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The New York Times
ON THE WEB

December 9, 2001

Simputer

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The most significant innovation in computer technology in 2001 was not Apple's gleaming titanium PowerBook G4 or Microsoft's Windows XP. It was the Simputer, a Net-linked, radically simple portable computer, intended to bring the computer revolution to the third world. The Simputer, officially unveiled last April and intended for mass production in India next March, is a small hand-held device designed for the rough conditions of rural India. It operates – without a keyboard – through touch, sound and simple visual icons. It translates English-language Web sites into local Indian languages, reading the content aloud to illiterate users.

The Simputer is expected to cost 9,000 rupees, or about $190; it is meant to be owned not by individual users but by village cooperatives. Each user carries a simple, tough, very cheap ''smart card,'' which will hold all his or her settings and data. No training is required; there are no upgrades, no broadband and no planned obsolescence. It runs on batteries.

This is computing as it would have looked if Gandhi had invented it, then used Steve Jobs for his ad campaign. India has already largely succeeded in localizing cinema, satellite communications, cable television and radio. The Simputer is meant to do the same for the Internet.

Americans own very American computers, perfectly suited for American social and economic conditions. American machines are much like American cars: bloated, shiny and specially designed and built to serve the institutional and commercial interests of American companies. Computation, however, is just a technology. In the hands of the planet's majority populations, it may look a lot different.