

Tiger Tiger Burning Bright: The Tweeting Tribes of Odisha

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Abstract

Odisha is an Indian state wherein a lot of tribal population is nested. This paper discusses the emancipatory journey that these forest dwellers were helped in taking by committed voluntary organisations towards accessing the fruits of good governance. It also records the trajectory wherein an unlettered population, who used to earlier chase civic service officials for securing basic functional necessities, graduated to acquiring social media skills and catalysing the delivery of hitherto delayed services. This occurred quite rapidly with their empowerment in using smartphone devices and harnessing social media tools. It is interesting to notice that the lockdown era of COVID, in fact, acted to expedite this journey.

*In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?
- William Blake*

In What Distant Deeps or Skies – The Challenges of Being Remote

Deep in the hills and forests, tucked away in mountainous cradles, lacing many jungle edges, far from the maddening crowd, are the homes of the tribes of Odisha. 62 of the 705¹ officially listed ethnic tribes of India live in the state of Odisha, with the second highest population of tribes after the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Unlike the Jarawa and Sentinelese of the Andamans, whose very lives are at peril when contacted by the mainland populace, the tribes of Odisha have long ago adopted many precepts of the mainstream population. Yet they remain outliers who struggle to preserve their unique life trajectories, with limited access to the fundamental material facilities that perceptibly define the non-tribal, non-rural masses.

For many of the tribal and rural communities, what this mostly translates to is abysmal access to basic facilities. We are looking at poor to no road connectivity, potable water, electricity, hospitals, schools, and agricultural support systems. Usually, they don't even have information about whom to approach to obtain these. With a high migration pattern for food, water, and jobs,

they intertwine with the rural and city folk. However, they lack the means and tools to economically or socially transact with them. Their geographical and cultural segregation, poor access to quality education, and a weak voice in policies that impact them put them in a highly vulnerable social, economic, and political spot.

Meanwhile, the world has been going digital at a fast pace. The unkind digital cut is that many are left out of this race. While those with digital access and education are harvesting its bounties, the digital gravy cart speedily bypasses those without the means, understanding, or access to the tiniest pixel of this digital cake.

The India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divideⁱⁱ states that only 1% of Scheduled Tribes and 2% of Scheduled Castes in India have access to a computer. They further note that only 8.9% of the 20% of India's poorest households have access to the Internet. In contrast, 50.7% of the 20% of the richest households have Internet.

The digital floodgates are suddenly opening up opportunities for those who can use it to inform themselves and leverage it to become unthinkably faster and more immediately potent and relevant. Where does this leave the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes of Odisha, who are already struggling with their redundancy, isolation, and disempowerment? What does it mean to be digitally disowned?

Burnt the Fire of Thine Eyes? – Interventions That Have Motivated the Tribes

The story of the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes of Odisha has largely been that of an ongoing struggle to shift from survival mode to thriving communities. Whatever access they had to natural bounties in the shape of land, forest produce, and natural waters in their own habitat, too, have been encroached upon. While there are laws to protect their rights, there are also laws that limit their free access to land and forest. Over the years, industries have polluted waters that are already going scarce in the shadow of both climate change and development.

There have been pockets of interventions from non-government organisations (NGOs) that gave them handouts – financial help, free food, medicines, rations, books for school children, and so on. Such limited aid does little more than make them depended and disempowered.

Fortunately, there have also been those NGOs that have slowly but surely educated them about their rights. They trained them to form their own village-level groups, and taught them to connect with each other. Over time they become a body large and knowledgeable enough to make an impression when demanding their rights. They became a force that people took notice of. This was a result of educating the tribes about every law, scheme, and opportunity that the government afforded them. Followed by motivating them to engage in an ongoing battle of small and large campaigns to ask for everything they have been promised and not delivered. The process of sustaining organised and committed groups doubtlessly requires a high investment of time, energy, and resources.

But these scores of local, organised groups with vernacular names have learned the value of collective action to get what is due to them. The habit of jumping into organised action makes them disinclined to timidly let fate wash over their aspirations of doing better. Especially when ‘better’ is a matter of survival. Some of these demands are shockingly basic – a single street light in a village of 40-50ⁱⁱⁱ families in the middle of nowhere. A road stretch that enables small children to be able to reach school without negotiating the rocks, wet mud, or jungle animals – usually a school with one room and one teacher for five classes. Installation or repair of a single hand pump in the village that saves the women from a daily 17-kilometer trek to fetch just two pots of water. A primary health center for a village of 150 people who have no means to reach the nearest hospital, which is about 50 kilometers away. The list of unfulfilled necessities is common to most communities and involves:

- water
- roads
- electricity
- health facilities
- primary education
- pensions
- housing

The above merge with some less fundamental needs for which they have learned to group and re-group to make applications, petitions, and organise protests and rallies to get the attention of authorities.

For many years they crossed some really daunting barriers. Getting out of villages, traveling miles on foot, on borrowed and sponsored cycles, and raising a storm of protest. They waited with infinite patience to enter daunting buildings to present their demand lists to intimidating-looking officials.

It was likely this background of struggle that made many of the tribes open to embracing a digital paradigm that would have normally bypassed them for many more years. When the Covid lockdowns in 2020-21 took away jobs and wiped out businesses and industries, it also made worse the daily livelihood struggle of the tribes.

In a way, the lockdowns really defined us. There were those that responded to the exceptionally difficult circumstances by finding extraordinary ways. They blazed new paths. Unexpectedly, this group was where the tribes of Odisha belonged, probably because that had become their default response to challenges.

A significant observation of *The India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide* was that by the end of 2021, the likelihood of an ST or SC having a phone increased as compared to 2018. The pandemic proved to be the challenge that brought out the best in the tribesmen of Odisha, and it was reflected in the most unlikely instrument – social media on phones. It was technology that required each tribe member to be educated, digitally educated, and have at least enough money to afford a smartphone. The majority of the tribes had none of the three qualifications.

On What Wings Dare He Aspire? – What Made the Odisha Tribes Adopt Social Media

The tribal communities have always been close-knit. But their resilience and die-hard outlook were born from their recent history of persistent and growing collective struggle. The struggle sought to obtain for themselves a semblance of the positives of ‘civilization’ that had taken away the comforts of their old and simple life without replacing them with the attendant perks of modern life. It had given them the ability to quickly recognise elements alien to their frame of reference. It also instilled in them courage and swiftness to adopt the new, as long as it demonstrated an ability to meet their immediate objectives. The relatively short collective activism gave them wings to transition to the novel paradigm of connectivism.

The last 10-20 years of using non-traditional means of negotiation for their needs developed in them a sense of flexibility.^{iv} This made them ready to learn yet another new thing and face the hurdles of alien technology head-on without prejudices. “Victory comes from finding opportunities in problems,” proclaimed Sun Tzu, the Chinese Military General and philosopher. What was true before 256 BCE is just as true today.

The young teenage boys, with their fascination for gadgets and time ‘wasted’ on social media, were the first to spot an opportunity on Facebook and Twitter. When all local offices repeatedly dismissed the villagers’ complaints for the handpump’s restoration, the boys discussed it with the village elders and tweeted the issue. They posted a picture and tagged government handles.^v After all, it was the entire village’s only source of water.

To their utter surprise and delight, the problem was rectified in fifteen days. This was an unprecedented response. Earlier, it would take them days to formulate an application, put together a representative group, and persuade people that this was important enough to take time off their regular work. Then it took weeks and often months to follow up the applications at the local and then at the block or state level offices, depending on how long or how high up in the chain of government delegation they had to go to find a resolution.

The news spread like wildfire. Soon anyone in any village with a smartphone was in demand because the list of issues in every village was a long and ongoing one. It didn’t take too long for local leaders to organise meetings where the people who knew how to open Twitter and Facebook accounts were helping everyone with a smartphone to open their accounts.

It’s important to note that this is an example of how structured, intensive action groups have been able to rapidly innovate and use the most available effective tool in a time of crisis. The driving impetus was a cultivated habit of finding solutions in the face of problems through organised and sustained collective action. When the opportunity to turn connective presented itself, they were able to recognise and use it because the driving force for coming together physically or virtually was exactly the same – putting community well-being in the fore.

The tribes, by and large have low to no literacy, no digital exposure, and very low access to the Internet. From not knowing the first thing about a smartphone or social media, how did they

become dedicated regular users of social media in such a short time? How did they pick up so soon the nuances of posting, replying, liking, sharing, retweeting, tagging, hash-tagging, and how and when to do these for maximum mileage and impact?

It is evident that they were acutely motivated by a shared feeling of community and the common objective of collective benefit. Their use of social media was need-driven. The connective phase using digital technology was an organic extension of their collective action graph. The phenomenon of something going 'viral' on social media, whether something entertaining or politically serious like '#MeToo' '#BlackLivesMatter,' '#FakeNews,' '#NeverAgain,' '#NotInMyName,' depended on the stimulated synchronicity of a large enough section of the population with a social media handle to think alike. It depended on their simultaneous motivation to trend something long enough to make it a noticeable social media phenomenon.

Here, it was and still is a well deliberated and studiously organised effort of communities that share the same bandwidth of problems. They don't casually post or tweet but use it specifically to meet their collective aim of resolving something that perhaps affects a micro subset but which the whole set empathizes with and stands in support of with the subset.

A person flagging an issue affecting them, their family, or their immediate local community is in tandem with similar issues in near and far villages and with the people in villages of other states with similar problems. It is something that they can relate to because they have experienced it themselves or through immediate members of their own villages.

The tribal social-media-posting member is defined by the following characteristics:

- Addresses the real needs of their own community
- Is best positioned to understand their own problems
- Is usually working at the local level, person to person
- Is involved in building intra-community trust and is forming new collaborations and partnerships
- Uses sustainable and scalable methods
- Adapts constantly

The tribe member who posts on social media is part of an existing and constantly growing collective and takes their existing strengths to unite the collective using technology and it's rapidly changing social media tools. This helps them steadily pursue loyalty, connection, and support for the tribal communities.

What the Hand, Dare Seize the Fire? – Strategies and Networking for Social Media Impact

It was not like the tribal communities figured out social media strategies on their own without external expert guidance. But what spun the spiral of success to the next level was constant – the spirit of collective action of people who absolutely supported one another in their times of trouble.

The mechanism they used earlier helped them speed up the process of building and expanding the new social media community. This included training and learning from each other at village-level meetings and then taking it from village to village. Though there were challenges with both basic and digital literacy, there were always a few in every village who helped with opening accounts, composing tweets, or posting on Facebook. Since most villagers could not afford a smartphone, they pooled money and bought a few. They then nominated young persons to operate accounts on their behalf.

As news spread about their success and local journalists reported their stories, social media experts partnered with them to help them do better.^{vi} They tied up with a Twitter platform called ‘*Bara baje bara minute*,’ translating to ‘12 O’clock, 12 minutes.’ The platform administrators got them organised into local WhatsApp groups. In the groups, they would answer questions and put in easy-to-follow training modules on how to tag and what hashtags to use for what sort of issues. They also broadcast lists of authorities and people to tag. Beginning at 12 O’clock every day for 12 minutes, everyone retweeted, commented on, and liked the post of the complaint that the admin had chosen to amplify. The fervour with which they had done their physical campaigns converted to social media campaigns, with far less effort for much greater results. As more and more tribals overcame their fear of the digital world and joined in, they proudly adopted the epithet they were given – Hashtag Warriors.

The success stories poured in of administrators and government officials responding to the posts and action taken on water, school, road, electricity, pension, and more issues that had been pending for years. In the wake of the cascade of posts and tweets, many government districts and block offices created a special team to respond to the posts and to follow up with action.

The transparency and public visibility worked both ways. It worked for the tribals for an increasing number of eyes to see what issues they were facing on a daily basis. When the administration tweeted back and posted results, they were seen as responsive and responsible by the same public. This goes down very well for the government, which is always looking for ways to impress upon the public that it is working for them. There is mutual gratification for both parties, unlike the physical system. There you could be complaining for years, and no one would know outside of your tiny village, and likewise, any work done by the administration, too, would not be acknowledged other than by a minuscule community.

Journalist Tazeen Qureshy^{vii} observed,

They may not know how to read and write, but they know that posting a problem on social media can get more traction than lining up in offices with a list of grievances. They know that sharing, liking, and commenting on the posts of their fellow tribes is the way they can support each other.

The Odisha tribes – with a positive history of collective action – were able to apply themselves to create an increasing cascade of positive action through a purposefully designed connective network. It had the ingredients to grow both deliberately and organically. Self-organised small

groups can burgeon into a flow of networked groups. Their results can become much larger than the sum total of its components, way beyond what they imagined.

In the deep and perilous digital world, the social media jungle is a tough nut to crack for those wanting to make a difference in the socio-political construct. It is tough to reach out to an audience that can change the quality of life on the ground. The unlikely Tribal collectives of Odisha, with all their handicap, have emerged tigers, showing the savvy digital crowd the way to create a connective digital community in a purposeful and meaningful way.

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- ⁱ Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute; SCSTRTI.in;
<https://www.scstrti.in/index.php/communities/tribes#:~:text=As%20per%20the%20Census%202011,30%20districts%20and%20314%20blocks>.
- ⁱⁱ Mahendru Apoorva, Dutta Mayurakshi, Mishra Pravas Ranjan. India Inequality Report 2022: The Digital Divide. Dec 2022; ruralindiaonline.org; <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/digital-divide-india-inequality-report-2022/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Information based on direct interviews with tribe members in villages of Odisha
- ^{iv} Information based on direct interviews with team members of Odisha Shramajeebi Manch, and Mahila Shramajeebi Manch, Odisha
- ^v Atmashakti Trust; Channel Atmashakti – How I Became a Warrior. YouTube Video, 5:21 mins.
- ^{vi} Qureshy Tazeen; *How social media became the last resort for Odisha villages to air grievances*, thefederal.com, 28th September 2022, <https://thefederal.com/the-eighth-column/how-social-media-became-the-last-resort-for-odisha-villages-to-air-grievances/>
- ^{vii} Atmashakti Trust; Channel Atmashakti – *How I Became a Warrior*. YouTube Video, 5:21 mins.