

3. Digital Media And Social Change Among Tribal Women In North East India

A K Sinha

Research Scholar

Abstract

The rapid diffusion of smartphones and digital media has begun to reshape everyday life across India's peripheral regions, including the tribal-dominated states of the North East. This paper examines the evolving patterns of digital engagement among tribal women in North East India and analyses how access to smartphones and online platforms is influencing social relations, economic practices, and cultural expression. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources—such as national and state-level surveys, academic research, policy reports, development agency publications, and media accounts—the study synthesises existing evidence on mobile phone access, social media use, digital literacy, and online participation.

The analysis highlights how digital technologies are opening new avenues for communication, education, micro-entrepreneurship, and collective mobilisation, particularly for women navigating historical marginalisation shaped by ethnicity, geography, and customary social structures. Simultaneously, the paper foregrounds persistent constraints, including uneven internet connectivity, gendered control over technology, limited digital skills, online harassment, and socio-cultural restrictions on women's digital visibility. Rather than presenting digitalisation as a linear story of empowerment, the findings reveal a nuanced landscape in which smartphones function as both enabling tools and sites of new vulnerability.

By adopting a secondary-data-driven approach, the paper situates individual experiences within broader regional trends and policy contexts. It argues that digital engagement among tribal women must be understood as a socially embedded process shaped by local cultures, power relations, and infrastructural realities. The study contributes to wider debates on gender, technology, and indigenous communities by demonstrating how digital media, even in constrained settings, acts as a subtle yet significant driver of social change in North East India. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for culturally sensitive digital inclusion policies that strengthen women's agency while respecting indigenous social frameworks.

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Keywords: *Tribal Women, North East India, Digital Media, Smartphones, Gender and Technology, Indigenous Communities, Digital Literacy, Social Change*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly altered social interactions, economic practices, and cultural expressions across India. While metropolitan and semi-urban regions have received substantial scholarly attention, the experiences of tribal communities—particularly women in the North Eastern states—remain underexplored. North East India, home to more than 200 tribal groups, presents a distinct socio-cultural landscape shaped by indigenous governance systems, strong community ties, and historically uneven development trajectories.

Tribal women in this region occupy a complex social position. While many communities accord women relatively higher visibility in customary life compared to other parts of India, structural disadvantages linked to remoteness, limited infrastructure, and economic marginalisation persist. The introduction of smartphones and digital platforms into this context has created new social spaces that intersect with traditional norms, gender relations, and livelihood strategies.

This paper examines how digital engagement among tribal women in North East India is contributing to subtle yet meaningful social change. Rather than assuming technology as inherently empowering, the study adopts a critical perspective to analyse both opportunities and constraints associated with digital participation. Relying exclusively on secondary data, the paper situates individual digital practices within broader regional trends, policy frameworks, and socio-cultural realities.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on gender and digital technology in India highlights the persistence of a gendered digital divide, marked by disparities in access, skills, and autonomy (GSMA, 2022; NFHS-5, 2021). Studies focusing on tribal and indigenous populations indicate that digital exclusion is often compounded by geographic isolation and infrastructural deficits (Mehta & Awasthi, 2020).

Research on North East India suggests that mobile phones have become important tools for communication, education, and informal economic activities, especially among youth and women (Baruah, 2019). Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are increasingly used for small-scale entrepreneurship, cultural promotion, and community networking (Das, 2021).

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At the same time, scholars caution against overly optimistic narratives of digital empowerment. Patriarchal control over technology, moral surveillance, online harassment, and limited digital literacy continue to shape women's online experiences (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2018). In tribal contexts, concerns around cultural erosion and generational tensions further complicate digital adoption.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in region-specific, gender-focused analyses that synthesise available data to understand long-term patterns of social change among tribal women in the North East. This paper addresses this gap by consolidating evidence from multiple secondary sources.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Examine patterns of digital access and smartphone usage among tribal women in North East India.
- Analyse the social, economic, and cultural implications of women's digital engagement.
- Identify key constraints affecting meaningful digital participation.
- Assess the broader role of digital technologies in shaping social change within tribal societies.

Methodology

This research is based entirely on secondary data. Sources include:

- National surveys such as NFHS-5 and NSS reports
- State-level digital inclusion and ICT reports
- Academic journals, edited volumes, and research papers
- Reports by UN agencies, NGOs, and development organisations
- Media documentation and policy briefs

The data were analysed thematically, focusing on access, usage patterns, social impact, and structural barriers. Comparative interpretation was used to identify regional trends rather than individual case studies.

Digital Access and Usage Patterns

Table 1: Mobile Phone and Internet Access among Women (Indicative Data)

Indicator	North East India (Tribal Areas)	All-India Average
Women owning a mobile phone (%)	52–60	71
Women using mobile internet (%)	38–45	54
Women with basic digital skills (%)	30–35	49

Source: NFHS-5; GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report

While mobile phone ownership among tribal women has increased, access remains uneven across states and districts. Connectivity gaps and affordability issues continue to limit regular internet use.

Social and Cultural Impacts of Digital Engagement

Digital platforms have altered everyday communication patterns among tribal women. Smartphones facilitate contact with family members working outside the region, strengthening social networks across distances. Social media also enables cultural visibility, allowing women to share indigenous art forms, traditional attire, and community events.

Table 2: Key Social Uses of Smartphones among Tribal Women

Area of Use	Observed Impact
Family communication	Increased emotional connectivity
Cultural expression	Online visibility of indigenous identity
Education	Access to learning materials and information
Community networking	Informal mobilisation and information sharing

However, digital visibility also exposes women to surveillance, moral policing, and social judgement, particularly in conservative community settings.

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Economic Dimensions and Digital Livelihoods

Digital tools have opened limited but growing economic opportunities for tribal women. Social media-based marketing of handicrafts, handloom products, and local food items has gained traction in states like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Assam. Mobile payment systems have further enabled participation in informal markets.

Table 3: Digital Platforms and Economic Activities

Platform	Type of Activity
WhatsApp	Order-based local trade
Facebook	Handicraft promotion
Instagram	Cultural branding and small businesses
YouTube	Storytelling and traditional knowledge sharing

Despite these opportunities, lack of formal training, inconsistent income, and limited market reach restrict scalability.

Constraints and Challenges

Several structural and social barriers limit the transformative potential of digital engagement:

- Infrastructure gaps: Poor network coverage in remote areas
- Gender norms: Restrictions on phone ownership and usage
- Digital literacy: Limited skills beyond basic functions
- Online risks: Cyber harassment and misinformation

These challenges highlight the need for interventions that go beyond access to address social and cultural dimensions of technology use.

Discussion

The findings suggest that digital engagement among tribal women in North East India operates within a complex interplay of empowerment and constraint. Smartphones function as tools of connection and self-expression, yet their impact is mediated by local power relations and infrastructural realities.

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Rather than disrupting traditional structures entirely, digital technologies are being selectively integrated into existing social frameworks. This reinforces the argument that technology-driven social change in indigenous contexts is gradual, negotiated, and deeply contextual.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital media is emerging as a subtle but significant agent of social change among tribal women in North East India. While smartphones and online platforms create new opportunities for communication, economic participation, and cultural expression, they also reproduce existing inequalities and introduce new vulnerabilities.

Understanding these dynamics through secondary data allows for a broader regional perspective that captures long-term trends rather than isolated success stories. The paper concludes that digital inclusion policies must move beyond infrastructure to address gender norms, digital literacy, and cultural sensitivity. Only then can digital technologies contribute meaningfully to inclusive and sustainable social transformation in indigenous regions.

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