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Role of Mobile technology in assisting decentralization process among Paniya tribes in Wayanad, Kerala

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Mobile technology, de-centralisation, tribes, Paniya, Kerala	*There has been much discussion amongst academics about the potential of using technology to facilitate greater interaction between the state and its citizens. Associated with the welfare of tribal community government of India has initiated various plans targeted at the uplift of the tribes to the fore front of the society. The present study examines the interaction of the state with the Paniya tribes in Wayanad from the perspective of Communicative Ecology. It discusses the 'social layer' wherein the community is connected to different local government institutions that facilitate 'decentralized governance'. The 'technical layer' addresses the incorporation of technologies, particularly mobile technology, in communication practices that connect the processes to the 'social layer'. It is found that the 'technical layer' has mobilised activities occurring at grass root level and provides new solutions to the issues in ways that was not possible before the advent of mobile technologies in this community. The study further suggests the formation of a mobile app based project that facilitate bottom up conversations, where Paniyas tribal people are able to communicate their needs and grievances to the state. The project aims at receiving feedback from the community related to the implementation of various schemes and enable fruitful analysis of day to day issues of the disadvantaged which helps in the proper execution of the 'tribal welfare programmes' of the state.*

Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies, particularly mobile phones have been integrated into the lives of people around the world both in the developed and the developing countries. The spread of mobile phones in low-income countries has spurred widespread enthusiasm and many have predicted that technology will enhance socio-economic development by facilitating the circulation of information. Horst and Miller assessed the impact of mobile phones within the Jamaican 'communicative ecology' (Horst and Miller, 2005:11).

This article examines how 'decentralized governance' works in tribal lives, specifically the Paniyas, with the incorporation of mobile phones from the perspective of Communicative Ecology. This approach advocates that technology can be studied only within the system it is a part of.

Decentralized governance is a process, a meaningful step towards participatory democracy. Under 'decentralization', functions, functionaries and finance are transferred from higher level governments

to local level governments which remain accountable to people. Hence decentralization is recognised for its unique potentiality for improving the delivery of public services at the local level (Oommen, 2008; GoK, 2009). Decentralization in the form of grama sabha, ward sabha and Oorukutams brings government closer to the people spatially and institutionally The present study focuses on the communication practices happening through technology mediation (mobile phones) within the local bodies of the state working among the tribal sector, particularly among the Paniya tribes residing in Wayanad, Kerala.

Paniyas

It is interesting to note that Indian constitution uses the term 'tribal folk' instead of 'tribe' meaning "people living in a particular place, who enter into marriage relationship among themselves, who have no specific skills in any work, traditionally or ethnically ruled by adivasi leaders, who speak their own language, have own beliefs, customs and tradition". Tribes in India are not a homogeneous group as their culture and values are distinct from each other. The scheduled Tribes (STs) constitutes1.14 percent of total population in the state of Kerala (Census, 2001). Tribes are considered as an excluded community in terms of main economic and non-economic indicators such as, literacy rate, average years of schooling, retention rate and availability of basic amenities (Shyjan & Sunitha, 2008). The tribal population is more concentrated in the district of Wayanad, which houses nearly 37 percent of the total ST population in Kerala. The main demographic feature of Wayanad is the existence of a large scheduled tribe population. The district has cross sections of population from all religions. The present study is focused on the 'Paniya' tribes who constitute 22% of the total tribal population in Kerala, which belongs to one of the backward categories of the tribes in the state.

Anthropologically, the Paniya are agricultural laborers classified as 'Aborigines-Predial, slaves' (Nair, 1911). Ippimala, near to the Tamaracherry Ghats, was believed to be the original home of Paniyars in Wayanad. They work as labourers for the other communities in Wayanad , and the term 'Pani' in 'Paniyar' means 'work'.

Communicative ecologies

An ecological framework called 'Communicative Ecology' – is appropriated in this study. Communicative Ecology Theory is an approach to understanding communication among and between people and groups, from a holistic perspective (Foth and Hearn, 2007). The holistic perspective of communicative ecologies provides a framework for researchers to understand the communication that occurs within the group and between groups, which focus as the term 'ecology' suggests on the broader field of the communication of groups of people who are connected.

To effectively apply the conceptual lens of communicative ecologies, Foth and Hearn (2007) suggest the division of the research foci into three layers: the technology and media layer, the discursive layer and the people layer (Foth and Hearn, 2007; Hearn et al. 2009; Tacchi et al., 2003). The technology and media layer describes the means used to communicate between the different people and groups and includes all communication devices, distribution systems and the technical systems that enable them. The discursive layer is ideational and has a focus on the actual content of communication, in particular the stories, understandings, beliefs and symbols that define the culture and practices involved; here tribal culture and the decentralization governance. The people layer describes the different people and groups who are involved, their social relationships and the social institutions and structures that connect them.

The role of mobile technology in local governance through the lens of communicative ecology theory

Communicative ecologies can be thought of as complex systems that evolve through time. The operation of complex systems in physical, biological, social and economic domains is now well accepted. The technical layer of a communicative ecology affec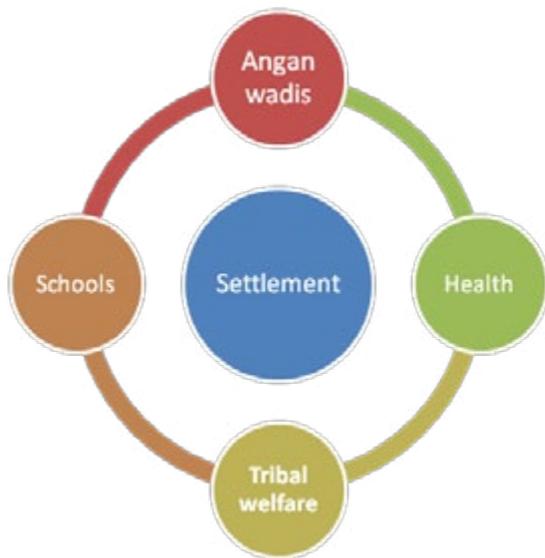ts the evolution of the social layer (Hearn et al., 2003). This is because technologies mediate both the discursive and social layers of communicative ecologies. They can in contradictory ways accelerate change and at other times inhibit change. Here the article specifically focuses around the mediation of mobile technology in the social layer constituting Paniya settlements and local bodies of the government. Figure 1 represents the involvement of local government sectors in the decentralization process among the tribal community in Wayanad.

Figure 1: Representation of decentralization governance surrounding a tribal settlement.

In order to foster a closer public service delivery system spatially and institutionally to the disadvantaged community, a decisive step was taken by the Government of Kerala towards the goal of democratic decentralization in the Annual Plan 1997-98, the Government of Kerala handed over most of the development programmes to local bodies. In Kerala, institutions of public service like primary health centres, schools, anganwadis, and veterinary institution have been transferred to local governments. The decisions of a local government should reflect the felt needs of the community. Baiju (2011) explores the development and welfare programmes addressing poverty, land alienation, exploitation, education, health care, employment, and social development and in their reach out to these target groups and discussion of policy implications and the strengthening of service delivery. The decentralized planning process enabled induction of views of local tribes through the structure of oorukuttams.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents from five different settlements in Wayanad. Stratified sampling technique was adopted. Two members from each settlement who maintained constant contacts with tribal promoters and who involved actively in the activities of local government were selected as participants. Data incorporated secondary sources as well by consulting government document, relevant books, e-journals and research reports that examined the implications of development and welfare programmes in the tribal settlements in Kerala.

Findings

People layer: Oorukoottams

The foremost thing required in strengthening the services delivery mechanism in tribal settlements is harmony between local development planning and the functioning of oorukoottom (Baiju, 2011). Each panchayath conduct a oorukoottam, a meeting comprising Panachayat President, Panchayat Secretary, promoters from the ward and individual members of the households from every settlement

in a ward. A oorukoottam occurs in each ward at least once a year. Many of those who deserve assistance are sidelined in the process and services rendered are criticized for lack of transparency. Elected ward members and oorukoottam leaders are often subjected to pressures to yield to individual requests. In respect to the functioning of an oorukoottam, the involvement of gramasabha and tribal extension leaders, tribal promoters should be made to ensure their participation in the discussion on project formulation and implementation. More participation of tribal households in designing of projects/ schemes helps to reflect the felt needs of the different tribal settlements that assist in decision making in the meeting.

Although oorukoottams do the needful for the tribal settlements as per the request of the residents, it were not effective in the maintenance of the facilities arranged in the settlements. For instance the tribal settlements are yet not relieved from the problems they face of water scarcity. In response to the requests presented in oorukoottam a 'well' was constructed in the area but it was not worthy to use for long.

> *We asked for constructing well here. But it cannot be used now. It's so deep and water can't be used to drink. Now we are getting water through Panchayat. We asked for street light but it's not granted* (Female, 33).

The houses constructed under the 'Life Mission Scheme' are criticized for the lack of cultural sensitivity. Residents havenot maintained their concrete houses, which reflects their lack of 'owning feeling' for these houses. Also some of the members in these houses desired to have better facilities to which government do not provide funding, as one of the respondents said,

> *We need better facilities in house. I asked for this. But they said that for improved facilities we have to spend money by our own. I cannot find enough money for this. My husband won't spend any money for the family* (Female, 32).

Field interviews show that respondents are not satisfied with the remedy measures of the state government. Most of them last for a short period only and won't serve for a longer period.

Government and non government organizations

Thr tribal community is hesitant and not willing to come out into society due to their incompetence factors such as low educational attainment and completely different livelihood (Binoj, Sujatha & David, 2018). However the involvement of government and non-government organizations forms the ecology of communication, which connects them to the people of other communities in the region. Interventions of these institutions made them aware of factors such as education, stop bad and addictive habits like alcohol consumption. Participation in the religious gatherings of other communities has also made a shift in their cultural practices and lifestyle.

The more interactive the respondents with the outside society such as involvement in organizations like church, kudumbasree and thozhilurappu scheme of Kerala government, the more they possessed and maintained a mobile phone with them. Although among the elderly people, possessing a mobile phone is out of initial curiosity, maintaining and having a frequent use of the mobile phone people betters their participation in social and religious gatherings. Mobile phones help them to keep their relationship with church pastors, school and anganwadi teachers, health workers and also with government employees working in the tribal development department. Outside of the direct community experiences, mobile phones mediate their social relations in society that adheres to the ideals of modernity. Among the Paniyan tribes these mediated relationships continue to be through oral communication rather than textual or digital since most of them make calls alone and do not use

messaging. Mobile phone usage reflected the existing structure of social relationships.

Technical and media layer

Various institutions now employ mobile technologies to mediate the communication between actors for the implementation of tribal welfare schemes. Tribal promoters use smart phones and tabs to record their field visits and surveys. In the education sector also mobile technology widely helps teachers to connect with parents and other government employees such as tribal promoters. Various employees of the state in primary health centre, anganwadis (pre-school system in Kerala), schools, and tribal department are connected to one another through this technology they provide assistance and information to one another to carry out the entrusted task by concerned authorities.

There had been regular interventions from the government in the welfare of tribes in the sectors of education, health and housing through implementing various schemes. Promoters (members of the tribal community mostly women) are trained to reach each settlements to check the progress of implemented schemes and also take socio-economic surveys. Promoters are given tabs for recording their surveys and training is also given through workshops conducted at regular intervals. All of them are provided with a tab for work purposes. Two apps are installed : one is regarding the socio-economic survey of tribal families, where they have to enter the details of each person in a family about his/her health, employment, education and all. Once collected, they have to send it to officers, which they have not done yet, since they have been learning on that. It's only about five months that they have been provided with tabs. They have to return them after the job. They have an app for daily work recordings, which they have to send to authorities. For calling purposes they get them recharged monthly. No official numbers are there. One of the promoters respond about the training they received to operate tabs.

> Last May there was a three day programme in DIET, Batherry and officers from various government departments talked to us. One session was entirely about operating the tabs they provided. It is for job purpose alone, provided with a sim card and Govt bears the recharge expenses. We only call for professional purposes in it, unless we have to make an urgent personal call.

Discursive layer

There exists a belief that tribal students, particularly Paniya students, are incompetent and uninterested in studies and also that parents have no interest to educate them as well. Paniya families are blamed for excessive alcoholic consumption and regular fights happening in the households. It's observed that interaction with mainstream society has improved awareness among the Paniyas for a need of formal education and to turn away from destructive habits. One of the residents said,

> Here in this settlement there was vaattu (a process of preparing alcohol at home) in every home about ten years ago, later Kudumbasree came and then it got stopped finally (Female,33).

Kudumbasree is a state project involving women from neighborhood households who come together every week to encourage their activities such as micro-entrepreneurship, cattle farming, vegetable gardening and such small enterprises. This is a project which actively runs throughout the state of Kerala. In time or a major crisis or disaster the state government used to support economically backward families by releasing fund through Kudumbasree.

One of the tribal settlements in Wayanad has a few families that asserted they educated their children and their children were doing their bachelor degree course. Interviews with their parents

revealed that their relationship with mainstream society motivated them to educate children.

> *I wanted my boys to get educated. The family where I used to go for work has children of my age. I want my children also to learn like them* (Female, 35).

Instead of sidelining tribes citing their backward state there is a need to address the real issues concerning them. This is possible by way of embracing them as our neighbors and fellow beings with an inclusive approach alone.

Tribes need to be given awareness of self-sustainment and to demand their rights provided to them. Awareness classes should be given to parents to educate their children and how education serves the community to sustain in the future. Proper monitoring of classes in schools can find reasons for the backwardness in the performance of tribal students. Also at schools classes are rendered in the tribal languages for students to comprehend better and mentor teacher are appointed for this purpose. One of the mentor teachers responded,

> *I have a whatsapp group of mentors in Wayanad which helps me to do the work effectively. I get updates about the students details from different settlements* (Female, 25).

Conclusion

Mobile phones facilitate bottom up conversation for the effective functioning of the people layer. Implementing a new paradigm, that is the incorporation of mobile technology that support bottom up conversation in the tribal welfare measurements, can assist in the formulation of schemes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation that ensure the involvement of tribal people in support of responsive, transparent, accountable public service delivery system. Oorukootams can bring forth a system of public delivery system ensuring a reasonable and quality service to the disadvantaged tribal community. Challenges in implementing tribal welfare schemes and policies can be overcome through a responsive and bottom up conversation from the tribal settlements.

Mobile technology can be used to co-ordinate the activities involved in institutions concerned with the welfare of Paniya tribes such as schools, anganwadis, health centres, regional tribal department and the residents in the settlement. The study here suggests the formation of a mobile app-based project that facilitates bottom up conversations, where Paniyas tribes are able to communicate their needs and grievances to the state. The project aims at receiving feedback from the community related to the implementation of various schemes and enable fruitful analysis of day to day issues of the disadvantaged which helps in the proper execution of the 'tribal welfare programmes' of the state. Introduction of mobile phones with media facilitating interactive service such as whatsapp shall serve as a mechanism to follow up the beneficiaries of different schemes and enquire whether the assistance has really helped them or improved their lives. The promoters, school and anganwadi teachers and health workers, oorukoottam leaders and the members should be made accountable for this sort of practice.

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