



Building a better tomorrow

E-patashaley – a novel, low cost rural digital experiment that teaches lessons in a fun way.

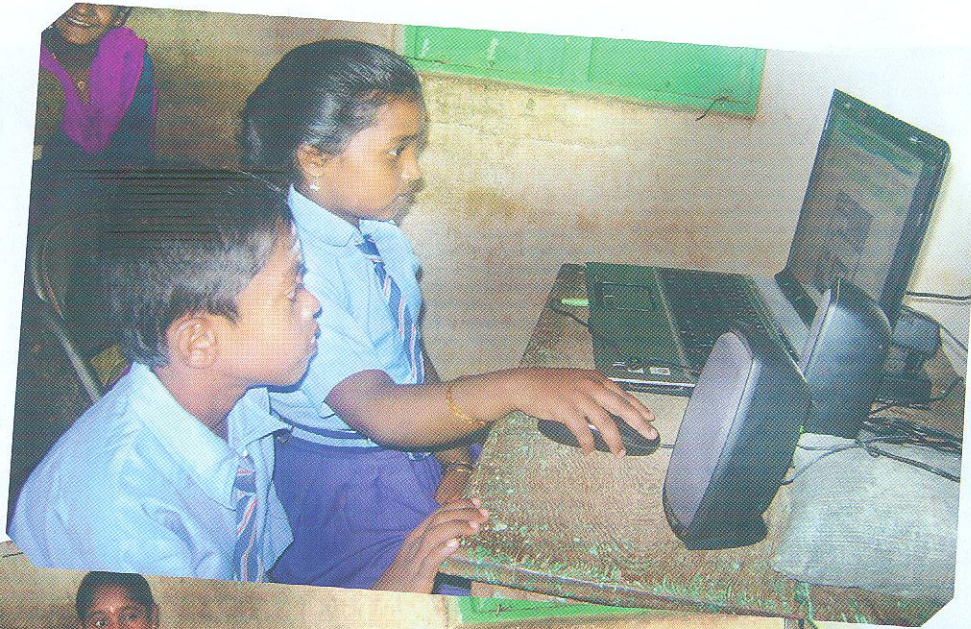
SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN, Karnataka

The bell clangs to announce the end of classes for the day, and a cluster of boys and girls from the government school at Jakkur on the outskirts of Bengaluru, scurry out – not heading homewards, but towards a brick building across the road where they race each other to a room upstairs, to try their hands at a row of computers, learning animation, gathering information on geography and history, learning about world events, or just having fun handling a mouse – all for free, for two joyous hours every afternoon.

These are children from low income rural families who can normally never dream of accessing a computer, but this 'computer club' for non-metropolitan youngsters is the brain child of Bhagya Rangachar, who went to the US as an 18 year old bride, lived overseas for 25 years and worked as a software professional, before her life changed 13 years ago

– and with hers, those of hundreds of rural children in Karnataka changed too.

In 1997 when her mother passed away, she came from Boston to Bengaluru to spend a month with her father. Living in Basavanagudi, she noticed children at a nearby construction site, building castles in the sand while their mothers worked all day carrying bricks. The kids were hungry and malnourished, and she decided to organise mid-day meals for them (the first such scheme in Karnataka, much before the state government launched its school mid-day meal scheme) Her friends back in Boston sent small donations after hearing about the construction workers' kids, and soon, a 13-year old American boy



Letters to the Editor

Congratulations to your entire team for the special issue of Vidura and the new edition of Grassroots.

I will continue to be a regular and avid reader of these prestigious and helpful journals. Kindly accept my heartiest congratulations for coming up with such good publi.

Manoj Sharma

Deputy Director
Ministry of Industry and Commerce
New Delhi

I received your copy and I am yet to read the articles in detail. But it's nice that an NGO wishes to reprint stories from Grassroots. There was a time when I used to look at Grassroots with awe (ages ago). Naturally, I was happy when my story appeared. So I feel quite hurt when people ask what it is. And I am quite surprised that even journalists have not heard of Grassroots and Vidura. I think PII should do something to increase its visibility.

Jency Samuel

Freelance Journalist
Chennai

We are pleased to renew our subscription for three years for our Resource Centre. Grassroots is undoubtedly a unique journal in the health and development sector currently available in India. It is definitely a valuable addition to our existing resource in the Centre.

Shekar Nambiar

Resource Centre
Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI), New Delhi

Please send in your comments / suggestions to
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had collected \$ 5,000 through friends, and brought his family to India with a suitcase full of stuff as donations. With that money Bhagya decided to widen her involvement to cover education, seeing how dull, dry, and unimaginative the lessons could be, in government schools where the children do not have a privileged background to supplement their conventional learning. That initiative of a decade ago has now grown into a novel experiment that targets teachers, rather than students, through innovative uses of technology. Siemens company donated old computers, Intel offered help with money and an educational software programme developed at MIT (USA) -- and Bhagya's Children's Love Castles Trust (named after the sand castles she had watched poor children building by the roadside) was born.

Using her expertise as a software professional, she launched a project that began with the question: Why not prepare innovative CDs to help teachers at government schools make conventional teaching and curricula more interesting? The CDs, on various topics connected to the existing syllabus, are distributed free to municipal schools, and all that they need is a TV screen or an ordinary computer or DVD player, to play the CDs. The teachers do not have to be computer savvy, they only play the CDs, as a supporting material for the lessons in the textbooks (whether it is a lesson on Indus Valley civilisation, or botany). The CD modules are also

available in Kannada translation (with plans for translations in other languages also in the pipeline). What began as a small experiment with one unpaid volunteer has now grown to cover 70 schools including 12 in Raichur and 16 in Nelamangala, and an enthusiastic team of paid staff trained in sophisticated digital technology, producing exciting CDs on every subject covered by school syllabus. The focus is on capacity building through the addition of an extra dimension of sound or visuals to the normal textbook lessons. As Priscilla, a teacher at Purnapura school says, the CDs increase students' interest in lessons and also makes the teachers' burden lighter. This low cost, digital, interactive (rather than passive) learning initiative that seeks to 'empower the teacher' is replicable, without sophisticated equipment at the school level, and Bhagya plans to take it to other districts too. This e-patasaley's video-based multimedia content is also easy to navigate. "We can accelerate the digital inclusion of rural schools by removing the prohibitive cost barrier and heavy dependency on training -- as most schools already have a TV set, we can leverage on this existing hardware and transform it into a powerful teaching and learning tool," says Bhagya. Inert classrooms thus become interactive, inspired learning communities.

CLT now has a computer club, science lab and library that caters to 650 rural children aged 9 to 19 access though a daily 'open house' after

school hours. Three times that many have used the club facilities in the last three years, Bhagya estimates. Mondays are exclusively 'girls' day' to encourage girls to come forward and gain skills as well as self-confidence. Some have produced animation clips, some have produced videos on topics like the environment and communal harmony, and picked up the intricacies of editing while 'having fun' as one excited 11-year-old boy put it. Bright and colourful paintings done by the kids decorate the walls of the premises, and most of the money that CLT gets goes in expanding facilities for the children, by keeping overheads very low.

Bhagya's month-long stay has stretched to 13 years now. Children sponsored by CLT go abroad to Boston every year, in collaboration with supporters in the US, and access classroom facilities at university campuses, for a life-changing experience. As I write, 15-year-old Sachin, one of the members of the CLT club, is interacting with 300 youngsters at a global technical teen summit, in the US. One girl has landed a job at HP after her trip to the US last year. Interns from Singapore National University are visiting CLT to study how technology is used for rural children's empowerment. As Bhagya sees it, nothing can match the satisfaction of enabling these rural school children to link with the wider, global world of technological sophistication -- and thereby changing their lives.