

Rural India : The Next Frontier for Social Media Networks

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Abstract

This paper establishes the relationship between the rural development in India and the social media networks. The area of rural development in India is as multi-faceted as the country itself and by and large media has affected almost every aspect of rural development. The paper extends the definition of social media networks from just being the social networking sites and micro blogging to other media networks like AIR, news channels and NGOs. Differentiation of modern day media and traditional media has been discussed very closely. The methodology of data collection is based upon the interviews of different people attached to the relevant fields. Various success stories were collected and analyzed. The paper aims to discuss various fields where social media has affected rural people's lives and also of the fields where media has been lacking in its role. This paper concludes that to achieve India Vision 2020, social media networks have to gear up more in rural areas of the country because India cannot shine without its villages shining as well.

Keywords: *Rural development, social media networks, modern media, traditional media, India vision 2020.*

1. Introduction

“The true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its seven hundred thousand villages. If the villages perish, India will perish too.”- M.K. Gandhi

The Indian society is a complex society with multi cultures, multi tribes and castes, multi lingual and the disparities between the urban and rural people. Since the inception of independent India, none can deny the fact that India has developed a lot in almost all the fields leading from infrastructure to public health care, from communication sector to IT field and

much more. This paper aims to find out the relationship between the social media networks and rural India's development and also critically examines why majority of rural India has remained an unexplored area for social media even after 65 years of independence.

Development is not a linear process but a multidimensional exercise. Even the rural India defies any definition. There have been many initiatives by Indian government and also many UN programs have been implemented in Indian villages. Besides that, many private social networks have taken the initiative like various NGOs, news channels, various web sites etc. As observed in many scenarios, development in Asia and Africa is not as systematic as the industrial development in Europe. That's the reason when rural areas of India still face issues like sanitation, public health care etc., social media finds a relevant place. Diverse social and infrastructural needs must be addressed more or less *simultaneously* to ensure a nation's future growth and prosperity. As the paper signifies, Social media has affected all spheres of rural people's lives: right from their livelihood to their healthcare, from traditions to social campaigns etc.

Many people have defined social media networks from time to time. But broadly, most of the people find social media networks synonymous with social networking sites, micro blogging, various internet forums etc. But as per the study of this paper, social media networks' have a broader area of definition. Every media whether it is a radio or a news channel or Ngo or any source which interacts with public at some level, has a social responsibility. This responsibility is very important in nature as it affects the development of the society by large means. Thus, the media cannot shirk from this social responsibility and thus, making all the prominent media networks as the 'social media networks'.

2. Background

At rural level, folk media has a very significant role and place in people's lives. Modern day media still appears alien to the rural people. Folk media mainly includes folk songs, folk dances, folk theatre and other folk performing arts. The first significant international recognition of the traditional media in the communication and the development strategies of developing countries came in 1972 when the International Planned Parenthood Federation and UNESCO organized in London a series of meetings on the integrated use of the folk and the mass media in family planning communication programmers. Every village has its relevant music, dance or theatre. The folk arts cater to the needs to the local people and are in accordance with the changing traditions of the society. Traditional folk forms in India can be effectively used for social developmental communication. The communication potential of Indian traditional performing art has been proved time again and again by many instances of national importance. One can find such examples in every state of India where through awareness is created through folk dances, folk songs or through folk theater. The outcome of various researchers has established the importance of rural media in development communication. Traditional uses of folk media were primarily for entertainment, social communication and persuasive communication. International commission for the study of communication problems, the commission, also popularly known Mac bride Commission, was established by UNESCO to study among issues as increasing importance attached to communication as a social phenomenon and the consequent interest shown in the development communication.

The limiting factor in case of mass media is that it appears glamorous, impersonal and unbelievable to the rural people whereas the traditional media are close to the hearts and minds of the people, so their appeal is at personal and intimate level. Folk media can overcome the language barriers and can appeal to the emotions and thus souls of the rural people.

Today, both the traditional and modern media complement each other. Therefore by keeping traditional media alive, we will not only be able to keep a very strong way of communicating with rural people open but also will be able to preserve the traditions and cultures of various tribes.

3. Methodology

The focus has been made on numerous case studies from various fields where media affects the lives of

rural people. Data was collected from various sources, journals, research papers and also through number of discussions with people from the fields like journalism, social work etc. After closely examining the various case studies, the author has critically examined the social media networks' performance in rural India field wise. The study was based on various case studies and success stories so as to reaffirm the beliefs cited in the introduction section.

4. Findings and Results

After the data collection, following are the case studies which are relevant to the topic of this paper. Each case study portrays various areas where social media network has affected the rural development in a large way.

4.1. All India Radio- Outstanding contribution in rural agriculture

All India Radio has been in rural development since India's independence. There are so many programs being aired which caters to the needs of rural people. The most successful one has been 'Kisan Vani' which informs farmers about day to day market rates, various agriculture techniques, new methods of farming, animal husbandry etc.

Besides that, AIR also has programs for the empowerment of rural women which educate them on family planning, dowry, female feticide, child care etc. AIR (also known as Aakashvani) works hand in hand with Ministries and Departments of agriculture & rural development of central and state governments. Various other issues which are discussed on the programs being broadcasted on AIR include gender issues, importance of proper schooling and child abuse. It won't be a hyperbole to say that All India Radio has served as the ocean of knowledge for rural people in India

4.2. Facebook- A boon to rural farmers

Although many of the Indian villages are deprived of regular supply of electricity and the internet connectivity is still a farfetched dream for the masses but still there are success stories where Facebook, the famous social networking site has helped to make a difference in lives of rural people. As per a report in The Economic Times dated February 10, 2012, it saved many farmers of Maharashtra's Sangli district's farmers from perishing. Due to oversupply of turmeric, prices crashed exorbitantly in the local market. One of the local farmers used Facebook to

connect to other turmeric farmers across the country and discussed the situation and discussed the prices with them. They decided not to participate in the local auction. Using social media, the news spread like a forest fire and 25000 turmeric farmers of Sangli heard of the boycott. The boycott served its purpose as the prices doubled. Earlier, a village sarpanch would sit under a tree and discuss certain issues with villagers before taking a final call. Facebook and Twitter are an extension of this concept." Farmer bodies are quick to point out the advantages of social media.

4.3. Shivnagar- A perfect example exhibiting social media's power

Shivnagar is a village in the northern India. Recently it has changed its name to Snapdeal.com Nagar. There was an interesting and a motivating reason behind it. The website that offers daily discounts, displayed a kind act of social good, by utilizing money for a worthwhile cause. The tiny village was devoid of proper facilities of water and villagers had to walk far as two miles to fetch fresh and clean water. A mere \$5,000 from the CEO's pocket – helped in installing more than 15 hand pumps and changed thousands of life. Just like a simple deals and discounts site mustered efforts to get water to doorsteps of villagers in North India, Social Media holds larger promises for the general community as a whole; all that is required is someone who can act like God.

4.4. NDTV-Toyota Greenathon- A campaign which light thousand of rural lives

NDTV-Toyota Greenathon was launched in April 2008 and it creates a nationwide awareness to save the environment. The GREENATHON is a fund raising event that brings in people to donate money to support TERI's initiative which aims at providing solar power to villages without electricity. In year 1, they raised funds to light up 56 villages and in Greenathon 2, the resulted in 115 villages being provided with solar power. The initiative is greatly supported by celebs like Priyanka Chopra, Shahrukh Khan and Katrina Kaif etc.

5. Discussion

The main reason behind poverty in rural India is the asymmetry in allocation of resources between rural India and urban India. Social media networks have proved to have the potential to become pioneers in rural development. It's very difficult to examine it on the whole. So the following sections examine the role

of social media networks in different fields of rural development:

5.1. Agriculture

In terms of any field Rural India could be a large market because approximately 750 million people live in 637,000 in Indian villages. Primarily the majority of rural population's livelihood depends on agriculture. So it is not wrong to say that even now India is an agriculture country. Given different topological conditions, farmers cultivate a wide range of crops in villages. Most of the farmers being illiterate face a lot of problems: right from the correct quality of seeds, insecticides, pesticides, new methods of cultivating etc.

The success of agricultural development programs in developing countries largely depends on the nature and extent of use of mass media in mobilization of people for development. Many Indian social media networks have committed themselves to provide information to the farmers regarding cultivation as well as animal husbandry especially All India Radio (AIR) which has been committed to rural audience for more than 50 years now. Among the several mass media, newspaper and farm magazine are commonly used. They have a vital role to play in the communication of agricultural information among the literate farmers. Increasing rate of literacy in the country offers new promises and prospects for utilizing print medium as a means of mass communication. Agriculture journalism is a new field in India and is growing rapidly as the food giver of India is becoming literate now.

As it has been seen by and large that Indian media has been unconcerned about the problems and hard realities of Indian farmer. A CMS (Center for Media Studies) media Lab study brings out that while 24 hour national news channels have by and large ignored reported farmers' distress, coverage of national newspapers was disjointed of larger phenomena of rural indebtedness and Government policies. Farmers and agriculture related news constitute not even one percent of total news items of rational news channels despite the fact that agriculture constitutes 14.2% of the GDP at constant 2004-2005 prices during 2010-2011 as per Central Statistics Office of India. Therefore, social media networks still have loads of opportunities to support Indian agriculture.

5.2. Public Health Care

Rural development means as overall development of rural areas social, economic, political and cultural - so that the people are to lead a pleasant life. Social

media networks have played a pivotal role in improving the health of rural people and creating awareness among rural people. The National Rural Health Mission has launched many campaigns. There are many advertisements by NRHM on right age of marriage, importance breast feeding, anganwadi programs, use of contraceptives, HIV AIDS. These advertisements directly appeal to village people as these are interactive and are in vernacular languages along with being in Hindi and English. Also, media has played a role of whistle blower in case of poor quality of mid day meals provided to children in rural schools.

The major achievement of social media in this area will be the eradication of polio from India. There have been many strategies successfully implemented by India National Polio plus Society (INPPS) of Rotary International. The advertisements carried out on TV as well as radio with slogans like ‘*Do boond zindagi ki*’ and bollywood celebrities appealing to all people to give polio drops to their children can be visualized of the main soldiers of this campaign.

Also broadcast of spots on All India Radio and articles in national newspapers, especially in U.P. with polio messages of Muslim clerics, Maulanas, Maulvis and scholars. INPPS had arranged for media interviews with highly respected and eminent Muslim religious leaders and scholars to address the issue of polio menace in their community, during which they urged their communities to cooperate in polio eradication initiatives and requested the Ulemas (clerics) of respective regions to help the campaign by educating the community about polio and installing booths camps at Madarsas during NIDs/SNIDs. The articles based on these interviews were published in leading vernacular newspapers of U.P. India celebrated its first polio free year in 2012.

Social media can prove to be of utmost importance in creating awareness in rural people about issues like sanitation, benefits of usage of LPG over cow dung cakes, drugs eradication etc. Media has covered miles in improving health of rural India and there are still many more miles to go.

5.3. Politics

The concept of ‘development’ does not only include economic progress and surges in science and technology. Development of the people inevitably assumes fulfillment of the rights of freedom of speech and expression and the freedom to be informed of the social reality. The rights of media are closely guarded by the civil society and it is the duty of social media networks to act as catalysts for socio-

political-economic development of the society of which they are part of. Media has played an important role in affecting the politics at grass roots levels in villages i.e. Panchayats. It’s often said that Panchayats form the backbone of Indian politics. Very often mainstream political parties support the candidates contesting for Panchayat elections thereby, creating a political furor among partially informed rural people. Thus, there is a need of third party to prevent the strangulation of a democratic process by the political parties and their leaders. The mass media can very well play the role of mediator to fend off the malicious intentions of the political parties and actively mobilize the grassroots participation in the Panchayat process. But the media hasn’t played its required role in affecting the rural politics to major extent. Workings of Panchayats or Panchayats’ elections hardly earn any place in the mainstream newspapers or TV. The only reference to a village politics comes when some national leader goes to the village. In the book, *Four Theories of the Press* written in 1963, Wilbur Schramm, Fred Siebert, and Theodore Peterson presented four different models on the behavior of the media. In the social responsibility theory, the media is believed to benefit the public. So, social media networks in India need to concentrate on this responsibility. At large the role which media has played in rural politics may not be that encouraging, but there’s an interesting case study of villages in Gujarat. It has been covered in results section.

But, social media has been quite vocal against the Khap Panchayats in Rohtak, Jhajjar, Bhiwani, Sonapat, Jind, Kaithal, Karnal, and Hisar districts of Haryana. Lately, these have been blamed to treat people inhumanely especially in case of same ‘gotra’ weddings. Since the Khap Panchayats are not sanctioned under law, social media presented the stories of boys and girls who had been tortured by Khap Panchayats in Haryana. This has saved lives of many young boys and girls.

5.4. Internet and Telecommunication

The idea that the internet and related technologies might have an important role in aiding developmental efforts has captured a central place in international policy debates. But when it comes to India there’s a digital divide between rural India and urban India. IT faces a lot of challenges in Indian villages like intermittent, inconsistent electrical power, archaic, scarce and unreliable telephony but still there are many success stories where internet has changed rural people’s lives. The Ministry of Rural Development in India has launched online public

grievances system where villagers can lodge their complaints. This initiative has aided rural people a lot. It is naive to imagine that electricity, telephony and connectivity in rural areas will improve if the demand for these resources does not grow.

In addition, information networks can become conduits that allow money to flow into the village through new kinds of non-discriminatory and clean industries. Information and communications technologies can also compensate for other kinds of infrastructure limitations. For example, if online work, trade, or payment were to become available for members of a village community, the poor quality of roads to and from that village becomes less of an obstacle to earnings and employment. Finally, and most importantly, if capital were to become more readily available within a village community through such networked systems, it would then be in a better position to finance the basic infrastructure that it needs, including roads, dispensaries, and water and sanitation systems. But interestingly, according to Latest Census data (Housing and House Listing Report, Census 2011) revealed that half of rural India now uses a mobile phone but just about one third of it has access to a proper toilet.

However, rural ICT projects are yet to effectively position themselves as a vehicle for online commerce and a mechanism of employment for village communities. Digital social networks provide an opportunity to India to get out from the box of developing nations and join the league of developed countries.

6. Conclusions

Social media networks have no doubt affected the lives of rural people. As far as agriculture is concerned, these have provided many opportunities to the farmers and eased the process of selling the crop through online schemes which has resulted in elimination of middlemen. There are innumerable success stories in field of health care as well. Rural politics is the area where social media networks haven't achieved to the required extent. As far as IT is concerned by making the resources like unregulated supply of electricity, subsidies in purchase of computers etc, available in villages, information centers can alleviate the asymmetry between urban and rural environments. In order to accelerate rural growth, it is essential that we learn new ways of integrating social and human infrastructure development into the installation of basic information and communications infrastructure. Also, it is true that if we want to penetrate the message of development among the rural masses we

would have to opt for the folk forms of this country in more planned manner.

Villagers comprise the core of Indian society and also represent the real India. And it is for these villagers that social media networks must realize their power as well as responsibility towards rural development. History has shown how nations have been 'built' by social media. Now it's India's turn to grow with its 637,000 villages! Rural development will pave the path to India Vision 2020.

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