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Reaching the unreached-social media, women and bay islands

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Introduction

In the words of Alvin Toffler, information and communication technology has become the third wave after agricultural and Industrial revolutions ^[1]. Internet has become one of the most amazing inventions of human kind and ruling the 21st century in every nook and corner of the world. Today, the world has become meaningless and lifeless without internet. Social media, the greatest and interesting offshoot of information and communication technology paved way for the people especially women to voice their views hitherto never spoken and unheard. Across the societies, woman an important and major component of any society has been neglected for ages together. Her feelings, emotions and opinions were never respected in the family as well as in the social space. But the emergence of social media gave an opportunity for woman to express and forcing the society to listen to her. But at the same time, the social media, yet to make inroads into all sections of women across the world. Like in many parts of India, the Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is one such area where internet and the social media yet to make its way into the everyday life of woman. The literacy rate among women in the largest Union Territory of India is one of the best in the country. Despite this high literacy rate among women and a free society, the Bay islands is yet to be emerged as techno savvy. In my research paper, I made an attempt to study about women in the Bay Islands with regard to the use of social media. In order to write this paper, sources like, census data, official documents of Andaman and Nicobar Administration, local news papers, interviews with some women and internet have been used.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the largest Union Territory of India is situated in the Bay of Bengal approximately, 1200 km away from the eastern coastal line. The Union Territory comprised of 572 islands of which 38 are habituated, 26 in Andaman and 12 are in Nicobar group of Islands ^[2]. Andaman was established as British Prison Settlement in the year 1789 and followed by 1857, in order to keep the convicts of uprising of 1857. By the beginning of twentieth century, the infamous Cellular jail was constructed by the colonial rulers to meet out the harshest punishment to the freedom fighters who were stationed in the Island ^[3]. During World War II, the Andaman and Nicobar group of Islands came under the control of Japan and they unleashed reign of terror over the people of the Islands. The islands were re occupied by the British in 1945 and after independence, the territory became integral part of Independent India under direct control of the Central Government. With the reorganisation of States in 1956, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands had become largest Union Territory ^[4]. Contrary to the popular perception, out of 3, 79, 944 population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the tribal population constitute only 8.27 percent ^[5]. "It was only in 1858 that Andaman was made as a penal settlement, people from the mainland and other British colonies came to these Islands in various capacities and settled here. In 1858, the British founded a penal settlement here. These Islands were subsequently opened up for settlement for people from the mainland India, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lankan repatriates, and ex-servicemen ^[6]." Prior to independence, people came here mainly as convicts, as this place was established as a Penal colony. Under the Independence Act, these islands have become part of Union of India after the British left. As this place is strategically very important, the Government of India, encouraged people from the mainland to come and settle here. The settlers were provided with land or a government job. Subsequently, a good number of people mainly from Bengal, Tamil Nadu and erstwhile Andhra Pradesh migrated to these islands in search of livelihood. All together these people are known as settlers.

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Apart from these permanent settlers, there are people from armed forces and Central Government institutions are posted here and also we find a good amount of floating population in the form tourists and short-term manual labour. The settlers in the islands can be divided into Locals or Andaman Indians and people from mainland. "In a cultural sense, the term Andaman Indians signifies the native Indians whose culture and history are rooted in this soil. The Locals are the direct descendants of the 'mutineers', convicts and the early free population. During the last hundred years, the 'Locals' have developed into a homogeneous community with a common culture, language, psychological makeup and pursuing common social, economic and political aims. These people hailed from all parts of undivided India and represented all streams of Indian culture and its languages. Historical pressure brought about the merging of all the above streams into a common cultural impress. For one or two generations, the mother culture also played its part but with the passage of time, the regional culture eclipsed it^[7]. The 'Locals' have no property, family or landed links with the mainland India and even ancestral links have disappeared with the passage of time. The 'new culture' which emerged out of amalgamation of mainland culture and at the same time with its disconnection, unites these 'Locals', is characterised by the absence of social orthodoxy, rigidity, casteism, communalism and linguism. Religion is considered more of an individual's affair, in which caste and all its negative influences on society were completely eliminated. Even marriages among religious communities are a common phenomenon among these 'Locals'. This process of assimilation and of merging was facilitated by the impact of social and economic problems that the 'Locals' faced in the course of their development and consolidation.

According to Wikipedia, "Social media are computer mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks^[8]." Social media has been emerging as an integral part of human life and a good amount of population across the world has been using social media. Generally, the social media is being used to stay in touch with our near and dear, to stay up to date with current affairs, to engage in spare time, for entertainment, to share opinions etc. As per wersm.com website, 36% of social media users are on social media, just because their friends were already there^[9]. Most of the people in social media are more of passive participants and they use social media to consume rather than contributing actively. In the beginning, technology had been male dominating and due to social media, the domination has been in the process of decline. More and more women are finding their voice, confidence and career through this communication and information technology. 75% of North American female internet users use social media compared to men being just 63%^[10]. In an interview, Jenni Hogan, a social savvy journalist stated that, "I think women are more powerful than they thin in social media, As a mother, I see other mothers multitasking, working full time, being CEO of their family and using technology to be more efficient. I think that we are the super users of technology being busy, working moms. Females, without even knowing it, are leaders in this area^[11]." The following table explains about internet usage rate worldwide in 2017 by gender and by region^[12].

Table 1

Sl. No	Region	Male Users	Female Users
1	Africa	24.9%	18.6%
2	Arab States	47.7%	39.4%
3	Asia Pacific	47.9%	39.7%
4	The Americas	65.1%	66.7%
5	Europe	82.9%	76.3%

As per the report from the Internet and Mobile Association of India, the number of Internet users in India has reached around 460 million in June 2017 which was a jump from 7% from 432 million in December 2016. The report also said, "Urban India with an estimated population of 444 million already has 269 million i.e. 60% using the Internet. Rural India with an estimated population of 906 million as per 2011 has only 163 million i.e. 17% Internet users"^[13]. With over 460 million Internet users, India is the second largest in the world lagging behind China. By 2021 India is expected to have 635.8 million Internet users^[14]. Despite being large base of Internet users in India, women account for less than one-third of internet users in India. The gender gap in India is not just confined to social, economic and political aspects. Even there is a digital gender gap which is the inability to access Internet services and information on various issues related to women. According to report released by United National Children Education Fund (UNICEF), India is still male dominated area with regard to usage of Internet, female being only 29% of Internet Users. The report titled, 'State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a digital world' unveiled by the UNICEF today, girls in rural India, face restrictions which using the Information and Communication Technology^[15]. India is known as IT hub in the digital world dominating world in software industry. There has been constant increase in the number of people going online in the country and government is trying to provide internet access to all the population, but girls in India are not equally accessible to the Internet world compared to their counter parts. In the world scenario, women population tend to cross men in the usage of popular social networking sites, the trend is exactly opposite in India. On the Facebook, the world's largest social networking website for which India is one of the important markets, there are only one woman out of every three men. The digital gender gap is so much that India's Facebook population comprised of 76% of men against 24% women and this gap is far more than neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan^[16]. In order push aggressive digitization of India, the gap of digital gender has to be bridged. While 43% Indian men own a cellphone, women constitute only 28%. A survey conducted by Tandem research foundation in semi-rural Madhya Pradesh revealed that, "a majority of the women who owned a cellphone did not know how to operate the phone. Unable to read or write, they could not dial a number or read messages; most did not know their mobile numbers hand had to ask their husbands. Their cellphone usage was mostly limited to pressing the green button when the phone rang^[17]."

Anja Kovacs director of The Internet Democracy Project and the champion of the feminist Internet works for providing opportunities to people whereby they use the Internet informed and judiciously. She say, "Women have been surveilled by communities and families for centuries. We know the impact that it has. Most people who are open to the kind of things we do can see the restrictions that are

there to women that are not on men. This harms women's lives, shapes their lives in particular ways because they constantly have to be careful of what they are doing, where they are going—they constantly have to justify.” Trends reflect that India is like any other country where patriarchy is strongly steeped within the structure of the society. This often gets translated to the nature of communication communities have within themselves and enforces on individuals, majorly women. There is evidence according to Anja that “the more conservative the family is, the more restricted you are on the Internet^[18]”.

In the total population of 3,80,581 in Andaman and Nicobar islands, female constitute 1,77,710 i.e. 46.69%, the gender gap being just 7.9% contrary to the Nationwide gender gap being 16.3% as per 2011 Census Report^[19]. The literacy rate among females is 82.43% which above 12% of national average. As per Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) pass percentage of 2015-16, 97% and 77% of girls cleared their class X and XII Board examinations^[20]. By the above data, it is clear that the condition of women in these islands is far better than many of their counter parts across the nation. Like in the rest of India, the accessibility or usage of Internet by women in Andamans is far lower than their counter parts. But the reasons for lack of accessibility of Internet to the women in this archipelago are different from rest of India. Like in mainland India, the gender discrimination and male dominance comparatively lesser in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands because of its historical back ground and emergence of its demographic composition. As these islands were formed as a penal colony mainly for male convicts, there was dearth of female population. With the coming of female convicts and subsequently settlers from various parts of the country and mainly from southern part of India, reduced the gender gap in terms population. Since colonial period, as elementary education was compulsory for both girls and boys, the literacy rate among women has been on par with men even after independence. As the cost of living in this remote area is very high (most of the commodities have to come from mainland), women along with are engaged in economic activities. Thus, women became economically less dependent on men. In the last hundred years, the locals in the Andaman had developed into a homogeneous community with a common culture, language, psychological makeup and pursuing common social, economic and political aims. These hailed from all parts of undivided India and represented all streams of India culture and its languages. Historical pressure brought about the merging of all the above streams into a common cultural impress^[21]. As a result, even in matrimonial alliances, there is no hard and fast rule that woman should get married to the male member from her own community. Inter religious, regional and lingual marriages very common in the Andamans. On account of this relatively economic independence of the woman in these Islands, she enjoyed freedom of expression, a say in both family and outside and generally her opinion is considered by the male.

As per the usage of Internet in India, Maharashtra has the highest number of Internet users in the country with more than 30 million followed by States like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Himachal Pradesh has the lowest number of Internet users with 3.02 million^[22]. As per the report, The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators released by Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, the area

wise Wireless Subscriber Base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is just 0.61 million^[23]. The internet connectivity in Andaman and Nicobar Islands has become a constant sources of frustration and disappointment to Islanders. The situation is so bad that often broadband work slower than Dial-Up network and 3G devices do not even get proper signals. The BSNL has given more than 4000 Broadband connections to people in Andaman and Nicobar Islands knowing fully well that the bandwidth is limited, this has jammed the network and almost killed speed of internet. Chief General Manager, of BSNL Mr. VK Sanjeevi told Andaman Sheekha that the technology is different in Andaman, unlike mainland where connectivity is from tower to tower, in the islands, the signal goes to satellite and comes back to land and it takes time^[24].

Conclusion

Yasmin Ali Haque, UNICEF representative to India said that, “The internet and social media provide incredible opportunities for children to learn, participate and socialize but it also brings significant risks of online abuse and violence, Digital literacy is, therefore, key to ensure that all girls and boys stay informed, engaged and safe online^[25]”.

The Union Government was expected to get a detailed project report soon so that the govt could go ahead to lay 2,200 kilometers of submarine cable from mainland to Andaman and Nicobar Islands in two to three years at an approximate cost of 600 crore^[26]. The Union Cabinet on 21 September, 2016 approved the proposal for Submarine OFC connectivity between Mainland India (Chennai) and five other islands Car Nicobar, Little Andaman, Havelock, Kamorota and Great Nicobar Island in single phase^[27]. This project has been targeted to be implemented by December 2018. Andaman being strategically located, a reliable and high-speed communications services is very much required. The Union Territory with 38 inhabited islands spread over the distance of more than 750 kilometers faces connectivity issues as these islands have got connectivity to the mainland through the satellite network with a limited capacity. As mentioned above, women in these islands are enjoying considerable freedom with regard to their personal life. Their literacy rate is high and they value dignity of labour and engage in any form of respectable employment. The Islands could be considered as one of the areas of India, where accessibility to the internet has been denied for whatever reasons. If the administration of the Islands able to provide a faster information and communication technology to the islanders particularly for women, they would be able to express their voice through the social media. Social media would definitely play a vital role in empowerment of women in all aspects, whether economic, political, social, educational, cultural in this part of India.

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