

A magic lantern for the grassroots

Jhumpa Ghosh and TK Omana

Our story takes place over a period of just a few months and describes how two newcomers to the art of video making were introduced to the basics and used it to enrich their work with local communities. Jhumpa Ghosh runs a non-government organisation (NGO) called Change Initiatives in Kolkata in West Bengal and is a specialist in the development of information content for sharing with women's networks. Ms T.K. Omana is the Director of an NGO called RASTA in the Wayanad district of Kerala and works with local rural communities, predominantly tribal women, to improve their lives. The two of us first met in December 2005 under the leaden grey skies of Chatham in England. The occasion was an inception meeting to launch a one-year pilot project, Telesupport, aimed at helping farmers to find solutions to local problems in agriculture and natural resources management.

Telesupport is an initiative supported by the European Union-India Economic Cross Cultural programme and focuses on facilitating the exchange of knowledge between farmers, community groups, research institutes and intermediary organizations. Web-based tools are used to store information and to allow stakeholders to communicate with each other; a range of other media complements these tools. A core element of this knowledge management system is a range of improved practices in agriculture and natural resources management, which have been tried and tested by farmers in their own localities. Needs assessments are carried out at the project sites to identify constraints and information gaps and to match the demand and supply of improved practices. These practices are documented in an interactive on-line database that allows the technologies or methodologies they describe to be continually updated to incorporate user feedback. The database is decentralized to allow local ownership and member organizations to submit their practices and maintain their own website on the system.

A key feature of the Telesupport approach is to use the most appropriate means of communication to deliver the desired messages and to make the relevant information available both on- and off-line. The information stored in the database is mainly textual but improved practices can be illustrated with visual images and audio. Video is of particular interest to us because of the immediacy of the visual image and the flexibility of this form of communication. In our situation, video can be used to document the experiences of local communities; if the communities themselves do this documentation, it can help to empower them by sharing their message and knowledge. The technology is especially useful in areas with low literacy rates. In addition, video can be utilized to make short clips to illustrate how improved practices are carried out. However, video making is a specialist skill that requires time and substantial financial resources. We wish to explore whether the use of video in Telesupport is likely to add significant value to what we are trying to achieve. We are interested in finding out if it is practical for non-specialists to produce high quality video films and how much continuing support is needed from specialists in this field.

A learning experience in Pastapur

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) has developed strong expertise in working with women's groups to help them express themselves through the medium of video. Thus DDS, led by Director P.V. Satheesh, was the natural organization to share these skills with other project partners. The training workshop, coordinated by Satheesh, began with a discussion on the Telesupport project and community filmmaking. The key question was how video would be used in the initiative and an expectation check was done with the participants.

The technical aspects of the course were covered thoroughly in spite of the short time available. Participants were introduced to the basics required for filmmaking, such as how the video camera works and how to handle it, how to record shots and take meaningful pictures. The basics of shots and composition were described, as well as framing, different angles and their meaning, the importance of headroom, nose room and walking room while recording. Lastly, the principles of editing and the use of the computer and proprietary software packages for editing were covered. Practice sessions followed all sections, providing participants with hands-on experience with telling a story through shots, scenes and sequences.

Subhra Saikat Ray, an agricultural graduate working for Change Initiatives, said it was an enriching experience at Pastapur. He said the duration of the workshop was an advantage; the first seven days were on shooting and the last three days were on editing. The period for editing provided a learning experience, as participants were better able to appreciate their weaknesses during the shooting period. The training session gave him the confidence to capture good practices more effectively and helped him realize that videos are an effective way to document research work.

Pushpa's story

Pushpa, a tribal woman aged 26, had her first experience of traveling a long distance from her homeland in Wayanad district. She had never even been on a train before. Initially she was scared and quite worried about the long journey to Pastapur, in the Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, and about the training programme. The area where she lives is cool and humid and she would be spending ten days in a totally new environment that is hot and dry. She did not know any other language other than Malayalam and her own local dialect. So throughout the ten days of the video training workshop, one of her fellow participants from RASTA, Ms. Jithya, did the translation for her, enthusiastically making use of the translation unit and the headphones, which she had just seen on television.

Pushpa was homesick for the first day, as this her first time away from home. Gradually, this feeling disappeared due to the down-home atmosphere and the hospitality shown by the Pastapur villagers and the members of the host organization DDS. Satheesh and his co-workers had shown special care and attention towards her and she came to feel much more comfortable. Moreover, among the DDS community filmmakers, there were village women who, like her, were illiterate. When she saw these women were leaders of the filmmaking unit, she gained self-confidence. And she was also able to make a strong contribution to the practical sessions making

stories related to agriculture, as she has been working in the fields since her childhood. Since she was not familiar with computers, the editing part of the programme was difficult for her. Consequently, the trainers involved her primarily in the filmmaking, confident as they were that she could make interesting videos to reach grassroots levels.

As with Pushpa, Celine of RASTA stated that her confidence in making short films dramatically increased within the ten days of the programme. Celine commented that on the very first day of the training programme she was nervous even just handling the camera, but by the end of the training, she felt as though her dreams had come true.

Following the training, it was harvesting season in Kerala. This provided an opportunity to start making a video and the filming began after only two weeks. With the help of the other participants from Kerala who had attended the video training, Pushpa shot a film in her own village community. The film focused mainly on paddy harvesting and paddy preservation techniques. People in Pushpa's community, especially the elders and even her own peer members, were very proud when they saw her handling the video camera. As a result, she was in high spirits and was pleased to have engaged in this new activity.

Sharing our knowledge in Coochbehar

Coochbehar lies in the foothills of the Himalayas, about 706 kilometres from Kolkata, the principal city of the Indian state of West Bengal and the base for the Telesupport project in West Bengal. The Uttar Banga Krishi Viswavidyalaya (UBKV), or North Bengal Agricultural University, is located in Coochbehar. The university is the hub for five Krishi Vikas Kendras (KVK) of North Bengal. Sponsored by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, the apex agricultural research agency of the Indian government, the mandate of KVKs is to foster closer relationship with farmers and to ensure that agricultural innovations are effectively promoted.

Shubra Saikat Ray of Change Initiatives and Biswajit Talukdar of the UBKV used the knowledge they gained at Pastapur to train five members of the KVKs with different disciplinary backgrounds in the field of agriculture and fisheries. Jhumpa also joined the group and there was a useful mix of agricultural and ICT expertise that facilitated effective documentation of good practices. The main outcome of the training was a video showing a farmer husbanding a neem tree: a leaf is plucked and taken to the research station; next, a technician in the laboratory extracts sap from the plant and prepares a suitable biopesticide formulation, pours it into a sprayer, and hands it over to the farmer for spraying on an eggplant field. The camera rolls on to show more uses of neem, for example, oil, soap, room cleaner, shampoo and many others.

The films, though lacking the finesse of experienced hands, were loaded with enthusiasm, and they hold the seeds for refined work in the future. The UBKVs have a substantial collection of good practices – and now dispose of excellent video equipment to document them. Moreover, the presence of Biswajit in the UBKV will also facilitate some good filmmaking in the future, especially as the university is our

partner for Telesupport in North Bengal. In fact, two professors have already expressed a desire to learn how to make videos.

Learning milestones

Our experiences so far have shown that, given suitable initial training by experts, non-specialists can make videos that communicate information effectively and in an appealing and accessible way. Illiterate tribal women from remote villages and those with a more formal education in agriculture and ICT can learn together and learn from each other. Basic video making skills can then be passed on to others, providing access to stories untold by the established media. The stories are conveyed in the local language, so farmers understand them. Apart from the online form of data storage, the videos can be stored offline at village Knowledge Centers, and replicated on CD. This is important where connectivity is a problem. The main limitation, apart from the cost of the equipment, is the complexity of the editing process, which is time-consuming and requires special software.

The video shots are uploaded in the database and can be viewed by farmers elsewhere in village Telecentres, equipped with computers and Internet connectivity, so that farmers can access the video files online. The videos are prepared in English as well as in the relevant local language, therefore allowing both the international (Telesupport) and Indian network of NGOs and KVKs to share and exchange good practices. These videos can contribute to farmers' knowledge and are an excellent way of communicating good practice to farmers in other regions.

The first video, on the benefits of azolla and how to grow it in an artificial pond, has already been uploaded on the online Telesupport database. This video is just under three minutes in length and is 4 megabytes in size. In addition to the videos on neem and rice harvesting and storage, several others are in preparation and will be used to illustrate good practices. We are confident that they will provide a helpful contribution to our aim of providing local solutions to the problems of farming communities.



The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the European Union - India Economic Cross-Cultural Programme which funded the research and this publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Abstract

This story describes how two newcomers to the art of video making were introduced to the basics and used it to enrich their work with local communities in India. Videos are used to illustrate good practices, providing a helpful contribution to providing local solutions to the problems of farming communities.

About the authors



Jhumpa Ghosh works on development issues in West Bengal. Her particular area of interest is community media, particularly in assimilating traditional forms of communication such as oral discourse and print with ICTs. She is the director of Nabanna, a project that empowered women through ICTs. Nabanna won the Gender & ICT Award 2003 from the Association of Women's Network Supporting Programme and the Global Knowledge

Partnership.

Jhumpa Ghosh Email: changeinitiatives@gmail.com



T.K. Omana is a social worker from Wayanad, one of the most underdeveloped districts of Kerala in south India. She works for the empowerment of rural women, indigenous communities and farmers of the region. She set up the RASTA organisation in 1984. RASTA works on natural resources management, livelihood issues and knowledge management at the grass roots level, with ICT through community-based groups. She was among 1000 women selected worldwide for the nomination of the Nobel peace prize in 2005.

T.K.Omana Email: rasta_k@satyam.net.in