

‘Global Events Local Impacts’: India’s Rural Emerging Markets

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The paper attempts to analyse rapidly changing rural Indian socio-economic landscapes from a recent empirical study of rural PC kiosks. Rural contexts in India are essentially composite and digitally immature communication ecologies. Some of the questions we wanted to answer were as follows: How do computing technologies find their way into a rural community? Who are the people driving this technology? How technology is being received by the community? Breaking away from a committed long-term participatory ethnography in a bounded field, we consider an array of wider contexts and a repertoire of methods available for qualitative research to study societies in transition.

Introduction

Our paper attempts at subjecting rapidly changing rural Indian socio-economic landscapes to ethnographic scrutiny. Through a study of PC kiosks struggling to survive in an immature information and communication technology (henceforth ICT) ecology, we visit technological interventions in social contexts under the influence of a dynamic Indian political economy and the interests of multinational corporations. Rural India is a potpourri of villages and village like towns with varying levels of urbanity in them. Transitions in village India, can be cast in terms of exchanges between the rural and urban, the pre-technological and post-technological and from people-focused to technology-focused ethnography brought in by our own research agenda.

From our recent empirical study about rural PC kiosk entrepreneurs, men and women who run computer centers as businesses in rural India, we noted the need to go beyond standard ethnographic techniques and imperatives of classical anthropology. Not just to make our work relevant to industry, but to do justice to our study of the kiosk entrepreneur (henceforth KO). Some of the questions we wanted to answer were as follows: How do computing technologies find their way into a rural community? Who are the people driving this technology? How technology is being received by the community?

Disciplinary social anthropology began with a locational bias and continues to grapple with framing the local against the trans-local. Anthropology circles have recognized the lack of fit between problems raised by a mobile, globalizing world and the resources provided by a methodology originally developed for studying small societies. If we consider a repertoire of methods available to do qualitative research, a different set of research

questions present themselves compared to committed long-term participatory ethnography in a bounded field. In this paper we specifically address the question of how we manage this methodological repertoire and how we make choices to use these to suit our field.

In particular, the nature of our field underlines the fact that long amounts of time spent living in the field and observing “the other” as participant did not seem to be the optimal way to answer these and related questions. The method we adopted instead, was less longitudinally intensive, but broader in scope. In this paper, we discuss the geographic breadth that we needed to explore, as well as the breadth in terms of influencers who ultimately impacted an individual kiosk entrepreneur.

In terms of geographic breadth, we conducted ethnographic studies of 12 villages, each with a rural kiosk, and additionally expanded our scope to nearby towns and cities the kiosk entrepreneurs were known to travel. As for breadth in influence, what makes rural kiosks interesting is that dialogue about them exists among the most privileged and powerful people in India. The President and the Prime Minister of the country are on record discussing the applications of IT in rural areas, and leaders of India’s booming IT economy are similarly engaged in discourse about rural PCs. As a result, it’s necessary to take in as data, government policy documents, interviews with technology leaders, and so on, few of whom are anywhere to be found within the physical space of a rural village, when understanding the rural kiosk entrepreneur.

We note that in order for our work to be relevant to industry, we had to constantly consider the kind of insights that would be of value to a corporation like Microsoft. One point of interest is that, for a company the size of Microsoft, the organization itself contains many sub-entities, each with its own agenda and biases. Understanding these was also necessary when framing our research.

Finally, we go beyond generalities and average behaviour to understand how people in particular contexts cope with, interact and develop strategies for new technology interventions. Our geographic field expanded to accommodate wider contexts that are actively influencing the focus of our study. Here, we adopt arguments from Marcus on multi sited strategies ‘...of doing and writing ethnography as a response to studying cultures increasingly in circulation...’(Marcus 1998:5) The idea was not to critique doing ethnography but to reexamine its field practices to study ‘unfolding’ social processes.

Why India?

The truly dizzying array of geographies, cultures, religions, races, and tongues combine to create a human dynamic which is both a strength and challenge particularly to

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marketers who want to achieve efficiencies with their product offerings and communications¹

The morphing of rural India beyond agriculture: Rural India has reduced its dependence on agriculture. A little less than half of rural GDP is from non-agricultural activities. This is creating a different kind of rural market. NCAER occupation data shows a decline in cultivators and there is enough evidence of dual-sector households. Add to this the exposure levels of the top end of rural society through television, and the rural market is becoming closer in its mindset to the urban market. This is already happening in the more developed higher-income states²

For industry, India presents a good case study of communication technologies since there is much optimism in the country about their reception and integration into the everyday life of its citizens. The social consequences of these technologies are often dependent on several causal factors and have partial and inconsistent impacts on populations. By some estimates, there are 150 rural PC-kiosk projects across India. Such projects could provide the first computing experience for as many as 700 million people in India (Toyama et al 2004). In this paper, our approach to understanding kiosks focuses on the strategies of kiosk entrepreneurs to make small businesses out of kiosk operations. India's IT industry is seen as a singular route to opportunity and access to employment and livelihoods on the one hand and hip life styles and global cultural exchanges on the other. Reflections of these structural changes cannot but be felt in small village communities either through infrastructural changes wrought on by the demands of a developing economy and/or the direct arrival of digital culture in their midst.

In India, where 'language, context, culture change in every few kilometers' potential IT users belong to a very large and highly diverse groups of which many are illiterate, a close look at these populations to understand the social context of software technologies becomes imperative. (Nielsen 2006)³ Contexts that are receiving this technology need special attention to be able to see linkages between them and the reception patterns in its 'every day'. Recognizing the complexity and diversity of Indian social landscapes were first steps to understand ICT applications in these contexts. Subject villages were one of the first recipients of ICT that arrived through a series of human interventions not exactly engineered by the recipient village or its communities. To understand socio-cultural contexts of these recipient villages we undertook profiling their social demographics and communication ecologies.

¹ Fundamental country knowledge; India, CMRI-Emerging Markets Research, Microsoft internal report, May 2006

² "The new improved consumer... but the marketers are ready" Rama Bijapurkar, <http://www.businessworldindia.com/Dec0803/coverstory01.asp>

³ Nielsen, speaks of ICT applications from an HCI, user centered design perspective, wherein context sensitivity becomes crucial while creating tools for cultures far removed from western social realities. This approach may help reveal cultural biases embedded in IT applications and may open up design and developments of new HCI methods and techniques

We limited ethnography to what it can say about the macro context through 'strategically chosen local determinants' (Marcus 1998: 46). To open up the larger field to diverse local sites in which they are relevant, we ventured to ask two sets of questions;

On village communication ecologies; It is evident that communication ecologies, especially in a developing region like India, are a composite mix of media, personal/impersonal, formal/informal and has many people, media, activities and relationships interacting and evolving over a period of time. It is important to map and record what is changing and partial in these ecologies. We were alert to the state and private initiatives differently impacting availability and access to media technologies.

On managing rural ICT businesses; Measuring or finding indicators for any phenomena, for example the business of running PC kiosks lead us to answer the following questions; what does it mean to do an ICT related business in a rural area/community? Its relationship with the larger structure/processes of the community that sustains it? Who are these business men? What forms do businesses take? What makes them good businesses? What are the survival strategies to keep these afloat? How are they organized? What are they most concerned with? Would/what technology make a difference?

Foregrounding Debates

Since our focus is the rural PC kiosk, its immediate social context, its functioning and the kiosk operator/manager became subjects of primary research. Conventional field work took the form of locating and mapping socio-economic lives of kiosks; record its monetary gains/losses, profile kiosk operators as social actors, and undertake surveys of communication ecologies and socio-cultural profiles of villages. The idea was to arrive at a comprehensive picture of rural contexts in which kiosks operate and ways in which operators develop a sense for business opportunities in composite and digitally immature communication ecologies. This breadth of study also affords a structural view of village communities, the interrelationships between village infrastructure and changes occurring from state policies and developmental incursions, and consequential impacts for socio-economic and consumption patterns (Rangaswamy 2006). Before we got to the field, it was important to scan several 'other' sites to foreground and inform data collection; We had to acquaint ourselves with on-going debates on rural ICT from state policy documents, interviews with technocrats and literature around development debates.

The spread of ICT's has added to the variety of media technologies available to people and debates around its impacts. Various actors have converged on the idea of communications technologies to augment development and business prospects for hitherto overlooked rural communities. One of them is information and Internet access through a PC kiosk. Rural kiosks are computer kiosks in rural areas with one or more computers, generally owned and run by independent entrepreneurs (Kurien et al 2006). We began by adopting an

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ethnographic approach to make sense of the complete range of social processes that come within the range of managing the business of PC kiosks. Doing ethnography in these villages is to gain a perspective on the entire social setting and relationships seeking to contextualize these in wider social processes. The wider context, in this instance, can be eluded as a globalizing economy affecting the villages in western India and offers up front the methodological challenges of ethnography to map rapidly changing social landscapes.

Today's anthropological field in an interconnected world, when territorially fixed communities or stable local cultures are fast disappearing (the idea of isolated people living in separate worlds). A field site, however bounded, is also an active recipient of larger political and economic dynamism and their fall outs. This leads us to ask: what kind of knowledge ethnography produces – by what method? For whom? About whom? By whom? To what end? Is 'the field' an interlocking of multiple socio-political sites and locations, offering diverse forms of knowledge from different sources and locations? From the first jotted down observations to the completed book, several processes affect the way in which a social group is registered and analyzed to make sense to the larger audience (Ferguson et al 1998). How do we position varied sources providing knowledge/information on our subject to arrive at a logical ladder leading up, from India's changing economic policies to the running of a PC kiosk in a village?

Several socio-political discourses from diverse domains of knowledge gave key insights to frame our study of rural ICT markets. The state has a stake in ICT for development projects⁴. Influenced by debates around bridging the digital divide in resource-stressed ecologies it launched several rural projects. These efforts were also underscored by the vision of bringing employment opportunities, infrastructural growth and community well being (Jhunjhunwala 2000a)

The same debates around ICTs primarily driven by non-government organizations, focuses on ICTs for development and frequently point to shared access models as critical enablers of sustainable development and digital inclusion (Best and Maclay 2003, Corea 2001, Haseloff 2005, Keniston and Kumar 2004). In development discourses, communication technologies are viewed as development tools and technology becomes an agent of change leading to prosperity for a majority of citizens hitherto excluded from the fruits of progress. This vision of ICT's does not go unchallenged. Literatures have called attention to the challenges of national projects dedicated to digital equality for its citizens

⁴ 1994 was a major turning point for India's engagement with ICT's. The 1994 National Telecom Policy (NTP) laid the foundation of allowing private sector to operate Basic Services. This policy document attempted to clearly enunciate the goals of the liberalization process. In 1997, establishment of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) was a major gain leading to 1998 Internet Policy. Around the time, the Indian software and services industry grew from \$12.8 billion in 2003 to \$17.2 billion in 2005 -- a 34% increase (DIT, 1996-97, 2005). The IT industry was given a 'bureaucracy free environment' for prospective investors in the late 1990's after India's economic reforms took off the ground. This marked a shift from the era of state planning in industries and businesses to a new ideology of more local ownership and private initiatives (Nayar 1998). Following the development of India's national strategies for ICT, the government made a concerted effort to bring low-cost connectivity and ICT enabled services to the 'rural masses' (Pohjola 2002).

(Colle and Roman, 2003; Dragon 2002). Along these lines, a public-private collaborative effort has launched the ambitious 'Mission 2007-Every village a knowledge centre' for achieving a knowledge revolution in India⁵

Technology innovators are major players in this arena. 'Disruptive technology', seemingly, was the key word in shifting the debate on low cost/high-utility technology for emerging markets and consumers. Disruptive innovation suggests that existing mainstream markets are not starting places for waves of growth, and there is need to "incubate technologies from ground up rather than introduce top down" (Christensen 2001)⁶.

One particular initiative was a joint effort by engineering scientists in academia and industry. Faculty members at IIT Madras of the Telecommunication and Computer Networking (TeNet) group took upon themselves to pursue such R&D and found success and recognition.⁷ N-logue, a private company in league with TeNet, has introduced 'disruptive IT', setting up Internet kiosks in several rural parts of India. Bringing ICT into virgin territories, for TeNet and N-logue, is not a government/NGO supported/subsidized process but linked to doing business with new groups, creating a business environment wherein the local unit can afford buying power and use technology profitably. For them, disruptive technologies will target the poor, drawing them within the market economy such that the transaction is enabling and empowering, and will create active agents in the circulation of capital, cash and material well-being. The fact that rural India contributes significantly to the national GDP makes immense business sense to enable rural connectivity, while at the same time the Internet becomes an enabling technology.

Private corporations took interest with equal enthusiasm, driven by both, the business prospects of ICTs in emerging markets and the vision of positive impact through their products. The study has immense interest for Microsoft as it forays into emerging market economies making concerted efforts to engage with rural spaces. It is in the process of rolling out projects that take the benefits of IT to rural India to develop content and applications aimed specifically for the rural segment. The company is partnering with key players to accelerate the adoption of these services. The interest in rural India is aligned with the overall vision of the Indian state and technocrats about their role in viewing IT as primary driver for social development⁸. Microsoft India has decided to enter rural markets through a project called 'Saksham' (meaning self reliant) that will tap local entrepreneurs and

⁵ Enunciation of these ideals can be found here <http://www.mission2007.org/mission/> and <http://www.mssrf.org/>

⁶ According to Clayton Christensen, these are "simple, convenient-to-use innovations that initially are used only by the unsophisticated customers at the low end of markets".

⁷ The group has developed the CorDet and the WLL telecom and Internet systems, which would cost about a third less than normal. These are decentralized access infrastructure technologies that would not only function in a harsh environment (high temperature and power fluctuation) but would also require significantly low initial investment (Jhunjhunwala 2001).

⁸ A press report on the MS initiative, http://news.moneycontrol.com/backends/News/frontend/press_releases.php?autono=200736

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help spread **IT** in areas that remain untouched by technology. Saksham will help people set up information kiosks, tie-up finances for entrepreneurs through banks and involve local people for developing relevant applications for mass use. The company would initiate 50,000 rural kiosks in three years. Currently, six lakh Indian villages have around 14,000 kiosks, according to a Microsoft research⁹.

Thus, powerful but often faceless institutions – the government, NGOs, technologists, corporations – all have a stake in the rural PC kiosk, which of course means that any study of the kiosk entrepreneur is incomplete without an understanding of the motives and policies of those institutions.

The Field and Its Subjects

“Yahoo Messenger is probably the only means of communication other than physical travel”¹⁰

Our subjects of field study were the 12 internet kiosks in rural India. A kiosk typically allowed customers, to browse, send mails, chat, offer on-line health consultancy, agri-consultancy, e-governance and on-line university admission. Off-line activities include teaching basic computer courses, digital photos and web-astrology. E-governance services, often available in kiosks, issue relevant government documents and identity certificates to clients digitally, thus saving time, money and rendering the process transparent.

The social origins of these kiosks were shaped by the following agencies; India's stated IT policies, corporates that were engaged in rural tele-com markets and evangelizing, technocrats passionate about creating viable and affordable technologies for underserved populations and regions and developments pundits who were equally passionate about bridging the digital divide.

The 12 PC kiosks around Pabal village, Maharashtra, Western India, had a local person running each of its PC kiosks. The kiosks were linked to several players in the rural internet connectivity service providing tier. Vigyan Ashram, an NGO in the village of Pabal, operates as the of local service provider, LSP, for internet connectivity in village kiosks around Pabal, bringing ICT for the first time to these landscapes. A private company, n-logue, in partnership with Pabal LSP, builds infrastructure for wireless internet connectivity. Both players are responsible for ensuring appropriate hard ware and soft ware packages, timely servicing and trouble shooting and a worked out financial arrangements by which all parties share and manage income from kiosks. The partnership was the combined result of state initiatives bringing IT to rural regions, corporate vision to steer growth of

⁹ <http://www.ciol.com/content/news/2006/106020111.asp>

¹⁰ Quote from a KO from a village with no telephones and his PC kiosk being the only tele-com presence (Rangaswamy 2003)

kiosk/internet user markets, and the desire of local entrepreneurs to pull technologies and make home villages tech- savvy communities.

Given the fact that technology arrived due to initiatives at a macro level, we found the business of running kiosks towards sustainability were largely driven by the KO's keen sense of business acumen and passion for computing technology. They also sensed acute constraints in the form of the multi-party dependency in ICT ventures on extraneous players and agencies. The internet becomes a very expensive and frustrating experience to both owners and clients of kiosks when hardware break down and a minimum of nine hour power cuts a day anywhere in rural India being the norm. The state, on the one hand, brings initiatives with much fanfare; make huge promises, dole out finance to kick start rural projects. On the other hand, they fail to persist to lend support or address the crucial goal of long term infrastructural assets for IT driven projects. All of these urged us to focus on the operators who were still holding on to their business and in some cases, finding creative ways of using kiosk resources.

Our initial work was around collecting base line information about the beginning of each kiosk, the motive behind investing in ICT, and the kind of financial and social support structures prompting this decision. We profiled KO's and social contexts in which they live and run their Kiosks. These include social positions of these individuals, family status, economic class/ landed status, educational levels and attitudes towards pulling technology into business. Apart from core interviews, we profiled the communication ecology and social demographics of villages hosting kiosks. This aided in locating the immediate and surrounding socio-economic contexts of kiosk business. We recorded existing social structures of community life including communication. Details of village geography, social structures, economic/agricultural patterns, water and electricity resources, migration, literacy/occupational levels and other demographic details were collected. Recording village communication patterns and presence of mass media were crucial to our study to give us a sense of the demand for communication, news, entertainment and opportunities for kiosk business. These included an actual count of telephones, land line and mobile, approximate readership of newspapers, cable TV connections, usage of postal services, estimates of audio-visual merchandise consumption and how do migrants keep in touch and transfer money. Data was also collected to get an idea of popular TV channels, soap operas and mega serials.

12 villages, home to 12 PC kiosks became our situated anthropological field. Six kiosks make healthy business, four struggle but stay afloat, and two were temporarily shut down. Healthy kiosks have specific social geographies intersecting with industrial/urban belts that bring significant floating population with a need for internet services. Two of these began by attaching kiosks to a flourishing business of teaching basic computer courses. One of these is a village bordering the outskirts of Pune city and four hours from Mumbai and part of a reserved green belt offering a unique opportunity for its residents to work in urban districts and live in a village. Most people in this village commute to work and it boasts of a railway station with 17 trains passing through in a day. The other village is again stationed on

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the fringes of an industrial belt, is a religious location drawing devotee tourists. The third 'fringe' village with a busy highway splitting through is attached to a medical pharmacy. Around 4000 mobile phones, by rough estimates, are to be found amongst its population of 10,000-12,000. The fourth village of Kendur, needs special mention for its enterprising KO adapting to local demands, shifting kiosk services and tweaking technology to meet them. The fifth village, in the healthy lot, transformed its socio-economic profile after agricultural lands were annexed by the government to develop an industrial belt. In the wake of new employment, in-migration and floating population, the kiosk began making revenues from internet services, e mail and chat. The KO, enthused by the socio-economic boom in his village, has plans to develop real estate, a shopping mall cum movie multiplex, to attract temporary inflow of potential consumers of this space.

Elements of urbanity and porosity in village social contexts turn them to receptive agents of ICT's and create an organic demand for their services. Steady inflow of new employees seeking new employment, encourage cash based market economy bringing in its wake the demand for personal communication devices and mobile phones. KO's in these villages manage to adapt kiosk business to new local demands for communication technologies. Incidentally, one of the successful KO is a dealer in mobile hand sets.

Incidentally, all 12 villages have at least one computer housed in one of their schools, some having up to 10! They are in various states of use or disuse as the case may be with some schools having trained teachers. We noted a co-relation between healthy use of computers and dynamic village contexts: proximity to elements of urbanity and good transport infrastructure seemed to play a crucial role in mediating consistent usage of computers.

Mapping communication ecologies of subject villages, made us notice inflections of urbanity and mainstream popular culture weaved into the social fabric of village communities. All 12 villages show very high TV viewership with significant private cable connections. A village with no cable TV service provider had 50 families sharing a privately owned dish antenna¹¹. Rural India's links with the mainstream (read urban) happens through social routes carrying popular cultural forms. Print, video and motion picture technologies aid and become prime mediating agencies. The internet is understood from a popular matinee idol hero surfing the net even before the local school gets one.

Technology Evangelists in Rural India?

If particular village contexts proved successful providing a toe hold for ICT's, KO's in these villages initiate and respond to the intermeshing of new technology and village

¹¹ Here, we make an interesting assumption. Computers viewed as source of entertainment could be a dominant mode of associating with the PC in rural regions. The existence of significant satellite/ cable TV viewership and consumption of audio-video merchandise in each village validate the above contention.

context. They are primarily situated in a socio-cultural world, be it an urbanizing rural landscape or a mixed media environment with mobile telephony and satellite TV, affined to strong social networks as bearers and transmitters of information. It is becoming clear from our village ethnography that technology and social contexts feed on each other to shape landscapes. Much depends on receptivity and social costs of technology to feed imaginations, prod human agency to learn skill sets, open businesses or take technology further to meet atypical demands¹².

Operators find creative alternatives to keep kiosk business from sinking. KO's have shown immense enthusiasm in driving the PC kiosk business initiative and detecting commercial possibilities assumed non-existent. These individuals are unique to their village environment in the sense that they possessed certain rare qualities. All of the Kos hail from farming communities with both or one parent practicing active farming. Most possess graduate/post-graduate degrees and have either studied or worked in urban centers. Out of the 12, 4 KO's are post-graduates, 6 graduates and the remaining 2 non-graduates having a basic diploma in computing skills. They are the first generation in the family to attain a college degree. They have made decisions, in some cases giving up active jobs, and reverted to native villages to start self owned business. We soon recognized in these individuals, pulling ICT into their village milieus, some specific and special personal qualities. All of them are probably among the less than one percent of the village population who have a graduate degrees, worked in urban settings, have active socio-professional networks fetching them business and cheap infrastructural hardware and above all a tech-savvy sensibility that these personal/social experience provide to push them to adopt technology in underserved ecologies. Many of them articulated personal drive in bringing technology to their homesteads.

The more enterprising the KO the more is the business coaxed out of latent demands creating active markets out of them. They attribute persistence to a strong belief, glamour not with standing, in ICT's and their commercial visualizations. They managed business making most of what is available; car batteries, LPG cylinders are used to power the PC during frequent electricity cuts.

It is interesting to see how desktop PC's attract other hardware/technology attachments to meet popular demands. Xerox/scanner/printer/Fax/web cameras are popular attachments that attract clients to the kiosk. Photo shop is a very popular application

¹² As mentioned, dynamic villages with diverse infrastructural facilities being part of industrial/ export zones, pull in business investments, socio cultural expectations and behavioral shifts. For an example, an out sourced Swarovski unit employs young women from local village to create premium fashion products. It may be hard to convince ourselves that they have no impacts on the social and imaginary worlds of the girls and their social groups. All of these create nascent consumption demands that KO's tap in ways to augment business. Kiosk services also depend on village social geographies. Demand for learning computing skill packages has obvious ties with the market and is part of an on-going process of demand and supply. Browsing/emailing happened in those spaces that attracted a floating population from urban areas with prior dependency on these services. Requests for information, whether agri-related or not, brought little commerce (Rangaswamy 2006).

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that makes over pictures to suit client preferences. A more enterprising operator will take the camera to the village to look for client and business opportunities. KO's have mentioned the desire for village web portals with dedicated ID's. A KO's brother, trustee of the local temple which is a prominent pilgrimage centre, expressed a strong demand for web sites to enhance and broadcast the visual appeal of such places. Creating web domains for a village and providing virtual space for each family to store their photos are thought as a future market demand. These are growing indications of an understanding that web spaces can accommodate visual representations of village social geographies. Seasonal events, weddings, festivals are attractions making demands for videography. Following success and swell in demand for pictures redesigned in Photoshop, a KO wanted to buy a digital handy cam to shoot weddings and other important events around the village. He is convinced of its business prospects¹³.

'PC's should entrench like FM radios and even a road side vendor must see value in using PC's for his businesses' says a kiosk operator who lives in a village, close to the city of Pune and has a busy railhead. Baba Sawant is a rare member of his village in that he migrated to Pune for the government and handled computers from its 'FOXPRO' days. He left the city he was working in and reverted to his village 8 years ago with an aim to begin a computer coaching institute imparting computing skills to clients. He says, 'I spotted the potential of computing technologies to change the face of society. I wanted my village to be one of them'. He has already built a data base of his village demography. He also has a voters list and spotted irregularities in these, 'All this is possible because of the computer. But there are no takers for this information! Sometimes the semi-urbanity in my village is its bane. It has half baked knowledge of everything'. The semi-urbanity he is referring to are the effects, direct and indirect, of several public-private efforts to urbanize rural India, building roads, laying cable for tele-com, promoting schemes to bring computers to rural schools that remain partial and leave much ground to be covered by individual dynamism. Like Sawant, whose futuristic vision of computers in emerging markets posits faith in creating community data bases, e government services and agri-information portals. He runs an agri-interest group updating farmers on information and markets. The very fact that so much is happening in his country is reason enough to post faith in development. "It is a matter of time when villages such as his will embrace digitization in all walks of life with aplomb! It would be great to have a plasma screen display in the middle of Uruli Kanchan that flashes various 'day in the life of his village' social scenes apart from providing relevant information about it..."

Another 'emerging village', as referred by the KO, seeing results of development initiatives through a hydro-electric dam project, has an ICT enthusiast running its PC kiosk.

¹³ Here, it is important to mention several contextual connections with kiosk survival. Why some villages prosper or do better business with ICT, is context-dependent ranging from degrees of industrialization/commercialization, proximity to markets to local consumption patterns. Degrees of urbanity in village contexts support a new crop of diverse occupations increasing the chances of KO's that are quick and creative to transform these to business prospects (ibid :)

Bharat runs one of the few kiosks that is making good profits from PC based services without tied businesses. These include Xerox, scanning, DTP and most interesting of all, digital-photographs redone in photo shop. His pictures of village folk are nothing short of transporting them photographically to Bollywood type scenarios. He uses a pirated version of photo shop. While this kind of scene spotting has always existed in photo studios its digitization by Bharat to fit the tastes of emerging markets is great tech-adoption. His business has expanded and a partner was found to manage the photo business. Laptops have caught his imagination and he is confident of finding cheap versions of these too! He is soon to begin wedding videography which he considers the 'next big market splash in emerging villages such as Kendur'. Bharat is a commerce graduate, studied and worked in Pune for a while, reverted to his village and is also a local reporter for a national newspaper. He views this as a social resource connecting him to a network of informed people clued in to current events around the village and beyond. Bharat is grateful to the NGO/LSP that got him this opportunity and the company that set up shop and promised him more help. Not much help came, but Bharat is not the one to nit pick. He saw a rare opportunity in these tech interventions and pulled them into his village. Bharat, armed with photo shop, quickly spotted the potential to manipulate images and present tangible visuals of them. "I have village people, now wanting to view images of themselves they probably dream of ... I had a young man come to me and ask me softly to Photoshop him into a women... Now, they probe what else this technology can do. How else can it portray me...? I get ideas from my clients and that triggers my creative quest whetting my appetite to get a different soft ware. My instinct for business and the right tech solution had never let me down... Now, I want to edit my own videos through Pinnacle..."

Bharat represents an ethnographic serendipity due to a motley combination of social events leading him to strike profits with digital make overs. His village community interfaced with technology through his efforts to meet latent desires for self- representations.

Global Events – Local Impacts

Choices of ethnographic sites are active negotiations of preference. If corporate research needs to understand rural emerging market spaces, it involves a scrutiny of state ideology and action, engagements of civil society, private players, in short, alertness to the buzz around these sites. My study, through engagements with data from diverse sources, foregrounds the relations between culture specifics, technology adoption and immersion in unexplored territories.

The arrival of ICT's and the repertoire of marketed devices have transformed the communication landscapes in developing nations. This is more of an evolutionary change as adoption rates increase with consumer friendly market tariffs, as further friendly policies are implemented by the government. It is in this dynamic context that we pose research questions about methodology and ethnographic practice.

What's Going On Out There?

Village India is no isolated self sufficient unit, bounded in time or space. It is replete with emerging social processes felt as a result of national and global changes setting its pace and influencing its content. Most societies possess the means to produce local versions, own understandings and adaptations of imported or borrowed material cultures/technologies. Each social unit actively negotiates such encounters. As effects of larger social events reach the village and in turn their own members move beyond village boundaries, may be even around the world, cultural exchanges and experiences inform and deflect one another. In a society such as rural India, where pre-literacy and non-literacy co-exist with literate sensibilities, where oral traditions and visual cultures, iconography and sign systems are an intrinsic part of lived experiences, an entire system of communication such as information technology can take a unique course in the process of entrenching itself. Technologies are mutating to adapt to this. In oral-biased contexts, business practices of a PC kiosk promote visual rather than information services; Mobile and telephonic systems are becoming very popular; Digital cameras are found to be more exciting than a word-processing system – so on and so forth.

As communities/persons negotiate social changes, opportunities, relocate, reconstruct lives, the task of ethnography is no longer in a tightly encased field but a world wide open to external rumblings (Appadurai 1991, 1996). In this case, our field site was one responding to the nascent context of India's open economy and polity and their inconsistent forays into its countryside. We reported on the kiosk operators, as dynamic people who refuse to stay in place, occupy special social locations displaying special skills and capacities. These individuals are products of their own place and cultures alert to social transitions and opportunities

A heterodoxy arising out of these concerns re-examine the field, combining and revitalizing different styles and sites of field work. To investigate and patrol the idea of a field site in the context of wider social and political developments poses its own challenges. The sort of scrutiny foregrounds questions of location and mobility of social persons, the same questions that have cropped up time and again while doing ethnography, now with more urgency. Field work cannot stem exclusively from disciplinary methodological concerns. Reality-imposed limitations of the field urge unconventional data inputs. Contemporary anthropology needs to confront social change and issues arising out of these and engage expertise with politically borne influences. How else do we frame an instance of technological intervention in transitioning rural India?

I end with a quote from a treatise that chose to register a formal critique of classical Anthropology and its techniques of knowledge creation

Ethnography is beginning to recognize a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making complex our ethnographic forays of people, places and different forms of knowledge from social and political locations available to augment reflexivity and understanding- archives, public discourse, interviews, journalism, fiction and statistical representation of collectivities- all of these make up for a explicit attentiveness

to location a different kind of anthropological knowledge and a different kind of anthropological subject. A heightened sense of location means most of all to recognize our study as linked with so much practice that fall outside the purview of the 'field' (Ferguson et al 1998:37)

Notes

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