

Empowerment through Communication: Media's Role in Development of the Santals in Jharkhand

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Abstract

In this era of globalization, "GLOCAL" is the most popular term to bridge the gap between local and global, whereas India's vision of Vikshit Bharat@2047 is to transform villages, especially tribal villages, into self-reliant hubs of development, integrating modern technology with tribal wisdom. To achieve this goal, media is the most effective mode of communication for upliftment and empowerment. Generally, mass media is considered to be a tool of power. However, mass media has not the same power for all groups and interests. This paper will critically analyse the role of media and communication in the development and empowerment of the Santal tribes which is third largest among Bhil and Gond. The tribe has been mostly distributed in the eastern parts of India such as West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand or Bihar. This tribe has also spread to neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. This study will explore how digital, print, electronic, and community-driven media have influenced the Santal's life based on secondary data analysis that includes descriptive and extensive literature review, field observations, and case studies through established media theories and development communication frameworks.

Keywords: Santal Tribe, Media, Development Communication, Empowerment, Case Study.

Introduction

India's population includes 8.61 percent Scheduled Tribes, with

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Jharkhand alone accounting for 26.21 percent. Within this demographic, the Santhal community represents approximately 32.77 percent of Jharkhand's total Scheduled Tribe population. Jharkhand itself ranks twelfth in terms of tribal population size nationally, contributing 8.3 percent to India's overall Scheduled Tribe population (Census of India, 2011).

Despite having a great legacy, the community is facing disparities in employment, education, and political participation. Indigenous communities like the Santhals are still marginalized across multiple spheres of development, and the government failed to achieve lasting improvements. Here in this age of network society, where everything is digital and accessibility is becoming easier, with 33.7% of population penetration making it the second-largest social media market globally. By 2029, with 1.3+ billion users, India will become the world's largest social media market, surpassing China (Vardhman, 2025). Media is used as an instrument for bridging gaps in representation, raising awareness, safeguarding cultural identity, and informing government announcements like welfare-oriented policies among the public. But after all this, media consumption is very low in tribal areas due to many problems like digital literacy, infrastructural lack, and limited media penetration. Mainstream media still follows stereotyped, misrepresented, suppressed, and colonial mentality, which is a big challenge with popular media.

Tribal communities still rely on community-driven communication modes like community radio, word of mouth, folk, and oral culture. The internet is being used but only for entertainment purposes, though the majority of youth are using it. Due to so many crises, the government failed to convey meaningful engagement and overlooked the emphasis on inclusive and participatory approaches to empower marginalized groups.

Historical role of media in development

Since the beginning of media transmission, such as radio in 1940, which is considered the first milestone in the history of development communication, programs were based on the basic needs of rural India agriculture, health, education, and farming delivered in local languages. With the advent of television in 1959, telecast programs again focused on agriculture, such as *Krishi Darshan*. Later,

with the launch of SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment), programs on education and development were broadcast.

One of the most trusted traditional media forms, print, played a crucial role in disseminating news about the government's Five-Year Plans among the public. Both print and electronic media focused on basic needs programs in very simple and accessible language, which encouraged participation.

Objectives

- To examine the communication barriers that hinder the empowerment of the Santal tribe.
- To identify the most effective modes of media for use in tribal areas.

Research methodology

This study uses descriptive qualitative approach and extensive literature review with field observations from selected villages in Dumka (Jharkhand), which has the highest concentration of the Santhal population. Data were collected from books, journals, media sources and government documents along with case studies of community-based media platforms. For an in depth insights of media's penetration and availability among tribal communities, field observations was conducted in 2025.

Theoretical framework

According to the Development Media Theory of Denis McQuail (1940), media should encourage national development, education, economic, and social change in society for nation-building through government policies. Media plays a positive and developmental role in the community. For holistic change, indigenous culture and community should be of concern for development and empowerment. According to Jan Servaes (2008), he recommends the use of the participatory communication model which places emphasis on the cultural representation of local communities and participation, at every level. This model emphasizes social change rather than mere message dissemination. Empowerment Theory by Marc A. Zimmerman (2000) talks about advocacy media, awareness campaigns, and action. It helps to distribute information to marginalized communities to recognize their rights, confront social justice, and organize for change, as constant exposure to information

leads to empowerment. Denis McQuail, in his proposed theory, the Democratic Participant Theory (1980), rejects centralized, commercialized, or state-owned media models. On the other hand, he strongly suggested horizontal, small-scale, and community-based media. He emphasized citizen and community needs rather than government interests. In the Cultural Studies Theory (1980) of Stuart Hall, he talks about how media shapes cultural representation, meaning, and identity. In the globalized media landscape, marginalized communities are portrayed with minority and stereotyped perspectives of their lived realities.

Literature review

Radio, has the availability to reach each and every corners of the world. Which is the lowest cost method of communication. Radio is the most effective medium to improve public education and development, especially in rural and remote areas. The mass media is used to spread the message of communication (Devi, Khan & Darang, 2022). In community radio, the marginalised communities are given access to their voices to express their views, which they cannot do the mainstream media. (Nirmala, 2015) New media provides easy access to a variety of health-related information, enabling youths to gain their knowledge about health issues (Agrawalla, Swain & Parhi, 2025). Collective sentiments are being eroded due to media exposure and individualism is increasing in tribal villages, rural villages (Panda & Mishra, 2023). Transport, communication and mass media are the mediums that put isolated tribal communities on show and put them into the mainstream (2020, Hossain). Media carries crucial information, disseminates knowledge of many things and best serves as a catalyst of development and most effectively and rapidly in relation to motivating social change and social upliftment (Jain, 2017). Awareness programmes are highly successful with traditional media such as theatrical performances. They are instrumental in the education of illiterate, rural and tribal communities (Sahoo & Vadrnam, 2024). Communication is useful in raising the socio-economic level and status of the family, it generates a demand for goods, it helps to improve literacy and standard of living. There is more awareness and consciousness among the tribesmen (Sahoo, 2017) due to mass media. Social media empowers marginalised voices, empowers political participation and overturns hierarchies

(Gante, 2022). Social media has ushered in a new form of media culture. It has developed a new youth world that is dependent upon these media. The youth of the tribes use these media as per their expectations (Vasava, 2025). Mass media is raising the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-democratic status of tribes (Bhadra & Amin, 2022). The media is important in the creation of national and local culture identity. Social media platforms educate and enable young people in northeast to change their behavior and their community as well as engage in political change (Sharma, 2016). With the proper and effective means of communication, most of the tribal issues can be resolved. Mass media has its role to improve and develop the tribal areas (Subramanyam & Mohan, 2006). Life is scarce for the marginalised and is hard out of their reach. However, mobile phone accessibility in today's context is one such enjoyment bestowed on them due to various friendly approaches by different agencies (Chattopadhyay & Mohanty, 2022). The exogenous mass media has the potential to facilitate change and progress in tribal societies, by communicating socio-economic transformation (Kamble, Malagatti & Patil). Tribal people now have the opportunity to create and disseminate media products in their own languages and dialects using modern media platforms (Naik, 2017). Tribal youths' social networking experiences can impact their social interactions, family lives, personal lives, socialization and education (Sharma, 2025). Media has been actively involved in the promotion of social issues like anti-dowry campaigns, health, literacy etc. Media can be a propeller and direction giver for the society (Meena & Yadav, 2021).

Field based observations 2025

State - Jharkhand, District - Dumka

Block 1- Jama, Village - Lakarjoriya



Block 2 - Kathikund

Village - Nakti



Observation

It has been observed that villagers primarily use phones for making calls. Oral communication, such as word of mouth from authoritative figures like the head of Sakhi Mandal, Sahya Sathi, Majhi (headman), local NGOs, Anganwadi staff, local haat, Mukhya Mantri Darbar, and local camps, raised awareness of government schemes more effectively than media. The majority of villagers use smartphones mainly for entertainment rather than for gathering information. Media penetration is quite low for television and the internet. Community radio was available, but villagers rarely listened to it due to lack of interest and language mismatches.

Case studies

Case Study 1: Dhimsha Radio: Transmitting social change in Koraput

Dhimsha Radio is a community radio station run by the district administration of Koraput and implemented by South Odisha Voluntary Action with support from UNICEF in Odisha. It has now been used to stir up social change by spreading information about government schemes. There are 12 reporters who visit the villages extensively in the district and interview villagers. Health, music, agriculture and other programs were narrowcast; and during the COVID-19 outbreak the station was a bridge to education to the

tribal villages. The radio station also has a few future plans that will benefit tribal communities.

Case Study 2: Nityananda Janavani Community Radio Station in West Bengal

It is an initiative by MANT (Manbhum Ananda Ashram Nityananda Trust), which is primarily run by locals from the Santal community in West Bengal. It serves 250 villages spread across the Pancha and Manbazar-I blocks in the district of Purulia. The radio station has become an integral part of the wider tribal community, providing them with news and information that they previously lacked, thereby enriching their lives and supporting their livelihoods.

Case Study 3: Santali Akhra (Programme in Akashvani)

A daily half-hour Santali programme was started on 15th August 1975. In the eighties, for the first time under the State Council of Educational Research and Training, a primary-level syllabus and terminology committee was formed for the Santali language in the Olchiki script. In the beginning, producing Santali programmes for radio with Adivasi women and artists was very difficult. However, later others came forward, breaking the shackles of superstition to participate in the programmes.

Case Study 4: Radio Milan Community Radio (Programme Johar Jhargram)

It was a celebration of Santali culture, traditions and a discussion on the facets of their reality today, including the challenges they faced. It was a space for community members to share and come together.

Case Study 5: Fagun (Santali newspaper)

Santali is a monthly newspaper in Santali language, using the Ol-Chiki script and printed in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. It is the first newspaper in India to be started in the Santali language and established in April 2008 by Mangat Murmu and edited by Malati Murmu with the vision of marginalised voices coming into the mainstream.

Case Study 6: The Dumka (Jharkhand) based regional daily

"Santal Express" newspaper

Dumka, a major centre for the Santal community in Jharkhand, It covers regional news in Hindi and Santali, aiming to provide accessible information to the tribal population. It acts as a local media voice, focusing on issues, culture and events relevant to the Jharkhand region and the Santal community.

Conclusion

Media's role is not only to disseminate information but also has a responsibility to raise awareness, represent local needs, preserve identity, raise public demands and voices before the government, and completely work as a mediator. Its work is to empower the community. Now, with the advent of digital media, reach and time are no longer barriers. But due to the commercialization and corporatization of media organizations, mainstream media is mainly focusing on TRP, box office, circulation, and subscription. So, to keep their organizations in profit, they follow the "Trending Policy." They broadcast or telecast the content that is in public demand, neglecting other important issues.

In the case of indigenous communities, they are still far behind the mainstream society. Due to lack of education, infrastructure, health facilities, and language barriers, they are unable to use media effectively. So they basically rely on oral communication, folk traditions, local NGOs, and word of mouth or persons from their community (Swasth Sahaya, Gram Pradhan, Sevika, Haat, Camps). Mainstream media still portrays the indigenous as downtrodden and stereotyped. In terms of media, tribal villages are in very remote places, and the condition of network and data is very poor.

To bring a holistic change in society, the government should first fulfill their basic needs like water, shelter, electricity, schools, and roads so that they can get better connectivity with the mainstream society. Train the youth from their community for better information dissemination and participation systems. Use traditional media like folklore, street plays, nukkad natak, seren, etc. This will increase their participation and awareness. Media content in their local dialect can overcome the language barrier. They are mostly exploited and fooled by middlemen (Bicholiya) due to their illiteracy.

So sometimes they are unable to take or understand the information and government's advantages. To overcome this, government authorities should keep visiting their villages on a regular basis.

Recommendations

- Encourage local dialect media content creation.
- Regular government authority visits, ignoring the interference of middlemen (Bicholiya) for the effectiveness of the policy.
- Fulfillment of basic needs (water, roads, health, electricity, and shelter).
- Promoting documentary making and media production.
- Media content should be infotainment.
- Youth Training for effectiveness of the policy implementation in the community.

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