They soon learnt that the MUPP course was being conducted at the VRC. Chitra's husband encouraged her to attend the same, but she was still not mentally prepared to join, until she learnt that one of her friends, who lived close by, had joined the course just a few days ago. Her friend motivated Chitra to make use of the opportunity and join immediately, though it was already ten days late. She was not even sure if she would be able to understand the lessons. She mentioned that though initially she had some difficulty, gradually she improved her learning.



Chitra assists her husband

According to Chitra, she was glad she could complete the course successfully, even while coping with other responsibilities at home. She worked on a tight schedule – taking care of the children, helping her husband in the shop and attending her computer classes. As Chitra was overwhelmed by the teachers' commitment and dedicated nature, she resolved that she should not take it lightly, and must make earnest efforts to study well, and do well in examination. She sent her children to her parents-in-laws' house during her examinations, so that she could concentrate better. She mentioned that at one point she became very nervous, and her husband encouraged her by pointing out that it was not a public exam. Her joy knew no bounds when she passed the exams, and her father-in-law was the first to be informed about it.

At first, when the income from the photocopier business started decreasing, Chitra wanted to improve the situation, but she did not know what to do. But now, she knows what could be done. Her fears about buying a computer have vanished. Having learnt to type in the computer, and take printouts, she is confident, and wishes to buy a computer for their shop. Even though her parents-in-law are in a position to finance them, she intends taking a bank loan. She feels that her father-in-law might have reservations about it. She and her husband need to explain to him and convince him in this regard.

Chitra says, *"I had the impression that computer education was something very difficult, and I could not manage to learn*

anything. Now I realise there is nothing one cannot do. After the MUPP course, I have gained self-confidence, and know that I can also do it." She is assured of herself now. She is only waiting for the opportune time to tell her father-in-law, whom she greatly respects, about her decision to buy a computer. She feels it is not fair on their part to depend on the elders, and that they have to be self-reliant. Chitra says, *"By using this computer knowledge to improve myself, and to also teach others, I wish to show my sense of gratitude to our teachers who taught us with great dedication. This will go a long way in helping us enhance our economic capabilities."*

Though Chitra's husband did not wish to attend the MUPP course as he lacked the confidence, he motivated her to take up the course since he was sure of her ability. He did not want his wife to miss this opportunity. He mentioned that the feedback from earlier students was very encouraging. It seems the students spoke highly of the quality of teaching – saying that it was even better than in the paid courses. They also mentioned that tests were conducted regularly during the course. He was very supportive, and even collected lessons related to computers that appeared in vernacular newspapers.

Her husband is proud of Chitra. He says he feels comfortable and secure to invest in a computer for his shop as his wife has good knowledge in computer basics - both in theory and applications. He feels that he could also gradually learn to operate the system. This would make the work more economical, and of better

quality because of their personal involvement.

Like several others, Chitra's husband too lauded the efforts of MSSRF in helping the rural population, particularly through programmes like MUPP. The rural students and women, who cannot afford to continue their studies after secondary and higher secondary school, are fortunate to have this facility. .

Chitra values her class notes, and keeps referring to them often. They are also useful when she teaches her children, and to clear their doubts regarding their

computer lessons. She also visits the VRC during her leisure time, and encourages and helps other MUPP students. She was proud to mention how her son also encouraged her during the exam, and that he was very happy, and congratulated her when she got the Certificate. Along with her computer lessons and note books, she also carefully preserves the issue of *Namma Ooru Seidhi*, the local newsletter, in which her results appeared. According to her, it is a great treasure for her to safeguard.



Kannan's (extreme left) family

"I am really fortunate and feel happy that I have a government job at this young age."

Kannan

Kannan hails from Rajendiram Village in Thanjavur District. He attended the MUPP course at the Village Resource Centre (VRC), M.S Swaminathan Research Foundation, Thiruvaiyaru, while he was in the final year of his under graduation B.C.A. course. When he learnt of the MUPP through the village *Panchayat* President, he was quite curious to know the details. He decided to join the course and to his surprise he found that the lessons were taught in great detail, and also in a very simple and effective manner by the teachers.

Rajendiram, an interior village, situated seven kilometres from Thiruvaiyaru, is one of the three villages in Manakarambai *Ooratchi* or *Panchayat*. Its economy is predominantly dependent on agriculture. Rice is grown twice a year, in two seasons. Large landholders are few in number. A majority of the households are either small/marginal landholders or landless labourers. Rearing cattle, goats and sheep is quiet common in this small village. A few

households are engaged in handloom cloth weaving for their livelihood.

Coming from an agricultural family, Kannan is 21 years old, the elder of two sons. His family lives in a spacious tiled house with traditional *thinnai* (pyols) on either side of the main door, and slanting thatched roof at the entrance; where one can relax after a day's work. Kannan's 51 year old father has studied up to 9th Standard and used to work in a cotton mill as a machine operator. He quit the job when he fell ill and began to work on his agricultural lands. Kannan's 41-year-old mother, who is very protective of her sons, has completed her higher secondary school education. She takes charge of the household activities. Kannan's brother is five years younger, and is a first year diploma student in Mechanical Engineering.

As mentioned earlier, Kannan joined the course more out of curiosity. He was polite and outspoken, and admitted, "*Before I joined the MUPP course, I was*

under the impression I knew Word, Excel and other basic lessons. But soon I realised that here the lessons were being taught in greater depth than even the course warranted. It was useful for my studies at college, where even the syllabus was not covered fully, and the lessons were also not taught in detail." He attended the course with great interest, and got a certificate on its completion.

Kannan's completion of the course coincided with setting up of a Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) in his village. He willingly offered to be a Knowledge Worker in the VKC. As he was in his final year of under graduation, he looked after the Centre in the evenings from 4.30 pm to 7 pm. He enjoyed taking computer lessons. His students were six boys and six girls who were from schools and colleges. He mentioned that the students were initially diffident to learn the computer. But gradually they started enjoying the experience. He mentioned that examinations could not be conducted for the first batch of the students since it coincided with their school/college examinations. Some of them were afraid to take the exam. He is trying to help them combat the fear and encourages them to take the exam in the next session.



During our discussion Kannan pointed out that the computer lessons taught at the VRC/VKC, and the teaching, are far better than that of the college or computer courses that are conducted by commercial institutions. In this context he mentioned that even his friends in the village who had done B.Sc. Computer Science, appreciated the MUPP course that is taught in detail. It seems they complimented him for his computer knowledge, and admitted that Kannan had a thorough understanding of the subject. As they were impressed, and found the syllabus useful, they also attended the MUPP course conducted at the VKC. *"I feel proud of myself that I am more knowledgeable than those who have done Computer Science,"* said a beaming Kannan.

Kannan continued to be a Knowledge Worker after he completed his undergraduate course in 2006. It was during this time that an unexpected but encouraging event took place in his life. He got an opportunity to work as a *Panchayat* Assistant in the local *Panchayat* Office. His joy knew no bounds when he was made a permanent employee after a few months of service.

Young Kannan never even remotely imagined that his first employment would be in his own village, that too as a government employee. He owes this to the training in MUPP course at the Village Resource Centre at Thiruvaiyaru that later led to his becoming a Knowledge Worker of the local VKC. Since the VKC functions in one of the rooms of the *Panchayat* building, Kannan used to help the *Panchayat* President in

his official work by typing letters, applications and taking printouts. He also assisted the *Panchayat* in accounting work. He was taking care of the VKC and also extending a helping hand to the *Panchayat* in his capacity as the Knowledge Worker. Even while doing so, he did not have the slightest anticipation that he would be appointed Village *Panchayat* Assistant. He got this opportunity when the earlier Village Assistant resigned to take up a more remunerative job in one of the Gulf countries. The then *Panchayat* President, who was impressed with Kannan's sincerity and efficiency, felt that he would be the right person for the post of Village Assistant. Kannan feels that his voluntary service to the *Panchayat* and his familiarity with *Panchayat* work fetched him this job.

When asked whether he is able to cope with the work, both as a *Panchayat* Assistant and as a Knowledge Worker at the VKC, he immediately replied that it is not a problem since he comes from the same village and could very well manage the VKC activities after office hours - just as he had always done while a college student.

Kannan says *"I did not even remotely think that I would be teaching computer lessons to my relatives, friends and fellow villagers in my own village. Another unexpected but pleasant thing that happened to me is that I am employed as a Village Panchayat Assistant in my native place itself."*

Though Kannan does not mind working in his village for few more years as a village *Panchayat* Assistant, his mother

feels he should soon move out of the village to find employment elsewhere. She thinks her son would get into some trouble with his relatives or the others if he stayed in the village. But Kannan does not think so. He does not anticipate such situations; he feels that if he stays in his native place he could look after the agricultural lands also.

Kannan could perform his work as a Knowledge Worker even while he was still in the college, since his parents supported and encouraged him. They did not mind him taking classes and looking after the VKC after his college hours. His father told him to be regular in his work, as he felt that by teaching others, Kannan would gain experience, and this would also help in enhancing his skills. He likes teaching computer lessons to the people of his village. He says that although they were initially hesitant and lacked confidence, gradually they began to show interest. Now they ask a lot of questions, and he is happy to clarify their doubts. His only worry is that they do not come forward to take the exam. He thinks he should make some more efforts to banish the fear and convince them to face the exam.

Kannan's father said, *"I am happy that a few of our villagers are benefited through my son. I never expected my son to be teaching computers in my village. I am really glad about it. It is important that one should have knowledge in the present age!"* His mother stated, *"It gives a great satisfaction that my son could teach our students and others in the village. By teaching, his knowledge is also growing."* She added, *"Namakku therindadai mattravargalakku*

chollitharuvadhu thane nyaayam?" (It is only fair that we share our knowledge with others?)

Kannan's mother is very careful to ensure that her sons should not get into any undesirable activities or relationships. She keeps a constant check on their movements. She questions Kannan if he comes home late. The only place where she allows her son to stay for long hours is at the VKC, as she is aware that he is doing something useful to the village and himself.

Kannan said he was excited when he received his honorarium in cash for his services as a Knowledge Worker at the VKC. He used the money to meet his college expenses. He did not take money from his parents. However, his parents are not dependent on his salary. He was glad to show us a mobile phone which he purchased after he received his salary as a Village Assistant. He mentioned that if for some reason his father is unable to pay or meet his younger brother's college expenses, his salary would come in handy. After taking some cash for his day-to-day expenses, he gives the balance to his mother. He has recently opened a bank account in his name

Kannan mentioned that he would continue to serve the VKC as a Knowledge Worker since this has helped him get the present employment

as Panchayat Assistant. He says, ***"I am really fortunate and feel happy that I have a government job at this young age."***

There are many boys and girls who have completed the secondary and higher secondary school education in his village. Most of them did not have knowledge of computers, and it is a great blessing to learn computers at the VKC. Many of them are not in a position to learn from commercial institutions. Since it is a free course offered at the VKC, they are able to utilise the opportunity given to them. According to Kannan, this would enable them to find employment. For jobs that involve accounts and stock maintenance, basic computer knowledge is sufficient. So it would enable people, both women and men from the villages, to get employment, in and around Thanjavur. *"Onnume theriyaadha irrundhavargalukku, basic computer knowledge kidaitiruppadhu periya vishayam,"* commented Kannan. (It is a great blessing for some of the villagers who did not have any knowledge about computers, to have this facility here). He is of the view that knowledge in DTP would be of great use as there are several printing presses and photo studios in Thanjavur. He wondered whether training in DTP could be offered to young women and men at the VRC or VKC.



“I am grateful that poor students like me can now make use of such opportunities to improve our future. It is a great boon to us.”

Arun

After school Arun keeps in touch with the computer at the VKC

Arun’s mother never went to school. Today she is proud that her 16-year-old son has learnt to use the computer. She feels that the computer classes have given him the incentive to study better at school. All she knows is that such education will make a bright future for Arun.

The small village of Manakarambai has a Primary Health Centre and a Bank. Here, Arun and his family live in the Government Housing Colony, built for the underprivileged. Arun’s parents

work as agricultural labourers for daily wages. They do not own any land. Arun’s father has taken some agricultural land on lease, and cultivates paddy. Arun’s younger sister is in the 9th Standard. Although they are very poor, Arun’s parents realise the value of education, and always encourage their children to study. His father has studied till the 10th, whereas his mother is illiterate.

Arun heard from his friends about the Microsoft computer training course conducted at the Village Knowledge Centre at Rajendiram. He wanted to learn to use computers, and was determined not to miss this opportunity.



The street where Arun lives

“Though I have seen a computer in our school I never had an opportunity to use one. I have learnt computer applications in MS Office through the MUPP offered at the Village Knowledge Centre at the neighbouring village of Rajendiram. It is only one kilometre away from my village. If we had to learn computers, we would have



Arun with parents and sister

to travel some 8 kilometres to Thanjavur, or 6 kilometres to Thiruvaiyaru. Since computers are now accessible through the Knowledge Centre, it is a great opportunity for the villagers. Only very few families could afford to send their children for a computer course. The teaching here is clear and easy to understand. Since my father is a daily wage labourer, I could not have afforded any computer course outside. I am grateful that poor students like me can now make use of such opportunities to improve our future. It is a great boon to us," he said.

Arun is disappointed that he could not take the computer exam as he was preparing for his 10th examination. He is planning to write the exam when it is next conducted at the VKC. Apart from learning computer skills, he could get to know a lot of useful information at the Centre. Since he likes to read, he is interested in the books available at the

Centre. Arun also takes part in health and agricultural programmes, and awareness programmes organised by the VKC. He is also aware of the other services and facilities available at the Centre. He shares the information on agriculture related aspects with his father, and the tips on herbal medicine with the neighbours, friends and other villagers.

Attending the MUPP course has kindled his desire to do an IT course in computer software in Manali Ramakrishna Polytechnic College, situated three kilometres from his village. He is also influenced by one of his relatives, who completed the IT diploma course. Now he wishes to do the same. As his financial status poses some constraints, he would have to take an educational loan. He says he can cycle to college. He feels that if courses

like Tally and DTP are available at the Centre, it would be really useful to the rural population - particularly those who come from poor socio-economic background.

Arun's father says that in this part of the rural area, people are indeed fortunate to have the Village Knowledge Centre. Arun's sister is now motivated to take up the computer course. Arun's mother mentioned that even though she does not know anything about education, she is glad that her son is able to learn

something new at the Centre, without wasting his time. She hopes that he will have a good future. His father said he would not have been able to send his son for any computer course outside. He never thought about it since it is beyond his capacity. *"Now I am keen on sending him for the IT course. I hope my son has a good future,"* stated Arun's father. During his leisure time, Arun helps his father in farming activities like weeding and irrigating the fields. He also keeps in touch with his computer lessons.



Kavitha with mother and daughter

“I am sure I can get a job even in the city.”

Kavitha

Kavitha, 31 years old, lives with her mother in Thiruvaiyaru. She has a B.Sc. degree in Physics. She belongs to a lower middle class family, and has a daughter who is 7 years old. Her husband, an ITI Diploma holder in welding, owned a bunk shop, but is currently employed in the city of Chennai as a sales representative of a chocolate company. Kavitha’s younger brother has a B.Sc. degree in Statistics, and works at a call centre. Her father, who is no more, used to work as an accountant in the Electricity Board.

What strikes us about Kavitha is her energy and positive outlook. Being a woman with great clarity of vision and immense confidence, she decided to take up the computer course at the local VRC, even though she was married, and had a child. She learnt about the MUPP computer training course from her friends. She was able to appear for the examinations after completing the MUPP course. She was sure it would be useful some day, and it proved to be very true within months.

Kavitha did not think of going for computer courses earlier while she was studying, as it would have involved a great deal of expense, and travel to Thanjavur. However, she had taken tailoring lessons, which is popular with girls in her area.

After her marriage, she was taking tuitions at home for school children, before she participated in the computer course. She mentioned that she made use of this opportunity to teach her daughter and other children lessons in computer also. Earlier she used to take tuition for a total of eight children - between 1st and 5th Standards. After joining the course she was encouraged to increase the number of children to 20 and teach students even up to 8th Standard.

Kavitha feels that the computer course at the VRC helped her to expand her social network. She is connected to a new set of friends. She looks on this as an opportunity to know people, and also

to get contacts for mutual assistance. Kavitha was very happy to mention that she has learnt to use Internet facility for communication. She says *"I have never heard of Internet before. Now I can use Internet facility. I can keep in touch with my friends through e-mail."*

Taking up a job had never been something she seriously planned earlier, though she had such a desire. However, she did apply for a couple of posts on the strength of her computer skills. She secured employment at the Sengipatti TB Hospital in Thanjavur District. She was offered Rs 3500 as salary. She did not take up the job, as it was a residential posting.

Fortunately for Kavitha she did not have to wait for a long time to find an employment. She has got a job in a pharmaceutical company in Thanjavur itself. She has been going there since 4 December, 2006. She is much excited about it. She could get this job because of her knowledge in computers. For the first 20 days she was posted in the stock section and now she works in the distribution section, where she takes care of accounts by using computers. While she goes for work, Kavitha's mother takes care of her daughter at home.

Kavitha is paid a monthly salary of Rs 2000, which excludes Rs 200 for bus fare. She mentioned that the company pays an incentive of Rs 250 to its employees for every sale worth 50 lakh rupees. The company also provides snacks and tea during the working hours. She is quite satisfied with her income and working atmosphere. Her husband is also happy

about her job. Since he does not have a regular job she feels it is only appropriate she should earn and save for the future while she can. She says she has the confidence that she will be able to provide a good future to her daughter. In her own words this is what she has to say, *"Nammal mudiyum. En magalakku nalla edirgalam amathukodukkalam engira dairiyam vandhu vittadu."* (I can work to ensure a bright future for my daughter. I am confident about it). She went on to say that within a short span of time she has grown to be more positive; she firmly believes that if a woman is self assured she will be able to bring up her children against all odds. Kavitha's friendly nature has earned her a good set of friends in her work place. It gives exposure to the outside world. She is quick to learn from others' life experiences to improve her personality to be more pragmatic and strong. In this context she mentioned about a senior woman colleague who, despite her broken marriage and without support from the family, has managed to bring up her two sons very well; the boys' good academic record has earned them admission in renowned engineering colleges. Kavitha regards this woman as her role model when she says that a woman can achieve anything if she has a will to do so.

Kavitha considers herself fortunate to be able to complete MUPP course. She has learnt something new and useful for her own social and economic development. Her knowledge about computers has made it easy for her to get a job. Apart from learning the skills in ICT, she also

got the opportunity to know about important activities of the VRC. Kavitha says that her computer teachers were extremely dedicated, and clarified her doubts very patiently. *“We were trained very well, and the teachers explained in ways that were easy to understand. I doubt if they teach so well in the courses available outside,”* she added. She always took down notes of the lessons, and would use them to help others learn from her. Kavitha, who was earlier taking tuitions for school children, misses doing the same; she does not find time now as she is going for work.

Besides certification for MS Office, she hopes that the Centre would arrange certificate courses for Tally and DTP, as these are very important for seeking employment. Being involved in the activities of the Centre, she had the opportunity to take part in the AIDS Awareness camps, and several craft workshops.

Kavitha hopes to join her husband in Chennai soon. Kavitha is brimming with confidence, and says, *“I am sure I can get a job even in the city (Chennai).”*



Santhanalakshmi (second from left) and her family

“Oh, I am not thinking about that (marriage) now.”

Santhanalakshmi

The village of Tirupazhanam is situated six kilometres from Thiruvaiyaru on the Thiruvaiyaru/Kumbakonam Main Road. Here, the usual crops grown by the villagers are coconut, betel, banana, gingely, black gram, green gram, and some vegetables. The village bears the mark of stark and rural simplicity. The six streets are lined on either side with houses that are either thatched or with sloping tiled roofs.

Santhanalakshmi, a first year student of M. A. in Tamil, is a slim and tall young woman, about 20 years of age. She comes from a lower income family of four children. She has an elder brother (who has ITI diploma), and younger sister and brother. Her father, around 52 years of age, has studied till the 7th Standard. He worked as a goldsmith. Now he restricts his activities, as he suffered a stroke. Her mother, a very warm and pleasant person, about 45 years of age, had studied till the 5th Standard.

Santhanalakshmi has always been a shy and diffident person. Being a girl child,

her parents had always been protective about her. A change in attitude and behaviour took place in Santhanalakshmi while she was doing her final year B.Lit in Thiruvaiyaru. It was at that time she heard from Mrs. Revathi, the Knowledge Worker from her village, about the MUPP computer training available free of cost at the Village Resource Centre (VRC), Thiruvaiyaru. As she realised her family could not afford her computer education, she availed of the opportunity and got a certificate. Santhanalakshmi, who had only seen a computer on a television screen before she joined the course, is now good in her basic computer application skills. Hitherto very reserved, Santhanalakshmi has become socially and economically empowered.

We met Santhanalakshmi in her whitewashed house, with the typical *thinnai* or *pyol* which serves as a seating for the family to relax and supervise the evening chores around the house. The



Teaching the Alphabet

kitchen is situated in the rear of the house, and has both the log fire and a gas stove. The gas stove however is sparingly used, as it is expensive, and cylinders have to be carted a long way from the depot. The house has a television set and an electric fan.

Santhanalakshmi, though keen to learn computers, was very apprehensive about the course because she thought the teaching would be in English. To her relief she found that it was being taught both in English and Tamil. Contrary to what she had imagined, fluency in English was not so vital to learn the computer. She is quiet confident now, and freely mixes with others. She is no more an inhibited person. The computer classes opened a vast vista for learning. Till now she had very little exposure beyond her home and school. During the computer course, she had an opportunity to interact with people and

learn new skills in a friendly atmosphere. She found that she could overcome her usual fears and diffidence that arose out of her rural upbringing. Today however, this young lady is herself a Knowledge Worker, enthusiastic and outgoing. Even while doing her B.Lit, she joined the VKC in her village as a Knowledge Worker. She takes care of the VKC activities after college hours.

As a Knowledge Worker, Santhanalakshmi encourages children to learn to use the computer. She teaches computer basics at the VKC. Her students include school children, students who have completed their schooling, and also some married women. She is involved in the activities of the Knowledge Centre, organising meetings and encouraging others to make use of the facilities available at the Centre.

Some of her friends, who had studied in the commercial computer institutes, had discouraged her from attending the course at the VRC saying that any course that is conducted free of cost will not be very useful. But today the same friends envy her, because they realise that her knowledge is thorough and the teaching has evidently been very good. She is glad that she is in a much better position to teach them all about the finer points of computer applications. She says that the credit goes to the teachers who are dedicated and patient. She continued to say, *“The teachers at the centre have been very helpful, and have always cleared the doubts, however often I asked them. We have always benefited by their individual attention to those students who are in need of more (hands on) training.”*

Teaching computer at the VKC has encouraged Santhanalakshmi to take tuitions at home for children, and earn an income. Her mother remarks that there is a positive change in her daughter’s attitude and outlook after joining the Centre and getting involved in its activities. Her mother, a friendly and outgoing person, says, *“After the MUPP course, she volunteered to be a Knowledge Worker at the VKC in our village. She used to be a timid and reserved person, but now she is much better; she has developed courage and confidence. She goes out to attend meetings and mobilises people for various programmes organised by VRC or any other Department in our village. She also talks in the meetings.”* Her mother is pleased with her daughter’s progress.

It was heartening to learn that Santhanalakshmi is able to make

independent decisions. She is clear about what she wants. When she wanted to study for an M.A. degree, her mother was apprehensive about what it would cost. But Santhanalakshmi convinced her mother that if they (parents) provided the initial payment of Rs 2000, she herself would take care of other expenses from her own earnings. Her mother proudly mentioned that they had paid only the initial fees, and after that Santhanalakshmi has not asked for any financial help from the parents. With her income from the VKC and home tuitions, Santhanalakshmi is able to meet all her college expenses. She manages her income very well, and sometimes buys books for her brother and younger sister. She also gives a little money to her mother now and then. Her mother remarked that nowadays she had no need to ask her husband for money to meet small household expenses.

When we casually asked Santhanalakshmi about her plans to get married, she was quick to remark, *“Oh, I am not thinking about that now.”* Her mother laughingly added, *“Earlier she would not have had the courage to answer the question. Her reaction would have been to keep quiet, even if she did not like the idea.”* Her mother continued, *“My daughter’s interest seems to be more in her studies now. She is confident that with her computer skills she will get a job. I do not want to force her to get married now.”*

Santhanalakshmi enthusiastically participates in all the programmes related to VRC and VKC. She says she has gained the confidence to meet school

teachers, veterinary doctors, and others whenever her work at the VKC demands. She attended the four-day training camp conducted by the Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Board. She was asked to talk to youngsters and villagers about issues relating to the disease, and to create awareness among the people. This shows the important and responsible status she has achieved in the community, and the way in which people look up to her for assistance and leadership.

Santhanalakshmi's self-esteem has greatly improved; she is more confident now. She is very happy and satisfied with herself because she could complete the course successfully. More importantly, she is sharing the computer knowledge by teaching others in the VKC. It helps her keep in touch with the subject. She is proud to say that it gives an immense joy when her village children address her as computer teacher. School students approach her when they have doubts regarding computer lessons. Her lecturer at the college felt happy when Santhanalakshmi said that she has learnt

to type with the Tamil font. She says the Centre, apart from its other services, provides a good opportunity for the rural poor to learn and develop skills in ICT. *"Poor students like me cannot afford computer education. For economically backward families, computers remains a distant dream,"* mentioned Santhanalakshmi.

By talking and interacting with the staff at the VRC and other Knowledge Workers from different villages in Thanjavur District during the weekly meetings at the VRC, she gathers valuable advice and information which she conveys to villagers. During these regular meetings, she has her doubts clarified. She is able to assess and choose appropriate content for her own village. In this way, through the VKC, she is able to cater to local specific needs of the villagers. Managing the VKC has given her considerable social prestige and self-esteem.

As the students started to come in one by one for their tuitions, we took leave of Santhanalakshmi and her family.

Concluding Observations

MSSRF established a Village Resource Centre in the year 2004 in Thiruvaiyaru, Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu. Using ICT as a tool, VRC attempts to empower people. While several impacts of the VRC on the local society are quite discernible, in this publication, we have used a single programme - the Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme (MUPP) - initiated by the VRC and VKCs of Thiruvaiyaru, to understand the various dimensions of the impact of skill development initiatives on the people of that area.

MUPP was initiated in mid 2005 in the VRC of Thiruvaiyaru, and later extended to other VKCs in the region. The MUPP course essentially attempts to provide a wide range of ICT skills to under-served people and thereby enhance their social and economic capabilities. Several impacts of this programme are evident from the case studies presented in the preceding section. While access to knowledge and skill development help significantly to empower people, social inclusion of individual members of deprived sections of the society, in particular, the youth and adult women from these sections, is happening to a great extent in this programme. Skill development and knowledge have empowered the participants in several respects. Tangible economic benefits aside, several social changes have occurred through positive attitudinal and behavioural changes. Participants' ability to make decisions, willingness of girls and women to work outside the

village, eagerness to go for higher studies, tendency to explore opportunities for development and overall enhancement in self confidence, are some of the visible changes that have taken place. For some students, the course made them realise their own capability and potential.

A total of 412 persons - 291 females and 121 males - have so far attended the entire course work offered by Microsoft (the MUPP course) at the VRC and VKCs since mid 2005. Age groups of the participant range from 15 to 50 years. Of the 412 persons, only 122 wrote the final exam. Out of 122 persons, 79 (69 women and 10 men) passed the MUPP curriculum examination to get a Certificate. Many could not take the exam due to fear and a lack of confidence. For some, their school/college exams/tests coincided with the MUPP examination. However, attending the entire course has itself improved their confidence level. Some of them said that they felt exhilarated and excited because of the confidence that they know about computers and can make use of the skills in the future.

A majority of the participants come from marginal farming households, followed by daily wage and agricultural labour households. A few households have petty shops or small businesses, and a few households depend on their work in garment stores for their livelihood. It is interesting to note that married women with children have utilised this

opportunity to equip themselves with computer knowledge. Though some underwent this course with a hope that they might get a job, others did it for self-improvement or to be of help to their children and neighbours. The mere feeling that they know how to operate the computer has enhanced their levels of self-esteem and confidence. Now they are ready to go out of their houses to work.

Access to computer knowledge represents an opportunity to develop skills and improve economic condition, and more importantly, ushers in positive behavioural and attitudinal changes. It has transformed the lives of some individuals by helping them overcome their shyness and become more self-assured. It has helped several persons overcome their timidity and reserve. The course has helped enhance people's self-expression and participation in wider community spaces. It has also helped some participants discover their latent potential and bring out their creativity.

Apart from the prospect of economic gain, the parents of the participants are happy with the positive social behavioural changes in their children. Family members of a few participants expressed their sense of gratitude to the organisers for the overall improvement in their children and said that they have found that the experience helped them learn to make friends, and communicate and interact comfortably with others. Some other parents felt that the children learned to give more importance to their studies and remain focused on their tasks.

After completing the MUPP course, some women have been inspired to develop and strengthen their computer skills further by taking additional courses offered by other institutions. Students who could not pursue their college education have been motivated to continue their studies through correspondence course. For some participants, the course has opened up avenues to explore the possibility of starting an economic enterprise by using the computer skills.

Attending the MUPP course has expanded the participants' social network. It has helped them find new friends and gain more contacts and enabled them to form healthy bonds, to mix and interact with the opposite sex and develop friendship and camaraderie. The course has helped to improve one's perceptions and attitudes. Some of them use the internet to keep in touch with their friends through e-mail.

It is common to hear from the people whom we spoke to, that women had a phobia about computer education. Some married women also had inhibitions in attending the course along with younger people, and those who are still in school or college.

It clearly emerged from our discussion that they generally had a notion that computer work is a skill that can be developed only by educated people. They assumed that computer education is meant only for highly qualified people. They were under the impression that computers are not meant for those

who have not completed schooling, and those who lack knowledge of English. Most of the villagers had initially taken it for granted that lessons for the MUPP would be conducted in English. When they found that this was not so, many went ahead to participate in the programme. Some mentioned that they were apprehensive of their ability and capacity to grasp the lessons.

It is interesting to observe that even women with college education had computer phobia. They lacked the confidence because they thought it would be difficult to comprehend and learn the skill. After the training, they realised that computer skills could be developed by practice, regardless of one's education, and age or sex. In turn, they encouraged others to get benefited.

Students, parents and family members speak highly of this course. According to them it sets the stage for a better future. Poor and lower middle class families cannot afford to have access to computer learning and skill development. Generally, in a traditional rural society, parents may not wish to invest in the computer education/training for girls. The services of the VRC and VKCs have been of great value in such a milieu.

The teachers in the VRC have undoubtedly been a great source of inspiration and motivation. We spoke to many people, and almost all of them uniformly praised the teachers for their dedicated work, and were grateful to MSSRF for providing such a valuable opportunity for villagers.

The teachers' capacity to instill and impart the lessons is of utmost importance, so also their rapport with the students. It is evident from the case studies that both students and parents express their immense gratitude to the computer teachers at the VKCs. Irrespective of age and sex, everyone mentioned that the method of teaching was very simple and could easily be understood even by those who have had a long break in their education. The students said that the teachers are sensitive and committed to their work. They would not proceed with the lessons unless they were convinced that all the students have understood what was being taught. They normally keep the students on their toes by asking questions and involving student participation. They encourage students to discuss and ask questions. The teachers are particularly concerned about those who have some difficulty in learning. Therefore the students, who had apprehensions and doubts about their ability to learn the computer, gradually relax and move with their team more confidently.

From the interviews it is revealed that the teachers and other staff at the VRC also guide and help the MUPP participants in securing jobs on completion of the course. VRC tries to help and offer guidance by organising counseling sessions through video conferencing to motivate the participants to select the right or suitable courses in their education by inviting professors from Anna University and University of Madras. The Centre also

encourages interactive sessions with local computer institutes. It is interesting to mention here that of the 21 Knowledge Workers managing the six VKCs connected to the Thiruvaiyaru VRC, ten (seven women and three men) have been inspired to become Knowledge Workers after they underwent MUPP course. Case studies of three such Knowledge Workers presently working in different VKCs of MSSRF are presented in this report (two women and one man).

While many have been fortunate to participate in the entire course, there are also several who discontinue abruptly. There are people who drop out within a few days, weeks and one or two months. There are several reasons for this. Mainly, some students are unable to cope with the increased study at the time of their school or college examinations and special classes. In the case of married women, there is resistance from the elders at home; they do not get the support to continue with their endeavours. An unfavourable atmosphere at home generally prevents women from completing the course.

In some cases women attend classes up to a certain level, and decide to discontinue on their own. We were told that for the sake of ensuring their job security, a few women, already working in grocery or medical stores, attended the course for two months just to familiarise themselves with computers. After learning Word and Excel, they dropped out to continue their jobs, or to take new jobs. Computers have become increasingly popular even in small

towns, where the shops and offices use them for accounts and data work. Therefore a rudimentary knowledge of computers is essential for job opportunities, and helps ensure a little more pay.

For a few women, the prevailing economic conditions of the households were such it was necessary for them to seek employment. These women would abandon the course mid way, when they got a job. However, they gained some basic knowledge and skills with the computer at the VRC. The women were often reluctant to give up the course, but constrained to do so. The teachers said that they were apologetic about not completing the MUPP curriculum.

People who take up the MUPP course get to know more about the other services and facilities available at the VRC and VKCs. They also gain useful information and knowledge about several aspects like health, education, job opportunities, agriculture, veterinary science, etc. Some enthusiastically participated in programmes such as the health awareness camps, micro-enterprise training, craft workshops and other such activities.

Interestingly, a few youngsters have voluntarily taken up the responsibility of disseminating important information and programmes of the VRC and VKCs in their localities. For example; they share the information on agriculture related aspects with their parents, and the tips on herbal medicine with the neighbours, friends and other villagers. This shows that the Centres, not only teach

computer programmes, but also foster a sense of community welfare and social commitment.

It is encouraging to find that the participants of the course are very confident, and are happy that they can share their computer knowledge with friends and neighbours. They find they have a strong foundation in the basic computer applications; even better than those who have attended courses conducted in commercial institutions, or studying in colleges with computers as a major subject. MUPP participants are in a position to teach and guide the others. Many friends and relatives of participants were prejudiced regarding the MUPP course, thinking that commercial computer training courses will be better. But soon they realised from a comparison of the class notes that the course taught at the VRC and VKCs was more in detail, and more efficacious.

Those who have completed the course, but are no longer in touch with the system, do not fear forgetting the computer knowledge, both theory and practical. In their opinion, as the class notes are clear, and all the points have been taken meticulously and in great detail, when a need arises, they can always fall back on their notes. They can pick up their skills; it would not be a problem.

Some participants wondered whether the VRC could arrange for courses like Tally and DTP besides the MS Office Certification. They felt that It would be really useful to the rural population - particularly those who come from poor socio-economic background, as these courses are very important for seeking employment. A few of them felt that a knowledge of DTP would be of great use since there are several printing presses and photo studios in Thanjavur.

The VRC and VKCs are thus playing a huge role in bringing forward the rural women, men and children to the forefront with services that have a wide range of impacts. However the MUPP course conducted at the VKCs needs to be strengthened. Knowledge Workers who teach the MUPP programme can benefit by focusing on their teaching and articulating skills. Capacity building among the Knowledge Workers involved with MUPP could bring about a better impact among the people. Their improved teaching skills would go a long way in helping the community more effectively.

The efforts of individual organisations such as this may only be a drop in the ocean; nevertheless it makes a huge difference to the people concerned.

Appendix - Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme Curriculum

- With the help of Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme NVA conducts Microsoft UP curriculum in all the VRCs and VKCs. This curriculum covers the following aspects.
- Computer Fundamentals: Basic computer concepts and the essentials of hardware, software, operating systems and the Internet.
- Digital Media Fundamentals: Digital photography, audio and digital video.
- Internet and World Wide Fundamentals: To explore the web, use search engines, work with e-mail and create web pages.
- Web Design Fundamentals: Web page design, from the basis of HTML to strategies for designing and building a complete web site.
- Word Processing Fundamentals: How to use a word processor to write and revise a variety of personal and business documents, from simple letters and memos to complex documents containing graphics and tables.
- Presentation Fundamentals: Creating basic slide shows, to adding graphics, video and audio for rich multimedia presentations.
- Database Fundamentals: Basis of using a relational database to create tables, forms and reports.
- Spreadsheet Fundamentals: Basics of spreadsheet concepts including creating worksheets, editing data, building charts and graphs and publishing a spreadsheet to the web.



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