IT in India: Social Revolution or Approaching Implosion?

This article, written by Kristina Gaerlan, is based on Kalyani Menon-Sen's panel presentation on Globlalised media and ICT systems and structures organised by Isis International-Manila during the World Summit on the Information Society held last 10 to 12 December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland.

JAGORI (which means "wake up, woman") was started by a group of seven feminists (six women and one man!) in 1984, and is a women's resource, communication and documentation centre. Our mandate is to meet the information needs of Indian women's movements, and help rural women and their organisations to link up with larger debates and issues at the national level. In the last twenty years of our work, we have been able to build a network of feminist activists (or activist feminists), particularly in the rural areas in the North Indian states where patriarchy operates in a strongly feudal context and where gender oppression and women's subjugation take brutal and very material forms that are not very different from those prevailing in colonial times.

Our primary constituency is rural poor women. These are women surviving on the edge of India, constantly falling off the edge of the 'development' map delineated by policy-makers and politicians, struggling to retain a precarious foothold on work and survival. In trying to become an information bridge for grassroots women, our major challenge is the huge numbers we have to reach, and our very limited resources. We have to work with forms and technologies of communication that will be accessible to women for whom even the basic technology of reading and writing is out of reach.

Over the last twenty years, we have used a variety of media. We started with songs—a very successful vehicle for mobilisation. We have produced several music cassettes. We have also produced posters, pamphlets, newsletters, booklets, TV spots, video documentaries, as well as community theatre. In the process, we have also honed our skills in making documentation a political activity.

The act of putting something down in writing is an intensely political act—it can bring a woman's life and mind out from her private silences, into the public domain where it cannot be ignored by others. Our work has helped to smash the silence around forbidden issues such as violence, child sexual abuse, sexuality and mental illness. Most recently, we have also had to confront the painful issue of sexual harassment and exploitation within NGOs. Throughout, we have used documentation as an act of giving women a voice, of recognising and affirming agency, of enabling them to speak the violation and name the violator.

The Politics of Information

Today, India is one of the global nodes of the 'IT Revolution' and a large number of well-meaning agencies are frantically trying to bridge the "Digital Divide", or the gap that keeps women from accessing information and information technologies. But for the women JAGORI works with, this is not a new situation—the situation of drowning in information that is of no use to them is a familiar element of their reality. In fact, information is central to the maintenance of the 'natural order' in patriarchal societies. Information and knowledge have always been used as tools of domination and subjugation, as means of consolidating and strengthening feudal oppression, caste discrimination and women's subjugation. Half the women in India do not have access to even the most basic of information technologies—reading and writing. Thus, much of the information that is vital to women's lives is coded in ways that make it inaccessible to them—that make it impossible for them to identify and challenge the roots of their subordination. This is the "information gap" that women have always had to contend with.

The situation of women in the Information Age is therefore no more than an update of an old story. While this statement may sound unnecessarily cynical at first glance, it is borne out by many of the documentations of "best practice" in taking IT to the grassroots in India, which once again represent women as objects and passive targets of development. The most successful experiments—and

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there is no denying that these are genuinely impressive—are those where Electronic Information Centres have been set up at the village level in some of India's most remote and deprived areas. These centres are often run by young women. Yet, the menu of information that is available for access gives the game away. While it is possible to download weather forecasts and the latest market prices of agricultural commodities, sometimes even the bio-data of prospective brides and grooms (sorted carefully by caste!), there is a notable absence of information on the legal protection available to women facing domestic violence, on inheritance rights, on Constitutional guarantees regarding women's rights, on the nearest certified abortion centre. It is obvious that despite the rhetoric of "empowerment" that these documents are peppered with, this is very much development as usual dictated by considerations of efficiency rather than by any vision of social transformation.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is about poverty as much as it is about development. The ICT Revolution in India is inextricably linked to the way in which the global economy is taking shape. In a world where capital, technologies and profits move ever more freely across borders, the Internet provides a fast, cheap and efficient way of manufacturing "knowledge products" in locations where labour costs can be cut to the bone, and transferring them back to locations where the highest profits can be guaranteed. The strategy is no different from the logic that enabled colonial powers to exploit the populations of colonised countries—for instance, millions of workers in the textile industry in South East Asia were engaged in such "remote work" in the 18th Century!

The development of technologies that have enabled services to be outsourced to countries where wages are low and labour laws less restrictive has allowed Indian IT companies to build huge empires and claim the credit for an industrial revival. However, once the rosy clouds of huge initial profits have dispersed, it is increasingly obvious that multi-national corporations (MNCs) see Indian IT firms not so much as a source of high-end IT products, but as suppliers of low-end "IT coolies"—cheap and efficient workers who will provide quick-fix solutions to the small nitty-gritty problems that crop up every day in the course of their global operations.

The IT Worker—Privileges and Pay-offs

The average IT professional in India is male, a graduate of one of our respected technology schools, and a strong candidate for recruitment by Microsoft or any of the global IT conglomerates. These—the finest IT brains in the world, according to many—spend their time working at about 10 percent of their intellectual capacities but earning salaries equivalent to 300 times the minimum wage and living in gated communities insulated from the uncomfortable reality of an economy where, despite the bouncy energy of the stock market, inequalities and injustice are visibly increasing. Whatever one may say about their exploitation by the global economy, there is no denying that these are among the most privileged section of professionals in the country.

At the other end of the spectrum from the IT professional is the worker in the "Business Process Outsourcing" segment of the IT sector. Here, the workers are mainly women who fall into two broad categories with very different profiles.

The first category is the home-based IT worker in the unorganised sector—like all home-based workers, usually a married woman with children, who has some basic marketable skills (in this case, typing) but finds it impossible to get and keep a regular job that also allows

her to manage her domestic workload. This category of women is involved in tasks such as medical and legal transcription or maintenance of daily accounts, for small clients—individuals or small businesses in Northern countries. These women fall into the same pattern (albeit a different and more privileged socio-economic profile) as all other home-based women workers in the unorganised sector—they continue with exhausting and mind-deadening work with irregular payments and less than optimal wages because it is the only alternative available and does not threaten the 'stability' of their traditional roles. The average earnings of women in such work looks far less enticing when one deducts the investments they make—buying a computer, paying for electricity and internet connectivity, frequently staying up all night to meet deadlines. Added to this is the insecurity of employment—contracts are extremely informal and do not conform to either Indian or U.S. laws—there are no easy legal remedies if payment is denied by the client.

The second category of "IT women" is much larger and more visible than the first. These are young women working in call centres. These workers—often very young girls from middle-class homes—earn far more than their peers in other sectors and lead apparently privileged lives. They are transported to and from work in air-conditioned vans. Their workplaces are climate controlled and attractively decorated, with piped music providing a soothing background. Food and drink is on the house—call centres constitute a large chunk of the clientele for Pizza Hut outlets and ice-cream parlours in their vicinity. Employees and employers are all young people and there are opportunities for socialisation between shifts.

This might seem like every young girl's idea of heaven. Yet, under the surface of this happy scenario, is a situation of exploitation that should cause serious concern to all those who speak of workers' rights.

"Call Centre Girls": The Dumbing Down of a Generation

In India today, thousands of young women are learning to talk with an American accent so that they do not give themselves away to the harried Colorado housewife calling to report a malfunctioning washing machine and who has no idea that her call is being answered from the opposite side of the world. Call centre work does not require any high-end technological skills. It is mind-numbing and de-skilling—the knowledge and skills acquired in school and college are inapplicable here. The work itself is boring but stressful, and girls are

/www.globalrespondez.com/aboutus.html

Thousand of "call centre girls" in India learn to talk with an American accent to answer calls from consumers in the U.S.

expected to retain their composure and patience even in the face of verbal assaults by irate customers.

The necessity of matching the time-schedules in the U.S. means that working hours are completely upside-down. There are three shifts of eight hours each—midnight to 8 am, 8 am to 4 pm and 4 pm to midnight again. The girls change shifts every two weeks, taking a day off at each change. There are no holidays—call centres in Delhi are open round the clock even on national holidays. "Call Centre Girls" have no social life—indeed, they are hardly able to exchange more than a few words with their families, far less spend time with friends on working days. On days off, most of them do not even read the newspaper or watch anything more than mindless programmes on TV. Many of them show symptoms of bipolar disorder with going to work each day as the "high"—when they are at home, they are listless, bad-tempered and depressed. Their usual activity on an off day is "hanging out" at one of the shopping malls that are a new but increasingly familiar feature of the Indian urban landscape. Not surprisingly, almost all call centre workers are single women living with their parents. Turnover is high—most workers leave the job when they get married—unless, of course, they marry a colleague on the same shift!

In the Indian context, IT is creating a generation of stunted women who do not see beyond their immediate privilege—who do not realise that the flow of outsourced work will slow to a trickle and may then grind to a complete halt in the next few years. The backlash from a restive labour force in the U.S., and the entry of players such as China who can provide even cheaper labour, are both very real threats.

Once the Chinese workforce breaks the English language barrier, the Indian IT revolution will begin to implode. The worst affected will be young women, who will be the first to be thrown out of their jobs. They will also be the least equipped to deal with this situation since they will not have the skills to command any other kind of work. Call Centre girls today lack any personal or professional networks, and most have very little understanding of the larger forces that are shaping their lives. Like other dispossessed women workers, they will be forced to either quit the labour market or become easy prey for exploitative employers.

An additional problem in the case of women workers in the IT sector is their isolation from labour movements. For the average trade union, it is difficult to see IT women as exploited in any way—they are earning more, they are educated, and they come from middle-class households that provide back-up services to allow them to hop from job to job if they choose.

The Challenge for Feminists

India's IT revolution provides yet another demonstration of the fact that technology is neither value-free, nor value-neutral. Embedded in the ICTs are values that reflect the most brutal aspects of both patriarchy and capitalism. The challenge for feminists is therefore not only to devise and propagate information technologies that women can shape and control, but also to do this in ways that engage and interrogate the mainstream as well. We have many questions. Are there feminist ways of using IT and communication technology that can subvert its inherently exploitative message? How can we use the Internet and e-learning technologies to transfer IT know-how to women with limited technological and reading skills while also drawing them into the women's movement? How can we use and influence mainstream television, characterised as it is in India today by a seductive cocktail of consumerism, religion and glamorised oppression?

We recognise the need to re-evaluate our own theorisation of documentation. Articulating our own experience in a form that allows others to understand and empathise with it is the first step to unravelling oppression. Today however, we are faced with a situation where our documentation of women's traditional knowledge may actually have rendered them more vulnerable to exploitation by global commercial interests. For instance, the easy access, via the internet, to health lore has helped put IPR fences around our herbs, healing technologies and traditional remedies. The IT Revolution is forcing upon us questions feminists never thought to ask. Where earlier, we refused to accept that anyone could own knowledge, today we ask: How can we document experience, knowledge and skills in ways that we can share among ourselves, but are not accessible to those who oppress us? The answers to these questions will, we hope, lead us into the real IT Revolution—one that will put into women's hands, the means to change their own place in the world.

Kalyani Menon-Sen works with Jagori, a feminist documentation centre in India. Jagori describes itself thus: "At the very least we are a women's documentation centre, and at the very best, we are at the cutting edge of feminist theory."