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**For information empowerment**

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| **Interview with Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Chairman, Mission 2007.** |

"It is the largest global effort to reach information and communication technology [ICT] to the people," says **Dr. M.S. Swaminathan**, Chairman of Mission 2007. Dr. Swaminathan, who heads the Chennai-based M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), has rich experience in taking ICT to the rural areas. His Biovillage and Information village projects in Pondicherry have attracted international attention and won several awards.

SANDEEP SAXENA   


Dr. Swaminathan spoke to **Asha Krishnakumar** about the aims and focus of the Mission, its viability, structure and future endeavours. Excerpts:

*Can you describe the progress in ICT in India?*

Since the 1990s, there has been enormous progress in ICT and biotechnology. ICT, in particular, has vested meaning to the saying `the world has become a global village'. The knowledge-information age is here to stay. The Kumbakonam school fire tragedy, the Olympics, or 9/11, people world over knew of it instantaneously either through radio, television or the Internet. But ICT is more than mere news and entertainment. It is a tool that can make a difference to the lives and livelihoods of those in the villages. The key is knowledge empowerment.

*What is knowledge?*

Value-added information is knowledge. For example, information on world commodity prices, weather and input cost are not of much use to a rural woman unless it is provided at the local level that impacts her life. In other words, knowledge is generic information converted into a location-specific one. That is what adds value for the local people.

*There is a lot of concern that ICT development will cause a digital divide that will further accentuate the rich-poor, urban-rural, class and caste divide, particularly given the differential access to resources by various groups of people. What is your assessment of the situation?*

The urban areas have seen enormous growth in ICT and the rural areas an enormous permeation of the cable television network. Our experience shows that the people in the rural areas respond well to communication technology that makes a difference to their day-to-day life.

An MSSRF project in 10 Pondicherry villages helped us understand how ICT can make a difference to the people - economically, socially and in empowering them on government entitlements and welfare schemes. We followed a multi-pronged strategy, concentrating more on the content.

Connectivity or technology is not a major problem. Important is to find ways to use it to benefit the rural people. That is why in 1997 we started a pilot project in Pondicherry to find out if the village residents would care for the technology and how to involve them in accessing the benefits of ICT.

It was a learning experience, which is helping us in Mission 2007.

*What were the lessons of the project?*

There were problems. For example, with telephones. But then, fortunately, we got wireless sets. Of course, now we have cell phones. There was problem with power. We put up solar power. I believe there is an affordable solution to every problem. The experience of these 10 villages helped us understand how to structure rural ICT programmes. In fact, this programme attracted international attention and got us a lot of awards because, for the first time, the emphasis was on people - especially women-centric community managed knowledge system. In other words, a participatory knowledge management system.

*What do you mean by a participatory knowledge management system?*

Technologists on the one hand, and rural women and men, on the other. It is the knowledge management system that has evolved through our partnership, each adding a bit. For example, in the Pondicherry project, the village community provides a place for the centre. Sometimes it may be a temple where everyone, irrespective of caste, class and religion, goes. The villagers provide us with a room, electricity and volunteers (invariably women), who are paid modestly from community collections. In fact, one of the women from our project was invited by the United Nations to the World Summit on Information Society in Geneva.

*What is the viability and sustainability of the Mission 2007 programme? How is it useful to the people in the villages, particularly those who own no resources?*

The project `Bridging the Digital Divide' at Veerampatinam village (in Pondicherry), for instance, was listed by *India Today* as one among the 57 innovations that have made a difference to the people. In this village, a fisherwoman downloads every day the weather data from the U.S. naval oceanographic office. The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information, operated by the Department of Ocean Development in Hyderabad, has installed a digital board. Their satellite gives information - on the longitude and latitude of the place of fish schools. Now, these women have put up loudspeakers to announce the information. We are trying to replicate such experiences. We are also trying to get community FM radio stations to transmit such information.

Globally, ICT has been an extremely important tool. For instance, in 1952 when I went to Wisconsin in the U.S., one cold day I saw a long queue outside a hospital. On enquiry I found that people had heard of the need for a rare blood group through their FM radio while driving and had come there to donate. That is the power of ICT.

*Is this project viable in a country like India where a large majority are illiterate and poor?*

We have denied ourselves the opportunity of using these tools. Information empowerment is fundamental to a successful democracy. That is the only way to eliminate corruption. People should know their entitlements and which offices are responsible for what so that they can stand up and ask the people concerned. Dr. Manmohan Singh is calling for a new deal for rural India and President Abdul Kalam is talking about providing urban amenities in rural areas. But how can one achieve all that?

I think we have found a methodology to make the achievement of such aims economically viable. For example, many of the STD/ISD/PCO centres in villages can be made knowledge centres; the panchayati raj institutions can be made use of. Ultimately, there should be a principle of social inclusion. We learnt a bitter lesson from our project in Pondicherry, where an enthusiastic couple set up the knowledge centre but refused access to Dalits. From then on I decided that the facility should be in a public space and I am very careful to make sure that the facility is used by all in the village - cutting across class, caste, gender and religion. That way we ensure that the principle of social inclusion is implemented, which I consider basic to a knowledge revolution.

The knowledge centre is also very useful for children who, from our experience, wait for the school to be over and run to these centres with joy. There is a huge difference inside the school walls and at these centres, where children learn enthusiastically.

We have in place the necessary structure for the project. We are recommending that government departments and private companies outsource many of their work to these rural knowledge centres. For example, maintaining land records. This can also bring down the government expenditure as well as help the rural people. We are urging NABARD to fund a new scheme for ICT-SHGs (self-help groups).

*Are you confident of reaching all the 600,000 villages as envisaged in Mission 2007?*

Most of them. Sometimes it may not be possible to reach very remote villages. But, then, such villages will have the FM radio facility, which will broadcast information from nearby villages. For example, from Veerampatinam village we can give information to fishing hamlets all along the Pondicherry coast on radio. Our focus is not only Internet connection. It is a combination of community radio, cable television and the language press.

There are three main ingredients for success: One, the information or content that is provided must make a difference to the lives of the people in the village. It must be a powerful tool of information empowerment and education. Two, infrastructure development. This is obviously the government's responsibility and over 80 per cent of the country already has broadband, cable connections and so on. The last-mile connectivity can now be focussed on. The existing infrastructure itself is not fully utilised because its use is essentially urban-based now. Unless rural India, where 700 million live, participates in the digital revolution, it will be a highly skewed one. It may accentuate rich-poor and gender divides. Three, we must bring together all the on-going efforts for synergies. A common goal for all is crucial for the success of the Mission.

The three important pillars are: Political commitment in words and action; professional skills that take into account socio-economic realities; and technology.

*What will be the commitment of each alliance partner?*

Each partner will commit to something. For instance, NASSCOM, one of the partners, is a coalition of 800 software companies that has committed to technology provision. Similarly, ITC has committed to reaching ICT to 100,000 villages and so on. The Mission structure is well defined. We have different groups such as the Task Force on Connectivity, Management of Education Monitoring and so on. The chairperson of each group will be responsible for its activity. We would like the government to fund the infrastructure development and some software development of information as we may need resource centres. The Mission is to function as a non-legal entity.