Social Technology for Rural Community Development: Bridging the Rural Urban Knowledge Divide Digitally

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Abstract

The paper proposes to utilize potential of social technology to define inclusive connectedness in contemporary digital world that would lead to empowerment of rural communities digitally. To address the issue of rural empowerment, the paper argues in favour of mass-scale digital participation as a potential means to enlarge agency and opportunity structure of target group. Subsequently, the paper proposes a social knowledge management framework, which helps to bridge rural urban knowledge divide and subsequently empowers rural participants by making them digitally mature and knowledge capable.

Keywords

Rural community, agency, opportunity structure, empowerment, social technology, social capital, digital maturity, knowledge capability, knowledge divide, social knowledge management.

Extended Abstract

Contemporary digitized era, ushering in a new age of easy communication and connectivity, has nullified the hindrances caused due to geographical isolation. The following paper is dedicated to study how the digital path, by virtually bridging knowledge and information divide, offers scopes of empowerment to marginalized population. In this context, the paper explores the existing opportunity structure of rural Indian artisans to derive an idea about their present constraints and prescribes the digital path to improve the rural population's life and livelihood choices. The paper tries to answer the following research questions: - How can the agency of rural population be enhanced, along with making greater opportunities available to them, to enable them to achieve degrees of empowerment? How can bridging of the rural urban knowledge divide using social technologies empower the rural population to take informed decisions and purposeful choices thereby making them agential actors? Chui (2012) defines social technologies "as digital technologies used by people to interact socially and together to create, enhance, and exchange content". Communication fostered by social technology pave the path for the creation of virtual communities, where relevant and easy exchange of information subsequently increases the efficiency of economic systems by reducing the costs of communication, collaboration and coordination.

In the context of rural Indian artisans, it is indeed true that several initiatives, public, private as well as NGOs, have been undertaken to broaden the opportunity scopes of these creative producers. However, partly because of the sporadic nature of most of these initiatives and lack of follow-up guidelines and partly due to the disadvantageous social position of the target group, attempts to broaden opportunity scopes have seldom translated themselves into an enhanced 'opportunity structure'. Cloward(1960) defines opportunity structure as the opportunities available to people in a given society, which are shaped by respective social organization and structure of that entity. While the definition highlights the importance of social norms in framing opportunity structure, making the target group autonomous to bring self-induced changes by negotiating with their restrictive social

ambience, or in other words, pronouncing their agency becomes a mandatory prerequisite in the process of empowering them.

Agency, defined as an individual/group's capacity to make purposeful choices, is a necessary condition along with an enhanced opportunity structure to bring about empowerment of target group (Emma, 2009). It is by making rural participants knowledge capable, where they will not only have digital literacy to gain e-knowledge, but will be digitally mature to evaluate the knowledge obtained, we can attempt at enhancing their opportunity structure by pronouncing individual as well as collective agency mandatory to bring about holistic development. Since knowledge capability directly enhances individual/group's ability to take informed decisions and purposeful choices, the paper demonstrates how the current internet-based social media revolution has the potential of livelihood enhancement and holistic development of the rural community by bridging rural-urban knowledge & information divide through the creation of a Social Knowledge Management (SKM) platform. Improving access to knowledge and informational resources through this social knowledge management platform will eventually act as a gateway to make other form of resources accessible (Liaqut Ali, 2015). At the same time, this social knowledge management platform is not only a medium of knowledge and information dissemination but also a facilitator in bringing together producers and consumers of knowledge and information disregarding geographical boundaries, thereby creating a global socio-cultural phenomenon. The SKM platform, bringing rural community, experts, professionals and mentors in a single platform works for enhancing the social capital of the rural community by fostering avenues for voluntary participation and creation of social networks. Through the relevant exchange of information, the platform enables people to interact and collaborate with each other, establish community norms and values, share resources and build trustful relationships, which are the core values of social capital (Putnam, 2000). An enhanced social capital often acts as an accelerating force to bring about empowerment for marginalized segment by improving individual/group's capacity to make purposeful choices and to take informed decisions.
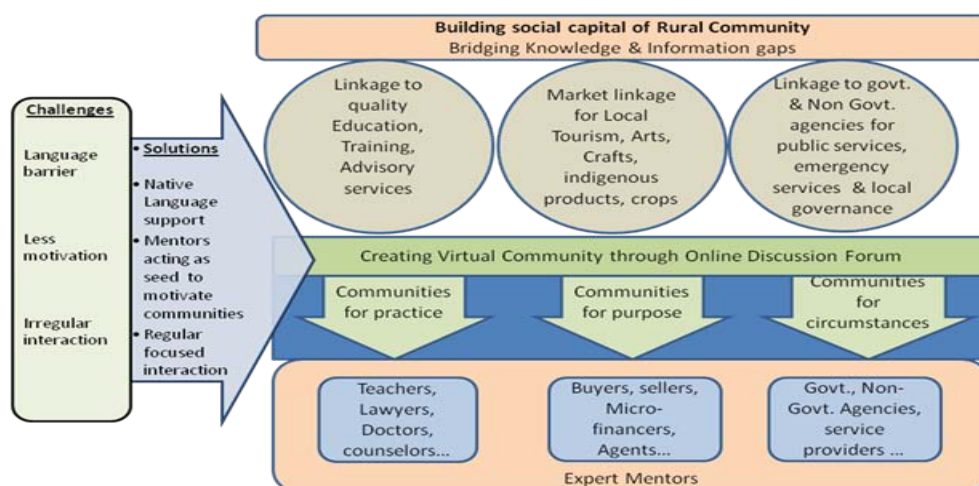

Fig.1. An Overall Architecture of a Social Knowledge Management Platform

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