

**M S Swaminathan
Research Foundation**

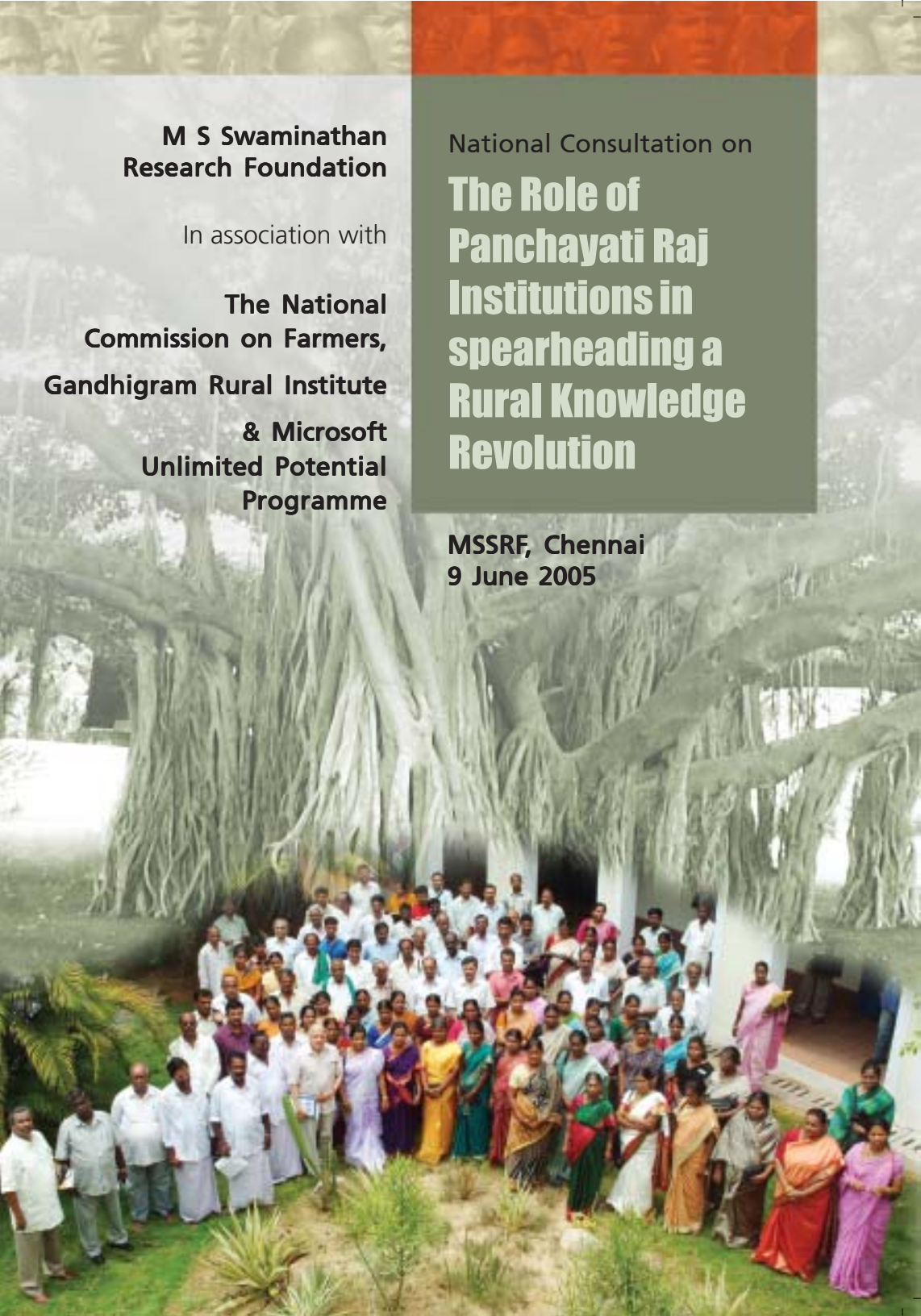
In association with

**The National
Commission on Farmers,
Gandhigram Rural Institute
& Microsoft
Unlimited Potential
Programme**

National Consultation on

**The Role of
Panchayati Raj
Institutions in
spearheading a
Rural Knowledge
Revolution**

**MSSRF, Chennai
9 June 2005**



Introduction

Elected Panchayats and local bodies can play a dynamic role in the information, knowledge and skill empowerment of rural women and men if they are empowered to do so. The National Alliance for Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre, which is a Consortium of government, non-government organizations, academic institutions, business and industry, financial institutions, and multi-lateral and bilateral donor agencies, has chosen the elected Panchayati Raj Institutions as the major instruments for bringing the benefits of information communication technologies (ICT) to rural communities. The aim of Mission 2007 is to ensure that everyone of the over 600,000 villages in the country experiences the benefits of the digital revolution and knowledge connectivity by 15 August 2007, which represents the 60th Anniversary of our independence.

Shri P Chidambaram, Union Finance Minister, made the following announcement concerning Mission 2007 in his budget speech on 28 February 2005 "The National Commission on Farmers has recommended the establishment of Rural Knowledge Centres all over the country using modern information and communication technology (ICT). Mission 2007 is a national initiative launched by an alliance comprising nearly 80 organisations including civil society organizations. Their goal is to set up a Knowledge Centre in every village by the 60th anniversary of Independence Day. **Government supports the goal, and I am glad to announce**



that Government has decided to join the alliance and route its support through NABARD. I propose to allow NABARD to provide Rs. 100 crore out of RIDF (i.e. Rural Infrastructure Development Fund).”



Potentials of the New Panchayat Raj System

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India has rich scope for bringing about sustainable development in rural areas through active participation of the people. It transforms the very character of democracy through an integrated representative (Gram Panchayat) and participatory (Gram Sabha) system of grassroots governance and likewise it reverses the development activities from supply driven to demand driven. Further it involves the hitherto marginalized groups such as women and Dalits in Governance and in the process of development. By bringing the women and Dalits to the process of governance and development, many of the development issues pertinent to them are brought to light for discussion, deliberation and decision making. The issues of children, water, environment, and other vital subjects related to livelihood are being brought to centre stage. This amendment provides scope for planning from below for achieving economic development and social justice. By activating grassroots democracy, not only is our society democratized but good governance is being established at the grassroots. It is obvious and unequivocal that wherever committed leaders are in position and wherever representatives have got leadership qualities, substantial development work is being carried out with the involvement of the people. To make the Panchayats perform effectively, the capacity of the local body leaders has to be enhanced and people have to be mobilized. By doing both, Panchayats are placed in an effective position to create a knowledge society at the grassroots.

In this backdrop, in order to accelerate progress in spreading the Village Knowledge Centre Programme, a National Consultation on the Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in implementing Mission 2007 was held at MSSRF, Chennai on 9 June 2005. The Consultation was attended by over 50 Panchayat Presidents, leaders of Self-Help Groups, government officers, ICT experts, NGOs and NABARD officials. The Consultation adopted the following **Chennai Platform**

for Action for involving the Panchayati Raj Institutions in implementing Mission 2007 in a structured manner.

II Chennai Platform for Action

for enabling Panchayats to become the flagships of the Rural Knowledge Revolution

The following are the components of the Chennai Platform for Action for urban-rural knowledge connectivity, through a national grid of Village Knowledge Centres (VKC)

1. Location

The VKC has to be located in a common place and accessible to all. Most of the panchayats have a building. The panchayats are willing to provide space, electricity and telephone for the VKC. Even if a building is not available, panchayats are willing to provide the necessary space. The State Government may provide finance for constructing the building. In fact Government has already announced that wherever space is provided by the Panchayats, Government would provide finance to construct the building. Panchayats will request the Chairpersons of Electricity Boards for a special electricity charge/nominal rate/ or waiver for VKCs.

If the Panchayat does not have a common building, the possibility of setting up VKC in the building of SHG / Adult Literacy Programme / Farmers' Club may be explored. All the VKCs should have toilet facility for women and men. KVKs can be used wherever possible. Different models for setting up VKCs could be explored to address specific local situations. Panchayats will explore the possibility of joining hands with local SHGs, Youth Clubs, different associations (clubs of farmers, fishermen and women, women farmers, seaweed collectors, etc.) to run the center sustainably.

Each VKC will cover a population of 2500 to 4000; thus each VKC will cater to a cluster of villages.



2. Content:

The content should be locale-specific. The information needed by the community should be ascertained through Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs), Gram Sabha meetings, various standing committee meetings etc. Before starting a VKC, the content and skills available in the village should be mapped. Documenting the indigenous (technology) knowledge and training in financial management skills are needed for SHGs. Market information is vital. This will help panchayats to contact each other and increase the value of e-commerce at village level.

Regarding needs assessment, there should be extensive discussion with SHGs, Youth Clubs, Farmers and socially underprivileged people. A door-to-door survey may be conducted in the case of Dalits, to ascertain their special needs.

Locale-specific demand driven information can be disseminated through notice boards, public address systems, cable TV, notices, community newspaper, multimedia modules, community radio, village meetings, school prayer meetings etc., so as to ensure social inclusion in the area of access to new knowledge. A multi-stakeholder management committee can play a role in validating the data initially and on an ongoing basis.

Panchayats can explore the possibility of providing bicycles for Knowledge Workers for content collection / dissemination. All software should be available in local language using technology / standards like Unicode, etc. Through use of technologies such as data mining, the same practices / content can be compared in different parts of the country (e.g., fishing, culinary habits, indigenous plant-based medicine).

3. Capacity Building:

In each village, three to five pairs of knowledge workers (i.e., each pair comprising one man and one woman) should be trained depending on the size of the village.



At least one man and woman should be from the SC/ST community. To begin with, at least one woman and one male member of every Panchayat may be trained. Such **Master Trainers** can then train others. Those who have mastered the use of ICT to meet rural needs may be elected as Fellows of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity.

Before setting up the VKC, the Monitoring Committee may organize a discussion/ planning meeting with the local NGOs, Government Departments, Community Associations, SHGs etc.

Basic and / or functional literacy is required for improvement of the quality of life; capacity building should include literacy programmes as a part of the agenda. Training Panchayat leaders in the use of the computer is also a key factor. Local youth can be trained in hardware and software maintenance to support the VKC, thereby creating job opportunities for them locally. Community Based Organizations can be involved in creating the local skills profile of the people.

4. ICT-Self Help Groups:

NGOs can support the formation and efficient functioning of ICT-SHG by providing demand-driven and need based help through Standing Committees of Panchayats. Each ICT-SHG should have backward linkages with technology and credit, and forward linkages with market and management institutions.

5. Evaluation and Monitoring:

The Management Committee of Village Knowledge Centre, may include in addition to Panchayat representatives, SHG leaders, school teachers, one or two local government officials, NGOs, etc. The management committee shall meet at least once a month and review the functioning of the knowledge centre. The Panchayat council should discuss the functioning of the VKC every two months.



6. Sustainability:

Sustainability is not restricted to money. There are other priorities, such as social sustainability and the impact on social change. Sustainability deals with a wider range of issues, such as those relating to economics, equity, energy and employment generation. Community ownership is the key to the sustainability of a community centred communication project.



The main source of income of a VKC can be assignments outsourced by government departments, banks and large private establishments. Some income can also be generated through local service provision by levying user charges on those who can afford to pay.

In order to make the VKC self sufficient on a sustained basis, Government can consider making the VKC a preferred outlet for providing e-Governance facilities like issuing of certificates relating to birth / death, land registration, etc. Both the central and state Governments should consider VKCs as an essential public service.

In most of the villages, the Panchayats collect fees for maintaining the temple, organizing festivals, construction of common building, etc. In the same way, the Panchayats can collect a modest fee for maintaining the VKCs.

Each Village Knowledge Centre can generate income by undertaking activities like introducing community fisheries in panchayat tanks, raising cash and fodder crops in panchayat lands, and making value added products. VKCs should also concentrate awareness and training on sanitation, harvesting and recharging of rainwater in farmers' fields, e-governance (birth certificate, death certificate, driving license) etc. They should also undertake to impart quality (i.e. *codex alimentarius* standards of food safety) trade and genetic literacy.

The VKCs can become the vehicles for the payment of electricity bill, water bill, property tax, registration / renewal of trade licenses, payment of telephone bills, reservation of bus tickets, payment of board examination fees of intermediate colleges, filing / payment of mobile phone bills, reservation of railway tickets, etc.

III Funding Support

NABARD will provide to State Governments Rs. 100 crores through the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) during 2005-06 for establishing 10,000 VKCs managed by ICT-SHG in different parts of the country, at the rate of Rs. 1 lakh per SHG.

The Ministry of Rural Development and Ministry of Panchayati Raj have been requested to allocate Rs.50 crores for training and capacity building.

IV Conclusion

Elected Panchayats are the most appropriate vehicles for spearheading the Rural Knowledge Revolution. Bridging the urban-rural digital divide is a must for implementing the provisions of the Right to Information Act. Also, bridging the digital divide is an effective method of bridging the gender divide in villages. Panchayats and rural ICT-SHGs should become mutually supportive. They can thus help to mobilize "people power" to make knowledge connectivity a reality. The one million women and two million men elected members of Panchayats can then become torchbearers of both the Rural Knowledge Revolution and the Bharat Nirman Movement. They will thereby help to convert Gandhiji's concept of Gram Swaraj into reality.

