



## Catalysing progress

**An initiative in Andhra Pradesh brings Hewlett Packard loads of intangible growth, with profits not far behind**

Two hours by road from Bangalore – past depleted gold mines and rocky mountains, “where *Sholay*’s Basanti danced for Gabbar Singh” – is a small town Kuppam in Andhra Pradesh. Include catchment areas, and its population touches 300,000. It is easy to dismiss this place as just another town in rural India, but for Hewlett Packard’s experiment that has unfolded over the past two years at a cost of about \$2 million.

Anand Tawker knows this town all too well. The director (emerging market solutions) has channelled this money in Kuppam, conducting research on the lives of its people, building infrastructure, and in tying-up with several partners to launch schemes tailored to local needs. He and the team even stayed in Kuppam homes to understand the people and their problems better. Today he prepares to soon hand over charge to a transferee organisation, which will manage things on an ongoing basis. HP’s role will reduce to working with the independent body, further deploying business models.

Two years ago, Tawker started with identifying problems in Kuppam, and then brought in solutions – designed around the company’s expertise in technology. A critical broadband wireless network was put in place. Then came in CICs or Community Information Centres and Mobile Solution Centres. What is pertinent to note here was HP’s cause: not just philanthropy, but to participate in a learning process, take its brand to the rural

deeps, “invent”, and make a profit while the town continues to develop.

Take for instance, a photographer programme. Sixteen unemployed women were given HP cameras, printers, and solar batteries – all in a kit that costs Rs20,000 each – to click pictures at functions, and weddings and at births within their block. Since buying the kit is expensive, at Rs30 charged per picture, HP takes away Rs20. Neelamma, a photographer, says that Rs10 has changed her life;



A villager accesses the HP i-community Web site at a CIC; (inset) Tawker

she invariably takes home a net sum of Rs1,000 per month.

Or take the CIC initiative. The proprietor of a CIC keeps an HP printer, xerox machine, scanner, and a computer with Internet access. The set up costs about Rs40,000 (with loans available through a partner network), and the proprietor takes home a net sum of Rs1,500. Today 13 CICs stand in Kuppam. The Mobile Solutions Centre – two mobile vans – travels from one block to another, with soil testing equipment. It also carries eye-testing equipment and serves as a clinic – where the villager can speak to a doctor via video-conferencing.

Several initiatives followed – like an ITES and a placement centre, a school, open air theatres, the growing of herbal gardens, and an extensive Web site which villagers access for information and the setting up of a hospital. From PES Institute of Sciences & Research Prof D. Jawahar, its director says, “About 50 patients are handled daily at the hospital, and 100 through the CICs and mobile vans.”

The moot question, however, was, at the end of two years was it worth the time and effort for HP to be involved in this – in things like soil testing, and herbal gardens? “In loads,” says Tawker. While recovering that \$2 million is at least seven years away, Tawker says the project means much more to HP. “We have the goodwill of the people,” he says. For instance, videocasting a festival held at a temple to a place kilometres away is not rocket science, “but when people don’t have to travel the distance to see the idol, they wonder how and who is doing this,” says Tawker.

Econometric figures are unavailable on how much Kuppam has actually developed since HP’s involvement, but its partners have released data on land prices doubling in pockets and soil productivity increases too. HP may have not hugely transformed the town, but as Girija Shanker, deputy collector and officer on special duty puts it, “They have managed to make a dent in Kuppam’s future.”

For Tawker, it is the learning from Kuppam that means everything. The CIC initiative is replicated in Mexico and the Philippines, and the eye testing and village photographer schemes are replicated in South Africa. HP’s initiative has managed to touch the lives of people in the deeps of Kuppam. It also has a more-or-less captive market for its products in this town. “We even get to test our low-end printers in real-time, for instance, and their viability in India,” says Tawker.

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