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INNOVATING ICT FOR GENDER SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of inclusive growth and political compulsions of governments across the world and more particularly in the developing nations necessitates that development initiatives occur without resistance. Neither the exchequer nor political parties can afford fracas like those happened in India. Over the last few decades, the imbroglia associated with environmental issues churning out of seismic activity in Tehri Dam site in the hilly Uttarakhand region & loss of vital forest cover near Posco's proposed Mining & Smelter project in Orissa and less compensation to farmers for their land acquired by Tata for Nano Car Project in Nandigram-Singur in West Bengal and by builders in Noida near New Delhi are some of the glaring examples of how utter lack of communication amongst stakeholders can lead to socio-economic upheavals. One of the emerging solutions to usher inclusive growth is to break Gender barriers and empower the 'weaker or second sex' along with linking the target population into a communication loop dispelling individual and collective fears through dialogue and discussion. This is primarily possible through the innovative and judicious exploitation of ICT options. The recent examples from the Arab world too support this view.

KEYWORDS

ICT, gender sensitive development.

INTRODUCTION

ustainable Development and inclusive growth are not just a global concern but also a priority. It is universally acknowledged that unless the anomalies of developments are addressed by ensuring a more habitable world for our coming generations coupled with equitable distribution of the benefits of growth, the future of Planet Earth as well as our fellow beings looks bleak. The World cannot afford to ignore the recent happening across the Globe, whether it is the sweeping changes happening in the Arab world or the confrontations between the have-nots & haves in India.

GENDER – A THORN IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT?

A comprehensive perception of development is a pre-requisite to launch & sustain a trouble-free development initiative. This holds true of both social and economic development. In both instances, development may be looked upon as a 'bi-polar activity' with one extreme occupied by the powerful minority of developers pitted against the other dominated by majority population or the masses. A further dissociation in this vertical divide is the problem of gender divide afflicting both the micro and macro environments especially in developing economies like India.

The seditious legacy that has reduced women to the humiliating position of the 'Second Sex' in countries like India even now, when it enjoys the Most Favored Nation status amongst the developed world, has further complicated the process of development. This is primarily because an inherent anomaly in the process of development is the element of 'loss' that unavoidably affects all target population. This is true even in the case of development initiatives which emerging economies are focusing on nowadays. The apparent sense of loss, primarily of 'land' due to its acquisition for various infrastructure projects, is a case in point. For example, in Singur in West Bengal where farmers initially sold their land to industrial giant Tata for the Nano car project, to land acquired for buildings & highways near Noida located on the fringe of New Delhi, this loss later seemed 'real'. However, when development targets social issues, as in the contexts of tribal population, the felt or perceived loss is more in terms of abstract issues like traditional occupation, culture and the like as in the case of Posco's mammoth mining project in Orissa. Both are traumatic for the people to bear.

In the case of women, the 'injustice' is twofold. For, along with bearing sexual discrimination in decision making, they are also made to suffer the pressure of development with no scope to ventilate their pain! Found often to be more judicious, reasonable and open to suggestion by field researchers, women are rarely 'spoken to' by developers, a prerogative still monopolized by men. This is a puzzle that still bothers researchers today.

NATIONAL PROSPERITY INDEX

It has to also be kept in mind that a simple growth in economy need not lead to overall development and progress. We may here refer to the former Indian President, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam. In an address to the students, he said that it was the happiness quotient which became more pertinent while measuring progress especially in the Indian context. In a similar vein the late JRD Tata once remarked that an image where all Indians were happy and contented appealed more to him than just an economically progressing India.

The National Prosperity Index proposed by Dr. Kalam is ideally the bedrock of development. He pointed out that the quality of life of a large population can be improved with emphasis on the basic needs like food, potable water, proper housing, sanitation, quality education, healthcare and employment potential. The concept thus, ideally ensures that citizens gain the capacity to enjoy the fruits of development through significant socio-cultural progress besides capacity building other measures.

Development initiatives are basically directed at those groups that are chronically, systematically and traditionally deprived of even the basic requirements like food, water, shelter and gainful employment. Economic development alone cannot address this problem holistically. Thus, there is a need to look at the socio-cultural aspect of development as well to reach the coveted destination of universal and sustainable development, a panacea for chronic and degenerating malaises. The social approach to development follows the principles of social justice and equity.

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPMENT

Progressive experience across the globe points out the need to allay individual & collective fears and sense of insecurity to make development not only acceptable but also resistance free. This would essentially mean dissemination of the very *raison d'être* of development projects to the target population right from the conception to the commissioning of the initiatives. However, progressive dissociation of the masses from the developers or those at the helm necessitates that the affected masses people be given a legitimate voice to express not only their concern but their wisdom as well. This gets duly reflected when we find that the United Nations System Network on Rural Development and Food Security too has propounded that 'knowledge and information are essential for people to successfully respond to the opportunities and challenges of social, economic and technological change'. But knowledge and information must be effectively communicated. This unambiguously ushers in the role & relevance of communication in development initiatives.

DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

Development communication connotes the use of communication tools, techniques and principles to bring about equitable development. It does so by looping the two proximities of development- the developers and the target population- into a mode of meaningful & sustained dialogue & discussion. Development Communication thus systematically applies the processes and strategies of communication to effect positive social change. It makes use of a variety of communication techniques to address the problems associated with changes brought about by development measures. Some of its approaches, which are applied for facilitating a hassle free process of development, are information dissemination, education, behavior change, social marketing & mobilization and so on, while participatory development communication being the most important of these.

TOWARDS NEW VECTOR OPTIONS

In today's context, with rising popular awareness and numerous means of information dissemination, the faceless man among the teeming millions is becoming crucially important for all those who have their fingers on important buttons. This common man's angst and displeasure is capable of throwing out novel initiatives like the ambitious Tata Nano Car project from West Bengal. On the other hand, paradoxically no exchequer or business house can afford such major hiccups.

We now add to the above the rising assessment of the women folk who are beginning to find the ground beneath their feet. This makes it almost mandatory that when a communication loop is being established, the individual voice, including that of the women is heard when negotiation & bargaining are done collectively! This focus on individual's aspirations, concerns and wisdom interestingly also conforms to the philosophy of inclusive growth. And for this to happen in real terms, communication has to move beyond the achievements of information dissemination through emerging techniques to the dawning realms of ICT options as the new age paradigm of Development Communication

Contemporary studies suggest some other determinants like 'Gender Sensitivity' as an essential dimension to the management, control and harvesting of the development projects. Gender relations are not biologically fixed but socially determined in terms of the relations of power and dominance which influences the life chances of men and women differently. This has a direct co-relation with policy planning, implementation and managing responsible social work. Simultaneously, it also has a significant bearing on Development Communication that is gender sensitive. As a result, participatory development communication ensures that a Gender sensitive approach to social development provides a scope for women to share their ideas, experiences and views so that they do not remain passive receivers and but instead become intelligent and rational contributors. Progressive spread of ICT devices across-the-board has ensured that women are in a position to be looped into a matrix of dialogue & discussion. India is no exception to this despite her humiliating gender statistics.

ICT

Progressive knowledge gained through cumulative experience has made us reach the stage where in the process of development we need the population to revert back to the developer endorsing the initiatives with local and micro level wisdom inputs, for the projects to be owned by the target population. ICT provides the mechanism for the common man to assume this voice of wisdom. Information and Communication Technology, or ICT, imbibes the entire process of storage, retrieval, manipulation, transmission or receipt of information that has become so indispensably crucial for development to happen without resistance.

Examples in focus: The year 2010 has been a revelation year in terms of the power of Multimedia to generate, organize and control social revolutions. The instances of Egypt and Tunisia in the Arab world, overthrowing the tyrannical or dictatorial rulers through peaceful agitations that were predominantly organized and broadcast by using the power of various multimedia networks like Facebook and Twitter, have become global models. Online forums and chat facilities on various social networking sites were used to contact and connect the youth in both these countries in order to make them aware of the malady. They were encouraged to become members of various social groups formed online to protest against the oppressive and undemocratic policies of the dictatorial regimes and offer remedy. These forums were used to spread messages about protests and demonstrations being organized in various parts of the country and encourage them and others through them to come out and participate in protest rallies. The servers operating these social networking websites were generally based outside the country of protest which made blocking or shutting down of this communication medium difficult for the regimes.

a) THE INDIAN CONTEXT

These developments in the Arab world made one wonder if this power of multimedia or ICT could be effectively harnessed to usher in socio-economic development in a country like India. ICT involves use of various multimedia elements like audio, video, text and images to convey social & economic development information to the deprived sections of the society. However, before jumping to any conclusion we need to understand certain aspects of developments that occurred in Egypt and Tunisia.

The multimedia element used in propelling the socio-political protests in countries like Egypt and Tunisia were essentially influential videos showing brutal government crackdown in the aftermath of these pro-democracy demonstrations. These videos were played on various social networking websites where they could be easily seen and downloaded from Facebook, Twitter and Orkut. The internet penetration data mentioned below will further buttress the point that internet and broadband penetration in these countries is much superior to that prevailing in India to have caused this kind of impact:

Content	Egypt	Tunisia	India
Internet Penetration (approx)	15.4%	48%	6.9%

Supported by high end broadband and internet speed and high internet penetration ratio which assured smooth access and downloading of various multimedia elements especially in terms of audio-video and still images by large section of the masses proved to be an effective tool for information dissemination in these countries. It also provided the citizens to connect to the cause and each other through the possibilities of reacting and thereupon responding to the sites, often instantaneously.

India, on the other hand, is marred by low broadband downloading speed which hinders smooth display and downloading of multimedia elements from the internet. Further, high cost of computers & peripherals prevents the Personal Computer or PC from becoming an Indian household commodity- a prospect without which it is not possible to implement multimedia based ICT generated and controlled revolutions. Simultaneously, poor and rural India is incapacitated

by pitiable infrastructure and inadequate socio-economic developments to support such emerging high-end communication paradigm. Thus as things stands today the idea of multimedia based ICT vectored development communication for socio-economic development in India stands negated.

b) THE 3G OPTION

In contrast to the PC, the penetration of mobile phones in the India is a resounding reality making it potent as an ICT option. What needs to be addressed in this context is to work towards better user compatibility between the point of transmission and the point of reception. Due to the present lack of infrastructure and the low levels of literacy and education, trained skill is difficult to find in the bottom of the pyramid (BOP) population. Added to this is the fact that it is not feasible to find high-end handsets amongst the masses as a common possession.

Several academic surveys further indicate the low propensity of the marginalized population to use their mobile phones to its full potential. Yet, there is no denying the common fondness for mobile phones even in places where, till the end of 20th century, people used to walk miles to receive & make calls on weak tele-networks due to the unavailability of infrastructure facilities! Hence high end transmission services like MMS, mobile and web internet, heavy and complex data transmission needed to engineer social mobilization may still not be possible. This is also compounded by the reality that for various socio-cultural and economic reasons, the BOP population in contexts like India despite their growing socio-political awareness is still either reluctant or is incapable of using the mobile phones beyond making and receiving calls. It thus becomes an enormous challenge & option for various stakeholders of development especially the government to reach out and meaningfully connect with the marginalized in areas deprived of basic civic facilities but riding high on mobile usage with multimedia based ICT borne development communication.

This brings us to the current requirement where we need to develop simple voice-backed message services along with using multimedia integration to connect with this teeming but intelligent & joyful common population. Living in the lowest rung of society, these are the illiterate and semi literate people with barely any trained skills who at the end of a hard day's work would love a unique simple image-based, voice-backed info-tainment message. Such messages would serve the purpose better than simple text messages which are, in general, not popular with most of the common population across the country. However, despite the overriding botheration for costs, 'gaming' as a multimedia product too is emerging as an option for connecting with the masses. This trend is predominantly based on popular propensity, especially amongst the youth, to dabble with multi-media vectored Games despite their contest with poverty and illiteracy. In fact, it is found that their contact with ICT frequently begins with video games.

Hinged on this knowledge of mass acceptance of the medium, the mobile phones are becoming the most common device used for multimedia based communication that is at once interactive and entertaining. This is a recent trend on internet and mobile internet where not just products but even television programme and movies are being promoted. Looking at its appeal and possibilities of future exploitation, the scope of mobile hand-set as potent tool of social mobilization for development is tremendous.

It should be kept in mind that India has the potential to become the animation and e-content development destination because of low cost, high quality advantage which offers a 60-80 percent cost saving for the international studios outsourcing/off shoring to studios in India. Increasing telecom bases and arrival of 3G are the driving factors for growth of Gaming and other multimedia based communication techniques. The current staggered rollout of 3G services is likely to provide efficient high speed data networks to mobile users. The telecom subscriber base is expected to increase to 725 million by 2013 with a mobile penetration of 60 percent. Infotainment with local flavour that can be played on consoles, internet and mobiles are becoming popular amongst Indians. What is significant from the stand of policy making is that these are infotainments with tremendous popularity even in the far flung areas which have little else to offer.

Keeping the above mentioned scenario in mind, a preliminary survey was done in a Village in Nuh block in the economically backward district of Mewat in Haryana province. A typical instance of a top-down model of growth, the district today is in a state of development ambivalence. With money-backed initiatives pouring in almost every avenue, the district now enjoys almost enviable infrastructure development efforts & outcomes. Yet the micro socio-economic environment suffers from lacunae that cry out for priority based remedies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CASE STUDY

a) LOCATION: The Mewat district was carved out from the erstwhile prosperous Gurgaon and Faridabad districts of Haryana and came into existence on 4 April 2005 as its 20th district. The district headquarter is located at Nuh. The district comprises of five blocks namely Nuh, Tauru, Nagina, Firozpur Jhirka and Punhana. There are 431 villages in the district and 297 *Panchayats* or local bodies. Geographically, Mewat District is situated between 26-degree and 30-degree North latitude and 76-degree and 78-degree East longitude. Inconsistency in Mewat topography is evident from hillock of the Aravali Mountains, on the one hand and the rugged plains, on the other. Thus, physio-graphically the area is divided into two tracts- the upland and the low land. Though the district is in the NCR (National Capital Region) and just 50 km from the international airport in New Delhi, it had remained a startling showcase of under development and gross neglect till it was 'adopted' by a plethora of government and non-government initiatives. Today amidst a vast array of development projects working in the area, the local population dominated by the Meo Muslim community is looking for socio-economic thrusts that would integrate them to the mainstream without disturbing the micro environment.

b) POPULATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: The main occupation of the people of Mewat is agriculture, agro-based and allied activities. The Meos are predominantly rural agriculturists. They perceive themselves as such with a sense of pride.

Agriculture in Mewat is mostly rain fed except in small pockets where canal irrigation is available. Agricultural production measured in terms of crop yield per hectare is low as compared with the other districts of the State. Animal husbandry, particularly dairy is the secondary source of income for people and those who live closer to the hilly ranges of Aravali also keep a few sheep and goats. Milk yields are not so low but due to heavy indebtedness most of the farmers are forced to sell milk to lenders at lower than normal price, which drastically reduces their income from the milk. The poultry population in Mewat district is much less in comparison to other districts of Haryana State. Statistics given below clearly bring to focus the social, cultural, geographical and economic parameters obtaining there.

c) MEWAT AREA AT A GLANCE: a. Total area in Hectares- 191154; Cultivated: 146805. Non-Irrigated: 45,000; Irrigated-1,01,00. b. Population- 993617; Rural: 95.36%; Urban: 4.64%. c. Literacy- 44%: (Male-61.53%, Female-24.26%). d. Sex Ratio- 893. e. Family Size 7.5. f. Health Services- General Hospital: 01; Community Health Centre: 05; Primary Health Centre: 17; Sub Centers Ayurvedic; 28 Homeopathic; 10. g. Agriculture- Total Area (in hectares): 1,86,000; Net area sown: 1,46,000; Area sown more than once: 66,000. Total cropped area: 2,12,000. h. Irrigation- Net area irrigated (in hectares): 42600; %age of irrigated area: 29.7; Tube well and pump sets; 18,553; No of tractors: 5,021; Percentage of villages connected with surfaced roads and also electrified: 100. i. Workers-Cultivators: 175794; Agri-labourers: 61136; Workers in Household Industries: 7629; others: 151647; Total: 396206. j. Livestock Population- Cows: 47995; Buffalos: 296137; Sheep: 22311, Goats: 83907; Pigs: 2315; Horse & Pony: 368; Mule & Donkey: 343; Camel: 428; Poultry: 124170. k. Number of Colleges-4; Number of Industrial Training/Vocational Institutes/Polytechnics- 9.

d) EDUCATION AND SELF – RELIANCE FOR GIRLS IN PALLA VILLAGE, MEWAT: Through sustained interaction and observation with women and young girls, it was found that there was an urge on their part to educate girls so that they become financially independent and capable enough to decide for themselves. But many factors do not encourage this. Primarily it is the shackles of the micro environment of the traditional village life which does not encourage young girls moving out of the house. Her domain is prominently defined to be the household responsibilities and marriage therefore becomes her prime aim. In fact, the women and young girls being interviewed were quite surprised to know that the survey of the present research was being conducted by a young lady!

An interview with a school teacher in a deserted area of the village brought an additional reality. There were very few girl students in the school and when asked for the reason, the teacher said that the parents were reluctant to send their daughters to study with a male teacher. He further added that qualified female teachers were not interested to come and live in such a place. Why would they leave a career in towns and cities to come all the way to a village like this? He suggested that government should take initiatives to send qualified and able female teachers to this area by giving them a good pay package and incentives.

These ideas have come from local people of this area and not from a minority group framing policies according to its whims. This point at the need for a gender sensitive approach to development which would make it possible to envisage, design, implement and evaluate with women as active decision makers alongside

the other stakeholders. The survey indicates that ICT borne development communication targeting the women using mobiles phones could mainstream local folks in a number of areas especially in terms of the dreams and aspirations of the women still held back to the hearth by poverty and tradition, which they desire to transcend.

CONCLUSIONS

The inclusion of a gender focus to development communication is very important because of the gender divisions in the society, in general in India and economically backward Mewat region, in particular. ICT options like simple messaging over mobile telephony offers opportunities of inclusive growth which can effectively address socio-economic and geo-cultural biases especially concerning females.

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