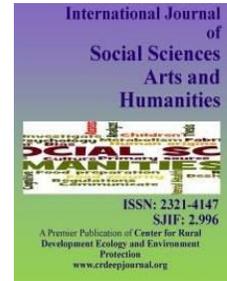


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Full Length Research Paper

Information and Communication Technology for Economic Empowerment of Dalit Women in Kancheepuram district in Tamilnadu

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is a concept that refers to an individual's ability to redefine one's possibilities or alternatives, as well as the ability to act on them. Women's empowerment is critical for long-term development and economic success. Women's empowerment may generally be divided into five categories: social, educational, economic, political, and psychological. Among all these types economic empowerment is an important aspect. There are various factors that provide economic empowerment. Among all, information and communication technology tools are effective to empower women economically. In India women are marginalized and in the case of Dalit women, they are marginalized twice – first being as women and second being a Dalit woman. Thus, in the study, the focus is on how information and communication technology is helping Dalit women to economic empowerment.

Introduction

Information and Communication Technology has permeated every walk of life ranging from telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services, and electronic media, for example, the internet and electronic mail. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have created a profound effect on social structures as well. In India, farmers in rural areas are making use of this technology like mobile phones and the internet to access market prices. In particular, ICTs are providing a platform for women, enabling them to participate in social and economic processes at an unprecedented scale. The role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a tool for development has attracted the sustained attention in India over recent years. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are a diverse and complex set of products, applications, and services that are used to create, process, distribute, and change data. Telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software, and services, and electronic media are all part of the ICT sector (for example, the Internet and electronic mail). Several types of research both within India and outside India have elucidated the potential of ICT in stimulating economic development particularly, the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. The growth of the internet is exponential in India as the usage is multiplying day by day.

According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI-Cube)'s research, "Internet in Rural India," there would be 72 million claimed Internet users by December 2013. By June 2014, claimed internet users in rural India will rise to 85 million and active internet users to 56 million (Singh, 2013).

In India, more than 250 million people are Dalits. They experience discrimination, violation, and social exclusion every day. The conditions of Dalit women are even more pathetic. They are discriminated against on three levels: because they are poor, women, and Dalits. Dalit women faced unfathomable tyranny in a male-dominated culture, not only due to caste but also due to gender, from which there was no escape (Mahey, 1999). There is meager development in the economic condition of Dalits in the past 50 years. Dalit women are frequently dispersed between villages and are not monogamous. About 75% of Dalits live below the poverty line. The economic backwardness of Dalits is mostly due to injustice done to them by the high castes and also due to exploitation. From time immemorial they worked as slaves, sold as commodities resulting in their social discrimination, economic deprivation, and educational backwardness.

In this scenario, the invention of technology such as the internet has contributed significantly to the economic empowerment of

Dalits in India. In this study, the researcher attempts to find out how Information and Communication have aided in the economic empowerment of Dalit women in rural villages of Kancheepuram districts in Tamil Nadu.

Background

Dalits in India suffer the stigma of untouchability and the violation of human rights. They are not treated as human beings. The basic human dignity, self-respect, and freedom to live as human beings, freedom to speak, freedom to choose any occupation, and freedom to develop their talents – have been denied to these people for centuries. The Government of India's proactive initiatives to economically empower them through reservations and subsidies is extremely important. Nonetheless, most of such economic policies failed the target of actually empowering Dalit women. One of the reasons for this failure was the imperfect notion of women's empowerment.

In southern India, caste-based divides are still a big issue, and the lower castes, notably the Dalit community (also known as "untouchables"), sometimes miss out on new advancements. Women's situation is similar, and they are frequently denied access to ICT facilities by their communities. To overcome these inequalities and give a chance to everybody to benefit from the centers, the villagers were actively involved in their establishment and management. The research will help to inspire policy debate and continued monitoring of progress made in ensuring that women in developing countries are equally able to harness the opportunities that ICT offers for improving their livelihoods.

The deep-rooted discrimination causes marginalization, social and economic exclusion, severely poor work conditions, and limited access to basic services such as water, sanitation, and employment. Historically, Dalits have no employment opportunities other than forced and bonded labor (where their labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan), depending on wage labour. To make ends meet, they are at the mercy of landlords from the ruling caste, trapping them in a cycle of poverty. Although, thanks to changes in the Indian constitution to protect their rights, a small number of Dalits have emerged as middle class and some as successful entrepreneurs, fighting against all social and economic barriers. At present, it is found that the Dalit women who were once deprived of all their rights including by their community members are now gradually emerging as an educated persona to support their children and their family members. They are exposed to the information and communication technologies to serve them as well as others.

Research Problem

India, over the past decade, has witnessed innovations in information and communication technologies (ICT) serving the rural user. This factor can be explained by various reasons. One of the most obvious reasons as to why India needed to search for a solution to what has long been an intractable problem: rural India has stayed impoverished while the rest of the country has progressed. ICT's strongest calling card is the optimism that it may overcome at least some of rural India's social, political, and administrative problems and establish a viable technology for the provision of health, education, and other social services. Although a number of researches were conducted on the impact

of ICT on women, it is found that the study on ICT and Dalits women particularly in rural India is lacking. Studies have time and again reminded the fact that Dalit women are thrice discriminated; treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to their caste, face gender discrimination being women and finally economic impoverishment due to unequal wage disparity, with low or underpaid labour. Statistics reveal that half of the Dalit population is women and the problems they undergo are more than of a male Dalit. Thus, there is a need for lending a helping hand to Dalit women to come out from the clutches of socio-economic problems. There are a number of schemes by the government for their upliftment and empowerment of Dalit women. Besides, many NGOs too are working for their development. Studies have been undertaken to study the role of ICT in women's development in general, but going a step ahead and finding out how ICT can enhance Dalit women for their economic empowerment is something unexplored area. Thus, the present study will help in understanding the usage of ICT by Dalit women and study whether ICT has played any role for their economic empowerment.

Review of Literature

From community radios in the most remote regions of the world to cellular phones in the hands of women and men in every community on the planet, to computers in nearly every medium to big enterprise, information and communication technologies pervade every aspect of our existence. For both women and men, the growth of ICTs has opened up new avenues for information sharing and collection. ICTs can give limitless potential for economic growth to the degree that the global community can contact previously disconnected people, families, and groups to better understand their needs and difficulties. and social engagement through new, innovative thinking and tools (Melham et al., 2009)

In a developing nation like India, ICTs are proving to be a strong instrument for female empowerment. During the late 1980s, the ICT sector has experienced significant expansion, and ICT use has increased considerably since the 1990s. Teledensity in India has reached 3.8 percent of the population by 2001, according to the World Bank.. The number of internet accounts is growing at a rate of 50% per annum (Jain, 2003).

ICT has proved a powerful tool of empowerment for minority nationalities with access to the web since it represents a *terra nullius* where readily accessible "virtual archives" of alternative histories can be constructed and maintained. Mitra (2001) articulates that the Internet serves as a medium where marginalized individuals can exercise discursive power, and resist damaging representations. As they voice against authority, socially oppressed groups communicate to one another. "On the Internet, the marginalised may call on the dominant and force the dominant to choose between recognising the marginalised or further isolating the dispossessed by rejecting the call," he adds. Joshi et al., (2005) found in their research that ICTs lay the inroads in knowledge networking to benefit especially women. It is also found that empowerment programmes for women by the NGOs focus on building their skills and abilities to gain insight into the issues related to their external environment, which has an impact on their lives and abilities, to express themselves and

make informed decisions about their families, and personal lives, and also economic and political processes.

Yatra (2000) found in his research that the process of educating women is related to an information dissemination transfer process. He also reports that there is an urgent need to disseminate information to the women movers for rapid and sustained growth of empowering communities. A report (2005) titled *gender equality and empowerment of women through ICT* published by the United State's Department of Economic and Social Affairs opines that ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. Choudhury (2009) investigates that in India the Internet is an empowering agent and predicts that the Internet would empower individuals and families by enhancing autonomy, offering opportunities, and facilitating relationships among diverse individuals. Burstein and Kline (1995) from their research have found that the Internet enables millions of women across the globe to access, exchange, analyze and create vast amounts of information. They also add that personal communication through Internet has been characterized as everything from free and egalitarian to wild and anarchic.

Mustoor.P and Zokarkar.S (2007) from their research *Empowerment of women and girls in ICT* find that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are one of the best ways to facilitate the empowerment process of women and girls to develop, involve and integrate them in the economic, political, technological and social environment of the world. This paper discusses the hurdles and challenges in the empowerment of women and girls through ICT in India and abroad and also the steps that are being taken all across the world by government, organizations, businesses, non-government organizations to empower them through ICT.

Table: 1 Demographic profile of women

	Demographic Details	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-20 Years	14	23%
	21-25 Years	18	30%
	26-30 Years	16	27%
	31-35 Years	12	20%
Education	Up to Secondary	26	43%
	Up to Higher Secondary	15	25%
	Up to Under Graduate	10	17%
	Above Post Graduate	9	15%
Marital status	Yes	41	68%
	No	19	32%
Employed	Yes	48	80%
	No	12	20%
Income	Below 10,000	14	23%
	11,000 - 15,000	25	42%
	16,000 – 20,000	11	18%
	Above 20,000	10	17%

The above table explains the demographic details of the women who responded to the study on the role of information and communication technology for their economic empowerment. As mentioned in the methodology, a total of 60 women were chosen for the study between the age group 15 to 35 years. Thus, the above table indicates that 30% of the respondents fall in the age

In this age of information revolution, ICT has enormous scope for the marginalized community to empower themselves both socially and economically. Tiruamal and Tartakov (2011) in their research paper on "*India's Dalit search for a democratic opening in the digital divide*" talk about the existence of significant opportunity that information technology and the internet in particular, available even to Dalits, the most marginalized community of India to take part in the national discourse of civil society and to have discourse among themselves.

Methodology

Isaac and Michael (1997) mention that the survey method is to respond to questions, solve problems that have been posed or observed, assess needs and set goals, determine if specific objectives have been met, establish baselines against which future comparisons can be made, analyze trends over time, and, in general, to describe what exists, in what amount, and in what context. Thus survey methodology was adopted to study the role of computer-mediated tools for the social and economic development of women, particularly Dalit women in the Kancheepuram district of Tamilnadu. The descriptive research design was formulated for the current research and the data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires. Totally 60 women between the age group 15 and 30 were selected from randomly selected three villages and from each village 20 women were selected for the study. The women who were selected were employed either in a nearby town or who traveled a bit far for their work.

Results

group of 21 to 25, 267% of them in the age group of 26 to 30. The youngest respondents of the survey were 23% and the remaining 20% of the respondents were in the age group of 31 to 35. The respondents were also asked about their education level. Hence, the findings of the survey on their education level point out that the majority of the respondents had their education up to

secondary level with 43%, followed by education up to higher secondary level with 25%. It's been observed that higher education among the respondents was low as 17% of them only were undergraduates and 15% of them had their education up to post-graduation or above. As the survey evinces majority of the respondents are married with 68% and the remaining 32% of the respondents were unmarried.

Women's economic empowerment is defined as the process of increasing women's access to economic resources and power so that they can make decisions that benefit themselves, their

families, and their communities. Employment is one of the important factors of economic resources. Thus, the survey throws light that the majority of the respondents were employed with 80 percent and only 20 percent of the respondents were not employed. Hence, the survey further investigated the employed respondents and they were asked about their income. Findings of the survey reveal that majority of the employed women (42%) were drawing the salary between Rs.11, 000 to Rs.15, 000 per month followed by the respondents (23%) with a salary below Rs.10, 000. The salary of 17% and 18% of the respondents is Rs.16,000 – Rs.20,000 and above 20,000 respectively.

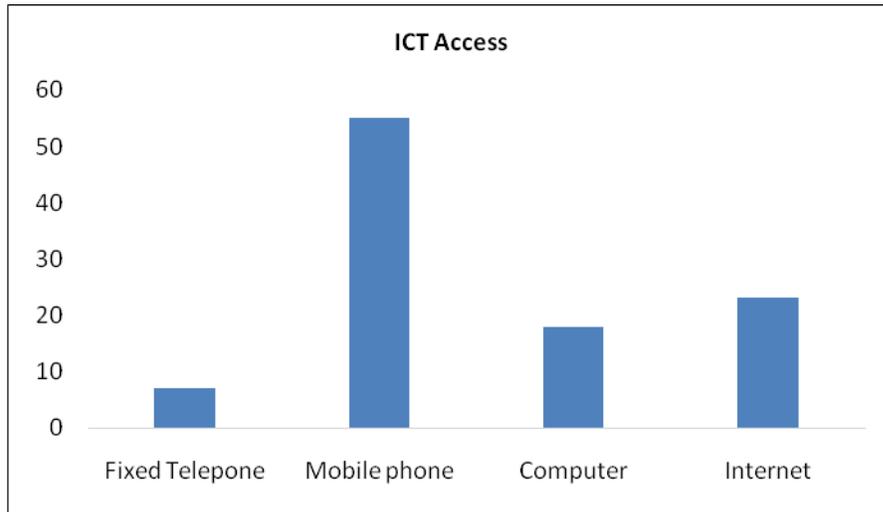


Fig.1 Access to Information and Communication Technology

The essential challenge for women's empowerment is access to information. Traditionally, women have been kept out of the external information sphere. ICT provides women with a direct line to the outside world. They receive information without being distorted or censored. This results in a shift of perspective, a better awareness of their current condition and the reasons for poverty, and the start of participatory information-sharing procedures. If ICTs are to be a tool for women's economic empowerment, they must be accessible. Therefore, the aspect of

access to ITC by the respondents was studied. The findings of the study are shown in the bar diagram above. It can be concluded that the majority of the women were exposed to ICT tools such as fixed telephone, mobile phones, computers, and the internet. The research reveals mobile phone is the very common ICT tool in which 92% of respondents have the access to it, followed by the internet, computer, and fixed telephone with 38%, 30%, and 12% respectively.

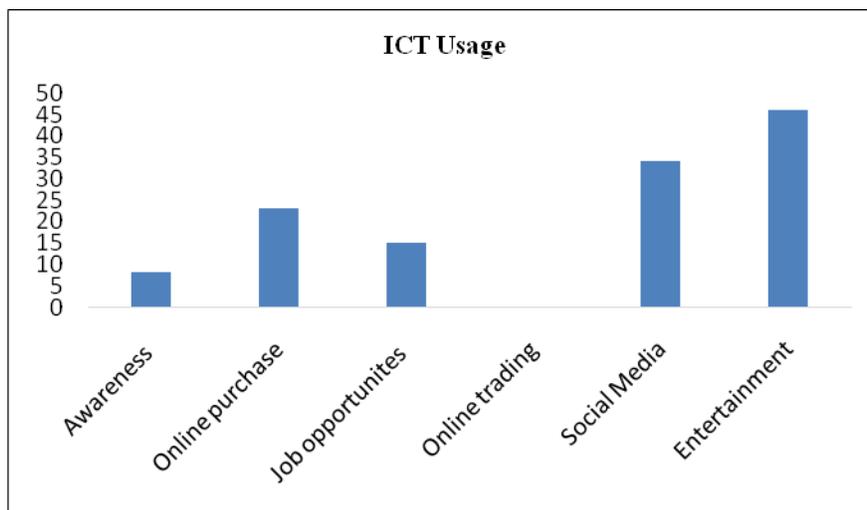


Fig: 2 Usage of Information and Communication Technology

The above diagram discusses the usage of ICT tools by the respondents of the survey. It's been observed from the findings of the study that the majority of the respondents utilize the ICT tools such as mobile phones and computers for purpose of entertainment such as watching films, videos, and listening to songs. Another important activity after the entertainment is engaging in social media. It is also interesting to note from the diagram that a quite number of people use the ICT tools for doing online purchases. The very fact that the respondents indulging online purchase is a form of economic empowerment

of women. As mentioned earlier, the right to economic resources and to have the power to make their own decision is a form of economic empowerment. This is evident from the findings of the existence of economic empowerment of women. The above bar diagram also reveals that respondents use ICT tools for getting awareness. Online trading is an activity where economic empowerment is exercised. It's noted from the diagram that none of the respondents were found to be engaging in the activity of online trading.

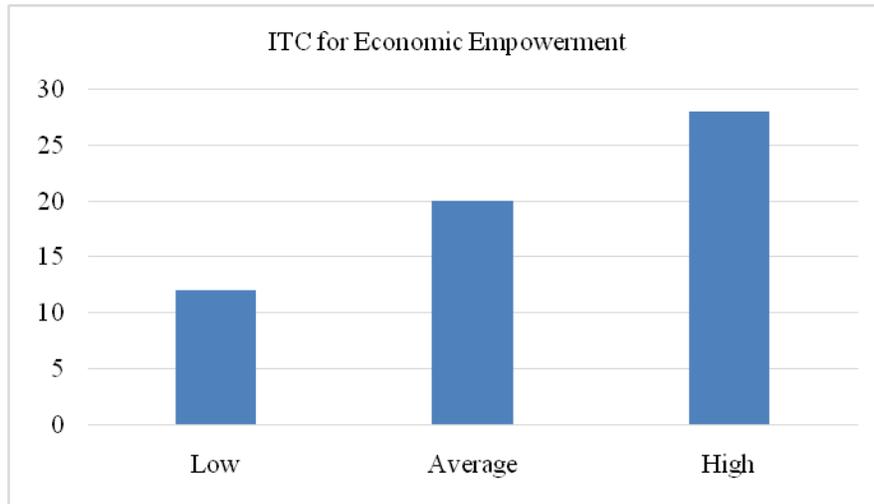


Fig: 2. Information and Communication Technology for Economic Empowerment

The above diagram answers the question on the perception of women respondents on the role of information and communication technology tools for the economic empowerment of women in the Kancheepuram districts of Tamilnadu. The question with a rating as high indicates, ICT tools with more potential for economic empowerment. Thus, the majority of the respondents view ICT tools as having the potential for the economic empowerment of women. Even though the majority view the ICT tools with a positive perspective, the next set of respondents hold a neutral opinion. They neither rule out nor reject the role of ICT tools for the economic empowerment of women. The remaining respondents perhaps are ignorant of the potential of information and communication technology and they are very few in numbers.

Conclusion

Women's ability to properly utilize information gained through ICT is dependent on numerous social factors, including literacy and education, geographic location, mobility, and socioeconomic status, according to a UNESCO report on "Gender Issues in the Information Society." Due to a multitude of constraints such as infrastructural, social, cultural, and linguistic barriers, the majority of women in developing countries do not have the access to ICTs. But in the case of India, the situation is improving. According to a report published in Times of India in 2018, Tamilnadu is in second place in rural smartphone use. The findings of the study also are in tune with the report where the majority of the respondents of the survey use one of the important tools of ICT – a mobile phone. It is agreed upon by the majority that ICT tools are contributing for the economic growth of women in Tamilnadu.

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