

# Mahiti Manthana

## Institutionalising ICTs for Women's Collectives



Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are redefining the social landscape around us, causing many power shifts. While they have a great potential for democratising power and resources, the same ICTs are also employed, for instance, to centralise control by corporations and the state. Within communities as well, ICTs have contingent outcomes and therefore, interventions need to be strategic for ICTs to work in favour of disadvantaged groups.

*Mahiti Manthana* (roughly translating into **knowledge processes**), is one such intervention with rural women from disadvantaged caste groups, organised into collectives locally known as *sanghas*. Using new technologies, the project enables a reconstitution of local information and communication processes where women's *sanghas* engage with and lead this change. *Mahiti Manthana* explores the role of ICTs in legitimising subaltern discourse; strengthening identity articulation, collective solidarity and knowledge-sharing processes; and engendering public spaces, leadership roles and access to key institutions.

## Key Features of Mahiti Manthana

- *Mahiti Manthana rides over an existing women's empowerment program* – Rather than create an entirely new structure, the project works through an intermediary partner organisation, using ICTs to strengthen and transform the existing activities and processes of the grassroots intervention.
- *Mahiti Manthana employs diverse ICTs* – including radio, video, telephones and computers. It envisions the development of a contextual technology-mediated change process in, and through, *sangha* activities, by adopting the best of all new technologies.
- *Mahiti Manthana has a strong focus on research and documentation* – for ensuring sustained process change in the activities of the partner organisation, the *sanghas*, and the 'federation' of *sanghas*, and for generating broader insights for ICT for Development (ICTD) policy and programs.



### Project Context

*Mahiti Manthana* directly addresses difficult-to-reach groups – poor, rural, non-literate women from disadvantaged castes. A socio-economic profile of the women whom the project works with is presented below.

- More than half the women are from disadvantaged caste and tribal backgrounds.
- Mean years of schooling is one year, and 77 percent of the women have never attended school.
- Sixty two percent of the women are daily-wage agricultural labourers, while 92 percent of the women do not own any land in their own name.
- Eighty seven percent of the women live in households where the annual household income is less than Rupees 30,000 (roughly, \$2 per day for a household consisting of 5 members on average).
- More than 1/3rd of the women's households do not have access to electricity and 80 percent have no access to private water supply.

(Source: Mahiti Manthana Baseline Survey, May 2007, IT for Change)

## Components of Mahiti Manthana

### Radio

- *Mahiti Manthana* runs a community radio – *Kelu Sakhi* (meaning 'Listen, My Friend') – that caters to women's *sanghas* distributed over several villages.
- The weekly radio program is oriented primarily to the processes and activities of the *sanghas*, rather than a wider community audience. This is critical to ensure *sangha* women's ownership and control, which would otherwise be diluted under a broad 'community' focus.
- The programs are made by the *Mahiti Manthana* team as well as the intermediary organisation and the women, with an increased shift to *sangha*-based production.
- The *Kelu Sakhi* broadcast serves as an umbrella information and communication platform for the women, bringing them together every week to strengthen their collective identity around a shared vocabulary.
- Women are encouraged to listen to the radio collectively and many *sanghas* now hold their weekly meetings to coincide with the radio broadcast.



### Video

- To cater to the needs of women who are largely non-literate, *Mahiti Manthana* develops inexpensive videos that are produced dynamically through collaborative iterations.
- A wide variety of formats are used: some videos capture women discussing issues; some document *sangha* and federation processes; others are inspirational videos featuring the outstanding feats of peers; yet others are edited versions of training workshops for skill development.
- Significantly, the project does not use videos merely for one-off screenings. It is developing a whole new institutional form – the *sangha shale* (or *sangha* classroom) – where self-driven and flexible use of videos is woven into systematic processes of continuous learning.



### Telecentres

- Radio and video technologies, to which disadvantaged women relate more easily, serve as a stepping stone to bridge the gap between women and computers.
- *Mahiti Manthana* telecentres cater to the local community, but are owned and managed by *sangha* women.
- As community spaces, telecentres are not just oriented to commercial services like computer education and web browsing, but primarily designed to strengthen community information processes and build new institutional linkages towards empowering outcomes.
- Some such processes are: collecting important governmental information and making it available at the centres; facilitating the 'Right to Information' through the centres to ensure that the community secures its rightful entitlements; and developing community databases for assisting in the delivery of social services as well as using this data to extract accountability from public institutions.
- The telecentres are emerging as critical local institutions, mediating contact with the outside world, and enhancing the status of the *sangha* and the women in the community.



### Mahiti Manthana - A Project of IT for Change

*Mahiti Manthana* is a project of IT for Change ([www.ITforChange.net](http://www.ITforChange.net)), a non-profit organisation located in Bangalore, India, working on research and policy advocacy in addition to field-based project implementation.

The project is being undertaken in partnership with Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka, a grassroots organisation working for women's empowerment.

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