

Development Potential of Social Media and Northeast India: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The development planners across the globe have been dependent on the multiplication ability of the media all along. Their hopes have been dashed many a times as mass media failed time and again to capture the imagination of the depraved as the media itself was fraught with inherent contradictions. With the arrival of Internet and more specifically social media, the communication dimension in developmental discourse acquired new significance. Social media, or for that matter Web 2.0 is loaded with certain advantages when it comes to mitigate the problems of the disadvantaged. Web 2.0 technologies have empowered social media with the ability of being dispersed without much strain and the effect is for everybody to see the marvel caused by social media. It has been able to spread the messages of revolution and development, insubordination and conformity with same gusto. The exponential growth of Internet has turned out to be a blessing for the national economy also. An increase of 10% in Internet penetration helps India's economy grow by another 1.08%, in monetary terms, an increase of \$ 17 billion. And in the last year only, Internet use increased in India by 10.1%. ICT revolution on the whole, has been able to unleash the power of information as a commodity in India also. In this largely optimistic scenario, while every nook and corner of the country is supposedly trying to keep pace with digital revolution, only 5% of the rural population in India, according to 2011 census owns a personal computer or laptop and only 1% enjoy having a computer with internet access. Northeast happens to feature among the lowest rung of internet penetration level as Arunachal and Nagaland have got the lowest level of access. To compare with the statistics of mass literacy at national level, certain parts of northeast stands in the upper category of literacy level. The lopsided penetration of internet and consequently the social media stands in the way of mushrooming of E-Chaupals in the northeast which happen to have a significantly different social morass and this social ethos has been able to restrict the chariot of globalization to run amok as a cultural philosophy of work ethic in the Northeast, and unless the multicultural strings of Northeast societies are taken into cognizance, this could well be the waterloo of using social media as a developmental tool on an organized scale.

Keywords: multicultural development, Actor-Network, dispersal media, globalization and homogeneity

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I. PROLOGUE

Science Finds- Industry Applies- Man Conforms', this motto of Chicago World's Fair, 1993, perhaps traces out the technological determinism associated with any new innovation and later its diffusion among the subscribers-wiling or unwilling with a surefire hope of success. The expectations around new media of which one of the dimensions is social media have been woven with a underlying hope of winning over the subscribers with the beauty and promise of a certain kind of technological determinism that lurks behind Chicago fair slogan Social media has been hailed as a gate way to unsubscribed mass of mass media to participate in a process of decision making as well as nation building. The idea of critical mass has been bid adieu with the hope that the dispersal nature of new media would be able to rope in the unwilling once the problem of digitization and reach are solved. The hope around social media espoused by development planners has a basis either, Lievrouw (2006) contends "As with other technologies, new media development is not just a matter of engineering or optional solutions to technical problems; it can be characterized as a *socio-technical phenomenon*. It brings together engineering specifications (such as interoperability, ergonomics, human factors, interface design, navigation, system implementation and media production values (such as visual or sound quality, postproduction techniques or style) in the changing social, institutional, economic, culture and policy context of everyday use." The idea of an '*Imagined Community*' that spreads out elsewhere and needs to be tapped for diffusing developmental issues is at the root of conceiving social media as a potential tool of development but like any other issue, it cannot be so linear and has got a member of vulnerable paints in the context of Northeast India.

II. NORTHEAST AT A GLANCE

While Northeast happens to be essentially a part of India by its geographical dimensions, it also remains an alienated society so far as the mainstream dynamics of socio-economic engineering is concerned. Home to 220 ethnic groups and divided in 8 states with nearly 70% of its hilly terrain and highly distinguished cultural norms among the ethnic groups, this smallest region of India also happens to exhibit most diverse of ideas. To quote Choudhury and Bhuiyan (2005) "It is important to note that the northeast as a physical or social space was far less integrated into the mainstream Indian polity even during the freedom movement and the region had very little presence at the national politics. The narrow physical connectivity and socio-cultural differences have perhaps some bearing on it." While the independent communities dominate the social landscape of the region, it leaves hardly any room to believe that the communities are homogeneous by nature and the best way to develop the region is through catering to communities. While the same community dominates both rural and urban centres here, for example Meghalaya's Khasi and Jaintia hills. The urban-rural divide across the region as a matter of fact is difficult to negotiate through any blanket theory. The communities itself are fraught with inherent contradictions as "the right to speak is always embedded in social relations and these generally give priorities to one group and discourage others" (Sparks, 2007, P.65) Cohen's (1996) idea (as cited in Sparks, 2007) "Within the community, there are several reasons why people might be reluctant to participate. Communities might be socially stratified, conservative, and may contain a range of conflicting and competing groups and interests." Northeastern communities are not only the victims of inner contradictions, but they have also been victims of the politics of identity leading to the formation of a number of Autonomous District Councils giving birth to rights-based approach to development which has essentially turned into a dole based economy. The two states with highest NSDP (National State Domestic Income), namely Assam and Tripura are also the states with lowest PCI (Per capita Income) as the two states are the most populous because of large areas of plain land.

In terms of HDI, Mizoram scores the highest among the northeastern states in terms higher level of literacy but a poor NSDP does not help the cause. At the same time it has also interestingly got a considerably better PCIME (Per Capita Monthly Consumption Expenditure) because of better distribution in a religion controlled socio-economic structure. The economic terms like PCI or NSDP or PCIME turn out to be important issues in the context of northeast development as it has been found that HDI has a positive influence on PCI impacting it within two years whereas PCI influences HDI over a span of eight years. In fact a World Bank study (2004) revealed that household living standards and national income levels influence the reduction of infant mortality rate positively and Assam is among the highest IMR (Infant Mortality Rate) states in the country. In terms of resource mobilization and use also, northeast is a victim of clan ownership of common property resources since tribal customary laws govern most of the lands. The politics of "reorganization of states in the name of democratic and federal structure based on western political theories has failed to deliver the desired results for northeast where the sense of exclusiveness in group identities is stronger than political consciousness of a democratic federal order with public accountability.... The past precedence of bifurcation has fuelled the imagination of other ethnic groups to demand for new states to ascertain their right to development. The protagonists of such populist demands are yet to realize that growth and development of any region cannot be realized by redrawing the boundaries based on political considerations only" (Choudhury and Bhuyan, 2005). Over the years the northeast has experienced different economic trajectories. Initially after the independence, the 'developmental paradigm spoke about 'Culture Paradigm' to retain the diverse mosaic of culture; after the Sino-India war, it was 'security paradigm' in the seventies; it followed a 'political paradigm' to counter secessionist movements and virtually post liberalization, the paradigm of 'economic development has been incorporated and being followed (Choudhury & Bhuyan, 2005). On the whole, the problems of northeast on the road to development ranges from intra and inter community rivalries to political manipulation of developmental paradigms to suit the political as well as economic control over the region.

III. SOCIAL AMBIVALENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

Social Ambivalence of social media- In the backdrop of social, political and economic developmental complexities of the northeast, one must wonder what kind of developmental tools can work to reach out to the optimum member of people. Social media obviously stands out to be the best hope for many because of its very participatory nature. But as has been pointed out already, any new innovation crisscrosses between technologically deterministic dimension and social construction of the technology. Northeast as a matter of fact, enjoys the poorest internet density in the country and since the average distance between the towns in northeast is nearly 40 kms, more than the national average, it is difficult to combat the situation of underdevelopment through technological means alone. Moreover, the region has got more than 160 Scheduled Tribes and 400 other sub-tribal groups, all of them using nearly different dialects. Fortunately, the female literacy rate in the region is significantly higher than national female literacy rate and there are societies, which are either matrilineal or dominated by women like Khasis or Manipuris respectively. In any case the technology of new media and its

use as a social tool has to tread a path which takes within its ambit the idea of the societies as Bucciarelli contends "design is best seen as a social process of negotiation and consensus, a consensus somewhat awkwardly expressed in the final product" (1994:20-1). Moreover, Brown and Duguid (1994; 29) posit, "Design and use mutually shape one another in iterative, social processes."

Taking the northeast as one social entity would be the biggest mistake of all for any development planner. Northeast poses interesting challenges to any sociologist in terms of any mutual and exclusive identity and rather its multicultural ethos has been responsible for the death of the unimpeded run of the chariot of globalization and McDonaldization. A society whose singular cornerstone of identity is 'diversity' and intra community negotiation and renegotiation, even a huge investment in the infrastructure is not enough to overcome mental blocks in addition to its hilly terrain and infrastructural bottlenecks.

In terms of applying new technologies in the northeast, the paradigm has to depend on the 'interpretive flexibility' of the tool by the ethnic groups in the region. Social Shaping of Technology (SST) doctrine "emphasizes the importance of human choices and action in technological change, rather than seeing technology as politically and ethically neutral, an independent force with its own inevitable logic and motives, or as a mysterious black box that cannot be analysed socially. From the SST point of view, to talk about the 'impacts' of technology on society, as though technology is the hammer and society the nail, is to accept implicitly the basic premises of technological determinism" (Lievrouw, 2006: P. 248). The idea of interpretive flexibility brings in the notion into any developmental discourse that any technology is understood and used with a huge array of differences by different social groups. The random use of social media for developmental purposes may turn out to be boundary objects which are constantly negotiated and renegotiated between groups and within the groups. It is now a fundamentally acknowledged part of any developmental discourse that there is no panacea for uniformly diffusing among the societies awaiting development. Castells (1997) had pointed out how Zapatistas had objected to the use of new technology in their lives. Northeast lives in the periphery of national discourse but it does not essentially mean that the inhabitants believe that they live in the periphery, which is exhibited in their politics of coming up with so many Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in the region. Rather their rights-based approach to development leads to the use of social media in the model of Actor Network Theory (ANT) paradigm. This paradigm accepts the fact that both action and network are equal and share same rights in determining the fate of the network. Technology has to be self-effacing which is impossible for its abstractness but the people imposing the use of the technology on the northeast must understand that the actors have a role to design the content of the network. In addition to that, the social media as a developmental tool already has started suffering from network externalities in other parts of the county, which restricts it from incorporating more participants into the network since it would lead to fewer benefits for the early adopters.

IV. EPILOGUE

The understanding about social media as a holistic technology is fraught with many inconsistencies. Already, the community leaders of ethnic groups in the northeast believe that they are at odds with the changes in the life style and age-old customary tribal laws are no more enough to reign in the rising voices. They would not like to endanger their tight fist control over the society to be let lose by the indiscriminate use of new media. Since social media also has to operate at the level of the opinion leaders to reach the 'critical mass', these community leaders would ensure that their ideas are essentially disseminated through social media as development discussions. At the point of use, computer remains a highly fragmentary experience, and "if integration and identity are the key points of a community formation and serve as the bedrock of building relationship, then new media while serving the purpose of identity formation fails to cater to the purpose of integration because essentially it is a fragmentary experience at the level of the individual" (Guha, 2011: P.52). In the context of development of the northeast, one should also address the fact that the market is a good servant but a bad master. If the social media has to ride on the wheels of market forces, then the northeast is obviously not the best place. Development planners have to remember that with liberalization of Indian economy, development outlay in the budgets of each state government in the northeast is on a declining curve while expenditure on non-development sector is on the rise. "Neither technology 'push' nor market 'pull' can fully account for the shaping of technology" (Lievrouw, 2006: p 250) and this has to be ingrained in the shaping of discourse on development in the context of the region. At the time of independence, HDI of northeast was higher than rest of the country in many respects but since then it has been a steady decline coupled with the increasing psychological alienation from rest of the country. Social media can still salvage the situation, in fact it is perhaps the last hope for the emergence of a deliberative, mechanism, but with liberalism, the market forces have developed a certain amount of share in the decision making which could be the unmaking for all honest efforts to develop the region. If development ideas can be made to be freed of the nexus of market capitalism and group leadership, social media can truly unleash the paradigm of a justifiable distribution of resources in the region. "Distribution is often highly politicized because different actors may have relatively more or less powers to influence or benefit from distribution. Access to technology is one outcome of particular patterns of

distribution" (ibid, 2006: p.260). In northeast, access is only one dimension of distribution mechanism, the content needs more of a political will to be integrated with national ideas of development, which is as yet a far cry in present context. Siemmel had conceived of a society as 'Web of affiliations' rather than a static superstructure with a power to impose. Social media as a developmental tool in the context of the northeast has to follow a society and community-specific application rather than as a social behemoth laden with contradictions and potential to crumble from within.

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