

Exploring the Role of Citizen Journalism in Rural India

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The mainstream media is known for its large news conglomerates comprising print, electronic and digital media, influencing and shaping public thought and opinion. However, the concentration of media ownership and homogenization of viewpoints presented to news consumers have drawn widespread flak and given rise to the emergence of alternative media. Citizen journalism, a form of alternative medium, came to the fore with the noble thought of public citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information. Citizen journalism in India and in rural regions in particular is of utmost importance as they are underserved by the mainstream media. CGNetSwara, one alternative platform, enables citizen journalism in rural regions. The current study has attempted to explore the nuances of production, distribution and consumption of citizen journalism in rural India.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, rural India, mobile, mainstream media, news, political economy

The village has for long been considered as a point of traditional Indian society. Noted Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1955) asserts that by studying a village, one can bring generalisations about social processes and social problems to be found in significant parts of India. For Mahatma Gandhi, India begins and ends in the villages (Gandhi 1979:45, in a letter to Nehru written on August 23, 1944). For Gandhi, rural India was a site of authenticity, for Nehru it was a site of backwardness, and for Ambedkar, the village was the site of oppression (Jodhka, 2002).

The government sources reveal that there are 597,464 census villages in India (Bhaskar, 2018). Indian villages are grappled with success and failure stories. Recently, the Prime Minister of India has already announced that all villages in India now have access to electricity. However, the World Bank underlined that around 200 million people in India still far from electricity (BBC, 2018). There is a severe lack of essential amenities for rural people. The media has a significant role to play in a democracy. The role of media, journalism, in particular, can be contextualized in this situation. To a great extent, Indian media is responsible for the vibrant democracy in India.

Media in Rural India and Development Communication

The role of media for rural development, in particular, national development can be traced back to the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE). The SITE experimented from

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August 1, 1975, to July 31, 1976 in 2400 villages in 20 districts of six Indian states and territories comprising Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Rajasthan. Support by the UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and ITU, the project was successful in developing India's satellite program, INSAT. The primary social objectives of this project were to educate the rural people on family planning, agricultural practices, and national integration. The secondary objectives were on school and adult education, training for teachers, improve occupational skills and health and hygiene. Besides, India experimented with gaining experience in all the technical aspects of the system, including broadcast and reception facilities and TV program material.

The emergence of development communication in India came to the fore with this experiment. Wilbur Schramm in his book 'Mass Media and National Development' (1964) underlines that media is the agent of change and development. Development communication is purposive, value-laden, and pragmatic. Hence, it is entirely different from propaganda and commercial-oriented communication. The discussion on the role of development communication for rural development is imperative. The current government at the center goes with the format of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (Collective efforts, Inclusive growth). However, to many, it has remained in mere slogans (Kumar, 2017).

The Indian media suffers from accuracy, journalistic ethics, and probity. On the other hand, there have been growing defamation suits against journalists, stress on whistle blowers, RTI activists and upsurge in political infotainment which have posed potential threats on journalists. The Indian news media has been ignoring the marginalized sections of society. It is not logical in representing the issues of the *Dalits*. Even news media and entertainment media like *Bollywood* is not judiciously representing the disability (Biswal, 2017; Biswal, 2019).

Most importantly, the mainstream media have taken the path of 'market-driven and 'spin-doctored' from the 'constructivist' approach. It is reeling under biased coverage and a lack of proper coverage on social issues (Murthy, 2013). The disparity in terms of the flow of information is of the problems that lead to the underdevelopment of Indian society. Therefore, alternative media came to the fore to address the inherent problems of mainstream media.

The Emergence of Alternative Media and Community Media

With the advent of new communication technologies, the mode of production, distribution, and consumption of news has changed. This mode of news has brought the increasing role of readers or audiences (Fortunati et al., 2009). Moreover, the interactive and mobile technologies are found more accessible and beneficial to empower citizens as they can publish their contents without any gatekeeping and filtering.

The difference between the mainstream and alternative media is quite striking. John Fiske (1992) underlines that it is the selection of news and the approach of news that demarcates the two modes of news production. The mainstream media confines the news to the 'market.' Alternative media facilitates interactive audiences which are only mass in traditional media. It develops the sense of active audience by transforming them from marginal or marginalized tendencies which are prevalent in the mainstream media (Livingstone, 2003). Hence, it is quite apparent that the alternative media have the edge over traditional media in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of news contents and has paved the way for participatory journalism.

Alternative media could be in the form of print, electronic and digital. The power of alternative media, Vinod Pavarala and Kanchan K. Malik (2007) state that community radio is a medium of participatory communication in revitalizing the civil society. Similarly, Bidu Bhusan Dash (2015, 2016) asserts that the community is making sincere efforts in the alternative space of communication. Hence, the power of community media, as a source of alternative media is getting recognized and accepted from various communities in India.

The Emergence of Participatory Journalism and Citizen Journalism

Participatory journalism is not a new phenomenon. It has its history in the eighteenth - century when newspapers in England used to leave space at the end of the page for readers' comments. Following the step of such participative journalism, in the American colonies, Benjamin Harris' Public Occurrences was printed on three pages, leaving the fourth-page blank on which the readers used to add something of their choice (Martin & Hansen, 1998). Citizen journalism in the light of participatory journalism can be discussed here.

Citizen journalism is also termed as participatory and democratic journalism. Citizen journalist as an individual who is not a trained professional. However, the individual may report on his or her neighborhood or community. To some others, citizen journalism is about the role of a citizen play in collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information. Therefore, citizen journalism is different from the dominant pattern of production, distribution, and consumption of contents.

Literature Review

To understand the existing literature on any topic is of utmost importance for proper investigation. Hence, a few pertinent reviews of the literature on the given topic has been conducted.

Advantages of Citizen Journalism

Rabia Noor (2010) underlines that sometimes citizen journalists break the news on the Internet before the traditional or mainstream journalists. Such kind of tendency has reduced the monopoly of and dependency on mainstream journalism. Citizen journalists cover the issues confronting them more than the issues that appear in the mainstream media. They cannot be compared with mainstream media journalists. However, they cover anything newsworthy, and their role should be accepted and acknowledged. It is also assessed that as the accessibility of technology is on the rise, citizen journalism will be more accepted and practiced.

In their analysis, S. Allan, and E. Thorsen's (2009) find that there is a definite link among citizen journalism, public opinion, and cultivating democracy. It is also found that the normative role of the journalist as gatekeeper is challenged in creating and distributing the information. It democratizes the mode of dissemination of information. It is used by mainstream media is an alternative media that can expose social injustice for the betterment of society.

Haluk Mert Bal and Lemi Baruh (2015) reveal that editorial independence is the most striking feature of citizen journalism. However, the boundaries of citizen journalism are not clear for citizen journalists. At the same time, Krishna Sankar Kusuma and Santosh Kumar Biswal (2011) find out that citizen journalism is people-centric, hyper-local and hence, becoming a separate entity from traditional journalism.

Disadvantages of Citizen Journalism

Saqib Riaz and Saadia Pasha (2011) find that the challenges for citizen journalism are the lack of credibility of information. Jessica Roberts and Linda Steiner (2012) unearth that citizen journalism is involved with unconfirmed assessments. So far as quality is concerned, such kind of journalism is subjective, amateurish, and haphazard in quality. Moreover, Anoop Saha (2012) points out that sometimes it has the problem of exaggerating unusual one-time cases, resulting in distortion of facts.

Peter Dooley (2008) highlights that the concept of citizen journalism is not a new one. On the other hand, traditional or professional journalism has been practiced for decades with certain standard norms. The norm of objectivity and accountability in citizen journalism based on user-generated content is far-fetched.

Rabia Noor (2010) stresses that the mainstream media is possessed with authenticity, credibility, and responsibility. It enjoys the trust of the audience because of a proper system of professional functioning. The audience prefers news and information by professional journalists rather than citizen journalists. So, mainstream journalism cannot be replaced by citizen journalism, can only complement it. Moreover, Noor asserts that the content in citizen journalism is of poor quality and hardly possesses news values. Such kind of journalism does rarely adhere to journalistic ethics. Also, many times the content is subjected to plagiarism, showing the loophole of such journalistic practice.

Mainstream Journalism and Citizen Journalism: A Collaborative Venture

It is argued that mainstream journalism and citizen journalism can function collaboratively for many reasons. Rabia Noor (2010) stresses that the mainstream media is possessed with authenticity, credibility, and responsibility. It enjoys the trust of the audience because of a proper system of professional functioning. The audience prefers news and information by professional journalists rather than citizen journalists. So mainstream journalism cannot be replaced by citizen journalism, can only complement it. Besides, since citizen journalism in its formative years, it cannot pose an imminent threat to mainstream journalism.

Reiterating the fact that citizen journalism cannot replace professional journalism, M. A. Dugan (2008) suggests that mainstream journalists should overcome the fear of fear and skepticism regarding their survival. Citizen journalists do not want space in the newsroom; instead, they want to say something which is ignored by the mainstream media while busy with the big stories.

Corinne Barnes (2012) explores that with the development in technologies and mobile devices, the online audience is fostering active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. In this sense, it is argued that mainstream and citizen journalism should collaborate to meet the requirements of their audiences.

Helen Boaden (2008) unravels that user-generated contents in citizen journalism provides a broader diversity of voices. As a result, mainstream media cannot enjoy the monopoly over the news stories. In a good sense, citizen journalism is a way to enhance the quality of mainstream journalism. Hence, there is an argument for the coexistence of mainstream journalism and citizen journalism.

Saqib Riaz and Saadia Pasha (2011) recommend that collaboration with citizen journalists and mainstream journalists may alleviate the problem of reliability of information in citizen journalism. However, Ingrid Volkmer and Amira Firdaus (2013) are

skeptical on the ground that citizen journalism as a supplement or complement to journalistic news reporting may pose another challenge to the dissemination of information.

Mark Deuze, Axel Bruns and Christoph Neuberger (2007) assert that citizen journalism relies on the traditional forms of journalism which is the basic to journalism. Similarly, mainstream journalism gets improved by using user-generated content. Moreover, there is a harmonious coexistence if each of these two forms of journalism understands each other.

Level of Participation and Influence

Haluk Mert Bal and Lemi Baruh (2015) find that citizen journalists frequently report what they witness or encounter. Mainstream media reports and wire services merely influence citizen journalists. This shows their potentiality in democratizing information production and dissemination. However, the researchers assert that it is the type or nature of the emergency that defines or determines the own accounts of incidents and its reporting as well. At the same time, Shanto Iyengar (1991) explores that usually, citizen journalists adopt episodic frames more than thematic frames.

Stephen Cooper (2006) emphasizes that it is citizen journalism which facilitates citizens' active engagement in reporting various events. As a result, it also challenges gatekeeping functions of mainstream media and adds some journalists as citizen journalists as the 'fifth estate.'

A. Bruns (2009) regrets that citizen journalism has failed to meet a sense of participation. There has been an absence of professional journalism. However, he recognizes the development of sustainable hybrid models in which there is active participation of the best of professional and citizen journalists. It leads to free up paid journalism staff to create content, add value to citizen journalism content, and curate the combined product.

Research Gaps

It is found that the study on citizen journalism in India is scarce. Whatever studies have been conducted so far, mostly confined to urban areas. Hence, there is a rural and urban dichotomy in the light of citizen journalism has developed. Rural communication plays a vital role in the process of disseminating information in India. In this context, the space of citizen journalism in rural communication is yet to be ascertained. Also, the level of participation in this form of journalism in India is to be studied.

Research Methodology

The current study has the following objectives:

- (i) To understand the functioning or participation of citizen journalism in rural India;
- (ii) To study the impact of citizen journalism in rural India

The current study is of qualitative in nature. In a view to understanding the functioning of citizen journalism in rural India; and to study the impact of citizen journalism in rural India, the case of CGNet Swara has been taken for this study. CGNet Swara, established in 2004, is an Indian voice-based online portal that facilitates people in the forests of Central Tribal India to report local news through using phone calls. The message recorded from the field goes through trained journalists and get available on the CGNet Swara website.

To meet the objectives of the study, the researcher has used both primary and secondary data. For primary data, the interviews with various stakeholders of CGNet Swara have been employed. For the collection of the secondary data, various data procured from the organization have been utilized. To understand the functioning of citizen journalism and the impact of citizen journalism in rural areas, the assessment of this organization has been conducted since its inception. The current study is based on the theory of gatekeeping, conscientization and participatory journalism.

According to Kurt Lewin, gatekeeping occurs at every phase of media structure and functioning. It could be at the level of reporters, editors, media owners, and advertisers. Even individuals can be gatekeepers to filter the information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009).

In his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' Paulo Freire (1993) underlines that conscientization should be a subject in the formation of a democratic society. To Freire, there are four types of consciousness- magical consciousness, naive consciousness, critical consciousness, and political consciousness. At the level of magical consciousness, people experience themselves as entirely impotent in their personal and socio-economic lives. Moreover, they are controlled by outside forces. At the level of naive consciousness, people can find a distinction between oneself and the outside world. They develop an understanding of the existing situation. They get to know that they can do something about their situation but are also swayed of not being capable of doing several things. At the level of consciousness, the people grow the understanding of their capabilities. They also identify the cause of oppression and ways to fight it out. At the level of political consciousness, people combine their strengths and attempt to control politics and work against the situation of oppression.

D. Gillmor (2006) asserts that the democratic role of journalism needs to be re-defined to make the system more inclusive unlike what happens in the traditional gatekeeping process. It disowns the top-down approach and encourages the citizens in the process of production, distribution, and consumption of news. Henry Jenkins (2006) stresses on the emergence of a participatory culture that empowers citizens in expressing themselves. This facilitates the discourse of active audiences, talking about users instead of passive readers.

Finding and Analysis

The functioning of CGNet Swara as a source of an alternative media throws numerous discussions. K. Barzilai-Nahon (2009) asserts that traditional gatekeeping media undergoes through reporters, editors, media owners, and advertisers and many others. However, it does not happen precisely in CGNet Swara. It is apt to bring the stand of D. Gillmor (2006) which underscores the need for the democratic role of journalism. In such a kind of journalism, the gatekeeping process of news filtering remains different. More strikingly and importantly, the dissemination of information follows the bottom-up approach which fosters the tempo of citizen journalism.

The political economy of CGNet Swara is different from commercially driven mainstream media (Mosco, 1998). It is a media driven for community development. It is a form of journalism that promotes the social development of the community. Unlike mainstream media, it empowers community people to be very much an active part of media. Instead of a passive audience, communities working under this platform of citizen journalism, attempt to democratize the news in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. Extending on this similar line, David Croteau (2007) asserts that such kind of 'self-produced media' in digital formats has the noble cause to meet the communication needs of communities.

Community participation is the mainstay of this alternative form of journalism. Henry Jenkins (2006) mentions that digital networks back a participatory culture empowers the citizens. Similarly, CGNet Swara facilitates digital interactions in which community people are involved in the process of citizen journalism. Over the years, it is found that news has become part of the personal, social and participatory experience.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) emphasizes that the ladder of citizen participation undergoes the process of manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegation, and citizen control. First, four states are not worthy. The real participation starts with the stage of partnership. The citizen journalists with this community media are at the stage of partnership. They are taking an important decision in the production, distribution, and consumption of news contents. Hence, such form of journalism is fostering citizen participation which ultimately leads to community development in the regions.

CGNet Swara can be termed as an alternative media. In the age of mergers, acquisitions, and concentration of ownership of media outlets, such of kind of community-owned media (Pavarala & Malik, 2007; Dash, 2015) is of utmost importance for the needs and demands of the communication. Since the functioning of such media is community-based participatory communication, this medium remains inclusive in several fronts. With the very nature of participatory to meet the requirements of communities, this medium fosters the sense of critical consciousness (Freire, 1993). Such kind of critical consciousness and political consciousness create the climate of liberation and development of society.

Whenever there is a discussion on the type of participation in development communication, the opinion of Maurizio Alí (2010) deserves for further deliberation. Alí underlines that there are four types of participation-passive participation, participation by consultation, participation by collaboration and empowerment participation. Considering the functioning in CGNet Swara, it is found that participation by collaboration and empowerment participation is prevalent. Such kind of participation has been enriching community participation which has become an integral part of development communication.

Since its inception, the impact of CGNet Swara has been significant and growing. Some of the issues which have been resolved through the platform of citizen journalism have been discussed. In a view to understand and assess the impact of citizen journalism, various cases and experience of community people deserve careful attention.

One resident from Geduraha village in Jaba Tehsil of Rewa District in Madhya Pradesh reported that several BPL families in their village are not getting ration regularly. After the report, the listeners pressurized the concerned officers, and the Collector and District Food Officer ordered an inquiry. After that, they received the rations regularly.

One woman from Basia-Khiria village in Batiagarh Block of Damoh District in Madhya Pradesh reported that the crops were lost in this area after a hailstorm, but a survey had found a crop loss of 5%. When she reported about it on CGNet Swara, officials came back for another survey, and the crop loss was found to be 100%. As a result, farmers could get reasonable compensation for crop loss.

One resident from Dharampur village in Dharmajaigarh block of Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh reported on CGNet Swara that Pando primitive tribals from the village were running pillar to post to get their due *Kendu* leaf collection wages. After the report, an officer came to the village early in the morning and woke people up to give them their due wages before another higher official visited the village during the day.

One resident from Kodapakha village in Bhanupratapur block of Kanker district in Chhattisgarh reported that Border Security Force was stationed in their village for the last five years. BSF had captured school and market place in the village. There was a Supreme Court order against it. Villagers complained about it many times, but nothing moved. However, after reporting in CGNet Swara, BSF vacated the places.

A resident from Pahadi Korwa adivasi community reported on CGNet Swara on various problems in their village. After the report, the government officials visited his village Salkheta in Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh. They sanctioned seven wells, one tube well, School and *Anganwadi* building and road. They assured two oxen to 28 families each and goats to seven families.

One woman from Kukurbhukha village in Patthalgaon block and Jashpur district in Chhattisgarh brought the issue of late payment of wages under the scheme of NREGA. Later, the issue was resolved through this medium of communication. Similarly, the issues of drinking water, primary education, transport, public distribution system, human trafficking was resolved and the condition is better now.

The cases mentioned above and experiences are few to name how the participatory culture came into existence. There is no doubt that CGNet Swara has expanded digital environments. It has fostered the discourse of active audiences, rather than passive consumers of digital platforms. Such kind of participatory culture powered by networked and interactive digital technologies has been empowering the community people (Jenkins, 2006). As a result, it is quite apparent that participatory culture through interactive digital platforms has empowered the community people.

In this context, Mitzi Waltz's (2005) stand on alternative and activist media is imperative for discussion. The alternative and activist media brings diverse voices and concepts from outside the commercial media and challenges and strengthens the commercial media. Robert McChesney (2012) claims that deregulated media is a misnomer. The government and corporate houses control it. They influence and control new coverage and distort the information. The problems which the mainstream media could not resolve, this community media came for people's rescue. This could be possible because of the counter-narrative of commercial media. Later, the effectiveness of this community media was highlighted in mainstream media and the public sphere. CGNet Swara has paved the way for media participation and consumption by marginalized audiences through digital platforms. It has carved out a place as an alternative media in culture.

With the active participation in the domain of production, distribution, and consumption of news contents, the community could able to get rid of the culture of silence. Paulo Freire (1993) asserts that it is the critical consciousness and political consciousness which elevates and liberate the oppressed from the state of cultural silence. There is no space for unequal social relations in the free flow of information and real development. Earlier, the community used to grapple with the sense of the culture of silence which ultimately led to oppression and underdevelopment.

The nature of citizen journalism can be measured in the prism of empowerment. With the growth of citizen journalism, the community could be empowered. The theoretical stand of Margaret Ledwith (2005) on community development can be contextualized here. Ledwith underlines that empowerment is not an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources. It comes with an apparatus to mold the system and to foster a critical way of thinking and consciousness. It is found that now community involved in citizen journalism has the power of empowerment, critical thinking, and critical consciousness.

There has been a growing global cohort on women empowerment and gender equality and noticeable theories, frameworks, and approaches to gender and development. The model of citizen journalism in rural India has provided an impetus to theorise in the light of women participation and gender equality. Framing gender in the process of citizen journalism is a newer insight that needs further deliberations. Caroline O. N. Moser (1993) underscores that some women are fully emancipated through various programmes. Gender has been never an issue in this community type of media. It is found that women have been part of the production, distribution, and consumption of news. They have also been instrumental in resolving specific issues with the power of journalism. With the inclusion of women, it has intensified community development in the region.

David Croteau (2007) highlights that 'self-produced media' provides ample of opportunities for the participation, production, and distribution of media contents, especially in digital formats. As a result, the community people in the process of citizen journalism in rural regions are taking advantage of journalism which traditional media outlets do not give space for this cause. Moreover, this form of journalism has become a personal, social and participatory experience for communities.

With the rise in citizen journalism, it has enhanced the capability among the communities. Since communities have control over the media, it serves their needs and demands. It can be said that there has been enchantment in terms of the human development index. Capability among the communities is one of the parameters that Dr. Amartya Sen claims for the real development of the society. Sen calls it a capability approach to bring overall development in a given society (Dang, 2014).

It is apparent that the functioning of CGNet Swara and its impact, as a source of alternative media has been significant. It has been instrumental in fostering citizen journalism in rural areas. It has sensitized and empowered the community people in resolving their problems. Moreover, it has enabled rural people to be active participants in the process of production, distribution, and consumption of information.

Conclusion

Probing and understanding the status of citizen journalism in rural India is an essential aspect of communication research in India. Since the coverage on rural areas is generally neglected in mainstream media, it is essential to assess the role of citizen journalism in rural regions. The functioning and its impact on the rural masses remain unique.

There is no doubt that gatekeeping is required to maintain news values in the dissemination of information to the public. Citizen journalism facilitates a participatory form of gatekeeping and fosters the democratic role of journalism in rural areas. Such kind of journalism is driven by a bottom-up approach that empowers the communities. Such nature of journalism has a respectable space in terms of participation of communities. The communities remain active instead of mere consumers of news contents. Unlike mainstream media driven by commercial interests, this form of media is like 'of the community, by the community, for the community.' Acting as a tool of communication, it fosters citizen participation in the ladder of participation among the communities. Rural people are taking advantage of journalism which traditional media do not give space for this cause. It brings the critical consciousness and political consciousness which elevate and liberate the communities from the state of cultural silence. Freedom of expression and the free flow of information is required for societal changes and development. Since such kind of media is 'self-produced media,' it paves the way for enhancing the capabilities of

communities and their empowerment as well. Hence, the power has shifted from news organization to the community people. It is also found that these journalists or community people are navigating new relationships with audiences. Moreover, they are negotiating new working practices and newsroom structures.

Citizen journalism in rural areas faces specific challenges. Lack of funds to run citizen journalism and upgrade the skills of communities is posing a threat to this alternative form of communication. In the light of democratizing news contents through such platforms, a judicious amount of community media in print, electronic and digital can be experimented. Besides, there should be need-based researches to improve this type of alternative media for the more significant cause of empowerment and development of the community.

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