

*Improved standards of living through ICT capacity building and community productivity—CASE STUDY*

**Submitted by :** Chetan Sharma-Founder, Datamation Foundation Trust  
“VIMAL-SHREE” B-12 Swasthya Vihar  
Delhi-110 092 (India)  
Email : [csharma@nda.vsnl.net.in](mailto:csharma@nda.vsnl.net.in)  
Mobile#9811039482

**The early days**

Seelampur is situated in the northeastern part of Delhi, the capital city of India. The eastern part of the city is characterised by low-income groups, high population density and poor civic amenities. Seelampur is inhabited primarily by Muslims. It has a high density of population and family incomes are low. The average monthly family income is 60 - 80 USD and the average family consists of eight members. Within Seelampur the area of Zaffarabad (having approximately 90% Muslim population) stands out as a pocket of extreme urban poverty and immensely poor living conditions.

Lack of opportunities in terms of education and employment also marks life for the people here. Formal education has become quite common and thus enrolment is high but dropping out at different grades is a continuing problem. Without adequate education, the possibility of white-collar jobs remains a distant reality for most boys and women. Most young women have not even completed high school. Usually they drop out of the school after finishing Grade VIII.

In 2003, UNESCO launched a pilot initiative to innovate, research social and technological strategies to put ICTs in the hands of the poor. This seemed a good opportunity in the given context and an ICT centre was set up at Seelampur-Zaffarabad by the Datamation Foundation with the support of UNESCO and Delhi Govt. Datamation Foundation has been working in the community for more than five years now.

**The cultural settings**

The towering minarets of numerous mosques in the area are indicators of the role played by religion and the clergy in the lives of the community. Traditional customs still play a powerful role especially with respect to gender. Women are expected to be good housewives, look after their husbands and in-laws, procreate and take care of children and the house. Education is not considered to be important for them. They are not encouraged to move out of the locality independently and the 'Burqa' (veil) system is prevalent. It may be noted that several studies done in India among other religious communities also suggest very strong gender related norms such as on mobility, marriage and education. Many other traditional practices are also still adhered to like with respect to kinship and arts, handicrafts and learning.

It was considered that for the initiative to make inroads into the lives of the women it may be useful for the ICT centre to be located in their midst. Thus a collaboration was formed with the Babool-Uloom Madrasa. It is a Madrasa (a place of learning) and Masjid (the place where prayer is offered and is also the centre of other religious activities) headed by the Maulana (refers to leader of prayer, Muslim caliph). The Madrasa is not only a place of prayer but also of learning. The Babool-Uloom Madrasa is a religious residential school providing learning to about 200 boys from humble backgrounds. A majority of students aspire to take up advanced religious studies so as to become Imams (teachers).

The Babool- Uloom is also a mosque, where the devout gather five times a day to offer prayers to Allah. Women are not allowed entry into the mosque. However~ they do come to the Maulana for

advice. He arbitrates on social disputes and religious matters. He is also believed to have healing powers.

Permission was sought to start the ICT centre at the Madrasa and for this purpose space was also requested. The factor that played a positive and decisive role was not that the key people viewed ICTs as important but that they felt a strong need to create some opportunities for women in the area. Indeed, it was much later that they began to understand the utility of ICTs.

The ICT center provides an open learning center for women and women. They receive training on computers and Internet and also obtain information on varied topics. Interactive multimedia content is developed and used to support vocational and life-skills training and provide rights-based information on various areas to poor women and women. The marginalised women use ICTs to learn marketable skills and build their awareness of health issues, their rights and livelihood opportunities. In contrast, the Madrasa has its own philosophy, where it seems to isolate itself from the outside world and the teachings have little influence of the outside, changing world. Movement of the students is restricted; there is no radio and no television.

For ICTs to establish their appropriateness, an overall evaluation is necessary. In an ideal world, universal access to information would create global information society yet the mode of interpretation will depend on the culture and traditions of the people and societies. A study (Ryckeghem 1995) shows how information technology and culture interact, wherein culture provides the condition for interpreting the utility of information technology. It is also believed that some 'cultural beliefs' are a hindrance to the adoption of ICTs though the reverse maybe true in many cases. Computers are a product of industrialised civilisation nor from this particular cultural context. Yet the endeavour in community-based interventions has been to be sensitive to cultural differences which was also the point of departure for the present initiative. The decision to set up the ICT centre in the annexe (one room) of the Madrasa gave it immediate legitimacy. Appreciating the socio-cultural scenario and the importance of the Masjid and Maulana in the lives of the community helped to harmonies that with the technological tools.

In today's information age of globalisation, computerisation, Internet and virtual world, there are fears that the global media is fast promoting a global monoculture that denies diverse socio-cultural realities. It is felt that this process of globalisation may swamp the not so strong cultures. English is the predominant language of the information age. The majority of the material on the Internet is from the developed and industrialised countries. Thus, there are fears that the local cultures would be eroded so the tendency is to further isolate themselves.

The global village is not global for most of the world's poor nor simply because technology is not available to them but because with or without these technologies the poor are likely to remain marginalised from the benefits of society if they are excluded from the benefits of over-all development. Apart from this is the issue of language and content because of which even if computers may be physically available they may continue to be 'out of reach' in crucial ways.

Thus, the Seelampur intervention was located within this fraught relationship between the modern-global and the traditional. There is an interesting contrast between the possibilities of globalised culture that the computer/Internet represents while being at a place that fiercely protects the local culture. What have been the experiences?

## **ICT ADAPTATIONS TO ORAL CULTURE AND TRADITIONS**

### **How the ICT intervention has adapted to cultural values...**

It was felt necessary to embed the project in the community taking into account the existing cultural values. Concrete actions are being taken to preserve the local oral culture and propagate the same. For culture to grow, it must be active, contextual and social. ICTs such as videos, TV

and multi-media computer software that combine text, sound and colourful images, are used to provide media for expression acting as facilitator.

**Seelampur women create their own content:**

Early enough in the project, it was evident the ICTs have given to the women of a “voice” for expression. Belonging to conservative families; women are not expected to move about in public especially unsorted and without “pardah”; the role of ICTs in providing a “voice” for their expression and creativity is undisputed.

The community ventured forward for a holy rendition of “Quran-Sharif” when the CMC Centre started. The women started first with designs—sharp, colorful designs have been created from their socio-cultural context—applying Paint Brush. Once they got exposed to the multi-media capability of the computers especially the recording features; they started enthusiastically recording:

- \*\*Naat : Religious songs sung for the Prophet
- \*\*Ghazals : Melodies of love, solitude, companionship and friendship
- \*\*Sher-Shairi : Rhythm melodies on variety of topics

Barring Fridays observed as “Jumma” as per tradition; the women have been singing and recording their renditions uninhibitedly.

### **Searching and retrieving content for personal needs:**

The women have been searching for English newspaper sites in the computer (web-site) since they get usually Hindi papers at home. Since there is a keen desire amongst the women to learn English; they have been searching the internet for different sites to learn English. The women have been expressing themselves in Hindi and Urdu by writing in Roman letters.

### **Searching and retrieving content for ODL:**

Since most of the participating women from the community have not even completed their upper primary education; there is a keen desire amongst the women to complete their basic secondary education; by open distance learning. Consequently the women access various Distance Learning sites such as the National Institute of Open Learning (NIOS) [www.nios.org](http://www.nios.org) ; or for the ones who have completed their school education and are desirous of enrolling themselves for the Graduation; admissions and learning sites such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Manipal-Sikkim Open University, Mysore University, Annamalai University are very popular. The e-Government and e-Learning opportunities offered by these Education sites to the Seelampur women; are helping the women get over their ‘school drop-out’ stigma very rapidly.

### **Searching and retrieving health content:**

In the wake of epidemics such as Viral, Dengue fever and other Diseases there is a good interest amongst the women to retrieve various health sites.

### **Using alternate channels of communications:**

For elderly women with large families, access to the ICT center has been limited. To overcome this, the vocational and skills enhancement modules were telecast over the cable network.

The combination of video and community’s own recording has enabled the community to learn the process of holding camera efficiently for recording purposes apart from observing the process of editing and mixing of the audio-cum-video; therefore the women have started feeling motivated enough to participate in the production of their own multimedia modules.

### **Usage of off-the shelf Digital content:**

The response of the community to the off-the shelf Digital content prepared in advance by the Datamation Foundation in below thematic areas has been very positive.

The topics of digital content have ranged from women’s empowerment to legal rights and issues; apart from skills enhancement and income generation. Health and education have been primary contributing factors towards the empowerment of the women.

It was observed that the women were keen to acquire certain vocational skills while learning to handle computers. The packages, with a voice-over option in both English and Hindi, include candle making, liquid soap and phenyl making, henna application and designs, making of soft toys and rag dolls, tailoring etc. also, based on their traditional skills (such as handicrafts) many new avenues are being explored to make these women have a means for an independent

income. Many of the women eagerly desire to have an independent source of income after coming to the centre and also, to be able to support or help their families financially.

The learning of local art and handicraft is being encouraged in the process of learning computers. The women bring local traditional designs and patterns of embroidery to the centre. These are computerized through the process of scanning or digital photography. Then these pictures are modified, improved and more innovative designs are developed with various colour combinations. Some of the participants download various patterns from the Internet and then evolve their own designs using traditional and modern tools as base.

### **Web marketing for the arts and crafts of Seelampur and e-Government services....**

With the help of the community, a portal [www.seelampurmart.org](http://www.seelampurmart.org) has been established for marketing arts and crafts made by the women. The portal provides forward-backward market linkages by providing direct access of the portal to the producers. The producers of arts and crafts can register themselves at the portal; showcasing their products with their pricing. The portal administrators subsequently would approve inclusion or otherwise of their products in the portal. There have been brisk sale of the arts and crafts from the portal. The women have been encouraged to access the portal themselves directly for knowing pending orders and how these orders can be served. Entire back end supply-chain management for processing the order is gradually getting transferred to the women.

Internet in conjunction with eNRICH, a local web-based browser developed by the National Informatics Centre—a Govt. of India organization--is being used imaginatively to record and showcase local talent and cultural heritage. At the same time the participants are getting an exposure to other cultures and ideas as well. E-mail has opened an avenue to have exchanges with people of the same religion, living in different countries. Images from Internet coupled with e-mail exchanges are making the participants aware about the cultural differences and similarities amongst the Muslims living in other countries..

Various e-Government services offered by the Delhi Govt. such as applying for birth and death certificates, vehicle registration, property registration and few other citizen services are being accessed.

### **How the community and the clergy have also adapted ..**

The centre also observes Fridays as a holiday, as it is a day (called 'Jumma'; On this special day, Muslims make an extra effort to go to their local masjid to listen to the khutbah -community address - by the Imam -worship leader - and to perform the formal worship with their fellow Muslims.) devoted to offering special congregational prayers among the Muslims. The tutor at the centre is from the community so the women feel comfortable. Hindi and Urdu are used along with English to facilitate learning. This was done for easy comprehension and for the realization of the importance of English as a link language (especially for using the internet). Above all there is an informality of atmosphere so that the staff and project team members are open to approach.

There are the traditional restrictions on mobility. Added to this is the fear of the "anti-social" elements that prohibits parents and husbands in Seelampur from sending women from their homes outside Seelampur. The Community ICT Center has gradually emerged as a "congregation" point of social contact in Seelampur as this is perceived as a safe place. Many women state that they feel very happy coming here and want to stay here for longer periods.

The centre is on the first floor of the annex to the Madrasa with an independent entry from the lane. The second floor of the Madrasa and the annex are interconnected with a passage like an aerobridge over the lane. Though women are not allowed into the Masjid they were permitted to transit through the exclusively boys' zone in this instance.

### **And there is resistance to ICT enabled Education...**

Often within the kinship context also, age-old patriarchal values may reinforce themselves even if by taking new forms in the face of these changes. Traditionally, women are seen as having a role only within the house and thus, formal education of any kind may not be seen as valuable and may even be discouraged. Recently in Seelampur women are being rejected in the process of spouse selection in arranged marriages on the ground that they know computers so will not 'adjust' in their marital family. Similar instances have also come to light about the boy's kin making greater demands for dowry from the girl's family if she is computer literate. Voices are raised in dissent...

The women remain in awe of the Maulana because of his status and traditional standing. During the month of Ramadan, he wanted the centre to be closed down. All through the month of Ramadan devout Muslims keep strict fast. Only before sunrise and after sunset do they take food. Early morning as the call for prayer is heard from the mosques, the boys and men set off to offer Namaz (prayers). Women stay at home and recite the Koran. Fasting during the days of Ramadan normally does not affect their daily routine and they go on with their daily chores. Thus the 29 or 30 days of the month of Ramadan pass and the sighting of the new moon brings good tidings of Eid-ul-Fitur and the end of the month.

The women were not happy with the decision that the centre be closed down for the month of Ramadan. They were enjoying the learning experience at the centre. They were encouraged by the project staff to go through the relevant web sites to understand the significance and meaning behind the rituals and why Ramadan is observed. Having understood they gathered courage and went to the Maulana to plead their case to keep the centre functioning. They did that convincingly and successfully. The compromise arrived at was that the centre would close down at 4 p.m. instead of at the usual closing time of 5 p.m. Only a few months ago such a dialogue between the Maulana and the women would have been unthinkable.

### **Concluding observations**

These small steps lead to changing relationships, practices, and adapting of old values to new situations. As we go along, these seemingly small changes may go on to impact the culture. Culture is how we view the events, how we think, how we perceive events, how we react and respond. Culture consists of social norms, group behaviour, respect and authority of decision-makers. These have got funneled into ODL. The Seelampur experience shows that while every effort is being made to respect the local culture, the project is also impinging on the participants and the stakeholders, making them think and act a little differently.

The initiative has shown that ICTs, ODL and e-Governance can be utilized to understand, preserve, and share cultural heritage apart from enhancing cultural values. exposure builds confidence in the women due to which they are able to articulate their opinions better. The Seelampur Community ICT initiative has been an interesting learning experience for the community as also for the project team.