

# SEWA Helping Women Find their Voice

by Namrata Bali

*A strong communication link can be set up with communities living in remote interior places through radio. This has been proven with several years of experience of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a grassroots organisation based in India, that has been working for the rights of women since 1972. SEWA is an organisation of poor, self employed women workers that seeks to empower women towards full employment and self reliance through capacity building, research and communications and documentation work conducted by the SEWA Academy. Throughout the conduct of these activities, SEWA has observed that many of its members avidly listen to the radio while they work. It realised that the low cost at which radio programmes are produced, its wide reach and accessibility makes it an ideal medium of communication, especially in communities. It realised that radio is an untapped source of education and communication to even the remotest village in India.*

**SEWA worked with radio** for the first time on the 16th of April in 2005 to mainstream gender issues experienced by women labourers into the development agenda. The SEWA Academy conducted research in the villages and slum areas on the types of programmes that interested women, the time suitable for them to listen to such programmes and the language in which the programmes should be conducted. Soon after the research, the SEWA Academy started broadcasting a 15-minute weekly programme, every Sunday at 8pm from the Amedabad and Vadodara Akashwani Centres. The programme is produced and recorded by women trained by the Academy.

Nearly five years since the successful launch of the radio programme, SEWA embarked on yet another project – the creation of its very own Community Radio Station which started broadcast in November 2009. It aired from the SEWA Academy Centre in the village of Manipur in Sanand Taluka, Gujarat, India with coverage spanning a 15 kilometer radius and broadcasting in 40 villages in surrounding areas.

To date, the SEWA Community Radio has produced a number of programmes focusing on a variety of topics. These include “Killol” a programme that captures the voice of children; and “Vadlo,” a programme for the elderly. The

program “Aakash mare Ambavu che” talks about aspirations of the youth and their work. “Rudu Upavan” is a programme for women, wherein information on cooking delicious food, beauty, health, literacy and their development is given. “Saptarangi” is a programme to listen to folk music of the community. Aside from these programmes, community people come to the studio and sing folk songs, and read poems, verses, or couplets.

Through these programmes, communities are linked, enabling an exchange of information and providing safe spaces for women to talk about their issues and concerns. Moreover, through the community radio station, SEWA Academy has reached out to the communities very effectively and efficiently, enabling them to build the capacities of women, making them realise their potentials as active agents of change in their villages. Indeed community radio proves to be a powerful tool towards the empowerment of women, particularly the women labourers SEWA closely work with. ♦

*For 24 years, **Namrata Bali** has organised urban and rural women into handicraft cooperatives in Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) where she now serves as its Director and also is the Treasurer. She was the Secretary of SEWA from 2001 to 2003 and General Secretary of SEWA from 2003 to 2005.*

