

The Centre for Internet and Society
in Association with
Mitra Jyothi



Girls in ICT Day
25th April 2013
an initiative of the ITU

Report

The International Girls in ICT Day is an initiative backed by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and their member states to create a global environment that empowers and encourages girls and young women to consider careers and actions in the growing field of information and communication technologies (ICTs). International Girls in ICT Day is celebrated on the 4th Thursday in April every year since 2010. This year the CIS, having recently become a sector member of ITU-D, hosted a Bangalore Girls in ICT Day on the 25th of April at the Mitra Jyothi trust, which uses information and communication technologies to empower the visually impaired and help them integrate into mainstream society. As ICTs are an important tool for personal empowerment, it was in the CIS and ITUs interest to include people with disabilities on Girls in ICT Day and hence holding the event at a centre which inspires people



Ms Madhu Singhal, founder of Mitra Jyothi welcomes Nirmita Narasimhan and Dr. U.B. Pavanaja of the CIS

with visual impairments was an important step towards including girls in the ICT sector in India, where according to a Times of India article, resides the worlds largest blind population¹. Nirmita Narasimhan of the CIS invited Dr. U.B. Pavanaja, a Social Media expert at the CIS, to have a talk, reaching out to the visually impaired girls at Mitra Jyothi and encouraging them to use ICT.

Around 30 to 40 visually impaired girls and boys came to listen to Dr. U.B. Pavanaja explaining the possibilities of using ICT with a visual disability in India. With Kannada being the local language in Karnataka, and hence in Bangalore, the focus was put upon applications available in Kannada and the talk, too, was held in a mix of English and Kannada.



Inauguration song by a member of Mitra Jyothi

After an introductory round, in which the founder and managing trustee Ms Madhu Singhal spoke out her thanks to Nirmita Narasimhan for organizing the event, as well as to Dr. Pavanaja, for taking the time to speak, one of the girls opened the event with an inaugural song.

¹ See Times of India issue Oct. 11th 2007: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-10-11/india/27977420_1_avoidable-blindness-ophthalmologists-eye-diseases



Dr. U.B. Pavanaja

Following that Dr. Pavanaja began his speech with a brief history of font technology, focussing on the problems and incompatibilities the Kannada language faced in the development of new applications for the visually impaired. A short non-representative survey he had made before, left him with the general feeling that girls use ICT mostly to simplify daily procedures like shopping, banking and communicating. Most of the websites mentioned were not accessible to the visually impaired, which explains the reason many members of the audience were unaware of these every day online experiences. He went on to introduce the audience to important apps and gadgets, which make using ICT easier for the visually impaired, some of which are also available in Kannada. This

included GPS bracelets and walking sticks, braille displays and live-scribe Echo pens, as well as apps like Fightback, which can be especially useful for women when confronted with a violent attacker or similar.

As the girls and boys in the audience had little or no experience with digital media and ICT, the talk gave insight on several ways of using ICT, which were previously unknown to the listeners. Several questions included finding the right operating system for the visually impaired, as some already have integrated audio prompt programs, while others require an additional installation. Also, the audience took interest in fonts with which Kannada voice prompts could most easily be implemented. Additionally, the discussion revolved around important ICT accessibility tools, standards and technologies



Attentive listeners at the final Q&A round
such as the importance of Unicode for regional languages, text to speech in Kannada language and available inbuilt and third party screen reading software which come with different mobile phones and operating systems on computers.

The gender balance was more or less equal, although the male members of the audience seemed to participate more in asking questions. This may reflect different attitudes towards ICT according to gender conceptions. However, it is important to remember that the male members of society have to play their part in the path to inclusion, being actors of change in empowering girls and women to use ICT. The exchange was vital and several of the girls stated in the following informal round that the talk had opened them towards using ICT in spite of their visual impairment. As their two-month training in ICT had just started a week earlier, Dr. Pavanaja's talk gave the listeners an opportunity to get to know information technologies, which they would then be able to explore further within their following time of training.

The CIS thanks Mitra Jyothi for the valuable cooperation and will continue to work on inclusion for girls and the visually impaired in ICT, hopefully hosting another successful Girls in ICT Day in 2014.