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SUSTAINABILITY

# Connecting society with environment



Aircel's CSR efforts focus on creating a sustainable environment for youth

By Ankita Rai



Felicitation at the Kolkata a+ centre

**I**n a bid to create a strong bond with communities and the environment, Aircel has structured its CSR into a '3Es Framework' to include the most pressing issues such as employability, education and environment. "The attempt is to not only address the requirements of the neediest, but also ensure a sustainable future for them, their families and the environment," says Anupam Vasudev, Chief Marketing Officer, Aircel.

Under employability, Aircel imparts vocational skilling

to create opportunities for youth. "We have created sustainable opportunities for underprivileged youth, by skilling them in skill-sets best suited to the markets they live in. Some of the skills taught are basic sales techniques, customer relationships, hospitality, etc. Post-skilling, youth are able to secure for themselves sustainable livelihood opportunities, which not only induce confidence among them but also help in uplifting their families and communities in the long term," explains Vasudev.

## SUSTAINABILITY

To bridge the digital divide in India, the telecom company conceptualised Aircel a+ in 2011. The idea behind Aircel a+ is to make a difference to underprivileged youth by imparting training in computer literacy and vocational skills. The result is better opportunities, which not only uplift the marginalised youth, but also positively impacts their families too. The training courses are taught under the Microsoft ULIP computer programme, which encompasses both a basic as well as an intermediate curriculum.

This initiative was started in 2011. Today Aircel has a+ centres in Chennai, Pondicherry, Pune, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Delhi, Jammu and Kolkata, running in partnership with various NGOs such as Khushii, SWATI, BOSCO Mane, etc. These training centres empower underprivileged youth by imparting computer literacy and vocational training. "For instance, in Kolkata we have a running centre in Kidderpore where approximately 200 students have enrolled for the programme," says Vasudev.

Aircel a+ establishes strong linkages between the child's educational background and its computer and vocational training programme, thus linking the two objectives of education and employment. The course is divided into three parts: basic, intermediate and advanced. The training manuals are designed by Aircel and the vocational training in various fields is provided by Aircel's training partner. Vasudev explains, "The training equips youth with skills to work in various sectors." Vocational training is provided in fields such as web designing, data entry, cashier, customer relations and sales (telemarketing and sales execution), hospitality services (front office, team leader, housekeeping, repair and maintenance), logistics, BPOs, etc. The duration of the computer literacy course is six months and the vocational training courses are for three to six months. After the youth have completed their vocational training, Aircel and its training partner Empower Pragati places them in jobs, to help them lead a sustainable and a better life.

In the last four years, Aircel has trained more than 10,000 students in computers and vocational skills through its a+ centres across India. The centres provide students with Certified Trainers from the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC), computer systems for practical learning, and relevant course material. The initiative has received positive response from students as well as local communities. The centres are also used for other activities like health check-ups and community meetings. Job fairs are regularly organised at Aircel a+ centres and through these, students have been placed in companies like HCL, TCS, Flextronics and AIGES over the last four years. "Along with vo-

catational skills, basic computers and life skills imparted at the centres have made the students more confident and job-ready. Aircel aims to train 25,000 students over the next five years as part of this initiative," says Vasudev.

On the environment front, Aircel is working on the 'Save Our Tigers' initiative. The company has designed a multimedia campaign attempting to raise awareness about India's low tiger count. The campaign is unique, as it utilises all the tools of marketing such as celebrity endorsement, new media and PR. "The fact that only 1,411 tigers were left in the wild in India triggered the 'Save Our Tigers' initiative. We felt that, being in the communication space, we had an opportunity to give voice to the cause of tiger protection," says Vasudev.

Aircel believes that the youth of today is much more aware and passionate about causes related to the environment. They can act as key influencers in spreading the message of tiger conservation. "We are reaching out to kids and youth through focused initiatives like organising panel discussions in various universities/colleges on the cause. We are also leveraging the digital medium — blogger communities and social media platforms like Facebook — to drive conversations around the topic," says Vasudev.

On the ground, some of the focus areas that Aircel is working towards include creation of awareness regarding the cause, increased involvement of local communities, emphasising the need for stronger political will, mitigation of man-animal conflicts and resolving the issue of poaching. "We reached out to various tiger experts, environmentalists and discussed the magnitude of the actual problems at hand, figured the appropriate approach, and narrowed down on a definitive methodology for 'Save Our Tigers' initiative," says Vasudev.

Since 2008, Aircel has reached out to and supported on-ground activities across all tiger reserves in India. Some of the key initiatives undertaken as part of Aircel's 'Save Our Tigers' campaign include supporting and funding rapid response units to help reduce man-animal conflict; anti-poaching camps; awareness drives and training of forest guards.

As part of the initiative, the company has also trained forest staff across tiger reserves, thereby enabling them to deal with the issue of tiger conservation more effectively. Aircel has also donated modern equipment to forest departments. It has also been organising awareness and education drives on the importance of saving tigers for schoolchildren across India. This is done as part of the Aircel-Sanctuary Asia 'Kids for Tigers' initiative.

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