

Society

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SANJAY RAWAT

A Khabran Ri Potli reporter at work

MEDIA: RURAL JOURNALISTS

**What A Girl Wants**

Women in India's villages have stories to tell. Now they are bent on telling it themselves.

NEHA BHATT

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**Give Us The Mike**

- Radio Bundelkhand in Orchha and Lalit Lokvani in Lalitpur have radio shows by women, for women
- *Khabra Ri Potli*, a monthly from Ajmer, has women readers across 28 villages
- Tribal women in Chhattisgarh post live news snippets of local corruption and civic issues on online platform CGNet Swara
- Goa-based Video Volunteers mobilises women community reporters to submit news clips
- Gaon ki Awaaz, a mobile audio news bulletin in Rampur-Mathura village, UP, ropes in women student reporters
- Over 50 women make films and news clips on village-level themes in Medak, AP

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**G**eeta Mohanpuria from Kishengarh village near Ajmer says she "used to be shy...too shy to even step out of my house". But that was awhile back. Today she's a hard-nosed, sharp-tongued reporter who chases news stories down on her motorcycle, long black plait trailing in the wind. In the last two years, Geeta, 32, has done it all: hassled men for questioning her occupation, ferried fellow women journalists to remote villages on reporting assignments on her bike, quizzed village menfolk on dowry deaths and domestic violence, even reported on panchayat meetings till the wee hours. With four other rural women journalists, Geeta runs *Khabra Ri Potli*, a six-page monthly newspaper for women that's put together in a cosy, three-room apartment in Ajmer. There, over cups of masala chai and biscuits, the group huddles over the latest edition of *Khabra*, swapping ideas, mulling over feedback from readers and the stories they did and missed.

It's pretty much how a newsroom feels like anywhere in the world. Except for this one facet, newsworthy in itself: the thrill of telling stories is attracting scores of rural women across India; young and old, many illiterate, an overwhelming number from marginalised communities. Boosting this shift is an expanding rural media, where several community radio

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stations, rural newspapers and outlets for video news stories are taking root, offering jobs that pay anywhere between Rs 2,000-4,000 a month. A women's collective working on a rural newspaper in Sitamarhi and Sheohar districts of Bihar is just taking wing, another in Ajmer is well into its third year of circulation. Over 15 tribal women in Bastar post live news on an online news portal and across Bundelkhand a clutch of women are emerging as RJs-cum-reporters, anchoring programmes for women on a number of local radio stations.

Keeping up with the times, a fledgling mobile news alert service in Rampur-Mathura village of Uttar Pradesh has roped in a young girl as reporter, while in Andhra Pradesh, over 50 women have been trained in making short films and newsclips that are regularly picked up by regional TV networks. Some of these stories, such as the one that highlighted corruption in nrega, have even been picked up by national publications.



The Lalit Lokvani radio station. (Photograph by Sanjay Rawat)

Despite the odds, even women who have always been homemakers are now out and experimenting. Like Uma Yadav, a mother of four in her 40s, from Balkheda village in Bundelkhand. "I've been a housewife for 20 years, and when I wanted to join Lalit Lokvani radio station as a radio jockey, my in-laws wondered why I wanted to get out and work now. But wouldn't you want a job like this, where your voice is heard across 120 villages, and people know your name?" she asks.

It's a feeling 36-year-old Gudi Punyamma knows only too well, having set a different kind of benchmark for womenfolk in her village, Zaheerabad, in Andhra Pradesh. The mother of two, trained in video reporting and documentary filmmaking by the Deccan Development Society (DDS), has travelled to cover conferences on environment-related issues and to promote her short film on BT cotton and biodiversity across India and abroad. "I like the mobility this profession gives me. Whenever I travel in and around my village to shoot a film, people recognise me. They now call me Madam, and I quite like that feeling," chuckles Punyamma. She cannot read or write, but manages just fine with the help of the younger, literate girls in the 10-member team. Their films have been screened across the world, a sure sign that the agricultural practices documented have global relevance. "The women have a very collective approach to their work and a strong sense of community. So 4-5 of them might do the camerawork, a few others will edit the film, but everyone's name will appear in the credits together," explains P.V. Sathesh of DDS, a former journalist himself. He trained the Dalit women in filmmaking, and found that many of them were keen to make films so that their issues could be known outside the community.

**"But six months later, with station popularity growing, fathers were bringing daughters to join our reporter gang..."**

Back up north in Lalitpur, in the Bundelkhand region of UP, 20-year-old Rachna Singh is busy at work at the community radio station. Her eyes light up when you ask what she savours most about her job. "I love editing my stories, putting music to a script. When I watch TV, I look out for interesting music that I can record and use as background score," explains the anchor-reporter. She seems completely at home in the studio as she readies to anchor the noon show, adjusting the mic, putting on the headphones and waiting for colleague Vidya Chandel to give the countdown from across the glass window. "This job gives me a sense of independence

I had never known," she smiles. Vidya, 20, pitches in, "Most of our friends are already married, but not us. I would rather do my MBA next year and then think of marriage." Equally ambitious is Prachi, 22, a star anchor at Radio Bundelkhand based in Orchha, who juggles college, reporting on women's issues and radio jockeying.

As any member of the growing community of rural women reporters would gladly confess, venturing into such unfamiliar territory comes with its challenges—whether it's battling their families, fending off petty neighbourhood gossip or fighting diktats served by the panchayat. "Uneven hours of work, interacting with men about sensitive issues like violence against women, speaking out against the establishment...that doesn't seem like a woman's job to my neighbours. My family was fined Rs 20,000 by the panchayat for supporting me, but we refused to pay," says Geeta. Despite the swelling aspirations, easing rural women into the media is easier said than done. "It's tough for women here to hold on to their jobs, often they have to drop out because it's difficult for them to travel and manage the work hours," admits Karuna Philip, editor at *Khabra Ri Potli*, one of the self-sustained rural media outfits.

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**B**ut there's been positive changes as well. When Radio Bundelkhand was launched in Orchha five years ago with five reporters, women in the region were hardly forthcoming. "But six months later, watching the community station gain popularity, fathers brought their own daughters to us. They wanted them to join the gang...they began to see it as a stable job where they were paid regular salaries," says Soma Biswas of Development Alternatives. For Mridul Srivastava, station director at Lalit Lokvani, the challenge was more in ensuring the women reporters faced the least trouble on the job. That said, women reporters have a clear advantage in some areas—if the story involves women, they get to the heart of it that much faster. They can go into houses, interview them, which is not always easy for the men. "Where they face difficulties is in commuting to the radio station from the villages. Many of them have to walk 8-10 km everyday and often parents hesitate to let them travel alone," says Srivastava.

Ask the women themselves and they tell you they are happy to go the extra mile. Last month, when the monsoons came down hard on Lalitpur, Vidya, from the neighbouring village of Baroda, preferred wading through the flooded 4-km stretch to get to the station rather than miss a day at work. "No, we don't even get a Sunday off," she smiles. Many of the all-women rural outfits follow the model popularised by *Khabar Lahariya*—the Chitrakoot-based newspaper that became a trendsetter—package, market and distribute their own products.



**Zoom in:** Cameraperson Suremma is a 60-plus illiterate Dalit who had never even touched a camera before she was trained by the DDS in Zaheerabad, AP.

The business model is simple: the outfits depend mostly on government and private grants, and earn a little extra through small-time advertising and subscriptions. The ads, mostly from local traders, is often sought through door-to-door visits by the women themselves. The subscription fee is usually Rs 1-3 for the newspapers, and a nominal amount for the community radio station. The video journalists earn a commission for each news clip or film, depending on the duration of the video. The print journalists also publicise their outfits by travelling to each village in the catchment area, dropping off copies where people might take note of their product, like at the village grocery store. The radio jockeys arrange village meetings with women, take along a radio, and play them a live show to make them aware and create interest in the radio channel.

Others package and distribute their own publication, like the team at *Khabra Ri Potli* in Ajmer, who gather at their office the day the newspaper arrives hot off the press. Geeta, Annu, Karuna, Bhanwari and Padma get down to folding each of the 500 copies of their newspaper, sealing 300-odd copies into envelopes to be posted to subscribers. The rest they deliver to readers by hand, and even hold informal group reading sessions in villages for the benefit of women who cannot read. "The entire exercise challenges illiteracy," says Shaitanu Gurjar, 17, a subscriber from Ajaysar village near Ajmer. "What I enjoy about a paper like *Khabra* is the variety it offers, plus it picks on news items that I don't see in local newspapers." That sums up the gap this budding community of journalists seeks to fill, perhaps even as they are hot on the heels of the next big breaking news at the heart of India's hinterland. Besides themselves.

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10:11 AM

11

People particularly women

Girls are changing very fast.This a great revolution given by modern technology to India.I know social changes progress very slow.India `s real problem is revolt against old ritual ,way of life it is taking very slow.

RAMESH RAGHUVANSHI  
PUNE, INDIA

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10

If only we do not treat them as museum pieces and a constant source of supply of maids and servants for Indian urbanites. These are the people we should be proud of in a country where there is nothing left to be proud of.

SUSHANT KUMAR  
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

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AUG 03, 2011  
09:08 AM

9

It feels good to know that women from rural India are coming out and proving themselves. If we will, we can bring about a change. This story is an example for the same. Go India!

FARHEEN SIDDIQUI  
MUMBAI, INDIA

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AUG 03, 2011  
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8

A truly inspiring and exhilarating development this . The shackles of conservative traditions, patriarchy and religious taboos against our womenfolk should disappear fast, so as to give them a breath of fresh air and a sense of liberation.

G. NIRANJAN RAO  
HYDERABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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7

These women are truly inspirational. The story motivates the female fraternity. Nice example of women empowerment.

SHWETA KESHRI  
MUMBAI, INDIA

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