6. Collectives and the Struggle for Diversity

The post-mediatic revolution to come will have to be guided to an unprecedented degree by those minority groups which are still the only ones to have realised the moral risk for humanity of questions such as: the nuclear arms race; world famine; irreversible ecological degradation; mass media pollution of collective subjectivities.

-Felix Guattari as quoted in Gary Genosko: The Promise of Post Media

In January 2015, the social networking site Facebook, introduced a new feature to ring in the New Year. Shah (2015a:1) describes it as the use of a predictive algorithm to remind us of what the past year looked like. He also records that when this feature was first brought in, one could choose as to whether or not one wanted to avail it. But a little later, as he writes, “Facebook transformed from a helpful friend to a nagging aunt and decided to put this summary on the top of our pages, urging us to look at the recap of the year whether we wanted to or not” (Ibid: 2). In this article, Shah is pointing to a noiseless battle we fight almost every day- one related to memory or remembrance. In a time when, as Shah (Ibid: 1) points out, big data and predictive algorithms curate and decide what is important, it can be argued that this battle is a two pronged one. On one hand we try hard to forget some things in the face of sapient technologies, constantly recording and regurgitating our every move (Shah 2015a, 2015b). And on another, there are projects such as Sangam Radio and DDS’s Participatory Video, that do the very opposite. They constantly work to help communities recollect and hold on to their affirmative ways of life against neoliberal forces that threaten to obliterate them.

In continuing with the above point on neoliberal forces, consider Silvia Federici’s (2012) comments in the essay The Unfinished Feminist Revolution. Here, she presses upon us the urgency for “re-opening collective struggles” (Ibid: 193) to transform the nature of reproductive work that women engage in. She (Ibid: 193) writes:

What we need is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to create new forms of cooperation around this work that are outside of the logic of capital and the market. This is not a utopia, but a process already under way in many parts of the world that will certainly expand in the face of the continuing institutional assault on our means of subsistence. Through land takeovers, urban farming, community-supported agriculture, through squats, the creation of various forms of barter, mutual aid, alternative forms of healthcare -to name some of the terrains on which the reorganisation of reproduction is more advanced- a new economy is beginning to emerge that may turn reproductive work from a stifling, discriminating activity into the most liberating and creative ground of experimentation in human relations.

The above resonates with the social movement at DDS. As outlined in previous chapters, DDS and its network of sangams are participants in a similar collective, community-based struggle for agrobiodiversity. They also attempt to redress gender, class, and caste oppression through the movement. In this study, I set out to explore the relationships between communities, their collective memories, and media technologies using the work of DDS as an illustration. Further I attempted to understand how these interactions either dampen or amplify a given community’s capacities in various ways,
particularly for political mobilisation. As argued in Chapter 2, to understand how interactions with things transform our capacities requires us to adopt a non-anthropocentric or non-representational view.

The media today, especially digital/new media and convergent forms of media (like the smart television or Internet radio), and biodiversity conservation are both rooted in the non-linear and the embodied. Our relationships with things such as seeds, trees, ploughs, radio, and cameras etc. capacitate us in different ways, and therefore, such a study cannot emphasise only the human subject. They require, “less monolithic frameworks and formulaic approaches” (Nazarea 2005: 20). It can be akin to Rossiter’s (2012: 48) application of dirt research to the study of cybernetics which, “diagrams the relations of force and transformation operative within ecologies of noise populated by unruly subjects, persistent objects and algorithmic cultures”. In this particular study, they have allowed me to draw patterns between embodied, everyday practices, skills, habits, and rituals and the entities we interact with. Further, to remove the aforementioned anthropocentric bias and adopt a non-representational approach a methodological tool box was drawn from affect studies, material media practice ecology, feminist studies, and ethnoecology. In this chapter, I summarise some of the major arguments of the study, reflect on the process of research conducted as well as point out lines of inquiry for the future.

**Collective Memory, Media Technology, and Political Mobilisation**

The arguments presented in Chapter 3, 4, and 5, along with ethnographic data draw out the complex links between collective memory, media technologies (community media in this case) and political mobilisation (here it is a biodiversity and social justice movement). Some of these are presented as follows. To begin with, Chapter 3 looked closely at the relationship between biodiversity conservation, collective memory, and TEK. The importance of this relationship is best summed up by Nazarea (2006: 318) who states that both local knowledge and cultural (or collective) memory are both important repositories of alternative choices that help cultural and biological diversity flourish. Secondly, such counter cultural memory is vital for people who are historically marginalised as it summons, “…aesthetics, emotions, and imaginations to inspire a swell of pride and a sense of possibility that can effectively counter ‘monocultures of the mind’ or hegemonic knowledge structures that destroy diversity by dismissing local alternatives from consideration” (Ibid: 329).

Work by Ethnoecologists such as Nazarea’s (1996, 2005), Hunn (1999) and Dove (1999) demonstrates that biodiversity conservation that is a way of life, i.e. *in vivo*, needs the building of ‘memory banks’ (Nazarea 1996) as much as they need seed banks. This implies an unearthing of old time, socio-cultural practices with traditional farming methods. We have seen that with DDS’s programmes and festivals, (like the Community Gene Fund, Village Medicinal Commons, the Krishi
Vigyan Kendra etc.) the attempt has been to revive or recreate the past (including but not limited to knowledge, practices and material things/artefacts) in the present. This works to reactivate memories of past affective encounters (Ash 2012). They are evoked through foods, seeds, songs, communal festivals or gatherings etc. For a marginalised community, such memories stand as counter memories to the dominant or official narratives. Revelry, revival and celebration of such alternatives is not just restoration- they also inspire visions of another, better future. This is best exemplified in the Mobile Biodiversity Festival discussed in Chapter 4. In the case of the MBF, the festival helps the community affectively engage with its collective past. It also helps rally and mobilise the community into action for a more dignified future.

Chapters 3 and 4 highlight how collective and counter memories become important resources or instruments in mobilising political affectivities. These arguments would then require us to change our understanding of social movements. As demonstrated in this study, this social movement is embedded in the silent practices of the everyday. These silent forms of resistance and counter memory, Nazarea argues can provide a release from “…the hegemony of blahs that most of us tolerate most of the time” (2005:43). These in her view are as capable of inspiring social movements as any other force. She (Ibid: 43) writes that, “…while social movements can be precipitated by a build-up of a sense of injustice and moral outrage, I believe that they are just as frequently and strongly stimulated by a release from reified boundaries and naturalised latitudes of choice”.

The linkages between biodiversity conservation and collective memories, perhaps more than any other, impressed upon us, the urgent need for a non-anthropocentric approach to the study of our ecologies. It shows how the biospheres we are inserted in shape our capacities and vice-versa. It indicates that our interactions with other entities (human and non-human) have deep implications for the wellbeing of our communities and our planet. A non-representational and non-anthropocentric approach will perhaps help us understand this intricate web of relationships better.

The above arguments and observations were extended to the analysis of the community media initiatives of DDS in Chapter 5. To reiterate, Participatory Video and Sangam Radio are closely linked to the biodiversity movement and daily lives of its ‘prosumers’ and the collective memories of the community. The agricultural seasons, crops and farming methods become an important source for media content. Similarly the folklore, songs, and stories also are important sources for content. Community media has helped build a community archive and has become an important resource for the DDS community. Further, it allows for both the discussion of current news and concerns, as well as engages with the community’s traditional folklore and songs in a sustained manner (especially through Sangam Radio as it broadcasts daily). As Larkin (2007: 78) points out, media technologies and other infrastructures (re)organise our sensory perception, create and sustain conditions of everyday living, as well as give rise to new forms of affectivities and leisure. This way, like other
DDS programmes, the media initiatives provide a means to connect with the past, as well as prime the community to fight for a better future.

At the very beginning of this thesis, I problematised the idea of access in relation to ITCs for development, especially in the Indian context. I argued that a ubiquitous availability of technology or media equipment may not necessarily equal access. To elaborate, recall this example from Chapter 5: The Sangam Radio team uses an English language keyboard to type out Telugu language words, with little to no knowledge of English. This makes us question what true access might really mean. In this particular case, while it can seem like a creative way to negotiate the issue, it also sediments existing hegemonies. It is in this sense that our interactions with media technologies as producers, consumers or prosumers begin to either unravel, sediment or create different relations of power. It is clear at this point, that it is not just the content of media that is important. Shifts in power necessarily relate to structures of participation (including creation, dissemination, and consumption) and material media practices. This is how media technology could be instrumental in political mobilisation as we see in the case of DDS’s community media projects.

To continue, the above projects have helped the DDS community challenge the organised media and culture industry. We note from Chapter 5 that the intense community foci of the two projects help diversify mainstream media to some extent. This is done through what Sundaram (2007) calls *cultures of insubordination* and by blurring the lines between the consumer and producer as pointed out by Karaganis (2007). Further, as DDS and the sangam members themselves explain, video and radio provides them with forms of expression that are not dependent on literacy, allowing them to bypass the obstacles posed by this 'developmental imperative’. Such forms of expression render silenced voices audible again. The ability to voice one’s opinion, dissent, or pleasure is important in projects such as Sangam Radio or participatory video, in processes of content production as well as the media content itself. As Jo Tacchi et. al (2009:575) point out, the idea of gaining a *voice* in such community media projects is vital. They argue that it is this that prevents a slide into a discourse that equates information with communication. Further, they emphasise that weight needs to be given to communication rather than information because information often refers to access but, “communication refers to participation along with the appropriation of communication processes and content” (*Ibid:* 575). Revising our ideas of access and participation in media ecologies are the need of the hour, especially in light of the current Indian government’s proposed project for a ‘Digital India’.

The next section looks briefly at the role of facilitators in social movements such as the one at DDS.

---

1 The ‘Digital India’ project aims to connect all gram panchayats (village self-government organisations) in India with broadband internet as well as increase ‘e-governance’ in these areas. See articles by NDTV (2015) and The Times of India (2015) for more details on the project.
The role of facilitators

Social movements and community based movements like DDS often have local leaders and/or governmental or non-governmental persons/organisations who become important facilitators, moving participants along to achieve their goals. This role is often a very challenging one, calling into question the facilitator’s socio-cultural position in the community and how they might influence the internal power dynamics of the movement. While I have pointed out the role different facilitators have played within DDS, I provide a quick summary here.

As discussed previously (See Chapter 3), civil society organisations or NGOs have often worked to build bridges or mediate interactions between various other stakeholders and the groups participating in collective action. This mediation happens through myriad tasks, ranging from building public relations, fund raising, planning protest meetings, and capacity building to simply rallying the masses. Many administrative staff, board members, field officers, programme managers, and group supervisors immerse themselves in the community or social group to varying extents, thus shaping an organisation’s internal dynamics in many ways. Their participation ranges from living with the social group they work with to working day jobs in the liaison office located in the city. DDS is no exception to this.

As established through ethnographic examples in preceding chapters, an effort to make the sangams as autonomous as possible continues. However, the staff and board members of the organisation currently weigh in on crucial decisions. This is complicated by the fact that in an organisation working towards the empowerment of Dalit women, many people occupying key administrative positions happen to be upper caste Hindu and/or men. This is not meant in any way to belittle the contributions of these members, but merely to point to the fact that any kind of facilitation (even in the case of participatory/action research) is messy and difficult. Change however, especially change requiring collective action needs engagement, and needs facilitators to come to the party\(^2\) as it were. In the next section I outline the limitations of this research and some possible lines of inquiry for future exploration.

Reflections, Limitation and Future Lines of Enquiry

Some Reflections on this Research and its Limitations. Building a rapport and trust as part of an ethnographic study in an ethical manner it is known, is a challenge. In my research experience with the DDS and its sangams, some of this was easy and at some junctures, challenging. As pointed out in

\(^2\) I thank Dr. Sara Kindon of the Victoria University of Wellington and Dr. Toni Bruce of the University of Auckland for their suggestion on this particular aspect of my study. Feedback from Dr. Bruce on a presentation based on this thesis as well as Dr. Kindon’s workshop titled ‘Navigating Participatory Ethnographies’, both held at the 2014 Contemporary Ethnographies Across Disciplines conference were very insightful.
Chapter 2, knowing the language made connecting with people easy. It luckily (as I learnt from a field officer later) made things easier for the DDS staff as I didn’t need any translator to accompany me to my interviews and meetings. It also helped that I was able to travel on my own, using available public transport on most occasions. These two factors, I was told, put lesser strain on the organisation’s time and resources. In my experience, this was an important factor to reduce the initial resistance that I met. Towards the end, I was able to make a small contribution in the form of translation services for a group of visiting students.

DDS and its sangam network, has in the past decade or so received extensive attention from academicians, scientists and the international community at large. It was challenging in this sense to get past the ‘official’ version of events or answers to what were probably frequently asked questions. Some of this is indeed reflected in the data presented here. However, there have been a few new insights that I was able to gain, due to the scope and timing of my study. Hence, for example, where Pavarala and Malik’s work *Other Voices* (2007) extensively comments on the narrowcasting experiments of Sangam Radio, I was able to understand the changes that came with receiving a broadcasting license. I was also able to understand the changes in how programmes were transmitted to its audience via such broadcasting. Given the time of my visits, I was also able to understand how the Community Media teams (both radio and video) transitioned from analogue to more digital equipment.

In retrospect, there are aspects of this study that could have been improved upon if not for the want of time and resources. For instance, a lot more ethnographic data could have been gathered on the Mobile Biodiversity Festival but for its annual occurrence. In the time I had, it became possible then to visit the festival just once. It also became difficult to track all aspects of it for a single person given its sheer magnitude. Similarly, attending late night sangam meetings was not possible, due to security reasons and the strain on transport facilities during late hours. This could have also provided a much richer data set. It was also a challenging task to balance out the time frame of my study, with the schedule of the DDS and sangam members. Members would be particularly busy during sowing and harvesting seasons. Thus, field visits had to be co-ordinated with these schedules, possibly limiting the number of interactions. Finally, researchers, like facilitators become part of a complex set of dynamics depending on their social identities and positions. I initially felt much hesitation on how my interactions with DDS would pan out, given my upper caste, upper class background. However, where this may have worked to a disadvantage, my gender worked to my advantage. I don’t mean to imply here that one compensated for the other, but merely that as much as there might have been points of strong disconnect there were also points of strong identification and empathy.

Any research, especially one with an intensive field based component, affects one on many different levels. My field experiences have influenced me on a personal level in many ways. I take back from
my time spent with the DDS members a new respect for food, nutrition, the environment and the significant connection women have with it. It matters not only that food got to our dinner table, but it also matters how it got there. For as the quote by Guattari at the beginning of the chapter points out, it is the minority groups that realise what is at risk for humanity, and it is they who will have to be the guides for a post-mediatic revolution. It becomes important, as I point out in my final argument, to celebrate such alternative practices in neoliberal times. In the next section, I briefly draw out lines of inquiry that could be pursued in the future, before I turn to my concluding note.

**Future Lines of Enquiry.** The time I spent working with DDS allowed me access not only into how their media initiatives function on a daily basis, but also gave me a chance to understand how some sangam members viewed other forms of media technology. The youngest member of the Sangam Radio team-Asha, during our interactions would look at how her mobile phone was different from mine. She would come around to ask various questions about its features such as the cameras, music players, and FM radio. In one such conversation, she mentioned that mobile phones are seen by some as a ‘bad influence’ especially on young people (Field Notes, September 2012). According to her some young people use their mobile phones to chat with people of the opposite sex previously unknown to them. These interactions usually occur when their calls are connected with random or incorrect numbers. A friendship is then struck that often evolve into romantic relationships via their phone conversations. I was told that there have been an increasing number of young people in such relationships who have eloped. Such a trend has not gone down well with community. The same view came up in a conversation with another Sangam Radio member Sunitha on a separate occasion (Field Notes, November 2012).

I noted that similar opinions, as above, were expressed towards television shows, mainly Telugu language soap operas, and commercial or mainstream films. Sunitha narrated an anecdote of a woman she knew, who faced marital strife because of her ‘addiction to television serials’ (Interview with Sunitha, September 2012). Commercial films are also often viewed as having a ‘bad influence’ on the way youngster, especially young women dress and behave (Field Notes, August 2012). It is interesting to note from all of these conversations that some media technologies are seen as empowering while others stand in stark contrast to them. Here, Radio and Participatory video hence become important tools of democratisation and giving the community a voice. Others such as television, commercial films, and mobile phones evoke a morality based judgement— a ‘bad’ influence, so to say. This clearly is a reflection on how various media technologies influence the expression and regulation of desire and sexuality, especially of women and young people. This is a line of enquiry that lay outside the scope of this project, but is one that could be pursued further, especially on the relationship between mobile phones and the regulation of young people’s sexuality.
A Final Note

As a final point, I return here to the incident at Sangam Radio mentioned in Chapter 5. Over ten years of producing radio content, the station has built a budding archive of regional folk songs. To recall, this has become a coveted resource, with a Telugu language television channel even pressuring Sangam Radio to share this archive. The station however refused to give in, not wanting to part with its community’s traditional resources. While, this is one example, many more such incidents indicate how the DDS community has to constantly struggle with value placed on its cultural resources and artefacts. They actively resist its co-option by larger commercial enterprises in every programme-be it community media, seed banks or community grain funds.

This pursuit of ‘value’ and commercialisation under the neoliberal turn has led to bringing everything under the logic of the market. This also means a loss of diversity and large-scale homogenisation in all dimensions of life (public and private), as has been shown here. In a milieu where spaces for public engagement and expression are increasingly being controlled, shut down or hollowed out, it becomes important to preserve alternative practices like those of DDS. In view of this, Wendy Brown’s (2015) argument for the urgency in seeing neoliberalism as not just an economic doctrine but as a ‘governing rationality’ is relevant here. It relates to the aforementioned idea of value. In her view, when this governing rationality becomes ascendant, it extends, “a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (Ibid: 30). To clarify, this economisation does not always mean monetisation. She (Ibid: 31) argues that the neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all spheres of life, even where money is not an issue. Ultimately, Brown (Ibid: 31) argues it, “…configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only and everywhere as homo oeonomicus”. This would in turn completely vanquish the political man or homo politicus because this governing rationality would have us preoccupied with, “…enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of its life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors” (Brown 2015: 33-34). It is this that has serious implications for democracy. Democracy, she states requires us to have at least a modest orientation towards self-rule and an understanding that our freedom rests in such self-rule. When this political dimension in us is extinguished she argues that it “…takes with it the necessary energies, practices and culture of democracy, as well as its intelligibility” (Brown and Shenk 2015). To elaborate, Brown (2015: 39) writes:

As neoliberalism wages war on public goods the very idea of public, including citizenship beyond membership, it dramatically thins public life without killing politics. Struggles remain over power, hegemonic values, resources, and future trajectories…Neoliberalism generates a condition of politics absent democratic institutions that would support a democratic public and all that such a public represents at its best: informed
passion, respectful deliberation, aspirational sovereignty, sharp containment of powers that would overrule or undermine it.

Are not these very processes, rather consequences of neoliberalism at play this very moment? The degradation of lands and ways of life in the Zaheerabad region are an illustration of this. But as Wiedemann and Zehle (2012:5) ask, what happens when, like the DDS community, “subjects and objects join in a refusal of roles in the great game of reification”? Most of all how do we refuse to play this game? The answer lies for me, in life affirming practices like that of the DDS community. To clarify these are not perfect, and need to reach the ideals they have set for themselves. However, they provide for us spaces to resist the emptying of public life and nurture diversity and creativity.