

Gender and Education in Oral Traditions, Culture, and ICTs

Chetan Sharma

Datamation Foundation Charitable Trust, India

Y. R. Maindiratta

Datamation Foundation Charitable Trust, India

INTRODUCTION

Seelampur, situated in the northeastern part of Delhi, the capital city of India, is characterized by low-income groups, high population density and poor civic amenities. It is a Muslim-dominated area with a high density of population and low family incomes. The average monthly family income is about 60-80 United States (U.S.) dollars, and the average family consists of eight members. Within Seelampur, the area of Zaffarabad (having approximately 90% Muslim population) stands out as a pocket of extreme urban poverty and immensely poor living conditions; open drains are clogged with sewage, power breakdowns are frequent, houses are dilapidated and people are residing in overcrowded lanes. Lack of opportunities in terms of education and employment also mark the life for people here. Formal education has become quite common, and thus, enrolment is high, but dropping out at different grades is a continuing problem. Most young women have not completed high school, as they usually drop out of the school after finishing

Grade 8. Datamation Foundation initiated some work in the area, particularly with women, in 2002. At this time, UNESCO launched a pilot initiative to innovate and research social and technological strategies to put information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the hands of the poor. This seemed a good opportunity in the given context, so an ICT center was set up at Zaffarabad. The initiative seeks to deploy ICTs to address urban poverty and is designed to empower the women of Seelampur.

BACKGROUND

The Cultural Settings

The towering minarets of numerous mosques in the area are indicators of the role played by religion and the clergy in the lives of the community. Traditional customs still play a powerful role, especially with respect to gender. Women are expected to be good housewives, look after their husbands and in-laws, procreate and take care of children and the house. They are not encouraged to move out of the locality independently, and the “Burqa” (veil) system is prevalent. Many other traditional practices are also still adhered to, such as with respect to kinship and arts, handicrafts and learning. It was considered that for the initiative to make inroads into the lives of the women, it may be useful for the ICT center to be located in their midst. Thus, collaboration was formed with the Babool-Uloom Madrasa. It is a Madrasa (a place of religious learning) and Masjid (the place where prayer is offered and is also the center of other religious activities) headed by the Maulana

Figure 1.



(refers to leader of prayer, Muslim caliph). The Babool-Uloom Madrasa is a religious residential school providing learning to about 200 boys from humble backgrounds. While women are not allowed entry into the mosque, they do come to the Maulana for advice. He arbitrates on social disputes and religious matters. Keeping this situation in mind, permission was sought to start the ICT center at the Madrasa, and for this purpose, space was also requested. The factor that played a positive and decisive role was not that the key people viewed ICTs as important but they felt a strong need to create some opportunities for women in the area. Indeed, it was much later that they began to understand the utility of ICTs.

The ICT center provides an open learning center for girls and women. They not only receive training on computers and the Internet, but also obtain information on varied topics. Interactive multimedia content is developed and used to support vocational and life-skills training and provide rights-based information on various areas to poor girls and women. The marginalized women use ICTs to learn marketable skills and build their awareness of health issues, their rights and livelihood opportunities. In contrast, the Madrasa has its own philosophy, where it seems to isolate itself from the outside world and the teachings have little influence of the outside, changing world. For ICTs to establish their appropriateness, an overall evaluation is necessary. In an ideal world, universal access to information would create a global information society, yet the mode of interpretation will depend on the culture and traditions of the people and societies. Yet, the endeavor in community-based interventions has been sensitive to cultural differences, which was also the point of departure for the present initiative. The decision to set up the ICT centre in the annex (one room) of the Madrasa gave it immediate legitimacy. Appreciating the socio-cultural scenario and the importance of the Masjid and Maulana in the lives of the community helped to harmonize that with the technological tools.

In today's information age of globalization, computerization, the Internet and the virtual world, there are fears that the global media is fast promoting a global monoculture that denies diverse socio-cultural realities. It is felt that this process of globaliza-

tion may swamp the not-so-strong cultures. English is the predominant language of the information age. The majority of material on the Internet is from developed and industrialized countries. Thus, there are fears that local cultures would be eroded, so the tendency is to further isolate themselves. The global village is not global for most of the world's poor, not simply because technology is not available to them, but because with or without these technologies the poor are likely to remain marginalized from the benefits of society if they are excluded from the benefits of overall development. Apart from this is the issue of language and content, because of which even if computers may be physically available they may continue to be "out of reach" in crucial ways. Thus, the intervention was located within this fraught relationship between the modern-global and the traditional. There is an interesting contrast between the possibilities of globalized culture that the computer/Internet represents while being at a place that fiercely protects the local culture. What have been the experiences?

HOW THE ICT INTERVENTION HAS ADAPTED TO CULTURAL VALUES

It was felt necessary to embed the project in the community, taking into account existing cultural values. Concrete actions are being taken to preserve the local oral culture and propagate the same. For culture to grow, it must be active, contextual and social. ICTs, such as videos, TV and multi-media computer software that combine text, sound and colorful images, are used to provide media for expression, acting as facilitator. The Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) revealed that women spend a considerable time at home watching soap operas and Hindi movies on television. Seeing the glamorous people on screen, they too are keen to dress well and dance and sing like them. They are also keen to act. The ICT center provided them a platform and an opportunity to express their talents. At the Madrasa, singing is taboo. So the girls sing "Naaths" (odes to God), with their heads covered in reverence. These along with stories, comic skits and plays have been recorded at the ICT center. Technological skills have been acquired in the process of expressing

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