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INDIA

Mobile Phone-Based News System Gives Voice to Tribals

By **Keya Acharya**

BANGALORE, India, May 5, 2010 (IPS) - The central Indian remote jungles of Chhattisgarh and the urban technology- savvy node of Bangalore are now linked by a mobile phone-based information system, a first in the world, called CG Net Swara.

CG (Chhattisgarh) Net Swara (Hindi word for 'voice') – the brainchild of freelance journalist Shubhanshu Choudhary, formerly with the British Broadcasting System, and Bill Thies, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) graduate now working at Microsoft in Bangalore – is essentially an internet-radio-cum-website system, funded by MIT, Microsoft and the U.S.- based Knight International Journalism, of which Choudhary is a Fellow.

Anyone can call the designated Bangalore number – 080 6693 2500 – listen to news on the line, as well as record his or her own report, or comment.

Once a news item is recorded, it shows up as a link on the website, which is moderated. The moderator then opens up the link, checks the content, edits and okays it, and puts it out.

As 'moderator', Choudhary goes through each report for editing and content checking, and publishes the material thereafter.

"This is an audio system where you can record your own report or comment – that's the difference that this offers," says Thies.

Choudhary, who grew up in Chhattisgarh and now lives in Delhi, says the idea spawned from a citizen journalism website, CG Net, which he started to serve as a voice for the tribal communities, India's original, and most ancient, inhabitants, living predominantly in this region. CG Net has approximately 1,500 members who are part of its discussion forum.

Chhattisgarh has a controversial history of "dealing" with its guerrilla-like anti-establishment movement called 'naxalism' or termed more recently as 'Maoists'.

The Naxal movement, rampant in the southern forested belt of Chhattisgarh, is an armed and violent guerrilla conflict born from long years of socioeconomic inequality, alienation and displacement of tribals from their lands.

In its turn, the state authorities had aided and abetted an even more violent vigilante movement, called Salwa Judum, started in 2005, to quash the Naxals.

Tribal rights groups say at least 700 villages and a population of 350,000 were brutally emptied from two districts alone in 2005-2006.

The most recent controversial government operation, Operation Greenhunt, used a slew of armed government paramilitary forces to quell this movement.

The tribal residents' overall neglect is also reflected in the lack of a single radio news bulletin in their local language, Gondi, though their population has grown to four million.

Displaced and alienated from the rest of the country, tribals have thus taken to CG Net Swara as ducks to water.

With innate talent in public speaking and presentation, ordinary citizens of the area file remarkably clear reports and narratives on news from the region, says Choudhary.

Take this example of how this 'media phone' is working. In the deep jungles of the Chhattisgarh, Prakash Korram – a tribal activist, native to the area and working with the non-governmental Ekta Parishad – is arrested by the police. The NGO says the arrest is arbitrary. Ekta Parishad co-ordinator Agnoo Sahoo calls up the Bangalore CG Swara mobile number and reports the incident. The police deny the charge. Sahoo repeats the report.

After the report is 'out' on the web, the police receive several phone calls from various parts of India and the world protesting Prakash Korram's arrest.

Faced with public pressure, the police release Korram on bail.

"This has now become 'appropriate technology' for the region," says Choudhary, explaining why, in spite of an expensive (10-20 Indian rupees or 22-44 U.S. cents) long-distance mobile phone call, the number of calls to the Bangalore number has risen exponentially in the last two months.

Choudhary runs the system with nine volunteers who train local tribals in voice modulation and narrative skills.



Two tribal women receive training in a unique cellular phone-based information system called CG Net Swara.

Credit:S.Choudhary/IPS

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"We hope that CG Net Swara creates a community of communication between tribals themselves and between them and the mainstream world," says Choudhary.

In north Chhatisgarh at Jashpur, Mamta Kajur of Adivasi Mahila Mahasangh, a tribal women's empowerment group, says CG Swara has been of tremendous help to both her and the surrounding villages.

Trained by CG Swara in February 2010, Mamta says the system has helped mobilise a rally on awareness of local issues, where a gathering of 5,000 people participated, at Kunkuri village in Jashpur .

Local mainstream media, in a continuation of the atmosphere of repression and fear in the region, either pay no attention to the condition of the tribals, or tow the government line, say Choudhary and Kajur. "People are very interested," says Mamta. "They didn't even know what was happening 50 kilometres away. Now they have access even to national news."

Both Thies and Choudhary are now working on scaling up the system to reach as many as possible, and to integrate the system into a national cellphone network.

But longevity remains challenged by the political nature of the area CG Net Swara serves, where police and administrative officials have the powers to shut down any operation perceived as "helping" the Naxal movement.

"I foresee problems ahead," says Choudhary. "Everything is susceptible to government," says Thies.

But both reiterate, in separate interviews with IPS, that the matter will not end there.

(END)

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