

THE HINDU

Money cannot buy this 'free' computer

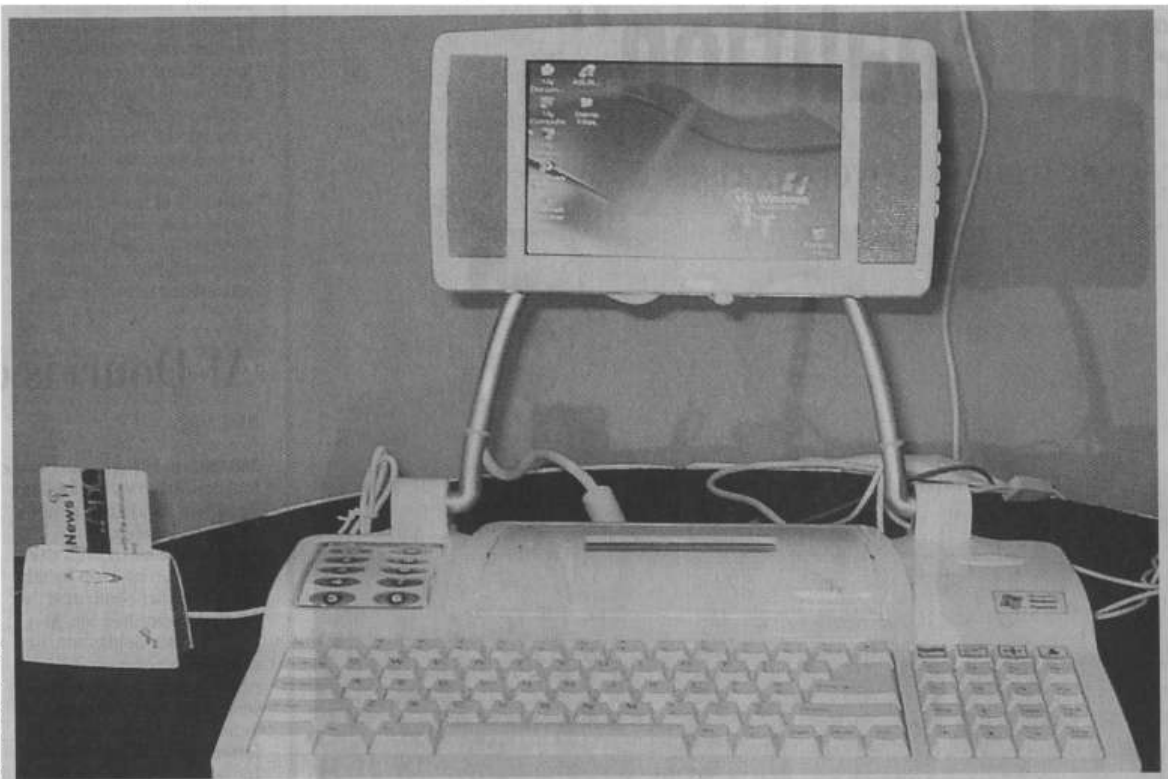
'IT' is the ideal device to empower the underprivileged people

Anand Parthasarathy

BANGALORE: It is unusual as personal computers go: the keyboard looks fairly standard — except for half-a-dozen especially large keys. The display screen resembles a portable DVD player but features the familiar "Windows" look... And the card reader is what shops use to swipe your credit card, only smaller. Say hello to "iT," an entirely new 'avatar' of the PC, tailored for first-time users and those who want to access the Internet without hassle.

But sorry, you cannot buy it because this innovative new information device will be manufactured in millions, only to be given away free in developing nations from Brazil to Mexico, India to Argentina, to those trying to bootstrap themselves across the so-called 'digital divide.' On Friday, Hong Kong-based technology company AsiaTotal.Net brought 'iT' to Bangalore for its India launch and invited corporates to sponsor the PC, so that lakhs of units could be given away in villages. AsiaTotal's president and CEO Judy Chen said the company took seven years and six possible prototypes before it homed in on 'iT' as the ideal device to empower the world's underprivileged people.

The machine has been manufactured by the Taiwan-based PC maker Biostar, which is geared to produce three million units a month, is currently rolling out the first two lakhs for giving away in Brazil. The machine can be localised to any language and the stripped-down version of the Windows operat-



SMALL WONDER: AsiaTotal's computer to bridge the digital divide features an 18cm screen, a smart card reader and a 'lite' version of Windows for Net access. — PHOTO: ANAND PARTHASARATHY

ing system is the same that runs on smart phones and handhelds.

To make it virtually virus-proof, the software has been 'embedded' in a chip, which means there is no hard disk to be infected, only some 64 megabytes of memory to save some small files. A universal serial bus

(USB) connector allows users to deploy external microdrives. The seven-inch (18 cm diagonal) screen comes with built-in speakers to make movie watching easy. A built-in modem allows Internet access. Ms. Chen suggested that the 'hot keys' included in the keyboard could serve as short cuts to special in-

terest resources such as health, cinema or money.

The card reader enables the machine to be used for Net-based financial transactions. Additional hot keys could be customised by sponsoring agencies to access their own services. "We will not be selling 'iT' directly. Our business model is based on

no money upfront from any one, only revenue sharing with sponsoring agencies."

The 'free' computer will be globally launched next week at the U.N.-sponsored World Summit of the Information Society in Tunisia, where AsiaTotal hopes to interest sponsors in all major developing regions.