

## Cyber kiosks and dilemmas of social inclusion in rural India

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Contemporary cyber-libertarian development orthodoxy identifies the deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a dominant factor in eliminating vestiges of feudal social organization and its iniquities and hierarchies in Asia by envisioning a techno-development paradigm of social change inherited from the industrial era (Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Sreekumar, 2003, 2006; UNDP, 2000; Wade, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, myriad government-sponsored agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in South Asia have initiated a host of ICT-based development projects to demonstrate the potential of ICTs to provide unprecedented social and economic opportunities for vulnerable groups such as women and marginalized communities (Bhatnagar and Sechware, 2000; Ng and Mitter, 2005; Peizer, 2005; Pringle and Subramanian, 2004). Arguably, the inclusion of marginalized communities in the emerging rural network society would help enhance their participation in the democratic processes on the one hand, and provide access to expanding social and economic opportunities on the other (Gajjala, 2002; Hafkin, 2002; Hafkin and Taggart, 2001; Rajora, 2002; Sharma, 2003). Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that the complex ensemble of social reality in South Asia makes it difficult to find easy solutions to developmental maladies.

By the turn of the new millennium, the phenomenon of village cyber kiosks, which began to appear in India only in the late 1990s, had already come to be identified as a major form of development experiment involving deployment of ICTs for social and economic transformation in rural India. Three major projects in India, the Village Knowledge Centres set up by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Pondicherry,<sup>2</sup> TARAKendras<sup>3</sup> initiated by

Development Alternatives (DA)<sup>4</sup> in Bhatinda (Punjab) and Bundelkhand (Uthar Pradesh), and Gyandoot Soochanaalays<sup>5</sup> (information centres) set up by the District Administration of Dhar (Madhya Pradesh) won international awards in a short span of two years following their inception. The city of Stockholm instituted the 'Stockholm Challenge Award' in separate categories in the mid-1990s, in the wake of Sweden's entry into the European Union, initially to introduce Stockholm as a leader in ICTs and to challenge other European cities to highlight their contributions in bridging the deeply felt technological gap between Europe and the United States. Later, the competition was thrown open to entries from non-European countries, for projects attempting to bridge the global digital divide. The projects from India, which were set up mostly in the late 1990s, bagged the prizes in several categories in 1999 and 2000, as initiatives with huge potential for bringing about social and economic change. International and national media began to give wide coverage to the projects, and anecdotes about the radical changes that these projects were bringing about accumulated, reassuring the public that an ICT revolution had been unleashed in rural India. The projects were promising creation of jobs, food security, better health, alleviation of poverty, eradication of illiteracy, and democratic participation and empowerment of socially and economically disadvantaged groups and communities in village India through effective use of ICTs.

The idea that ICTs are a unique technological intervention capable of challenging traditional barriers to social change and economic development continues to be the central pillar of ICT-based civil society initiatives in rural South Asia. Contrary to this widely held belief, the actual experience of many much-acclaimed developmental ICT projects provides grounds for reassessing the strategies and options of ICT deployment in rural spaces, given the fact that the application of information technology has not in itself led to any profound transformation of the social and economic milieu of marginalized communities. While major ICT-based projects initiated by either the state or NGOs are floundering due to the existence of formidable social and economic obstacles that they are unable to overcome, several new ICT-based projects are proliferating in rural South Asia. The attempt to usher in economic changes through providing access to net-based services and information has not had a significant impact on the rural economy in India. Besides, the potential for the organizational as well as technical innovations that lay at the base of these interventions, remoulding micro-level practices in order to generate sustained growth in incomes and jobs, appears to be rather limited and conditioned by the historically given socio-economic milieu in which they operate (Sreekumar, 2006).

In India, the biggest and most populous nation in South Asia, one of the major claims made on behalf of these projects, besides their ability to redefine the economic contours of Indian villages, is their potential to engage in social transformative action at the village level (Arunachalam, 2002; Dugger, 2000; Rajora, 2002). It is widely recognized that caste and gender inequalities in rural

Indian society have shown extraordinary resilience. Despite decades of social and political struggles, rural, and to a great extent urban, social life in India is marked by caste-based social divisions and feudal gender values biased against women. Recently, proponents of ICT-based developmental initiatives in India have apparently been taking note of the issue of unjust social structure, arguing that deployment of new technologies into rural areas would enhance participation of marginalized communities and vulnerable groups such as women and the aged in developmental and political processes. The issue is often identified as one of increasing the level of skills and providing organizational support (Goyal, 2003). An attempt to increase participation by women and *Dalits* (lower castes)<sup>6</sup> has thus become a major objective, outlined by these projects in their mission statements and publicity materials.

Nevertheless, the existing literature mostly understands the question of inclusion as a matter of choice rather than structure. In these analyses, social exclusion is a matter of lack of awareness and inappropriate project design, although mention is occasionally made of the societal contexts; incorporation of gender concerns 'from the very beginning of the project design' is a more or less universal solution for enhancing participation (Gajjala, 2002; Hafkin, 2002). While participation could be, to a certain extent, a matter of choice either of the project implementers or the 'beneficiaries', the overarching structures of social barriers appear to be more inhibiting than is often appreciated. It is in this regard that some of these projects began to make claims about the social transformative potential of new technologies, and to define their own role as one of mediating social change through deployment of ICTs.

This study takes a closer look at this position and argues that the question of inclusion cannot be satisfactorily addressed within the paradigm of understanding failure as a matter of design and choice. The failure is deeply embedded in the social and institutional processes through which projects necessarily become part of rural social setting. Further, it is argued that the potential for transcending these constraints by taking on the role of social movements is limited due to the inability of the agencies involved to challenge the existing institutional agencies and social forces that assist them in their project implementation. We first focus on the question of women's participation in ICT-based community projects in India. We then look at the claims of selected initiatives regarding their social transformative capabilities to act as a caste equalizer in the rural social structure and examine the huge gap between reality and rhetoric that provides useful insights into the dynamics of human-ICT interaction in the emerging rural network society in South Asia.

### **Women and ICTs: rhetoric and reality of participation**

Research in the area of gender and ICTs, mostly conducted in the US and European contexts, has highlighted the recurrence of some of the traditional

gender issues relating to technology, such as its impacts on housework, the labour market and leisure, and perhaps also the familiar question of stereotyping women in the context of their relations with computers and the internet. Research in this area has also opened up a completely new set of issues relating to the positive and negative consequences of gender, and the perceived gradual erosion of women's agency in the everyday practices of the internet, despite their growing visibility on the web. There is also a growing uneasiness and concern regarding the question of internet access for women, particularly in the context of increasing digitization of traditional governmental functions and services both in the developed and developing countries (Scott and Page, 2001: 149). The issue of access is significant given that recent research purveys the impression that ICTs are transforming themselves to become increasingly women-friendly (Green, 2002: 191). While the new technologies arguably are becoming more women-friendly, the question of women's internet access becomes an interesting research question in the emerging context of the increasingly universal use of ICTs in everyday practices of governance and commerce. Quoting Moore (1998), Holloway and Valentine (2003: 21) point out that ICTs are often tied to political visions of social inclusion and cohesiveness, and seen as potentially facilitating higher participation levels, producing democracy that is more informed.

Given this backdrop, it is not surprising that the major ICT-based projects launched in South Asia have gender sensitivity as their flagship aim. Even though none of these projects were initially aimed exclusively at women's empowerment, most organizations and projects soon began to project the potential as well as achieved empowerment of women as their major contribution. In posters, pamphlets, media reports and standard publicity materials these organizations project pictures of rural women in large numbers flocking around computers in cyber kiosks. Videos and similar publicity material emphasize the benefits of the initiatives to rural women, who are marginalized or excluded from social and political processes due to illiteracy, traditions, patriarchal values and general State apathy.<sup>7</sup> ICTs, ever since they began to become popular with bureaucrats and policy-makers, have thus been characterized as an emancipating technology, particularly for the disadvantaged and for marginalized women (Ng and Mitter, 2005; Sharma, 2003). The notion that ICTs in the rural Asian setting can be liberating, particularly for women, has received continued favourable attention and appreciation.<sup>8</sup> The question of the digital divide in terms of gender is mostly identified in the literature as a barrier to be overcome with increased use of ICTs in rural areas, ostensibly strengthening the rural network society. Nevertheless, it is important that we consider the digital divide as a social phenomenon better addressed as a question of structure rather than as one of choice. More ICTs does not necessarily bring about more equality. On the contrary, the patterns of deployment and control of ICTs in the rural setting could reinforce existing social divides and, in certain cases, create new divisions.

### **Gyandoot: tribal women at large**

The Gyandoot kiosks offer a wide set of facilities and services, such as gathering and disseminating agricultural prices, online registration of applications, online redress of public grievances, rural email, village auction sites, online matrimonial sites, information regarding governmental programmes, career counselling for students and the facility to put questions to experts, a technical advice channel between experts and villagers, downloading online application formats (for 'caste certificates', income certificates, welfare benefits and so on), a village newspaper, etc. It can be imagined that, if functioning properly, the centres can be of very high utility to the villagers. It becomes apparent that if such services are offered and any particular sections in the community are excluded from accessing them, then that would lead to the emergence of new social divides or reinforce existing divisions within the village community.

One of the most important aspects of the Gyandoot project has been its location. Dhar is a tribal district and the notion that a relatively underdeveloped tribal district can be the site of an enormous experiment with the application of ICTs in governance is an inspiring one. Nevertheless, the decision to implement the project in a tribal district was not part of any larger scheme of linking up economically poor regions in the state of Madhya Pradesh. On the other hand, it was contingent upon the fact that the senior government official who masterminded the project was the chief administrative official – the District Collector of Dhar, a relatively backward tribal region.

When the project was conceived, it was believed that it would provide equal opportunities for men and women, as well as people belonging to weaker sections of society such as *Dalits*. The aims and objectives set out by the innovator revolved around the idea of equal participation. Hence, the first two major goals of the project as outlined by Rajora (2002: 66) were 'enhanced participation in community affairs through the creative use of information technology and ensuring equal access to emerging technologies for oppressed and exploited segments of the society'.

Nonetheless, the project has not been able to achieve a critically significant degree of participation of women and *Dalits* to ensure that these objectives are met. The problem of inadequate participation by women means further marginalization of women in Dhar for a variety of reasons. The first and foremost factor that deserves attention in this context is the fact that Dhar is a tribal district and tribal women are one of the most marginalized groups in India. When most of the government services are made available through Gyandoot, the insufficient participation of women would imply that these services will eventually fall outside the reach of tribal women. Besides, it would also imply that, instead of bridging the gender divide characteristic of rural India, the new technology is reinforcing the existing divide, or even widening it.

Hence, it turns out that one of the important and visible divisions that is reinforced in the context of the emergence of Gyandoot kiosks is the gender divide. While the number of people accessing the utilities provided by the kiosk is abysmally low in relation to the total population of the villages, it is all the more clear that female users of Gyandoot are far fewer compared to male users (see Table 1). The data shows that, three years into the project, women were still not in a position to make use of the facilities available through Gyandoot kiosks. It can be seen from Table 1 that children and youngsters are the major users of the Gyandoot kiosks, which shows that exclusion of the aged is also an important social problem that has arisen in the context of e-governance services provided by the ICT-based projects. What is notable in Table 1, besides the glaring fact that female participation is relatively low, is the pattern of female participation. In the age group of below 18 years and above 60 years, we can see relatively high usage of the kiosks. In itself, this is an encouraging and positive development. It means that school girls and older women have a greater potential for being the clients of the project. However, when we try to unravel the deeper implications of this phenomenon, the picture that emerges would not be a promising one. What the pattern tells us is that young women and middle-aged women have been staying away from the kiosks, and this group includes young mothers and workers. It is striking that the lowest level of participation is for women belonging to the 18–30 and 30–40 age groups, and perhaps this points to the whole set of issues pertaining to the question of the gender divide in rural India and the inability of the project to address the question, as I would like to bring out below.

The fact that school girls and destitute women form the majority of the women visitors to the Gyandoot kiosks is corroborated by observations made by the Soochaks (i.e. the entrepreneurs/managers who run the kiosks). In the Nagda kiosk, for example, the Soochak mentioned that less than 10 percent of the users are women. Many Soochaks have pointed out that, for long intervals, no women ever visit the centre. As one of the Soochaks put it:

Mostly, men visit my centre. However, occasionally some women who have no male members in their family would come for help. They mainly come for the welfare schemes. Sometimes they visit the kiosks seeking help for resolving land disputes or to complain about encroachments, when someone forcibly takes away parts of their land. Land disputes can go violent at times. Children come here to play computer games when I allow them once in a week. Some of the children are girls.<sup>9</sup>

The officials and the Soochaks are in fact aware of the relative non-presence of women as users and offer a variety of reasons for the lack of participation of women in the activities of the project. Even among the Soochaks who manage the kiosks, not many are women. At the time of our visits, only one kiosk was managed and operated by a woman Soochak. Moreover, at the executive level too there is an absence of females. Even though one of the sloganized objectives of the project is to bring more women into the internet and

**TABLE 1**  
**Users of Gyandoot by gender and age, 2000–2**

Age group	Male	Female	Total	Percentage of women users (age category)	Percentage of women users (cumulative)
Below 18	770	422	1192	35.40	38.00
18–30	406	6	412	1.46	0.54
30–40	2092	211	2303	9.16	19.00
40–60	1014	234	1248	18.75	21.14
Above 60	376	234	610	38.36	21.14
Total	4658	1107	5765	19.20	100.00

*Source:* Adapted from CEG-IIMA (2002: 17)

make it a weapon for their liberation, in the formation of its organizational structure the basic requirement in achieving this goal has been overlooked – the programme does not have a women coordinator.

The oft-cited reasons for non-participation of women by male coordinators as well as Sookhaks of Gyandoot are illiteracy, family ties, and tribal customs and traditions that inhibit women's participation.<sup>10</sup> While these are all facts relating to the social realities of rural India, particularly in tribal areas, the account stands as a testimony to the failure of the belief that information technology is inherently capable of resolving existing social divides. Problems like illiteracy and tribal customs, which prohibit women from participating in the project, are not isolated issues that one or even a set of development initiatives can properly address. They are deeply embedded in the ensemble of power relations of both the caste-based and patriarchal hierarchy of social organization in rural India.

It is noteworthy that some of the attempts by the officials to launch awareness campaigns to attract more women to the centres also have not produced the desired results. An apparently innovative programme that Gyandoot officials conceived was to organize competitions for children in the villages on behalf of the kiosks, expecting that this would result in increased understanding of the working of the kiosks for their mothers, who bring them for these contests. In order to overcome the inertia in female participation, for example, the Samithi (Committee) conducted a 'healthiest child' competition at the village/kiosk level. Nevertheless, according to the accounts of the officials themselves, it did not succeed in attracting women customers.<sup>11</sup>

### **TARAKendras: accepting gender divisions**

Challenging gender divisions and providing greater access to women and disadvantaged groups is the most publicized benefit of ICT-based developmental

projects, including TARahaat.<sup>12</sup> While conceiving the TARahaat project, given that illiteracy is especially high among women and *Dalits*, these vulnerable groups were recognized as 'part of the core audience for the TARahaat Web site', which is why developing a non-text-based medium was believed to be an imperative for the success of project (San Miguel, 2001). In one of the presentations of the project made to an international audience – in which TARahaat portrays itself as an internet-based organization with social objectives, commercial strategies and multi-layered partnerships – an implementation plan was outlined to achieve nationwide deployment of TARakendras by March 2002, an expectation which remains unfulfilled even in 2007. The unique means of outreach the organization expected to employ included associations of government pensioners, Mahila Mandals (Women's Groups) and Soldier Sailor Boards in order to popularize the kendras.<sup>13</sup> The belief that the model has been performing well in India has led many to believe that it is replicable. In Afghanistan, following the US-led war, attempts to use ICTs for developmental action confronting widespread female illiteracy looks to the success of TARakendras as a source of inspiration and intends to emulate them. The image of the project, as a major initiative drawing village women into the dawn of the information revolution and sidestepping conventional disadvantages of illiteracy and inadequate education, is deeply ingrained in such narratives on the project:

Education programs for illiterate women allow women to skip over their first two prerequisites – literacy in their own language and in English – and jump immediately into learning how to use a computer to access information. TARahaat.com in India is an ideal example of a source of information that is made to suit the needs of women at the village level. In this website, pictures are used to represent things that are important to women in Indian villages, such as clinics or schools. The women click on the object and access information such as why it is important to educate their daughters. (Abirafeh, 2002)

Sponsored studies also have attempted to highlight the issue of women as a major agenda of the project in the discussion of the social components that the project would address:

TARahaat's overarching social objective is the creation of sustainable rural livelihoods and the enrichment of the rural Indian economy through improved information flows, education and direct job creation. In addition, TARahaat will address a number of social issues, including women's health and education, governance, and resource conservation, primarily by providing relevant and easily accessible information on its Web site. (Peterson et al., 2001: 4)

However, the reality is far from this ideal these discourses attempt to bring out. Interestingly, the promoters of the TARakendras visit the villages and hold discussion with the village elites as well as others before an entrepreneur is identified to set up the kiosk (Sreekumar, 2006). Once the centres are established,



TARahaat attempts to consolidate the centres by offering a spectrum of community activities and programmes, such as seminars, group meetings, workshops, etc., in order to draw the attention of villagers to the centre and its benefits. The staff, as well as the entrepreneurs connected with the project, were aware that female participation in the activities of the tele-centres is relatively low.

The TARAkendras have a flexible organizational structure so that informal initiatives by entrepreneurs often play a major strategic role in awareness campaigns. In Raman Mandi, for example, the kiosk manager arranged an entertainment programme for children every Saturday.<sup>14</sup> The TARahaat team welcomed these initiatives, since they hoped that their info-tech centres could be transformed into village or peri-urban community centres. Nevertheless, while initially considered as a good marketing strategy,<sup>15</sup> these independent initiatives have not resulted in any increased participation of women in TARAkendras' activities, although a good number of female students were enrolled for their e-education programmes. It may be noted that female students were not sent to these centres to attend courses when mixed classes were proposed. Realizing this problem, some centres have begun to offer separate sessions for girls and employed women tutors.<sup>16</sup> Reports highly sympathetic to the organization have also noted that the reluctance of parents to send their daughters to TARAkendras had been a major problem:

In Bathinda, the Pacca Kalan franchisee found villagers hesitant to send their daughters to the TARAkendra because they thought that the girls might be harassed there, especially by boys from surrounding villages. The franchise owner offered personally to guarantee the girl's well-being during visits with their parents. (Peterson et al., 2001: 14)

The operating model of the TARahaat kiosks was based on the computer educational services it provides to students. The enrolment of girls in these programmes was lower than that of boys. Traditionally, girls and boys are not allowed to sit together in the classroom and hence separate hours had to be scheduled for them. However, this strategy also did not result in any substantial increase in girls' participation. It is also noted that women franchisees were singled out for ostracism or vandalism in Bathinda.<sup>17</sup>

While these local initiatives were either floundering or registering moderate successes, the TARahaat team conceived a comprehensive strategy to increase local participation in general and female participation in particular. TARahaat experimented with a new organizational arrangement called 'TARAbathcheet' (a bathcheet is a forum for dialogue) to attract women. Originally envisaged as an interactive forum for people, particularly women, to raise their problems and grievances and find solutions wherever possible, TARAbathcheet was intended to evolve as a forum that would provide exposure to the activities of the kiosks to rural women. Separate 'Bathcheets' were envisaged for different groups of people, such as old men, women, youth and children. However, the coverage of the programme was limited to

a few centres, and it was hardly successful in most of the kiosks where it was implemented. After it was realized that women's attendance at mixed meetings was negligible, exclusive meetings for women, moderated by a female resource person, were held in some centres. A woman medical practitioner from Chandigarh was appointed as consultant for these meetings.<sup>18</sup> Another 'successful' case of inclusion is more revealing with regard to the social complexities that envelop such projects in rural India:

The three girls who own and operate the Punavali Kalan franchise near Jhansi belong to one of India's higher social classes. Some villagers were reluctant to visit the TARAKendra because they considered it just one more way to increase the power vested in the higher class. The franchisees have managed to overcome this initial resistance through door-to-door visits with the villagers. Several people showed up when personally invited to visit the TARAKendra and see the 'new type of TV' for themselves. (Peterson et al., 2001: 14)

It becomes clear from these narratives that, in the process of formation of the kiosks, there is an over-dependence on the support of the rural elite. These elites control the social milieu of the domain of activities often offered by the kiosks and, in order for the tele-centres to function in this milieu, they invariably have to accept the traditional social divides, including the gender divide, instead of striving to transform them. Hence it is highly unlikely that the technology in itself will have any emancipating effects as far as women and the underprivileged are concerned.

### **Village Knowledge Centres and women's participation**

As in the case of the other projects, non-participation of women and the elderly stand out as a major drawback of the Village Knowledge Centres project, although the rhetoric regarding participation of the marginalized and underprivileged is at a very high pitch in the publicity materials produced in support of it. The reality on the ground, in most cases, stands in sharp contrast to this orchestrated over-hype. The all-women centre in Embalam is perhaps typical of this contrast between rhetoric and reality.

In Embalam, a group of eight volunteers, all women, manages the MSSRF kiosk. In the publicity materials and information literature supplied by the organization, it is often noted that 50 percent of the volunteers are women. The Integrated Village Research Project (IVRP) has a total of 26–8 volunteers spanning across 11 centres. There is a surprisingly high concentration of women volunteers in Embalam, which partly explains the high percentage of women volunteers for the IVRP as a whole. Also notably this is the centre with the highest number of volunteers managing a single kiosk. In other centres, one could normally expect 2–4 volunteers, with a chance of one of them being a woman in a few places. One of the most striking aspects about the

volunteers in Embalam is that their educational background is 10th standard or below, whereas in other kiosks a good majority of them have attended college or even acquired technical education before joining IVRP.

The Embalam kiosk was set up as a result of the initiative by the project staff who interacted with the key personnel of the Mangalam Society, an organization with local roots in Pondicherry that works to bring about the social advancement of disadvantaged women in society. It regularly conducts training camps for women and follows them up with additional activities to refresh their knowledge in topics such as personal development, time management, about various schemes, interpersonal relationships, family harmony and consumer awareness, etc.<sup>19</sup> It appears that the project failed to elicit the interests of the educated and skilled youth in the locality, who refused to offer unpaid labour to manage the kiosk. As one volunteer at Embalam notes:

You can see only women volunteers here. But it is not because there are no young men who can run this. The fact is that they asked for a salary. They said they need at least 2000 rupees per month. It is reasonable but the project does not pay salary.<sup>20</sup>

The women volunteers said they take shifts in batches of four. If one is surprised by the relatively large number of volunteers managing the kiosk in Embalam, the reason is to be found in the social milieu, which remains unchanged in spite of intrusion of technology:

We are all housewives and we have children to look after. Since we are not paid for this work, we have to take up casual work for our livelihood. We have to sit here in groups because it is not probably safe to be alone as we are women. So four of us sit here in the morning and the other group would manage in the evening.<sup>21</sup>

The volunteers recollect that the kiosk was set up as a result of contacts established with the IVRP staff through a Chennai-based high-level functionary of the Mangalam Society called Anjali Dayanand. Usha Rani, a local organizer of the society, had attended a training programme led by Anjali Dayanand. She instructed Usha Rani to take other members of the local group to attend a meeting organized by Rajashekhar Reddy of IVRP, to look at the possibility of setting up an IVRP centre in the locality. The meeting was held not in Embalam but in Ariyoor.

What is remarkable about the centre is that the kiosk is being run by relatively less-educated women. They seem to be at ease to be with the machines as well as with the procedures for running the kiosk. However, the fact that it is run entirely by women, has not, according to their own assessment, led to any enhanced participation of women in the project. They explain that this may be because the information available from the kiosk, such as market prices, is demanded more by men than women. In this sense, the Embalam kiosk is not strikingly different from other IVRP kiosks. The clientele are children and youth, who visit the centre to play computer games or watch CDs.

**TABLE 2**  
**Users by gender at the Veerampatinam kiosk, March 1999**

Group	Male	Female	Total
Adult	75	7	82
Child	13	0	13
Total	88	7	95

*Source:* User register, Veerampatinam kiosk

The data provided in the annual report of the MSSRF is also revealing, although it is a bit misleading (MSSRF, 2002). It gives the compiled user profile of probably a cumulative distribution for the years 1999–2001. While non-participation of women, lower castes, aged and the underprivileged has been a glaring feature of the project since its inception, there is always an attempt to underplay this fact. In what follows we try to compare the user register for two randomly selected months in 1999, the year in which the project was launched, and in 2002 (see Tables 2 and 3). I have chosen the most celebrated of the MSSRF kiosks – Veerampatinam – for this comparative exercise. Because of the differences in the way in which data are recorded at the centre in the past and present, we do not get strictly comparable information regarding the ages of users. But since a separate category of student users is kept, even in the earliest registers, this limitation is not overly constraining.

The noticeable absence of women in the user list of Veerampatinam kiosk in the year of its inception has not been a temporary phenomenon, as evidenced by the user statistics for June 2002 (Table 3). If, in 1999, seven visits out of a total of 95 visits were made by women, after three years, while the total number of visits has almost doubled, the number of visits by women remains unchanged. This clearly shows that women's participation in the project was low and declining as a share of total visits, while the propaganda had maintained just the opposite.

### **Social enterprises as social movements**

It is also necessary to reassess the promises of the ICT-based NGOs regarding their social transformative role as crusaders for social equity and gender equality. We need to address this question against the backdrop of the claims made in this regard by the supporters and functionaries of these organizations. While it is widely accepted that ICTs are increasingly being used as a vehicle for channelling social protests and mobilizing resources for social struggles (Castells, 2001), the ability of the ICT-NGOs to take up this task appears to be limited. Participation in the projects by the marginalized and vulnerable communities is, more often than not, dictated by the facilities as well as the social dynamics that define their existence.

**TABLE 3**  
**Users by gender and age at the Veerampatinam kiosk, June 2002**

Age group \ Gender	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Below 15	58	0	58
16–25	106	6	112
26–35	48	1	49
36–45	5	0	0
46–55	0	0	0
Above 55	0	0	0
Total	192	7	199

Source: User register, Veerampatinam kiosk

**TABLE 4**  
**Cyber kiosks and their activities**

Activity \ Project	Project		Total
	Male	Female	
E-governance and civic information	Nil	Limited	Major thrust
Horizontal exchange of information by participants	Nil	Nil	Limited
Access to online networking	Limited	Limited and subject to availability of necessary facilities in the kiosks	Limited

Castells (2001) identifies three major characteristics that are shared by community tele-centres as they become operational in urban settings. First, he regards these centres as providing information from local authorities, as well as from various civic associations acting as a ‘technologically updated bulletin of city life’. The ITC initiatives in rural India have not yet been able to deliver on this count, as the network society is technologically as well as financially limited by resource constraints. IVRP, probably recognizing this limitation, publishes a printed newspaper called *Naama Ooru Sheyvi*, meaning ‘Our Local News’, which was not available online or in any electronic format!

In the case of TARAKendras, there was practically no information on governance that could be communicated to participants and, not surprisingly, many of the TARAKendra managers had not even heard about e-governance. However, probably since Gyandoot has been tailor-made to provide e-governance information, most of its activities involved C2G (i.e. citizens to government) interface. The second factor which Castells identifies is the ability of these centres to organize horizontal exchange of information and electronic conversation among participants in the network. In the case of IVRP and TARAKendras, such activities have not become popular and, apart from one or two anecdotal references to horizontal exchange between participants and a one-way flow of information from the main centre to sub-centres, there is hardly any networking among participants. Gyandoot reports more instances of participants engaging in information exchange. Third, Castells mentions access to online networking for individuals and organizations that have long been outside the internet. In this respect, too, TARAKendras, IVRP and Gyandoot do not appear to be making a remarkable showing, although, given the facilities, the potential for offering this service is indeed bright.

Nevertheless, the initiators of these projects often attempt to portray them as having the emancipatory potential and the image of social movements. The examples which are often quoted to support this are at best exaggerated and distorted accounts of inconsequential incidents, or, at worst, mere figments of imagination. The degree of distortion and exaggeration increases with each iteration of the example. The story relating to MSSRF's Embalam centre is a case in point. As in the case of many other MSSRF centres, the space for housing the information shop was provided by the Temple Trust in this village. The room given by the temple was one adjoining its outer wall near the main entrance. This caught the imagination of the correspondent of the *New York Times*, who reported as follows:

Embalam, India – In this village at the southern tip of India, the century-old temple has two doors. Through one lies tradition. People from the lowest castes and menstruating women cannot pass its threshold. Inside, the devout perform daily poojas, offering prayers. Through the second door lies the Information Age and anyone can enter. In a rare *social experiment*, the village elders have allowed one side of the temple to house two solar-powered computers that give this poor village a wealth of data, from the price of rice to the day's most auspicious hours. (Dugger, 2000)

As a matter of fact, the temple does have more than one door (see Figure 1). However, the second door mentioned in this passage (the roll-down shutter door, to the left of the temple gate, which is the first door referred to) does not open to the temple but to the 'information age' only, and this room does not even have ventilation facing the temple. The emphasis on menstruating women is far off the mark since all temples in India prohibit their entry, with this temple being no exception. The temple had allowed entry to *Dalits* several years before the project was conceived, according to accounts of the villagers,

**FIGURE 1**  
The 'two doors' and the Embalam kiosk



including volunteers at the kiosk. In fact, a representative of *Dalits* was a sitting member of the Board of Trustees of the temple, and *Dalit* meetings were often held within its premises. However, by the time the Jury of the Stockholm Challenge Award interpreted the *New York Times*' report, the story had developed further:

Because of this project, some traditional barriers have fallen. For example, a temple that formerly excluded low-caste people now opens *its doors to everyone so they may use computers*. This project is a wonderful example of the benefits of IT, and of the power of information and opportunity. (quoted in MSSRF, 2002: 137, emphasis added)

The member of the Temple Trust who was also a party to the decision to let the kiosk use its outer room, is now portrayed as a beneficiary of the social transformation brought about by the project. Surprisingly, the functionaries of MSSRF use this imaginary social action to consolidate its image as a crusader against caste iniquities. Quoting Dugger, Arunachalam (2002) explains: 'Caste-based division is still a problem in southern India, despite strict laws in force; our knowledge centre at Embalam has made a minor dent'.

Our own enquiry has provided additional information contradicting most of the claims about ICT-based NGOs initiating social revolution in rural India.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, rather than scrutinizing the truth behind a number of such claims, we may instead raise the question of the potential of these NGOs to emerge as social movements. The NGOs operate under conditions predicated by the social and economic institutional structures and their ability to react is inherently limited by the nature of mediations into which they enter while seeking legitimation. They work closely with the village elites, intermediaries or temple trustees. This crucial factor is often overlooked in the exaggerated accounts of ICT-based NGOs as vehicles of social transformation.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

MSSRF and TARAhaat are social enterprises operating within the realm of civil society, while Gyandoot is a semi-autonomous NGO with a notional relationship to civil society. These developmental NGOs and quasi-NGOs appear to have only a very limited scope in engaging in social transformative praxis using ICTs. Organizations such as TARAhaat, Gyandoot and MSSRF look at technology as a medium as well as goal, with a loosely defined idea of developmentalism motivating their strategies and actions at the grassroots level. These organizations tend to view information technology as the most crucial factor in solving developmental maladies and social inequality. The concept of sustainable livelihood, for example, would now be seen as a possibility where computer-mediated technology is used in a local context to enable villagers to access crucial information that they formerly lacked.

The question of actual participation by vulnerable and marginalized communities in the ICT-based developmental projects has not received serious attention from most commentators on these initiatives in rural India. More often than not, the claims made by the NGOs on behalf of the underprivileged, including women, are considered to be valid in confirming the hypothesis that information technology is a gender and caste equalizer in the context of rural South Asia. The corollary is that the emerging rural network society is less hierarchical and more inclusive than the existing social organization in these societies. A reality check in terms of actual participation and an analysis of the dimensions of non-participation has been enormously revelatory. Non-participation would imply further social exclusion as the internet becomes the dominant domain of the public sphere as well as the site of governmental action and service delivery. Computer illiteracy may emerge as a structural disadvantage like illiteracy as computer-mediated communication and action becomes more widespread in the everyday life of villagers, shaping the contours of a rural network society.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the question of inclusion is fundamentally a matter of choice rather than structure, and the belief that all that is required to overcome the problem is added emphasis on the role of awareness-building, conscious design and incorporation of gender concerns, our



study reveals that the overarching structures of social barriers appear to be far more constraining in the Indian rural setting. Developmental NGOs have inherent limitations that prevent them from taking the role of social movements. In the Indian context, the analysis of the patterns of inclusion in rural cyber kiosks shows that non-participation, particularly by women, is an important drawback in ICT-based projects. Contrary to popular belief, these social enterprises are not inclusive enough, and the social factors that perpetuate inequalities in rural areas are in fact reinforced by the projects rather than eliminated. The participation of women and the underprivileged in these projects is abysmally low and this is strikingly in contrast to the projected image of these initiatives as being overtly sensitive to issues of gender and social divisions. Nonetheless, ICT-based NGOs are often wrongly credited with social achievements that decades of social and political interventions and struggles have been striving to attain, such as reducing gender inequalities and mitigating caste oppression. The trajectories of these organizations clearly suggest that such claims are devoid of genuine historical and empirical support.

## Notes

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1. Robert Wade (2002) identifies some common features of the approach he calls 'Groupthink' in 'ICT for development' discourse. The Groupthink is based on some key assumptions. In his critique of the Groupthink, Wade challenges these assumptions. The Groupthink in ICTs assumes that the digital divide is the site of a major unequalizing force in the contemporary world economy. Further to this, it also assumes that this divide could be bridged by supplying more ICTs to developing countries. The Groupthink tends to view ICTs as an 'inherently enabling meta-technology that can bypass or leapfrog institutional and infrastructural obstacles' (2002). Fearing that the concrete benefits of ICT expansion for rural poor are difficult to establish, the Groupthink advances the position that standard cost-benefit comparisons are irrelevant in the case of ICT projects.

2. These centres were set up under the Integrated Village Research Project (IVRP) of the MSSRF Foundation.

3. TARA is the acronym for Technology and Action for Rural Advancement, the information and communication division of the Development Alternatives (DA) Group, a non-profit research, development and consultancy outfit. 'Kendra' means 'centre'.

4. DA had already been active in the area of sustainable rural livelihood for more than two decades when they planned to launch the ICT-based project.

5. Although the Gyandoot centres were established by the district administration, management and control were vested with a semi-autonomous NGO called Gyandoot Samithi (Committee) nominated by the Government.

6. *Dalit* is a pan-Indian word, which roughly means 'the oppressed', preferred by a wide section of underprivileged castes in India to the official expression 'Scheduled Castes' or '*Harijan*' (God's Children) coined by M.K. Gandhi.

7. See for example, the video *Reaching the Unreached: Village Knowledge Centres in Pondicherry for Sustainable Food Security*, by MSSRF Foundation Chennai.

8. See for example a special issue of *i4d (Information for Development)*, vol. 1[3] on gender and ICTs; it is a journal which devotes considerable attention to various aspects of ICTs in rural development.

9. Interview with Akhil Jain, 14 August 2002.

10. Interview with Naveen Prakash, 12 August 2002. However, the status of tribal women in the Indian context has to be understood in its diverging contexts. Anthropological literature on tribal customs and values in India has pointed to the fact that tribal women in general enjoy better social status within their communities than women belonging to caste groups associated with the Brahmanical Hindu order. Singh and Rajyalakshmi (1993) cite Furer-Haimendorf (1943), Hutton (1921), Hunter (1973) and Firth (1946) as examples of studies which report a high social status for tribal women among Tharus of Uthar Pradesh, and Nagas and Garos of the north-east. These studies recognize the fact that child marriage, the stigma on widowhood, etc. are not practised by many tribal groups. Tribal women are also able to enjoy choice of marriage, divorce and remarriage. Nonetheless, Singh and Rajyalakshmi (1993) also point to some of the grim scenarios of tribal social life such as absence of property rights, taboos implying impurity and low status, a ban on touching agricultural implements for fear of ritual pollution, etc. However, tribal customs cannot solely explain the indifference, or even antipathy of tribal women towards attending the kiosks. For a recent analysis of the socio-economic status of tribal women in India see Tripathy (2002). For a comparison of tribal and non-tribal women see Sahay (2002).

11. Interview with Naveen Prakash, 12 August 2002.

12. Tarahaat is the networking organization and internet portal that supports the kendras (kiosks).

13. A PowerPoint presentation highlights the major strategies and potential of the initiative as understood in the initial phase of its implementation (see [www.developmentgateway.org/download/123055/TARahaat.ppt](http://www.developmentgateway.org/download/123055/TARahaat.ppt)).

14. Interview with Aseem Bajaj on 9 August 2002. However, many franchisees of TARahaat might not be able to afford this due to financial constraints as well as limitations imposed by scarcity of electricity. Even in the kiosk in question, it does not appear sustainable.

15. Interview with Aseem Bajaj on 9 August 2002. Many franchisees expect more aggressive marketing strategies from the top-level management of the TARahaat. They believe that only the synergy created by local initiatives in conjunction with a regional-level drive to expand the market can help build awareness among women and marginalized groups.

16. Interview with Amrish Kumar Mittal on 9 August 2002.

17. Peterson et al. (2001: 14) note that: 'A franchisee in the Bathinda region, for example, suffered early vandalism and threats because the villagers felt that her TARakendra would disrupt their peaceful existence'. They argue that an intervention by the district authorities to quell the threats, and later a campaign by the franchisee herself, eventually helped to overcome this distrust.

18. Dr Mrs Tejinder Sethi held this post in 2002.

19. For an overview of the activities of the Society see the Special Correspondent's report 'NGO to Promote 50 More SHGs in Pondicherry, in *The Hindu Online* (2005).

20. Interview with Dhanalakshmi on 29 August 2002.

21. *ibid.*

22. My fieldwork has revealed that many of the claims about a reduction in caste inequalities, gender empowerment, access to health services, etc. that have been featured in the local and international media are, more often than not, over-hyped. Another example is from Thirukanchipet. It is claimed that:

A new knowledge center in Thirukanchipet, a village of Dalits, has led to another minor social revolution. These villagers used to get their tea served in cups reserved for them in the tea stall in the neighboring village Thirukanchi; the upper caste men would use a different set of cups. After the Dalit volunteers started working with computers and new technologies at the knowledge center, they became a bit emboldened and started displaying on the notice board of the knowledge center the poems of the Tamil revolutionary poet Subramanya Bharathi, who had played a key role in India winning independence from British rule, which questioned caste-based divisions in society and reiterated that all men are equal. Within a few weeks, the tea stall started serving tea in the same cups used by upper caste clients. Yet another example of including the excluded. (Arunachalam, 2002: 4)

Our enquiries revealed that the practice of separate cups still continued in Thirukanchi, and that some local politicians who have no links with the ICT project have been trying to put an end to this practice for several years. It is sheer wishful thinking that caste inequities such as this could be eradicated by putting up posters in computer kiosks miles away from the locality where the evil exists.

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