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A Simple Plan

From Bangalore comes a spirited attempt to bring computers to the gigabyte-less masses

BY PHIL ZABRISKIE



Namas Bhojani for TIME.

Schoolboy Ravi Prasad, 16, examines a microcomputer, known as a Simputer, as friends look on.

The 16-year-old has been told that he is holding a computer. He looks skeptical. His school in Madavara, a dusty farming village outside Bangalore, has a computer: a big one, with a keyboard, a wide screen and all kinds of wires. This has none of that. Instead, it's the size of a datebook and has earphones and some kind of blunt writing utensil. "Why is it so small?" he asks. "This is a computer?"

Yes and no. It's not a PC, but rather a microcomputer, a "Simple Inexpensive Mobile Computer." In short, a Simputer. It's the latest attempt to reach a kind of techno-humanist grail: a computer priced and designed for the billions of people who have yet to set foot in the wired wards of the Global Village. A computer, say its creators, for the masses. And if you're talking masses, there is no better place to start than India, a country of more than 1 billion people and fewer than 5 million computers.

The Simputer is the result of more than two years of R. and D. conducted and funded by Simputer Trust, a hydra-headed company led by the Bangalore Seven—four Indian Institute of Science professors and three engineers from Encore, an Indian software company. In 1998, New Delhi recruited them to explore ways of bridging the digital divide. Importing hardware would be too expensive, they figured, and existing operating systems too complex, especially for the illiterate. "Can we think beyond the PC?" Vinay Deshpande, Encore ceo, asked the team.

They could, and they did, envisioning a new device, a cheap, mobile, mass-

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Ravi prasad studies the small machine in his hands. Friends peer over his shoulder, while several young children scramble for a good view.

produced computer that even illiterate farmers and poorly educated small businessmen could use. But it would have to be scalable and Internet-ready and therefore suitable for banks, local governments, schools and relief agencies.

Then they decided to build it, throwing the equivalent of \$10 million (in funds and hardware) into the project, and emerging with a blueprint for a machine with an Intel chip, 32 MB of ram and 16 MB of flash memory. Running the free Linux operating system, it features a picture-based touch-sensitive screen, multilingual text-to-speech capabilities and a writing program that differs enough from the Xerox-patented version used on Palm Pilots to skirt costly licensing fees. It allows e-mail and Net access, provided there is a working telephone line. All this, with smart card compatibility, powered by three AAA batteries and retailing, ideally, for the (relatively) low, low price of \$200.

What Ravi clutches in his hands is a prototype, one of four currently in beta testing. Field tests begin April 25 (Ravi's getting a preview). The next step, however, is the real trial: raising enough money and manufacturer interest to get the Simputer onto store shelves. "We need a new breed of social entrepreneur to address the technology needs of the world's underprivileged," said the late Dewang Mehta, a visionary who headed India's software trade body, nasscom, until his sudden death in mid-April. The Bangalore Seven has formed a for-profit spin-off, picoPeta, to manage the Simputer's commercial birth. Deshpande gave a spirited presentation at last year's World Economic Summit in Davos. But drumming up actual investment on the downside of a boom is a tough task, especially with a business plan that allows for easy access to the Simputer design (for a nominal fee) and an open-code software-sharing initiative. The theory is that the arrangement will promote widespread use and higher revenues from licensing. Noble, but perhaps naive. "The venture capitalists simply freeze when they hear the word 'free,'" says Professor V. Vinay, one of the founders. "Some ask the standard VC question: 'What vertical market are you addressing?'" In other words, who will you be selling this to? Only politeness stops Vinay from telling them what a stupid question that is.

The Simputer is a still-awkward (though highly anticipated) child of Indian humanism and technology. Its future depends on how well it is nurtured, by investment, by improvement, by acceptance. But for the moment it is one of the best tools the developing world has to get wired. Dr. Muhammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, gushes that the Simputer "will be an Aladdin's Lamp in the hands of the poor." Kenneth Keniston, director of projects in science, technology and society at M.I.T., believes the Simputer "should be more than adequate to meet any foreseeable computing, Internet or Web need in any developing nation within the next five or more years." It may be shrouded in optimism, but never has mass adequacy sounded so good.

Reported by Saritha Rai/Bangalore

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