

Prakriye – Centre for Community Informatics and Development

Seeking an equitable and just information society requires us to go beyond engaging with the macro-level governance of technology architectures. We need to be able to effectively challenge these architectures, by demonstrating how innovative, alternative models can be created at the micro-level, for empowering communities who are otherwise increasingly marginalised in the information society. This has been the primary vision guiding the activities of our field centre Prakriye- Centre for Community Informatics and Development.

Prakriye partners with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations working on diverse issues, ranging from empowering women to strengthening livelihoods, to help them avail of the rich possibilities that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer for development practice, when implemented in a contextually-appropriate and sensitive manner. The learnings gained from such engagements at the field level are deployed in IT for Change's larger advocacy efforts towards community-centric ICTs for development practice.

We have continued our long-standing engagement in Mysore district with the *sanghas* (women's collectives) of *Mahila Samakhya*¹ Karnataka (MSK), in the areas of community radio, community video and community computing. In the area of capacity-building, we continued our work with Communication for Development Learning (CDL), a Bengaluru-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and the Karnataka Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, for training people living with HIV/AIDS in using videos effectively in their advocacy and internal capacity-building efforts. We also extended support to Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), a Mysore based NGO, in their efforts to set up and launch a community radio station. In the area of education, the *Kishori Chitrapata* (images by adolescent girls) project, launched in 2009, was successfully concluded this year. Right now, we are in the process of consolidating our work with *MSK sanghas* (collectives), through a deepening of our engagement with the community information centres that we set up at the village and block level with *sangha* ownership and management.



A movie was screened at Andanahalli in Hunsur taluk where all the MSK and non MSK sanghas were gathered together to watch it.

Our Work with Mahila Samakhya Karnataka

We continue to work with the *sanghas* of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka, in three *taluks* (sub-district units) of Mysore district – H. D. Kote, Hunsur and Nanjangud – using community radio, video and community information centres, to support and strengthen their collective learning-action processes.

This year, we focused on consolidating *Kelu Sakhi*², our weekly '*sangha* radio' programme. Radio broadcasts on issues such as child marriage, re-enrolments of school drop-outs and women's health continued to generate heated discussions among communities about the need to understand and respect the aspirations of women.

Also, the community of listeners of the community radio programme has now expanded to include non-*sangha* women, men from the community and even children.

On the community video component, we continued our efforts at increasing the collective viewing of the videos produced, as part of our work with *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*. This year, screenings were conducted

at *Mahila Samakhya* events at the district level, and the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* (community information centres). This year, for the first time, a *sakhi*³ (community information centre operator) was involved in the video production, a testimony to further decentralisation of the process. The expectation is that one day every field-level development worker will consider it as a normal and necessary skill to be able to make local videos.

After viewing a film on the experience of blood tests and its relevance that was shot on *sangha* women of Attiguppe village, *sanghas* from Mullur village wanted to go for blood tests and also make their own film about this experience. It is heartening to note how the perception of ownership of the video or cinematic medium, once considered so much a reflection of the outside reality, is growing among *sangha* women. The *sakhi* from the Attiguppe *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (community information centre) assisted the Mullur *sangha* women by filming their entire experience of going for a blood test, with some assistance from the *Prakriye* team. We did not suspect that a film about women undertaking blood tests could be so useful and powerful in the local context. This experience re-affirmed our faith in the potential of locally created videos in catalysing action. It also underlined the fact that it is very difficult to know from the outside what kind of media activity is more important and pertinent in a particular context. This must be discovered from within, which requires appropriate local community processes to be developed over a relatively long period.

We continued our work with the *two Namma Mahiti Kendras* (community information centres) at Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi; and the two block level community information centres (called the *Taluk Mahiti Kendras*) at Hunsur and H. D. Kote *taluks*. This year witnessed the deepening and broadening of information linkages that the centres have created between communities and government departments at the block level, and with non-governmental agencies. The information centres continue to provide information about entitlements from government departments, as well as skill-building and livelihood opportunities to communities. We also came across instances where the centres have enhanced community

“ I felt very happy when what I spoke about the gram panchayat came on air. All my *sangha* members said, "Devamma is speaking on radio". It felt good to know that my thoughts could be shared with everyone, through **Kelu Sakhi**.

Devamma, sangha woman from Attiguppe village, Mysore district, India

Mahiti Kendras: Changing Information Asymmetries

There is a governmental scheme that provides pensions to unmarried women, who are above forty-five years. For this scheme, the *anganwadi*⁴ teacher is responsible for identifying the beneficiaries and processing the applications. In Attiguppe, the *anganwadi* teacher had written back to block officials that there are no women who fall under this category in the village, without conducting any enquiries on the ground. She had not even approached the *sanghas* in the village. The *sakhi* at the village information centre heard about this scheme, from the block information centre. She independently enquired with *sangha* members and was able to identify 3-4 eligible beneficiaries from the village. Later on, she also tactfully confronted the *anganwadi* teacher for her non-transparent handling of this issue.

The role of the *Kendras* in the local information ecology is being increasingly recognised by the larger village community and block level officials. A member of the state legislature visited the Hosavaranchi *Kendra* in November 2011 and appreciated its working. There were other visits from groups and organisations who wanted to learn more about the work of the *Namma Mahiti Kendras* – including a study visit from a Mongolian government delegation who were trying to understand the Indian experience of using ICTs to strengthen governance, and a team from the Foundation for Ecological Security (an Indian NGO), who visited our centres to garner insights that could be useful to their efforts towards setting up *Gramina Mahiti Kendras* (resource centres at the village level) in Kolar and Chikkaballapur districts in Karnataka.

“ It was a great experience to meet a fine team at Prakriye, IT for Change and learn about a project with in-depth conceptualisation and strong community-based process.

Bhuvaneswari Mahalingam, Consultant for UNICEF

members' participation in local governance, such as participation in the *gram sabhas* (the village electorate); as well as instances of the centres changing the information asymmetry vis-à-vis local officials leading to a wider coverage of, and benefit from, social welfare schemes.

ICTs for Education

During 2011-2012, our work with out-of-school adolescent girls (*kishoris*) in Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi villages, as part of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) supported *Kishori Chitrapata* (images by adolescent girls) project, was successfully concluded. *Kishori Chitrapata*, launched in 2009 in partnership with



The kishoris learning how to use the digital camera as part of their training (Mysore district, India)

Mahila Samakhya Karnataka and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, has primarily explored the innovative use of ICTs, in particular, videos and photos, in enabling *kishoris* to individually and collectively explore, question and critically engage with their immediate social and cultural milieu. Through the process of critical engagement, it was hoped that *kishoris* could be aided in developing their abilities to creatively negotiate their lives, for fulfilling their aspirations and realising their potential. The first year of the project was dedicated to enrolling the *kishoris*, and creating a sense of confidence and trust among the *kishoris* themselves,

and between the *kishoris* and the programme facilitators. From the second year onwards, the project focused on training the girls in still photography and video, especially using these technologies as means to enable the girls to explore critical issues and questions about their lives related to empowerment.

This final year of the project, we continued to focus on using technology training as a means for assisting *kishoris* in their learning and critical self-examination processes. Some of the themes we explored were livelihood options for *kishoris*, 'know your village', awareness about the functioning of the local government, critical awareness about how patriarchy operates, and questions of individual and collective identity. The curriculum also dealt with other key subjects such as reflecting upon their body image, as well as understanding adolescence and dealing effectively with its challenges.

In order for *kishoris* from the two project villages to interact with each other, and for the facilitators to conduct

“ I had earlier thought of the panchayat as a male space below the peepal tree where elders met to sit and pass judgements. When we visited the gram panchayat office, I realised that this is not the case. I asked the officials present there about the services that exist for girls and women. I was the first to ask a question there!

Reetha, one of the kishoris

intensive training sessions on important subjects, we organised a workshop in the *Prakriye* office, Mysore. This workshop also gave the girls a chance to travel outside their village, which was very significant, considering the enormous restrictions placed on their mobility by their family and the larger community. The workshop organised in Mysore mainly

focused on enabling the girls to recognise and overcome gender stereotypes, in their immediate contexts as well as in the larger society.

The *Kishori Chitrapata* project was concluded in January 2012, by organising a celebration in Hosavaranchi, with the *kishoris*, their parents, other community members and *Mahila Samakhya sangha*

women and programme staff. The celebration, which was given the name '*Kishori Chitrapata Habba*' (the adolescent girls' festival) was organised entirely by the *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* in the village. At the event, all the parents spoke about the positive changes the programme had brought to their daughters. *Kishoris* recounted their experiences of the training, in front of their parents and community members. The programme ended with a community screening of some of the films made by the *kishoris*. Our experience with *Kishori Chitrapata* has re-affirmed our faith in constructivist learning processes.

“ *It is very important to have a sakhi and not a sakha because there is a need to respond sensitively to women's needs. Also, in the male-dominated world, it is an opportunity for the girls like me, and we become role models for other kishoris who would come out.*

Tara, sakhi at Hosavaranchi Namma Mahiti Kendra

Capacity-Building

Digital Story Telling Workshops with Karnataka Network of Positive People

This year, we continued our digital story telling capacity-building training for members of the Karnataka Network of Positive People (KNP+), which we had initiated in partnership with CDL in 2010. CDL is a Bengaluru-based NGO engaged in media research, training and advocacy efforts. This year, we conducted four workshops for members of KNP+ from across Karnataka, to train them in digital story telling using public software. As the name suggests, digital story telling is a process of telling stories with the help of ICTs, using a montage of images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and/or music.



A sangha woman learning to handle a digital camera.

The overall goals of the workshops were to enable the participants to capture and share their opinions, experiences and inspirational stories on video so that they as individuals and as a community of people living with HIV/AIDS, are motivated and are able to gain confidence and courage in each others positive stories. The project also sought to enable the participants to share these videos with the rest of the world so as to influence the mainstream discourse on people living with HIV/AIDS. At the workshops, the participants learned the necessary technical and conceptual skills for creating their own digital stories, in a powerful and gender sensitive manner.

Capacity-Building for the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement on Community Radio

We supported the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), which has recently obtained a community radio licence, in strategising and operationalising their community radio initiative. Capacity-building workshops were conducted on script-writing, recording, content management and the overall community radio strategy for the staff of SVYM, to enable them to fully understand the socio-technical processes that were necessary for shaping community radio into an effective strategy for community development efforts. Their community radio

station '*Jana Dhvani*' (Voice of the people), went live on February 24, 2012.

Looking Ahead

Over 2011-2012, we plan to consolidate our work with the community-based people's organisations – *sanghas* and federations – of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka. We are beginning a project supported by International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, on exploring information society possibilities for women's engagement with local governance. The project involves activities at three project sites, one each in India, South Africa and Brazil. This year *Prakriye's* work will therefore be more specifically focused on exploring the potential of techno-social processes for enhancing women's participation in local governance structures and institutions. We will set up a few more community information centres. We will also be experimenting with newer technologies whose potential is often touted but rarely explored at the grass-roots level in a systematic manner – specifically, the potential of Short Message Service (SMS) networks as a local media, and the opportunities offered by Geographic Information System (GIS) technologies to motivate communities to engage in micro-planning.

Meanwhile, we will continue to work towards our mandate of enabling various developmental agencies to understand better the possibilities opened up by community informatics for development.

Over the next year, we also plan to improve linkages with other sites in India where important community informatics work is being done. We plan to hold workshops to connect, and cross-learn among, these projects. We also plan to build our capacities to be able to provide short-term support and hand-holding to initiatives in other parts of the country.

Confronting Gender Stereotypes

At one workshop organised with *kishoris* in Mysore, participants were divided into four groups. Two groups were asked to go outside and search for objects that represented 'manliness'. The other two groups were asked to search for objects that represented 'femininity'. The girls generally chose to represent the feminine using 'chocolates' and 'flowers', while they used 'cigarette butts' and 'stones' to represent the masculine. We asked the girls to explain their choices – and then the girls came up with their ideas on 'strong, tough' men and 'soft, fragile' women. We then conducted another activity with the four groups, where we asked each group to pick a leader they admired (either from their own village or from anywhere in the world). We asked two groups to pick men leaders and the other two to pick women leaders. After selecting a leader they admired, each group was required to explain the reasons guiding its choice. All groups came up with similar sets of qualities they admired in the leader they selected – honesty, commitment to community welfare, courage, sincerity, sensitivity and ability to inspire other people around him/her. Then, we asked the group – Are these qualities gender specific? Can women become leaders just as men can? Then, through a process of dialogue, we enabled them to reflect on the earlier exercise, as well as on questions of gender stereotyping in their community. We concluded the workshop by watching a popular film '*Kalasipalaya*' with the girls, and enabling them to reflect on gender stereotypes in popular media.

1 *Mahila Samakhya* 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'.

2 *Kelu Sakhi* which means 'Listen, my friend', is a weekly radio programme that is broadcasted over the Karnataka State Open University FM channel in Mysore, between 9:00-9:30 pm every Monday. The programme is produced by IT for Change, as part of its work with women's collectives of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

3 *Sakhi* (which literally means friend), refers to the adolescent girls who work as the information intermediaries in the community information centres set up by IT for Change.

4 *Anganwadi* (courtyard shelter) is a government sponsored child-care centre in India, that caters to children in the age group of zero to six years.