Changing Mobile Phone Usage in India and Its Impact on Social Identity

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The study aims to explore the economic and social changes in low-literacy and low-income populations in India, brought about by the introduction of a relatively new communication technology – the mobile phone.

Modern communication technologies have been developed and essentially tailored to fulfil the needs of the high-income, literate populace that is characteristic of developed countries.

My contention is that low-income populations in the process of adapting this communication technology have made it an integral part of their identity.

An ethnographic study, which includes in-depth interviews and participant observation of mobile phone usage, rituals and patterns, both in social and economic spheres in rural populations is my planned method of research. An initial historical study of the mobile phone industry in India, along with probable material in the form of focus group data and group discussions, will also add to this.

My idea rests on several observations:

• A majority of low-income, low-literacy populations have a fluid and temporary identity. They lack any form of permanent identification and are under the radar of governmental and institutional surveillance. For a migrant population, the mobile phone could be an integral part of constructing identity.

• The so-called ‘emerging market’ has circumvented technological, physical, educational, amongst other barriers to creatively use mobile phones to uplift themselves. The mobile phone’s varied adaptations are many – whether as a tool to access banking, increase profits, or in instances of community ownership of a mobile phone, or illiterate people using the mobile phone [1], [2], [3]. The huge second-hand markets for mobile phones, the unorganised mobile repair industry, are all instances of this localised usage which do not find widespread discussion in the concepts of ‘emerging markets’.

• This interesting aspect of “vernacular globalization” [4] has low-income and rural populations engaging with a global, modern communication technology, to construct an “alternative social imaginary” [5] through their non-traditional uses and adaptations of it.

References


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