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# From Canvas to Screen: The Impact of Digital Literacy and New Media on Indigenous Women Artisans of Eastern India

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## ABSTRACT

The present study explores digital literacy, new media and its transformative impact on the lives of indigenous women artisans, by providing them with a platform to showcase their creations, empowering them both financially and socially, and enabling them to raise their concerns, challenge traditional norms, and redefine their identities. The research utilizes data from both primary and secondary sources. The Primary data is collected through a field study among the indigenous women artisans from Purulia district of West Bengal. The secondary data is drawn from various scientific research papers, government reports, newspaper articles and magazine features. The study reveals a significant impact of digital literacy and new media on the indigenous women artisans, in terms of access to new markets, increased visibility of their creation in digital spaces, economic independence and social recognition.

**Keywords** Digital Literacy, New Media, Indigenous Women Artisans, Indigenous Knowledge, Eastern India, Socio-Economic Empowerment

## I. Introduction

With the advent of newer technologies, the concept of literacy has expanded from the traditional reading and writing to the ability to navigate, evaluate and use the digital platforms, a skill known as digital literacy. This new literacy empowers individuals to effectively participate and contribute to the digital ecosystem. The rise of New Media, often referred to as Web 2.0, characterized by web technologies like social media, wikis, interactive multimedia platforms and online spaces, has profoundly reshaped the modern life (Yujie, Yasin, Alsagoff & Hoon,2022; Brownlee, 2018; Uduak, 2021). Unlike the old media such as newspaper, television and radio, this newer form of web-based technologies has redefined the way people used to communicate, interact and perceive themselves, impacting social structures and personal identities (Lysak, 2012; Boulos, 2006). As the boundaries between the public and private life blur, individuals are increasingly navigating a world where their thoughts, beliefs, and self- representations are continuously influenced by their digital experiences. (Effimova & de Moor, 2005; Friedman, Lopez-Pumarejo & Friedman, 2008). The very notion of identity, once anchored in stable, physical communities, becomes fluid and multi-dimensional in the digital age (Turke, 2011). Individuals now develop multiple meta-identities on various platforms where one's 'ideal self' is carefully constructed to fit into the context of each online space (Oyserman & Markus, 1998; Boyd, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This has given way to newer forms of self-representation where individuals are no longer passively consuming media anymore but are themselves involved in the creation and dissemination of content (Pazer, 2024; Jeyanthi, 2022). New Media has been a great avenue towards visibility, activism, and self-expression for marginalized people. For instance, transgender people are using social media to share their stories, create support networks and challenge transphobia (Buss, Le & Haimson, 2021). Similarly, Dalits and Adivasis have used digital means to document and fight caste-based discrimination (De Kruijf, 2015), while religious minorities have found their spaces to talk about their lives and resist against oppression. Such virtual platforms allow for the articulation of identities by subjugated people in ways that challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative representations of their experiences. It may be through the sharing of content reflecting their realities that they are able to counter stereotypes and claim their rights to visibility and voice. In this way, digital self-representation becomes very instrumental in building a sense of empowerment and community among such marginalized groups, often denied visibility and subject to misrepresentation in traditional media. Yet, the New Media visibility comes with risks as well. Marginalized individuals are often subjected to online harassment, hate speech, and cyberbullying, which can be particularly severe for those who challenge societal norms or confront powerful interests (Aldridge, McDermott, Thorne, Arcelus, & Witcomb, 2024). For transgender people, Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities, the digital space can be both a sanctuary and a battleground, where the struggle for recognition

and equality is met with intense resistance (Carlson & Kennedy). The indigenous communities in Eastern India, such as those in the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, have a dynamic tapestry of artistic traditions and craftsmanship passed down through generations (Pal & Kalam, 2023). These include painting, weaving, pottery, and storytelling, each with deep roots within the culture and spiritual practices of these communities (Vijayalakshmi, 2021). The indigenous women have always played a vital role in preserving and nurturing these art forms. In their art, these women not

only express themselves creatively but also share stories, beliefs, and values that form an integral part of their identity (Kumari & Sarma, 2023). However, despite their important contribution, indigenous women artisans face a number of socio-economic challenges that prevents them from rising to gain recognition and economic independence (Sahal, 2023). For the most part, their marginalization, limited access to education, and geographical isolation have always restricted these indigenous women's opportunities to make connections with the outside world (Rana, 2023). So, most indigenous women artisans cannot translate their craftsmanship into sustainable livelihoods. During the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous artisans all over the world were driven into digital spaces (Borea, 2023). Moving into New Media has opened up for them far greater possibilities of reaching global audiences and engaging in online marketplaces. This research focuses on how that transition has affected indigenous women artisans. The study explores the role of digital literacy and new media on the indigenous women artisans, in terms of access to new markets, increased visibility of their creation in digital spaces, economic independence and social recognition.

## II. Objectives

The principal aim of the article is to explore how new media has affected the lives of indigenous

women artisans in the study area and becomes a vital tool for their self-expression, cultural preservation and socio-economic empowerment.

## III. Methodology

The researchers conducted ethnographic fieldwork to collect empirical inferences from the indigenous women artisans of the three selected blocks of Purulia-I, Baghmundi and Kashipur of Purulia district of West Bengal. A sample of 6 women artisans has been collected through purposive sampling technique. Primary and secondary data has been collected to meet the purpose of the study, The researchers spent a considerable amount of time with the respondents to gather primary data for six months, from January 2024 to June 2024. In this study, the narrators are six indigenous women artisans, two of the artisans are from Santhal community who works in Chou mask making, two of the artisans are from Sabar community who prepares various handicrafts using the leaves of date palm trees and bamboo and the last two women artisans works in cloth painting which is known as Patachitra art. The narrative inquiry is done as laid down by Sharp et al (2019). The researchers shared the purpose of the study with the participants and their consent was taken for the interview. After taking their consent, a semi- structured questionnaire was prepared for the in-depth interview. The researchers took field notes during the interview and it was recorded to be transcribed later on. The transcribed data was dissected using open coding and identification of the relationship between the data was done through axial coding, and the main themes emerged from the data. The narratives were arranged chronologically, the stories were contextualized and analysed using rich descriptions. Next, Thematic analysis was done according to Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes, patterns and key insights from the stories. The secondary data has been gathered from various published research articles, reports, websites and data sources of government and non-governmental agencies.

## IV. Findings and Discussions

**Theme 1: Access to New Markets and Economic Independence:**

"Earlier I used to wait for festivals and village fairs to sell the masks, but now, with the help of

Facebook, people from different cities and even other countries are buying our masks. This has

changed everything for me. I can now contribute to my family's income and even save for my children's future," said Narrator 1. Similarly, Narrator 6 shared, "Our bamboo and palm leaf handicrafts used to be sold only in local markets, but now, people order them online. I never imagined that what I make with my hands could bring in this much money. It's a big relief knowing I don't have to depend on anyone anymore." Narrator 3 echoed this sentiment: "Earlier, we had to rely on middlemen, but now we sell our cloth paintings directly to buyers through social media. It feels good to know that our art is valued." The statements from the interview bring forth the transformative impact of social media on traditional artisans. Before, these artisans relied on middlemen, fairs, and markets in the villages to sell their handmade products, which actually brought about a limitation of their reach and consequently their profit. With platforms like Facebook, however, they have now been able to connect with customers from other cities and even countries. This has brought about expansion in their business base and further empowered them financially. Selling directly, they make more and gain recognition for their craft. The ability to contribute to the family income and ensure the well-being of their children brings a sense of pride and stability. The experiences of the narrators resonate with the observation by Asrafi, Radhikaashree, Saleema Parvin and Rao (2024) who observed how access to new media has provided the tribal artisans a chance to sell their products online to a larger audience who value their work, without relying on any middleman.

**Theme 2: Cultural Preservation and Transmission**

"My daughter loves showing how I make Chou masks in short videos and sharing them on her

YouTube channel. It's not just for selling; it's also a way to keep our tradition alive. Young

people in our community watch these videos and want to learn, and that makes me so happy, "Narrator 5 explained. Besides, Narrator 4 shared, "Our paintings tell stories from mythology, and by posting them online, we are keeping those stories alive. People ask questions about the stories, and it feels like we're teaching others about our culture." The experiences of Narrator 4 and 5 aligns with the findings from the study conducted by Panchal and

Mago (2024) which indicates that social media has become a tool for diaspora groups to preserve their cultural customs, language and practices and transmit it to future generations. The interview excerpts highlight how digital platforms are not just boosting sales but also preserving cultural heritage. Narrator 5 shares how their daughter uses YouTube to showcase the process of making Chou masks, attracting young learners and ensuring the tradition continues. This reflects how social media serves as a bridge between generations, keeping traditional crafts relevant in the modern world. Similarly, Narrator 4 emphasizes how posting mythological paintings online helps keep ancient stories alive. By engaging with viewers who ask questions, artisans are not just selling their work but also educating others about their culture. This shift from mere commerce to cultural preservation is significant, as it ensures that traditional art forms are appreciated beyond local communities.

**Theme 3: Empowerment and Identity Transformation:**

"I used to feel like I was just another woman making masks in a small village, but now people

call me an artist," said Narrator 1 proudly. "When someone praises my work online, it feels like they see me, not just the masks" Narrator 2 shared. Narrator 4 said, "When people recognize my work and even ask me to teach them, it's a different kind of happiness. I now see myself as more than just a painter—I'm a storyteller" These statements reflect the deep sense of identity and validation artisans gain through digital recognition. Narrator 1's transformation from feeling like an ordinary craftsperson to being acknowledged as an artist showcases the power of online appreciation in boosting self-worth. Narrator 2 echoes this sentiment, emphasizing how praise on social media makes them feel seen as an individual, not just as a maker of objects. This highlights how digital platforms provide visibility that was previously limited to local communities. Narrator 4 further expresses how recognition has expanded their role beyond painting—by engaging with people who seek to learn from them, they have become storytellers, preserving and sharing cultural narratives. These experiences show how the internet not only enhances financial opportunities but also gives artisans a newfound sense of pride and purpose. The experiences shared by Narrator 1,2 and 4 aligns with the findings from the study conducted by Barnes (2024) who showed how indigenous artisans use TikTok videos as a tool to showcase their culture, assert their identities and maintain relationalities with their community and ancestors.

**Theme 4: Barriers in Digital Adaptation:**

"Learning to use a smartphone was so hard at first. I didn't even know how to switch it on,"

Narrator 4 laughed, adding, "But I kept trying because I saw the benefits. The internet doesn't always work well in our area, though, and that's frustrating." Narrator 3 shared, "Buying a phone was a big expense for us. It was scary because I didn't want to waste money on something I didn't know how to use, but I've learned little by little." These statements highlight the challenges artisans face in adapting to technology while also recognizing its transformative benefits. Narrator 4 shares the initial struggle of learning to use a smartphone, emphasizing the persistence required to adapt to digital tools. Despite technical difficulties like poor internet connectivity, the potential advantages of online exposure and sales kept them motivated. Similarly, Narrator 3 describes the financial risk involved in purchasing a smartphone, reflecting the hesitation many artisans feel when investing in unfamiliar technology. However, their gradual learning process underscores the importance of digital literacy in today's world. These experiences reveal both the barriers and breakthroughs that come with technological adoption. While the transition is not always smooth, the long-term benefits—such as increased visibility, direct customer interaction, and financial independence—make it a worthwhile journey. These experiences align with the findings by Asrafi, Radhikaashree, Saleema Parvin and Rao (2024) who observed that there are many tribal communities that lack access to stable internet connection, computer, smartphone etc which limits their ability to engage with digital marketing platforms effectively, and recommended improved internet infrastructure as well as digital literacy programs aimed at enhancing the digital skills.

## V. Conclusion:

The findings reveal that while social media and digital platforms have highly transformed the lives of indigenous women artisans, in terms of offering them economic independence and new opportunities, there are still outstanding challenges impeding the process of full digitization. Researchers noted that although artisans do recognize benefits of using digital tools, lack of digital literacy really makes it hard for many to adjust to technology. The results show that specialised digital literacy programs for rural artisans are necessary for them to use online platforms effectively. A few respondents reported having problems learning how to use smartphones and digital tools, which hindered their ability to fully tap into online opportunities. Researchers urge the government and non-government organizations to initiate focused training workshops on digital marketing, e-commerce, and financial management. Moreover, the findings underpin the fact that unreliable internet connectivity is one of the biggest challenges; therefore, artisans cannot maintain consistency in their online presence. The gap in this area can be reduced by investment in digital infrastructure, including improved broadband and mobile networks in rural areas. The other major factor is financial constraint, whereby most of the artisans are afraid of investing in a smartphone or even internet access because of high costs. The researchers recommend microfinance schemes or subsidies, for instance, a government grant so artisans can access digital devices to showcase their business. Additionally, there should be a regionally specific online marketplace or government-funded e-commerce websites for local artisans so they wouldn't have to be at the mercy of mainstream social media platforms that occasionally pay little mind to traditional crafts. Lastly, this research points out that community-driven digital initiatives might encourage more artisans to participate in online marketplaces while preserving the authenticity and cultural value of their work. Researchers underline that closing these gaps will not only empower artisans but also contribute to the broader goal of inclusive digital development.

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