

“We speak, as we are.”

A qualitative research study on the impact of the *Mahiti Manthana* project  
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The *Mahiti Manthana* project is an initiative of IT for Change and its Mysore field centre, *Prakriye- Centre for Community Informatics and Development*, which has been undertaken in partnership with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka. Since its inception in 2005, the project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by community informatics practice, for strengthening the empowerment processes of marginalised women's collectives (locally known as *sanghas*) formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India, in three blocks (*taluks*) of Mysore district- Hunsur, H.D. Kote and Nanjangud. *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian governmental programme which works towards the education and empowerment of women from socially and economically disadvantaged sections in rural areas, through a collectivisation strategy of mobilising and organising women into village level collectives (locally known as *sanghas*). Primarily, *Mahiti Manthana* has adopted a three-pronged ICT strategy of community radio, video and information centres.

This is a report of a qualitative research study on the project impact, that we carried out between 2009-2011. We assess the impact of *Mahiti Manthana* on the collective-learning action processes of *sanghas*, and the intra-organisational communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. We conclude with the insights that the *Mahiti Manthana* experience offers, for designing community informatics interventions in the network society context.

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## Abbreviations

BDO	Block Development Officer
CRP	Cluster Resource Person
EC	Executive Committee
GO NGO	Government- Non Governmental Organisation partnership
ICTD	Information and Communication Technologies for Development
I & C	Information and Communication processes
ITfC	IT for Change
JRP	Junior Resource Person
MC	Managing Committee
MS	<i>Mahila Samakhya</i>
MSK	<i>Mahila Samakhya Karnataka</i>
NISG	National Institute of Smart Government
NMK	<i>Namma Mahiti Kendra</i>
RP	Resource Person
TMK	<i>Taluk Mahiti Kendra</i>

## Summary

### **The *Mahiti Manthana* project: An introduction**

The *Mahiti Manthana* project is an initiative of IT for Change and its Mysore field centre, *Prakriye*- Centre for Community Informatics and Development, undertaken in partnership with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka. *Mahiti Manthana* was initiated in 2005 with funding from the United Nations Development Programme, routed through the National Institute for Smart Government, Hyderabad. Since its inception, the project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by community informatics practice, for strengthening the empowerment processes of marginalised women's collectives (locally known as *sanghas*) formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India, in three blocks (*taluks*) of Mysore district- Hunsur, H. D. Kote and Nanjangud. *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian governmental programme which works towards the education and empowerment of women from socially and economically disadvantaged sections in rural areas, through a collectivisation strategy of mobilising and organising women into village level collectives (*sanghas*).

Primarily, the *Mahiti Manthana* project has attempted to strengthen the capacities of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* through a three-pronged strategy consisting of community radio, video and telecentres, in the following areas:

1. Transforming the information and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme so that there is a qualitative shift in the reach of the programme; as well as enhanced involvement from the *sangha* women in self-directing their collective-learning processes towards empowerment.
2. Carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere.
3. Displacing information gate-keeping and control in information ecologies of local communities, and enhancing *sangha* women's access, use and appropriation of information.

Though the funding for the project came to an end in 2009, activities on the ground continue. This is because IT for Change has been continuing its efforts to work out a way by which the project's three-pronged Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)- based strategy can be integrated into the regular programmatic structure of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka.

### **Impact evaluation study: Design and methodology**

This qualitative research study on the impact of the *Mahiti Manthana project* was initiated in 2009. Data collection extended to the whole of 2010, and the analysis of findings and research report writing were completed in early 2012. This research study aims at consolidating our learnings from *Mahiti Manthana*, which may prove useful for developing a set of design guidelines for community informatics practice elsewhere.

This research study has adopted a “theory of change evaluation framework” (Weiss, 1972) which shifts the focus of evaluation from the question of whether a developmental intervention has produced certain outcomes, to asking 'why' and 'how' these outcomes have emerged (Connell and Kubisch, 1998); and by emphasising the evaluation of the contextual understanding guiding a particular intervention (ibid). Hence, this study first maps the theories of change which have guided the *Mahiti Manthana* project, and then analyses the soundness of these theories, through a systematic reconstruction of the unfolding of the project.

The two premises (or in the Weissian phraseology, 'the two theories of change' ) guiding the *Mahiti Manthana* project are (IT for Change, 2009):

1. Community informatics as a development methodology transforms the collective learning-action processes of grassroots groups in a manner that enables a power shift that positively impacts *sanghas* and *sangha* women by:

- a. Displacing information gatekeeping and control
- b. Decentralising information access, use and appropriation
- c. Carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere; in other words, enabling *sangha* women to emerge as a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1991).

2. New ICTs enhance intra-organisational information sharing and communication systems of geographically dispersed and institutionalised development interventions (in this case, *Mahila Samakhya*) in a manner that effects greater participation and inclusion of organisational peripheries.

The evaluation study enquired into how these two premises have unfolded over the course of the project, and the extent to which the vision of empowerment guiding the project has been realised on the ground.

This study has used an integrated design with a control group. It is well acknowledged that evaluation studies benefit from comparing an 'action' group that received the intervention under evaluation, with a 'control' group sharing all the characteristics of the action group except that of being exposed to the intervention under study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Therefore, the methodology consisted of comparing the experiences of two action groups with different levels of exposure to the project, with a control group that was not exposed to the project.

For this evaluation research, the 'control' and 'action' groups were as follows:

**Group A (control group):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project, who were not aware of the radio programme, the videos, and the information centres – in other words, women who were unexposed to the project.

**Group B (action group 1):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project who were aware of the radio and the video components of the project, but who were from villages that did not have information centres set up under the project.

**Group C (action group 2):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project who were aware of the radio and the video components of the project, and who also belonged to villages with functioning information centres set up under the project.

In-depth interviews were conducted with women from each of the three groups, selected through a purposive sampling technique by members of the project implementation team. The interviews aimed at capturing *sangha* women's perceptions of the project's influence on *sangha* collective learning processes; their perceptions about the potential of ICTs to bring about a transformation at an individual and a collective level; their perspectives on the newly emerging space for "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1991) within the local public sphere; and changes (if any) in women's experiences of *Mahila Samakhya* activities and processes in the post-*Mahiti Manthana* period. The insights from the in-depth interviews were triangulated by interviewing *Mahila Samakhya* resource persons working in the *Mahiti Manthana* project area, as well as a detailed examination of the project planning and process documentation maintained by the project implementation team (the team from *Prakriye*-Centre for Community Informatics and Development; the IT for Change field centre in Mysore).

### Findings from the impact study

The impact research study demonstrates that the *Mahiti Manthana* project has been fairly successful in enabling a material and a discursive shift in power relations, in the project

area, through its three pronged ICT strategy. The *Kelu Sakhi* radio programme has emerged as a 'translocal counterpublic' sphere where *sangha* women can challenge the mainstream discourses operating in the local public spheres of their communities, and also reach out to a wide network of peers, the geographically dispersed *sanghas* spread across Mysore district, for enhancing their collective learning-action processes. The video strategy of the project has posed a direct challenge to the mainstream discourses in the local public sphere– thus enabling discursive shifts. The information centres set up under the project (at the village and the block level) have created a community owned, bottom-up information network, which has been successful in shifting material power relations in terms of access to information and entitlements and enhancing the bargaining power of *sangha* women in their communities.

To conclude, the *Mahiti Manthana* project has carved out a space for *sangha* women in the local public sphere and has enabled *sangha* women to occupy central positions in the information ecologies of their communities. Additionally, it has transformed the existing collective learning-action processes of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* by carving out new possibilities for peer learning. The project has also helped in enhancing intra-organisational informational and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

## 1. Introduction

A model that does not separate the technical from the social shifts the ground upon which we stand to think about the world (...) A given technology – TV, the production line, the Internet, the Community Network, is not a good thing for society (or community), nor a bad thing to be resisted. Rather, the hybridisation of the social and the technical changes the basis upon which we make a judgement about social goods and about outcomes.

– Arnold M. (2007), 'The concept of community and the character of networks', in *Journal of Community Informatics* 3(2)

The *Mahiti Manthana* project emerged as a response to what IT for Change considers to be the main challenge in exploring the potential that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer for development interventions- the acquisition of the ability to “see [ICTs] as a set of possibilities that need elaboration within a specific social context, so that they clearly serve the desired social ends” (Gurumurthy and Singh, 2007).

We think that this 'set of possibilities' cannot be adequately mapped by mainstream 'ICTs for development' approaches that tend to view ICTs as mere tools. This is because ICTs facilitate a coming together of the social and technical, in a way where raising questions about their interrelationship, through the modern episteme that privileges binaries, becomes no longer fruitful – for what emerges before us is a new entity with both hierarchic and heterarchic potential (Arnold, 2007). As many scholars have pointed out, this new entity cannot be understood through approaches that try to focus on best practices (Gurumurthy et al., 2010); or an overemphasis on 'technological access' concerns as the mainstream 'ICTs for development' literature tends to do (Wilson, 2002).

To understand this new entity and the set of possibilities associated with it, we require an approach founded upon a recognition of the context specific possibilities arising out of the diverse, multitudinous unions of the technical and the social emerging all around us. We find the community informatics approach which focuses on the “contextual embedding of ICTs and the grounded analysis of the possibilities that ICTs offer for social change, in a situated manner” (Gurumurthy et.al., 2011) useful for this purpose. It is such an approach which we have adopted, in the *Mahiti Manthana* project - a joint initiative of IT for Change and its Mysore field centre, *Prakriye*- Centre for Community Informatics and Development.

*Mahiti Manthana* was initiated in 2005 with funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), routed through the National Institute for Smart Government, Hyderabad. The project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by community informatics practice, for strengthening the empowerment processes of marginalised women's collectives (locally known as *sanghas*) formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India, in three blocks (*taluks*) of Mysore district- Hunsur, H. D. Kote and Nanjangud. *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian governmental programme which works towards the education and empowerment of women from socially and economically disadvantaged sections in rural areas, through a collectivisation strategy of mobilising and organising women into village level collectives (locally known as *sanghas*). Since its inception, the *Mahiti Manthana project* has adopted a three pronged ICT-strategy of community radio, community video and telecentres, for strengthening the capacities of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*, in three key areas:

1. Transforming the information and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme so that there is a qualitative shift in the reach of the programme; as well as enhanced involvement from the *sangha* women in self-directing their collective-learning processes towards empowerment.
2. Carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere.
3. Displacing information gatekeeping and control in information ecologies of local communities, and enhancing *sangha* women's access, use and appropriation of information.

Though the funding for the project came to an end in 2009, activities on the ground continue. This is because IT for Change is continuing its efforts to work out a way by which the project's three component ICT strategy can be integrated into the regular programmatic structure of *Mahila Samakhya*, Mysore; as part of its project withdrawal strategy.

This qualitative research study on the impact of the *Mahiti Manthana project* was initiated in 2009. Data collection extended to the whole of 2010, and the analysis of findings and research report writing were completed by early 2012. The idea behind this research study is to consolidate our learnings from *Mahiti Manthana*, which may also prove useful for developing a set of design guidelines for community informatics practice elsewhere.

This research report is divided into six chapters. This chapter (Chapter 1) has introduced the basic elements of the *Mahiti Manthana* project to the reader. The following chapter, Chapter 2, explains the context within which the *Mahiti Manthana* project emerged. Chapter 3 describes in detail, the experience of IT for Change and its field centre *Prakriye*, in

implementing the *Mahiti Manthana* project. Chapter 4 briefly describes the methodology adopted by us for this evaluation study, and also provides an account of the challenges faced during the research process. Chapter 5 discusses the main findings of the study. With Chapter 6, we conclude the report by examining the lessons that the *Mahiti Manthana* experience offers community informatics practitioners, in strategising for political change, within the network society context.

## 2. The context that shaped *Mahiti Manthana*

There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus to speak a true word is to transform the word.... When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating blah.

--- Freire, P. (2000), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

### A) Introduction

When we initiated the *Mahiti Manthana* project, we decided to locate ourselves within an existing development intervention, as our ideology of practice has always been cognisant of the dangers of gatecrashing into communities as ICT experts, and end up creating isolated pockets of technical infrastructure that are irrelevant to the larger life of the communities (IT for Change, 2009). We have always felt that ICT projects must engage with existing development interventions in the project area as this would enable the project implementers to get better insights into the power relationships that operate within the social, economic and political processes in the life of the communities they work with. Hence, for the *Mahiti Manthana* project, we located ourselves within the Mysore district implementation unit of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India.

To understand a project that is embedded in another development intervention, it is first important to map the opportunities and constraints emerging from such a location. Therefore, before we proceed to examine the *Mahiti Manthana* project experience in detail, we first need to understand the opportunities and constraints emerging out of our decision to locate ourselves within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

### B) The *Mahila Samakhya* programme in Karnataka : A chapter in a pan-Indian story

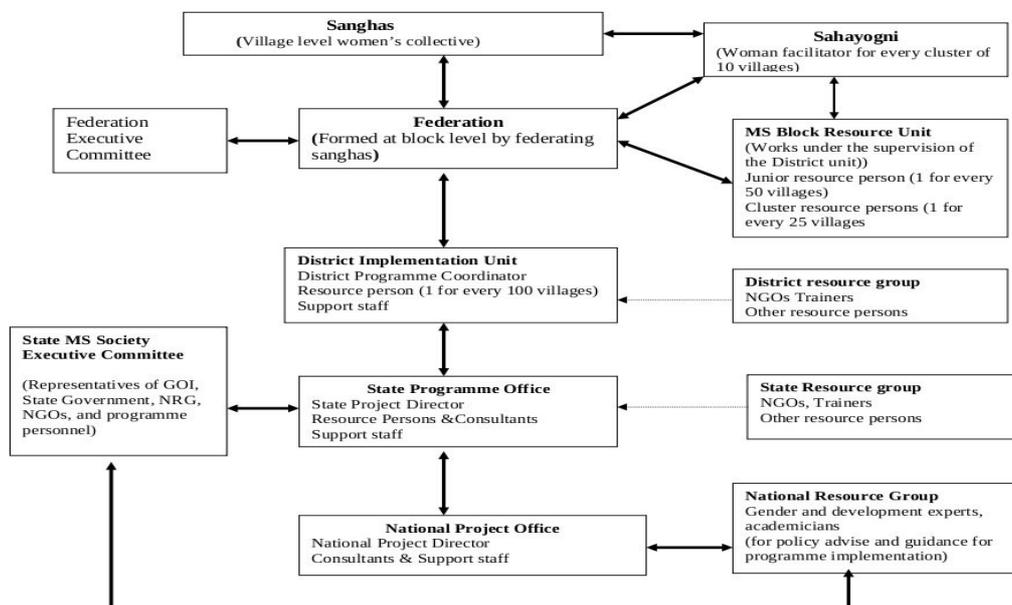
*Mahila Samakhya* emerged in the late 1980s, as a programmatic intervention of the Department of Education, Government of India; focussing on the twin goals of education and empowerment of marginalised women. The Department of Education decided that the

principal strategy for such a programme should be involving the women it targeted (women who are socially and economically marginalised : SC/ST women, women from landless and poor households) at every stage –through a process of mobilising and organising women into *sanghas/collectives*. The women who were a part of the *sanghas/collectives* were to set the agenda as well as the targets for the programme- no component was to be pre-determined. The Department of Education also decided to go in for an unconventional institutional structure for the programme, the GO NGO<sup>1</sup> structure, as it felt that such a structure would help in retaining the authority of the government structure even as it provided the flexibility of a NGO structure for better implementation of the programme<sup>2</sup>. Hence, it was decided that the programme would be implemented through autonomous registered societies set up at the state level. Thus, *Mahila Samakhya* societies were registered separately in each state and placed under the broad guidance of the concerned Minister of Education and Education Secretary in each state. It was decided that funding to the registered societies at the state Level would be routed through State Programme Offices, from the National Project Office. There were also resource groups formed at the state and national level to provide occasional guidance and policy advice for the programme.

In the 1980s when the programme was designed, such an institutional structure that emphasised centralised funding and autonomous, decentralised programme design was also part of the prevailing wisdom on constructing State -civil society partnerships for building grassroots leadership, in feminist organising circles.

The organisational structure of the programme is detailed, below.

**MAHILA SAMAKHYA: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**



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Source: [mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/MSorganogram.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/MSorganogram.pdf), Retrieved on June 6 2012

The programme was piloted in 10 districts across the three states of Karnataka, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, in 1989, with funding assistance from the Netherlands government. These districts were selected by the Department of Education after consultations with concerned State officials. The choice of districts was guided by the following criteria: districts which had low female literacy, poor enrolment and retention of girls in the school system and low level of socio-economic development; but which also received inputs from other development programmes of the State and where dynamic voluntary sector organisations were present.

The programme was extended to Andhra Pradesh at the end of 1992 and to two districts in Kerala in 1998<sup>3</sup>. The *Mahila Samakhya* programme is currently being implemented in nine States viz., Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand spread over 83 districts and covering more than 21,000 villages<sup>4</sup>. Karnataka was one of the states where the programme was piloted in 1989. Since then, *Mahila Samakhya* has expanded its work to over 15 districts in Karnataka. Today, *Mahila Samakhya* works with around 1,00,000 women and 4500 sanghas in around 3000 villages in 15 districts of Karnataka<sup>5</sup>.

In Karnataka, the programme's empowerment strategy addresses the following key thematic areas- education, health, legal literacy, livelihoods, enhancing *sangha* self reliance, governance and strengthening community linkages to government. Specific activities under each theme are designed at the district level, keeping in mind the local context<sup>6</sup>. The *sangha* women at the village level play a crucial role in designing and implementing activities taken up under these overarching themes. Activities range from school enrolment drives, anti child marriage campaigns, monitoring of mid-day meal schemes; trainings on legal literacy and *panchayat* processes; strengthening of non formal dispute mechanisms such as *Nari Adalat*; formation of legal committees among *sangha* women to enhance legal literacy; health drives on school hygiene and sanitation, maternal and child care; encouraging small savings and credit schemes; and facilitating *sangha* self reliance through a strategy of federating village

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://education.nic.in/ms/Genesis.pdf> Retrieved November 2011

<sup>4</sup> See <http://india.gov.in/sectors/education/index.php?id=16>. Retrieved 6 July 2012

<sup>5</sup> See [www.mahilasamakhya.org](http://www.mahilasamakhya.org) Retrieved 28 November 2011

<sup>6</sup> See IT for Change (2005), Detailed Project Report of the *Mahiti Manthana* Project, IT for Change internal documentation.

level *sanghas* in a process intensive manner; and building *sangha* women's capacity to carry on these empowerment processes within their communities with minimum handholding.

Apart from these thematic activities, *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka has also set up two major initiatives – the *Mahila Shikshana Kendras* (set up in 1993) to revive the education of girl drop outs and facilitate them to complete their formal schooling and the *Sakshara Samakhya* programme: a literacy programme for *sangha* women in the age group of 18-35 which follows a strategy of holding residential and non residential camps for literacy training.

### **C) Neo-liberal governance reform, and its impact on *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka**

In recent years, the pan-Indian *Mahila Samakhya* programme, as an intervention entangled with the structures of an Indian State caught in the throes of a neo-liberal reform agenda, is undergoing a fundamental shift in its guiding philosophy. Under the Tenth Five Year Plan of the Government of India (2002-2007), the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy of the Ministry of Human Development came up with a plan for *Mahila Samakhya* that marked a substantial shift from its original philosophy. The plan emphasised

“target-orientation (coverage of minimum of 250 villages in each district); new expansion delimited to educationally backward blocks, and hence a dovetailing of women's *sangha* formation with priorities to meet targets in girl-child education and directives to involve *sangha* women in this endeavour; elimination of middle level staff (withdrawal of *sahayoginis* within specified time frames in old and new districts); formalisation of the role of federations with an emphasis on monitoring; a push for self-governance of *sanghas* and minimising of learning-action processes and their concomitant resource investment aspects; and a clear transfer to *sanghas* and federations of the burden of assisting in and monitoring state educational initiatives at the village level, including primary school, adult education, non-formal education and facilities for continuing education”<sup>7</sup>.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Plan document further affirms this techno-managerial thrust.

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<sup>7</sup> From the analysis of the Tenth Plan Document of the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy of the Ministry of Human Development in Gurumurthy A., and Batiwala S. (forthcoming), 'Revisiting an Idea Called 'Empowerment' – a Reconnaissance of the *Mahila Samakhya* Experience', in Ramachandran, V. et al. (eds.), *Cartographies of Empowerment: Tracing the Journey of Mahila Samakhya, 1988-2006*, New Delhi: Zubaan

“The MS (*Mahila Samakhya*) programme will be continued as per the existing pattern and expanded in a phased manner to cover all the EBBs [Educationally Backward Blocks] and also in urban/suburban slums, as it contributes to educational empowerment of poor women. There is a need to operationalise the National Resource Centre of MS to support training, research, and proper documentation. The documentation and dissemination of MS needs its strengthening. It is desirable to conclude negotiations with the development partners as EAP [Externally Assisted Project] comes with excellent project design and measurement system, capacity building, and TA. It is desirable to conclude negotiations with the development partners as EAP comes with excellent project design and measurement system, capacity building, and TA [Technical Assistance]”<sup>8</sup>.

Such a target orientation that focuses on programmatic expansion and federation of *sanghas* coupled with a move towards cutting down personnel for a leaner organisation structure, is likely to affect the programme's original process orientation to facilitate reflective, critical learning and action among rural women<sup>9</sup>.

Another problem with the State's re-visioning is the conflation of *sangha* autonomy with financial independence.

Women on the field clearly distinguish between the two, as the following excerpt from the 2004 National Evaluation Report of *Mahila Samakhya* Andhra Pradesh reveals:

“We can run our activities on our own like holding meetings and forming new *sanghams* in the neighbouring villages. There is no problem if the *karyakarthis* [workers] are removed. But we cannot support the expenses of these activities. We are not fully grown up to be on our own” (*Mahila Samakhya* Andhra Pradesh 2004: 25).

Clearly, the questions of financial support and sustainability cannot be dismissed, by adopting a rhetoric of autonomy. These changing expectations of the Union Government from the *Mahila Samakhya* programme have also led to difficulties for the programme, in its Karnataka operations. The Tenth Plan document's target oriented approach and the focus on expansion with a leaner support staff structure has meant that the newer *sanghas* have lost out on many of the inputs gained by the older *sanghas* from a process oriented formation strategy.

The 2004 National Evaluation Report of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka highlights some of the problems in the formation of the newer *sanghas*:

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<sup>8</sup> See [http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/11th/11\\_v2/11v2\\_ch1.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/11th/11_v2/11v2_ch1.pdf). Retrieved July 6 2012

<sup>9</sup> See *Mahila Samakhya* Jharkhand (2004), *National Evaluation Report*.

"In several districts in Karnataka, the younger *sangha* women do not take on public roles; *sanghas* also position older women as tactically better bets in local contexts for negotiations with male authorities. There is also an age vacuum- with very few women in their twenties and early thirties. The lack of autonomy of younger women to join groups like those run by MS that offer no personal 'visible' benefits (like loans and so on), preference for other income-generating groups like *Strishakti* or *Swashakti*, and multiple burdens at home have been hypothesised as contributing factors" (*Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* 2004).

The new role assigned to *sangha* women as active campaigners in the expansion of *Mahila Samakhya* also seems to have led to a situation of volunteerism under duress in the State: In fact, recent evaluations of *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* indicate that:

"It is also not clear (in Karnataka) if the *sangha* women themselves feel the need to give their time and energies to set up new *sanghas*. If not, the new imposition will be a dilution/a contradiction in the basic philosophy of *Mahila Samakhya*" (Gurumurthy and Batliwala, forthcoming).

Similarly, the expectations from federating for expansion that are laid out in the Tenth and Eleventh Plan documents also seems alien to how the federations have been historically envisioned within *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka*. Federating<sup>10</sup> has been traditionally envisioned as a means to propel the *sanghas* into public life, enable them to become civil society institutions, secure political participation of women, respond collectively to structural violence, and change norms in public and private arenas- a process that requires intense groundwork unlike in the Statist vision outlined in the Tenth Plan document. (*Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* 2004)

Another challenge emerging out of the shift in the overall priorities of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme is the imperative to withdraw from the older districts such as Mysore which leads to considerable pressure on the block level federations.

At present, in accordance with the changing priorities at the pan-Indian level, *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* is the process of phasing out from Mysore district and moving the *sanghas* towards greater autonomy in functioning. For instance, the *sahayoginis* ( the village level motivators) have already been pulled out from the villages from Mysore district. This strategy leads to considerable pressure on block level federations, who now face the

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<sup>10</sup> Constituting federations of *sanghas* at the block level is an integral part of the *Mahila Samakhya* strategy. Federations are attached to a block level resource unit of *Mahila Samakhya* and the members of the Federation Executive Committee are elected by the *sangha* women themselves annually- as indicated in the diagram on the Organisation structure of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

situation of having to self-direct the learning-action processes of the village level *sanghas* without support from programmatic staff, and acquire financial autonomy. *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka, right from the early 2000s, has felt that setting up resource centres that could provide support to *sanghas* and federations, was crucial for an effective withdrawal strategy, as these resource centres would become the new support mechanism for the *sangha* women, in the absence of programmatic staff (IT for Change, 2005).

#### **D) Conclusion: The structural location of *Mahiti Manthana***

It was within this context of the withdrawal strategy through the setting up of resource centres that the *Mahiti Manthana* project took shape. During this period when *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka was focussing on developing a withdrawal strategy, IT for Change was partnering with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka for producing digital content and providing support for organisational processes of knowledge management. In the course of discussions about the withdrawal strategy, both IT for Change and *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka were convinced that the resource centres strategy would be strengthened by harnessing the potential of ICTs, which is not surprising; considering that in recent years, there has been widespread acceptance of the unleashed potential of ICTs among global development organisations, as well as policy makers and feminist organisers in India (Swamy, 2007).

*Mahiti Manthana* was initially envisioned as a project that would work towards the following goal:

“To appropriately ICT-enable the resource centre strategy of *Mahila Samakhya*, so that the information and communication processes of the *sanghas* and federations are sufficiently strengthened, for them to function autonomously, and for achieving the goal of women's empowerment at higher levels of effectiveness” (IT for Change, 2005).

In other words, the project sought to re-politicise the empowerment agenda within *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka, as far as possible, even as recent shifts to the *Mahila Samakhya* programme design are attempting to juxtapose the neo-liberal conceptions of self-rule and self-care with a formalisation of grassroots processes of empowerment (Gurumurthy and Batliwala, forthcoming).

It is also important to mention here that though the withdrawal strategy of resource centres provided the context and the initial opportunity for the *Mahiti Manthana* project to emerge, IT for Change was aware that the sphere of influence of the project could be much wider. Thus as the project design took shape, IT for Change increasingly felt that the

opportunity provided by the introduction of ICT based systems and processes for enhancing organisational communication processes within *Mahila Samakhya*, should be explored to the fullest (IT for Change, 2005).

Our experience in implementing the *Mahiti Manthana* project is described in the following chapter.

### 3. The *Mahiti Manthana* project: Our experience in handling an “information-churn”

“*Mahiti Manthana* calls for a vision beyond the conventional mainstream usage of ICTs. As a ownership driven project, it has its own set of processes to follow in the field. The following steps were supposed to happen in succession :Understanding *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka (MSK) and building rapport , understanding MSK *sanghas*, piloting processes based on the above understanding and learning from the outcomes – and redesigning if necessary. These phases have not been really happening in succession but have happened simultaneously. At the outset, it appears like it takes more time but, what we know from experience is that it is well worth the time spent initially than despairing over sustainability issues in future.”

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*<sup>11</sup>, Bengaluru: IT for Change

#### A) Introduction: Objectives and project strategy

The specific objectives that we identified for the *Mahiti Manthana* project were as follows:

1. Meeting the knowledge and capacity needs of *sangha* women
2. Addressing communication and identity building needs of *sangha* women
3. Addressing information and communication needs of adolescent girls<sup>12</sup>

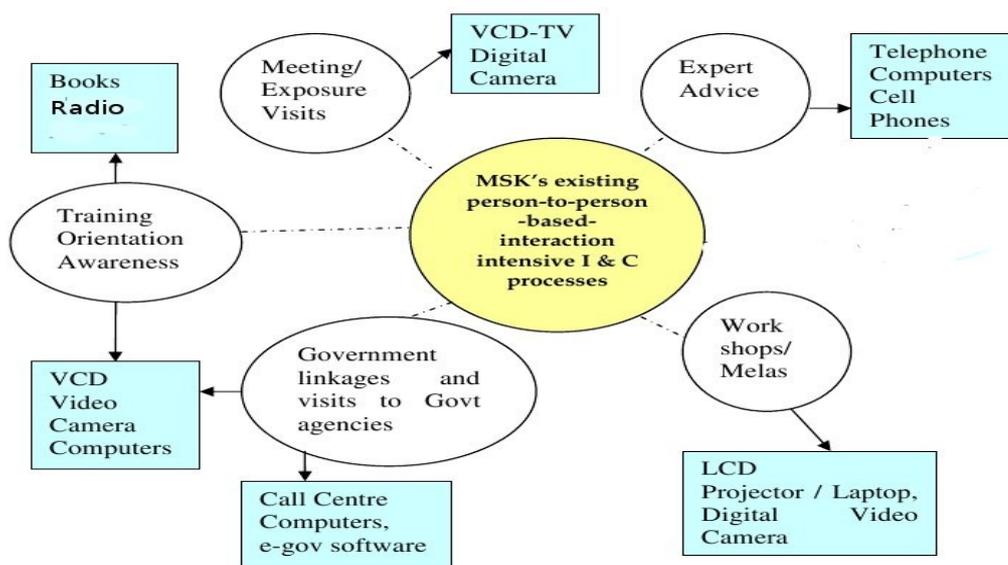
<sup>11</sup> The forthcoming publication, *Mahiti Manthana diaries*, that is extensively quoted in this chapter, is a reflection on the project implementation experience by Aparna Kalley, Venkatesh Prasad, Chinmayi Arakali and Krupa Thimmaiah, who have been part of IT for Change's field centre *Prakriye*, right from the start of the *Mahiti Manthana* project.

<sup>12</sup> This objective was later addressed through a separate project, Kishori Chitrapata, funded by UNICEF. This project explores the innovative use of ICTs, in particular videos and photos, to address the learning needs of out-of-school adolescent girls through empowering constructivist learning processes. For more details, see [http://www.itforchange.net/resources\\_all](http://www.itforchange.net/resources_all) , Retrieved 17 July 2012.

4. Building and sustaining capacities of MSK Resource Persons
5. Enhancing intra-organisational Information and Communication (I&C) processes; and the knowledge management activities of MSK
6. Providing effective access to legal information/expertise/help as well as legal redressal and access to justice through a helpline, as well as information management support and linkages to processes for formal and informal justice dispensation
7. Strengthening linkages to governmental and other agencies
8. Leveraging the ICT enabled infrastructure of the proposed MSK resource centres and the capacities of *sangha* women to provide telecentre services to the community, in order to enhance the I&C processes in the community as well as facilitate women empowerment processes. (IT for Change, 2005)

The objective of setting up a legal helpline was not pursued as the Government of Karnataka had started work towards this through its line departments, and we did not want to duplicate efforts through our project.

As one can see from the list of objectives, the project sought to influence the existing I&C processes of MSK and strengthen them further by harnessing the potential of ICTs. It was always clear, right from the inception of the project, that we wanted to augment and not replace existing media and communication processes that MSK was following (IT for Change, 2005). The project aimed at building a mixed media strategy- through augmenting existing means such as reading material, games, pictorial representations, meetings, training sessions and workshops, and enriching these through digital possibilities- to maximise absorption of information by *sangha* women and to build their capacity for critical learning.



**Employing ICTs to enhance person-to-person based information and communication processes of MSK**

*Existing Information and Communication processes at MSK (text within circles) have been largely mediated through person to person interaction (dotted links). This is highly resource intensive. The project seeks to augment and enhance these Information and Communication processes through appropriate use of new ICTs (outward arrows towards text in boxes)*

Source: modified from IT for Change (2005), Detailed Project Report of the *Mahiti Manthana* Project, IT for Change internal documentation.

The emphasis was to avoid wastefulness and overawing people with the technology; rather, the attempt was to gradually develop the most appropriate media/technology mix for each *sangha* as per its contextual situation, for the most effective I&C processes, as can be seen from the description of the three pronged ICT strategy in the box below.

**The three pronged ICT strategy:**

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* process 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 rich informatics culture [of] 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, that is a new pedagogical approach with videos on basic information that women wanted, inspirational biographies of *sangha* women, and others that open up debates. 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 information intermediary, 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.

-Gurumurthy, A., Singh ,P., Kalley,A., Arakali, C. and Thimmaiah, K. (2010), 'Digitising a Feminist Stratagem - What *Mahiti Manthana* has taught us about women's empowerment' in *Women in Action 2010-1*. Retrieved from [http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1474&Itemid=206](http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1474&Itemid=206) , 17 July 2012.

Additionally, the ICT strategy also emphasised:

1. Digital content production by *sangha* women, in both audio-visual and digital-textual formats, for documenting local knowledge, providing information to other *sanghas* and for identity building and articulation.

2. Honing the ICT skills of MSK resource persons of the Mysore district unit – to handle and develop their comfort in using ICTs in trainings for *sangha* women as well as in *Samakhya's* internal organisational processes, to ensure long term sustainability of project activities.

This ICT strategy in the medium and long term, it was hoped, would enable *sanghas* to further their empowerment processes through ICT enabled information and communication processes and become nodes for dissemination of information within their villages.

### **B) Mahiti Manthana: Project reach**

Considering the ambitions of the project, IT for Change felt that it would be appropriate to first pilot the *Mahiti Manthana* project in one location, and then expand it to other locations across MSK based upon the learnings from this experience. Therefore, IT for Change together with MSK decided that the project would be piloted in three *taluks* of Mysore district – Hunsur, Nanjangud and H.D.Kote. Based upon the learnings about the sustainability, scalability and replicability of the pilot project, it was hoped that the project could be duplicated in other locations of *Mahila Samakhya*.

The *taluks* of H. D. Kote and Hunsur (covered under the project) had been classified in 2002, by the High Power Committee for the Redressal of Regional Imbalances<sup>13</sup> set up by the Government of Karnataka, as two of the “most backward” *taluks* of Karnataka State; and Nanjangud had been classified under the “more backward” category, only a notch higher. Within the three selected *taluks*, the target group for *Mahiti Manthana* comprised of the villages where *Mahila Samakhya* was working, specifically the *sanghas* in these villages.

The following table provides an overall idea of the reach of the project:

Sl. No	Taluk	Total number of villages MSK works in	Total number of <i>Sanghas</i> in these villages
1	Hunsur	56	86
2	H.D Kote	55	73

<sup>13</sup> Government of Karnataka (2002) High Power Committee for Redressal of Regional Imbalances, *Final Report*.

3	Nanjangud	59	89
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**Source:** *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka, Mysore District Unit, 2011

### **C) *Mahiti Manthana*: Governance and implementation structure of the project**

The technical support and digital content development for the *Mahiti Manthana* project, has been taken care of by IT for Change from its Project Coordination Office in Bangalore, and its field centre in Mysore district (*Prakriye*- Centre for Community Informatics and Development), working together with the *Mahila Samakhya* District Office.

During the implementation of the project, IT for Change has also drawn upon the repertoire of experiences of the experts from the National Resource Group of *Mahila Samakhya*; as well as the National Institute of Smart Government (NISG)- in project design. Timely reviews (for which the IT for Change team and a Board of advisers consisting of a government official, an independent film-maker, a technical expert and a feminist activist-researcher would meet every quarter for internal evaluations) were also conducted, between 2005-2009, to ensure the project was on course.

### **D) *Mahiti Manthana*: The implementation experience**

We will now chart out the the project implementation experience, beginning from the inception stage of the project upto the point of time when most components of the ICT strategy became operational on the ground. This stretches over a period of two and a half years, from 2005 to mid 2008.

Additionally, at the end of this chapter, we have also enclosed a time-line classifying project processes under the heads of: 1. Overall Activities 2. Video 3. Community Radio and 4. *Namma Mahiti Kendras*, which provides greater details for each stage of the project implementation process.

#### ***i. Baseline survey of sangha women***

A Baseline survey of *sangha* women was carried out between September 2005- November 2005 to assess the socio-economic profile of *sangha* women, their involvement in *Mahila Samakhya* and their level of exposure to ICTs. The Baseline survey was carried out in the

the project area. Nineteen villages from these three *taluks* were chosen for the baseline, through a process of semi-random sampling.

Some villages were chosen keeping in mind the age and strength of their *sanghas*. Other villages were chosen through random sampling from a register of villages shared with us by *Mahila Samakhya staff*. The survey was carried out by IT for Change project staff with the assistance of undergraduate students of Sociology from Mysore University.

### **Our experience of conducting the Baseline survey**

The baseline brought the team together for the first time. Once the volunteers were chosen and trained to conduct the survey, we piloted the baseline in three villages in September '05. We realised for the first time, how difficult it was to ask questions and how long each survey could take! The baseline consisted of 183 questions. It was a quantitative survey that helped obtain information related to the village, households, *sangha*, MSK and ICT use. Talking to the *sangha* women in many villages across the three *taluks* was an experience that provided many insights. Most of the *sangha* women were non-literate dalit women. Almost all of them were daily wage labourers who earned 25-30 rupees after a hard days labour. Very few of them owned land. Livelihood seemed to be their main concern.

-Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K.  
(forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

Our observations during the baseline helped us to re-affirm our choice of an ICT strategy that did not depend upon the physical presence of MSK resource persons; and also offered the promise of facilitating self-driven processes of collective learning.

### **Problems at the village level revealed by the Baseline survey**

During the baseline, We saw various problems at the village level that needed attention-

- a. Lack of MSK staff presence at village level regularly (except for *taluk* level meetings)
- b. No clarity on part of *sangha* women regarding the committees they belong to,
- c. Only a few women in leadership positions get information, (such as women who are elected

- to the Executive Committee of the *sangha* federation at the *taluk* level),
- d. Lack of communication to village level *sanghas* (both from federation members and organisational communication by staff),
  - e. Lack of second line leadership

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

The baseline strategy also helped us in identifying the villages where we could initiate processes for the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* component of our ICT strategy<sup>14</sup>. For, dalit inclusion and participation in project activities were a non-negotiable criteria in our intervention.

**Dalit inclusion and participation: A non-negotiable for setting up *Namma Mahiti Kendras***

During the baseline, we also identified which village was most suited for our intervention and which village was not. (...) In some villages, we came to know that the elected representative does not do the basic task he/she is supposed to do, takes bribe, etc. (...)we heard stories about loan repayment problems in *sanghas*, we got to know the caste politics in most of the villages, including situations where one caste community does not enter areas within the village occupied by other caste groups (...) in fact, in one village, we found that some caste groups do not send their children to *anganwadi* as the *anganwadi* centre is situated in the dalit neighbourhood. Some villages we surveyed even prohibited entry of other caste people from entering the village temple .

We were clear that the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Information Centre at the village level) had to be located in the dalit part of the village, and the dalits of the village must have a say in the management and operations of the centre.

<sup>14</sup> IT for Change(2007), *Baseline Survey Analysis Report*, IT for Change internal documentation

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*,  
Bengaluru: IT for Change

## ***ii. Needs assessment exercise***

Following the baseline survey and the parallel processes that we were engaged in, for designing and implementing the video and radio components of our ICT strategy (See project time-line at the end of the chapter for further details on these processes), we decided to do a Needs Assessment exercise with *sangha* women and MSK staff to gain further inputs that could feed our strategic ideation processes.

The main objectives of the Needs Assessment were to capture the perceptions of *sangha* women about empowerment and disempowerment; and understand how inter-sectional identities operate in constituting the '*sangha* woman' identity.

For the needs assessment, six villages were selected- two each from H. D. Kote, Hunsur and Nanjangud *taluks*, with each of which we had varying degrees of familiarity. The needs assessment was carried out through a mixed methodological process – which included focus group discussions as well as activity based exercises such as 'Building a Story' and 'Tracing your Daily Routine' as some words such as “empowerment” were difficult for the women to instantly identify with and discuss. Around 2.5 hours were spent in every village, after taking into account the amount of time the women said they could spare for this exercise. Through this needs assessment exercise, we managed to glean *sangha* women's perceptions about the category of the 'empowered woman' and the 'empowered man', as detailed in the box below.

### **Excerpt from the Summary of the Needs Assessment Exercise, 2007 conducted with *sangha* women:**

“Empowered woman” in the *sangha* women's eyes:

1. She is a *sangha* member
2. She is economically independent
3. She is brave

*Sangha* women also identified the following characteristics, which can be categorised as

qualities which aid empowerment :

1. Knowledge about relevant issues
2. Mobility
3. Involvement in Decision making in the family
4. Involvement in public space

“Empowered Man” in the *sangha* women's eyes:

- 1.He loves his wife
- 2.He respects his wife and daughter in law
- 3.He supports his wife in *sangha* activities
- 4.He believes in equality

It is not difficult to understand why *sangha* membership emerged as a key element in women's definitions of empowerment. The *sangha* woman is more mobile; she has knowledge of the six key issues MSK focusses upon (Health, Education, Legal Literacy, Governance, Livelihoods and self -reliance); she is able to negotiate with officials and take care of savings. Membership in the *sangha*, by consequence, is valued.

The needs assessment exercise was also repeated with the MSK staff, to capture their perceptions on empowerment.

**Excerpt from the Needs Assessment Exercise with MSK Staff, 2007:**

MSK staff felt that we need to look at *sangha* women's empowerment at 3 levels : individual, family and community levels.

The MSK staff opined that at an individual level, *sangha* women enjoy a high degree of empowerment; at the community level they enjoy a moderate degree of empowerment but they are not really empowered within the family space. For the *sangha* women, the biggest challenge is to move forward in all these levels, surpassing traditional boundaries.

Through the needs assessment exercise, we discussed about what MSK, government departments and NGOs can do to aid her in her journey. MSK staff came up with a strategy of developing women's faith in striving for equality and enabling them to fight struggles for

equality; strengthening women's abilities of claiming their rights , and exercising, negotiating and managing and striving for ownership of assets. MSK staff felt that NGOs should start focussing on overall development of women rather than implementing projects for savings and micro-credit activities alone. MSK staff discussed about the role of government departments in empowering *sangha* women and felt that they should become more helpful, by changing their top down approach and include *sangha* women in planning. It was also felt that departments could become more transparent, informative, accountable and responsive to *sangha* women . The need for women in the posts of authority was stressed.

Thus needs assessments with *sangha* women and MSK staff indicated the importance of addressing information needs at various levels, building capacities of *sangha* women and networking *sanghas* with different agencies – through our three-pronged ICT strategy. The following sections describe how we attempted to address these imperatives, while developing each component of the project strategy.

### ***iii. The video component of our ICT strategy***

The video component of *Mahiti Manthana* started out with two main objectives :

1. To support MSK's ongoing I&C processes ( workshops, trainings and campaigns) through the creation of videos around the six thematic areas, the workings of government agencies and welfare schemes, and inspirational and thought-provoking real-life stories.
2. To gradually create a platform for *sangha* women to share their experiences and successes, facilitating peer to peer learning processes.

The target audience for the films were the *Mahila Samakhya* women themselves.

#### ***Mahiti Manthana Videos: A typology***

Since we were out to evolve methods of using an existing technology in a new context, we would have to also define this new method and technology. Our videos did not classify as commercial, traditional or mainstream. Nor did it fall under the category of “community video” - the form of video made by and of the community- mostly as a means of self-expression. MM video came to be governed by the following:

Videos made for MSK *sangha* women

Videos made for MSK- to aid their I&C processes

Videos made by “non-experts”

Videos made with the participation of MSK (and by MSK)

Videos made with a gender sensitive and development approach

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*,  
Bengaluru: IT for Change

The *Mahiti Manthana* project staff not only made videos on the basis of video needs identified by the *Mahila Samakhya* staff; and on the basis of their observations of information gaps identified in the *Mahila Samakhya* processes and grassroots level information needs of *sangha* women. Not only did the project staff make the videos; they also trained village level women and MSK resource persons in the conceptual and technical aspects of making videos. One of the *sangha* women learned to handle the camera so well that she managed to shoot video footage of a MSK event which she attended in New Delhi – this footage with some help from the *Prakriye* team of IT for Change, was transformed into a film – *Halliyinde Dillige* (From the village to Delhi). One of the films made by a MSK Staff Member – *Namma Akkandira Nodi* (Breaking Gender Stereotypes) has turned out to be one of the most popular films in the video bank of the project.

Some of the videos made as part of the Mahiti Manthana project are listed below.

<b>Sl.</b>	<b>Video</b>
1.	<b>Three Standing Committees</b> A film providing information about the Three Standing committees of the <i>Panchayat</i> - Agriculture, Infrastructure and Minority Welfare
2.	<b>Through the eyes of the Children</b> A film on children's responses to a gender sensitization programme
3.	<b>Women and ICTs</b>
4.	<b><i>Sangha mane</i> (The House of the <i>sangha</i>)</b> Under the <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> programme, village level <i>sanghas</i> are given funds for constructing their own building if they manage to get land allocated by the <i>Panchayat</i> . Naturally, this involves a process of

<b>Sl.</b>	<b>Video</b>
	bargaining and negotiating with the power elite, and is considered a huge re-affirmation of strength by the <i>sanghas</i> . This film showed one <i>sangha's</i> fight for a <i>sangha</i> mane ( in Attiguppe village)
5.	<b><i>Arogya Sakhi</i></b> A video focussing on health education
6.	<b>Menstruation</b> A video dealing with the social and biological aspects of menstruation
7.	<b><i>Bank mattu Sangha (The Bank and Sangha)</i></b> A film exploring the relation ship of <i>sanghas</i> with banks, focussing on procedural aspects of savings and accessing credit.
8.	<b><i>Sangha Sabala Sakshara</i></b> A film on women's experiences in a 48 day literacy camp held in Hunsur for <i>sangha</i> women, at the end of which the women were to be evaluated by the Department of Education.
12.	<b>Attiguppe Village Mapping process</b> A film of the village mapping process as a part of data collection about the village by the Attiguppe <i>Namma Mahiti Kendra</i> (Village information centre)
13.	<b><i>Huduga Oppigena</i></b> A film on role plays by adolescent girls from the villages, made at a training camp conducted by MSK, dealing with issues of choice in marriage.
14.	<b><i>Sanghada Sangaati Kelu Sakhi:</i></b> A film on collective listening of the <i>Kelu Sakhi</i> community radio programme by Chamanahalli Hundi village <i>sangha</i> women

Source: *Prakriye* field centre, 2011

In March 2007, the video component was approved in MSK's annual plan – which meant that MSK staff were officially allowed to spend some of their time on this component. Some

MSK staff quite enthusiastically took up the task of directing videos. The experience of working with a MSK staff member for the video component, is recounted in the box below.

**The making of *Namma Akkandira Nodi* (Breaking Gender Stereotypes)- The film making experience of a MSK staff member**

Savita (MSK Resource Person) stepped forward to make her first film. Savita thought of a visual that was so powerful that it had stayed in her mind always. She then thought of a way this visual (and the story behind it) could be used at a training MSK conducted. At the staff meeting, she mentioned: "I have heard that J..... of Hosavaranchi tills the land. It is an image that to me is so powerful- this small thin woman doing a "man's work". She explained that at the gender sensitisation training sessions, the men retort- "You might say that men and women are equal, but women can never till the land." Savita said that she would like to show the visual of J..... tilling the land, at this point in the training.

At the staff meeting, Savita had nothing more thought out than this much. "How should we take it forward?"-she asked. A month later, on the day she had fixed, Savita came over to our office to find a way to take the idea forward. After talking about the subject, we arrived at the following objective for the video:

Break the gender stereotype: to show that women too do what is typically termed "man's work". Practice and confidence are the only prerequisites.

I gave her pointers to build her video. Always thinking of the objective in mind, detail out what you want to say. Then think of HOW you are going to say it. The tough part is always- the transition from thinking about the message you want to communicate (and putting it into words) to communicating it through the image. Getting your subject to literally say what you want them to say is easier decided. This is only half exploiting the medium. The better part is to use visuals to speak for you. With Savita's film (*Namma Akkandira Nodi – Breaking Gender Stereotypes*), this discussion was so exciting because the scope for visual communication was high. She had started her idea with an IMAGE in her mind!

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*,  
Bengaluru: IT for Change

We also tried to introduce the concept of *Sangha Shaale* ( the *Sangha Classroom* ) as a basis for a new pedagogical approach where women could self-direct their learning processes by watching and discussing videos, based on their information needs. This concept, despite a lot of efforts, caught on only to a limited extent, and that too, only in the villages of Hosavaranchi and Chamanahalli Hundi, where it was an occasional activity at the *Mahiti Kendras* (information centres) set up by the project. Some of the reasons why the *sangha shaale* concept did not take off very well, have been explored in the impact study, and are recounted in Chapter 5 of this report.

#### ***iv. The Radio component of our ICT strategy***

The radio component of our ICT strategy was developed on the basis of exposure visits to other community radio interventions and discussions with MSK. The radio component of our strategy comprises of a weekly radio programme broadcast every Monday evening at 9 pm, over the *Gyanvani* FM of the Karnataka State Open University. The timing for the broadcast was fixed after consultations with *sangha* women. *Sangha* women told us that they usually hold their weekly savings meetings at 8 pm on Monday- and hence, broadcasting the programme at 9 pm would be convenient, as they would be able to come together for the savings meeting and then stay on to listen to the programme. *Kelu Sakhi* first went on air on November 27 2006 and regular broadcasts were commenced from December 25 of the same year. The programme has never been off air since then.

#### **Communicating to a Dispersed Audience : The *Kelu Sakhi* model**

With GoI opening up community radio licenses to NGOs, we need to examine the pros and cons of a programme on community radio and a programme like *Kelu Sakhi*.

When is one model more suitable than the other?

The main characteristic of community radio is that the community owns the station. The content on the radio is of, by and for the community. The range of broadcast is about 5-6 km. This kind of radio is useful for a community bounded by a specific geographic area but not for a community that identifies itself otherwise, for eg. a community of sugarcane farmers, a community of women entrepreneurs and so on. Ownership is very high when the station is community run and community specific problems can be addressed through the programmes. With planning and partnerships the airtime can be shared with other NGOs and communities;

and there can be day long broadcasts. 24 hours of airtime is available and different projects with different objectives can share it. This means that the content production team should have the necessary skills to produce content in a very systematic way.

*Kelu Sakhi* which is the radio programme of MSK *sangha* women is a programme without a dedicated station. *Kelu Sakhi* does not buy time but is broadcast on the Open University frequency. The broadcast covers the entire district. It addresses a specific community that is distributed across the district. Because of its coverage, it reaches the MSK *sangha* women. The content on the programme is guided by MSK's agenda and the over-all content is aimed at women's empowerment. The content could also come from external resources although it is primarily of, by and for the women. The purpose of a programme like *Kelu Sakhi* is very defined. Airtime available is set and defined by availability at *Gyanvani*. The *Kelu Sakhi* model is ideal for organisations like MSK that need to communicate to a dispersed audience.

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*,  
Bengaluru: IT for Change

There was a lot of difficulty in finding appropriate scriptwriters, songwriters for the signature tunes and compères for the weekly programme because of our expectations on the guidelines which scripts should adhere to (outlined in the box below).

**Guidelines for scripting the Kelu Sakhi weekly radio programmes:**

1. Language: It should be written in colloquial Kannada. We use the mix of three dialects (Hunsur, H.D Kote and Nanjangud *taluks*) in order to make the target audience feel that the language used is their own.
2. Names of the characters: This might seem like a minor detail but it really makes a difference. We have collected the common names for women, men, young girls and boys in the project area and we go back to it this each time we need a new name. We take care to use names which do not give away the caste identity of a character and can belong to any caste group.
3. Tone: The characters should not be experts but should be curious about new information or new ways of looking at things. So, the tone of the script has to be in a peer to peer sharing

mode and it cannot be top down.

4. Addressing questions: Anticipating the common questions with respect to the subject of the programme (belief systems – Gender stereotypes, traditional practices, mainstream ideas) and discussing them in the programme itself. The more questions answered or discussed the more powerful the script.

5. Information Covered: One feature cannot exceed 6-7 minutes in order to keep up the interest and thus a feature cannot address the subject taken up, in entirety. Focus is important. For example – when we write a feature on Property Rights, we have to decide before hand, whether we are going to cover the technical information or social aspect of it or whether should there be a balance between both etc. These decisions are important to make before writing as it will help in thinking about future programmes or complimentary features on the same subject.

6. Acknowledging greyness: Using interaction between the characters to build a conflict and suggest remedies is a helpful framing device. The programmes should never talk about absolute 'right or wrong' solutions, but wonder about many possibilities and the approaches to dealing with the issue discussed.

7. No stereotyping: A character is not made fun of on the basis of gender, religion, caste, economic status, literacy levels, marital status, and age. Stereotypes are never reinforced. Characters are not judged on the basis of their information levels and attitudes. We always try to build positive images and thinking.

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

Finally, a *Prakriye* project team member took upon the task of writing the script and compering the programme for a long time, until one of the *sakhis* (an info-intermediary from a *Mahiti Kendra* set up under the project, discussed in the subsequent section) , came forward at a later stage to take upon this responsibility. At present, many of the staff of *Prakriye* have acquired the skills to script the programme.

Similarly, many content generation processes had to be experimented with, until the project team hit upon the ones that worked : requisitioning MSK staff for content for a weekly update slot on MSK activities; introducing a phone-in feature where listeners could give

feedback; and also introducing a system where *sanghas* could offer to provide content through a telephone call to the *Prakriye* team after which the team would go to the village for a radio recording after fixing a date in consultation with the *sangha*. The phone-in component helped us realise that women outside the *taluks* where the project was operating were tuning in, such as women from K.R.Nagara and Periyapatna in Mysore; and sometimes there were even listeners from the neighbouring state of Kerala, tuning in !

**Artists, thinkers and talkers : Understanding the *sangha* women we interact with for producing *Kelu Sakhi***

At the outset many subjects seem like potential ideas to explore. But, they do not work all the time due to the heterogeneous nature of the *sanghas* and the sort of meetings we go to in order to record the programmes. *Sangha* women fall under the following categories.

1.Artists: These are the women who sing well and can say riddles non stop. They are not always good talkers. We have to record what they already know well.

2.Thinkers: They are usually found in the leadership roles.....and they are the dreams of ideators. When such women speak, all the programme requires is good editing. . .

3.Talkers: These are the women who can talk if the method used is correct ... They talk well about issues which are camouflaged as very simple daily life things. For instance, things such as the changing experiences of going to the town market, changing festival celebrations, the benefits of going to school, etc. These programmes work with a crisp edit and good comper who can pitch the programme in the way we want it.

When we first started out with the weekly radio programme, we collected ideas from *sangha* women, from MSK staff and we ideated as a team. We thus had a comprehensive list to chose from. We sat in the team, before the *sangha* meetings where we could record, and then decided formats which were suitable for the subject. This approach did not really yield positive results all the time.

After realising the importance of understanding the strengths of the women we are doing a recording with, we changed our approach. Now, based on this classification of talkers and thinkers, we come up with suitable ideas. The team thinks of simple but fun ideas and simple but thought provoking ideas. One example for simple and fun ideas is – Talking about festivals,

how is it done, why do they celebrate it, and what they cook for the festival etc. Or, asking women to share their experiences of the marriage ceremony – what happened on that day, what did they wear, how old were they etc. (majority did not remember what they wore because they were too young and the compere connected it to child marriage). The ideation has to happen before each *sangha* meeting we attend for recording.

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

Similarly, the format of the radio programme went through many ideational steps and also evolved in the course of our implementation process. The format for “*Kelu Sakhi*” initially followed the model outlined below:

**Slot 1:** Sangha dhvani-5 minutes

This is a space for women to share their stories, achievements and experiences. The idea is to create a feeling in every sangha woman's mind that she will definitely feature on this slot one day.

**Slot 2:** Tan Tara Tan - 5-6 minutes.

This is a discussion slot shared by sangha women and kishoris (adolescent girls). The discussions are around burning problems like alcohol, domestic violence, property rights and caste system in schools. At present, the women no longer need a facilitator for the discussions; they only need to be briefed ahead of it. This was meant to be an open and flexible slot, but one which had progressed well and reached its present form.

**Slot 3:** Filler or song

**Slot 4:** KSOU advertisement- 5 minutes

**Slot 5:** MSK slot: 3-6 minutes

A story/ feature/ discussion/play presented by MSK, followed by announcements

**Slot 6: Humour Series: 6-7 minute**

This slot uses a scripted format and fixed characters. Initially, ITfC held scriptwriting workshops with well known script writers in the state. Unfortunately, the outcome was rendered unusable due to reinforcement of the very stereotypes that MSK were trying to change. At this point, ITfC field coordinator Aparna took over the scripting. The main characters are- Fathima, Neelakka and Maniakka (empowered sangha women), Jayakka (anti-sangha woman), Puttathayakka (a wise old woman who could both be extremely traditional or at times agree with the sangha women-based on her own logic), Motu Beedi Siddanna (a sensitive man, plays the male stereotype, raising questions from the male perspective), Kendagannapa (wise old man who is proud of his daughter-in-law who is in the sangha) and Maadevanna (husband of a sangha woman; he was apprehensive of her joining the sangha, but is now convinced of its benefits).

While the topics covered ranges from education and literacy to legal issues and nutrition, this is developing into a slot that women follow and like to listen to. Although production of this slot is the most time consuming and laborious, it serves well as a thinking point.

Source: Model Format of Kelu Sakhi programme (Raghavaiah, 2007)

At present, there have been some changes in this model. For instance, instead of the slot on achievements/ experiences of *sangha* women, now there is a focus on capturing the experiences of even those *sangha* women who are not in leadership roles. Similarly, we have also run radio campaigns on pertinent local issues. For example, there have been radio campaigns on *panchayat* elections, menstrual hygiene etc. Recently, we have attempted to bring in a stronger sense of place and carve out some local geographic contours in the imagination of the space, within the scripts.

The radio programmes are produced and recorded in a recording studio that we have set up in the project office. Some glimpses into the impact of radio are provided in the box below.

**Radio to resolve a problem locally?**

At a village in HD Kote *taluk*, there is a woman who is beaten by her husband regularly, who is often seen with a wound or a split lip. When asked about this, she covers up the violence by saying that she had bumped into the door or some similar excuse. Her husband has a relationship with another woman in the village and all in the village are aware of the situation. Once when our field coordinator was there at the village, this woman had been beaten up the previous evening and a couple of *sangha* members who had been nearby had not done a thing to help her. Our field co-ordinator attended their *sangha* meeting that evening where one woman was taking those *sangha* members to task. She asked them what the use of belonging to a *sangha* was, if one does not get support when one most wants it. The field coordinator used this episode in a script for the serial programme. After it was aired, another woman from the village called to tell us that they had been thinking about the situation. They wanted to ask the 'other' woman to join the *sangha*. Then they wanted her to go on air because she had been critical about the battered woman having come on radio. This they thought would make the equations equal between the two women. This is a unique use of radio at the local level to resolve an issue.

***Sangha* women become consultants!**

We had featured an interview with J..... i in which she spoke about how she and the *sangha*

helped resolve a land dispute. People from the neighbouring village heard the broadcast and came to J's village looking for her.... They met her and asked her to help them resolve a similar dispute in their village. MSK's vision is that *sangha* women become resources to their village and these events show that radio can facilitate this!

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

### ***v. The Mahiti Kendras (Information Centres) component of our ICT strategy***

The *Mahiti Kendras* were conceived of as information centres at the village level, that were to be managed by the *sangha* women and operated by a young adolescent girl (*sakhi*) who would act as the information intermediary for the community. The *Mahiti Kendra* was seen as a step towards building local knowledge institutions in the village communities; and by keeping women at the centre of the information centres, it was hoped that this would help in shifting power relationships where men, landed elite and government officials tend to enjoy greater access to information.

Along the same lines, We also wanted to set up *Mahiti Kendras* at the *taluk* level, in the *taluk* offices of the *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka*. Such information centres, to be managed by the Federation Executive Committee, consisting of *sangha* women elected to the *taluk* federation, were conceptualised as a way of furthering access to information for the village level *Mahiti Kendras*. It was anticipated that the *taluk* level *sakhi* (information intermediary) because of her geographical location, could be in touch with *taluk* level government functionaries on a more regular basis, and she was to act as an information link for the village level *sakhis*.

Our first task was to shortlist villages for the village level information centres (*Namma Mahiti Kendras*). We had some basic criterion to guide us in village identification:

1. The village should be accessible by road – as a lot of travelling will be involved both for *sakhi* and for *sangha* women,
2. The village should be electrified – It should have power for at least 6 hours in the daytime so that the technologies can work,
3. The village should should have at least 200 households.

4. The *sanghas* in the village should be interested in the idea of the *Namma Mahiti Kendra*.
5. There should be at least 2 MSK *sanghas* in the village – to ensure ownership in situations of crisis and
6. The village should have at least 4-5 neighbouring villages within 3-4 kilometers for optimal reach of the *Mahiti Kendra*.

Due to the difficulties in finding villages which matched our criterion, we were able to initiate *Namma Mahiti Kendras* only in Bannikuppe, Hosavaranchi, Chamanahalli Hundi, Attiguppe and Rajegowdanahundi. However, at present, only the Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi NMKs are active- the other NMKs have closed down either temporarily because of *sakhis* resigning or because of management conflicts within *sanghas*.

Similarly, we were able to initiate *Taluk Mahiti Kendras* only in Hunsur and H.D.Kote taluks.

### ***Namma Mahiti Kendras* : Challenging popular perceptions of telecentres**

One of the major challenges for *Mahiti Manthana* was to change the perception of telecentres that many have. The general perception of a telecentre focusses on the number of transactions that happen per day or per month. That is to say the number of people coming in to avail services, the number of services that happened per day, amount collected per day, etc. This means a business approach and investment and profits analysis. At the end of the day, a business model relies on technology to control the processes in the communities. But *Mahiti Manthana* NMKs are purely empowerment oriented. We set out with the basic approach of developmental model, a sustainable model (not just financially), an empowering model which focused on community ownership.

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

Our insistence on finding a *sakhi* – a young adolescent girl as an information intermediary has sometimes not been well received in the community.

### **Some difficulties in finding the right *sakhi***

**Caste barriers** - A lot of adolescents who were willing to work as *sakhi* were not allowed by their parents as either they were from dalit community and were not allowed to walk into upper caste areas, or were from upper caste areas and were not allowed to walk in the dalit community.

**Gender issues** - There was always pressure from the community (especially men) to take on boys for this post. Travel, technology, skills and livelihoods were perceived as men's domains.

**Skills** - It was a great difficulty to find a *sakhi* with computer skills. So, we also started focusing on contributing towards enhancing this skill while training *sakhis*.

**Cultural barriers** - Girls working outside home was firstly seen as not so acceptable by communities. Also, girls' traveling to other places was objectionable to many people in the village including their families.

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

Similarly, the structure for the Managing Committee (MC) of the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* as designed by us, took some time to be totally accepted by *sangha* women and MSK staff.

### **Our experience in forming Managing Committees for the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* (NMK)**

The [MC] was designed to enhance the true ownership, accountability and transparency at the village level. This committee handles the day to day affairs of the NMK, monitors *sakhi* activities, takes all the decision pertaining to NMK.

The committee consists of one representative from each *sangha* in the village. We also decided to include *Stri Shakti Sangha* women in it. (*Stri Shakti* is a Karnataka state project under which rural women are formed into collectives and the main activities of these *sanghas* are savings and credit). Each *sangha* (both MSK and *Stri Shakti*) elects or nominates one person to be included in the MC.

Decisions on fixing charges for NMK services, and the activities that the NMK should focus on initially and what to take up next, are taken up by the MC. Initially there would be no quorum (which is a requirement that at least 60% of the committee members are

present during any decision taken in the MC) (...) This forum of MC was something new and so women thought that we were not serious about quorum(...) But we decided we would not go with the general practice of proxy followed by many *sanghas*.

We used to cancel meetings that did not have a quorum and ask women come back. This, over a period of time, had serious impact on women. They realised that MC is not just another committee that happens without a quorum(...)

The MC meets at least once a month. In this meeting, they take stock of the situation in the NMK, they review the previous month's activities that the *sakhi* has done, and they plan for the coming month (...)we have some women who are really well aware of all the processes that happen in the village.

A second line leadership, that was mostly lacking in many village level *sanghas*, has started emerging.

– Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

The *Mahiti Kendras* set up under the project have now become spaces that host community databases; provide information about government departments, schemes and public services; and create awareness about entitlements such as old age pensions, disability pension, state support for the mentally ill and so on. Revenue generating activities such as DTP, photography and internet surfing also happen in the *Mahiti Kendras* to a limited extent. The potential of linking the *Mahiti Kendras* to other government programmes, such as e-district, and tie-ups between local government and *Mahiti Kendras* for administrative work, are possibilities that can be explored to ensure financial sustainability of the centres in the long run. However, a word of caution – sustainability of these information centres should not be cast in financial terms alone. For:

“It may not actually be possible to monetise every benefit and even if this were possible, the target group may just not have the resources to pay service charges. In such cases, the sustainability of an intervention has to be judged on whether the scale of benefits delivered is a good return on the development investments made. If the level of benefits are high enough (and can be expected to continue to be so) as compared to the investments made/ costs incurred, an intervention can be considered sustainable in terms of useful public/ communal investment for creating public/communal goods” (IT for Change, 2005).

Though the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* and the *Taluk Mahiti Kendras* have taken off in a more limited way that we had planned for, our experiences have helped us realize that this intervention is bringing in some changes at the village level.

Some examples are cited below:

- In Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi NMKs after the household profile was done, we had the health department contact us for information! The health worker who was visiting the village came to know of the information collected by the NMK, regarding children and pregnant women in the village. She was also supposed to collect the same information for the Primary Health Centre. She approached the NMK *sakhi* and asked whether she could get a copy of the information. The MC decided to share it free of cost as a rapport building aspect this time and charge it from the next time onwards.
- During the Hosavaranchi *gram sabha*, we discussed entitlements in the meeting to the leaders of the village. One of them was a GP member and another was the president of the GP. As soon as they came to know that we would be taking up entitlements, they called one of the *sangha* leaders, and told her that it is very important that she makes a list of all the widows, disabled, etc in the village and they will personally take it up and get it done.

- Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming),  
*Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

## E) Conclusion

The processes initiated in the *Mahiti Manthana* project have continued to thrive on field. Since mid 2008, we have been trying to completely withdraw after handing over the management of the radio programme and the video component, as well as the running of the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* to *Mahila Samakhya*. However, this has been taking a lot of time due to the flux that the *Mahila Samakhya* programme finds itself in, due to changing governmental priorities as detailed in Chapter 2 of this report. The Mysore unit of *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* is still attempting to hone its own withdrawal strategy, and the existing pressures on programmatic staff to use *Mahila Samakhya* structures for meeting the Department of Education's literacy and enrolment drive targets makes the carving out of

a sustainable institutionalised space for *Mahiti Manthana*, within MSK, a difficult endeavour. Meanwhile, we continue in our attempts to effect a full handover.

Our experiential learning during the implementation of the *Mahiti Manthana* on the effects of the ICT components on *sanghas* and MSK processes, motivated us to initiate this research study for a more systematic assessment of the impacts of *Mahiti Manthana*. The objectives of the study, the research methodology adopted and our experiences of carrying out the study are detailed in the following chapter. Before we move on to the next chapter, we detail out the Project Timeline of Activities.

F) *Mahiti Manthana*: Project Timeline of Activities

<b>Project Timeline: <i>Mahiti Manthana</i></b>				
<b>Time period</b>	<b>Overall activities</b>	<b>Video</b>	<b>Radio</b>	<b>Namma Mahiti Kendras</b>
2005 September		The first video for <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> was shot in September 2005- it was the filming of a MSK gender sensitization training for men		
2005 October	Baseline survey for the project was completed			
2005 November				
2005 December	Exposure visits for <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> project implementation team to other community radio and community telecentre initiatives	Filming the General Body meeting of <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> at Nanjangud taluk where the annual elections to the taluk EC take place – the first official video shoot of the project		
2006 January	Continuing Exposure visits to other Community ICT interventions			
2006 January-February	Participating in and Observing <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> events and meetings to gauge the pulse, identify information gaps, especially to determine the kind of videos required			Process for identification of villages for setting up <i>Namma Mahiti Kendras</i>
2006 February	Continuing to participate in <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> processes			
2006 March		Video Documentation of <i>Nari Adalat</i> for MSK		NMK inaugurated in Attiguppe Village on March 1 2006

2006 March		Production of first video film for training: “Three Standing Committees of the Panchayat”		
2006 March	Recruiting Project Assistants for Mysore unit			
2006 March		Capacity Building of Project Assistants for developing video skills	Capacity Building of Project Assistants for developing Audio Skills	Capacity Building of Project Assistants for enhancing social work skills
2006 April				NMK inaugurated in Chamanahalli Hundi Village on March 1 2006
2006 May		Production of video on telecentres: “Into the new horizons”		Management Committees of <i>sangha</i> women are formed to run the NMKs. They meet monthly, and are active even now.
2006 June			We and MSK agree for a weekly radio programme that would focus on a sangha women audience. MSK names this programme “Kelu Sakhi” meaning “Listen, my friend”	NMK possibility explored in two other villages but dropped as they did not satisfy criterion
2006 July-September	We tried to introduce the concept of <i>Sangha Shaale</i> ( <i>Sangha</i> classroom) – a new pedagogical approach where sanghas at the village level would jointly watch videos, discuss them and start their own processes of collective learning through requisitioning MSK resource persons and MM staff for videos to meet their self-identified information needs. This idea took off to a limited extent in two villages- Hosavaranchi and Chamanahalli Hundi but nowhere was it sustained long enough to be labelled a success.	Video on <i>Sangha Mane</i> (meaning <i>Sangha</i> House) was filmed. MSK provides funds to sanghas to construct a building of their own if they can succeed in getting land allotted for this purpose from the village <i>panchayat</i> . As one can imagine this involves a process of negotiating and bargaining with the power elite of the village, so for many <i>sanghas</i> , succeeding in getting a <i>sangha mane</i> is a huge re-affirmation of their ability to maneuver power relationships in the village. This video intended to motivate <i>sanghas</i> without <i>sangha mane</i> to start negotiating processes for acquiring one.	Partnership finalised with Karnataka State Open University for 30 minutes air time on their FM	Training sangha women who were in the Management Committees of NMKs, the basic computer skills

2006 July-September		Working with Health and Legal Thematic Committees within <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> to identify information needs that videos could supplement	Identified scriptwriters and tried holding a workshop with them to generate content for radio show but strategy failed	
2006 July-September			Also tried to form a Radio Committee of MSK resource persons and MM project staff but strategy failed	
2006 September			Second exposure visit to seek advice on equipment for radio recordings	
2006 September		Two videos were produced -Know your <i>Arogya Sakhi</i> (the <i>sangha</i> women who are part of the health committee in the thematic division followed in MSK) and Dealing with Menstruation	MM project staff put in their own efforts to design content for radio. Process of content bank building begins and is ongoing.	
2006 October		Video on “Bank and <i>Sangha</i> ” produced- it deals with issues of savings by MSK <i>sanghas</i> , procedures to be followed while applying bank loan and tries to familiarise the viewer with banking facilities	Finding compere artists and recording of signature tune for radio programme	
2006 November			Inaugural Broadcast of “ <i>Kelu Sakhi</i> ” on 27 November 2006. The programme has not been off air since then.	Visits to departments begin for collecting information for <i>Mahiti Kendras</i> . In Attiguppe, briefed village community at the <i>Gram sabha</i> about <i>Mahiti Kendra</i> . Also began village household level survey at Attiguppe through <i>Mahiti Kendra sakhi</i> as government information about village was found lacking

2006 December	We tried a strategy of building clusters of villages with a NMK village in the middle, which would also enable generation of micro level content or radio and video, but this strategy failed because of difficulty in matching our criterion for identification of NMK with <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> criterion	Filming the video “ <i>Huduga Oppigena</i> ” ( Is the boy suitable?) - a role play by adolescent girls ( <i>kishoris</i> ) in the <i>kishori</i> skill building camp organised by MSK. The role play focused on discussing the girls' views on handling situations around marriage choices.		
2007 January		Filming the video <i>Sangha Sabala Saakshara</i> (Together, Strong, Literate)- a film on a 48 day literacy camp that was held in January 2007 in Mullur <i>taluk</i> at the end of which they would be evaluated by officials from the Education Department. The idea for the film came from MSK staff who felt it would be motivational for other <i>sangha</i> women to attend literacy.		Inauguration of <i>Namma Mahiti Kendra</i> at Hosavaranchi village . During this period, the NMKS begin providing information about various schemes , State services and entitlements under welfare programmes. They continue to do that even today.
2007 February		Filming of village mapping data collection exercise of NMK in Attiguppe , Video on “Breaking Gender Stereotypes is Shot”	Collective listening of weekly radio programme by <i>sanghas</i> is advocated. This means that MM gave out radio sets at subsidised rates to <i>sanghas</i> interested in purchasing them and the <i>sangha</i> women were encouraged to collectively listen to the radio programme and discuss it among themselves. MSK staff encouraged <i>sanghas</i> to hold their weekly savings meetings after the radio programme, as a way of facilitating this.	
2007 March	Inclusion of radio and video components into MSK's annual plan. This means that MSK resource person can formally invest part of their time in these processes.			

2007 March	Workshop on Radio for MSK staff held by MM project staff: to introduce MSK staff to the intricacies of managing a radio programme, including content generation.	As the collective listening process had many takers, it was decided to shoot a video on it. The MM team also shot a second video on “Breaking Gender Stereotypes” inspired by the success of the first one.		NMK <i>Sakhis</i> start visiting government department on a regular basis and interacting with officials for information.
2007 April		Workshop with <i>sangha</i> women on video to introduce them to technical as well as ideational aspects of making videos	Workshop on Radio was conducted for <i>sangha</i> women and adolescent girls (kishoris) from village communities to generate content ideas as well as discuss their experiences with collective listening.	Training NMK <i>sakhis</i> in digital photography to add to revenue generating potential of telecentres.
2007 May			MM team takes over as comperes for the radio show.	
2007 May			Equipment for recording radio programme and radio studio set up at MM office in Mysore	Workshop on RTI for <i>sangha</i> women at Mysore office, to enhance information processes at community level and pro-activity in engagement with officials
2007 December	<i>Taluk</i> information centres are set up at MSK offices in Hunsur and H.D.Kote offices. They are to be managed by the Federation Executive Committee, annually elected from the <i>sangha</i> women from the village level <i>sanghas</i> , working together with the CRPs and JRPs. These <i>Mahiti Kendras</i> also appoint a ' <i>sakhi</i> ', to function as information intermediary. The <i>taluk level sakhi</i> is expected to collect information from government departments at <i>taluk</i> levels and pass it on to <i>sakhis</i> of village level <i>Mahiti Kendras</i> , strengthening information linkages. The Hunsur <i>taluk Kendra</i> continues to be operational though the H.D. Kote <i>Kendra</i> closed down due to managerial issues.		<i>Kelu Sakhi</i> completes one year	

2008 January		First video of department profile was shot at the Hunsur <i>tehsildar's</i> office	Recording women's voice for inclusion in <i>Kelu Sakhi</i> are shifted from <i>taluk</i> level to cluster level meetings but this does not generate sufficient content.	NMK established at Rajegowdanahundi village. However, the NMK closes down later due to managerial problems within the Management Committee of sangha women.
2008 January				The possibility of setting up a NMK is explored in Nellithalpure, Masage and Kolagala villages but is dropped due to lack of enthusiasm among <i>sanghas</i> .
2008 February			CRU	NMK outreach is begun. This means that NMKs have to consciously reach out to a cluster of 1-2 villages that are close to the village where the NMK is located.
2008 May		Video Film showcasing the <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> project is completed.		
2008 May	<i>Mahiti Manthana</i> Field office takes on the identity of Centre for Community Informatics and Development (rechristened <i>Prakriye</i> in 2010) as it has started helping other development organisations adopt digital technology to restructure their methods, supporting them to revisit their goals in the context of our contemporary reality that is an unique amalgam of the technical and the social			

2008 May onwards	<p>The processes initiated in the <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> project have continued to thrive on field. Since mid 2008, we have been trying to completely withdraw after handing over the management of the radio programme, video component and financial support for the <i>sakhis</i> of <i>Namma Mahiti Kendras</i> to <i>Mahila Samakhya</i>. However, this has been taking a lot of time due to the flux that the <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> programme finds itself in, due to changing governmental priorities as detailed in Chapter 1 of the report.</p>		
2009 December onwards	<p>Ideation for Impact Assesment study of <i>Mahiti Manthana</i> begins. It is hoped that the findings from this study can help in persuading <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> to totally integrate MM within its activities, after being convinced of the potential of the MM components in strengthening MSK processes. It is also hoped that this impact study will generate learnings and point to strategic failures that can be taken on board when implementing a similar intervention elsewhere or scaling this up to other locations of MSK, as originally planned.</p>		

#### 4. Research methodology: An evaluation study based upon the theory of change framework

The two premises ( or in the Weissian phraseology, “the two theories of change ) that have guided the *Mahiti Manthana* project are(IT for Change, 2009):

1. Community informatics as a development methodology transforms the collective learning-action processes of grassroots groups in a manner that enables a power shift that positively impacts *sanghas* and *sangha* women by:

- a. displacing information gatekeeping and control
- b. decentralising information access, use and appropriation
- c. carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere; in other words, enabling *sangha* women to emerge as a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1991).

2. New ICTs enhance intra-organisational information sharing and communication systems of geographically dispersed and institutionalised development interventions (in this case,*Mahila Samakhya*) in a manner that effects greater participation and inclusion of organisational peripheries.

This evaluation study has essentially been an enquiry into how the two premises have unfolded over the course of the project, and the extent to which the vision of empowerment guiding the project has been realised on the ground. Therefore, the evaluation study has attempted a systematic reconstruction of the experiences of the various groups involved in the project, especially focusing on the *sangha* women most impacted by the project, through a critical reading of *sangha* women's accounts of the impact of *Mahiti Manthana* on their life experiences.

#### A) Introduction

This research study was conceptualised in 2009 in an attempt to systematically assess the impact of the *Mahiti Manthana* project which, until then, had only been sporadically captured by the team implementing the project, at various points of time as a part of their documentation of their experiential learning from the project.

This research study adopts a “theory of change evaluation framework” (Weiss, 1972) which attempts to overcome the limitations of indicator based evaluation research , by shifting the focus of evaluation from the question of whether a developmental intervention has

produced certain outcomes, to asking 'why' and 'how' these outcomes have emerged (Connell and Kubisch, 1998); and by emphasising the evaluation of the contextual understanding guiding a particular intervention (ibid). To put it more simply, a Theory of Change approach to evaluation recognises that every programmatic intervention is based upon explicit or implicit theories of how and why the programme will work, founded upon a certain understanding of the larger context within which the programme is embedded. Therefore, evaluation must be an exercise in assessing the soundness of these theories guiding a particular intervention, through a systematic reconstruction of the intervention experience from multiple perspectives.

Hence, for our present research study, we first mapped the theories of change which guided the *Mahiti Manthana* project, and then tried to analyse to what extent these theories have proved to be sound, through a systematic reconstruction of the unfolding of the project. This reconstruction was based on a systematic mapping of the multiple perspectives on the project, from the various groups most closely involved in it – the *sangha* women who are the target of the intervention, the resource persons of *Mahila Samakhya* working in the three *taluks* where *Mahiti Manthana* has been implemented, and the field team of *Prakriye* (Centre for Community Informatics and Development) who manage the everyday running of the project.

This chapter first outlines the theories of change which guided the *Mahiti Manthana* project, and then goes on to explain the methodology we used to systematically map the perspectives of the various groups involved in the project. It closes with a reflection on the challenges encountered while carrying out the research. The subsequent chapters discuss the findings from the research and their larger implications.

## **B) The theories of change, guiding the *Mahiti Manthana* project**

The *Mahiti Manthana* project certainly does not belong to the first generation of ICTD projects which were founded on an extremely instrumentalist understanding of technologies. These first-generation projects had considered technologies to be merely efficiency enhancing tools, and hence their designs did not go beyond hoisting technologies onto communities. Therefore, they were ill equipped to effectively deal with the impact of

the complex interactions that emerge between technologies and cultures when new technologies are introduced (Saith & Vijayabaskar, 2008); and hence, many of these projects failed to produce the desired outcomes<sup>15</sup>.

In fact, the new discipline of Community Informatics emerged from a systematic attempt to overcome the limitations of the value-neutral approaches to technologies that guided many of the first generation ICTD projects, through an emphasis on building a community perspective towards information and communication technologies. Community Informatics “brings together the concepts of IT and information systems with the concept of community development” (Gurstein, 2007) and is founded on the understanding that

“geographically-based communities (also known as “physical” or “geo-local” communities) have characteristics, requirements and opportunities that require different strategies for ICT intervention and development different from widely accepted models of individual or in-home computer/Internet access and use – something earlier ICTD approaches failed to take adequate notice of” (ibid).

*Mahiti Manthana*, with its objective of developing a comprehensive ICT based strategy for strengthening the *Mahila Samakhya sangha* women's journey towards empowerment is clearly based on a Community Informatics approach. For, firstly, the ICT based strategy of the project has emerged from a non-instrumental vision of ICTs; the project wants to harness the potential of ICTs (particularly radio, video and computers) in further enhancing the *sangha* women's ability to question existing social power hierarchies and negotiate social power relationships. As the previous chapter demonstrates, within the *Mahiti Manthana* project, ICTs have certainly not been seen as mere tools for enhancing the efficiency of the activities of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

Secondly, the team designing the *Mahiti Manthana* project has always been fully aware of the potential of the project to bring about a transformative impact on the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, as the following excerpt from the Detailed Project Report 2005 elucidates:

“[the project recognises that].. the new ICTs, if leveraged and employed creatively and contextually, can be so empowering that their use with respect to even a few organisational processes, is bound to impact the entire organisation-its activities, strategies and goals” (IT for Change, 2005).

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<sup>15</sup> For a further discussion on the need for recognizing the co constitutive relationship between technologies and societies in ICTD interventions, see Sarukkai, S. (2008), 'Culture of Technology & ICTs' in Saith, A., Vijayabaskar, M and Gayathri, V. (eds.), *ICTs and Indian Social Change : Diffusion, Poverty and Governance*, New Delhi : Sage Publications.

More explicitly, the two premises (or in the Weissian phraseology, “the two theories of change” ) that have guided the *Mahiti Manthana* project are (IT for Change, 2009):

1. Community informatics as a development methodology transforms the collective learning-action processes of grassroots groups in a manner that enables a power shift that positively impacts *sanghas* and *sangha* women by:

- a. Displacing information gate-keeping and control
- b. Decentralising information access, use and appropriation
- c. Carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere; in other words, enabling *sangha* women to emerge as a “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1991).

2. New ICTs enhance intra-organisational information sharing and communication systems of geographically dispersed and institutionalised development interventions (in this case, *Mahila Samakhya*) in a manner that effects greater participation and inclusion of organisational peripheries.

*Mahiti Manthana* is clearly geared towards realising a particular vision of empowerment, which very closely resembles the BRIDGE Report's conceptualisation of empowerment as the “power to, with and within” (Oxaal and Baden, 1997) ; for the project is focused on aiding the processes through which “women as individuals and as collectives [can]mediate and challenge those structures and institutions that re-inforce their unequal position in society” (Swamy, 2007).

The evaluation study was essentially an enquiry into how the two premises have unfolded over the course of the project, and the extent to which the vision of empowerment guiding the project has been realised on the ground. Therefore, the evaluation study has attempted a systematic reconstruction of the experiences of the various groups involved in the project, especially focusing on the *sangha* women most impacted by the project, through a critical reading of *sangha* women's accounts of the impact of *Mahiti Manthana* on their life experiences.

### **C) Evaluation design and methodology**

An integrated design with a control group was adopted for this evaluation study. It is well acknowledged that evaluation studies benefit from comparing an 'action' group that received the intervention under evaluation, with a 'control' group sharing all the characteristics of the action group except that of being exposed to the intervention under study (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). Therefore, the methodology consisted of comparing the experiences of two action

groups with different levels of exposure to the project, with a control group that was not exposed to the project.

For this evaluation research, we studied the following groups:

**Group A (control group):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project, who were not aware of the radio programme, the videos, and the information centres – in other words, women who were unexposed to the project.

**Group B ( action group 1):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project who were aware of the radio and the video components of the project, but who were from villages that did not have information centres set up under the project.

**Group C (action group 2):** *Sangha* women from the three *taluks* in Mysore covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project who were aware of the radio and the video components of the project, and who also belonged to villages with functional information centres set up under the project.

In-depth interviews were conducted with women from each of the three groups, selected through a purposive sampling technique by members of the team implementing the *Mahiti Manthana* project. The interview schedule that was used, is enclosed at **Annexure 1**, at the end of the chapter. The interviews aimed at capturing *sangha* women's perceptions of the project's influence on their collective learning processes; their perceptions about the potential of ICTs to bring about a transformation at an individual and a collective level; their perspectives on the newly emerging space for subaltern counterpublics within the local public sphere because of *Mahiti Manthana*; and any changes in women's experiences of *Mahila Samakhya* activities and processes in the post-*Mahiti Manthana* period. One pilot interview was conducted with one participant from each of the three groups, in order to streamline and improve the interview schedule, before conducting the actual interviews for the research study.

The insights from the in-depth interviews were triangulated by interviewing *Mahila Samakhya* resource persons working in the *Mahiti Manthana* project area, as well as a detailed examination of the project planning and process documentation maintained by the team implementing the project ( the team from *Prakriye*- Centre for Community Informatics and Development; the IT for Change field centre in Mysore).

#### **D) Challenges encountered in the research process**

The in-depth interviews with the *sangha* women were conducted over a two month period, from September 2010 to October 2010. It was very difficult to find *sangha* women for the Group A (control group) interviews due to the deep penetration of the radio programme “*Kelu Sakhi*”. Only 6 interviews out of over 30 interviews conducted, qualified for analysis under Group A; as many a time, the interviewers realised only during the course of the interview that the women were aware of some component of the *Mahiti Manthana* project, and hence, could not qualify as members of the control group. The reason for this difficulty in identifying the control group sample lay in the intervention strategy adopted by the *Mahiti Manthana* project staff. The staff of the project implementation team at *Prakriye* had attempted to ally with *Mahila Samakhya* and adopt the *Mahila Samakhya* identity as closely as possible while implementing the project. Due to this, many *sangha* women thought that the project components were part of the larger *Mahila Samakhya* activities and did not recognize them as “*Mahiti Manthana*” components, making the initial identification process of women for the control group interviews difficult.

During the interview process, another difficulty encountered was in capturing women's perception of the changes in their individual and collective experience of *Mahila Samakhya* activities due to the radio and video components of the project. Women found it much more easier to articulate changes brought about by the information centres component of the project. In fact, the team implementing the project felt that many of the changes brought about by the radio and video components which they are aware of because of their interactions with the *sangha* women outside the interview process, failed to emerge in a formal interview setting. As one of the field researchers writes in her process document on the interview process,

“We did not get enough on radio and video and there are stories out there that are yet to be captured. Maybe this is because women are not able to reflect upon the link between the content of radio and video programmes and its influence on their actions. On the other hand, for the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* ( Village Information Centre), they were easily able to articulate the changes to their lives, resulting from it, probably because these changes were more tangible” (Thimmaiah, 2010).

Due to this challenge encountered in the research process, we have had to supplement the discussion on the research findings, with insights from interviews with the project implementers and interviews with *Mahila Samakhya* programme staff. Another challenge which we encountered was in capturing the impact of the project beyond the project area.

From anecdotal evidence, we know that the radio programme has listeners from other *taluks* in Mysore and even neighboring states. We also know that women from other *taluks* know about the *Mahiti Manthana* project because of their interactions with *sangha* women from the *taluks* covered under the *Mahiti Manthana* project, at *taluk* level meetings and events of *Mahila Samakhya*. Sometimes, some of these women have even been exposed to the project components. In order to cover this impact, we have chosen to include an interview with a woman from K.R. Nagara *taluk* ( not a part of the target area) and an interview with a MSK staff member from outside the *taluks* covered by the project, in this research study.

Accounting for the operations of the 'threshold effect' that is common to many ICT interventions, was another substantive challenge for us in this evaluation study. A threshold effect may be defined as a radical change of state within a system that suddenly manifests itself when a critical limit is crossed. (In fact, research has shown that most ICT interventions are characterised by the 'threshold effect'.) Even as we conducted the evaluation study, we had to acknowledge that we could only partially understand the project impacts at this stage in the project's life as a critical thresh-hold has not yet been reached . However, we would like to direct the readers' attention to the fact that as the three pronged ICT strategy on-ground continues, we are hopeful that at some point in the future, the project will cross a critical limit at which point, there would be a radical transformative impact on the local information ecology.

Finally, a significant challenge was in ensuring that the sampling process was satisfactory. As a lot of resources had to be invested in Group A interviews, we were able to complete only 18 interviews totally – 6 from each of the three groups; though initially, we had planned to conduct 10 interviews from each of the three groups (IT for Change, 2009). However, based upon the data analysis of the 18 interviews and a round of interviews with the senior members of the project implementation team on their experiences, we are confident that our research sample has fairly captured the divergence of perspectives on the project experience - even though the research process was not taken ahead to a point where data saturation becomes unquestionable. Hence, we believe that the insights offered by the research study are sound.

The next chapter details the main findings from the research study, outlining how the theories of change underlying the *Mahiti Manthana* project design have unfolded in actuality, along with an investigation into the possible factors influencing the project outcomes.

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## Annexure 1: Interview Schedule used in the evaluation study

### Section I (for all groups)

#### Individual and Household Level Data

Question

- (1) Age
- (2) Caste
- (3) Religion
- (4) Marital Status
- (5) Years of schooling
- (6) Household Size
- (7) Head of the Household
- (8) Main income generating activity of household
- (9) Main occupation of respondent
- (10) Type of material used in house construction
- (11) Land owned (in acres)
- (12) Annual Household Income

#### ***Mahila Samakhya Sangha* membership related information**

- (1) Years of MSK *sangha* membership
- (2) What theme committee is she a part of?
- (3) Details of any special role in *sangha* committees
- (4) Have they been in MC?
- (5) Why did you join the *Mahila Samakhya Sangha*?
- (6) What activities have you done as part of the *Sangha*?

#### **Nature of the various fora available for participation**

- (1) How many times a month do the *Mahila Samakhya* women meet in your village?
- (2) What are the various kinds of meetings that happen in the village?
- (3) What happens in the savings meetings?
- (4) What kinds of discussions happen in the savings meetings?

- (5) Can you recall some topics or issues discussed in the savings meetings recently?
- (6) What use has the information obtained from these meetings been put to by you?
- (7) What use has the information obtained from these meetings been put to by other people you know?
- (8) How many times a month does the CRP come to your village?
- (9) What happens in the CRP visits?
- (10) What are the issues you discuss in the CRP visits?
- (11) What use has the information obtained from these CRP meetings been put to by you?
- (12) What use has the information obtained from these CRP meetings been put to by other people you know?

### **Access to institutions**

- (1) Has your *sangha* accessed a loan from the bank?
- (2) How did you learn about the procedure for accessing the bank loan?
- (3) Have you ever visited a government department?
- (4) What was your experience of visiting the department like?
- (5) Why do you think women usually stay away from government departments?
- (6) Why were you able to start accessing government departments?
- (7) Has your *sangha* availed any government benefits from any department?
- (8) Have you ever availed of any benefit from a government department?
- (9) If you were to inform women from other *sanghas* about your experience in dealing with banks and government departments, how would you?

### **Gender and empowerment**

- (1) Do you think men and women are equal?
- (2) How did you develop your perspective about equality?
- (3) How do other people in your village respond to the idea that men and women are equal?
- (4) How can one change situations where men and women are treated unequally?
- (5) How can the *sangha* help in changing situations where men and women are treated unequally?
- (6) What kinds of discussions happen among *sangha* members about this idea of equality between men and women?
- (7) Is child marriage prevalent in your village?
- (8) What do you think of child marriage?

- (9) What has led you to form these views around child marriage?
- (10) Have any of your household members been involved in stopping child marriage?
- (11) Describe the engagement of your *sangha* with the issue of child marriage
- (12) What kinds of discussions happen among *sangha* members about child marriage?

### **Participation in decision making**

- (1) Does *Gram Sabha* happen in your village?
- (2) Have you ever attended the *Gram Sabha*?
- (3) Describe what happens in an usual *Gram Sabha*.
- (4) Can women speak at *Gram sabhas*?
- (5) Have you ever spoken at a *Gram Sabha*?
- (6) How are decisions made at the *Gram Sabha*?
- (7) What is your opinion about the current decision making process at the *Gram Sabha*?
- (8) If you were to inform women from other *sanghas* about your experience in dealing with banks and government departments, how would you?
- (9) In your opinion, how can women's participation in the *Gram Sabha* be enhanced?

### **Perception and use of ICTs**

- (1) How often do you listen to radio?
- (2) What programmes do you listen to on radio?
- (3) Have you ever used a computer?
- (4) What are your perceptions about computers?
- (5) Describe your experiences of watching films
- (6) Describe your experiences of watching films as a *sangha*.
- (7) Describe experiences of CRPs showing films to *sangha* women.
- (8) Have you ever used a camera?
- (9) Have you ever faced a camera?
- (10) Have you ever faced a video camera?
- (11) Have you ever used a video camera?
- (12) Describe your feelings while facing a camera.
- (13) Describe your feelings while facing a video camera.
- (14) Describe your feelings while handling a camera.
- (15) Describe your feelings while handling a video camera.

- (16) Have you heard of the *Mahiti Kendras*?
- (17) What do you know about the *Namma Mahiti Kendras*?
- (18) What do you know about the *Taluk Mahiti Kendras*?
- (19) What do you think about the idea of *sangha* women making films?

## Section II (for Group B and Group C women only)

### Respondent's exposure to Radio, Video and Mahiti Kendras under Mahiti Manthana

- (1) Has respondent appeared on *Kelu Sakhi* ?
- (2) No. of times respondent featured on *Kelu Sakhi*
- (3) No. of times she participated in creating a radio programme
- (4) No. of times she appeared in a video
- (5) No. of videos she helped create
- (6) Has respondent helped in screening videos in the village
- (7) No. of videos she has helped screen in the village
- (8) Has she been involved in NMK/TMK?
- (9) What activities of the *Mahiti Kendras* has she been a part of?

### *Kelu Sakhi*

- (1) Are there any differences between *Kelu Sakhi* and other radio programmes?
- (2) Tell us about your opinion of the *Kelu Sakhi* programmes.
- (3) Has information you heard on *Kelu Sakhi* been useful to you in your everyday life?
- (4) Do you know of instances where others have used information from *Kelu Sakhi* in their everyday life?
- (5) Have you ever spoken on radio?
- (6) Describe your feelings about speaking on radio
- (7) What did other *sangha* women say about you speaking on radio?
- (8) What do other women in your village think about the *Kelu Sakhi* programme?
- (9) How will you introduce *Kelu Sakhi* to other women in your village?

### Videos

- (1) Give feedback about the *sangha* films you have watched
- (2) What has been the impact of these *sangha* films on your life?

- (3) What has been the impact of these *sangha* films on the *sanghas*?
- (4) Are you in any of the *sangha* films?
- (5) How did it feel to be a part of the *sangha* films?
- (6) How did it feel to watch the *sangha* film(s) you were part of, with other *sangha* women?
- (7) If you were to talk about the *sangha* videos to others, what would you say?

***Mahiti Kendras***

- (1) Why did your village get a NMK?
- (2) What do you think about the impact of NMK on the *sanghas*?
- (3) What do you think about the impact of NMK on the village?
- (4) What do you understand about the role of the *sakhi* in the NMK?
- (5) What is the role of the MC?
- (6) How has the NMK affected relationships between your *sangha* and members of other *sanghas*, and other people in the village?
- (7) How do you think the TMK is different from other computer centres?
- (8) Has the TMK changed your village's relationship with government departments?

## 5. The impact of *Mahiti Manthana*: Findings from the research study

*Mahiti Manthana* has certainly transformed the existing collective learning-action processes of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* by opening up ICT-enabled peer learning processes. It has also helped in enhancing intra-organisational informational and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. Most importantly, it has carved out a space for *sangha* women in the local public sphere and has enabled *sangha* women to occupy central positions in the information ecologies of their communities.

### A) Introduction

This evaluation study emphasises a critical reading of *sangha* women's accounts of their experiences of the project. Critical reading, for us, involves a systematic attempt to understand the world views and the vocabularies that the women adopt to make sense of their life experiences, by placing the women's accounts in conjunction with their structural location. This does not mean that we are buying into a deterministic theory of ideology – where women's subjectivities are solely a function of their location in the social structure, in a reductionist Marxist fashion. We are only cautioning against an approach that attempts to understand the questions of empowerment, women's subjectivity and the politics of gender equality at the micrological level alone, as some post-structuralist projects are wont to do. For, we think that such questions can be addressed only by understanding the relationships between the macrological structures of power and the micrologies of power that operate at the level of the individual subject. With this clarity on the analytical approach adopted by the research study, let us develop an understanding of the structural location of the study participants.

All the 18 women interviewed are members of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* in Mysore district. 17 women are from the *taluks* covered by the *Mahiti Manthana* project, while one woman hails from K.R. Nagara *taluk*, which has not been targeted by the project<sup>16</sup>. On an average, the women we interviewed have been a part of *Mahila Samakhya* for a decade. 10 women have played an active role in the activities of *Mahila Samakhya* – through their association with the *Nari Adalat*, their involvement in the *Arogya Sakhi* initiative, or because of their

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 4 for details of the sampling process followed in this research study that explains the selection of one respondent from a non-project area.

election to the Executive Committee at the federation level. Almost all the women interviewed have been actively involved in one of the thematic committees of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. Moreover, all the thematic committees ( Health, Economic Development, Self Reliance, Legal, *Panchayat* and Education) have been represented in the research sample.

The participants' ages range from 28-58 years, and the median age of the participants is 41 years. Many of the participants are dalits, and one participant is Muslim. The majority of the participants are women in monogamous marriages. However, one woman we interviewed is the second wife of a man, living in the same house as his first wife. We also interviewed one unmarried woman, one widowed woman and another who is separated from her husband. Only three of the participants have been to high school; over half of the participants have not completed their primary level schooling.

On an average, the households to which the participants belong have 5 members. Half the participants said that their household income is generated from agriculture on their own land, supported by seasonal earnings from agricultural wage labour. The majority of the participants said they are engaged in work apart from their domestic work within the household – mostly, they work on the land owned by the family or work for daily wages during the agricultural season. 5 participants are from landless households, and 10 participants are from households that have landholdings of less than 2.5 acres.

Recognising the disadvantageous structural location inhabited by the majority of *sangha* women that this sample is representative of, let us proceed to examine how the theories of change and the vision of empowerment guiding the *Mahiti Manthana* project have unfolded on the ground.

## **B) *Mahiti Manthana*: Transforming the collective learning-action processes of *sangha* women**

Firstly, we should understand the collective learning processes experienced by the *sangha* women, because of their involvement in *Mahila Samakhya*. It is only against this background that we can assess the impact of *Mahiti Manthana*- for the question is actually this : how have the pre-existing collective learning-action processes of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* been transformed by *Mahiti Manthana*?

**i. “Just being together is happiness” - *Sangha* women's receptivity to collective learning processes**

Our interviews reveal that across the control group (Group A) and action groups (Group B and Group C), the decision to become a part of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme seems to have emerged from women's desire for '*tiluvalike*' - which in the sense the *sangha* women have used it, translates closely to 'critical awareness'.

As Chandamma<sup>17</sup> (a Group A interviewee) from H.D. Kote *taluk* explained:

“ I joined the *sangha* because I decided I must not be ignorant anymore. And, we women felt that joining the *sangha* would do us women some good(...)Others could keep their women at home if they liked. So, one by one, we found the courage to join. ”

Fatima (a Group B interviewee) who hails from a village in H.D. Kote *taluk* told us:

“Earlier, we did not know anything. We would not even go anywhere outside the house. When the *Mahila Samakhya* programme came to our village, we thought this was an opportunity for us to get information about what is happening in the outside world, to develop our *tiluvalike*.That is why we joined the *Mahila Samakhya sangha* instead of going to *Stree Shakti Sanghas* where the women are only involved in savings activities”.

For some of the women we interviewed,the promise of enhanced mobility that *sangha* membership offers seems to have been another important motivating factor for joining the *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*.

As Bama (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* explained:

“ We thought that for savings, we will be able to go out of the house and get a chance to talk freely and gain courage from each other(...) and we were also told that we could enhance our *tiluvalike* through the *sanghas*.”

Most of the interviews revealed this orientation towards “developing *our tiluvalike*” rather than “*my tiluvalike*”- this motivation for becoming involved in a learning process that re-affirms a collective identity was explicitly articulated by some of the women we interviewed.

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<sup>17</sup> All names have been changed and village names have not been disclosed in order to protect the identities of research participants.

Sannamma (a Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote *taluk* was very clear that:

“ I joined the *Mahila Samakhya sangha* as I wanted to be united with other women in the village.”

Sitalakshmi (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* described it thus :

“ When we first heard about the *sanghas* (of *Mahila Samakhya*), we did not know what they were. But we (all the women in our village) thought that we should find out more about it. We went to Hunsur, and to Mysore, to find out. We went because just being together was happiness. And then ( after finding out about the *sanghas*) we went around to tell more people about the *sangha* and also ask people to join the *sangha*(...) All of us women travelling and walking together (...) those days were like festivals”.

The interviews also revealed that most of the participants (in the control group as well as the two action groups) felt that their experience with *Mahila Samakhya* had been very enriching. In fact, they felt that it had exceeded their initial expectations. Most women told us that membership of the *sangha* and participation in the thematic committee activities with inputs from the resource persons of *Mahila Samakhya*, has helped them improve their knowledge about a range of issues pertinent to their immediate life context – from gynaecological health care to savings; from initiating micro enterprises to becoming aware of the legal rights of women.

**ii. “They ignore you if you are just another woman from the village. But they heed your words if you are a *sangha* woman”– *Sangha* women's recognition of the transformative potential of collective learning-action processes**

Our interviews also revealed that because of *Mahila Samakhya's* programmatic emphasis on motivating women to undertake local level campaigns and/or local level action based on their learning, many of the women have a sense of the transformatory potential of the collective learning-action processes they undertake in their *sanghas*.

For instance, Chowdamma (a Group B interviewee) from H.D. Kote *taluk* shared with us how the *sangha* women in her village had handled a case of theft in the community :

“Once, we had a problem in our local *anganwadi*. The *anganwadi* helper had taken the vessels used for cooking the food, and pledged them for a loan. ... But she reported to the *sangha* women and the other villagers that the vessels had gone missing. We (*sangha* women) called that woman and asked her. She then confessed that she had pledged them and would get them back. But pledging government assets is an offence. Then, the *anganwadi* supervisor also visited and wanted to file a formal complaint about this issue. But the people in our village said that we will deal with the matter within the village. We *sangha* women then discussed this issue in our meeting. We decided that we could not support her. Though we *sangha* women accept that all women are equal, we cannot condone theft and therefore, we felt that she had to be punished. Then, all of us in the village decided that we would fine her Rs. 500/ and she was also removed from the job.”

In fact, we found that most of the *sangha* women we interviewed had been a part of some collective action-learning process at the local level – whether it involved convincing non *sangha* women in the village to go for a gynaecological health check-up; or participating in larger level campaigns<sup>18</sup> on issues relevant to the larger village community.

More importantly, the women we spoke to felt that their involvement in *Mahila Samakhya* has enabled them to develop a sense of confidence in interacting with formal institutions as well as a re-affirmation of the strength of the collective. Most of our interviewees acknowledged that the *Mahila Samakhya* programme has played a key role in enabling *sangha* women acquire the confidence to visit government departments and offices at the village and block level.

Except four women (two from Group A, and two from Group C), all the women we interviewed had visited government departments at the block level with other *sangha* members. The women we interviewed also identified the inputs and training from *Mahila Samakhya* programmatic staff and their *sangha* membership as key factors in building their capacity to access government departments.

As Shyamala (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* explained:

“I have realised that there is a difference between approaching government officers as a mere woman from the community, and as a *sangha* woman. They

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<sup>18</sup> These campaigns have been undertaken on a variety of issues ranging from dissuading parents from discontinuing their children's schooling, building awareness in the larger community on the ill effects of child marriage to putting pressure on the *taluk* level administration for better monitoring of the Public Distribution System. These campaigns are guided and supported by the programmatic staff of *Mahila Samakhya*.

ignore you if you are just another woman from the village. But they heed your words if you are a *sangha* woman”.

Our interviews also revealed that women felt that *Mahila Samakhya* had enabled them to involve actively in institutions of the participatory sphere<sup>19</sup> (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007), such as the *gram sabha*.

For instance, Rajamma (a Group A interviewee) from Nanjangud *taluk* shared with us how she had spoken about the need to construct a bus stop in her village, at one of the *gram sabhas*:

“Some time ago, five persons from our village died in a lightning strike. If the village had a bus stop, when it started raining, they could have come and take shelter under the bus stop. So people from our village submitted a petition requesting the construction of a bus stop, to the government. Also, I raised this issue in the *gram sabha* when they asked us to talk about our demands.”

Gowramma (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* gave us some insights into why *sangha* women have started participated in *gram sabhas*.

“Earlier it was only the men who would meet in the *gram sabha*. They would take all the decisions themselves. But our madam (*Mahila Samakhya* resource person) was always convincing us that we must participate. She said there is nothing wrong in attending the *gram sabha* as only then would we understand what was going on. We started going. In fact now, all *sangha* members participate. There are even women members in the *panchayat*.”

However, this space for collective learning-action processes seems to have shrunk in recent years, within *Mahila Samakhya*. This is discussed in the following section.

### ***iii. Current challenges to collective learning-action processes of sanghas***

Our interviews reveal that visits from *Mahila Samakhya* staff to village level *sanghas* have become less frequent in recent years. Out of the 18 women we interviewed, 10 women said that the CRP visited their village once a month, and 8 said that the CRP visited their village

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<sup>19</sup> “Participatory sphere” (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007) is a term which describes the new democratic spaces that are emerging at the cusp of state and civil society, as states increasingly attempt to carve out spaces for citizen involvement in decision making through legislation and administrative reform. This liminal space is distinct from the space occupied by the institutions of formal politics and bureaucracy, as well as the space of everyday associational life which in political democracies is understood through the analytical category of the public sphere.

only once in 2-3 months. Many of the interviewees also pointed out that the number of CRP visits have decreased, when compared to earlier years.

Some interviewees, like Savitamma (a Group A interviewee) from Nanjangud *taluk* reflected on how the nature of *Mahila Samakhya* staff visits had undergone a change:

“Earlier, the meetings [with *Mahila Samakhya* staff] would be different. We would put up a *pandal*/ tent [for the event]..... and the men would also support us. One or two times, they did do some street plays here. The community helped to prepare food for everyone...Now we haven't done any of those. .... Of late, since they come home and write [about maintaining the *sangha* and its accounts], we don't do these elaborate things anymore.”

In fact, many of our interviews indicate that audit of *sangha* accounts and procedural concerns pertaining to the *sanghas*, have become major focus areas of staff visits, in recent years. When time and energies of programmatic staff increasingly get spent on such procedural concerns, *sangha* learning-action processes are bound to get adversely affected as interactions with staff constitute a major part of *sangha* learning processes in the traditional collective learning-action strategy of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

At present, *Mahila Samakhya* does not seem to have a very effective strategy to fill the vacuum created by reduced visits by resource persons, and to provide alternative learning resources. Though books to propel *sangha* learning-action processes have been provided under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, they have not been very useful as most of the *sangha* women have very low levels of formal education (as this research sample appropriately reflects). It is telling that out of the 18 women we interviewed, only one identified books (specifically the legal rights handbooks) as resources for aiding *sangha* learning- action processes.

Another issue that seems to have further affected the space for collective learning at the village level is a recent initiative of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka – the “*Oorigondu Sangha*” (One *sangha* for one village). *Oorigondu Sangha* was initiated a couple of years ago when some members of the State Resource Group of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka suggested that *Mahila Samakhya* resource persons should make an effort to include even the women who are not a part of the *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*, in the outreach activities they conduct at the village level.

As one of the members of the project implementation team of IT for Change shared, “*Ooringondu sangha* is fine at the conceptual level – as a way of ensuring that collective learning processes reach out to non *sangha* women also. But in practice, what this has become, [especially considering the reduced frequency of

*Mahila Samakhya* staff visits to the village level *sanghas*] is an occasional village level meeting where all the women of the village gather, and the resource person from *Mahila Samakhya* gives a lecture over a microphone. The dialogic character of collective learning gets comprised”.

*Oorigondu sangha* commitments further pressurise the CRPs on their village visits, and the requirement of addressing such a large audience does not help in effective dialogic processes. In such a scenario, alternative strategies to foster *sangha* learning-action processes must be designed and implemented at the village level, for strengthening *sangha* capacities.

This is where *Mahiti Manthana* seems to have played an important role – in re-invigorating the space for collective learning-action processes of *sanghas*.

#### ***iv. Mahiti Manthana: Re-invigorating collective learning-action processes of sanghas by creating spaces for peer learning***

##### ***(a) Kelu Sakhi and sangha collective learning-action processes***

Our research indicates that the *Kelu Sakhi* programme seems to have become an effective forum for developing peer learning processes in *sanghas*. Though women did not use the term peer learning in their responses, some respondents from Group B and Group C explicitly pointed out the opportunity radio offers for sharing with other *sangha* women their learnings through *sangha* activities (such as effectively negotiating with *panchayat* members for claiming entitlements; or understanding the ills of child marriage).

In fact, interviews revealed that *sangha* women involved in the *Mahiti Manthana* project consider collectively listening to the *Kelu Sakhi* radio programme, to be a regular part of their weekly savings meetings. Prior to the *Mahiti Manthana* project, savings meetings were devoted mostly to collection of money and discussions of the financial matters of the *sangha*. But at present, radio also seems to have opened up the possibility for using the weekly savings meeting as a forum for substantive discussions on village level issues, or issues pertaining to the thematic committees of *Mahila Samakhya*. Out of the six women we interviewed in Group A, only two women said that the agenda of their weekly savings meeting includes matters other than accounts and finances of the *sangha*.

In fact, one of the two women, Rajamma from Nanjangud taluk (Group A interviewee) shared that her *sangha's* weekly savings meetings had substantive agendas only if resources persons of *Mahila Samakhya* were present:

“At the savings meeting, we used to do nothing, we just used to talk.... We used to ask those who have not paid for savings to come and pay. We tell sangha members that if we have a higher deposit the bank will sanction a loan....And sometimes if Madam (MSK resource person) has given (one of us) any information, we share it with others. ... When Madam comes to the village, sometimes she sits with the 3 sanghas in the villages and gives information.”

On the other hand, all the women in Group B and Group C said that substantive discussions take place in the weekly savings meetings, and some of them also felt that these discussions have been sparked off by collective listening to the radio programmes . discussions. Interviews reveal that for Group B and Group C women, discussions at the savings meetings have also often extended to health and nutrition issues, and issues related to the Gram panchayat. For Group C women, the savings meetings are also a forum to discuss the activities of the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Village information centre). The Group B and Group C women also reported that they discuss the contents of the *Kelu Sakhi* programme after collective listening, and also make feedback calls at times.

Group B and Group C women were not able to point out any particular slot on *Kelu Sakhi* as being most helpful to their learning, but they articulated an overall sense of satisfaction with the programme when compared to other programmes on radio. The reason for this probably lies in the resonance of *Kelu Sakhi* with women's informational and learning needs rooted in their everyday experience.

As Chowdamma (a Group B interviewee) from H.D. Kote *taluk* shared with us:

“We listen to all the programmes. All the programmes that come on *Kelu Sakhi* are good. We can hear about the experience of our EC members, the successes of other *sangha* women and also get information about new schemes and entitlements as sometimes government officials speak in the programme. *Sangha* women like us sing *sobaane* and *raagi bisuva haadu*<sup>20</sup> - we like to listen to these kinds of songs. I have even telephoned and requested for programmes for *panchayats* when I felt we needed more information about this, when the elections were nearing.”

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<sup>20</sup> Specific kinds of folk songs

*Kelu Sakhi*, by virtue of being aired on an Open University FM channel that has a broadcast range covering almost the entire district, enables *sangha* women to listen to experiences of other *sangha* women, whom they may otherwise not have met.

Though radio in itself is not an interactive medium, the setting up of a feedback mechanism and the emphasis on promoting collective listening has enabled the radio programme to catalyse dialogic processes at the village level.

### **(b) Video and *sangha* collective learning-action processes**

The *sangha* women from Group C have seen all the videos made under the Mahiti Manthana project. However, women from Group B have seen only three of the 20 odd videos made under the *Mahiti Manthana* project : *Namma Akkandira Nodi*, *Sangha Sabala Sakshara* and *Bank Mattu Sangha*.

*Sangha Sabala Sakshara* and *Bank Mattu Sangha*<sup>21</sup> are videos that focus on providing information about particular components of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme – the films discuss the adult literacy camps periodically organised by *Mahila Samakhya* and the benefits of creating *sangha*-bank linkages respectively. *Namma Akkandira Nodi* is a slightly more introspective film, which tries to challenge prevailing norms regarding the gender differentiation of labour.

The reasons for this difference, are best explained by the following excerpt from an interview with a member of the project implementation team from the *Prakriye* field centre :

“Except in the villages where we had established *Namma Mahiti Kendras*, which have the equipment for video screening and a video bank with copies of all the films we have made, it has been difficult to put in place a continuous video based learning activity for the *sangha* women – especially as the CRPs have not really managed to incorporate collective viewing of videos into their regular agenda of their village level visits as most of them are already overburdened.. So most women from villages without the *Mahiti Kendras* have watched videos only in the village level community screenings, the cluster level meetings of *Mahila Samakhya* where the focus is not on viewing the video, trainings conducted by *Mahila Samakhya*, and the occasional video screened by the CRPs during their visits. Hence, our initial idea of a regular video based learning process has not fully taken off on the ground”.

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 3 for more information on these films

In spite of these limitations, the video strategy seems to have made some significant impacts on *sangha* women's learning-action processes. Many of the *sangha* women we interviewed, especially from Group C, acknowledged how the videos they had seen had increased their awareness on issues such as the procedural intricacies of accessing bank loans, the functioning of *panchayat* committees and their entitlements to government schemes.

In fact, Parvati (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* acknowledged how a video of the *Mahiti Manthana* project has helped her realise the importance of participating actively in *Gram Sabhas*.

“After watching the film on the Three standing Committees, I felt that we should not blindly go to *Gram Sabhas* but be aware of our entitlements and ask questions about them and get them.”

Another respondent, Sitamma (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* recalled the impact of the community screening of *Kalikege Haadigalu*, a film on the importance of education, in her village :

“After seeing the film about the Mullur school, the men also said they realized sending children to school was important. The men came up to us after the screening and said 'You *sangha* women have done a good job'.”

Almost all the women we interviewed recalled the powerful imagery of *Namma Akkandira Nodi* (which opens with a shot of a *sangha* woman from H.D.Kote *taluk* ploughing the field, a task which is usually considered to be 'men's work'). They spoke about their admiration for the woman wielding the plough, the woman splitting firewood and the woman driving the cart showcased in the film, as they felt these women were able to do a man's job. In the words of Mangalamma ( a Group B interviewee) from K.R. Nagara *taluk*, “*being women, they were doing those things. That was an achievement, you know*”. *Namma Akkandira Nodi* has also been very popular with the *Mahila Samakhya* CRPs and they have often screened it on their village visits and gender trainings.

However, *Namma Akkandira Nodi* has had its share of limitations in serving as a learning-resource for *sangha* women, or as a resource for gender trainings. As one of the members of the project implementation team from the *Prakriye* field centre has pointed out:

“ The CRPs really like the film *Namma Akkandira Nodi*, that's true.. Some of them have even screened it in their community gender sensitisation trainings. But I feel that they have not really actualised the potential of the film in the trainings.. For, there is no consciously evolved pedagogical approach to direct attention to the

questions the films throws open, and enable trainees to move towards critical self-reflection(... ) In fact, in one of the trainings I attended where the film was screened, some of the women in the audience were irked by the film.. They told the trainer (...) 'What are you trying to tell us? We already do so much around the house. Are you saying we must plough the land, and split firewood also like these women in the film'(...) The trainer was not able to articulate effectively that the film was trying to challenge the prevailing view that ploughing and splitting firewood were 'men's work'(...) the opportunity was lost..”

An important learning from this experience for us, has been that addressing pedagogical issues, while developing non-*textual* learning resources, in conjunction with those who will be using the resources on the field, is very important.

The women we interviewed, also acknowledged that participating in the creation of videos – speaking on video and/or handling the camera while filming- had boosted their self-confidence. Interviewees also felt that participating in the video component of the project had brought them community recognition. “*Now that I have participated in two other films, I am a camera person myself, I have no problem now. I have no fears... In my village, they all now call me “Shooting Chowdamma”,* shared Chowdamma (a Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote taluk who has appeared in two of the *Mahiti Manthana* films, and has also shot the footage for the film *Halliyinde Dillige*.

The interviews also revealed that women who have been exposed to the *Mahiti Manthana* project are able to grasp the transformative potential offered by video for *sangha* collective learning-action processes. Out of the study participants, two women from Group B and four women from Group C were explicitly able to articulate the potential that videos offered for peer learning processes.

Shivamma (a Group B interviewee) from Nanjangud taluk who appears in a film on the role of the *Arogya sakhi*, explained to us how viewing a film, which features another woman like themselves, motivates *sangha* women:

“(When some *sangha* women watched the *Arogya sakhi* film) they said, 'we also should become like you'; then I said, 'go ahead, grow.' They said, 'are we capable of that?'; then I said, 'why not, you can also grow like me. You must work hard..... You should conduct all the activities in the village, and work for the welfare of women. You should treat men and women equally. You should support the downtrodden women, like I do. If you work like that, you will be recognised'.”

Most of the Group C women felt that videos have provided opportunities for enhancing dialogue between *sangha* women who are geographically dispersed, and for motivating women to participate more actively in the activities of the *sangha*.

As Sitalakshmi (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* shared with us,

“Films are the way of bringing information to even those who are hiding in the corners”.

Our research also suggests that radio and video as learning platforms may help women in acquiring a wider imagination about *sangha* collective learning-action processes. For example, when a question about “How can one enhance women's participation at the *Gram Sabha*?” was raised by us, Group A women's responses were restricted to two options: “getting a higher official to endorse women's participation” or “form more *sanghas* at the village level”. On the other hand, the majority of Group B and Group C women were able to chalk out various means by which *sanghas* could persuade, motivate and support their members to participate; and also articulate how radio/video could be suitable platforms for these motivational and persuasive processes. Similarly, Group B and Group C women were more forthcoming with ideas than women from Group A, when asked about how they could motivate other *sanghas* to participate in anti-child marriage campaigns or try and influence the *Gram Sabha*.

### **C) *Kelu Sakhi*: Carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere**

The *Kelu Sakhi* weekly broadcast provides *sangha* women the means to reach out to other peers (other *sanghas*), who are geographically dispersed over Mysore district. Many of the women we interviewed in Group B and Group C recognised this potential that *Kelu Sakhi* offers them, for reaching out to geographically dispersed *sanghas*,

As Sitamma (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* evocatively expressed:

“Because of *Kelu Sakhi*, the voices of women from other *sanghas* are heard by us; and those women are able to listen to our voices. Till now our voice was with us alone, now I feel happy knowing that our voices are heard by many other *sanghas* ... for, our voices are transmitted far and wide.”

Interviews also revealed how *Kelu Sakhi* is emerging as a space for *sangha* women to acquire the capacity to challenge the mainstream discourses operating in the local public sphere, and also acquire the confidence to bargain with/ question the power-elite in the local communities where they reside.

For example, consider the following incident narrated by Sanamma ( a Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote *taluk*:

“ After listening to the radio programme on *Gram Panchayat*, we thought when all these women are talking about this (placing demands before the *Panchayat*), why are we not going there....So we (*sangha* women) had gone to the *Gram Panchayat*... and we got facilities such as *Bhagya Jyoti* lights, and managed to get the housing scheme allotments and even get the drainage systems cleaned in our village (by the *Panchayat*).”

Another instance, reported by the project implementation team of IT for Change, sheds further light on this<sup>22</sup>:

“We had featured an interview with J..... in which she spoke about how she and the *sangha* helped resolve a land dispute. People from the neighbouring village heard the broadcast and came to J's village looking for her.... They met her and asked her to help them resolve a similar dispute in their village..”

Furthermore, our interviews revealed that not only did women appreciate the radio programme for being in their dialect and providing them with information useful to their everyday life, they also pointed out the satisfaction of having an exclusive space on air.

As Shyamala (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* reflected:

“ Other radio programmes are made by spending a lot of money and getting (formally) educated people to talk. But our programme is not like that. For, We *sangha* women speak. And, we speak just as we are. ”

“ (On radio) We speak just as we are” is a very telling statement. It is an acknowledgement of the space that radio provides the *sangha* women to speak as themselves, without necessarily confirming to the expectations of the mainstream audience. There is also a tacit admission that the listeners the *sangha* women hope to reach out to are primarily other *sangha* women like themselves, though there may be others tuning into the programme. Of course, as in any intervention, there is a small active pool of *sangha* women who talk on

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<sup>22</sup> Kalley A., Prasad V., Arakali C. and Thimmaiah K. (forthcoming), *Mahiti Manthana Diaries*, Bengaluru: IT for Change

radio and a majority who are primarily engaged in listening to the weekly broadcast; some of whom provide feedback (Raghaviah, 2007).

It is also important to point out here that *sangha* women feel that *Kelu Sakhi* has won them recognition and respect in the communities they are a part of. As Shivamma (a Group B interviewee) from Nanjangud *taluk* shared with us:

“People in my village, even those who are not from my caste, have heard the radio programme and then come up to me and said that the *sangha* programme was good. I have even had people from other villages telling me positive feedback about the programme. In fact, even the bill collector<sup>23</sup> of our village praised it.”

For an individual dalit woman, receiving appreciation from the larger community for the programme run by a collective of which she is a member of, is indeed an event of immense significance. Clearly, *Kelu Sakhi* has been instrumental in carving out a space for *sangha* women's voices in the local public sphere.

#### **D) Mahiti Kendras: Decentralising information access, use and appropriation at the local level**

Currently, under *Mahiti Manthana*, there are two functioning *Namma Mahiti Kendras* (NMK) – in Hosavaranchi village and Attiguppe village of Hunsur *taluk*. Similarly, there are two *Taluk Mahiti Kendras* – in H.D.Kote *taluk* and Hunsur *taluk*.

As explained earlier (in Chapter 3), the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* are information centres at the village level, to be managed by the *sangha* women and operated by a young adolescent girl (*sakhi*) who would act as the information intermediary for the community. The idea was that keeping women at the centre of the information centres would help in shifting existing power relationships where men, landed elite and government officials tend to enjoy greater access to information.

Along the same lines, *Taluk Mahiti Kendras* have been set up in the *taluk* offices of the *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka*, to be managed by the Federation Executive Committee, consisting of *sangha* women elected to the *taluk* federation; and operated by a young adolescent girl (*sakhi*). It was anticipated that the *taluk* level *sakhi* (information intermediary) because of her geographical location, could be in touch with *taluk* level government functionaries on a more regular basis, and that she could also act as an information link for the village level *sakhis*.

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<sup>23</sup> A minor government official at the village level.

Our interviews revealed that the *sangha* women interviewed from Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi (i.e. the Group C interviewees) certainly think that the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* has enabled the creation of informational linkages that are useful to them, non-*sangha* women and other marginalised groups in the community.

In addition to the informational role of the NMKs, our interviewees (from Group C) also felt that the NMKs had brought some very important services such as photocopying and photography to the village.

As Sitalakshmi (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* explained:

“ (Because of the *Mahiti Kendra*) we are able to get the information that was available earlier only at the *taluk* level, within the village itself... Before the *Mahiti Kendra* was set up, if someone had any work at the *taluk* offices (with government departments) such as getting an application drafted or take photos or xerox copies, they had to spend over two days on this....and a person had to spend twenty five rupees just to reach Hunsur (*taluk*) to get such things done(...) Now that is not so(...) for (*Mahiti Kendra* is in our village) and it is very useful to us.. This is our *Kendra* and we run it(...) and we see it is functioning properly. Unlike other computer centres, we don't run this for profit(...) (We run this because) the *Mahiti Kendra* is very useful to all.”

In the words of Gowramma ( a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk*:

“The (*Namma*) *Mahiti Kendra* is essential for our *sangha*. Not only for taking photos (or xerox copies) we need(...) It enables us to access whatever information arrives from Hunsur (through government departments and/or *taluk sakhi*), we get to know all that. For example, this has helped us get benefit for the widows in our village. Things like getting benefits, which used to be very difficult, have become easier to access through the *Mahiti Kendra*(...) We want to get to know about whatever important thing happens around us, in Hunsur; if any of our villagers have any work with the government offices they should be lent help. Children desirous of learning computer should be taught computer.. for all this we have a *sakhi* for the (*Namma*) *Mahiti Kendra*.”

As Parvati from ( a Group C interviewee)Hunsur *taluk* pointed out,

“... through *Namma Mahiti Kendras*, people in our village have availed of sprinkler pipes, benefits for banana cultivators and many such schemes of the agricultural department, old age and widow pensions(...) *Swarna Jayanti Swarozgar Yojana*<sup>24</sup> loan from *taluk panchayat*, free saplings from Forest Department... Any

<sup>24</sup> A welfare scheme of the Government of India that aims at providing self employment to the rural populations through formation of Self Help Groups, and supporting the group members financially and technically through skills training and a revolving fund for capital formation.

information which she gets from the departments is shared by the *sakhi* at all our meetings [*sangha* and village meetings] (...) Why, our *Namma Mahiti Kendra* has even helped in checking the accuracy of the Below Poverty Line households list that the government made for our village..”.

The NMKs also seem to have given *sangha* women the confidence for appropriating information and enhanced their ability to contribute to peer to peer informational sharing processes.

As Parvati from Hunsur *taluk* (a Group C interviewee) shared: “... after the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* was set up, *sangha* women from other villagers consult us.. bring their information related queries to us and ask us to share what we know...”

The new informational linkages that women have acquired, because of the NMKs, has also improved *sangha* women's standing in their communities.

Gowamma (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk*, shared:

“Earlier the men folk used to tease us about our going to *sangha*; but now [after the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* has been functioning]they rightly recognise our presence on different occasions”.

Sitalakshmi ( a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* told us:

“Earlier, people in the community did not respect us *sangha* women, but now they have to. (Because of our *Namma Mahiti Kendra*) we have reached a level above them”.

The Group B respondents (who belong to villages where *Namma Mahiti Kendras* have not been set up) felt that the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* has been beneficial for them. They also expressed a sense of ownership over the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra*.

In the words of Fatima (Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote *taluk*:

“ The *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* is the *sangha's* and *Samakhya's* own *Kendra*. Because the *Kendra* is ours, we can go there and get the information we want about departments and schemes. At other centres<sup>25</sup>, one has to wait... ”

In the words of Chowdamma (Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote *taluk*:

“The *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* is ours. It is also *Mahila Samakhya's*. It has a computer, a TV, and one can also do recording, for radio programmes there. It has Internet, and telephone facilities. The role of the *Mahiti Kendra* is to collect and

<sup>25</sup> The other centres alluded to, by Fatima and Chowdamma, are the government initiated *Nemmadi Kendras* at the *taluk* level, which are part of a single widow service delivery initiative, the Common Service Centres scheme of the Government of India.

disseminate information to people. It has to share all department related information with villages and *sanghas*. .....When people ask us about something, then we take them to the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* and introduce them to our *sakhi*. .....Whenever we want some specific information, we ask the *sakhi*..... if the information is readily available, she will tell us at once. Otherwise, she will go and collect the information from the appropriate government department and give it to us..... this is our computer centre. We can utilize the facilities here, as we want to. The other centres are not ours. We cannot touch anything there..."

### **E) Mahiti Kendras : The displacement of information gate-keeping by local officials**

Many of the *sangha* women we interviewed, said that the NMK *sakhis* are ably discharging their responsibilities of visiting government officials when required, collecting updates on governmental schemes and programmes from the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* and presenting the information to the community in an appropriate way to community members; and even visiting neighbouring villages at regular intervals.

Interviewees also observed that the TMK *sakhis* have been collecting regular updates of information from the departments at the *taluk* level. The women we interviewed also acknowledged that the *sakhis* of the NMKs and TMKs have played a crucial role in the loosening of official control over information.

Shyamala (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* said:

“ Not all the women in our *sangha* are educated and confident of visiting the government departments. Many also don't have the time and resources to do this. Earlier, it was always difficult to find someone from among ourselves to visit the departments and even then, the visits were not effective.....we did not even know information was available with the departments..... Now, after the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* was set up, by appointing a *sakhi*, we are able to get useful information from government departments regularly”.

Fatima (a Group B interviewee) from H.D.Kote *taluk* shared:

“Earlier, I did not know much about government departments.... But after the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* was set up, I am able to go to the TMK *sakhi* to various departments.. I have been to the *taluk* office and the BDO office with the TMK *sakhi*. And I can now share my learnings from these visits with other *sangha* women.”

Parvati (a Group C interviewee) from Hunsur *taluk* shared:

“Earlier the government officials would not treat us right and were usually not very interested in *sangha* women's concerns. But now after the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* started functioning, they pass on the information promptly and we hear about new schemes as soon as they are announced.”

The *Mahila Samakhya* CRP<sup>26</sup>s we interviewed, also share the *sangha* women's viewpoint on the usefulness of the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* and the *Taluk Mahiti Kendras* in enhancing women's capacity to access information.

As the CRP from Hunsur *taluk* shared with us,

“Earlier we would have to go and help them get the benefits from the *taluk* office. A couple of days ago, I directed a woman to the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra* and gave her the contact of the *sakhi* there. Prior to the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra*, I would have had to go with the woman to get her the pension. Now things are easy for us. Also if there are any schemes to avail of, entitlements to get, then we tell everyone to go to the *Taluk Mahiti Kendra sakhi* and you will get it without paying a rupee.”

## **F) The impact of *Mahiti Manthana* on the intra-organisational Information & Communication Processes of *Mahila Samakhya***

### **i. Carving out additional channels for intra-organisational communication**

It is fairly evident that the success of *Mahila Samakhya* as an organisation rests upon its ability to build effective communication processes between the *sangha* women and the resource persons, as well as between *sangha* women themselves. Our study revealed that there have been some additional channels for intra-organisational communication that the *Mahiti Manthana* project has managed to carve out.

Earlier, all communication pertaining to CRP visits to villages, cluster level meetings of thematic committees, other taluk level meetings of *sanghas* etc.- used to be communicated

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<sup>26</sup> Cluster Resource Person, *Mahila Samakhya*

through post cards from the Block Office of *Mahila Samakhya*. After the introduction of *Mahiti Manthana*, the weekly broadcast of *Kelu Sakhi* carried a small slot for such announcements from *Mahila Samakhya* staff.

Moreover, the JRP<sup>27</sup> of Hunsur *taluk* whom we interviewed, shared with us that the attendance at *sangha* meetings and activities improved, after the MSK staff started using the *Kelu Sakhi* platform for announcements.

## **ii. Enabling *Mahila Samakhya* programmatic staff to develop ICT skills**

More substantially, *Mahiti Manthana* has enabled the resource persons of *Mahila Samakhya* in effectively developing their skills in handling ICTs – including recording and editing radio programmes; and conceptualising, shooting and editing videos. Most of the resource persons interviewed, acknowledged the impact of *Mahiti Manthana* on helping them overcome their fear of technology and in shaping their perspectives on technology. As the CRP from Hunsur *taluk* told us:

“ [Creating content for the radio programme] was a happy experience. I never thought I could learn something like that. I thought only people like you[ with formal technical training]could do that... Now when I feel proud I can do this... When I listen to radio, now I feel close to it”.

She also added :

“Usually one thinks technology itself is not accessible to us, it is for the rich and the elite. But if there is technology it allows many things(...) If one knows how to make films for example, one need not depend on others for it. We can make films on whatever we want. Also one feels that video, photography – technologies are only for men. Its usually the men who do it. That these technologies are for men. But I have realised now that it is good to prove that women too can do it. That it is for them too. ...”.

## **iii. Enabling *Mahila Samakhya* staff to harness the new pedagogical possibilities opened up by ICTs**

The recognition of the new possibilities that ICTs offer for creating non-textual based resources for aiding the collective learning-action processes of *sanghas*, was a common thread running through our interviews with resource persons of *Mahila Samakhya*.

On the whole, the resource persons considered videos to be a more effective aid to the collective learning- action processes of *sanghas*, than collective listening. Collective listening

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<sup>27</sup> Junior Resource Person, *Mahila Samakhya*

was perceived to be an activity difficult to sustain on a long term basis, due to competing priorities on *sangha* women's time and the pull of television programmes. However, the CRPs acknowledged that if listenership could be sustained, *Kelu Sakhi* would be very useful for furthering *Mahila Samakhya* programmatic activities.

As the CRP from Nanjangud *taluk* shared with us:

"... *Sangha* women come to *Samakhya* meetings after listening to the dates on the radio. *Kelu Sakhi* also enables *sangha* women to access new information. One *sangha* woman I know, made Nilgiri oil after listening on radio, even if she did not attend any training on this... And collective listening motivates women (to act upon information) ... After listening to the radio programme on haemoglobin, many women have gone and got their (blood) tests done..."

Videos were perceived as effective as they replaced the tedium of lectures by resource persons, and featured *sangha* women themselves.

As the JRP from Hunsur *taluk* said:

"... There is a difference between the MSK staff sharing something and the women watching a video and learning something. For, in the videos, they see *sangha* women like themselves speaking.. This makes them more receptive".

The CRP from Periyapatna *taluk* we interviewed, shared how the videos have greatly aided her work:

".., after the video screenings, my work has reduced to quite an extent..When we used to lecture *sanghas* about the procedure for stating bank accounts, they don't listen.. But now, when we show the *Bank Mattu Sangha* film to a new *sangha* before they start a bank account, then they themselves ask for the right books. That makes things easier. ... Now after we started showing the film, there have been cases where *sanghas* themselves have got the audit done from us at the right times, and applied for loans on their own, after watching the film".

The CRP from Nanjangud *taluk* also shared with us the reasons she found videos to be useful in *sangha* learning-action processes.

" ... When information is communicated by the Madam (CRP), it feels like work for the *sangha* women.. But (on video), when they watch women like themselves doing things, it works wonders...."

## G) Conclusion

*Mahiti Manthana* has certainly transformed the existing collective learning-action processes of *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* by opening up ICT-enabled peer learning processes. It has also helped in enhancing intra-organisational informational and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. Most importantly, it has carved out a space for *sangha* women in the local public sphere and has enabled *sangha* women to occupy central positions in the information ecologies of their communities.

## 6. Evolving community informatics strategies in the network society: Some learnings from *Mahiti Manthana*

The *Mahiti Manthana* experience teaches us that it is only an alternative imagination of the local and the global, which recognises the multi-scalar nature of processes and the multi-layered nature of space, that can enable us develop an effective community informatics practice. For, such an imagination helps us in designing a change strategy that simultaneously challenges the geographies and the sociologies of existing power constellations, at both the material and the discursive level, in an effective manner.

The impact research study demonstrates that the *Mahiti Manthana* project has been fairly successful in enabling a material and a discursive shift in power relations, in the project area, through its three pronged ICT strategy.

The *Kelu Sakhi* radio programme has emerged as a 'translocal counterpublic' (Fraser 1991) sphere where *sangha* women can challenge the mainstream discourses of the local public spheres in the villages where they reside, and also reach out to a wide network of peers, the geographically dispersed *sanghas* spread across Mysore district. The video strategy of the project has posed a direct challenge to the mainstream discourses operating in the local public spheres of the communities to which the *sangha* women belong – thus enabling discursive shifts. The information centres set up under the project (at the village and the block level) have created a community owned, bottom-up information network, which has been successful in shifting material power relations in terms of access to information & entitlements and enhancing the bargaining power of *sangha* women in their communities.

Certainly, the three-pronged ICT strategy of the project has been an effective one. The question that we now need to ask is this – Why did this strategy work? For, answering this will help us apply learnings from *Mahiti Manthana* to designing community informatics interventions in other sites.

We think that one of the main reasons that the *Mahiti Manthana* strategy has worked so well, is because of its clear understanding of what 'working for change at the local level' actually involves, in the network society context that we inhabit. The hallmark of the network society context we inhabit is the ever-growing influence of a capitalism that “ seems

to have donned a new cloak -that of the information society" (Gurumurthy, 2007), resulting in a "restructured capitalism characterised by the emergence of transnational, networked spaces in the economic, political and cultural system, mediated by cyberspace as a tool of global co-ordination and communication" (ibid). This network age capitalism "multiplies and distributes differences for the sake of profit" (Braidotti, 2006), on a hitherto unprecedented scale. In such a context, many have given up hope in the idea of 'working for change at the local level' – for, it seems that the 'local' will inevitably be determined and subsumed by a global networked capitalism.

We believe that such an imagination of the 'local' and the 'global' is a flawed one. In such an imagination, the analytical category of the 'local' serves only two purposes "... at best, the residual category of the local provides the hope for resistance, and at worst, the local is seen as succumbing to the global" (Jacobs, 1996). Of course, in this imagination, working for change at the local level is always a gamble, as this imagination considers 'the local' to be a "part of nested hierarchies of scale running from the local to the regional, the national, the international (and of course, the global)" (Sassen, 2003) and it considers the global to be the determinant of the national, regional and the local.

We think that it may be more productive to view "localities (or the local) ... (as constituting) multiscale systems – operating across scales and not merely scaling upward because of new communication capabilities" (ibid)<sup>28</sup> For, it is only such an imagination that can help us recognise that though site-specific particularities are produced by the interplay of processes at the global, the national, and the sub-national scale; the 'local' is not always subordinate to the 'global'. Or to put it differently, even as we use the global and the local as analytical categories to describe the different scales along which processes operate, we must recognise that global processes are not necessarily always more powerful than the local. In other words, we need to evolve a perspective that recognises the co-constitutive nature of 'the local' and 'the global', in our practice.

Such a perspective can aid those of us who are searching for effective political strategies that can bring about 'a change at the local level'. For, recognising the co-constitutive nature of the 'global' and the 'local' enables us to ask the following question: Using this multi-scale imagination of the local, in the present network society context, how can we develop

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed understanding of this point, as Sassen herself has pointed out, refer the literature on "global cities". Global city studies recognises that the processes that constitute the global city operate simultaneously at local, sub-national, national and global scales. It also recognises the importance of studying the specificities of the interactions between global, national and local specific processes that determine the configuration of city space, at specific sites.

frameworks for practice that can enable community informatics projects to emerge as sites for political action?

To some extent, scholars have attempted to theorise how a multi-scalar imagination of the local enables effective political action, in the network society context – especially because of its heightened deterritorialisation. Scholars have attempted to reflect upon what this deterritorialisation means for political action. For instance, Fraser has pointed out how the question of how one can develop strategies to make “public spheres (...) sufficiently efficacious to constrain the various powers that determine the conditions of the interlocutors’ lives” (Fraser, 2007) becomes even more difficult in the present context. This is because public spheres which constituted the bed-rock of national democracies have now transformed into transnational communities that stretch beyond national boundaries, forming “a transnational community of fate and risk”(Fraser, 2007). Similarly, other scholars have reflected on how the current context requires of us multiple strategies for political action across various scales: “place-based strategies that rely on the attachment to territory and culture; and glocal strategies through meshworks that enable social movements to engage in the production of locality by enacting a politics of scale from below”(Escobar, 2001).

Extending these reflections on political action in the network society context, we can effectively conclude that this multi-scalar imagination is vital even for effective community informatics practice. For, in our community informatics practice, if we are aiming to bring about a transformative change in the sites we are situated in, we must be guided by an imaginary of political action that enables us to understand how we can navigate the interstitial spaces within a network- in other words, we need to think across scales in a non-hierarchical manner.

The starting point is of course, the recognition that our community informatics practice must tap into the full potential that community networks<sup>29</sup> offer us. This needs us to recognise that community networks are simultaneously “heterarchic and hierarchic in nature”(Arnold, 2007)<sup>30</sup>, and focus on the heterarchic potential that community networks offer; in other words, “[ to move towards a recognition that] the centres of action are emergent in action,[and are] not established structurally”(ibid) in community networks. This

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<sup>29</sup> As Michael Arnold points out, “Community Networks are both technical devices and social arrangements; they invoke the identity of a network and a community, and manifest both hierarchic and heterarchic structures”. See **Arnold, M 2007. The concept of community and the character of networks: Journal of Community Informatics Vol3, No 2,2007**

<sup>30</sup> ibid

requires us to break free from all imaginations of rigid hierarchies, including that of nested networks that form a neat scalar hierarchy of local-regional-national- global, when evolving strategies for community informatics practice. This was our attempt in the *Mahiti Manthana* project, as discussed below.

We started off the *Mahiti Manthana* project, with an analysis of how the global and national level forces and processes operating upon the pan-Indian governmental programme, has influenced the strategic direction of the programme on the ground. The pan-Indian *Mahila Samakhya* programme had its genesis at a historical moment<sup>31</sup> when the empowerment approach was gaining widespread appeal as a critique of the mainstream approaches in development practice, and when women's groups considered the State to be an active enabler in empowerment processes, even if they sometimes had confrontations with the State (Batliwala 2010). However, the programme has not managed to remain immune to the rising hegemony of the discourse of neo-liberalism within the field of governance as well as development interventions (Gurumurthy and Batliwala, forthcoming), in the post 1990s period. Much has been written about how 'empowerment' was co-opted within the neo-liberal lexicon, in a larger move towards co-opting the language of grassroots movements and social transformation, to justify the ongoing advocacy for public-private partnership models of governance which reduce State accountability and weaken entitlements based citizenship (Rose, 1999). In fact, many scholars have pointed out how empowerment itself gets recast as " liberation from an interventionist State, within neo-liberal discourse" (Jones and Gaventa, 2002).

The *Mahila Samakhya* programme has succumbed to these pressures. In the post-nineties period, *Mahila Samakhya's* vision has shifted to an increasingly target-oriented one with a focus on numeric targets, channelising of *sangha* women to meet targets of government schemes, with an over-emphasis on federation building and reduction of personnel<sup>32</sup>. In recent plan documents<sup>33</sup>, this target-orientation co-exists with a commitment to build strong and autonomous *sanghas*. However, as many feminist scholars have pointed out, a target orientation that focuses on expansion and federation of *sanghas* coupled with a move towards cutting down personnel for a leaner organisation structure, adversely affects the

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<sup>31</sup> The 1980s in the Indian context

<sup>32</sup> An analysis of the the Ministry of Human Resource Department's plan framed under the X and XI Five Year Planning exercise of the Government of India supports this conclusion, as explicated in Chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

programme's original process orientation to facilitate critical learning and action among rural women<sup>34</sup>.

*Mahiti Manthana* was designed after taking into consideration, these structural forces operating on the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. While designing the project, we were also aware that because of these forces, *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* has been under increasing pressure (since the early 2000s) to develop a withdrawal strategy to enable the total phasing out of resource support by programme staff in the older districts it was working in, such as Mysore.

Therefore, the project goal of *Mahiti Manthana* was defined as "To appropriately ICT-enable the resource centre strategy of *Mahila Samakhya*, so that the information and communication processes of the *sanghas* and federations are sufficiently strengthened, for them to function autonomously, and for achieving the goal of women's empowerment at higher levels of effectiveness" (IT for Change, 2005). Moreover, we chose information and communication processes as a key area of intervention after we found evidence of the declining quality of learning among the village level collectives, because of the phasing out of resource support by programme staff in Mysore; and the withdrawal of *sahayoginis* (village level facilitators) from Mysore district.

The project design was also informed by an assessment of the the multi-scalar processes contributing to the marginalisation of the women belonging to the village level collectives (*sanghas*) formed under the programme. For example, we approached the question of women's rights in our project design, through a multi-scalar analysis of the political economy of patriarchy. Specifically, we analysed how the operations of patriarchy on the local scale are constructed through the interlacings of the global marginalisation of women with respect to access to economic resources, or new technologies, in the network society; with the particular operations of neo-liberal governmentality and the specific intersections of caste-gender-nation in the Indian context determining the participation of women in the public sphere. This in turn helped us understand the structural forces that have gradually transformed *Mahila Samakhya* into a target-oriented programme, succumbing to the incorporation of outcomes-based rhetoric which reduces women's rights to measurables. This attention to the multi-scalar operations of patriarchy also facilitated our understanding of the sociological operation of power relations at the local level. Similar analyses of the multi-scalar processes constructing site-specific experiences of economic marginality and site-specific features of local information networks, contributed to our project design.

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<sup>34</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on this.

Informed by these multi-scalar analyses, the *Mahiti Manthana* project attempted to challenge the interlacings of patriarchies at multiple levels; through a demonstration of emancipatory possibilities using the three pronged ICT strategy. We felt that this strategy could repoliticise the programme, bringing the local *sangha* back to power; recovering it from inescapable policy bureaucracy that treats it simply as a unit of budgetary allocation. We also wanted to challenge the inevitable reification that occurs over time where the *sangha* is celebrated for its valiant action, and the unfortunate instrumentalisation that has occurred in the capitalisation by neo-liberal economics of *sangha* labour for grassroots monitoring and such. Through *Mahiti Manthana*, our attempt was not only to bring an informatics approach to support the organisational structure of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, but to see if there was an opening to transfer power back, and construct women as active political agents, through the three pronged ICT strategy.

The primary learning from the *Mahiti Manthana* project implementation experience is that only a multi-scalar imagination of how 'the local' gets constituted, can enable one identify the apertures for transformative action. We may choose, in a change strategy, to focus on some of the apertures, and not act across all the scales, as in the case of the *Mahiti Manthana* project. But what is important to acknowledge is that the appropriate identification of apertures is predicated upon the recognition of the local and the global as part of a multi-layered space that is constantly being re-made by the geographic shifts of power.

Specifically, *Mahiti Manthana* has chosen to largely focus on the apertures at the scale of the 'translocal'. The 'translocal', as is well-known, refers to a local-to-local spatiality that by-passes a mediation by the boundaries of the nation-state. In the preceding discussion on the findings of the research study, we have seen how *Kelu Sakhi* and the video strategy of the project have enabled the creation of a translocal community of geographically dispersed women. We would like to add that the information centres strategy too, is at the scale of the 'translocal'. The networks between the village communities, village information centres and the *taluk* information centres are certainly not mediated by the nation state- on the other hand, the network is mediated by the norms and the processes put in place by the village level collectives of *sangha* women, with some initial help from project staff. This information networking them enables women to acquire the power to challenge the local manifestation of the nation-state in its village level governance initiatives.

This translocal networking and the sense of belonging to a translocal community of *sanghas* has enabled *sangha* women to challenge the local manifestations of the working of the nation-state, in ways that enable them to increase their material power. And within this translocal networked space created by the three-pronged ICT strategy, women interact with one another by drawing upon their identity as part of a translocal collective of *sangha* women, and not as encumbered subjects of a nation-state or as individuals encumbered by their situated identities of belonging to a family or a community.

Thus, the *Mahiti Manthana* project experience shows us how opportunities for transformative political action can be opened up by a community informatics strategy, if one adopts an alternative imagination of 'the local', going beyond the 'local-global' binary.

## Glossary of Indian terms

- **Anganwadi (courtyard shelter)** : is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care centre in India. It caters to children in the 0-6 age group.
- **Arogya Sakhi**: An initiative of the Mahila Samakhya programme under which sangha women are chosen to act as community health workers on a voluntary basis.
- **Dalit**: Dalit is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as of a lower caste.
- **District**: The district is the node of local governance at the state level in the Indian administrative system.
- **EC** : This is how the *sangha* women refer to the Executive Committee at the Federation level, formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. The Executive Committee meets at the block level, and its members are elected by the *sangha* women of the Mahila Samakhya programme, annually. The Executive Committee is gradually expected to take over the role of monitoring, management and coordination of the programme activities currently being performed by *Mahila Samakhya* staff.
- **Gram Panchayat**: This is the lowest tier of governance and administration in the quasi-federal Indian system, which is situated at the village level. Tremendous fiscal and

administrative powers were devolved from the State Governments to the *panchayats* by the Central Government of India, through the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992. However, in practice, the devolution of powers to *Gram Panchayats* has been broached with reluctance by State Governments.

- **Gram sabha:** *Gram Sabha*, which means “Village Council”, refers to the village level electorate – in other words, the body consisting of all registered voters in a village. Indian law, policy and the resolutions adopted by an Inter-State Ministerial Conference on *Gram Panchayats* in May 1998 require the elected representatives of the Gram Panchayat are required to convene a meeting of the *gram sabha* on a single pre-determined, at least every quarter, and the approval of the *gram sabha* must be taken before implementing any village level development works that would affect the local population.
- **Kelu Sakhi:** *Kelu Sakhi* which means “Listen, my friend” is a weekly radio programme that is broadcast over the Karnataka State Open University FM channel in Mysore, between 9.00-9.30 P.M every Monday. The programme, produced by IT for Change, reaches out to women who are part of the *Mahila Samakhya* self help groups, in their idiom, and is an attempt at carving out an alternate public sphere that enables rural, dalit women to speak their concerns.
- **Kishoris:** This means adolescent girls, in the local language Kannada.
- **MS :** *Mahila Samakhya*. This is a pan Indian programme of the Government of India that aims at mobilising and collectivising rural women belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, with the aim of “education for empowerment”.
- **MSK:** *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka*. This is the state level wing of the pan Indian *Mahila Samakhya* programme.
- **Nari Adalat:** These are “*informal, conciliatory, non-adversarial ‘courts’ with complete lay participation*”<sup>35</sup> that try to institute an alternative dispute resolution mechanism for women, outside the mainstream courts. These courts constituted of women, aim at assisting women in distress, to assert their rights. The *Mahila Samakhya* programme played an important role in the establishment of *Nari Adalats* in some parts of the country.
- **NMK:** *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Our Information Centres). This refers to the information centres set up at the village level, as part of the *Mahiti Manthana* project of IT for Change. These centres are owned and managed by women's collectives at the grassroots level, and are operated by young adolescent girls.

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<sup>35</sup> Iyengar, S. (2007), *A Study of Nari Adalats (Women's Courts) and Caste Panchayats in Gujarat*, Bangkok: Asia Pacific Gender Mainstreaming Programme, UNDP.

- **ragi** : The local language term for finger millet
- **Sakhi** : *Sakhi* (which literally means friend) is the term used in the *Mahiti Manthana* project for the knowledge workers of the village information centres run by the women of the *Mahila Samakhya* self help groups.
- **Sangha shales** (Classrooms for the *sanghas*) : *This was an attempt under the Mahiti Manthana project to promote collective viewing of videos made under the project ( which addressed the various aspects and concerns of sangha women's lives) by sangha women followed by discussions on the videos aided by helpsheets and other resource material. It was hoped that collective viewing and discussions would contribute to the learning processes of sangha women.*
- **Sangha**: *Sangha* (which literally means group) is commonly used to refer to Self Help Groups (mainly of women) that have become widespread in rural India, in the last two decades. In this context, they refer to the Self Help Groups formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India.
- **Self Help Group**: Though the term originally referred to a member run Support Group, it has increasingly become synonymous with village level groups of microentrepreneurs whose main activities are savings and credit. In the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, as the process documents reveal, the Self Help Groups were formed with the aim of 'education for empowerment' though they also undertake savings and credit activities.
- **SJSY** : *Swarna Jayanthi Swarozgar Yojana. It is a welfare scheme of the Government of India that aims at providing self employment to the rural populations through formation of Self Help Groups, and supporting the group members financially and technically through skills training and a revolving fund for capital formation. SHG members are also eligible for subsidy from the government in establishing enterprises.*
- **Stree Shakti (SS) sanghas** : *SS sanghas refer to a Karnataka state project under which rural women are formed into collectives. The main activities these sanghas do is thrift and credit.*
- **Taluk panchayat** : *It is the local government body at the taluk level that acts as the link between the district level administration and the panchayats.*
- **Taluk**: *A taluk is an administrative division lower than the district. As an entity of local government, it exercises certain fiscal and administrative powers over the villages and municipalities within its jurisdiction.*

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- ***Zilla panchayat***: It is the local government body at the district level that administers the rural areas of a district.

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