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### The new jungle drums

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CGNetSwara Calling. Photo: Purushottam Thakur

The Hindu

**A unique cell phone-based networking system in Chhattisgarh helps Adivasi Gonds share local news and air grievances.**

Deep in the jungles of Chhattisgarh, a straightforward, earthy man named Naresh Bunkar, field co-ordinator of the Adivasi Santha Manch, picks up his mobile phone and dials +918050068000, a long-distance number in Bangalore. He immediately cuts off and waits. Within seconds, he gets a call from the dialled number, and he hears a recorded voice telling him to leave his message after the beep. Bunkar waits for the beep and then, in a two-minute statement, he records the incredible story of a Forest Ranger in the Kabirdham district of Chhattisgarh.

The Ranger had come to the community promising them land titles under the Forest Rights Act (2006) in exchange for Rs. 3000 per family. But two months passed, with the families feeding him “many chickens”, and they realised that he was not going to help them in any way. He even told them that there was nothing they could do to him. That's when the families came to Bunkar for help. Bunkar says his recorded message was seen by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, who then sent the Sub-Divisional Officer to investigate. When the accusation was found to be true, they suspended the Ranger, who now says he took the money by mistake. He not only returned the money (Rs. 99,000), but also apologised to the community.

The phone call that Bunkar made is part of a unique cell phone-based social media networking system called CGNetSwara, which operates inside sensitive territory termed ‘Maoist areas’. Set up by former BBC journalist Shubhranshu Choudhary, CGNetSwara gives the Adivasi Gonds of central India a voice that reflects their interests, their local news and events.

Choudhary is a native of Chhattisgarh, who earlier worked with BBC World News as a journalist and now works on CGNetSwara on a John S. Knight fellowship grant he won from the International Center for Journalists in the U.S. Choudhary's interest in the Gonds stems from his childhood upbringing in the Adivasi region of Chhattisgarh. He says many of the ‘top’ Maoists today were his classmates in school, ‘sitting in the back benches’, possibly unable to integrate wholly with the class. He says the region's ferment stems from desperate neglect that is historical. “While Indian states got divided on linguistic lines, the Adivasi Gonds of central India were forgotten. They don't have a newspaper or communication system in their native Gondi and the only ‘new’ thing I found on my return here is that most people now had cell phones. So I used their familiarity with mobiles to set up CGNetSwara.”

CGNetSwara's Bangalore-based server was set up by Bill Thies, a researcher in Microsoft and a self-confessed IT geek whose interest in user-generated technology aligned with Choudhary's ideas. Using open-source code and a simple desktop computer with a modem, Thies built a piece of software with 10 voice lines that automatically call the caller back and record his or her message. “It's going to sound very strange for a computer nerd to tell you, however, that technology is not the secret ingredient here,” says Thies. “The secret ingredients are Choudhary's social contacts and the community itself.”

CGNetSwara now gets up to 400 calls daily. The callers talk about local happenings, a lot of it related to their interaction with government schemes. Bunkar is very happy with CGNetSwara's sphere of influence. He says that earlier efforts like *dharnas* in front of the Assembly in Raipur, agitating for land rights for Adivasis, had not worked,

“Computer *mein chhappa jaata hai*”, says Bunkar, meaning that the news spreads through the Internet. “It is so easy now.” Bunkar narrates how he previously had to travel miles on foot to relay a message, or meet a reporter who was, in most cases, unreceptive to local news. “*Abhi ek paisa bhi nahin lagta hai*,” he says. It doesn’t cost anything.

Each Swara message goes to the moderator, Choudhary, and through him to about 50 strategically located volunteer sub-editors for cross checking facts through on-site visits or a follow-up with someone trustworthy from the area, according to the sub-editor’s geographical area of residence. These volunteers are educated citizens, culled from a web-based Yahoo group called CGNet. Set up in 2004 by Choudhary and journalist Frederick Noronha, CGNet’s 2,500-odd members discuss various matters related to Chhattisgarh.

“There is no need for a newsroom”, says Choudhary. “Geography is now history.”

In another instance of the government taking notice of CGNetSwara, Thies talks of CGNetSwara’s recorded reports of malaria cases in the villages. “CGNetSwara had more malaria incidents in a single year than what the government reported in a decade; we even had reports of government health workers dying of malaria”. The Swara reports made the government machinery pay attention to the malaria cases, and the reported figures rose more realistically thereafter.

But Chhattisgarh’s government is not completely ready to embrace this parallel system of governance, working in an area that has historically befuddled them with its insurgency. “I, personally, find it an effective source of feedback and grievance redressal from the grassroots. I make use of it off and on,” says Chief Secretary Sunil Kumar, taking care to emphasise the non-official nature of his usage.

But CGNetSwara appears to have taken root in tribal Chhattisgarh. Choudhary calls it citizen journalism of a different kind. In an area neglected by mainstream media (unless the news concerns Maoism), there is now a system to get across local Adivasi news to others in the community. CGNetSwara has spread, purely by word of mouth, to Adivasis in the central Gondwana belt in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh — an expanse that Choudhary calls the ‘media dark zone’. “We are trying to create another paradigm in the term ‘development,’” he says. “This communication system could well become the ‘Google of the poor.’”

The area’s ‘Maoists’ have taken note, issuing threats to Choudhary, but he feels they are threatened by the concept of self-empowerment that CGNetSwara brings to its users. Bunkar, though, thinks the system works better in areas that are ‘Naxal free’, away from Chhattisgarh’s borders with AP and Jharkhand. He says, “Naxals gather strength from cross-border infiltration.”

CGNetSwara is now at a crossroads of sorts. So far, it has run on grants by the UN Democracy Fund and a Knight Fellowship, and is now trying to become self-sufficient by evolving into other streams using the same basic infrastructure. The central server in Bangalore has now mutated into ‘nodes’ in the field through a smart-phone-sized server called a ‘Raspberry Pi’, derived from the Python programming language of the early days of ‘fruity’ home computers such as Apple, Apricot and Tangerine. Raspberry Pi costs roughly Rs. 3,500, essentially giving you an entire basic desktop computer connected to two GSM wireless network gateways. Arjun Venkatraman of Mojolab, a design engineering firm, set up two of these servers in Bhopal, and is now looking for even cheaper alternatives to take to the field.

Then there is ‘Citizen Band’ that is now poised to take off from CGNetSwara, using the free range radio frequency, 26.9 to 27.2 MHz, which does not need any official licensing for usage. Choudhary and his team are now in Bhopal — at ‘Hacker Gram’, an unused mushroom farm owned by a team member — trying to modify cheap locally available radios to fit this bandwidth. “We are now extending our Swara system into a mobile-based voice portal,” says Choudhary, who expects to air two-minute news and views for an inexpensive subscription cost.

Another offshoot of CGNetSwara is Swasthya Swara, a health-based system running on the Swara infrastructure. It gathers local traditional healers for consultation on the mobile phone system. It is funded by non-Adivasi callers who are able to pay. Thus, a caller from Bangalore can now pay for a consultation with a herbal practitioner for, say, diabetes, and thus cross-subsidise others who cannot pay.

Any wonder, then, that CGNetSwara is fast becoming India’s new ‘jungle drums’?

**Correction: Shubhranshu Choudhary got his Knight fellowship from the International Center for Journalists, not Stanford, as stated in the original copy.**

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