

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- ▼ Vasudeva Kutumb?: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti  
- Aastha Tyagi, pg 1
- ▼ Prohibition and Naga Cultural Identity: Cultural Politics of Hornbill Festival, Nagaland  
- Theyiesinuo Kreditsu, pg 22
- ▼ “May I know who is on the line?”: Technology consumption, mobile telephony and the gender question  
- Nirali Joshi, pg 35
- ▼ Community Radio and Collective Memory: A mapping of material media practices at a Community Radio Station in Telangana  
- Madhavi Manchi, pg 53
- ▼ *Khabar Lahariya*: a Feminist Critique of Mainstream Hindi Print Media  
- Ranu Tomar, pg 101
- ▼ Televisation of a Marathi Past: The Brahmanical emancipation of women in *Uncha Mazha Zoka*, a Marathi TV show based on Ramabai Ranade’s life  
- Rajashree Gandhi, pg 114

## About SubVersions

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## Editorial Note

This issue of SubVersions brings together work done by early career researchers in media and cultural studies, exploring how institutions, practices, technologies, and spaces, in varying contexts, attempt to form and shape publics around specific agendas. From an ethnographic study of Durga Vahini, the women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, to a close exploration of the Hornbill Festival as an articulation of Naga cultural identity, the researchers focus on the ways in which plural and fluid identities are being increasingly fixed and reified. The papers in the issue also take a look at new media, community media and regional television from the perspectives of gender, ecology and caste, and offer critical insights into their promise, vitality, and hegemonic orientations.

On the editorial front, this issue took a long time to produce because of the limited time and resources at hand. Going ahead, we seek to put the publishing timeline back on track at the earliest.

## Vasudeva Kutumb?: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti

**Aastha Tyagi**

### **Abstract**

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In patriarchal societies, women have always carried the burden of preserving the tradition and culture. The narrative of the largest Hindu-right organisation in India, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh makes no pretensions about its expectations of the role of the woman in its project of the creation of the Hindu nation or 'rashtra'. Confining women to the role of the home-maker and working specifically in the private sphere, most of the wives/daughters of RSS members go on to join its parallel women's organisation, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Thus the Samiti becomes a space where women are given a chance to step outside the binds of the home and yet remain under the larger ideological framework of the RSS.

This paper is a part of the larger project to understand the world view of the young women who become part of the Samiti. This paper in particular seeks to ascertain the root of the membership base of the Samiti and its ties to the RSS. While RSS is a widely known organisation, the Samiti is relatively lesser known by purpose. How do women see their membership in the Samiti, is there a question of agency that arises and what are the negotiations that they have to make to not question the larger RSS ideological framework? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the course of this paper.

Keywords: Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Hindu right wing, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharati, membership, girlhood, Hindu rashtra, brahmanical patriarchy, Ram Janmbhoomi movement, Sangh Parivar, Lakshmibai Kelkar, Durga Vahini, Meerut

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## Introduction

### *Women and the Hindu Right-wing*

Nationalism has routinely been understood as a masculine discourse. The Hindu nationalism of the *Sangh Parivar* and its affiliates is seen even more blatantly so, because of the patriarchal imaginary it espouses (Sarkar 1991). Yet for the *Ram janmbhoomi* campaign, the onus of hate speech lies with two women associated with RSS affiliates with the Hindu right: Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati. During the course of this study, I spoke to KK, a resident of Delhi who was involved with an unsuccessful group of *kar sevaks* (the men recruited for the building of Ram Mandir and destruction of Babri Masjid, mostly belonging to the north of India). The group did not get to Faizabad because they were intercepted<sup>1</sup> by the Uttar Pradesh police and taken to Gorakhpur. Upon being asked what compelled him to go the distance and risk being arrested, KK remembers being deeply influenced by the videos of Lal Krishna Advani's *Rathiyatra*<sup>2</sup> (a journey undertaken in a vehicle fashioned like a chariot) of 1992, watching images of a hurt Ashok Singhal (President of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)) and listening to Sadhvi Rithambara. Similarly, ST, currently a teacher in a government school in Delhi, recalls watching a smuggled video of Uma Bharti and again, a hurt Ashok Singhal in his hostel in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. Although he does admit that the videos might have been fabricated, he believes that they were very influential.

The Hindu right (from hereon used to refer to the *Sangh parivar* and its affiliates) works through male networks — the pedagogical tools, influence and action has originated from the men of the

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<sup>1</sup> The reason why I use 'intercepted' and not arrested is because they were not booked under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). In fact, he remembers the episode as a pleasant one where the *kar sevaks* were given "respect and honour" by the people of Gorakhpur.

<sup>2</sup> Advani's journey has been captured vividly in Anand Patwardhan's film 'Ram Ke Naam' (1991).

organisation. In fact, apart from the women mentioned above, it is rare for women to be at the forefront of the RSS.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it is important to understand the role of the women in the propagation of such an ideology.

Thus, how are women, who are primary educators of the ideology in the private sphere and are expected to conform to feminine roles, in accordance with upper-caste Hindu beliefs, recruited and indoctrinated? What are the sites and bonds that are invoked to ensure at least introduction to the Hindu right-wing ideology of the RSS? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to address.

Like in most cultures, women are seen as sites/keepers of the tradition, culture and honour of the group (Gupta 1998). They are singled out for their reproductive role.<sup>4</sup> . As attested by several scholars (Kovacs 2010), by venerating the reproductive powers of the woman, there is an automatic denial of sexual desire and agency. Thus, a narrative of women's protection and mobility is constructed and internalised. The position and hierarchy of women in Hindu society and among the *Sangh* groups is the same. Uma Chakravarti in her 1993 essay succinctly encapsulates the role women play in the formulation of a Hindu ideology. Further, she borrows from Nur Yalman's study of practices and beliefs of the upper castes<sup>5</sup> and writes,

*...the fundamental principle of the Hindu social organisation is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. The three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising female sexuality. Indeed, neither land, nor ritual quality, ie., the purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure (Chakravarti 1993).*

However, I seek to assert here that these discourses have adapted to contemporary times, thus attempting to utilise the female subject for political gains. The Hindu right, which finally realised the power of the female electorate, has constructed its discourse, from the *Ramjanmbhoomi*

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<sup>3</sup> One cannot say for certainty that this could be due to the lack of female participation at the ideologue level of the RSS.

<sup>4</sup> I consciously avoid using the term 'power', which is often exploited in such narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Caste is an extremely contentious issue in the Hindu right-wing discourse. While the core ideology completely denies caste, one can see the internalisation of caste and its manifestation in any arena. This topic needs elaborate discussion.

Movement till now, to accommodate the female sensibility. It is important to note the steps taken to accommodate the female subject and the magnitude of participation in the Ramjanmbhoomi movement by the women, directly or indirectly. In 'The Woman as a Communal Subject', Tanika Sarkar has noted, 'While *Ramlala* (the image of Ram as a toddler) appeals to the mother in the woman, the warrior Ram probably simultaneously arouses a response to an aggressive male sexuality'<sup>6</sup> (Sarkar 1991: 258). On the modernisation of Ram, Uma Bharati, a former member of the National Democratic Alliance cabinet (BJP alliance which governed from 2000-2004) said, "...that picture of Ram, with Hanuman bowing to him, or Krishna playing the flute. That's why we are so ineffective and weak...You have to show them fighting. Krishna with a *chakra* (rotating circle with spokes, regarded as a weapon) and Ram with his bow drawn" (Uma Bharati quoted in Rajagopal 1994: 1663). While Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati and more recently, Sadhvi Pragma<sup>7</sup> have been pushed as role models for the establishment of the '*Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra*', the electoral affiliates like the BJP have used Sushma Swaraj, Vasundhara Raje Scindia and Smriti Irani as icons in political arena that women can aspire to. Further, Sarkar (1991: 2057-2061) writes, "The BJP has located women along with SC/STs as a primary target area for the coming times". This has been seen widely in *Sangh Parivar*'s new methods of recruitment and political action.

### **Women & the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti***

Although one seldom hears of the working of the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* (National Women's Service Committee) in the media or mainstream discourse, the organisation is posited as the ideal women's collective by the *Sangh* and sympathisers. The current member base comprises of

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, a Hindi film, *Galiyon ki Rasleela-Ram Leela* (Sanjay Leela Bhasali, 2013) introduced the actor of the film in the modernised, Ram- avatar. The actor, Ranveer Singh, is modeled on the Ram of the Hindu right, with flowing hair and a muscular body. The women in the song 'Tattad-Tattad' are shown to be completely enamored by his look and often shown fainting at the display of his sexuality. What is also interesting to note is that the image popularised of the new Ram during the Ram Janmbhoomi Movement is also shown larger than life in the background of the song.

<sup>7</sup> Allegedly involved in the infamous Malegaon Blasts of 2008.

unmarried and married<sup>8</sup> women who are all in some way or the other connected to the *Sangh parivar*.

The *Samiti* was formed in 1936 the efforts of Lakshmibai Kelkar. It was envisioned as the ‘parallel but separate organisation’ of the RSS. Paola Bachhetta says that the *Samiti* members believe that the organisation was established as a “culturally grounded alternative to the IWM (Indian Women Movement) which, it claims, was bent on westernising women” (Bachhetta 1999: 129).

The RSS and *Samiti* hold their primary allegiance to the ‘Guru *Bhagwa Dhwa*’, the saffron flag which in popular imagination has come to be identified with all-things Hindutva. The iconography and symbolism of glorious ‘Hindu’ heroes (Chhatrapati Shivaji) reign supreme as defenders of *Bharat Mata*, a goddess fashioned to represent the ‘Hindu’ subcontinent with parts like Kashmir, Pakistan and Bangladesh intact. They are more loyal to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Bande Mataram* and sing it faithfully along with *Samiti Prarthana* (prayer) which is the *Saraswati Vandana* (Ode to Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge). Their vision is to make possible the dream of *Akhand Bharat* (United India) and establish a *Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra* (an enlightened Hindu nation).

The members of both the organisations are encouraged to be physically active and learn self-defence. The ideology of RSS and *Samiti* believes that the role of the man is working hard outside home, to save the *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) while sees serving the family, in the domestic sphere, as the woman’s primary duty.

Here an attempt will be made to understand how women come in contact with the *Samiti* and how the present members make active arrangements to expand their member base. This information was collected in the field as a part of a Master’s thesis project on the organisation. The site was Meerut, a city in Western Uttar Pradesh in the month of June 2013. The women and girls who were interviewed were part of the residential summer camp being held in the city where I stayed and conducted research through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Most women attendees at the camp had come in contact with the ideals of the *Samiti* through male family members: fathers, brothers and husbands. Hence, their first interaction with the Hindutva ideology was with the RSS and its patriarchal ideas of nationhood formation.

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<sup>8</sup> This is an important distinction that many *Samiti* members made while speaking about recruitment strategies.



What is interesting is that most women interviewed found the space of the *Samiti* to be empowering because it enabled them to speak about the world outside of their homes, without coming in conflict with their household duties. Importantly, this venturing out was not restricted because of the blessings of the male family members who perhaps see the Samiti as a contributor to both, the support for the nation and the society with strict gender-roles that they seek to create, thus reproducing the subjugation of women in all respects. These women then take it upon themselves to propagate the ideals of the Samiti in two forms. The first is through *sampark* (contact) in their communities by holding the *Shakhas* and other programmes. The other more important way, that is also the most effective, are the yearly summer camps. It is in these camps that young women are given a taste of the *Samiti* ideology while being completely removed from their surroundings.

All the present members spoke of fostering a feeling of patriotism even before they had heard of the *Samiti*. Only after establishing, what seems to be a cosmic connection between patriotism, themselves and the Samiti, would they then establish the tangible reason of coming in contact with the *Samiti*. They remember seeing their fathers/brothers/husbands being engrossed in *Shakha* work. All admit that they did not want to pursue what the male members of the family were doing. They wanted to contribute in whatever way and to whatever degree the patriarchal figures in their homes found appropriate.

I will describe the nature of the women's association with the Samiti by dividing them into two; first, association through the natal/maternal home (fathers, brothers) and second, through the marital home (father-in-law, husband). What is common to all the narratives is that none of the members were aware of the Samiti and had initially thought of the RSS as the means to realise their 'patriotic' ambitions.

### ***Fathers***

The *Pracharika* of the Western Uttar Pradesh region was raised in an atmosphere that was conducive to the ideals of the *Sangh*. Her father was the President of the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*, an affiliate of the *Sangh Parivar*. While describing her parents' union, she speaks about their marriage as an arrangement where they both realised their dream of serving the society through their children. In fact, one can see the parents' union/marriage as a perfect specimen of the *Sangh* ideals: that the marriage be for procreation and as a result, create the perfect Hindu citizen, modelled on their ideals. Of the seven siblings, three are full-time workers of the *Sangh* family.

According to her, her values or *sanskaar* given to her by her parents were to serve the society and it was through the *Samiti* she sought to realise this dream. She talks of being born with a ‘vision’ to serve *Bharatiya Sanskriti* (Culture of Bharat). In this respect, she went on to study Sanskrit language and eventually to obtain a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in the same. The interaction with the *Samiti* was a revelation of sorts that gave her a direction in life. She said:

*...it was my ambition to serve the society. We knew that there was the Sangh but did not know about the activities of the Samiti till MA/B.Ed. After that, I attended the camp (varg) and it is then that I got a direction on how to proceed with my life. This was the year 1995. It was then that I took the decision to become a Pracharika.*

It is only later that she mentions that two of her brothers were already *Pracharaks* before she took the vow to remain celibate and work for the Hindutva cause.

Considering the social set-up of the Hindu community her decision to value education and aspiration over marriage seems like a radical move for two reasons.. Firstly, she uses education as a means of negotiating the patriarchal system of marriage and manages to legitimise such a decision while fulfilling her own dream of serving the society. Secondly, despite the *Samiti* stance of marriage being the most important stage in a woman’s life,<sup>9</sup> she completely avoided that route altogether and added to a variety in its membership, in her own way.

But despite all these decisions that seem to show agency, there is an overarching patriarchal notion at work here. The decision to see one’s ‘choice’ of serving the society, and therefore not marrying as more legitimate, is problematic. That some choices are approved to avoid marriage and further, that women need to have a concrete, patriarchy approved reason to not marry points that in fact, there is no agency involved here. What is at work is a negotiation with oneself with high possibilities of compromise in other spheres of life.

Paola Bachhetta chooses to put it more positively as:

*...Samiti serves as a space where members can escape constraints which otherwise may have been imposed upon them as women, within their context. They do so not only without directly rebelling against their environment, but also with its express approval as long as their demands are formulated not in terms of*

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<sup>9</sup> *Samiti* members constantly create discourses the value marriage over everything that women can do in their lives. One has constantly heard of the refrain, ‘Everyone has to get married. It is natural’. This naturalisation of marriage is problematic in both feminist and sociological areas and this will be discussed in detail later.

*themselves, but in terms of self-sacrifice in the service of a higher common cause, the Hindu Nation* (Bacchetta 2004: 77).

In Bachchetta's case, her subject, Kamlabehn, was using her *Samiti* position to enable increased mobility that would have been unavailable to her otherwise. The *Pracharika* that I interviewed spoke at length of her work in idyllic terms. Also, according to the latter, the mobility and the access to public space were already a given. In another instance, Kamlabehn's rejection of a suitor of marriage and influencing him to become a Pracharak and work for the *Sangh* is seen as more respectable option, which is in line with the narrative provided to me by the *Pracharika*. But what is different about the two women in the same position is the complete denial of, not only a possibility but also existence of any romance with the same or opposite sex, by the latter.<sup>10</sup>

Another member, the Western Uttar Pradesh *Baudhik Pramukh*, MS, was also introduced to the *Samiti* through her father. She distinctly remembers the RSS dress, the khaki shorts being worn by her father before leaving for *Shakha*. It was through this association that she was asked to attend her first camp in Muzaffarnagar. She says that she agreed to attend the camp "since it was part of the *Sangh*, the camp could only be a good thing". But what emerges from her narrative was that, unlike other interviewees, what attracted her to the *Sangh* was the way the *Sangh* people conducted themselves and not so much the camp experience.<sup>11</sup> She says, in a rather long monologue:

*People used to come home so my father would introduce them to us, telling us that they were Pracharaks, they work for the Sangh. We would have them over for tea or a meal... They used to come and ask my mother what had been cooked for the day, my mother would tell them that the sabji (vegetable curry) is over and only rotis are left. They used to ask my mother to bring rotis with salt, even if pickle is over. They never made my mother cook especially for them. Whatever was left, they would eat. If there was chai, good enough, otherwise, they would make do with water only. If a Sangh Parivar person comes, their first question is about the well-being of the family. They would make enquiries about home, work, family,*

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<sup>10</sup> I should point out that there was an age difference between me and *Pracharika*. Yet, if one can talk about sexual violence and 'immorality' among girls, surely romance is a topic that she must be aware about and would not be hesitant to approach.

<sup>11</sup> Most women, as you will notice from their narratives describe the first experience of the camp as a pre-ordained enlightenment and some sort of a holy induction.

*kids even before stepping inside the house. There is an attachment with these people. If we do have a problem, you feel like sharing it .*

Hence, for her, the extended *Samiti* was not a space of the unknown where she would go on to realise her dream of the unified motherland. For her, the space of the *Samiti* represented a safe space that she was accustomed to, especially in its membership, form and functioning. What is interesting to note in this regard is the complete absence of any female influence in the *Sangh*. Never were the wives/mothers/sisters/daughters of other *Sangh* members mentioned. Hence, her earlier statement about the *Samiti* camp being a ‘good thing’ is based on her experience with the *Sangh* men only. Thus, whatever aspiration for working for the cause of the Hindu nation, would have been inspired from the role of the men. The *Baudhik* Pramukh, MS, then went on to marry a member of the *Sangh* itself and her husband is currently an active member of the RSS in Saharanpur region.

### ***Husbands***

With the husbands or connections with the marital home, the wives/daughters-in-law are bound to become members if their husbands are active members of the RSS. Most women, whose husbands were part of the RSS, were automatically expected to become a part of the *Samiti* or contribute in some way or the other to the functioning of the RSS. The reverse, though, may not always be true. For example, the area in Delhi, where my relative was part of the RSS, was a hotbed for the *Sangh* recruits. In a span of two years, most men became avid members of the RSS, and their wives and daughters simultaneously became members of the *Samiti*. The wives celebrated all the *Sangh/Samiti* events with much fanfare. Three women that I spoke to narrated at length their experiences of induction into the *Samiti* as a part of the natural transformation from the natal to the marital home. None spoke of a discussion preceding the camp or the woman even being asked if she agreed with the ideology.

The Western Uttar Pradesh *Karyavahika*, GB, was one such inductee. She speaks at length about her mother’s love for the country and how she inherited that love from her. She wanted to serve the country in some way and to realise that dream, wished to marry a soldier from the armed forces. Her husband, a member of the RSS, is a teacher. It was he who pressed her to do an Officer’s Training Course (OTC) at a *Samiti* camp in 1985. “I came here and I realised that this is exactly the kind of platform I was looking for. I should have come here earlier”, she spoke of the

camp, adding, “At the time, I felt that every girl should attend such a camp before getting married”.

The statement above deserves further elaboration, not only because it is laden with meaning, but also because of the context that it was spoken in. Before speaking about the *Samiti*’s positive influence on women’s mentality, she mentioned that her husband’s work in the RSS was erratic and at times, she used to give in to the natural reactions of anger and feel neglected. She said:

*I was foolish, I got married while studying and after kids, sometimes I would also fight with my husband. My husband used to go for Shakhas and there was no fixed time for his return. We would all wait for him, kids and I. We would prepare food for two or three people, but he would return accompanied with five. I had small kids and then to prepare the extra food, I would sometimes get angry. So these values I wish had before getting married.*

Instead of asking her husband to reconsider and alter his lifestyle, she blames herself for failing to see the larger picture: his work was too important for nation building.

Unlike the narrative of the *Baudhik* in-charge, MS, earlier, where she waxes eloquent about the simple lifestyles of the RSS members, the *Karyavahika*’s narrative can be used to understand a wife’s point of view. The feeling of anger and neglect is something natural but her association with the *Samiti* and the ‘values’ she gained during the camp taught her that the woman should be sacrificial to the point of self-erasure. She says, “If I had become associated with the *Sangh* earlier in my life, I would have given better values (*sanskāra*) to my children. At the time I did not have wisdom, as to what preparation a mother should do before children are born. I got that wisdom/knowledge only after coming here”.

Another aspect of this is the ‘wisdom’ given by the *Samiti* of its ideology of wifedom entails is being passed off as natural truth and an ideal that all women should emulate. Those women, who have not ‘realised’ or refuse to adhere, then should always feel guilty of not performing well the role of the wife and further, obstructing the cause of the nation.

What follows in her narrative is then the previous lack of ‘wisdom’ is compensated for in the promise she made to the teacher, *Bhagwa Dhwaj*, to serve the society and dedicate 15 days every summer to the *Samiti*. “I wrote on a paper and made a commitment that I would devote 15 days of every summer holidays to the camp. Now, I made that commitment in front of the *Bhagwa Dhwaj*, our teacher, so I should fulfil it right?” But since she was not affiliated to the RSS, the

reverence for the *Bhagwa Dhwaj* and other *Samiti* symbols should not be assumed to be automatic as well? From her and other recent inductees' narratives, this reverence and beliefs come almost gradually, naturally but surely and it seems that there is a special effort taken to establish such an unshakable belief. For example:

*Q. 'Considering you did not know about the Bhagwa-Dhwaj or Lakshmibai Kelkar before marriage, how did you start believing in them because it cannot come all of a sudden'?*  
*A. Faith in the Bhagwa-Dhwaj was present from before because I studied in an Arya Samaj school. There, the flag has an Aum sign on it which represents the higher Being. That time I did not know why we hoist the flag. After coming to the camp, we were told that the Rig Ved has a mention of Arun-Ketu and a flag. But even then questions about why we pray to the flag kept crossing my mind. The belief increased slowly'.*

The inductees that come through their fathers do not have to make such a negotiation with the ideology of the *Samiti* the way one does when she comes from a marital home. What is interesting from her statement is the cosmic connection that she tries to make with the ideology (as was mentioned before) as being aware, yet unaware of the significance of the *Bhagwa Dhwaj* in the knowledge that she gained before getting married. What is also important to note in her narrative is that the *Samiti* provided her answers to her questions of 'why', which her previous educational affiliation failed to do. Hence, for her, the association with the *Samiti* brought with it enlightenment and a reason to believe in the flag and other beliefs. This 'scientific' or explanatory approach is used widely by such organisations to lend credibility to their beliefs.

While the *Karyavahika* GB spoke of leaning towards the ideology 'slowly', another member of the *Samiti*, BT, speaks of making a partial negotiation with the *Samiti*. She was introduced to the *Samiti* through her father-in-law who has been a long-time member of the RSS and hence, her association was to be taken for granted. Her husband is presently the Principal of the school in their village and until recently, she was the Vice-Principal. Her daughter, a very active and lively girl, loves the *Shakha* because of the physical activities that she gets to take part in.

A part of the *Samiti* for eight years now, she was first asked to attend the camp by her father-in-law in 2005. Since then, she has repeatedly attended the camps, first as a student and now as a *Shikshika* (peer educator). Upon being asked what attracted her to the *Samiti*, her response was, "As such there is nothing". This is indicative of 'granted-ness' that was spoken of earlier with regard to her membership in the *Samiti*. On being prodded, she added, "But yes, we do not take



to an activity only because of selfish reasons. I like that we are able to manage work and household and still devote time to social causes. Hence, because of our affinity to social work, we got associated with the *Samiti*”.

Hence, it is not so much a passive association that she is making with the *Samiti*. An active agent, she is trying to negotiate the ideology and be clear about the reasons why she chooses to remain connected to it. The *Samiti*’s work in the field of social work is respected by the people of the community and her clear distinction with regard to her reasons for association also shows an alternate reason for the attraction towards the *Samiti*. As the *Pracharika* had mentioned earlier, “Before I knew about the *Samiti*, I planned to open an orphanage or work independently as a social worker. But after my association with the *Samiti*, I came to know that it is a vast organisation where they work to create people into *ati-manav*, *swavlambi* and patriots. There cannot be a better way to lead your life than this”.

Kathleen M. Bleen, in her essay ‘Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups’ (1996) writes to demolish notion that women in organised racist groups are passive recipients of a male ideology. Calling this notion among scholarly work as ‘circular logic’, she writes that most literature focuses on male members of such groups. She, importantly points out,

*As a result of such a reasoning, scholarship on women in modern racist groups in the United States is virtually non-existent-although studies on women in 1920’s Ku Klux Klan and in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, contemporary Hindu Fascism in India, the German Nazi Movement and World War II-era Italian fascism find that women have not been incidental to the reactionary, racist and anti-Semitic movements* (Bleen 1996: 681).

She then goes to explain the consequences of such a move: ignorance of the women’s psychology and the perplexing reasons why women in such large numbers choose to attach themselves to such groups.

She then goes on to point out the three ways that women take to become one with the ideology: ‘Conversion’, ‘Adoption’ and ‘Resignation’. Conversion occurs when, assuming such an ideology is to be introduced to be accepted, the women make/construct a ‘personal, dramatic transformation’ towards the ideology. This is the case universally: when the *Pracharika* insists that she was born with a ‘vision’ with a serve the society or the way the *Baudhik Pramukh* was naturalised and began to appreciate the *Sangh* for the caring nature of its members. Second

alternative, 'Adoption' is prevalent in cases where one comes with a certain set of ideas and has to adapt to an ideology because of the conditions of their context. Hence, a way to look at 'adoption' is that it could be seen as a positive negotiation. Negotiations, such as above, are important to understand and predict the memberships and future of the Samiti. For example, BT's partial acceptance of the *Samiti* ideology because of their work in the social sector or NJ's appreciation of the *Samiti* space as being informative and allowing girls to learn self-defence. Of course, the discourse and the aim for which such steps are taken are highly questionable and problematic, but the active negotiation to appropriate an ideology and engage with it is definitely a positive sign.

### **Recruitment**

After the negotiation and acceptance of the ideology, the members are required to bring in more members to make the organisation numerically stronger. The recruitment of fresh members happens in various ways. One is through aligning with an existing member of the *Samiti* in their practice: for example, attending the *Shakha*, lectures and initiatives that bring the community women together. The second way is to attend the camps held by the Samiti in a site carefully identified to attract maximum new members.

All the permanent members of the *Samiti* spoke reverently of working on their *Shakhas* and seeing young girls becoming active members of the *Samiti*. To acquire a status and position in the *Samiti*, members are required to open as many *Shakhas* as possible and induct and further train potential members. Various other programmes are conducted before opening of the first *Shakha* to attract the girls. GB, the Western UP *Karyavahika* spoke of organising a grand prayer ceremony on *Guru Purnima*, a day dedicated to the reverence of the *Bhagwa Dhwaj* by the *Sangh parivar*. This programme was conducted in a school that was run by her relative and which was sympathetic to the Hindutva cause. This function gave her the initial numbers to begin her own *Shakha*. This method was to induct young girls exclusively.

To garner the support of adult women, she again describes, in much detail, how she organised weekly '*aartis*' (prayer ceremonies) and conducted lectures among housewives to discuss relevant topics, mostly relating to housekeeping and religion. Through her experience, she learnt that very few women choose to actively associate themselves with the *Samiti* because this work requires one to step outside of the home and according to her, "the housewives do not want to do anything outside the home". And secondly, that to keep the member base, it is more important



to focus on the daughters-in-law than the daughters because the former do not change their location and are future child bearers. The reason to not give as much attention to insist on the membership of the daughters was that they go away once they are married and hence are not a very reliable investment. She said, “The girls I worked with have gotten married and moved away. So, we shifted the experiment to daughters-in-law. If we are able to transform their thinking, then we expect they will stay for around twenty years. Girls can only stay for ten” (Karyavahika 2013).

She also spoke of working with under-privileged girls and women and lending them support after which they ally themselves with the *Samiti*. She gives the example of an orphan girl who was supported by her and who was inducted into the Samiti once she acquired the required values or ‘*sanskaars*’. In Mumbai, the same technique was used to induct members of a relatively newer demographic: lower-caste, lower-class young girls.<sup>12</sup> The mothers were told to send their girls because they would be made to play games and taught ‘*Shloks*’ (religious Hindu chants).

Through these acts of Sanskritisation, the *Samiti* members always assume the role of the selfless, ever-giving privileged authority that is doing the society a favour. They use such instances to demonstrate that their minds are free of prejudice because the cause of the Hindu nation demands that one dissolve such differences. But the hint of prejudice lingers. For example, speaking on the *Sangh*’s caste position, the *Prant Karyavahika* of the Saharanpur region, SB, mentioned,

*Even before marriage, I had to work with members (karyakarta) and we never came to know that the person sitting next to us is a Harijan or not... I have even gone into their (unke; ambiguous term referring to ‘lower caste’) homes and eaten with them. I have taught their daughters in their homes itself. Even though I don’t like tea, if I refuse it they think that I am discriminating. One has to drink it to demonstrate that we are not discriminating. And it is not like their homes are dirty. The way they keep their homes and utensils, even our homes will not have such cleanliness.*

The other method of recruiting is to hold large scale meetings and camps. Such camps have been a feature of all organisations seeking to consolidate a member base and transmit their ideology on a larger scale. The organisers provided various reasons for choosing Meerut as a site but in

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<sup>12</sup> This is a part of a larger Sangh drive to include the demographics that have been hitherto been excluded from their upper-caste focused narrative like the marginalized groups like poor, Dalits etc.

the present section, it is important to mention that the site was chosen so as to establish a strong Samiti presence in Meerut, which it had lacked till now. The *Prant Karyavahika* SB elaborated,

*In Meerut, I was the Karyavahika and we had five shakhas in all. In Pratap Nagar (the neighbourhood of her natal home), our numbers were 50-60...Girls, as young as three, would come for the Shakha...But I don't think the group they trained after them was good enough. Now, there is no Shakha in Meerut. That is why we have held this camp here to create Shakhas here (SB 2013).*

The camps, such as the ones held by right-wing organisations in India, are held primarily to recruit newer members into the fold. These spaces provide an uninterrupted flow for transmission of the ideology. For this, the younger people (children, adolescents, teenagers) are preferred because the institutions believe that it is easier to influence them.

*Balika Shikshan* (Education for Girls) (BS) is a State-prescribed lesson-plan for teachers in government schools. It aids teachers in providing knowledge to girls which does not fall into the category of schooling curriculum. In a textual analysis and in-depth interviews of teachers who teach *Balika Shikshan*, Nandini Manjrekar notes from her study of State-sanctioned, Hindutva literature on girls,

*A girl needs to be trained to nurture all these values, not in order to strengthen her own capacities, but to be the carrier of these virtues for children, particularly male children, and their spread to the matrimonial home, which BS (Bal Shikshan) states to be the 'additional' value of such 'knowledge' (Manjrekar 2011: 358).*

She notes how the gendering of schooling education is furthering patriarchal codes and how conditioning by adults shapes the future roles that girls envision for themselves.

In the same vein, the *Samiti* believes that a girl has the power to transform two homes-natal and marital. Therefore, if a girl is introduced to the ideology at a young age, she can try in her power to transmit the ideology in her natal home and then once, married, to members in the marital home. For the *Samiti*, younger girls are also preferred because they believe that the ideology will be transferred to the next generation as well because all the girls will someday become mothers. Hence, to understand how their target audience, i.e. young women, is analysing the discourse, such a camp seemed like the perfect site.

Majority of the population of the camp I attended were below the age of 25. Out of nine groups, only one was of older, married women. Rest of the groups were divided into respective age

groups from eight years to 25 years. Most of the girls came from villages near the districts of Saharanpur, Shamli, Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Moradabad and Ghaziabad. Except the group where 15 girls were completing their second year (*Prabodh* group), this camp was the first time that any of them had the chance to step outside of their homes for a comparatively longer period of time. Also, this was the first opportunity where many saw the urban setting without their parents.

The sample I am using consists of three different groups of girls. The first group was the one I was clubbed into for the purposes of lectures and physical training. It consisted of 13 girls who were unmarried and were pursuing their higher education. Through camp activities with this group, I borrow opinions and discussions held during '*Aachar paddbhati*' (Code of conduct) lectures. All the girls in this group, even though they were aware of the work of the *Sangh*, were all first-time attendees of the camp.

The second group of girls are the ones who had attended the camp more than once. These were girls from the *Prabodh* group (completing second level of 'varg' or camp) and *Shikshikas* (teachers who performed the roles of peer educators). I chose to interview these girls because they had been accustomed to the Samiti setting and would be able to give more information regarding its ideology and their understanding of it. Out of 12 girls, six belonged to the *Shikshika* group and six to the *Prabodh* group. The third group consisted of girls who were studying at a *Sangh* hostel and were required to attend the camp as an obligation for availing *Sangh*-funded facilities.

### **Association with the Samiti**

The girls who were attending the camp were in some way or the other, aware of the work of the *Sangh* (and sometimes, *Samiti*). Like the older members, most of the girls came through the contact of male family members – fathers or brothers. While most of the girls confessed that they were initially forced into attending the camp, almost all accepted that it was a learning experience. TS, a first-time attendee said,

*My father and brothers used to practice the physical exercises at home. To me, this was both curiosity inducing and funny and I used to make fun of them for doing so... Then, when we came to know that the camp was to be held here, my father decided that he would make me attend the camp at all costs. I was stubborn too and protested till the last day. But somewhere, I did want to see what the camp was about' (TS 2013).*

The girls from the *Shikshika* and *Prabodh* groups declared that they were testaments to the fact that the camp experience is rich and compels one to attend again. Another girl, a *Shikshika* recounted,

*I was in eighth standard when I first attended a camp. My father had forced me to go the first time. Going to a new place is frightening, obviously. The first two days I didn't like it there at all... after those initial days, I gradually started liking the camp. I began to take interest and was excited about what they would teach next. The yearning to learn grew* (AK 2013).

Those who attended the camp through family members were more comfortable in the surroundings than those who had lesser influential contacts in the *Sangh Parivar*. The girls whose fathers occupied higher posts in the *Sangh* were more likely to attend the camp the second time. According to them, the daunting atmosphere of the camp became less threatening if an older, recognisable person was at the camp. As NS, a 17 year old, three-time *Shikshika* said,

*I have seen the RSS since childhood since my father is a member...I've been coming to the camp ever since eighth standard. The first time camp experience was a little problematic ('gad-bad'). My mother, brother and sister-in-law would come to visit me every three-four days and my father used to have his meals at the camp itself. But even then I used to cry. The second time I went, I was wiser and enjoyed myself* (NS 2013).

This experience seems like an ideal one because the girls at the camp were denied any contact with relatives. Those with prior contacts could make calls home and could meet with parents.

Other than the ones coming via *Sangh* families, there were three other affiliations that brought the girls to the camp. First group consisted of teachers of the primary schools run by the *Samiti*. The teachers of the *Saraswati Shishu Mandir*-affiliated schools were attending the camp because of a requirement of teaching at the school. This was described as the OTC (optional/officer training course). In my group itself, there were 4 teachers from the school and many others in the married women's group. They were not necessarily from *Sangh* families but adapted very quickly to the camp setting. In fact, most of them admitted to not knowing about the existence of the *Samiti* as a separate entity, prior to the camp. NS, a 21-year old, *Prabodh* level attendee said, 'I teach the primary level at the Saraswati School. These schools, even though private, have RSS members as founders. This is how I came here'. She also admits that she did not like the rules of the camp at the start but the '*masti*' (fun) atmosphere in the room compelled her to come back. Two other teachers from another region who were attending the camp for the first time

confessed during discussions that they had no idea about the *Samiti*. 'I had only heard of the RSS and thought that it was a political party', recounted one.

Another *Samiti* school teacher, a first time attendee, admitted to me that attending the camp was imperative to remain in the good books of the administrators of their respective schools. It was pointing to such entrants that the *Pracharika* had remarked nastily,

*There have been times when some behnein have joined us for their selfish purposes and have remained only for a short duration. By selfish reasons I mean for political reasons or by the compulsions of their job. Some women believe that their personal enmities will be won if they ally themselves with this organisation* (Pracharika 2013).

It is this compulsion that perhaps the earlier young woman had pointed to.

The third group of girls were the ones who were being educated at the *Sangh Parivar* hostels and were required to attend these camps during their holidays. At the present camp, a large group of girls from a town at the bottom of the Shiwalik hills were in attendance. They were distributed as helpers, teachers and participants. All the girls were originally from the states in the north-east part of India. These are the states where the *Sangh* is "trying to fight off missionary conversion activity" and establish its presence (Dixit 2013). These girls, because of disadvantaged economic backgrounds were brought to hostels such as these through local RSS (significantly, not *Samiti*) workers. All the girls that were attending were between the ages of 12-18.

For them, availing the hostel facilities is synonymous to attending the camp. DS was first introduced to the *Sangh* through the rampant RSS work taking place in her state. GS's uncle was a member of the RSS and he was the one who told her family about the free-of-cost hostels and education. "My uncle is working with the RSS so he sent us here to the hostel. I came here when I was in third standard and now I am 18 years old. I just completed my 12th and am now looking for an admission in BA", she said (GS 2013). Apart from ones organised by the *Samiti*, all the girls had also participated in Durga Vahini (women's wing of the VHP) camps.

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated, the membership of the *Samiti* is not by chance or choice. A paternal/marital connection is imperative to making the first contact and more importantly, to sustain it. The 'agency' in this framework can be understood in the extent to which the girls and women choose to appropriate the ideology and align it with their life goals. What is important to note here is

also that the members of the Samiti use its means to negotiate the public sphere, all the while being enclosed with the larger right-wing patriarchal framework. Further though, this negotiation is always seen as an ancillary exercise, the focus always remaining to serve the cause of the male members associated with the RSS in the private sphere.

When it comes to the girls and the young women, the extent and depth of the association is directly proportional to the comfort of the male members of the family with their involvement. Uncertain of her future at the Samiti, AK said, “I will definitely try to remain associated with the Samiti but there are lot of problems and sometimes, unexpected, that don’t allow you to continue...”. On being asked if she wanted to go on to become a *Pracharika* for the Samiti, NB said, “I would want to, but I know my family is concerned about the society. I think that even my father would be supportive of the idea but the rest of the family would not” (NB 2013). Her solution was that in case her family did not agree to her becoming a *Pracharika*, she would try to devote some years exclusively to the organisation.

Older Samiti members had raised this concern during interviews, saying that investment in young girls sometimes became futile because they moved to other places after their marriages. SB, a *Karyavahika*, remembers training many girls before her marriage and at the time, the area was brimming with *Shakhas*. She remembers, “There were 40 *Shakhas* here at the time. I expected the numbers to continue. But I don’t think the group they trained after them was good enough” (SB 2013). The result was that the region did not have a single shakha at the time of the present camp. Another *Karyavahika* said, “Now, the thing is that I am getting tired. The girls I worked with have gotten married and moved away”. After seeing that the girls they trained did not yield any visible effects in their own areas, her solution was to focus on the women who join families after marriage, i.e., daughters-in-law. She said,

*After seeing this, we shifted the experiment to daughters-in-law. It takes time with them too because they have values of their own maternal homes but even if four women come out of it, we feel we are successful. If we are able to transform their thinking, then we expect they will stay for around twenty years. Girls can only stay for ten (Karyavahika 2013)<sup>13</sup>.*

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<sup>13</sup> Maybe I am over-analysing this method of recruitment but this seems to further belittle the position of girls before marriage and subsequently, pays more emphasis to birthing boys who will be responsible in bringing the next potential members of the Samiti as wives and further, as sons and daughters.

But what is extremely interesting is that the *Samiti* members see their rigid ideology as being a reason for the dwindling numbers. This was lamented by almost all older *Samiti* members, who tried to rationalise various reasons for the lesser participation. The *Pracharika* said, “In this camp, girls from 23 districts are in attendance. But in the men’s camp (*bhaiyon ka varg*), there are 550 people attending...They have 550 in one place and 230 in another. We are short also when it comes to manpower (numbers)”. On being asked if the *Samiti* should modify its beliefs to accommodate girls who are living in the present society, she remarked, “We cannot change this at all. If we do, they will destroy us. It is only because of this reason that we could hold on to your culture even after being under slavery (*ghulam*) for so many years. I don’t think we should lessen our vigour even one bit” (Pracharika 2013).

### **Glossary:**

The following list includes words that have been repeated often in the paper and are important to understand the discourse of the *Samiti*. Though most of the words are in Hindi, they are used for the same purposes in other areas where Hindi is not the native language.

(In order of appearance)

Sangh Parivar: Meaning the family of the *Sangh*, the coalition of organisations that follow the philosophy of Hindutva and look to the RSS as their ideologue. This includes cultural and electoral organisations like *Samiti*, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, World Hindu Organisation) which includes *Bajrang Dal* (male, referring to the bravado of Hindu deity Hanuman) and *Durga Vahini* (female, the chariot of Hindu goddess Durga); *Bharatiya Janta Party* (BJP, Indian People’s Party) which includes the youth-wing *Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad* (ABVP, All-India Student Committee) and *Bharatiya Yuva Janta Morcha* (BYJM, Indian Youth People’s Campaign), the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (Indian Labour Union) etc. Due to the interchangeable memberships and similar ideology, the collective is called a ‘*parivar*’.

Kar sevak/s: Literally, a person (here, man) who is an on-ground worker. This term became extremely popular during the lead-up to the *Ram Janmbhoomi* campaign. *Kar sevaks* collected bricks, donations, formed and organised crowds and finally, answered the call to demolish the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh on 6 December, 1991.



Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra: Translated as ‘enlightened Hindu nation’, the *Samiti* counts this as the ultimate aim. This refers to restoring the golden age in the territorial Hindu nation.

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# Prohibition and Naga Cultural Identity: Cultural Politics of Hornbill Festival, Nagaland

Theyiesinuo Kreditsu

## Abstract

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This paper explores the conflict between two important markers of Naga cultural identity namely ethnic identity and Christian identity, brought about by the observance of the Hornbill Festival in Kohima, Nagaland. In particular, it examines the ways in which the hegemony of the church via the long-standing prohibition of alcohol is contested in the space of Kisama, the venue for the Hornbill festival and during week to ten day long celebration of the festival. It proposes that by making these contestations possible, the Hornbill festival has given rise to new possibilities for the articulation of Naga cultural identity.

Keywords: Naga cultural identity, Ethnic identity, Christian identity, Prohibition, Hornbill Festival

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The Hornbill Festival was created and implemented by the Government of Nagaland in 2000. The first staging of the Hornbill Festival occurred in the Kohima Local Ground, which is situated in the heart of Kohima Town. In 2003, it was moved to its now permanent location, at Kisama, a heritage village constructed as the venue for this festival. It is held on the first week of December of every year.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out between 2008 to 2011 in Kohima, Nagaland, particularly during the first week of December when the Hornbill festival is held. Data was collected through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and participant observation. It is also partly a product of my own negotiations of my ethnic identity as an Angami Naga and as a practising Baptist and therefore member of the Baptist Church of Nagaland.

What Kathleen M. Adams (1997) observes about ethnic tourism in Toraja, “a mountainous interior region of South Sulawesi, Indonesia” (ibid: 311) may be said to hold true in the case of the Hornbill Festival as well:

*Both the growing tourist and anthropological literature have helped make Torajans international celebrities, their culture an entity to be studied, dissected, photographed, and packaged for export. Today's Torajans are increasingly exposed to outsider images of their culture...In short, contemporary Torajans are not only ethnically self-conscious, but are also avid consumers, manipulators, and critics of the ethnographic and touristic images of their culture. (ibid: 312)*

By attributing agency to the tourist ‘object/subject’, Adams moves beyond the notion of museumisation, which conceptualises the space and peoples of ethnic tourism as trapped in a touristic definition of themselves, deploying this in representations rather than their culture as it really is. Agency on the part of the Nagas is evident both in the way the Nagas articulate various aspects of their cultural identity and in the way they negotiate between these aspects.

With regards to the festivals/festivities reenacted in Kisama Heritage Village, the conflict between ethnic and Christian identity becomes evident. Traditionally, the identity of the Naga as a tribal—naked, animalist and head hunter has been constructed as the binary opposite to the identity of the Naga as Christian, educated and therefore reformed (Kikon 2009). Ethnic identity was unstable, potentially disruptive and could only be ‘tamed’ if it was expressed or lived through, mediated and monitored by Christianity. What began as a ‘controlled’ exhibition of Naga ethnic culture has evolved into a chimeric display of both ethnic as well as modern Naga culture that has challenged the hegemony of the Church. The carnivalesque nature of the festival (this is the only time in this dry state that *Thutse* or local rice beer is openly sold and liberally consumed with the consent of the government) has resulted in a strong reaction from, in particular, the Baptist Church (the largest and predominant in the state). This festival has thus provoked the revival of a discourse on Naga ethnic identity vis-a-vis Christian identity.

Particularly in the months leading to December (October onwards) till February, the editorial pages of local newspapers are replete with attempts to arbitrate this conflict between the ethnic and Christian components that constitute part of Naga cultural identity.

Where once, the ‘new life’ in Christianity meant a rejection of traditional cultural practices ranging from cultivation, rituals and/or festivals, feasts of merit to attire and bodily adornments like tattoos and jewellery (Hutton 2003; 2003; Mills 2003; Jacobs 1990; Eaton 1984), the Hornbill Festival has ‘glamourised’ these very practices. Firstly it has done this by proving traditional Naga cultural heritage to have a greater commercial viability than Christianity and its way of life. Granted that the Church (Baptist as well as other denominations) in Nagaland has always enjoyed the patronage of the international Christian community, both in the form of goodwill as well as donations. However, one of the marks of an established and thriving Church is to ‘give back’ and to engage in mission work. Hence, while it asks and accepts funding, the Church also contributes to international evangelist missions by sending and supporting missionaries within the country and without. In terms of actual visits as well, the influx of foreign missionaries or representatives from churches abroad, into Nagaland have been viewed with suspicion and rigorously controlled. And when they do arrive, they do so upon invitation, as guests who enjoy ‘free’ hospitality and usually ostentatious shower of ‘gifts’. There is little money to be made in this arrangement.

On the other hand, the form and manner in which Hornbill Festival represents traditional cultural heritage has been a commercial success, both with the local public as well as the increasing number of tourists that come to attend. Tourists Arrivals recorded by the department of Tourism have increased from 13268 domestic visitors in the year 2000 to 20953 in 2009 and 451 foreign visitors in 2000 to 8423 in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Tourist Arrivals have since decreased, or “leveled out” to use the words of an official in the Tourism Department, to 15881 domestic and 1457 foreign visitors in 2013 and 17044 domestic and 1360 foreign visitors in 2014. There is awareness, both on the part of the organizers and the locals that the Hornbill Festival draws in tourists and thus, generates revenue. According to a handicraftsman I interviewed in the Bamboo pavilion,

*Before I used to make my things but I wasn't sure when and if I would be able to sell them. There were things that I made two or five years ago which were unsold. But now I know that once a year, I can come*

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<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from the records of the Department of Tourism, Nagaland

*here and there will be people to buy my things...No, not only foreigners but also our own people buy also...so during the year, as I work I know that at this time I can earn for my work, it makes me want to do this.*

But to explain the articulation of a more ethnically centred cultural identity simply in terms of the political economy of the event would be to overlook more intricate maneuvering that takes place in trying to negotiate between ethnic identity and Christian identity.

Prior to the Hornbill Festival, it may safely be said that in this struggle, Christian identity enjoyed hegemony over ethnic identity. Folk songs were re-worded to include the Christian God. Festival programmes, or rather most social programmes followed and do still follow the format of a Church programme with an invocation prayer and a benediction and a prayer to bless the meal, all to the Christian God. Those held without alcohol were and are still regarded as more acceptable than those that are. While western clothing introduced by the Baptist missionaries came to signify not just a new life in Christ but also a more 'civilized' identity (cf Kikon 2009), the fad also changed the way traditional costumes were worn, over underwear, shorts, or in some cases the design of entirely new garments to cover the breasts or private parts. The legacy of this can be seen in the way Nagas themselves view those tribes whose current traditional attire expose more skin as less 'advanced' than those who have learnt to cover up. Nowhere is this more evident in the 'traditional' costumes worn by women in cultural troupes across the tribes. Where once an upper garment covering the breasts was a rarity, all the 'costumes' now include some such garment. Christianity has ensured that shame and modesty, with regards to the naked body, and that of the female in particular is now inextricably linked with the representation of an ethnic identity. Hence while reviving and highlighting an ethnic identity may be seen and has been perceived as more profitable, the deep-rootedness of Christianity in Naga cultural identity has led to a reconfiguration of the ethnic identity which is represented. The concern has thus been to showcase a Naga cultural identity that is both authentically ethnic enough to draw in tourists but one that also pacifies anxieties rooted in our Christian heritage, about not betraying Christian principles and beliefs by appearing too 'savage' and uncivilised.

This tension was made visible in a now infamous incident when members of the Chakhesang cultural troupe tore a live dog apart as part of their 'cultural display' in the 2005 Hornbill Festival. Foreign tourists were horrified and made this known both at the venue and to the organisers. The locals were concerned about how outsiders would perceive the Nagas. The modern rhetoric of 'animal rights/cruelty' was deployed by Nagas to accuse the perpetrators of

‘uncivilised and savage behaviour’. The Church condemned this act as ‘unChristian’. The act as well as the people involved was disowned in various papers as being ‘Un-Naga’. A few voices that defended it as part of customary practices were drowned out by the cacophony of protests. Explained by Prohibitionists who sought to highlight the evils of intoxication, as a drunken act, this incident was used to lobby for the banning of local alcoholic brews that were being served and sold at the festival.

The presence of alcohol, in its modern as well as its indigenous variations, in and during the Hornbill Festival has been the most contentious issue discussed by the Naga public with regards to this event. In place since 1989, the Prohibition in Nagaland was a culmination of many cultural influences, the foremost being the conversion of Nagas to the Baptist Denomination (Eaton 1984; Jacobs 1990; Mills 2003). The Baptists “prohibited the drinking of rice beer,...Catholic missionaries, arriving later, tended to take on a more relaxed attitude to rice-beer and traditional songs” (Jacobs 1990: 153). Writing about the effects of Baptist conversion on the Ao Nagas in the early 1920s, J.P.Mills (2003) observed the relationship between the (non)consumption of ‘madhu’, a term used loosely to refer to alcohol, and Christian identity:

*From the time when Mr.Perrine and Mr.Haggard joined the Mission in about 1892 all converts have been strictly forbidden to touch alcohol in any form. Anyone who transgresses this law is expelled from the community. Nothing in Christianity looms as large in the Ao mind as this prohibition. Teetotalism is to the ordinary convert the outstanding sign of Christianity, and an Ao Christian, when asked his religion, often defines himself, through what he considers to be the essential, simply as a ‘non-drinker of ‘madhu’’. Even in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper unfermented American grape-juice is used, and the average Ao does not realize that Our Lord at the Institution used fermented wine...the word used for the grape juice partaken of ... is tsükmenatsü tzü, a term which carries no implication of fermentation...There is therefore more than a tendency for the Ao to think that the tsükmenatsü tzü of Our Lord’s day was the same as the unfermented grape-juice with which he is familiar. I have often talked to the Missionaries about this rule, and they have always based their Manichean attitude towards alcohol not on Scripture, but on a conviction that social benefits accrue from it. No “madhu” means more rice to eat, and no drunkenness means fewer quarrels and less sexual immorality. This may be true but there remains the danger of secret drinking (entailing hypocrisy), and the adoption of evil substitutes for the comparatively harmless rice-beer. (Mills 2003: 416-417)*

Mills’ apprehensions were not unfounded as this has been one area where the pervasive power of the Church over the Nagas has been at once demonstrated and challenged, not in the least

because of the way the Church has positioned alcohol as symbolizing the antithesis of a Christian life.

*A man will become a (nominal) Christian and be baptized. Then his soul yearns for “madbu” and, since anyone who touches alcohol is expelled from the Baptist community, he often goes the whole hog and joins the non-Christians again. Later he may change his mind, give up his “madbu” and heathen practices and be readmitted into the Baptist Church. (Mills 2003: 414)*

The consumption of alcohol has thus become fixed in the popular imaginary as a sign of a ‘sinful’ character. As Christianity brought modern western education to the Naga Hills, a Christian identity also came to imply a ‘civilised’ identity. Thus, the ‘sinful’ drunkard was not only morally debauched but was assumed to be uneducated and uncivilised, placing him/her at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The consumption of alcohol has thus been constructed as indicative of a nefarious character, if it was a deliberate lifestyle choice, or an ignorant one, if it was perceived not to be. Either explanation justified intervention and thus the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) along with various women’s organisations, in particular the Naga Mothers’ Association, lobbied successfully for Prohibition in the state. The power inherent in Christian identity is evident in the way the Government then, and subsequent ones thereafter have upheld this Prohibition despite damaging evidence that it costs the state huge revenue losses. Thus far, neither political parties, nor individual leaders are ultimately willing to risk being labeled ‘unchristian’ by revoking the Prohibition.

While it has not demolished this relation of power, the Hornbill Festival managed to temporarily destabilise the stronghold the Church sustained in this debate. The debate on Prohibition was thus a battlefield on which a war of sorts, over the definition of Naga cultural identity was waged. The then Secretary of Tourism, L.Thangi Mannen narrates the initial response to the Hornbill Festival:

*In the early years, the Hornbill Festival was not very well taken by the public. Churches were against the sale of local brew and let’s not even get started on other alcohols. Hornbill [Festival] was viewed as encouraging anti-social activities and sexual immorality...there was very strong opposition.*

As stringent as the Baptist proscription on alcohol may be, the consumption of local rice beer has persisted. This was in part because it was an integral part of village life, particularly during traditional feasts of merit and festivities and in part because the arrival of Catholic missions that were more sympathetic to indigenous cultural life and thus, allowed its consumption. Those who

brew rice beer however were and are relegated to the margins of respectability and a visit to a 'madhu ghor' (alcohol house) identified as a mark of either sin or 'backsliding'. It is not that either local rice beer or other alcohol are rarely drunk during the rest of the year. Only that drinking during the rest of the year takes place furtively, as far away as possible from the Church and society's panoptic gaze. Drinkers, drinking and the spaces in which it happens are rendered socially liminal by the very presence of alcohol.

Given this status quo (ante), it is interesting how the Hornbill Festival briefly made behaviour, generally avoided or hidden for fear of being treated as social pariahs, possible in the open. Some explanations may be found by examining the nature of festivals and the ways in which the panoptical repression of the Church facilitated the intensity with which the Hornbill Festival is celebrated. Festivals are by nature jubilant occasions characterized by a break from the daily routines of life and in many cases, marked by revelry and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1984) proposed that the carnival, through its merging of the sacred and profane, allowed for a liberating subversion while also dispelling the tension between authority and subject, thus allowing for the perpetuation of "official culture".

It may acceptable to surmise that a directly proportional relationship between the degree of power exercised by the ideological state apparatus and the intensity of the carnivalesque that manifests exists. However, Althusser's understanding of the ideological state apparatus as exo-state institutions like those of the Church, education, family, law, the media etc., that further the agenda of the State through interpellation needs to be rethought in the Naga context. The introduction to the modern notion of state was engendered by conversion to Christianity. It was through the education provided by Mission Schools that the language with which to understand and articulate a unified 'Naga' identity was acquired. The formation both of the State of Nagaland as well as the functioning of the state has been intimately linked to the emergence of a Christian identity. In fact, Nagaland is a self-declared Christian state, the first state in 'secular' India to do this. Hence, the state's identity is collapsed with a Christian identity. The state has thus had to submit to the authority of the Church as have the other institutions mentioned by Althusser. An extreme but apt illustration of this may be found in the attempt of the Dimapur District Commissioner's office to close shops on Sunday. This dictate was greeted by heated protests from the public as well as the city's chamber of commerce. The bone of contention was the conflict between a biblically substantiated dictate of Sabbath and commercial profit. It was



finally deemed too unprofitable and therefore a threat to Dimapur's reputation as the 'commercial capital' of Nagaland and revoked.

Similar protests of the economic losses caused by Prohibition have however failed to move the Church to change its stance. To understand the power of the Church over Nagas then, one may employ Foucault's concept of panopticism. Foucault (1999) defines panopticism as the internalized and embodied operation of power, one characterized by self-surveillance. In the Naga context, the network of surveillance checks for and interpellates a 'Christian' identity. Modesty, whether in lifestyle, speech, or dress is one widely agreed upon 'sign' of an active Christianity. Other important 'signs' include abstinence from drinking (alcohol), smoking, drugs and sex outside of marriage. These in combination with Nagaland's history of political unrest have led to a certain way of life in Kohima and most other towns: an existence where one is always watching and has a sense of being watched.

Shops, eating places, offices shut early. There are few (now growing because of tourism) eating places. Most are functional eating houses for locals, only a few are recreational. Going to a restaurant is still looked upon as a frivolous activity, one that indicates indulgence, laziness and in the case of women, a lack of domestic skills. Bars or places, which sell alcohol, were officially banned with the onset of the Prohibition; there are many places however, which sell various kinds and qualities of alcohol. The video parlour, a room equipped with a video projector and speakers in which movies were screened for a paying audience has been made obsolete through raids conducted by women's organizations as well as the arrival first of the home TV and VCR set followed by Cable TV and now the Internet. Nightlife was until very recently non-existent. While people do meet for private parties, because of panoptic surveillance, those with a reputation of attending them are held in disrepute by society. By extension, one of the few 'acceptable' forms of social recreation is the Church and its various activities such as Sunday service, prayer meetings, Bible camps etc.

The responses to this prolonged and palpable experience of the power of the Church, via state, education, family and law range from resignation to indignation. And the Hornbill Festival acts as a fissure through which these tensions find release. It is no wonder then that since its inception, a considerable portion of the public, in particular the youth have indulged in week-long revelry.



The organizers of the Hornbill Festival defended their decision to allow the sale and consumption of local rice beer on the grounds that any ‘authentic’ representation of traditional ethnic life, and in particular festivals, required it. While the response to the cultural revival it set off has met with the approval of Naga society, the repercussions of permitting alcohol have led to vehement protests. This is not without cause. The number of drunk driving-related accidents and deaths increase during the time of the festival. Incidences of physical fighting, at the individual and ‘gang’ level have occurred enough times for the public to associate this week with a marked rise in random acts of violence. Finally, this week has come to be infamous for apparently alcohol induced sexual ‘debauchery’.

More than one participant shared that on the nights after the Rock shows, the venue is strewn with used condoms. When prodded, only one admitted to seeing this sight with her own eyes, the others claim they ‘just heard’. What is significant is that by the time of these interviews, the association of the Hornbill Festival, alcohol and “immorality” had graduated to the realm of myth.

Because it occurs within the context of tourism, in which the gaze of the tourist/outsider plays a pivotal role, there is a heightened awareness that the Hornbill Festival represents the Nagas to the world. The apprehension about alcohol thus stems from the desire to affirm and portray a cultural identity rooted in Christianity. Accidents, death, violence and sexual immorality are the antithesis of what is understood to be the true spirit of Christianity. This was the argument put forth by the Church, in particular the Baptist denomination with increasing fervour until the Government relented and enforced the ban of alcohol, local and otherwise, during the Hornbill Festival in 2008. Youth organizations from the neighbouring villages of Kigwema and Phesama, who volunteer at the Heritage Village each year, were given the additional task of enforcing this ban, as was the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), already stationed at Kisama for ‘security’ reasons. In Kohima Town, the onus of enforcing the ban went to the Kohima Chamber of Commerce (KCCI). As they sought to pitch the Night Carnival as a ‘family friendly’ event, this ban helped in altering public perception of this event/space. The Night Carnival is now indeed seen as a safe, family friendly event complete with Church groups performing songs and preaching the Gospel.

Despite the ban, the sale of alcohol has persisted, particularly in the Heritage Complex and at the venue(s) of the Hornbill National Rock Contest, albeit more surreptitiously. What I hope to have demonstrated through the above discussion is that the extension of the Prohibition into Hornbill Festival space and time is the culmination of a power struggle between the religious and the

secular in which the former eventually managed to regain control over an articulation of Naga cultural identity. By submitting to this hegemonic equation, the Hornbill Festival was able to legitimize itself in the public sphere. This regaining was thus pivotal to its movement from a liminal transgressive social space to the cultural heart of the Naga social calendar. Yet this control has been transformed by this struggle. A space has subsequently opened for subversion which was previously not available. The clearest evidence of this is the reopening of the debate on Prohibition in the state in general over the last five years in which anti-prohibitionists emerged from a wider spectrum of society, including even members of the Church. Their polemic was noticeably bolder and more vociferous resulting in a formidable lobby to lift the Prohibition. Here again, a power struggle ensued and the Prohibition stayed. What these struggles have managed to do is to the rupture the power of the Church over Naga cultural identity. Many adults and youth encountered and interviewed during data collection freely admitted to drinking recreationally and openly argued for a culture of drinking. For them, this practice was not viewed as contrary to Naga cultural identity but rather as something that could be part of it.

Naga cultural identity may be conceived of as a hybridity. It is at once an amalgam of a range of other cultural identities but also none of these. Homi Bhabha's work may be employed to understand the hybridisation of Naga Cultural Identity and its location in/as the Hornbill Festival. According to Bhabha (1990:210), "culture is a signifying or symbolic activity. The articulation of cultures is possible not because of the familiarity or similarity of *contents* but all cultures are symbol-forming and subject-constituting interpellative practices." Hence the meaning(s) of culture are ascribed through processes of what Bhabha calls "cultural translation...a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense—imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum", it is simultaneously representation and reproduction (ibid: 210-211).

The construction/articulation of Naga cultural identity is a process of hybridisation, it "bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it" (Bhabha 1990: 211). The Nagas' ethnic heritage, Christianity, Naga nationalism and the Indian state as well as modernity and globalization all act as "originaries", referents without which a Naga cultural identity would not be possible but which at the same time are altered and re-constituted through translation. This translation/hybridity is both visible and enabled in and through the Hornbill Festival. Naga

Cultural identity and the Hornbill Festival are thus collapsed together, both hybrid. Bhabha further describes this hybridity as a “third space [as that which] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, ...” (ibid: 211). The conflation of Naga cultural identity and the Hornbill festival operates as one such third space.

By virtue of its incommensurable nature, the third space acts as a heterotopia, which according to Foucault “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986: 8). In the heterotopia of the Hornbill Festival, the actual Heritage Complex, Kohima and other venues, the space of memory and the space of future aspirations exist as superimposed layers. Each as already discussed signifying and interpellating a range of Naga cultural identities. As Nagas navigate amongst and between these spaces, they must negotiate with matrices of power that hold these structures together. However, as the discussion on Prohibition has shown, these negotiations conversely also reconstitute the matrices of power.

Just by its permanent physical presence on the map of Kohima in particular and Nagaland in general, the Hornbill Festival acts as a visual reminder of the identities it made/makes possible. The hotels, restaurants, events borne out of this one festival now survive during the rest of the year, not as relics but as alternative third spaces where the Naga cultural identity can be dis/re-articulated, thus propagating this hybridity until the next December. As these proliferate, one can observe an increasing “boldness” particularly in the youth who no longer conform to the Naga cultural identity boundaries delineated by Christian hegemony. At this point in time however, this observation runs the danger of being presumptive as the Church is also transformed by this increasing resistance, co-opting cultural modes like fashion and music for its own cause.

Even as they negotiate existing events and practices in the Hornbill Festival, each year more Nagas join the Hornbill Festival with new events that they hope will articulate what they feel is also “Naga [cultural] identity”. Nagas, particularly those living in the capital and the city of Dimapur, two hours away, view the Hornbill Festival as a site through which to articulate Naga cultural identity. The fact that this space exists for a week and is therefore transient also serves to embolden people to ‘come out’ as well as explains one of the reasons why the state apparatus and more importantly the Church, tolerates it. This heterotopic third space thus, allows for the proliferation of multiple articulations of identity, creating new encounters and challenging hegemonies that were once held to be firmly established and in the case of the Church, sacred.

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## **“May I know who is on the line?”: Technology consumption, mobile telephony and the gender question**

**Nirali Joshi**

### **Abstract**

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The paper makes a contribution to gender and technology studies and offers a contemporary critique of patriarchal forms and expressions in the information age. Amidst an ambient optimism for the potential of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the advancement of women especially in the developing world, this paper sharpens focus on mobile telephony to draw attention to the reproduction of hegemonic patriarchy that persists within them. While dominant discourses around gender and technology building up to techno feminism tend to present themselves as temporally superseding and reactionary to each other, this paper revisits them to observe how each of them remains relevant, co-existent, intertwined or conflicting in understanding the positing of information and communication technology and its leaping innovations within contemporary gender discourse and complexity.

**Keywords:** Mobile telephony, social construction of technology, gendered technology

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An advantage of brain over brawn and structure of networks instead of hierarchy is what largely valorises digital technology as capable of heralding new relationships between women and machines. However, standing tall at one end is a persisting technological divide that quite confidently places women on the side of a compromised understanding of technology. Technological ability itself is gendered in this formulation, where technological mastery is a

masculine characteristic and conversely, technological inability a feminine one. Women are for the most part passive consumers in the chain of production and use of technology, especially in the case of information technology.

In attempting to trace briefly the trajectory of the discourse on techno-feminism over the past few decades, this essay borrows from other scholarly work such as that of Wajcman (2007) and Ganito (2010). Liberal feminism, which gained momentum in the 1970s-80s, accorded and accepted an inherent value of neutrality in science, and sought solutions in terms of access, i.e. getting more women to enter science and technology (emphasising different socialisation processes and equal opportunity policies). A critique of this found voice in the accusation that such theorisation, with its focus on gender stereotypes and customary expectations, only served to deny the existence of sex differences between women and men, and in fact relocated the problem as lying within the women themselves. Both radical and social feminism then brought focus on the gendered nature of technology itself in the very way it was conceptualised and produced. For the radical feminists, gender was highlighted in the difference, with concern expressed for the male values that dominated the development of technology and making a call out for women to be better served by current technologies. Socialist feminists, with their focus on the machinery of production and use of a historical perspective to bear on the analysis of men's monopoly of technology, saw gender as not the exclusive basis of all oppression. Socialist feminism asserts that technology is definitely socially shaped, but shaped by men for the exclusion of women.

Wajcman (2007) argues that all of these approaches missed out on unravelling the prospects that technology held out for women –just not enough attention was paid to women's agency. And it is that which prompted some contemporary feminist writers such as Haraway to urge an embracing of the positive potential of science and technology. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1983), a theory defined by her as one of wholes and part, is understood to be a critique of the traditional notions of feminism in which she prompts academics to begin theorising about the digital body as virtual and physical identities became blurred. Since the 1990s -2000s, Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies have increasingly theorised an evolution of technology and gender as mutually shaped. In her own work, Wajcman (ibid.) introduces techno-feminism which seeks to bring out the significant aspect of this relationship as a co-production of gender and technology which does not end with the innovation and design process, but emphasises the connectedness of all phases of technological development. Authors such as Lauretis (2004: 12)

propose that technologies of gender concern themselves “not only with how the representation of gender is constructed by the given technology, but also how it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual whom that technology addresses”.

Within various digital technologies, the added appeal of mobile phones is located variously in their transcendence of spatial and temporal as well as of social boundaries that separate public space from private space (Archambault, 2011; Lee Dong-Hoo, 2005); in the privacy and anonymity they afford toward new behaviours and spaces; and in blurring institutional boundaries between the domestic and work worlds (Rakow and Navarro, 1993). What makes a mobile phone even more significant in this context is its multi-functionalism – it is at once a radio, telecommunications device, a camera, a storage disk and several possible other things.

Rai (2012) draws us into a theorisation that extends beyond the ‘becoming’ of the artefact into an entire ecology of mobile phones. According to Rai (2012):

*the reason the diagram of the mobile ecology is different from the landline, the STD booth, the TV, or radio is that it traverses singularities of emergent capacities and speeds of flows, and involves these fluxes in the production of a new ecology of sensation, the individuation of which can be experimented with bodily, intensively, by modulating this processes of individuation.*

With particular reference to gender dynamics, several studies are bringing in empirical evidence to argue that these new users of ICTs are, in many cases, asserting their agency in using the mobile phone in ways that have previously been unarticulated or unintended by the inventor. Within this, working systematically at one end are market surveys that constantly seek to establish usage patterns of mobile phones in terms of age, gender, socio-economic profiles etc. in order to feed into the development of specific features for consumer target groups. At the other, is a growing body of research work across global geographical and cultural contexts that is serving to bring to the fore the differences in male versus female use of mobile telephony. Through the study on the sociocultural practices and meanings ascribed to mobile phones in a low-income neighbourhood in Southern Brazil, Silva (2014) argues that while mobile phones engender conditions in which men and women interact in sociocultural dynamics that may reproduce gender hierarchies, they also hold the potential to subvert them.

Two dominant trajectories are clearly identifiable here– one that looks at how technology is gendered, and another that tries to focus on the experience-based usage of technology (and thereby its construction) by women. Both are useful in engaging in a discussion about gender in



mobile phone cultures. When viewed through the lens of the former, a cell phone in the possession of a woman is essentially a mobile device with the mobile body of a female. The ban in 2012 by a self-appointed village council of Sunderbari in the state of Bihar<sup>1</sup> on the use of mobile phones by unmarried women and girls, also by married women when indoors or in the presence of other family members points to one of the most direct implications of this placement<sup>2</sup>. This, with the unsurprising argument that mobile phones accorded increased communication to women and were leading to immoral relationships outside of the community as well as outside of marriages. In his paper based on work in North India, Doron (2007) draws attention to this projection of a personal mobile phone with a woman as an object of distrust, citing examples of daughters-in-law forbidden from continuing with the same mobile connection that they used in their natal homes. Other case studies (Silva, *ibid*) in the field from various countries indicate how certain women experience increased and stressful surveillance because of mobile phones, wherein their husbands ring them incessantly only to keep a tab on where they are.

The same physical mobility of the device with the body is also projected as a weapon for safety, with a number of mobile apps being developed to help women reach out to friends and helplines in times of danger/assault through the use of the mobile. One is yet to find enough statistical data to prove how effective or ineffective or possibly erroneous/misused the utilisation of these apps has been. In exploring how women's claim to public space in the city gets shaped, Phadke et al. (2011) refer to women who use a personal engagement with the mobile phone as a mechanism to ward off undesirable attention in public spaces. Working at another end of the spectrum are apps<sup>3</sup> that invite citizens to provide data on the extent and nature of crimes in their neighbourhoods, with the intention to provide a comprehensive mapping of grades of crime and safety across the city. Apart from their disturbing potential to colour certain neighbourhoods and

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Kishanganj-village-bans-useof-cellphones-by-girls/articleshow/17471655.cms> A similar diktat was issued by a caste body in Odisha in 2011. Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Orissa-body-bans-mobiles-among-girls/articleshow/8907452.cms?> [Accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

<sup>2</sup> Implicit to this directness is a hint at the entire range and levels of restrictions possibly in play to curb the freedom of women to own and use a mobile device.

<sup>3</sup> Such as mylocalcrime and citizencop.

localities as ambiently dangerous, how this ready reckoner to crime and danger in turn affects women's freedom to traverse the city is yet to be seen. The deployment of mobile phones in this 'defence' rhetoric through their connotation as weapons, or as a means for creating information-charged barricading against possible threats to safe manoeuvre place them amidst the larger, more profoundly worrisome context of the construction of public spaces and women's presence in them as one where the latter has to validate itself in the former through a constant quest for respectability and legitimate purpose.

Moving on, a mobile phone is also a mobile device outside a woman's body, i.e. as much in possession of other individuals that make up the social as well as physical experience of her everyday lived life. Thus while mobile phones are especially underscored for their blurring of public space and private space, it is the same that poses the greatest threat to her sense of security. In its compact multi-functionalism, the mobile phone camouflages its destructive ability to constantly record data and deploy it for subjugation/domination. Their offer of anonymity, automation and opportunity of distanced attack, along with affordability and propagation are identified by Radloff (2013) as the major attributes of ICTs that perpetuate abuse and are changing the way that women experience violence.

The question of access is resurrected both in terms of women's participation in the production of digital technology as well as the manner in which the technological product is made available for personalised use to women. Furthermore, even when women can own or use mobile phones and other technologies with ease and the support of their communities, their needs are not represented in the end products because women are often excluded from the production of ICTs, thereby resulting in services and software that may not serve to advance women. Field research is bringing in a lot of substantiating evidence that political and social structures play a very detrimental role in women's access to ICTs, and thereby ICTs can potentially create greater gender marginality. The essay now takes up a couple of contemporary examples, selected largely to highlight the manner in which the smartness/intelligence and handiness of mobile phones, and the gender lop-sidedness in their technical as well as cultural production is working to both perpetuate and create new patriarchal hierarchies, and are deployed sometimes as a simple extension of the male gaze.

**Titstare:**

Titstare is a mobile application that was introduced in 2013 at the TechCrunch Disrupt Hackathon<sup>4</sup>. Titstare was described by its makers, a twenty-something Australian designer duo, as "... an app where you take photos of yourself staring at tits." The launch was followed by an outrage on social media<sup>5</sup>. The reactions ranged from laments about how it was yet another product of the 'brogrammer'<sup>6</sup> culture that has been hotly posited as a systemic problem in the American tech industry, to it being another practice of objectifying the female body, where the male gaze is recorded and the female body, or rather specific parts of it, are distributed as a consumable, with legitimacy accorded by its formal development into an app (simultaneous to a notion of triviality as it being 'just another app'). Expectedly, at the other end was disappointment at the inability of women 'to take a joke', asking them to loosen up in their acceptance of such male engagement.

Let us now pick up on a trail of events post the Titstare launch. TechCrunch posted a formal apology<sup>7</sup> on its web site, calling the presentation "misogynistic" and acknowledging, "Sexism is a major problem in the tech industry." Pat Dickinson, partner in a start-up called Glimpse-Labs, and chief technology officer of the news site Business Insider, then made it to the news for writing in, "It is not misogyny to tell a sexist joke, or to fail to take a woman seriously, or to enjoy boobies." As expressed in an article in the New York Times dated April 2014<sup>8</sup>, this

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<sup>4</sup> An entrepreneur platform, which was the same event where another app 'Circle Shake' was introduced, with its maker demonstrating the product by simulating masturbation on stage.

<sup>5</sup> Much of which can be captured through a simple google search in the name of the app.

<sup>6</sup> An amalgamation of qualitative characteristics of nerdiness + alpha maleness, and more technically, of the words 'programmer' and 'bro'; the latter a term of endearment members of fraternities in American universities and party enthusiasts use to refer to each other. This rises beyond identifying the frugal representation of women in technology as a supply problem (availability of a much smaller pool of qualified and interested women), or generated from wider societal issues, to bring attention to the sexist culture that dominates participation in this particular profession.

<sup>7</sup> "An Apology From TechCrunch"; Posted by Tsotsis, A. Eldon, E (Sep 2013) Retrieved from <http://techcrunch.com/2013/09/08/an-apology-from-techcrunch/> [Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.html?_r=0). [Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

again played out interestingly as his business partner, Ms. Shevinsky quit the company in offence over her partner's public views on the Titstare incident. She was soon to rejoin it later upon insistence of Pat Dickinson, with certain terms and conditions laid out which included a confirmation that all of his public statements would be sanctioned and signed off by her first and that more women be included on the Board.

The article highlights several contradictions and complexities inherent to the participation of women in computer-engineering technology, especially programming. These are apparent by the select listing of some of the statements made by or about the author throughout the feature (reproduced here):

*It was about computer-engineering culture and her relationship with it. She had enjoyed being "one of the bros" — throwing back whiskey and rubbing shoulders with M.I.T. graduates. And if that sometimes meant fake-laughing as her colleagues cracked jokes about porn, so be it.*

*"For years, all I wanted to do was work and code and make software," she said in an interview. "That's why I didn't care about feminism. I just wanted to build stuff."*

*"My general issue with the coverage of women in tech is that women in the technology press are talked about in the context of being women, and men are talked about in the context of being in technology," said a technical woman who would speak only on condition of anonymity because she did not want to be part of an article about women in tech. "I'm also very good at my job, and as a technologist, I want to be recognized for that and not because I have breasts."*

Identifying critical issues in Ms. Shevinsky's interview is not so difficult. She herself coughs up the problematic through the various statements she makes –that she would have nothing to do with feminism because of a more unadulterated desire to partake in the building of the technology itself. In saying that, she directly pitches the two at opposing ends to each other. Her perpetuating of computer engineering culture as symbolised by performances of masculinity or endorsements of it, reinforces the argument of cultural techno feminism that technology is culturally created in symbols and meanings as essentially masculine.

Through the accounts of several female employees, the configurational (social, cultural, physical, associational) space of start-ups is being especially highlighted for their dominant sexist nature. Populated largely by young people with an almost normative culture of putting in long hours amidst founders and employees, who are often assembled by looping in likeminded friends, this

arena is where lines between work and social life are understood to be highly blurred, and desirably so. Of greater concern is the fact that these start-ups pride themselves on a lack of bureaucracy, which often implies an absence of big-company layers such as human resources departments.

The above-mentioned article helps highlight the strong differences of opinion, even among women in tech, about how to make the culture more welcoming. While some continue to push for increased employment of women as engineers at the founding of a company, in management and in conducting of job interviews, others advocate creating women-only tech events and programmes. Several denounce this constant highlighting of sexism, making a case for bringing out positive examples as encouragement to women's participation. This case study finds a fair amount of consonance with the critique of liberal feminism of the 1970s-80s which emphasised that technologies had a masculine image, not only because they were dominated by men, but because they worked to incorporate symbols, metaphors and values that have masculine connotations (Wajcman 2004). Sex-stereotyping of technology served to discourage women from entering technology as an activity, or rather the world of technology as a cosmos, doing so only at the risk of forsaking their femininity. The statistics of participation of women in the creation of digital technology in India mirror a similar scenario. A report by WageIndicator (2012) revealed the ICT industry in India to be highly male dominated and reflective of a gender pay gap between males and females to the tune of about 29%. The reasons attributed to this were the underrepresentation of women in supervisory positions as compared to non-supervisory ones, perceptions about women's limited capabilities and societal and familial pressures that prevent them from productive and committed inputs in terms of time and effort, and also the added cost that ensuring compliance to women's safety brings on to the organisations. Moreover, the percentage of women employed in the IT industry in India has actually decreased from 26% in 2010 to 22% in 2012 even though the number of jobs created in this sector continues to increase annually.

### **Japanese Dating Sim Games**

The second example comes from none other than the technology-high, gizmo-wonderland of Japan. This is the country that is now worrying about a declining birth rate and a supposedly

disturbing decline in ‘carnal desires’ of its young men. In the second article<sup>9</sup> BBC’s Anita Rani quotes a member of the Japan Family Planning Association, as describing many young Japanese men as ‘herbivores’ - passive and lacking carnal desire. The larger article is a feature on the rising relationships between Japanese men and their virtual girlfriends.

Rani describes the growing *Otaku* culture in Japanese men, where an increasing number of Japanese men are choosing to engage in continued, clandestine relationships with virtual girlfriends. Interestingly, *Otaku*, a Japanese term originally referring to ‘another house’ or ‘another family’, has taken on a very derogatory connotation in contemporary time, now being indicative of an undesirable condition of being at home for the lack of any other social life. While *Otaku* is deployed in reference to a type of geek, however, it could also refer to *anime* or *manga* fans. *Manga* in Japanese refers to comics and cartooning, and are thus reproduced as two-dimensional print products. *Anime* are animations, and in show format. Both *manga* and *anime* are globally deployed to specifically indicate Japanese-stylised and Japanese-disseminated comics and animation. With their long standing and widespread proliferation and patronage in Japanese society, *manga* and *anime* have been widely discussed for their boxed demographics, and their discrete yet blurring categorisations in terms of gender and age<sup>10</sup>.

Dating sim games in Japan present an interface of both *manga* and *anime* (although it is commonly *manga* that are developed into *anime*). Taylor (2007) distinguishes dating sim games from other video games for remaining largely two-dimensional, even while the medium offered the scope for richer three dimensional graphic content. The author attributes this to dating-sim games’ greater focus on characters. For long after they were introduced in the 1980’s, dating sim games remained confined to the Japanese video and computer game market, but of late, they are taking form as websites and mobile apps too.

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9 Rani A. (2013) ‘The Japanese men who prefer virtual girlfriends to sex’. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24614830>. [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

10 Amongst the four broad categories of manga, Shonen was initially just manga for youth, which then got gradually transformed to a demographic of young men, where Shojo crawled in to take the thus generated vacuum for similar work that catered to young women. Shojo is meant for girls or ‘about to be adult women’, Sienen for the intended demographic of men aged between 18-40 and Josei is manga for adult women written with much higher maturity levels.

It is easy to identify a fairly significant difference in the manner and mould in which these games are created and offered for use to men and women. In a study on Japanese dating sim games, Taylor (ibid: p. 198)<sup>11</sup> suggests that while the female characters in them include both complex and simple figures, male characters are "... essentially empty shells. They are characterized not by their personalities but by their lack thereof, have no outstanding traits or personalities, are mediocre students, and are not especially popular with women."

In 2008, Webkare (translating into web boyfriend), a combination social networking site and online game<sup>12</sup> in which young Japanese women attempt to hook up with one of four *anime* suitors found instant and widespread success in user proliferation. Here, players interact with their virtual crushes through short cartoon sequences that allow for very little actual interaction. Important events in the storyline are saved digitally in a memories album on the site. More recent in this category are the '*otome*' - a range of romance apps by Japanese app developer Voltage that target young Japanese women. While acknowledging that dating games in Japan were long confined to men and boys, these *otomes* are described by their makers as a response to the identification of a potent market considering the widespread use of mobile phones amongst young women.

Virtual companions are not a new concept in Japan, a country known for the widespread acceptance of virtual pets and virtual children. Also, this life with the virtual partner is virtual at various levels- the technology itself as well as the construction of the self that is a protagonist in the virtual life of virtual love offered by the virtual technology. Men in their late thirties are sometimes actually high school students in this game. While rendering their real life existence as an 'other', what is more strongly coded is the otherness of real women in Japan – wives, girlfriends, potential partners, or even none of the above. A particular quote by a young Japanese man featured in Rani's article referred to Japanese women as '3D women'. These real life women

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11 Various dating sim types are identified by the author as: bishojo games, in which a playable male character interacts with attractive anime-style girls; GxB or otome games, where a playable female character dates male characters; and BL ('boys' love) games, where the characters are homosexual. Bishojo games are the most common.

<sup>12</sup> <http://web-kare.jp/>. [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2014]



are represented as demanding – emotionally, physically, materially, with a relationship with them culminating most often, and undesirably, in marriage.

In an online media article<sup>13</sup> that ponders on whether and how the Japanese dating-sim games would be able to tap into the western market, lifestyle journalist Dickson points to the distortion in the fact that despite *otome*'s staunchly asexual character in view of the fact that they are ideally aimed at younger Japanese women who may not have had a sexual experience before, the CEO of Voltage claimed that many *otome* games are actually played by much older women. In the same article, the author further identifies the element of rape fantasy and non-consensuality, which runs throughout even SFW<sup>14</sup> as the most problematic trope associated with *otome* games, not to mention *manga* and *anime* in general. This could be identified in their constant resurrections of 'shy, weak-willed female protagonists swept off their feet by eerie, verbally abusive, high-cheekboned androgynes'. Dickson also had the CEO elaborate that the North American releases would 'de-stress' the damsel-in-distress trope to give form to more independent female characters and more masculine men.

However, Rani's article seems to point at a more serious and immediate construction of the virtual girlfriends in the life of the Japanese men. This is done by simultaneous highlighting of the fact in several surveys that even when Japanese men and women are in relationships, they have very little sex. This construction and the seemingly nationalist concerns that accompany it are deeply patriarchal. By suggesting that one of the reasons that Japanese men are taking to a virtualisation of their intimate world is as an escape from committed relationships, and that too because many young Japanese men are pessimistic about the future pushes forth the conception that it is the men who are torchbearers of secure national futures. The discussion takes an even more sinister tone when this so called disillusionment of young Japanese men is seen to contribute to a demographic plunge, putting the future of an entire nation at stake. The article lacks an acknowledgement whatsoever of the possible effects that this entire phenomenon has

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<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/>. [Accessed on 13th September 2014]

<sup>14</sup> Internet slang or shorthand for Safe for Work.

on the citizenship and participation of women in the ideation of a national future. This is corroborated by Taylor (ibid: 103) as well in saying that:

*The interconnection between fantasy and reality is a key element of otaku culture. As a rejection of societal expectations for them to get married and support a household, an ideal based on the salaryman figure (the man who dedicates himself to his company to support his family), otaku choose instead to delve into a fantasy world of anime, manga, and video games.*

*Many otaku claim that they express themselves better through computers and virtual identities than they do in real life; for these people, their virtual self is the 'real them,' continuing to blur the line between fantasy and reality. Like young women who delay marriage and become 'parasite singles,' otaku may also hold full-time jobs—but their income goes toward consuming fantasy in the form of dating-sim games, trips to maid cafés, anime and manga paraphernalia, and so on. Otaku therefore represent a rejection of adulthood by resisting work, women, and the salaryman ideal.*

Urged by a perceived dubiousness of some of the comments on Japan's social situation, a blog article<sup>15</sup> works to dismantle the bearings of Rani's proposition. By first attempting to draw possible correlations between increased levels of education and low birth-rates, the author eventually tries to drive home the point that low birth-rates could be attributed to various reasons, that they were not unique to Japan, and certainly could not be attributed to the apparent lack of interest in sex. He points to ethno-centrism by arguing instead that talking about a lack of enough sex in eastern cultures was a western obsession to derive a contrast with their own societies.

### **In conclusion**

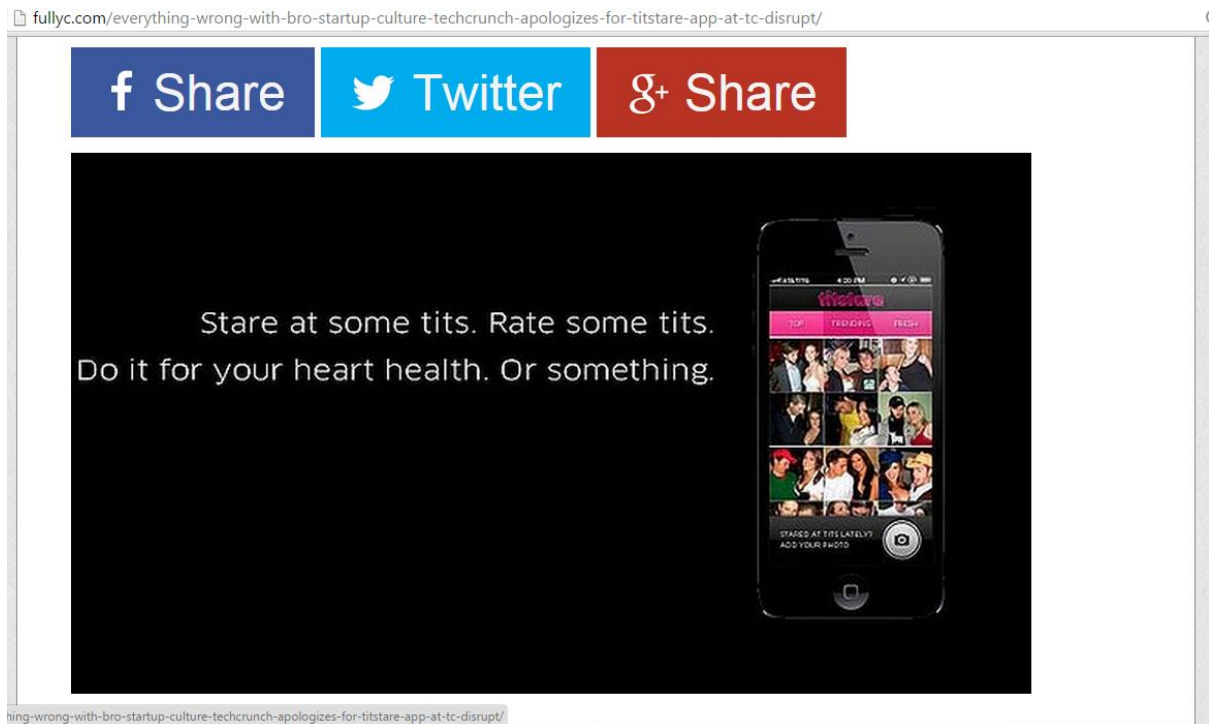
Using mobile telephony in focus and as a point of entry, the above illustrations highlight how the discourses on technology and feminism remain both complicated in themselves and inter-twined, owing to the simultaneous realities they bring into this context, as also in each setting itself up as

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<sup>15</sup> By Japanese author, blogger and YouTuber, Yuta Aoki. Retrieved from <http://www.yutaaoki.com/blog/top5-mistakes-journalists-make-about-sexless-japan>. [Accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2014]

solutioning or interjecting in the face of the problematic of the other (such as measures to correct male dominance in tech by ensuring women's presence in critical work profiles, or in the promotion of women-only tech events). This may render the very effort of examining the relationship between mobile phones and gender inequality as inadequate, reductionist and futile, considering the number of other social, cultural and material variables actively in play. However, while reflecting both the positive and negative potentiality of digital technology at large, mobile phones present a special case for attention due to their exponential rates of user proliferation. Greater attention is sought towards unravelling the negative social impacts of mobile technology, especially in their implication in perpetuating gender inequalities and reinforcing gender stereotypes and power equations, and the resulting violence against women. The issues vary geographically and culturally, as brought out by various case studies emerging from across the globe. Furthermore, it feels valid enough to agree with Wajcman (2004) that while women have been actively engaged in constructing hybrid transgendered identities through their consumption of new media, the possibility for and the fluidity of gender discourse in the virtual world is constrained by the material world.

**Annexures:**



*Figure: Promotional material for Titstare.*

*Source:*<http://fullyc.com/everything-wrong-with-bro-startup-culture-techcrunch-apologizes-for-titstare-app-at-tc-disrupt/>

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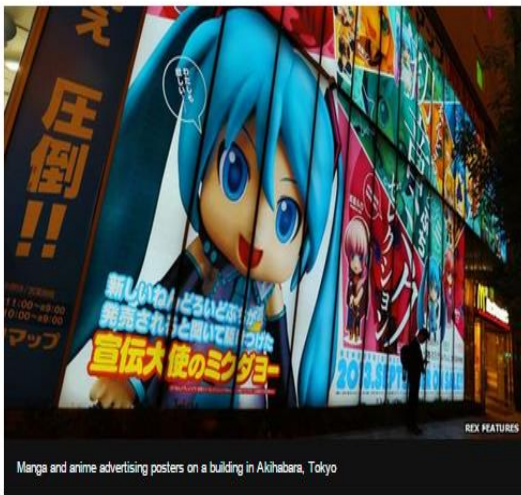
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Magazine

## The Japanese men who prefer virtual girlfriends to sex

By Anita Rani  
Presenter, This World

24 October 2013 Magazine



Manga and anime advertising posters on a building in Akihabara, Tokyo

Unless something happens to boost Japan's birth rate, its population will shrink by a third between

In today's Magazine


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Thousands line the streets in totemal rain in Singapore to see the funeral procession of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.  
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**Briton's father in plea to airlines**  
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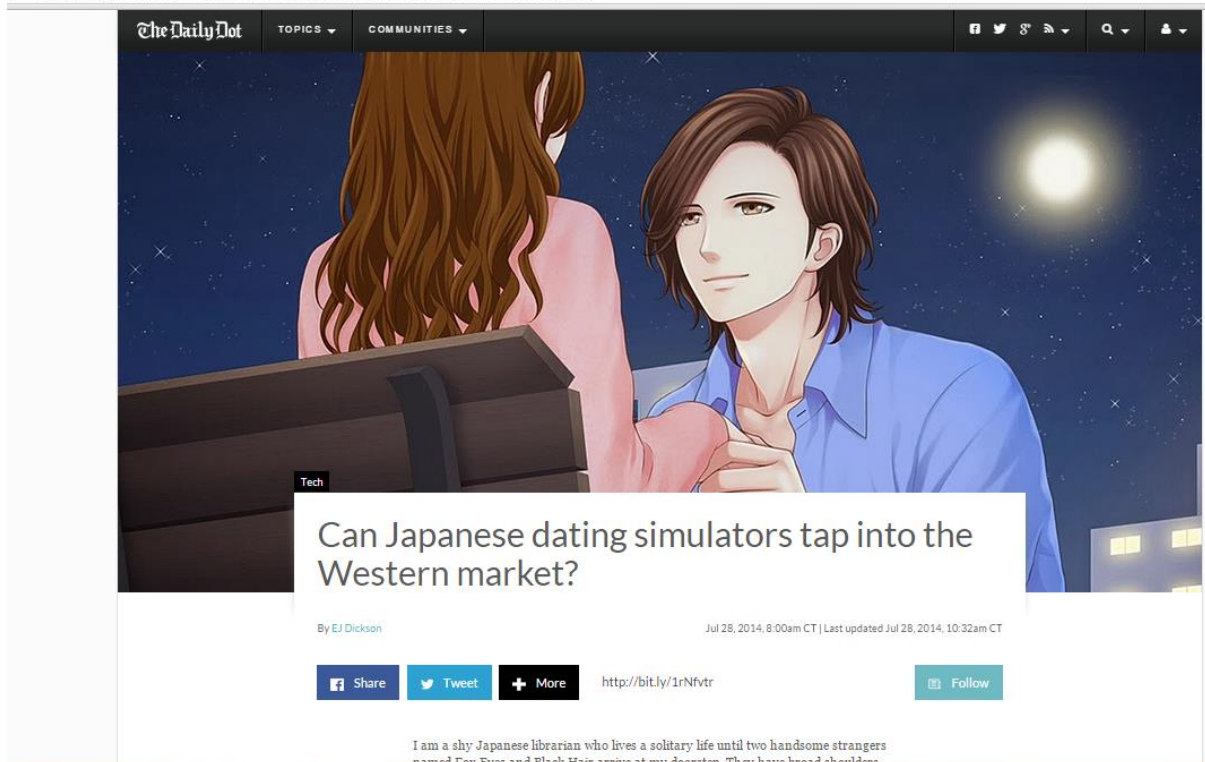


**Drum roll**  
The six-second solo that's been copied in 1,500 songs

Figure: BBC article on Japanese men's companionship preferences.

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24614830>

www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/



*Figure: Graphic from a Japanese dating sim game.*

*Source: <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/voltage-japanese-romance-simulators/>*

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# Community Radio and Collective Memory: A mapping of material media practices at a Community Radio Station in Telangana

Madhavi Manchi

## Abstract

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This paper is based on Ph.D. work currently being done by the author. An attempt is made here to move away from an anthropocentric understanding of media technology. Here, I extending ideas from material media ecology practice, affect studies and Cybercultures to a case of a community radio in Telangana, India. This radio station is embedded within a larger biodiversity movement underway in the region, run with the help of a Non-Governmental Organisation. In doing so I argue that the station serves important archival and mnemonic function within the larger movement. Secondly, I also argue that the specific media practices that have emerged in this context tend to fray the processes of “cultural production” within what Joe Karaganis (2007) calls the “industrial organization of culture” or the “culture industry”. Finally, I also draw parallels between this case of community radio and Guattari’s idea of Free Radio.

Keywords: community radio, telangana, collective memory, free radio, affect, non-representation, biodiversity

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“...it is less the question of the subversive use of a technical media form than the generation of a media, or rather post-media, ecology that is a self-referential network for an unforeseen processual production of subjectivity amplifying itself via technical means”

-Michael Goddard: *Felix and Alice in Wonderland*

Amanda Williams and Michael Merten, in a 2009 study, looked at how adolescents used online social networking sites as a means to cope with the sudden death of peer. This study came into circulation at an interesting time. It was just a few years after social networking site Facebook had moved out of limited college campus usage to the larger public domain, and sites like Orkut and Myspace had seen increase in popularity. The study was one of the many (in the preceding two decades) that was preoccupied with what, *new*<sup>1</sup> media, and technology were “*doing to us*”. While, other aspects of this study are not of importance here, their study highlights one point which is of interest here. They observed that adolescents continued to post on the deceased peer’s online page and “talk” to them (Williams & Merten 2009: 82). The authors see this as a coping mechanism in the process of bereavement; however, this phenomenon opens up a host of other questions regarding our relationship with technology. The number of times we comment on the complex relationships we share with media technology is innumerable. But what does this really mean? The idea that people still “talk” to people who have passed on would, I argue, calls for a reconfiguration in our understanding of identity, rituals of grieving, and, more relevant to this study, of memory and cultural practice in relation to media technology. Further, one could ask does this apply only to new media or is there a need to rework how we approach the study of “old” or analogue media technology?

As a starting point for such a reconfiguration, there are a number of scholars who have stressed the need to move away from an emphasis on media content and a social constructivist approach and adopt a more non-linear and non-representational way of studying media technologies. This has especially gained strength in the wake of the “digital revolution”. An assertion by Andy Clarke (2003) on cyborgs is appropriate in this regard. He states that the emergence of cyborgs is not a phenomenon of today. We have always been cyborgs, in so far as we understand them as human beings’ capacities being extended by the technology they interact with. Humans, therefore, have always been inserted in a social, biotechnological matrix, whether it is with our watches, phones, or pencils.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “new” media has often had some scholars hail this category enthusiastically and others who have questioned the “newness” of new media. For one account that complicates these debates see Wendy Chun (2006) “Introduction: Did Somebody Say New Media?” in Wendy Chun and Thomas Keenan (eds) *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (For a complete citation, see Bibliography).

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this line of thinking and joins in the assertion that there is a need to move away from an anthropocentric understanding of media technologies. The emphasis on a non-anthropocentric approach to media technologies and practices is also intertwined with similar debates within the areas of Ethnoecology and biodiversity conservation. Here, I extend ideas from material media ecology practice, Affect Studies, Cybercultures, and Ethnoecology to a case of a community radio<sup>2</sup> station in Telangana, India. This radio station is embedded within a larger biodiversity movement underway in the region, run with the help of a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) called the Deccan Development Society (DDS). In extending this line of thinking to this particular case, I argue that the station serves important archival and mnemonic functions within the larger movement. Secondly, I argue that the specific media practices that have emerged in this context tend to fray the processes of “cultural production” within what Joe Karaganis (2007) calls the “industrial organization of culture” or the “culture industry”. This fraying, in turn, also ties back to the challenge that DDS poses to what it sees as the homogenising tendencies of globalisation and neoliberalism. Finally, I argue that a non-anthropocentric approach, such as the one outlined in this paper, helps highlight and value concrete embodied practices that preserve diversity and multiplicities. Some of these practices tend to emerge, like DDS, within the margins or the grey areas and as alternatives to the dominant, hegemonic practices. Such efforts need urgent recognition and even celebration to counter the aforementioned homogenising forces.

The rest of the paper is divided roughly into six sections. The next section provides an introduction to the Deccan Development Society and its various programmes and how they are geared towards conserving agricultural biodiversity. Also included here are brief notes on the history of the Telangana region, where DDS is located. In the third section I develop arguments for the use of a non-anthropocentric or a non-representational approach as mentioned earlier. I start with a critique of social constructivism and critical realism and move on to expand on two concepts- affect and assemblages and their relevance to this study. Section four provides a detailed analysis of Sangam Radio at DDS. I start by locating the initial phase of narrowcasting adopted by Sangam Radio within the larger context of the Community Radio movement in

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I take two definitions of Community Radio. The first is AMARC, the World Association for Community Radio Broadcasting criteria which states that community radio “has three aspects: non-profit making, community ownership, and control and community participation” (as quoted in Pavarala and Malik, 2007: 16). The second definition by Tabing states that a community radio station is “one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community” (as quoted in Pavarala and Malik, 2007:17). See Bibliography for full citations.

India. I then describe the media practices of the Radio station in its current phase of broadcasting. The last two sections draw out the two main arguments of this paper. The first one argues that Sangam Radio serves important archival and mnemonic functions within the biodiversity movement of the DDS community. Secondly I argue that the media practices of Sangam Radio, tied in with the general practices of biodiversity conservation at DDS ; serve to resist the dominant systems of media and agriculture. I close the paper with some concluding comments, highlighting why there is need for practices such as those of DDS.

### **The Deccan Development Society (DDS)**

The Deccan Development Society, as mentioned above is a grass-root level organisation that works with women's self-help groups or *Sangams* as they are locally known. It was founded in 1983, by a group of professionals from various fields. They got together to take over a rural development project initiated and later abandoned by an industrial house (DDS -DDS Team 2015.). Today they work predominantly with (albeit not restricted to) Dalit women in the Zaheerabad, Medak district of Telangana. They work across seventy-five villages across four mandals of Zaheerabad, about a 100 kilometres outside Hyderabad city.

DDS could be cast as one of many organisations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in response to a growing, world-wide call to resolve biodiversity and environmental degradation (for example the Slow Food Movement in Italy and subsequently spreading across the world). This is especially so after the signing of the Convention of Biological Diversity at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Nazarea notes in this regard that, "Since the first call to arms in the 1980s, biological and social scientists have been analysing causes and trends and fashioning solutions" (2006: 319-320). Starting out to increase food security in the region, they have over the years developed community oriented programmes through which they aim to achieve various autonomies. These include autonomy over food production, seeds, natural resources, market, and media (DDS- About Us 2015). As they state, DDS, and its sangams have:

*...a vision of consolidating these village groups into vibrant organs of primary local governance and federate them into a strong pressure lobby for women, the poor and Dalits. A host of continuing dialogues, debates, educational and other activities with the people, facilitated by the Society, try to translate this vision into a reality (DDS- About Us 2015).*

DDS has a strong stand against genetically modified crops, chemical based agriculture, and monocropping. It has also been critical of the Green Revolution in India, arguing that it has

“caused untold deprivation to small and marginal farmers (DDS-Food Security: Four Major Steps 2015). The Green Revolution has led to the introduction of such things as genetically modified or high yielding variety crops, high input based farming and monocropping into the Indian agricultural system. More specifically they state:

*The Green Revolution model of agriculture, which started in India in the 1960s with a focus on varieties of seeds that respond to high external inputs, resulted in widespread monocrops and the chemicalisation of agriculture, destroying in its wake much of the agricultural biodiversity of the irrigated tracts. Nevertheless, large pockets of the Green Revolution model have continued to sustain not only their biodiversity, but also the farmers’ knowledge associated with this biodiversity (Ibid).*

Its main efforts are aimed towards the promotion of millet and other food systems indigenous to the area, as well as what is today popularly termed as ‘organic’ farming techniques. Most importantly, it works to reverse the degradation of biodiversity and the ecosystem of the region. They have three guiding principles as the basic foundation for all their programmes. These are gender justice, environmental soundness and people’s knowledge (DDS - DDS Team 2015). With these principles, the various DDS programmes have gone on to address more than just the issue of food security and agricultural biodiversity. They work towards a vision of reviving indigenous knowledge and practices to be able to build a better, more equitable world. There is a strong connection with the past and the old- with their collective memory which reverberates through all their schemes and programmes. Thus, it matters to them not only what crops are grown, but also how they are grown. With a revival of traditional seeds, is a revival of traditional agricultural and cultural practices. The festivals, folk stories and folksongs and their preservation then, are as important to them as the seeds. To put it in brief, DDS’s biodiversity conservation efforts are what Ethnoecologists call *in vivo* or conservation as a *way of life* (see for example, Hunn 1999 and Nazarea 2005).

The network of DDS *Sangams* works towards the implementation of their programmes in each affiliated village. Each of these *Sangams* is split into various committees and sub-committees that correspond with the larger DDS programmes. These committees work to achieve the goals of each of the programmes in their respective villages, thus decentralising the day-to-day functioning of DDS. The DDS board and its members has over the years assumed more of an advisory role, and helps with raising funds or sponsorship for its programmes. Starting with a micro-finance initiative, DDS has expanded to introduce a Community Grain Fund, a Community Gene Bank, a Farmer’s Science Center or *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK), Balwadies and

a *Paccha Shaale* (Green School), Village Medicinal Commons, Mobile Biodiversity Festivals and Community Media initiatives (Participatory Video and Community Radio) (Field Notes, November 2011). A brief description of these follows.

Each village has a day care centres or *bahvadies* across villages to help care for children whose parents go to work. The schools, called *Paccha Shaale* or ‘green schools’ aim to provide not just mainstream education but an all-round education by including in their syllabus resources from indigenous knowledge systems. The Community Gene Banks, simply called Seed Banks established in each village work as storehouses for native seeds and landraces of the region. Many villagers approach the *Sangam* seed banks to borrow seeds from them. This is coupled with a Community Grain Fund or the Alternative Public Distribution System (APDS) that works on the localised procurement and distribution of food. The APDS has proven to be a powerful alternative to the state run Public Distribution Systems, by increasing food security in the region with many villages achieving complete security. It has also worked to include millets within the APDS, reducing the dominance of and dependence on wheat and rice. This has further helped the cause, bringing back traditional millets into the diets of the people (Field Notes, September 2012).

The *Krishi Vigyana Kendra* (KVK), or the Farmers’ Science Centre works to record, preserve, and encourage the use of local and traditional agricultural systems and farming practices, as opposed to what they call market driven farming practices. It is a place that connects the activists and scientists with the farmers, often to produce collaborative projects. Unlike other KVKs in India, DDS’s KVK is centred on traditional practices and farmer’s knowledge or research. Instead of just imparting the technology or knowledge that is state approved, the KVK works to preserve and legitimise the farmer’s experience and practices as equally important as those of an agricultural scientist (DDS-Activities-Krishi Vigyan Kendra 2015).

DDS and the *Sangams* also host an annual Mobile Biodiversity Festival that sees the entire community come together to celebrate their traditional crops and farming methods. This usually coincides with the Hindu winter harvest festival of *Sankranti*, and is a month long affair. The festival consists of a caravan of bullock carts, which travels to all seventy five affiliate villages over the month. With the visit of the bullock cart in each village, the members hold food and film festivals, as well as village level meetings to discuss their concerns/grievances with regard to their farming futures. These also include discussions and debates on agricultural and biodiversity policies. The Inaugural and Closing ceremonies are colourful gatherings, consisting of folk songs,



stories and dance performances native to the region, with children's quiz contests and awards presented to villages and individuals for their contributions/achievements. Apart from all this, DDS has also started a small café called Café Ethnic in the nearby town of Zaheerabad, which serves up millet based cuisine. They also have Mobile markets and have produced a Millet Cookbook (Field Notes, January 2012).

As mentioned earlier the overall emphasis of DDS's goals is to work with the community to enhance local practices, resources, and knowledge systems, as opposed to those driven by commercial enterprises, some government schemes, or other third parties. In trying to realize these efforts DDS also started a Community Media Team (CMT) that works pre-dominantly with Community Radio and Participatory Video. This is seen as an effort to democratise media and give a voice to people that have been silenced. The members of the CMT are predominantly drawn from the women's *Sangams* and play important roles in the creation and dissemination of its media content. The most unique aspect of the Community Radio is the content of its broadcasts and how closely tied they are to the daily lives of the people of Medak. The seasons, rain, crop, actions, interactions, festivities, celebrations, fights, health, stories, and songs all shape the content of any given show. It emerges from the locales and the people that inhabit it and goes back to them.

In sum, what pervades all of DDS's programmes is a sense of nostalgia as well as an effort to overcome what Virginia Nazarea (2005: x) calls "organised forgetting" induced by commercial agriculture, especially encouraged by the Green Revolution. Over the next two sub sections, I develop two separate but connected points- one on the history of the Telangana region, and the significance of the term *Sangam*, to help lay a more detailed background to DDS and the region it works in.

**Some historical notes on the Telangana region.** Telangana lies on the Deccan Plateau of South India. Vastly an arid to semi-arid region, the agriculture here has been rain-fed. Evidence has shown that along with dry land agriculture, the region developed a pastoral lifestyle since prehistoric times (Talbot 2001: 23). Through the Medieval period, the region, along with what is the current state of Andhra Pradesh (post bifurcation) was ruled by the Satavahana dynasty (200 B.C. - 300 A.D), the Eastern and Western Chalukyas (624 A.D. to mid-8<sup>th</sup> century), and the Kakatiya dynasty (1175 A.D- 1324 A.D.). From the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D till around the mid -1950s the region came under the reign of the Bahamani and Vijayanagar kingdoms, the Qutubshahi dynasty and Asif Jahi Nizams or the Nizams of Hyderabad respectively (Thapar 1966).

It was under the last of the Nizams that the region saw the one of the most important uprising in Telangana history. This was from 1946-1951, and events of the period continue to influence politics here to date. The people of Telangana had seen extreme oppression at the hands of feudal landlords under the Nizams. It was first through the Andhra Mahasabha (AMS) and later the Communist Party in the 1940s that people were rallied and organised to fight off this exploitation, take back lands and redistribute them. To quell the uprising the Nizam organised their own militia called the Razakars who added to the oppression through torture, killing and rape. The Indian National Congress and Indian Union (since 1947) did not intervene till 1948. It was this intervention through the army that ultimately also played a part in the annexure of the state to the India Union (Sundarayya 1973a, Sundarayya 1973b). Parallel to this set of events, was the carving out of the Andhra<sup>3</sup> State from the state of Madras in 1953. It was in 1956, amongst much controversy and opposition that the state of Hyderabad and Andhra were merged into one with a Gentleman's agreement that included provisions for people from Telangana regions to help especially with the improvement of employment and education (Forrester 1970:11-12). The region saw an uprising in 1969, because the people of Telangana felt like this Gentlemen's Agreement was not adhered to; but it was quelled through an intervention by the then Congress government through promises of more provisions (*Ibid*: 12).

In 2001, Kalvakuntla Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) started the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) with the sole agenda of creation of a separate Telangana state (Jafri: 2001). The struggle for this separate state intensified from 2009 and ended with the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in February 2014. KCR took over as the Chief Minister in June 2014 and the city of Hyderabad is to remain a shared capital for the next ten years (The Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act 2014). Given this background, it makes the location of DDS in Medak unique economically, politically and socio-culturally, especially given that Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, and KCR have won their Lok Sabha seat from the constituency of Medak.

**Significance of the term *Sangam*.** Continuing with the discussion in the previous sections, I turn to outline the significance of the term *Sangam*. One connotation of this term has connections with some history of the Telangana discussed above. To recall, the self-help groups

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<sup>3</sup> The state of Andhra during this period is different from the state of Hyderabad as well as present day state of Andhra Pradesh. What is referenced as the Andhra state here was carved out by merging Telugu speaking districts with the state of Madras and had Karnool for its capital. The Hyderabad state was the princely state under the Nizams and approximates the present day state of Telangana.

of DDS as well as their radio station are named *Sangam*. The name also recurs elsewhere within the DDS community. For instance, the Participatory Video team has a film named *Sangam Shot*<sup>4</sup>. This term has some historic significance in the Telangana region. In the Telangana People's Struggle of 1946-1951 the Communist Party had a major role to play in rallying people to the cause. They had village level units which were referred to by the people as *Sangam*. For instance Thirumali recounts that "the cultivators of *Betavolu makta* lands, the peasants from Munagala Zamindari and the Suryapet AMS<sup>5</sup> workers came to the session singing songs and shouting slogans '*Join the Sangam*', 'Witness Andhra Sabha'" (1996:169) (emphasis added). Take as another instance, Sundarayya<sup>6</sup>, talking of the heroic acts of the *Lambadi* community during the uprising, where he writes, "under the leadership of the AMS or the *Sangham* (sic) as it was known to the people, took up sticks and slings, planted red flags in their fields and, marching up and down, protected their fields, drove away the goondas and tilled their lands" (1973a:18-19) (emphasis added). The *Sangams* became the nuclei of the movement in every village. It was the place where people came to seek justice, right wrongs and managed to abolish exploitative practices like the *Vetti* at a systemic level. The role *Sangam* leaders and entire village *Sangams* played are often the premise for many a song and stories of the period.

While the above is one connotation of the term, it also has a connection to the religion of Buddhism in general. Sourayan Mookerjee (2010: 111), in this regard writes, "The term *Sangham* (sic) derives from the Buddhist conception of an egalitarian and cooperative political community that was formed by the Buddhist movement in the fifth century BCE". In his study of DDS, he argues that *Sangam* in this particular context "can be understood in light of the revival of

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Participatory Video team learnt various camera angles by giving them names from their local linguistic context. So for instance, a high angle shot, where the camera is placed on a tripod and shoots angles lower than eye-level is called a Patel shot. This is because the angle and camera placement resembles a landlord or Patel sitting on a high bench in village meetings. Another instance is the term Sangam Shot, which is the name for a camera angle placed at eye-level and hence signifies equality.

<sup>5</sup> AMS stands for the Andhra Mahasabha. Initially the Community Party made inroads into the region through the AMS. Gradually one faction within the AMS, sometime during the 1940s aligned itself completely with the Communist Party later leading to a split. See Thirumali's 'The Political Pragmatism of the Communists in Telangana, 1938-48' (1996) for an extensive account of the AMS's contact with the Communist Party and the subsequent split in the AMS leadership. The role of specific leaders, members and the roles they played in the armed struggle outlined in detail is particularly useful.

<sup>6</sup> Sundarayya (1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1973d) provides a detailed, four part account of the Telangana Struggle of 1946-51 from the Communist Party's perspective. This is an interesting account as Sundarayya himself was deeply involved in the struggle. See Bibliography for full citations.

Buddhism by Dalit mass conversions in the twentieth century” (*Ibid.* 111). Keeping in mind these two strains of history behind the word *Sangam*, I find that it might be hard to pinpoint which particular legacy might be a force circulating within the DDS community. It could be either one or a combination of both. However, what I do take as a common from both is the idea of *Sangam*<sup>7</sup> being synonymous with a collective, cooperative or meeting. It is this meaning and this spirit that is often reflected in the many programs of DDS. Thus, I would like to set the idea of a *Sangam* as a collective as a sort of background score to the entire paper. In the next section, I will elaborate on the non-anthropocentric approach mentioned in the introduction and discuss how I adopt the approach to this study.

### **A Non-Representational Approach**

DDS’s biodiversity conservation can be classified as what Nazarea (2005: 17) refers to as “*in vivo*” or “*conservation as a way of life*” as opposed to conservation by design. Hence, it is not just plant genetic resources or seeds that need preservation. Such an approach to conservation of diversity requires the unearthing of knowledge and of practices, rituals, and skills – cultural and agricultural – that are connected to these seeds/crops. These practices, rituals, and skills are embedded in the complex realities of everyday life. They are not only symbolic gestures or utterance; they are also embodied utterances and gestures. A similar proposition was made in the introduction vis-à-vis our relationship with technology. To recount, Andy Clarke (2003) suggests that we are constantly inserted in a social biotechnological matrix. To provide an illustration of this take how Connerton (1989: 76-77) analyses the act of writing as constituted of both the muscular action of inscribing letters on a surface as well as the symbolic component of alphabets- i.e. acts of incorporation and inscription respectively. To quote Connerton:

*For it is certainly the case that many practices of inscription contain an element of incorporation, and it may be indeed be that no type of inscription is at all conceivable without such an irreducible incorporating aspect....Each of these acts, none the less, is accompanied by a corresponding muscular action. The way in which we generally adhere to the same method of forming the same character in handwriting demonstrates that writing entails a minimal muscular skill; and if we begin to write in an unfamiliar way, as when printing our letters instead of writing them longhand, we will be alerted to the fact that every character we form entails a bodily action (Ibid: 76-77).*

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar term *Sangamam* in the Telugu language is also used to describe the confluence of two or more rivers.

There is, therefore, a need in this study to look at the everyday as well as the embodied practices, habits and rituals of the people and objects involved. There is a need to go beyond the symbol, the textual, or the representational. Attention also needs to be drawn to various objects and entities that we come into contact with and the relationship we build with them in our daily lives. So the seeds, radios, phones, soil, farm animals etc. each extend our capacities in infinitely different ways. It is these relationships which also lie at the heart of conservation as a way of life in this particular case. Hence, the move away from an anthropocentric understanding of our world helps highlight these relations. In short, we need a methodological approach that helps map embodied actions as well the relational aspect of interactions. In the following section, I take a critical look at some theoretical approaches that are classified as representational approaches and how they may be slightly limited in achieving the above.

**Representational Approaches: A Critique.** Different philosophical approaches have either emphasized the Individual over the Society or vice-versa. Some theories emphasise the System or Society as independent of the individual, subsuming the individual, and shaping her/his behaviour. And on the other hand, philosophical approaches like phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, among others, state that society is continuously constituted through and by interacting subjects; reversing the emphasis back on to the individual's actions and interpretations of things around them. Massumi (2002) in his comparison finds the later set of positions to be "foundationalist". They "...conjure away society with the fiction of an atomistic flock of individuals who forge a relation with one another on the basis of a normative recognition of shared needs and common goods" (Masumi 2002: 68). Masumi is critical of such approaches, as they appeal, "more or less explicitly to the myth of origins" (*Ibid*: 68). He also argues that theoretical positions emphasising society/system are no less foundationalist. Such positions privilege notions such as structures and semiotic systems, leading one to posit society as an *a priori*.

Hence, these theories swing from a time axis to a spatial or position axis respectively. He stresses that individuals and societies are strictly simultaneous and consubstantial:

*It is an absurdity even to speak of them (individuals and societies) using notions of mediations, as if they were discrete entities that enter into extrinsic relation to one another, let alone to wonder which term takes precedence over the other in determining stasis and change (Ibid: 71).*

Nick Srnicek (2007) makes similar arguments as above, on issues related to the Philosophy of Science and Political Science. He points to the same inadequacies within Social Constructivism as well as in Critical Realism. Srnicek (2007: 9) builds a critique of social constructivist ontology as such:

*...For the social constructivists, the object of study is never fully present; in studying the social world, the other's subjective meaning is never available to us in-itself. Instead, we always have to undertake an interpretive process in order to understand it; meaning therefore becomes a problem insofar as the 'objective' meaning of a sign cannot be considered as identical to the 'subjective' meaning that was intended. In a social constructivist's ontology, it is argued that there are ultimately no pure objects, but only signs that refer to the intention they represent. As a result of all these factors, the social constructivist argues that there must necessarily be a focus upon the ontological givens of language (and semiotics as the general science of signs) and the construction of meanings.*

Srnicek rightly points out that such ontology has risen out of a criticism of Positivism and lays stress on the “actors who constitute the social world and the interpretations and meanings they ascribe to their actions” (*Ibid*: 9). He however, argues in favour of the mind-independent world that Critical Realist ontology offers, but says it is limited by their essentialism and dynamic ontology. For him this is resolved by folding into the mix ideas of Deleuze (*Ibid*: 9). He argues that both paths are limited in terms of the ontological stance they can offer; often stressing epistemology over ontology. While his interest lies in applying this to the field of Political Science, it can be extended to this project. For both theoretical traditions, “...their primary mistake is to tie their ontology too closely to subjective experience” (*Ibid*: 9). In his view, most importantly “both commit the fallacy of projecting *anthropocentric images* onto the nature of being” (*Ibid*: 23) (emphasis added).

This is an important point, for a move away from an anthropocentric bias allows us to look at questions of social change differently, especially in relation to nature, things, and technologies. Like Srnicek, de Landa (2010: 31) warns us of essentialism in the asserting a mind-independent world:

*When one asserts the mind-independence of the material world a crucial task is to explain the more or less stable identity of the entities that inhabit that world. If this identity is explained by the possession of an atemporal essence then all one has done is to reintroduce idealism through the back door. Thus,*



*a coherent materialism must have as its main tool a concept of objective synthesis, that is, of a historical process that produces and maintains those stable identities..*

The call made here by these scholars is to start from the middle, the in-between. And, while we are in this in-between, they ask us to shift our focus from the system and the individual to the *event*. Immerse ourselves in the processes and flows that crystalize and fuel these systems and individuals; for these systems, structures and persons arise from and feed back into these processes. And this rising and feeding back is not done in some staid, mundane cycle but in a space of infinite possibilities forever at the brink of actualization. It is a call for a new kind of a materialist ontology; a non-representational approach.

**Affect and Assemblages.** The idea of a non-representational approach I choose to adapt here is probably best elaborated in the many works of Nigel Thrift (e.g. 2000, 2008); within the field of Human Geography. He states that this is a *style of thinking* rather than a new theoretical approach. As he writes:

*Note that I use the word 'style' deliberately: this is not a new theoretical edifice that is being constructed, but a means of valuing and working with everyday practical activities as they occur. It follows that this style of working is both anti-cognitivist and, by extension anti-elitist since it is trying to counter the still-prevalent tendency to consider life from the point of view of individual agents who generate action by instead weaving a poetic of the common practices and skills which produce people, selves, and worlds (2000: 216) (emphasis original).*

Not only does Thrift press upon us the importance of common practices and skills, but also that it is such actions and relationships that *produce both* people and things. The stress on relationality here stems from the idea that when one interacts, comes in contact with, or builds a relationship with an “other”, this other produces a change in our capacities and potential, as much as we produce such changes in this other. de Landa (2010) explains this with the illustration of a simple tool like a knife. The knife along with certain properties such as weight, length or sharpness, also has capacities. But what these capacities might be is difficult to ascertain till one know what or who else the knife interacts with. To quote de Landa (2010: 70-71):

*A sharp knife... also has capacities, like its capacity to cut. Unlike sharpness, the capacity to cut need not be actual, if the knife is not presently cutting something, and may never become actual if the knife is never used. And when a capacity does become actual it is never as an enduring state but as a*



*more or less instantaneous event. Moreover, this event is always double, to cut-to be cut, (emphasis original) because a capacity to affect must always be coupled to a capacity to be affected: a particular knife may be able to cut through bread, cheese, paper, or even wood, but not through a solid block of titanium. This implies that while properties are finite and may be put into a closed list, capacities to affect may not be fully enumerated because they depend on a potentially infinite number of capacities to be affected. Thus, a knife may not only have a capacity to cut but also a capacity to kill, if it happens to interact with a large enough organism with differentiated organs, that is, with an entity having the capacity to be killed (emphasis added).*

This is in effect, the basic Spinozan notion (and also a Deleuzian notion) of the power or ability “*to affect and be affected*” (As cited in Massumi and McKim 2009:1). To clarify, affect is “an outcome of an encounter between two or more bodies (which can be human or non-human, organic or inorganic), which either increases or decreases a body’s capacity for action” (Ash 2010:657). It serves to say that all entities in a given relationship affect and are affected simultaneously. Affect also has another dimension, one that Simpson (2009: 2558) calls “*the not-already-qualified registers of experience* present within everyday practices” (emphasis added) or what is described as a “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Massumi quoted in Dewsbury 2012: 78). Thus, it refers to aspects of us and our encounter with others (things and people) that is not registered (and cannot always be registered) in our conscious minds. It is these dimensions of affect that help pin down to some extent the embodied aspect of practices, rituals, skills, and habits or bodily automatisms.

There is a need to bridge one more gap in this argument- that is the one of the individual and system. Further, how can one use the above notion- the *ability to affect and be affected* to understand entities of a larger scale (such as communities or associations) and interaction between them? How do the individual and system (or parts and wholes) feature within a non-representational approach? For this I turn to Manuel de Landa (2010) and his rendering of the Deleuzian concept of *assemblages*. While many scholars have written about this, I use the works of Manuel de Landa because of how he breaks down Deleuze’s rich philosophy into lucid, easily digestible pieces and adds to this his own innovative insights. To begin with, de Landa conceives of *wholes* as having properties that are not present in their parts. Rather, they *emerge* when *parts* interact with each other. Such a model de Landa argues, removes that possibility of micro-reductionism, but is still open to macro-reductionism. To block this, the parts need to share relations of exteriority

between them. Here the parts then subsist/exist independently of their wholes and ‘being part of a whole’ is not the only defining characteristic of the part (de Landa 2010: 3). This way we “conceive of emergent wholes in which the parts retain a relative autonomy, so that they can be detached from one whole and plugged into another one entering into new interactions” (*Ibid.* 3-4) .

In other words, we can compare the composition of entities to playing with Lego blocks. Each block has a different shape, size, colour, and possible ways of fitting into the other blocks. And each of these blocks can be plugged and unplugged into each other in infinite combinations to form countless number of structures, from robots and castles to pyramids and planes. What then makes an individual different from say an association is the scale at which they are organised. This in particular also helps us deal with a criticism levelled against realist and/or materialist ontology- i.e. “essences acting as formal causes” (de Landa 2010: 84) for the existence of objects. An assemblage then:

*...is a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns-different natures. Thus the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys: these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind (Deleuze and Parnet as quoted in de Landa, 2010:10).*

How can we in turn, use the above to reconfigure our understanding of the relationship between media technology and memory? We find some clues when we return to Andy Clarke’s (2003) idea of a cyborg. He suggests that we are constantly in an encounter with many things in our lives both human and non-human. These in turn, lead to either amplification -as James Ash (2012a) calls it, or dampening of capacities, and opens up the potential for new ones. As he states elsewhere, “Technologies<sup>8</sup> are worked into the practices of bodies and directly reorganize the perceptual capacities of these bodies” (2012b: 188) (See also Larkin 2007). If we were to accept this assertion and apply it to this particular study, then the question that arises is; what transpires in this community’s encounter with a media set up like a community radio station?. What capacities are amplified and dampened, and what new potentials are unlocked? Further, how

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<sup>8</sup> Ash (2012a: 10) elaborates on the concept of Technology, following Stiegler in his article titled ‘Attention, Videogames, and the Retentional Economies of Affective Amplification’ (For full references see Bibliography). He states that technology “can be understood as inorganic organized being, which is a form of being that is irreducible to either biological bodies or inert passive matter”.

does this shift dynamics of power within and without this entity especially in relation to the biodiversity movement at DDS? An attempt at such an analysis forms the rest of this paper.

There has been an effort with this study, to apply this approach to understanding the connection between community media, memory, and the biodiversity movement. Specifically tools of ethnography- such as observation (participatory and non-participatory), interviews with key informants and more informal conversations became ways to map and gain insight into these relationships, interactions and, daily practices, skills and rituals. A more detailed description of how this data was collected is described below.

**A Note on Data.** This paper and data used for it are based on ongoing Ph.D. work. Data was collected between November 2011 and November 2012. It was done over 3-6 day visits across each month. Ethnographic methods were used for data collection, hence, conversations<sup>9</sup>, with the various members of DDS whether as formal interviews<sup>10</sup> or more informal ones shared over an evening tea, all provided rich insight. These have occurred with individuals as well as in groups. Some of these individuals I have met only once and others I had the luxury of meeting every day through the course of their work schedule. These conversations are supplemented by field notes and observations recorded during my stay. The Sangam Radio team at DDS have been generous in sharing some of their recorded content and archived material with me. These are an invaluable resource to this project. These include songs, shows, and stories that have been part of the daily broadcasts. The team also kindly accommodated me into their everyday work schedules during my visits and I have often spent full days at the radio station, becoming a part of the coming and going within the station. It is in time that I gained some understanding about how the team operates radio equipment, records shows, plans content, and maintain a schedule of shows and recordings. I was privy on some occasion to the creative and administrative/managerial aspects of running Sangam Radio. The DDS office shared with me,

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<sup>9</sup> Familiarity with the local language was something that worked to my advantage. I am somewhat fluent with a dialect of Telugu language spoken in the Seem Andhra region, which helped establish rapport straight away. However, it took me sometime to understand the distinct Telangana dialect of Telugu spoken around the Zaheerabad region. Thus, some help with meanings of local words and phrases from the DDS members went a long way.

<sup>10</sup> Through the period of data collection there were some select conversations that could be classified as formal, recorded interviews. However, I found people opened up better once the Dictaphone was switched off. Hence, many of these formal interviews were supplemented with interview notes and field observations. As mentioned, many of the “informal” interviews occurred more as casual conversations through the course of visits. I found that people grew more comfortable going about their usual routine and interactions around me towards my later visits. This could be attributed to the increased level of familiarity with me over time.

copies of some documentary films produced by their participatory video team. An analysis of these is a part of the data. Over and above this, the DDS websites and the literature published by them have also been included in this study. This literature includes annual reports on events as well as research papers published by the DDS members.

The aim at each point of my field visits was to immerse myself into the environment of DDS as much as circumstances would permit. I have tried paying attention to the relationships people share and build with non-human and human entities- be it their *Sangams*, seeds, or their radios and phones. The focus, in keeping with the non-representational approach discussed above; has been to understand and record the everyday- practices, habits, skills, and rituals, for it is through these, as mentioned earlier, that we can comprehend how our capacities are transformed through multitudes of interactions, including technology<sup>11</sup>. I have let the different themes and content emerging from this data become the basis on which to consolidate and analyse it. These have in turn been woven back in with the various ideas mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

To summarise this section of arguments I go back to stressing on the need to study the everyday and common practices. Mizuko Ito's comments on the topic in her study of media mix games and the subculture of *Yu-Gi-Oh* in Japan are apt here. This everyday life, she states:

*...needs to be theorized as a site of generative cultural creativity and productivity. This is a structure of participation (emphasis original) in cultural life that, since the modern era of mechanical cultural reproduction...has been overshadowed but never eliminated by centralized, professionalized, and capitalized form of media production (2007:90).*

The above also resonates with arguments some Ethnoecologists make in relation to *in vivo* biodiversity conservation and preservation of Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) (e.g. Nazarea 2005, Nazarea 2006, and Hunn 1999). For instance, Nazarea argues that, "local knowledge is experiential and embodied in *everyday practice* (emphasis added). It is not logically formulated apart from what makes sense from living day to day in one's environment; nor is it inscribed as a set of processes or rules"(2006:323). She also notes that indigenous knowledge that

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<sup>11</sup> James Ash makes a compelling point about studying micro-analysis, especially with regard habits and skills. In relation to his study of video game players, he states, "The importance of this micro-analysis is emphasized by the fact that there are now whole companies that can be hired to quantify the biological basis of user experience of videogames through testing, including measuring processed such as tracking eye movement of players in real time to analyse how they perceive and interpret visual information on screen" (2012: 5) (See Bibliography for full citation).

is contained in these everyday practice provide a powerful counter in marginal fields and, “for most part this counter is lodged not in rhetoric and text but in the senses and the flesh- in the dance pungency and grittiness of everyday life” (*Ibid*: 320).

Keeping in mind how much embodied practices are integral to media practices, biodiversity conservation, and TEK, the non-representational approach outlined above helps map such practices. Over the next few sections I look at the Community Radio initiative of DDS and its role within the biodiversity movement in Zaheerabad. Sangam Radio is one of two Community Media initiatives at DDS, the other being a Participatory Video (PV) unit. In the next section, I start by looking at some developments within the community radio movement in India, and DDS’s role in the same. This is followed by a description of the daily functioning and media practices of the Sangam Radio station. I then connect some of the observations made here to the larger theoretical arguments of the paper.

### **Community Radio at DDS**

Sangam Radio, along with the Participatory team was started in 1998, but it would take a long, arduous struggle to officially make their first broadcast. This struggle DDS faced is closely tied to the larger movement for a third tier of radio (or community radio) in India. Community radio, argue Pavarala and Malik (2007: 18), gives people from marginalised communities the chance to expresses themselves socially, culturally and politically. The struggle for community radio can be seen as a part of a broader struggle “...for access to communication media and as a mechanism for social groups to reproduce their cultural identity, to voice their social and economic demands and to create new social relations” (*Ibid*: 18).

This same reasoning is reflected in the wish expressed by the members of the DDS *Sangams*. Sangam Radio was funded by UNESCO’s ‘Women Speak to Women’ programme. In speaking with UNESCO officials, they assert that a radio of their own would be an “effective medium for articulating locally relevant issues, in their own language and in their own time” (*Ibid*: 141). Sighting more reasons they say that mainstream media is elitist, and is not interested in covering the minute details of their lives. These details and issues are, however, relevant to them. This radio would help them carry the message of their efforts to other people in their community, reducing the burden on individual leaders (DDS- An entitlement refused 2015). After receiving funding for the radio station from UNESCO and setting up the facilities for it, DDS then

applied to the government of the time, for a broadcasting licence. P.V. Satheesh notes the development of events around the refusal of licence as such:

*After sixteen months, in January 2002, came a bland six line reply from the Government of India which said starkly [that] at present the [government] does not have a policy of granting licences to NGOs or charitable institutions [to set] up and [operate] Radio Stations. Licences have been issued only to Indian registered [Private] Companies for operating FM channels for entertainment, Music & Information (DDS- An entitlement refused 2015).*

Pavarala and Malik, in their important work *Other Voices* (2007), document the movement started by NGOs, civil society organisations media advocacy groups and activists for a community radio policy in India. I provide a summary of some of their main arguments and findings to understand the different transitions of Sangam Radio over the years. Sangam Radio of DDS was a one of the case-studies included in *Other Voices* along with others such as VOICES/MYRADA (Karnataka), the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghathan (KMVS, Gujrat) and Alternative for India Development (AID, Jharkhand) to make a case for community radio in India. These organisations were also important participants in the struggle.

**Community Radio in India.** Pavarala and Malik argue that Radio as a medium has been monopolised by the Government of India and private companies. There has been a general hesitation on the part of the government from the start to decentralise the operation and bring in a variety in programs that truly engage with its audience. “All India Radio set out after independence to ‘benefit’ the masses by giving them not what they sought to hear but what they ought to hear” (2007: 86). Pavarala and Malik cite finding from the Chanda committee report which found that “... AIR programmes were dull and drab and low on variety. They did not engage with contentious political matters or even those of civic consequence” (*Ibid*: 91). This situation has been hampered further by the uneven and improper setting up of infrastructure across the country. Further the report:

*...castigated AIR’s programme policy in the two decades of its functioning after Independence on the grounds that the government was overlooking development imperatives and that a technical infrastructure built with public resources was being misused for propaganda of public policy and as a vehicle for setting political agendas (Ibid: 90).*

Providing this historical account of Radio and Broadcasting policy in India, Pavarala and Malik argue that the Government of India still retains this tendency, refusing to free the air waves to



allow more public participation in the setting up of stations and broadcasting of programmes. Instead, it has “shifted from being a government monopoly to a highly commercialised broadcasting after the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) announced the Phase I of auctioning of licences to set up 140 private FM stations in 40 cities in November 1999” (*Ibid*: 27). Various marginalised sections across the country, including the rural, urban poor and tribal communities amongst many others were and are rendered voiceless because of this. “No one seemed to have an ear for the voices from the rural areas that were seeking a ‘radio of our own’ for using it as a tool to participate in and further their own development” (*Ibid*: 27). What the government has extended instead, they state, is a mere token that has been labelled ‘Community Radio’. Although, the airwaves have been declared public property through a Supreme Court ruling on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 1995, the government continues to be “... cautious in unshackling broadcasting, but to allow its use only for entertainment” (*Ibid*: 27).

Further, it has not permitted private FM stations to broadcast news or programs related to current affairs<sup>12</sup>. Instead the “demands for a third tier of independent, not-for-profit broadcasting in the country yielded a confined ‘campus’ avatar of community radio in the form of ‘Guidelines’ issued in the first quarter of 2003 that allow ‘well-established’ educational institutions to set up FM transmitters and run radio stations on their campuses” (*Ibid*: 27). The authors argue that while this move, somewhat dilutes the stronghold of the government, it only continues to serve the well-educated, urban elite who already have access to media. Pavarala (2003: 2166) states elsewhere

*Mistakenly labelled 'community radio', the norms laid down for licences include content regulations that suggest that these campus radio stations air programmes on agriculture, environment, health, and other development-related information. Apart from the fact that university campuses are privileged 'communities' with more than adequate access to media resources, it is unrealistic to expect campus radio stations managed by young students to eschew fun and entertainment. There is no apparent fit between form and content in this new policy, even as marginalised rural communities continue to be denied the right to produce, own, and operate real community radio.*

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<sup>12</sup> At the time of writing this paper, this stance has seen some relaxation by the current Ministry for Information and Broadcasting which allows Private FM Radio stations to broadcast news from the AIR news bulletins See The Times of India (2014) and The Hindu (2014) for reports on the issue. This stance however, only continues to reflect the aforementioned attitude of the state towards completely freeing airwaves as argued by Pavarala and Malik.



Given this background to Community Radio in India, a number of non-profits/ NGOs, activists and civil society organisations have been demanding a policy that genuinely fosters autonomy and self-reliance with which communities can set up radio projects, especially for marginalised groups.

At the time that Pavarala and Malik brought out this work, Sangam Radio had already started a form of narrowcasting of its programmes to its growing network of *Sangams*. By the time I came to undertake my study however, many developments had come to pass in this movement. The government brought in a policy for community radio and started to give out licences to NGOs and non-profits. Thus, when I started my interactions with Sangam Radio, it had already been about three years since the station had received its licence and broadcasting underway, reaching its seventy five villages. The next section looks briefly at this transition from narrowcasting to broadcasting, in turn also detailing how and what kind of programmes are produced by the station. The reason I keep the section on narrowcasting brief is so as to avoid a repetition of the work established by Pavarala and Malik, seeking instead to build on their study by focusing on the broadcasting aspects.

**Narrowcasting to Broadcasting at Sangam Radio.** Sangam Radio is located in a village that is roughly a 30-45 minute auto- rickshaw ride away from the DDS office. A round red brick building, it effortlessly merges into its surroundings. Made of materials local to the area, the building consists of a reception area, a small meeting room, and a recording studio attached to the control room. There are not many lights around the building so it goes quite dark in the evening, around the time of the broadcasts. There is a neatly maintained garden surrounding the building. Within the control room is a computer, mixer, microphones, and recorders. Present in the control room are shelves filled with tapes of past shows; an archive. The content that is digitally recorded these days is stored on a backup drive. There is a folder here for each show and content produced for each show are filed into their respective folders for retrieval. The recording studio is adjacent to the control room and has microphones where people sit down and record programs. It allows for small groups of people to record at one go. After having moved to broadcasting, and adding a computerised set up; Sangam Radio employs a software called Wavelab for recording and editing content and a software program called Green for the actual broadcasting (Field Notes, November 2011). It has two FM transmitters and a 100-metre tall transmission tower, which has a capacity to broadcast to a radius of 30 km, roughly the coverage area of DDS. With this installation and the nominal amounts paid to community

members who are compensated for the time they spend in the studio, Pavarala and Malik estimated that an hour's worth of programming would cost Rs. 500 and would cost approximately Rs.1000-1,500 per hour once the station went on air (2007: 141).



Fig 5.2: The Sangam Radio station. (Photo taken by author, November 2011)

Between 1998 to 2009, Sangam Radio members, along with a team of *Sangam* supervisors and other *Sangam* programme coordinators would make decisions on what kind of content was to be produced, depending on the season and other DDS initiatives. The station in this time period would record and edit show content on audio tapes<sup>13</sup>. The shows were similar to what is now being broadcast, including songs, stories, recipes, discussions on seasonal crops etc. Without a means to transmit to a large audience the team would take the tapes to *Sangam* or self-help group meetings and play it back to the members. This way they took their radio programmes out to their community via a type of “analogue network”. After playing the programme in each meeting, the team would take feedback, ideas, and suggestions from its listeners to improve their programs (Interview with Geetha, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011). Sangam Radio during its days of Narrowcasting would have fallen under what Ravi Sundaram calls a “non-legal” domain (2007:

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<sup>13</sup> Pavarala and Malik, provide a detailed account of this process in *Other Voices* (2007) Particularly in Chapter 5 of this book.

50). This is especially given the strong resistance to the establishment of community radio by the India state. Pavarala and Malik's comments in this regard are particularly telling

*...the Government of India stubbornly refused to yield to the demands for opening up this sector, under misplaced apprehensions that secessionists, militants or subversive elements would misuse the medium...this is just a bogey raised by a government uneasy about the consequences of allowing autonomous broadcasting spaces to communities and the social sector (Pavarala and Malik 2007:28)*

On one of my visits in 2012, the DDS community had gathered together to sign a petition being submitted to the government in power at the time. This was petition opposing the increased prices for community radio licenses, making it unaffordable for communities like DDS. It is obvious therefore, that this sense of unease on behalf of the state continues to exist as does the somewhat tense relationship it shares with actors like DDS. As I argue later in a later section, it is these very boundaries that entities like Sangam Radio push.

Pavarala and Malik, at the time of their study had noted that Sangam radio has canned more than 400 hours of programming on various issues. They also noted that playing back the cassettes in meetings, helped women reconnect with traditional crops and farming methods (*Ibid*: 180). They found in their study across different community radio projects and especially DDS that the gender dimension was "...not limited to the gender of the participant or simply including women-related issues in communicative interaction. The women also influence the nature of message production" (*Ibid*: 239-240). They note that the radio programme, along with participation in various other *Sangam* activities have helped them build a solidarity and assert themselves, where they once stood alone and silent. Like the PV team and other programmes at DDS, the content produced by Sangam Radio is closely connected to their everyday lives. This is probably more defined in the case of the radio team. The next section looks at the different ways in which content for the radio programmes are produced as well as some details of the programmes itself.

**From the Community and Back to the Community.** At the time of my visits, Sangam Radio's broadcasts were produced by three women.<sup>14</sup> Geetha and Sunitha, the two station managers and radio jockeys and Asha a young women who would help with setting up recordings, edits and the general maintenance of the studio. Sangam Radio broadcasts seven days a week, and from 7:00-9:00 pm each day. The slot between 7:00-8:30 pm consists of pre-recorded programs. Between

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<sup>14</sup> The names of all three women have been changed to maintain anonymity.

8:30 and 9:00 pm the station takes in requests from its listeners. These usually consist of songs, but also include a replay of stories or parts of previous episodes from other programmes. *Table 1* provides an overview of the programs broadcasted through the week.

Note from *Table 1*, how closely linked the programmes and their contents are to the lives of their producers and listeners. The songs and stories also come from the folklore of the community. To reiterate what was said in the introduction, it emerges from their lives and goes back to them. Thus, each piece of content is based on the crop, agricultural methods, cultural practices, and festivals of that season. Locals identified as having extensive knowledge of these various aspects are brought in to record debates, interviews, or discussions on their respective topics. As one of the team members elaborates:

*Now it is a season for sowing. We look at what are the crops generally sown around this time. For instance, now is the season to sow senegalau (chickpeas), vomam (bishop's weed) and aavalu (mustard). So for the next 15 odd days, our diet consists of food cooked with these crops of the season... We know that some villages yield a high Rabi season harvest, and some others yield a higher Poonasa<sup>15</sup> season harvest. For instance, Village C has a higher Poonasa crop, so at the moment they find it difficult to get a supply of crops like vomam, senegalu etc. On the other hand if you go to say Village P, R or Z, their Rabi crop is better. So we focus our programs on how these villages and what they are doing to get a good yield, how are they cooking these crops, what new recipes are possible etc. Over say the next 10-15 days our programs concentrate on broadcasting this content. If we don't do so while it is the season, then it won't be useful for anybody later. So everything is based on season-whether it is the kind of fodder for our cattle, the food for us humans, and the kinds of manure that strengthens the earth or what we face while going about our work. All of these are based on what season it is. We make the programs at that particular time and broadcast it (Interview with Geetha, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011).*

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<sup>15</sup> Poonasa and Rabi are the two major agricultural harvest seasons in Zaheerabad. Rabi is the winter crop harvest and Poonasa is approximately the spring to summer crop harvest.

**Table 1**

**Programmes produced and broadcasted by Sangam Radio**

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of Programme</i>	<i>Description of Programme</i>	<i>Days of Broadcast in a week.</i>
1	Mana Oori Pantalu (The crops of our villages)	Discussions and information on the crops of each season, with tips and suggestions on agricultural practices and methods.	Monday-Sunday
2	Mana Bhasha (Our Language)	Stories of various kinds, native to the region. Three of these kinds are generally used: <i>Hun Ante Katha</i> , <i>Bicchapolla Katha</i> , and <i>Burrakatha</i> .	Monday-Sunday
3	Arogyam (Health/Well-Being)	Programme focusing on health, nutrition, and general well-being.	Monday, Wednesday, Friday.
4	Aadolla Sanghalu (Women's <i>Sangams</i> )	Here, members from different village <i>Sangams</i> share the activities conducted by their <i>Sangams</i> , including problems faced, challenges overcome and their achievements.	Monday
5	Patalu (Songs)	These are folksongs indigenous to the region of Zahirabad. These songs are used as fillers between each programme. Also, the last 20-30 minutes of each day's broadcast, between 8:30-9:00 pm is slotted for playing requests from audiences which includes these songs.	Monday-Sunday
6	Mee Letters (Letters from You)	A reading of letters from listeners, usually consisting of feedback and requests to play/re-play songs, parts of shows, stories etc.	Monday-Sunday



7	Oori Varthalu (Local News)	A round up of the local news from all the villages affiliated to DDS.	Monday-Sunday
8	Yarralla Muchatlu (Light hearted talk or gossip between co-sisters)	This programme is structured as a light-hearted conversation between two co-sisters or sisters-in law in the family. However, through their conversation they discuss and advise each other (and the audience) on various topics of interest. Be it health, agricultural practices, and other cultural practices.	Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.
9	Chaduvu (Studies/Education)	Educational stories and songs focused on children's interest	Tuesday
10	Savidi Katta (Village Gathering)	The Legal Committee of different <i>Sangams</i> present cases they have handled and how they have been resolved. The format for this discussion is set to emulate a village gathering to announce or debate important issue.	Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.
11	Mana Ruchulu (Our cuisine/ Our Tastes)	A show focusing on recipes with crops of the season, particularly millets and vegetables indigenous to the region. These are interspersed with home-remedies and nutritional information.	Thursday, Saturday, Sunday.
12	Balanandanamu (For our children's delight)	An entertainment programme of humorous, light stories and songs from the region for children.	Sunday
13	Pariyavaranam (The Environment)	A show consisting of discussion, debates and information focused on the environmental and biodiversity conservation and issues.	Sunday
14	Voche Varam Prasalaru (Programs for the coming week)	An announcement of the shows and topics that will be discussed in the coming week.	Saturday.

Another example can be cited to highlight this process of creating content. During my visits to Sangam Radio, a member pulled out a file recording for one of the shows. This consisted of a local farmer talking about the importance of birds for agriculture, and how different birds shared a symbiotic existence with the various crops in the two major agricultural seasons. The farmer had also talked about how the number of birds in that ecology are depleting and this has an adverse effect on the crops they sow.

One of the major ways in which content is created is through the participation of the *Sangam* members particularly as well as other residents of the affiliate villages.

*Sangam members and other people [also] do come. While anyone is welcome to come and record with us, Sangam members in any given village are usually more familiar with approaching the radio station than non-members. Hence, they tend to bring other people and non-members from their village to record a program...once a month, people from each affiliated village record an hour's worth of content for different programs and go. It could be anything- songs, stories, debates, etc. So, different parties come on different days, whenever they are free, record content and go* (Interview with Geetha, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011).

Apart from studio recordings, there are members of the *Sangams*, usually *Sangam* Supervisors and the radio jockeys who do field recordings. So instead of community members coming to the studio, the jockeys or supervisors go into villages and record either group debates on issues of interest, songs, stories news and other interviews and items. For instance, during one of my visits Saritha<sup>16</sup>, a *Sangam* supervisor, demonstrated how a field recording is done with the help of another member. She recorded an interviewed with the member on the problems she was facing with her crops that season. This member also sang a song eulogising a former chief minister of the state, who had recently passed away. While this was a small glimpse of what a field recording would involve, it highlights the participation of the community in content creation. Saritha explained later that interviews recorded in this manner would go into their files for use in one of the upcoming broadcasts.

There is also a Planning Committee that sits down and helps decide the content for shows, especially around special occasions and festivals. This is similar to the committee that existed during the narrowcasting period, constituted of *Sangam* supervisors, CMT members, and *Sangam* programme coordinators. I had a chance to observe a Planning Committee meeting as they

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<sup>16</sup> Name of person changed to maintain anonymity.



discussed the content for a special show, i.e. Peerla Panduga<sup>17</sup> or Muharram (Field Notes, September 2012). While there didn't seem to be a specific way in which these members were chosen or replaced, the committee was carved out of existing DDS staff and those who left were replaced. The committee also had a few male staff as a part of it, which makes it one of the few committees in DDS teams or *Sangams* to do so. The meeting mostly revolved around what songs, shows stories should be broadcasted on the day of the festival.

Inspiration also comes from routines in daily life. One of the radio jockeys once chanced upon a discussion between some men in her village on her everyday commute. The men were talking about how a scheme of 'chits', <sup>18</sup> (or 'chitty' in the Telugu language) as well as getting jobs, let women get everything today. They are financially secure and even independent. This inspired her to include it in one of the radio shows as a group debate or discussion. Apart from this, two of the major ways in which the community, as an audience participates is through letters they write in, requesting for particular content to be played back. The second way is, as mentioned above, through the request programme aired live, every night. The requests in this slot mostly consist of folk songs and stories of the region or the replay of a certain show they heard previously. Specific requests for songs or stories related to special occasions would be made around the times of festivals or days of commemoration (e.g. an Ambedkar Paata on Ambedkar Jayanti).

The *Sangam* members from different villages and the radio team manage the daily working of the radio station. However, the administration of DDS often weighs in on some matters; usually the field officers and the director. It is in such interactions that some hierarchies within DDS often get expressed. For instance, there has been some difference in opinion in how to approach sponsored advertisements or public service announcements. Some members of at Sangam Radio

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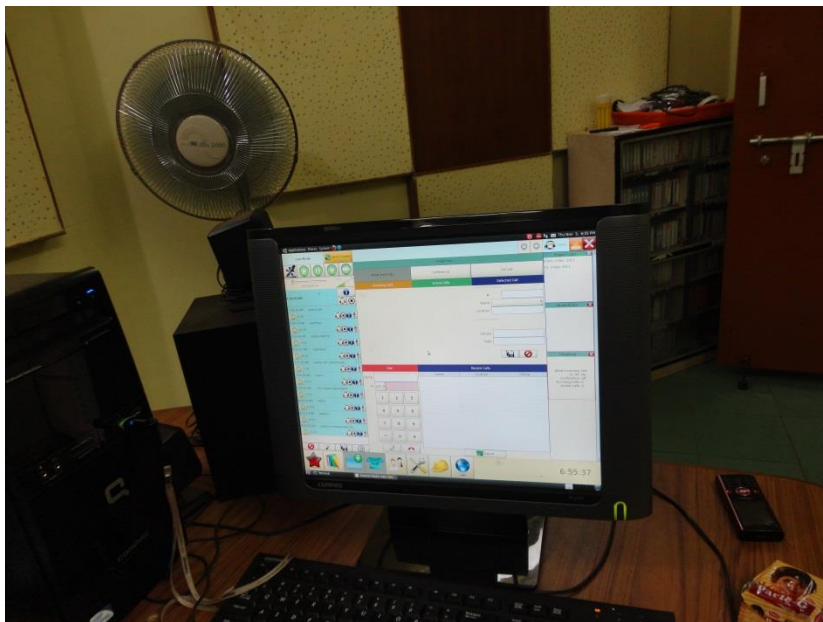
<sup>17</sup> Peerla Panduga is a unique way of observing Muharram in the Telangana region of India. It is observed across Sufi shrines in the area, involving the participation of Muslims and Hindus. The highlight of the festival is procession of a sacred relic called the *Alam*. It has been hailed as a festival, particularly in recent decades, that promotes communal harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. In fact, in some areas and shrines such as *Bibi Ka Alwa*, in Hyderabad city, Hindus are the standard bearers or *Alambardaar*, as they are parochially known. The Hindus of the region believe that worshipping the relic *Alam* will bring them solace and peace of mind. They also go on to take part in the conventional Muharram processions taken out in memory of Martyrs by the Muslims (Telangana Tourism, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Chits here refer to a kitty of money pooled in by a group of people (in this case it is women). This kitty is then lent to a member of the group as a loan to be used for personal and/or professional purposes (like a wedding, or setting up a small business etc.) and repaid as soon as possible. Then this kitty is lent to another member. It is similar to microfinance schemes, but is not always formally organised. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a brief discussion on microfinance schemes.

feel like the station could earn good revenue by airing such announcements and have suggested it to the concerned administrative staff. This idea has been suggested a few times to the administration, but the concerned team members feel like their views have not been taken seriously enough<sup>19</sup> (Field notes, September 2012). Along with balancing intra-community relationships and power dynamics such as the aforementioned ones, the Radio team has had to undergo training so as to operate various recording and editing equipment. This included acquiring some computer literacy when they moved from narrowcasting to broadcasting.

**Transition from Tapes to Computers.** Around the same time that Sangam Radio received its broadcasting licence, they had also moved from using audio tapes to computers (such as the one shown in Figure 5.3) for producing and transmitting content. It has taken the Sangam Radio team months of practice to edit with the ease that they do. In my conversations with the three of the members they reminisce about the early days of training:<sup>20</sup>

*It used to be difficult, no matter how hard we tried. A cassette would instantaneously play as soon as you hit a button. With a computer, cutting it at the right time is easier, it's neater. Things like a 'fade out' and 'fade in' are quite tough on an audio tape. With a computer, fade out, fade in, volume control etc. are much easier* (Interview with Geetha, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011).



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<sup>19</sup> The specific details of this event have been altered slightly to maintain anonymity of the people concerned. The issues of importance however have been brought forth as is.

<sup>20</sup> Pavarala and Malik (2007) elaborate on experiences of training the Sangam Radio Team had with technical equipment during the period of narrowcasting. The women recount similar experiences. See pages 195-202.

Fig 5.3: Recording equipment at Sangam Radio

Sunitha adds to this experience in another conversation:

*On the computer it is much easier to edit. And it's easier to note and observe the time of the recording, duration of the recording. It is also easier to go from one part of the recording to another. On a tape, you don't know which corner of the tape has the content you need. A lot time has gone by before you find it (Interview with Sunitha, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012).*

Asha and Sunitha had anecdotes about when they first operated a computer. They look back at the mistakes today with amusement, but at the time it seemed like a herculean task. Sunitha relates this anecdote:

*When using a computer, if you want two hours' worth of programs, you need to record about two and a half hours' of content and edit it down. So it was quite tedious and challenging at the start. We also had to make announcements between each programme. I was always afraid I would make mistakes while announcing. We used to record these announcements and paste it in line with the programs. I remember one of our field officers was there on one of the first days and tried helping us out. We sat down recorded and saved the files. When we went back later to retrieve them, we couldn't find the files. And this happened just when we sat down to do the broadcast for the day. God knows where they went! (Laughs) I just don't know where they went. I worked on it all morning and even skipped lunch. I started at 9:00 am and I was in this bad state at 7:00 pm in the night. I kept wondering what happened. I went home very upset (Interview with Sunitha, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012).*

Sunitha says that she took to making announcements between programs live, after her husband gave her the idea that day. She would make the announcements live into the microphone and then play the program from the tapes or computer. So she had to just line them up in order from then on. Asha recollects an incident when, she was alone at the station one day. This was in her early days at the station. A group of women came in to do a recording. She set up the studio, computer, mixer etc. and completed the recording. When she went back to retrieve it to show the radio jockeys, she found that she captured only one minute of the entire recording. They had to call the group back to record the program again. The team expressed that through the course of learning computer related skills, felt joy, fear, and excitement. One of the fears they expressed was making mistakes with keyboard short cuts and pressing buttons. Especially when it came to *cut, copy, paste* and *save command*.

*I didn't know what would happen when I pressed what button. So I was scared the first few days. But as I worked with it I got better. I learned to do what was needed and leave it at that and not do anything extra. That way it was safe. Nothing would happen* (Interview with Sunitha, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012).

The issue that comes to fore from the experiences related in our conversations though, is not just one of challenges in mastering certain skills. It is an issue of language and access. I noticed in the time spent with them that they would use a computer keyboard based on the English alphabet to spell out Telugu words. Asha knows a minimal amount of English making it a little easier than say for Sunitha or Geetha. On asking her how she gets around this she says

*I pick out the English alphabets based on the Telugu ones I need. I am a little familiar with English alphabets and how they sound. And that I relate it back to the Telugu ones. So for e.g. if I need to write Katha (story), I use Ka and tha from the English keyboard* (Interview with Asha, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2012).

The same is a little more challenging for Sunitha:

*I don't know English. In the beginning I tried observing and taught myself using the sounds of the alphabets. E.g. Pata (song) has 'Paa'. I spell it out in my own way and I know how I have spelt a particular word. There are probably many mistakes, but I understand how I spelt it so I can make out. It is okay* (Interview with Sunitha, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

This practice of spelling Telugu words using the English alphabet is in one sense a creative way to negotiate the barriers posed by language and literacy. The familiarity with the *cut*, *copy* and *paste* functions to save computer files or those of editing audio content would come with practice. On the other hand this English language keyboard is an indicator of certain biases that technologies continue to carry. Thus, while it has become easy to hand over the technologies, make them ubiquitous in a community, and train people to use them, it is seemingly small issues like this that continue to reproduce hegemonies. This is both in terms of hardware and software. Gee (2005) for instance makes a case an increase in availability of software applications like word processors in various Afrikaans dialects to make accesses to (digital) technologies better. *Access* to media technologies here then cannot be understood only in terms of varying degrees of ownership or availability for use. It needs to also be understood as ease of comprehension and learning the skills to operate them. The observations of Jo Tacchi et.al (2009:580), in relation to participatory content creation project in Sri Lanka seems apt in this context:

*The social and political contexts in which the technological and human intermediaries operate shape the processes that emerge...Local power relations and inequalities can simply serve to reinforce existing power dynamics, or shift them in ways that benefit neither the wider community, nor the most marginalised. This emphasises the need to pay close attention to local contexts and power dynamics and recognise that any introduction of new technologies and media will happen in richly layered social and political contexts, with or without intermediaries.*

While computer and recording equipment posed one sort of challenge, adapting their numerous songs and stories to a recorded, oral format was another challenge. This is elaborated in the following section.

**Adapting Folk Culture to Radio.** A special mention needs to be made about the variety of folk songs and stories and how some of these are adapted to radio. There are three or four major categories of songs used on air. These have a long history in the region of Telengana, even playing a major role in the Telengana Uprising of 1946-1951. *Sangam* supervisor, Saritha,<sup>21</sup> spoke to me about some of these songs, providing a rough classification of them. There is the *Chaitrika patalu*<sup>22</sup>, usually songs on the relationships between men and women. *Bhootalli Mata Patalu* are songs dedicated to Mother Earth. *Bhootalli Patalu* are sung during festivals. Men in the village usually drive bullocks attached to ploughs around a tree while singing these songs praising Mother Earth and urging her to yield a plentiful harvest. Further, there are songs praising political heroes such as Ambedkar. So much so that there is a small collection of songs on his life and work called *Ambedkar Patalu*. There is also the *Uyalla patalu*, sung by women and girls, usually while playing on swings or cradles, which speak of the deeds of the gods and goddesses. They end with the word *Uyalla* meaning cradle at the end of each line. For example, one *Uyalla Paata* goes : ‘*Nadilla Baludu Uyallo, nagale gatinde uyallo, okka suttu thirigenu uyallo, rendu suttu thirigenu uyallo*’ (Sample from Sangam Radio, 2012). Another popular type of song is the *Peerala Pata* sung by Muslim mendicants. These are especially broadcast around the Islamic festivals of Muharram and Eid.

The stories used are of three major kinds: *Bicchapolla Katha*, *Burrakatha*, and *Hun Ante Katha*. These three types, like the songs are indigenous to the Telengana region. The *Bicchapolla katha* (Stories

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<sup>21</sup> Name changed to maintain anonymity.

<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted here that the term *patalu* is the plural form of the term *paata* in the Telugu language, with both terms meaning “song”.



of the mendicants) are usually stories that are sung- a format similar to ballads. These storytellers hail from a particular caste called *Bicchapollas* who are similar to mendicants. They have for generations, sung these songs at events in upper caste homes in exchange for alms. The *Burrakatha* is a very popular form of folktales, again similar in format to a ballad. This though proceeds as a conversation between three singers as demonstrated in Figure 5.4 below. While it also began as stories narrating myths of gods and goddesses, new *burrakathas* have been written to spread different messages. Many famous ones such as ‘*Moscow Polimeralona*’ and ‘*Telangana Veerayodhulu*’ were written during the Telengana struggle of 1946-51 (Dhanaraju 2012: 3-4).



Fig 5.4 : Folk artists performing a Burrakatha at the Mobile Biodiversity Festival 2012

(Photo by Author, January 2012)

The third type of story is the *Hun Ante Katha*. In this is form of story- telling, especially popular in Telengana, proceeding from one point in the narrative to the next only upon a signal through the sound ‘*Hun*’ from the audience. Radio adapts these myriad forms of folksongs, stories, and ballads in innovative ways for broadcasting. Take for illustration the *Hun Ante Katha*. As mentioned above, this is a form that involves the storyteller and the audience, with the story proceeding from one point to another only when the audience says ‘*hun*’. Hun is a sound or word similar to the English “Hmmm”. Depending on the context it denotes agreement or a signal for the narrator to continue. It goes something like this:

Storyteller: Once there was a king in a faraway land. He was a fair and just king who had two sons.

Audience: Hun

Story teller: The king bought the sons up with great love and care. He provided for a good education in various subjects.

Audience: Hun.

Adapting this to radio can be tricky. So while the story teller at Sangam Radio sits in a studio recording a Hun Ante Katha, another person sits in front of the narrator nodding or saying *hun* to help the story teller proceed. While the *hun* response is not always recorded or heard on the radio, tiny pauses are often heard at relevant points when the recording is aired (Field notes and Sample recording from Sangam Radio, 2012).

A lot of these songs and stories are such that the basic format remains the same, but very often the lyrics are spontaneously made up to describe a situation and express a range of emotions from happiness, anger to sadness, and determination amongst others. It can encompass encouragement, motivation, a call to arms and satire. For instance, *Uyalla Patalu* are often modified to sing of the importance of a girl child in the family and to urge people to treat women with more respect. There is even a song describing the formation and activities of the *Sangams* through DDS called *Akkachellelu koodi poddamu* (Sisters let us go to the *Sangam* to meet) that is often sung on important occasions. It also describes which crops and herbs can be used as medications for different ailments (Sample song '*Akkachellelu koodi poddamu*', Sangam Radio 2012). This type of adaptation played an important role in the Telangana Uprising of 1946-51. Many of these folk songs and stories, which have a mythological or historical basis, were tweaked instead, to describe the problems of the people's lives and carry across the message of the revolution (Dhanaraju 2012:3-4, See also Sundarayya 1973b: 38).

These songs and stories then constantly open up capacities for a new kind of expression (e.g. *Ambedkar patalu*) or reconfigure old ones (e.g. *Uyalla Patalu on the importance of the girl child*). Similarly, recall the lady who sang a eulogy about a late chief minister of the state. Such songs are created to express deep seated sentiments, afforded to its singer by the form of the song itself. And the capacities for myriad expressions are further opened up, as I argue in detail over the next few sections; when such songs are transmitted via radio or video.



## Community Radio as Communal Archives

In one of the interviews conducted, a Participatory Video team member explained that video would help them create programmes on one agricultural season to be viewed in another. They also mentioned how it could help them record meetings they had with various government officials. This is similar to how Sangam Radio bases their programmes on agricultural seasons, local news, and events. Similarly, as illustrated in Figure 5.5 and Figure 5.6, the Sangam Radio programmes recorded on tapes, and computer hard drives all collectively form an archive, a point also noted by Pavarala and Malik (2007: 181). This is not only of their songs and stories, but also of their struggles and everyday lives. *Sangam* supervisor Saritha discusses this archival role in our conversation:

Compared to the elders, the youth prefer film songs. But with Sangam Radio, these songs are preserved and both the young and the old like listening to them. They would have been forgotten if they were not preserved via radio (Conversation with *Sangam* Supervisor, September, 2012).



Fig 5.5: A collection of Video and Radio tapes at the Community Media Trust centre



Fig 5.6: A collection of Radio programme tapes at Sangam Radio

Brian Larkin makes an observation in relation to Pirate media and “pirate archives” in Nigeria that seem relevant here. He argues that new infrastructural forms create and recreates conditions for everyday urban life. Piracy in turn also “creates new kinds of archives inconceivable outside of this mode of media reproduction” (2007:78). While, the media at work here is very different from pirate media and archives, what is relevant from Larkin is how new technologies “organise sensory perception, provide new relationships between people and things, and give rise to different forms of affectivity, sociability, and leisure” (*Ibid*: 78). Not only are these cultural artefacts recorded and archived, but are constantly played and replayed to the community through the radio programmes and audience feedback. The radio station in a sense also serves a mnemonic function within the larger biodiversity movement underway at DDS. It constantly engages with the community’s collective memory, as well as mobilises it for political action directed at achieving future goals. Thus, Sangam Radio works to “amplify”- as James Ash puts it (2012a:18) -certain affects. He argues in relation to videogame technologies that “these systems transport the potential for the reactivation of memories regarding an affective encounter or the potential production of new affects...” (*Ibid*: 18) which is could be extended to this case.

Extending the above ideas from Ash and Larkin, nostalgia for the *old* or *traditional* is what is often circulated within the various programmes DDS, especially Sangam Radio. As Ash puts it above, this system constantly create spaces and “transport the potential for the reactivation” of the collective memories of the region. Not only this, they reconfigure us so as to be able to create new forms of expressions, as in the case of the *Uyalla Paata* on the importance of girl child, or

the telling of a *Hun Ante Katha* adapted to Radio. To elaborate, take a *Uyalla Pata* on a girl child. A group of *Sangam* members, who were present for a recording session in July 2012, obliged me with one such song after their recording. They sang a song *Ninati Monati Uyallo* (From a group interview, July 2012), which describes the family dynamics, considered as typical within a household in the region. It talks of a family of brothers, who after much struggle were able to sow their land with *Jonna* or *Jowar* (Sorghum). However, they weren't always available to keep the birds from pecking on the young crop. The daughters-in-law of the house suggest their sister-in-law, a young girl, take charge of this. She spent much time tending to the crops, in the harsh sun. However, the daughters-in-law would not feed her well, and expected her to eat whatever she was given. The song goes on then to explain how she was not treated well by the daughters-in-law; a dynamic often seen as common between sisters-in-law. Using this they point to how it is important to treat the girl of the house well and count her labour as equal.

Dhanaraju (2012:5) points out that traditionally *Uyalla Patalu* were based on the Hindu Goddesses of *Lakshmi* and *Gowri*. They were sung by girls who would hang cradles from a tree branch. A form of song such as this however, has been modified in this regard to address gender inequality in above instance. Interestingly, Dhanaraju notes in his paper (*Ibid*: 5), that *Uyalla Patalu* were often used to mobilise women during the Telangana Struggle of 1946-1951 by modifying the lyrics at the time to reflect the oppressive conditions of the period.

The Community Radio's recordings as a communal archive have now also become a much coveted resource. A major television channel in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, tried many a times to get Sangam Radio to share folksongs from their archives- a move vehemently opposed by the community. The content was to be used in a popular T.V. program that showcased folk songs and artists. The community refused to let private companies co-opt what they had spent years collecting and building, asserting their ownership over their inheritance (Interview with Sunitha, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012). On the other hand, in the interest of spreading awareness for their cause, their Participatory Video team, in the past has collaborated with state sponsored and private commercial television channel to telecast a few documentaries made by them (Field Notes, November 2011). Sangam Radio, at the time of my visits had agreed to play Public Service Announcements on consumer rights introduced by the government. The DDS community is constantly struggling with the commodification of their cultural artefacts, while sharing an uneasy work relationship with the more formally organised media industry. This tension and uneasy work relationship with commercial media that Sangam radio shares as well as with the

state; given the historical context of the development of community radio in India, could be typified as a what Ravi Sundaram (2007) calls “cultures of insubordination”. Ito (2007: 105) describes it as those practices that:

*produce alternative cultural forms that are disseminated through everyday peer-to-peer exchanges below the radar of commodity capitalism; they are a mode of cultural production that does not overthrow capitalism, but operates in its shadow...that both rely on and disrupt the dominant mode.*

These “cultures of insubordination” then constitute practices that slowly chew away at the peripheries of commercial or organised industries such as media, and agriculture. They entail working in grey areas and the margins to preserve an alternative to the dominant and hegemonic systems. I elaborate further on this argument in what follows.

### **Fraying the Edges of the Media and Culture Industry**

Joe Karaganis (2007), in a volume that inquiries into the “structures of participation” in digital cultures, points out that digital cultures, like a lot of cultural activities allow for the embracing of new capacities for making and sharing cultural work. Further, they provide “new ways of scaling up cultural agency from interpersonal and local relations toward the larger dispersed forms of associations characteristic of modern society” (Karaganis 2007: 225). What makes digital technologies particularly different is that they “create the conditions for a shift in the organisation of culture, away from the exclusive reliance on culture industries to manage these transitions of scale” (*Ibid*: 225). He makes another point that is important to this discussion. That is, digital technologies have done more than “...encroach on the productive roles once reserved for a large-scale enterprises...” but have in fact, “broken open the carefully disciplined networks of distribution and promotion that makes cultural goods available and visible in crowded media environments” (*Ibid*: 225).

If one were to keep with Karaganis’ arguments, the next question that comes to mind is if this is relevant to non-digital or the “older” formats of media like radio which have been; as in the case of DDS’s Sangam Radio, reconfigured to blur the lines between the traditionally assigned roles of producer and consumer? Would his argument hold true for such “structures of participation”? I would argue that large parts of it would. A structure of participation where a woman from the one of the most marginalised sections of society is able to produce her own radio show and carry it across to others in her community; have an important say in creative and managerial decisions in the production processes; such a structure of participation would have the potential to upset

the “carefully disciplined networks of distribution and promotion” that Karaganis alludes to. This tension is probably most obviously in the incident discussed earlier of the private television channel pressuring Sangam Radio to share their archive of folk music. The argument made above is closely related to the final argument I make in the next section, which is, that such media assemblages, are also *collective assemblages of enunciations*. I make this argument in relation to Sangam Radio by drawing parallels to Guattari’s notion of a *Free Radho* and *Post Media*.

**Guattari’s Free Radio and Collective Assemblages of Enunciation.** Livesey, in his reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, talks of an assemblage<sup>23</sup> as “the processes of arranging, organising, or fitting together” (2010: 18). Further, assemblages have a horizontal and a vertical axis associated with them. The vertical axis consists of territorialised sides or reterritorialised sides which help stabilise it, as well as the forces of deterritorialisation that carry it away (*Ibid*: 18). Of interest to us here is the horizontal axis that deals with two things. One is a machinic assemblage of bodies, actions, and passions and the second, *collective assemblages of enunciations* that consist of “acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations of bodies” (*Ibid*: 18). Guattari spoke of Italy’s 1970s radio project -Radio Alice as one of these collective assemblages of enunciations. Further, it is projects like that of Radio Alice that would lead into a *post-mediatic era*. Why such post-media are important, is a point I elaborate in the concluding comments of this paper.

To continue, in the mid to late 1970s, the then government in Italy had a monopoly over radio airwaves with high levels of regulations of what could and couldn’t be broadcasted. There started in the face of this chocking stronghold, a number of unauthorised or pirate radio stations to challenge this monopoly. Radio Alice was one of these, short-lived, but prominent and catalytic, pirate or *free* (as they referred to themselves) radio stations that the government saw as an “intolerable threat” (Padovani 2011: 207). Its founders; one of whom was Franco Berardi- a close associate of Guattari; are described as “hackers, pirates of technology and language, true innovators of the counterculture scene of the 1977 movement” (*Ibid*: 206). Their programming is described as a mix of poetry, far left politics, performance art, innovative music, and call-ins (Downing 2004: 2150). The call-ins to the radio station particularly, were described as a powerful source of information. Callers would phone in to report events as they occurred, which allowed people to join marches and protests as they happened on the streets. It is an event touted to have

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<sup>23</sup> To reiterate, Livesey understands assemblages as “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning” (2005:18).



played a catalytic role in the riots of 1977 in Bologna (Padovani 2011: 206). It was these forms of participation and media production that Guattari was inspired by, hailing such efforts as heralding the post media era. What Michael Goddard says about Italy's 1970s free radio experiment, seems apt here:

*Radio ... had not only the technical advantage of lightweight replaceable technology, but more importantly was able to be used to create a self-referential feedback loop of political communication between producers and receivers, tending towards breaking down the distinctions between them* (2013: 48).

Keeping in mind the above points, I argue that DDS's Sangam Radio could be seen as a potential form of post media, with interesting parallels between the free radio described above and Sangam radio. As demonstrated in the processes of media production at Sangam Radio, the lines between the producer and consumer of their programmes is blurred. The members who come in to make programmes are the ones consuming it as well. Goddard also says of Free Radio that:

*...the totality of technical and human means available must permit the establishment of a veritable feedback loop between the auditors and the broadcast team: whether through direct intervention by phone, through opening studio doors, through interviews or programmes based on listener made cassettes* (Guattari, Felix, as quoted in Goddard 2013: 48).

The travelling of villagers up to Machanoor to record shows, Jockeys and *Sangam* supervisors going into various villages to record/produce content, the planning of shows for special occasions, everyday conversations inspiring debates, audiences punctuating daily broadcasts with feedback and requests via letters and phone calls while on air—all add to this *breaking down of distinctions*; rising from and going back to the community, establishing that “veritable feedback loop”. While Goddard's strict reading of Guattari's Free Radio doesn't lend itself to community radio stations such as the one discussed here, which work to represent their particular interests, I am more inclined to agree with Genosko's understanding of the same. He sees free radio as, “a node in a complex media ecology that is sustained by micropolitics built upon experimentation that perfuses a social assemblage” (2013: 21).

Keeping aside the matter of definitions for a moment, what I would like to draw our attention to is why such media assemblages are important. Whether it was Radio Alice in the 1970s Italy or Sangam Radio in today's India. Goddard sees such collective assemblages of enunciation, as a cause for the panic on part of the order of social forces because it begins to mobilise a massive

and unpredictable political affectivity and subjectivity that is “autonomous, self-referential, and self-reinforcing” (2013: 50). Taking this argument in tandem with Ash’s idea of such systems transporting the potential for the reactivation of memories of an affective encounter (as well as the potential production of new ones), such mobilisations of “unpredictable political affectivity and subjectivity” (Goddard 2013: 50) in a sense become a contagion. A much needed one perhaps to break existing hegemonies along the lines of gender, caste, and class. I move into the next section to provide some concluding comments.

## Conclusion

In January 2015, the social networking site Facebook, introduced a new feature to ring in the New Year. Shah (2015:1) describes it as the use of a predictive algorithm to remind us of what the year past looked like. He also records that when this feature was first brought in, one could choose as to whether or not one wanted to avail it. But a little later, he writes, “Facebook transformed from a helpful friend to a nagging aunt and decided to put this summary on the top of our pages, urging us to look at the recap of the year whether we wanted to or not” (*Ibid.* 2). Shah’s observation go on to confirm the complicated relations between media technologies and memory. In a time when memory is often conflated with storage (following Chun 2008), and as Shah points out, big data and predictive algorithms curate and decide what is important (2015:1), it can be argued that this battle is a two-pronged one. For on one hand we try hard to forget some things in the face of sapient technologies constantly recording and regurgitating our every move. On another, there are projects such as Sangam Radio and DDS’s Participatory Video, that do the very opposite. They constantly work to help communities recollect and hold on to their affirmative ways of life against neoliberal forces that threaten to obliterate them.

This paper was an attempt at understanding this complex relationship between media technologies, memory, and biodiversity. Above all it joins in the argument made by some scholars who impress upon us the need to understand both media and biodiversity conservation (especially by indigenous communities) from a non-linear and non-anthropocentric approach. One reason for this is because both media today, especially digital/new media and convergent forms of media (like the smart television or internet radio); as well as the area of biodiversity conservation are both rooted in the non-linear and the embodied. Therefore, they require, “less monolithic frameworks and formulaic approaches” (Nazarea 2005: 20). It can be akin to Rossiter’s application of *dirt research* to the study of cybernetics which, “diagrams the relations of force and transformation operative within ecologies of noise populated by unruly subjects,



persistent objects and algorithmic cultures” (2012: 48). In this particular study, they have allowed me to draw patterns between embodied, everyday practices, skills, habits, and rituals and the other entities we interact with. In turn, it helps understand how such interactions transform capacities (amplify or diminish) and how these reconfigure relationships of power in our daily lives.

To summarise the major observations and arguments, I point out that in this particular case, Sangam Radio station serves important archival and mnemonic functions. It helps the community engage with its collective memory and cultural artefacts on a daily basis. Such an engagement with memory, mostly in the form of nostalgia serves to counter the dominant practices and systems. This collective memory then is also a counter memory that provides us with an alternative narrative of events within a movement for agro biodiversity conservation. As argued earlier in the paper, collective memory and indigenous knowledge are intrinsic to and inseparable from biodiversity conservation that is a way of life. In this particular case, a non-representational approach helps highlight and value that which frays at the neat, uniform edges. It draws our attention to the periphery- to all that is grey and even disruptive. In this study it has helped understand how DDS and its network of *Sangams* challenge dominant systems of knowledge, agricultural biodiversity and media systems. It goes on to confirm the ideas of Ethnoecologists that it is in the margins that we find alternatives. These, as Hunn argues, serve as “...independent alternatives to the globalization of a market mentality that at present comes close to overwhelming all competitions for the hearts and minds of humanity” (1999: 26). As mentioned earlier, they tend towards a Deleuzian notion of a post-media.

These arguments would then require us to change our understanding of social movements. As demonstrated in this study, this social movement is embedded in the silent practices of the everyday. These silent forms of resistance and counter memory, Nazarea argues can provide a release from “...the hegemony of blahs that most of us tolerate most of the time” (2005:43). These in her view are as capable of inspiring social movements as any other force. She writes that, “...while social movements can be precipitated by a build-up of a sense of injustice and moral outrage, I believe that they are just as frequently and strongly stimulated by a release from reified boundaries and naturalised latitudes of choice” (*Ibid.* 43). To make a final point here, I would like to make an argument as to why we need such post-media, biodiversity conservation efforts *in vivo* and many more such social movements. Why do we need this opposition to the dominant systems; a resistance to what encompasses globalisation and/or a neoliberal offensive?

Wendy Brown argues for the urgency in seeing neoliberalism as not just an economic doctrine but as a “governing rationality” (2015). To elaborate, while neoliberalism as an economic policy

*...generates and legitimates extreme inequalities of wealth and life conditions; that it leads to increasingly precarious and disposable populations; that it produces an unprecedented intimacy between capital (especially finance capital) and states, and thus permits domination of political life by capital; that it generates crass and even unethical commercialization of things rightly protected from markets, for example, babies, human organs, or endangered species or wilderness; that it privatizes public goods and thus eliminates shared and egalitarian access to them...* (Brown and Shenk 2015:1)

However it is not just these economic repercussion that result from neoliberalism. Brown argues that it has deeper implications for democracy, where the meaning of democratic value changes from a political to an economic register (*Ibid*). This would in turn completely vanquish the political man or *homo politicus* because this governing rationality would have us preoccupied with “...enhancing present and future value through self-investments...” (*Ibid*). Democracy on the other hand she states requires us to have at least a modest orientation towards self-rule and an understanding that our freedom rests in such self-rule. When this political dimension in us is extinguished she argues that it “...takes with it the necessary energies, practices and culture of democracy, as well as its intelligibility” (*Ibid*). Are not these very processes, rather consequences of neoliberalism at play this very moment? The degradation of lands and ways of life in the Zaheerabad region are an illustration of this. But as Wiedemann and Zehle (2012:5) ask, what happens when, like the DDS community, “subjects and objects join in a refusal of roles in the great game of reification”? Most of all how to we refuse to play this game? The answer lies for me, in life affirming practices like that of the DDS community. For while these are not perfect and need to reach the ideals they have set for themselves they provide for us spaces to nurture diversity and creativity.

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## ***Khabar Lahariya*: A Feminist Critique of Mainstream Hindi Print Media**

**Ranu Tomar**

### **Abstract**

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The Hindi media is rapidly expanding its market in Hindi heartland of India. Hindi newspapers are increasing their readership in areas of the Hindi-speaking belt. In contrast to this scenario there is a rural newspaper called '*Khabar Lahariya*', which is paving its own way against the mainstream Hindi print media. It is a weekly newspaper in the local language -Bundeli and is run completely by women from Dalit, Muslim, and lower caste communities. This newspaper was started in 2002 in the Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh, India. *Khabar Lahariya* employs neo-literate and semi-literate journalists and many of them have been working for the newspapers since it started.

This paper is an attempt to analyse *Khabar Lahariya* as a feminist critique of mainstream Hindi media hegemony. It tries to understand the women working with *Khabar Lahariya* and their struggles against the rural-patriarchal society. It reflects on the under discussed and ignored issue of family versus work. My research suggests that *Khabar Lahariya*, this completely women-run newspaper, embodies an inclusive work-culture that is not sexist or masculinist. I reflect on the relationship between women journalists and their location in the media amidst existing choices in market-driven media hegemony. *Khabar Lahariya*'s work challenges the existing division of labour in mainstream media where newsrooms tend to be upper caste and male dominated. Since it is published in local languages, *Khabar Lahariya* also breaks the language hegemony of mainstream Hindi media.

This paper explores the personal journeys of women journalists in *Khabar Lahariya* drawing on my experience while working on a project with a non-profit organisation called 'Point of View'. As a project coordinator, I worked closely with *Khabar Lahariya*

team members. It is an attempt to convert my field experience into an academic contribution towards feminist media analysis.

Keywords: *khabar lahariya*, *bundeli*, mainstream hindi media, feminist critique, hegemony.

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## Introduction

Running a newspaper is an economic activity. Newspapers are a medium having a certain structure for the dissemination of information. The Hindi media is expanding into the Hindi heartland with efforts to increase its reach and access. The more corporate a newspaper, the more power it has to negotiate a profit. Sevanti Ninan (2007) writes that

*The decade of the 1990s saw the convergence of many changes in the country and in the Hindi belt, which transformed the print media landscape. Literacy, which had been low in the region, grew rapidly, as reflected in the dramatic increase recorded by the 2001 Census. [...] Rising farm incomes and a growing service sector in rural areas pointed to the emergence of a rural middle class whose purchasing power had made newspaper affordable. It was targeted by marketers who underwrote the expansion of newspapers in these parts. The market in small town and rural India was expanding (Ninan 2007: 14-15).*

Amidst all these transformation of the mainstream Hindi print media some interesting new 'print-spaces' in the rural areas have been largely ignored. One such intervention is *Khabar Lahariya* (KL), a rural newspaper that seeks to reflect on the realities of rural society.

*Khabar Lahariya* is a weekly newspaper that started in 2002 from Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh. The first edition was in the local language, Bundeli. Currently, it has six editions; one each from Chitrakoot, Banda, Mahoba, Banaras, Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh, and Sitamarhi in Bihar. The newspaper is printed in four local languages, namely Budeli, Bajjika, Bhojpuri and Awadhi. There is also an online edition where English translations are made available. The use of local languages for the KL editions is an attempt to highlight the local rural issues and problems like the lack of infrastructure in the villages, water scarcity, veterinary issues and health facilities, and local administrative issues such as scams and crime.

KL consists of eight pages with seven sections covering news on the Village, the Town, Women Issues, Regional News, National-International News, Entertainment, and Editorial. It is the only newspaper that covers issues from rural areas that are usually ignored by mainstream print media. KL has launched its online edition (<http://khabarlahariya.org/>)<sup>1</sup>. This is an achievement as it allows for a rural local language newspaper to have an online presence thus giving it world-wide access and visibility.

KL is run completely by women from the Muslim community and lower castes, many of whom are neo-literate and semi-literate journalists and some of whom have been working for the newspaper since its inception. Over the past decade, this all-women team has been challenging the stereotyped roles of women in rural areas by creating their own media. This is a unique example of feminist intervention at this level. This newspaper gives a challenge to the existing patterns of media ownership; which is largely controlled and regulated by men.

### **Background of *Khabar Lahariya***

In 2002, Nirantar<sup>2</sup> a Delhi based NGO took the initiative to start a ‘completely-rural-newspaper.’ They called it ‘*Khabar Lahariya* (KL)’, which means spreading waves of news and information, in Bundeli—the language of the first edition of the newspaper. Nirantar, as a feminist organisation took the lead in democratising rural communication to start *Khabar Lahariya* in Chitrakoot in 2002. Nirantar has been encouraging and conducting the training of the women as journalists; improving their literacy skills and honing their reporting abilities. This training involves news-collection, dealing with public figures, news-sources and improving their editing skills. Now *Khabar Lahariya* is a well- established rural-newspaper with a reputation that it has earned over time.

*Khabar Lahariya was the kind of breakthrough that happens only every once in a while, when many streams of thought and action come together in constructive, inspired fusion. Unlike other media products,*

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<sup>1</sup> *Khabar Lahariya* website having all the KL editions in different languages.

<sup>2</sup> Nirantar is Delhi-based feminist organisation that works towards enabling empowering education, especially for girls and women from marginalised communities. It promotes transformatory formal and non-formal learning processes, which enable the marginalised to better understand and address their realities. Nirantar has been actively involved with the women’s movement and other democratic rights movements since its inception in 1993.

*Khabar Lahariya was not guided by commercial interests, nor launched by a large media company as part of its rural outreach strategy. But the paper like all other before and since did have an agenda: to empower the people of rural Chitrakoot, to give them a voice, to strengthen their fragile literacy skills and give them power to construct their own words. It was the product of an ideology, at the core of which lay the values of feminism, equality and justice for the most marginalized, the twice disenfranchised, the rural poor, the Dalits, the women (Naqvi 2007: 21).*

The team of KL journalists exhibit a more inclusive work culture challenging the upper-caste controlled mainstream media where the number of women journalists is low.

## **Methodology**

I was appointed Project Coordinator with a non-profit organisation called ‘Point of View’ (POV)<sup>3</sup> situated in Mumbai, India. While working as project coordinator on the *Khabar Lahariya* - Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) project, I got to know *Khabar Lahariya* from the inside. This work is based on my observations and conversations with the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists during their Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) workshops learning process. To some extent, imparting ICT training to the journalists gave me some insights into their work culture and enthusiasm to learn new things. This paper is based on my work experience and is an attempt to convert it into an academic contribution towards feminist media analysis.

This paper uses a qualitative approach to understand the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists’ location in personal and professional media space. Apart from this, it takes the help of secondary literature and certain resource materials of ‘Point of View’.

## **An Exploration of Mainstream Hindi Media Hegemony versus *Khabar Lahariya***

Recently the Hindi heartland is experiencing a major media expansion targeting maximum profit from Hindi-readers. “As a result of the increased literacy, improved communication and rising rural incomes, as well as aggressive marketing strategies adopted by publishers, newspapers penetration in the Hindi belt increased” (Ninan, 2007:15).

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<sup>3</sup> Point of View is a Mumbai-based non-profit platform that brings the points of view of women into community, social, cultural and public domains through media, art and culture. Point of View was started in Bombay, India, in November 1997. It amplifies the voices of women and removes barriers to free speech and expression. Our work straddles multiple forms of media, art and culture, both online and offline.

Ninan (2007: 113) writes that:

*Newspaper expansion and the localisation had many colourful consequences for daily journalism in the Hindi heartland. It created a genre of news which did not exist before in this region, and a new breed of news gatherer. As urban and rural local self-governance took root in India, as local-communities become more vocal and more conscious of their rights, as local commercial interest came forward to make viable the publications that could engender such a space, its emergence became inevitable (Ninan 2007: 113).*

Today, cities are witnessing the growth of an urban-mall-culture, which has a direct relationship with the advertisement and revenue generating systems of newspapers. In the Hindi heartland, the news content gives more space to commercial interests and rural coverage is sidelined.

*Khabar Lahariya* editions seem to have content that addresses rural lives and issues of interest to them. Since local-rural news and issues are in focus, people are more aware and interested to read the newspaper. Here, women deliver the news-content in language that is more inclusive and eschews the stereotyped-male vocabulary. Thus, KL journalists challenge the sexist and male-constructed language of mainstream Hindi print media that neglects women's perspectives in its language. KL brings women's perspectives and their language of experiences in rural patriarchal society, having a specific socio-cultural contextual meaning. The following are some examples of headlines from KL: "What is the point of institutional deliveries" (July 22, 2014) – this headline talks about the failure of the Janani Suraksha Yojana under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). A woman who chooses to deliver in a government health centre, is supposed to receive an incentive of Rs. 1400, but in some cases beneficiaries did not receive their incentives despite choosing institutional deliveries. Other examples of headlines include "Black Out in Chobepur Bazar: Power Supply at Three Hours a Day" (July 28, 2014), "What Do The Poor Do In Time of Inflation" (August 4, 2014), "Post Pregnancy Death Leads to Protests in Banda, FIR filed" (August 25, 2014), "2 Pregnant Women Burnt for Dowry" (September 1, 2014), "Dalit Women Beaten Up by High Caste Neighbour" (September 15, 2014), and "They Threatened Us to Agree to a Compromise" (September 16, 2014). The last mentioned news story is about incidents of gender and caste-based violence where women were raped and asked to withdraw the case. All these headlines highlight the nature of local problems and issues in these rural areas. The women journalists bring out these issues, which demonstrate that each news article has a gender aspect, and focuses on marginalised sections. This kind of news remains overlooked in mainstream media.

Being a weekly newspaper *Khabar Lahariya* cannot be compared with the other Hindi-language daily newspapers. However, it must be acknowledged that it has all the potential to challenge the market-driven mainstream Hindi media. KL has introduced seriousness for rural issues that did not exist earlier in the region. A fact that cannot be ignored is that KL is really making progress entering into the male-dominated media market strategies and breaking the glass ceiling. Media strategies are designed to gain profit following the corporate model focusing more on advertisement and revenue generation. KL has emerged as an alternative model that focuses more on the quality of the content rather than attracting profits.

*Khabar Lahariya* aims to promote gender equality, rural development, and women empowerment, which are interlinked with mainstream politics. KL publishes a 'special issue', which is dedicated to one theme covering different special stories on Women, Travel, Election, Health, Water and issues relevant to current affairs. Previous special issues included one on the situation after the Muzzaffar Nagar riots (*September 15, 2014*) and others on themes such as the Elections, Media, Travel, Technology, the Monsoons, and Food. The emergence and existence of *Khabar Lahariya* paradoxically both reflects and undermines the gender gaps in media practice through systematic discrimination in rural society of north India.

### **Modern Communication Technology and New Media Empowering *Khabar Lahariya* Journalists**

The team members of *Khabar Lahariya* try to make KL journalists confident on a personal level too. While being part of the newspaper they are capable enough to deal with the struggles and challenges of personal life. Many of the team members who are from small villages and towns shared their experiences with a sense of being empowered.

Chhoti Meera, a journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya*, says that her two daughters enjoy working on the computer because they see her do so. She said that she too had a keen desire to learn computers ever since she joined KL but was initially afraid of even touching one. She mentioned that while working with KL she feels empowered by the fact that she is running her family and has her own earned identity. Being outside of home for work and getting to know the outer world has brought about a positive change in her. Chhoti Meera shared that she did not ever think of becoming a journalist but she always wanted to be a self-reliant woman.

Another rural journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya* got an opportunity to learn computers properly only when she joined the newspaper. She mentioned that she also tried to learn from a

training centre but only learnt how to turn the computer on and off. She admits that she does not know English well, which makes it difficult to learn computers but she has picked up typing well.

A long time after its inception, it was decided that *Khabar Lahariya* should be made available online to expand its reach and access. Journalists were given training to understand new media. Many of the journalists who were not tech-savvy found it very exciting and helpful in their work for newsgathering and sharing news.

It was a completely new experience for them to learn about new media particularly the use of search engines, mailing, blogging, Twitter and Facebook for their work as well as for their own personal use. Moreover, they now understand that it is a versatile platform to promote their newspaper. It is interesting to see how these rural women are using new media to write their own history of their commendable work.

This introduction to new media gave them more access to the world of information. It gave them access to a wide range of knowledge and information available online, which they intend to use for their professional growth and to improve their performance. The journalists learnt about feminist blogs available in Hindi.

They demonstrated that they had learnt to use the Internet well by accessing information through government web portals and official websites. One KL journalist expressed the view that it was good to know about the wide range of things available and that things are changing at fast pace. It indicates a divide in mainstream media and a rural newspaper in terms of having resources and material support. This brings out the stark reality of the market, where resources are controlled by the powerful.

*Khabar Lahariya* actualises the need to highlight the local-rural issues. Here I would like to argue that the training the KL journalists in the use of communication technology and new media can cultivate their skills but it does not make them aware of their location as a woman in rural patriarchy. KL women have been trying bravely to set a new example of a rural-professional woman. However they face criticisms and are expected to prove themselves more on the personal front since a woman leaving the home is not easily accepted in rural society. When they visit their respective native places they are expected to dress traditionally, wear marriage symbols and abide by the accepted norms and values, which shows another side of these women. Though



the KL women are economically independent, they find it difficult to exercise their freedom and choice in the rural social surroundings.

### **Women Journalists' Life and Experiences Working with KL**

It is interesting to see the personal and professional journey of the women associated with *Khabar Lahariya* who have also shown great capacity to learn. Sunita, a KL rural journalist, who belongs to Banda, walks long distances to reach far-flung places to collect news stories. Many small villages do not have roads, transportation, and connectivity, yet she covers the distance on foot to gather news. KL journalists show great dedication to the newspaper, taking risks to cover news stories even in areas that are dacoit-infested and infamous for crime. She says that hardly any other newspaper journalist comes to cover these small villages so the question of covering women's issues does not even arise. This area is poverty-ridden and inhabited by scheduled tribes. Other journalists do not cover these issues and problems or ask to be paid to get the news published.

Another journalist Shyamkali, who also hails from Banda shared that prior to becoming a journalist at KL she was afraid to take up this profession, but after having spent some time as a journalist, she has learnt how to voice issues and deal with people. She expressed the feeling that she could never have imagined becoming a journalist but now, she does not give up easily and she no longer thinks that being a woman prevents her from taking up any job.

Shivdevi, while working with KL bought herself a piece of land. It gives her a sense of ownership and power. She has been associated with KL since before its inception. She continued studying even after delivering her baby and continued her efforts to be economically independent. Shivdevi revealed that earlier she was not aware of 'women's issues' and what those meant. She said that it used to be a challenging task to go to officials and talk to them. While working with KL she developed her understanding of her own rights and as a result about women's issues more broadly. Working as a journalist for the area gave her confidence. She shares, with pride, that because of KL she was able to buy property, which made her feel empowered. Shivdevi mentions that this job allowed her to know more about her own small district with regard to its geographical location in relation to the rest of India.

Another KL journalist who is good at newspaper distribution in villages, is confident enough to reach out to new places. While selling the newspaper to new places she informs people about

KL. She takes pride in this work of distributing newspapers. She strongly feels that KL has changed her life and gave her freedom and economic independence.

Fieldwork has given these rural journalists strength and exposure to their own surroundings. In a social context where women and their mobility is strictly controlled by men, it is an achievement for these women journalists to talk to the *Pradhan*, the head of the village. This is an example of how these journalists, belonging to lower castes, challenge the hierarchy of the male-dominated and patriarchal society to which they belong.

Each journalist appreciates being associated with *Khabar Lahariya*. A young rural journalist says that it is common to see men working in every field but women are seen less. *Khabar Lahariya* women are developing new approaches to local feminism to negotiate their own set of struggles. Most of the women working with KL have faced bitter experiences and struggles in their personal life and many have had to suffer because they were not educated and independent. However, *Khabar Lahariya* proved them capable, and strong enough to deal with personal life too.

I need to emphasise here, the subjective understanding of the development and empowerment of these socio-economically weaker rural women through the KL newspaper, in the context of the rampant patriarchy of North Indian villages. The word ‘empowerment’ has real application here, which is working with an impact to challenge the rural patriarchy. Does the economic independence really make them stronger against the rural patriarchy? Or are they merely considered as another earning member who can manage both the home and their journalistic work, at the same time? Empowerment remains limited unless women are free to take their own decisions regarding household work. The situation for most of the KL women journalists is that they are still expected to prioritise household work over their journalistic work.

### **Breaking down the Dominant Social-Cultural Order in the Workplace**

The interesting fact about KL is that it is an egalitarian workplace working against social and economic hierarchies. The workplace shows a great sense of understanding of employees’ skills and attempts to bringing out the best in them. The production meetings are full of work and fun, and keep the team in high spirits. Even the training workshops are fun learning experiences for the team members.

When new journalists join KL they learn from their seniors; be it legwork for newsgathering or distributing the newspaper. Many journalists working with KL shared that traveling and visiting new places has given them a great sense of confidence.

The KL work culture is in contrast to the ‘lobbying culture’ that is a reality of work place politics of the newsrooms. There is, therefore, every chance of power lobbying. Byerly and Ross (2006) write that

*[...] newsroom culture that masquerades as a neutral “professional journalism ethos” is, for all practical and ideological purposes, organised around a man-as-norm and women-as-interloper structure. [...] The consequences for women who choose to work in the male-ordered domain, which is the newsroom are to develop strategies that involve either beating the boys at their own game or else developing alternative ways of practicing journalism* (Byerly and Ross, 2006: 79)

In such a scenario the emergence and existence of KL demonstrates that it is possible to have a women-only space. Having all female colleagues makes the working environment very comfortable. The KL-team reflects sisterhood, breaking certain power-dynamics existing in other media organisations. Though the concept of sisterhood has been criticised on different grounds, showing the hierarchies within, it has been used by essentialist feminists to call for a women-only space. To my mind, the KL work culture is a successful method to challenge the mainstream media, which is reluctant to accept women as professionals. KL has made it possible to have an alternative workable model to run a newspaper having no men on the team.

Some KL journalists are very young; they are given a feminist orientation and understanding about themselves as women. They are taught how to deal with the many questions they are likely to be asked while conducting fieldwork in small villages and far-flung rural areas. In mainstream media, training of newcomers is intentionally gender-blind, where it is emphasised that ‘a journalist is journalist’ whether it is a man or woman. This profession conveniently disregards gender, perhaps assuming that the women taking up this profession are already empowered and therefore do not need to be identified as a woman anymore.

*There is still a widespread assumption among many female journalists and feminists scholars that the news would change into new directions more relevant to women if only there were more female journalists. Two questionable issues are at the heart of this assumption: one is that journalists have sufficient*

*autonomy in day-to-day work to perform in a uniquely individual in gendered manner. However, there is ample of research that suggests the profession is organised such that different individuals will operate in much the same way, whether they are women or men. The second issue is that women journalists are distinguished more by their femininity than by any other dimension of identity, like professionalism or ethnicity. However, the contested and contradictory nature of gender has become common sense in most feminist theory, thus undermining any possibility of a definitively 'feminine' input to the news by female journalists (Van Zoonen, 1998: 34).*

According to a government report of the National Commission for Women, sexual harassment is a part of the work culture in media organisations in India but women either do not know how or, for a wide variety of reasons, choose not to do anything about it. The report (Bhagat 2004) states,

*Women in media are vulnerable to harassment from colleagues who come drunk for night shift and the night staff leaving pornographic pictures and messages on their computers. Making sexist, vulgar comments is common in the editorial room of newspapers as also so-called humorous or snide remarks on women colleagues' work. Most women hesitate to speak of sexual harassment, but are more than willing to speak of sexist remarks they are subjected to at workplace (Bhagat, 2004: 49).*

This is the stark reality of sexual harassment in the newsrooms of mainstream media. However, to date, the KL workplace has had no issues of sexual harassment at the workplace as experienced by women journalists working with mainstream print media.

The KL workplace provides a healthy working environment and gives no space to 'sexist work culture'. The women journalists working with *Khabar Lahariya* are well aware of their rights and remain alert during fieldwork, as the field is an extension of their workplace. They are regularly encouraged to participate in gender-sensitisation and orientation workshops to fight against gender discrimination and sexual harassment. A journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya* shared her experience that initially while distributing newspapers in villages she sometimes faced ridiculing and sarcastic comments regarding her work. Another young journalist mentioned that she was often criticised for being a 'woman' journalist, since this was seen as job unfit for women as it requires being outside the home. She says, however, that now in some areas where people know *Khabar Lahariya*, they no longer verbally express their criticisms but still their gaze at KL women journalists expresses a lot. She adds that some people in villages show great respect for the newspaper and its work. *Khabar Lahariya* might not be a powerful profit-making

newspaper but it does have a strong egalitarian system with little or no power manipulation and especially no aggressive masculine style of work culture.

In a survey<sup>4</sup> (2006) conducted in Delhi, the social background of 315 key decision makers of 37 Delhi based (Hindi and English) publications and television channels have been underlined. They are predominantly Hindu upper caste and male. Almost 90% of decision- makers in the English language print media and 79% in television are of the upper caste, although the upper castes are about 16% of the country's population; Brahmins alone constitute 49% of this segment, and 71% of the total are upper caste men. Not one of the 315 is a Dalit or an Adivasi. Only 4% are OBC, 3% are Muslims (13.4% of the country's population). Christians do better (4%) as a proportion of their population (2.3%). Women are vastly under represented, 17% of the total, although they do better (32%) in the English language electronic media. The diversity of the newsroom work force is rarely a topic of discussion, which has resulted in the social hierarchy being reproduced over time. *Khabar Lahariya's* work force composition challenges dominant social hierarchy by employing women from lower caste, scheduled tribes and the Muslim community, and representing women from these marginalised groups. These rural journalists are coming from socially excluded backgrounds and have been working while challenging these deeply rooted caste hierarchies.

## Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to analyse *Khabar Lahariya* as a feminist critique of mainstream Hindi media and demonstrate its potential to challenge the hierarchies in the mainstream media. This paper reveals that *Khabar Lahariya* is developing an intersectional approach by bringing together women from different socio-economic backgrounds. *Khabar Lahariya* challenges the existing division of labour, based on dominant socio-cultural values where newsrooms are male-dominated, which is the 'de facto' in mainstream media. It also addresses issues that have been largely ignored, such as the issue of family versus work.

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<sup>4</sup> Upper Castes Dominate National Media (2006) a survey conducted in Delhi. The survey was designed and executed by Anil Chamaria, freelance journalist, Jitendra Kumar from the Media Study Group and Yogendra Yadav, senior fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

This study shows that *Khabar Lahariya* is a challenge to the market-driven mainstream media and its homogenised content. It gives importance to rural issues that have been overlooked by the mainstream Hindi print media. The local dialect of the newspaper breaks the language hegemony in the region where Hindi language is used as an ideological tool for ruling elite. It also highlights the fact that if rural women, like those involved with KL, can run alternative feminist media then urban women journalists can also come forward to challenge mainstream media by creating their own feminist alternatives.

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## Television of a Marathi Past: The Brahmanical emancipation of women in *Uncha Mazha Zoka*, a Marathi TV show based on Ramabai Ranade's life

Rajashree Gandhi

### Abstract

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Marathi Television has been at its peak in the last decade. Marathi Television has often come up with strong female protagonists, right from Paulkhuna (1993), to Damini (1998-99) and finally to the recent Uncha Maza Zoka (2012-13). 'Uncha Maza Zoka' was a prime time show based on the life of Ramabai Ranade, the wife of Justice M.G. Ranade: both renowned social reformers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra.

While sitting in front of the television screen and watching the prime time show 'Uncha Maza Zoka', I was put into a sense of discomfort when I looked at the satisfied smiles of my 'upper' caste, upper middle class, Marathi family. When I took up this discomfort into the realm of academic enquiry using the theories of feminist television studies and the studies on 19<sup>th</sup> century Brahmanical patriarchy, I could put myself in a position to make an argument about why this show, based on the progressive history of Maharashtra, brings smiles to the faces of people and why it makes them 'feel good.'

In this paper, I argue that this representation of reform and women's emancipation in a Brahmanical setting, forms some sort of a post-feminist assurance, restores faith in family and nationalism for the conservative but forward-looking by erasing their anxieties about loss of 'Indian culture,' and also doesn't leave any space to suggest that 'the progressive' viewpoint wasn't enough to end all kinds of oppression. From a feminist and an anti-caste perspective, I try to analyze who is the true protagonist of this show, what televising such a representation does to the narrative itself, and how the (regional



language) television screen comforts its consumer audiences with tales of the glorious past of Maharashtra. The region and its past are thus immortalized on screen, and its broadcasting is just another reinforcement of a truly 'Brahmanical' narrative of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Marathi television serials, caste, Ramabai Ranade, women's empowerment, Brahmanical patriarchy.

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## Introduction

*"Women, not excluding Brahmin women, are the worst victims of this Brahmin law. So, women, particularly the Brahmin women, should consider the destruction of Brahmanism their primary goal in life. It is only when Brahmanism is dead true liberation of women can take place. Women libbers please note."*  
- V. T. Rajshekhar (1981)

**Author's note:** I am a *Savarna* (caste Hindu) woman, and have lived and interacted with plenty of Marathi Brahmin people, including my own family. My position of privilege in this region and society is undoubted, almost next to the fair Brahmin heterosexual male in the hierarchy. Also, as Rajshekhar suggests, it is one of my primary goals to destroy Brahmanism. I owe my caste consciousness and my interest in annihilation of caste to the sincere and passionate people working continuously and relentlessly to further Dalit scholarship and assertion. Without their resistance to the Brahmanical worlds of oppression, I wouldn't have been able to reflect on the several sociological manifestations of Brahmanism in my own living room. And I believe the politics of the living room lies at the heart of television studies.

## Television Studies

The discipline of Television Studies in India has had only a very few academicians studying the representation of women on the small screen. Though few, most of them have contributed heavily by analysing the shift from the state's ownership of television broadcasting to that of private players, and also by arguing how representation of women, their sexuality, their

aspirations, the 'erotic' is shaped both on television and in households where it is consumed (Mankekar 2004). In the neo-liberal era, the screen becomes a shop and content is married to advertising. While the content of television is supposedly “women-oriented” or “family oriented”, the producers sell their shows with the logic that they are simply offering what the 'middle class housewife,' demands; and hence if she demands '*saas-bahu*' kitchen dramas, they will supply it to her. This simple logic often goes unchallenged. Even if there are shows that go beyond the family dramas of stiff patriarchies, for example shows about women's liberation or independent women, they can't help but not give in to the continuous urge to package the show for mass consumption in a globalisation-friendly nation-state, where the 'modern, yet traditional woman' manages the professional with the personal or the domestic and becomes an active consumer in the economy (Niyogi De 2012).

The content and broadcast practices of regional language television in India have also not been studied adequately. There are, at this moment, as many regional channels of Doordarshan as there are privately owned regional language channels. The representation of gender dynamics and roles on these channels are specifically to entertain the regional sensibilities of family and sub-nations. There is a strong need to document and analyse these texts as they are more prevalent in households than films and Hindi/English television.

For my study, I have chosen to look at Marathi television, particularly taking the case of a recently broadcast show '*Uncha Maza Zoka*,' (henceforth UMZ ) a 'period show/drama' describing the life of Ramabai Ranade after her marriage to Justice M. G. Ranade, both of whom are renowned social reformers of Maharashtra. I will start out by commenting on the evolution of Marathi television, followed by the justification of why I chose this show as well as the prediction of why a serial on Ramabai Ranade, adapted from her writings, is feasible or profitable to produce commercially at this point of time. I will then elaborately talk about the content of the show, using illustrative examples from some selected episodes. UMZ has over 420 episodes. I have chosen to study the first 15 episodes of the show, since they set the tone of the show, introduce the characters, and establish its feel-good factor and its 'saleability'. In addition to that, I have also chosen 3 episodes at random and 3 episodes towards the end of the show to observe the shaping up of the narrative. Since I also aim to go beyond the content analysis of these episodes, I will mention my observations as I have watched other visual/textual material related to the show. For example, two months after the last episode of UMZ, the channel came up with a 2 hour long awards show based on the series, in which women achievers were congratulated

and honoured. I have also come across the interviews of the lead actors given on an entertainment based news programme that show their views on playing historically relevant characters. I would like to state in the beginning itself that I have watched this show (very infrequently) since it started airing, and I have unintentionally been a participant observer amongst people who watch this serial regularly. Though I would not generalise based on this observation, I would write it into this study along with expressing my discomfort and issues with the show and its representation of a process of women emancipation.

Charlotte Brundson (1993) mentions in her work on television/media studies and feminist scholarship that especially while studying television, the feminist scholar and the female viewer are pitted against one another, creating a power relation between the two, where one has the capital and resources to study the other. I am interested in this politics and would like to be alert and reflective about it while doing this study.

### **A Brief History of Marathi Television – Evolution and Practices**

In the neoliberal era, it is not just by coincidence that you see the growth of regional-language television on one hand and the aspiration to be accepted at a global level on the other. Especially in a multilingual society like India, the principle of narrowcasting and tailoring narratives of local progress works to establish a positive consent from the local people; not just Marathi people in Maharashtra but elsewhere or even in the Marathi speaking diaspora in foreign countries (Niyogi De, 2012).

While Regional Language Television is relatively young in India, Marathi- language broadcasting started a bit earlier than the rest. From 1972 to 1984, Doordarshan had slots for Marathi language broadcasting, ranging from half an hour to three hours. Anupama Rao (1995) has analyzed a show called *Paulakhuna*, which was aired on 'Bombay Doordarshan' in 1993. *Paulakhuna* was a series based on 6 famous novels written by Marathi authors in the pre-Independence era, a time when social reform was a project taken up by many educated middle-class Brahmins. The producers of the show introduced the show as "...the evolution of Maharashtrian womanhood as depicted in the literary writing from the 19th through the 20th century" (Rao, 1995:521). Since my paper also talks about what televising a historical narrative into a contemporary serial does to the progressive nature of the narrative, I am borrowing a lot from her study. Like her, I am also curious about the politics of broadcasting stories of the

improved status of Marathi women. I am interested in the questions that Rao (1995) raises with regard to this type of Marathi TV programming:

*At first glance, Paulakhuna does indeed seem configured as yet another exemplary progress-narrative. It is this to some extent: I will later argue that the serial gives the category 'woman' a narrative fullness through the delineation of a progressively evolving feminine 'self'. Initially, my interest in the serial was sparked by what I saw as the convergence between the realm of televisual culture and the arena of history (as a specialized academic discipline with its own discursive modalities) that Paulakhuna seemed to map; at least as far-as narratives about women were concerned. I was intrigued by the contemporaneity of Paulakhuna with the current historiographical interest in social reform.' How was it that the question (drama, really) of the brahmin, middle class woman's improvement was enacted (in the serial) with the same teleological fervour and ventriloquial skill that characterized the debates of the social reformers? (Rao, 1995: 521)*

In 1994, Doordarshan inaugurated a separate Marathi channel named DD Sahyadri in 1998. DD Sahyadri was one of the more popular channels of Doordarshan, as it had one representative from each genre, a cookery show, a family drama, a Women's talk show, a comedy show, and so on. In fact the most memorable show for many people, even for those in living in the state of Maharashtra who didn't speak much Marathi but didn't have satellite television, was *Damini* in which a print media reporter's (Damini played by Pratiksha Lonkar) professional life is described along with bits and pieces of her personal life. After a few years, the protagonist even dies in one of the incidents, (and doesn't come back to life unlike how it happens in a few hit Hindi serials). After her death, the show takes a leap and showcases the story of her daughter Divya who becomes a cop and continues her mother's legacy of playing her role in keeping justice. The show, with its evocative and almost angrily sung title song, spoke about women doing jobs other than what the domestic demands of them and doing them with intense passion and ambition. After *Damini*, there were very few shows with a female cast in the lead role.

In 1999, the first private Marathi channel was started by the Zee Network, first named Alpha Marathi and later, Zee Marathi. By 2008, Marathi had 6 entertainment channels of its own. It also had four news channels, one 24x7 music channel and one movie channel. The Marathi television industry had grown big and in 2011, even 'Balaji,' the biggest production house of Hindi television made its entry into Marathi households with Marathi entertainment.

The largest component of Marathi TV is composed of the family dramas, from the old ones like *Gharkool*, *Vaadalaat*, *Chaar Divas Sasuche*, *Ya Gojirvanya Gharaat*, *Asambhav*, *Agnibotra*, to the ones on air right now: *Mala Sasu Havi*, *Honaar Soon Mi Hya Ghar Chi*, *Devyani*, *Pudhcha Paul* etc. All these shows are about upper middle class or upper class royal families with surnames like Deshmukh, Pathwardhan, Raje-Shirke, Ratnaparkhi, Sardeshmukh, Tipre, Vikhe-Patil etc. This clearly shows that these shows are made keeping the 'upper' caste middle-class Marathi (only the forward-looking, urban, culturally and economically groomed people from Western Maharashtra) people in mind, either as characters and protagonists or as target audience.

Interestingly, at the same time while UMZ is airing on Zee Marathi, its rival Star Pravah is also airing another show which is loosely based on a similar storyline (child marriage of a charming Marathi girl into the family of social reformers) though it does not make any claim of being based on real historical characters. It would be a promising possibility to watch these shows and spot the similarities, wonder why they are both being produced at the same time and also to notice that both of them give similar disclaimers at the start of the show.

### **Uncha Mazha Zoka**

*Uncha Mazha Zoka*, which literally means 'high is my flight' (here the flight refers specifically to that experienced on a swing), is a prime time show with a storyline set in the late 19th century Maharashtra, and based on a book written by Ramabai Ranade called *Aamchya Aayushyathya Kaahi Aathvani*.

The sets for the show, presenting the houses and interiors resembling that era are constructed at Film City, Goregaon. Erected on 30-50 thousand square feet area, the set is mainly designed as per descriptions of Ranade Wada as written by Ramabai Ranade. The director of the show Viren Pradhan had also roped in a famous historian to ensure authenticity of the narrative.

Briefly the story of Uncha Maaza Zhoka can be narrated as follows. 11 year old Yamuna Kurlekar who lives with her parents in a small village in Satara district is very innocent and naïve, as children generally are. Madhavrao Ranade is a 33-year-old widower, living in an ancestral *wada* in Pune and is a “*nava-mata-waadi*” (progressive/reformist) and a learned man (district judge) from an affluent family of Ranades. After her marriage to Madhavrao, Yamuna's name is changed to Rama and she tries hard to be the responsible newly-wed looking after her husband's

needs as she was by her mother. Madhavrao considers it as his responsibility to make the charming little Yamuna understand the importance of education. However, since his family believes that the education of women can potentially harm everyone in the family in all kinds of ways, the husband-wife duo has to struggle to take their project forward. When Madhavrao dies, Ramabai continues his legacy and becomes a well-known social reformer herself—Ramabai Ranade.

### **What is so special about the Ranades?**

There have been many social reformers in Maharashtra in the pre-independence period, both male and female. What makes it feasible and profitable to make a TV show based on the lives of Ramabai Ranade (1862-1926) and Justice M. G. Ranade (1842-1901)? Is it as simple and coincidental that the show was made just because the director, Virendra Pradhan happened to read Ramabai's memoir (mentioned above) and got inspired? We need to ask whether similar shows are possible on the small screen, which is heavily dependent on advertising, based on other leaders such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887)?

Let us try to answer this question with more questions. Reform could refer to two things: “...attempting to generate internal change in society, and attacking it from the outside” (Kosambi, 1991). While there was Ramabai Ranade, who followed the footsteps of her husband, and after his death, ran the Seva Sadan in Pune keeping the traditional role of women as supporters, good wives, service of others alive, there was also Pandita Ramabai who advocated self-reliance for women by vocally discarding given notions of womanhood and especially those of Hindu womanhood by converting to Christianity. The question I raise here is – Does the story of Ramabai Ranade make better TV to cater to a society, which calls itself both progressive and traditional at the same time, as compared to a show on Pandita Ramabai?

If the motive of the serial was to talk about women's education, could they have not taken stories of Savitribai Phule or Anandibai Joshi? The Ranades were Chitpavan Brahmins who were known to have a huge ideological influence in politics, journalism, education, literature, medicine etc. even though they were a small community (Kumar, Hatekar, and Mathur 2009) Savitribai Phule and her husband Jotiba struggled intensely against the caste-Hindu society in both word and deed by writing against it, and teaching girls and untouchables. They were more in favour of the

British rule than the rule of caste Hindus. Their patriotism was always in question, unlike that of the Ranades. Moreover, Savitribai's struggle cannot be easily sanitised. A scene of her being called a whore and pelted with stones (for her grit to teach girls and untouchables) on the streets of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pune, is difficult to capture on the small screen and broadcast on a prime time family slot. Similarly, it would be difficult to narrate the tale of Anandibai Joshi, the first ever woman to go to the United States to become a doctor, as her husband abused her physically, mentally, verbally, and sexually if she did not study English and get educated. Sexual violence was a big part of the story of her 'emancipation', which was conveniently ignored even in the popular history of Maharashtra and the psyche of its people, to say nothing of a probable TV adaptation.

### **The Framing by the Small Screen**

Any story, be it fictional or non-fiction when adapted to a medium like television tends to get framed in specific ways to meet the needs of the markets and advertisers. Tagore's celebrated feminist dance drama *Chitrangada*, which questioned both heteronormativity and nationalism, when was made into a TV show directed by Piyali Basu, lost its reflexive and critical character, especially at its climax, even if it was choreographed to show the strength of a woman. His poem *Sadharan Meye*, sensitive of gender roles, was also televised and rather than critiquing the expectations from a traditional Hindu girl in a Bengali family, the adaptation assures the viewers of the girl's cultural rootedness and moreover this is only because she establishes her autonomy by cooking and setting up a professional kitchen.

Similarly, *UMZ* is not just about Ramabai Ranade's life, it is also about providing entertainment in some form or other. Viren Pradhan, the director of the show, says in an interview with the Marathi Daily *Loksatta* available on YouTube that what he wanted to depict more than the social reform was the lovable romance between Ramabai and Mahadevrao. He adds that though it was a child marriage, no viewer of the show has ever expressed any discomfort regarding the romantic scenes. He further explains this romance as 'worship' and finds it extremely romantic how Ramabai literally grounded herself in her room for a year after his death. The irony here is that after the death of the character of Mahadevrao, *UMZ* runs only for another week, and all the work Ramabai does after his death is reduced to a couple of episodes!



Another space that becomes a site for the director to make a 'serial' or a '*maalika*' is the kitchen of the Ranade Wada. The director, in the same YouTube video interview, mentions that though it might seem as if so many kitchen scenes imply that I am falling into the trap of making a conventional serial, "...it is not untrue that when 5 women coexist in a house or a kitchen, *bhandya la bhandi laagelach* (utensils will clank, or fights are bound to happen)." Ramabai Ranade herself has written in her work how there is a tension amongst women themselves and it is women who keep resisting change (Chakravarty 1993).

## **Content – Representation**

I have divided my analysis of the politics of representation in UMZ into several themes and I wish to illustrate my observations with existing theories and examples from the show.

### ***Thresholds and Households: Brahmanical Patriarchy***

Since the beginning of the show, UMZ represents womanhood of a specific kind, that of 'upper' caste Hindu women. The girls, the '*suashinis*', (the married ones) and the widows were shown in restricted spaces with restricted body movements. To keep social systems of graded inequality like the caste system alive, a society needs the compliance of the 'upper' caste women. There needs to be some sort of a sexual control over their bodies to ensure caste purity, and even ancient Brahmanical texts talk about these women as objects of moral panic and suspicion. So on one hand, they are treated differently than men in terms of education, property rights, sexual liberation, etc., while on the other they get to be superior in the caste hierarchy than women of lower castes (Chakravarty 1993).

### ***Childhood and Child Marriage***

In the first set of episodes, Yamuna's (i.e. Ramabai's) childishness is shown as her most charming trait, apart from her kindness. She is good to everybody, the British officer, the poor, the Dalit servant, etc. even if it annoys and worries the elders. Before her marriage she is trained by her mother to be a good woman and a good wife. Her mother teaches her how to perform nurturing tasks like nursing someone with the knowledge of Ayurveda that she got from her father. When she is arranged to be married into a big household, her mother tells her about how she has to grow up and accept her husband's happiness as well as his grief as her own. Since the sexual control of 'upper' caste females matters so much, the appearance of puberty makes her

'dangerous' and thus prepubescent marriages are preferred for girls within the Brahmins. When she marries a man 20 years elder to her, he slowly and patiently tries to reform her to become a demure, soft-spoken, submissive supporter/partner in his work. Most of the episodes in the first part of the series (when Ramabai is played by a child actor called Tejashree Wawalkar) form this as the central plot in one way or the other.

### ***Widowhood and Widow Remarriage***

UMZ is one of the few shows which enlighten the viewers about how widows in 19<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra actually looked and how they were treated; they would be tonsured and they would cover their heads with the 9-yard plain red sari that they wore each and every day, without any jewellery. Intentionally or unintentionally, the show depicts what was their reality; they are kept in the house and are shown doing continuous labour, throughout, since it is also unpunctuated by childbirth (Chakravarty 1993).

Mahadevrao Ranade, one of the strongest supporters of widow-remarriage, couldn't marry a widow himself due to the pressure of his family. He could also convince his father to get his sister married, even though she is younger than him. Durga/Akkasaheb, was a widow living in their father's household. In her memoir 'Aamchya Ayushyachya Kaahi Athvani', Ramabai Ranade writes about how Durga was as brilliant and smart as his brother in their childhood, and later when she came back as the widow she was dominant as compared to other women. The show depicts a certain rivalry between the two, which is not mutual exactly but that Durga is jealous of Ramabai's status as a married woman. The depiction of widows as envious characters is kind of expected. The tonsure of a widow is to ensure the social and the sexual death of her existence. In the show, there is an episode where Durga is sent to an empty room with a barber who has come to tonsure her head and we hear screams on the screen, suggesting that she was sexually harassed by him. If there is anything that UMZ depicts truthfully it is the representation of widows and widowhood.

### ***Maintenance of the Family Unit, and thus the Nation***

One of the promotional stills of the show has a caption that reads, "*Lagna..jyamule tila ayushacha artha umajla*" i.e. "it is only after marriage, that she got to know the true meaning of life". Spruha Joshi, the actor who plays the elder version of Ramabai, also agrees with this in an interview on a news channel ABP Majha (available on YouTube). During the freedom struggle, having women and men who believed in producing and reproducing the traditional national family, was

important to build a nation or do nation-work. UMZ clearly wants to build not just the idea of the Indian nation but also of a Marathi nation. Whenever there are British characters in any episode, the Indian-ness of the Ranades, especially that of Ramabai is over-emphasised. In one of the episodes when Rama is anxious about her ability to communicate with the British family that is going to visit them, she is surprised to know that the British women have learnt a few Marathi words, as they were also eager to communicate. Their conversation is not merely about the Ranades' work, but specifically about 'Indian culture' and they ask, "Where is the kitchen" in Marathi and also keep their sandals outside the house in keeping with tradition. The reaction expected from the audience seems to be that of nationalistic pride and awe at how lucky and charming the Ranades were. UMZ also shows the struggle of the Ranades, who were soft-spoken people, with their families and how they kept relationships intact and yet did what they did. This sort of a representation is a comment on all those leaders of either the past or the present who question the basic concepts of family and the nation and attempt to upset the status quo. It signifies that such truly rebellious leaders will be rejected and conformist social reformers will always be chosen for such representations on television.

### **The 'Hero' that was Justice M.G. Ranade**

The show carves a hero out of the character of Mahadevrao. He is an educated scholar and a 'nyaaymurti' (meaning judge, a very evocative term which demands respect) and thus his superiority in the household is further accentuated over his superiority from being a son or a man. All the women treat him as the benevolent ruler of the household. They, including his mother and Ramabai, ask him for permissions on some occasions and for forgiveness on others, and he grants it to them very kindly with an additional philosophical speech, performing his character as a man with not just a smart brain but also a big heart and a quest for justice. Sometimes it also makes one question whether UMZ is about Ramabai, or if it is about Mahadevrao enabling Ramabai to actualise herself? Actress Spruha Joshi says in an interview with ABP Majha (available on YouTube) that Ramabai was truly lucky to have found such a supportive husband in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even at the UMZ awards, women awardees kept coming on stage to thank their husbands who were supportive and without whom they would never have been able to aim high. This makes one wonder who the real protagonist is, especially since after Mahadevrao's death, the serial lasts only for about a week.

### ***Orthodox Brahmanism vs. Progressive Brahmanism***

In the time when India was under the British, a new kind of a Brahmanism emerged which wasn't as orthodox or as feudal as before, but it was Brahmanism nonetheless. Brahmins were now the educated, elite, modernised representatives of a broader Hindu community. UMZ also shows this conflict between '*karmath*' (orthodox) Brahmins and '*navamatavaadi*' (progressive) Brahmins. These conflicts are shown to mostly happen on the street, on topics like widow remarriage, idol worship, tonsure of widows, women's education, even untouchability. In one of the episodes, they show Ramabai's brother (who is heavily influenced by Mahadevrao) get into a fight with orthodox Brahmins because they abuse a Dalit man whose shadow touched them when he bumped into them on the street. To prove his reformist outlook, the progressive Brahmin man insists that untouchability is a lie and wrong and that he will go to the Dalit's house for dinner tonight, and it is taken for granted that the Dalit would be honoured to invite a Brahmin into his home. The progressive brother almost scolds the Dalit when the latter (shown as a dark, stout and a physically and emotionally weak man) says things like, "Why are you getting into fights for us, sir? We are small people." The way the scene represents Dalits and the large-heartedness of the progressive Brahmin reforms is problematic. Even though that is the way it might have been, what it does is that when such a scene is broadcast, it vindicates the 'upper' caste, upper middleclass urban perception that caste no longer exists and that our forefathers have done the reform for us and we do not need to do anything more.

### **Reception: Brahmanical Post-Feminism, Restored Nationalism and the Resulting 'Feel-Good'**

To gauge the patterns and meanings audiences make in their minds about a show is a matter of presumptions and predictions, if one does not go and interview a set of diverse people. In this section, I would like to try and predict how such a TV adaptation will be received. Some of this prediction is based on the participant observation conducted while watching this show with members of my 'upper' caste, upper middle class family. The rest of it borrows from research articles on reception of content, blog pieces, informal discussions with friends and general theories about both media/television studies and women's representation in them.

The show is popular for many reasons other than it being about a historical character. Some people love it simply because it is not a typical serial or a family drama. One of my progressive friends also loves the show, and sits with her entire family when they watch UMZ, as she finds it

“...any day better than 'masala' K-serials”.<sup>1</sup> At that time, a blogger<sup>2</sup> wrote specially in the context of the UMZ awards, that he is pleasantly surprised to see a channel other than DD Sahyadri, which is fulfilling a '*samajik bandhilkai*' or a social responsibility.

So in a way, the fat well-fed lie/scam of the 'corporate social responsibility' that the neo liberal market boasts of, is fulfilled at the hands of shows like UMZ for the corporate that is Zee Marathi. And socially relevant shows find their audience as swiftly as 'masala' content does. In fact after a point, one begins to wonder, if something which is touted as being socially relevant, is in fact just another form of entertainment, since it gives you a kind of a 'feel good' massage about your progressive culture.

To talk more about this 'feel-good,' it is exemplified when the content of the show represents the reformists or the upper caste nationalists as forgiving, just, and kind men who have now dedicated their lives to correct the oppression carried out by their forefathers on both the Dalits and the womenfolk of their own community, as I demonstrated earlier in the episode where the Dalit man was rescued and coerced into a dinner by the progressive Brahmin man.

Personally, as a feminist who believes in the anti-caste movement, this 'feel-good' scares me and keeps me far from appreciating the show for the so-called progressive narrative. Having seen it in person on the faces of my own family, it makes me uncomfortable to look at their satisfaction. It is as if they are almost reassured about their glorious past where all the reforms, justice and equality were taken care of by their 'progressive forefathers'. To arrive at a more informed claim, I would need to extend this observation and research to people from various backgrounds, and validate or revise my argument.

I want to problematise the way post-feminism (meaning a stage where it seems that a certain equality between men and women has been achieved) tends to get articulated, so that now we can caricature men-hating feminists. Also the market can now target the newly independent young woman and make her feel-good about herself via the route of fashioning her body and mind in a particular way and pattern of consumption. This idea has arrived in the West, and even

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<sup>1</sup> K serials refer to serials which are either produced by Ekta Kapoor's Balaji Telefilms or those similar to it. They are mostly family dramas with a certain typical set of themes and treatments.

<sup>2</sup> Jaydeep, "jd chi wadi." *Kshitija palikade Bharari Marnaara Uncha Maza Zoka Purskar*. November, 2013. Accessed at <http://jdchivadi.blogspot.in/2013/08/blog-post.html/>

in the nationalistic discourse of India, a certain kind of post-emancipation phase is visible and represented through the show. The assumption then goes like this: “Now that we have 'taken into account' the various struggles women leaders fought and how their male counterparts supported them, we are now free to think that there is a certain kind of equality achieved while we remember our progressive past.” I can imagine financially independent Marathi (upper caste or middle caste) women watching the show with their husbands/families and appreciating the show for its effort at helping us remember how we are better off, probably than the 'other' kind of families. This other might include those of other castes, classes, educational background and religious minorities like Muslims who are always attacked as backward especially in the context of women. Thus, this further intensifies the pride in one's culture and its dominance.

In one of the episodes of UMZ, a debate between the conservative father of M.G. Ranade and the 'upper' caste tuition teacher (who earns money for the family, though she assures that it is her husband who not just allows it but also advises her to do the same) about the consequences of women's over-education (meaning education more than that required for house work) and what it will mean to the society, seems like it is addressed to all independent women or feminists; the way they dialogue and look at the screen, it is almost like they are talking to today's women. This education vs. *sansaar* (in Marathi *sansaar* means world, but in this context it means marriage, happy married life, the husband's household and also if put crudely, the bed and the kitchen) debate is interesting and the conservative patriarch is able to create anxieties in the tuition teacher's head, which she then installs in Ramabai's head. She worriedly tells Ramabai, “What if women don't use this education properly? What if 100-150 years later, women use their education and start living like men? Won't that reduce the sweetness in the family life and lead to conflict and chaos?” Ramabai is shown worried, curious, and anxious of the future. What such a scene creates in the minds of the viewers is a big question in my mind. So is it that the 'feel good' about a progressive gender equality also accompanied with an anxiety about equality that's truly radical or that shakes the entire system of Brahmin Patriarchy?

## Conclusion

The show UMZ has been successful in presenting some complex debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century context and some of them are relevant even now. That much effort in writing dialogues of arguments and theories is not seen on TV these days. Even though that is worth appreciating,

what is saddening is that the show does not leave any scope to visualise a future, i.e. a time after Ramabai Ranade and the likes of her, when there will be more battles to fight for gender equality. Ideally, a show based on history shouldn't claim a full stop or a finished business, but should convey that there is still space for more history to be created. If the show had left some space to critically analyse the whole rigmarole of social reform itself, so as to both appreciate it truly and also to plan or conceptualise the next step towards equality of all kinds, it would truly be 'inspiring'. But the way television frames history and reduces this space makes the representation of women problematic. It also excludes other women from histories and from the set target audience, making the narrative of women's emancipation truly Brahmanical.

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