This thesis is an attempt to explore the links between community media, collective memory, and political mobilisation. The study of these links between memory, media technologies, and biodiversity can help underline the serious implications they have for history, knowledge, political mobilisation, and processes of identity. In the context of Indian, there has been an explosion in the past twenty to twenty five years of ‘e-solutions’ to ‘solve’ issues related to health, education, and poverty in India. Various Government organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations, and collaborative efforts between the state and civil society organisations or business corporations have introduced various Information and Communication Technology projects, especially in rural areas and amongst the urban poor to induce ‘development’. In a rather alarming echo of a Lerner-isque (1958) notion of progress, a ‘trickling down of technology’ continues to be hailed as an answer. Its enthusiastic cheer-leaders continue to state that it is only a matter of making it more accessible to empower users. However, past experiences have also taught us that while access to technology can enable its users, it always occurs in contexts layered with relations of power. It follows, that an introduction of media technologies tends to reconfigure these relations of power- some in subtle ways and others in more overt ways. In consideration of the above propositions, it might be useful to understand how the concept of ‘access’ might have translated on the ground. How are the capacities of the community interacting with these different media-technologies “amplified” (Ash 2012) or dampened? Further, we need to explore how they might have complicated existing relations of powers (e.g. those of gender, caste, and class relations) or introduced new ones.

Taking community media projects (Community Radio and Participatory Video) based in rural Telangana for illustrations, this study attempts to understand how these media projects become a way for the community to engage with their collective memory on a daily basis. Located in Medak district and started in the 1980s, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) works with Dalit women involved in agriculture. The women are federated into village level self-help groups or Sangams across seventy five villages in the area. Further, their community media are important nodes in a larger Agro-Biodiversity movement underway in the community. They have been fighting for about three decades to reverse large- scale environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity in the region due to extensive use of genetically modified crops, the Green Revolution, and chemical based agriculture. With women in the community taking up leadership roles at the grassroots, the movement addresses gender issues alongside caste and class issues. The organisation believes that this has gone on to help
the community increase food security and sovereignty in the region. Further, the community media initiatives have helped its members voice their issues and take control of media technology and thwart the dominant media practices (both in terms of production and consumption). Given the community’s strong role within the biodiversity movement, this study remains incomplete without looking at the relationship between counter memory, traditional environmental knowledge, and the biodiversity movement. Hence, the focus here is on the links between media, memory, and biodiversity.

In some studies on media and collective memory, the object is posited as a signifier, a symbol, or a text/narrative that has implications for our subjectivities and how we make sense of the world around us. This tends to place privilege on the (human) subject and her/his consciousness, giving them an anthropocentric bias. However, to understand how interactions with media technologies capacitate us in different ways, I argue that we need a reorientation in our approach. An interest in how our interactions with things shape our capacities and influence our practices or habits brings to the fore two things. One is the relationship or the relational and the Spinozian notion of the “power to affect and be affected” (Massumi and McKim 2009:1). Thus, it allows one to move away from the aforementioned anthropocentric bias, by underscoring things and the embodied. These embodied habits, practices, and rituals then become the (data) pegs for the various arguments in this study, making them part of a non-representational approach (as opposed to a representational approach).

There is a need in this case, for the chosen set of research tools, to capture the green, the concrete, the seed, the habits, the songs, and stories in their entirety. Keeping in line with this, I extend ideas and tools from Ethnoecology, Affect Theory, Ecofeminism, Cyber Cultures, Memory Studies, and Critical Ethnography to this case.

Extending ideas from Ethnoecology, this thesis analyses various programmes of DDS to argue that they attempt to revive various agricultural and cultural practices of the community’s past. DDS’s biodiversity conservation efforts are conservation in vivo or a way of life. This implies that the revival of seeds is as important as the revival of the stories and cultural practices connected to it. At the same time, this revival is not a blind revival of the past. Attempts are made, with varying degrees of success, to reconfigure the relations of power within the community. Thus, for example, DDS seedbanks centres the Dalit women as village seed keepers, as opposed to the village Patel who traditionally occupies that role. Further, the analysis of DDS programmes is linked to arguments on the micro-finance movement, collective-counter memory, and ecofeminism.

Another important point of analysis is the colourful Mobile Biodiversity Festival of DDS. I connect this event to the debates on mnemonic practices and collective memory. The festival can be seen as a means to mobilise people, readying them for political action. It is argued here that the collective memory of this region becomes a resource for the larger environmental and anti-globalisation movements underway. Secondly, it looks at collective memory as a site of struggle and resistance
against the oppression faced by this community. The section on the Community Media Trust (CMT) of DDS focuses on some of the films by the Participatory Video team and the Sangam Radio programmes. It takes a critical look at the power relations at work in the daily running and creation of media content. It also outlines how closely connected the media initiatives are to the collective memory of the community, as well as their daily lives. For instance, the songs and stories of the community are a vital feature in Community Media content (particularly Sangam Radio). Close attention is paid to the way the Sangam Radio team interacts with the radio equipment and technology at hand to map material media practices within the CMT. In conclusion, I propose that the CMT and Sangam Radio can be understood in the light of Guattari’s concept of Free Radio and Post Media (as cited in Goddard 2013, Genosko 2013).

Presented in the conclusion is a summary of arguments together with some broad, interconnected themes. Included also are some reflections on the data collection process and some lines of inquiry for further exploration. Finally I argue for why non-anthropocentric approaches as well as movements such as the ones at DDS become important in the face of neoliberalism.

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