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Digital Empowerment through Mobile Phone: A Study on Rural Women Enterpreneurs in Modlanga Gram, Bolpur Sub-Division, West Bnegal

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Abstract:

Women empowerment through entrepreneurship is a much-discussed and debated topic these days. Women constitute half of the population of India and contribute a significant portion to the Indian economy. A Google report shows that in 2030, women entrepreneurship can create 150-170 million jobs in India. As technology speeds up lives, women are an emerging economic force that policymakers cannot neglect. The world's modern democratic economy depends on the participation of both sexes. The growth of women entrepreneurship has increased with the innovation of technologies, especially mobile phones. Mobile phones can be a game-changer for women entrepreneurs, as many of them have struggled with various limitations and barriers in Indian patriarchal society. Also, the innovation of mobile phones has changed the entire scenario of entrepreneurship. Thus, this study will discuss the role of mobile phones among the rural women entrepreneurs of Moldanga Gram under the Bolpur sub-division and focus on the limitations and challenges of using mobile phones by the rural women of Moldanga Gram. Additionally, Actor-Network Theory has been used as a theoretical framework to understand the different entities of this study and to map the relationships between human non-human actors, as well as to determine the extent to which these actors are linked to achieve their goals towards entrepreneurship. The study uses a mixed method data collection techniques, employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches for gathering primary data. The data will be analyzed and presented through descriptive analysis, accompanied by charts and graphs.

Keywords:

Women Entrepreneurs, Mobile Phones, Technology, Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Rural Women.

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Inroduction:

Women empowerment through entrepreneurship is a much-discussed and debated topic these days. Women are constitute half of the population of India and contribute a significant portion to the Indian economy. A Google report shows that in 2030, Women entrepreneurship can create 150-170 million jobs in India. The growth of women entrepreneurship has increased with the innovation of technologies, especially mobile phones. Mobile phones can be a game-changer for women entrepreneurs as many of them have struggled with the various limitations and barriers in Indian patriarchal society. Also, the innovation of mobile phones has changed the entire scenario of entrepreneurship. According to TRAI (December 2019), India is the second-largest country globally with 1.1514 billion mobile subscribers; 38% of Indian women use mobile phones while 71% of for men do. The reason behind the rapid growth of mobile phones in India is the lowest call tariffs in the world, with hyper-competition among a number of telecom operators. The adaptability and diversity features of mobile phones have also played an essential role in women's entrepreneurship. Mobile phone offer extraordinary business opportunities for entrepreneurs, regardless of their gender or their businesses' location (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2014). However, limitations and challenges of using mobile phones by women are still present in India, but it has been noticed that women entrepreneurs contribute a remarkable role in the amount of GDP. Government and various leading private organizations, NGOs, and SHGs (Self Help Group) now have been concentrating on women entrepreneurship as women are another wing of the nations, and without strengthening both wings, a nation cannot reach its highest peak. Women are using a mobile phones not only for connecting with their families and friends; they also used them to connect with their business partners, clients, search for market price, transfer and receive money for their business, and so on. Moreover, the report of the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW, 2012) stated that ‘mobile phone can catalyze women economic development by promoting entrepreneurial activity, improving business practice and breaking traditional gender barrier at home and in the market place’(Warner et al., 2012). These recent trends of using mobile phones have portrayed a scenario that in the future, women entrepreneurs will use mobile phones as the key accelerator for their business, and the usage of mobile phones will becomes ubiquitous (Kapinga et al., 2016).

Women Entrepreneurship:

Women entrepreneurship is how women initiate a business, gather all resources, undertake risks, face challenges, provide employment to others, and manage the business independently. Approximately 1/3 of the entrepreneurs in the world are women entrepreneurs. According to the definition given by the Government of India – “A women entrepreneur is defined as an enterprise owned and controlled by a woman having a minimum financial interest of 51% of the capital and giving at least 51% employment generated to women”(Models, 2020). Thus, women entrepreneurs refer to those who starts business or organization by themselves or with the support of the government or SHGs or NGOs, and in which the majority of employees are also women.

These entrepreneurs generally belong to small-scale industries run such as Agarbati making, Jewellary making, Papad making, Embroidery, Handicrafts, Catering services, Running a restaurant, snack bars, boutique, Small retail shops, Beauty parlors, Pickle manufacturing, etc. It has been noticed in many studies that women entrepreneurs start their business in the second half of their life, precisely after their marriage. When we tried to discover the reason behind these late entrepreneurial careers, we found that most Indian women get married at an early age, and they are not allowed to do business for their achievement, but the scenario has changed according to the needs of their family. We have noticed in our study that lack of literacy, the traditional rigid mentality of the male-dominated society, motherhood, lack of experience, and lack of monetary support are also the reason for this late entrepreneurial career of women.

The time has changed; Indian women are much more liberal than in earlier days; they have left their footprints in every sphere of achievement like administration, academics, politics, science, the armed force, social work, etc. Entrepreneurship opportunities open a new window for women to achieve their desired goals and cherished professional success independently by self-support. (Carrington, 2006). Women entrepreneurship has remarkably increased in Japan, USA, France, UK, and Canada. According to the Sixth Economic Census of India, women constitute around 14% of the total entrepreneurship that is 8.05 million out of the total 58.5 million entrepreneurs. With the increasing number of startup opportunities, entrepreneurship among women has increased these days. Potential women entrepreneurs can contribute a significant percentage to India's GDP.

Review of literature:

ICT-based mobile phones have become widespread in rural and low-income communities. This has resulted in positive beliefs about the potential role of mobile phones in bringing about significant societal transformations, which could include the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment (Abubakar & Dasuki, 2018). In a chapter titled 'Mobile empowering people and society' (2015), the annual Global Mobile Economy Report highlights a connection between economic development and mobile penetration, as it states there that "mobile technology has had a profound impact on national economies worldwide, particularly in the areas of job creation and economic growth" (Grindrod, 2016). It has been noted that the use of mobile phones has significantly increased among women in recent times. Even the use of the internet has also increased among women through mobile phones, and it is the primary tool for women to access internet. Specifically, in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) ownership of mobile phones has risen up among the women since 2014. Nearly, 250 million women are now are using mobile phones. Through the use of mobile internet and mobile money and also the others advantageous services provided by the mobile phones women now can unlock the various significant commercial as well as socio-economic benefits for their livelihood (GSMA, 2019).

With the emerging trends of mobile phone technology, women are now using it as informal and non-formal resources for their livelihood. In social capital, it is possible to

shift from powerlessness to empowerment through the informal and non-formal learning system and low-cost mobile technology. A framework titled 'Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3)' was developed by The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) based on open and distance learning (ODL) and information and communication technology (ICT). This program facilitates the farmers, landless labourers, and marginalized rural communities in developing their social and economic spheres and living a dignified life. Like many other developing countries, In India, gender stereotyping also acts as a barrier for women to access ICT and mobile phones. It is a different concept and ideology of gender which hinders women from using mobile phones and ICT freely. VIDIVELLI, an association of 239women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), worked for goat and sheep enterprise undertaken by the nongovernmental organization Vidiyal (Vidiyal means dawn in Tamil). This project allied with IKSL-Airtel Group (service provider of mobile phones in southern India) to cut their cost for calling, sending voicemail, and audio messages through the mobile phones to the 300 women associated with this project. It has been noted that daily 500 audio messages were recorded and circulated by the Vidiyal for the women of SHGs, and these messages helped them and taught them about the goat-rearing enterprise. Vidiyal encouraged women men to talk about the enterprise issues among themselves through mobile phones. Theis transformation of women's role from homemaker to entrepreneur made an immense change in their lives. Among 320 women of Vidiyal, 82% agreed that transforming information through mobile phones or mobile phone-based training is more effortless and helpful than face-to-face training or formal training. 'Mobile phones have become a symbolic representation of our transition from dependency on males to self-dependency.' Nonetheless, women accepted that their social networking had now become more intensive with mobile phones than before. Empowering women through a Micro-enterprise and lifelong learning project, which is based on mobile phones and ICT technology brings challenges to the existing social relationship and triggers the decision-making power of women in their family and society. (Balasubramanian et al., 2010).

Google and Tata trust jointly started a project named 'Internet Saathi' to develop the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. This project engaged 3000 women volunteers or 'Internet Saathi' and equip them with mobile phones (as ICT tools and knowledge) to connect with mainstream worlds which brings the light of knowledge to them. This project aimed to unfold the use of the internet through mobile phones to the rural women of villages. Nevertheless, it also aims to aware the rural women of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh about the uses and benefits of mobile phones. 'Internet Saathi' increased women's mobility and helped them step out of their homes and see the world without social fear. Through the knowledge of ICT, women could break the social and cultural barriers that restricted them from moving and live freely (Parashar, 2017).

Research purpose:

The primary purpose of this study is to find what kind of opportunities rural women have for their entrepreneurship in this technological era and how the mobile phone does help rural women become independent entrepreneurs. Although the societal perspectives of the world are not the same; Indian society still believes in patriarchy mentality, and many states of the country are rigorously practicing the patriarchal culture where women are not even free to talk to their male partner; consequently, entrepreneurship is a fairy tale for these women. The situation is even worse in the rural area of our country. In the rural part, several limitations have been imposed on women; women are less likely to be entrepreneurs than men are, and they face many challenges throughout their lives. Sometimes rural women are not allowed to obtain higher study or even secondary study. It has been noticed during the interviews, 67% of women entrepreneurs of Moldanga are nearly illiterate, and they only can sign their names. Also, many of them do not even know how to read and write. In this context, this study will also try to discover the limitations and challenges these women have face to become an entrepreneur in a male-dominated society. Besides that, many studies have found that most Indian women are starting their entrepreneurship at the age of 35-45, which is after ten years than men (Carrington, 2006). Thus, this study will try to find out why women are lagging as entrepreneurs. Though we have limited time and scopes for this study, our goals are to include all the potential aspects of using mobile phone technology to accelerate women's entrepreneurship.

Objectives:

This study will discuss the role of mobile phones among the rural women entrepreneurs of Moldanga Gram and will also focus on the limitations and challenges of using mobile phones by these women. Moreover, this study will try to find the opportunities for rural women to use mobile phones in their entrepreneurship and will analyze the role of mobile phones in accelerating rural women's participation in entrepreneurship.

- To understand the usage of mobile phones among rural women entrepreneurs of Moldanga
- How mobile phones help rural women to connect with their potential customers
- To map the challenges rural women face in using mobile phones
- To what extent mobile phones can be used to accelerate women's entrepreneurship

Study Area:

Though no specific information is available on the internet about Moldanga Gram, the majority of its population belongs to the Muslim community. The literacy rate of Moldanga is extremely poor, and the women's literacy rate is the lowest under Ruppur Panchayat. Most of the residents of this gram are unemployed, marginalized workers, non-regular or seasonal laborers, and small-scale farmers. Women in this gram are primarily engaged in Katha-stitching, Batik-printing, and handcrafting. They are also

associated with different Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to borrow money for purchasing raw materials and supporting their livelihoods.

Moldanga Gram, under the Bolpur sub-division, is situated within Ruppur Gram Panchayat. Ruppur is a large village consisting of 801 families in the Bolpur Sriniketan Block of Birbhum district, West Bengal. According to the 2011 Population Census, Ruppur village has a total population of 3,803, including 2,019 men and 1,784 women. The village has an average sex ratio of 884, which is lower than the West Bengal state average of 950.

In terms of literacy, Ruppur village recorded a literacy rate of 59.76 percent in 2011, significantly lower than the state average of 76.26 percent. The male literacy rate stands at 65.59 percent, while the female literacy rate is 53.19 percent. Ruppur village is located in Bolpur Sriniketan Tehsil of Birbhum district, West Bengal. It is situated 37.1 kilometers from the Suri district headquarters and 4.9 kilometers from the Sriniketan sub-district headquarters. According to 2009 statistics, Ruppur functions as a Gram Panchayat. The total geographical area of the village is 722.4 hectares. As per 2019 records, Ruppur village falls under the Bolpur Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies. Bolpur is the nearest town, located approximately 10 km away. The pincode of Ruppur village is 731236.

Methodology:

A mixed-method Data collection techniques has been used to collect the data. A purposive sampling technique has been used to collect primary data, followed by a closed-ended questionnaire. 139 respondents voluntarily participated in this survey to complete the study. Also, for collecting qualitative data, in-depth interviews have been conducted with 57 respondents to understand their daily use of mobile phones and what challenges they have faced in using mobile phones. The answers were recorded by using the in-built recording system of mobile phones. All these respondents are small entrepreneurs and are associated with SGH, Katha-stitching, and Handcrafted work. Also, the journal and online database have been used to find the relevant secondary data to review the literature.

Among the 196 respondents, 69 are small entrepreneurs, who sell their handcrafted items in the local market (Haat), and they all are associated with the different SGH groups (Mayurakhshi, Bandhan, Asha, West Bengal Swanirbhar Sahayak Prakalpo, etc.) from where they can borrow money for their business and household purposes. Besides, 71 women are associated with Katha-stitching (*Kantha is a form of embroidery often practiced by rural women. The traditional form of Kantha embroidery was done with soft dhotis and saris, with a simple running stitch along the edges. Rural Bengali women used the simple running embroidery stitch to hold recycled cloth layers together using threads taken from old saris and stitching techniques passed down from mother to daughter. The embroidered cloth has many uses, including shawls, covers for mirrors, boxes, and pillows. In some cases, the entire cloth is covered with running stitches, employing beautiful motifs of flowers, animals, birds, and geometrical shapes, as well as*

themes from everyday activities. The stitching on the cloth gives it a slightly wrinkled, wavy effect. Contemporary Kantha is applied to a wider range of garments such as sarees, dupatta, shirts for men and women, bedding, and other furnishing fabrics, mainly using cotton and silk), most of them directly get their orders from their clients, and others get orders from the middleman called 'Mohajan,' or from the local garment shops. 56 women are linked with Batik printing (Batik is an Indonesian technique of wax-resist dyeing applied to the whole cloth). These women have a small Batik Printing set up at their home, and they take a direct orders from the market and their regular clients. Some of them also worked as part-time labor in the nearest Batik printing factory. The women entrepreneurs of Moldanga mainly belong to the Muslim community, and they all are rural women from a variety of age groups.

Theoretical framework:

The theoretical framework of this study is based on John Law's s Actor-Network Theory (ANT). According to Law (1992), the concept of 'Network' in ANT is a metaphor. In ANT, it is assumed that "realities are all effects generated by networks or relationships of diverse entities" (Priyatma, 2013). Based on ANT, rural women entrepreneurs and their customers act as human actors, whereas the mobile phone acts as a non-human actor. Besides this, the courier service system, social media apps, mobile banking facilities, market information, women's s associations, and SHGs are all working as non-human actors too, and together they build a network to achieve a common interest in women entrepreneurship. All these 'actants' are intermediately linked with each other.

Findings:

After collecting the interviews and survey, this study has found that:

Mobile phones help rural women entrepreneurs to communicate with their potential customers for taking orders or delivering products. Many women entrepreneurs of Moldanga use mobile banking facilities for payment and transaction-related purposes. They are using mobile phones to easily access market information, as it is difficult for rural women to roam around to collect market information. Some of them have started using social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and create groups with their customers to promote their products and get online orders from prospective customers. These groups help them circulate promotional messages, find market information, and save their time and advertisement costs. Moreover, rural women entrepreneurs find their relevant buyers also with the help of these groups. Besides that, these respondents use mobile phones not only for business purposes, but they also find this device a string to stay attached to their family and friends in their busy schedules. They can take care of their families when they are away from home, and this function of mobile phones helps them reduce their work stress and balance their personal and professional lives in a coordinated manner. Mobile phones help rural women entrepreneurs build a network among their acquaintances, which helps them seek legal and moral support regarding their professional hindrances. With the aid of

SHGs, they create women's groups of 10-12 members and borrow an amount to expand their businesses and livelihoods. Societal and religious obstacles like the prohibition of meeting male customers, going outside for business purposes, and roaming around the market to collect information can be overcome with the help of mobile phones. During the data collection, we have observed that many of the women entrepreneurs of Moldanga belong to the Muslim community, and some of their spouses are inflexible about client meetings/visits of their wives. Therefore, these women are using mobile phones to overcome this barrier. The rural women entrepreneurs find mobile phones a game-changer in their lives, and they feel much safer with a mobile device. One of the heads of the SHG members has said, â€˜It gave us the power to decide our work patterns and timings. Now we do not need to go outside to sell our products, which saves our time. Now the families cannot make any complaint about our trade and timing. We also take orders from customers via WhatsApp, voice calls, or SMS, and send them the products by courier service, and the customers send the money through Paytm or GPay, or through bank account details. This mobile payment facility helps us save a good amount, as the money is directly credited to our bank accounts. It helps us fulfill our daily requirements and gives us the essence of being the family's financial decision-maker, as we can manage our earnings and savings.

Conclusion:

This study has noticed the translation processes that influence women entrepreneurs to adopt mobile phones and make progressive use of them for their well-being. SHG group members played an important role as moderators for the rural women to use mobile phones for their self-development. Together, these members act upon a common interest to build up a business network and perform according to the needs of the association to expand and run their business. But mobile phones have their limits; network issues sometimes bring difficulties, the cost of call rates or special tariffs, poor mobile literacy, and meanwhile societal mentality or family members create obstacles for using mobile phones or owning a personal device by these rural women entrepreneurs, which hinders their prospective efficiency. Additionally, literacy and financial condition restrict rural women from using mobile phones. We have noticed that many of the rural women entrepreneurs of Moldanga do not have their own handset. They are operating from their spouse or other family members phones to run their business. Also, the aged rural women of Moldanga are not so familiar with online payment methods and mobile technology, which creates a problem for them in using the device.

So it can be concluded that a mobile phone alone cannot change the scenario for women entrepreneurs, but mobile phones definitely accelerate the mobility of their users. According to ANT (Actor-Network Theory), social media apps, courier services, mobile payments, voice calls, SHGs, and SMS facilities all together form a network with the rural women entrepreneurs of Moldanga, which helps them to increase their business opportunities and give them the essence of freedom from boundaries. However, mobile phones have some limitations like call tariffs and handset costs, mobile

network service issues, and illiteracy. If we overcome all these hindrances and strategically deploy mobile phones, then they can be real game changers for rural women entrepreneurs. Moreover, if the government and private organizations collaboratively reduce the price of mobile handsets and call tariffs, then not only in Moldanga, but rural women entrepreneurs across the country will get the actual benefits of mobile devices to accelerate their business and livelihoods.

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