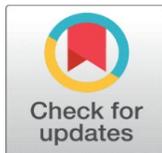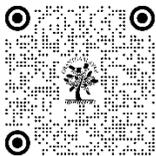# THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPING RURAL INDIA, A CRITICAL CASE STUDY ON "PROTOVILLAGE", ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

Athreya, A. [1] ✉ iD, Dr Jain, P. [1] ✉ iD

[1] Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the role of communication within rural India, focusing on a rural economic zone called "Protovillage", in Andhra Pradesh, India. The paper investigates how Protovillage has achieved its resilient living and how it is looking to enhance its communication system with neighbouring communities by introducing a newsletter service. It highlights the importance of communication in rural areas and how it can be used as a tool for development and social change. The research presents the community stories of Protovillage and how they have built themselves a resilient way of life. It further explores the current communication strategies within rural India and how the potential benefits of the proposed newsletter service in Protovillage can be used to foster communication within the village, with nearby villages, and with the entire rural community in India.

Keywords: Communication, Community Methods, Newsletter, Rural India, Resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Our country is home to a large number of diverse rural villages and communities which makes up a significant portion of our population and economy. Here, agriculture is the primary source of earnings for these communities. Despite India's expanding economic growth and development, many rural villages and communities still face numerous challenges across the board. These range from limited access to basic amenities like education, healthcare and electricity to inadequate infrastructure and employment prospects. This leads to another challenge of urban migration, as the youth of these rural communities aim for better

job opportunities and a better standard of living in cities. This results often in the loss of human resources for these villages, obstructing their progress and development. While there are many government and non-government initiatives and interventions helping improve the lives of village communities, there is still more that needs to and can be done. Appadurai (2002)

Communication is a vital aspect of life that connects people, communities, and societies across the world. In rural India, communication plays an essential role in accessing information, resources, and opportunities that can improve lives, while building networks and relationships within their community and outside their immediate vicinity. Rural communities have long faced the limitation of access to communication technology and infrastructure. However, in recent times, there has been a noticeable shift in the adoption of digital services with affordable smartphones and low-cost data plans. This is making it easier for rural communities to access the internet and gain new methods of information sharing and receiving. Digital services such as online education, telemedicine and business services are now available in many rural areas, along with the use of multiple social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Although some rural areas still lack access to communication technology, the overall digital penetration is productive, in hopes to develop greater opportunities and growth in rural India. Balaji (2017)

Within this context, one such rural community looked at in this paper, is a rural economic zone in Andhra Pradesh, India called **"Proto Village"**. Proto (in short), was founded by Mr Kalyan Akkipeddi and nearing village community members close to 8 years ago. They aim to establish a resilient community through 9 basic needs which they have put together collectively. Their main focus currently looks at enterprise & education through their methods of communication and resilient living amongst themselves and nearby villages. They are a self-sustaining community that has been working towards building an interdependent system. Through their many developments and explorations, Proto Village's community members further wish to build a communication network where they can disseminate information in a creative format to expand their methods and benefit other communities. Voices of Rural India. (n.d.)

Figure 1

Figure 1 Signage Outside Protovillage

2. RESEARCH SCOPE

1) Protovillage: A Community of Resilient Individuals

Protovillage on average has a community consisting of 15-20 individuals who live and work together. Most of them have recently moved into Proto (6 months -2 years back), and a few have been there for close to 7 years. Although they're spread across different age groups, their average age group comprises more pre-teens than young adults. Members of the community have come from different parts of Andhra

Pradesh and the south. Many of them have had a lot of hardships in their native towns before coming to Proto. Bertelsmann Stiftung (2017)

Kalyan and the members from the beginning have aimed to create a space where people could live in harmony with nature and each other. The members of the community are committed to a set of values that they have developed together. Some of these values include:

- **Resilience:** Importance in the need to be resilient in the face of challenges. Strive to live off the land and to support each other through difficult times.
- **Sustainability:** Commitment to living a sustainable way of life. Reduce, Reuse, Repurpose and Recycle
- **Community:** Belief that community is essential for individual and collective happiness. Work together to grow a strong and supportive community.
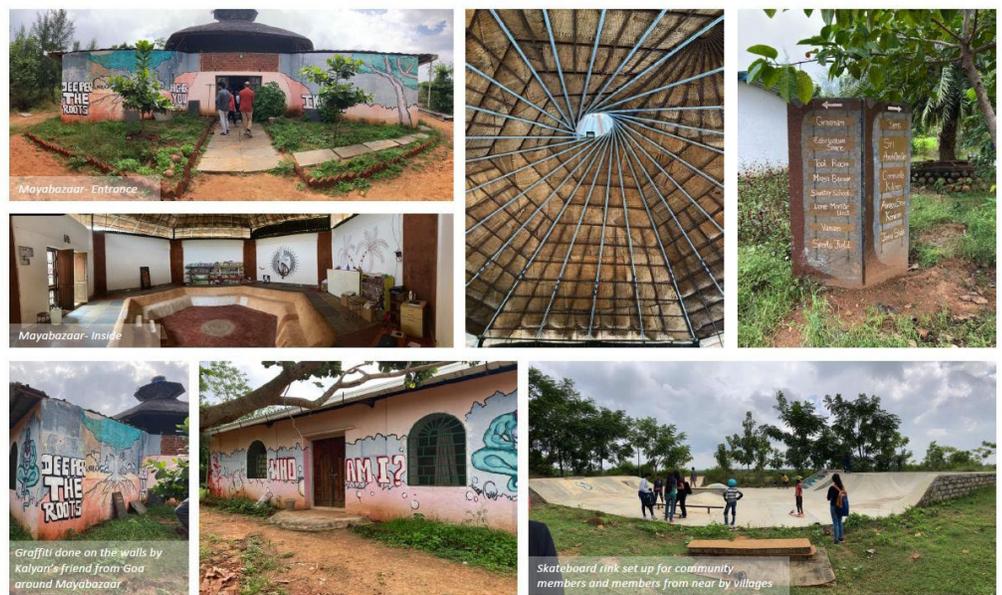
Figure 2

Figure 2 Pictures of Protovillage Clicked During the Visit

The community also alongside have generated a revenue stream through their enterprise called "GRAAMAM". Here they create products from elements and resources around their land, such as millet-based consumables and leaf-variety pickles. They are further diversifying and innovating their product stream and infrastructure. Bhutani (2016)

They aim to build and enrich community mental health, focusing primarily on degrowth from the monetary-specific economy. They choose to seek value in community wealth. Money to them is not the only idea of success. The concept of money is transparent and open in Proto. All members are aware of each other's allowances and the village transactions are open book. This however seems to have shown no effect on how it changes the community bond. If anything, the value of honesty is portrayed more through this way of life. Chung (2014)

The members of Proto consist of individuals with many unique talents and skills. Together, they contribute to the community in a variety of ways, such as business and product management, cooking and cleaning duties, teaching, building, and maintaining their infrastructures. They all consider themselves as equal

partners in the community and make decisions together. This usually happens in a weekly round- circle where they discuss the sharing of responsibilities and running the community. They don't believe in the concept of voting or Majority/Minority in decision-making. A decision can only be made once every single member of the community is on board. Development Alternatives. (2021)

The concept of money is transparent and open in Proto. All members are aware of each other's allowances and the village transactions are open book. This however seems to have shown no effect on how it changes the community bond. If anything, the value of honesty is portrayed more through this way of life. The village has undergone multiple changes in the past few years, where many members have joined and left the community due to various reasons like family, studies, or job opportunities. A big change occurred during the pandemic where in addition to having members leave due to family obligations, many left due to differences in opinion when it came to financial sustainability during the lockdown. However, to date, the community has managed to retain their core values.

Figure 3

Figure 3 Pictures of Protovillage Clicked During the Visit

1) Creating New Communication Strategies

The community members along with Kalyan are committed to the continuous building of a strong and resilient community. Along with the belief that their model can be beneficial to other communities, they also believe in building a communicative network to disseminate information and expand the landscape of information sharing amongst other village communities. This has been imagined by them as either in the form of an information centre displaying their community model and stories or a newsletter which can be circulated. They currently have the tools and resources to document information digitally and put it on the map. Most of the community members have access to phones and the internet, plus they have computer systems with design tools that they can use. The current communications portals they have are social media and their website. Development Alternatives. (n.d.)

2) Present Landscape of Communication in Rural India

The role of "communication" is to empower an individual with the knowledge and skills they would need to make informed decisions about their lives and livelihoods. The majority of information being shared with the rural population today is rapidly converting to digital methods. That said several offline portals still work as primary platforms for information sharing.

Many portals are developed as part of government initiatives - where the information provided is dedicated to services and opportunities in various domains. The information provided can help people learn new skills, make informed decisions, and connect with others. It can also help people understand their rights and how to advocate for themselves. It plays as a massive marketing tool for buying/selling & market information. Development changes through online and offline marketing in rural areas is also predominant by the government to implement change, an example is how public defecation has been curbed in a lot of rural communities (and this has gone to be documented as their best practices).

Main communicators	• Markets • Government (E Governance)
Platforms	• ICT • Communication Centre's/Kiosks/Offices with Wifi and Systems - Example - Gp- One Initiative at Chamarajanagara District, Karnataka State • Gram Panchayat / E – Panchayat • Government think tanks - Example NITI Aayog (Rural initiatives undertaken by them) • Non-Government Initiatives - Example Goonj • International Initiatives - Example OPM India
Traditional Communication	• Radio • Television • Newspapers (Limited Access) • Wall Paintings • Street Plays • Folk Theatre • Audio Vans
Digitised Communication	• Through Internet- Websites (major contributor) • Apps • Social Media

3. OBJECTIVE

The objective of my research would look at exploring and validating Protovillage's need to create a new communicative initiative and what it would look like based on the present communication landscape within rural India. The validity of this enquiry is to understand and reflect on the relevance of Proto village in today's world, exploring further the need for such a model and the possible routes of expansion, integration, and restoration for use in other communities across India. Using the members of the community and their voices as an active part in this process.

Research Questions:

- How and why is it relevant for them to share information about the community?
- Why are the stories of the people important?
- How can they do this by themselves without Kalyan? If this model was to be replicated elsewhere, could it work without a Kalyan figure?
- What showcases the values that they imbibed upon coming to proto and how is it implied through their stories?
- What is the impact proto has on the community's perception of familial relationships amongst each other?

- What impact it will create on both their lives and the lives of other nearby village members/rest of the world?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

- Yanu Endar Prasetyo in the paper "From Storytelling to Social Change: The Power of Story in the Community Building" mentions how storytelling is an essential part of human culture. She explains how stories have allowed generations to share knowledge, experiences, and ideas and can be used to build trust, transfer knowledge, and generate emotional connections. Furthermore, how they can reflect and create reality, opening up new possibilities for action. Her paper explains how for generations, stories have been passed down from one to another, providing valuable lessons and opportunities to empathize with different cultures and ways of life. The paper further expands on how storytelling is an effective way to communicate, educate, entertain, inspire, and can help us to connect with others on a deeper level.

  The author concludes how storytelling has become an increasingly popular strategy for community development, as it helps to build trust and cooperation within communities and raise awareness of important issues. In this way, storytelling is a powerful tool that we can use to make a difference in the world, by sharing our stories, learning from others, and building a better future.

- Dr Peter Walkenhorst and Murali Nair in their article **"Social Cohesion in Transformation: The Experience of India and Beyond"** discusses how India is quickly growing and its social structures are changing. Old dependencies are becoming redundant, and people are questioning the old structures of authority and power. However, this has also led to new vulnerabilities for significant parts of the population, which are often exacerbated by caste and class politics. There is also criticism that the middle-class imagination has become the hegemonic imagination of contemporary India. When people talk about India, they often only talk about urban, metropolitan India, IT services, shopping malls, and consumption cultures. However, this ignores the fact that more than 70 per cent of the Indian population still lives in rural areas.

- Brennan Lowery, John Dagevos, Ratana Chuenpagdee and Kelly Vodden in their paper **"Storytelling for sustainable development in rural communities: An alternative approach"** emphasise on the power of storytelling and how it has been used for centuries to pass down wisdom and traditions through generations. They mention how alternatively, they are used to make sense of the world around us to cope with growing change. Of late, the say storytelling has gained popularity within academia as a method to understand human behaviour and social change. They describe how storytelling has a variety of formats besides written language like oral tradition, music, dance, and art. The authors describe Rural Sustainability as the ability of rural communities to meet their needs in an environmental, social, and economic way. However, this comes with the disadvantage of access to resources, markets, and infrastructure. They also are more exposed to the effects of climate and environmental change. The paper further explains the role of storytelling in rural sustainability. Here, the authors highlight the importance storytelling plays in educating people on the need and importance of sustainability in hopes to inspire them to take

action. Stories here can also be used to communicate the successes of rural sustainability for motivation and show how it can be possible. In the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, the authors use this as an example to showcase how certain rural communities in North America benefitted from storytelling to cope with the challenges they were facing as well as information about the lockdown, and building hope.

5. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research looks at both primary and secondary research analysis in a qualitative format. The primary research involves spending time in Proto Village to understand its ecosystem better and understand how they have been able to leverage its values to build a sustainable ecosystem. Qualitative data is collected through interviews documenting the stories of community members to understand their communication practices and how they have been able to overcome challenges. Information collected through these interviews is also used to understand the level of communication infrastructure in the village and the impact of communication on the standard of living of the members. The secondary research looks at analysing the different communication portals that are in existence within rural India. India Brand Equity Foundation. (2021)

6. PROTO'S COMMUNITY & THEIR STORIES

The different stories shared by the members of Proto establish a great sense of community and family they have made for themselves. Though they come from different backgrounds, they are able to share in each other's hardships and joys. They practice a certain way of living with each other that pertains to their set values. These values come out through personal stories and community anecdotes. Their sense of community building helps the village maintain a sense of peace that strengthens their values of trust, loyalty, patience, and forgiveness. This model of the community also expands to both its education system and enterprises. A few interview highlights from the community members is given below.

"**Vamsi** completed his formal education till 11th grade in alternative schooling. After making his way through different NGOs across India, he made his way to Proto and has lived there ever since. Vamsi had to leave Proto during the months of lockdown as he had to go back to his family.

Upon arriving back at Proto, he saw that many members of the community had left due to differences in opinion. He was greatly saddened by this and described the moment as "shattering". "

"**Govardhan** made his way to Proto 3 years back when he came in looking for a job opportunity. He believes he is qualified to go to the city and work a job, while

earning Rs 20000, but chooses to want to live in Proto and live around his family. He was honest and open about sharing his monthly allowance and states he's able to save a lot of money because his food and stay are taken care of Govardhan is known to make fun of and imitate members of the community and takes the lead in group meetings. He describes the round meetings as the reason for productive and peaceful living."

"**Geeta** (35 years) comes from a nearby village in Karnataka (Bagyapalli). She has a daughter (Pravalika) and a son (PrithviSai) who lives with her. Geeta takes the initiative in developing the enterprise model with Kalyan for Proto. Her husband who is an alcoholic, gambled away 6 lakhs of borrowed money resulting in debt. Geeta is still working on clearing her loan, but has severed ties with her husband and is looking to build and establish her life in Proto for herself and her kids. She has been at Proto for a little over a year. Never having travelled before, She originally came in thinking it would give her an opportunity to create income. Her initial fears and inhibitions vanished upon the community celebrating her daughter's birthday. More than the actual celebration it was the happiness and involvement of the whole community that made her feel confident about wanting to stay back. The attitude of the people there helped her regain her self-esteem and confidence.

However, since then, she says she has gained a lot more through the community members and the bond she shares with them. What makes her choose to stay back is the attitude of the community members. "

"**Urga** originally came to Proto a few years back hoping to join computer courses, which he had heard through a village grapevine. He eventually stayed back helping out with various activities in proto and joined the education model. Ugra is going to give is 10th board exams in 2022. He comes from a broken home where his mother had left him as a kid. He said he carried that resentment for a long time till he came to Proto. The atmosphere and the attitude of the members here helped him develop a sense of trust and be able to make peace with his resentment and his mother. He compares the concept of Proto to a home instead of a house, stating the

people over there care for him and share in his problems, whether they are able to help or not."

"**Unnais** hails from Kerala and has travelled through his 20's. He made his way to Proto 2 years ago and works closely with Kalyan and the rest of the community in village development. For someone who doesn't stay at a place beyond 1-2 months, Unnais finds himself pleasantly surprised at how much "at home" he feels in proto with the people and their values."

"**Vasu** moved to Proto 5 years ago. His parents were neighbours with the family Kalyan was originally staying with. Vasu also known as the "Thatha/ Baba/ Dada" of the group is a spunky kid who loves to skateboard and talk his mind. He visits his family once a month. He mentioned not liking to live in the village because they impose too many "rules" such as women being confined to the kitchen."

"Known as Narasamma – "Nurse+Amma", Meena joined the community 3 months ago. She's a practising nurse and contributes to everything medical-related with the community. She is currently working with Kalyan on pursuing Natural medicine."

7. COMMUNICATION PORTALS IN RURAL INDIA

With the diverse and vast population present in India, there is a need for effective communication platforms that can reach to all parts of the country. For this study, 3 different portals are looked at that provide information specifically targeted at a rural and semi-urban setting. The platforms range from online portals to mobile services to radio stations that connect with rural communities.

1) **VIKASPEDIA -** https://vikaspedia.in/

Goals/Objectives:

Vikaspedia is a multilingual (12 languages) knowledge portal that provides information, products, and services to communities throughout India. The website is designed to reach "unreached" communities, especially those that are in rural parts of India. Vikaspedia is part of the India Development Gateway initiative of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. The portal provides information on a wide range of topics, including education, health, agriculture, employment, women's empowerment, child development, poverty alleviation, and governance. Additionally, it provides access to a variety of products and services, such as e-learning courses, online tools, government services, financial assistance, and job opportunities. Vikaspedia is considered a valuable resource for communities in India, providing information, products, and services that can help people improve their lives. It is a key part of the government's efforts to bridge the digital divide and empower communities throughout India.

Key Functions/Processes:

- News - Countrywide
- Innovations
- Guides and how to do's on various topics
- Schemes
- Fellowship opportunities
- Job Opportunities
- Impact Stories

- Information, Awareness and Opportunities in Agriculture, Education, Healthcare, Social Welfare, Energy and E- Governance

Current Impact / Milestones:
- 472,333 Info Objects
- 174,037 Registered Volunteers
- 89,611,580 Hits / Month
- 9,241,506 Visitors / Month

2) GRAMVAANI - https://gramvaani.org/

Goals/Objectives:

Gramvaani is a communication platform that empowers people to share their opinions, hear from each other, and build communities. They function as a community media platform that uses voice messages to connect with rural communities They strive to be a bottom-up, inclusive media platform that can help to build considerate societies by promoting continual, affirmative behaviour change. Their platform is designed to be relevant to contexts and needs around communities they identify and their issues, further creating a way to address these issues in ways which are accessible and engaging. Their platform also has a space for people to share their stories, perspectives, and experiences. They use this as a tool for building empathy between people from different backgrounds.

Key Functions/Processes:

GV provides a variety of services that broadly cover the following focus areas:
- Governance
- Rights (Women, Work, Children)
- Health
- Child Development
- Livelihoods and Agriculture
- Education and Youth Engagement
- Community Volunteering

Current Impact / Milestones:

Presence: 5 Countries Calls: 12M

Presence In India: 10+ States Partners: 150+

3) Radio Kotagiri - https://radiokotagiri.keystone-foundation.org/

Goals/Objectives:

Radio Kotagiri is an FM radio station that focuses on communicating issues faced directly by communities which aids to closing gaps in many problem areas that are generally faced. Established in the Nilgiris region of Tamil Nadu, the station was started with the goal to empower these communities by giving them a voice, in particular to indigenous communities and tribals, in an initiative to improve social and economic as well as the environment. They aim to be a community radio medium.

Key Functions / Processes:

Apart from providing information amongst the communities, RK also runs a variety of programmes, including:

- Programme on Health and Nutrition for Women
- Snakebite Awareness Programmes
- Empowering youngsters and first-time voters to understand the importance of voting in a democracy.
- Stream Clean- up Programmes

Current Impact / Milestones:

Radio Kothagiri caters to over 28,207 people in and around Kotagiri town, which includes about 15 villages. The communities present over here have had a rich history of oral tradition. The radio station continues to serve as a means to attain, transcribe, and disseminate information, making it easily accessible and pertinent to its listeners. The Communication Initiative Network. (n.d.)

8. RESEARCH OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHTS

- Proto Village stands out as a model built around questioning our traditional aspects of monetary and societal value. The community actively chooses to let go of any belief in archaic rules and ways of life, that are an existing part of Indian societal structures.
- Moving away from the known can allow these communities to thrive. Focusing on the bigger relevant questions like, why is localization important? How does regeneration work effectively? *How can a community's interactions with each other affect value systems and chains*? Especially in a fast-changing digitized world where a sense of community and what that means is constantly transforming.
- The dynamics between people within proto on paper seemed very idealistic, but upon meeting the community, it created a different impact. They have the capability to use the power of their narrative to put themselves out there and try to create change through their stories. Looking at the present platforms in place for information sharing and storytelling, there feels to be a relevant opportunity area for Protovillage to leverage, in order to build a rural network.
- They believe in a focus on community building, with similar communities that can retain the same values in other parts of India and with the general audience who can gauge the progress and importance of these stories. A centric threshold is to thus deep dive into the possible and potential opportunities Proto Village could use as a portal to expanding this unique model enabling community integration.

Figure 4

Figure 4 Inscribed Stones Around Protovillage

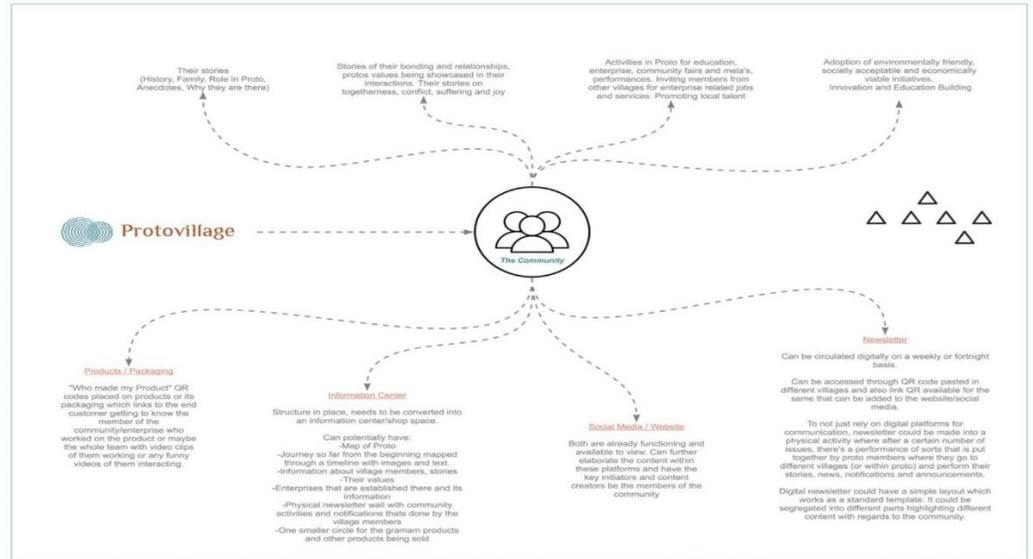## 9. ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

Figure 5

Figure 5 Map of Potential Communication Routes for Protovillage

1) Validating Opportunity, Implication and Need:

A newsletter service by ProtoVillage can be circulated both digitally and through other mediums (which can be further explored). The newsletter would not only attract people to Protovillage but also give an opportunity to socio-economic strata which can benefit from community learning. In order to bridge the gap between local communities and traditional media platforms, the newsletter would allow focused information that drives accessibility to this specified demographic, additionally bringing about a sense of identity.

The vision that drove Protovillage into existence has primarily based itself on questioning traditional values ingrained into our current and evolving societies with a focus on monetary growth, which in today's world used this aspect as its central focus point. Sharing proto's community knowledge and values could resonate with their vision of thriving for more in life than just income and success, and finding other alternative methods to define what value means in one's life. The Communication Initiative Network. (2004)

Since the newsletter will give access to people who don't have access to social media platforms, it hence allows them to create a sense of equity. This could also help create better networking opportunities between them and other villages and help with recruitment for
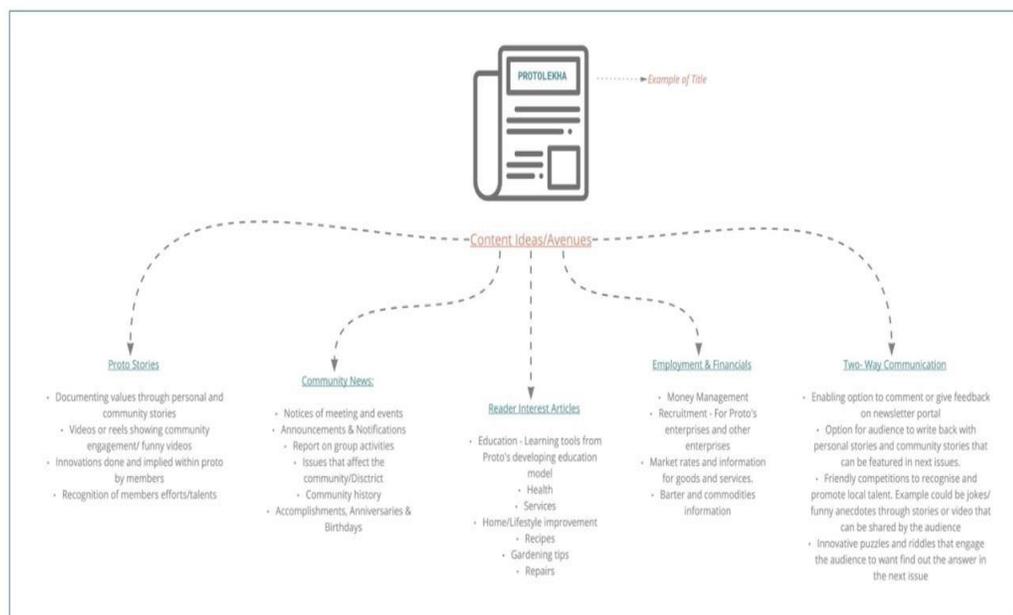
Figure 6

Figure 6 Description of Content Avenues for a Newsletter by Proto

enterprises and bring in children for educational purposes. With just social media and their website, they'll be primarily engaging with certain social economic groups that have access to it. However, with a local newsletter (digital or physical) they have the power of reaching more people in nearby villages and communities which is an equally important need for causing any intervention of change. As to why a newsletter, information most times gets stuck and stagnant on websites. A regularly updated newsletter can make a difference here as it's personally curated. Newsletters can be targeted to specific groups and communities. The digital newsletter can avoid the risk of not being destroyed or banned by opposing views by village influencers (if it was a physical poster/Newspaper) Suresh (2018)

2) Power of Own Voice

Currently, the most popular local communication platforms across rural India are collecting information from external sources. Consequently, these sources (markets, agencies, government portals) end up becoming major stakeholders in the decision-making process and dictate what information will be communicated. Due to this, information is often times being passed on from one source to another

without any equal engagement or control. Thus, for Protovillage to effectively create an engagement outlet/platform for communication, it is essential for a significant portion of the content being generated to come from within the community. Having personal voices, opinions and stories shared directly from the source can create a lot more impact in influencing what Protovillage is trying to promote to other individuals and communities. It shows faith in their awareness and gives them more agency. Kreider (2017)

To quote an example of this, a study conducted in Gujarat examined whether social hierarchy plays an important role in communication, specifically in terms of the source authority's effect on agricultural services and advice. The experiment was conducted on a voice-based agricultural information service for farmers in Gujarat, India, where 305 farmers were sent seven agricultural tips via automated phone calls over a two-week period. The tips were recorded by two university scientists and two peer farmers, and participants received a preview of the tip from a randomly assigned source via the automated call. The results showed that participants called the follow-up number significantly more often when the tip preview was recorded by a peer rather than a scientist. However, in interviews conducted both before and after the experiment, a majority of farmers expressed a preference for receiving information from scientists, possibly reflecting a socially acceptable response. This study highlights the need for design implications for peer-to-peer information services for rural communities in India. (Adapted from "Power to the Peers: Authority of Source Effects for a Voice-based Agricultural Information Service in Rural India") Parthasarathy & Somasundaram (2020)

10. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

"The Protovillage Newsletter": A Tool for Communication and Development

Proto Village has the potential to pursue this avenue for engagement as there is a prime need for personal communication that is not market or government-led within rural communities in India. In order to make this a successful impact, they need to implement merging both traditional communication and new digital communication tools to expand their reach. By entertaining, educating and engaging. ProtoVillage. (2021)

Ideally, a creative documentation process needs to take place to put together and curate the vision and mission of this newsletter service. This documentation will not only allow them to understand and choose the medium that feels most capable of expansion and sustenance but will also energize it. By opening to the floor to the community members, to narrate and speak about the stories from their lives (especially from a first-person perspective), allows them not only to have autonomy but also gives them the strength and power to take control over their narrative and establish self-resilience and self-esteem within this opportunity. This contributes to the bigger picture of resilience amongst themselves and also portrays an inspiring example for other communities to build from. Singh (2016)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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