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Everyday Life in Tamil Nadu, India and Its Cost to “Free Basics”

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This paper explores how the ‘Free Basics’ initiative in India got transformed into a national debate on ‘net neutrality’ principle and finally led to it being banned in India. Further, this paper will also use ethnographic data to analyse how this ‘controversial’ initiative was debated, the claims it made and the actual ground level reality in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Adoption, Consumer, Freebasics, Internet, Net Neutrality, Technology

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how a pro-poor techno-social initiative ‘Internet.org’/‘Free Basics’, introduced by Facebook, in the emerging market India,¹ was also in a way a strategic scaling initiative, which failed to gain inroads into the Indian market due to a national level debate, spearheaded by the Indian middle class activists on the initiative’s violation of the ‘net neutrality’ principle.² While surveying the initiative’s failure from both Facebook’s and the activists’ perspectives, this paper also showcases the disjuncture between the claims made and the actual ground level realities from the perspective of the poor, to whom this was meant in the first place. The insights from the bottom of the economic pyramid are gained through ethnography, a methodology best suited to study the everyday life practices of this population and its complex interactions with technologies.

What would happen to India if Facebook just disappeared tomorrow?

Before we answer this question, let’s consider a few facts: Over 75% of India is not connected to the Internet³ and approximately 90% of India⁴ is not connected to two of the world’s most used social media – Facebook and WhatsApp.⁵

Yet, India has the second largest Facebook user base (with over 100 million users) in the entire world⁶ closely following the United States of America (USA). Also, India has one of largest user base for WhatsApp as well and approximately 10% of WhatsApp users are from the subcontinent.⁷

So, to answer the earlier question, while it is certainly true that India’s share of users on Facebook or WhatsApp is significant, Facebook or WhatsApp’s impact on India as a whole doesn’t really matter much, as over 90% of India’s population is not on either of these media.⁸

Conversely the question of what would happen to Facebook if it lost the Indian user base arises. These statistics spell out a different story when we consider them from Facebook’s standpoint. While at first glance it might certainly seem that the current user base of over 100 million users is a staggering number and certainly matters to Facebook, what can

be easily missed is the promise of much larger user base that the Indian market holds for Facebook.

While over 80% of India was not connected to the internet in 2013, this number reduced to 75% in 2015.⁹ This growth rate of approximately 5% in two years coincided with a parallel growth rate of 3% in the Indian user base on Facebook between 2012 and 2014. This growth rate achieves significance since it catapulted India from having the third largest Facebook user base following USA and Brazil in 2012 to the second largest (outranking Brazil)¹⁰ by 2014.

Though the respective growth rates showcases a promising user base of digitally connected Indians both for the state as well as for Facebook, these statistics in a way also showcase a hidden threat to Facebook's growth as a company in India. At the current growth rate of digitally connected Indians, Facebook can only target a potential 15% of India (as only less than 25% use the internet and 10% are already on Facebook) as its probable user base. However, this means that Facebook is still missing the potential 75% of the non internet users (or approximately 90% of non Facebook users). So, while the 5% growth rate showcases a promising user base of digitally connected Indians from a government and demographic standpoint, at this growth rate, it might be another 10 to 15 years to even get 50% of this non internet users online. Further, getting them online does not necessarily mean that they would sign up for Facebook, so this poses an even graver threat and at the current level of market competition, this could spell ruin for Facebook.

Challenging this further is that approximately 69%¹¹ of India's population lives in rural areas and approximately 22%¹² of the population falls below poverty line. So, while the urban population might soon become digitally connected through diffusion of internet and digital devices, the major challenge rests with the untapped rural and India's poor, which results in a potential loss of at least 600 million people.

While these challenges might seem daunting from Facebook's standpoint, this spells an opportunity for a disruptive innovation¹³ strategically. Just relying on the spread of the internet naturally or with the bare minimum state development schemes might be too slow for any company looking to scale quickly. So, if most of India's rural and poor population can be brought online and if their first experience of the internet is through Facebook, this strategically achieves both blitz scaling¹⁴ as well as a potentially loyal first generation Facebook user base. Further, this gesture also showcases Facebook as a socially conscious business, which strives for digital equality by helping the disadvantaged people (this includes rural, poor and the women in these groups)¹⁵ access information that was denied to them earlier. So, with all the corporate goodness and social responsibility rhetoric of being pro-disadvantaged/poor, this was precisely the beginning of the techno-social initiative of Freebasics in India.

However, getting in touch with the wider rural and poor market in India and pushing them online can once again be challenging to blitz scaling. So, this has to go through partners who know the Indian market well and have also established their foothold with the target groups. This is where the Telecom companies play a significant role, due to the penetration of mobile phones amongst the rural and the poor.

Mobile devices gain significance for internet companies, since a growing number of internet users all around the world access the internet through their mobile devices, specifically phones¹⁶ and India is no different. Infact, the growth rate of mobile phone subscribers (addition of 110 million subscribers in 2014 and 2015 alone) in India¹⁷ is

comparatively faster than the growth of the internet users, since India now has over one billion mobile subscribers.¹⁸ In the same time period that witnessed a 5% growth rate of the internet users in India, there seemed to be a parallel increase (from 12% to 17%) in the number of smart phone users¹⁹ as well and in fact, this rate of increase in the user base of both the Internet and smartphone market in India also seem connected to the parallel growth of social media users. The increase in the mobile (smartphone) subscriber base and the simultaneous growth of mobile based social media platforms like WhatsApp in India appear to be correlated, since within a short period of time WhatsApp had accumulated over 70 million users²⁰ in India alone. Further, it is also projected that by 2017, India would have the highest number of Facebook user base on mobile phones.²¹

Feature phones, as compared to smart phones, still dominate the mobile phone market in India, especially amongst the rural and the poor. Hence, the growth of the internet users also nest with the feature phone subscribers and the only way to connect to them is through major telecom companies which intensely compete in acquiring more subscribers and providing its current ones with additional features for the purpose of retention. Hence, the role of telecom companies assumes significance in this context.

However, the telecom regulation in India is under the control of the state. The state development plans associated with digital aspects and its associated subsidies gain importance for both telecom and social media companies. In the same time period, parallel to these developments was the launch of a new initiative Digital India²² by the Government of India. This coincided with the rise and participation of the national level leaders on Facebook and Twitter²³ and acted as a step towards recognizing India as a growing market of Internet users and an expanding user base for social networks.

With all the right factors in place, this seemed like the best scenario to execute the Internet.org's Free Basics²⁴ programme initiated by Facebook. However, soon after its launch, it met with unforeseen roadblocks, not from any of its stake holders or even the rural/poor people for who it was intended in the first place, but from the urban middle class internet activists who disputed Freebasics as being against a Free internet and net neutrality. The situation reeks of irony, since it was only the urban middle class who were striking against the free internet for the rural and the poor as being against the ideal of Free internet/net neutrality. The target group wasn't even asked for its opinion nor was even informed completely about the situation. The programme faced a complete ban from the Telecom regulatory authority in early 2016. Though unsuccessful in its plan to implement the programme in India, it still stands as an example of the promise that this emerging market holds for social media companies.²⁵

However, even if implemented, the question of whether it would have succeeded in its rhetoric as being pro-disadvantaged surfaces. This question leads to a significant issue on how strategies sometimes completely fail to consider the socio-cultural issues that arise in such groups with respect to technology.

This paper seeks to showcase that this debate and opposition to Freebasics has a bit of a history albeit a short one and wasn't something that got sparked all of sudden. It will summarize the events leading to the banning of Freebasics from India.

Further, by taking into consideration certain ethnographic facts arising out of a fifteen month ethnography (conducted almost in the same time period) in a fast transitioning peri-urban area in Tamil Nadu South India, it will also show how the people to whom it was really intended did not even know, nor did they care for the programme or the debate. It will

show the difference between a rhetorical strategy and the ground level realities with respect to using technologies. The irony of the situation is also reflected in the fieldsite itself, which belongs to a state known for its freebies. Even in such a state that has traction with freebies, the pro-disadvantaged rhetoric of the programme could have failed as it led to the rupturing of its socio-cultural fabric.

A SHORT HISTORY OF FREEBASICS AND ITS ROCKY INDIAN SOJOURN

In August 2013, Mark Zuckerberg, announced an ambitious project titled the 'Internet.org', which was intended to help the disadvantaged (poor) have access to information and the same opportunities that the rest of the world have, thereby also reducing digital inequality and in a way striving for social equality by reduction of poverty in the long run.

However, this initiative wasn't entirely new. It closely followed the direction of the already launched Facebook Zero²⁶ (in May 2010), but just that this time the initiative was of a much larger scale. With over 73% of the world's phone market being a feature phone market,²⁷ Facebook Zero was an initiative that was aimed at the world's non-Facebook users (specifically in the emerging economies) who were using a feature phone with no specific data plan. The idea was to partner with mobile networks and offer a stripped down version of Facebook (text only with no visuals) free of charge to these subscribers and in case they opt to download the visuals, then they would incur the data charges as tarified by the mobile operators. Partnering with around 50 operators in over 45 countries, Facebook reached out to the potential consumer base in these countries. However, the list of countries not only included the emerging economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America but also a few wealthy nations such as Austria, United Kingdom and other European countries.

Carriers such as Videocon and Reliance (the latter would also go on to partner with Facebook Free Basics later on) were partnering with Facebook for its Facebook Zero programme in India.

While critics noted Facebook's scaling strategies in Africa,²⁸ not much was made of this in India. A critique of Facebook's strategy included how for several first time users, Facebook became the first experience of the internet and sometimes even became synonymous to the internet and was in all actuality a marketing ploy, whereby the hope was that people would get hooked onto it and actually subscribe to a full scale internet data pack with the internet service provider.

In 2012, Facebook held its initial public offering (IPO) and was valued at a historic all time high for any newly listed public company at \$104 billion at \$38/- per share and in Oct 2012, Zuckerberg announced that Facebook had now surpassed its first one billion user base.

Ten months later, in August 2013, Zuckerberg announced Internet.org with an idea to bring free internet to the world's poor by once again partnering with mobile network providers all around the world and while it was only Facebook (text version) previously, this time around, a lot more partners were invited to become a part of this initiative. It was stressed that the intent was to not just try and make Facebook accessible to the billions, but to make the internet itself more affordable. In other words, Internet.org was to become the gateway to the internet for the disadvantaged.

The Beginning of Net Neutrality in India

In 2006, TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) tried its hand at formulating rules regarding net neutrality by inviting comments from both the stakeholders and the industry itself.²⁹ However, nothing concrete materialized from this attempt.

Six years later in 2012, the initial spark of net neutrality and differential pricing debates was opened by telecom provider Airtel³⁰ with suggestions on taxing Youtube and revenue sharing with companies such as Google and Facebook to thwart network costs incurred by the telecom companies. Closely following this, in 2013 and 2014, telecom operators raised concerns about VoIP based services such as Skype and WhatsApp.

This was also the time that TRAI first started keenly observing pricing strategies of companies like Airtel for platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp and explored if a preferential treatment was meted out to only a couple of services as against the rest.³¹ By late 2014, Airtel started charging the consumers at differential rates for Skype or WhatsApp, which allowed voice based services over the internet. Though, this was largely seen as a violation to the net neutrality issue, not much could be done since there were no strict rules on net neutrality and all the earlier attempts to have one had failed.

However, a large volley of public criticism was levelled against Airtel for such a provocative action. Though activists and organizations in India were vigilant about net neutrality issues, the public outcry on social media over Airtel's differential pricing was the one that garnered visibility and attention from mainstream media as well. This was to become even more in the next six months.

Telecom Partnerships and the Heat of Net Neutrality

Though Google was experimenting with Project Loon and Facebook welcomed partnership with its rival, in Oct 2014, Facebook announced that it was eager to partner with the mobile network operators in India for its Internet.org as only they could get the internet to the poor population with their already established network user base. Facebook's old partner Reliance from Facebook Zero and Airtel (also a partner in Internet.org in Ghana) showed interest. In February 2015, Facebook announced its partnership with Reliance communication in bringing the internet to the one billion 'unconnected' people in India and formally launched the Internet.org in India.

At the same time, Airtel announced an initiative largely on the same lines of Internet.org and called it Airtel Zero. The idea was that certain Apps and services could be accessed free of charge by the Airtel consumers and Airtel suggested that the cost of access would be borne by the app makers and service providers. This time there was an even bigger public backlash, mostly over social media, criticizing Airtel's direct violation of the net neutrality principle. Since, the chances of Airtel promoting a bigger brand which partnered with Airtel was much higher than Airtel promoting brands that have not partnered with it or other smaller brands which might not be able to pay for such partnerships and given that this is in direct violation to net neutrality, the public criticism was aggressive this time and was larger in scale as well. This led to Airtel subsequently stopping this service.

Airtel's announcement of the Airtel Zero was just after the announcement of the internet.org, however, the public backlash for Airtel Zero and its stoppage of services was

building up and was soon directed towards internet.org as well. Soon after the public backlash on the Airtel Zero initiative, the Indian startup companies, which had signed a deal with internet.org, withdrew fearing an even larger backlash that might affect both their brand names and their business subsequently.

The Birth of Protesting Free Basics

In April 2015, Facebook rolled out internet.org through Reliance communication in states such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala and Telangana.³² Though the service was not rebranded as Freebasics yet, it called the services as free basic services. Very soon websites such as netneutrality.in and savetheinternet.in set up specifically to raise awareness about the net neutrality issues gained popularity, while groups like the AIB (All India Bakchod – a controversial standup comedy group), pitched in and ensured that the mainstream media caught onto the debate³³ by creating a few Youtube videos on the net neutrality issues.³⁴

The mainstream media, which caught onto the debate, included well known English television news channels such as NDTV and Times Now and print media such as The Hindu, Times of India and others who carried opinion pieces debating net neutrality. Only few south Indian regional language television channels and vernacular press debated this issue following their north Indian counterparts. However, most debates around this occurred either in English or Hindi, leaving out a majority of India, which spoke neither of these languages.

Facebook took these reactions from the activists and the growing complaints from the social media world (ironically their activism was on/through Facebook) seriously and provided a transparent guidelines document in May 2015, which gave a detailed implementation guideline about the Internet.org initiative. This was immediately followed by a strategic public relations outreach from Facebook with advertisements (both offline and online), which made claims about how this initiative could help deliver the Indian poor out of poverty by providing them free internet and access to information, and opportunities that were only available to the more affluent.

The Role of the State

In July 2015, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi announced the Digital India campaign, which aimed at making the government services available to all citizens of India, through betterment of the internet technology and increasing informational connectivity. Announcing nine pillars of digital India plan,³⁵ he made certain that all of this was also meant for the rural and urban poor and was aimed at increasing their awareness to the wider world through which development in India could take shape.

A couple of months later, he visited the Silicon Valley to meet with the heads of the technology giants. During this visit, Facebook agreed to provide Wi-Fi hotspots in rural Indian villages, while other companies such as Google, Microsoft and Oracle promised to pitch in with internet connectivity as well.

However, what stood out the camaraderie between Modi and Zuckerberg, be it the former's participation in the Town hall meeting or him hugging the latter or the latter's

enthusiasm by changing his profile picture on Facebook to support Modi's Digital India initiative. Somehow, this came to symbolise an indirect government support of the internet.org initiative, which irked the activists in India even further.

Politics of Free Basics and its Death in India

It was around the same time, that the Internet.org programme in India came to be called as Freebasics. However, Freebasics was the app through which subscribers could access the internet that Facebook promised. It was supposed to align to the slower connections in areas where connectivity was sparse by providing some basic Internet connectivity. This was crucial since, Facebook for its part made it very clear that the Freebasics package was only designed to provide access to the websites that sign up with it. However, this was stated as a way to get people on the internet and it said people will start paying for the services if they wanted a quicker and wider internet service. Internet.org's official website reports that at least 50% go onto subscribe to the fuller version after the first 30 days. Also, if the user/subscriber wanted to access other sites, they would incur additional costs levied by the network provider. In short, Freebasics meant that only the basics would be free and those basics depended on who signed up for the initiative. Also, this would only be available to Reliance communication subscribers, which was the fourth largest network provider in India.³⁶

Neither this rebranding nor the clarification helped and the debates in India did not subside and took an even aggressive turn that led to TRAI inviting comments on net neutrality and Freebasics from the public. Once again, both the net neutrality activists and Facebook as a company took to spreading awareness, so while the former took to social media (like Facebook/YouTube and Twitter) and wrote online and on print media, the latter spent money marketing and advertising the initiative as a social initiative across media platforms.

In Nov 2015, Freebasics launched all across India providing access to Wikipedia, Bing search, BBC News and a host of local news services.³⁷ Freebasics also invited several other developers and companies to join them in providing internet access to the poor. This was also the time, when Google, which was initially a part of the Freebasics platform in Zambia, withdrew from it, creating even higher degrees of scepticism about this platform in India and very shortly in Jan 2016, TRAI accused Facebook of misleading the public through its marketing of the Save Freebasics campaign in India and its response to TRAI's consultative paper on net neutrality and Freebasics. Facebook was urging its users to send in an email (also created an auto email form) to TRAI suggesting that the regulatory authority support its Freebasics program. This controversial system created an even greater furore and culminated in Freebasics being banned from India in February 2016, stating its violation of the net neutrality principle and under the "Prohibition of Discriminatory tariffs for Data Services Regulations 2016" notification.³⁸

DIFFERENTIAL UNDERSTANDING AND DOES IT REALLY MATTER TO THE POOR? – KEY PERSPECTIVES/PLAYERS

This entire episode showcases how the techno-social initiative was viewed differently by Facebook and by net neutrality activists. While this may at the outset seem like just two camps opposed to each other, within each of these camps there were several key players which included the self proclaimed public intellectuals, advocates of free market, development and net neutrality and various Non-governmental organizations. Despite the players being diverse, their critiques were similar enough to group them together under these two opposing camps.

While zero rating and regulation of market competition was the primary concern of the net neutrality activists, Facebook simply saw its initiative as a social and developmental enterprise that stood for digital equality and said it always welcomed every player in the market to partner with the platform.

The activists stressed that Freebasics should allow access to the entire internet rather than a few sites and their stance on if not full access then no access was the irritant to the Freebasics camp, which kept stressing that users could access other sites if they opted for a paid service like any other service in the market, which in a way is not any different from the market structure of paying for the internet. Since complete free connectivity might not be possible due to resource constraints and incurrence of losses,³⁹ this camp argued that at least some connectivity still brought people online and was much better than no connectivity.

While both camps with the help of the mainstream media argued from their own angles, what needs to be truly understood was whether this initiative really mattered to the poor.

Though Freebasics supporters asked a pertinent question of wasn't some connectivity better than no connectivity, their questions are silenced through several others that surface with respect to their pro-disadvantaged rhetoric. Will some connectivity allow the poor to escape the clutches of poverty? If they were anyway going to make use of the internet and pay for a full service, in what way does it really help the poor? In a way though, doesn't this idea of some connectivity (part information/slow connections) in itself reassert digital inequality rather than reduce it?

Even more crucial are questions on whether the poor really got a chance to speak about net neutrality, was it explained to them in their own local language or would it have really mattered to them even if introduced. To understand this, it is vital to recognize the role of internet, mobile devices and social media in the everyday lives of people⁴⁰ and how it fits into their socio-cultural fabric, since only then can an understanding of the process of both diffusion and penetration of such technologies in the lives of people emerge. Ethnography becomes one of the most suited methodologies to understand such socio-cultural complications.

Grounding the Debate: Freebasics from the Lens of Everyday Life

A fifteen-month ethnography was conducted in 2013 and 2014 in a peri-urban area (pseudonym – Panchagrami) right next to the city of Chennai, in Tamil Nadu, South India to understand the impact of social media and digital technologies in the lives of people. This was a place where over 200,000 people commute every single day to work in a special

economic zone specifically catering to the IT services. This entire set up is situated right in the midst of a few traditional Indian villages with their own population of around 30,000 (nearly 48% long term rural residents and 52% newly settled residents, across all socio-economic classes). The ethnography involved collecting data through participant observation, interviews (over 100 formal and innumerable informal), questionnaires and schedules intending to understand the digital media landscape (five in total). The ethnography was conducted both offline and online for a total of fifteen months.

Chennai, Tamil Nadu assumes immense importance in this debate since it was one of the first areas where the free basic services through Internet.org was rolled out before its expansion across India in Nov 2015. With Panchagrami being right next to Chennai and having a significant proportion of rural and lower socio-economic classes, exploring its residents' thought processes on Freebasics helps understand the impact of the app or the debate surrounding it. The following sections strive to explore the topic from the perspective of the poor in Panchagrami by systematically engaging with the rhetoric as expressed by Freebasics and should not be taken as an argument either for Free Basics or for net neutrality.

One of the most misunderstood ideas is that the rural and poorer populations cannot access the internet if not for schemes such as Freebasics. With competitive data packs available at affordable prices, this is increasingly becoming a false ideology when applied to the rural population. However, when it comes to the really poor below poverty line who find it difficult to access even three square meals a day, access to a cheap used phone in itself is a huge challenge (and a luxury in a way) and the question of why and how would they access the internet does arise. Further, given their priorities and their levels of literacy, the question of whether such programmes are even relevant to them also surface.

The next section details some direct and indirect claims as offered by Freebasics and strives to see if they hold true for the target group that this programme is aimed at.

Claim: Digital Equality might bring social equality

Ground level reality: Digital Equality is not social equality

One of the key statements that seem to recur in most communication concerning Freebasics is that bringing the disadvantaged online would usher in digital equality and thereby reduce poverty and create social equality. However, by studying the different socio-economic groups at Panchagrami, which is under transition from an agricultural economy to a knowledge economy, insights into key issues regarding social media and social inequality can be gained.

What became very clear is that digital equality does not necessarily mean social equality. At one level there is clearly a growing equality of access, since a smartphone can give you the same communication tools as the rich or the privileged have and this is exactly the argument that Facebook makes in support of the Freebasics. However, when one delves deeper, the truth that stands out is that online equality does not mean offline equality. This is illustrated in Panchagrami, where one may actually prefer to remove one's driver from his/her social media account than feel that you are in some sense 'friending' a servant.

For example: Ravikrishna, an IT executive and his wife Sindhu, a homemaker, felt uncomfortable friending their driver, Ganesh, a 22 year old, on Facebook, since they didn't

want him to see their personal interactions on it. For them Facebook was much more personal. They felt that such friending would actually undermine authority and promote a sense of informality. Ravikrishna said that this wasn't wrong in anyway, since even bosses don't friend their subordinates at work. Though, he quotes hierarchy as a factor, in this case, it was more pronounced since it was between classes. This wasn't true of Ravikrishna or his wife Sindhu alone, as many agreed to this notion during interviews.

Further, equality is a cultural issue and cannot be just equated to class alone. In India the idea of equality is more complicated and has a very long history when combined with issues of caste.

Sundararajan, a 57-year-old upper middle class, upper caste businessman, who wanted to let out one of his apartments for rent to a vegetarian from the same socio-economic background, enlisted the help of his neighbours who were more or less from the same background to help him by advertising on their online social networks, since he wasn't a member of any. Very soon, he found a suitable tenant for his apartment. Sundararajan quipped that he wasn't really surprised by the response, since he knew that his neighbours mostly socialized within the same socio-economic background offline and he had simply assumed that they would maintain the same networks online as well. This was true, since very soon, a census of the Facebook profiles of the upper caste Hindus revealed that on an average, 58% of their friends and contacts were from their own communities and even the others were mostly those who they knew offline. In other words an unconscious Network Homophily existed and this continued from their offline practices.

Both offline and online equality in a sense influence each other and are complexly interwoven. So, while web companies may see technology or access to the internet as a panacea for all social evils, they often don't consider the wider complexities or see how social issues like caste and class influence digital equality.

Claim: Women can now access information

Ground Level reality: Women have severe family restrictions in accessing information

Another important claim was that the Freebasics would help women access information. This could only be true for those in the lower socio-economic classes as women belonging to upper socio-economic classes, already access the internet and social media sites. However, in the lower middle classes and lower socio-economic classes, caste issues and strict social surveillance of young unmarried women often makes it difficult for them to access even phones, let alone use the internet or social media. There is a prevalent social notion that access to phones might endanger a woman's chastity.⁴¹ Unmarried young women with school education have the highest potential to access the internet of all the people, but are cut off from tools to gain such access. Once married they may gain the right to own a phone, yet access to the internet might still be guarded by their in-laws.

For example: Rajah is a 22 year old studying Computer Science. He is always signed into Facebook through his smart phone, however, when it comes to his sister who studies in the same college as he does, Rajah exerts a control on her and doesn't allow her to access social media of any kind. His reason for keeping out his sister from the 'clutches' of social media is related to the discourses on ideal Tamil women.

Such normative discourses on ideal Tamil women and the associated perception of social media and the internet as a masculine space⁴² dangerous for women, occur often. Strict surveillance over boundaries of time and space of access make everything else dangerous and masculine and prompts a hyper-masculine response from the male members of these families.

Claim: Access to information is through the internet

Ground level reality: News is through offline social networks

Access to news/information through the internet is the most important claim of the Free Basics scheme. However, for the poor in Panchagrami, access to information and news is through entirely different channels. While news pertaining to people's everyday needs is often passed through word of mouth, access to news for men is often through the "corner tea shop culture" that has long existed in Tamil Nadu, where people meet to drink tea, read newspapers, and partake in informal debates about daily news. Listening to such debates forms an important learning culture for the illiterate poor men in Panchagrami. Further, people still rely on Panchayat offices (local village council offices) to pass on policy news that affects them. Aural learning assumes more importance than textual learning for this group and access to information is stippled due to issues of illiteracy.

Take the case of Sukumar, a 23 year old, first generation graduate from lower socio-economic background, who works for a medical transcription company at Panchagrami and owns a cheap smart phone and is on Facebook. However, most of his friends are only the young from his area who have had some sort of exposure to education (though being school dropouts). His profile, as that of many others in his socio-economic group, has an age restriction with respect to who they friend. This is not borne out of a conscious choice, but is often driven by issues such as illiteracy, which keeps the middle aged and the elderly away from social media. Even communication with his parents has to happen over voice rather than even text messages. This is in direct contrast to the age range seen in the friends' lists of the middle and higher socio-economic classes.

On an average, a lower socio-economic household in Panchagrami might possess one, or a maximum of two used feature phones, whose primary purpose is voice communication. This limited use of mobile technology is not only due to more advanced communication tools being inaccessible, but also due to the illiteracy of users. There were several cases where even a text message had to be read by someone other than the phone's owner (especially when the owner was a woman). Although literacy amongst the younger generations is on the rise (with people often staying in school until at least the 5th grade), literacy still needs to improve for people to be able to send text messages, let alone use the internet.

In a way TamilNadu is the state that pioneered the practice of providing freebies to the poor during elections.⁴³ Freebies ranged from television sets to cooking gas to blenders to grinding machines to even cycles and laptops for school going children. The current ruling government and its opposition parties compete with each other to announce freebies to ensure that they attract votes from the poor. The poor here are pretty cognizant of the freebies offered through the state as opposed to a private enterprise. This also speaks to the

information network that the poor maintain, where election offerings and state schemes are well known through their networks rather than offerings of a private enterprise.

The words of Pandi, a 26 year old, Plumber, from the lower socio-economic class directly speaks to this *“What is Free Basics? I am ready for anything Free... (after knowing its from Facebook)... Isn't Facebook already free? So what is extra in Free Basics? Can't our government offer it as a part of the election campaign?”*

The idea that such a scheme might help atleast in combating boredom does arise. People here normally combat boredom by listening to songs from films and watching television (freely provided by the government). Film songs are typically bought cheaply from phone recharge booths by an individual and then shared with others. Since the latest and the best songs are bought and shared this way, people do not need to access the internet to enjoy their favoured forms of entertainment. Even if they did, the Free Basics package does not provide them with a site to download such songs.

Another question that arises is in the choice of the telecom provider, namely, Reliance Communications. Competitors such as Airtel, Aircel, and Vodafone occupy the biggest share of telecom services used by people here, hence, offering the Free Basics package on Reliance won't necessarily reach the poor, as they don't even use this provider.

What also needs to be stated is that the situation right from the start reeked with irony. The activists who were against Facebook's Freebasics used Facebook and other social media sites to communicate to the public. If the internet and Facebook hadn't reached the rural and the poor in the first place, who were these activists communicating with? Infact, the answer to this question leads to another irony. The net neutrality activists were largely the middle and upper middle classes and were communicating to their own classes specifically in the urban areas. Further, even the debates in the mainstream media, which took place in English (followed by Hindi as well) didn't even reach the target group in this area. This was true of the Freebasics camp as well and their communication was steeped with challenges too. Also, though Freebasics was first introduced in most south Indian states, most debates around it happened in mainstream media only when the national level televisions of north India got involved in the issue.

Further, even the thrust by the activists for a full internet access through the Freebasics app is itself an irony, since the question of 'wouldn't making a proprietary app as the gateway to the internet in itself lead to a market monopoly' does arise.

While the middle class activists saw the rural and the poor as the 'other' that needs to be saved from such unethical internet practices, the Freebasics camp for its part saw these activists as the 'other' from whom the poor need to be saved.

However, in reality, atleast for the lower socio-economic classes and the rural population at Panchagrami, both the Freebasics as well as the internet activists were 'others' who didn't really matter in their everyday lives.

In conclusion, the Free Basics scheme might have an affect on India's telecom policies, but its intended benefits for the really poor warrant further study, since currently it does not seem to make a difference to their lives, at least for people in Panchagrami. Probably, Facebook's re-entry through low cost Wi-Fi in rural areas might be the much-awaited magic.⁴⁴

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NOTES

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1. <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/> (Facebook's second largest user base after the USA is India).
2. The idea that no online content should be favored or blocked by the internet service providers. When it comes to access, the idea is that all content should be treated equally irrespective of their source. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Net_neutrality
3. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/02/22/smartphone-ownership-and-internet-usage-continues-to-climb-in-emerging-economies/>
4. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/india-to-have-the-largest-number-of-facebook-users-on-mobile-by-2017-report/articleshow/45978668.cms>. India's population is approximately 1.25 billion according to <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html> and <http://censusindia.gov.in/>
5. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
6. Statista.com, socialbakers.com, The Hindu, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/india-to-have-the-largest-number-of-facebook-users-on-mobile-by-2017-report/articleshow/45978668.cms>
7. <http://www.dnaindia.com/scitech/report-whatsapp-user-base-crosses-70-million-in-india-2031465>
8. This also has to do with low levels of internet penetration in India.
9. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/06/global-tech-companies-see-indias-vast-offline-population-as-untapped-market/ft_16-04-06_indiainternet_ownership/
10. www.socialbakers.com
11. http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf
12. http://planningcommission.nic.in/news/pre_pov2307.pdf - These estimates have been debated with claims that these estimates are reduced to only show the minimum likelihood of poverty in India.
13. <http://www.claytonchristensen.com/key-concepts/>
14. <https://hbr.org/2016/04/blitzscaling>
15. <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10102033678947881>
16. <http://www.statista.com/topics/779/mobile-internet/>
17. <http://trak.in/tags/business/2016/01/05/indian-telecom-stats-1billion-mobile-subscriber-base/>
18. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/saritharai/2016/01/06/india-just-crossed-1-billion-mobile-subscribers-milestone-and-the-excitements-just-beginning/#6940dced5ac2>
19. *ibid.*
20. <http://www.dnaindia.com/scitech/report-whatsapp-user-base-crosses-70-million-in-india-2031465>
21. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/india-to-have-the-largest-number-of-facebook-users-on-mobile-by-2017-report/articleshow/45978668.cms>
22. <http://www.digitalindia.gov.in/>
23. <https://twitter.com/narendramodi>
24. <https://info.internet.org/en/story/free-basics-from-internet-org/>

25. <http://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/facebook-free-basics-ban-net-neutrality-all-you-need-to-know/>
26. Closely following Facebook, Wikipedia launched Wikipedia Zero and was followed by Google Free Zone.
27. <http://thenextweb.com/mobile/2011/11/29/report-smartphones-account-for-just-27-of-all-mobile-phones-worldwide/>
28. <http://qz.com/5180/facebooks-plan-to-find-its-next-billion-users-convince-them-the-internet-and-facebook-are-the-same/>
29. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tech/tech-news/What-is-net-neutrality-and-why-it-is-important/articleshow/29083935.cms>
30. Arguably India's biggest private telecom provider.
31. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-11-25/news/56455517_1_net-neutrality-mobile-data-services-uninor
32. <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10102033678947881>
33. AIB had just become well known after their controversial comedy roast, which involved Bollywood film personalities created a furore and was almost taken down from Youtube, just to be re-uploaded back within a few days.
34. The last hit count on the three Youtube videos was around 3.5, 1.13 and 1.14 million respectively. Accessed in July 2016.
35. <http://digitalindia.gov.in/content/programme-pillars>
36. <http://www.trai.gov.in/WriteReadData/WhatsNew/Documents/PR-No=47.pdf>
37. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10102490971619701&set=a.529237706231.2034669.4&type=3>
38. <http://www.gizmodo.in/indiamodo/Heres-ADetailed-Timeline-Of-Facebooks-Free-Basics-And-How-It-Originally-Started/articleshow/50947015.cms>
39. Which Aircel management also agreed with their free basic internet
40. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1474805/1/How-the-World-Changed-Social-Media.pdf>
41. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/girls-and-unmarried-women-in-india-forbidden-from-using-mobile-phones-to-prevent-disturbance-in-a6888911.html>
42. Laughy, D., 2007. *Key themes in media theory*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
43. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tamil-nadu-the-ultimate-freebie-state/article7046314.ece>
44. <http://qz.com/754252/facebook-has-come-up-with-a-plan-b-for-bringing-the-internet-to-india/>

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