

A rural radio revolution

A community radio started by Dalit women in Andhra's Medak district talks about local issues in local dialect

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A SMALL community radio started by illiterate rural women of Zahirabad in Medak district is making itself heard in villages afflicted by domestic violence, crop failures, livestock diseases and frequent droughts. It is the only radio station in the country that is operated and maintained entirely by Dalit women, none of whom has studied beyond class X.

What began two years ago as an experiment to broadcast messages of marital harmony to menfolk in a couple of villages has been transformed by these women into a community radio that now covers more than 500 villages in a 30-km radius and addresses issues like domestic violence, debts, failure of crops, livestock-rearing, healthcare and education. The message is in their own local dialect with help from their own people. In fact, the evening slot of cable TV has now been taken up by 'Radio Sangham' for an hour when programmes, interviews, songs and plays are broadcast.



(above) Radio Sangham reporter Marthamma interviewing a villager; (right) anchor G Narsamma in the studio

It all began when women of Machnoor village came up with the idea of having a radio two years ago and suggested it to the Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO which works in the region. Instead of running a radio station themselves, DDS decided to train two women in operating the systems after providing the necessary infrastructure, and asked them to become radio jockeys and choose the form and content and

the kind of programmes they wanted for their community.

Algole Narsamma and G Narsamma become the first women radio anchors and jockeys here. They have now trained at least 12 other women. Their community radio called 'Radio Sangham' works very differently from regular radio stations. They only use local dialect, which is a mix of Telangana Telugu, Marathi, Kannada and Urdu. When

the women are not broadcasting, they work as farm labourers beside their husbands.

"It is operated and managed entirely by the community. We do not call experts or specialists from outside. Our problems and issues can be best understood and addressed by people from within the community, so we call experienced elders. It ensures that our listeners immediately identify with the speaker who may be



their neighbour and speaks the same language," says G Narsamma.

Equipped with microphones and recorders, the women go out in the villages to conduct interviews. "A farmer who experimented with a crop in this semi-arid region and got a better yield, another sharing tips on why a crop might fail, or a panchayat worker giving information on sanitation and cleanliness, or a community health centre worker advising a mother with a newborn, or a student talking about high school and exams—we speak with them or they speak directly to their community on our radio in a language that only this community understands," says P Sushila, an anchor.

"Millet is our staple crop but which radio programme gives information about this crop with regard to soil, weather and water conditions

here? If I want to share information about our experiences of goat-rearing—from where we bought them, how we take care of them and how much profit we made, only I can explain it to my village people in the language they understand, that is why our radio is so important to us," says M Anasuya, another anchor.

On the way, the women also discovered the importance of preserving their native dialect, culture and traditions. By touring the villages, the women have gathered a database of folk songs, stories and plays which they play every night at 8 p.m.

"The radio has become their medium of expression. It has given them (villagers) dignity and confidence, and the knowledge they share among themselves through their radio is invaluable," says P Satheesh, director of DDS.