

Moulding ICT to Their Needs: Kerala's Women Overcome Their Misgivings

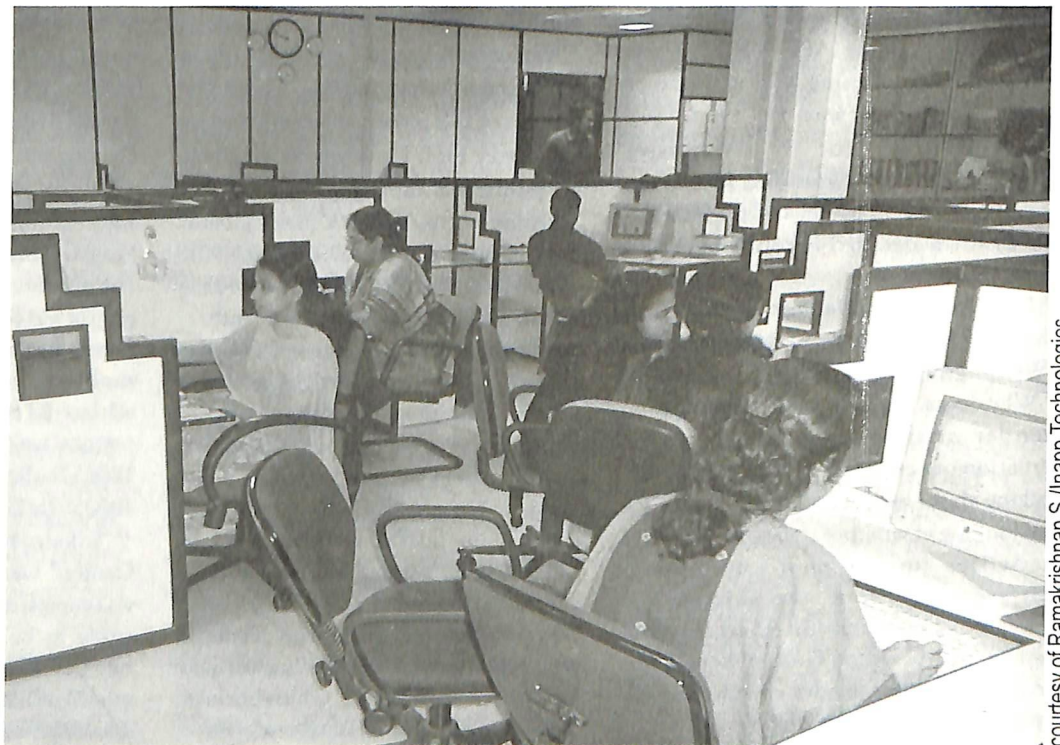
by Prema Nair

Developments in information technology affect men and women differently. With the Internet fast becoming the “electronic hall of democracy,” access to this becomes a paramount issue for women in their efforts to enter the public arena. Though women in Kerala enjoy the highest rate of literacy and educational status in India, this has not necessarily translated to social conditions that might encourage them into fields such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In addition, there is further reluctance among many women to accept new technological advances.

Society still views the computer as an instrument, the mysteries of which a man can better unravel. From childhood, the girl child is not encouraged to ‘experiment’ and ‘explore’—which is usually the prerogative of the boy child, and considered his natural instinct. There is also the general feeling that information technology (IT) and related jobs are elite, connected to foreign lands and to be taken up only if you are thinking of such a career. “The computer is not native. It is still viewed as something which came from abroad,” said S. Jayasree, project associate of the Sakhi Resource Centre for Women in Trivandrum, Kerala.

The experience at the documentation cen-

tre of Sakhi, the first resource and documentation centre on women’s issues in the state of Kerala, shows the urgent need to apply the latest ICT innovations, however, simply because it is the fastest and surest way to be heard. Our experiences with grassroots women and others from diverse backgrounds confirm that such technology is the answer to a reliable means of communicating and propagating women’s concerns.



With fair access and regular exposure to ICTs, women and girls realise the potentials of powerful technologies as means for their development.

courtesy of Ramakrishnan S./Inapp Technologies

Kerala Women in the Development Debate

Despite Kerala's high literacy rate, functional literacy on its own, however, does not necessarily constitute an ability to be open to and adept in new technological advances. The computer and E-mail communication era has not found easy acceptability among the women of Kerala. To begin with, technology is generally introduced first to the male members in a household. The boys get priority over girls. It is usually the brother who 'teaches' the sister to use the computer. Internet kiosks in Kerala are filled with boys surfing the Web. The girls' usage of the computer is much less, and limited to typing of application letters, rarely as a tool for enjoyment or exploration. This opportunity of a space accessible to boys from any economic background is not similarly available to the girls. The women and girls who access the Web are those who have personal computers or PCs in their homes.

Kerala has a vibrant and growing women's movement drawing on the collective experience of women in trying to understand and challenge the current gender power structure in society. Even though the reactions from the public in the beginning were not favourable or encouraging (as feminists are still seen as weird and frustrated women), there is an acknowledgement of their role in reacting and protesting against the various unequal relations. Prominent among their protests was their campaign on the Suryanelli case, where a young girl was

...a majority of the computer companies in Kerala prefer men to women as a long-term investment, especially when it comes to the product-development level, because of the misperception that the women are less experimental.

detained by 42 men, and exchanged and exploited for sexual favours. In its campaign strategy, Streevedi, a women's network, blocked the entry of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) while the assembly was in session. It also strived to keep the issue (and similar sex racket cases) alive in the minds of the public by organising 'caravans' through the state, distributing pamphlets, and delivering speeches to introduce to people a perspective of such abuses vis-à-vis the media's tendency to sensationalise these cases into tabloid scandals.

Two other successful campaigns of the women's movement were instances of sexual harassment at work: the complaints of a high-ranking officer against a minister, which led to the latter's resignation, and that of an employee of the Calicut University. In the Calicut University case, the Internet played a crucial role in garnering international and

national support for the victim.

"I appreciate its speed. We are able to link with other groups of women and thus mobilise and gather international support fast," says Mercy Alexander, social activist and convenor of Streevedi.

It is striking that these technological advances are happening in an environment that theoretically offers tremendous opportunity for Kerala women. ICT can link women in various areas, help coordinate agenda, speed up communication, reaching a vast number of people in less time. It moreover allows people not used to verbalising their opinions to articulate them in a relatively safe space. The computer, in other words, ironically allows one to be powerfully evocative. However, in a predominantly rural state like Kerala, the lack of resonance between technologies and women's own realities may result in alienation. "At first I was apprehensive of the computer. I thought I would make a mistake, and the computer would be harmed! It is, after all, an important instrument," says Daya J., another project associate of Sakhi Resource Centre for Women.

The IT World: A Man's World

The paradoxical situation in Kerala of high educational attainment and the low visibility of women in the technical spheres extends to the IT world. While women are generally preferred in the data-entry stage, there is a higher percentage of men in Web Design and advanced stages of pro-

duction. Moreover, a majority of the computer companies in Kerala prefer men to women as a long-term investment, especially when it comes to the product-development level, because of the misperception that the women are less experimental. "While men and women adapt equally well to a new computer in their work environment, men tend to push the machine to new limits, where women tend to limit themselves to what has been taught to them—though again, there are exceptions," says Inapp Software's Babu.

There is an impression that women cannot cope with the demands of ICT-based work, and that their priorities revolve around their families. The usual reasons of ICT employers who prefer hiring men to women:

- ◆ reluctance of women to travel due to domestic/societal controls (objections from parents/husbands, childcare/pregnancy);
- ◆ additional problems encountered with young and single women employees who travel, including their refusal to share accommodation with the opposite sex;
- ◆ tendency of women to leave their jobs to get married, leading to the organisation's loss in terms of the training and time invested on the worker; and
- ◆ the generally tight work schedule of ICT organisations, fixed deadlines and high-stress nature of the work.

"But it should also not be forgotten that women have a double work

The Net gives equal opportunities to all, regardless of their gender, background and economic status. This is a medium that could be a leveller—some may have a PC at home but women can also use and access the Net through the computers at a centre, NGO office, etc. The important point is fair access.

burden, and much of the constraints and so-called 'inefficiency' of women are not a result of personal incapability but of men deciding what their priorities should be," says Aleyamma Vijayan, director of Sakhi Resource Centre for Women.

The creative, challenging work is usually assigned to the men, and the monotonous, repetitive work such as data entry to the women. Women's lack of mobility, and the late work hours also impinge on the full participation of women in technology-oriented endeavours. Again, it is the men that set the norms and accepted social behaviour patterns for women. "Anything a woman does becomes a news item!" says Jayasree, referring to how a woman's situation is almost always trivialised.

Sakhi's Attempts to Fill the Gap

The idea behind the setting up of a documentation unit in Sakhi was to make changes happen, because any restructuring and redefining of embedded attitudes in both women and men presume significant change. Sakhi was established in 1996 to the amalgamation of women's voices and experiences. As a training and information dissemination centre, the group's focus is to gear grassroots women and activists for action, advocacy and lobbying, as well as policy formation. The centre's mission is to empower and network grassroots women's groups.

The Challenges and Local Application

Synergy between one's receipt of information and her application of this is needed. Because the issue of access is all-important, Sakhi has used translations to reach the masses. The strategy of repackaging the traditional trusted word to an unattractive page of grey matter, however, has its limitations and constraints. Malayalam, the regional language used in Kerala, is a tone-specific, gesture-intense language, but the language's nuances and feel are swept aside in the translated versions.

Within India, the diversity of dialects and languages is overwhelming, yet for women to inform and inspire change, they need to share their experiences closely. Inter-regional sharing of encounters is necessary, but the challenges of cross-regional translations are tremendous. Since the culture of globalisation

holds prominence, it becomes all the more crucial to insist that new technologies accommodate regional languages for future exchange. Here, ICT plays a major role: a software in Malayalam font is now widely used to encourage the local population to access ICT without hesitation. This has made it easy for women activists to express themselves via the computer. To paraphrase, Satish Babu of Inapp Software in Technopark, Trivandrum, networks don't connect computers, they connect people, and women are better at networking than most men."

Hearing their Voices

A number of women with the practical knowledge and insights of activists have been working at the grassroots level for years now. But there are many more women with indefatigable energy and athletic minds that are invisible. Several women's groups and feminist individuals should be given recognition and be made visible, especially to the academe. However, turning this dream into reality, initially received with excitement, has dented enthusiasm somewhat because the entry of these social activists into the theoretical, scientific world with technological props like the computer and the Internet came quite late. Occupied and exhausted by their problems at home and at work, as their presence is required in both arenas, the women found participation in the world of research daunting. On top of technology's rapid move forward to an alien planet of keyboards, monitors, computer languages, E-mail, and chat lines, the silence, privacy and basic

self-reliance that research work requires can result in the alienation of these women.

At the documentation centre, this uncertainty was tackled by the provision of resource persons to ease the women's journey through their studies. The initial hesitation having passed, many of them are now eager to try their hands at the computer. Though owning a PC is still beyond the reach of many of these women, there are several centres—NGOs and women's groups—where computer time and space are available. Using the E-mail as a link won quick acceptance.

Pinpricks and Drawbacks

The IT world could be the equalizer for women from diverse backgrounds and with different concerns. The Net gives equal opportunities to all, regardless of their gender, background and economic status. This is a medium that could be a leveller—some may have a PC at home but women can also use and access the Net through the computers at a centre, NGO office, etc. The important point is fair access.

The experience at the documentation centre reveals that any intimidation first experienced in dealing with ICT is offset by the women's energy and curiosity. Women activists and social activists in general remain spirited towards new ICT, even though their late entry into cyber age, coupled with their domestic duties and commitments, may delay their mastery of the computer.

ICT as Change Maker

Fortunately, the computer and the Internet, together, make for a media unique in its elasticity—that is, an individual can adapt/mould the technology to her taste. Unlike the typewriter, the computer has receptiveness and adaptability. The development of the Malayalam font, meanwhile, has democratised usage. In effect, women have access to a space where they can be discerning and apply their analytical abilities, and this is precisely why this medium can be the change maker in terms of information dissemination and consciousness raising. It also gives the women activist a chance to reach out and interact with the public space. This is crucial because Kerala still practices strict patriarchal moral policing of its women, and their visibility in public space is minimal.

A significant start is the decentralisation process in Kerala where the *panchayats* (local administrative units) are being computerised. Computer kiosks for information are also on the agenda. The elected women representatives can use these to interact with their constituencies and their colleagues overseas. The underlying objective here is to use ICT in implementing change and restructuring power equations. ♪

Prema Nair is an independent research partner based in Trivandrum, Kerala, India. Her interests include gender equality, women and communication, and women in tourism. Creative writing, poetry and reading fill her leisure space.