

Kerala's Malappuram district spawns e-literacy revolution

An innovative government-backed project to make 500,000 people computer literate in the Muslim-dominated district of Malappuram, in the southern Indian state of Kerala, has become an Asian paradigm that has attracted a high degree of media attention, with several international academics coming down to study it. It has also become a model for other countries.

Recently a British professor, who led a team of 35 delegates from Latin American and African countries, expressed interest in replicating the project after a visit to this fertile land dotted with coconut palms, water bodies and lush greenery.

Kerala, on the southwestern coast of India, is popularly referred to as 'God's Own Country' due to its scenic beauty. In terms of social indicators, it is the most advanced state in India, boasting the highest literacy rate and the lowest birth rate. Malappuram sprawls over 3,550 square kilometres and is home to about 360,000 people, mostly employed in agriculture.

In November 2003, President A.P.J Abdul Kalam launched a nearly \$6 million computer literacy programme, called 'Akshaya' (imperishable), that established a network of over 600 computer centres across the district.

About two years later, the project won an international honour when the Austria-based Digital Communities awarded it the Golden Nica (the highest prize) in the Prix Ars Electronica, an international competition in the cyber arts. This was the first time an Asian project was given this award, which carries a cash prize of 10,000 euros.

The project was the brainchild of the state's erstwhile Information Technology Minister P.K. Kunhalikutty. He recalled, "I attracted a lot of flak (from skeptics) when I decided to launch this project, but I was determined. I feel the sky is the limit for these centres."

It was a daunting task to begin with, teaching a wide range of people, aged between 20 and 80 years, many of whom had studied only till Grade 3. Along with it was felt the need of developing some special teaching tools to target this large and computer-illiterate population.

An absurdly simple software was developed, involving people in a wide selection of games taken from everyday life situations — from

catching mangoes and making a dragonfly lift a stone to drawing and painting a house. These games caught on and news about them spread fast by word of mouth. People gleefully trekked long distances for lessons on the computer, regarding it as some magical new toy.

Exclaimed 50-year-old domestic help Nabeeza, from Thiruranagadi village in Malappuram: "The 15-hour class completely changed my outlook. I finished my course, even though I had studied only till Grade 3."

Computer literacy was a boon for people here, most of whom survive on remittances from relatives working in the Middle East. Enthused project official Hasif Ameen: "The project on the whole has certainly changed the lives of people here in all respects."

Finally, they can e-mail their relatives abroad and get news of them on a regular basis. A woman running an Akshaya centre said it had been inundated with e-mails, which are delivered home to the addressees for a nominal fee.

As demand spiralled, all the centres began running short-term courses in MS Word, Windows and other programmes. After one member of each family became computer literate, Kunhalikutty converted them into utility centres, where the local population could pay power, water and telephone bills.

The centres are all self-sustaining, earning from service charges levied for delivering e-mails and collecting bills.

"We are shortly launching another 10-hour course on the Internet. A thousand youths would be selected to attend the course from each of the 102 village councils in this district," said Ameen.

State Chief Minister Oommen Chandy has said he intends to take the programme to seven more districts in the state, later extending it to the remaining six in a state of 32 million people. Chandy has also set himself another ambitious target. "Like becoming a 100 percent literate state, by 2007 we will make one member of every family in the state e-literate," he pledged.

For a state that has in many ways been a trendsetter, Kerala's novel efforts to technologically empower the masses is yet another success story for a country like India that is recognised as a global leader in information technology. ■



PHOTO ABOVE, a farmer tries his hand at a computer at an e-literacy center in the district of Malappuram in Kerala. PHOTO BELOW, enthusiastic women being trained at an e-learning centre.

