



The Mobile Vaani Manifesto: 2019

Mission

The Mobile Vaani mission is to challenge socio-economic ideologies and norms that are responsible for the reproduction of all forms of inequality, by providing a community media technology platform along with services or guidance on the operation of the platform, to achieve the goal.

The forms of inequality we are most concerned about include wealth and income inequality, gender-based inequality, and caste-based inequality. These inequalities are reproduced by socio-economic ideologies and norms such as neo-liberal economics, patriarchy, caste hierarchies of work, and vestiges of feudalism¹. These inequalities in turn manifest themselves in creating gaps in education, health, nutrition, access to information, and in general in allowing people to realize their capabilities and live fulfilling lives.

Our belief is that policies specifically targeting equality can rein-in the underlying norms and ideologies, but in a democratic setup these policies need to be demanded by the people. People will only demand good policies once they are able to understand the processes behind the reproduction of different inequalities. Arriving at this shared understanding requires communication between people and demonstration through action. Mobile Vaani aims to enable this communication and facilitate action through a community media platform that meets the following properties:

- It should be equitably accessible to people despite existing inequalities in which they are caught
- It should enable building a shared understanding among people of matters of concern
- It should facilitate action by leveraging the power of media to demand better models of change

Mobile Vaani meets these properties in the following ways. First, the voice-based nature of the medium, and free of cost to access, allows a wide range of people to utilize it. Technology access to phones, and basic mobile literacy to operate the platform, are still important prerequisites though, and pro-active approaches are needed to ensure that access is not impeded due to a lack of these capabilities. Second, Mobile Vaani advocates editorial policies that enhance the context, completeness, and credibility of information on the platform. These properties have been validated to improve the understanding of people about messages floated on the platform by making the messages more contextual through contributions by other people, more complete by creating a culture that encourages diversity and debate of viewpoints from different stakeholders, and more credible by ensuring factual correctness of information published on the platform. Such a conversational approach to discussing topics helps build a shared understanding among people. Third, Mobile Vaani provides features to publish selective information on the web, social media, forward it to officials, run pledges, coordinate social movements, etc, to draw the attention of different stakeholders to important issues and bring about action which can encourage more people to participate.

We invite individuals or organizations or collectives with similar views to set up their own groups on the Mobile Vaani platform, and use it to enable strategic communication among their members.

Why Mobile Vaani

Why not use other online platforms like Facebook or Whatsapp? The fundamental design of these platforms is broken to support the properties that we have listed above. For example:

- The editorial algorithms of Facebook are geared towards sharpening echo chambers, there is no focus on fostering a diversity of views or even acknowledging to have diversity as a feature in the ranking of content in its news feeds



- Moderation on Facebook is governed by “community standards” but these standards are not defined by the communities themselves. Rather the effort is towards centralized codification of standards for different countries or religions or other broad categorical definitions, which is unlikely to succeed because of its complexity, and the control rests in the hands of Facebook in terms of whatever it believes to be acceptable or non-acceptable expressions
- Appropriate tools and authority is not given to users or group administrators to shape the usage norms for their groups. The simple tools that Facebook provides for users to anonymously report on each other, run into many problems, such as people not confronting one another in the open for a healthy debate, which ultimately leads to broken conversations that are not able to shape norms or bring consensus

Mobile Vaani on the other hand provides a rich moderation and content management backend to group administrators, to shape usage norms and define their own editorial policies. Training can also be provided on editorial policies advocated by Mobile Vaani itself, to create diversity and debate on topics of relevance to a group, maintain norms for the tone of argument to encourage mutual respect for different viewpoints, and ensure that a handful of users are not able to misappropriate the platform for their vested interests.

The use of personal data by Facebook is also controversial, it uses the data to be able to predict actions of users and of groups, to be able to benefit from these predictions. Mobile Vaani on the other hand does not even require users to register on the platform and it does not collect any personal details. Even on content contributed on the platform, groups are free to shape practices of whether or not users should reveal their identity when recording messages on the platform.

Whatsapp is not as insidious as Facebook in its use of data, in fact they do not have much data at all. The design however allows people to hide behind the veil of anonymity and untraceability to misuse the platform. Limits on the group size, and minimal methods for group administrators or users to enforce usage norms, thus leaves it open to misuse.

Twitter is more open than Whatsapp in terms of the observability of actions of people that it allows, which encourages a stronger culture debate by making echo chambers visible and enabling cross-chamber debate, but the very open and unmoderated design leads to users not having any control to establish usage norms. Like Facebook, Twitter too does not impose any value principles of its own, such as an emphasis on diversity.

Platforms such as Slashdot and Reddit are more similar to Mobile Vaani in terms of giving sufficient tools for users to shape usage norms, and consequently both have been successful in avoiding misuse of the sort as seen on Facebook. However, the voice-based medium of Mobile Vaani makes it a more appropriate medium for collectivizing low-income and marginalized users in India.

How is Mobile Vaani sustained

Mobile Vaani sustains itself through service fees from primarily non-profit organizations to use the platform for different development objectives. Organizations leverage Mobile Vaani to create awareness and behavior change on aspects such as health and nutrition, agricultural practices, child education and career counseling, etc, within their specific groups. Slight profits made on these services are used to fund several non-paying groups, such as approximately 20 groups in rural areas of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh that work on improving local governance and educating people on policies for growth and development.

Current activities on Mobile Vaani

Over 40 groups are operating on Mobile Vaani, to bring about change on topics of working conditions in factories, provisioning of welfare schemes and public services, health and nutrition of mothers and small children, financial inclusion of women, sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents, employment



opportunities for physically disabled people, career counseling of youth, agricultural advisory for farmers, and the treatment of migrants in cities, among others. Content of wider relevance is often cross-published across multiple groups. In all the groups, the foundational discussion-based methodology of Mobile Vaani is used to build a better understanding of the users through the editorial policies of enhancing context, completeness, and credibility of information. The media function of making information publicly available is actively utilized to bring about action on individual and community level grievances by putting pressure on authorities to pay attention to the reported issues. Users have reported that significant learning happens through these processes and builds their agency for further action.

If you are interested to participate in any of the existing groups and want to bring your own members to it, then download the Mobile Vaani app or ask us for the IVR phone numbers.

Alternately, if you are keen to set up your group then let us know. App-based groups can be created at no cost, IVR groups and any other services such as content creation and moderation can be provided for a fees.

To download the app: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.gramvaani.mobilevaani&hl=en_IN

To try the IVRs, give a missed call to these numbers and you will get a call back:

Saajha Manch, on rights of industrial workers in Delhi NCR	9211153555
Meri Avaaz Meri Pehchaan, on gender empowerment of rural women in Nalanda	9266614000
Hamari Vaani, on jobs and support for people with physical disabilities	9266344222
Kahi Ankahi Baatein, on sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents	9266292662
JEEViKA Mobile Vaani, on livelihood generation for Self Help Group members	9250200111
IVR of district clubs, on local news and governance improvement	
Ghazipur, UP	9266300111
Madhubani, Bihar	9250300111
Jamui, Bihar	9266066111
Munger, Bihar	9278701369
Bokaro, Jharkhand	9266653111
Dhanbad, Jharkhand	9266673444
Shibpuri, MP	9266613222

¹ The neo-liberal ideology of competitive and free-market based economic growth is able to benefit from various inequalities and perpetuate them. Greater concentration of wealth gives the capitalist class greater power to mould policies in its favour for continued exploitation of the workers, and reproduces income and wealth inequality. Gender and caste-based divisions are similarly exploited in the neo-liberal system to create fragmentation and work differentiation, making it harder for workers to unite and overcome these inequalities.

Social norms of patriarchy are exercised to withhold girls and women from economic independence, or have equal access to better health and education opportunities, thus perpetuating gender-based inequality.

Feudal practices of dependency on local elite continue to persist in the form of loan arrangements and sharecropping in rural areas, they are facilitated by caste-based work hierarchies, and relentlessly perpetuate wealth and income inequalities. Formalization of these arrangements by expanding markets for neo-liberal practices only changes the methods of exploitation but doesn't overcome the inequalities.

Social norms of caste-based work hierarchies facilitate many of the processes above, and continue to reinforce caste-based and other inequalities.