Notes from the field:

Some reflections on our information centres strategy

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October 2012[1]

In this document, we discuss some of our experiences in the field, as part of the Women-gov action research project (Mysore, India). In specific, we reflect upon those conversations and experiences that raise some issues for reflection, around the information centres component of our project strategy.

Introduction

The core question that we (IT for Change) are trying to answer through the India component of the Women-Gov action-research project is: How can we effectively use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enhance the informational, associational and communicative power of rural, marginalised women's collectives?[2]

Our project attempts to pursue this enquiry, by furthering our on-going engagement with marginalised women's collectives (*sanghas*) formed under the *Mahila Samakhya*[3] programme of

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1   With inputs from our colleague Rajesh Hanbal, Project Associate, *Prakriye* field centre, IT for Change

2   For a further discussion of the core components of the India intervention strategy, see http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/Intervention%20strategy_Indiateam_Maymeeting.pdf Retrieved 30 October 2012

3   *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian programme of the Government of India that aims at mobilising and collectivising rural women belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, with the aim of "education for empowerment". In Karnataka, the programme's empowerment strategy addresses the following key thematic areas- education, health, legal literacy, livelihoods, enhancing *sangha* self reliance, governance and strengthening community linkages to government. Specific activities under each theme are designed at the district level, keeping in mind the local context. The sangha women at the village level are organised into committees along the key thematic lines, and they play a crucial role in designing and implementing activities taken up under these overarching themes.

the Government of India, in Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks, of Mysore district, in Karnataka. Since 2005, we have been working with the *sanghas* in Hunsur and two other blocks of Mysore district, through our field centre *Prakriye*. Our work has focussed on enhancing their collective empowerment processes, through a three-pronged ICT strategy consisting of:

1. A weekly radio broadcast that serves as the *sangha* women's own voice in the local public sphere, called *Kelu Sakhi* [4]("Listen, my friend").
2. An on-demand as well as push-based video system for information about entitlements, as well sharing inspirational biographies of *sangha* women,and opening up debates on gender and patriarchy.
3. A village based telecentre model for public information access called the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (NMK for short, meaning Our Information Centre). It is run by *sangha* women in select villages through a young adolescent girl who acts as an information intermediary – locally known as *sakhi* (friend – trained by the *Prakriye*[5] team and mentored and supported by the sangha women. The *sakhi* addresses the information needs of the village community and engages with local institutions through a continued dialogue with government departments at the block level to push for transparency and responsiveness. The *sakhi* not only has to address the information requests raised by visitors to the centre, but she also has to visit households in the village where the centre is located, and neighbouring villages situated within a 2-3 km radius, for information outreach. The *sakhi* periodically reports to the Managing Committee of the information centre, which has around nine members selected from among the *sangha* women in the village. The Managing Committee members review and monitor the *sakhi's* performance, and address any operational challenges in the centre's functioning. At present, we have two information centres at the village level (in Attiguppe and Hosavaranchi villages of Hunsur block). We also facilitate the running of two more centres at the block (sub-district) level (in Hunsur and H.D.Kote blocks). The management of the block level centres is taken care of by the Executive Committee members of *Mahila Samakhya's* block level federations[6]. The centres have been designed as public institutions owned and managed by the *sanghas*, and built upon principles and processes of citizen oriented intermediation with governance institutions, acting simultaneously also as knowledge centres providing the space for media-based learning systems. Networking among the *sakhis* is encouraged for cross-learning - not only about governance related information and processes, but also to build the insight, skills and peer support to meet expectations of the village communities.

When taking up the Women-gov project, our idea was to use the opportunity to deepen and strengthen our existing ICT strategy, especially the information centres component. Over the course of the project, we have planned to set up 3-5 more village level centres in Hunsur block with the hope of catalysing a 'network effect' that allows the centres to become nodes of a new citizen-oriented informational ecosystem with *sangha* women gaining in their collective strength and

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4   *Kelu Sakhi* which means 'Listen, my friend' is a weekly radio programme that is broadcast over the Karnataka State Open University FM channel in Mysore, between 9.00-9.30 P.M every Monday. The programme, produced by IT for Change, reaches out to women who are part of the *Mahila Samakhya* self help groups, in their idiom, and is an attempt at carving out an alternate public sphere that enables rural, dalit women to speak their concerns.

5   *Prakriye* is IT for Change's field center, located in Mysore district in Karnataka, South India.

6   The Executive Committee meets at the block level, and its members are elected by the *sangha* women of the Mahila Samakhya programme, annually. The Executive Committee is gradually expected to take over the role of monitoring, management and coordination of the programme activities currently being performed by *Mahila Samakhya* staff.

identity in local democracy. We therefore also wanted to focus on extending the ambit of the two village level information centres, to include citizenship education,and hone *sangha* women's critical questioning of local governance structures.

As we started engaging closely with the field, newer questions emerged. We were forced to deliberate upon the nuances of our information centres strategy – How exactly have the existing information centres impacted local power ecologies? What are the alternative power centres created by the information centres strategy? What kinds of 'captures' are the information centres prone to? What elements should we stress upon, in the design of the information centres, to ensure that they do not create new informational asymmetries, which would harm the interests of the most marginalised women, at the village level? We are reflecting upon these questions at the moment, and trying to productively engage with these challenges. This note in fact captures the experiences that have led us to ask these questions.

To be more specific, from our engagement over the past six months with the members of the Managing Committees of the four currently existing information centres; as well as key reflections emerging from dedicated focus group discussions with Managing Committee members of our village information centres[7], we have attempted to think aloud on the emerging relationship patterns, formulating tentative conceptions of potential power shifts. To protect the confidentiality of the women we work with, we have withheld all information that can be used to identify respondents, including names, specific details of their family background and place of residence.

Some reflections on the impact of information centres on existing power ecologies at the community level

More than the information available at the centres, *sangha* women feel that the opportunities opened up by the information centres to acquaint themselves with the 'techniques of using information for entitlement seeking' had been extremely useful. One Managing Committee members from Hosahalli spoke about this succinctly, during the Focus Group Discussions:

> *" It is very important to have all the facts with you, before you approach an official. For example, let us say that a woman in the village has heard about a housing scheme that is available at the panchayat[8] level. If she goes and approaches the Panchayat Development Officer[9] saying that 'I have heard something from people about how you are giving a house', she will just be asked to shut up and pack up from there. It is important to go with confidence and accurate information about the name of the scheme, the details of who is eligible for the scheme, and also present a case for one's eligibility. Not all women know this technique. Our sakhi gives us the correct*

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7   We have masked the names of the villages in this note, to protect the identity of the project participants.

8   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.

9   An administrative functionary at the *panchayat* level.

information. But we also need to teach other members of the Managing Committee who are not very well-versed in negotiation, as well as other sangha women in the village, how to go about using this information when they go to meet officers for getting work done. We are doing that here, in our village. I like to tell my peers on the Managing Committee – the law and the rules for schemes are like dams to ensure that the water (entitlements) does not flow into ditches (meaning diversion of funds for wasteful purposes). But you must know when and where to build the dam... (and we are doing that here).”

Within our Managing Committees at the two village level information centres, we have included women from *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* as well as women from *sanghas* formed under *Stree Shakti*[10]. We find that women who emerge as leaders within the Managing Committee, who are able to challenge officialdom, as well as local power elite, are mostly from *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*. Their membership in the *Mahila Samakhya* organisational processes gives them relatively better access to information and peer group networks, and often, women benefit from the brand image of *Mahila Samakhya* as an empowerment programme in official quarters. The information centre concretises their collective agenda for local action, providing the institutional means to formalise or quasi-formalise their relationship with local governance structures and power elite. We are yet to see ripple effects that extend the geographies of such impact. But the recent emphasis on visiting 'outreach' villages and re-kindling the connection between *sanghas* surrounding Byrasandra and Hosahalli with the NMKs may see a new status for the NMK emerging over time. One of the women in the Managing Committee at Hosahalli, who is from a *Stree Shakti Sangha*, shared with us, as part of the Focus Group Discussions:

> *“All of us are on the Managing Committee but the Mahila Samakhya sangha women are at a greater advantage, I feel. They learn so much at the sangha events at the cluster[11] and block level, as well as through the trainings and the thematic committee[12] meetings that they are a part of. They know so much, they can travel to the block and district level and meet so many people and officials.”*

This edge of *Mahila Samakhya* makes them able partners to the design of this research, helping us work on our hypothesis, with the cushioning that women leaders of *sanghas* provide in their active agency. While it may be true that not all *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* are studded with heroes, and not all women in any *sangha* are vocal, the organisational ethos of *Mahila Samakhya* does endow the Women-gov project with the vibrant democratic spirit and rich legacy of citizen action by economically and socially marginalised women. The wider forces of change do impinge upon and destabilise this legacy – which analysis is the subject matter of another note. Being cognizant of the need to preserve the vibrancy of the peer and informational networks of women from *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*, has been central to the techno-social approaches we have adopted. There are possibilities we see for new alignments that bring *sanghas* managing the NMKs, new status.
In Byrasandra,one of the villages where we have an information centre, the *sakhi* sourced some

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10   *Stree Shakti* refers to a Karnataka state project under which rural women are formed into collectives, which are mainly focussed on savings and credit.

11   Cluster-level events is a term used by the *Mahila Samakhya* programme staff and participants to refer to awareness generation events and trainings for a group of villages.

12   Under the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, women are divided across thematic committees to help them participate in focussed capacity-building activites. In Karnataka, the thematic committees include Health, Education, Legal awareness, *Panchayat*, Finance and Self Reliance.

information from the block level department officials on the amount of food grains that the *anganwadis*[13] were supposed to provide nursing mothers, as part of a certain government scheme. She first brought to the notice of the Managing Committee members that the *anganwad*i in the village, had distributed less food grains than the amount specified under the scheme. Some of the Managing Committee members, under the leadership of a Managing Committee member who is also the ASHA worker[14] for the village, found out that this discrepancy was because of insufficient supply to the *anganwadi*. However, one important outcome of this incident was that the *anganwadi* teacher decided that in future she would distribute food grains only in the presence of all the *sangha* members, to ensure transparency in distribution. It must be noted here that the *anganwadi* teacher and the village level ASHA worker are expected to work together on a number of health and nutrition programmes. In fact, both are part of the Village level health and sanitation committee, one of the many local bodies constituted at the community level as part of the state's decentralisation efforts, to promote community participation in governance and development. Soon after this incident, the *sakhi* was included as a member of the Village health and sanitation committee.

On the whole, we have observed that with strong *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*, the NMK related structures and processes gather impetus, resulting in greater accountability of local actors in governance. We have also found instances where women from *Mahila Samakhya sanghas*, have capitalised on the information provided by the *sakhi*, and with support from their peers and resource persons from the *Mahila Samakhya* programme, have been able to negotiate for their entitlements successfully with officials at the *panchayat* and block level.

At the current stage however, the information centres still need to evolve better data systems and informational capabilities to support women in challenging the *Gram Panchayat* collectively, or leverage the *Gram Sabha*[15] as a platform for questioning the local governance agenda and conduct of functionaries, in an adequate manner. There have been instances in the past when emboldened by the *Mahiti Kendra*, *sanghas* have decided to attend *gram sabha* meetings in the village as a collective, in order to exert pressure on the allotment of facilities under government schemes by the *Gram Panchayat*, and have sometimes even taken the *sakhi* along to record the minutes of the *Gram Sabha* meeting. In other words, they have managed to create their accounts of what transpired at the *Gram sabha* meeting in a gesture challenging the dominant discourse in the official minutes.

However, the task of making local governance work for women needs tireless and tactful effort. Without strong associational power within the *sanghas*, action based on information may not take off. There are barriers other than informational ones, which need to be crossed, to ensure women's substantive participation in local governance – the collusion of the power elite controlling the governance spaces with the forces of patriarchal control and gate-keeping continues to be a challenge.

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13 *Anganwadi* **(courtyard shelter) :** is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care centre in India. It caters to children in the 0-6 age group.

14 Accredited Social Health activist. The term refers to community health workers instituted by the Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as part of the National Rural Health Mission. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accredited_Social_Health_Activist for more details.

15 *Gram Sabha*, which means "Village Council", refers to the village level electorate – in other words, the body consisting of all registered voters in a village. Indian law , policy and the resolutions adopted by an Inter-State Ministerial Conference on *Gram Panchayats* in May 1998 require the elected representatives of the *Gram Panchayat* to convene a meeting of the *gram sabha* on a single pre-determined day, at least every quarter, and the approval of the *gram sabha* must be taken before implementing any village level development works that would affect the local population.

As one of the *Mahila Samakhya sangha* women from Byrasandra shared with us, in our Focus Group Discussions:

> *"They do tell us in Mahila Samakhya events that we must participate in the Gram Sabha and raise questions about our entitlements, and community issues. We also have information. But when you try to go there, men sit on the veranda of their houses and say 'She is a Indira Gandhi, is that what she thinks?'... Some men say "the Stree Shakti women don't go. Why don't you just sit at home?"...... And once, when they knew we sangha women were determined to go to the gram sabha, the panchayat officials got the men drunk just to sabotage the proceedings and prevent us from raising questions... "*

Another concern that prevents women from taking on the *gram panchayat* and other power elite, is lack of assured protection and support, especially for strategising collective action efforts. As one woman said in one of the Focus Group Discussions:

> *" Sometimes we are scared to question. In one of the villages near ours, the sangha challenged the ration shop owner as he was not giving people their allotted quota, and there were always shortfalls. After they got together and agitated, he said 'Very well, I will give you the allotted quota', but he keeps his shop open only on one single day in the month, and that is very diffcult for everyone......................But sometimes, where we have questioned, it has been helpful. For instance, a few years ago, the doctor in the nearby Primary Health Centre used to take money from the poor always, for treating them. As part of our Mahila Samakhya Health Committee activities, one day, we called him over for a meeting in the presence of the Resource Person (staff of the programme). We explained to him that we are poor, and he should not be taking the money...He accepted and he is good to us since then."*

The information centres seem to be emerging as a strategic dimension of the *sangha* women and their relative power in demanding accountability in the local governance ecology. There is however no straightforward connection between informational power and collective action. The action research process has built upon and even revived the culture of critical questioning among the *sanghas*, but the situationally appropriate strategies for action, are many times the function of conjuncture – the calculations around who can be taken on and at what cost.

Greater communicative authority and associational power of the *sanghas* would certainly better galvanise information access through the centres into action for transforming governance. But this presupposes networking geographically dispersed *sanghas* as well as capitalising on the *sanghas'* linkages with local organisations, and most importantly, the continued and palpable organisational backing of *Mahila Samakhya* in women's travails into action for change.

Some reflections on the possibilities of alternate power centres emerging because of the *Mahiti Kendras*

Right from the time we started our field intervention in 2005, we were cognisant that the information centre must not end up as a new power centre at the village level. We applied ourselves to create and shape the *Mahiti Kendra* as an intermediary institution with credibility in the local ecology for being transparent and equitable.

Therefore many checks and balances were included in the information centre design – such as the mentoring and monitoring of the *sakhi* – who is the infomediary – by the Managing Committee members. The Managing Committee consists of nine members drawn from the sanghas in the village. We have consciously attempted to bring in women not part of the *Mahila Samakhya* fraternity such as members of *Stree Shakti sanghas (explain),* into the Managing Committee of the NMK in order to democratise and broadenits ownership by poor, dalit women. We have also insisted on adequate representation of all caste groups although we are also increasingly inclined to put our weight behind the poorest and most marginalised castes. This nine-member Managing Committee plays a crucial role in the selection of the sakhi, and also meets every month to monitor and review the work of the *sakhi*. Our team members continue to facilitate these meetings, but we try to emphasise *sangha* ownership of the centre's work at every meeting. We also try and re-emphasise at these meetings that the *sakhi* must not be seen as an errand-girl for the *sangha,* but as someone who needs mentoring from the *sangha* members.

The NMK does hold the promise for new alignments of power locally as described above. But this potential is not a simplistic derivative of its techno-social processes. The NMK cannot be essentialised as a space for female solidarity. Over the years, as the centres have become more established, they find that different kinds of contestations tend to emerge, . In the centre at Hosahalli, we found that one of the Managing Committee members has a relative who is an elected member of the local government. This woman had been charging a 'fee' from other Managing Committee members, and other women in the *sanghas*, for processing entitlement claims through her relative. This parallel channel for entitlements, that existed alongside the information centre, was of course questioned by us. But this incident made us reflect on our goal of working towards complete *sangha* ownership and oversight of the centres– Can we ever say at a point that the centres can be run by Managing Committees completely? If yes, then under what circumstances? How must governance structures of people's community based institutions be strengthened (especially when the winds of change constantly seem to be undermining public interest based collectivities)?. Evolving mechanisms in our model to build Managing Committees as 'principles- and process-oriented structures' is an area we are working on.

We have also realised that threats of 'capture' can be more insidious. In one of the centres, we noticed that the *sakhi* was using extra-official channels to process entitlement claims for people, as it produced faster results. It took a lot of explaining to enable her to understand why we felt that she should not use any channels other than the official ones. This experience helped us understand the need to re-inforce the normative values that the centres stand for, among the *sakhis* and the Managing Committee, constantly, so that the larger frameworks within which marginalised women's capabilities to gain informational, associative and communicative power are not lost sight of.

To conclude these reflections, we will paraphrase one of our women respondents, on the most important insight from our work in the field is so far. To effectively tackle power structures and challenge existing power relations, we must realise that what we have to tackle is *"no lion, but many rats gnawing away."* In other words, it is important to remember that power is relational and decentralised – everywhere and ever present.