

NATIONAL TECHNOLOGY DAY

Video Conference Presentations



Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA)
M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai

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11 May 2009

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Introduction

Since 1998, the Government of India has been celebrating 11 May as National Technology Day to commemorate India's technological achievements. It is also a day when laboratories are open to the public at large. MSSRF celebrates Technology Day by demonstrating how rural communities use different ICT-tools through Village Resource Centres and Village Knowledge Centres, to improve their livelihood, self-esteem, education, health, safety, etc.

Since 1992, MSSRF has been operating Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs). A Village Resource Centre is typically located at the block level, the commune level or the mandal level or at the central point of a cluster of villages. Village Knowledge Centres are normally located among a cluster of villages or at the panchayat level. In 2003, the VRC and VKC programmes were strengthened by the creation of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy (NVA). The NVA mission is "to promote sustainable rural livelihoods through digital empowerment, based on a pro-poor and pro-women orientation to technology choice and dissemination, and human resources development." The NVA programme is intended to bring together experts and grass-roots level communities in two-way communication, with the objective of making knowledge accessible to every home and hut.

The ISRO-VRC programme was also established in 2003, whereby VRCs are connected through the Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) uplink and downlink satellite facilities. Users located at one node of this network can fully interact with others located at another node through video and audio links.

On 11 May 2009, NVA linked many VRCs in Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Pondicherry (Pillayarkuppam, Chidambaram, Nagapattinam, Thiruvaiyaru, Annavasal, Sempatti, Thangachimadam, Nagercoil) to MSSRF, Chennai, through ISRO's video-conferencing mode. Participants from these VRCs, ranging in age from 11 to 65, talked about the different ways in which they have gained from the ICT programmes. The following pages carry brief descriptions of their presentations.

Virtual Presentations

Annavasal

The Annavasal VRC in Pudukottai district was set up in 2004 and mainly focuses on dry land agriculture and micro-enterprises.

Name of participant: Thalinchy Ramasami

Age: 45

Village: Thalinchy

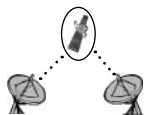


Ramasami is a small farmer cultivating groundnut on 5 acres of land with well irrigation. Using chemical fertilisers and pesticides, he had been producing 75 bags of groundnut which brought him an income Rs. 60,000 at Rs. 800 per bag. The input cost of crop production was Rs. 40,000 and the net profit was Rs. 20,000.

He had read about Professor M.S. Swaminathan and came to know about MSSRF activities in villages. He started to visit the Village Resource Centre at Annavasal and get guidance on adopting new technologies, particularly the use of bio-fertilisers, seed treatment and eco-friendly management of insect and pests. On one occasion he participated in a video-conferencing programme with the scientists of ICRISAT and shared the problems encountered in groundnut cultivation.

Ramasami learnt about technologies such as organic farming, eco-friendly practices of pest management, water conservation and water use efficiency, vermicomposting, etc., and also gained access to marketing channels. He practised all the methods in his fields, especially that of using *panchakavya* as a bio-pesticide and growth promoter.

According to Ramasami, the participation in the video-conferencing and the guidance by the VRC at Annavasal has helped boost his production to 100 bags of groundnut from the same 5 acres of land. At Rs. 1100 per bag, he has earned Rs. 1,10,000 and made a net profit of Rs. 50,000.



Thiruvaiyaru

The Village Resource Centre at Thiruvaiyaru in Thanjavur district started functioning in 2004, and agriculture and animal husbandry are the chief occupations of its members.

Name of participant: Kalaivani Rajendran

Age: 48

Village: Pasupathikovil

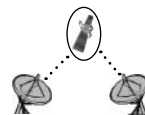
Though she hails from an ordinary farmer family with a very strong traditional background, **Kalaivani Rajendran** is a very good example of one who has benefited by MSSRF's ICT programmes. As far back as 1992, she participated in a 5-day training programme of TANWA (Tamil Nadu Women in Agriculture) organised by the farmer training centre at Saakkotai.



In 1994, she was chosen as the best woman farmer for successfully running the first All Womens' Field Training School, through Environment Research Centre with the help of Mr. Palaniyappan, an advisor of MSSRF, Thiruvaiyaru, and former Assistant Director of Agriculture. This was the first of her many achievements. She has been working as a resource person in field training schools in and around Pasupathikovil. She was the first to introduce the SRI technique of rice production and the usage of drum seeder for direct sowing. This has been observed by farmers of her village (and neighbouring ones too) and they have started adopting these techniques. In promoting organic farming, she produces *panchakavya*, *amirtha karaisal*, organic insecticides and bio-control agents like *Pseudomonas* and *Trichoderma viridi*.

Kalavani has held many positions: Farmer Debate Committee (FDC) organiser; TANWA, TANWABE (Tamil Nadu Women in Agri-business and Extension), Women Farmers' Group president; link leader and president of All Women Farmers' Society. She has also served as a mediator farmer for promoting agriculture in her village by coordinating with the Agricultural University and Agricultural Departments of Tamil Nadu.

In 2004, her impressive contributions to agriculture fetched her the Mumbai-based ASPEE Foundation's International Rice Women Award (plus one lakh cash) through MSSRF for being the best woman farmer. In recognition of her services to agriculture as well as to society, MSSRF awarded Kalaivani the NVA Fellowship for 2007.



Sempatti

The Sempatti VRC (Dindigul district), established in 2004, concentrates on horticulture.

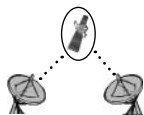
Name of participant: M.Thenmozhi

Age: 45

Village: Sempatti



Thenmozhi grows *sampangi* flowers in one acre of land in Sempatti village. Recently she noticed that the plants were stunted in growth and the blooms faded before reaching maturity. The plants were also infested with worms. She took some sample plants to the Village Resource Centre at Sempatti and asked for advice. The staff at the VRC took photographs of the diseased plants to investigate the problem. Meanwhile, they also suggested spraying the plants with Chloropos pesticide morning and evening. After a month of carefully following this suggestion, Thenmozhi noticed enhanced growth of the plants and the flowers were also rich in colour. She was able to produce the best quality and quantity of *sampangi* plants in her village, earning as much as Rs.100 per kg on special occasions and Rs. 40 to Rs. 45 in the regular season. She says she now earns Rs.800 to Rs.900 per day.



Thangachimadam

The livelihoods of the members of Thangachimadam VRC in Ramanathapuram district, which was set up in 2004, are mainly in the areas of fisheries and agriculture.

Name of participant: K. Yowan

Age: 11

Village: Akkalmadam

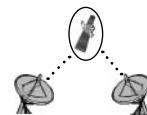
A student of Standard VI in St. Anne's Matriculation School, Akkalmadam, near Thangachimadam, **Yowan** comes from a family of fisherfolk. His father is a volunteer at the Village Resource Centre at Thangachimadam. When the Intel Learn Programme (ILP) — an ICT-based curriculum to

teach students to work on projects on various developmental issues — was introduced at the VRC, Yowan and his friends joined the first batch of students. They soon became proficient in computer programmes such as Word, Excel, Power Point, etc.



The group chose to work on the problems of Thaneerootru village for their ILP project. Garbage and waste matter was being thrown in a central place in the village, which had become a breeding ground for mosquitoes. The team members suggested that this area should be converted into a park. They projected their study and the findings and recommendations through the Intel showcase programme at the Thangachimadam VRC. Six months later they learnt to their great satisfaction that an aquarium was being set up at the proposed park site.

In the video-conference, Yowan said how delighted he was that their dream had come true, remembering Dr. Abdul Kalam's inspiring words.



Nagapattinam

Fisheries and agriculture are the focus of the Village Resource Centre at Nagapattinam (Nagapattinam district) too. This VRC was started in 2005.

Name of participant: T.Velmurugan

Age: 15

Village: Agalangan

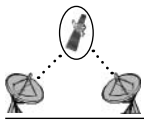


Velmurugan of Agalangan village in Karaikal has had a congenital eye problem, the inability to open or close his eyes fully. An ophthalmologist in Tirunallaru referred him to an expert in the field who advised surgery. Unfortunately, his family could not bear the estimated expense of Rs. 20,000 – Rs. 40,000. There were days when his mother would cry over their inability to afford the operation due to their financial status.

Velmurugan was a frequent visitor to the Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) in his village, where he read the newspapers and also learnt to use computers. It was during one such visit that he came to know about the free eye camp organised by MSSRF along with Sankara Nethralaya, with its mobile eye-care unit which has all the necessary ophthalmic equipment for diagnosis of eye problems. He attended the camp and later availed of the tele-ophthalmology services the Sankara Nethralaya Medical Research Foundation provides to the rural communities. This consultation was through the video-conferencing facility at Nagapattinam VRC. Velmurugan was really happy when the doctors told him that surgery was possible and it could be done free of cost.

On 15 October 2007, with the support from Nagapattinam VRC staff, Velmurugan got himself admitted into the Sankara Nethralaya hospital in Chennai. Within two days of surgery, Velmurugan was able to open and close his eyes completely and see even minute objects clearly without any pain, like any other normal kid.

Velmurugan is very grateful to MSSRF and Sankara Nethralaya for giving him the gift of sight and considers the VKC in his village as the best gift to the community. He wished MSSRF success in all its ventures.



Chidambaram

The VRC in Chidambaram in Cuddalore district was established in 2006, and, like the other coastal centres, this also focuses on fisheries along with agriculture.

Name of participant: Kaveri

Age: 40

Village: Killai

Kaveri, a single mother of two, lives in Killai, a small village near Chidambaram. After her husband's death, she has been taking care of her two daughters on her meagre earnings as a coolie.

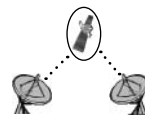


Very often there was no work for her and she found it very difficult to make ends meet.

Coming to know of a vacancy in the Forest Office, she decided to apply for the post, hoping that it would provide a decent and a stable income for her family. In March 2008 she approached the Forest Office, expressing interest in the post of gardener. However, she was disappointed when the officials informed her that at the minimum she must be able to read and write in Tamil to get the job.

Kaveri had heard about the TCS- ALP programme that was being run at the Killai VKC. TCS-ALP is an adult literacy programme that aims at teaching adults to read and write in Tamil. She visited the Killai VKC and, encouraged by Sumathi, the knowledge worker at the VKC, she enrolled herself in the programme. Soon Kaveri was able to read and write and even sign her name in Tamil. Armed with her new-found skill, she once again approached the Forest Office, where she was offered the job that she had been previously denied.

For 10 months now Kaveri has had stable employment, and she earns around Rs. 2000 per month. She said that she is able to manage her family better and she is also confident of running the local SHG. She is immensely thankful to MSSRF for the opportunity to become literate and thus being saved from dire poverty.



Nagercoil

The members of the Nagercoil VRC, located in the Kanniyakumari district, are for the most part in the fishing profession. This centre was set up in 2006.

Name of participant: A. Alphonse

Age: 49

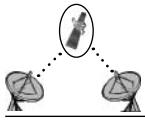
Village: Kovalam, Kanniyakumari



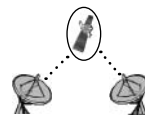
It was a bright and sunny April morning that day; everything was the same as usual in Kovalam, a small fishing village 3 km from Kanyakumari. The sea was a little bit rough on that day, recalls the village head. The fishermen of Kovalam decided in all their wisdom not to venture out into the sea as they did not expect any major haul. However, there was one fisherman who decided to bet against the odds. **Alphonse** was one of the recipients of the Fisher Friend Mobile Application (FFMA) phone (which disseminates relevant information to fisherfolk through mobile networks), on a test basis. Everyday he used to go through the information provided through the application, such as wave heights, weather forecasts, potential fishing zones, market prices and flash news.

On that particular day there was a FFMA relay about a potential fishing zone in the nearby Kovalam waters. Though his mates had decided it was not worth putting out to sea, Alphonse decided to check it out and ventured out in his trusted *vallam* (fibre boat). On reaching the area mentioned in the FFMA relay, he came across a large catch of fish. Delighted, he called another FFMA user, Britto, and informed him of the large haul and its location. Britto shared the information with the rest of the village fisherfolk and soon the Kovalam beach was abuzz with activity as the fishermen rushed towards the fishing grounds. Thanks to the timely information provided by Alphonse and Britto, both FFMA users, on that particular day alone the fishermen of Kovalam had a huge haul worth over Rs. 25 lakh.

Alphonse remembers that day with pride. Recalling the incident, he said: *"Enaku indha mobile koduthu thagaval pakach sonnaga, naanum thinasari parpen, anniku meenava nanaban mobile thagaval kodugalana, naan kadalaaku poiruka matten. Adhula kodutha*



thagaval seriya irukave naan piravu mathavangalukum sonnen, anniku kadaluku pogalana 25 lacham nattam ayirukum." ("They gave me this mobile and asked me to scan through the information provided. I used to go through the news on a daily basis. If on that day the FFMA had not provided the information I would not have gone to sea. Since the information was correct, I shared it with the others. If we had not ventured to sea on that day we would have lost such a huge haul.")



Pillayarkuppam, Puducherry

One of the oldest VRCs, the Pillayarkuppam one in the Union Territory of Pondicherry started in 1997, with its main focus on animal husbandry, fisheries, and agriculture-related issues.

Name of participant: Chinnathambi

Age: 65

Village: Eambalam



Chinnathambi is a farmer who hails from Eambalam village, Union Territory of Pondicherry. For years in his small 4-acre farmland he has been cultivating both wet and dry land plants. He is a regular visitor to the VKC at Eambalam and has learnt about alternative crop cultivation. Upon being told that the government offers a subsidy of up to Rs. 5000 per acre for cultivation of bean plants, Chinnathambi learnt about the methods involved in cultivating this winter crop, favourable weather and soil conditions, etc. He got more information from the Horticulture Officer, Pondicherry. He has been cultivating beans for the past 4 years and makes a profit of Rs. 30,000 per acre.

For the past ten years the MSSRF Village Knowledge Centre at Eambalam has been stressing on the harmful effects of using chemical fertilisers in the field. Going by the VKC workers' advice, Chinnathambi uses only bio-fertilisers like *panchakavya*, which he prepares himself. He breeds earthworms, and apart from using them in his fields, he sells them to fellow farmers and earns Rs. 3000 per tonne.

Chinnathambi participated in one of the clean milk production training programmes organised by MSSRF at Pillayarkuppam VRC, learning about aspects such as fodder cultivation techniques and enhanced production by feeding the cows with green fodder. Again, Chinnathambi made use of government subsidies, this time 50p per kg of seed grass planted. He started cultivating high quality fodder in $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of farm land. He utilises the fodder to feed his five cows, and also sells the fodder to other cattle breeders, which fetches him a profit of Rs. 50,000.

Chinnathambi is a role model to other farmers in his village who approach him to seek advice. He said proudly that his village is slowly transforming itself towards organic farming, giving credence to Professor Swaminathan's vision.



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