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Mobile Phone Usage Pattern of Women of Santal Tribe in West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal rise of mobile phones in the country can be ascribed to the construction of a wide network and diverse mobile phone services available to users from all walks of life. The greatest success of the mobile phone revolution can be explained by its increasing density and remotest reach where no roads exist or people struggle for basic healthcare facilities. It has become a ubiquitous part of life. This commonplace instrument has become an important communication tool in the modern world. With 52,963 residents, West Bengal makes up 5.8% of the state's total population and 5.01% of all tribal people in the country. Santal, which shares common states of habitation with West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, and Tripura, is the third most populous tribe after Bhil and Gond. The usage patterns of women of Santal tribe in West Bengal, India, served as the basis for this study. The Singur block in West Bengal's Hooghly district served as the study's location. Ten Santal tribal women in the age range of 18 to 38 were chosen in total. We conducted in-depth interviews with every participant. It was discovered that women of all ages owned mobile phones, either from self-affordance purchases or inheritance from male family members. They use their phones for various reasons, such as making calls and chatting on social media platforms like WhatsApp, but mostly for their own or their children's educational requirements.

INTRODUCTION

The use of mobile phones has increased significantly in the last several years. The global population, who was growing less vulnerable because to the pandemic's limited immobility, embraced it. Mobile phones have made it practically easier to travel from home to all social areas, such as banks, offices, schools, and universities without making physical movement. Both the gendered and digital divides have dramatically diminished as a result of our increasing reliance on mobile devices. Women can now own cell phones, however they were previously only allowed to use them in an emergency. Thanks to cell phones, the gendered digital divide is becoming less pronounced. According to GSMA (2022), there was a significant increase in the proportion of Indian women who utilised mobile internet during the COVID-19 epidemic, with the number going from 21% to 30% between 2020 and 2021. One of these kinds of major shifts has taken place among the native tribes of West Bengal. The languages, cultures, and lifestyles of the tribal people are distinctive. The advent of the mobile phone has also brought about changes inside the tribal community. In a country like India where patriarchy is the norm and women are compelled to submit to being commissioned over utilising technology, the pandemic has changed the landscape.

In recent times, scholars of media studies have found great value in researching women from underprivileged rural communities. Thus, studies like Bhatia *et al*. (2019) and Garg (2021) have focused on research on mobile phone ownership, usage, behavior, and patterns. Women from tribal communities who are severely marginalized in society because of their remoteness, cultural differences, lack of resources, and country of origin can now integrate into society at large with the aid of mobile phones.

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Review of Literature

Status of Ownership and Mobile Phone Usage in India

Potnis (2016) investigated ownership and discovered gender inequality in India. The four primary causes of this gender gap among women, according to him, are the power differential between men and women, gender roles that require women to accept responsibility and submit to authority, the fact that women are unable to own mobile phones due to financial uncertainty, and societal expectations that prioritize family over personal spending, making them victims of "collectivism." Interestingly, Tsetsi and Rains (2017) discovered that, despite the digital divide, women in minority categories known as "internet have-nots" relied more on smartphones than women in other demographic groups. There is a gender difference in mobile phone ownership in Central India (Scott *et al*., 2021). They noticed that, other from listening to the Kilkari health program, postpartum women mostly relied on their husbands for phone access. According to Devdas (2022), mobile phones are a source of contamination for female subjectivity in Tamil Nadu's patriarchal culture. This was corroborated by Bhallamudi (2022), who discovered that girls resorted to strategies like borrowing and sharing a common household phone, whereas male friends' brothers had easy access to phones. This is due to the belief that phones may harm girls, which has resulted in restrictions due to concerns about romantic behavior or outside influences.

The nature of usage is illustrated by examining the interaction and perspective of women's mobile phone uses, women's negotiated mobile phone access, and additional study in the academic field of gender and mobile phone interaction. Garg (2021) claims that women utilise mobile devices to communicate with family, maintain virtual narratives, and earn a living. For example, it was discovered that women from a remote village in Punjab's Bhatinda were mostly using their mobile phones to stay in touch with their close and extended family members. Tenhunen's (2014) research, which details how young girls use mobile phones to stay in touch with their family members even after marriage, supported a similar conclusion. Literature has noted that young adult women and adolescent girls are defying imposed traditional norms. In particular, they go above and beyond all conventions by bringing it online. Unlike older women, they engage in a variety of online activities and expand the use of their phones beyond just making contacts on social and internal media. According to Bhatia *et al*. (2019), teenagers in India utilise techniques like hiding their profile photos or using a generic photo with a fictitious user ID in order to avoid being recognized on social media. This enables individuals to navigate their use of digital media and surreptitiously monitor the lives of others without running the risk of being suppressed.

Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 years increased the use of mobile phones by women of all ages in both urban and rural settings. How it was connected to business and education changed women's lives. The widespread use of this modest, contemporary technical marvel has diminished the significance of distance and linguistic barriers. The largest penetration of mobile handsets and recharge plans has been achieved in rural India due to their economical availability. The number of internet users in India reached half a billion in the year before to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mishra *et al*., 2020). The growth rate of these users is 10% in urban areas and 15% in rural regions, with 35% of them being women. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable surge in the percentage of Indian women who used mobile internet, rising from 21% to 30% of the population between 2020 and 2021 (GSMA, 2022). In a similar vein, the Schedule Tribe's percentage of mobile phone owners fell from 10% of the general category in pre-COVID-19 years to 7% at the end of 2021. Moreover, when it came to phone recharges, SC, ST, and OBC were more likely to spend over 400 rupees (just 10% less than the general category) in the post-pandemic era than they were to spend less than 100 rupees in the pre-pandemic period. Additionally, STs in India have the lowest levels of digital literacy at the household level (21%) when compared to the general, SC, and OBC groups (Oxfam India, 2022).

According to the data, the ST category in India had the lowest rates of monthly spending, mobile literacy, and phone penetration in both the pre- and post-COVID periods. In a patriarchal country like India, this study intends to investigate the access and usage patterns of tribal women, a particularly marginalized segment of our society.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the mobile phone ownership of tribal women
- To examine the purpose of using a mobile phone
- To study the features used by women

Methodology

The current research work was carried out in West Bengal's Hooghly district's Singur Block. We chose women between the ages of 18 and 38 years. Ten women in all were interviewed. This sample size number is accepted in qualitative study (Chakraborty and Garg, 2023). The Santal tribe was selected for this investigation. Respondents were reached through snowball sampling.

The Indigenous Community and Santal Tribe

Indigenous people are the custodians of distinctive customs, languages, and cultural heritage. Over 476 million indigenous people live in 90 different countries and represent 5,000 distinct cultures worldwide. They

inhabit all geographical regions and comprise 6.2% of the world's population; at least 40% of the 7,000 languages spoken there are endangered (UNDP, 2021). 89.9% of tribal Indians live in rural areas, and 10.03 percent live in urban areas, according to the 2011 Census (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013).

India is home to several indigenous groups, the majority of which are confined to the country's arid landscape. Scheduled Tribes (ST) are the poorest and most economically deprived indigenous communities in India. There are 705 tribal organizations in India, out of which 75 are classified as vulnerable tribal organizations (PVTGs), with a combined membership of over 10.2 crore. Due to their 'forest-based livelihood, pre-agriculture level of existence, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy, and subsistence economy, among other factors,' historically prehistoric tribal tribes are especially vulnerable (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2010).

8.6% of the nation's total population are tribal people, also known as 'Adivasi', are the country's original settlers (Census of India). With 52,963 residents, West Bengal makes up 5.8% of the state's total population and 5.01% of all tribal people in the country. Santal, which shares common states of habitation with West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, and Tripura, is the third most populous tribe after Bhil and Gond (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013; Ali, 1998; Siddique, 1984).

Theoretical Framework

Digital divide

The phrase' digital divide' first emerged in the 1990s in relation to the discussion about students of different races having unequal access to computers (Carlson and Isaacs, 2018). Nevertheless, the issue goes beyond simple differences of 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Dewan and Riggins, 2005; Hargittai, 2002) or differences that result in 'winners and losers' of the 'information society' (Bruno *et al*., 2011). Instead, a plethora of 'complex, multifaceted, and dynamic' social disparities contribute to the digital divide (Goedhart *et al*., 2019). These disparities include poverty and illiteracy (Mubarak *et al*., 2019), gender-based disparities in outcomes (Serrano-Cinca *et al*., 2018), and marginalized groups (Jackson *et al*., 2008), all of which limit ICT adoption and use. Scholars like Attwell (2001), Ragnedda and Ruiu (2017) have proposed three different levels of digital divide. Early studies of digital divide emerged from access perspective, i.e., the divide in accessing digital devices. The second level of digital divide deals with the technological proficiency of digital divide who already own it, where Van Deursen *et al*. (2016) identified five essential skills that make up the 'use' aspects of the second level: operational skills (related to use of internet), the capacity to navigate and assess online information, the ability to communicate with others, the capacity to create and share content and the ability to use mobile devices. The third level of digital divide looks at the inequality of output of exploring the information technology arising from second level and conceptual factor termed as 'Digital outcome divide' (Wei *et al*., 2011)

Uses and gratification

Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz *et al*., 1973) explains why people use particular media. This theory emphasises that an individual actively selects the media they engage in based on the gratification they want. The primary assumptions of this theory are that (a) media use is goal-directed; (b) people use media to satisfy needs and desires; (c) social and psychological factors mediate media use; and (d) media use and interpersonal communication are related. Uses and Gratification Theory is a micro-level media effect theory as it is based on observation and conclusion more on individual media users than on institutions, systems, or societies. In terms of uses and gratification, an individual has a few needs to be satisfied: cognitive, affective, personal, social integrative, and tension-free (Katz *et al*., 1973). Uses and gratification in this context are used as a theoretical framework to understand what gratification tribal women receive from mobile phones.

Result

Ownership of a Mobile Phone

Among indigenous women, we discovered two divisions of ownership patterns. Among all the respondents, 90% were found to be using smartphone and only 10% women possess keypad phone (Figure. 1) Young people (under 30

Table 1: Mobile phone ownership pattern of Santal women

Women (below 30)	*Women (Above 30)*
First-time owners of mobile phone	Second-time owners of mobile phone
First-time users of mobile internet	First-time users of mobile internet
Owned mobile phone with self-affordance	Mobile phone passed by male member
Male surveillance experienced	Male patron has access

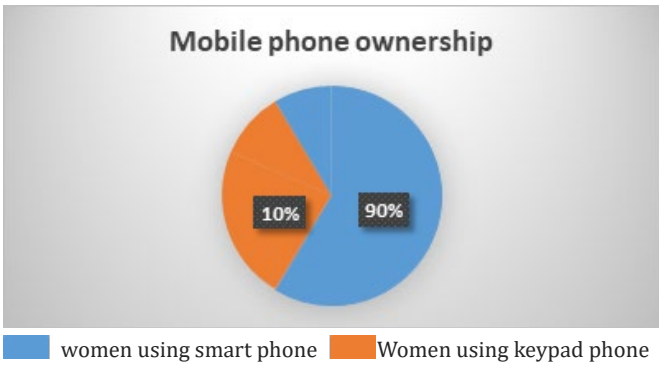

Figure 1: Mobile phone ownership

years) can purchase a mobile phone on their own, while married people over 30 years have cell phones given to them by their spouses.

It is via self-affordance that young indigenous unmarried women are able to own a mobile phone. They are able to purchase a phone with their savings plus the assistance of a sibling or cousin – and that too a used model. But occasionally, a brother or cousin will chip in. Alternatively, they must continue to rely on a male relative to obtain a phone. Respondent 1 paid for her used phone – which cost Rs 4,000—with her personal funds. Respondent 2: Her father was unable to purchase a phone, so she and her sister contributed Rs. 5,000 to purchase a used one. Respondent 3's parents could not purchase her phone, so her maternal uncle helped her with a few amounts of money along with the amount she saved for herself. Her parents are her only source of energy. Since her father purchased the phone specifically for her younger brother before she has the new one, respondent 3 had to bargain with the phone's owner (her brother), who is in middle school. She could then only maintain contact with her study groups and college pals as part of her ownership.

Respondent 4 also bargains with her spouse to obtain the one mobile phone that her husband owns in the home. She has an eight-month-old daughter, is married, 21 years old, and is in her first semester of college. After being admitted to college at the age of 18, she left because she became pregnant, but she later returned to university after giving birth. She only attends university classes four days a week, and each time she visits the college, she mostly takes her husband's smartphone with her. On the name of the personal phone, she has one keypad phone only.

It was discovered that among women over 30, the all were mothers and had mobile phones that their spouses passed. They used keypad phones back then (pre-pandemic). However, they received smartphones for their school-age children in COVID-19. Respondents verified during the conversation that older kids occasionally teach younger ones how to use a cell phone. Ten years ago, for instance, a 38-year-old woman of two children owned her own personal keypad phone. All she knew was how to make and get calls. She used it then to speak with family members and to phone her spouse before he left for work.

Indigenous women's mobile phone ownership

Purpose of using a mobile phone

There are other reasons to utilise a mobile phone, such as keeping in touch with loved ones or using it for academic purposes. It was discovered that young female college students attended online classes throughout the pandemic using their phones. To attend online classes and maintain contact with friends and teachers, they make use of Google Meet and WhatsApp respectively.

Figure 2 90% of the all respondents were found to be using WhatsApp for varied purposes. Young girls were found to be using WhatsApp to stay connected with friends and teachers and get updates of classes. Mothers use WhatsApp to record voice notes, exchange messages and images, make video calls, and remain in touch. And interact with the school's teachers and get coaching materials via WhatsApp. A 38-year-old graduate mother of two responders states that although she had a keypad phone, her only phone literacy was placing and receiving calls. But she has learnt to type messages using a smartphone. She eventually learned how to use the English alphabet to type in her native tongue. Her children in middle and high school, respectively, must use WhatsApp for their academic purposes. Her spouse and children have access to her phone. She claimed to write questions for professors in WhatsApp groups. She revealed that she uploads her images to her WhatsApp status in her usage habit. She picked up all these traits from her children. Another 35-year-old mother respondent shared that whose daughter is 16 years old has a personal smartphone that her husband gave her. Occasionally, a phone is given to the girl to use. The 35-year-old gives her spouse access to her phone password, but she is not permitted to know her husband's password. She claimed to have learned how to make video calls and alter her WhatsApp profile picture from her daughter. She thus changes her WhatsApp display picture each time they take a new photo.

YouTube was noted to be the second most used feature after WhatsApp 80% (Figure 2) of all women responded agreed on use of YouTube. Young girls make the most of YouTube. They utilise YouTube for both learning and entertainment. Mothers who can type and those who are unable to do so search using YouTube microphone. One mother respondent shared that her go-to sources of satisfaction on YouTube are Bengali tunes, Santali folk music, a variety of ethnic cookery videos, and researching educational materials for her children.

Google features has been acknowledged to be most helpful feature among respondents (Figure 2) 60% of respondents feel enthusiastic about using various google features. One mother respondent shared that she uses Google for everything from aiding her child to looking up the definition of a phrase she is unfamiliar with. She uses a Google microphone occasionally, and types her question other times.

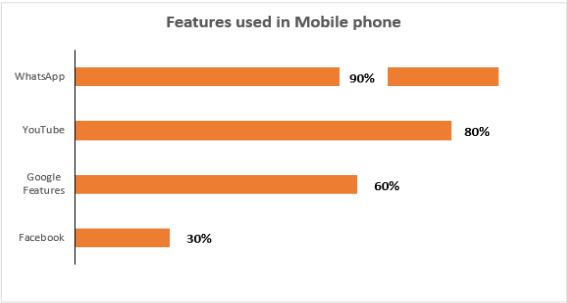

Figure 2: Features used in Mobile phone

Only Figure 2 30% of all respondents acknowledge to be on social media. Fewer married women agreed that, with their husbands' consent, they even use his social media account but on their husband's account. Only one 35-year-old respondent enjoys watching videos her daughter has made on her phone on social media platforms like Facebook. Daily soap opera clips, Santali songs, Santali albums, and Santali movie clips are the most popular posts on her Facebook page.

How socio-cultural dynamics within the tribal communities influence mobile phone usage, especially focusing on gender roles and economic factors

In India, 49.4% tribal female are literate against 68.5% tribal male. In the state of West Bengal, literacy rate of female stands for 70.6% where only literacy rates among tribal women population stands for only 47.7% and the gap is 22.9%. The Gross Enrolment Ration among schedule tribes of India (GER) as per the data available of 2015-16 is 42.4% girls as compared to 43.8% boys of Senior Secondary school (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). Santal, one of the oldest groups to arrive in the subcontinent, are credited with creating and maintaining the agricultural system and agro-based society (Banglapedia, n.d,). Carrin (2007) has called Santal community 'agriculturalist tribe'. Traditionally both the genders of this community are often responsible for engaging in agricultural activities and women with extra activity to involve in household chores. In this community, male dominance is more pronounced, while the role of women in the household is far more negligible (Ota and Patnaik, 2014). Women enjoy liberty in marriage and labour only (Carrin, 2007).

In the context of digital technology adoption (mobile phone in specific) within any community, socio-cultural dynamics play a crucial role and the situation becomes more complexed when it comes women. The complexities of this dynamic have found in the case of Santal community, an indigenous Indian community that as apart of the larger Indian patriarchal society presents a scenario in which women face distinct challenges in embracing technology like mobile phone. A noteworthy determinant in this regard is the economic condition of individual families given the marginalised status of the tribal community within the broader social framework. As per the findings, the adoption hurdles experienced by women in the Santal community are mostly due to the income levels in their households. The tribal community's economic condition appears as a critical element influencing the adoption of new technology devices. This finding is supported by the GSMA's (2023) finding on mobile phone ownership in India which identifies 'affordability' as the most significant barrier in owning a mobile phone for women followed by 'digital literacy and skills and 'relevance'. This research finding indicates that Santal women has owned mobile phone for educational reasons, family co-ordinations and domestic management. It was found that male authority exercises a considerable influence over initiative aimed at promoting education. Despite minimal financial resources and limited digital literacy, both younger and older women show are embracing mobile phone technology.

In the face of a constrained economy and low level of digital literacy, demographic shifts and evolving preferences within the community have contributed to a gradual acceptance of mobile phones. This paradigm shift highlights the multifaced nature of the socio-cultural dynamics shaping technology adoption, particularly within the marginalized communities of the Santal, necessitating a comprehensive understanding to formulate targeted interventions and strategies that cater to their specific needs and challenges.

Discussion

According to this survey, indigenous women of various ages who have smartphones use them for a variety of reasons. Smartphones are not limited to making and getting calls only. They use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook.

The least amount of women from indigenous areas can use the internet and education (Nayak and Alam, 2022). Their inability to afford a cell phone restricts their ownership. Gender-specific norms in COVID-19 pose a substantial hurdle for girls and women from socially disadvantaged groups living in remote locations when they want to access digital infrastructure, according to the Centre for Catalysing Change (2021). It has been observed that young indigenous females living in remote areas have considerable challenges when trying to access the internet because of their lack of knowledge and fear of technology. Functional literacy and digital abilities connected to mobile devices are the main obstacles to the adoption of mobile phone internet, according to GSMA (2022). For female respondents in nations like India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, and Guatemala, reading and writing difficulties are especially important problems. The succeeding reasons for the barriers to women's mobile internet use in India include literacy and digital skills, affordability, and relevance.

The respondents mentioned all the conveniences they had experienced when asked about the value of owning a mobile phone and what changes had occurred in their life. According to them, everyone's phone plays a crucial role in their lives. It makes a lot of chores easier. As one mother respondent put it, *'I use Google Maps whenever I go outside; of course, that is something that my son has taught me.'*, it is an essential gadget these days. Another respondent said, '*everything is now quick thanks to the phone. We can now call anyone at any time, but in the past, we had to send letters. My daughter is in middle school. She does her homework on her phone. She can quickly download past year's exam questions from internet. Thus, it is rather beneficial. It seems impossible to survive these days without a phone. They ought*

to be provided a phone, of course. My daughter now has a phone. She attends school and is always free to call in case of emergency. The phone is now for girls' safety.'

It is noteworthy that tribal women have been exposed to the internet via smartphones for the first time. It was discovered that compared to non-tribal communities, their community owns smartphones on a lesser scale. Women acknowledge that in order to own a mobile phone they must bargain on the family budget. Even they must yield before the silent male right to use a women's phone. In marriage, a woman's mobile phone is a shared item between partners. Nonetheless, this procedure is not applicable in the event of a husband. The results of Potnis (2016) who emphasised the power disparity between men and women, gender roles that require women to accept responsibility and submit to authority, the fact that women are unable to own mobile phones due to financial uncertainty and societal expectations that prioritize family over personal spending make them the victims of 'collectivism' are consistent with the findings of the tribal community.

Conclusion

Mobile phones are ubiquitous that they have impacted every aspect of human life. Prejudices against women are steadily hanging as a result of mobile phones. Primitive tribes accept the spread because they reside in areas with high socioeconomic backwardness. The availability of mobile device has significantly changed their way of life. Despite their limited resources, they recognise its value, accept it and utilise it to the fullest. Furthermore, women are utilising and exploring every communication option that mobile phones provide.

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