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Responding to the learning and developmental needs of out-of-school adolescents



The *kishoris* dressed in sarees for the *Kishori Habba*, a festival they wished to organise to launch the second part of the trainings

"... we need to recall how difficult the life of adolescent girls in India is, and not just on the poorer strata of society. Our culture poses formidable mental and social barriers to girls when they attain puberty. Some of these mental blocks make it extremely difficult for education to do what it is supposed to - namely, boost confidence in one's abilities by developing a positive self-concept. Right from early childhood, girls are socialised to perceive matrimony and motherhood as the ultimate goals of their life. A numbing array of rituals and customs is used to prepare girls for the inescapability of leaving their natal homes and for a life of dependence and silent compliance..."

– Prof. Krishna Kumar, former Director NCERT¹





Adolescence is a stage of high vulnerability for girls, with maximum familial and social constraints. The mainstream schooling system often fails them through alienating curricular and pedagogical processes. There is a need for alternate learning models that focus on their empowerment through contextual and constructivist learning approaches. The *Kishori Chithrapata* (KC) project of *Prakriye* - Centre for Community Informatics and Development² (Mysore, Karnataka) works with the *Kishori sanghas* (collectives of adolescent girls) of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka³ (MSK). It uses video as a curricular tool and weaves techno-social processes of learning: these focus on identity strengthening, understanding and relating to local contexts, building networks of peer support and supporting the development of life skills, as well as a deeper understanding of contexts and possibilities.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

An adolescent girl in rural India is conspicuous by her complete absence in development discourses. She has to be a 'child' or a 'woman' to get noticed. Many deprivations faced by women begin during adolescence. Girls are pulled out of schools; malnutrition manifests itself in health problems; patriarchal interests dictate social norms, which are tacitly accepted. Though primary enrolment has achieved near-universal levels, the high level of drop-out (where less than a third of students starting primary school reach secondary school) means that a majority of children fail to benefit from the school system. Hence education, considered a powerful tool for the socially vulnerable, is at present not fully available to most adolescent girls. Programmes that aim to empower adolescent girls through education also sometimes suffer from disadvantages of processes similar to

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schools from which the girls have dropped out – text-heavy, decontextualised curriculum, and rote-based pedagogy. The *Kishori Chithrapata* project aims to empower adolescent girls through a process of learning that is not limited by script and in which *kishoris* (adolescent girls) construct curricular resources that are intimately linked to their immediate life contexts and priorities for their learning and empowerment.

PROJECT

Drawing on our experiences in community radio, video and computing in the *Mahiti Manthana*⁴ project, with women *sanghas* (collectives) of MSK, IT for Change (ITfC) in partnership with MSK, UNICEF and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*⁵ (SSA)



Manjula discontinued her education because she had to get married.



launched the KC project in July 2009. The project works with around 55 *kishoris* in two village hubs – Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi (Mysore district, Karnataka) as well as in the *Mahila Shikshan Kendra* (women education centre), Hunsur district (Karnataka). The KC project addresses the learning needs of out-of-school adolescent girls through innovative uses of video, radio and computing technologies. The project takes a social constructivist approach to learning; girls are encouraged, individually and collectively, to explore, question and redefine their social and cultural universe through these technologies and to achieve the larger purpose of education – the ability to creatively negotiate one's ecosystem in order to fulfil one's potential and aspirations. Some KC-specific goals are to:

- Initiate *kishori sanghas* and build capacities for developing local audio, video and computer based content, in a collaborative and spiral manner through constructivist learning processes
- Contribute to empowerment of *kishoris* through new empowering learning processes, social roles and skills
- Use the content produced, as well as the related processes, for various local community development objectives, including health-related activities, basic legal and rights awareness, strengthening linkages with self-governance bodies, etc.
- Advocate for absorption of the developed models, in girls' education and empowerment programmes

STRATEGIES

The project focuses on digital camera and video technologies, taking advantage of the relative ease



Reetha stopped going to school because her mother was not well. Someone had to cook and take care of the household.

of use and sharing of these technologies, as well as the opportunity for creativity, amenability to inculcate a spirit of enquiry, and the supporting of individual expression, as well as teamwork afforded by them. The curriculum interweaves social themes and topics with technical learning, and takes the *kishoris* through a variety of issues relating to the self, family, friends, relations, community, by means of lessons on digital photography and digital video. Initially, the focus was on 'video learning'; this moved gradually to 'video-aided learning' which would include widening the *kishoris'* world views regarding adolescence, through activities such as watching and discussing adolescent girl initiatives throughout the country, articulating around role models, understanding and examining their

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Seeing their village through the eye of the camera

perceptions of their body. Essentially, the *kishoris* would get a bird's eye view of their life through a new lens using video, a powerful method to construct, store and share knowledge.

The pedagogy was largely experimental and experiential, integrating its technical and social/pedagogical components. Training videos, activities and games supplemented conceptual sessions; this helped keep the training vibrant and interesting (whereas long lectures caused silences). *Kishoris* looked forward to game based learning; they had not played games in years and would not be allowed to play in the future. The pedagogy was sensitive to the diverse backgrounds and capacities of *kishoris*, helping in their unique journeys of learning and empowerment. The project used localised examples to explain technical words; also, by allowing the learners to come up with their own terminologies, the project demystified jargon and never allowed technology to intimidate learners. The use of video training manuals worked well. When *kishoris* watched a video, understanding was spontaneous, with high recall; the video also became an easy tool for those who missed the training to quickly pick up the

required understanding.

Keeping in mind the social risks attached to this age group, significant trust building measures were taken to elicit commitment from the parents of the *kishoris*. Thanks to the *Mahiti Manthana* project, the *sangha* women emerged as a support group for the adolescent girls. Video emerged as a subversive technology; parents and community members did not feel too much threat in letting *kishoris* into new digital learning spaces. In order to create visibility for the girl's work to both build their esteem and confidence and to build social acceptance for this kind of learning training, photo exhibitions were held, and received with much curiosity, enthusiasm and joy. These exhibitions additionally helped the community to change their perceptions of adolescents as weak, vulnerable people who needed to be confined for their own good.

OUTCOMES “WE DIDN'T KNOW OUR VILLAGE WAS SO BEAUTIFUL!”

The *kishoris* created pictures and video resources of learning and empowerment and acquired capabilities for 'reading' photographs/videos and interpreting their environment. For instance, they held a piece of mirror in the hand to create an illusion; arranged flowers specifically for photos; waded into water to get the right height, etc. As an

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integral part of this process, they picked up life skills: articulating their opinions and feelings, committing themselves to take responsibility for their own learning, starting to think about their own and others' likes and dislikes, and seeing new things with openness, thereby enhancing their understanding of themselves and the community they live in. Topics also included health and hygiene, local geography and environment, resource mapping, local vocations, local government, etc. An important outcome has been that *kishoris* have ventured out into the village – looked at the streets of their village, men and women through the camera. The presence and novelty of the camera and their growing boldness seems to have validated this new found mobility. The *kishoris* also went beyond their local confines, travelling to use their technical learnings to seek exposure and gain understanding.

Any initiative becomes a movement only when people organise around common objectives and interests. The *kishoris* have begun to build a sense of collective – which is also encouraged consciously in the trainings. The exhibition created spaces that allow the community to interact with

other communities at various levels – celebration, critical appreciation, a new engagement with art, and an acknowledgement of the achievement of young girls, thus building acceptance for such efforts. The interaction between villages during exhibitions strengthened this process. It also marked the empowering step that helped the *kishoris* negotiate with their families to visit another village on personal agendas. Finally, the trainings enabled the *kishoris* to articulate questions earlier trapped in their minds, and to think, individually as well as collectively, about these questions – Why am I in this street? Why am I supposed to marry now? Why are my parents anxious when I get out? What skills do I need to negotiate more space for myself? Can I take on a vocation like my brother?

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNT AND WAY FORWARD

One continuous and severe challenge is of drop out, due to a variety of reasons such as early marriage, intimidation from brothers, lack of interest, care taking of younger siblings, needing additional household income, and responsibilities at home including cooking, filling water, house maintenance, care taking of sick people etc. Their mobility is highly restricted and their interactions are limited to their own household members and neighbours, which also affects their participation in the programme. Caste is a severe obstacle to building sense of collective identity. Technical challenges such as electricity supply were solved to some degree by using laptops. A key project learning is the way in which audio visual technology is extremely amenable to exploring opinions, capturing ideas and consolidating concepts. A curriculum for 'video-aided learning' can support alternate learning and empowerment

The *Kishori Habba* (festival): launching the second series of training modules





processes for those who are pushed out by the mainstream. Yet camera, video and audio are not as easily accepted by the entire community as computers. This perception needs to be dealt with subtly by making the pedagogical value of the camera trainings explicit to both *kishoris* and the community. Acceptance from the community is a significant factor for *kishoris* to pursue learning avenues.

The way forward is to build on the socio-technical skills of the *kishoris* and explore a whole range of issues, including identity, strength of a collective, etc. Trainings have started and are based on the

collective creation of audio visual content, which is being shared locally – through audio programmes broadcast on our radio programme, *Kelu Sakhi*, and films screened to the larger community. Longer term goals include increasing the project coverage and advocating integration of the programme learnings and resources into the formal education system, beginning with *Mahila Shikshan Kendras*, and schools that come under other SSA projects, such as *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) and the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL).





Endnotes

- 1 Kumar K. (31 August 2010), 'Empowerment by verbal chicanery', in *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article605995.ece?homepage=true>, 3 March 2011. The NCERT is the National Council of Educational Research and Training (Government of India).
- 2 *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.
- 3 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.
- 4 *Mahiti Manthana* is a women's empowerment pilot project of ITfC, in partnership with *Mahila Samakhya*. ITfC has been working towards enabling *Mahila Samakhya* to set up systems to become more autonomous with their ICT pathways through *Kelu Sakhi*, a community radio programme, *sangha-shaale*, a video-based platform and *Namma Mahiti Kendra*, a rights-based approach to community telecentres.
- 5 *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* is a central Government of India programme that aims to universalise elementary education by community-ownership of the school system.

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