

**Patterns of Visitation:  
Site Visits and Evaluation in Developing Areas**

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*Project evaluation based on site visits has been an important element of donor and NGO practice throughout the modern development era. One or more individuals travel to project locations, observing and reporting on site activities, often with an evaluative purpose. While the management of impressions during site visits is a well-known phenomenon, information on the degree to which it affects the witnessing process is lacking. This study compares two kinds of qualitative observations made during site visits of a project involving computer centres in south India; visits that differ in terms of the degree to which project representatives were aware in advance. Results show that advance notice is associated with major differences in peopling and processing, that is, in terms of on-site personnel and visible activities. While we do not recommend disuse of site visits as a means of understanding and evaluating projects, we conclude that their serious limitations are not easily overcome.*

[Keywords: agency; ICTs; Kerala; site visits; tele-centres]

In the context of development works, project evaluation has been an important element of donor and NGO practice throughout the modern era. Typically, any project evaluation seeks information for taking decisions related to the performance of the project. In other words, it is a performance audit that determines outcome and impact vis-à-vis the goals and objectives of the developmental project under scrutiny (Cracknell 2000; Roy 2002). Hence, a project evaluation normally looks closely into the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, validity of design, unanticipated effect, alternative strategies, causality, and sustainability of the project (Carlsoon *et al.* 1994; Dale 1998; Roy 2002).

In the field of international economic and social development, the site visit is ubiquitous in project evaluations. It is one of the most significant practices in donor–NGO relations to have emerged during the past several decades. However, the scholarly study of site visits is in its infancy. Compared with case studies and surveys, site visits are often utilised, but their processes and consequences are rarely studied. This is unfortunate, because site visit has become an important assessment tool – both for granting funds and for designing projects – in the development arsenal. F. Lawrenz *et al.* have shown that site visits are a primary tool for evaluation; but, unlike case studies or surveys, there is ‘little discussion in the evaluation community about the theoretical bases (methodologies) or practices (methods) related to site visits’ (2003: 341).

In the domain of site visits, the extensive literature review by Lawrenz *et al.* (*ibid.*) reveals that few have examined the epistemology or methodology of site visits, or addressed even the most basic practical questions of what kind of personnel to involve, how to implement, or how to use the information collected. Still less has systematic research addressed the question: what kind of knowledge and understanding do site visits actually produce? This paper takes a small step in that direction through a conceptual distinction between types of visitation and an examination of different characterisations of a computer project using two types of site visit.

After presenting the distinction between guided and unguided visitation, we summarise our theoretical approach. This approach combines Erving Goffman’s ‘impression management’ (1959, 1967) with a reagency perspective on initiatives and projects that channel funds to remote locations. Next, we describe the background for the particular case at issue and the twofold methodology of the study, before presenting results from the two modes of site visits. Finally, we compare guided and unguided visitation and discuss the implications of their selection for future development programmes.

Site visits vary along a number of dimensions, including their duration, the number of visitors, and the relationship between visitors and hosts. Lawrenz *et al.* have addressed many of the intellectual issues raised by the social practice of site visits. They propose the following definition of an *evaluative* site visit: persons with specific expertise and preparation go to a site for a limited period of time and gather information about an evaluation object either through their own experience or through the reported experiences of others in order to prepare testimony addressing the purpose of the site visit (Lawrenz *et al.* 2003: 341).

To focus on *evaluative* site visits is either to accept that, at least in a limited sense, all visitations are evaluative, or to differentiate evaluative

from non-evaluative visitations. There is one advantage to the latter approach: visits that do not result in reports with implications for resource transfers may be viewed as a distinctive object for analysis. However, there are many possible typologies of site visits. Lawrenz *et al.* focus on evaluative site visits because the resultant evaluation is the primary object of concern to both visitors and their hosts in most cases.

For research purposes, we simplify the definition of site visit to a relatively brief event in which one or more individuals travel to locations where resources from elsewhere may be or have been channelled towards a distinctive purpose, observing and reporting on site activities. This characterisation includes visitations where the object is *not* to testify to an organisation that provides or legitimates resources, but to observe a project in order to acquire and disseminate knowledge. An example would be a demonstration project that receives visitors seeking to replicate its practices. To the degree that visitors are impressed, and seek to implement similar projects or aspects of projects, a positive evaluation is implied, just as a decision not to follow up constitutes a negative (or mixed) evaluation – even though the actions of the visitors have no direct bearing on funding of the host project.

Our argument is that the evaluation product (recommendation for funding or dissemination) does not influence the process and personnel observed as much as the *awareness of project management prior to the visit*. To the extent that the structure of the visitation process impacts the kinds of knowledge and understanding that results from reportage, advance awareness is a key factor that determines the preparation of the site and the visibility of conditions available to visitors. In site visits, information is gathered either through direct or reported experience. It is this information that is interpreted and processed for developing an account, or story of what is happening at the project.

We use the terms ‘visitors’ and ‘guests’ interchangeably to refer to the individuals who travel to the project site for informational purposes. ‘Hosts’ are those project representatives (managers or staff) who interact with Guests during the limited course of the visit itself. ‘Participants’ are the intermediaries: clients, indigenous peoples: whoever is served or affected by the project, but not a direct employee or volunteer. The central concept distinguishing one type of visitation from another is ‘guidance’ or ‘assistance’: the extent to which visitation is known and incorporated into the actions of project managers or their on-site representatives. In the case of ‘guided visitation’ (alternatively, ‘assisted visitation’), those in charge of a development project are aware of the arrival of visitors in advance of the visit. Correspondingly, they have an opportunity to prepare and calculate the effects of activities and

presentations on the visiting body. In the case of ‘unguided visitation,’ those in charge of a project are unaware of the event prior to its occurrence, with minimal or no opportunity to prepare and calculate.<sup>1</sup> This paper is a qualitative exploration of the differences between these types of site visit. We find that guided and unguided visitations differ in terms of ‘peopling and processing’: the former generates much higher numbers of observable social actors and significantly greater activities than the latter.

The difference between guided and unguided visitation is reasonably intuitive (produced by advance knowledge of the event by project representatives), but requires two theoretical elements for a complete treatment of the phenomenon. First, it requires an account of the behaviour of project representatives and the visibility conditions produced during the site visit. Second, it requires an account of institutional resource flows and their conditions of accountability. That is, it requires an account not just of the micro-sociology of interaction, but the relationships between Hosts and Guests more generally. We employ an ‘impression management’ framework to understand the conditions under which actors and events are rendered observable, and a reagency perspective to describe the ways in which initiatives are promoted and resources travel (Shrum 2005).

The immediate social situation in which a site visit takes place requires a micro-sociological analysis of interaction. Our perspective on the consequences of that knowledge is taken from a classical argument in symbolic interactionism pioneered by Goffman (1959, 1961). Goffman examined the ways in which people understand and seek to influence the perceptions of others through the process of ‘impression management’. As social beings, individuals who come into proximity with one another continually look for symbolic indicators of identity and status. They examine and interpret informational cues provided by both the setting and the interaction itself, as if they are actors on a stage using a set, props, and costumes as well as behaviours designed to create certain effects on an audience. An ‘impression’ given, or given off, is created by both verbal and non-verbal information, accompanied by an interpretation – usually provided by convention or through a script of sorts – through the eyes of co-participants. Since each individual is both actor and audience in the drama,<sup>2</sup> the process of information, interpretation, response, and the acquisition of new information is both continuous and mutual. Where the number of participants increases from a dyadic encounter to the site visits analyzed here, opportunities emerge for multiple stagings. We can speak of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ behaviour, such as we observe in a restaurant where the waiters engage

in different behaviours and conversation depending on whether they are in the kitchen with cooks or in the dining room with customers.

Visitation is an event occurring within a well-defined time-frame that provides a strategic opportunity to examine the process of impression management. With guided visitation, the date and time of the visit are known in advance by project representatives, who themselves make judgments about the status, the motivations, and the opportunities and risks associated with visitors. The evaluation component of site visits occurs just as much on the side of the hosts as the visitors. How important are the site visitors? To what extent is it worthwhile to change our routine? Does this merit the presence of the higher administrators on the project? Are there costs involved if the visitors are not satisfied with what they see? Will this be a chance to maintain or increase resources for the project? Will there be any publicity attached to the visit, perhaps even members of the press? The answers to these questions influence the efforts at managing the impressions received by the visitors. Our aim in this paper is to speak of the ways in which the observability of site conditions is altered as a result.

While the concept of impression management is crucial to the analysis of visitation, the Goffmanian framework by itself tells us little about the conditions under which institutional forces come into play, nor does it adequately address the dynamics of resources and motivations that characterise site visits more generally. The idea of ‘development’ has been the subject of penetrating debates primarily at the conceptual and theoretical fronts (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1994; Sen 1999; Mann 2003; UNO 2005). Typically, these focus on *how to improve* the development process rather than *what to analyze* in the context of projects within the institutional framework of organisations that undertake social and economic change, as in the ‘ICT4D’ (Information and Communications Technology for Development) (Arunachalam 2002, Eggleston *et al.* 2002, Keniston 2002, Prahalad 2004). Another approach based on the concept of ‘reagency’ analyzes cross-national resource transfers, not as development but as a redirection of action involving a contingent relationship between identities (Shrum 2005). Based on the Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische’s concept of agency (1998), identity and place are the focus of the analysis, where Guests come from afar – as in a site visit – and Hosts accommodate in order to produce and maintain resources at remote sites.

Reagency analysis views Guest/Host interactions as central, and serves as an important analytic tool for an account of the visitation process. Reagency adds the concept of resource management to the concept of impression management. As it stands, however, the pre-

occupation with cross-national resource transfers must be broadened to include internal programmes such as the computer centres analyzed here. These are funded and promoted as national development schemes, for instance, to bring the benefits of new information and communications technology (ICT) to the poor. We extend reagency to include programmes, particularly in larger countries such as India, China, and Brazil that target social problems and less-advantaged sectors.<sup>3</sup> The key elements of reagency are (a) initiatives set in motion by state or non-governmental agencies that trigger long chains of interactions (competition for funding; development of specialised groups of professionals); (b) organisational identities that set expectations for behaviour, as well as the constraints and opportunities for resources; and (c) places (locations in physical space) where resource generation, decision-making to channel funds, and action are often far removed from one another. Programmatic resources are transformed and repackaged on location and by *reagents*<sup>4</sup> who have the capacity to instigate and participate in reactions, but not to control them. The lack of control may create issues of accountability, but less frequently than one might suspect, since it is in the joint interest of providers and receivers of resources to have successful projects, and excessive scrutiny frequently provides a mixed or negative picture.

This 'remove,' the social and physical distance between the location and destination of resources, creates the necessity for site visits. The promise and prospects of electronic data collection, traditional surveys, and accounts from afar have not altered the importance of distance for social interaction (Olson and Olson 2000) that brings funding officers to sites, yields visits from interested parties who *want to see with their own eyes*, and creates invitations to politicians and even celebrities who are sought to provide project legitimation and visibility. In the next two sections, we introduce our subject, a highly acclaimed state-funded computer project, and outline our methodology of guided and unguided visits.

## Background

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is still an elitist, urban phenomenon in India. Its impact on the masses is yet to be widely felt. However, a wide range of innovative experiments is currently underway as governments and service providers increasingly deploy ICT tools to reach the rural poor. Innovations range from community networks that deliver e-governance and e-commerce to public ICT kiosks

offering low-cost Internet access, and from popular communication and computing devices to ICT-enabled healthcare and education.

K. Kuriyan and J. Brussel (2007) have observed that rural kiosk projects drew on different conceptions of development and are implemented with different strategies, ownership models, and project goals. Designed as a public-private sector collaboration, such projects propose to achieve the twin goals of social development through increased access to computers for rural people and financial viability through market-driven entrepreneurship. While reviewing some of the widely acclaimed successful projects for ICT for development (ICT 4D) in India, they argue that the strategy employed is geared to benefiting both the rural poor and the private entrepreneurs. Initiatives in ICT contain an inherent tension between having the goals at the macro level (within the state) and micro level (with entrepreneurs and potential consumers). In their study of one ICT project in Kerala, Kuriyan *et al.* (2006) have argued that its implementation should not be regarded as a technical process of delivering services to the poor, but a highly political process that involves checks and balances and prioritisation of goals to maintain sustainability.

Our study examined Vinimaya,<sup>5</sup> a pioneering ICT dissemination initiative based on an entrepreneurship model in which an agency of government provides assistance to private entrepreneurs to run computer kiosks. It emerged as a grass-roots effort, despite the sponsorship of the agency, and was initiated by demands from local villages. Conceived initially as a modest computer literacy drive covering one district, the programme subsequently evolved into a mass dissemination project aimed at universalising computer access and skill development in the State. The programme had two primary elements: a government subsidised effort to provide e-literacy training for one member of each household, and an ongoing partnership with local entrepreneurs to provide public access to ICTs, internet connectivity, and e-services through the Vinimaya kiosks. It was envisioned as a rural kiosk project to 'bridge the digital divide' by providing access to communication in rural areas as well as to offer 'e-governance' services such as the payment of bills and access to official documentation such as birth and death certificates.

The lead for Vinimaya project came from one particular district. The idea was that it would be a pilot project the government would eventually 'roll out' to the other districts of the state. The project started with an e-literacy phase, highly subsidised by the state, with the goal of training one member from each household in a basic e-literacy course. In this phase the panchayat contributed eighty rupees per trainee and the clients

had to pay forty rupees, although poor were exempted from this requirement. The e-literacy module contained fifteen hours of content with ten sessions of one-and-a-half hours each. The entrepreneurs tried to select the decision maker in every household for this basic computer-training programme that the project offered in its first phase. One Vinimaya centre is expected to cover 1,500–2,000 families on an average.

The project was designed to establish a wide network of public ICT kiosks across the state as self-employment ventures. Typically, each Vinimaya kiosk would have 5–10 computers with Internet access and at least one trained person to man the centre. Later, the project was extended to a number of other districts with the addition of 2,500 centres and several sub-centres (computers are kept in a house or somewhere there is a temporary need). The process of expansion is headed by the government, which selects and trains entrepreneurs, initiates the e-literacy phase, and provides the connectivity infrastructure. All of these activities are intended to support the social development of the community and the economic viability of the centres themselves.

### **Method**

We compare the two different modes of visitation, namely, guided and unguided. We undertook guided visitation in one of the early districts where the lessons of the Vinimaya pilot project were put into action. Our visitation involved all the process of a typical field visit. Prior to the visit, it was officially discussed with the agency coordinator and intimated to the district project office. The objective of the guided visit was to examine the way in which Vinimaya centres present themselves, their self-described manner of operation and to review the accounts given by proprietors regarding what is happening on site on any given day. The visit was fully videotaped and later transcribed.

The guided visitation was followed by unannounced observational visits in the computer centres of two districts by two volunteers who were from these districts. Two young women spent two months of observation in Vinimaya centres with the seemingly simple task of ‘taking note of what is seen while there’, for example, how many people are there and what are they doing? This is a classic technique of non-participant observation with the strict protocol of ‘talk minimum, observe maximum’. The minimum period of observation in each location was fixed at four hours so as to allow for the possibility of two training periods, since one module consisted of one-and-a-half hours of training.

The two volunteers visited forty Vinimaya centres each in two selected districts.

While the volunteers spent their observational hours in the café, they were supposed to observe ‘who was there, for how long, and what they did’. They reported all that they observed rather than seeking to collect any information about the centre through questioning others. More specifically, they had to take note of the following details: (a) location of the centre – including the name boards, registration number, sign boards and accessibility; (b) physical structure and appearance of the centre with a description of the office, the facilities available including Internet and other business/activity like photostat, fax, DTP (Desk Top Publishing), and computer accessory sales that were going on there; (c) number of persons (owner/tutors/clients) and their activities; (d) the behaviour of persons in charge of the café towards volunteers; (e) profile of the tutors and owner, including their conversation details, if any; (f) profile and activities of the clients, including the time of their arrival and departure and interactions with the tutors; (g) the register book/complaint book etc. and the kind of information they provide; and (h) profile of the sub-centres. The volunteers submitted a detailed report of their visits that contained their observations, comments, and inferences. In the next section, we describe the experience of guided visitation, followed by an analysis of unguided visitation.

## **Results**

### **Guided Visitation**

As we reached the front of the District Project Office in District A, our video camera zoomed on the motto of the Vinimaya project in big letters that read ‘Towards Opportunities without Frontiers’. The board also carried the words of a popular cine artist in the state, as the brand ambassador of the project urging the citizens to seize myriads of opportunities in Vinimaya. The District Project was, in fact, waiting for our arrival since there was advance intimation about our visit from the state project office. After the introductory rubrics of a cordial welcome and hospitality, which are generally associated with a formal site visitation, we were soon brought around a table for formal interaction with the District Project Coordinator and Assistant Project Coordinator. At this point, to our sheer surprise, we noticed the arrival of local print and broadcast media personnel with equipment to cover the news of our arrival and activities.

Officers portrayed Vinimaya as a project that seeks to bridge the digital divide in the state. They reiterated that kiosks were conceived as multi-purpose community technology centres that are accessible to all categories of people, particularly those in rural areas. They stressed the aspect of private-public partnership that was integral to the project. They described the careful process in the selection of the entrepreneurs and the involvement of the local bodies in the project, the financial support systems, the monitoring, supervision and steering mechanisms, the nature, type and modality of the programmes envisaged in the next phase of the project, and the future plans. In short, the interaction with the district administration provided us with a very positive picture of the project elaborating its concept, approach, history, programmes, and mode of operations of the project. From past experience in various states and countries, this phase of interaction is quite similar to introductions in almost all cases except where the visitors are making a repeat visit to the project.

Immediately after this phase of discourse, we moved on to Vinimaya kiosks for short visits in a vehicle especially arranged by the Host with the accompaniment of the District Project Coordinator. Each visit to a new centre was designed to be (a) brief, (b) comprised of the items such as tea upon the arrival, (c) discussions with the director of the centre, and (d) an opportunity to walk around the premises or the one or two rooms of the centre. We visited four main kiosks in this district, two each in urban and rural settings. One of these centres was situated in an area that had recently experienced a natural disaster.

There were visible signs that the entrepreneurs were informed in advance of our visit and all of them had made arrangements to make the kiosks attractive: it would have been hard not to describe any of the centres as successful. We noted the sudden appearance of the husbands of women entrepreneurs during our visit. They took an active role even to the point of one of them joining us for noon meals. Constant use of cell phones by the hosts who accompanied our trip providing running information like 'we are moving from here...', 'we are having lunch...', 'we will be reaching there in half an hour...', etc. At one point the officer told us impatiently 'we will hurry up; the guy at the centre is waiting for us...'

Some clients even signed up for the Vinimaya course at the time of our visit, including the sweeper in one of the centres. The sweeper told us 'he [the husband of the woman entrepreneur] has been inviting me for a long time. I held back until now, because most of the persons studying here are younger to me'. One of them assumed we were higher governmental officials and asked the first author, 'you said that the second

phase is starting soon...?’ We discovered that she had already finished her ten days of Vinimaya lessons, so it seemed curious that she would be at the centre having finished her course. According to her, ‘we are coming again to learn!’ Presentation of these customers and their activities in the centre at the time of our visitation appeared to be a planned action.

### **Unguided Visitation**

In sharp contrast to the guided visitation, the volunteers were not easily welcomed, sometimes subjected to gruelling interrogation before ‘granting’ them permission to sit in the cafes. The volunteers in general felt that they were looked at with ‘suspicion’ and ‘fear’: in one of the centres, the observer even felt that the entrepreneur questioned her like a policeman. In another centre she had an even more isolating experience: ‘The owner was so watchful that he did not allow me to interact with the students. He did not even allow me to sit in the lab. All the time I was surrounded by the entrepreneur that inhibited my freedom to observe the activities of the centre independently.’ Those in the cafés did not appreciate their visits, especially to the computer lab that was the actual focus of the centre. The managers preferred to talk to them and tell them about the centre: they said that, in this way, they could obtain all the information they needed about Vinimaya.

Although the programme was designed to spread computer knowledge to rural areas, several centres in rural areas were not easily accessible and their name boards were not even visible, whereas most of the urban centres were located in the prominent areas of the city. Unlike the rural ones, urban centres largely functioned in big buildings with a front office and office cabins, and in some places, a separate room for classes. They were also equipped with well-furnished computer labs with all the paraphernalia and office equipment. In both districts there were many centres with inadequate space and infrastructure for a kiosk according to government stipulations.

Majority of the centres in both districts offered various certificate and diploma courses in computer applications such as C-DAC, PGDCA, and ‘O’ level that were expensive but recognised by various agencies, both governmental and private. Student Net, Net Education, and Internet to the Masses were offered in one district as part of Vinimaya, and they also had provisions for e-payment of electricity and phone bills. In several centres in the district the volunteer could see clients making e-payment of these bills. Several of them also served as Internet cafés for the public. In each district, entrepreneurs owned more than one centre.

Most of the students whom they saw in the centres at the time of their visit were found being trained in courses other than Vinimaya and the tutors were mostly engaged in teaching them. Tutors paid more attention to those students who came to learn other courses than Vinimaya.

The main trainer said that the District Collector named this centre as the best Vinimaya training centre in [the district]. But I could not find any Vinimaya activity going on there. No student was learning Vinimaya. The centre is very famous in the area. There were many students in the centre at that time [a volunteer].

I found a lot of footwear outside the centre, as I entered and I thought there would be many clients doing Vinimaya lesson. But later I came to know that the students inside the centre were not doing Vinimaya project at all.

Many students were coming to the centre during the time I was there. But none of them was doing Vinimaya e-literacy course [a volunteer].

The volunteers reported that most of the tutors appeared to be in their early twenties who had completed their basics in computer from the respective centres. Some tutors told them that their remuneration was too low and even that was not paid to them regularly. The tutors, in general, showed an air of 'fear' in talking and divulging details regarding the centre and Vinimaya.

Many centres in both districts were reluctant to show the register that contained the details of the students who studied there. The volunteer was unable to see the register in the centre which was visited by both the volunteers and the authors; the volunteer said, 'one of the tutors told me that it was with the owner. But I could see the register lying on the table itself. After a while the man said that these are all government files and we will not give any information to the outsiders.'

Many cafés did not maintain a proper register because they did not offer Vinimaya-specific programmes. Other cafés maintained two registers – one for Vinimaya and the other for the students doing other courses. But the volunteer was not allowed to see it, since there was the standing instruction from the entrepreneur that it should not be shown to anybody, except to those officers coming from the IT Mission.

The volunteers noted that in many centres there occurred a gradual decline in the turnout of students for the Vinimaya programme: 'During the two hours that I spent, there was nobody in the centre except the staff until I left that place, I did not see any student coming to learn Vinimaya course. There were some students doing other courses at the centre.' The volunteers learned that the main problem they faced was that the students who registered for Vinimaya programme did not come regularly.

In one of the districts, the volunteer was told that the focus was on sub-centres and they claimed that more activity took place in sub-centres rather than in main centres. She heard interesting stories about sub-centres operating in places like police stations, old age homes, scheduled caste colonies, and women's groups. Nevertheless, she was emphatic that many people on the wayside did not have any information about Vinimaya computer literacy programme of the government. Many of them seemed quite ignorant about it. She also noticed that many centres have not even covered half the number of beneficiaries under their jurisdiction.

While guided visitation was carefully designed to prevent entrance into the staged aspects of performance, there were a few moments of insight. Some believed that the authors were unfamiliar with the local language since we generally spoke in English. As we were moving to one of the Vinimaya centres, the entrepreneur who accompanied us pointed to a gentleman who was coming in a scooter. We were told (in English) that he was simply a learner coming to the centre. But upon his arrival we heard him saying (in the local language) to the entrepreneur that he made it because he wanted to attend the 'meeting with the visitors' and so he had rushed to be there before us. In another centre we met a few elderly women sitting near the computers but learned that all of them had already finished their ten-day Vinimaya course. When we asked them the reason for their coming to the centre again, they replied us saying that they just came to have some more practice in Vinimaya lessons. But Vinimaya package did not offer any free 'practice sessions' for those who have completed their course. The hosts had simply invited these individuals to impress the visitors with their number of clients and their activity. Inviting the local channels and releasing the news of our visit in the local print media (in fact some dailies carried the news of our visit with photographs on the following day) is a clear instance of planning by the host.

In one instance of guided visitation we witnessed a parade of panchayat council members in front of an urban Vinimaya café who then organised a formal meeting during this short period of our visit as an important item of this impression management. The 'surprise meet' with the council members included formal welcome, introduction by the vice-president, and address by the president, and remarks by a woman councillor. The vice-president began his welcome address thus: 'We first of all congratulate and thank you for visiting our panchayat for your study about the Information Technology and Vinimaya.... A few words about the panchayat and other things the president will deliver a speech. After that I will explain.' The lady councillor in her turn had the

following to say: 'Vinimaya is a very good scheme. Thousands of people have utilised this scheme. We members also utilise this scheme and I am the first student when the project was implemented.' As we toured the centre we were provided stories and visual evidence of extensive use.

But the volunteers had stories that were quite different from the portrayal of the Panchayat councillors:

The entrepreneur was a lady in her late thirties. She seemed to be a capable woman. She was a teacher but she believed that she should devote some of her time for society and that was why she became an entrepreneur of Vinimaya. She said that even though she worked very hard, she did not get any support from the local administration. Till date only two of her bills were passed for payment and the panchayat also did not give any encouragement.

While the mission of the volunteers was 'to observe, not converse', they were often provided with accounts of the operation of the centres at odds with the accounts produced in guided visitation. According to the district officers, the success of Vinimaya project depended mainly on the entrepreneur and about ninety per cent of the entrepreneurs were socially committed, though some of them lagged behind because they lacked interest. But our volunteers revealed that majority of the entrepreneurs appeared to be dissatisfied with the project:

The entrepreneur was not very pleased with the Vinimaya scheme of the government. He said that eighty rupees per person was not sufficient. He added that with this meagre amount the scheme could not be implemented properly. He hoped that [the next phase] would be more rewarding.

Another entrepreneur who was very successful with other commercial computer courses was more forthright when he said that the inadequacy of Vinimaya fund forced him to sideline the project. It is important to note that, during the guided visitation, there was never any sign of other courses being offered in Vinimaya cafés, whereas the volunteers often found these other courses were the major activity going on in the centres.

During the guided visitation, all the entrepreneurs confided that the project was not remunerative as other commercial computer centres and their profit has decreased. Nevertheless, they were optimistic that it would be compensated in the second phase and they could capitalise on the contacts that they established in the present phase of the project. All of them seemed to be charged with a spirit of social service and commitment and so they were not too worried about the non-profitable

element associated with the project in the first phase. Above all, they asserted that they did not have any problem in getting the payment from either the local bodies or the state department.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that the project in its current condition did not bring sufficient income to the entrepreneurs for their sustenance and so they had to be engaged in some other jobs that necessitated relegating Vinimaya to a side business. Other studies of computer kiosks have reported similar problems in receiving government reimbursement.<sup>6</sup> Our research parallels a finding by T.T. Sreekumar (2007) in his study of Akshaya. The unannounced and unceremonious visits of the volunteers expressly confirmed this. In many kiosks the volunteers were not able to see the entrepreneurs during the entire time of their visit, and in most cases they learnt that entrepreneurs had other regular jobs. One entrepreneur who was present in the café told the volunteer that it was difficult to run the centre with Vinimaya courses alone. Hence, he undertook job works in DTP, projects and dissertations, CD/DVD writing, Internet browsing, etc. The volunteers also learnt that several Vinimaya centres had to close down because of financial constraints and shortage of takers. This scenario of financial and other issues leading to the closure of Vinimaya centres had been pointed out earlier by other sources. More alarmingly, a woman entrepreneur in one district told the volunteer that she incurred a debt of rupees three lakhs and was on the verge of despair.

### **Discussion**

Two findings emerge from this comparative analysis of guided and unguided visitation. First, the two differ in terms of the number of social actors observed on site and in terms of the social activities that were occurring. Noticeable mismatch occurred in the ambience created, the activities and the personnel present: unguided visitation involved fewer people and activities than guided. Second, guided visitation involved impression management that led to different characterisations of stories about the development project. Relying exclusively on guided visitation as a type of site visit for development projects has serious limitations.

We advance no claims to the superiority of unguided visitation, but the peopling and processing in unguided visitation are different from those in guided visitation that usually characterises site visits. Our concern was to open up the study of site visits by distinguishing two major varieties and to offer a conceptual framework combining reagency and impression management. Reagency implies that, when resources move from central to dispersed locations for development projects, there

is no means to target specific activities – at least none that do not absorb much of those same resources (Harsh *et al.* 2010). The site visit is one of few tools that has been widely used to discover and evaluate what is happening to these resources, what kinds of personnel are involved, and what activities are occurring.

Yet site visits invariably occur as guided visitation. In comparing guided and unguided visitations we find large differences in the level and pattern of activities, and personnel and participants and their behaviour. The transaction and behaviour of the entrepreneurs and tutors shifted heavily when the impression management process shifts from unwelcoming to welcoming, generating an active production of a staged performance. While guided visitation produces a description of a project that generates a great deal of activity and large numbers of participants, the unannounced visit produces a description with few participants and relatively low levels of activity. Accounts based on unguided visitation provide a different understanding of Vinimaya, whereas guided visitation was largely coloured by management schemes that were highly staged both to give off positive impressions and to generate press reports of significant outsiders visiting an important development project.

Similarly, we do not argue that no useful information can be obtained by judicious use of the guided visitation process. The most prominent example in our study was the examination of status claims regarding gender, where similar descriptions were produced with both guided and unguided visitation. There were many statements boasting about the high percentage of women entrepreneurs in Vinimaya by the district administrators, but observational opportunities in the guided visits were sufficient to view this claim with scepticism. In two of the four centres we visited, women entrepreneurs did receive us, but our interactions unambiguously revealed that their husbands actually managed and controlled everything. Although they bragged about women being the entrepreneurs, men did all the talking. In one instance, no men were mentioned in any managerial roles and none were observed. Then, without warning, a man arrived and was clearly the dominant figure for the remainder of our visit, joining us for the rest of the day, including lunch. In the case of gender, volunteers observed the same pattern.<sup>7</sup>

A neglected issue in this essay is the role of site selection in producing observed patterns. That is, does the choice of certain project sites over others by local hosts yield differences in the numbers of people and their activities we have seen in comparing guided and unguided visitation? Was the selection of the particular sites offered to the authors the reason for the differences? We doubt this because our volunteers also

observed the guided visitation sites. But another methodology would be required to test the hypothesis that non-preferred sites would operate differently if exposed to guided visitation. The guided visitation sites would need to be randomly selected, or, at minimum, the preferred sites of the hosts would need to be rejected in favour of other sites. Only in this way can the required comparison be made. Our own speculation is that it would make little difference: the key factor is advance knowledge of the visit in order to set impression management processes in motion.

We have argued that redirections of action and resources (reagency) routinely occur in guided visitation, just as they occur in other projects where remote locations are controlled by local Hosts. Hosts seek to manage the impressions given to Guests who are accommodated in order to produce and maintain resources that originate in decisions by donors and government agencies and end with owners, managers, and even project staff, who utilise them in diverse and unpredictable ways. Our view is not that these resources are misused. On the contrary, local actors might produce more value by diverting resources than using them for their intended purposes. Programmatic resources are transformed and repackaged on location. We emphasise that it is generally in the interest of both providers and receivers of resources to push resources through to successful projects, so the process of impression management does not warrant excessive attention by those who are in the business of granting funds. The ‘remove’, that is, the social and physical distance between the location and destination of resources, creates the need for site visits to produce evidence of action, which in turn provides an incentive to populate project sites with visitors who are not generally present and activities that do not generally occur.

The objective of this study was to embark upon an examination of two types of site visits as they could be employed in a typical ICT project in low-income areas. Our purpose was not to criticise the Vinimaya project, rather it was to highlight the methodological limitations of depending on site visitation alone owing to the dramaturgical elements associated with the impression management efforts. We submit that unannounced observation is also an important form of account making: guided visitation may give us, at best, a partial understanding. While we do not recommend disuse of site visits as a means of understanding and evaluating development projects, we conclude that their limitations are not easily overcome. Therefore, the donors may undertake a typical evaluation not relying only on guided site visits, but combining it with unannounced observational visits.

## Notes

We would like to thank the anonymous referee for her/his comments and suggestions.

1. The distinction between guided and unguided visitation is not dissimilar to the distinction between participant and non-participant observation, as utilised in the distinctive context of social research methodologies.
2. This school is called 'dramaturgy' or the 'dramaturgical perspective' for this reason.
3. Nor is it clear why the concept of reagency should not be applied to social programmes in the 'developed' countries such as the USA or in Europe.
4. The concept was adapted from the chemical reagent, which is used in a chemical reaction to produce other substances.
5. The name 'Vinimaya' is a Sanskrit derivative, meaning 'communication'. All names, including components, persons, and programmes associated with Vinimaya, have been anonymised.
6. Sreekumar writes: 'one of the major complaints by entrepreneurs, who have now formed an organisation of Akshaya franchisees to fight bureaucratic apathy and indifference, was the undue delay in getting the subsidies' (2007: 124).
7. While the administration and the male associates tried to impress the visitors with the role of women in the project, it was quite apparent that husbands were the decision makers in nearly all the cafés where women appeared to be the entrepreneurs. Women were namesake entrepreneurs since there were some advantages in the grading system if the application was filed in a woman's name. The women could perhaps stay in the office more regularly, while the man could be engaged in some other job, but took a subordinate role when the male was present.

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[The final revised version of this paper was received on 25 September 2010 – *Managing Editor*]