

"Empowering India's Indigenous Communities: Harnessing Digital Media Technologies for MSME Growth under the Vocal for Local Initiative"

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Abstract

Indigenous people are sole communities connected to their ancestral lands and resources, which significantly impact their cultural identity, livelihoods, and overall well-being. They often have their own distinct leaders and organizations for representation, separate from mainstream society. Indigenous communities are known for the development of sustainable products and hand-crafted work such as wooden toys, bamboo bottles, cane hats and many more. The Government of India in order to promote local entrepreneurs belonging to indigenous communities, launched Vocal for Local initiative and NITI Aayog further partnered with Government e-marketplace and ONDC platform for providing indigenous communities with digital e-commerce support to showcase and sell their products. The descriptive research paper aims to find out the use of digital media technologies along with initiatives taken by the government to boost indigenous communities' representation and economic growth. It will further help in identifying the products that are exclusively made by indigenous people and which are helping in sustainable development. Moreover, the research will help in understanding the challenges faced by indigenous people in participating in the mainstream communities and decision making. Lastly, it will provide some suggestions to improve the indigenous community's participation in MSME sector and become the mainstream voice of Vocal for Local initiative.

Keywords: Digital Media, Indigenous Community, MSME, Empowerment, Public Initiatives, Made in India, Vocal for Local

Introduction

Indigenous people across the globe are known for living a sustainable life closely with the environment without harming the nature. Indigenous people belong to the tribal population. In India, the tribal population accounts for 8.9% of the total population. The indigenous communities have their own cultural and social institutions and practice their own governance system to function. With the advent of modernisation and globalisation, these communities face economic crisis due to low incomes resulting from cultivation and manufacturing of products only for self-consumption. However, they are now coming forward to participate in mainstream community practices and decision making. Further, people from these communities have realised that they can boost their economic growth by connecting with the world and transferring their knowledge of sustainable lifestyle practices and development of products which are eco-friendly. All the products made by indigenous people are made using raw material procured from forests and natural resources such as cane and bamboo products, ornaments, pottery and handicraft paintings. There is a huge demand of organic and environment friendly products in the country as well as abroad because of plastic waste accumulating in the world posing a big threat to our environment but these

indigenous communities are often unaware of such consumer needs. (Dr. Muniraju & Ms. K.

Sirisha, 2022) Thus, the consumer despite having knowledge of existence such products are unable to purchase them. The government of India has taken several measures and initiatives to uplift indigenous communities by highlighting their products relating it with sustainable development. With the help of digital media, awareness is being spread about the availability of sustainable products and exhibitions where people from indigenous communities are participating to showcase and sell their products promoting the Vocal for Local initiative and fostering the economic growth of the country. The research is focusing on the initiatives taken to promote indigenous knowledge and the products being developed by such communities which are helping to achieve sustainable development. It is further highlighting the current challenges faced by tribal and indigenous communities. Moreover, the role of digital media to boost economic growth of indigenous communities and MSME sector to strengthen the diversity and economy of India.

Review of Literature

Vocal for Local initiative

Vocal for Local is an initiative which motivates Indian consumers to buy products that locally produced in the country by domestic workers. It advocates backing of tribal artisans, local producers and skilled labour through better employment opportunities and providing them with advanced technology for manufacturing of products. (*What Is Vocal for Local How Is the Government Aiding Local Artisans*, 2024)

The Vocal for Local initiative is helping tribal indigenous communities to a large extent as they have been granted ownership rights over the resources collected from forests. In order to promote sustainable products made by these communities, the government has provided minimum support price to as many as 90 products manufactured by indigenous communities and tribal artisans. The cover as well as drawings in Indian educational books are being designed by tribal artists showcasing the cultural identity and diversity of the nation.

NITI Aayog launched Vocal for Local initiative to promote local entrepreneurship and sustainable growth. Under this initiative, various indigenous products from 500 Aspirational blocks have been selected to showcase on Aakanksha which will be government run brand that will have various sub brands to create an international market. The initiative further involves digital literacy of indigenous entrepreneurs and helping them onboard e-commerce platform to display and sell their products. (NITI Aayog Launches “Vocal for Local” Initiative Fostering Grassroots Entrepreneurship and Self-Reliance, 2024) It will help in bridging the gap between indigenous communities and mainstream society as indigenous people will no longer feel uneducated or digitally handicapped.

Role of NITI Aayog and use of digital media technologies to spread awareness about indigenous communities

- NITI Aayog partnered with Government e marketplace for the procurement of indigenous products. Government e marketplace is a digital ecommerce platform where all the goods and services are available which are required by various government departments on a regular basis. It aims to provide transparency and faster delivery of products or service demanded by any government agency. There is a separate page for purchasing products developed by indigenous communities on the digital platform. It streamlines the process of buying goods and services for

government ministries, departments, and public sector units promoting inclusivity and ease of doing business, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

- Digital media involves websites, apps, software, digital videos and social media to reach public with some information about a product or service online. It plays a crucial role in spreading information about the latest developments happening across the globe and makes lives of people easier by making things accessible at the click of a button. Digital media gave people the power to make their own websites and social media accounts to reach millions of people informing them about their products and services.
- The Khadi and village industries commission came up with an initiative to boost the selling of products by local artisans through online marketing by launching KVIC E-portal. It allowed indigenous, tribal and local artists from remote areas to promote their products online via e-portal and made it possible to sell their products across the country.
- Influencer marketing is another latest concept that came to existence with the advent of digital media. Influencer marketing involves the promotion of a product or service by an influencer. An influencer is a person who is not as famous as a celebrity but he or she is a well-known person in a particular area or region. When such influencer uses a particular product and shows them in their videos, people who follow them on social media gets influenced and it leads to selling of the product/service. (Kharb, 2023)
- Several entrepreneurs and private organisations using digital media technology are trying to help spread a word about indigenous communities and the products made by them. The integration of private businesses with indigenous people leads to the economic development of both the mainstream and indigenous community leading to the welfare of the country.
- News and media websites constantly share articles about the role played by homegrown brands along with indigenous communities in following sustainable development. For instance, a business website Moneycontrol shared a list of 75 homegrown brands that are selling sustainable products on the occasion of 75th Independence Day. (Paul, 2024) Using digital media in such manner helps in both informing the public and promoting the homegrown brands which further motivates indigenous communities to work.
- OneEarth is an Indian company which manufactures sustainable products such as bamboo toothbrush, pen stand and massage roller, cork yoga mats, wooden hand juicer and hand-woven bags and basket made of jute and cotton. The company started in 2020 procures the raw material from tribal communities and villages and has made a good business by selling these products via website. (Khan, 2023)
- Aslee was started in 2017 to promote sustainable clothing. The company procures the raw material from Indigenous communities of Himalyan region and act as retailer as whole manufacturing is being done by the indigenous people. The Indian company Aslee has online presence via their own website and they are also using e-commerce platform Amazon to sell the sustainable products made of hemp and bamboo.

Role of MSME in the growth of indigenous artists and their products

MSME stands for micro small and medium enterprise. Under MSME, there are over 15 different schemes to start a business for new entrepreneurs or upgrade existing business. Each scheme has different objectives ensuring that every citizen of India who want to start their business and become self-employed should get maximum support from the government in terms of financial assistance as well as technical support along with information about events and exhibitions where their products can be sold. For instance, the 'Credit Guarantee Scheme for Micro and Small Enterprise' provides loans up to 2 crore rupees without any guarantee from third party or collateral. This scheme encourages new entrepreneurs to start fresh business. Other scheme called 'Scheme of fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries' provides financial assistance up to 2.5 crore rupees for maximum of 500 artisans to organize traditional industries and promote artisans by providing them sustainable employment and increase production of goods.

Need for indigenous knowledge in development of sustainable products over others

Today the mass production of regular use products involves the use of plastic, polyester, synthetics and other material which are harmful for the environment and contributes to land waste. The daily lifestyle products made using non-biodegradable material and are often cheap and easily available due to which people prefer to buy them. Indigenous people do not practice sustainable development because someone has asked them. They feel connected with the nature and respect natural resources for the survival of their future generations. For instance, the Baka community collects honey from rainforest and leave some honey for tigers as well. Local manufacturing is a sustainable option as it provides local employment, reduces carbon footprints, and increases domestic manufacturing self-sufficiency. It also strengthens local manufacturers by promoting accountability and transparency between consumers and producers, and protects small-scale manufacturers and skilled resources, ultimately contributing to sustainable local economies through economic benefits such as job retention, income generation, and employment growth. (Garg Astha et al., 2020) Moreover, Indigenous communities teach us that life can be sustained in balance without causing damage to the forests and the environment.

Other initiatives to support Indigenous communities

- TRIFED, a national-level cooperative body established in 1987, to promote the socio-economic development of Indian tribal communities by institutionalizing the trade of Minor Forest Produce and Surplus Agricultural Produce, launched a retail chain by the name of Tribes India. Various secondary initiatives were introduced under TRIFED to support tribal artisans and forest produce gatherers such as Minimum support price and Van Dhan Yojana in 2018 to maximise the promotion of indigenous produce. (Dr. Muniraju & Ms. K. Sirisha, 2022)
- The government of India introduced in setting up of craft village in 2015 where artisans from mainstream and indigenous communities are encouraged to live and work at the same place. This initiative combines tourism with traditional craft and provides an opportunity to artisans for exhibiting and selling their sustainable products. It allows foreigners to engage with local artisans and people from indigenous community. The office of DC handicraft is also working towards the development of more craft villages connecting indigenous artisans with tourism. A total of 8 craft villages have been setup till 2024. (Khurania, 2024)

- The PM Vishwakarma Yojana, launched in September 2023, aims to boost the traditional crafts industry by providing financial support to financially weak families and preserving tribal communities' artistic traditions. With a budget of Rs. 13,000 crores, the scheme offers a new wave of optimism for millions of families reliant on manual skills and tools, targeting artisans from Dalit, tribal, and indigenous communities. More than 1,25,700 craftsmen have been registered to benefit from the scheme. This number proves that indigenous communities and their products are helping in great extent to establish sustainable development of the country.
- Mother dairy launched a campaign 'Desh Ki Dhara' by showcasing their range of oils and the process behind making of them by locals and encouraged people to bring a little change in their lifestyle by adopting products that are made in India. The primary theme of the campaign is to be a part of the change and prove to be 100% Indian. (Srivastava, 2020)
- The ASPIRE scheme aims to promote innovation, rural industry, and entrepreneurship in the agro-rural sector by creating employment opportunities. The scheme has two components: the Livelihood Business Incubator (LBI), which provides skill development and incubation programs to promote entrepreneurship and employment generation.

Methodology

This study employed a literature review and descriptive method as a research methodology to provide a comprehensive foundation for knowledge advancement, identifying and contrasting key ideas, and generating insights on the initiatives done for the development of indigenous communities. A systematic search of secondary data was conducted to gather relevant articles including government records, press release, news articles and web pages highlighting major steps in the areas of tribal art, MSME sector, indigenous development and sustainable products.

Challenges faced by indigenous people to participate in the mainstream community

Over the past few years there has been a shift in perception of people over products that are made in India. Earlier people used to prefer products that were imported from foreign countries and treat them as better over Indian manufactured products. Still, there is a long way to go in order to eradicate the perception and promote Vocal for Local initiative. The following are the challenges faced by indigenous communities when they participate in mainstream events.

- Language barrier: language plays a crucial role in establishing a communication channel. Even when access to media is available, it often fails to cater to the specific needs and aspirations of tribal sections and indigenous communities as the content is often presented in a language that is not their native tongue, neglecting the importance of media in indigenous communications. This language barrier affects the development of such communities to a great extent as they are unable to get the desired information in their language, nor they are able to communicate their problems to the concerned authorities. Even this language barrier comes into play when they participate in events outside their territory to exhibit their products as they cannot explain the use as well as the hard work they put into making of the products.

- **Adoption of ICT:** As the information society advances, ICTs have become the primary means of communication, connecting individuals, communities, and society as a whole. They have also been recognized as a tool to bring development to rural areas, which have previously been underserved by traditional communication channels. However, this increased access to ICTs has raised concerns about how rural communities, particularly isolated indigenous and ethnic minority groups, will accept and adapt to new media, as they may be exposed to unfamiliar information and cultural influences. (Harris et al., 2011) Tribal people often do not have access to digital media and those who have either hesitate or lack general knowledge on how to take advantage of the medium to maximise their profit.
- **Cost of indigenous products:** The production cost of making a handicraft product by indigenous people is quite cheap as the raw material is procured from natural resources and it does not require any other costs such as travelling or transportation. However, few brands collaborate with them, collect finished material and then sell it on major e-commerce platforms and exhibitions at a much higher price. It fades the essence of locally made sustainable products. Consumer feels that indigenous products are expensive and chooses to buy alternatives at a cheaper cost.
- **Lack of awareness and recognition:** Indigenous people often live in remote areas which makes it difficult for NGOs and public servants to reach out to them informing about every upcoming event and developments. This leads to unawareness about the consumer needs and indigenous people are unable to grow economically. Another aspect is lack of recognition during participation in mainstream events. When artisans from tribal communities are not recognised for their work, it often discourages them to participate further as participation requires fee and cost of living outside their territory becomes unaffordable sometimes.
- **Lack of access to social media:** Today, most of the Indian startups are using the power of social media advertising and influencer marketing to promote their business and products without spending huge amount of money. Social media has enabled many local entrepreneurs to earn decent profits and turned their business into full time. When people see pictures and videos of new products on social media, they get attracted and develop a desire to purchase them and try. Also, the biggest advantage of social media is cross sharing. When people like a certain product, they post a review or a simple photo/video on their personal profiles, indirectly promoting the local brand. For instance, Boat is the leading manufacturer of electronic music products such as speakers and headphones. However, many people belonging to indigenous communities still don't have the knowledge to use social media for promoting and selling their products online. They rely on government institutions for supporting them in online marketing.

Results and discussion

India has provided a lot of support both technically and financially to people who want to start their own business and become self-employed especially people belonging to indigenous communities. Various initiatives have been introduced to boost their participation and promote micro and small enterprises with the help of digital media technology started by government ministries and MSME schemes. There has been a significant growth in the number of artisans register under MSME scheme over the past decade. Popular annual events

and exhibitions such as Surajkund Mela and Dilli Haat are perfect examples where handicraft and sustainable products coming from indigenous communities are showcased and often liked and purchased by general people.

The Udyam registration has seen a significant surge, with 88.89 lakh new registrations in the year 2023, taking the total number to 2.19 crore. The Ministry of MSME has also launched the Udyam Assist Platform, which has onboarded 1.11 crore Informal Micro Enterprises, allowing them to access Priority Sector Lending benefits on par with Udyam Registration Certificate.

Till 2023, the PM Vishwakarma scheme has achieved significant milestones, with 48.80 lakh enrolments and 1.32 lakh successful registrations. The registered applicants will be provided with a 5-day basic training program, after which those who have opted for credit support will be eligible for collateral-free credit.

A separate "MSME pavilion" was made at the 42nd India International Trade Fair (IITF) under the theme "PM Vishwakarma" from November 14th to 27th, 2023 which featured 195 stalls allocated to Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) from 29 states and UTs, with a significant 85% of stalls going to first-time participants. No participation fee was charged from entrepreneurs who were women, SC/ST, NER, and Aspirational District beneficiaries.

The Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance Programme (RAMP) Scheme aims to boost the performance of MSMEs by strengthening institutions at the Centre and State levels, improving Centre-State linkages, and enhancing access to markets, credit, technology, and resolving issues of delayed payments and green initiatives.

NSIC provides credit support for raw material procurement through the Raw Material Assistance scheme, which involves making payments to suppliers against bank guarantees. Additionally, the organization facilitates e-marketing services through the MSME Global Mart Web Portal, which has enrolled 10,399 members till 2023. To commemorate International MSME Day, the CHAMPIONS 2.0 portal was launched, featuring an upgraded user interface and enhanced grievance resolution capabilities. Notably, the portal has received over 76,000 grievances, with a remarkable 99.48% response rate.

(YEAR END REVIEW – 2023-MINISTRY OF MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (MSME), 2023)

However, the major problem with respect to these initiatives is that the access to most of the information via digital media websites requires basic education in English or Hindi in order to read the given notices and other information on the websites developed by government. For instance, the website of National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC) can be read only in two languages which are Hindi and English where all the details of upcoming exhibitions are available. The artisan is required to register on the website first in order to access the website. Lack of education is a major problem for indigenous people as most of them are either uneducated or study in their regional language only.

Suggestions to improve the indigenous community's participation in MSME sector

- To promote tribal products, it is necessary to encourage Corporate Social Responsibility funds to support the upscaling of tribal youth, and invest in making raw materials easily available, accessible, and affordable.

- Innovation in products and marketing facilities is needed, along with promoting marketing strategies to encourage sales and engaging franchises in small and medium towns and metropolitan cities.
- Efforts should be made to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices into formal education so that every child could understand the importance of sustainable development and the crucial role played by tribal artisans and indigenous communities in developing products using natural resources which are eco-friendly. (Sharma & Bakshi, 2022)
- There is a need to organise more annual events such as Surajkund Craft mela across the country where artisans from indigenous communities gets an opportunity to participate and sell their products. Such events not just help tribal artists financially but at the same time provides them recognition for their art and skills. They feel respected and encouraged to step out of their territories and improve their quality of life and become a role model for their community.

Conclusion

India is a land of diversity with a huge number of people having variety of skills and knowledge of handicraft. To meet the rising demand of sustainable products and promote local and indigenous artisans, there is a need to integrate indigenous knowledge with entrepreneurship. Right education about entrepreneurship encourages the startups to utilize the digital media technologies to reach consumers globally and sell their products from the remote areas making them finally independent. The power of digital media is phenomenal as it has completely changed the way people look at the market. Everything today is available at the click of a button. Social media as a part of digital media is a great tool to influence people and move them towards sustainability by promoting the use of indigenous products. Influencers play a key role in bridging the gap between real and reel world when they use media wisely. Digital media literacy enables a person to become financially independent as they can choose to sell their products and services online without involving any middlemen. With several government initiatives such as KVIC E-portal, Government e Marketplace and Vocal for Local, indigenous communities are being encouraged to produce more sustainable products for the consumers across the globe and transfer their knowledge to upcoming generations for a better future.

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