



Photo: Author

Young volunteers encourage villagers to share their experiences and problems on Namma Dhwani radio.

Namma Dhwani: our voices

John Anthony

In rural India, as in many other countries, opportunities for children and young people to learn about the world outside their village, or even to keep in touch with the traditions and current events in their own region, are often limited. They are not part of the informal communication networks that keep adults up to date, and in poor communities newspapers, radios and televisions are scarce.

In the same way the technologies and innovations like computers, television, video, and cinema, which make town life seem attractive, are out of reach to the majority of young people living in the Indian countryside. This is the case in Boodikote, a village less than two hours drive from the Indian "Silicon Valley" of Bangalore, on the borders of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It is a small, drought-ridden village with one high school and three primary schools and there are not many opportunities and outlets for its young people. In 2002, however, community radio came to Boodikote and the original community audio production centre, known as *Namma Dhwani* or *Our Voices*, has since grown into a complete information centre, with a recording studio, transmission facilities, computer courses and plans to link to the world wide web.

Children in the studio

Children visit the studio a lot. Many of them heard about *Namma Dhwani* at the Tuesday market or *santhe*, where programmes made by community members are played regularly, others through the facilities that link their schools to the studio. Encouraged by local volunteers, children have not only been listening but also making programmes, as 15-year-old Usharani explained: "I know the *Namma Dhwani* centre well. It's here in Boodikote and they play programmes at the *santhe*. I made a programme about "healthy foods". I am against child marriage so I am going to make a programme about that too. When it's ready *Namma Dhwani* will play it".

Community radio has meant a lot to the children. It has proved an excellent way of helping them gather and exchange information amongst themselves and to become articulate enough to present it to others. Srinivas Reddy, a young pupil from Dinakotturu, says he listens to all the music and agriculture programmes on *Namma Dhwani* with his parents. Others like Prema, aged 12 years, use the studio to make programmes on issues they feel strongly about. "I have made many programmes about cruelty to animals by man, protests about animal sacrifices, and the importance of trees in the world", she says. Most children say they want to know more about what is happening in their country and the world and many have ideas about how *Namma Dhwani* can become even more useful. "My parents have been coming to the computer centre and that is how I came to know it", says Prashant, aged 14 years. "I like the radio centre too, but if they broadcast more programmes about computers that would be very helpful".

The children have been coached and introduced to the world of broadcasting by the studio managers, themselves young community volunteers, who are responsible for technical and programming work. The opinions of children quoted above have been collected together by VOICES, one of the four organizations responsible for the *Namma Dhwani* project. It shows how quickly young people have established an easy relationship with the studio and its technology and how they use it. "In the beginning," says Ramesh, a pupil at the Government High School in Boodikote, "We did not know anything about it. Then Amereshsanna (one of the studio managers) came to our village and took us to the studio to make programmes. Now we are bold enough to go to the centre and give programmes ourselves".

The power of radio

Namma Dhwani has brought a technology within reach of the poor and "voiceless" of Boodikote that is essential to the functioning of democratic processes. In a recent speech to mark the inauguration of school campus radio, Mr L.K. Advani, the Deputy Prime Minister of India, made a special reference to

Namma Dhwani praising the efforts of the local team of young volunteers and told how, recently, the community had used their radio station to complain – with success – about non-functioning water services.

Individual villagers have also experienced the power of the radio. Narayanswamy lived by selling milk till her only cow died. When she claimed insurance money for her cow, the agent tried to cheat her. He said he did not owe her money. She went to his office a dozen times in vain. Then she talked about her problem on *Namma Dhwani*. The next day, the agent gave her the money.

Getting started

How has this communication revolution come about? Located in Kolar, a district famous for milk, silk and gold, *Namma Dhwani* is India's first cable community radio station. It is the result of a partnership between the rural community in Boodikote; MYRADA, a Southern India NGO with wide experience in institution building; VOICES, a development-orientated communications organization that has lobbied intensively for community radio, and UNESCO. MYRADA facilitated the introduction of the radio into Boodikote and provided the infrastructure, VOICES provided the technical expertise and UNESCO has funded equipment. Representatives of the Self Help Groups form the *Namma Dhwani Management Committee* (NDMC) and are the chief planners and implementers of the service, and the centre is ably coordinated by Mr Balu from MYRADA and Seema from VOICES.

As a trading centre and the headquarters of the *panchayat*, Boodikote is a place where all sorts of news, gossip and information gets passed around. With a literacy rate of 58%, written information is less important than what people hear from their neighbours, at school or on the radio. Boodikote has 633 households and, since the early 1990s, MYRADA has worked with local people to establish an institutional structure to support women empowerment, livelihood programmes and watershed development activities. These institutions – including self help groups, watershed development associations and two youth groups – have been important from the beginning, first in assessing whether the village was interested in community radio, and later in building up the necessary operating and support structures.

The only transmission network in Boodikote before *Namma Dhwani* was All India Radio (AIR). Although AIR transmits in three languages and its programs are popular, the local community felt they were not relevant enough to their situation. People thought that community radio could provide them with more timely and useful local information. Community radio – which is non-profit making, is owned and managed by the community and depends on full community participation – is an ideal way of generating and delivering information tailored to the educational, developmental and cultural needs of the community it serves. “This radio station is ours because it speaks about us, in our language and in our accent. When I turn it on, I hear the voices of people I know,” says Triveni Narayanswamy, 28 years.

Once the decision had been to establish community-based radio in Boodikote, specialists from AIR and VOICES started training young volunteers in programming techniques. Programmes were made on a wide variety of topics including sericulture, organic farming and health. Making these programmes not only deepened young peoples knowledge on matters critical to their livelihoods, but it also involved them more closely in the development of their community.

The programmes had to reach the people but the cost of obtaining a broadcasting license was high, therefore the community radio staff started narrow casting at self help meetings. The network was extended to 60 Self Help Groups in 35 villages around Boodikote and the system worked well. These groups consisted mainly of women from poor families who had little access to information. Because listening to programmes in this way was a group activity, the discussions that followed provided plenty of feedback.

In 2001, UNESCO made funds available to set up a recording studio in space provided by MYRADA, and the *Namma Dhwani Management Committee* (NDMC). NDMC's main job was to oversee community radio operations. Each Self Help Group involved made a one time contribution of Rs.1000.00 (US\$20) to cover the cost of running the studio, a significant commitment to the new initiative. After conducting a survey amongst school children, parents, teachers and other members of the community, the NDMC started a new phase of programming activities monitoring programmes carefully and providing studio managers with feedback from the community. >>

Bridging the language of generations

Children from Mayan communities in the Maxcanu region of Mexico use radio to build bridges between generations, cultures and local communities. Aged between seven and thirteen years, they develop and broadcast their own radio programmes and, once trained, are responsible for a radio station known as *La Voz de los Mayas* (*The Voice of the Mayans*). Not only do they prepare programmes in the Mayan language, they also handle many of the technical aspects of broadcasting.

Often the children are the only ones in their communities able to read, write and speak both Spanish and Mayan and therefore they provide an important communication bridge with the older Mayan speaking generation. At the same time, being so closely involved in preparing radio programmes on local issues brings the children closer to their Mayan cultural heritage and makes them better able to take part in discussions on issues that directly affect them.

Programmes involve community members discussing local and national issues and also deal with such agricultural topics as crop prices and marketing opportunities. Children regularly use the Internet to get this type of information. There are also programmes on social, cultural and educational affairs.

The Voice of the Mayans is part of a larger network of 20 stations in the country. Run by children, these stations reach some 954 municipalities and broadcast in 30 indigenous languages and Spanish to some 22 million people, a quarter of whom are indigenous peoples.

La Voz de los Mayas is a joint initiative of the *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CONADEPI), the *International Fund for Agricultural Development* (IFAD) and the *Rural Development Project of the Mayan Communities in the Yucantan Peninsula*.

This extract has been compiled from the IFAD fact sheet “Fighting rural poverty: the role of ICTs”, available at www.ifad.org/pub/factsheet/index.htm

>> Between September 2001 and late 2002 *Namma Dhwani* produced 266 programmes. Resource people were drawn from the community to talk about selected topics and interviews were recorded on tape. Programmes were played at community meetings, in schools, at youth groups, during training programmes and at the local market. A 150-meter cable was installed to connect the studio to a nearby school so programmes – often produced by the children – could be played during school hours.

In 2002, *Namma Dhwani* made an agreement with the local cable operator allowing it to use his cable network to transmit programmes. *Namma Dhwani* now transmits all its programmes over the cable. This was a huge step forward because, for the first time, the studio was able to broadcast live to the community. Studio staff were trained for this new situation and the NDMC decided to send out programmes twice in a day for a total of two hours. “Cable casting” meant that those who had a television could hear these programmes via their televisions through the regular television cable installed in their houses. To enable the poorer families to pick up these transmissions, the project installed new cables and each family was given the opportunity of buying a radio and accompanying jack from *Namma Dhwani* on reasonable terms. Some 326 families are now able to receive community radio programmes in this way.

Opportunities for youth

The young volunteers running the studio have been closely involved in planning and implementing these new developments. They have learned new skills including the art of presentation, and they now manage a schedule that includes regular features and entertainment. Working on the programmes has given them an outlet for their talents. Articulate and confident they read out and answer listeners’ letters, report the news and put together programmes with music, poetry and drama. Maglagauri, one of the studio staff explains how she felt doing her first programme: “I was struck with fear. My hands and voice were trembling. I felt shy at the sound of my own voice.” Three years later, she can look back on the 150 programmes she has produced. Like the other young people working on the *Namma Dhwani* team, she has a positive attitude to her future in Boodikote and wants to serve the community by developing good programmes. This group of youth commands

respect within the community. Narsimha, another studio volunteer, says people point him out in the street and say “That’s the one who makes programmes on *Namma Dhwani*”. “My status has increased within my village” he says. “I know my parents support me and feel proud hearing my voice over radio”.

Namma Dhwani is not just a community radio station; it is part of a resource centre that contains computers for community use. These computers have made a strong impression on the youth of Boodikote. Access to computers means learning how they work, what they can do and how they can bring new worlds of knowledge into the village. Narsimha explains his experience with computers in this way. “We had heard about computers but had not seen them. I have friends in Kolar city. They always used to talk about computers and what they did with them. I used to feel inferior. I had not even seen a computer. I was also afraid of touching it. Then *Namma Dhwani* got six computers. I was one of the first to enrol as a student and it didn’t take long before I knew much more than my city friends”.

In collaboration with a computer institute in Kolar, *Namma Dhwani* now offers certificate courses on Microsoft Office package to young people from Boodikote. At the moment eleven students are taking the two-month course. It also organizes children camps and more than 60 local children have been introduced to programme making and computers. These interventions have helped bridge the gap between rural and urban youth and have given young people the confidence and ability to speak out and express themselves.

Feedback

Namma Dhwani gets weekly feedback in a “letter show” broadcast every Friday. Letters written by community members are read out and the ideas, advice and criticisms they contain are used to improve the programmes. To date some 300 letters have been received, many of them containing poetry written by listeners. *Namma Dhwani* also gets feedback from house-to-house surveys and from the results of the NDMC meetings with villagers. The results of surveys show that *Namma Dhwani* programmes are not only helping to break through taboos and stimulate discussions between generations with programmes such as those on female and adolescent health, it has also provided an important link between the village and the wider economy by reporting on matters concerning the status and price of crops thus enabling farmers to negotiate more effectively with the dealers who come to buy their produce.

Challenges

Legal restrictions that limit the places where community radio can be established and the financial costs of licenses, radios, and other equipment are the main problem to the wider implementation of community radio in India at the moment. However, in Boodikote, *Namma Dhwani* has shown that despite restrictions and poverty a community radio, especially if located in a broader resource context, can be of critical importance to the development of village youth.

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Photo: Voices, 2002

