Rural India in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are widely acknowledged as an important resource in all the aspects of socio-economic development, and this is especially articulated in national policies. In developing countries, this perspective incorporates ICTs into the development agenda because of their relevance in transforming human activities and in presenting new opportunities for economic growth. ICTs have very resounding presence in present day and age but one can not ignore the digital divide and social exclusion in today's context. A considerable number of marginalized groups remain unreached by the benefits ICTs are supposed to offer. The vision of a so-called "information *society* for all" as stated in both developed and developing countries' ICT policy documents today does not apparently include "all". This article examines the patterns of ICT use and information flow perceived in India, especially in the rural areas where the impact of ICTs is still very limited, despite its penetration into every corner of modern life.

Table of Contents

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1   Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are widely acknowledged as important resource in all aspects of socioeconomic development, and this is especially articulated in national policies. In developing countries, this perspective incorporates ICTs into the development agenda because of their relevance in transforming human activities and in presenting new opportunities for economic growth. ICTs have very resounding presence in present day and age but one can not ignore the digital divide and social exclusion in todays context. It is also argued that inequalities have increased since the late 1970s between and within countries, as well as in both developed and developing nations (Thomas &Parayil, 2008). A considerable number of marginalized groups, such as rural population, women and low-income youth remain unreached by the benefits which ICTs are supposed to offer. The vision of a so-called "information *society* for all," as stated in both developed and developing countries' ICT policy documents today, does not apparently include "all" (Chiumbu, 2008). There are reasons to question both the local practices and the future vision for ICT, and how the industry sector can play a role for ICT inclusion; how and on whose premises. Global visions and myths on possible prosperous ICT futures are continuously repeated, but there are attempts to problematize the mindsets and visions associated with ICTs for "development" (Mosco, 2004).

The study examines the patterns of ICT use and information flow perceived in India, especially in rural areas. India is a country of multiple divides; social and economic divides already exist in the country and now with the emergence of new ICTs new divisions are taking shape on the basis of many factors involved in its use and access. Today, growing ICTs and the telecommunication in the country have given opportunities to the excluded sections to be part of this new information society. But the impact of ICTs in rural areas is still very limited, despite its penetration into every corner of modern life. There is need of relatively increased flow of information and special skills to make full use of ICT for socio-economic gains.

1.1   Objective of the Study

The study examines the patterns of people's ICT use and information flow perceived in India, especially in the rural areas of Haryana which is one amongst India's developing states.

1.2 Field of the Study

The study has been conducted in a comparative perspective with reference to two villages (Babupur and Dharampur) of different social and demographic composition, located at equal distance from the district headquarters at the Gurgaon city of Gurgaon Development Block in the Gurgaon district of the State of Haryana. The headquarters of the development block and the Gurgaon district are located in the Gurgaon town, which is emerging as a major hub for information and communication technology and automobile industry. Haryana itself is an aspiring e-Governance leader-state as per the India's e-Governance Readiness Index, giving particular stress on implementing Mission Mode e-Governance Projects identified under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP).

1.3 Methodology of the Study

The descriptive research design is used to analyze the ICT use patterns and flow of information among the people of Babupur and Dharampur villages. The chart given below shows the sampling and sample size of the study.
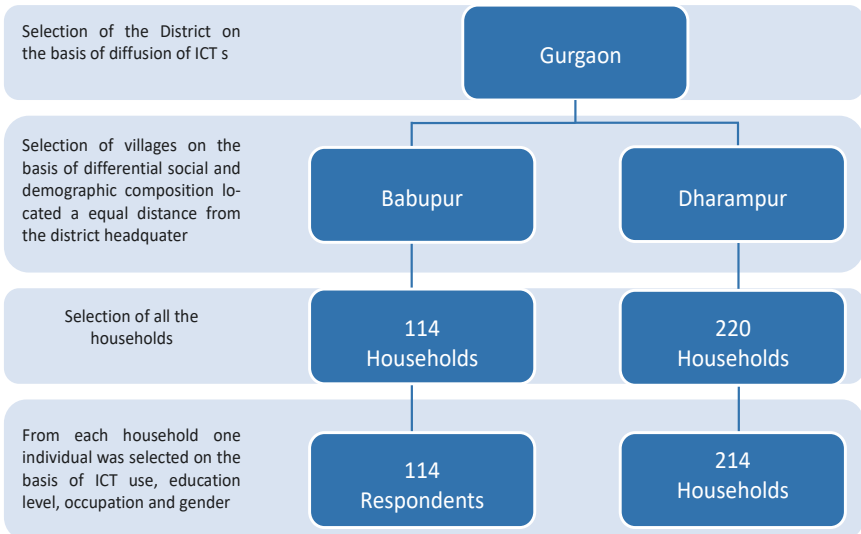
Selection of the District on the basis of diffusion of ICT s	Gurgaon	
Selection of villages on the basis of differential social and demographic composition located a equal distance from the district headquater	Babupur	Dharampur
Selection of all the households	114 Households	220 Households
From each household one individual was selected on the basis of ICT use, education level, occupation and gender	114 Respondents	214 Households

Fig. 1: Sampling of the study

2   Analysis &Conclusion of the Study

2.1   Patterns of Communication in Rural India

As such rural inhabitants do not have any specific informational needs. For maximum time, they are engaged in eking out their livelihoods. In rural area-speople are very much involved in the families and communities. Because of this their inner circle for communication falls between these two, and consequently, whatever information they need is related to family and community only. In outer communication circles, they interact with unknown or lesser known people sometimes regarding the work or any other purpose which is quite limited. Thus, in rural areas people communicate at two levels; one is the inner level which is close to them and about which they always want to be informed and the other is the outer level which is not that much close to them but is somehow linked to them. Mobile service is the only ICT which fulfills their informational needs at both the levels. It has a great impact on their inner communication circle because it is fast, cheap and easy to access.

2.2   Patterns of Access to ICTs in Rural India

Mobile service is the most acceptable ICT in rural India and is equally popular among every age group and gender. Whereas internet has to go a long way yet to reach members in rural India, it is limited to the young and literate people. Its cost and complexity keep it away from that majority of people who are poor and illiterate. Also, it doesn't fulfill their inner communication circle informational needs in a simple way. Other than capacity barriers, infrastructure is another major barrier for the people to access the internet.

2.3   Patterns of Access to ICTs on the basis of Caste

Rural India remains a caste-based society and the traditional village economy revolved around a hereditary caste hierarchy that prescribed individuals' occupations. Upper castes were the landowners, middle-ranked (backward) castes-the farmers and artisans, and the lowest-ranked (scheduled) castes- the laborers who performed menial tasks. The social and cultural capital, as well as the educational capital, that the people from historically higher castes may possess gives them distinct advantage in securing better opportunities. Whereas lower castes lack social, cultural and educational capital and therefore they have limited or little opportunities. This is one of the important factors which hinder their potential access to finance due to which they lack access to ICTs.

2.4   Patterns of Access to ICTs on the basis of Gender

ICTs are not gender-neutral. ICTs exist within the societal realm, so they are influenced by society in terms of gender. Because of this they impact both men and women differently. There is found ample difference in the access of men and women to the ICTs. Education attainment of women is extremely low, and as a consequence they are unable to pursue and develop skills and opportunities. The most time consuming activities for women are cooking and taking care of household members. Another prominent challenge is the lack of relevant local content and the continued use of predominant English language.

2.5   Patterns of Access to ICTs among the Youth

For young people, access to information means better access to capital, market and training needed to pursue a career or studies. Entertainment is the main reason for most youths to use mobile phone and the internet as they play games, download music, and videos and talking with friends. The ICTs have wide-ranging effect on youth transitions. New opportunities for work and study are opening up for the youth in the country. These new technologies with their interactive and decentralized nature are providing youth many more opportunities to obtain information outside the traditional channels, enhancing their agency.

On the whole, ICTs are used by community members in the rural areas but these are at very nascent stage. ICTs, especially mobile services, have great impact on the life of people, whereas internet is still emerging among them. The use of mobile service breaks all social, economical, political and cultural barriers. Youths are becoming the leaders of ICT usage. ICTs are providing ways to become economically, socially, and politically transformative. The impact of village structure, size, location and distance from city does not matter in use of ICTs; it is the individual capacity and infrastructure characteristics which matter the most.

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