

The power of information

NGOs are taking steps towards computerising, and benefiting, says Manjula Lal

COMPUTERS having become de rigeur for anybody in the information business, it is no surprise to find the Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), a non-government organisation, getting an Internet account this month.

But while most foreign-funded NGOs easily find the resources to acquire these little powerhouses, they are almost apologetic about it, stressing that computers are just a tool to help them in their core activity. As if they are anything else for industry, PC-owners or children!

CED, funded by a Netherlands donor, operates out of Mumbai and Bangalore. Its mission is to make available to other organisations and opinion leaders in the social sphere, information and analyses on all emerging and latent issues which affect the interests of the marginalised.

The effort is to democratise information, making it available a low cost, in the process jiding up a counter to mainstream worldviews.

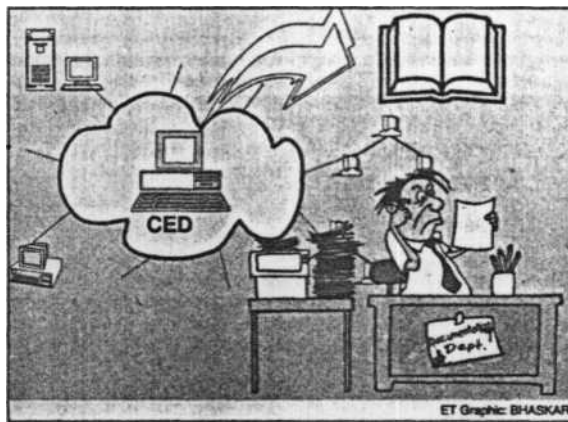
In Mumbai, where CED is has been functional since 1976, there are 7,500 books and 5,110 reports. Centrally located in Colaba behind Regal theatre, it has become a popular library for those believing in alternative lifestyles. The Bangalore branch, started only four years ago, also boasts of 3,770 titles and 2,500-odd reports.

The effort, in future, will naturally focus on making all this information more easily accessible — on-line, if possible. The users are professionals (lawyers, journalists, doctors), students, researchers, grassroots activists, and other NGOs. Already, the e-mail facility has been put to good use*.

The Bangalore office, for tance, acts as a nodal point for messages, often from rural areas. For instance, a village activist may send a message about trouble brewing. The CED would send this information out to all its 'India-link'* members, 86 in all, 46 of whom are in

Mumbai.

India-link, of course, runs on a not-for-profit basis, and the purpose is to be the most inexpensive e-mail provider to those committed to social causes. Activists who do not own a computer-modem can make use of the one at CED by paying Rs 600 per quarter, or Rs 30 per hour. The only similar facility is at Cybercafe, where one can pay Rs 100 per hour to surf the Internet.



SOLUTIONS

When India-link was first started, e-mail and Internet facilities were not available in India. Connectivity itself was a big thing. Now the National Informatics Centre has offered NIC-NET services to NGOs and other public organisations.

This means that most rural organisations can get e-mail and access databases and bulletin boards. CED has informed its users that they could connect to India-link computers using a telephone line to the district headquarters. It is also trying to work out the kind of software and other support required to make connectivity to India-link possible.

"Computers have helped us improve accessibility, sharpen our focus and use our materials better," says Shubha Chacko, senior documentalist at the Bangalore unit for the last two years.

"Our outreach is much more." Till the advent of computers, the only way to send information to remote corners was by DocPost, where photostats of the required documents were sent by mail. Now, newspaper clippings are scanned and stored electronically for quick retrieval and transmission.

Since no commercial courses are offered for the kind of training and software required by NGOs, CED has had to improvise as soon as its documentation officers acquire computer literacy.

For instance, the Dewey Decimal system was not used for cataloguing its library, as it would list "women's

issues, for instance, as a sub-category under Sociology. Tribes would come under Anthropology. Ecology would come under Science. Dowry would find no place. Prostitution would come under Crime, whereas the prevailing ideology would put it under Violence Against Women.

Knowing the core issues which NGOs grapple with, the CED developed a more user-friendly catalogue, with categories like Dams, Deforestation, Tribalsetc

When it came to computerising this catalogue, the documentalists found that it made browsing much easier, as the search for the information can be done in many more ways: alphabetically, or under Classifications, or by using the 'key words' catalogue. The Mumbai library's catalogue is also on-line.

There is also a plan to have

electronic conferences, which is described as "a huge notice-board on which you can pin public notices, articles, in fact anything that you think you would like the world to know.**

The idea is that organisations and individuals specialising in different topics (environment, human rights) would take up the responsibility of moderating conferences on their areas of interest, and also updating information, raising issues for debate. Since many NGOs are not on-line, they would be sent print-outs if they enroll as subscribers.

Computer training is another area that CED will be entering. *The current computer educational system is expensive, elite-oriented and geared for the corporate sector," according to the* centre's newsletter.

"NGOs have their own peculiar ethos and needs which are not addressed by this educational system. Besides, NGOs especially in rural areas finds it difficult to get good computer literate persons to work in rural areas.**

For this reason, CED has decided to take up computer training programmes in order to enable existing committed activists work directly on their computers.

The training will cover correspondence, data entry, regional language word processing, accounts, project monitoring, etc. Other NGOs are expected to sponsor their employees for these courses.

But one thing is clean no commercial organisation is to be given access to the CED's storehouse of information, the fear being it will pick and choose the information to suit its own ends — much like the Devil quoting the Scriptures.

As Chacko says, "Information is such a forceful area of society and the kind of information available says a lot about the kind of society we are. We believe that if there is propaganda, the answer to that is not counter-propaganda."