

Nabanna: gender, grassroots & ICTs

Suryatirtha Ray

(suryatirtha@vsnl.com)

Overview

Poor women of Baduria, a rural region in the Indian state of West Bengal, are building a local information network by integrating ICTs into their communicative ecology. The information network is called Nabanna, and the facilitating agency is Change Initiatives, a Kolkata-based NGO.

In Nabanna, the women are assimilating a wide array of ICT tools with traditional media to detect innovation in information use. The media for interaction, thus, not only involves a specially developed web browser but also human interfaces that are allowing uneducated women to become part of the electronic network. Further, to ensure efficient circulation of content, a community tabloid is published monthly.

Nabanna came into operation in early 2003 with the support of UNESCO. It is being undertaken in phases encompassing ICT training, information use and information sharing. The aim is to have a web-based information system among poor rural women, governments, private sector and research institutes.

Background

Women in rural and semi-rural areas do not have any structured information network or access centres, to collect information and acquire knowledge, and use it to cross the barrier of poverty. Nabanna is about women building a community network that facilitates local information and communication with the ultimate goal of reducing poverty.

Nabanna is a Bengali word literally meaning *first rice*. Rice is more than a staple in Bengal – it tends to symbolise agriculture and food. ‘Nabanna’ is also the name of a

festival that occurs when rice is harvested in November. Like many resources, rice is at times out of the reach for some people. Nabanna's vision is to energise the community in Baduria by empowering the poor women to organise and use – to 'harvest' - information.

The network covers six regions in Baduria Block and Baduria Municipality: Jagannathpur, Taragunia, Arbelia, Baduria and Rudrapur. Located around 65 kilometres from Kolkata, the regions possess separate ethno-cultural identities. The Change Initiatives Research Team believed this will provide a 'fertile' basis of information sharing.

Work around Nabanna is centred around two ICT centres. One centre is located in Jagannathpur and the other is located in Arbelia. The Jagannathpur ICT centre has three desktops, three dot-matrix printers and a telephone. The Arbelia centre has three desktops and three dot-matrix printers. Laptops and Pocket PCs are extensively used, as these allow Nabanna to reach out to the poor women who cannot afford to visit the ICT centres.

The browser for the project is eNRICH, a software developed jointly by the Government of India's National Informatics Centre and UNESCO. Operating in local language (Bangla), eNRICH is a web-based solution for community knowledge management adapted to the needs and circumstances of the poor.

Content work relates to health, livelihood and education. The Change Initiatives team has developed an evolving and dynamic approach to content creation by researching context of information use and incorporating observations in subsequent content creation work.

Description: Embedding ICTs

Nabanna has been guided by the idea that technological interventions should be integrated into social networks and structures, and should be locally suitable, owned and operated.

For this reason the approach has been to introduce technology gradually and in step with the local communication environment .

The project's first phase, for a year, focused on computer training and in an extensive needs assessment survey. The ongoing second phase revolves around building communication models that will allow even the uneducated access to ICT contents.

In the first phase about 45 poor women learned knowledge management basics. They learnt applications like MS-Paint and MS-Office. The poor women were taught computers for free; in return they undertook a voluntary service within the community. They organized groups of uneducated, poor women, which formed the basis of Change Initiatives' participatory information networking (PIN) model. These groups were called information groups, and the model allowed these uneducated women access to ICT contents.

The model was tested through an information modules on health, livelihood and women's rights. For instance, in the case of anemia, the process went as follows:

- The contents of the module was obtained from a Unicef booklet.
- First the entire anemia booklet was scanned by the trainers and inserted into eNRICH as a Power Point document.
- The computer trainers read the contents, copied them down and informed their information group members about anemia contents.
- The information group members then asked questions on anemia
- The trainers inputted these questions into eNRICH

- The local government doctor came to the ICT centre, saw the questions on eNRICH and provided the answers
- The direct beneficiaries took the answers to their information group members
- They also inputted the answers into eNRICH. So there was a list of Q and As on anemia which the community could use for future reference.
- Finally, the women came out with a newsletter on anemia.

Work on PIN was undertaken in the second phase.

Research methodology:

The focal point of Nabanna was research. As a facilitating agency, Change Initiatives main role has been to provide research solutions to the poor women as they went about working on the ICT-enabled local information network.

Under UNESCO's aegis, a research team comprising representatives of London School of Economics and Queensland University of Technology has developed an Ethnographic Action Research methodology (EAR) which is the central platform for the project.

The ethnographic action research approach is based on combining two research approaches: ethnography and action research. Ethnography is a research approach that has been traditionally been used to understand different cultures. Action research is used to bring about new activities through new understanding of situations. We use ethnography to guide the research process, while we use action research to link the research back to the project's plans and activities.

Focusing on both qualitative and quantitative changes, the following tools were used for conducting ethnographic research:

- Questionnaire-based sample surveys
- Observation and participant observation
- Field notes
- In-depth interviews
- Group interviews
- Workshops, brainstorming and information sharing sessions
- ICT/Media content analysis
- Documentary materials — published statistics, reports , media coverage and so on.
- Diary writing
- Mind mapping

For Nabanna, Change Initiatives had developed a novel participatory rural appraisal tool (PRA). We have asked the trainees to maintain diaries on their lives. The diaries were an effective tool for needs assessment, in addition to being a vehicle for self-expression since the contents were published in our newsletters. Besides the diary writings inculcated a research mentality into our candidates, enabling them to effectively note important points when they got into informal discussions with community women.

An excerpt from a diary is given below:

Today is Thursday, the 6th of March. In the morning I went outside, brushing my teeth. This is my old habit and I do it everyday since the road is just besides my house. But today while I was doing my routine job, I heard that a boy in our locality had got married. I was very excited by the news. I love to see new brides. Thus I decided that I must go and see her. But since it was not possible immediately I sat down to study. However my mind was not in my studies, it constantly went back to that new bride, who would now appear any moment. Then finally the news came that the new bride has come.

I immediately ran to see her. When I reached there some people had already gathered to see the new bride. But surprisingly the countenance of few present there showed that they were disappointed. The reason I discovered was because the bride's complexion was dark! However, to me she was quite pretty and I vehemently disagreed with our neighbours' opinion. I also felt sorry for the girl, since it was not her fault. Neither was it her parents'. It forced me to think that is being dark a curse in the society?

If everybody demands fair brides then what will happen to the girls who are not? I can definitely state that the fair one's are given importance because of the presence of the dark one's. Why can not people think that we are firstly humans and being fair or dark is something very insignificant. A glass of water tastes the same always, no matter weather fair hands or dark hands give it. But we humans refuse to realise the deep philosophies of life.

Is this god's injustice? Where are you my lord? Can't you create everybody alike so that discriminations would not exist at all? Have we to bear with this again and again? Answer me almighty! But where is God? Who'll listen to me? I know we have to live with these humiliations.

Impact assessment:

Phase 1:

In the first phase a sense of personal empowerment was installed among the beneficiaries by just ensuring greater access to and use of ICTs. We find that our beneficiaries can raise their voice within their family; are respected by their husbands, in-laws, parents and other family members; are considered knowledgeable persons in their community (since they learn computers); have become more creative after learning programmes like Paintbrush in WindowsXP. Many of them said that by learning computers, they will be able to approach the job market with greater confidence.

Over and above this, is the emergence of solidarity that resulted through the correct perception of the ICT centres being spaces reserved exclusively for women. While

learning computers, our beneficiaries often discuss their problems, creating a sense of unity among them and also bringing forth the leadership qualities in them. Solidarity outcomes have also been noticed in our review of information group meetings.

In the second phase, Nabanna learning modules led to entitlements for the members. The launch of the anemia module to test the PIN model revealed ignorance about the disease. From the module, Nabanna members not only learned about the disease, they also got to know that the local government offers a free iron pill. Many of the Nabanna beneficiaries then approached the local government to get the pill.

After the dowry module was launched, the Nabanna members decided to organise a workshop with the police and local lawyers. The workshop is slated to be held soon.

Information module impact:

An information module on livelihood was launched in April of this year.

On getting the information, 15 women from Arbelia created a sample of their needle work and handed it over to the Nabanna information coordinator.

Nabanna showed the samples to potential entrepreneurs and got the first order for embroidery in sarees (Indian wear). The order was small in size, and the work was distributed on first come first serve basis.

Very interestingly the information spread all over the village and the women who were not interested in this also came to observe how the program would be conducted.

This is for the first time they fixed up price for their work and maintained a proper database of how the work is done. Two young Nabanna group members played a leadership role in successful implementation of the initiative.

As soon as their work was shown to outsiders they started getting more orders. At this moment the quantity of work is very limited but slowly this would grow as it gets more and more organized.

In most cases information on livelihood does not flow in the community like other information. Everyone feels more people get the information would lead to less work. But in the case of Nabanna the other IGs who did not have the initiative to do such activity started showing interest and did realize each information has its own power.

Media Mixes:

During its work on information modules, Nabanna experimented with different media tools to reach the community at large.

The women combined a mix of print media, handhelds, laptop, PCs and oral discourse to produce a single communication solution for the community.

The single communication solution is being alpha-tested in Nabanna. So far we have in principle integrated print media, handhelds, laptop and oral discourse into a single entity. The efficiency of this communication solution needs to be tested through the launch of more information modules. Also the solution can be expanded by incorporating cellular phones which can be a mobile internet hub.

The process works as follows: detailed content is inputted at the ICT center in PCs. A synopsis of the content, the laptop and handheld is taken to the community meetings. The content is taken up for oral discussion, followed by a film show on laptop. Audience queries are recorded in the handhelds. The queries are embedded in the main information module that is in the PCs at the ICT center. The system is re-inforced by the newsletter.

In the course of working on this communication solution, we found the possibility of using the laptop as an ICT hub, with handhelds turning into access hubs, and connectivity being made through mobile phones. There are two reasons why the concept needs to be explored: mobile ICT devices that are battery operated and rechargeable can be an answer to the power problems of India; secondly prices of hardware devices are falling rapidly in India.

Conclusions: Sustainability & The Road Ahead

Nabanna's search for formats and procedures in information use and information sharing is a research endeavour. Sustainability solutions are also an outcome of research. Ethnographic Action research till now have thrown sustainability solutions that have been implemented in the project.

The approach is to make the operations of the two ICT centers sustainable, while pursuing research on information use. Nabanna has adopted a two-pronged strategy to this end: a group of women have been allowed to ICT centers who receive only training but for a fee. Secondly, the women are transforming the centres into ICT enterprises. They are taking training in DTP and have already bagged a order for execution.

In the long run, we expect the project to derive its strength from the substantial number of participations that are ensured by electronic networking and from efficient interactive procedures that are facilitated by electronic documentation. Specifically:

- The coming together in virtual space of remote rural communities to

exchange their experiences will serve as an empowerment tool to demand greater access to economic, social and cultural resources

- Documentation in electronic format — with its attendant search, archival and retrieval capabilities — will enable better focusing on resources, production and people. Rural woman will be in a better position to assess their needs and formulate their responses

- A real-time interactive platform among poor women, decision makers (governments and corporates) and learning institutes will lead to formulation of more inclusive and transparent strategies in relation to development and growth

- An online learning network among poor women, learning institutes, governments and corporates will improve knowledge base and vocational skills that will improve decision-making and bargaining power of poor families.

- Greater opportunities for rural woman through training in information management basics