

MS SWAMINATHAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION – JAMSETJI TATA NATIONAL VIRTUAL ACADEMY FOR RURAL PROSPERITY, TAMIL NADU

As scientists, we need to study and learn from MS Swaminathan Research Foundation experiments – so as to make a science out of connecting the world to knowledge resources. With the technology moving so fast it is critical to ‘learn by doing’ in this way, so that we learn how to make the next wave of the technology even more useful for productive and sustainable economic development.’

The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) was established in 1988 by eminent scientist, Professor MS Swaminathan, as a non-profit, research, training and advocacy institution with its headquarters at Chennai. Its mission is to use science and technology for conservation of nature and fostering sustainable human livelihoods. Professor Swaminathan leads a committed workforce comprising 106 scientists, 81 technical and 46 non-technical staff, about a third of which are women.

The Foundation works with rural communities in close collaboration with government

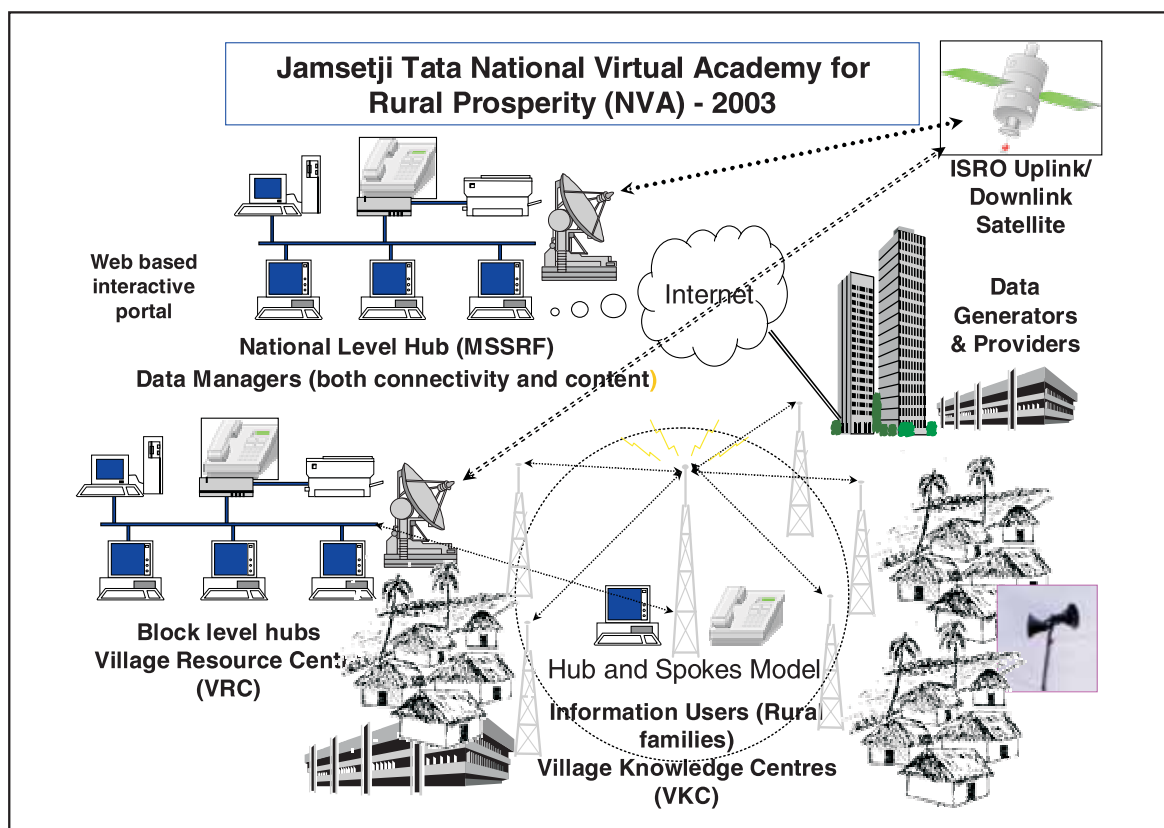
departments, NGOs, academic and research institutions and civil society organizations. It promotes pro-nature, pro-poor, pro-women and pro-livelihood enhancement activities for the farming communities, and the rural poor. It engages in intensive, inter-disciplinary research which forms a basis for its interventions. The Foundation has 13 field centres in Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Orissa.

The Tata Trusts have been instrumental in supporting some of the important initiatives of the Foundation through endowment funds.

An initiative which has captured the imagination of both planners and practitioners is the ICT initiative carried out through Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity (NVA).

Bridging the Digital Divide

The NVA, which was established in 2003 with a grant of Rs 10 million from the Sir Dorabji Tata



Trust, aims at providing information and knowledge to rural communities that would give them better livelihood choices and enable them to have better control over their own development. The knowledge network created under the initiative generates information on subjects such as drought, climate management, water resource development, crop productivity, water use efficiency and markets, etc. which have a direct bearing on the livelihoods of the rural poor.

NVA strives to develop a user-controlled, owned and managed knowledge network, to help reach the un-reached and include the excluded in terms of information, knowledge and skill empowerment. This is envisaged as the first Virtual Academy in the world which aims at treading the path of 'antyodaya' (i.e., starting with poorest of the poor) as shown by Mahatma Gandhi. In so doing, the Academy would connect cutting-edge technology with resource-poor rural women and men and help to create a large number of

information managers in India's villages. With most of them being women, the initiative to bridge the digital divide will also become a powerful instrument for bridging the gender divide.

The NVA project has its origin in a pilot project, Information Village Research Project, initiated in 1998 with a small grant from IDRC, Canada. The project won the Motorola Dispatch Solution Gold Award for innovative use of ICT technology for a socially relevant goal. It further went on to bag the Stockholm Challenge Award in the Global Village category for promoting social inclusion through the use of ICTs. According to the Stockholm Jury:

"The project is a wonderful example of the benefits of IT, and of the power of information and opportunity. These new technology tools are bridging the economic and social divide between the haves and have-nots. They are empowering everyone with knowledge and opportunity by an inclusive use of local language and multimedia format which allows all to participate."



Information being disseminated at the village knowledge centre

The NVA project as visualized in 2003 has a three-tier structure with a national hub at MSSRF, Chennai, a block-level hub called village resource centre (VRC) which services a number of village knowledge centres (VKC) through a hub and spokes model (see figure on page 109). As of early 2006, MSSRF had set up 12 VRCs and 40 VKCs in five states and one union territory.

The VKC is regarded as a common property by the villagers. It is located in a public building and is governed by a representative village council. The local community takes care of the rent and electricity from day one. Village volunteers are trained as knowledge workers and are responsible for running the centre. The NVA takes care of the capacity building and monitoring and evaluation of the centre's activities. The information content is developed in close interaction with the local people in a bottom-up manner. The VKC is expected to be sustainable on the principle of 'fragmented returns' whereby it would be supported in the long run through spin-off effects and contributions from members who have gained financially and socially from it.

The positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of the participating communities which have by now been well documented, prompted MSSRF to consider strategies for scaling up the project in a big way.

Mission 2007: Catalyzing a National Information Revolution

'Mission 2007' was conceptualized during a consultation with policy makers, banks, research institutions and civil society organizations in October 2003. The idea was to trigger a national movement that would help to create VKCs to serve every village in the country by the time it celebrates its 60th Independence Day in August 2007. In July 2004, this took the form of a structured program. A National Alliance for Mission 2007 was established with 60 partner institutions, including the government of India. The membership of the Alliance has since grown to over 200. The Mission has a steering committee of eminent thinkers and leaders from civil society, private and public sector



President Kalam interacts with community members at the Nagapattinam centre

undertakings and the government. It has established five task forces to design national strategies in the areas of content, connectivity, capacity building, care and management and policy and resources.

By the end of 2004, MSSRF felt the need to strengthen the NVA to carry out activities like field demonstrations in different agro-ecological conditions, training of NVA Fellows, strengthening of connectivity, content and capacity building at the knowledge centres and setting up of the Mission 2007 Secretariat. In March 2005, the Tata Education Trust approved a corpus grant of Rs 100 million to be disbursed over three years to strengthen the NVA.

Mission 2007 received support from the government of India, in the budget speech of the finance minister, P Chidambaram in February 2005. This was further reiterated in the central government's official planning document, *Bharat Nirman*, in December 2005.

Under the Mission, it is envisaged that VKCs owned and managed by the village community would be established in 100,000 villages. The concept of NVA fellows as 'knowledge workers', locally selected and trained has been developed to meet this objective. At least one woman and one man are to be selected from each village on the basis of their leadership qualities, communication skills and desire to serve the community. They will serve as the torchbearers of the 'knowledge revolution' in rural India.

¹ *Professor Bruce Alberts, president, US National Academy of Sciences.*