

Exploring an institutional model for *Samudaya Jnana Kendras* : An Executive Summary

Background

For Karnataka to be a real knowledge society, it is important to look beyond the opportunities which are emerging in the formal economy and formal education sectors; to understand and examine the transformative knowledge possibilities which have opened up vis-a-vis the daily lives of people and communities. The concept of *Samudaya Jnana Kendra* was conceived with this end in mind. This *Kendra* is supposed to conceptually epitomize and physically represent the idea of 'knowledge for everyone' in the lived community context, by recognising and invigorating those informal processes and institutions which have a major impact on the knowledge culture of people and communities. Knowledge, as we know, has always been a prime factor of development and positive change in societies. We recognize that information, learning and knowledge (ILK) are closely related concepts that can be placed in a continuum. Therefore, we often employ the composite term ILK, in this report.

This report is an attempt to address the question of what kind of community institution(s) can help address the ILK needs of communities, in the current context of an emerging knowledge society. It begins by analysing existing ILK needs and processes in communities on the basis of a primary research study. Then it goes on to review the current role of governments in this area, followed by an examination of some new convergent delivery models from across the country. On the basis of these assessments, the report attempts to develop an institutional model for the *Samudaya Jnana Kendras*.

Assessing community ILK needs

Any knowledge intervention can be successful only when it facilitates community level ILK processes in a holistic manner. This requires an effective mapping of ILK processes on the

ground, which has to be as much informed by collective needs and social values and norms, as by immediate individual interests. Recognising this, we developed a community level ILK assessment framework, with the following components: nature of articulations of ILK needs by community members, the state of existing ILK infrastructure in the community, level of individual and institutional ILK skills in the community and the impact of mass media on community level ILK processes. Using this framework, we conducted a participatory ILK assessment study in the districts of Mandya and Koppal. The field work in these areas was respectively facilitated by *Samuha* and *Vikasana*, which are NGOs with considerable and long-standing community presence.

We adopted a participatory research design which primarily relied on the methodology of Focus Group Discussions with various groups in the communities. In addition to assessing community ILK needs, We also elicited ideas from the research participants on various aspects of designing a model for the SJKs. We also conducted key informant interviews with people who were identified as possessing the expertise to provide special insights in the area of study. Two consultations, one each at Koppal and Mysore, involving development workers, community leaders and articulate community members, were also conducted.

Our main findings from the participatory ILK assessment, the key informant interviews and consultations are highlighted below:

- The most commonly expressed information needs related to immediate gratification – for instance, information connected to livelihoods, educational opportunities and public service entitlements. This is only to be expected. It is rather unlikely that a community whose ILK needs at this level are not being addressed, will articulate higher level non-instrumental ILK needs. Non-articulation cannot be interpreted as a lack of higher level knowledge needs. The situation is somewhat similar to how, in post-independence decades, it was difficult to convince most marginalised communities about the necessity of schooling their children, since they felt that it will be of no use to them, in their given material and social context. In our field interactions, we found that more marginalised a group was, the less eager it was to talk about ILK needs, which may appear paradoxical as these groups obviously have great need for ILK. This shows that the articulation of ILK needs is strongly tied to

one's current contextual location, and recognition of concrete possibilities.

- Significantly, when presented with the possibility of a community ILK centre, most people we interacted with were able to articulate a strong need for both (1) a very broad set of ILK activities in the community, including knowledge needs, aspirational life skills, a need for engagement with traditional knowledge, ILK needs related to strengthening local democracy and community building, maintaining good libraries, developing robust community media, ICT-enablement etc., and (2) ILK services to be provided, or at least facilitated, by public agencies, treating them as public goods. These twin findings are very important for laying out the context of a possible new public intervention in the area of community ILK needs.
- Most people we interacted with had strong reservations about existing institutional efforts for addressing ILK needs. They felt that the public servants involved had a very top-down attitude, and carried out a standardised ILK delivery without taking note of the particular context. These kinds of ILK processes were simply not suited to adult ILK interactions, apart from being of little substantive value. There was also a feeling that strong vested interests get developed around public service delivery which cause deliberate withholding of information, and its use for illegitimate personal and political benefit.
- At the consultations, when this aspect of involved vested interests was probed in greater detail, we found an almost **unanimous view that for ILK activities to be effective and free from the manipulations of vested interests, they must preferably be separated from the service delivery parts of government machinery as well as from local politics.** There was a strong accent on context-specific flexibility and a strong community management role, as key factors in the success of any ILK intervention. Perhaps, the single most important issue that was repeatedly asserted as key to a successful ILK intervention was that the community level facilitator of any ILK centre *must* possess certain personal qualities, which enable committed but humble facilitation. Any proposed

centre has to be a welcoming public space, not only open to all, but which also pro-actively enables equality of participation.

These distinct imperatives and principles that should inform the design of any new initiative in the area of community ILK emerging from our interactions with community members and development workers were re-affirmed by our case studies of some large-scale existing State ILK interventions as well as some new age ICT enabled community information and service centres. These case studies and the insights therefrom are detailed in Sections 1B and 1C respectively, of the report.

A brief review of governmental ILK interventions:

We studied three large scale existing State ILK interventions, in Karnataka : the agricultural extension system, the adult education programme and rural public libraries. These are interventions with a wide scope and long history, and our examination of them was by no means exhaustive. It was tuned to the objective at hand, of identifying learnings which could help us in devising strategies to address communities' informal ILK needs, in the new context of a knowledge society.

The agricultural extension system is by far the most intensively invested in, among the State's ILK interventions. It has numerous facets involving multiple agencies, and there have been a few system overhauls as well, since this ILK area has been perceived as really important. Because of such investments and attention, there is not really any dearth of agriculture related information in the system. However, both our primary field studies and review of secondary literature reveal that very few farmers access or depend on the State's extension system for information related to agriculture and allied activities. How can this be explained? To begin with, ILK delivery is a very specialised process, quite different from service delivery. It is not just a matter of having the required information. It needs adequate attention to demand-side processes, chiefly the processes at the interface of the community with the extension system. A closer examination reveals that insufficient attention to these processes at the last mile is at the root of the failure of our current agricultural extension systems. Instead of focusing on specialisation in ILK delivery, the agricultural extension system seems to be moving in the opposite direction, of further converging it with service delivery , There has been a gradual but clear shift from an ILK focus in the agricultural

extension system, making ILK functions secondary to service delivery functions which appear more immediately gratifying and measurable.

In terms of insights from the case of the agricultural extension system for a new approach which can comprehensively address a broad range of ILK needs of the community, it is fairly evident that the supply side processes are not the main aspect that require working on. **The supply side focus has to abate in favor of a new approach stressing the demand side, or the community-end dynamics. This requires examining strategies for specialising and developing core competencies in the area of ILK delivery functions. This necessitates their separation from service delivery functions, and cultivation of a participatory knowledge culture at the community level, that can be fed into by experts, as appropriate.**

A brief study of the Adult Education Programme in Karnataka confirmed the lack of a participatory knowledge culture, and the failure to locate ILK activities in the community's felt needs, as the key problem areas. The Programme focuses on the instrumental element of basic literacy, despite the widely acknowledged fact that neo-literates relapse very frequently in the absence of the rootedness and immersion of literacy programmes within the larger ILK context of the community. Whether literacy triggers wider ILK engagements or whether ILK activities situated in people's felt needs and context build the hunger for sustaining literacy is an interesting exploration. However, the Adult Education Programme, seems to be moving towards reducing its community presence, and focusing on instrumental, and more easily measurable, goals. The insights for building a new comprehensive ILK approach from a review of the Adult Education Programme are similar to the learnings from the review of the agricultural extension system. Further, adult education needs to be recognised as a broad, self-motivated and self-driven engagement with community based ILK processes and activities. It is only through strengthening the latter that individual-oriented goals and number-driven targets of literacy and adult education can be improved. We also briefly examined the *Mahila Samkhaya* programme of the Government of India which is guided by the motto 'education for empowerment'. This programme helps marginalised women organise themselves in knowledge-activity oriented self help groups. While acknowledging literacy to be an important area of work, the programme focuses on building a larger engagement with knowledge and community processes, which thinking can help us envision an alternate strategy for adult education.

The rural public library system in Karnataka is quite extensive. There are over 5000 *Gram Panchayat* libraries in Karnataka, making it a state with one of the largest rural library networks. However the dynamism and responsiveness of these libraries to community level ILK needs to be re-examined. Field interviews and research reveal a gradual loss of any reading culture, that may have existed, to the pull of audio-visual media. Many people we spoke to, including community members, seemed to suggest that very few people in villages read books, even if literate. Our field study as well as secondary literature reviews indicate that the books available at the village library may often not be very relevant to user needs and preferences. In many cases, the book lending system itself is not functional, mainly from a fear that books may not be returned, which indicates a lack of community engagement and inadequate local community spiritedness. Our field visits also found that the dynamism, or even the bare functioning, of the village library largely depended on the dynamism of the library supervisor. This once again affirms the centrality of community-end processes, and the need to focus on getting them right.

Clearly, the village library has little relationship with the local ILK ecology and processes. Instead, it functions as a standalone institution; a mere repository of books and some other reading material. One is surprised by the lack of institutional linkages of village libraries to other large-scale ILK interventions such as the agricultural extension system and the adult education programme. Especially, in the case of the Adult Education Programme, the Continuing Education Centres were supposed to house a library, but no attempt was made to link them with the existing libraries. A comprehensive community level ILK initiative will require an across-departments, institutional (and not ad-hoc) convergence, that can link to, and service, all departments' ILK mandates.

While the State's performance in its development role has a mixed report card across the country; in the ILK space, even the concerned departments and senior officials seem to accept that the current strategies are simply not working. Hence, there is an urgent imperative to look at new approaches. **This time, the focus should be on convergence of specialised across-the-sectors information delivery functions, with stress on developing appropriate community-end processes, with close involvement of the community.** Fortunately, ICTs provide just such a convergence opportunity, with possibilities of community-end ownership and flexibilities. Some experiments are being done across the country for developing community

level convergences, and we have examined four of them for the present study.

ICTs for community level convergence – Lessons from across the country

The countrywide Government of India programme of Common Service Centres (*Nemmadi* Centres in Karnataka) is a bold and ambitious initiative for setting up 1,00,000 centres, one each for 6 villages. These centres are supposed to deliver public services as well as commercial services of various kinds. The centres are mostly owned by corporate groups and run by village entrepreneurs. We will not go into an in-depth discussion of this interesting initiative, because ILK functions are clearly not a priority here (except for a very few easily monetisable ones, like providing examination results). There is certainly a move towards converged service delivery, at the community level. However, such a convergence, especially if owned and managed by corporate players and completely based on business models, does not serve the purposes of community ILK needs. Unfortunately, expansive and unsubstantiated claims of those in charge of these programmes of being able to deliver practically everything through these centres, have blocked specialised ILK convergent initiatives. **Our field assessment of Common Service Centres reveals that they are not suited to take up most of the required ILK functions, and it is important to have a separate ICT enabled convergence of just community ILK functions.**

The *Akshaya* programme of the Government of Kerala is a Common Service Centre-like scheme, but here the main player is a public agency, the Kerala State IT Mission, and not a corporate. Also, unlike the Common Service Centres in other states, *Akshaya* centres, though run by village entrepreneurs, have a close relationship with *gram panchayats*. Such close involvement of public agencies has enabled *Akshaya* centres to fulfill some ILK functions. Even when these functions are not monetisable, the centre operator feels obliged to facilitate them because his/her centre is organically linked to, and in many ways dependent on, these public agencies. However, the focus remains on service delivery, and even this arrangement does not seem adequate to comprehensively, and in a sustained manner, address community ILK needs.

The Village Knowledge Centres of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Puduchery are a good example of community owned ILK

centres. **The agenda and work plan of the centres is set locally, by a Managing Committee consisting of community members.** The community also contributes funds for running the centres, apart from providing rent-free space and community volunteers. However, an absence of integration of the initiative with government systems means that these centres are not able to facilitate key areas of government ILK roles and functions. This leads both to sub-optimal use of these centres and ineffectiveness of this otherwise well-resourced ILK initiative. The MSSRF Centres also focus largely on apolitical information and training without taking an active role in the local governance processes. While this may have helped the centres stay above village politics and thus ensured continued support from all sections of the community, non-involvement in political work such as facilitating right to information, helping organise social audits, supporting *gram sabhas*, facilitating community-generated information etc., may reduce their relevance to the community, and the considerable community voluntary energy that could be mustered through these activities remains unaccessed.

The *Suvidha Kendras* of the Mission Convergence initiative of Delhi government started as a scheme to provide information about public services to women in marginalised communities. They have now expanded to servicing the entire community, and have also taken up functions such as identifying vulnerable households in the community. What is most interesting about this initiative is its innovative networked governance model. At the apex is Mission Convergence as a specialised agency of the state government. The *Kendras* are run by NGOs, which in turn are supervised by mother NGOs, as well as specialised district level bodies of Mission Convergence. **This model ensures that the resources and accountability that are associated with governments are obtained by the *Kendras* even while taking the benefit of NGO's superior skills in community level work.**

Our primary and secondary research provides useful guidelines for identifying the principles that should inform any new community ILK initiative, and developing the design of a possible community level ILK institution, the *Samudaya Jnana Kendra* (SJK). Part 2 of the report explores in detail the questions of what should such a new institution do, and what will it look like.

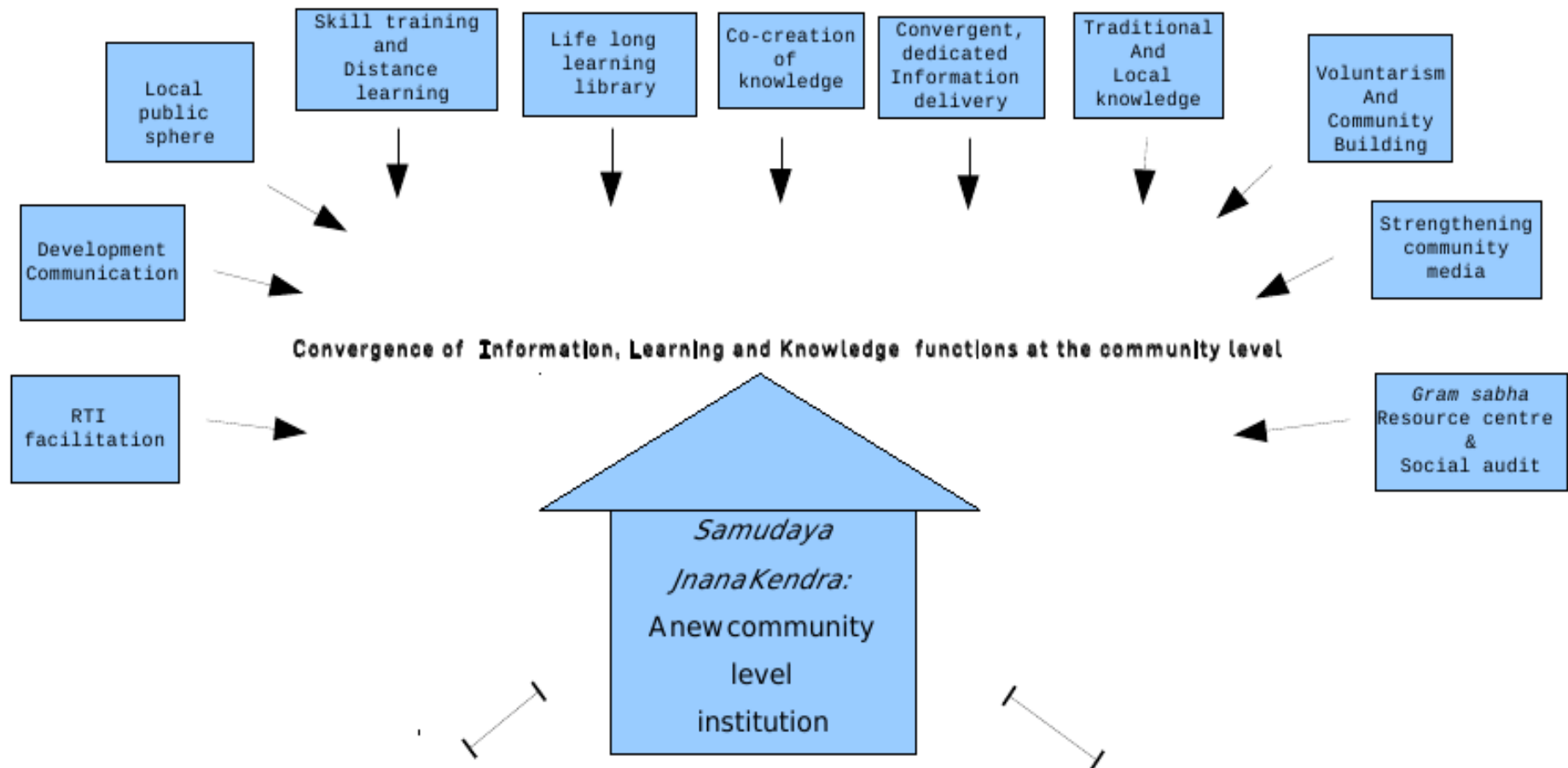
Functions of *Samudaya Jnana Kendras*

Section 2A of the report lists the various community level functions that SJKs could, and should, perform. We describe them under 14 headings, covering functions such as right to information, development communication, skill building, local media, engagement with traditional and local knowledge, facilitating co-creation of information, assisting in social audits and acting as a *gram sabha* resource centre.

The list is indeed long. However, these functions are synergistic, and best performed together, rather than separately. In fact, separately, many of these important functions may not be viable to be successfully carried out. **Being able to perform such a range of very important community functions will enhance SJK's appeal to state and non-state development actors who would be able to provide support for such an initiative, and this will also motivate community based actors to actively engage and participate.** The knowledge society context enables convergence of these ILK functions, and also their separation from service delivery related functions and core political activities. This is a prime design principle that will inform the model of SJKS that we present in Section 2B of the report. The schematic diagram on the adjoining page discusses various proposed functions of the *Samudaya Jnana Kendras*.

An Institutional model for *Samudaya Jnana Kendras*

The *Samudaya Jnana Kendras* (SJK) have to be at a place where all sections of the society, even those with less mobility, like women, can easily and regularly access it. There must therefore, eventually, be an SJK in each village. It should work on a public goods model, supported by public resources. As discussed, ILK activities are difficult to monetise successfully. For other reasons too, the SJK should be exclusively devoted to ILK activities, and avoid service delivery activities, to the extent possible. **It should have around it, the sanctity that is associated with an institution of knowledge. Borrowing a phrase used by the Karnataka Department of Public Libraries notes in one of its documents about libraries, the aim of being 'a people's university' should inform the positioning of the SJK.**



Core Principles of SJK

- a) Respect for community autonomy and self-determination of local level ILK processes
- b) Supporting a participatory knowledge culture
- c) Clear separation of service delivery and ILK functions
- d) Deepening democracy at the village level
- e) Firm commitment to inclusion of marginalised groups

Structural Elements:

- a) Community ownership and management
- b) Accountability to *gram sabha*
- c) Autonomy in local level functioning with resource support and guidance from a dedicated State agency -- *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan*
- d) Co-funded by different departments from their budget for ILK activities
- e) Involvement of NGOs in resource support and capacity building of SJK facilitators

SJKs will perform core knowledge functions, such as library functions and activities related to engagement with traditional knowledge; development information functions, like interaction with specialists and skill building; and democracy related ILK activities, like assisting social audits and being a gram sabha resource centre. Getting involved in political functions can however be tricky, possibly embroiling the SJK in the divisiveness of local politics. To prevent this, the *panchayats* should not directly supervise SJKs. Instead, **SJKs should be a body of the gram sabha, managed by a gram sabha instituted committee.** One of the *panchayat* members should represent the *panchayat* on this committee. Also, strong norms of not getting into divisive politics, (similar to the norms guiding other institutions of knowledge such as schools or universities) should be internalised in the SJK system.

As mentioned earlier, much of the failure of existing ILK initiatives can be attributed to the lack of development of a 'participatory knowledge culture'. For adult ILK interactions, especially of the informal kind, development of such a culture is a primary imperative. SJKs would, most of all, be the embodiment of such a local culture of participatory knowledge. The physical space of SJK and all its processes should be informed by this basic principle.

A state level specialised agency, *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan*, will need to be set up to ensure that the SJK system functions as required. This agency will provide resource support to SJKs and linkages with other departments and agencies to facilitate their ILK activities. But foremost, it will ensure that the principles of 'participatory knowledge culture' are promoted throughout the ILK delivery chain, from top to bottom. It is vain to expect that the village level SJK facilitator will possess all the desirable qualities that are not (to whatever extent possible) also built upstream in the ILK delivery chain. It may appear to be a formidable task, as indeed promoting true democracy is also almost an impossible challenge. However, having such a normative framework for the SJK system is something that it cannot work effectively without.

Instead of seeing SJKs as an outpost of the government's ILK machinery, the various departments and agencies involved have to see themselves as providing resource support to the 'primary institution' of SJK. The community/*gram sabha* ownership of SJKs provides the legitimate basis of such a bottom up

relationship. However, these different departments and agencies should be able to seek accountability from the SJK system for fulfilling their community end obligations, for which a proper monitoring and reporting system should be devised through the *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan*. Since, the SJK system will save these departments and agencies resources that they otherwise commit to community presence, it should be possible to fund the SJK system and the *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan* through the ILK/ communication budgets of these various 'client' agencies.

The SJK should be run by a *Jnana Sahayaki*, selected by the management committee, and be supported by one or two staff. The selection of right staff for SJKs is of central importance. They should be appointed on a three year contract, with a transparent but rigorous method of evaluation involving both community and outside actors. District-wise NGOs should be selected to provide very regular training and resource support to the SJK system. A few days of training every month should be compulsory. These, or other, NGOs should also be involved in the monitoring and assessment system. District level management committee for SJKs should involve prominent public interest actors, and it should provide guidance and supervision to the district level presence of the *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan*.

Since the extensive public library system in Karnataka comes close, as a starting point, to the desired SJK system, and also since the library function will be subsumed into the SJKs, as a starting point, **these libraries should be converted to SJKs**. However, the much broader vision and functions described for SJKs need to be kept centrally in mind. Also, to learn about how SJKs can be run most effectively, pilots should be launched in some places. Some of these pilots can be conducted by NGOs, and others directly by the proposed *Samudaya Jnana Abhiyan* (or the anchor department) to test different kinds of possibilities. **Extensive public consultations should be taken up around the SJK concept**, and the outcomes of these should be used to frame new policies, and, as appropriate, new institutional systems in the area of community ILK needs.