

# Digitising a Feminist Stratagem

## What Mahiti Manthana has taught us about women's empowerment

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### How we embarked upon Mahiti Manthana

For the last five years, IT for Change (ITfC) has been working with the Centre for Community Informatics and Development (CCID), our field unit at Mysore, India, exploring how women's mobilisation and organising processes can be strengthened through new information and communication technologies (ICTs) systems. We have done this by enabling organisations to adopt digital technology to restructure their methods, and supporting them in revisiting

*Collective listening at "sangha" meeting of community radio broadcast.*  
Photo courtesy of Anita Gurumurthy

### Centre for Community Informatics and Development (CCID)

CCID is the field unit of IT for Change that works with local organisations to explore progressive and community-driven ICTD models that engage with, and are able to, address local power relations.

their goals to identify whether and how ICTs can make their work more efficient. Our strategy has been to democratise the use of technology. This is primarily done by enabling field workers and women leaders in the rural communities we work with to deploy it, rather than developing specialised ICT units.

Our oldest partner is Mahila Samakhya Karnataka (MSK). The Mahila Samakhya initiative is a pan-Indian programme for women's collectivisation at the local level whose working motto is: "education for empowerment". The initiative is a project of the Government of India that is being conducted by the Department of Education. Set up about two decades ago, the Samakhya experiment is meant to support marginalised women's learning processes. As such, it has led to the clear insight that education means much more than literacy, and that it is, in fact, a process of creating spaces for reflection, action and the assertion of women's citizenship through collectives or sanghas. The Samakhya sanghas are supported by the staff of the programme – known as resource persons – who facilitate grassroots women's learning that is relevant to their everyday struggles and needs. It focuses on active agency by opening up debates on gender, and promoting women's leadership at the local level so that action for their rights and claims vis-a-vis local institutions are part of the learning-reflection spiral.

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

The CCID team came with the hypothesis that the power of ICTs as system building blocks could be deployed to revitalise the Mahila Samakhya, bringing to focus its original structures and processes. This would help in bringing back the space and time for sangha

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

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

The cornerstone of our strategy was in building a new culture – a tall order no doubt, but the dead-ends of the Samakhya strategy could only be dealt with by quantum shifts of the kind that would usher in fresh energy and new ways of thinking and doing. It was a let's-start-from-scratch approach that was undertaken through emerging digital opportunities. This new culture entails a complex web of new institutional mechanisms for tweaking the

relationship structure within Samakhya and with the communities. This includes: new communication protocols for the Samakhya staff and sanghas for vertical and horizontal organisational communication, new self-directed methods of classroom pedagogy (on a range of issues from child marriage to elections and entitlements), claiming the public space with confidence and tact and taking the Samakhya ideology out into the masculine village agora, and pro-actively interpreting it to the multiple actors in community life.

This rich informatics culture includes three digitally enabled components. One was a weekly radio broadcast that is the sangha woman's own voice in the local public called Kelu Sakhi (Listen, my friend). The other is an on-demand as well as push-based video system, Sangha Shaale (sangha classroom), that is a new pedagogical approach with videos on basic information that women wanted such as "how to get a bank loan". It also included videos that the Samakhya team felt would be useful for nascent sanghas like inspirational biographies of veteran sangha women, and others that open up debates through narratives of the daily lives of girls and boys. The third component was a village-based telecentre model for public information access called the Namma Mahiti Kendra (Our Information Centres). It is run by sangha women in select villages through a young female information intermediary (known as an infomediary), trained by the women and our CCID team so that she can directly address information remoteness from

the village and institutional non-transparency and apathy.

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

### **What Mahiti Manthana has taught us**

*It is not about capacity alone, but about a culture*

When CCID started working with Samakhya, our initial task was to bring the rational and affective dimensions of movement-building into

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the Samakhya system through the power of a new, ICT-enabled systems design. As such, we carved a new local subaltern public sphere through Kelu Sakhi, the radio broadcast. Moreover, we burnt the mid-night oil and indulged in many feminist discussions to evolve rapid, garage production techniques needed to make video material. We also set up sangha managed telecentres to streamline a transparent, state-citizen transaction pathway to reach the “right to know”<sup>1</sup> and the funds committed by the state for development to the communities where the sanghas were active.

The design was not about technology. Rather, it was about being partners in a new system-building exercise; dealing with the information, knowledge and communication aspects of Samakhya; and making it possible for sangha women to experience and leverage a new social ecology enabled by technology. Sanghas continued to do what they had been doing for

all those years — asserting their voices, exercising their agency and bringing accountability to institutions — but now it was through new modalities of Mahiti Manthana that culture began to be shaped and targeted.

We necessarily privileged what we knew and felt were feminist methods of technology practice. For example, while radio broadcast had always been a space for women in sanghas across the district, we did resist the temptation to create

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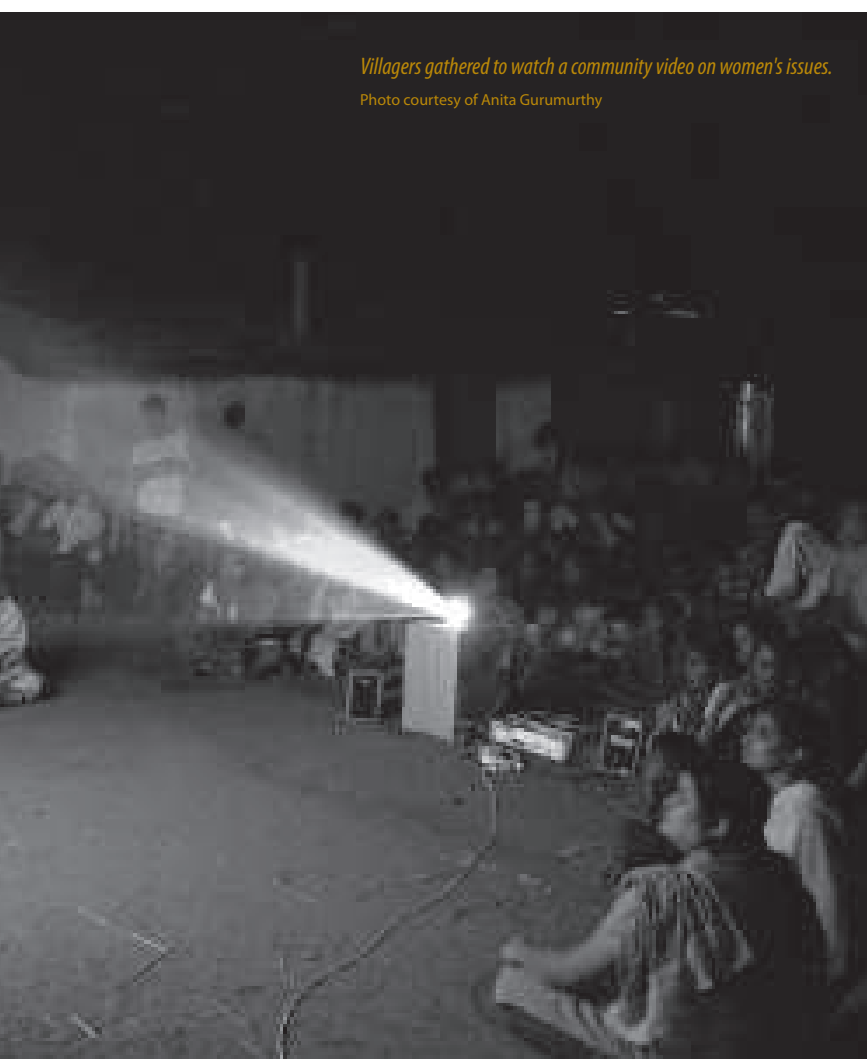
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heroes out of some women. As such, broadcasts are not heard individually, but as a collective which is an altogether different discursive space. Moreover, the videos are screened within the context of the collective so that they generate debate and enable multiple perspectives to be aired without fear of exclusion. The telecentres are at the service of all households in the village and are zealously protected from being politicised by vested interests. In this culture of creating democratic relationship structures that work collaboratively and advance the standpoint of the women we work with, we have constantly examined our own conceptual and action frameworks. Our questions are not only about how to approach caste and gender politics but also concern choices surrounding technology – what kind of hardware and software promote, rather than undermine, the feminist informatics culture we are so carefully nurturing?

We are often asked, “do women produce their own radio programmes and do they edit video films themselves?” Our response is both yes and no. The notion of participatory development must be understood to emphasise local autonomy and freedom from dependencies that are

*Villagers gathered to watch a community video on women's issues.*

Photo courtesy of Anita Gurumurthy



exploitative. Participatory media production thus needs to be visualised as a dynamic process where technology trainers must play their role in shaping the techno-social ecology. This is a learning process for both the trainer and the community of women whose lives are being touched by digital media for the first time. Some women will become adept at recording, directing and even editing with gadgets, but others may not. However, the participatory element in the techno-social process lies in the subtle processes of dialogues around media production and artefact creation – how should we interpret phenomena, how do we ascribe meaning to it, and how do we represent situations and issues?

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This process of figuring out the “how” is not so much about grassroots women becoming technical experts, but primarily about how they learn to appropriate and integrate digital spaces into their individual subjectivity and infiltrate the local public sphere with digitally-mediated feminist publics. Thus, participation is in the small but significant aspects of practising participatory democracy. It is reflected in sangha women’s mentoring of the young infomediary of the telecentre, the contestations around middle-class and rural, poor and lower caste women’s respective notions of the female subject and feminist issues in the mainstream. This is also reflected in their own alternative media and the debates between the CCID team, Samakhya staff and sangha women on feminist ethics and the aesthetic of representing issues in the media. It matters less that video editing is done by the CCID team. Instead, it is highly significant that women whose lives we want to impact positively are in dialogue with us in a shared journey in creating a feminist digital space that can work for them.

It is not just about strengthening women-only spaces but also about feminising the local public sphere

Samakhya was in a kind of limbo when Mahiti Manthana began. There was an active engagement with the local male elite and local governance systems – formal and traditional/informal. However, this was more to do with strategic communication to selectively co-opt men in power and male household members to push the Samakhya cart along. Sangha women would steer the empowerment process through the inevitable bargaining and power brokering with local political and community leaders; trading some short term benefits for strategic long term gains. These bargains would sometimes entail open confrontation to build consensus or opposition and resistance to unjust patriarchal practices. In the art of feminist practice, no one method can be seen as an ideal feminist stratagem; power needs to be understood and dealt with through due process and in contextual interpretations of history and justice.

With Mahiti Manthana, women saw that the airwaves of their radio programme and the sangha screenings of their films were a solidarity building exercise that brought greater clarity and energy to politics related to their identities. It was also a new space for inviting community members to understand and engage with these politics in subtle and non-threatening ways. The film screenings were a way to showcase their victories to fellow community members and the male elite in their villages, and the radio was a fun way to inform conventional male spaces – tea shop tête-a-tetes and local bus rides – with feminist messages. The telecentre-routed access to entitlements allowed for a new political consciousness among women about their rights and citizenship, but it was also a credibility building exercise for the sangha as a champion for the poor. The young female telecentre infomediary and her cohort were literally and figuratively entering upper caste, male bastions, and generating enough curiosity and healthy discomfort in the wider village context about the sangha and the politics of gender, caste and





*Village men gathered at a village shop to listen to a women's community radio programme.*

Photo courtesy of Anita Gurumurthy

class. This has not been a smooth fantasy ride, but a roller coaster that has had its ups and downs – drunken men opposing film screenings, family members preventing young women from playing their public service role as telecentre infomediaries, local contractors and brokers trying to sabotage the information transparency sought by well-informed sangha women.

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

### **It is not only about the information ecosystem but also about renegotiating gender orders**

In the beginning, while planning for *Mahiti Manthana*, the CCID team felt the need to take stock of two systems. First, the organisational information and communication processes of Samakhya in terms of its effectiveness to support sangha women's knowledge processes (top-down) and second, the information needs and knowledge practices of the sanghas (peer-to-peer and horizontal). Setting up the *Mahiti Manthana* ecosystem was about re-engineering these two systems and this was essentially what we can describe as a techno-social project.

Thus, what we did is not just set up the digital paraphernalia, but infuse it with new processes, and hence, ended up creating a new relationship architecture. Sanghas were now not dependent on visits of the Samakhya staff for charting out action strategies; aided as they were by *Kelu Sakhi*, *Sangha Shaale* and *Namma Mahiti Kendra*. Their information seeking, processing and subsequent action pathways were now on auto-pilot. Announcements on the radio about forthcoming meetings were a small innovation, but a big step forward for efficient coordination; requisitioning specific videos for sangha viewing just a phone call away, and the Samakhya staff and sangha women were more connected rather than less.

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

We found that community screenings and those in the sangha were able to pry open sensitive issues in non-threatening ways and work to address prejudices and stereotypes at deeper levels. Also, the screen or the projected image

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

### The Development Connection to Feminist Informatics

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

same realities on which women depend for their everyday survival requires sustained effort and is above and beyond funding cycles and project timelines.

The pressure of the global neoliberal development environment is palpable at the local level and this means many “distractions,” which are perhaps part of the alternatives that women encounter in making choices for themselves and their families. Network society’s big system propensity is increasingly taking control of our lives in inconspicuous but profound ways such as the enrolling of sangha women as insurance agents by transnational corporations, which pulls them away from their leadership roles as change agents and poses complex challenges where there is no straightforward ethical resolution. We find ourselves having to build alternatives that carry meaning, on the one hand, while taking stances against the totalising propensities of corporate and state driven technological systems that at a macro level, disempower the local in favour of hegemonic global forces.

The supposedly “secular” and “democratic” public spheres at the local context are in reality blatantly anti-secular and unapologetically undemocratic. Feminist informatics attempts to address questions of freedom and rights without binaries – stacking the socio cultural at par with the economic. However, this is a fine art that calls for a strong commitment to feminist methods. We are grateful to the sangha women for sharing their time and space with us to learn what the meaning of empowerment is. For, we also had much to learn in those transformative spaces and our learning was reciprocal. ♦

*The authors are with **IT for Change**, an NGO in India that works on information society issues from the standpoint of the Global South. While critiquing the dominant approaches to new technologies and development, IT for Change also works with alternatives. Mahiti Manthana, the subject of this article, has been one such project dealing with the questions of women’s empowerment, gender equality and digital technologies.*