



Mahiti Manthana

Reimagining a women's empowerment programme through digital technologies

Anita Gurumurthy, Parminder Jeet Singh, Aparna Kalley,
Chinmayi Arakali and Krupa Thimmaiah 2010

HOW WE EMBARKED UPON MAHITI MANTHANA

For the last five years, IT for Change (ITfC) has been working with *Prakriye* - Centre for Community Informatics and Development¹ in exploring how women's mobilisation and organising processes can be strengthened through new information and communication technologies (ICTs) systems. We have done this by enabling organisations to adopt digital technology to restructure their methods; supporting them to revisit their goals and identify whether and how the information society can be harnessed for doing what they do more effectively. The strategy has been to democratise the use of technology, enabling field workers and women leaders in the rural communities we work with to deploy it, rather than developing specialised ICT units.

Our oldest partner is *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* (MSK). The *Mahila Samakhya* initiative, working with the motto 'education for empowerment', is

a pan-Indian programme for women's collectivisation at the local level. It is a scheme of the Department of Education, Government of India. Set up about two decades ago, the *Samakhya* experiment, meant to support marginalised women's learning processes, has led to the clear insight that education means much more than literacy, and that it is, in fact, a process of creating spaces for reflection and action and assertion of women's citizenship through collectives or sanghas. The *Samakhya sanghas* are supported by the staff of the programme – resource persons – who facilitate grassroots women's learning that is directly pertinent to their everyday struggles and needs. It focuses on active agency by opening up debates on gender, and

promoting women's leadership at the local level so that action for their rights and claims *vis-à-vis* local institutions are part of the learning-reflection spiral.

When our *Prakriye* team started working with the Karnataka (a state in south India) unit of *Mahila Samakhya*, we wanted to deploy digital technologies to strengthen women's mobilisation and learning-action endeavours and to support women's aspirations towards democratising the *Samakhya* model. We used a range of techno-social innovations through radio, video and telecentres.

The *Prakriye* team began with the hypothesis that the power of ICTs as system building blocks could be deployed to revitalise the *Mahila Samakhya*, bringing

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Film screenings are a way for women to showcase their victories to fellow community members and to the male elite in their villages

to focus its original structures and processes. This would help in bringing back the space and time for *sangha* women to discuss, debate, assert and claim rights and reflect upon the process of social change. We wanted to be designers of a system that would address the architecture of power by privileging the socially marginalised women of the community. We wanted to employ new technologies to build an informatics process embedded in the ethos of *Mahila Samakhya* so that its motto of education for empowerment could be recast in the information society space and time.

We created a strategy that addressed bottlenecks in the *Samakhya* system which we felt were compromising the vibrance

and momentum of *sangha* learning processes and the introduction of newer *sanghas* into the *Samakhya* family. Our ICT strategy was designed to tackle the dependency of *sangha* learning processes and mobilisation on the resource person's physical presence. It was clear that the continued diffusion of the *Samakhya* philosophy of collectivisation must be a process that is less dependent on physical visits to villages. It must also be increasingly reliant on the clear value of the *sangha* as a space for training in citizenship and as a local knowledge institution that was on the side of women and the marginalised in the community.

The cornerstone of our strategy was in building a new culture – a tall order no doubt, but the dead-

ends of the *Samakhya* strategy could only be dealt with by quantum shifts of the kind that would usher in fresh energy and new ways of thinking and doing. It was a let's-start-from-scratch approach through an emerging digital opportunity. This new culture entails a complex web of new institutional mechanisms for tweaking the relationship structure within *Samakhya* and with the communities. This includes new communication protocols for the *Samakhya* staff and *sanghas* for vertical and horizontal organisational communication, new self-directed methods of classroom pedagogy (on a range of issues from child marriage to elections and entitlements), claiming the public space with confidence and tact and taking the *Samakhya* ideology out into the masculine village agora, and proactively interpreting it to the multiple actors in community life.

This rich informatics culture includes three digitally enabled components. One was a weekly radio broadcast that is the *sangha* women's own voice in the local public, called *Kelu Sakhi* (Listen, my friend). The other is an on-demand as well as push-based video system, *Sangha Shaale* (*sangha* classroom) that is a new pedagogical approach





(with videos on basic information that women wanted such as “how to get a bank loan”. It also included videos that the *Samakhya* team felt would be useful for nascent *sanghas*, like inspirational biographies of veteran *sangha* women, and others that open up debates through narratives of the daily lives of girls and boys). The third component is a village-based telecentre model for public information access called the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Our information centre). It is run by *sangha* women in select villages through a young female information intermediary (known as an infomediary), trained by the women and our *Prakriye* team so that she can address directly, information remoteness from the village and institutional non-transparency and apathy.

The new culture we have strived to create has been about inundating the experiential and intellectual space of the *sangha* and the village community with new local media and information rituals. This is rooted in the *Samakhya* ideology to politicise the local public sphere and open up new spaces for democratic and equitable social change. We named our process experiment *Mahiti Manthana* (roughly translated as “Informational Churn”).

WHAT MAHITI MANTHANA HAS TAUGHT US

IT IS NOT ABOUT CAPACITY ALONE, BUT ABOUT A CULTURE

When *Prakriye* started working with *Samakhya*, our initial task was to bring the rational and affective dimensions of movement-building into the *Samakhya* system through the power of a new, ICT-enabled systems design. We carved a new local subaltern public sphere through *Kelu Sakhi*, the radio broadcast. Simultaneously, we burnt the midnight oil and indulged in many a feminist argument to evolve rapid, garage production techniques to make video material. We also ran a one-step-forward-two-back-and-then-a-leap race to set up *sangha*-managed telecentres that would streamline a transparent, state-citizen transaction pathway to reach the “right to know”² and the funds committed by the state for development to the communities where the *sanghas* were active.

The design was not about technology. It was about being partners in a new system-building exercise, dealing with the information, knowledge and communication aspects of *Samakhya*, making it possible for *sangha* women to experience and

leverage a new social ecology enabled by technology. *Sanghas* continued to do what they had been doing all these years – asserting their voice, exercising their agency and bringing institutions to account – but now it was through the new modalities of *Mahiti Manthana* that were about shaping culture.

We privileged what we knew and felt were feminist methods of technology practice. For example, while radio broadcast has always been a space for women in *sanghas* across the district, we do resist the temptation to create heroes out of some women. The broadcasts are heard not individually, but as a collective which is an altogether different discursive space. Moreover, the videos are screened within the context of the collective so that they generate debate and enable multiple perspectives to be aired without fear of exclusion. The telecentres are at the service of all households in the village and are protected zealously from being politicised by vested interests. In this culture of creating democratic relationship structures that work collaboratively and advance the standpoint of the women we work with, we have constantly examined our own conceptual





and action frameworks. Our questions are not only about how to approach caste and gender politics but also about technology choices — what kind of hardware and software promote, rather than undermine, the feminist informatics culture we are so carefully nurturing?

We are often asked, do women produce their own radio programmes or do they edit video films themselves? Our response is both yes and no. The notion of participatory development must be understood to emphasise local autonomy and freedom from dependencies that are exploitative. Participatory media production thus needs to be visualised as a dynamic process where technology trainers must play their role in shaping the techno-social ecology, but this is a learning process for both the trainer and community women whose lives are being touched by digital media for the first time. Some women will become adept at recording, directing and even editing with gadgets, but others may not. However, the participatory element in the techno-social process lies in the subtle processes of dialogues around media production and artefact creation - how should we interpret phenomena, how do

we ascribe meaning and how do we represent situations and issues?

This process of figuring out the “how” is not so much about grassroots women becoming technical experts, but primarily about how they learn to appropriate and integrate the digital space into their individual subjectivity and infiltrate the local public sphere with digitally-mediated feminist publics. Participation thus, is in the small but significant aspects of practising participatory democracy. It is reflected in *sangha* women's mentoring of the young infomediary of the telecentre, the contestations around middle-class and rural, poor and lower caste women's respective notions of the female subject and feminist issues in the mainstream. This is also reflected in their own, alternative media, the debates between the *Prakriye* team, *Samakhya* staff and *sangha* women on feminist ethics and

the aesthetic of representing issues in the media. It matters less that video editing is done by the *Prakriye* team. Instead, it is highly significant that women whose lives we want to impact positively are in dialogue with us in what is a shared journey in creating a feminist digital space that can work for them.

IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT STRENGTHENING WOMEN-ONLY SPACES BUT ALSO ABOUT FEMINISING THE LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Samakhya was in a kind of limbo when *Mahiti Manthana* began. There was an active engagement with the local male elite and local governance systems – formal and traditional/informal. However, this was more to do with strategic communication to selectively co-opt men in power and male household members to push the *Samakhya* cart along. *Sangha* women would steer the empowerment process through the inevitable bargaining and

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power brokering with local political and community leaders and trading some short term benefits for strategic long term gains. These bargains would sometimes entail open confrontation to build consensus or even oppose and resist unjust patriarchal practices. In the art of feminist practice, no one method can be seen as an ideal feminist stratagem; power needs to be understood and dealt with through due process and in contextual interpretations of history and justice.

With *Mahiti Manthana*, women saw that the airwaves of their radio programme and the *sangha* screenings of their films were a solidarity building exercise that brought greater clarity and energy to their identity-related politics. It was also a new space for inviting community members to understand and engage with this politics in subtle and non-threatening ways. The film screenings were a way to showcase their victories to fellow community members and the male elite in their villages, and the radio was a fun way to inform conventional male spaces – tea shop *tête-a-têtes* and local bus rides – with feminist musings. The telecentre-routed access to entitlements allowed for a new political consciousness among women about rights and

citizenship, but it was also a credibility building exercise for the *sangha* as a champion for the poor. The young female telecentre infomediary and her cohort were literally and figuratively entering upper caste, male bastions, and generating enough curiosity and healthy discomfort in the wider village context about the *sangha* and the politics of gender, caste and class. This has not been a smooth fantasy ride, but a roller coaster that has had its ups and downs – drunken men opposing film screenings, family members preventing young women from playing their public service role

as telecentre infomediaries, local contractors and brokers trying to sabotage the information transparency sought by well-informed *sangha* women.

Yet this feminisation of the public sphere has been a welcome churning (as the word *Manthana* suggests), and a no-turning-back cultural process that has interjected new meanings of the emerging digital into the local public discourse on gender, at the pace that *sangha* women have set and in a manner that is tactical and supportive of their struggles.

Community radio: Sundaramma (Namma Mahiti Kendra Management committee member) from Attiguppe village listens to her own voice for the first time.





IT IS NOT ONLY ABOUT THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM BUT ALSO ABOUT RENEGOTIATING GENDER ORDERS

In the beginning, while planning for *Mahiti Manthana*, the *Prakriye* team felt the need to take stock of two systems. First, the organisational information and communication processes of *Samakhya* in terms of its effectiveness to support *sangha* women's knowledge processes (top-down) and second, the information needs and knowledge practices of the *sanghas* (peer-to-peer and horizontal). Setting up the *Mahiti Manthana* ecosystem was about re-engineering these two systems and this was essentially what we can describe as a techno-social project. Thus, what we did is not just set up the digital paraphernalia, but infuse it with new processes, and hence, ended up creating a new relationship architecture. *Sanghas* were now not dependent on visits of the *Samakhya* staff for charting out action strategies; aided as they were by *Kelu Sakhi*, *Sangha Shaale* and *Namma Mahiti Kendra*. Their information seeking, processing and subsequent action pathways were now on auto-pilot. Announcements on the radio

about forthcoming meetings were a small innovation, but a big step forward for efficient coordination; requisitioning specific videos for *sangha* viewing just a phone call away, and the *Samakhya* staff and *sangha* women were more connected rather than less.

This auto-pilot did not entail the elimination of the human element, but rather, a more decentralised and democratic approach to organisational knowledge processes. *Sanghas* were approaching the learning and knowledge process in a self-driven way. Obviously, this destabilised many power equations – between the *Samakhya* staff and women, between the traditional information brokers and the *sangha*, between public authorities and *sangha* women. The *Prakriye* team was implicated in these changing power equations and we were not only facilitators of the process with some technical expertise, but at the receiving end of wisdom from the many debates we had with *Samakhya* staff and *sangha* women. For instance, putting together a film meant constructing truth in a certain way.

We found that community screenings and those in the

sangha were able to prise open sensitive issues in non-threatening ways and work to address prejudices and stereotypes at deeper levels. Also, the screen or the projected image and *sangha* voices on the radio seemed to have greater legitimacy. *Sangha* women wanted to take advantage of this for destabilising traditional gender orders, but through creative ways. They screened films for men from their households about public departments and government schemes, invited the wider community to watch provocative films addressing obstinate gender-based biases and used radio programmes to denounce corrupt practices in local institutions and to embolden other women to take on local government structures that were unaccountable. *Mahiti Manthana* allowed *sangha* women to indirectly tackle deeply entrenched stereotypical assumptions – that women do not have informed opinions, that women can only be users and not creators of media, or that after joining the *sangha*, women have become “troublesome”. Our informatics strategy was thus dealing with the most potent and subliminal aspects impacting the way gender equality is understood and interpreted.





THE DEVELOPMENT CONNECTION TO FEMINIST INFORMATICS

While we have much to be hopeful about, the multitude of changes in the *Mahiti Manthana* strategy are rather subtle and defy easy mapping. Intergenerational communication – between *sangha* women and the girls associated with the telecentres as infomediaries – has had a profound impact on their respective lives. However, such processes, empowering as they are, do not translate as easily into measurables. Also, ambiguities continue even as gender orders are destabilised, and contextual factors play a big role in how outcomes pan out for gender equality. The practice of getting girls married even if they are below the legal age, and the practice of giving dowry to get daughters married has continued. The ambivalence of women does disturb us, but we

have to be very aware of it at all times. Grappling with exploitative and violent patriarchies and masculinities embedded in the same realities on which women depend for their everyday survival requires sustained effort and is above and beyond funding cycles and project timelines.

The pressure of the global neoliberal development environment is palpable at the local level and this means many “distractions”, which are perhaps part of the alternatives that women encounter in making choices for themselves and their families. Network society's big system propensity is increasingly taking control of our lives and in inconspicuous but profound ways such as the enrolling of *sangha* women as insurance agents by transnational corporates, which pulls them away from their leadership roles as change agents and poses complex challenges where there is no

straightforward ethical resolution. We find ourselves having to build alternatives that carry meaning, on the one hand, and also taking stances against the totalising propensities of corporate and state driven technological systems that at a macro level, disempower the local in favour of the hegemonic global.

The supposedly “secular” and “democratic” public spheres at the local context are in reality blatantly anti-secular and unapologetically undemocratic. Feminist informatics attempts to imbricate questions of freedom and rights without binaries – stacking the socio cultural at par with the economic. However, this is a fine art that calls for indefatigable application to feminist methods. We are indeed grateful to the *sangha* women that they share their time and space with us to learn what the meaning of empowerment is.

Endnotes

- 1 Located in Mysore (Karnataka), *Prakriye* - Centre for Community Informatics and Development is the field unit of IT for Change that works with local organisations to explore progressive and community-driven ICTD models that engage with, and are able to, address local power relations.
- 2 The right to information is legislated in the Indian context and is a powerful tool meant to protect and promote the citizen's right to claim information from the state that concerns her rights.

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IT for Change (ITfC) is an India-based NGO working on information society theory and practice from the standpoint of equity and social justice. Through our research, advocacy and field projects, we seek to challenge approaches that fail to address the structural exclusions in the emerging information society. We also propose alternative models that are participatory and equitable. Our work spans a range of development arenas – gender, education, community media and governance. IT for Change is in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

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