



# Economic Empowerment through Digital Inclusion: An Empirical Analysis of the Paniya Tribe in the Nilgiris of Tamilnadu

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**Abstract:** Tamil Nadu is one of the major states in the southern part of India with a significant tribal population. Many important tribal groups dating back to early history are present in the state. The total tribal population is 794697 (401068 males and 393629 females (census 2011). It constitutes 1.1 per cent of the total general population of the state. 83.08% of the tribes continue to live in traditional hilly/rural areas and 16.91% have migrated to urban areas.

Paniya is a Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG's) in Tamil Nadu. They are living in the states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, they are residing in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris district. The total population of the Paniyas in Nilgiris district is 9,824 (4741 males and 5083 females, (census 2011). They have subsistence living and lack education, health care and other modern amenities. Paniyas are a heterogeneous group surviving as landless laborers and do not form representational cohort in electoral politics of India.

In this digital age, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made a significant impact in all the sections of population. It has benefited all the subgroups to a remarkable extent. This study attempts to investigate the role of ICTs for economic empowerment of the Paniya tribe. Specific emphasis of the study is to understand the impact of cell phone and laptop usage by Paniya youth for economic and educational empowerment. This empirical study was conducted in the Panthalur region of the Nilgiris district in Tamilnadu.

**Key words :** Tribes, Paniyas, ICTs, economic , Empowerment, Nilgiris Tamil Nadu

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## Introduction

India has a large tribal population in the world and is next only to Africa. The tribal communities lead an isolated traditional way of life in remote areas. About 705

ethnic groups are recognized as Scheduled Tribes in India. They encompass 8.6% of the total population of India. Indian tribes do not enjoy the rights or the status of being called as aboriginals or first citizens like Canada or Australia. They were given an honorific 'Adivasi' meaning indigenous peoples or original inhabitants. Indian constitution promised several privileges to the scheduled tribes such as right to forest land and self governance. However, they are often honored in exception than as the norm.

The following table 1 indicates that the Scheduled Tribes Population in India.

**Table 1**

| <i>Sex</i>       | <i>STs population<br/>(in crores)</i> |       | <i>Growth rate p</i> | <i>Percentage of STs to<br/>total population</i> |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|-------|----------------------|--|
|                  | 2001                                  | 2011  |                      |  |
| <b>2001 2011</b> | 2001                                  | 2011  |                      |  |
| Person           | 08.43                                 | 10.43 | 23.70                | 8.6  |
| Male             | 04.26                                 | 05.24 | 22.90                | 8.4  |
| Female           | 04.17                                 | 05.19 | 24.40                | 8.8  |

*Source:* Primary Census Abstract, Census of India, 2013.

## **Economic Condition of Tribes in India**

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Generally, the tribal economy is based on forest and sea. The tribal family acts as a unit of both production and consumption. The tribal economy is familiar with the community acting like a co-operative unit. The tribal communities often live in a village or economically interdependent location. Another important aspect of tribal economy is the low level of monetization and exchange system. Also, the tribal economic growth and development depend upon the policies, welfare schemes, and programmes of the government.

## **Education and Employment Status**

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The inclusive development is one of the focus metrics for the government's five year plans. It considers social, economic, educational, political and technological growth of the all people of the society as significant. As a welfare and democratic country, even an individual should not remain outside in the mainstream of society is the ideal. In line with the ideal education development is seen as a key determinant leading to all other developments in the society. Education empowers the individual and reinforces social strength. Education enables skill and knowledge acquisition and provides the wherewithal to face social challenges. Therefore education is

factored in government policy making as a major means for upgrading individuals in the society.

## Education Status of Tribal People in India

Education is widely accepted as a critical aid to attain developmental goals, political consciousness, awareness of rights, and duties. It plays a crucial role in ushering in social changes, improved individual esteem, upward mobility in social status, radical transformation in individual and social outlook and perception. Access to affordable education and quality schools are vital to realize tribal community development. Despite strenuous efforts from government and committed NGOs for tribal education development is yet in its infancy. Multiple socio economic factors deter tribal children accessing higher education and upward mobility. The Government of India has been introduced many education related schemes such as Top Class Education for ST Students, Vocational Training Centres in Tribal Areas, Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship for ST Students National Overseas Scholarships for Scheduled Tribe Students, , Post Metric Scholarship (PMS) for ST students, etc. also it has provided hostels for ST boys and Girls, Eklavya Model Residential School etc., The plethora of schemes announced has not fructified intended results in terms of female literacy. However, according to the last decadal census data there is pronounced improvement in education.

**Table 2: Educational Growth of Tribes in India**

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1961        | 13.83       | 3.16          | 8.54         |
| 1971        | 17.63       | 4.85          | 11.39        |
| 1981        | 24.52       | 8.05          | 16.35        |
| 1991        | 40.65       | 18.19         | 29.35        |
| 2001        | 59.17       | 34.76         | 47.10        |
| 2011        | 71.70       | 54.4          | 63.1         |

*Source:* National Commission for SCs & STs, Fifth Report & Census, 2011

## ICTs and Tribal Development

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays an important role in changing quality of life of all the sections of society. In the digital era, there is scarcely any field disengaged from ICT's. ICT is an umbrella term which contains both Information Technology (IT) as well as Communications Technology.

Developments in these fields occur at a phenomenal rate and the time between inventions to practical application at the market place has increasingly getting shorter. The technological changes have significantly modified social resistance to new practices. ICT is not restricted to a particular field like army or design but acts all across the social strata touching upon lives of all. It would be vain to list all areas influenced by ICTs but an indicative selection would include scientific studies and techniques used in the handling of telecommunications; media management and broadcast; intelligent systems; data handling, processing, storage and transmission; network based solutions; as well as audio visual monitoring processes. The term broadly refers to all devices, networking components, applications and systems and their totality that allows people to digitally interact from anywhere in the world. ICT projects are deployed by both government and other voluntary, civil society organizations for the tribal community development. These ICTs projects are planned to empower tribal people, improve economy, ensuring healthcare, enabling distance learning etc. The schemes have certainly provided new ways of information exchange and knowledge sharing. The real degree of impact on tribal community and improved quality of life are to be continuously monitored and suitable interventions made to meet the target development. Television was given freely by successive governments in Tamilnadu and fair penetration can be seen in all areas. The prices of cell phones were drastically cut by service providers in a price war leading to horizontal consolidation of business. The flip side of the price war was that a large section of the population could possess a cell phone. These technologies have improved connectivity of social groups and lend an opportunity to share / business and employment related information. ICT projects in the tribal areas suffer from languages barriers, connectivity of the internet in remote areas, infrastructure facilities, capacity, and also need and value system of the tribal people. A major influence of ICTs in the tribal regions is for personal usage rather than ICT based community developmental projects.

### **Paniya Tribe in Tamil Nadu**

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The Paniya tribe is one of the major tribes in Tami Nadu. They have living in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, predominantly in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks. The Nilgiris is surrounded on North by Karnataka State on the East by Coimbatore District, Erode District, South by Coimbatore District and Kerala State, and in the West by Kerala State. The Nilgiris region is populated by the following tribal groups—the Paniya, Kota, Irula, Urali Kurumba, Kattunayaka, Mullu Kurumba, Toda, and Jenu Kurumba. All these communities depend upon the luxuriant forest

around them and possess intimate knowledge about the flora and fauna of the region. There was a belief that the Mandatan Chetties a prominent caste group first introduced them into Tamil Nadu. Originally the Paniyas belonged to the Waynad region of Kerala. They were brought as agricultural labourers to the Mandatan Chetties lands in the Gudalur taluk. Many of them were indentured servants. The Bonded labor System (abolition) ordinance was issued on October 24th, 1976 by the President of India. It was also made applicable to the Paniyas by the Government of Tamil Nadu. This historical legal support helped many of bonded Paniya workers to be released from their owners and return to their own settlements. In 1976, the government distributed lands to the Paniyas, thereafter many Paniyas became farmers in their own land. Voluntary organization like NAWA (The Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association) is working to provide medical and educational needs of the tribe. The S.S.S.S.S (Sree Saguru Sarva Samarasa Sangam) is focused on the education of Paniyas children and the ACORD (Action for Community Organization, Rehabilitation and Development) has been helping in agriculture, health, education and awareness programmes. According to Anthropological Survey of India, 2011, the Paniyas are spread across Tamilnadu. The following data indicates that population of the Paniya tribes in Tamil nadu, Chennai – 202 Chengal Pattu – 120 North Arcot – 82 South Arcot- 62 Dharmapuri – 90 Salem- 32 Nilgiris- 8500, Madurai – 50 Thanjavur- 45 total – 9,183. The Paniyas are one of the significant tribes but are very poor. Many households lack even basic household utensils. Alcohol consumption across all ages is a bane of the community. The youth do not hesitate to spend on purchasing mobile sets.

### **Significant of the Study**

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Information and communication Technologies are one of the significant tools in the developmental arena. These are giving extreme level of advantages in social, economical and educational spares of the human being in the present situation. Majority of the population in the world believes that ICTs are one of the essential components of life, and without these their life is not be able to move to the next step. On the other side, the tribes are significant 8.6 percentages populace lives in India itself. Majority of them are still living awful condition in many parts of the states. At this situation, generally, there is need to study about how far these people are accessing the ICTs and how these technologies are helping to improve their life condition, what are all their practical difficulties in effective access of these ICTs, their expectations on these technologies, and how far these technologies are helping the economic and educational enhancement of the youth in the tribal community.

However, this particular study focuses on the economic empowerment of the Paniya youth through accessing the ICTs. Paniya is an important tribal group in Tamilnadu and there is considerable ICTs usage by the youth. Therefore this study was conducted with Paniya tribe youth in Pandalur taluk of the Nilgiris district of Tamilnadu.

## Methodology

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Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) is all pervasive and affects all the sections of society. A considerable number of the Paniya youth are known to access the cell phone and laptop for their communication and education purposes. This investigation attempts to analyse indicators of the economic empowerment through usage of these ICTs among the Paniya youth in Pandalur region of the Nilgiris district in Tamilnadu. The following objectives are framed for the study

- To study about the present communication methods of the Paniya tribal youths
- To find out the usage of the cell phone and laptop by the Paniya tribal youths
- To analyse the economic empowerment of the Paniya tribal youth through the ICTs.
- To analyse the difficulties faced by the tribal youth in access of the ICTs

This study employed descriptive research design and it seeks to understand communication pattern and usage of the ICTs by the Paniya youth. Data collection was carried out through interview, scheduled and observation, and focus group discussion (FGD) methods. Self Structured interview schedule was prepared and used by the researcher. The interview schedule collected personal details, questions related to social, economic status and ICTs access by the tribal youth. The data was collected through the simple random technique from the tribal youth and the household survey method. The data of the study was collected from 15 to 35 years age group of Paniya youth in tribal settlement such as Kalliyodu, Athisal, Pudumula, and PR colony of the Pandalur taluk in the Nilgiris District.

## Results and Discussion

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This research work was conducted in Pandalur taluk of the Nilgiris district. 51 respondents were selected through the simple random technique. The cohort contained 26 male and 25 female respondents. 33% of the respondents were illiterate.

32% of them studied primary level. 29.4% had secondary education ranging from 6- 10<sup>th</sup> standard and 15.6 % has completed higher secondary level. 1.9% had college degree. Majority 67% of the respondents had access to cell phone, 30.6% watched TV programmes and 2% continue to listen radio programme. The half 50.9% of the respondents uses the internet in their cell phone. The predominant purpose of use was chatting and watching movies, songs, and sports and playing games. Majority of the Paniya youth are accessing the Whatsapp for their communication using Tamil language for chatting.

Their major business and employment related communication happen through cellphone. 35.9% of the respondents reported that they contact their employers/ land owners and business people through Cell phone. 9.7% of the respondents claimed that cell phone helped to trade easily and 17.2 % of the respondents were fixing the rate of the goods with their buyers through this gadget. There are 14.1% of the respondents said that cell phone helped significantly to reduce the transport charges in selling the goods and receiving work-related information from the land owners. The availability of the electricity is a major constraint for the tribal people as nearly half of the respondent's houses did not have electrical connection. They manage to recharge their cell phone using nearby houses and shops. Curiously, the respondents keep the contact phone numbers written in a separate notebook and they do not use the contact list option in phones. The youth were having both android and basic model mobile phones. The respondents were mostly watching cinema and serial drama in the TV and cell phone. They have the knowledge of storing and sharing data in their cell phone.

Interestingly majority 60.3% of the respondents were accessing Whatsapp and 39.6% access Face book. 19.8% of the respondents have laptop freely provided by the government for the students. However, the lack of technical knowledge restricts laptop use. Most find it easy to sell their laptop to other community people.

The amount spent for cell phone data is significant. The vast majority 73.5% respondents spend Rs.100 to 200. 26.5% spend Rs.200 to 300 per month for use data with internet connectivity. The used second hand cell phones are frequently purchased and the cost of repairs was seen as a constraint. The social interaction of Paniya with other social group is very low. The advents of cell phone have made a qualitative change with majority 65.1% of the youth have established regular interaction with peers in other community using phone. 53.4% labours also affirmed that cell phones have aided in promoting relationship with other communities.

Cell phone possession is seen as a status marker among youth. 37.5% of the respondents had one cell phone, 21.7% had two cell phones, 12% had three and



1% had four cell phones. The phones are used by all the members of the family. Surprisingly, the three fourth 74.3% of the respondents told that they do not encourage their family women to use the cell phone.

## Conclusion

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The usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is universal in this age. It cuts across all communities and barriers. The urban and rural community people have a greater spread of ICTs. The tribal community is beginning to use these technologies. The tribal community is to be encouraged to use these technologies to sell their non timber forest produce, handicrafts and other products, and also for getting better employment. Lack of infrastructure facilities like electrical connection, poor living condition, low education, inadequate exposure to new technologies, inhibition and social barriers to communicate with other community people etc are plagued them. From this study one can understand that there is major scope for the ICTs usages in the tribal community. The youth of Paniya tribes have acquired skill sets to use the cell phone and being initiated in the potential uses of technology will use it more and more. Hence, the Governments and Non Governmental Organizations even the corporate sectors should incentivize use of ICTs in the tribal settlements. Proper training to use new technologies to uplift tribal livelihoods need to be provided. The increase in data cost will be dampener as the tribal households very poor. The Paniya youth will suffer a change in traditional culture with the arrival of new material culture products but then the can adapt to social changes. The technology benefits accruing from new technology gadgets must translate in to tangible benefits for the community.

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