

ICT usage and Rural Development: A Study

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Introduction

India is a country of villages and about 50 per cent of the villages have very poor socio-economic conditions. Since the dawn of independence constant efforts have been made to emancipate the living standard of rural masses. The five-year plans of the central government also largely aim at Rural Development. The Ministry of Rural Development in India is the apex body for formulating policies, regulations and acts pertaining to the development of the rural sector. Agriculture, handicrafts, fisheries, poultry, and diary are the primary contributors to the rural business and economy.

Rural Development which is concerned with economic growth and social justice, improvement in the living standard of the rural people by providing adequate and quality social services and minimum basic needs becomes essential. The present strategy of rural development mainly focuses on poverty alleviation, better livelihood opportunities, provision of basic amenities and infrastructure facilities through innovative programmes of wage and self-employment. ICT is the new tool for rural development. Information and Communication Technology, if used properly can be of great advantage for the development at grass root levels. At the same time challenge remains with the administration to capture the minds of the rural masses, mostly illiterate, to make them adapt the new technology which is completely alien to them. There are various rural development schemes run by the government of India and also organizations are present to look after the implementations of these programmes.

Scope of ICT in Rural Economic Development

Recent developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have introduced a plethora of opportunities for economic development in every conceivable area. ICT as an enabler has broken all bounds of cost, distance and time. The fusion of computing and communications, especially through the internet has reduced the world indeed into global village creating new actors and new environments.

One of the major components and driving force of rural development is communication. Conventionally, communication includes electronic media, human communication & now information technology (IT). All forms of communications have dominated the development scene in which its persuasive role has been most dominant within the democratic political frame work of the country. Persuasive communication for rural development has been given highest priority for bringing about desirable social and behavioral change among the most vulnerable rural poor and women. Initially, and to a certain extent now, the approach lacks gender sensitivity and empathy of the communicators and development agents who came from urban elite homes. Added to these constraints is political will that still influences the pace and progress of rural development.

Technological changes further compounded the direction of rural development as information and communication technology (ICT) has been thought by communication and development workers as a panacea for other ills that obstructs the development process. It has led to indiscriminate applications and use of ICT in every aspect of information dissemination, management & governance of development. While there are few shining examples of achievements of ICT in development, there are a large number of failures and unauthenticated claims.

The closing decade of twentieth century was the opening of historic information and communication technology interventions for development. This period has witnessed enormous and unprecedented changes in every aspect of communications technologies, policies, infrastructure development and services. The ICT boom in India has already started changing the lives of Indian masses. The role of ICT in Rural Development must be viewed in this changing scenario.

Role of ICT in Rural Development

Since the dawn of independence, concerted efforts have been made to ameliorate the living standard of rural masses. So, rural development is an integrated concept of growth, and poverty elimination has been of paramount concern in all the five year plans. Rural Development (RD) programmes comprise of following:

- Provision of basic infrastructure facilities in the rural areas e.g. schools, health facilities, roads, drinking water, electrification etc.
- Improving agricultural productivity in the rural areas.
- Provision of social services like health and education for socio-economic development.
- Implementing schemes for the promotion of rural industry increasing agriculture productivity, providing rural employment etc.
- Assistance to individual families and Self Help Groups (SHG) living below poverty line by providing productive resources through credit and subsidy.

Communication has been seen by a large number of development planners as a panacea for solving major social evils and problems. Apart from development, the introduction of communication in the educational process for open and distance learning is seen as step towards improving the quality of education and bridging the social and educational gap. ICT can be used towards betterment of education, agriculture, social awareness and health and hygiene.

ICT and e-Governance for Rural Development

Several states have initiated the creation of State Wide Area Networks (SWAN) to facilitate electronic access of the state and district administration services to the citizens in villages. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are being increasingly used by the governments to deliver its services at the locations convenient to the citizens. The rural ICT applications attempt to offer the services of central agencies (like district administration, cooperative union, and state and central government departments) to the

citizens at their village door steps. These applications utilize the ICT in offering improved and affordable connectivity and processing solutions.

Computerization of land records have been a great success in application of ICT in rural development. Land records are great importance to contemporary socio economic imperatives and their revision and updation are necessary for capturing the changes in rural social dynamics.

Land records are an important part of rural development. The govt. of India started the centrally sponsored scheme of Computerization of Land Records (CoLR) in 1988-89 with main objectives of:

- Creating database of basic records
- Facilitating the issues of copies of records
- Reducing work load by elimination of drudgery of paper work
- Minimizing the possibilities manipulation of land records, and
- Creating a land management information system

The farmers were largely benefited Computerization of Land Records. The farmers can get all necessary records when they need it, these records are free from human arbitrations, the updating becomes easy, free from harassment and the farmers had direct access to information regarding their property.

Challenges of application of ICT in Rural Development

ICTs alone can't bring about rural development. Education is one of the basic problem for application of ICT as 40% of India's population is illiterate. All modern economies have demonstrated in the past that education is the first step to building the capacity which people can then use. If the Indian economy grows at 5-6 per cent per annum as it has been growing over last 2-3 years, then over 10-15 years the size of the Indian economy would have doubled. Even with this level of growth it cannot by any means bridge disparities and eradicate poverty. Therefore, introducing ICTs alone will not meet the development challenge. For ICTs to succeed in India, education for all must be the first priority.

It is, of course, important to note that the proportion of the economy involved in some or other form of adaptation or usage of ICT is still very small. The proportion of people involved in the ICT Industry, especially in the rural areas is negligible. Thus, another priority action, in order for the benefits of ICT to trickle down as well as contribute to the rural prosperity, would involve setting up several rural and village level micro-enterprises.

The basic challenges that usage of ICT for rural development faces are-

- Illiteracy amongst the vast multitude of people.
- Major power-cuts and 'brown-outs' affecting the country-side ranging from 5 to 12 hours every day. Even though uninterrupted power supply systems are used; yet they prove insufficient to cope up with the power breakdowns.
- Serious band-width issues and connectivity problems. Even though technology is available to upgrade the band-width; not enough resources have been budgeted by the Government to change this scenario.

However once a few projects for the upgradation of the band-width on the anvil get commissioned, there should be a significant improvement in the connectivity.

- Financing difficulties encountered by the local grass root level institutions as well as by the state governments. Drastic steps are needed to inject funds for the development of the ICTs in the rural areas; increasingly by the participation of the private sector.
- Acute shortage of project leaders and guides who could ensure implementation of the ICTs at the grass root levels. Unfortunately, most professionals want to work in the urban areas where there are ample opportunities available to them for growth as well as prosperity. In the absence of these 'techno-catalytic' resources; development of ICTs in the rural areas will always be very slow.
- Information and Communication Technology has great relevance in today's world. If implemented properly ICT can surely bridge the gap between economically and technology backward and forward classes. With the IT boom in India technology is easily accessible to the government machineries with relevantly cheaper and convenient manner. Proper training and implementation of ICT programmes in simple way and language which is easily understandable by the rural people can surely bring about revolution in rural development.

Conclusion

- The ICT technology is being used for a number of purposes: social, educational, recreational, health, political, agriculture etc.
- ICT is being used by the rural women to enhance their knowledge base on the profession or the job that they are doing. The same is not used instantly. This is for a number of reasons.
- Increased efforts by way of investment and popularization of the technology in the rural areas.
- CSR initiatives to focus more on the ICT needs of the rural women.

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