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Negotiating Structural Absences: Voices of Indigenous Subalterns of Eastern India

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ABSTRACT
Historically, indigenous people have been struggling with the issues of material and communicative absences and their voices systematically erased from discursive spaces. Critical-cultural frameworks such as the culture-centered approach (CCA) argue that reflexive engagements with subaltern communities by listening to their narratives are instrumental in interrogating structural absences. By mindfully attending to the emerging contextual narratives, this CCA study examines how indigenous villagers of eastern-India negotiate and exert agency with situated structural absences in their day-to-day existence. This research seeks to explore as well as extend our understanding of structural marginalization and its negotiations in the realm of subaltern agency.

Increasingly, the academic domains of culture and communication emphasize listening to underserved voices in order to foreground the narratives of subalterns in the spaces of decision-making (Dutta, 2011; Sorrells, 2013). Such communicative engagements of scholars are meaningful in the contexts where marginalized voices and discourses are systematically ignored by dominant forces to fulfil hegemonic agendas (Guha, 1981; Spivak, 1999). Historically these forces portrayed indigenous communities as agency-less as well as objects of control and reform (Beverley, 2001; Harding, 1998). Consequently the hegemon strategically delegitimized subaltern issues and voices to maintain the status quo (Dutta, 2015b; Shome & Hedge, 2002). To address the issues of dominant moves and conditions of marginalization, critical communication scholars are more and more arguing in favour of foregrounding the voices, agencies, and realities of the subalterns in discursive spaces.

The critical paradigm of intercultural communication recognizes that “culture cannot be abstracted from structures of power” (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2001, p. 226), and to understand power and contextual inequalities we need to interrogate historical, social, political, and contextual realities (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). A critical cultural approach argues that engaged listening and dialogue with marginalized communities can create avenues to bring about social justice and equity (Dutta, 2014; Hammond, Anderson, & Cissna, 2003; Farmer, 2003; Millen, Irwin, & Kim, 2000). One of the key critical-communicative frameworks is the culture-centered approach (CCA) which
U. Dutta conceptualizes structure as a material-reality shaped by hegemonic policies and agendas. Structure privileges dominant sections of the society while marginalizing the underserved by restricting their access to economic and material resources (Dutta, 2011). Thus, structural absences are constituted by the economic and/or material as well as communicative shortages as negotiated by the subalterns. As the structural absences are deeply intertwined with discursive erasures and voicelessness, listening to the narratives and agentic potentials of subalterns offers an entry point for interrogating social inequities and taken for granted dominant constructions (Dutta, 2011).

International indices suggest that a vast percentage of the underserved people of the developing countries of the global south are suffering from poverty, hunger, and underdevelopment. Hall and Patrinos (2012) argued that, although the political visibility of the indigenous people of developing countries has increased in recent years, their poverty level and other structural absences are still a matter of concern. India, with one third of the world’s poor (Olinto, Beegle, Sobrado, & Uematsu, 2013), is no exception. As per the UNDP Human Poverty Index, indigenous communities located in the central indigenous belt of India and nearby regions, where this research was conducted, ranked in the bottom 25 globally (United Nations, 2009). Again, the Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme, 2013) showed that 52.7% (i.e., more than 600 million) people in India, including a large number of indigenous people, are facing multidimensional poverty (a measure of both the number and the intensity of overlapping human deprivations in health, education and standard of living).

This research project examines the realities and implications of the material and communicative absences as well as agency of subaltern population in the context of their marginalization. Specifically, guided by the CCA principles, the project seeks to understand the conditions of poverty, situated resource-scarcity, socio-communicative inequalities, and agentic-potentials as negotiated and articulated by the indigenous people of eastern India. Ethnographic field research was conducted from May 2010 to August 2014 in two geographical regions; i.e., Purulia (forest region) and Buxa Duar (Himalayan region) of West Bengal, India.

The processes of culture-centered listening, in this research, sought to enable the indigenous people of the Himalayan and the forest regions to articulate their pains and struggles. Perhaps more important, such engagements help in understanding how they delineate as well as thrive to overcome situated social inequalities and critical infrastructural issues within the existing scopes and availabilities of cultural and structural resources. Thus, this CCA research, on one hand, documented of the voices and agencies of the marginalized to question the totalizing consequences of the top-down modernist discourses. On the other hand, the study seeks to contribute to shifting the landscape of identifying and describing issues and conditions of marginalization in the realm of subaltern discourses and agencies.

The CCA, Dialogic Process, and Subalternity

Halualani et al. (2009) noted that, so far, the role of structural forces and their interplay with social groups “in constituting, constraining, and enabling particular forms of cultural practices and communication is completely unrecognized” in intercultural scholarship. To address the gap, critical intercultural communication scholars seek to “frame intercultural studies as structural-cultural projects” (Halualani et al., 2009, p. 25), where culture is “not just a variable, nor
benignly socially constructed but a site of struggle where various communication meanings are constructed” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 8). Acknowledging the de-legitimization of subaltern voices by dominant power structures, critical communication scholars interrogate the structural and systematic modes of erasing narratives of the subalterns from the discursive spaces. The CCA (Dutta, 2008, 2011), a critical communicative framework, culturally and communicatively studies socio-political inequities, and seeks to foreground local knowledge and agencies to create entry points for hearing and representing subaltern voices.

Structure, culture and agency are the three key theoretical constructs of CCA. Structures refer to the policies and institutional frameworks that privilege certain section of community by organizing rules, and subsequently constrain, and control access to resources for the others (Dutta, 2008). Culture is a dynamic, communicative process of meaning making and interpretation. Interacting with structures and its social, economic, political parameters, culture constitutes and shapes communicative behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, values of members from the community. The term “agency” denotes the capacity of human beings to engage and negotiate with structures, and their ability to create discursive opening and seeking social change through interpretation and re-interpretation of culturally produced meanings (Dutta, 2008). This approach also puts emphasis on the concept of “context”, which refers to local environments and surroundings where people enact their agency materially, and symbolically.

Theoretically, the CCA is grounded in the frameworks of subaltern studies and post-colonial studies. Subaltern studies perspectives questioned the deterministic orthodoxy of classical Marxism (Chaturvedi, 2007) and sought to go beyond the realm of class and pure-economism in understanding the realities of the subalterns (Chatterjee, 1989). Subaltern studies theories emphasized the cultural aspect of subalternity (Chakraborty, 2000), as well as questioned and ruptured the hegemonic construction of subalterns as devoid of agency (Spivak, 1999). The scholarship conceptualized subalterns as the central force of social transformative efforts and the “primary organization principle for political mobilization” (Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 15). Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, questioned the West-centric depiction of subalterns as primitive, irrational or inferior (Harding, 1998). The postcolonial lens essentially challenged the emergence of the “others” as a subject of study and inquired how the “others” were measured and evaluated in the dominant practices of knowledge production (Beverley, 2001). Postcolonial approaches communicatively engaged with the marginalized, whose voices were historically erased, to interrogate the dominant moves and agendas that reified social inequalities (Shome & Hedge, 2002).

Through reflexive listening and engaging with situated narratives of the subalterns, the CCA seeks to break the deep-rooted silences at the margins, and creates possibilities for bringing forth subaltern realities. As Dutta (2015a) noted, “reflexivity as a key tenet of listening is also vigilant of the intent that resides with the researcher and her or his interactions”, as well as a listening approach for “participating simultaneously in solidarity as the self is understood as a site of meaning making” (p. 77). According to the CCA, such engagements essentially challenge the dominant discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions about empowering the underserved. CCA further argues, dialogic articulations from the margins on one hand demonstrate the agency of the subalterns and on the other hand, foreground alternate perspectives and rationalities based on their lived experiences. Mitra (2015) opined that agentic praxis of the marginalized people question the hegemonic structures “through collectively enacted cultural practices on the ground” (p. 1811). Such involvements lead
the CCA scholarship to address structural absences and inequities as well as to open up avenues for emancipation (Dutta, 2011). This research is based on the premise that “the key role of listening is to challenge the status quo, and along with dialogue, serves as the foundations of social change” and offers “an entry point to transformations of oppressive conditions” (Dutta, 2014, p. 69).

**Context**

While more than 370 million diverse indigenous people live on this globe (United Nations, 2009), more than 90% of the population are from the global south. Many of the indigenous people are economically poor; consequently they have limited access to structural resources and discursive spaces, which essentially delegitimized their voices and agentic expressions. Smith (1999) showed that survival remains their primary challenge. Owing to hegemonic moves, indigenous people across the global south are facing oppression and disenfranchisement, e.g., in Indonesia, Philippines, Laos and Botswana industrial projects (primarily mining) pollute the indigenous environment. In China (inner Mongolian region), Bangladesh (Chittagong region), Nepal and Kenya rich businessmen and/or government agencies grabbed indigenous lands and natural resources (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2013; International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2016). While facing such challenges, many indigenous groups exercised their collective agencies to fight against dominant agendas and actions; for example, in the Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala, (Holden, Nadeau, & Jacobson, 2011) and in Niyamgiri (India) (Kumar, 2014) local indigenous people fought against aggressions of mining companies. Likewise, in Cambodia, Fiji, and Paraguay some indigenous communities demonstrated that they could manage their own community matters (Bourdier, 2008). More recently, in Bangladesh and India, indigenous people are gradually participating in social media spaces to share their day-to-day realities (Dutta, 2016).

Historically, European colonizers ruled various parts of the global south, including India, for more than two centuries. During the colonial period, the British colonizers systematically ignored Indian subaltern-issues and restricted access of the subalterns to structural resources (Guha, 1988). Moreover, the dominant discourses such as colonial and mainstream (primarily brahminical/upper-caste) depictions portrayed indigenous identities as demons (Ashura), untouchables (Shudra), and “born-criminals” (Danda, 2002); in contemporary India, indigenous people are considered as the members of the lowest socio-economic strata. As per the 2011 census report, more than 104 million indigenous people live in India; which is 8.6% of the total population of the nation (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2012). Owing to prolonged and systematic structural negligence and discursive delegitimization, the socio-political situation of indigenous subalterns is vulnerable and they struggle to meet their basic minimum needs. The particular situation of the indigenous in the central indigenous belt and surrounding region (where this research was conducted) is considerably worrisome, in comparison to the North-east tribal communities, where the indigenous presence is more prominent both numerically and socio-politically.

Indigenous people of West Bengal (located in the eastern part of India) at-large are experiencing material and communicative absences, primarily from issues like hunger, poverty, illiteracy, joblessness, and discriminations. The indigenous population of the Bengal is predominantly rural (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2008); more than
three-fourths of the districts of West Bengal are declared as “backward” in terms of indigenous development, by the central government. According to the annual report (2016–2017) of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, more than 50% of the indigenous populations in West Bengal is living below poverty line; for instance, the average income of the indigenous villagers of the forest and Himalayan regions (studied in this research) are less than 0.33 USD per capita per day. The report also talked about the severe shortfall of health infrastructure and resources in the indigenous spaces of rural India; further, the twelfth 5-year plan (Government of India) document noted, “they (indigenous people) have limited access to critical infrastructure facilities such as roads, communication, health, education, electricity, drinking water and so on. This widens the gap between the quality of their life and the people in the country” (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2013, p. 230). This provides a rationale for conducting research (and foregrounding agencies and voice of the communities) in these particular areas.

Purulia (a district in forest region) is located in the western part of the state; for this project, the author studied Santuri block of Purulia where the Santhal and Mahli indigenous tribes live. It is a drought prone zone; so, water scarcity is a challenge especially in the summer. The people of those villages mainly communicate in Santali and Bengali languages. Most of the villagers are unskilled workers; apart from agricultural jobs, they work in coal-mines (mostly in illegal mines), stone-crusher units and local shops.

Buxa Duar of the Duars region of the eastern Himalaya is the second research-site. Dukpa, the main indigenous tribe of the zone, along with the Yumlu and Kagate tribes live in this hilly region where slides and soil erosion are the primary challenges. People usually travel by foot between mountainous villages as no other transportation facilities are available. Villagers have to travel at least 40–50 km to access basic public services like hospitals and banks. They frequently cross national and international borders (more specifically, Indo-Bhutan border) to work and earn a living; mostly they work as unskilled labourers.

Method

Data Collection

The project began after the institutional review board (IRB) of the author’s university approved the research-plan. Between May 2010 and August 2014, embracing the principles of CCA, the researcher conducted the study in the difficult-to-access geographical terrains of Santuri block of Purulia district (forest region) and Buxa-Duar area of Jalpaiguri district (Himalayan region) of West Bengal. The author started visiting the villages in 2010 to make contacts and to build rapport with the members of these indigenous communities. In this process, he introduced himself honestly (Jones, 1961) and also made multiple visits in these remote regions. Accessing these communities, both physically and linguistically, was somewhat challenging. For instance, to reach the Himalayan villages, the author trekked for several hours in the mountainous region, and also learnt local dialects (and vocabulary) to create openings and communicative possibilities. It should be noted that villagers’ communicative engagements with the researcher seemed to present moments of dilemma for them. On one hand, they seemed interested in sharing their narratives, and on the other hand, primarily because of past experience of abuse, they were reticent to openly communicate with an outsider. It soon became apparent that the villagers looked curious when noticing that a community member was conversing with a community-outsider (the researcher),
and shared that they preferred to talk with the researcher in a group situation. In reality, in both regions, as soon as the interview process started, the villagers gradually joined the interview session primarily out of curiosity. Then, once they felt comfortable, they started taking part in the focus-group interviews.

After a few visits, when initial rapport was established, permission was sought from the village-heads for conducting research work, by explaining to them the significance and rationale of the research. The village-heads and senior community-members then took the initiative in organizing the interview sessions as well as in helping the author to initiate the interaction process with the villagers. After establishing initial acquaintances, research-participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique. Based on CCA and its methodological framework, the protocols of the in-depth interviews were co-constructed through reflexive engagement with the community members. The participants and the author collectively reviewed the interview questions to ensure the interview protocol was culturally appropriate (Dutta, 2008). Examples of interview questions include: What does “well-being” mean to you? What are the key issues you face in your day-to-day life? How do you negotiate with those issues? The time and venue of the in-depth interviews were chosen as per the convenience of the participants; e.g., interviews were held in their residence, work sites, and places where they socialize.

Interviews began with discussions of locally situated issues; followed by probing questions that built on the topics of the conditions and consequences of marginalization and socio-political injustices and their negotiations and agentic potentials to overcome those issues. CCA methodology is guided by the ethical foundations of critical ethnography (Conquergood, 1982). While CCA seeks to engage with discursive processes and politics of power inequity (Alcoff, 1991–1992), the approach does not claim to represent the subalterns. Being aware that the dialogic spaces are constantly erased by the hegemonic acts and structural processes, the author attempted to reflexively engage with the villagers and to meaningfully listen to their narratives. Such engaged interactions also prompted the author to question some of his taken for granted presumptions, positionality and ethnocentrism as well as provided him a way to iteratively and organically refine his research engagement in these discursive spaces. Dutta (2011) noted that reflexivity not only prepares researchers to become authentically committed to marginalized communities, but also facilitates co-construction and legitimization of local narratives. In reflexive listening, the author embraced the principles of care and respect, which he considered a first step towards working in solidarity with the villagers.

For this research, 20 focus groups (10 focus groups in each region) and two in-depth individual interviews were conducted, totalling 165 people. 116 male and 49 female indigenous villagers (or the members of Scheduled Tribe communities) participated in the semi-structured interviewing processes. In case of two individual interviews, the interviewees chose to visit the interviewer’s room, as they could not participate in the village-level interview sessions for personal reasons (e.g., doctor’s appointment, local travel). The durations of the in-depth interviews and focus group sessions ranged from approximately 45–75 min. They were conducted by the author in Bengali and Hindi languages and their dialects, when necessary, and were audio-recorded. Then, the audio-files of the interviews were translated and transcribed from Bengali and Hindi and dialects to English. While transcribing, the author oftentimes faced difficulties in translating local proverbs and colloquial expressions. In order to ensure the authenticity of the translation, local people and scholars were consulted.
during the translation process and in addition, the transcriptions of the interviews were also examined by another academic who is well-conversant in Bengali, Hindi and English languages (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As per the IRB provision, the author took oral informed consents (dually recorded) before initiation of each interview. After translation and transcription, the interview audio-files were destroyed. Conforming to the IRB rules, pseudonyms were used for all the research participants, so that responses could not be traced back to any indigenous interviewees.

**Data Analysis**

Concomitant with a culture-centered research approach, the grounded theory method and the constant comparison technique were followed for the data analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparison technique was useful in identifying meaningful themes and concepts emerging from the articulations of the subalterns. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were diligently employed to build meaningful understanding of the contextual discourses. That is, the open coding process was initially followed to identify discrete concepts; actual narratives of the villagers from the transcripts were sorted and labelled, and then grouped together for building various themes. The data were analyzed sentence by sentence to develop the concepts. Subsequently, distinct concepts that were related to similar phenomena were grouped into conceptual categories; as a result, 42 open codes were identified. Axial coding followed the open coding process; in this process, keeping the three theoretical tenets of CCA, i.e., culture, structure and agency, in mind, the author derived relationships among and within various identified open categories; consequently, ten higher-order axial codes emerged.

Finally, theoretical integration was achieved in the selective coding process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At this stage, a more abstract level relationship among the axial codes was established, which enabled the researcher to conceptualize and derive the overarching themes. In the context of structural absences and subaltern realities, six themes emerged: resource-scarcity, domestic economy, income/job options, basic infrastructures, communication shortages and subaltern agency. After generation of the codes, the author shared these codes with the indigenous villagers, by reading aloud in a group situation and by providing explanations when asked, in order to discover whether the codes made sense to them; in response to their feedback, the codes were revisited and revised, which made the coding process contextually meaningful and culture-centered.

**Results**

Historically, indigenous communities in India have struggled against structural inequities and discursive delegitimization, experienced “voicelessness” and got “extraordinary little attention” (Dreze & Sen, 2002, p. 28). Dutta (2008, 2011) argued that structural forces systematically erased the voices of the subalterns to accomplish their dominant agendas; such erasures of underserved voices fundamentally disempowered the subalterns as they are constantly negotiating with material and communicative absences. The articulations of the indigenous villagers on structural absences are presented theme-wise in the following sub-sections.
Scarcity of Resources

The Government of India’s twelfth 5-year plan (2012–2017) document noted that the current situation of rural indigenous spaces is a matter of concern; according to the report, “not only poverty continues at an exceptionally high levels in these regions, but the decline in poverty has been much slower here than in the entire country” (p. 228); consequently, such a scenario is reinforcing structural gaps between indigenous people and rest of the population. The document further commented, “similar gaps continue between literacy levels and health indicators of STs (indigenous population) and the general population and have widened over the years” (p. 229).

As most of the villagers were negotiating to overcome structural absences to fulfil their basic minimum needs of life, they narrated their struggle in gathering food resources. Moreover, the price hike of essential commodities in recent years badly affected the domestic economy of poor villagers across the nation. According to the government of India, the “Consumer Price Index” has increased 47.5% in the four years (i.e., 2010–2014, when the research was conducted) in rural India; i.e., estimated annual inflation is approximately 12% (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2014). Consequently, poor indigenous people were facing major difficulties in negotiating with such steep price rise when their income remained more or less stagnant. Jadu, a villager from forest region, articulated,

We are facing difficulties in feeding our family members. It is almost impossible for us to cope up with price-hikes of essential commodities. It is a great problem especially when we do not have any regular jobs or income source. Our income is less, but expenses are huge due to the price rise …

In such scenario, when the resources are scarce and expenditures are huge, the geographically remote villagers become incapacitated and vulnerable to poverty. Ratan, a friend of Jadu, commented on food scarcity,

We are surviving and feeding our family members with great difficulties; sometime we starve … sometimes we get something to eat. Many of the families eat once a day. If they cannot earn food, they starve. What else can we do? What is the alternative?

Overcoming such adverse conditions was not easy for the resource-scarce population of the forest region. A similar situation exists in the villages of Himalayan region too. Moreover, in the hilly area, many of the villagers are landless. Kano, an indigenous villager, said,

Some of the families in this village cannot afford two meals a day. They are facing severe problems. They cannot provide food for their children. We do not get rice from the Public Distribution System (PDS) shops; we do not have any lands. How can we possibly feed our family properly?

Voicing the narratives of hunger and domestic poverty was never easy for the villagers. As mentioned previously, they preferred to converse with the community-outsiders in a group situation. At the same time, in such public settings, many of the villagers were uncomfortable in talking about household issues; they opined that it was not a good practice to share their household issues such as poverty and hunger openly, especially in front of an outsider. Dhira, a homemaker of the forest region, said, “we do not usually talk about these sensitive domestic issues … our family members, especially the elderly members might take them personally … as a blame or a complaint”. One of her companions, Shimul, supported her, and asked the author, “Everyone wants to eat … do not you want to eat?” Such a fundamental
local expression offers a counter-dominant entry point for understanding the underserved voices and perspectives in interrogating social inequities.

**Domestic Economy and Resources**

A second theme articulated by the villagers from both regions involved how scarcity of resources affected their domestic infrastructure. Poverty-stricken indigenous villagers opined that it was difficult for them to construct houses and sanitary toilets for domestic purposes. As Sujon said, “One cannot make durable or concrete house from limited agricultural income. Only those who are government servants or contractors can make decent personal houses.” Though it is difficult, they also described how they can meet these challenges. They try their best to build affordable houses, by saving and spending wisely, as further described by Sujon, “For us, it takes several years to make a complete house. We work hard. We try to spend and save money wisely. More importantly, we do not waste money; for instance, we do not drink alcohol.”

Like the construction of domestic houses, building sanitary latrines is also expensive and hence unaffordable for many villagers. The Government of India reports suggest that more than 50% households in India defecate openly (National Sample Survey Office, 2016). Amidst resource scarcity, many of the indigenous villagers articulated their agentic willingness to construct sanitary latrines; as Dukhu noted, “Costing is a problem. We all know what are the benefits and advantages of having a sanitary latrine. However, we cannot afford it. What can we do? … those who earn more … can build latrines in their houses.” Negotiating such poor-economic scenario, most of the indigenous villagers are living in insubstantial houses and without latrines.

The economies of both the indigenous communities are primarily agrarian; villagers said that along with producing crops, they also meet these economic challenges by procuring and rearing domestic animals. In the Himalayan region, they produce ginger, squash, millet and corn; while rice is the main crop produced in the forest villages. Kanu, a resident of the forest region, reported that “Income from agriculture is crucial for our survival.” For many centuries, these isolated indigenous people from relatively inaccessible geographical regions mostly followed traditional agricultural methods. Santu, an indigenous farmer from forest region, said, “Our agriculture is dependent on God … on monsoon. This is a drought prone zone and our land is ‘taanr’ (or highlands, they are less-fertile lands). For the last three years we are facing major drought problems.” In addition, inadequate irrigation infrastructures in the indigenous regions limit their prospect of agricultural productions; consequently, their domestic economies are affected.

Poor domestic economy and price hikes of essential commodities (as previously mentioned) lead to little or no savings for the indigenous villagers. The situation worsens in unfavourable economic scenarios, especially in cases of family emergency. However, they deal with this lack of resources in the best ways they can. For example, in cases of acute or urgent financial crisis, they either borrow from neighbours or local moneylenders and/or sell domestic resources. Haru illustrates how they manage to ameliorate the situation:

> It is difficult; but we try to save money. At the time of adversities, we sold our domestic animals to gather money in an emergency. Oftentimes, we request our neighbours, or go to the money lenders to borrow money. In case of money lenders, we have to repay the loan with high interest.
For that, we sell our crops or cattle … Now, tell me, how one can save some money in such situation. If we had some steady jobs, we could earn more and save some money.

Villagers also reported that owing to remoteness, it is almost impossible for many of them to access bank and other government-run financial institutions.

**Income and Job Options**

Major industries or economically profitable ventures are usually non-existent in the geographically isolated spaces where the indigenous villages are located. Consequently, they depend on government-aided income generation programs and on local jobs available in nearby cities. Most of the villagers are daily-wage unskilled labourers; they work as agricultural, construction, transportation labourers. Illiteracy and limited skill-sets reduce their chances of getting better employment options. Women are mostly homemakers; they cannot go very far from their villages due to their family commitments.

Government of India claimed that the employment scenario in rural indigenous spaces has been improved in the recent years; as per the Ministry of Tribal Affair’s annual report (2016–2017), more than 95% of the rural indigenous population (those who are “available of work”) worked for at least 6 months in 2013–2014. But, according to cultural participants, overall availability of local jobs in both the regions for the indigenous villagers is limited. Metu, a villager from Himalayan region shared his experience,

> There is no work-opportunity here. No jobs … in nearby cities. City people and contractors consider us as outsiders. They say, you people are not entitled to work here. That is why many of us go to nearby states such as Meghalaya, Nagaland to earn money. Oftentimes, we illegally cross the international border and go to Bhutan. We earn money from outside the country then come back to our village to feed our family.

In 2006, the government of India introduced the national rural employment generation program (NREGA or MGNREGA) to generate local employment opportunities for unskilled rural people across the nation. Though the employment generation program promised to provide 100 days of employment (annually) to the rural subalterns, the villagers reported that they are getting fewer/inadequate work opportunities. Sanu shared his experience,

> We never get jobs on a regular basis. In the last two years, we got a total of 27-28 man-days (person-days) … so, on an average 12-14 days of work per year. If we have to solely depend on MGNREGA … then we have to die of starvation along with our family members.

In such scenario of limited job availability, the indigenous people of the forest region again demonstrate their capacity for meeting their challenges. In this case, they sometimes opt to participate in high risk/illegal jobs; e.g., work in illegal coal mines. As reported by the villagers, these illegal mines are very dangerous; every year, many labourers die inside such mines. Sanat, an unskilled worker from the forest region, said,

> Many people go to khadans (illegal coalmines) everyday … people from almost all the houses of this area go there. They are illegal coalmines … owned by local coal mafias. This profession is very risky, one might die at any moment. At the same time, we are surviving because of the income from illegal coal mines. If we do not get any money, from there (illegal coal mines) … we will die of starvation.
Such practices of these villagers can be considered as a strong expression of agency towards improving their lives and domestic economies in spite of the present dangers and can be seen as an example of how subalterns enact their agencies to make the best of adverse situations.

**Lack of Basic Infrastructures**

Lack of access to basic infrastructure also affected and shaped the conditions of marginalization of the indigenous villagers. As per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act – 2006, the Government of India should take adequate initiatives to provide basic infrastructures to the underserved, such as electricity, roads, and telecommunication facilities. Again, local government authorities noted that they build public transportation systems to connect indigenous villages to the nearby cities. However, the indigenous articulations revealed the gaps between the government policies/claims and the actual ground-realities.

In difficult-to-access geographical terrains of Himalayan region, the villagers have to travel on foot as they do not have any road infrastructure and adequate transportation options. Moreover, to visit nearby cities, they have to trek for several kilometres to reach closest motorable roads. Muku described this challenge,

We do not have many transportation options here because we do not have an acceptable road infrastructure. No proper public transportation service is available for going to nearby towns. One State Transport Corporation bus runs once in every week … on Wednesday morning. Once I fell down from the roof of the bus because there were too many people on the bus.

Another major infrastructural component that is lacking is electricity. There is no electricity facility in the Himalayan villages, though some people use solar panels in that region. About ten years ago, the government provided some subsidized solar panel sets and batteries to the villagers. Fuka told, “Some of the families use solar sets. In most cases, old solar sets are not working properly. We do not have money to repair or upgrade them.” Unlike the hilly region, most of the villages in the forest region have seen electricity facilities in recent years. However, the majority of the poor villagers were disconnected, as paying for electricity is often difficult for them. Samar commented, “Most of the houses had electricity. In 2007, we got electricity in this village. Many of us could not afford to pay electricity bills on time; that is why they cut the connections.” Thus, the voices from the margins showed that poverty-stricken villagers oftentimes face difficulties to access and/or afford basic infrastructural facility. In the scenarios of material absences, the villagers rely on their agency (primarily collective) and attitude of taking ownership to fight the contextual adversities (as noted in sub-section “subaltern agency”).

**Lack of Information and Communication**

For many centuries, indigenous people have lived in difficult-to-access geographical regions; their secluded existence oftentimes creates and magnifies communicative absences. On one hand, lack of access to structural resources such as television and newspapers and other informational sources made them discursively isolated. For instance, they could not gather information; participate/represent in decision-making spaces and processes. In long run, such communicative absences aggravate their information-poverty. On the other hand, cultural aspects of their situated communicative practices oftentimes prevent them from
interacting with the outside world. For example, owing to scepticism (about outsiders and strangers, and uncertainty about their communicative expectations), lack of proficiency in mainstream languages, make them further disconnected from the discursive spaces. As a collective, they often rely on experienced and/or educated community members, who are more knowledgeable and effective to communicate with the mainstream society. While most of the indigenous villagers are illiterate and information-poor, a handful of the young have completed their school education. They enact their agency to meet these challenges; e.g., they sometime gather the community members and share national and regional news, notices and updates by reading newspapers. In terms of audio media, most of the villagers prefer listening to radio programs mainly for entertainment purposes. Muka, a villager, describes,

Oftentimes we read newspapers when we go outside. Two families in this village buy newspapers, that too occasionally … maximum twice a week. They informed us about the government matters, events and incidents happening in the outside world. We mainly listen to radio programs … recreational programs in FM channels … mostly music programs.

Several relatively affluent families have televisions in their homes. Owing to the irregular electricity service, most of them cannot watch television programs on a regular basis. On television, they primarily watch Bollywood movies and entertainment programs.

Again, owing to the remoteness of these villages, indigenous people do not get timely information, which essentially reduces their chances of getting employment; it is evident from the words of Natu, “We do not get information about employment opportunities due to the remoteness of this place.” Consequently, the indigenous villagers could not apply for jobs or participate in income/economic opportunities. Communicative shortages such as non-availability of timely information and low-literacy level thus have material implications in the lives of the indigenous villagers.

Dominant structure and stakeholders oftentimes take advantage of communicative inabilities of the indigenous villagers. For example, one of the communicative barriers, lack of knowledge or fluency in mainstream Indian languages such as Bengali, Hindi and English, is a challenge often negotiated by the villagers. They usually converse among themselves in local indigenous languages such as Santali (the forest villages) and Jongha (the Himalayan villages), the majority are not fluent in any of the mainstream languages, and consequently, face difficulties when they visit nearby towns and cities. Dima was talking about his experience,

People like me cannot read and write in Bengali or Hindi. We communicate in local “jongha” language. Those city people think that we are uneducated and un-smart. Oftentimes, we cannot read the price tags. As soon as they identify us as indigenous people, they cheat us monetarily … they exploit us.

Dominant structure systematically privileges one language over the others; such hegemonic move essentially delegitimizes the indigenous languages and its speakers. It has been noticed that none of the indigenous languages/scripts are recognized in the indigenous regions as languages for official purposes.

Another communication barrier is villagers’ uneasiness in communicating with outsiders. They said that they are unsure, frightened and sceptical due to their past experiences of getting ignored and abused by the people of the mainstream. Bhala narrated,

We are not sure what to say, what not to tell. We are not habituated to talk in front of an outsider. If we say something in public, they (dominant stakeholders) will say that this person is complaining in front of an outsider and trying to create an issue. Therefore, we are afraid. We
try to express … but we face difficulties in putting our thoughts properly in right words. Our “voiceless-ness” become our behavioural pattern. We get used to it.

Thus, prolonged (and ongoing) structural oppressions muted the indigenous villagers, and the indigenous people are still apprehensive about freely sharing their narratives and lived experiences with community-outsiders.

**Subaltern Agency**

While the research revealed the situated structural (material and communicative) absences these villagers face in everyday life, the research also uncovered how they negotiated these absences by delineating their ownership and commitment to work as a collective for changing their situations for good. Specifically, the indigenous people from both forest and Himalayan region shared narratives about their collective efforts and experiences towards improving their lives. For instance, in Chunabhati, a Himalayan village, villagers formed a local committee named Village Development Committee to operationalize collaborative development activities. According to Lamu, the secretary of the committee,

> It is our village. It is our responsibility to develop our village. If we do not do it … who else will develop our village? We work together to develop our village. Many of us have new ideas. So every one of us, irrespective of age, religion should work together and learn from each other to accomplish our goals.

In order to improve their quality of lives, the villagers are opening up to communicate with people from both inside and outside of their communities. Such agentic expressions are helping them to take initiatives to develop their villages. For instance, villagers of the forest region undertook an effort to solve local issues. In Shushuniadanga, villagers were facing difficulties as the main road (made of mud) was badly damaged due to excessive soil-erosion. That caused several accidents and villagers found it difficult to commute on the damaged road, especially during the nights and in emergencies when they have to carry patients and elderly people. Determined and united villagers discussed the matter in the village-forum and took collaborative initiatives to reconstruct that road. Laltu talked about their collective effort,

> Laltu: We constructed the road in a participatory way. It was about 20 years from now. We still have the written records of expenditures; total expense was Rs. 300 (USD 5 approx.). Sixteen trucks of boulders collected from a local hill were used for that construction.

> Me: How? Sixteen trucks of boulders … in just Rs. 300 (USD 5)?

> Laltu: (smiling) Actually, we contacted local businesspersons who owned those trucks. We told them that we could not pay the rent for the vehicle, but we could pay fuel price and daily wage of drivers. In reality, the drivers did not take any money from us as we were co-works in local jobs. In addition, we did not have to pay for the fuel at the end as many of us worked under those businessmen. Within our community, we started organizing our villagers. One person per family volunteered for that work. None took a single penny for it. Moreover, we donated money as per to our economic situation to create a common fund of Rs. 390 (approx. USD 6) … We served puffed rice, tea and **singara** (Indian snacks) to every volunteer; that is how we spent the money.

Such collective effort to solve situated infrastructural issues was preferred by the people of most of the indigenous villages (studied in this research). Indigenous villagers sought autonomy and meaningful ownership for undertaking local initiatives to overcome structural
obstacles. Such articulations fundamentally challenged the modernist construction of indigenous as agency-less, and situate the subalterns at the centre of the social change activities. Historically, indigenous people paid attention to communicative praxis to make collective decisions to solve their social and economic issues. For instance, in forest region, every Santhal community is headed by a “morol” or leader; he is assisted by a “koltal,” who usually acts as an organizer or a convener of village-meetings. In such meetings, representatives from every family participate, and thereby take collective decisions. Pintu, a villager, opined,

Our traditional system is known as “sholoaana process”. According to our traditional system, all the villagers (“sholoaana”) used to take collective decisions to solve local issues. It is a good idea to do something collectively and sharing the outcome with everyone … be it a success or failure. Let me share one example … few years ago, we, all the villagers, collaboratively constructed a “majhi-than” or “haram-than” (equivalent to a church or temple). That point of time one of the rooms of our primary school got damaged; we took permission from the school authority and collected those broken bricks and constructed the “haram-than”. Clay, stone etc. were collected from nearby places. Straw was collected from every house. One person from each family volunteered for the project.

Participations of community members are crucial for any localo-centric initiatives. On the one hand, such an approach embraces voices and agentic interventions of the subalterns, and on the other hand, the articulations seek to rupture the dominant ideological constructions of development/social change initiatives, and to foreground alternate rationalities emerged from the margins. Through their words, the indigenous villagers essentially emphasized the relevance of local voice in social change activities. According to Kamol, “voices of the local people should get priority. We, the villagers, come first. Therefore, recommendations from local people should be taken seriously before finalizing any plans (externally driven). Such approach can make collaborative efforts successful”.

**Discussion**

This “structural-cultural” research was conducted in geographically remote indigenous villages, where structural and contextual realities posed unique challenges to the villagers both culturally and communicatively. The research revealed how the agentic abilities and efforts of the indigenous people constantly negotiate against the odds, and act towards ensuring survival of their communities. On one hand the dialogic process aids to break the age-old silences at the margins, and on the other hand, helps in inverting the hegemonic discourses and depictions by bringing forth the lived experiences and actualities of the subalterns. Subaltern articulations from the margins on structural absence and its negotiations pointed towards three aspects: communicative absences, material absences and subaltern agencies.

**Communicative Absences**

From CCA perspective, Dutta (2011) argued that the communicative shortage is one of the key constituents of structural absences; situated narratives of the villagers revealed how communicative shortages shape and impact their marginalized existence. As the indigenous communities (studied here) are geographically isolated, low-literate, experience difficulties in communicating in mainstream languages such as Bengali, Hindi and Nepali; they identified several communicative barriers in their everyday existence. First, information
barrier—owing to limited or no access to mainstream media sources and other information infrastructures such as newspapers and televisions, the reach to information at the margins is limited; moreover, such shortages prevent them from accessing timely information as well as participating in decision-making spaces, which oftentimes leads to their material absences as well. Second, the linguistic barrier—many of the villagers talk only in their local indigenous language and they cannot communicate in mainstream languages like Bengali, Hindi, or Nepali. Such difficulties in interacting with the mainstream stakeholders such as the officers, doctors and urban populations lead to communication gaps and further isolation, and thereby increase their marginalization. In addition, indigenous realities suggest that the government administration and dominant stakeholders do not accept the use of indigenous languages for official purposes; such hegemonic moves systematically keep the subalterns outside of the spaces of decision-making. Third, literacy barrier—most of the indigenous villagers are semi-literate or illiterate; therefore, they cannot read written instructions or messages, and cannot communicate by writing with others. Such barriers not only prevent them from effectively communicating and participating in legal/official activities, but also make the villagers vulnerable to the oppressions and material exploitations. Fourthly, attitudinal barrier—the majority of the indigenous participants were not comfortable speaking to outsiders because of their bitter past experiences of oppression and exploitation, and therefore most of them were sceptical and cautious about participating in one-on-one conversations especially with outsiders. Finally, contextual barrier—systematic and long-term ignorance of indigenous issues and agencies by the dominant stakeholders erased indigenous voices from the discourse as well as forced the villagers become accustomed to the muteness. Aforementioned structural- and cultural-communicative barriers constantly restrict indigenous access and representation to discursive spaces, which also contributed to their material absences. Moreover, these communicative barriers could cause communicative silences and even communicative impossibilities, i.e., a scenario where indigenous and mainstream societies would be incapable to listen to and interact with each other because of scepticism and lack of competence, and/or opportunity. Thereby, the communicative barriers often result in further marginalization and discursive isolation of the subaltern communities.

**Material Absences**

In indigenous subaltern context, poverty, hunger, and scarcity of infrastructural and domestic resources are deeply intertwined with their structural deprivation. Moreover, steep price hikes of essential commodities in recent years and insecure job scenario further worsen their situation. As socio-economic and cultural contexts shape and define material absences, participation of indigenous subalterns in this research unveiled their scepticism at the margins that challenged the status quo and questioned the dominant discourses. For instance, subaltern articulations ruptured the dominant claims of rural infrastructural improvements “in sectors like education, drinking water, PDS, health, minor irrigation, roads, housing, telecommunications and electrification” (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2008, p. 117). The villagers articulated that remote indigenous regions remained neglected in terms of infrastructural development, and most of the aforementioned parameters never got adequate attention in the underserved spaces. Communicative inputs of the community members were instrumental to foreground the emerging subaltern voices, which delineated
how being members of the lowest socio-economic strata, the indigenous people, negotiated with severe poverty, including food-insecurity and resource-scarcity. Thus, the situated narratives of material absences created openings for understanding the contextual negotiations and struggles of the subalterns in securing basic minimum needs of life. Moreover, lived experiences of the cultural participants about material absences imply how their economic and infrastructural shortages shape and contribute to communicative absences. In other words, material and communicative absences are intertwined and thereby create a vicious cycle of structural absences at the margins.

**Subaltern Agencies**

The indigenous narratives indicated that being members of the lowest socio-economic strata, the cultural participants experience discrimination and stigma; in addition, strategic negligence of indigenous issues by the larger structural forces makes their situation more vulnerable. Emergent discourses from the margins uncovered the alternate rationalities and worldviews embraced by the subalterns. The articulations also revealed firm expressions of the indigenous people in communicating their aspirations for enhancing their lives within limited scope and availability of structural resources. CCA fundamentally considers the agency of the subalterns as the central force to question situated socio-communicative inequities as well as bringing about meaningful change in local spaces. Through contextual delineations, cultural participants emphasized human relationships and communications, as the primary impetus for bringing about meaningful change in local spaces. For instance, villagers narrated how they led and accomplished local projects such as construction of the road and the “haram-than”. Such agentic expressions also dismantled economic-centric (and aid-driven) notions of development and social change, and thereby, put forth humane approaches at the centre of the social change activities. Thus, engagement of subaltern communities in “structural-cultural” researches fundamentally ruptures hegemonic conceptualization of subalternity as devoid of agency and shift the landscape of understanding structural marginalization in the realm of subaltern agency.

While embracing the CCA framework, this study seeks to extend the scope of its theorization particularly in the light of critical intercultural communication perspectives. Though mainly used for health communication research, CCA framework is increasingly used for conducting critical intercultural communication (Critical ICC) research and communication for development and social change (CDSC) research. Again, although widely used in a variety of marginalized contexts, utilization of CCA in indigenous context is rather limited. To conduct more “structural-cultural” research among indigenous and other subaltern communities, the CCA framework can be used; some of the reasons are- (a) CCA is rooted in and driven by critical communication and cultural studies theories, and examines power inequity and discursive erasures in underserved contexts, (b) CCA integrates elements of ethnographic and qualitative research which help yielding thick description from the margins, and (c) rooted in post-colonial and subaltern studies, CCA is committed to meaningful social transformation and equity. Moreover, CCA focuses more on creating awareness of subalternity for a broader audience and on legitimizing issues in policy-making and other spaces of discursivity. Therefore, in the context of conducting as well as expanding the scope of Critical ICC research, CCA is uniquely positioned.
Some key aspects emerged from this research could be relevant for future Critical ICC scholars, practitioners and policymakers for researching and working with the indigenous/underserved population of the global south and elsewhere. From the global indigenous (Kim, 2010; Wilson & Stewart, 2008) perspectives, especially towards expanding theoretical understanding of Critical ICC and/or communication (at large) research, (i) it is crucial to understand the cultural dynamics of the community; e.g., it is important to learn whether the community is collectivistic or individualistic and the nature of the power hierarchy operates in the context of the community- such an understanding would be helpful to study their agentic interactions as well as inter- and intra-community communication; (ii) the relationship of indigenous people with local spaces, and embedded knowledge and ideologies (particularly, nature and/or spirituality) is an important aspect, which build the foundation of agency and worldview of indigenous communities- a proper understanding indigenous values and cultural interplays would be helpful to create successful communicative environment; (iii) from contextual angle, it is necessary to understand co-cultural history, social, political aspects of indigenous communities and their interaction with the mainstream and larger power structures of the society.

Similarly from communication for development and social change (CDSC) perspective, this study notes that (i) it is important to observe and learn about organizing dynamics and decision-making praxis of the indigenous communities- i.e., a thorough knowledge about the same would help researchers to successfully create and sustain partnerships with the community members; (ii) it is also crucial to (a) study intra-and inter-community communication patterns and roles of different stakeholders in indigenous communities (e.g., morol and kotal in the context of this study) as well as (b) communicative expectations and scepticism of community members, especially when they interact with people outside of their communities. Globally, the diversity of indigenous communities is vast; it could be linguistically, religion wise, ethnicity-wise, race/caste-wise and more. A context specific understanding about the above pointers (though it is by no means an exhaustive list) would help future researchers to more meaningfully conduct their study.

This paper sought to highlight both the dire predicament and structural absences that the indigenous villagers face in their everyday life, and also acknowledges and describe specifically how they act, with agency, to meet these challenges. From a macro perspective, the processes of foregrounding local voices would potentially create more understanding about indigenous issues for the regional, national and international thinkers, planners and policy-makers. Consequently, the process would facilitate welfare and localocentric-interventions that are meaningful, useful and respectful for the underserved indigenous communities. This research attends to and foregrounds the subaltern articulations of poverty, resource-scarcity, voicelessness, and discrimination. Thereby, this study locates the need to communicatively engage to the structural, cultural and agentic negotiations from the margins to understand subalternity in transforming (local) structural configurations. To facilitate the processes of social equity, this paper calls for more communication research to foreground the voices from the margins in the spaces of decision-making.
Notes

1. Subaltern: The term subaltern refers to a “name for the general attribute of subordination … in society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1988, p. 35).

2. Indigenous People: While describing the term “indigenous”, the United Nations brings forth the following aspects,

   According to the UN the most fruitful approach is to identify, rather than define indigenous peoples. … Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member, historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies, strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources, distinct social, economic or political systems, distinct language, culture and beliefs, form non-dominant groups of society, resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. (United Nations, 2006, p. 1)

   Whereas, “Article 342” of the Indian constitution noted some criteria for identifying indigenous people; they are, “geographical isolation, distinctive culture, primitive traits [sic], shyness of contact with [the] community at large and economic backwardness [sic]”. This study paid attention to both the perspectives in understanding the indigenous people, their contexts and experiences. The terms Scheduled tribes (or tribes), adivasi(s) are used interchangeably with “indigenous people”, in this paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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