

## When villages discover Computerji

FOR many years Vasava tribals in Ghanikut, a village in south Gujarat's Netrang district, waited patiently for electricity. Poles and promises were made. Officials came and went. Stuck on a rocky hill, the Vasavas waited in vain.

Then, in May 2007, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and Microsoft set up a computer hub, called a Community Based Technology Centre (CILC), close by in Thava village. Salim Bhai, the technical trainer told Mohan and Ishwar Vasava that they could find out through the computer why they were not getting electricity. Salim also told them about the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

The form was acquired and signed by 60 Vasavas. It was sent to the Gujarat Electricity Board with a copy to the district collector. Almost instantly, a nervous district executive engineer appeared saying he'd fix the problem. For the Vasavas, it was a rare moment of victory.

Microsoft and the AKRSP have set up 13 such CILCs in Bharuch and Surendranagar districts of Gujarat. Each has around six or seven computers, a technical trainer and a community worker. It services villages in a 10 km radius.

The facilities the computer kiosks offer are catching the fancy of rural folk. Villages are vying with each other to have one. Tribals in deep forests are lobbying for at least a 'sub-centre'. At Phulgram village, in Surendranagar district, as tea was passed around, the village sarpanch keen to fob off any likely competition, marshalled a long line of reasons why a CILC in his village would be a bigger success.

"Our village is better located near the main road, other children can come easily, we will create space, look after it..." he continued.

All eyes were on Vikas Goswami, head of Microsoft's CSR programme, here on a blitz tour to find out how the CILCs were doing.

Having a CILC is not only a matter of prestige. The kiosks are attracting rural youth, farmers, tribals and village communities because of the range of information and computer courses they offer. Despite targeting the poorest, the CILCs still netted revenue of Rs 7 lakh in seven months surprising even AKRSP's assiduous project coordinator, Sheeji Abraham.

For one, the CILCs provide computer training courses at very low rates. You get admission readily if you have the following qualifications: poor, marginalised and barely literate. A two month basic computer course is just Rs 200 and a three-month Microsoft Unlimited Potential Program costs only Rs 450."



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At the end of the course, Microsoft gives a much valued certificate. At Chotila village, when certificates were to be distributed by Goswami, the panchayat turned up in full strength with flowers, speeches and flashbulbs popping to record the moment for posterity.

For those who can't pay at all there is a subsidy scheme. It is mandatory for government servants in Class 3 and Class 4 category to learn how to use computers to get ahead in their jobs. The CILCs charge them Rs 2,500 for a certificate course. This helps subsidise the poorer students. Then the centres take up job work, which helps needy students gain experience and meet the cost of the course. Till now 1,046 people have been trained.

Employers now go to the CILCs to head hunt. When the bank manager of the Baroda Gujarat Grameen Bank at Netrang was looking for a data entry operator, he inquired at the kiosk. Coincidentally Deepmala, an unemployed graduate was doing a course there. Her technical trainer recommended her. She now works at the bank earning Rs 2,700 and the bank manager wants to hire more youngsters from the center.

The walls of each CILC are decorated with job notices. The technical trainer gathers all these for display. Information is accessed from the Internet and job applications downloaded.

At the Sagbara CILC, Shankar a 22-year-old tribal who used to travel 17 km to attend the computer course now has a job at the Pune Telephone Exchange.

The CILCs live up to their slogan: '*Computerji jode duniya se*' (Computer Sir will join you to the world). They are certainly *jodo-ing* people with the government.

"In many cases government schemes are not implemented," says Adal, AKRSP's communications officer. "The reason is villages don't know how to access these schemes and the government doesn't know whom to give the money to."

The CILC workers tell people about all government schemes including the rural employment guarantee scheme, the tribal sub plan for which Rs 13 crores has been allocated, the Manav Kalyan Yojana (for micro enterprises), micro-finance schemes, how to get a BPL certificate and so on.

Since AKRSP has been working for long in these regions it has built federations of farmers and of women. The government is happy to give money to such groups or to individuals they recommend.

"When we wanted cows we applied under an animal husbandry scheme," explained Indira of Ghanikut, where AKRSP has organised an SHG and made a lift irrigation system. "We got 66 cows and we gave the first few cows to the poorest women

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