The long march to we-gov:

Insights from the *Women-gov* action-research project in India (2012-2014)

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The Women-gov project (2012-2014), a two-year multi-country action-research initiative supported by the International Development Research Centre, Canada, has explored the question of how the guided use of digital technologies can strengthen marginalised women's informational, associational and communicative power in their engagement with formal and informal structures of local governance, across three sites in India, Brazil and South Africa. In particular, the project focused on studying context-appropriate techno-social models that can enable marginalised women in post-colonial democratic contexts in the global South, to effectively assert their citizenship. IT for Change has provided conceptual leadership to the project and in conjunction with its field centre Prakriye, steered the action-research at the India site. The Brazil research was spearheaded by Instituto Nupef; and that in South Africa by the University of the Western Cape. This research report highlights the main insights and key learnings, from the India research site.

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1. Introduction:

1.1 The Rationale guiding the *Women-gov* project

The reconstitution of the sphere of politics in the network society context is an oft studied theme, especially the democratising propensities of the times we live in. The horizontalisation of communications and the virtualisation and deterritorialisation of social interactions (Frissen 2002) have blurred the binaries between the sphere of the public and the private, and decentred the nation-state. This has led to a rapid reconfiguration of political cultures. For starters, politics in the network age has become increasingly diffuse and decentralised (Gurumurthy 2013). Not to forget, as the Arab Spring and Occupy movement have eloquently demonstrated, the Arendtian transformational moment when the old order is questioned, and old routines are cast away, assumes a new morphology today (Price 2011). In current enactments of radical and anarchic politics, the Internet and social media play a crucial role – as the connections they facilitate help in making a *'known'* a *'known known'* (common knowledge), demonstrating to individuals that they are not alone in holding a particular set of beliefs, thereby enabling them to make that critical leap of faith, crucial for political action.

At this historical conjuncture, feminist praxis at the intersection of women's rights, digital technologies and the sphere of politics has largely focused on the shifts in the politics of subjectivity in the digitally mediated public sphere (Gill 2003); the problem of developing a new idiom of feminist resistance in the post-national, post-capitalist, networked order we inhabit (Fraser 2009); and critiquing the new techniques of governmentality emerging in the network age, especially around the governance of new technology architectures, that *"hijack feminist positions"* (Jensen 2013).

However, one major gap in existing feminist theory (and practice) is the lack of attention to the question of how we can harness the potential that digital technologies offer for transforming women's quotidian experiences of citizenship – especially for those who encounter multiple marginalisations, across the intersecting axes of gender, race, caste and class – in a way that foregrounds their *"voice, visibility and centrality"*(IT for Change 2012).

One major gap in current feminist praxis is the lack of attention to the question of how we can harness the potential of digital technologies for transforming women's quotidian experiences of citizenship.

In the current scenario wherein governance structures (from the global to the local) are being rapidly reconstituted through the techno-social cultural shifts facilitated by the rise of the Internet and ICTs, this line of inquiry is essential for meaningfully continuing the Southern feminist tradition of critiquing the limitations of the liberal citizenship paradigm, and its foundations in *"the binary principles of public-private, productive-reproductive, economic-cultural"*, which has historically excluded women from governance processes and the space of politics.

While it is true that the new technologies offer ample scope for troubling the status quo and established power relations (including gender orders); the dominant governance paradigm of the network age has not adequately explored this transformatory potential. This gap remains, despite

the veritable explosion of 'e-governance' initiatives in democracies of the global South, as they have been largely ill-informed, lacking in a sound 'theory of change' and fixated on the latest technology fad – e-service delivery today, m-governance tomorrow, and cloud computing the day after. The discussion below highlights some of their main shortcomings.

Firstly, most of these initiatives have been crippled by the failure to recognise that e-governance is not a neutral, 'technical' exercise but a 'socio-technical' endeavor that carves out new 'techno-social' spaces where politics is well and truly present (Sreekumar 2007; Bussell 2012). This techno-managerial approach has resulted in a situation where e-governance initiatives have largely been left at sea – without an overarching policy framework that can build their sustainability – as illustrated by the experience of Nicaragua, a few years ago (eLaC 2010), and lacking the means to ward off the threat of capture by entrenched political interests – as illustrated by India's recent foray into setting up biometric authentication systems for service delivery. Secondly, amidst the hype around initiating e-governance projects, the foundational question of putting in place a connectivity infrastructure that brings together the multiple empowering possibilities of the emerging digital eco-system in specific, local contexts is often ignored. As the International Telecommunications Union pointed out in its 2012 report on *Measuring the Information Society*, in most countries in the global South, low band-width, mobile broadband is being utilised as a replacement rather than a reinforcement for high-bandwidth fixed broadband, resulting in sub-optimal outcomes with respect to harnessing the Internet and ICTs for strengthening public institutional information outreach and service delivery. Needless to say, the crippling effects of this lack of attention to basic infrastructure development has severe ramifications on the capacities of public institutions, especially at the local level, to effectively harness the digital delta (ITU 2012). Finally, as the Working Group on Gender and Broadband of the ITU's Broadband Commission recently observed (Broadband Commission 2013), e-governance initiatives are mostly gender-blind in their design, and fail to address the socio-cultural barriers that impede women's participation in governance processes at the local level (for which ICTs are no silver bullet!).

There are clear tensions between the dominant governance paradigm of the network age and inclusive democracy.

Also, governance structures in the network age are steeped in the teleology of 'good governance', which has an uneasy relationship with the project of transformative change and deepening democracy. This is reflected in the dominant e-governance paradigm, as well. On the one hand, it is chock-a-bloc with initiatives that seek to reproduce existing systems of disciplining democracy – such as the controversial Unique Identification project (http://uidai.gov.in/) of the Government of India that aims at developing a biometric data-base of the country's citizenry upon which 'efficient' service delivery systems can be constructed; and Brazil's recent move towards compulsory pregnancy registration to create a maternal health data-base for effective service delivery, that covertly enabled the further restriction of women's right to abortion (Diniz 2012). On the other hand, we are witnessing a new ICT-enabled avatar of post-welfare neo-liberalism – whose hall-mark is a strident 'poverty governance' discourse that reduces the social inclusion question to that of constructing an effective data-oriented governance system, the most recent exemplars of which are the 'Smart Cities' and 'Big Data' discourses that have captured the imaginaries of policy makers in development planning circles.

Another striking feature of this emergent governance paradigm of the network age is its *"intensified focus on the fragmentation and decentering of the institutional set-up of the public sector, and a further blurring of the borderline between state and civil society through the enrollment of private actors in the provision of public governance"*(Sorensen and Torfing 2009*).* This is reflected in the movement away from a state-centred model of governance to that of a coordinated, diffuse, networked governance model in which there are a multiplicity of actors working together, towards the realisation of specified goals. Theorists have often highlighted the tensions between this networked governance model and inclusive democracy – as this model proceeds from a narrow definition of 'shared interests' and does not provide the space for collective articulation of demands (Sorensen and Torfing 2009*)*, and shifts the burden of social reproduction entirely onto the shoulders of individual citizens, especially onto poor women (Durano and Nicole 2005).

This transmutes the foundational democratic concept of 'participation' into Orwellian New-Speak. Firstly, in this model, participation becomes reduced to a depoliticised exercise – as the focus here is on creating conditions where all actors in governance networks are 'free' to participate, rather than addressing the question of their wherewithal to participate. Consequently, the underlying structural conditions that leave some actors more equal than others, such as the workings of elite-controlled 'networks of favours' remain untouched. Also, the lack of attention to structural inequalities in the design of e-gov initiatives to promote transparency, accountability and participation may end up exacerbating rather than containing exclusions, and reproducing unequal citizenship – as revealed from existing studies of Open Government initiatives (Davies and Bawa 2012). Secondly, citizen participation becomes the discursive site through which a 'perverse confluence' (Dagnino 2005), is obtained – between the transformatory project of deepening democracy (that stresses the performance of citizenship as the collective assertion and articulation of rights-claims on state structures) and the neo-liberal project of the strategic retreat of the state from its social responsibilities (that reduces citizenship to the idea of self-reliance and volunteerism).

Against this backdrop, for feminist scholars and practitioners in the network society context, the key question is to explore how an alternative governance paradigm can be created for the network age – one in which the affordances[1] of digital technologies are leveraged for building vibrant, local, institutional and democratic cultures, that further women's active citizenship, as substantive and transformational public-political participation. This is the rationale guiding the *Women-gov* project.

1.2 Research Framework

The *Women-gov* action-research project aimed at testing the following hypothesis.

The guided use of digital technologies enables marginalised women to gain active citizenship at the local level, democratizing formal and informal institutions and systems, particularly in the sphere of local governance, by creating empowering ecologies constituted by:
- New information & learning processes

1 Affordances may be defined as "all action possibilities latent in the environment, objectively measurable and independent of the individual's ability to recognize them, but always in relation to agents and therefore dependent on their capabilities". The environment psychologist James Gibson coined this term in the late 1970s.

- *New associational processes and **e**xpanded possibilities for collective action*
- *New communication processes.*

Active citizenship is operationally defined as the extent to which women are able to exercise informational, communicative and associational power in the local public-political sphere.

Informational power: is understood as the power gained from access to information, including information about services and entitlements. It also refers to the power women gain from becoming key interlocutors in the local informational ecology. Finally, informational power also includes the power that women gain when they acquire the capacity to be producers of information that is sought after by government officials and other groups in the community.
The parameters used to measure informational power in this research are:
– Women's access to public information
– Women's participation in local information networks

Associational power: is understood as the power gained from being a part of collective. This includes the following aspects: the vibrancy and growth of a collective, the capacity of a collective to form cross-linkages and convene public forums as well as its ability to engage in local level action (collective action) such as protest marches and filing joint petitions.

The parameters used to measure associational power in this research are:
- Strength of women's collectives (including vibrancy, growth, cross-linkages and convening power)
- Capacity for collective action

Communicative power: is defined as the power to shape or challenge the mainstream discourse in the public sphere , as well as the power to open up an official communication channel (such as giving applications for entitlement seeking) and challenge informal power structures.

The parameters used to measure communicative power in this research are:
- Women acquiring a voice in the local public sphere
- Women challenging the status quo in discussions in the public sphere
- Women's participation in / appropriation of media for content generation processes
- Women coming together to build a counter public (and building a peer based group around the project, that uses technology)

2. The 'action' in the India research project

Under the India component of the *Women-gov* project, we interrogated the main hypothesis, through the development of a participatory governance model utilising multi-pronged ICT strategies – community radio, community video, digitally enabled information centres, mobile phone-based networking and participatory mapping utilising GIS technology – from the standpoint of rendering democracy at the last mile, meaningful for marginalised, rural women. Concretely, this meant a deepening of the preexisting engagement of IT for Change's field centre *Prakriye*, with women's collectives in Mysore district (Karnataka, India).

Before we explain the specifics of the action research design at the India site, a brief introduction

to the context we work in may be useful. Mysore district has a population of over 2.9 million, according to the Census of India 2011, making it the 125th most populous district out of the 600-plus districts in the country.

According to the District Human Development Report 2009, out of the 30 districts of the state of Karnataka, Mysore ranks 7th in terms of income, but only 14th when the Human Development Index is used as the base. The blocks[2] that *Prakriye* works in – Hunsur and H.D.Kote – have a significant *dalit* and tribal population. Also, they were both identified by the state-government constituted High Power Committee on Regional Imbalances, in the early 2000s, as areas with high levels of socio-economic deprivation, within Karnataka.

Women-gov seemed a crucial opportunity for deepening our existing work – refining our existing strategies of community radio, community video and ICT-enabled information centres; as well as new techno-social strategies such as GIS-enabled participatory mapping and mobile-phone based networking for strengthening women's active citizenship.

2.1 Head start: building on our community informatics model-building efforts with women's collectives in Mysore

Between 2005-12, prior to the start of the *Women-gov* project, *Prakriye* was primarily involved in building a community informatics model to strengthen the empowerment processes of women's collectives formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* governmental programme, in Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks of Mysore district. The *Mahila Samakhya* (http://mhrd.gov.in/mahila-samakhya-programme) programme works across various states of India, towards the aim of 'education for empowerment', adopting a collectivisation strategy that brings together economically and socially disadvantaged women, by creating a shared identity and building a sense of solidarity. In fact, in Mysore district, in its two decades of existence, the programme has mainly worked with *dalit* women, hailing from households with precarious livelihood and income security, for whom survival is an everyday struggle (Gurumurthy and Chami 2012).

The following elements constituted the corner-store of our community informatics model:

(a) A weekly 30-minute radio-broadcast (titled *Kelu Sakhi* – which means ‘Listen, my friend’ in the local language Kannada), produced with the extensive involvement of women's collectives in the two blocks, straddling engendered perspectives on various thematics such as health, education, legal rights, governance and economic empowerment, and valorising the idea of feminist solidarity-building.
(b) An on-demand, as well as push-based community video strategy, focusing on public information women seek, inspirational biographies about some members of women's collectives, and discursive critiques of gender and patriarchy.
(c) A village-based, ICT-enabled, community information centre model, owned and managed by women's collectives, for enhancing women's access to public information and pushing for transparency and responsiveness from government departments. In specific, we set up two information centres at the village level, linked to two hubs at the sub-district (block) level, where most government departments are situated. The management of each village information centre

2 Blocks refer to the sub-district units of administration in the Indian context.

was placed with a Managing Committee comprising representatives from local women's collectives in the village (with the majority of the members hailing from *Mahila Samakhya* collectives). Day-to-day operations were vested with a young woman infomediary selected and trained by the women and the *Prakriye* team, accountable to the Managing Committee.

The main idea was that the infomediary would collect public information from officials of government departments and local public institutions, governmental websites, and newspapers, and disseminate this information to the community of the village where the centre is situated, as well as 4-5 contiguous villages within a 1-2 km radius – especially to members of women's collectives in these areas. The infomediary was also required to support members of the community in filing claims and applications for the entitlements they were eligible for – a process that hitherto had been the fiefdom of the local elite.

The block level centres followed a similar structure – the only difference was that in this case, the Managing Committee members were drawn only from members of collectives of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme. This was because the *Mahila Samakhya* programme already had a pre-existing structure – a Federation Executive Committee of 9 members annually elected from the women's collectives across the block, who were gradually expected to take over the role of coordination and management of the various activities of the collectives, being handled by the programme staff, as a strategy for developing their independence and autonomy. We decided that this Executive Committee would *ex officio* be the Managing Committee of the block information centres we set up.

Over the years, there has been unmistakable evidence of the transformational impact of our work. We observed that the network of information centres we set up were enabling women by-pass traditional gate-keeping of public information architectures and circumvent middle-men in accessing state structures. The community radio and community video platforms were not only enabling women confidently assert their political voice in the local public sphere, but also seeding new, peer learning cultures among women's collectives which reinforced trust and togetherness. We also observed reduced dependencies of women's collectives on the physical presence of the staff of the programme, who have historically played a key role in hand-holding the women in their everyday grassroots struggles, as our strategies enhanced the capacity of the collectives to self-direct their learning processes, and effectively dialogue with local governance structures to claim their rightful entitlements. And, most crucially, we found that women were growing in their self-esteem as they engaged in this effort – through their experiences of handling ICTs, including their newly-found capacities to search and obtain information through digital means, and their appropriation of digital learning resources.

2.2 First Principles: the *Women-gov* project design

Women-gov seemed a crucial opportunity for deepening our existing work in Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks, to engage with women's collectives apart from the ones formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, and embark on other techno-social journeys to strengthen our community informatics explorations. From our prior experiences at the India site, we already had a glimpse of the immense potential of community radio, community video and community information centres to enhance women's collectives' informational, associational and communicative power – the

building blocks of active citizenship.
Therefore, we focused on leveraging this advantage, as the following discussion on the building blocks of the India component of the action-research, explicate:

2.2.1 Building on our information centres strategy: efforts to create a local information architecture that privileges *dalit* women's collectives

(a) Setting up a critical mass of women-run community information centres

At the start of the *Women-gov* project, we had two information centres operating at the village level[3] – in Devanahalli and Vajarahalli villages of Hunsur block; and two information centres operating at the block level in Hunsur and H.D.Kote (to facilitate the linkages of the village centres with government departments, most of which are located at the block/sub-district level).

When we decided to set up new village information centres, we undertook a rigorous process of selecting a village community that we could partner with, as our previous experiences had taught us that a women-run information centre can be sustained only in a context where women's collectives have some pre-existing solidarity, and demonstrate a strong sense of interest and initiative in running with this effort. Further, we were also clear that we would work only in those areas where there was a 'felt' and 'perceived' information deficit[4], and where we were confident of our capacity to manage the existing village social dynamics, to ensure that *dalit* women's collectives would have a significant voice in managing the centre. Our village selection process, underscored by these caveats, took six months (from September 2012 to February 2013).

While setting up new information centres, we were clear that we would work only in areas with 'felt' and 'perceived' information deficits, and where we were confident of our ability to manage village social dynamics in a manner that guaranteed *dalit* women's collectives' substantive participation.

During this period, we short-listed 18 villages in Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks, through discussions with *Mahila Samakhya* programme staff who were able to make an initial assessment of the fit of the villages to our criteria, based on their familiarity with the local geography. We then undertook a preliminary set of visits to meet *Mahila Samakhya* women's collectives in these villages, to undertake a detailed assessment of their strength and vibrancy. Following this, we shortlisted 6 villages, and carried out a second set of meetings, to assess the willingness of the collectives and the larger community in taking up an information centre. At the end of this set of meetings, we narrowed down upon 2 villages – Hosahalli in Hunsur and Taverekere in H.D.Kote – where we initiated the process of establishing information centres, in March 2013.

3 As this research report analyses the socio-political dynamics of the contexts we work in, in great detail, and this information is potentially politically explosive, we decided to mask the names of all the villages and persons we discuss. The background information about the villages have not been altered – but we have used names of localities of the peri-urban names of Bengaluru to avoid revealing those details that may compromise the confidentiality of discussions with project participants.
4 Felt needs are those that are expressed by the target group members, as opposed to ascribed needs/perceived needs which are needs that are identified by the practitioner. See Sheppard, M. (2006), Social Work and Social Exclusion: The Idea of Practice, Hampshire: Ashgate.

In both villages, the information centres were formally inaugurated in September 2013, after an arduous process of obtaining the buy-in of local village leaders, identifying a space to house the centre, selecting an infomediary (especially convincing the community about why we cannot take a man in this role!) and fine-tuning the constitution of the Managing Committee. Despite initial adversities, the Hosahalli centre is now taking off, moving from strength to strength. However, in Taverekere, a combination of difficult circumstances (the infomediary's sudden resignation, the owner of the building where the info-centre was housed making a sudden demand on the collective to vacate the space, and the women's fruitless efforts to find another young woman who was willing to be the infomediary) led to the closure of the centre – as the women's collective managing the information centre reached the end of their tether, and their resilience was beaten down. Needless to say, the process of setting up village information centres is an uphill battle, against the face of constant threats from the local elite, and entrenched interests (detailed in Section 4 of this brief).

We would like to highlight here that the information centres do not charge any fee for their informational services, as a revenue-based informational model is antithetical to our vision of setting up an alternative information network that helps historically excluded groups to access public information. However, the two older village information centres do provide Desktop Publishing, photocopying and photography services – at rates fixed by the Managing Committee. The income from these activities goes into building a Sustainability Fund for the future of the centres. At the moment, the income from these services is not sufficient for the centres to break even – and we continue to support the operational costs of running the centre, including the salaries of the infomediaries. The diagrams that follow, illustrate the current status of the network of community information centres, set up under the project.

Figure 1: Infrastructure at the information centres

Equipment	Hunsur block centre	Devanahalli village centre	Vajarahalli village centre	Hosahalli village centre	H.D.Kote block centre
Personal Computer with the following specifications: "20" TFT Monitor 4 Gb RAM Intel Processor – 2.8Ghz HDD – 500GB K/M Optical Drive"	√	√	√	√	√
TV (Onida 21 inches)	√	√	√	-	√
H.P Color Printer and Copier	-	√	√	-	-
Landline telephone	Outgoing barred	√	√	-	√
Mobile phone for infomediary	Android	Android	Android	Basic	Android
Digital camera	√	√	√	-	√
Tablet PC with pre-loaded audio and video resources	√	-	-	-	-
Internet	BSNL broadband 512 kbps	Dongle 2G Airtel 1X speed	Dongle Reliance 1X speed	Dongle 2G Airtel 1X speed	Dongle 2G Aircel 1X speed
Internet speed – qualitative assessment by infomediary and the technical associate of the Prakriye field centre	Operates at its full capacity	Very poor	Very poor	Very poor	Operates at its full capacity
Number of hours in a day the centre receives power supply	Day – 8 hours	Day – 4 hours	Day – 4 hours	Day – 4 hours	Day – 8 hours
UPS Back-up power supply	5 hours	5 hours without printer; 2 hours with printer.	5 hours without printer; 2 hours with printer.	5 hours	5 hours

Figure 2: Current status of the network of information centres

Hunsur block information centre
Set up: December 2007

Devanahalli village information centre, Hunsur block
Set up: March 2006
Number of households:205 (Census of India 2011)
Village Profile: Devanahalli has 2 caste groups – *Namdhari Gowdas* (a dominant caste in the region) and *dalits*. Agriculture and supplying milk to the state-run dairy are the main occupations – but many are marginal farmers. One interesting fact we have noticed about this village is that the women's collectives bring together members from both caste groups, whereas the dominant trend is for collectives to restrict their membership to a single caste group. When the information centre was set up in 2006, the women's collectives fought a hard battle to obtain land sanctioned from local government authorities to house the centre, and volunteered their labour to construct the building. **Paid services**: xerox, photo studio, Desktop Publishing

Role of block centres:
The block centres are managed by the Federation Executive Committee (EC) of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.
– Liaison between sub-district level government departments and public institutions such as banks, training institutes, NGOs and the village information centres.
– Key point of public information for villages where there are no information centres (especially for the areas EC members have close ties to)
– Processing applications for entitlements for members of marginalised groups, from villages spread across the block.

Vajarahalli village information centre, Hunsur block
Set up: April 2006
Number of households: 300 appx. (Figures not available in Census of India 2011 as combined with neighbouring villages)
Village Profile: Vajarahalli has a number of caste groups – dominant castes such as Gowdas, *dalit* groups and also one or two Muslim households. The women's collectives here have been formed on the basis of caste – and 2 *dalit* women's collectives and one upper caste women's collective formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme have played a key role in the establishment, and operations, of the information centre, and securing a building from local government authorities, for the centre. However, the upper caste collective is less involved than the *dalit* collectives in the Management Committee of the centre, as it is housed in the *dalit* neighbourhood.
Paid services: xerox, photo studio, Desktop Publishing

Hosahalli village information centre, Hunsur block
Set up: September 2013
Number of households: 216 (Census of India 2011)
Village Profile: Hosahalli is very remote from the sub-district headquarters, and is located on the borders of the Nagerhole National Park (state-protected forest). This village has many caste groups. Tensions between the upper castes and the *dalit* groups are high. Historically, all the village amenities (school, dairy,bus shelter and government-run child care centre) have been housed in the upper caste neighbourhood. The upper castes opposed the move to locate the information centre in the *dalit* settlement, as this meant a challenge to their dominance – which made the process of setting up the centre, tension-filled and difficult.

H.D.Kote block information centre
Set up: December 2007

Taverekere village information centre, H.D.Kote block
Set up: September 2013, **Closed down:** April 2014
Number of households: 35 appx. (Figures not available in Census of India 2011 as combined with neighbouring villages)
Village Profile: An *all-dalit* village in which the residents are mostly marginal farmers who support themselves with daily wage labour. This village was founded 30-40 years ago, through an act of expulsion of *dalits* from the adjoining, bigger village of Hannuru that today has only *non-dalit* residents. This village has only one women's collective, and it has been formed under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme.

b) Strengthening the existing information centres

When we initiated the *Women-gov* project, a major gap in our existing information centres strategy that we identified, was the tendency of the information centres to focus exclusively on processing applications for individual entitlements – without sufficient focus towards building the capabilities of women's collectives in the areas they worked in, to collectively place their demands in the local public-political sphere, demand accountability from public institutions such as the primary health centre, government school and state-run child care centres *(anganwadis*[5]*)* and articulate their concerns in formal citizenship participation forums convened by the local government (the *Gram Panchayat*[6]) to influence agenda-setting processes, including the selection of beneficiaries under various social security schemes. Certainly, women and *dalits* have been historically excluded from these spaces.

Under the *Women-gov* project, we sought to build the capacities of the existing village information centres to produce community data centres to buffer women's claims on local government; and serve as dialogic platforms for women's collectives and elected women representatives.

Therefore, the challenge before us was to leverage the existing work of the information centres (especially those at the village level) in overturning this state of affairs – in order to enhance the associational and communicative power of women's collectives. Towards this, the following efforts were undertaken at the older village information centres in Devanahalli and Vajarahalli:

- Encouraging the infomediary to make regular visits to the *Gram Panchayat* so that regular updates on upcoming meetings with citizens, public assemblies such as the *Gram Sabha*[7]and *Ward Sabha*[8], and beneficiary selection processes under different schemes, could be obtained.
- Encouraging the members of the Managing Committee, and other members of the women's collectives running the centres, to actively engage with the various participatory forums

5 *Anganwadis* are government sponsored child-care and mother-care centres in India. They cater to children in the 0-6 age group.

6 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 73rd 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. In some states, especially in North India, there is one Panchayat for every village. Karnataka has a system of Group *Gram Panchayats* which means there are 6-8 villages under the jurisdiction of a single *Gram Panchayat.*

7 *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 Panchayat*s 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 day, at least every six months, and the approval of the *Gram Sabha* must be taken before implementing any village level development works that would affect the local population.

8 The *Ward Sabha* is a meeting that is held in every electoral ward of the *Panchayat*, prior to the *Gram Sabha*. The idea being that those sections of the community who cannot travel to the *Gram Sabha*, can raise their issues at this neighbourhood level meeting.

that have been compulsorily constituted at the local level, with representatives from the elected *Panchayat* body, and citizenry – such as the Village Health and Sanitation Committee, the School Management Committee and so on.

- Building the capacities of the infomediary and members of the Managing Committee of the information centres to demand accountability from local public institutions such as the Primary Health Centre[9], *anganwadi*, village school, and government health extension workers (ASHAS[10]). In specific, we focused on enhancing the capacities of infomediaries and the Managing Committee members to produce data sets that would ground local governance debates, in bottom-up evidence.
- Utilising the information centre as a key platform for strengthening the linkages of women's collectives in the *Gram Panchayat* in which the centre is housed, with their elected women representatives, so that the foundations for a vibrant, women's political constituency at the grass-roots can be built. (India constitutionally mandates one-third of seats in *Gram Panchayat* bodies to be reserved for women, and some states such as Karnataka have enacted provisions recently, raising this limit to 50%. However, needless to say, presence does not guarantee participation – and often, as numerous studies have revealed, women candidates are proxies for other power leaders; and lack meaningful connections with their constituencies).

2.2.2 Recalibrating our community media efforts: maximising the potential of radio and video for enhancing women's associational and communicative power

(a) Revamping our existing community radio strategy

Prior to the *Women-gov* project, the idea behind the weekly community radio programme *(Kelu Sakhi)* was to carve out a virtual, trans-local platform for dialogue, for geographically dispersed *Mahila Samakhya* women's collectives from all blocks of Mysore district. Therefore, the content of the radio programme primarily revolved around the activities of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme – such as information about health, education, legal literacy, micro-finance and other thematic areas the programme took up through its multifarious training and capacity-building efforts; announcements of upcoming programmatic events at the block and village level, and achievements and success stories of women's collectives. These multiple strands in the programme were loosely held together through a compere script that centred around an imaginary women's collective in an imagined village – a composite created out of the numerous stories, individuals, places and histories that the field team encountered in their everyday work.

Another key element in our radio strategy was the promotion of collective listening – the practice of encouraging members of women's collectives to jointly listen to the programme, rather than individually tune in to the broadcast, from their respective houses. The idea behind this move was that such collective listening could trigger dialogue and peer learning processes among collectives. In fact, even the timing of the weekly radio broadcast had been picked on the basis of on-ground

9 State-owned rural health facilities, which are the most basic units of the government-run public health care system in India. They are single-physician units.
10 Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are community-level extension workers under the public health system of the Indian State.

surveys to assess women's convenience.

After the inception of the *Women-gov* project, we decided to revamp the existing community radio strategy – to shift it from being a platform for *Mahila Samakhya* collectives across Mysore district, to one that would become a space to air perspectives on 'gender and governance' concerns for all women's collectives in the areas we intensively work in – the specific geographies where information centres were functioning, within Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks of Mysore district.

Under the *Women-gov* project, we sought to consciously embed the community radio programme to the information centre geographies, to effectively realise its potential for solidarity-building.

We initiated this shift as we strongly felt that if the potential of the radio for enhancing women's solidarities and their communicative power in public-political debate, had to be realised, the programme had to be rooted in specific geographic referents and build concrete narratives on issues, rather than remain restricted to an imagined geography. As part of this move, we also invested in building the capacities of infomediaries to identify and produce relevant content for the programme.

(b) Strengthening the community video strategy:

Prior to the *Women-gov* project, our video strategy consisted largely of producing and screening films on issues that addressed women's collectives' informational and learning needs. These films were mainly screened to women's collectives by *Mahila Samakhya* staff during block level events and trainings, and we also conducted community screenings on request, by advertising our films on the weekly radio programme. Though we had plans of developing the information centres at the block and village level, into a video library for women, this did not take off – as it was positioned as a voluntary service offered at the information centres, for collectives of the village.

At the start of the *Women-gov* project, we had a video bank of about 20 films, on a variety of subjects –such as the importance of women's collectives, information about government departments, the role of *Gram Panchayats*, and a few videos critiquing existing social norms around girl's education, restrictions on the mobility of adolescent girls, and the gendered division of labour. In the making of the majority of the films (in fact, all except one), women had not been involved in the thick of the production. This was because we continued to place a lot of emphasis on the technical finesse of the final product, though we strived hard to make films in an idiom that matched the women's aesthetic – in a departure from traditional development communication efforts.

With the advent of the *Women-gov* project, we wanted to strengthen our existing video strategy by taking it closer to the women. Rather than focus on technical finesse, we decided to work towards enabling women themselves to produce 'quick and dirty' videos of the issues/concerns that mattered most to them, which could circulate extensively in the geographies of our work and function as a 'video newsletter' for the collectives – so that it would become women's voice in the local public sphere. Also, we decided to explore other formats (such as Digital Story-Telling) and add to our existing video-bank, to bring greater variety to existing content. Most importantly, we decided to focus on building the capacities of the infomediaries to motivate women's collectives to

engage in video-based learning processes, during their weekly meetings at the information centres.

(c) Utilising community radio and community video as catalysts for citizenship education:

The biggest shift in our community media strategy, after the launch of the *Women-gov* project, has been our dedicated effort to create audio- and video-based learning cultures at the information centres, in a manner that enables the community radio and video resources to be utilised as catalysts for the citizenship education of women's collectives, and other members of the local communities. In the concrete, this has meant training infomediaries to play appropriate audio and video resources to address the informational needs of visitors to the centres, and encouraging them to take pre-loaded audio and video content on their mobiles and Tablet PCs supplied by the project, on their outreach visits to neighbouring villages. The effort here, has been the creation of a new communicative culture – one in which videos and audio clips assume the place of 'books' in a non-textual culture; rather than remain as objects of fetish.

2.2.3 New horizons: Exploring mobile phone and GIS possibilities

Further, we decided to take up a couple of techno-social dimensions we had not experimented with earlier, as they seemed to offer enormous scope for strengthening women's active citizenship. These were:

- Exploring the potential of mobile phone technology for creating a trans-local dialogic forum where women's collectives could network, share insights from their specific experiences of engaging with local governance structures, and serve as a pathway to building the bridging capital of geographically dispersed women (that plays a key role in collective action efforts)
- Utilising GIS technologies as a critical pedagogic tool (because of the immense potential they hold for visual representation and recombination of multiple data sets) in enabling women unpack the relationship between the spatial geographies of power and the physical geographies of the communities they live in – in order to acquire the analytical skills to scrutinise 'evidence-based' local governance decisions shared in citizen forums.

3. Methodology: systematising our action-research praxis

Starting from the conviction that action-research is essentially about self-reflexive enquiry, we approached the project with a clear intent to unpack at every step, the questions of “What are we doing? How are we doing it? How can it be done better?”(Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003) rather than pushing the pedal on achievement of key milestones with respect to the techno-social explorations. Needless to say, rather than shine the torchlight on the question of “How can we make this project design work?”, we focused on understanding women's contextual needs, and constraints, and factored this into the project planning and execution. We put in place the following processes to make our praxis more robust:

1. Baseline analysis of the project context: Since Devanahalli and Vajarahalli village centres and the block information centres had been set up long before the *Women-gov* project commenced, we carried out a situation analysis in April 2012 with the Managing Committee members and infomediaries of these centres, to map women's collectives' perceived needs in relation to their participation in local governance processes and their political voice, and their vision of how the

information centre, and digital technologies, could contribute to this. However, in Taverekere and Hosahalli, after they were finalised as the villages where new information centres would be set up, a detailed quantitative baseline survey assessing the following parameters, was carried out, in April 2013:

a. Understanding the socio-economic profile of project participants,
b. Their interface with local governance structures, processes and institutions,
c. Women's self-recognition as political actors,
d. Existing spaces of association that are available exclusively for women, to build their solidarities and
e. Access, diffusion and use of ICTs in these contexts.

13 out of the 17 members of the women's collective we partnered with, in Taverekere, were surveyed; as were 37 out of the 40-odd members of the three women's collectives most closely involved in the establishment of the Hosahalli information centre.

We adopted a combination of baseline-endline analysis, systematic process documentation and reflection meetings to trace the non-linear pathways to active citizenship, opened up by the digital eco-system created by the project.

'Active Citizenship' index questions:
We would also like to highlight here, that a small sub-set of questions in the survey which we termed the 'Active Citizenship' index questions, were developed jointly by IT for Change, *Instituto Nupef* and the University of the Western Cape, and fielded at all three sites – to enable a comparative assessment of women's informational, associational and communicative power across the three sites. The set of questions fielded at the India site is reproduced here.

Informational power
(Women's access to public information and participation in local information networks)
1. If you need information from the *Panchayat*, will you be able to access it?
2. If you need information about block department schemes, will you be able to access it?
3. Do you receive advance notice of *Gram Sabha* meetings?

Associational power
(Strength of women's collectives and capacity for collective action. Please note that participation in the local citizen forum, the *Gram Sabha,* and other public forums, is being used as a proxy question to assess associational power, as this is very much a function of women's confidence in the backing their collective provides them, in the project context).
1. Do you participate in the *Gram Sabha*?
2. Are you able to raise questions and seek clarifications in public forums in the village?
3. Has your collective helped another in times of difficulty?

Communicative power?
(Acquiring voice, challenging the status quo in discussions in the public sphere, building a strong counter-public).
1. Do you feel you have adequate opportunities to share your ideas and opinions with your community and the larger society?
2. Have you helped another woman raise in public her problems and difficulties?

2. Team blog for ongoing process documentation: The project set up a blog in the local language Kannada for the members of the *Prakriye* team to maintain a field diary on a regular basis, highlighting their key interactions with women's collectives and members of the community, over the course of the project, across the different geographies. As the *Prakriye* team spend about 60% of their time every month in the field, and opportunities for detailed de-briefing and weekly reflection meetings are limited, the blog was seen as a useful alternative. The protocol followed was that any member who makes a field visit, or participates in a project related activity, will immediately document their experience (a factual account followed by reflections) on the blog. 53 blogs were written between March-December 2012, 186 between January 2013-December 2013, and 136 between January-December 2014.

3. Reflection meetings between the researchers in IT for Change, Bangalore and the Prakriye field team: Every six months, a day-long reflection meeting was organised in Mysore for the research and field teams to jointly introspect on the key highlights, set-backs, concerns and dilemmas, encountered in the course of the project, and ideate on ways forward.

4. Monthly reflections with the infomediaries of the information centres: Every month, at the *Prakriye* office in Mysore, a 2-day reflection meeting was held with the infomediaries of the project. This meeting focused on building the capacities of infomediaries w.r.t techno-social aspects and interfacing with institutions, as well as elicting their reflections and insights on 'gender and governance' issues at the local level.

5. Endline research: We primarily adopted a qualitative design, within which a quantitative survey was embedded, to support the analysis. The endline research, carried out between June -September 2014, comprised of the following dimensions:

a. Focus Group Discussions with Managing Committees of the village information centres at Devanahalli, Vajarahalli, Hosahalli and Taverekere to understand how the empowering digital eco-system constituted by the project with the information centre as its locus, has re-constituted women's informational, associational and communicative power. Rather than do a linear question-and-answer probe, we used group exercises that drew upon story-telling, and photo- based recall and reminiscing.
b. Focus Group Discussion with the Managing Committee of the block information centre at Hunsur, to understand the role of the block hub in the information centre ecology.
c. Individual interviews with the infomediaries of Devanahalli, Vajarahalli, and Hosahalli village information centres, and the Hunsur block information centre to trace infomediaries' insights into women's active citizenship journeys – highlights, challenges and set-backs encountered.
d. Individual interviews with select Managing Committee members at Devanahalli, Vajarahalli, and Hosahalli village information centres, to probe into their experiences of the community media strategy.
e. Key informant interviews with elected women representatives from the project area, block department officials in Hunsur, a local newspaper reporter, and research-scholars studying local governance, to place the movement of the project against the larger socio-political transformations, in the project context.
f. We fielded the Active Citizenship Index questionnaire again, in Hosahalli and Taverekere

villages to trace the movement in women's informational, associational and communicative power, over the life of the project. Additionally, we fielded this set of questions in Devanahalli and Vajarahalli villages despite the absence of a baseline score – as we also wanted to do a 'point in time' comparision of the old and new villages where information centres have been functioning.

The following sections of the report detail the key highlights of this action-research journey, and the main findings in relation to the potential of digital technologies for enhancing marginalised women's active citizenship.

4. Our action-research journey: Insights on creating empowering ecologies for marginalised women's active citizenship, through the guided use of digital technologies

The India action-research journey can be fully understood only when we place it against the context of the two main factors that circumscribed the limits of our strategic directions:

a) Access to ICT infrastructure in the project context: According to the Census of India 2011, the rate of household level penetration of the Internet is a mere 4.12% in Mysore district. Not to forget, there is yet another set of socio-structural divides in Internet access (gender, caste, class, and rural-urban gaps) hidden in this data. Television has been gradually replacing the radio – over 64.07% of the households in the district have television, while only 26.68% have radio. Mobile phone diffusion at the household level is very high, at about 57.54%, dovetailing with the current pan-Indian trend. However, it is important to remember that the availability of the mobile phone at the household level does not guarantee women's access.

These trends were borne out by our baseline survey findings – of the 50 respondents in Hosahalli and Taverekere, only 2 were from households which owned radios, though 27 respondents reported that their households had television sets. Further, though 20 of the 50 respondents – a sizeable number – perceived the computer to be an informational artefact, only 3 had the experience of ever handling one! Needless to say, not a single participant was from a household with a computer. Further, the baseline survey revealed that though over 40% of the respondents were from households which had mobiles, only 25% had a phone that they personally owned.

The limited time-frame of our action-research project did not offer us the scope to transform the underlying conditions that structured project participants' access to ICT infrastructure – we had to work within them.

b) Our capacities to manage socio-political dynamics at the grassroots: We have undertaken this endeavor to build a feminist democratic culture, at a time when the space of the civic is being *"increasingly cannibalized by (the forces) of the political and the economic"* (Chopra 2013). On the one hand, democratic decentralisation has unwittingly reduced the politics of representation to a sectarian ball-game, where elected local government is built on the fractures of caste-,and religious-identities, on top of which perch the formal and informal workings of multi-party politics. Needless to say, the intersectionality of gendered identity makes the construction of a feminist politics – where women across different socio-structural locations can come together to frame a common governance agenda that reflects their priorities – even more difficult in this context. Empirically, this translates into situations where upper caste women side with the men of their community, rather than with *dalit* members of their collective; elected women representatives are not able to bridge the caste divide and join hands with all women's collectives in their

constituencies; and where members of women's collectives practice caste-discrimination towards their own peers!

On the other, the macro-economic paradigm is being increasingly swayed by discourses of harnessing the market-route for poverty alleviation, as against traditional welfarist safety-nets for the poor. One of the major casualities of this trend has been the traditional strategy of collectivising women at the grassroots, for their socio-political and economic empowerment (Kannabiran 2005). The original idea of building women's groups rooted in a philosophy of co-operation has been perverted into a pernicious project for extending the reach of the financial market, to women at the bottom of the pyramid – where collectives become mere aggregates of individuals, each fending for herself, for that previously inaccesible loan; and an effective mechanism for controlling and punishing errant borrowers (such as the policy of collective surety for individual loans, followed by certain micro-finance institutions).

Needless to say, the imbrications of digital technologies in the sphere of governance and politics further complicate this mix – as new possibilities emerge for targeted campaigning by the political elite, extending the reach of identity-based political messaging[11], tracking efficiencies in welfare spending through citizen authentication of service-delivery to check leakages and monitoring local government spending[12], aggressive market-finance models that target the 'bottom of the pyramid', and so on.

It was this risky terrain that we entered, with the *Women-gov* action-research project. Many a time, project decisions and choices about strategic directions were guided by our knowledge about the limitations of our ability to negotiate the existing socio-political dynamics. This meant that some battles against existing systems of injustice had to be consciously foregone, however painful this choice was.

The following sections discuss our action-research journey, highlighting how the two caveats mentioned above, have underscored every step.

4.1 Setting up new information centres – “A jeep ride where smooth stretches alternate with thorny patches”

Information centres are extremely valuable assets in the hands of the marginalised, as they hold the potential to effectively counter the existing political economy of ignorance, through which elite groups consolidate their power. In the same vein, if the ownership and control of these assets slips into the hands of elite groups, it will lead to an exacerbation of existing inequalities. Therefore, the decisions to select the communities and the women's collectives to partner with, for setting up information centres, required extensive calibration – as we had to ensure that our efforts were actually enabling hitherto marginalised groups to counter the status-quo, as well as ensure that we were able to protect these groups from the backlash from entrenched interests, who accurately perceived the project's threat to their existing status in the communities. This was a tight-rope walk, and this tricky balancing act resulted in our spending over six months of the first year of the project, trying to zero in on villages where the new centres could be set up.

11 For example, as one of our team members brought to our attention, a Mysore legislator has started sending personalised SMS greetings to voters, on their birthdays – through data collected by his second-line leaders about date-of-birth and mobile numbers of voters.

12 Such as the recent move of the Karnataka state government introducing mobile phone authentication for beneficiary authentication for the distribution of food grains under the public distribution system. See http://www.biometricsintegrated.com/karnataka-makes-epic-number-mandatory-for-ration-cards-sahilonline.html

As mentioned in Section 2.2.1 of this Report, we visited over 18 villages that we shortlisted with the help of *Mahila Samakhya* programme staff, capitalising on their empirical knowledge of the project context, from their two decades of experience.

In many of these villages, we found that women's collectives were not vibrant – they were marked by in-fighting and personal feuds, mainly over the management of savings and bank loans. In the post-1990s context, there has been a proliferation of the 'Self-Help Group' approach to development in the Indian context – and Mysore is no exception. There is a multiplicity of women's collectives at the village level – and many women join more than one self-help group, and juggle loans, as a strategy to deal with their extremely precarious household level economy.

> Many a time, project decisions and choices about strategic directions were guided by our knowledge about the limitations of our ability to negotiate the existing socio-political dynamics.

Needless to say, the risk of failing to meet the weekly savings requirement, and the risk of default on loan repayment also becomes higher when women hold multiple memberships. As the self-help group model of lending penalises the entire group for individual defaulters, this becomes a common point of conflict and strife – one over which many women's collectives break up. From these initial round of visits, we prepared a second short-list of 6 villages where the women's collectives were relatively strong and united. In fact, the initial round of interactions had revealed that in these villages, the collectives had demonstrated initiative and engagement in participating in local governance forums, taking up local governance agendas and question existing hierarchies of caste, class and gender (whether it be in the form of participating in a picketing of the village shop where arrack was being illegally sold to the men-folk, visiting the *Gram Panchayat* collectively to support their members in processing claims etc.). Of course, this opens up the very valid question of whether we risked excluding the most disadvantaged women's collectives, in our project Our answer to this, is quite straight-forward – the information centres strategy can aid collectives' empowerment journeys only when they have reached a certain maturity in their learning-action process. Otherwise, there is an extremely high chance of the information centres failing, because of the collectives' inability to ward off the threats from the power-elite (as we found out in our attempts prior to the *Women-gov* project, while setting up a network of information centres – of which only 2 of the 5 we set up have survived).

Among the 6 villages that made it to the second short-list, we had to reject 2, as the women's collectives in these villages were not agreeable to some of the foundational norms guiding the information centre strategy – such as appointing a young woman from the community as the infomediary, and not a man – as this meant challenging prevailing social norms.

> By no means was the ground-work towards setting up new information centres, smooth, in the 2 new villages we entered into.

Out of the 4 villages that remained, we had to drop 2 for logistical reasons. One which was being resettled under a dam project; and another which was so remote that it would have meant an unsupportable drain on our limited human resources, on an everyday basis. The final 2 villages selected for setting up new information centres, were: Hosahalli in Hunsur block; and Tavarekere in H.D.Kote block. By no means was the ground-work towards setting up new information centres, smooth, in these 2 villages, as the following section reveals.

4.1.1 The Hosahalli experience: “Let's see how your centre runs if you give it to the *dalits*”

In Hosahalli, in the initial round of conversations that we had with women's collectives, those from the upper caste neighbourhood and the *dalit* settlement were present. However, as conversations progressed, and it was extremely clear that we intended to set up the centre in the *dalit* settlement, the upper caste collectives turned hostile. In fact, they stormed out of the meeting where we revealed that this was a non-negotiable condition for setting up the centre, threatening “Let us see how your information centre runs, if it is given to the *dalits*”. The *dalit* women's collectives in the village were determined to go ahead with setting up the centre, at all costs, for they had the backing of the young male leader of the *dalit* youth group (known as the *Ambedkar sangha*) , and they were tired of the existing state of affairs where all the facilities went to the upper caste neighbourhood.

As one woman shared with us during an interview we carried out as part of the endline research:

> “The upper caste women fought with us about the information centre, saying : '*The school is in our street, so is the bus shelter, the village temple, the dairy, and the anganwadi. You come to our neighbourhood to access this, that has been the practice. Why should this change now? How can we walk to your area to come to the centre?'* We wanted this to change – and so we wanted this centre.”

Another key factor that motivated the women was the promise of the 'digital' they saw in the centre, however vague it seemed. As Ratna from Hosahalli shared with us, during the endline research:

> “We knew that if the information centre comes to the village, we will have our own computer. Of course, at that point (and even now), we do not know how to fully utilise the computer. But we were very clear that the computer opens up the doors to a lot of information. And if we had a computer and an infomediary who could use it for our needs, we knew we would be able to go very far.”

This high level of motivation of the *dalit* women's collectives and their refusal to kowtow before the upper caste groups, made us go ahead with the ground-work for setting up the centre – such as identifying a place to house the centre, selecting an infomediary and constituting a Managing Committee. During this process, another major setback we encountered was the suicide of Yamuna, an active and outspoken member of one of the *dalit* women's collectives – who killed herself when she could no longer withstand the everyday abusive behaviour she faced from her husband. In fact, some of her peers confided in our team their suspicion that domestic violence in Yamuna's household had increased, after she started participating in the meetings about setting up the information centre. Her husband had been taunted by the men of the upper caste neighbourhood, about his wife's lack of shame in speaking at public meetings – and she faced the consequences of these 'insults' and his 'loss of face'. However, none of the women wanted to file a complaint or initiate any legal action, as they felt they had no right to intervene when even her natal family was not interested in pursuing this matter as they felt their daughter had got just deserts for provoking her husband's wrath– and we had to let things rest, however unwillingly. This incident provided important insights into the limits of our capacity to intervene in the complex nexus between caste and patriarchy. Also, once again, a foundational feminist lesson was

brought home – “Patriarchy's most important bastion remains the family, and no amount of investment in economic empowerment and bringing women's voices to the public sphere can help in breaking down patriarchy totally unless its stranglehold over familial relationships is directly challenged”.

Interacting with the women's collectives of the older Vajarahalli information centre gave the collectives of Hosahalli a much needed shot in the arm, to persevere in setting up their centre.

At this juncture, when the *dalit* women's collectives were quite demoralised, one strategy we adopted to strengthen their resolve, was to organise a visit to the Vajarahalli information centre, one of the older village information centres that had been set up much before the *Women-gov* project. During this visit, the Managing Committee members of the Vajarahalli centre shared their struggles and the challenges they faced, while setting up the centre – and this visit gave the Hosahalli women's collectives a much-needed shot in the arm, to continue with their pursuit of setting up the centre. As one of the women shared with us, during the endline research:

> “After seeing the information centre at Vajarahalli, we felt that if they (women like ourselves), are running the centre, we should also try and get ours started.”

Thus, with the women's perseverance, the information centre was set up and formally inaugurated in September 2013, an event that the upper caste groups of the village boycotted. However, over the next few months, as they increasingly became cognizant of the benefits they stood to lose from this hardline stance, there has been a gradual turn-around. The upper caste groups are no longer hostile to the infomediary when she visits their streets as part of her information outreach activities; though many of them still hesitate to come to the centre and ask for information. Most strikingly, one of the women from the upper caste neighbourhood has taken on the responsibility of coordinating the delivery of the daily newspaper to the centre, which is dropped off at an upper caste household, situated next to the bus shelter, by the driver of the public bus service!

4.1.2 The Tavarekere experience: “After 30 years, a political leader visited us”

Tavarekere is a small, remote village of about 30 *dalit* households – most of whom are landless laborers. As discussed in the previous section of the report, this village was founded 30-40 years ago by the expulsion of the entire *dalit* population of the bigger village of Madiwala (incidentally, the village where the *Gram Panchayat* under whose jurisdiction Taverekere falls, is located). There is only one women's collective in the village, whose members, in spite of heavy time burdens and the severe economic pressures at the household level they have to deal with on an everyday basis, were determined to participate in the *Women-gov* project. For they glimpsed in the idea of the women-run community information centre the project offered, the potential for leapfrogging the social and economic empowerment of their extremely marginalised village community.

Though it was an uphill struggle, the women's collective successfully completed the groundwork required for setting up the centre. With great difficulty, in a village with small and crowded houses with hardly any living space to spare, they persuaded one of the households in the village to refurbish an unused cattleshed, and rent it out for the centre's activities. They identified a young woman from the village, who had completed her secondary schooling, as a suitable candidate for

the role of the infomediary.
The young woman joined, with the grudging support of her household members.

The centre was formally inaugurated in September 2013, and in what was an extremely proud moment for the women and men of the village – an active political leader from the village of Madiwala attended this function. This was a historic moment for no member from the upper caste village of Madiwala had ever visited the *dalit* settlement, until this point. Over the next 3 months, the young woman infomediary went through the trainings provided by the *Prakriye* team, started attending the monthly capacity-building meetings at the *Prakriye* office in Mysore, and became a part of the peer network of infomediaries. She slowly started acquiring the skills required to effectively perform her role. Meanwhile, her family members were increasingly unhappy with her job profile – one which, in their opinion, required her to contravene prevailing gender norms (a high risk activity for an unmarried girl), even as it did not provide sufficient monetary returns. The lack of support at the household level eventually led to the young woman infomediary's resignation in January 2014.

Consequently, the activities of the information centre had to be temporarily suspended – as there was no other candidate forthcoming from the village, to step into the role. In the face of this crisis, the women's collective rallied bravely – and they took upon themselves the task of searching for another young woman who could take on the role of the infomediary, in the neighboring villages. This proved to be an unfruitful exercise, and the women's morale took a beating. The last straw was when the owner of the premises of the centre, asked the women to vacate in March 2014, as his household could no longer afford to do without the extra space, as his son was getting married. At this juncture, the women felt that the task of reviving the centre was one where the dice were loaded against them, and asked the *Prakriye* team to take back the equipment they had provided, and shut down the centre. Even after taking back the equipment in April 2014, the *Prakriye* team continued to try and negotiate with the women's collective to try and continue their efforts at locating an infomediary. especially using the endline research as an opportunity to continue this dialogue. The endline research where women reminisced about how they missed the infomediary's outreach visits, the opportunity to see project films and hear audio clips on the computer – “where we see women like ourselves” – provided a suitable opening to continue this dialogue. In fact, we were able to build on women's recollections about the high-points of their information centre journey as a way of initiating conversations around why they could still try to re-open their centre.

These discussions, in June-July 2014, revealed a hitherto hidden facet of the Tavarekere experience – women were desperately looking for an infomediary from the neighbouring village, but were unwilling to persuade suitable candidates from their own village. In fact, one of the members of the women's collective was literate, and had studied up to Class IX – but her mother-in-law (also a part of the same collective) was not willing to let her take up the job, as she felt it would be socially inappropriate to let a young married woman take up this responsibility – a point she avoided discussing with the *Prakriye* team, even when other members of the collective brought it up. Certainly, women's willingness to challenge prevailing gender and social norms, and the length to which they are willing to travel in this effort, is a factor that cannot be ignored.

On the whole, the experience of setting up information centres is best summed up in the words of one of the project participants from Hosahalli, Karuna:

> "When we started out on this journey of setting up information centres, we got into this jeep on this path full of stones and thorns. Now we seem to have come onto a smooth stretch on the road – but that can be misleading. We may come across a rough stretch again, and we have to decide how we deal with them"

Most important, is respecting women's decisions on dealing with these stones and thorns – in other words, women's decisions about what they want to fight for, and to what extent.

4.2 Building the institutional vibrancy of the information centres: Democracy in the vernacular

Setting up the information centres is only half the battle – sustaining them, and strengthening their institutional vibrancy is a longer struggle. Part of the difficulty is that we do not have many traditions to turn back to, and learn from, on effective ways of managing the tensions between the liberal democratic vision of equal citizenship, and the operations of communitarian systems that differentiate members of a community – gender and caste norms, for example.

This is unsurprising, in the Indian context, where the project of democratic institution-building has largely been an endeavor of the elite, failing to resonate with the poor. As the path-breaking work of post-colonial theorists of the past two decades has revealed, this has meant that democratic institutional cultures remain a foreign implant, failing to fully take root at the grassroots – in the eloquent words of the scholar Sudipta Kaviraj, this has resulted in a situation where *"the Indian state has vernacular feet of clay"* (Kaviraj 1984).

More importantly, the democratic tradition in India has historically relegated the question of 'culture' to the private sphere – and the question of how to regulate 'culture' has been a vexatious one, especially for feminist groups, considering the deep scars that remain, from colonial attempts at governing communities (Birla 2009). The mainstream response to this dilemma has been to try and bracket out 'culture' from formal democratic institutions (Roy 2001) – a ploy that has not clearly worked as a lot of insightful scholarship around the failure of Indian secularism has pointed out.

"This is a public place and caste rules don't apply". Managing the tensions between the liberal democratic vision of equal citizenship, and ascribed identities, is not easy.

This discussion is not a digression, but something which is at the heart of the *Women-gov* project – for the attempt to set up a village information centre is about creating a local institution that is steeped in a feminist vision of democracy – which means that these tensions cannot be side-stepped, as they have to be be negotiated on an everyday basis.

4.2.1. In the face of ascribed identities: Crossing the caste threshold through the information centres strategy

In the village of Hosahalli, we set up the information centre in the *dalit* neighbourhood, amidst stiff opposition from powerful upper caste groups, including a social boycott of the inauguration. However, on the day of the inauguration, when women from the adjoining tribal hamlet visited the centre, they stood outside, and did not cross the threshold of the information centre – as some tribal communities in this region consider the touch of *dalit* groups 'polluting' (and vice-versa)

even though both groups are regarded as 'lowly' by caste Hindus, and discriminated against. Taking a stiff moralist stance against this was difficult – and we left it to the women's decision on managing this dynamic. Over the next few months, the women from the tribal hamlet started becoming increasingly familiar with the information centre's activities. In fact, during the Focus Group Discussion organised for the endline research, two women from the hamlet who came to the centre, crossed the thresh-hold and sat with the *dalit* women's collectives, who told them, jokingly, *"This is a public place and not a dwelling-place. So caste rules do not apply. Come in and sit with us"*. This is important, for it is an act of subversion, however small, that has used humour and irony to question the existing mainstream democratic tradition of relegating caste to the 'cultural' sphere, while pretending it does not exist in the formal institutional sphere.

Sometimes, we have been disheartened – such as how, in the village of Devanahalli, despite its tradition of having mixed collectives that draw upon membership from various caste groups, the women who have sat together and held meetings jointly for over twenty years, still go home and change their *saris* before entering their kitchens, to 'purify' themselves. In fact, in this village, sometimes upper caste women from the collective have excused themselves from outreach visits, on festival and ritually important days of the almanac, as they would be 'polluted' with close interactions with *dalit* women, on these days. However, we try and keep reminding ourselves that this road is a difficult one, and that we have indeed travelled a long distance, even though the pace of change is very slow. In the words of our infomediary at the Devanahalli centre:

> "Earlier, even though there were upper caste women in the collective, and they would meet us (*dalit* women) for savings meetings, we would not go to their streets or their neighbourhood. But after the centre has come (which is located in a government-alloted piece of land adjoining the upper caste settlement) I have been going to parts of the village I never ever visited earlier – as girls from my community never used to go there. Initially, they were hostile but today they invite me at least up to the entrance of the house – though I cannot cross the threshold."

At first glance, when despite six years of work, the threshold of the caste barrier has still not been crossed, the dream of an inclusive institutional culture may seem futile; but in the long run, such dialogue certainly holds tremendous tranformatory potential.

The question of building the institutional vibrancy of the information centres is not merely one of managing the tight-rope balancing act of upholding respect for grassroots cultures with a commitment to democratic values. It is also one of constantly ensuring that within collective decision-making processes in the ownership and management of a centre, some sections do not dominate others. This was an issue that we recently encountered at the Vajarahalli information centre.

4.2.2 Managing the tensions between individual leaders and the collectives: A story from Vajarahalli

When the Vajarahalli centre was set up in 2006, there was only one women's collective in the village and it had a very strong and powerful *dalit* woman leader – Jayamma. She had mobilised the support of the women of her collective, other key leaders in the village and the *dalit* youth group, in the process of setting up the centre. In specific, all the members of the collective of which she is a part, had contributed voluntary labour towards constructing the building where the centre is housed, on a piece of land that they bargained for, from the

Panchayat. Since then, there have been other women's collectives that have been formed in the village – and 2 of them, that demonstrated intensive interest in the centre's activities, have been included in its management. This centre has a printer, photocopying and photo studio service – and the revenue from these services have been managed by Jayamma. Though this revenue is supposed to be ear-marked for building a Sustainability Fund for the centre, to support its operations after the eventual withdrawal of IT for Change and *Prakriye*, in Vajarahalli, this money has been deposited in the bank account of Jayamma's women's collective and not in a separate account, opened for the information centre. This was never a problem, until late 2013, when the building where the centre is located, tottered on the brink of collapse – as there were numerous repairs required.

Following this, in January 2014, all the 3 women's collectives came together to discuss what could be done – and Jayamma demanded that the estimated cost for the repairs be split 3-ways between the 3 groups. The other 2 groups demanded that they wanted to first see the records of how much money was available in the Sustainability Fund of the centre, being managed by Jayamma's collective, and that they could accordingly decide the contributions to be collected. This demand was perceived as a personal insult by Jayamma. In the war of words that ensued, she told the other 2 collectives that if this was the stance they were taking, there was no way forward – for, the centre had been built by her collective, and she and her peers did not need to account anything about the centre to anyone, for they were the actual owners. The meeting ended on this discordant note.

The following week, when the 2 newer collectives came to the centre as was their usual practice for their weekly meetings, they found the door locked. When they went to Jayamma's house, she reportedly told them:

> “This is the centre of our collective. If you want to do your savings meetings here, you pay us rent for using this space”.

Ticked off by this reception, the 2 collectives decided they wanted to have nothing to do with the centre. In the months that followed, they did not even turn up for the Managing Committee meetings – and these had to be called off due to the absence of the required quorum (as only Jayamma's collective was present). For 4-5 months, other than pushing the women to meet and resolve the issue, we did not intervene. This is because we felt that any externally driven compromise would only have limited success. The building became more dilapidated, and the infomediary really feared for her safety and that of the equipment.

When it seemed that there was no way out of this impasse, we decided to revise our stance and bring in a *Mahila Samakhya* programme staff member who had played a lead role in the formation of all 3 collectives involved in this fight. At the meeting that was organised in the presence of this *Mahila Samakhya* staff member, all the collectives turned up as all of them wanted to present their side of the story. In the discussion that followed, what emerged was that Jayamma had not consulted her collective before demanding rent from the other 2 groups. She had to back down from her stance. However, her collective stood behind her decision in not wanting to open discussions about the financial accounts of the previous years – probably out of a sense of obligation to not completely contradict their leader. The other groups compromised – and it was decided that from this point onwards, in the future,

accounts about the centre would be shared every month.

Re-constituting the Managing Committee of the information centres, periodically, is important, to ensure that some voices are not marginalised in the working of the politics of representation.

It is experiences like this one in Vajarahalli that have made us adopt a firm policy of periodically re-constituting the Managing Committee of the information centres, to ensure that some voices are not marginalised in the working of the politics of representation. All women's collectives involved in the centre and nominating representatives to the Managing Committee, have to change the representatives they nominate to the Committee – at least once in 3 years – to ensure that this system of management does not end up consolidating existing power inequalities between and among women's collectives in the contexts we work with.

4.2.3: Guarding against elite capture: The experience of the Devanahalli centre

Another ever-present threat that has to be constantly kept at bay is the danger of elite factions of the village, usurping the centre's assets, for their interests. For example, in Devanahalli, a few months ago, a farmer's club was started under a recent Organic Farming initiative of the Government of Karnataka (a scheme titled *'Savayava Bhagya'*, literally 'Organic Fortune'). This club needed a space to meet every Monday for their weekly training with the local agricultural extension worker, and they approached the Managing Committee members of the centre for permission to use the premises. The women in the Managing Committee agreed, as there is a prevailing practice of renting out the centre's premises for village functions – especially as meeting space is scarce. After a few weeks, when the women demanded the rent from the Farmers' Club, they refused to pay – saying that the centre was anyway housed on government land allotted by the *Gram Panchayat*, and is the common property of the village! Some powerful leaders of the village are also members of the Club – and the women are unwilling to risk an open confrontation with them, though they fear that at some point, the Club may try to completely take over the building. We are highlighting this case, as this is illustrative of a 'clear and present danger' that any bottom-up institution-building effort faces – one which makes the question of long-term sustainability even more difficult, as women by themselves, may not have the bargaining power and social capital to fight local elite networks.

4.2.4 Contextual changes that weaken women's collectives: The crisis of the block information centres

Another major concern has recently arisen regarding the institutional vibrancy and sustainability of the block information centres, due to the decision of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme to withdraw from Mysore district by the end of 2014. For the *Mahila Samakhya* governmental programme, 'withdrawal' has always been an important milestone – the idea being that marginalised women's empowerment journeys can reach fruition, only if at a certain point, middle-class feminists directing the programme's priorities, and chalking pathways for grassroots women's growth, are willing to let go. This has been one of the key principles guiding the design of the programme's federated structure at the block level – as the federation was originally intended as a trans-local platform that would gradually enable women's collectives across a wide geography, to organise themselves into active citizen-

agents and self-direct their empowerment journeys. However, in the current context, where *"the idea of the Self-Help Group … as an idea for building identity and creating solidarity networks for women's self-advancement"* (Gurumurthy 2014) has been transmuted into a mere vehicle for reaching targets in welfare and entitlements scheme, and BoP[13] models of financial inclusion, 'withdrawal' has become a mere budgetary watershed – the point beyond which financial investments in certain geographies cannot be justified under the governmental programme. In this conceptualisation, there is no room to evaluate women's readiness to assume complete control over their learning-action processes – before taking programmatic decisions about exiting from communities. This has led to a situation where the results of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme's decision to withdraw from certain geographies on a pan-Indian level has led to uneven results – as women's collectives and their federations in some sites are more equipped than others to proceed on their empowerment journeys, in the absence of hand-holding.

What is of immediate concern to us is that in H.D.Kote and Hunsur blocks, the women's collectives of *Mahila Samakhya* and their federations at the block level were not prepared for the withdrawal – in fact, this decision had to be made hurriedly, in response to a sudden slash of the programme budget, at the national level. This left the programme staff in these two blocks of Mysore, in a lot of confusion – as they were faced with the unenviable task of telling the women that in a few months, they would no longer be available, and that the collectives would be on their own. The women were hurt and bewildered. As Jayamma, from Vajarahalli, an active *Mahila Samakhya* member who has been with the programme for over 20 years, and a member of the Federation Executive Committee member from Hunsur block, shared with us at a common meeting of the *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* staff and the IT for Change team, to discuss the future of the block information centres' management structure:

> "How can the 'government' decide to withdraw? What happens to all our sacrifices over the years we have made for our collective? We have 20 long years behind us, and having brought us here, there is no way we are willing to be 'abandoned'. We will go to the centre or anywhere to challenge this decision. We need the programme to support us"

Clearly, women's perceptions of the ideas of autonomy and responsibility are very different from how these notions are cast in the mainstream discourse around women's empowerment programming. Women are very clear that they are capable of fighting against gender injustice at the grassroots, but that they expect the state to underwrite these struggles. This could be something as simple as compensating the opportunity costs women incur when they forgo daily labour to participate in learning-action processes of their collectives (such as trainings and meetings at the block level) to ongoing support mechanisms such as setting up block level resource centres that women can turn to, in the face of severe reprisal, in their village level struggles. Marginalised women cannot be expected to meet the financial cost of creating and sustaining these support mechanism – though this is what *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* has had to do, in the current situation. The State Office has proposed that if the federations feel that there is a strong need for ongoing support, one staff member can be retained in each of the 2 blocks – if their salaries can be supported by the women's collectives.

13 Bottom of the Pyramid

Therefore, in both blocks, the Federations have been overwhelmed by the anxiety of self-supporting their activities – and they are caught up in exploring a range of income generation activities, which leaves them with little time to devote to the information centres.

In both blocks, the sudden exit of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme has posed many challenges to the existing block level information centre management model.

More worryingly, one proposal that has been recently coming up in the block level meetings, from the women and the programme staff, is to opt for a different information centre model – which is revenue-based. This poses a number of strategic difficulties for our team, as one of the guiding principles of our information centre strategy has been our firm, evidence-based conviction about the nature of distortions that arise when information provision becomes a monetised service. We are still grappling with the question of how to re-work our block level information centre model, and successfully tide over these challenges.

4.3 Creating a new information architecture at the grassroots: Harnessing the transformative possibilities of the 'digital' effectively

As described in preceding sections of this Report, the information centres have been set up under a 'hub-and-spoke' model, with the village information centres being networked to centres at the block/sub-disrtrict, where most government offices are located, to facilitate smooth informational linkages. All information centres have been provided a computer, mobile and landline phone and a mobile Internet connection, as our idea was to ensure that the infomediaries have a variety of means to aid their information collection activities, rather than become completely dependent on their monthly visits to line departments at the block level and the *Gram Panchayat* (in the case of village information centres). In practice, the infomediaries have found direct face-to-face meetings with government departments and the *Gram Panchayats*, and phone enquiries to officials, more useful than accessing governmental websites for information updates. As the infomediary of the Hunsur block level centre explained to us, during the endline research:

> “I prefer to go to the department offices and those officials with whom I have a good rapport, I call on my phone. I use the websites for only a couple of things – such as checking the status of applications for the Unique Identification Card, or for checking state level public examination results. This is because the websites of government agencies are very confusing, and they don't have the most recent information. But the phone is very useful – for women can call me about new schemes, and I call the infomediaries of the village centres whenever I receive some new tips – and it helps me update people without delays – especially in cases when I am tracking individual applications for schemes.”

The infomediary's observation can be fully understood only when placed against the macro-context of India's e-participation initiatives. On the one hand, in recent years, Indian policy

makers and administrators have been pushing for measures that leverage the 'digital delta' for increasing public information outreach to citizens – influenced by the twinning of public debates around 'Open Government Data' and 'Right to Information' (Chattapadhyay 2013). Two well-known measures are: the National Policy on Data Sharing and Accessibility of 2012 which has attempted to push for the sharing of non-sensitive data and information held by government agencies, and a recent office memo circulated by the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India, on 15th April 2013 – which has made it mandatory for all government agencies to publicly disclose on their website, a list of the data-sets that they manage, and details about which of them are open to the citizenry. However, in practice, the implementation of these measures have left a lot to be desired. As Sowmya Kidambi, Director of the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency set up by the Government of Andhra Pradesh recently observed:

> "The problem is that when data and information are shared online, government departments are not thinking from the citizens' end. So, you end up with information organised in a matrix that is very confusing for the citizen-user – and does not make meaning."

"The problem is that when data and information are shared online, government departments are not thinking from the citizens' end".

We also want to re-iterate that the existing inadequacies in the telecommunications infrastructure have also constrained some of our ideas around experimenting with the informational and communicational possibilities that online spaces open up. For example, in late 2012, we had conducted a set of trainings for the infomediaries of the centres in introducing them to effective ways of utilising online searches, blogs and other social media platforms, including alerting them to issues of safety in these spaces.

One of the main ideas that emerged from these interactions was that of setting up a closed blog for infomediaries to interact with each other, sharing their reflections about their work and the challenges that they encounter, on an everyday basis – as a means of enhancing their solidarities. The poor quality of the Internet infrastructure at the village information centres has meant that this blog has morphed into a platform for the infomediaries of the block centres to 'broadcast' information updates to their village level counter-parts – and the potentialities for the horizontalisation of communication that the Internet offers, has not been fully realised.

On the other hand, the information centres have successfully harnessed the mobile phone's propensity to act as a 'force-multiplier', giving people "*an ability to do things which they otherwise could not*" (Jeffrey and Doron 2012) of which the following story shared by the infomediary of the Hunsur block information centre, is an outstanding example.

The village of Malleshpalya is one of the villages close to the Hunsur block headquarters – and women's collectives from this centre frequently visit the Hunsur block information centre for information, seeking help in filing applications and so on. During one such visit, a few months ago, the women's collectives told the infomediary that despite a recent government announcement that all Below Poverty Line households would receive their

monthly quota of rice from the Fair Price Shops set up under the Public Distribution System at Rs 1/ per kilogram, their local Fair Price Shop owner was charging a disproportionate amount of money. The infomediary explained the government directive clearly to the women, and she also telephoned the Food Inspector, Hunsur block (the designated officer to monitor Fair Price Shops), explaining that the women from Malleshpalya were facing this issue, and that she wanted to give them his contact number, so that this situation could be remedied.

> "When I called Sir (the Food Inspector), he was very patient and encouraging, and said that they could phone him anytime, about this issue, as such cases of corruption had to checked. As I had dialed Sir's number in front of the women, they felt more re-assured and they took down his number and went away. That month, when they went to collect their monthly rations (food grain allotments) they found that the owner's wife was managing the shop as he had gone out for some work. When she named the usual price, the women challenged her saying that they now knew the law, and what she was demanding was unfair. She backed down, and gave the women their allotted quota of grains, at the lawful price. The women collected their grains and went away. Later on, they were scolded by their husbands – as they felt that since the Fair Price Shop owner was politically well connected, crossing him was risky and they should have kept quiet and paid the price he asked. The next month, the women went again and were met by the angry owner who threatened them saying *'How dare you bully my wife? Let me see who will give you the grains now?'* The women were a little scared, and wanted to back off, but one of the key leaders of the collective, who was angered by this taunt, told him 'O.K., you speak to the Food Inspector', dialed the Food Inspector's number on her cell phone, and handed the phone over to the shop owner! Needless to say, he received a warning and a ticking off – and has since then been toeing the line."

The enormity of this achievement comes to light when read against the immense scale of corruption, that works through entrenched 'networks of favours' in the Public Distribution System. As the Supreme Court constituted Justice Wadhwa committee in the landmark 'Right to Food' Public Interest Litigation (that played a key role in the enactment of the National Food Security Act 2013) observed in its 2007 Report about the status of the Public Distribution System in Karnataka:

> "The Committee felt that the applications (for grant of licenses to open ration shops) are generally recommended either by the MP[14] or MLA[15], District Collector does not record any reason while passing allotment order / granting the license. No reason is given by the District Collector while denying the licences to the applicant. It was also found that in many cases a candidate from a category which in (sic) priority list is ignored and other persons is granted license on one excuse or the other."

This provides a segue into the next set of issues that we want to discuss from our action-research experience – our insights from utilising the information centres as public institutions for demanding accountability from local governance structures.

14 Member of Parliament
15 Member of Legislative Assembly (State Legislature)

4.4 Demanding accountability from local governance structures:

4.4.1 Understanding the local governance scenario: A short tour

The project's encounters with local governance structures can be fully understood only when they are read against the historical evolution of the local governance scenario in India. Traditionally, many parts of pre-colonial India had a system of village self-government *(Gram Panchayats).* The British colonial administration manipulated this system effectively, using their strategy of "leav(ing) as much as possible of the business of the country to be done by the people... and (confining themselves) to... influencing and directing in a general way all the movements of the social machine" (IIPA 2013). The result of this strategy was that, by the time of independence, the *Panchayats* had been reduced to mere feudal and patriarchal outposts, devoid of any financial autonomy – whose only function was to extract local revenue and taxes from the local economy, for the colonial rulers. To counter this situation, the newly independent Indian state decided to adopt the strategy of strengthening elected government at the central and state level, while strengthening the executive, rather than the elected, wing of government, at the last mile. The idea behind this move was to cripple the all-pervasive traditional authority of *Gram Panchayats* that had by then become 'a sink of localism, a den of ignorance and communalism[16].'

In the decades that followed, the shortcomings of this strategy became increasingly clear. The absence of a strong elected government at the grassroots led to the emergence of *'Official Raj'* where the whims and fancies of bureaucracy, dictated the delivery of services and schemes – leading to administrative inefficiencies and corruption. Needless to say, there was an increasing clamour of civil society voices to deepen democracy, and strengthen governance at the last mile, overturning this ineffective system of last mile governance.

This push led to the enactment of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India in 1993 – which revived the idea of strong *Gram Panchayats*, by re-casting them in a liberal democratic avatar. The amendment attempted to do this, by providing for the constitution of *Gram Panchayats* through elections, mandating 5 yearly elections of these bodies, laying down provisions for the devolution of powers and finances from the upper tiers of governance, guaranteeing reservations of seats for women, *dalits* and tribals – groups which had been historically marginalised in village-level governance, and mandating periodic village level assemblies *(Gram Sabhas)* for the village electorates to demand accountability from their respective *Panchayats*.

Nearly two decades after the enactment of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India, it seems that the promise of democratic decentralisation is still a pipe-dream. This sad state of affairs, has arisen, mainly because:

> "the establishment of these institutions of local self-government has not been followed by a structured, scientific, consistent, and sustained process of devolution. All devolution of powers and authority has been ad-hoc, fitful and sometimes reversed. This in itself leaches the political will displayed in the first instance by Central and State legislatures and executives in supporting the Constitutional amendments; then, passing the required State legislation; going on to holding regular elections, and establishing new mandated institutions such as the State Election Commissions and the

16 An observation made by Dr. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution.

State Finance Commissions. The shell of *Panchayat Raj* is in place. Filling that shell has not followed any consistent pattern, either within States or between States (Expert Committee on Leveraging *Panchayats* for the Efficient Delivery of Public Goods and Services 2013."

Caught between the tugs of the 'networks of favours' and the 'politics of reservation', *Gram Sabha* processes are often reduced to empty rituals.

Another challenge that *Gram Panchayats* have had to grapple with, has arisen out of the constitutional provision that reserves seats for women and members of marginalised groups, in these bodies. On the one hand, there is some evidence that the reservations policy has led to enhanced delivery of public goods to disadvantaged sections (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). On the other, it has also had some unwelcome side-effects: such as the rise of a grassroots political culture, that is built on the fault-lines of communal identities; and the trend of 'proxy' candidates being fielded under reserved seats, who serve as mere 'fronts' for the local elite.

When combined with the fact that most states of the country have not passed supporting legislation to strengthen the constitutional mandate of having a vibrant village-level assembly that demands the accountability of *Gram Panchayat* functionaries, the politics of reservations has inadvertently created (and consolidated) 'networks of favours' in the last-mile implementation of governmental schemes and services. In recent years, as there has been a shift towards making the *Gram Panchaya*t, rather than the executive officers at the district level, responsible for scheme-implementation – these 'networks of favours' have spawned extensive corruption.

The Karnataka scenario mirrors this pan-Indian situation. In fact, this existing mix is further complicated by the Karnataka state government's decision to create a new cadre of executive officers at the *Panchayat* level – *'Panchayat* Development Officers' whose role was originally envisioned as that of supporting the elected members with the administrative work of the *Panchayat*, so that they were free to focus on identifying governance priorities and attending to the needs of their electorates. However, this has ended up creating an intense power struggle within the Gram Panchayat – between the *Panchayat* Development Officer and the head of the elected body, the *Panchayat* member, as both hold immense power, and their joint approval/sanction is mandated for many decisions and works of the *Panchayat*. In some cases, this extensively disrupts the workings of the *Panchayat* – especially when one of the two parties is not corrupt, and is opposed to the 'favours' logic in beneficiary selection processes[17].

The situation in our project area is no different. From our interactions with the women's collectives in the geographies we work with, we realise that there is in fact a veritable menu card of corruption, that most community members are used to maneuvering, and *Gram Sabha* processes are reduced to mere empty rituals.

When the *Women-gov* project had just commenced, in early 2012, we held a set of meetings with women's collectives in the older geographies to understand their perspectives on

17 In fact, an unfortunate outcome of such power struggle was that in early 2012 was that a number of Panchayat Development Officers, committed suicide, across the state of Karnataka, unable to withstand this pressure. See http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysore/Spate-of-suicides-by-panchayat-officers-alarms-govt-CID-probe-initiated/articleshow/12540425.cms

engaging with local governance processes (as described in Section 3 of the Report). The discussions revealed that women clearly recognised the importance of engaging in public forums such as the *Gram Sabha*, but also provided us an insight into the differences in individual women's abilities to break down existing socio-cultural norms that hindered their participation.

As the women from Devanahalli shared with us,

> "Women rarely go to the *Gram Sabha*. The few who go, such as Janakamma, are the ones who pay no heed to the taunts of their neighbours. When she goes, the men sit on their porch and call out "Hey, there goes Indira Gandhi"... "There goes that woman who is more like a man".... but she does not care. Not all women are that brave. So they stay at home".

Similar discussions at Vajarahalli village revealed the extensive corruption that women had to navigate, to get their rightful entitlements. As Jayamma reflected,

> "Earlier (before a lot of power had been given to the *Panchayats*) we only had to feed one tiger – the concerned line department officer– to get our dues. Nowadays, there is a rat pack instead.. and it is far easier to fight a tiger than a rat pack."

"Earlier (before the days of decentralisation), we had to feed one tiger to get our dues.. now we deal with a pack of rats!"

In fact, there is an extensive ecology of corruption – in the workings of which community members have to school themselves, if they are to get their dues. Our team members sum this up very well:

> "Under the housing scheme of the state, each beneficiary is eligible for 135000 INR. As we know, according to the rule book, beneficiary selection is supposed to happen in the open village assembly (the *Gram Sabha*). What usually happens is that one list is announced, and minuted, and signed – but this list is changed afterwards, by forging the original and changing the names.. anyone who pays 25000/ can get into this list.. Similarly, under the universal sanitation programme, each beneficiary receives 10,400 for constructing a household toilet. For this, *Panchayat* functionaries take a cut of 2500/ on an average. And for certificates you need from the *Panchayat* they take 500/.. there is a whole menu, in fact!"

These 'networks of corruption' have been further entrenched by the recent moves of the central and state government to switch to increased co-option of community members in the delivery of public services under a 'Management by Committees' model. There are committees with members drawn from the *Gram Panchayat* body and members of the community, for almost every aspect of monitoring last-mile public service delivery – Village Health and Sanitation Committees to monitor the functioning of the public health extension system; School Management Committees to supervise state-run schools at the local level, Vigilance Committees to monitor the Fair Price shops, and so on.

In a context where the village assembly of citizenry is weak, these Committees become effective tools for local elite to misappropriate public funds – with falsified minutes and proceedings to facilitate diversion of funds.

4.4.2 Stirring in 'the digital': the experience of utilising ICTs for promoting accountability, in the mainstream governance paradigm

Corruption runs so deep that even new-age digitalised monitoring mechanisms which the state government has attempted to introduce in *Panchayats*, to contain these diversions and misappropriations, have been successfully subverted. For instance, the state government's move to digitalise payments[18] to beneficiaries of schemes through bank transfers, rather than allow cash payments, has worsened rather than improved matters. As one of our field team members wryly observed:

> "In the days of cash payments, the poor had to shell out money to the officials and elected member only after they received something in hand. These days, if you want your instalments under the housing scheme to be released on time, you have to pay the official signing the validation certificate, well in advance, as he knows that he cannot take a cut when the money is released.. This makes things worse.. as where are you going to cough up the money from?"

It is also important to understand that mechanisms for digital monitoring, when they fail to understand the contextual limitations, cause additional red-tape – in our team's observation. As another field team member told us:

> "As you know under one of the recent housing schemes, there is a requirement for GIS authentication before release of the final instalment, and this authentication has to be made within a stipulated period, by the *Panchayat* Development Officer... otherwise there will be a system lock-in.... and the funds can be released only after special requests are sent to the line departments higher up in the chain... and so on...when administrative staff such as the *Panchayat* Development Officers are already overburdened, proposals such as under housing schemes, can cause further delays."

There have been similar outcomes even with attempts to use digital technologies to monitor the *Gram Sabha*/ village assemblies. For example, the State Government of Karnataka has set up a portal titled 'Panchtantra' where *Gram Panchayats* are required to upload the proceedings of their meetings, the *Gram Sabhas* and *Ward Sabhas* they hold, and financial statements for the year. However, in the absence of an on-ground process by which this transparency loop is completed – such as community-based audits of the *Gram Panchayat* functioning, where the information provided officially by the *Panchayat* is cross-verified by the community – the utility of this initiative is limited.

18 This point may seem counter-intuitive at first glance, as the digitalisation of payments under India's flagship employment guarantee programme – the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme in Andhra Pradhesh – is an oft-cited success story in e-governance circles. However, it will do us well to remember that in this scheme, the digital MIS is supplemented by a physical verification of scheme implementation through social audits, completing the transparency loop, a very different scenario from what is happening in the instance described above.

The following case study makes this even more clearer. A few months ago, the state government of Karnataka strongly pushed for video recordings of all *Gram Sabha* proceedings, to minimise the tampering of beneficiary selection processes. When this directive was issued, one of the *Gram Panchayats* that we have closely engaged with, approached our field team with a request to video-document their *Gram Sabha* – as they could not locate another camera-person at short notice. Our team agreed and video-shot the event. In the course of the meeting, an ugly fight broke out between some community members and an elected male representative. The fight turned into a brawl, a few days after the meeting, and one of the community members was badly injured and hospitalised.

> Most digital monitoring mechanisms lack an idea of the on-ground process they need to be embedded in, so that the transparency and accountable governance loop can be completed successfully.

Our team was approached by the elected male representative, who requested that we delete evidence of the fight from the raw footage of the meeting (that we held, though we handed over the processed copy to the *Gram Panchayat*). A detailed conversation revealed that he had already deleted the clip in the official copy that was handed over by the *Gram Panchayat* to the district authorities, and that he was approaching us just to ensure that he was completely protected. Needless to say, we did not acquiesce to his request, but there was hardly anything we could do against the tampering of the footage in the official records – as the community members did not want to take this particular fight forward!

Finally, it is important to always keep in mind that we are discussing digital strategies for promoting accountability in a context where the digital infrastructure is rudimentary – at the *Panchayat* level, in most Indian states, there is no fibre network, and only mobile Internet is available. Also, mainstream state policy and programming has tended to use 'digital means' for top-down priorities such as demanding updates and records from the lower tiers of governance, rather than adopt a holistic approach towards accountable governance – one that focuses on the development of the capacities of local public institutions in appropriating the 'digital' to enhance their outreach to citizens (Mudgal 2014).

4.4.3 Women's fight for accountable governance: the search for the right know-how (and 'know-who')

The fight against such entrenched networks of corruption is extremely hard – and the progress that we have made through our information centres in enabling women's collectives to demand accountability from local governance structures, may seem small, unless it is contextualised against this highly politicised, elite-controlled and patriarchal milieu.

The strategy that we have adopted, to enhance women's fight for accountability, is best summed up in the women's own words:

> “If you have to avoid paying bribes and succeed in getting your entitlements the correct way, then you must have the right knowledge – of both the rules, and the way of talking and negotiating with the concerned officials (or elected members).”

Over the two years of the *Women-gov* project, we have focused on strengthening the linkages of the infomediaries of the village information centres with the range of public institutions at the local

level – such as the Primary Health Centre, the *anganwadi*, the Fair Price Shop and the *Gram Panchayat* representatives and the *Panchayat* Development Officer. Considering the power-politics that operates within and between the functionaries of these institutions, the task of building linkages has not been simple – it is akin to finding a way out of a labyrinth, without being endangered in the process. More simply, it means learning the ropes of how to build connections of trust with sympathetic officials and elected members, and modes of demanding accountability other than open and direct confrontation (which can become extremely threatening for the women).

Considering that the bulk of our energies in the newer information centres of Hosahalli and Taverekere went into establishing the institutional foundations, and as the Tavarekere centre unfortunately folded up six months after it started operations, we have been able to work on the local governance aspect only in the older geographies of Devanahalli and Vajarahalli, and the key highlights of our engagement are summarised below.

– One area that we have made a lot of headway on, is enhancing the linkages of the women's collectives with *anganwadis*, and enabling them demand greater accountability from *anganwadi* functionaries. For example, in the first year of the project, the infomediary at the Hunsur block centre had found out the exact allotment of take-home, food grain allotments for mothers of children between 0-3 years of age. She had then shared this information with the infomediaries of the village level centres, who conveyed it to the women in the Managing Committees, who then told the other women in their collectives. Following this, the next time the food grains were distributed in the Devanahalli *anganwadi*, the women beneficiaries, many of whom were also in the women's collectives in the village, started complaining that the full quota had not been provided to them. They then questioned the *anganwadi* teacher – the government employee in charge of the crèche. The teacher tried to explain to them that to begin with, the *anganwadi* had not received the full quota from the state and that there was a shortfall in the allotment, and what she had received from the block office, she had distributed equally among all those eligible for the allotment. Even after this exchange, there was some tension. In order to clear the air, the *anganwadi* teacher and the women's collectives in the village decided that in the future, the sealed carton containing the individual 'take-home' packets of food grains would be opened only in the presence of the infomediary and the Managing Committee members of the information centre – and that every month, the *anganwadi* teacher would send word as soon as the packets arrived at the centre. This practice continues even now, and has become part of the *anganwadi's* institutional culture. In fact, nowadays, the infomediary takes photos of the distribution of the foodgrains which the *anganwadi* teacher uses as part of her formal report to her supervisors at the block level. Similarly, in Vajarahalli village, the women's collectives regularly inspect the *anganwadi* to assess its qualitative functioning – and the *anganwadi* teacher has started sending a slip to the centre, on the days she takes leave.

– The Devanahalli and Vajarahalli women's collectives managing the information centres have managed to make a lot of headway in strengthening their linkages with their local Primary Health Centres. For example, in early 2014, the women's collectives of Vajarahalli approached the doctor of their local Primary Health Centre to come to their village and carry out a complete hematological analysis on women, adolescent girls and children – to enable early detection of anemia and malnutrition. The women's perseverance made the doctor

follow up with the block level authorities and obtain the required permissions, and come with his lab technicians to the Vajarahalli information centre on a date that was selected by community members and the women's collectives. This is extremely significant as the Primary Health Centre is quite some distance away from Vajarahalli, and if the 'blood test camp' had not been organised, most women would never have got this done, as that would have meant foregoing a day's labour and travelling to the Primary Health Centre. Similarly, in Devanahalli village, the women's collectives managed to get an 'eye-camp' organised in their village as detailed below.

– In March 2014, Lata, an active member of the Managing Committee of the Devanahalli information centre, and ASHA worker, went to attend a meeting convened by the Department of Health at the local Primary Health Centre. She chanced upon the ophthalmologist (or in our parlance, 'eye-doctor') making his mandatory visit to the Primary Heath Centre. In the public health system, general physicians are posted in the Primary Health Centre and specialists are posted in block level officials, and required to make periodic visits to the Primary Health Centres that fall within their jurisdiction. The ophthalmologist told Lata, and other ASHAs present, that they could ask people from their villages to visit the health centre, any time that day, as it was the day of his scheduled visit. An incensed Lata pointed out that it was not possible for people to put aside their tasks at such short notice, and come to the health centre, if prior notice was not given. She said that if the doctor was willing, the Devanahalli information centre would take the responsibility of organising an eye camp and inform the doctor in advance so that he could plan the visit. The doctor agreed and a camp was successfully organised by the Managing Committee of the centre, the subsequent month.

– Since the start of the project, the information centres have strengthened their linkages with the *Gram Panchayat* as well – projecting themselves as allies rather than opponents of the *Panchayat*. This has meant picking and choosing battles for accountability, very carefully. For instance, in Devanahalli, the *Panchayat* Development Officer who was a very enterprising individual, was determined to weed out spurious claims for old age and widow pensions – and he approached the information centre (as its activities have slowly built its reputation as a public interest arbitrator) to undertake a survey in Devanahalli and its contiguous villages to build the requisite evidence to ensure that beneficiary selection was carried out in a bonafide manner.

> The information centres' activities are building their reputation as public interest arbitrators.

Similarly, in Vajarahalli, the *Gram Panchayat* approached the information centre for its support in the selection of beneficiaries for a rural sanitation scheme that subsidises the construction of household toilets. At first glance, this move seems counter-intuitive, on the part of the *Panchayat.* But in a context where the supply of schemes is always lesser than the demand, and the *Panchayat* members are always at the receiving end of abuse from community members who fail to understand why all demands cannot be accommodated, it is also in the *Panchayat*'s interest to demonstrate the involvement of a community institution in this process. Despite the self-preservation logic behind the *Panchayat*'s invite, the Vajarahalli information centre seized this opportunity – as it was a golden chance to work towards regularising beneficiary selection processes (at least in the implementation of this scheme). The infomediary, with some support from the women's collectives, carried out a door-to-door survey of all the households in the

village, and generated a list of eligible households, keeping in mind the scheme criteria. This list was accepted, when tabled in the next *Gram Sabha*.

Most importantly, these experiences have made the Managing Committees of both Devanahalli and Vajarahalli information centres realise the power of generating their own data, in order to influence decision making processes at the *Panchayat* level. The information centre's long standing presence, and the *Women-gov* project's focus on building the centre's linkages with the *Gram Panchayat*, has enabled women recognise that very often, the *Panchayat* derives legitimacy for its decisions on allocation of benefits, from government generated data sets – that cannot be challenged by the community. Fudged official records are all too important for powers that be to maintain the status-quo.

Therefore, generating their own data sets, which can challenge the narrative the *Panchayat* uses to justify its decisions, becomes a very important tactic for women's collectives, to question unfairness and non-transparency in local governance processes. In fact, at the moment, the information centres have initiated a household level survey, to create their own alternative demographic data-base – and the infomediaries are being trained in digitally managing such data-bases to effectively counter official claims. The impact of this effort may not be visible before the end of the project, but an inkling into the transformatory power of such community generated data sets and the caveats that structure it, is made visible, by the following case study.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) that guarantees 100 days of work to every rural household applying for work under this scheme, is a very crucial social security scheme for rural, *dalit* households in the areas we work in. Under this scheme, all the wage seekers from a single household have to submit a single application to the *Gram Panchaya*t – and they will then receive a Job Card with their names and photographs affixed. The *Panchayat* is then supposed to initiate a process of community level planning to identify key village level public works to be undertaken (which fall within a list of works sanctioned by the Central Government). After this Plan of Action is finalised with approval from the block level, the *Panchayat* is supposed to initiate these works and ensure that at least one applicant from every household that requested for employment under the scheme, gets wage-work for 100 days, through these works. The Job Card becomes a critical document for wage-seeking households to demand their right to employment. There is always the risk that the *Panchayat* may subvert the scheme by hiring a contractor who uses machinery rather than manual labour to complete the works; and many times, that the *Panchayat* may fail to initiate any works at all.

In both Devanahalli and Vajarahalli, many households do not have job cards. For some, this is because their applications have not been processed; for others, it is because they are not very aware of the provisions of this scheme. We have found that in both villages, the Managing Committee members of the information centres have independently initiated a household survey of job cards, as the first step in educating the local community about their rights under the employment guarantee scheme; and generating a data set to question the *Panchayat's* unexplained delays in processing job card applications.

However, we must mention here that it would be a grave error to assume that because these processes have improved the bargaining power of the women in the Managing Committee, they also enable women to automatically become empowered political agents who further the

democratic ideal. In the case of the Job cards, there is much at stake for informal and formal powers waiting to make their big bucks. Individual women may also use their status as members of the Managing Committee of the info-centres, to garner personal gains. Setting agenda for action therefore has required us to unravel the individual interests of many a woman, and keep up the dialogue through the collective.

> It would be a grave error to assume that by improving the bargaining power of the women in the Managing Committee, we automatically enable women to become political agents who will further the democratic ideal.

More importantly, women may not also want to rally around an issue, sensing that it would open up risks they know cannot be countered. We have not been able to therefore take up the Job cards issue beyond a simple - “lets-try-to-get-everyone-to-have-Job card” - agenda. Touching the actual implementation of the scheme and its expenditure is beyond the collective resilience of the MC of the centre at this point in time. (In many parts of India, activists exposing irregularities in the NREGA scheme have been killed in broad day light.)

Another important challenge that we have had to constantly battle is to convince the women of the importance of upholding the civic-democratic ideal, in this milieu. For instance, in late 2012, we chanced upon the infomediary of the block information centre approaching the 'local agent' of the MLA to process a particularly difficult application for entitlement, rather than go through the 'proper channel' – our team members had a tough time convincing her about the need to go through the 'proper channel' even if it meant more inconvenience and processing delays. A more difficult situation arose at the Vajarahalli information centre – when we found out that one of the Members of the Managing Committee had been pressurising the infomediary to fill in applications of entitlements, for some individuals, even if they did not meet the eligibility criteria set by the state, for these schemes. This strong woman leader was using her clout with a few local leaders, to push for these applications through non-legal routes. This issue was tided over by calling for an emergency Managing Committee meeting, and issuing a strict warning to the member to not continue these dealings if she wanted to retain her affiliation to the centre. In the long run, if the sustainability of the centres has to be ensured, strengthening its democratic ethos is essential – and we have a long road to travel, as far as this is concerned.

4.5 Strengthening the linkages of women's collectives to elected women representatives in local government: How do you bring them together “when they don't face each other even in sleep”?

When the politics of reservations combines with the intersectionality of gendered identity, the result is that women elected to the *Gram Panchayat*, are not in a position to effectively connect to a women's constituency at the grassroots, and engender agenda-setting processes. Firstly, women are divided along caste lines. Secondly, most women come into public-political life at the behest of their husbands or other male family members – who find an effective way to enter local politics by using the women as 'proxies'. Because of this, we have come across many instances where a woman's entry into formal politics has led to an increase of household level controls.

For example, one of the former infomediaries of the Hunsur block information centre has now

been elected to the Block *Panchayat* – and we find that her husband, who was previously relaxed, is now keeping tabs on all her phone calls. Similarly, in Devanahalli, Sanamma who was a part of the local women's collective, contested the elections and was successfully elected to the *Gram Panchayat*, with the support of the members of her collective. After she came to power, her husband forced her to break all ties with her collective, to the bitterness and chagrin of her peers, who had hoped to push the priorities of the collective, using her presence in the *Panchayat*. As one of the members of the Managing Committee of the Devanahalli information centre, bitterly observed:

> "We had elected her in the hope that we would have a strong ally inside the *Panchayat*, in our work, and our struggles. She does not even face this side, in her sleep. What is the whole point?"

The issue of ensuring that elected women representatives have complete control over their public-political lives, is a difficult one to address.

However, there are also instances where the women's collective is a strong ally of the husband of the elected woman representative, and consult him on all matters – and are quite accepting of the situation that the husbands have used their wives as 'proxy members' to gain a foothold into the *panchayat*. This is the situation in both Hosahalli and Vajarahalli.

In Hosahalli, the *dalit* elected woman representative Mayilamma and her husband Somaiah (who is part of all public-political activities she engages in) have been very supportive of the *dalit* women's collectives in the village, and backed them in their long-drawn struggle with upper caste groups, during the establishment of the village information centre (detailed in the preceding section). In Vajarahalli, the women's collective address the husband of the elected woman representative as 'Member' and find him in a valuable source of support, and have very limited ties with his wife, who is actually the formally elected member!

This issue of ensuring that elected women representatives have complete control over their public-political lives is a difficult one to address. As very often, women themselves want their husband's involvement and continuous presence to negotiate the hyper-politicised environment where the stakes are high. As Somaiah observed when gently questioned about his constant interference in his wives' official duties, he explained: "The kind of language they use in the *Panchayat*, and the way they treat first-time members...that is not something my wife should be exposed to, without protection". While on the one hand, this attitude does reflect a patronising protectionism, we have also encountered instances where women express the need for their husband's support. As Sanamma told us,

> "I know what you are asking.. it is not as if I can't sit alone in *Panchayat* meetings and understand what is happening. I have studied upto Class XII – and as you know, rules do not permit my husband to come inside and sit during the meetings. I attend them alone, of course. But in the kind of politics they play – for instance, a few months ago, a woman from a *dalit* community had to be given the post of President, as it was her turn (as *Panchayats* in Karnataka have followed the norm of indirect election to the post of President, there is usually an informal agreement about the rotation of this post among a few members). This did not go down well with some members – who felt that

> their honour had crumbled to dust as they were sitting lower than a *dalit* woman! They made it a point to disrupt every single meeting – and I did not know how to react, or what to do, when arguments broke out. My husband who is seasoned in these matters advised me – otherwise it would have been impossible."

Certainly, there are some women we have encountered who are able to hold their own in the public spotlight (such as Savitri, elected from one of the outreach villages of the Vajarahalli information centre). However, even such women find it difficult to raise women's issues in the *Gram Sabha,* and in the *Gram Panchayat* – as the existing legal-administrative framework has reduced *Gram Panchayat* to a post-office that disburses money under various schemes of the central and state government, rather than imagine it as a vibrant space for democratic decision-making.

Also, existing capacity-building and training measures for first-time elected representatives, and recently instituted trainings focusing on women members, do not equip participants with the wherewithal they need to leverage the system, for bringing in community priorities through dialogue and deliberations. As an expert trainer who has over two-decades of experience of working on state training programmes for elected representatives, shared with us:

> "The problem in such programmes is the starting point. There is no focus on inspiring the first-time elected members, and building from their vision for their village, and then showing them how existing schemes and administrative provisions can be harnessed towards this.. On the other hand, we feed them reams and reams of scheme disbursement provisions. The same goes for elected women representatives' trainings. Unless you ask them what is their dream of the women of the village, and continuously provide them support and hand-holding to work towards this, how can women's priorities be realised just because they have been elected to local government? What we do now is to bring them together two times, during their term, and throw in a set of activities and lectures...how can that work? Should we not equip them to dialogue and jointly come up with priorities with the women of the village?"

It was part of this gap that we attempted to address in this project – primarily in 2014. As *Gram Sabhas* were almost entirely male spaces, and the issue of beneficiary selection tends to dominate all discussions, we felt that it was important to carve out alternative spaces where women could put forward their priorities and issues, before the *Gram Panchayat* body and officials of the *Panchayat*. In fact, this gap has been acknowledged by the Union Ministry of *Panchayati Raj*, as well – in 2010, the Ministry, in its *Guidelines for activating Gram Sabha, Ward Sabha and other People's assemblies during the year of the Gram Sabha*, recommended that *Mahila Sabhas* (or Women-only *Gram Sabhas*) be instituted by state governments, to ensure women's substantive participation in local governance processes. Needless to say, not all state governments have been robust in their implementation of these guidelines. The Karnataka government, for instance, has been rather lax, and such women-only assemblies were organised only in some *Gram Panchayats* where the *Sampoorna* programme for promoting gender responsive governance, a joint initiative of UN Women and the Government of Karnataka, was operating in. This programme was not operational in any of the project geographies (though there were other *Gram Panchayats* in Mysore district that were part of the programme), but it was a useful point of reference, to gain

acceptance from the *Gram Panchayats* we work with, to the idea of organising such *Mahila Gram Sabhas*. Even then, this has not been an easy endeavor.

To date, in the project area, we have managed to organise *Mahila Gram Sabhas* only in the *Gram Panchayat* in which the Vajarahalli information centre is a part of – in 2 of the villages that fall under its jurisdiction – Vajarahalli itself, and Maidan. While both *Mahila Gram Sabhas* were attended by the *Panchayat* Development Officer and elected male representatives, in Vajarahalli, the elected woman representative dropped out at the last minute, and sent her husband instead, excusing herself on the grounds that guests had come home! Certainly, in these discussions, women were able to bring in their priorities – queries about governmental schemes sanctioning a 'Revolving Fund' for women's collectives and the need to repair the dilapidated *anganwadi* building were put forward (issues that usually get totally brushed aside in the main *Gram Sabha* where beneficiary selection for housing and sanitation schemes sideline every other agenda). However, there is a long way to go before they become effective spaces for the redressal of gender injustice.

We would also like to highlight here that to prepare women for effectively positioning their demands in the *Mahila Gram Sabha*, we adopted a strategy of organising meetings between the women's collectives and their elected woman representative, to jointly ideate on the most effective way of placing their demands. In fact, in the village of Maidan, it was at this preliminary meeting that the elected woman representative Sannamma motivated the women's collectives to attend the *Mahila Gram Sabha*, when they complained to her about how the Bill Collector (contractual employee of the *Gram Panchayat* who is in charge of collecting house and water taxes) was embezzling money from the tax collection, failing to give them receipts. On hearing this, Sanamma told the women, “Why don't you come and raise this issue before the *Gram Panchayat*?” They responded that they found it uncomfortable to go there, as most of the men would dominate and shut them up, and Sanamma used this as an opportunity to convince them about attending the upcoming *Mahila Gram Sabha* meeting. Subsequently, they raised this issue in the *Mahila Gram Sabha*, and the *Panchayat* Development Officer has agreed to take up this matter. We hope that in the near future, we will be able to make such inroads in Devanahalli and Hosahalli as well. In fact, in two of the outreach villages of the Devanahalli information centre, we have already organised meetings bringing together women's collectives with elected women representatives.

4.6 The community media experience: The 'communification' enabled by 'listening to and seeing other women like ourselves'

As described in Section 2.2 of the Report, our community media strategy has largely centred around utilising the potential of community radio and community video, for citizenship education of women's collectives and strengthening their associational and communicative power. The impacts of the radio strategy in enabling women to assert their associational power, are very tricky to assess. This is because motivation from hearing another woman on radio, or listening to an expert talk about some local governance process, may be one of many factors that trigger concerted action on the ground, and attributions may be hard to trace.

For example, in Vajarahalli, it was after the start of the *Women-gov* project that the Managing

Committee members and other women's collectives started going regularly to the *Ward Sabha*. Part of this was because the infomediary was persuading them, convinced as she was by the need to engage with the *Ward Sabha*, because of her discussions and dialogue at the monthly sharing meetings with other infomediaries at the *Prakriye* office. However, this was also the time when we ran a month long feature on the need for women to participate in local governance forums such as the *Ward Sabha*. Some women from the village had also called and provided feedback that this set of programmes were very interesting. It may be hard to lay a finger on the extent to which the radio strategy was key in triggering women's collectives in Vajarahalli to regularly engage with the Ward *Sabha*, but ideas do shape action, and to the extent that women feel a sense of ownership over their media platforms, their public actions may well draw inspiration from ideas discussed on the radio. There have been other such instances – for example, soon after they heard a radio broadcast where the compere script essayed a scenario where women's collectives were preparing to organise Independence Day celebrations, women in Devanahalli did this on the ground.

Similarly, there is also some evidence that the project's video strategy has been key in nudging the women's collectives to exercise their convening power for some local level action. For example, in early 2013, the IT for Change team and a staff member from *Mahila Samakhya* had gone to Hebbala– an outreach village of the Devanahalli information centre, on a casual visit, as part of doing a status check on the effectiveness of information outreach efforts of the centre. At that time, there was a discussion around how the women's collectives from Hebbala had gone to the Primary Health Centre jointly, to test for anemia. The test results had shown that many of them had a very low haemoglobin count. The *Mahila Samakhya* staff member suggested that the women should come together on a full moon night convenient for all the members of the collective, for a potluck. Each one could cook one dish rich in iron, and then all of them could meet under the moonlight for a feast! The idea of a 'Moonlight Dinner' was received with great enthusiasm. Our field team chipped in and offered to make a film on this event. This film was made, and has since been shown to other women's collectives in contiguous villages. For the women's collectives who watched the film, the potential of this event to strengthen solidarities, struck a chord, and they have also indicated their keenness in regularising such an activity in their villages. Video screenings were also used as a strategy for opening up dialogue between the elected women representatives and the women's collectives during the 'networking meetings' that were held prior to the *Mahila Gram Sabha* – described in the previous section. The idea was that films about the role and responsibilities of local government, and other priorities of women, would help in creating healthy dialogue – by breaking the ice, as there are very few forums where elected women engage with women's collectives.

The video strategy has been built upon the premise that the hard parts of collective action presuppose the soft parts of convivial association. Amplifying this, through the video, creates the space to introduce non-instrumental, commons oriented approaches to association.

The hard parts of collective action presuppose the soft parts of convivial association.

We have also spent some time in the older villages of Devanahalli and Vajarahalli, in training women in photography and video filming. One woman from Devanahalli has shot two films – on the rights of citizens under the newly enacted Guarantee of Services to Citizens Act, enacted by the Karnataka State government; and another film on the 'Nutrition Day' celebrations organised in her village – an awareness-building event on reproductive and child health for which funding support is available from the state, if community members are

willing to take the initiative for organising the same. Due to footage-quality issues, the first film could not be finalised. The second film was edited by the *Prakriye* field team, and has been screened since, in the other geographies we work in.

As far as the citizenship education potential of the community radio and video is concerned, we have had mixed results. This is because considering the constraints of the digital infrastructure existing at the village level – especially the negligible rates of smart-phone ownership among the women we work with, and the lack of broadband Internet, the possibilities for developing a peer-learning culture through travelling 'audio' and 'video' was limited – as ideas such quick-sharing of audio and video clips among women over Android applications, creating trans-local video exchanges between women's collectives in different geographies through online video newsletters that could be downloaded at the information centres, were ideas that could never be pragmatically brought to fruition. Therefore, our citizenship education processes continued to be largely centred around screenings and audio narrow-casting at the information centres; and in the case of Hunsur block, sharing audio and video content over the Tablet PC, by the infomediary, during the course of her outreach visits.

There has been some difference in women's response to the citizenship education aspect of our community media strategy, between the older and newer information centres. In both Hosahalli and Taverekere centres, in the initial days after the centre was set up, there was a lot of enthusiasm from the women in listening to the audio clips of the radio programme, and viewing the films – as the idea of listening and watching other women like themselves, was extremely novel and attractive. In the older villages of Devanahalli and Vajarahalli, women's collectives still listen to the radio programme, and watch the films, but there is some fatigue – as they feel that the content is not 'new' enough. Though women hesitate to reveal this vague discontent to the field team members, they do express in their conversation with the infomediaries. As the infomediary of the Devanahalli centre shared with us:

> “Women do recognise the 'difference' between *Kelu Sakhi* (the radio broadcast) , the films shared by the *Prakriye* team, and the mainstream media – especially TV serials. They say that listening to the radio is good for their growth and learning, but that the pull of TV is hard to resist... as there is a certain attraction in the style that the content is presented.. but they make this admission somewhat sheepishly.”

Or, as one woman from the Devanahalli centre told us, during one of the interactions over the life of the project:

> “We know our radio programme comes on Mondays but the cliff-hangers that TV serials end with on Fridays, are resolved on this day.. we feel very torn. One is good for us, the other is more thrilling.”

Another issue that affects women's participation in the community media strategy, is the enormous time-burdens they have to grapple with. Many women find it extremely hard to participate in community video screening or listen to an audio narrow-casting at the information centre, in the agricultural peak season, and they are able to spare the time for this, a few months of the year. Similarly, as many women have joined multiple collectives to manage their household economies through multiple savings-borrowings dealings, they have limited time for discussion-intensive

processes such as community media production, and media-based learning. As one woman from Devanahalli told us, “The number of meetings that we have to attend every week (due to their affiliation in multiple collectives) is just too much.. my very life-blood is draining away”. These tensions are reflected in the endline survey responses to the questions around women's participations in community media processes – especially as the survey was carried out at the height of the agricultural season when women had multiple demands on their time, and various priorities to juggle. Thus, the low levels of listener-ship and viewer-ship that the survey indicates, is also partly a function of its timing.

Community Media element – What the endline survey revealed	Hosahalli	Taverekere	Devanahalli	Vajarahalli
Regularly follows the radio broadcast (listens every week)	3	5	6	0
Frequently listens to the radio broadcast	4	4	7	4
Rarely listens to the broadcast	7	4	2	9
Listen to the audio narrow-casting	12	9	11	10
See video films being screened at the centre	10	8	15	7
Number of respondents	33	14	23	21

What is important to us is that even if women are unable to devote a lot of time to engage with the community media processes, it should still hold the potential to act as a “communification” force – the process by which “people without direct interpersonal relations imagine themselves as members of community through communication of symbols and cultural artefacts of a particular kind, which can arouse deep and strong attachments (Calhoun 1991).”

This potential is very much present, as a quick analysis of the qualitative endline interviews about women's involvement with community media processes, reveals:

Responses about community radio

Responses about community video

The above diagrams were generated by feeding 38 qualitative responses about community radio, and 56 responses about community video, from respondents across the four information centre geographies into the online 'word cloud generator' – 'Wordle' (http://www.wordle.net/) – that enables users to generate representations of the most commonly occurring words in a text. As women's responses about community radio were more divergent than their responses about community video, we limited the word cloud of community radio sources to the 50 most commonly occurring words in the text, while further restricting the word cloud of community video responses to the 30 most commonly occurring words in the text. Certainly, this is no sophisticated discursive analysis software – but its basic feature of indicating frequency through relative differences in font size, does enable us to represent some of our analytical highlights in a visually appealing way.

For both community radio and video, women's responses were focused on the nature of the space, rather than specific programmes.

In both community radio and video, women's responses were focused on the nature of the space – rather than specific programmes. Both radio and video are seen as informational spaces, as well as platforms to connect to the experiences of other collectives. In terms of specific content that was recalled by women, the most frequently recalled content was that which centred around women's health (indicated by 'blood-test', 'vaginal-discharge', and 'health' in the word-cloud), and information about strengthening the financial linkages of the women's collectives with banks. In the case of radio, content about the *Gram Panchayat* was recalled by a few women; and so was video content challenging gender-stereotyping of work.

We now move on to discussing our experiences with the new techno-social possibilities of IVR technology and GIS mapping, that we took up, under the *Women-gov* project.

4.7 Insights into the new techno-social strategies we explored in *Women-gov*: mobile phone-based networking and GIS mapping

4.7.1 Mobile phone-based networking

At the start of the project, we planned to set up a local SMS based network that would connect some members of women's collectives with their counter-parts in other distant areas, to create a trans-local networking platform for women. In the first 6 months of the project, we made a lot of progress on identifying the technical architecture for sending mass SMS. However, our efforts hit a brick wall when we were unable to identify a solution for successfully sending messages in the local language Kannada. This was a difficult problem to solve as the hardware of most mobile phones available in the market, do not support the Unicode format which is necessary for reading non-English text.

Also, as our ideas evolved over the life of the project, we felt that any strategy that would further create a hierarchy between members of a women's collective (in this case, the literate and non-literate ones – as the project context has high degrees of non-textual literacy) may not be a good idea. Therefore, we opted instead for setting up an Interactive Voice Recording System, to network women's collectives. By early 2013, the technological backbone required for this system was ready. It had been developed on the Asterix Open-Source Platform, with the help of the

Chhattisgarh-based resource group – CG Net *Swara*, that has a lot of experience in identifying contextually-appropriate IVRS solutions for grassroots organisations' peer networking processes. Our idea behind developing the IVR was to create a platform that could enable geographically dispersed elected women representatives and women's collectives to share insights on their specific experiences with, and challenges they have faced, in dealing with, local governance institutions. However, as right now, only the 'voice-blast' functionality has been completely set up, and we are still working on the 'call-back' functionality that will enable horizontal peer-to-peer dialogue, the IVR has been mainly used as a broadcast rather than networking medium.

From June 2014 onwards, the *Prakriye* team has initiated the process of sending 1 minute reminders about the '*Kelu Sakhi*' programme to women's collectives; and from August onwards, 1 minute “info capsules” about women's health. Over the next few months, messages pertaining to governance schemes, *Panchayat* functioning, and women's rights vis-a-vis local institutions, will be sent; and the call-back facility will become fully functional.

These delays in the mobile-phone based networking strategy has meant that we have not been able to assess its impact, within the life of the *Women-gov* project.

4.7.2 GIS-enabled participatory mapping

As mentioned in Section 2.2.3 of the brief, our initial idea was to utilise GIS-based participatory mapping as a strategy to educate women about the workings of the geographies of power, in their immediate context. In other words, to facilitate reflections on questions such as: What are the infrastructural investments that have been prioritised by the *Gram Panchayat*? Which areas are better equipped with infrastructure? Which households have greater access to resources? Which households have efficiently accessed their entitlements under various state schemes? Are the households that have received allotments under schemes meeting the eligibility criteria set by the state?

However, the first step in any such exercise is ensuring that these geographies are put on the map – and thus, the first six months of the project were devoted to plotting the villages we work in, on Open Street Map, using a GPS device. Considering the deep reach of the networks of corruption, we decided that we would focus on one dimension of public services, to start off with, rather than take up the mapping of the status of local governance, in its entirety. Therefore, in October 2013, we decided to undertake a social audit of all schools in the *Gram Panchayat* area where the Hosahalli village information centre is situated) – known for its high drop-out rates in middle school – utilising the participatory mapping possibilities opened up by GIS technologies.

Firstly, utilising the secondary data available with the Department of Education, a GIS map that plotted all schools in the selected area, with school-level information about their infrastructural facilities (number of rooms in school building, availability of separate toilets for girls and boys, provision for library, supply of teaching-learning material and so on) and school performance (teacher-student ratios for each subject, unfilled teaching vacancies and so on), was created. The idea behind this exercise was to share this map with the concerned School Management Committees and ask them to audit the governmental data, as a means for triggering discussion and debate among members of each Committee on the health of their school – in the hope of catalysing local level action. Through this exercise, we intended to bring some energies and vibrancies into the School Management Committees.

However, when we tried to move forward on this, we found out that the School Management Committees are completely defunct. Therefore, we modified our strategy – we decided to first approach the schools, trigger discussions among the staff; and then bring them together with women's collective members who are supposed to be on the Committee for a next round of dialogue – gradually pushing for the re-activation of the Committee.

At this point, we have completed one step in the process. We have taken the completed school maps to the headmaster and school staff of the public schools in the area. Apart from the expected outcome of triggering discussion on the problems of each school, the GIS maps also helped each school compare its performance with other schools in the area – and in one case, we actually found a school that was doing well. As one head-master remarked: “It is good sometimes to sit back and reflect on what's actually working.. otherwise, we are always caught up in a cycle of complaints.”

Needless to say, this experience has just been a starting point. Additionally, we are working towards exploring GIS-mapping possibilities for a community-level audit of the rural sanitation programme in one of the *Gram Panchayats* that is in the vicinity of the Hunsur block information centre.

Thus, we have taken some initial strides as far as the mobile and GIS strategies are concerned, and we now have an inking of their transformative potential.

As the preceding sections clearly illustrate, the project has focused on putting in place a range of 'socio-technical' processes to carve out 'techno-social' spaces that can transform local democratic and institutional cultures. What is clear is that once the socio-technical processes become part of the local mix in the existing culture of democracy, it is hard to predict how their inter-twining with other socio-political elements will impact everyday institutional practices. Sometimes they may disrupt existing power structures succesfully, other times there may be a backlash, or co-option. But what is undeniable is that a culture o f guided use goes a long way in furthering their transformative potential. For at every step, this will ensure a conscious assessment of the particular inter-twinings of the socio-technical elements of the strategy with caste and gender structures, and the deliberated selection of the future course of action.

We now move on to discussing women's perspectives on how their participation in the project has transformed their engagement in local institutional and democratic cultures – vis-a-vis the vectors of information, association and communication – in other words, the shifts in their 'active citizenship'.

5. The shifts women perceive in their 'active citizenship': A snapshot of the endline survey

The working definition of active citizenship that the project adopted, was as follows: “*the extent to which women are able to exercise informational, communicative and associational power in the local public-political sphere”*. Needless to say, none of these elements are completely discrete from each other, but this analytical separation was created by us, to help us point to the specifics of

the transformations, the project has enabled, in women's everyday experiences of citizenship, and to facilitate inter-country comparisons between Brazil, India and South Africa sites.

As explained earlier in Section 3 on Methodology, an endline survey was carried out in all the four information centre project geographies to enable a point-in-time analysis of women's active citizenship across the older and newer geographies; and a baseline-endline assessment of the transformations the project has facilitated, in the newer geographies.

Before we proceed to examining the endline survey data in greater detail, we would like to highlight one caveat here. The endline survey aimed at capturing the changes experienced by the women who were centrally involved in the project strategies, and not women who had been occasionally touched by the sphere of influence of the project. Therefore, we interviewed women who were part of the Managing Committee of the four information centres, and a selection of their peers from the collectives they hailed from. Thus, a non-random, quota sampling was adopted, with the intention of covering at least 20 women in each geography – including the 9 Managing Committee members. In Devanahalli, 23 women were covered; 21 in Vajarahalli and 33 in Hosahalli. Only 14 women have been surveyed in Taverekere – this is because as a small village, it has only one women's collective, and that has only 17 members.

Also, in Hosahalli and Taverekere, we covered the same women who had been interviewed during the baseline survey to assess their movement over the life of the project. 50 women had been surveyed in the baseline; and in the endline, we covered 47 of these 50 women as 3 of these women had left the village of Taverekere, migrating for work.

It is important to understand that the idea behind the survey was to get a dip-stick insight into how women's engagement with local governance has moved over the life of the project, to be examined against our own experiential insights – and not a complete assessment, that can stand-alone, in and of itself.

5.1 Informational power

Informational power is understood as the power gained from access to information, including information about services and entitlements. It also refers to the power women gain from becoming key interlocutors in the local informational ecology. For example, the power wielded by women leaders, or that of the information intermediaries operating community information centres. Finally, informational power also includes the power that women gain when they acquire the capacity to be producers of information that is sought after by government officials and other groups in the community.

Table 1: Women's perspectives on their informational power (from the endline survey)

Questions to assess informational power	Devanahalli (N=23)	Vajarahalli (N=21)	Hosahalli (N=33)	Taverekere (N=14)
1. If you need information from the *Panchayat*, will you be able to access it?				
Yes, easily	12 (52.2%)	10 (47.6%)	10 (30.3%)	1 (7.1%)

Yes, with some difficulty	8 (34.8%)	5 (23.8%)	12 (36.4%)	8 (57.2%)
No	3 (13%)	6 (28.6%)	11 (33.3%)	5 (35.7%)
2. If you need information about block department schemes, will you be able to access it?				
Yes, easily	16 (69.6%)	9 (42.9%)	20 (60.6%)	6 (42.9%)
Yes, with some difficulty	5 (21.7%)	6 (28.6%)	8 (24.2%)	6 (42.8%)
No	2 (8.7%)	6 (28.5%)	5 (15.2%)	2 (14.2%)
3. Do you receive advance notice of *Gram Sabha* meetings?				
Always	15 (65.2%)	13 (61.9%)	8 (24.2%)	6 (42.8%)
Sometimes	3 (13%)	5 (23.8%)	9 (24.3%)	3 (21.4%)
Rarely	2 (8.7%)	2 (9.5%)	6 (18.2%)	3 (21.5%)
Never	3 (13.1%)	1 (4.8%)	10 (30.3%)	2 (14.3%)

- Women associated with the older information centres report greater ease in accessing information from the *Gram Panchayat*, and information about citizen forums such as the *Gram Sabha*, when compared to the newer information centres. This is not surprising, when read against the fact that there has been much more extensive work in the older information centre geographies, when compared to the new, in building women's collectives' linkages with *Gram Panchayats*, as detailed in Section 4.
- In both older and newer villages, the ease of accessing information from the line departments seems easier than accessing information from the *Gram Panchayat*. This is not surprising when read against the backdrop of the larger political milieu.
- The older village of Devanahalli and the newer village of Hosahalli seem to have higher ease of access to departmental information than the older village of Vajarahalli. This can be explained when we keep in mind the inter-collective struggles in this village, that disrupted the smooth functioning of the Vajarahalli centre (detailed in the previous section).
- Though the Taverekere centre worked only for a very short period (6 months), the women's responses clearly indicate that they have had a clear overview of the tremendous potential it holds, for enhancing their informational linkages.

5.2 Associational Power

Associational power is understood as the power gained from being a part of collective. This includes the following aspects: the vibrancy and growth of a collective, the capacity of a collective to form cross-linkages and convene public forums as well as its ability to engage in local level action (collective action) such as protest marches and filing joint petitions.

Table 2: Women's perspectives on their associational power (from the end-line survey)

Questions to assess associational power	Devanahalli (N=23)	Vajarahalli (N=21)	Hosahalli (N=33)	Taverekere (N=14)
1. Do you participate in the *Gram Sabha*?				
Always participate	4 (17.4%)	2 (9.5%)	2 (6.1%)	1 (7.1%)
Sometimes participate	8 (34.8%)	7 (33.3%)	6 (18.2%)	3 (21.4%)
No	8 (34.8%)	11 (52.4%)	15 (45.4%)	8 (57.1%)
Respondents have said they never receive intimation of the *Gram Sabha*	3 (13%)	1 (4.8%)	10 (30.3%)	2 (14.3%)
2. Are you able to raise questions and seek clarifications, in public forums in the village?				
Yes	10 (43.5%)	14 (66.7%)	17 (51.5%)	7 (50%)
No	13 (56.5%)	7 (33.3%)	16 (48.5%)	7 (50%)
3. Has your collective, helped another woman, in times of difficulty?				
Yes	13 (56.5%)	16 (76.2%)	23 (69.7%)	4 (28.6%)
No	10 (43.5%)	5 (23.8%)	10 (30.3%)	10 (71.4%)

- The survey clearly reveals that in the older villages, women's participation in the *Gram Sabha* is far higher than in the newer villages. Over the project period, when read against the efforts made by the information centres to regularise beneficiary selection and delivery of entitlements in these areas, and bring women into the *Gram Sabha*, this is easily explainable.
- As we believe that women's ability to raise questions in public forums is deeply tied to their faith that their collective will back them, we have taken the question on individual ability to raise questions and seek clarifications in public forums, into associational, rather than collective power. It is interesting that the older village of Vajarahalli has the highest score on this count, and the older village of Devanahalli scores lower than the newer villages of Hosahalli and Taverekere when read against the fact that it is Vajarahalli that has been experiencing a high degree of inter-collective conflict. Some digging into the specific experiences the women were going through when the surveys were fielded, can shed some light on this.

  In Devanahalli, the survey was fielded at the time when the women were going through the intensive conflict with the organic farming collective made an attempt to take over the info-centre space; while in Vajarahalli, the women's collectives had just received another invitation from their *Gram Panchayat*, to undertake a survey for identification of beneficiaries under a governmental rural sanitation programme. In Hosahalli and Taverekere, women's sense of having acquired the capacity to speak in public forums,

despite their low levels of attendance in the *Gram Sabha*, can be traced to the extensive number of village meetings that women participated in during the setting up of the information centre – and dialoguing with the men of the village, and other village leaders.

– The question about the extent to which women view their collective as a back-bone that supports all the women of the village is a harder one to unpack – as the reflects specific, affective ties to the collective that women are experiencing at that particular point – and cannot be easily traced to a set of specific incidents. Sometimes, women clearly tie their responses down to a specific incident. For example, in the case of Hosahalli, while answering this question, women shared with their interviewers details of the help they had extended to the infomediary recently, when she was facing conflicts with her husband, as he felt threatened by the increasing recognition that his wife was received from officials, and her enhanced mobility. At other times, as in the case of Vajarahalli, it is a re-affirmation of the imaginary of the collective – at times when women have just managed to successfully navigate threats and challenges (even if internal) to the solidarity of their collective.

5.3 Communicative power

Communicative power is defined as the power to shape the mainstream discourse in the public sphere or challenge mainstream discourse, as well as the power to open up an official communication channel (such as giving applications for entitlement seeking) and challenge informal power structures. It also includes the following aspects: the capacity to build critiques of the status-quo, acquiring voice, and building as a strong counter-public.

Table 3: Women's perspectives on their communicative power (from the endline survey)

Questions to assess communicative power	Devanahalli (N=23)	Vajarahalli (N=21)	Hosahalli (N=33)	Taverekere (N=14)
1. Do you feel you have adequate opportunities to share your ideas and opinions with your community and the larger society?				
Yes, I have adequate opportunities	6 (26.1%)	6 (28.6%)	6 (18.2%)	5 (35.7%)
Yes but very few opportunities	13 (56.5%)	12 (57.1%)	14 (42.4%)	5 (35.7%)
No, I don't have any	4 (17.4%)	3 (14.3%)	13 (39.4%)	4 (28.6%)
2. Have you helped another woman raise in public her problems and difficulties?				
Yes	6 (26.1%)	4 (19.1%)	12 (36.4%)	7 (50%)
No	17 (73.9%)	17 (80.9%)	21 (63.6%)	7 (50%)

– The data clearly reveals that as far as communicative power is concerned, there is a long road to be travelled in all the four geographies. The high scores in Tavarekere, despite the extremely short period of engagement, can be understood when we consider that for women who were living in extreme marginality, even the small window opened up by the

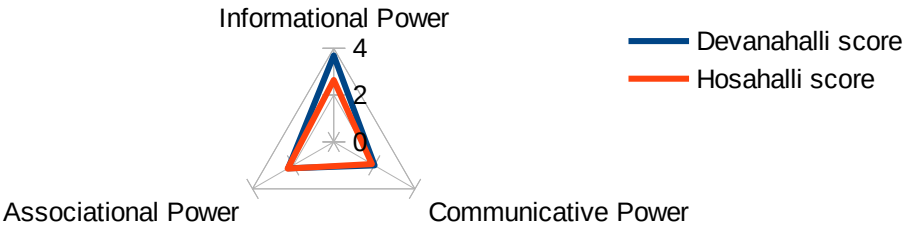
project would have seemed extremely empowering. The reason that Hosahalli scores above Devanahalli and Vajarahalli can be traced to the single episode of the collective intervening in the infomediary's intra-household conflict mentioned above – borne out by the documents maintained by the interviewers.

- Another factor that must be kept in mind is that we have not been able to deploy our ideas around community media strategies in the most optimal manner, constrained both by the limited availability of digital infrastructure at the local level and women's time poverty. Thus, there is more work to be done before the potential of community media, especially the community radio platform, becomes an effective dialogic forum for women's self-expression and airing of perspectives on gender and governance debates. The notes from the interviewers corroborate our assessment that the community radio or community video did not enter women's mind as a powerful channel for sharing their views – when this question was raised – even though in specific questions about community media (discussed in the preceding section), they were able to identify it as a 'collective-owned space'.
- Finally, raising women's concerns and issues in the local public sphere, especially concerns that are traditionally relegated to the sphere of the private such as household conflict, continues to be an endeavor fraught with numerous risks and conflicts – and it is not easy for women to publicly debate matters that go against prevailing caste and gender norms. This may be slightly easier in a single caste village – such as Taverekere; or in cases where women involved are all from a single caste group, and trying to find solutions within this group (as encountered in the case of Hosahalli). However, in contexts where there are multiple caste groups, the intertwining of caste and patriarchal structures create additional barriers to engendering discussions in the local public sphere, as the responses to the question on *'have you helped another woman raise in public her problems and difficulties?'*, reveal.

5.4 A dip-stick analysis of women's active citizenship

We generated active-citizenship triangles, by plotting the questions detailed above, on a 5-point scale, to measure the extent of achievement along each of the 3 dimensions (informational, associational and communicative power) – to highlight some significant trends. The methodology that we used for generating the diagrams reproduced here, has been inspired by the 'Civicus Index on Civil Society' (and will be appended as an Annexure in the finalised version of this report).

Diagram 1:Comparision of
Devanahalli and Hosahalli Citizenship Indices

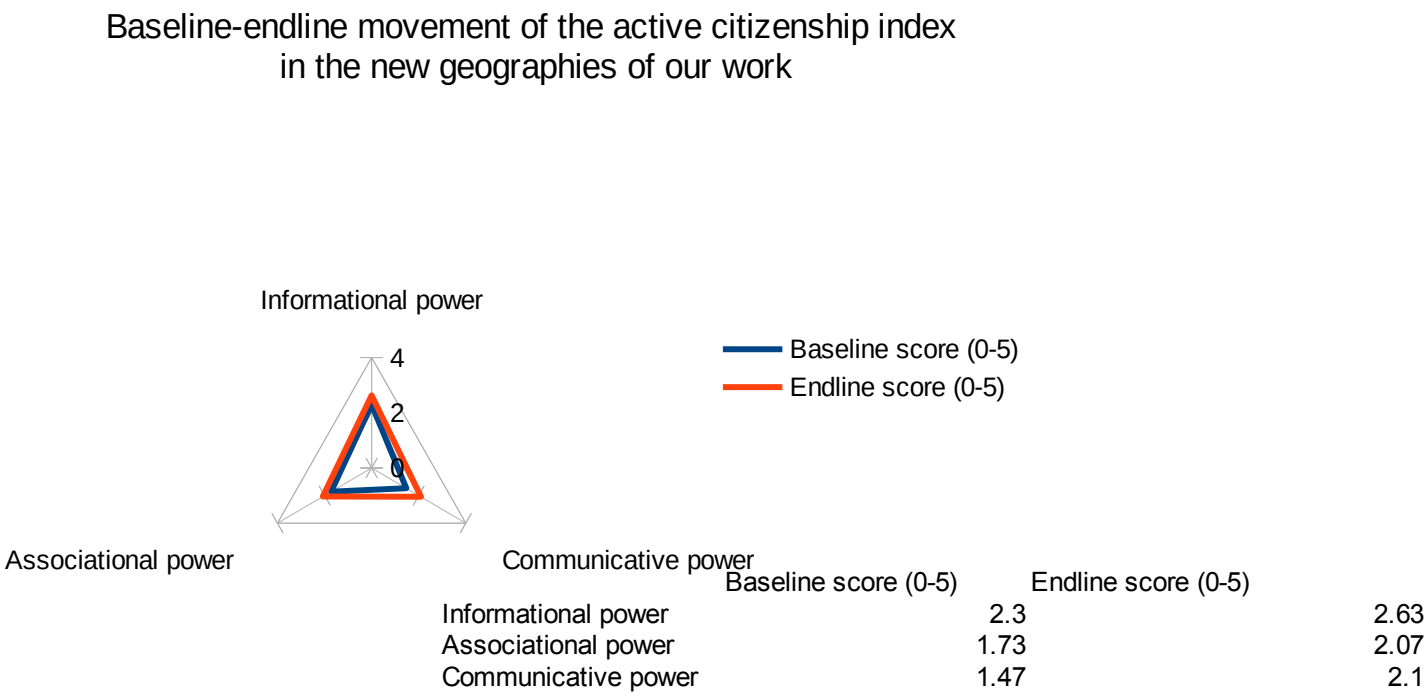


	Devanahalli score	Hosahalli score
Informational Power	3.69	2.64
Associational Power	2.24	2.27
Communicative Power	2.01	1.88

We would first like to highlight here that the new village of Hosahalli seems to be following the foot-steps of Devanahalli – and in fact, has a marginally higher score for associational power, due to women's enhanced confidence in their collective over their successful battle against the upper-caste groups of the village, a few months ago,

Then we come to the question that may remain at the back of the minds of most readers of the report – how has the project transformed the lives of the women of Hosahalli and Taverekere, over its two-year period?

We tried to track this, by generating a combined citizenship index for the villages of Hosahalli and Taverekere – from the baseline and endline survey – as it would be meaningful, as the same women were interviewed.



	Baseline score (0-5)	Endline score (0-5)
Informational power	2.3	2.63
Associational power	1.73	2.07
Communicative power	1.47	2.1

Clearly, the project has shifted women's informational, associational and communicative power, in these two areas – of course, this movement has not been linear; and certainly, there are inter-geographic differences, as highlighted in the preceding sections of this report.

6. Key findings and conclusion

The project has clearly demonstrated that leveraging digital technologies for enhancing marginalised women's active citizenship has to move far beyond the 'give -access- get empowerment' formulas parroted in the mainstream ICTs for development discourse, if this idea has to be effectively realised.

In the current context, the imbrications of digital technologies in all aspects of our everyday social

world, has created hybrid spaces – that are highly localised, where highly particularised meanings obtain. Therefore, the starting point of any endeavor that intends to leverage the 'digital' has to be steeped in the recognition that the digital has no universal character. On the contrary, it possesses a unique DNA in each specific context.

Only this starting point can help us keep up a constant vigil while undertaking endeavors that seek to utilise the 'digital delta' for bringing in new networks, new 'safe' spaces, new sites of learning and new informational linkages to women. Needless to say, without such constant reflection, in such endeavors, there is always the danger of proceeding with our given notions of the properties of the 'digital', rather than responding effectively to its specific manifestations in the site we are situated in – which means that we may lose sight of the context-appropriateness of our techno-social strategies.

Further, we need to constantly ensure that our endeavors never lose their moorings in democratic values – as otherwise, they can be easily captured by entrenched interests, and subsumed in the operations of the existing networks of favour and patronage that reproduce the status quo. Needless to say, in post-colonial sites such as India, the quest for a democratic tradition that balances the tension between communal ties and liberal-democratic values has been a long-standing one – and it is important to continue with this pursuit, even in the network-society context.

Our experiences at the India research site have also enabled us to glean more specific insights into how the guided use of digital technologies can strengthen marginalised women's active citizenship, as detailed below:

1. The creation of a decentralised information and data architecture, owned and managed by women, can enhance women's informational power. This is because women can leverage this architecture not just for accessing public information and entitlements, by overcoming traditional gate-keeping mechanisms; but also for generating their own data, that can effectively challenge dominant discourses in the local governance arena.
2. Carving out techno-social spaces that ushers in a non-instrumental, commons-oriented approach to association, plays a significant role in building marginalised women's solidarities, in the current context where the civic-public sphere is increasingly shrinking. This is possible only if we move away from approaches that tie down the movement-building potential of ICTs to those forms that are built on the strength of weak ties – such as uprisings and flash mobs. The important learning here is that the 'digital' as a political medium does not create any one particular use value. In fact, studies have demonstrated how digital technologies create different political use values in different contexts: they have been found to enable spontaneous mobilisation in those contexts where freedom of association is low; and strengthen more traditional forms of organising in contexts with a high degree of freedom of association (Elting, Faris, and Palfrey 2010).
3. Setting up media platforms, in the ownership and control of which, women play a critical role, is a key strategy for enhancing women's communicative power. It is only then that women can forge a 'communications community' – articulating ideas, creating new representations, mentoring and being mentored, – transcending literacy barriers. Needless to say, this is a pre-requisite for women's communicative power.

Finally, we take up the question that underscores this entire research effort – under what conditions can such 'guided use' of technologies enhance marginalised women's active citizenship? The

action-research experience has clearly demonstrated that the fundamental pre-requisite in this case, is a new paradigm of governance that utilises digital technologies in a manner that is completely different from the mainstream 'network governance' paradigm – in other words, a governance paradigm that harnesses the 'digital' for ushering in a feminist democratic culture at the grassroots; instead of one that is tied to the neo-liberal 'good governance' agenda. The theoretical pushing of boundaries that this entails, is a task for the synthesis – as this will immensely benefit from the comparision of the research experiences across all the 3 sites.

However, we will take up the pragmatic-empirical question of the policy directions that are necessary, to move towards such an alternative governance paradigm, before concluding this report.

6.1 Recommendations for policy

1. Ensuring meaningful access to the Internet and ICTs for marginalised women

Meaningful access to the Internet and ICTs is a pre-condition to effectively harness their transformatory power for women's public-political participation and active citizenship. For this, the availability of the public infrastructure backbone – guaranteed wired Internet connectivity at the last mile, backed by concrete, engendered, policies around specific strategies for utilising Internet affordances for strengthening the capacities of the *Gram Panchayat* and other local institutions – such as schools, health centres, and self-groups is essential (Mudgal 2014).

In India, we do have a proposal for laying the infrastructural backbone – the much-delayed National Optic Fibre Network[19] that aims at providing optic fibre connectivity to all *Gram Panchayats* of the country, utilising Universal Service Obligation funds. However, there has been no further attention devoted to the question of how to leverage it strategically, for maximising benefits to citizens. The assumption being made is that once the basic infrastructure is laid, private telcos can step in for creating the last-mile wireless connectivity, from the National Optic Fibre Network – as a demand-pull will get generated, at this point[20]. However, previous experiments to use market forces to push for end-user connectivity, tried out by a few state-governments in the country have clearly revealed that the Internet is not like the phone – the demand-pull for the Internet outside certain (socio-economic) demographics has (always) been very low (Singh forthcoming). This is easy to understand when we consider the low levels of textual literacy and the lack of content in Indian languages on the Internet. In this situation, community access points that provide free or subsidised Internet access to users, at least for certain uses, are essential; and so are facilitators to help commmunity members navigate the Internet to track down the information they need (Singh forthcoming).

Further, to make access a meaningful experience, policy frameworks and programmes have to provide a convergent framework that harnesses the multifarious possibilities of the emerging digital ecosytem (Internet, phone calls, community radio, community video, apps) in a contextually relevant manner – with special focus on the needs and priorities of marginalised groups. To come back to the question of evolving policy and programmes for ensuring meaningful access to the Internet and ICTs for marginalised women, it would mean converging the National Optic Fibre Network with other programmes that are currently in silos: such as the *Sanchar Shakti*

19 Subsumed under the Digital India scheme launched in the 2014-15 Union Budget

20 http://myiris.com/newsCentre/storyShow.php?fileR=20140924122646717&secID=sector&dir=2014/09/24&secTitle=Sector%20Stories , Retrieved 28 September 2014

scheme that seeks to utilise Universal Service Obligation Funds for providing mobile value-added services to women's self help groups, and the numerous schemes for setting up information and facilitation centres initiated by the Department of Rural Development and the Department of Women and Child Development. It would also mean some creative thinking, to see how digitally-enabled learning cultures that draw upon community media resources can be used to support collectives' learning-action processes – such as transforming community information centres into digital libraries.

2. Engendering Data Frameworks in Development Planning

Evolving a comprehensive framework for collecting and maintaining gender related data at the community level, with the participation of women's collectives, in a manner that converges with the democratic decentralisation agenda is essential for furthering gender-responsive local governance, in the Indian context. We would like to add that this recommendation also seems useful at a global, and not just India-specific level – considering the wider range of gender gaps in existing policy related data in the areas of health, education, economic opportunities, political participation and human security(Buvinic, Nichols and Koolwal 2014).

3. Regulating data architectures in the digital age

As mentioned earlier, utilising the digital opportunity to create local level content and community-generated data sets to guide local level planning is a priority that we cannot afford to lose sight of. However, we must also remember that data is the next frontier for capital accumulation – the scramble for which has already started. For example, Monsanto, the global seeds and pesticides company recently acquired Climate Corporation that underwrites weather insurance for farmers – in what has been seen by some as a far-sighted business investment that recognises that information services to communities are a very lucrative opportunity in the information economy[21]. In this scenario, it is important to have adequate policy safeguards that protect rural, marginalised women's interests – especially as it is only a matter of time before BoP models that thrive on mining data from mobiles, will emerge. This is of special concern in the Indian context as the country has no clear data protection and data privacy law currently.

4. Ensuring Media Plurality

There is ample evidence the ownership and control over media platforms – particularly community radio – gives marginalised groups the opportunity to hone their political voice and develop their counter-discourses. However, the Indian government has been very slow to move on evolving community radio policies – in fact, it was only in 2006 that the community radio policy was framed by the government; and even now, there are significant hurdles towards setting up new radio stations – such as the high import duty on the transmitters without which the cost of setting up a station would be much more affordable for small civil society organisations. In the 2014-15 Union Budget, a provision has been made for supporting a total of 600 community radio stations (including existing ones) but there is no reason why this cannot be extended to the entire country. Community Radio policy frameworks need an overhaul – and incentives for women's organisations and women's collectives and CBOs to set up their radio channels must be factored in. We would also like to add a cautionary note here – encouragement to community radio and

21 http://www.forbes.com/sites/bruceupbin/2013/10/02/monsanto-buys-climate-corp-for-930-million/ Retrieved 14 August 2014

community media experiments, in and of itself, cannot guarantee media plurality.

This needs strong safeguards against horizontal and vertical media convergences. However, in India, though the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has recently issued a set of recommendations on media ownership for print and broadcast media in August 2014, the guidelines assume that 'market neutrality' protected by competition law which regulates market dominance within a specific media market (market is defined as pan-India for English media; and linguistic states for regional language media) but not across media markets, is sufficient. To put this in a simpler way, this means that in the case of an English news channel, existing competition law covers its operations in the field of English media, checking market domination tendencies – but the entity's business transactions in another media market, say that of Telugu media, are left unchecked. However, this poses challenges to media plurality. Similarly, when the logic of ensuring market plurality (ensuring adequate competition by keeping media barriers low) rather than media plurality is adopted while deciding upon media mergers and horizontal integration), the results are sub-optimal – best illustrated by the decision of the Competition Commission of India to allow the Reliance-Network 18 combination, which was soon followed by reports of Reliance Industries trying to manipulate the editorial policies of the channels it had acquired[22]. However, one good point about the TRAI guidelines was that it pointed to the need for a convergent approach to media regulation stretching across the old and new media platforms – highlighting the futility of trying to regulate only traditional media in the digital age (Singh forthcoming). The question of ensuring media plurality in the age of convergent media architectures, where Twitter determines the newsroom and print feeds, in a context where hardly 12% of the population is on the Internet – is of course a separate one – and needs much deliberating over – and is one that is closely linked to the question of boosting local language and contextually embedded non-textual content production.

22 For more details read, http://kafila.org/2014/09/08/striving-for-plurality-in-media-the-promises-and-shortcomings-of-trais-recommendations-on-media-ownership-smarika-kumar/ Retrieved 28 September 2014

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