

The New Age of Communication: Social Media Use among Women in the Koya Tribal Community

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Abstract

The digital and social media have been on the rise in the 21st century, yet most tribal communities in India have limited access. To enhance accessibility to digital resources, programs such as Digital India are developed, but tribal women tend to stay on the periphery. The paper examines the applications of social media in the daily lives of Koya tribal women in Gattumalla Hamlet, Telangana. The study aims at getting to know their media preferences and the utilization of social media in communication, learning and health. The study applied a qualitative research methodology where focus groups and in-depth interviews were employed. Photographs of the field research were captured. The theoretical framework of the study includes both Diffusion of Innovation and Uses and Gratification theories. The results indicate that there exists a digital divide, which is being corrected gradually. Two examples, a non-verbal girl and a young health worker, demonstrate how the digital tools assisted them in coping with barriers to education and healthcare. Analysis based on Uses and Gratification theory shows the opportunities and obstacles of digital inclusion in tribal regions.

Keywords: Social media, Digital inclusion, Tribal women, Koya community, Digital divide, Communication, Health awareness, Education access, Telangana, Qualitative research

1 Introduction

India has the largest tribal population on the globe with more than 90 million people, nearly a third of the world population belonging to one or another tribe (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 2022). Many of these "tribal" societies continue to be marginalized and are not completely incorporated into the mainstream of the nation. The Koya tribe in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Chhattisgarh is one of them. Koya are a group of people with a rich culture and a peculiar arrangement of social life (Sharma, 2024). Nevertheless, like other tribal groups, they have incomplete access to many key resources currently available in the developed world such as education, healthcare, and modern technology. This inaccessibility creates a certain distance between tribal groups and the rest of society, which is sometimes described as a glass divide. Tribal communities are left out of most digital developments, although non-tribal urban communities are catching up with the use of digital tools (Laskar, 2023).

Recent developments in the use of digital technologies and social media have led to numerous transformations in society. Such tools are now applied in education, health, governance and disaster management. As an example, digital tools can be used to collect and exchange the fast information which is needed in an emergency (Mohan & Mittal, 2020). But the technologies have struggled to reach most of the tribes in India. Due to this, communities such as Koya continue to be left outside of the digital world (Yifu & Kumar, 2022).

The concept of the media as a means of unity of the world is given by Marshall McLuhan in his theory of the global village linking people all around the globe in the global village, though they may

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be separated in time and space (McLuhan, 1964). More specifically, social media enables citizens to disseminate information immediately. It can be defined as electronic communication facilitating teamwork or bonding among individuals and firms (Spiller & Tuten, 2015). Social media can provide tribal people with an opportunity to conserve and pass on their traditional arts such as music and storytelling to a larger audience. Theoretically, it aids them in preserving their own culture in the process of interacting with the modern world. To illustrate, tribal music is now not only recordable, but it can be shared all over the world on such sites as YouTube and Instagram (Jhamb & Rehalia, 2020). This would not only safeguard cultural identity but also target new audiences.

Even though these opportunities exist, many tribal communities still have no access to digital technologies. Koya people are largely concentrated in forested and hilly areas of Telangana particularly in such districts as Bhadradi Kothagudem, Khammam and Warangal. There are also some smaller groups living in Adilabad and Karimnagar. The Government of Telangana (2022) says that Scheduled Tribes constitute 9.3 percent of the population of the state. Koya are the largest ones, totaling nearly 381,000. Nevertheless, the majority of Koya people are not on the winning side of digital development. The Koya language (also known as Koya Basha) does not have its own unique script but is typically written using other scripts like Telugu, Oriya, or Devanagari, with the Telugu script being most common due to the language's similarity to Telugu. While there is no traditional Koya script, there have been efforts to develop one (Sathya Mohan, 2018).

This is a study on Koya women in Gattumalla hamlet, Bhadradi Kothagudem district. It seeks to discover the way these women exploit digital media and whether it has altered their mode of information sharing. The research examines which sites they access, like WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Google, and other mobile applications, why they go to these sites, and whether the digital media is assisting them in functions like health and education. It also focuses on the hurdles they encountered on their way of using such technologies and how their communication habits are gradually transforming into the digital age.

2 Research objectives and questions

This research seeks to examine the use of social media and their influence on the lives of Koya women in Gattumalla hamlet of Bhadradi Kothagudem, Telangana state. The following research objectives and related questions were developed:

- i. To identify which digital media applications are used by Koya tribal women.
- ii. To examine how the communication practices of the Koya tribe are transforming with the adoption of digital media, particularly in comparison to traditional forms of communication.
- iii. To evaluate the impact of transition from traditional communication to digital communication among the Koya tribe community.

3 Literature review

In recent years, a considerable number of scholars have investigated how the tribal communities in India are utilizing digital media. The literature available indicates that some tribal populations are beginning to use digital platforms, but others continue to have many difficulties. These are inaccessibility, illiteracy, poverty, and underdeveloped infrastructure, especially the widespread lack of internet connectivity. Stephen and Pramanathan (2015) analyzed the frequency of the use of social networking sites among students belonging to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category in the region of Arunachal Pradesh. In their research, they discovered that Facebook and YouTube were being used most by these students. They had internet connection and used their computers to visit these sites on a regular basis. These tribal youths had access to technology, and when they could they actively utilized social media just like their counterparts in urban areas.

The article by Dutta (2016) is on the significance of community-led media. According to him, such platforms have the capability of providing a platform through which the tribal communities can express their stories in their own way. This can assist them in maintaining their identity and gives them a forum where they can show their needs but, according to Dutta, most tribal regions have no means of accessing the internet even if they are willing to do so. Miah (2017) discussed the transformation of the lives of tribal people brought about by social media. In his research, he realized that such sites as YouTube and Facebook can contribute to the promotion of tribal languages, cultures, and crafts. Tribal farmers and artisans can access buyers and sell their products directly through these tools, without the services of middlemen. But it was also revealed in the study that in terms of adopting digital media, the non-tribal rural communities are catching up faster than the tribal communities, resulting in a disparity in digital inclusion.

Pathlavath (2019) studied the Chenchu tribe, and the results indicated poverty and illiteracy as the reasons behind most members not having the means of using mobile phones or using the internet. On the same note, Jathavath (2020) established that media usage influenced the behavior and values of Banjara tribal youngsters. Media contents influenced the youth causing them to adopt new styles of dressing, change in language, and even change in perspectives about family and society.

Talukdar and Mete (2021) focused on tribal people in West Bengal and found that there is an increasing usage of social media with a practical purpose. Many tribal people sold agricultural products on these platforms. Nonetheless, new technology was not adopted by all people in the community. They were concerned about losing their cultural values and they were attached to traditional ways of doing things. Chattopadhyay and Mohanty (2022) considered the impact that digital media produces on tribal youth in Odisha. Their work revealed that the young people were becoming urban in thoughts and actions. This created an age gap between the young and the old generations. As young people adopted digital technology, the seniors held on to their culture and traditional lifestyle leading to cultural and communication divides within the community.

3.1 The gendered digital divide in rural India

The 'digital divide' is a multi-layered barrier, disproportionately affecting rural women in India. This divide is not merely about infrastructure but encompasses access, skills, and meaningful usage. National data reveal a stark gender gap. While India has made strides in connectivity, only about 41.75% of internet users are rural, despite constituting over 65% of the population. A critical barrier is device ownership, with reports indicating roughly 51% of rural women do not own a mobile phone. In South Asia, rural women are 41% less likely than rural men to use mobile internet (Das, 2025; Verghese & Telecom, 2025). Research highlights that access does not guarantee empowerment. Many women, particularly in rural areas, rely on male family members or local shopkeepers for basic digital tasks like booking LPG (liquefied propane gas) cylinders or checking subsidies, creating a cycle of dependence and digital invisibility. Barriers include affordability, safety concerns, low digital literacy, and social norms that restrict autonomy and create a fear of doing something wrong (Fatima, 2025; Verghese & Telecom, 2025).

3.2 Tribal women and digital (dis)empowerment: Evidence from regional studies

Research on tribal communities in other Indian states offers critical insights into the intersection of indigeneity, gender, and technology. Previous research found that many tribal women are digitally disempowered with no internet/social media access. The most marginalized sub-communities (Paniya, Adiya) were the worst affected, hindering their social and economic advancement (Arya & Pradeep Kumar, 2025). A quasi-experimental study showed that a culturally tailored Digital Literacy Training Program (DLTP) significantly improved skills, access to ICT devices, and knowledge of government schemes among tribal adolescent girls. This demonstrates a model for effective intervention (Gogoi et al., 2025).

3.3 Contextual factors for Telangana's tribal communities

As with findings in Kerala and Jharkhand (Gogoi et al., 2025), tribal women in Telangana likely face compounded barriers: geographical remoteness, linguistic diversity (e.g., Gorboli dialect), lower literacy rates, and patriarchal norms within communities. These factors intensify the digital disparities documented at the national level (Arya & Pradeep Kumar, 2025).

Critical gaps for Telangana-specific research:

1. *Empirical data:* A complete lack of primary, peer-reviewed studies focusing on the digital media practices, access patterns, and communication needs of tribal women in Telangana.
2. *Impact analysis:* No research assesses how digital media influences specific outcomes for these women, such as access to healthcare, education, livelihood opportunities, or participation in local governance.
3. *Content and platform use:* No analysis has been done on what digital content is consumed/created, which platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, YouTube) are used, and for what purposes (social, informational, economic).

To sum up the literature, there is evidence that digital media is gradually being accessed by individual tribal communities in India. Yet access and use are highly uneven. Poverty, low literacy levels, and ineffective infrastructure among tribal groups still are handicaps that some of these communities must deal with. Wherever they can be used, digital tools can provide such advantages as improved education, enhanced healthcare information, and new economic opportunities. However, they are also accompanied by issues such as cultural transformation and generational gaps. The present research is an extension of these concepts, targeting Koya tribal women in Telangana. It aims at examining the embracing of social media in their day-to-day lives particularly in terms of communication, education, and health matters.

4 Theoretical frameworks

4.1 Diffusion of Innovation theory

The Diffusion of Innovations theory describes how a new idea or product spreads through a social system using five stages: Knowledge, Persuasion, Decision, Implementation, and Confirmation. Additionally, adopters of an innovation are categorized into five adopter types: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards (Rogers, 1983). Diffusion of Innovation theory can be applied to evaluate how users and non-users in the Koya tribe are willing to adopt or ignore smartphones and their applications.

4.2 Uses and Gratification theory

Uses and Gratification theory discusses the effects of the media on people. It explains how people use the media for their own needs and get satisfied when their needs are fulfilled. The theory also argues what people do with media rather than what media does to people. Needs are categorized into: Cognitive needs, Affective needs, Personal integrative needs, Social integrative needs, and Tension-free needs (Almakaty, 2025). The Uses and Gratification theory could be compared and analyzed among smartphone users based on the needs that they satisfy by using smartphones and their applications.

5 Methods

This paper uses a qualitative research design with secondary data descriptive analysis. Purposive sampling was utilized in selecting the participants who are, in this case, women of the Koya community in Gattumalla hamlet. Fifteen Koya women aged from 12 years to 45 years were chosen for closer study. Among these

women, six use smartphones regularly and the other nine had no experience with or access to smartphones. The latter group represents the Laggards of Innovation Theory. The involvement of smartphone users and non-user groups gave an opportunity to compare the effects of digital media. Data collection combined in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These approaches produced qualitative data on the communication behaviors of the women, their experience with social media, and the attitudes they hold about digital technology. Interviews and discussions were carried out in the local language of the respondents (with the help of a translator in some cases) to ensure the transparency of the discussion and to make the interlocutor feel more comfortable. Observational notes and pictorial documentation (photos of the daily life of the community and the availability of media devices, when available) were also collected, as a complement to the verbal data, to provide a visual context, i.e., availability of any digital infrastructure, and usage of old forms of communication. Figures 1 to 3 give a general impression of conditions in the hamlet under study.



Figure 1: A bulb powered by solar energy in the hamlet at Kothagudem.

Secondary data collection was done by literature review, reading, reports and official statistics on scheduled tribes (Government of Telangana, 2022). These sources were used to gather information on the demography and the background of the Koya tribe and to gain a global overview of digital inclusion programs. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. The entries of interview transcripts along with field notes were coded to identify the major themes and patterns regarding ease of access, the level to which digital media has been adopted, kinds of social media that are being used, and shifts in communication behavior. Based on the methods of iterative reading and coding, the key themes that were identified include: (a) Media accessibility, (b) digital media accessibility, (c) usage of the application on social media and (d) communication practices among the Koya women. These motifs organize the description of findings. Following the Results and Discussion part of the paper, there are also detailed case studies, which provide context of the themes. The two case studies of Madakam Soni and Paddam Adavi were selected because they represent how individual tribal women have used digital media to prevail over troubles in health care and education respectively.



Figure 2: The traditional mode of cooking in the hamlet at Kothagudem.



Figure 3: The exterior look of hamlets indicates the infrastructure of the Koya community, shown here during the monsoon season.

Before undertaking data collection, all respondents gave informed consent after being assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The research participants were a sensitive group of people; thus, much care was taken to carry out the research in a way that was culturally sensitive and respected local norms. The objectives of the study were also presented to community leaders, and their permission was secured before approaching the women participants. Also, the emergence of media literacy and the usage of smartphones to satisfy their needs was explained to the tribals.

6 Results and discussion

The results of the study are structured according to the main themes which were revealed in the thematic analysis. They are the general trends of media and digital accessibility in the community, the particular social media platforms that persons use, and the changing communication between Koya women. Moreover, there are two detailed case studies offered to reveal the impact of digital media adoption on personal cases connected to healthcare and education.

6.1 *Media accessibility*

Traditional mass media reach of the Koya community is very limited. Most of the inhabitants do not read newspapers and do not watch television. The main reason is the unavailability or inconvenience of the media in their hamlet. Local newspapers do not exist in the Koya language (which, in fact, lacks a written script), and the local area cannot be reliably reached by television signal or even radio. Koya people usually use sources of folk media and verbal communication for information and entertainment. The cultural forms that are in use are the traditional ones (folk songs, storytelling, and dance dramas), and they are used to entertain as well communicate within the tribe. Word of mouth has been the most powerful news and information channel in day-to-day life. This information disseminates through community meetings and one-on-one verbal discussions as there is almost no penetration of both print and broadcast media in Gattumalla. Overall, traditional media outlets are practically unavailable, and this increases the reliance of the people on face-to-face communication and aboriginal education.

6.2 *Digital media accessibility*

Digital technology in the hamlet is at an infant stage and unequal. In this community, less than a quarter of the Koya population has any form of smartphone. As a rough estimate, women amount to about half of the smartphone users. There are a few households with basic phones that can be used to call and text, but not the internet-enabled ones that can be used to access social media. Most of the tribal inhabitants cannot afford smartphones, or else they do not find them very useful because of low digital literacy. Also, connectivity infrastructure for people who have a device is spotty, and internet data plans (by players such as Jio) are out of financial reach of many. Thus, even though the community has access to digital media, it is restricted to a very small number. Most Koya women do not possess their own gadget or sometimes are forced to borrow one from a relative or friend. This leads to a strong digital divide: a few people start to bridge the digital divide, but the number of people who are not connected is huge. In the context of tribal communities in India, diffusion is influenced by kinship networks, traditional leadership structures, cultural beliefs, and geographic isolation (Singh, 1992). Based on the Diffusion of Innovation theory and research analysis during this study, the few tribals who are using smartphones are late adopters and the ones who don't want to use are the laggards due to their economic status, infrastructure, lack of education, and strong belief in their cultural and traditional practices.

6.3 *Social media application use*

The Koya women are active users of social media even though there are few smartphone owners in the community. The most popular application is WhatsApp. It is commonly the initial program acquired due

to the simplicity with which it can be used as well as because it assists a lot in keeping the family close. Most women use WhatsApp daily to talk to their relatives, especially those who live in other districts or in Chhattisgarh. This saves the high cost of travel. YouTube is also used by some women to watch videos especially in regional languages e.g., songs and religious videos. Some of the women use Instagram to see or post pictures and adorable videos, and Google to support their health tips, farming information or news. Facebook is less prevalent because it involves further reading and writing skills. There are also younger women who are fond of mobile games in general. The women tend to use their smartphones in a comparable way to urban users, but still have restricted internet connection and digital literacy. Those using social media applications through smartphones clearly satisfied all the needs of Uses and Gratification theory: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal-integrative needs, social-integrative needs, and tension-free needs.

6.4 *Communication practices among the Koya women*

One of the highlights of the research is the accommodation process that Koya women use to communicate differently in the context of social media. The Koya language, which belongs to the Dravidian language family (Wikipedia, 2025), is written in Telugu, Odisha, Devanagari and Latin, but Koya tribal women tend to use Telugu or Hindi online, and sometimes English of a basic level, those at least who had a school education. In such applications as WhatsApp, most women provide voice messages or audio files because it is not always easy to write because of low levels of literacy. The primary use of communication through the internet is to stay in contact with relatives who live some distance away. This, at least, is the way the internet is used in Chhattisgarh. Their presence in person would be time-consuming and costly, but via WhatsApp, it takes only a few minutes and is economical. Nonetheless, in everyday village life, the women are fond of person-to-person discussions and group meetings. They also think face to face communication is superior during important occasions, cultural functions, and solving disputes. Digital communication is therefore useful but not a substitute to their traditional way of doing things. Figures 4 and 5 depict the Koya women.



Figure 4: The researcher collecting data among the health workers.



Figure 5: Health workers using mobile phone and digital media applications to save lives with virtual communication. They are equipped with the bare minimum network range and mobile data facilities.

7 Case studies

7.1 Case study 1: Madakam Soni – digital media for healthcare volunteer

A case study of a local health worker who is fondly known as Madakam Soni, a 22-year-old woman in Gattumalla hamlet, is one of the brightest examples of the impact of social media in the community. The case study of Soni illustrates how digital tools can enhance health outcomes in a remote tribal area.

- **Context and Challenge:** The Koya tribe inhabiting this area is severely challenged by the lack of healthcare because the region is remote with little infrastructure. The closest government health facility is too far away and there is lack of good transport. Previously, tragedies could have been averted in many medical situations if they had been addressed in time, which was however often not the case. Information exchange on health requirements was carried out by runners or by messages conveyed by individuals traveling beyond the hamlet. This was not only time-consuming but also often irking to the messenger. These gaps were also witnessed in detail by Soni, a community health worker with basic training who has observed aggravated cases of maternal and infant deaths and complications of untreated illnesses or injuries.
- **Digital Media Intervention:** Soni's trip into the digital media started when one of the visiting physicians taught her how to utilize a smartphone to connect with the medical staff. Once aware of this possibility, she bought a smartphone and learned to work with applications such as WhatsApp on her own. She took the initiative and formed a WhatsApp group with local health volunteers, the ambulance driver closest to her and a doctor at a district hospital, and some educated young people in the community. This organization became a valuable emergency network to the hamlet. Should there be accidents, high fever, complications during childbirth, or any form of emergency in general, Soni or one of them would post the alarm in the group. The members could act swiftly by organizing the transport or to get emergency medical consultations. The digital system enabled prompt interventions and cut down significantly the response gap. This saved several lives that would have been lost without the ability to communicate fast. Even though Madakam Soni attended school only to tenth grade, she was well trained out of interest to be the health worker and to help people. She had saved the lives of at least 30 people during multiple emergencies by communicating from the tribal area to the town hospitals.
- **Broader Community Impact:** There are wider benefits of Soni's WhatsApp group beyond emergencies. It fostered a team spirit between health workers and the people in the community. Health

volunteers who had originally worked individually now consider themselves as members of a supportive network. They also use the group to circulate first aid information, information about disease prevention, and information about health camps. The WhatsApp group has become a digital medical facility in the community. It has enhanced attendance at vaccinations and prenatal checks as reminders are sent as messages. The simple mobile app that Soni used demonstrates that gaps in health services can be covered even with the help of low-tech digital tools. Without access to quality medical resources, digital communication ensures that people are connected to those who can provide support and professional advice on time.

- **Self-empowerment:** Personal empowerment is related not only to her work with health care related to digital media only; there was also personal empowerment and skill building by Madakam Soni. In a bid to be self-reliant financially, she began using YouTube to learn how to tailor, because this is not a common skill taught in her village. She observed Telugu stitching and tutorial videos in embroidery and practiced them. She later perfected her skills and started sewing clothes for the local people. This was a service to the people as well as an income. This is the kind of opportunity that digital media presents to empower individuals living in remote marginalized communities. The potential of digital literacy has been underscored by Soni practicing community healthcare with the use of her smartphone and using it in her personal education. Her experience testifies to the fact that these tools can help tribal women to find self-sustainability and skill development. Apart from using it for intellectual advancement and service to the community, Madakam Soni gave all her interest to tailoring and stitching.

Outcomes

The example of Madakam Soni brings out some of the major ways in which digital media can integrate health care communication in a tribal community:

- **Improved emergency response:** Response time has been decreased dramatically during medical emergencies and thus the outcome of patients is better. Lives have been saved where delays would have been fatal. Based on the reflection of Uses and Gratification theory, Madakam Soni was able to fulfil her “affective needs” through the improved emergency response.
- **Community empowerment through collaboration:** The initiative by Soni enabled the community members to solve their health crisis themselves, increased their ability to respond to such crises at the local level, and instilled a culture of mutual aid and dialogue in the community. Based on the reflection of Uses and Gratification theory, Madakam Soni was able to fulfil her “social integrative needs” through community empowerment and collaboration.
- **Skill development and economic opportunity:** One way in which the tribal women can be empowered by digital media is by using it to learn a skill, as demonstrated by Soni when she uses YouTube tutorials to learn how to tailor. Based on the reflection of Uses and Gratification theory, Madakam Soni was able to improve her “cognitive needs” by developing her skills and finding economic opportunities.
- **Bridging infrastructure gaps:** To some degree, the use of digital communication has filled in the gap in village-based health infrastructure, bridging a gap between the village and outside support. The model developed by Soni can be replicated in other underprivileged regions to overcome issues of distance and inefficient infrastructure. Based on the reflection of Uses and Gratification theory, Madakam Soni was able to fulfil both personal integrative needs, cognitive needs, and tension-free needs.

This case study reaffirms the fact that social change in a disadvantaged community can be brought about with basic digital equipment and a committed individual. The story of Madakam Soni demonstrates how social media and mobile technology have great potential to enhance health services and empower the community members at the grassroots level, especially by using digital media and social media applications like Google, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram.

7.2 Case study 2: Paddam Adavi – digital media as an educational and communication tool

The second case study addresses Paddam Adavi, a 15-year-old girl belonging to the Koya community, whose experience shows how digital media is helping people living in tribal regions deal with issues of education and communicating with individuals with disabilities.

- **Context and challenge:** Paddam Adavi was born with the disability of being non-verbal (mute) and has struggled greatly in the regular school system. In earlier times she could not speak, which made it hard to engage her in a conventional classroom because the teachers had not undergone any training on alternative communication strategies, and peer group members occasionally faced challenges in integrating her into their group activities. The 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic led to the shutdown of schools and made many schools adopt online learning platforms. It was in this period that the parents of Paddam acknowledged that she was not keeping up well with her remote studies given the few resources that they could provide, so they went ahead to buy her a smartphone. For Paddam this smartphone, which was supposed to serve only to facilitate simple communication and reception of government announcements, became an essential learning tool. Based on the reflection of Uses and Gratification theory, Paddam's preference for gaining context and facing various challenges satisfied her cognitive needs.
- **Educational use of digital media:** Smartphone and sluggish internet connection enabled Paddam to find YouTube was a good tool in the learning process. She started to watch videos that teach about her school subjects, mostly in Telugu. These videos provided answers to issues of mathematics, science and social studies, using easy words and pictures. This way of learning was very effective to her because it allowed her to learn without speaking. She was able to freeze, rewind, watch the videos again, jot down some notes, and compare with her textbooks. She had control over her learning because she was able to learn at her own pace. She also utilized the comment areas to read other learners' questions and the answers, thus got to learn from others' opinions. Paddam also took advantage of Google sometimes to check the definition or translation of terms she did not understand. Gradually, this self-directed multimedia method worked out to be explicit academic enhancement. Her educators found that she was supplying more competent written work and more profound proficiency in the subject matter, and her grades have been increasing after she began using digital media. Although she had not really been comfortable asking questions before, now she could access anything that she required, and she was willing to learn from the internet through digital learning platforms like YouTube. In the jargon of Uses and Gratification theory, Paddam's preference for consuming education through the digital media satisfied her cognitive needs.
- **Communication and social inclusion:** The smartphone allowed Paddam to overcome the social isolation brought about by her non-verbal condition. She started to communicate with her friends and relatives via WhatsApp and Facebook. She wrote in Telugu script on WhatsApp, or "talked" using emojis and photos. At other times, she posted recordings by other people on voice. She joined pages that deal with tribal culture and disability rights on Facebook through the assistance of a worker of an NGO. Unlike face-to-face communication, the social media provided her with a platform to express herself without much fear. Typing was her voice, and she was able to speak in her own way and at her own comfort. The people of her age group did not have an easy time discussing their issues face to face, but they could comfortably talk to her over the internet. In the COVID-19 pandemic, she even formed a WhatsApp group of schoolmates in which she shared tips on studying and gave each other motivation. Paddam received support in her social circle because of such interactions, which made her feel more included and connected. According to Uses and Gratification theory, Paddam's use of digital media for communication and social inclusion satisfied her social-integrative needs.
- **Preference for digital communication:** Paddam prefers digital communication rather than face to face to express herself. The fact that she cannot speak is not a hindrance in the virtual world. She

takes the time to put her thoughts on paper in a coherent way to make herself understood. On the contrary, face-to-face communication frequently left her excluded, or frustrated, even when others made their best efforts. Her experience demonstrates the necessity of technology to individuals with certain disabilities. Paddam had the opportunity to engage in learning and social life with the help of digital technology in the form of a smartphone. It enabled her to interact and negotiate with other people in a more even-handed way. This underscores the point that digital media may be viewed as an effective inclusion tool. Even the simplest smartphone with access to internet would go a long way to improve the lives of many individuals in the tribal regions where special education or assistive tools do not form a major part of life. Paddam's experiences demonstrate that when equipped with the right gadgets, people can use them to bypass obstacles and connect to the world. Based on Uses and Gratification theory, Paddam's preference for digital communication satisfied her tension-free needs.

8 Conclusion

This paper reveals how digital media can assist a tribal community in leading better lives, using the cases of Madakam Soni and Paddam Adavi. Soni has been able to enhance her work on emergency health communication in her village through WhatsApp, whereas Paddam, who is a non-speaking girl, has managed to use YouTube and social media to facilitate her education and social communication. These examples demonstrate that digital tools can benefit health, learning, and inclusion. Nevertheless, the majority of Koya society is still not able to use digital media. Many families cannot afford smartphones or internet services. The digital divide is the result of poor infrastructure, low educational attainments, and lack of familiarity with technology, in line with Rogers' levels of diffusion theory. Consequently, very few tribal women have taken to digital platforms, most of them to communicate and learn essential skills. Traditional forms of communication, such as oral storytelling and direct contact meetings, continue to play critical roles in everyday life.

Nonetheless, there are minor shifts. The digital tools are being explored by some young people and local leaders. This indicates that with appropriate assistance like affordable internet, training on digital platforms, and local language awareness, even tribal communities can gain much by using digital media. These online media can enhance access to education, healthcare and facilities without ignoring the culture and identity of tribes. Digital inclusion can lead to positive changes, provided it is used while keeping in mind the needs of the community. The researcher analysed the changing patterns of communication in the Koya tribal areas, from folk media communication to digital media communication, among only a limited number of Koya tribals at Ghattumalla hamlet. The Koya tribals use mainly WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. They mainly use WhatsApp for communication, YouTube to watch films and learn new things, and Instagram to get information. They prefer Social Media Communication or Virtual Communication to communicate with their friends who live in Chhattisgarh and learn new things despite the language barrier. Yet they still prefer their traditional folk media communication over digital media communication in daily life.

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