

Full length Research Paper

Cross-ethnic collaboration in Sri Lankan E-learning - problems and possibilities for telecentres in Rural Regions

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Sri Lanka has a tradition of being a multi-ethnic nation and in the post war Sri Lanka there is still a big social and economical gap between different population groups. English has been suggested as the official common language for Singalese, Tamils, Muslims and other Sri Lankan citizens. But at telecentres in rural areas the challenge today is more about how to provide content in local languages. The main research question in this article is to analyse and discuss which factors are important in the management of a telecentre in a poor non urban region with a multicultural and multilingual population. This article is based on observations, group discussions and interviews with different stakeholders at the Haldemulla telecentre and some other neighbour telecentres between 2008 and 2011. Findings show that the cross-ethnic collaboration between the Sinhalese owner, the Tamil manager and the telecentre visitors works well and is not the crucial problem. At the Haldemulla *Nenasala* telecentre the prime problems are more about the current lack of Internet access and how to keep the best employees when the salaries are far below the standard income for staff in the urban ICT industry. However the *Nenasala* telecentre in Haldemulla has found a model that seems to be sustainable and with or without Internet access they have their regular visitors and provide appreciated services to the local community. This telecentre has since its inauguration been one of the best performing in the island-wide Sri Lankan *Nenasala* network. But the rate off regular visitors has decreased when we compare with the situation at our first visit in 2008. Since teachers as well as teaching sessions have improved we find the lack of Internet access to be the factor that has had an impact on the number of monthly visitors. Internet is today an important source for information in poor rural areas as well as in richer metropolitan regions. Another challenge for a multicultural telecentre is how to provide high quality digital content in the various local languages.

Keywords: ICT4D, Telecentres, *Nenasala*, Tamil, Singalese, Ethnicity, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION AND AIM

Information and Communication Technology in Sri Lanka

Even if the history of computers and computer science in Sri Lanka started as early as in 1967 when the first mainframe computer was brought to the island (MP3-

Wikramanayake, 2011) access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is still not for everyone. (Gaiani et al., 2009) As in several other countries in Asia the infrastructural differences between fast expanding urban regions and rural areas can be much bigger than the difference between a Sri Lankan city and a European. In Sri Lanka ICT facilities are mainly limited to Colombo with surroundings in the Western province and major provincial towns like as Kandy, Batticaloa and Galle. In the areas that could be classified as rural, where over 75% of the population lives, the infrastructures are not at

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all as developed as they are in urban regions (Hansson et al., 2010). In the strive to bridge the *internal digital divide* the establishment of telecentres in poor rural areas could be seen as an important initiative. (Gaiani et al., 2009)

The eSri Lanka Initiative and the Nenasala Network

Different information technology based initiatives started by the Sri Lankan Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) have been linked together under the umbrella of *eSri Lanka*. The common vision should be realized through a coordinated six programme strategy: "that encompasses ICT Policy, Leadership, and Institutional Development Programme, The Information Infrastructure, Re-engineering Government, ICT Human Resource Development, ICT Investment and Private Sector Development, e-Society." (eSri Lanka, 2011)

Main objectives in the eSri Lanka initiative is to "develop *the economy of Sri Lanka, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life*". (eSri Lanka, 2011) The ICTA based initiative that we will put focus on in this article is the Nenasala telecentre network. The Nenasala Project should aim to meet the infrastructure requirements with a purpose to address the information and communication needs of rural areas all over the island through the establishment of Nenasala telecentres and provide ICT based services. (Nenasala, 2011)

Since e-learning and use of ICT facilities are rare phenomena in rural areas, a Nenasala network has been launched to provide access to ICTs for the rural regions in Sri Lanka. Main objectives of a Nenasala is to assist in:

- poverty reduction
- peace building
- social and economic development (Nenasala, 2011)

Aim

The aim of this study is to analyse and discuss which factors are crucial in the management of a telecentre in a rural multicultural and multilingual area.

Ethnic Groups, Caste and Local Languages

The Sri Lankan island has always been a place with a mixed population but colonialism brought about a new way to classify people. Dutch priests refer to "Chingala" and "Tamul" in the 18th century but it was in the censuses during the British era that a more specific division was done (Wickramasinghe, 2006). In the 1814 and 1824

censuses religion and caste were categories in Ceylon as well as in India. Later in the 20th century when nationality increased in popularity in Europe the term was dropped in Ceylon in 1911 and replaced by "race". In the 1921 census the population was divided into 10 principal races: Low Country and Kandyan Sinhalese, Ceylon and Indian Tamils, Ceylon and Indian Moors, Burghers, Eurasians, Malays and Veddhhas. (Wickramasinghe, 2006)

The Sinhalese majority

Around 72 % of the Sri Lankan population belongs to the Sinhalese and mostly Buddhist majority. The Sinhalese often divide themselves into *Low Country Dwellers* and *Kandyan Hill Country Inhabitants*. The Sinhalese are the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka and they live mainly in the Central and Southwestern parts of the island where agriculture is important and the largest caste among the Sinhalese is the farming caste.

The Sinhalese history begins with the Aryan-speaking West Bengals who vanquished the islands aboriginal inhabitants and settled permanently (Husseini, 2009). No exact numerical figures can be determined and there where Tamil mercenaries and traders as well on the island about 2000 years ago. In this early stage of Sri Lankan history these two ethnic groups lived in harmony. The main difference between the groups at that time seems to have been that Tamils spoke Tamil and adhered to Hinduism when the Sinhalese spoke Sinhala and professed Buddhism. (Siriwera, 2002) One considered root to the modern ethnic conflicts between the groups is the link between the Sri Lankan state and Buddhism. In the post-colonial Sri Lanka Sinhala nationalist propagated for a Buddhist prototype of democracy and in 1972 the new *Republican Constitution* gave the religion of the majority a special and higher status (Wickramasinghe, 2006).

Tamil speaking groups

The four main Tamil speaking groups in Sri Lanka are:

1. Indian Tamils or Tea Estate Tamils
2. Jaffna Tamils
3. Colombo Tamils
4. Tamil Speaking Muslims

Tea Estate Tamils are immigrant from Tamil Nadu in southern India. They are of low caste origin and came to Sri Lanka during the British era to work in tea estates or rubber plantations (Wickramasinghe, 2006). *Jaffna Tamils* lives in the northern regions around the city of Jaffna. *Colombo Tamils* lives in Colombo often in Southern Colombo along the Galle Road and in the



Figure 1. The Buddhist Priest in a Discussion with Telecentre Users. Photo: Peter Mozelius

Wellawatta zone. Most of them are Hindus but the majority of Muslims speak Tamil as well (MP3- Rahuman and Ramberg, 2011).

Muslims or Moors

Around 7% are Muslims and they can be divided into three ethnic groups:

1. Sri Lankan Moors (95 %)
2. Indian Muslims
3. Malays

Most of the Muslims have Tamil as their mother tongue but in the Ampara district and in Colombo a lot of the Muslims have Sinhala as their mother tongue. (MP3- Rahuman, 2011)

Christianity

Sri Lankan Christians themselves believe that the apostle Thomas actively preached the bible on the island as early as in the first century but Sri Lankan Christianity did not start until the 1500s when Portuguese missionaries were brought to the coastal regions. Especially in the *Karava* fisher caste there were a lot of people that converted. (Travelsrilanka, 2007) In Sri Lanka it is not easy to get rid of your caste origin but you can convert to another religion if you are a Buddhist or a Tamil (MP3- GirtyGamage, 2012). A conversion to Christianity can in several aspects give a higher status for someone from the fisher caste and they were also exempted from various taxes. Many people that converted to Christianity have also changed their Sinhalese or Tamil surnames to the Portuguese names of their sponsors at baptism. For people from caste the change of name could hide their

origins (Wickramasinghe, 2006). Still the coastal fisher regions like Negombo are the areas with the most Christians and the majority of them are Catholics. Of the total population around 8% are Christians.

Burghers

The word *Burgher* is of Dutch origin and does not have any connotations related to hamburgers. Most of the early Burgers had Portuguese or Dutch ancestors that intermarried with the Tamil and Sinhalese communities. The Dutch Burgher community emerged from lower-ranking military recruits that settled down and married local women (Wickramasinghe, 2006). A lot of Burghers have later migrated to Australia, Europe and other parts of the world. A Burgher was originally a person of European and local descent but the word Burgher nowadays refers loosely to any Sri Lankan citizen of mixed origin. (Travelsrilanka, 2007)

Annialato or Veddhas

The aboriginal inhabitants on the Sri Lankan island call themselves Annialato but they are more known under the rather disparagingly Sinhala term *Veddha* which translated to English would be something like *primitive people*. Only a few Annialato communities are left in the Southeastern and Northwestern forests. Veddhas were originally hunter-gatherers hunting with bows and arrows, but also with a long tradition of gathering wild plants and honey. Later many Veddha persons settled down as farmers with a slash and burn cultivation.

The Veddha languages, are of unknown origins. Phonologically they can be distinguished by the high

frequencies of languages' C and J sounds. (Lakshman, 2011) More than other indigenous group in Sri Lanka the Veddhas have preserved a traditional live style where computers and mobile phones mainly are seen as treats to the community's traditional cultural values (MP3-VeddhaChief, Dec 2011). In early 2010 a telecentre was established in the Veddha village in Dambana but there are very few visitors and the equipment in the Nenasala building is mostly used for digitalizing Veddha artefacts (MP3-VeddhaTeacherAndTelecentreOperator, Dec 2011).

Caste

Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Japan, have a long tradition of caste systems and they are all on the UNICEF list for discrimination based on caste. Even in developed countries like Japan, caste-specific values are still defining gender roles. Privilege is to the eldest sons in the families and women are supposed support the smooth running of families and society. (Zhou N., and Teasdale, 2004) In the beginning of the 20th century Sri Lanka had a cast system that was cross-ethnic and rigid. It was caste and not ethnicity that divided the society, with the Pannas, Hinnas and Demalagattaras at the very bottom. At the top of the social ladder, above the caste groups were Englishmen and Burghers. As late as in the 1960s a political career was seen as impossible for people from low-castes. Later the election of Ranasinghe Premadasa as Sri Lanka's president in 1988 elections has been compared to the election of Barack Obama 2008 in the United States. (The Island, 25/02/2011)

Currently, in the 21st century, ethnicity has become more decisive than caste and amongst the Sinhalese majority in urban areas where caste issues are something that mostly belongs to the private sphere. In rural areas the caste systems still have influences in several areas. For Tamil groups the caste division has significance and during the civil war attacks on Sinhalese targets were often planned by high-caste LTTE leaders and later executed by low-caste persons (Kaarthikeyan and Radhavinod, 2004). Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Japan, have a long tradition of caste systems and they are all on the UNICEF list for discrimination based on caste. Even in developed countries like Japan, caste-specific values are still defining gender roles. Privilege is to the eldest sons in the families and women are supposed support the smooth running of families and society. (Zhou N., and Teasdale, 2004) In the beginning of the 20th century Sri Lanka had a cast system that was cross-ethnic and rigid.

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The Nenasala Network and the Haldemmulla Nenasala Telecentre

The services and support that should be provided by the Nenasalas should be designed to guarantee a long-term sustainability. (Nenasala, 2011) Some initial support and hardware is provided by ICTA but how a telecentre more in detail should be organized and managed have a lot of variations. The initial hardware equipment provided by ICTA consists of 2-4 computers 1 printer and often Internet access via satellite (Meegamma et al, 2010). There is also a financial funding for the inception phase with good support during the first years but then phasing out and after 5 years the funding is over and the telecentre has to be sustainable. (MP3-Koslanda_Telecentre_Owner_Manager And Teacher, 2011).

To build on existing local organizations is a tradition for telecentres in Sri Lanka and has been tried before the launch of the Nenasala network. (MP3-Wijayawardhana, 2008) In the Sri Lankan telecentre network the Sinhalese term *Nenasala* is used. Translated to English the word would mean something like *center for knowledge* (Meegamma et al., 2010). Telecentres are by design targeted to bridge the internal digital divide and support

inclusion and equal rights. But the lack of this impact has often been the overarching theme in contemporary discussions on the use of ICT in development. Currently the 4 different main types of Nenasala telecentres are:

1. Rural Knowledge Centres
2. e-Libraries
3. Distance and e-Learning centres
4. Tsunami camp computer kiosks (Nenasala, 2011)

When it comes to ownership there are also different models and 3 of them are:

- The Temple model
- The Family model
- The Entrepreneur model (Gaiani et al., 2009)

Each model has pros and cons and a particular model could favor or disfavor some groups in the community and exclude others (MP3-Wijayawardhana, 2008). Specific support needs to be initiated for under privileged groups as poor, old, women and disabled. In a nation-wide perspective it is effective to use different organizational models in order to maximize local resources. One model does not fit all geographical, economical and cultural variations. (Gaiani et al, 2009)

Considering ownership and organization the Haldemmulla Nenasala belongs to the *Temple model* and for that reason is more of a type 3 Nenasala than a type 1 *Rural Knowledge Centre*. The concept of a type 1 Nenasala includes ideas of an Entrepreneurial or Commercial Model which would be against the rules of a Buddhist Temple. The telecentre in Haldemmulla has standard equipment but currently (February 2011) no Internet connection. What makes the Nenasala special is the fact that the manager is Tamil and a Hindu running the activities in a Buddhist Temple. This cross-ethnic collaboration started during the civil war when the Singalese Buddhists were on one side and Tamil Hindus on the other.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on observations and interviews with different stakeholders made during 2 visits to the Haldemmulla telecentre in 2008 and 2011. Authors have since many years had a frequent email correspondence with the telecentre manager where e-learning and telecentre management has been discussed. Except for the more formal interviews the authors have participated in informal lunch and dinner discussions and Niranjana Megammaana has during 2007 to 2012 assisted the telecentre with hardware and software maintenance. During 2007 – 2012 the authors have visited about 20 telecentres and other rural computer based learning centres. The introduction of the article is built on findings

from a literature study where research papers and books on Sri Lankan history have been combined with newspaper articles and internet resources.

Observations

During the visits to the Haldemmulla Nenasala and other telecentres in Sri Lankan rural areas (Gaiani et al., 2009) (Mozelius and Megammaana, 2011) we have sometimes participated in workshops and teaching sessions and sometimes mostly been passive observers. Authors have also examined the installed programs and discussed the software with telecentre visitors.

Interviews

One definition of interview is that it could be seen as a meaningful discussion between two or more people (Kahn and Cannell, 1957). There are different kind of interviews that can help you to collect purposeful information for your specific research topic. The classification of different interviews is ranged from strictly formalized interviews with questionnaires to more informal and unstructured conversations. Interviews in this study should be classified as semi-structured in-depth interviews and unstructured conversations. (Scribd Inc, 2010).

Interviews conducted in the Singalese language are sometimes translated by Niranjana Megammaana (mother tongue) and sometimes by Kalelur Rahuman. Interviews in the Tamil language are translated by Kalelur Rahuman (mother tongue). At the Haldemmulla telecentre we have interviewed different stakeholders like the owner, the operator, teachers and various kinds of visitors. We have also been in touch with central administrators at the Sri Lankan ICT Agency (ICTA). Some of the interviews were recorded can be found at the end of the reference list.

Recorded Interviews in MP3-format

Academic research has a tradition of in-depth interviews as a tool for gathering data on people's opinion and the analysis of more abstract and complex phenomena. Another tradition is to capture the conversations by taking notes. In modern journalism interviews are since way back frequently recorded as audio files. However, the academic default standard is still mainly written text and shorthand. Improvements in digital audio technology could open up new possibilities of data gathering, storage, analysis and reuse. (Mozelius, and Hansson,

2009).

Interviews listed at the end of this article can be found and downloaded at <http://people.dsv.su.se/~mozelius/thesis/interviews/>.

The names of the files are the same as they are given in the separate section for “Recorded interviews in MP3-format” at the end of this article. We have chosen the mp3-format since it is an open standard that can be played on most of the existing computer platforms.

LITERATURE STUDY

The history of ICT in Sri Lanka is a young phenomenon and research papers and literature had to be completed with information from the web and from Sri Lankan newspapers.

FINDINGS

Currently there are 607 working telecentres connected to the Nenasala network (Nenasala Project, 2011), but grassroots as well as the ICTA staff estimates that only 50 % of them could be classified as sustainable and in a good condition. To run a telecentre in a rural area like Haldemulla is not easy. Fees for courses, workshops, and teaching sessions are low and teachers as well as the manager are underpaid (MP3-Haldemulla_Telecentre_Manager, 2011). The telecentre is located in a poor tea estate area in central Sri Lanka where people's salaries are far lower than in the urban regions of Sri Lanka. With a management based on the *Temple model* no commercial activities are allowed since that would be against the Buddhist rule of keeping business outside the temple. A Nenasala with *The Family model* or the *The Entrepreneur model* can be run as a multi-purpose telecentre where selling CDs, DVDs and mobile phone cards can be an important complement.

Indian Tamils or the Tea Estate Tamils in this area of Sri Lanka have hardly ever been involved in the civil war and also during the final cruel phase of the war there were no ethnical tensions in this region. The fact that the owner is a Singalese Buddhist Priest and the manager a Tamil has never created any serious conflicts in Haldemulla. They do not always agree on everything but that has never been the situation at any Nenasala where the owner and the manager is not the same person. To have the telecentre located in a Buddhist Temple works here in Haldemulla but has not always been successful. In some other cases the Buddhist communion have interfered too much in the activities and used the telecentre for their own purposes (MP3-

Wijayawardhana, 2008).

The manager is also the main teacher and teaches in the language that is most suitable for the group of participants. People visiting the telecentre is a 50 – 50 mix of Singalese and Tamils. Most courses are given in both local languages and the staff has also relatively good English skills. Teaching sessions are often conducted in a multilingual manner. The number of participants is now (2011) lower than when we visited Haldemulla in 2008 (MP3-Haldemulla_Telecentre_Manager, 2011). The main reason is that the Nenasala does not have Internet access anymore and that it is hard to find a subscription with good quality that is not too costly. Measurements done by the Sri Lankan Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (TRCSL) shows that transmission values could go down to 100 Kb/s in rural regions. (Daily News, 03/03/2011) At the neighbor Nenasala in Koslanda a broadband fiber connection is available at an affordable cost (Koslanda_Telecentre_Owner_ManagerAndTeacher, 2011) and the telecentre there has been able to extend their services (Mozelius and Megammaana, 2011). To retrieve information from the Internet is an appreciated service that will increase the number of visitors in a region where Internet access is rare. Without an Internet connection the Haldemulla telecentre tries to extend and improve their training in basic computer and software skills. Students that have passed O- and A-level exams but do not have any computer skills is a group that often want to participate in more advanced and longer courses (MP3-Haldemulla_Telecentre_OLevelBoyStudent, 2011). In this group of students that have completed secondary school IT skills can give career opportunities (MP3-Haldemulla_Telecentre_AlevelGirlStudent, 2011). Computers and other equipment are in a good condition and the visitors we met seem to be satisfied with the telecentre's services and the way the staff is teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

Even if there exist economical problems and the staff is underpaid we would like to categorize the Haldemulla telecentre as sustainable and well organized. The telecentre has existed for 6 years and bears its own costs and expenses by revenues from the courses and workshops that are conducted. Lack of Internet access is the main problem and a crucial factor for the financial situation as well as for a future extension of the activities at the telecentre. During the recent period without any Internet connection the number of visitors has decreased and the opportunity of sharing content with other educational organizations has disappeared.

For a telecentre located in a remote area Internet is

also a tool for updating software and participation in online discussions. An interesting idea discussed at the telecentre is the possibility of sharing digital content in Tamil with colleagues in Tamil Nadu in Southern India. As in many other tea estate areas there is a tradition of tolerance and cross-ethnic collaboration. The tea estate Tamils that have immigrated from India during the British era to work in the tea industry has seldom been involved in the Sri Lankan Civil War. Cross-ethnic collaboration is an important part of the telecentre management in Haldemulla and providing services to Tamil as well as to Sinhalese people could rather be seen as a condition for a Nenasala to survive in this area.

Future Work

This telecentre is located in the Sri Lankan central Hill Country where the population is a mix between Singalese and Tea Estate Tamils. What would be interesting is to study the situation for *Jaffna Tamils* living in the northern regions and their collaboration with local Singalese groups.

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