Conclusion

The study has been able to throw light into the operational and managerial details of Akshaya with focus on the determinants of the sustainability of such an initiative. Akshaya which has been hailed as the most effective e-literacy programme of its kind has an incredible mechanism to ensure people's participation and thereby sustainability. The study tried to explore whether the components and processes involved in the programme had been able to ensure sustainability in real practice. This would be greatly useful in determining the intervention points to improve the programme further. The data collected from stakeholders reflected the advantages and shortcomings of the programme in general. Valuable lessons as regards the possible issues and challenges in replicating the programme in other districts could be inferred from this ex post facto study. Since Akshaya envisages massive e-literacy of citizens and diffusion of ICT applications in the society, a consolidation of the opinions and suggestions of various stakeholders involved in the pilot programme would be of immense use. This has shown the directions at which the programme could be diversified to earn the repute of a self sustaining model of participatory e-governance with an elaborate interface with the people.

It has been found that the service of Akshaya Centres are utilised by the low income group in general and in that category itself, Below Poverty Line (BPL) in particular as the higher middle income and high income categories prefer to use their own in house information facilities or to go for private service providers. Also coming to the Akshaya service providers, the entrepreneurs need only general managerial skills with minimal technological skills and formal education. However, it would be better if the centres could draw the attention of different sections of the society and cater to their varying informational needs. This should be complemented with deliberate need based initiatives make the systems sustainable.

The results of the study also make explicit the need to strengthen the Akshaya Centres with periodic reviews to enhance the managerial capacity of the
entrepreneurs and to ensure that the centres earn adequately to sustain the programme. This requires proactive involvement of the government through a mechanism that would provide constant encouragement and support to the entrepreneurs. Also, updating the technology available with the centres to keep pace with the ever changing technological advancement seems to be very important. Training of the entrepreneurs to take on new challenges and meet the varied requirements of the citizens is another area of immediate concern. Developing locally relevant content that can be accessed on line as well as off line has been pointed out to be an intervention area of prime importance. To facilitate sustainable growth of the centres, back end linkages with various government departments, service agencies, academic institutions, commercial establishments and marketing agencies, medical institutions etc has to be undertaken. Periodic promotional campaigns and out sourcing of citizen services have been found to be vital areas of intervention. Inclusion of more services and products that can be delivered through the centres is to be thought of with immediate effect to sustain the relevance of the centres in the community.

Support from the government during the initial phase of the programme has generated a tendency among the public to look forward to the government for subsidized services to continue. The citizens would have a propensity to move away from the centre on charging for the services provided. Massive awareness building programmes will have to be conducted to change this tendency. With regard to the various educational programmes envisaged through the centres, the issues of authentic certification and the lack of assurance on career opportunities have emerged as serious concerns among the clientele. Lack of experienced man power to administer the courses has also been pointed out as a major constraint.

However, the spread of ICT centres has provided a convenient access to information services through cheaper means of communication like the Internet, e-mail and chat. The socio economic and personal profile of beneficiaries indicates that the younger generation turns up in more numbers to avail the services provided by the centres. Attracting women and the older generation to the centres require
services that are relevant to the occupations or means of livelihood of the adult population.

Sustainability of the centres depends on several factors including education programmes, communication services, e-governance services etc. Specific interventions to improve these services have been suggested by different stakeholders. However, location of the centre has been found to be a major factor that has positive and significant relationship with the profitability of the centre. This suggests the need to relocate many of the centres from the present locations. Scores of positional advantage is indicative of the unscientific selection of locations for the centres.

The study reveals that the business model suggested by the government to ensure sustainability has been largely inadequate and inefficient on account of improper management, insufficient professionalism and poor back end linkages. Though the planners and decision makers have envisaged excellent linkages and enterprises through the centres, the capability of the entrepreneurs have not been upgraded accordingly to reap the maximum benefits out of these innovations. Environment building and awareness creating exercises have lost momentum in the later stages of the programme. In fact this has to be enthusiastically pursued till a considerable proportion of the community get to know the services and functions of the centres. Most ICT projects of this kind require a long incubation period between the initial task of raising awareness through to implementation and social appropriation. Based on the inferences of the study a few concrete interventions are suggested to enhance the sustainability of the programme.

5.1 Future Services Proposed to be Offered in the Next Phase

Since the services offered by the centres do not cater to the extensive needs of different sections of the society, measures have to be taken to bring the centres closer to the community with useful, innovative and viable projects that would directly benefit the people. It is imperative that along with improvement of the existing programme, equal importance has to be given to introduce new programmes
and test their feasibility through scientific preference analysis. A few suggestions in this regard are:

**E-Governance Hub**

Akshaya centres can also function as a single point/window for delivery of services, Data collection for the Government, redressal of public grievances etc. The ICT access points (Akshaya Centers) set up throughout the State through private sector initiatives, which will initially act as the training centers for the IT Literacy campaign, will continue to be the IT dissemination nodes and service delivery points for local population. Each Centre have a catchment of 1500 households. As the locations of these centers are strategically planned and spatially distributed to cater to the people in all parts of the State and are connected through the internet, they would form a powerful network to guide and support the e-governance initiatives, communication advancements, e-commerce and information dissemination.

**Developmental Databases**

Akshaya centres shall function as effective sources of development databases required for local level planning and development. The decentralized planning programme through the local self government institutions require host of developmental databases for enabling spatial planning and delivery of services. Akshaya centres can be the most effective resource groups for digitization of development data including demographic details, natural resources, socio economic details etc. at the local level. Appropriate institutional mechanisms for linking Akshaya centres with this activity have to be put in place.

**Akshaya Markets**

In order to provide an impetus to the rural local market, Akshaya shall provide relevant market information to interested groups. Direct link with manufacturers and dealers shall be established on a continuous basis using the Akshaya network. It is reported that preliminary activities for creation of a Market Directory are progressing. With the availability of high speed broadband
connectivity in Malappuram District, updated information pertaining to the rural market shall be made available to the public.

E-trading and transaction based activities can be performed using the Akshaya network in the district. This will substantially reduce intervention of middlemen and brokers, especially in transaction of agriculture produces and handicrafts.

**Telemedicine Project**

It is proposed to implement Telemedicine services through an external service provider. The service provider will supply necessary software & hardware in addition to the current infrastructure available at Akshaya centres. Linkage with major super-specialty hospitals will also be established.

**Insurance Services**

Special arrangements with Public sector/Private sector Insurance Companies have been made exclusively for Akshaya. Options are available for the entrepreneurs to choose from a basket of life insurance and non-life insurance services. The services will ensure a steady income and attractive commission for the Akshaya centres.

**Special Job Oriented Training on Animation and Multimedia Packages**

Training on Animation and Multimedia packages shall be offered through corporate partners specialized in the subject and the course certificates of which will be recognised by Government of Kerala. The package for the Akshaya centres will be designed in such a way that placement to at least 10% of the successful trainees will be guaranteed. The corporate partner will supply entire course materials, software, trainer's training etc.

**Akshaya Hardware Initiative**

The project Akshaya has accelerated PC penetration and computer awareness in Malappuram. As a reinforcing step, it is envisaged that an institutionalized platform for purchase of PCs and peripherals shall be established through Akshaya centres. Akshaya Hardware Initiative will be the core office/centre for
Assembly of PCs from imported components, tie-up for import of components at cheapest price, reverse auction etc.

**Vocational Courses**

Vocational courses with due certification from authentic agencies that would qualify the learner for jobs in various sectors are to be introduced. Liaisoning with academic institutions to establish franchises can also be contemplated.

**Other Services**

Services which are relevant in the rural context, viz., employment news letter, rural matrimonial services, listing of special services like carpentry, plumbing etc. are also proposed to be introduced from the Akshaya centres. In addition to these, definitive plans should also be formulated for providing services like digitization, data processing, market research, travel and tour operations, IT-enabled productive sector intervention, product marketing support etc. from Akshaya centres in future.

It shall be concluded that with the sustainable implementation of Akshaya, the society can be provided with a real time based information system that can empower everyone especially the low income group and bridge the digital divide thereby materializing the strategy of ‘welfare through empowerment’.