

Digital Literacy, Media Consumption and Cultural Exclusion - A Study on the Lodha Tribal Community of India

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Abstract

In today's volatile globalized world, our daily existence is observed to be highly dependent on digital literacy and new media consumption. Yet at the same time, while some social groups exist within a dynamic and highly advanced technology-enabled media life, some others are still happy to sustain a media existence that adheres to, and promotes all that is conventional and predictable. The reasons for this preference towards a traditional media existence could be many – lack of access to a digitized world, unconcern and indifference towards a technologically-advanced media, or lack of interest from coming out of a familiar and comfortable media space. Nevertheless, it is widely observed that when changes are wrought in communities and societies relating to technological advancements, it is the youth who are both its primary architect, and also the consumers. And in today's world of instant connectivity, no matter how remote a community is located in a country's map, the youths certainly find a way out to 'connect' to the outer world, or access the myriad entertainment outlets that new media has to offer. So how does this digital literacy and new media accessibility affect the social and cultural life of closed communities who have always been bound by specific cultural customs and traditions that gives them their unique identity? This change is now also visible among the Lodha tribal community of India, which was never observed before. The Lodhas are one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India, and are primarily found in the eastern Indian states of Odisha and West Bengal. They are forest dwellers and depend on the forest produce for their daily subsistence. The young people of the Lodha community are today observed to be moving away from their traditional cultural systems and into a more urbanized existence that is far removed from the life known to their previous generations. The research question that this study seeks to answer is – “Is there any interrelationship between new media existence and cultural exclusion among the youths of the Lodha community?” The study would be conducted among the Lodhas of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha to find out the extent of cultural exclusion among the Lodha youths. The study thus seeks to highlight the different aspects of cultural marginalization among the Lodha youth due to the influence of new media, which is being increasingly observed to be highly intrusive and all pervasive.

Key Words: Digital literacy, cultural exclusion, new media, Lodha community, tribals, India



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Introduction

- Our daily existence is observed to be highly dependent on digital literacy and new media consumption.
- Some social groups exist within a dynamic and highly advanced technology-enabled media life.
- But, some others are still happy to sustain a media existence that adheres to, and promotes all that is conventional and predictable.



Reasons are many:

- lack of access to a digitized world,
- unconcern and indifference towards a technologically-advanced media,
- or lack of interest from coming out of familiar and comfortable media space.

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- **Yet, in today's world of instant connectivity, no matter how remote is the community from an urban existence, the youth always find a way to connect to the world,**
 - **or access the myriad entertainment outlets that new media has to offer**

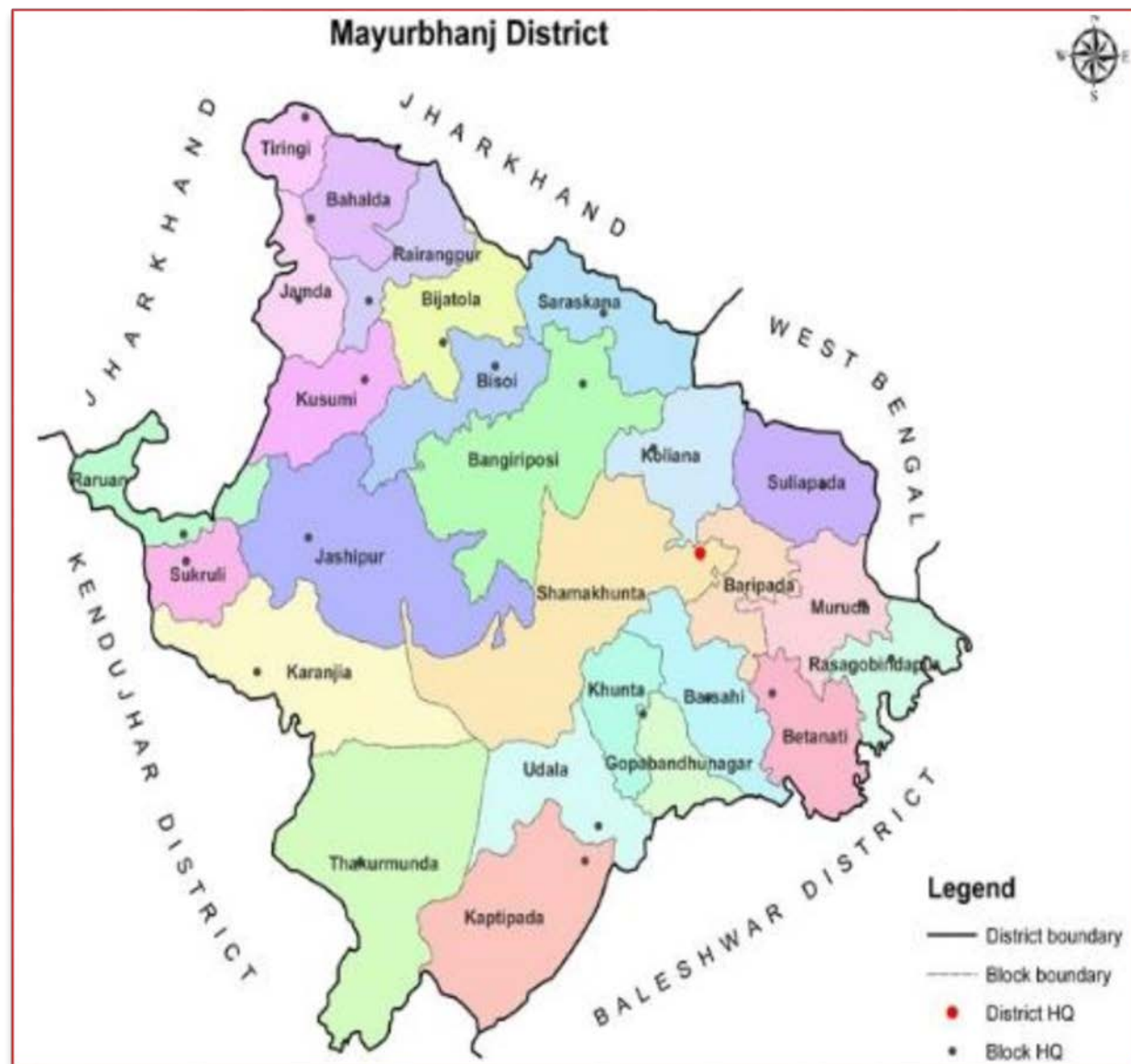
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- **So how does new media affect the social and cultural life of closed communities who have always been bound by specific cultural customs and traditions that gives them their unique identity?**

Research Question

- **“Is there any interrelationship between new media existence and cultural exclusion among the youths of the Lodha community?”**

The Lodha Tribal Community

- **The Lodhas are one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India, and are primarily found in the eastern Indian states of Odisha and West Bengal.**
- **India has 705 tribes and 75 PVTGs. Odisha has 62 tribes and 13 PVTGs (the largest among all states).**
- **Odisha has 22.8% tribal population (Census 2011).**



Digital Connectivity in Rural India

- Indian Digital Marketing Statistics 2016 states that there are 462 million internet users, and around 992 million mobile phone users.
- Boston Consulting Group (BCG), 2016 estimates that up to 850 million Indian consumers are expected to be online by 2025, and “half of those would be rural users”
- “More than the combined population of the G7 countries”

The Lodha Tribe

- Have a long history of oppression, exploitation, marginalization, and human rights violation.
- Derived from “lubdhaka”, meaning a flower.
- Branded as a ‘Criminal Tribe’ by the British.
- According to Guha (2016) “Having been deprived of their livelihood and without any alternatives, they took to criminal ways of life.”
- Since then the Govt. of India has started the ‘demarginalization process’ and tried to attach them to the mainstream societal process through several developmental pgms.

Lodhas of Odisha State

- **A small community having only 9785 members, primarily found in Morada, Suliapada and Udala blocks of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha (Census, 2011).**
- **Originally they spoke Mundari (from Austroasiatic language family) , but today they speak a dialect comprising distorted versions of Odia, Bengali (Indo-Aryan languages) and Mundari.**



A former criminal who has given up guns and is now dependent on agriculture for survival (a 2017 newspaper report)

Main Source of Livelihood

- **Collecting minor forest products, such as leaves for preparing leaf-plates, for preparing country-cigars or *Bidis* and firewood for sale.**
- **Collecting edible roots and fruits for household consumption and for selling in the local market.**
- **Catching fish and small tortoises for domestic consumption and sale.**

Livelihood of a Lodha Youth

- **Depend on the forest for livelihood**
- **With the passage of time they are now spread out in other deforested areas.**
- **Nowadays they work as farm labourers / daily labourers / migrant workers.**
- **Some are engaged as construction workers in town areas.**

Study Methods

- **Qualitative study -**

Face to face interviews, group discussions and observation methods were applied.

Forty-four (44) youths (age group 16-35) were interviewed (Male -32, Female -12).

(all had mobile phones/access to TV)

- **Key questions that were asked –**

the kind of devices used, their usage, frequency of usage, purpose of usage, time of usage, monthly expenditure on new media, effects on their relationships, family, employability, social and cultural life.

Lodha Youths



Key Findings

- **Even without any real school education the tribal youths are able to use the new media devices quite well & frequently.**
- **Out of the total 44 respondents, 28 had internet connection on their phones.**
- **There is a growing aspiration to use more number of smartphones.**
- **Primarily it is the men who are using smartphones. The girls had feature phones with them.**

Key Findings...continued

- From celebrating their traditional festivals like *Sitala puja*, *Chandi puja*, *Mansa puja*, *Jathel*, they have moved on to celebrate festivals like *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Ganesh/Saraswati puja*, *Christmas*, *Dusshera*, etc. to their own birthdays and sometimes even anniversaries.
- Their rituals used to be performed by a *Dehuri* (a priest from their own tribe). But now with assimilation sometimes they invite *Brahmins*.
- Marriages used to be fixed by exchange of food grains, but now it's more about clothes & ornaments.

Key Findings...

- They have started showcasing their tribal dance/music during marriage processions of upper caste people for money.
- Mobile phones come in handy for this. People contact them through their mobiles, and immediate arrangements are made.
- But, in their own marriage ceremonies they prefer playing modern Hindi/Odia songs rather than their traditional *baddi* songs.

Key Findings...continued

- The dances are then sometimes uploaded to social media sites like FB and Whatsapp.
- Odia and Hindi languages are gaining ground as compared to their local language, because of access to Odia and Hindi TV serials.
- They also know the meanings of 'LOL, GDN, BRO, GR8, PLS, UR, U and D8.'
- Their clothes, hairstyles, food habits are all changing quite fast. Urban lifestyle is preferred.
- The Lodha girls prefer boys who look like their TV stars. 'Selfie-culture' is also on the rise.

Conclusion

- Budget-friendly tariff charges of the internet and electricity in the most backward villages and free-to-air channel package has developed their desire towards new media consumption.
- From agricultural practices to health and education information are nowadays readily available.
- Industry supervisors are able to contact them immediately for labour-related work.
- But families are not as cohesive as they used to be. Youths are mostly busy with their mobiles.
- Do not connect much with their parents or with their traditional way of life any longer.

Tribal Village Areas in Odisha





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- Thank You

