

## First female Dalit radio makes waves

*Roli Srivastava /TNN*

Hyderabad: Algole Narsamma makes for an unusual reporter. Every morning at 10, she starts her journey to various villages in search of stories that are neither breaking news nor juicy snippets that sell. But the 25-year-old mother of two says she is always sure her reports strike a chord with listeners every time they are aired.

Algole is a producer at 90.4 FM, the radio channel started "by Dalit women, for Dalit women". It's making waves not only in her village, Machnoor, but nationally. Algole's reports on farming tools, and folk songs are a hit in Zaheerabad, where most women her caste toil in the fields. The audience base has been expanding in the 11 days the channel has existed. Many listeners are even buying FM-enabled cellphones to catch the station.

About 70 villages in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh have been tuning into India's first female Dalit community radio. Every night at 8, the channel airs a one-and-a-half hour package of local news and views, tidbits on herbal medicines for animals and folk songs and stories.

This all-woman, all-Dalit Sangham (community) radio station, which boasts the signature tune, 'akka chillelu kudi podame (come sisters, let us go to the sangham radio)', is seen as the first 'audible' voice of the state's Dalit women. Algole claims the station "represents" over 5,000 women. Her studio partner General Narsamma doubles as reporter and jockey. She has studied to Class 10 and is adept at the computer, editing programmes before they are aired.

The station is an initiative of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO that works with 100 groups of the poorest Dalit women. "They still earn Rs 10-15 for six to eight hours of work," says DDS director PV Satheesh. The low incomes are a reflection of Zaheerabad's poor land, which offers limited livelihood opportunities in agriculture. There is hardly any industrialization, and development plans do not reach the targeted populations. This is why Kancha Ilaiah, one of the state's best known campaigners on Dalit issues, is elated at the news. He says the radio can even generate new struggles. For instance, domestic abuse is no longer news but if they air a case of the wife resisting her husband's violence, women will be empowered.

The station has already received a congratulatory note from the upper-caste sarpanch. But the best feedback so far is from those it's meant to serve. One listener asked if her children could work as reporters. Another felt proud to be interviewed by the radio. "I always heard others," she said. "Now I hear my voice, my views. I too will be recognized some day."

Satheesh and others point out that the radio station was possible because Dalit women in the area are used to working outside the home. "Most women who joined self-help groups were Dalit. Their mobility was never a problem," says P Prasanthi, programme director of the AP Mahila Samatha Society, a part of the government's Mahila Samakhya Programme. She may have a point. Sixteen women have already volunteered to get stories for the radio station.



Algotle Narsamma interviews a daily wage farm worker for 90.4 FM