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## E- GOVERNANCE SUCCESS PROJECTS IN KERALA: A STUDY OF AKSHAYA

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### Abstract

The spread of Information Technology has led to many dramatic changes in our economic, social and political life. It has created new challenges and opportunities for people. New structures and institutions have been created to manage these changes. In this context, it is important that people have the ability to control or modulate these changes, leverage on the new opportunities and manage the challenges. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are hailed as important tools for rural development and are considered essential for enhancing livelihoods of people in rural areas, ICT can be used as a tool for strengthening education, improving public services and governance as well as for supporting agriculture and the service industry. As the part of e governance initiatives government of Kerala started Akshaya project. The **Akshaya project**, first started in the rural areas of Malappuram district of Kerala, India, and now spread all around the state, was the first district-wide e-literacy project in India and one of the largest known Internet Protocol (IP) based wireless networks in the world. The project with the goal of at least one person in every family to be computer literate in that district. Malappuram is now what is said to be India's First E-literate District. The mission continues to make Kerala the First E-literate state in India. The present article is going to discuss about the e governance practices and also success of Akshaya project in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Information Technology, Rural Development, Akshaya Project, E- Literate.

### Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are hailed as important tools for rural development and are considered essential for enhancing livelihoods of people in rural areas (Gilbert et al., 2008). According to Geldof and Unwin (2005), ICT can be used as a tool for strengthening education, improving public services and governance as well as for supporting agriculture and the service industry.

The spread of Information Technology has led to many dramatic changes in our economic, social and political life. It has created new challenges and opportunities for people. New structures and institutions have been created to manage these changes. In this context, it is important that people have the ability to control or modulate these changes, leverage on the new opportunities and manage the challenges. Therefore, in a society such as that of Kerala, where democratic values are cherished, it is important that digital literacy is universalized. A rough set of skills that a digitally literate person should have would be the ability to switch on and off a computing device, understanding operating systems, files, folders and drives, ability to use office applications and media applications, ability to use Internet for emailing, accessing websites and engage in social networking. It is only through achievement of a universalisation of this digital literacy that one can ensure that people have the necessary power to leverage on the unfolding IT revolution.

The Government of India envisages common service centres, or telecentres, as integrated front-end delivery points for services from the government, the private sector, and the social sector for the rural citizens of India. Through a social development approach, telecentres intend to help individuals and communities to address social needs of the disadvantaged and excluded less-resourced majority of a community. However, the said approach generates considerably high social capital since it is community driven, but it is weak on financial sustainability (Meddie, 2006).

### Akshaya project

The Project Launched in November 2002, Akshaya is an effort on the part of the information technology (IT) department of the Kerala, India government to 'bridge the Digital Divide'. By the end of the 3-year project, organisers hope to have set up a network of 6000 information centres that have the potential to impart basic IT literacy to at least one member in each of the 6.5 million families in Kerala; generate and distribute locally relevant content; improve public delivery of services; and create employment opportunities. The Akshaya project is being implemented through Local Self Government (Panchayati Raj Institutions), and involves private enterprise in the development of training institutes and content generation. The **Akshaya project**, first started in the rural areas of Malappuram district of Kerala, India, and now spread all around the state, was the first district-wide e-literacy project in India and one of the largest known Internet Protocol (IP) based wireless networks in the world. In November 2002, the state government of Kerala put into place a project, piloted in Malappuram, with the goal of at least one person in every family



to be computer literate in that district. Malappuram is now what is said to be India's First E-literate District. The mission continues to make Kerala the First E-literate state in India.

### Communication Strategies

Organisers describe the project as aiming to create a community "successfully re-inventing itself for prosperity" ("Akshaya" means "perpetuating prosperity" in the local language). To this end, Akshaya addresses three issues in IT dissemination:

- bringing the benefits of technology to even the most rural households (access)
- providing an information base in local language that is relevant to citizens' lives (content)
- fostering an understanding of the world of IT and how it can improve lives (skills).

### Akshaya Kendras

In terms of the technology itself, the project involves the setting up of multi-purpose IT-enabled "Akshaya Kendras" in every two wards, each catering to approximately 1000 families. The idea is that each centre will become the primary contact point for residents in its vicinity by offering facilities that citizens can use to simplify their day-to-day activities. A typical Akshaya Kendra is equipped with computers, printers, fax machines, and photocopiers. Other services available may include computer rental and Internet telephony, as well as government information and forms for various government services. Organisers plan to integrate communities through the creation of e-networks and a community portal.

### Community participation

Local Akshaya bodies will use a rating scale to select "entrepreneurs" who have prior entrepreneurial experience and familiarity with the local region to run the centres. The commitment to work full-time and provide quality service, as well as the ability to form a bond with the local community, are other necessary qualities. For a 3-year period, this person will be provided with marketing guidance/support, technical guidance for continuous improvements, content generation related support, and overall management support. At each centre, the entrepreneur will set up the infrastructure and then meet with community members to convince them of the usefulness of the project and to encourage them to use the facilities.

### E-Literacy

A 3-month e Literacy campaign was the foundation on which the state sought to bridge the digital divide in the state. The underlying objective of the campaign was to remove the "fear of the unknown" that common people have about technology in general and computers in particular. To this end, articles were published about the need for the programme by eminent personalities in leading dailies and other publications; advertisements were included in both print and electronic media; brochures and posters highlighted the benefits of IT; and road shows, seminars, discussions, and exhibitions were held. This campaign was designed to create interest in training as part of the goal of imparting basic/functional e Literacy to one member of each of the families in the state. Selection of the member to be trained is determined by the family members, but the preferred age range is 20-30 years. Those trained as part of this campaign are expected to act as a catalyst to mobilise and teach relatives and fellow citizens; the course content is designed with this role in mind. The sessions are conducted by entrepreneurs, who are motivated by an incentive of Rs. 20,000 if they train 100% of citizens allocated to them within a specified time. These sessions emphasise the potential associated with learning to use technology and not technology itself. After completing the initial training, participants are grouped into different categories such as students, housewives, and professionals, who are then invited to undergo need-based trainings at the respective centres. This continued e-learning programme is designed to help the beneficiaries attain knowledge and practical skills in specific areas of relevance to their lives. Once e-literacy has been increased, the next step is to make facilities available to citizens in the sense of creating a useful learning experience through content. The Centre for Development of Imaging Technology (C-DIT) has developed and supplied a IT literacy CD that is based on cultural and linguistic customization and creativity. The CD is designed as a 10-lesson IT tutor that features games with Kerala ambience. This approach is designed to help the learner easily and enjoyably pick up the psychomotor skills required for mouse and keyboard operation. In addition to customised software like Chithraavidya, Ganithavidya, and Aksharavidya, a browser called WebDarshini is designed to garner access to the Internet on the part of Malayalee community members who do not speak English. The Kerala button in the WebDarshini brings up Kerala directory, giving preference to Malayalam content websites. There is also a Janakeeya email facility in the browser.

### Significance of the Akshaya project

The government of Kerala has initiated a string of measures to improve upon this scenario, the results of which should be seen in the near future. Some of the key initiatives of the government in this direction include the Akshaya Project and the IT School Project.



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The Government of Kerala initiated Akshaya as a landmark ICT Project of Kerala State IT Mission. The Project has the mission of bridging the digital divide, addressing the issues of ICT access, providing training in basic skill sets and enabling availability of relevant content. The Akshaya Centres located across the length and breadth of the state of Kerala, which is the centre piece of the programme is run by independent entrepreneurs from the locality. It is in their role as evangelists of Information Technology that these entrepreneurs play a major role in bridging the digital divide in Kerala. Today, they have emerged as a major channel for government to citizen services and can be seen as the delivery mechanism for the e-governance system in Kerala. Additionally, they have also played an important role in enhancing e-literacy by organizing training programmes in association with Kerala State IT Mission and companies like Intel. These two investments by the Government of Kerala over the last one decade are beginning to yield its results. Today Kerala is one of the leading states in the country for e-governance and e-literacy. The state can potentially witness a dramatic emergence of IT enabled people and organizations in the state.

### Conclusion

Akshaya one of the famous e – governance initiatives in India and Kerala government strated Akshaya e – governance programmes with people’s participation. Akshya programme which include E – literacy and Services provide centres and also provides self-employment through Information and communication technologies with local community participation.

Akshaya projects have also commercial services (e.g., utility bill payment) and non-commercial services (e.g., information), and it is reflected in the literature that the commercial model is better for financial sustainability and the non-commercial or social model fosters social capital (Toyama & Kuriyan, 2007; Meddie, 2006). Based on our results, we conclude that the social capital model can be added to the commercial enterprise model at the maturity stage of the telecentre lifecycle because financial sustainability can be ascertained with commercial services. When the centers are financially sustainable, additional social capital services may be included. Also, a mechanism should be devised by the entrepreneurs to fix costs for such services given that most entrepreneurs studied have difficulty in setting the price for non-commercial services. Akshaya is the one of the successful e governance projects in the country and also in Kerala.

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