



How a Script-Agnostic Media Can Empower The Illiterate



www.defindia.org

With an increasingly high penetration of mobile phones, we have witnessed traditionally "illiterate" people learning to use digital tools to tell their stories.

With an increasingly high penetration of mobile phones, the Digital Empowerment Foundation has witnessed people learning to use digital tools to tell their stories. There are "illiterate" people who are using smartphones to become community journalists; who are sharing their folk music on YouTube; who are using WhatsApp to find buyers for their handloom and handicraft; who are using emojis and audio notes to communicate with their loved ones.

A low literacy rate, especially in rural India, has for long kept people devoid of any information. But with the advent of the internet, is there a possibility that the gap can be bridged?

About 60 per cent of India still lives in rural India. While internet penetration has been growing, especially in the last couple of years, as much as close to 70 per cent of the population still does not have access to the Internet. Their digital disconnect tells a sordid saga in times when the government rolls out all communication related to rural schemes and information on their websites and other digital platforms.

Most of the poor in India do not even receive a fixed remuneration, let alone a retirement plan that deducts automatically from them. Approximate median income of daily wage earners in India would be around Rs 200 a day. Living on that amount of money a day means one has limited access to information — newspapers, television and books all cost money — and so often one doesn't know certain facts that rest of the world takes as given. Lack of information, in this case, means living in a world whose institutions are not meant for you.

Unlike merely reading texts and only consuming information, internet literacy also opens the door to a more conversational, two-way approach. The parameter on which functional literacy is measured — being able to read, write and understand at least one or more languages — restricts information flow in the hands of a few, rendering close to 30 per cent of the population illiterate as per the government records. Even as the government puts the national literacy rate at close to 70 per cent, the functional literacy rate would be even lower in the country. It also means not attaching value to what close to 500 million people have to share with you, the world. This puts several hundreds of tribal and folk dialects, arts and traditions that have only been preserved orally for generations on backfoot.



Gondi, a South-Central Dravidian language in India, is spoken by close to three million people of Gond ethnicity. Although it is the language of Gonds, only a one-fifth can speak the language, putting on the verge of extinction the rich folk literature that survived through marriage songs and narrations till now. There is also certain unwillingness on the part of the younger generation in learning the native language as they mostly migrate to cities looking for better opportunities leaving the age-old livelihood practices. However, pages on social media sites like “Humans of Gondwana” (Facebook) and “Gondwana Events” (YouTube) are trying to give a new lease of life to the culture. Run by locals, these pages are telling the world stories from a communities’ perspective, their day-to-day lives and major Gondi events.

However, India is a country of 22 official languages; and a total of 19,500 languages or dialects that are spoken in India as mother tongues — not all of them even have scripts. Around the world, the rural and villages’ folk societies have depended on the oral traditions for centuries for information dissemination from generations to generations. Interestingly, more than 55 per cent of all Web content is in English even though only around 20 per cent of the world’s population speaks English, and just five per cent of the world speaks English as their native language.

In such an English-dominating virtual world, where

It is interesting to see how people in rural, remote and tribal locations with no formal education and lack of knowledge of a script are engaging in fluent conversations in real time through audio notes, video calls and a bucket full of emojis to express an entire thought without any letter at all. And so, the written medium of communication is no more the parameter to define literacy. Knowledge is for all.

And we see our success when a 60-year-old folk musician from Rajasthan, who cannot even pen his name, uses his smartphone to record his songs and create a digital archive of his culture, tradition, art, geography, history and language through his voice. “My brain can store over 500 songs, can your memory card do the same,” he had asked on his first day at training.

technology, too, is largely developed and designed by native English-speaking persons, how do the oral or illiterate communities become a part?

There is no denying that with the help of basic digital tools, people can be empowered to tell their own stories, beating long-set information exchange criterion of being able to read and write one or more script. By using the medium of spoken words and audio-visual story-telling, masses are better placed in the current information economy.



With an increasingly high penetration of mobile phones, the Digital Empowerment Foundation has witnessed people learning to use digital tools to tell their stories. There are “illiterate” people who are using smartphones to become community journalists; who are sharing their folk music on YouTube; who are using WhatsApp to find buyers for their handloom and handicraft; who are using emojis and audio notes to communicate with their loved ones.

It is interesting to see how people in rural, remote and tribal locations with no formal education and lack of knowledge of a script are engaging in fluent conversations in real time through audio notes, video calls and a bucket full of emojis to express an entire thought without any letter at all. And so, the

written medium of communication is no more the parameter to define literacy. Knowledge is for all.

And that is what makes it imperative to include the excluded — those who yet to get online, those are part of the oral and illiterate society — in to the digital world with not just digital literacy, but with media and information literacy (MIL) to ensure that they do not just become consumers of information; but can consciously and judiciously access, organise, analyse, evaluate and produce information.

Just imagine a nervous system like a mesh of information packets that the Internet is providing right now and what will become of it if the people considered “digitally illiterate”, too, start contributing their bit to it. How many oral histories will be preserved, how many art forms will live to see the light of another century and how many deprived communities will be heard?

And we see our success when a 60-year-old folk musician from Rajasthan, who cannot even pen his name, uses his smartphone to record his songs and create a digital archive of his culture, tradition, art, geography, history and language through his voice. “My brain can store over 500 songs, can your memory card do the same,” he had asked on his first day at training.

In such a scenario where the entire world is online, where the oral community and the “literate” community have equal opportunities, will traditional literacy and script still matter? I wonder.

Osama Manzar is founder-director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chair of Manthan and mBillionth awards. He is member, advisory board, at Alliance for Affordable Internet and has co-authored NetCh@kra-15 Years of Internet in India and Internet Economy of India. He tweets @osamamanzar.