

1. What is Mahiti Manthana?

The Mahiti Manthana (MM) project comes in response to a long felt need in Mahila Samakhya that after a few years of handholding, sanghas and federations should become strong, capable and independent. The idea of MSK has been that over the years sanghas should be able to take up most of the organizational responsibility themselves. However, it was always understood that even when sanghas do become strong and person-based interventions from MSK are minimized, sanghas and federations will need to be supported by some kind of a resource support structure or a system for effective functioning. The idea of a Resource Centre that was conceived many years earlier, captures this need for a resource support structure or system. More recently, Mahila Samakhya felt that the new technologies represented by computers, internet, mobile phones, VCDs etc must have an important role in this Resource Centre strategy. After all, these information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the very landscape of information and communication activity in the world, and so MS must capitalize on these.

It is here that our organization, IT for Change, came in. IT for Change is an NGO that seeks to use opportunities in the new ICTs for development activity in the grassroots. We adapt the new technology possibilities to serve the objectives and activities of grassroots organizations. MSK and IT for Change decided to work together to explore how the new technologies can be used to develop an appropriate resource support strategy for MSK. It was decided that this exploration needs to be piloted to see how best ICTs can help MSK's goals. Mahiti Manthana is the name of the pilot project and will be implemented in three talukas of Mysore. It will explore how best these technology options can be combined with MSK activity. Once this pilot or demonstration project tries these options over 2 years, we will build a resource support strategy for whole of MSK that can be sustained from within MSK's resources. We are also committed to present the model that arises out of our MM project to the NRG of MS for nationwide adoption.

2. What exactly are the new technology developments that Mahiti Manthana will use? How are they relevant to MSK and the sanghas?

There is nothing completely new in what MM seeks to implement. In simple terms, the MM project has four parts, using four sets of technologies for women's empowerment, all of them building on MSK's current processes. These are audio visual media or video technology, radio, telephones and computers.

Audio visual media in terms of TV has a great impact on most people today. However, this powerful medium has not been used to put out the kind of programs or content that can help the empowerment of poor women. Video films give us this option to reach programs that can help women's empowerment. Today, a VCD costs around Rs. 8 and can be easily freely copied over most computer systems. Video shooting and editing have also become much more easy and less expensive. All these developments provide a good opportunity for MSK to develop a knowledge transfer strategy using the video format.

Radio has always been recognized as a powerful medium. FM technologies have also become more inexpensive. It is possible today to get a good transmitter for a few lakhs of rupees. And the laws governing radio are also changing and it is expected that NGOs will soon be given community radio licenses. MSK should be one of the first organizations to take on this opportunity. Think of a situation where one of the rooms at MSK office is a simple studio where at pre-announced times broadcasts of discussions, talks by resource persons, important organizational announcements and communications etc can be made with very little cost. MM project will develop MSK's capacities in this area, and will also use existing FM radios in Mysore to make MSK radio broadcasts.

Telephones again are a technology that MSK women are aware of and comfortable with. MSK has also used helplines. Today the telephone technologies and tele-assistance (helpline) technologies have undergone tremendous developments. The project will explore how telephones and helplines can be made much more useful and effective by employing these technology developments.

Computers as normally understood, denote a class of technologies that is transforming our personal and social lives in some very basic ways. Basic computer literacy is considered necessary for even small jobs today. Education and health advice is given over computers. Government forms and certificates can be obtained over computers. The PDS list and supplies can be checked on computers. Complaints and applications for government schemes can be sent to government departments over the Internet /computers. The government has already declared that many panchayat activities will be done over computers within the next 2 years. The costs and user-friendliness of computers is now close to that of television's today and the uses of computers will soon be much much higher.

3. Will sangha women be able to use these technologies?

Literacy is also a technology, and there was a time when people had doubts about whether poor women could learn to use that technology. In the initial years of the work of Mahila Samakhya, the team faced resistance from some people when they tried to take literacy especially to tribal women. They were told that they were trying to disrupt age-old oral traditions of these people. The resistance to new ICTs is also similar and misplaced.

If we look at it, written and spoken language involving a pen and paper, and symbols, is in fact a complex technology. We do not see it like that, because we are used to it. The same is true of digital technologies; only that literacy and print-based technologies took decades and centuries to spread, but the adoption of new ICTs is happening very rapidly. And we want take pro-active steps so that that the exclusions that illiteracy caused are not made worse by the new divide that has come because some have access to new technologies and some don't.

As people who stand for and guide social change that is empowering to the poor and the disadvantaged, we cannot escape responsibility to engage with these technologies. We need to use them in the context of the reality of the women we are working with and in a manner that benefits them. In fact, there may be in these technologies the opportunity to even overcome many un-surmountable disadvantages of illiteracy.

One must also consider whether it is at all desirable for MSK and its sanghas to fall behind in the race of using new ICTs for innumerable benefits to everyone's personal and social life. If we look around us, more and more activities – be it in government departments, or banks, or educational institutions - use technology solutions for more effective functioning. Women's empowerment also needs to reap the benefits of effective engagement with the new technologies.

We often under-estimate poor people's engagement with new technologies. Today VCD players are moving into rural areas rapidly, and are being used even by the poor. Sangha women told us that they are very familiar with VCDs. Where they do have an initial intimidation to use technology, we need to actively support them to build capacities.

4. Even if we accept that these technologies can be useful for MSK women, does MSK, or any other grassroots organization, have the resources to sustain a strategy that intensively uses technology? What is the use of learning about something we cannot own and work on in a sustainable manner?

When we look at new technologies, the one thing that is striking is that the costs of these technologies are falling rapidly, as their applications are increasing. Under the circumstances, the cost-benefit equation is soon going to be very favorable. Computers are already very user-friendly and their costs are coming down. Mobiles phones were considered a luxury till just some time ago – now they are considered increasingly necessary for most working people. With external organizations rapidly shifting in the direction of these technologies, there is an urgency to develop organizational and individual capacities – both for MSK staff and sangha women - to engage with these technologies.

And costs always need to be compared with the potential benefits. Audio visual media can overcome the constraints of illiteracy, and form the basis of a lot of rich content that can completely transform the context of information and communication processes in MSK. Community radio also has far reaching possibilities.

Most of the output of the project like content VCDs, helpline related structures and systems, community radio content and systems are highly scalable – meaning that if the project establishes processes in a contextualised manner, the number of sanghas and women who can benefit from it can keep multiplying. The MM project is committed to developing these appropriate processes for sustaining the benefits. However, in the initial period involving learning and experimentation, the investments understandably involve higher costs.

5. How does MM plan to work? Will it bring in new systems and processes, disrupting the important work that MSK does? Will it stretch MSK's resources, especially in terms of people?

MM's primary agenda is to understand the activities of MSK staff and sangha women, and try to explore how these activities can be done more efficiently and effectively. If training material is used for workshops, MM will explore how some or all of the four components described above can help create training material that can supplement existing processes. Where MSK uses telephones and help-lines for communication, MM will try to make these processes more efficient and productive. To overcome the problems that are encountered in developing accountable linkages with government departments, we will probe how internet or computer based linkages help in this matter. If seeking information on some basic government scheme is becoming a tedious and time-consuming activity for the sangha women, we will explore possibilities of instant access to all-round information through computer assisted-helplines.

However, in the period of the project when new processes will be experimented with and developed, MM will need a lot of assistance from MSK staff on three general areas. This support will enable the project to explore the full range of possibilities in the new technologies for advancing MSK's objectives. These are:

- Helping MM project staff understand MSK processes, and conduct field activity necessary for the MM project.
- Help MM project staff experiment with and develop new processes of information and communication using the new technologies.
- Show readiness to absorb and develop capacity to engage and experiment with new technologies

Specifically MM requires the following roles and responsibilities from MSK staff

- Key contact points for day to day MM project activity
- Regular facilitation to visit sanghas, MSK meetings etc and interact with MSK staff and sangha women
- Help in developing technology assisted processes – like for video making, video viewing, radio programs, computer assisted helplines etc
- Integrating the above technology processes in the general day-to-day MSK activity plan (with an understanding that in the initial times, more intensive activity in these areas may be required for positive outcomes.)
- Help in developing content for videos, radio, help-line, computers, and in developing linkages with government departments.
- Help in research and documentation of the project – baseline, need assessment, feedback, evaluations, process documentation etc

6. Now please tell us what exactly is the project going to do on day-to-day basis, so that we can understand our roles better on a day-to-day basis.

- The project will develop a lot of video material – short films on different themes, training aids, video-magazines, capturing important meetings/workshops for ‘replays’ and dissemination etc.
- It will require video recording important MSK ‘events’/ workshops etc, as also non-MSK ‘events’ that are good for viewing by sangha women.
- MM team will need MSK’s assistance to develop video ideas, and hold scripting workshops etc for this purpose.
- The project will train MSK staff and sangha women to freely use video to ‘capture issues’, develop useful content, express themselves etc
- MM will try and integrate videos into MSK and sangha meetings, training sessions and other such activity.
- MM will make available copies of these videos for sanghas and taluka centres and develop effective distribution processes for it.
- MM will develop radio programs with assistance of MSK staff.
- MM will develop MSK and sangha capacities for regular community radio activity.
- These radio programs will have to be produced as well broadcast in tandem with MSK’s activity plan for maximum impact.
- MM will assess the impact of video and radio sessions, document it and discuss with MSK how to factor in the feedback into future MM activities.
- MM will make the helpline more useful with providing computer based facilities at the helpdesk. These include well classified and easily accessible content in every area of user needs, FAQ help, logging and classification of calls and callers, teleconferencing between sangha women and MSK RPs, experts, emergency help like from police etc.
- MM will develop content and content management system for the helpdesk in consultation with MSK staff.
- MM will provide telephones to some sanghas, that can also be run as PCO-STD booths, and will basically be for sangha-MSK activity. MM will study and document activities around such community telephones.
- MM will try telecentres in some bigger villages with stronger sanghas. This will impart basic computer training to some kishoris/ sangha members, and train 1-2 kishoris to teach basic computer skills to students in the village.
- MM will develop a lot of relevant content with easy user-friendly interfaces for sanghas, and for general village needs. It will also use existing content developed by many other agencies that is relevant to the needs of sangha women.
- MM is already in touch with the concerned department of the state government for providing Rural Digital Services through these telecentres. These will help sangha members and villagers send grievances, applications for entitlements, certificate requests etc and also access useful government information.

- MM, with the assistance of MSK, will develop close contacts with government officials at the local level, and use digital platforms wherever possible to facilitate these linkages, especially in the direction of making them more accountable.
- MM with MSK's assistance will document all processes, take in feedback, do evaluations regularly, make mid-course corrections, and at the end of the project, along with impact assessment, develop process documentation for continued use of these technologies within the structure and context of Mahila Samakhya.

The above list of activities that MM will undertake require MM staff and MSK staff to work closely together. MM has 2 Field Coordinators and 2 assisting staff in the field who are available full time for implementation of the project. However, the project obviously will require constant engagement of MSK staff across all the above lines of activities. The structures and processes of such engagement and the allocation of respective roles etc can be worked in consultation with MSK management.