

*Sisters, let us go together to our sangham, so that we can talk. We have retrieved forgotten conversations and brought them alive in our radio. We have recovered lost festivals and described it in our radio. We have planted diverse crops and sung about it in our radio. We have saved traditional seeds and brought their methods to our radio.* ~Sangham Radio opening song

In the countryside of Andhra Pradesh, India, a small building sits hidden behind masses of jackfruit and custard-apple trees. Rising above the foliage, an orange signal tower marks the building's location. This is the home of Sangham Radio, a community radio station run by women from the impoverished Medak district. The station shares and preserves the knowledge of villagers by offering programs on health, agriculture, childcare and culture.

Three women manage the low-frequency station, which has a 20-mile signal radius and reaches about 100 villages. Algole, Narsamma and Pulemma prepare programs that both entertain and disseminate information for listeners in the local Telugu language. The women stand against the indifference of India's national media towards the region's impoverished population and reserves of traditional knowledge.

Narsamma, the station's lead anchor, sits in a chair in the editing room with her sari tucked around her knees as she prepares to go on the air. She double-checks to ensure that all the pre-recorded programs are queued on the computer screen, and then clicks the broadcast icon.

"Welcome to all the hard workers," she begins before playing a short song about the hardships of children farming the fields. She invites all children to listen to the radio because she will play the Children's Special. "Children should have education for a bright future," Narsamma says.

In this case, the special features a small contest. One child asks others 20 questions. The most correct answers win a prize. The child asks, "How many types of oil seeds are grown?" "In which types of seeds are more vitamins found?" "On which day do we celebrate children's rights?"

Narsamma announces the winners and continues with the programming, speaking eloquently and without notes. After playing Our Village Crop, a segment featuring updates on local farming, Narsamma urges listeners to plant more than one kind of seed for sustainability.

"Even though we have problems, we must face them and cope to find solutions," she encourages listeners before playing a local song, followed by a village story.

Sangham Radio broadcasts in an extremely neglected region of India. The majority of the population relies on agriculture for a living, and literacy rates remain below the national average. The farmers lack access to mainstream media such as the national radio broadcaster All India Radio.

Most of Sangham Radio's listeners and participants have never been formally educated and are illiterate. They use their radio to share and receive valuable knowledge.

Argole, another anchor at the station, says Sangham Radio contributes to the autonomy of its listeners by broadcasting relevant information.

"We tell villagers how to make organic pesticides, [methods for] natural pesticide management, good agriculture practices, health and hygiene, the advantage of micro-credit methods, setting up of medicinal plantations, and the need to repay loans in time to have a sense of integrity and pride," Argole told India Together Magazine.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) is a local organization that supports Sangham Radio. P.V. Satheesh, co-founder of DDS, says the station proves that education can come in a variety of formats.

Literacy, he says, is just one outcome of education.

"You need hundreds of skills to live in this world and literacy is one of the skills," he says. "But if you come and sit in a place like [Medak] and live and work here and start interacting with people, you understand that people have hundreds of different skills."

Radio provides a platform for sharing these skills and can liberate people from "the stigma of illiteracy," Satheesh says.

The station launched in 1998. Despite having equipment, the support of the DDS and a partnership with UNESCO, the station did not receive a license from the government. Certain about the importance of their radio vision, the farm women persisted for 10 years, gathering and editing material. They played audio-cassettes of their programs at community meetings while waiting for the day when they could broadcast live. Finally, in 2008, Sangham Radio went on the air.

Narsamma says the station serves a vital function for local villagers. "The radio connects the problems of various villagers to others who can help," she says.

One program features a question-and-answer format that allows listeners to call for health advice. The women at the station find a local health expert, who then prescribes a solution over the radio for all listeners.

Even the entertainment elements of the station's programming, such as stories and songs, often serve didactic purposes. Stories tell how to be a better husband or community member or how to properly celebrate a wedding. Ancestral songs remind listeners to take pride in their past.

The real force behind Sangham Radio stems from the groups of village women who come to record their knowledge, stories, concerns and ancestral songs. Each day, the women sit on the worn steps of the station to practice their singing and discuss what they want to share. Then, after sipping steaming cups of chai, the groups enter the recording room.

Tuljamma, a village woman who comes often to record at the station, says many local women have made participation in Sangham Radio a priority.

"Even though they have work, they have made a point to make sure they tell their stories to benefit others," she says.

These women of Sangham Radio demonstrate how community and creativity can rise above the crippling effects of poverty on education.

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