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Understanding the rural consumer's behaviour in the context of his ecosystem

A telecommunication perspective

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Rural markets have always been a challenge for market researchers. Conventional tools applicable in urban areas are not directly adaptable in the rural setting. With the emergence of rural markets in terms of brand awareness, and the shift from nominal decision-making process to a more extensive decision-making process, more innovative research tools are required to capture data about rural consumers in a more effective way. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is one tool that does precisely that. The tool itself, however, has evolved over time and has recently caught the attention of rural market researchers for commercial projects. The tool has so far been limited to application by NGOs for the implementation of either government projects or donor NGO-funded initiatives. This paper strives to highlight the evolution of PRA as well as its interpretation by MART (India's leading rural market research firm) in terms of one commercial project undertaken for a telecom player.

Introduction

The rural population, often considered as a homogeneous mass by marketers, is heterogeneous not only by its economic capacity but also by its occupation. The consumption capabilities of these households vary for different product categories, and this includes mobile phone ownership and usage. The critical variation in the rural population is occupation,

where 70% of the households are engaged in agriculture but only about 40% own cultivable land. The different occupation requires the person to remain connected with different touchpoints. The farmer may need to remain connected with the agri-input trader, agriculture society and *mandi* (wholesale market) trader, while the retailer needs to connect with the company stockist and wholesaler in one town or multiple towns. This study therefore assumes that the occupation would also influence need for and ownership of mobile phones.

Past research data is not much help either. There was little understanding of the profile of existing mobile phone ownership and usage in rural areas considering the occupational variance and socio-economic classification indicated in the Indian Readership Survey. Therefore it was required that the research explore the different occupational groups and socio-economic classes for their felt need for connectivity, the utility of mobile phones and usage behaviour, if any.

Why PRA?

With the limitation of conventional marketing tools to capture data in the Indian rural sector, innovative techniques need to be devised. The tool this paper looks to use and further in the context of a consultancy project for a major Indian telecom player is PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal). Kashyap (2011) has defined the following broad PRA tools used most in the Indian context.

- *Market Access or Mobility Map:* permits understanding of the mobility of consumers in and around the villages for accessing products and services.
- *Daily Activity Clock:* captures the economic and social activity in the daily life of a rural inhabitant.
- *Chapati (Venn) Diagram:* for understanding rural consumer behaviour, especially for capturing the importance of and access to any particular unit in the lives of rural people.
- *Process Map:* step-by-step approach to complete any activity.
- *Need Assessment Map:* brings forth the needs and need gaps prevalent in the rural community.
- *Wealth Map:* used to understand income flows and expenditure patterns.

PRA has attracted significant comments, review and application from scholars over a long period of time. Mehta *et al*. have done significant

work on use of this technique in the Indian context in their series of KRIBP working papers. Chambers in a three-part series (1994) has been credited with the evolution of this technique, which now is widely used in social studies in India and other developing countries (adapted and used in corporate market research studies conducted by MART). Chambers (1994a) highlighted how the facilitators completely subjugated the locals in Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), which consists of a series of techniques for 'quick and dirty' research that are claimed to generate results of less apparent precision, but greater evidential value, and thus proposed PRA for more accurate data collection and objectivity. This presented an epistemological shift, highlighting clearly who is the facilitator and who are the locals in charge of the entire activity. Kashyap (2012) has differentiated PRA from focus group discussions (FGD) as outlined in Table 1.

Mosse and Mehta (1993) suggested two areas where PRA tools can face problems: gaining the trust of the community, as well as ensuring equitable participation from all members of the community. Richards (1995) also raised a few concerns in his critique of PRA by highlighting questions of PRA subjugating other social research methods, bureaucratisation of PRA, social theory underpinning the PRA, and participation issues.

Table 1 Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) vs focus group discussions (FGD)

PRA	FGD
Large group and heterogeneous in nature, ensuring participation from all walks of life	Typically small group and homogeneous in nature
As expression is both verbal and non-verbal, even less assertive people can express their views	A verbal channel – outspoken individuals dominate the discussion
Moderator's role is low, hence information flow is more natural; the role is to facilitate discussion among the group	Moderator's intervention can be high in evoking response and from all sections
Attitudes and behavioural change orientated	Action orientated
On-the-spot analysis by participants	Analysis done by moderators
Cross-checking and validation of data can be done on site by involving other members or groups	FGD needs to be verified with more FGDs until a consensus is reached

Telecom study background: research objectives

A report in the *Hindu* (23 January 2011) stated that the next wave of growth in telecom subscriptions will come from semi-urban and rural areas. Today, the penetration of mobile phones in urban areas is almost 100%, while in rural areas it is only 23%. In light of this, a telecom service provider felt a need to understand the context to present practices

regarding customer mobile service delivery and their expectation mapping for the future. With hindsight on the potential that the rural market holds for different telecom players, a leading client commissioned this study with the following objectives.

- The primary objective of the study was to gain an insight into rural buying and usage behaviour when it comes to consumption of mobile services, and understand how this differs from its urban counterpart. These findings should provide visible and viable alternatives to the client to target these consumers more effectively.
- The shops in rural markets are very different from those in urban areas, and are not only POPs but also facilitators and thus an inherent ingredient of the effective marketing strategy in form of 'place' in the 4Ps in the rural context. This study thus also aims to understand peripheral telecom services availability at local retail outlets servicing mobile phone users.

PRA methodology

MART has adapted the PRA tools with the knowledge that the rural consumer lives in a community and his social context is more important than his individual context. The tools were used by villagers to map their physical and social resources, and in the process identified the gaps, and the community collectively decided on the need for change. These are drawn pictorially on paper sheets using colour sketch pens. A chart paper with sketch pens was used to draw the inputs for access maps and time clocks. The researchers recorded the profile of respondents by determining their socio-economic class and occupation. This study focused on village men between 20 and 45 years of age.

To mobilise the villagers it is important that the researcher first holds a discussion with community leaders to inform them about the purpose of the research. These discussions also help in identifying the households he/she wants to include in the research. The researcher then engages with the village youth to mobilise the male or female members of the households, as required, to gather at a public space where all village communities have access (caste boundaries often restrict physical movement within a village). Therefore the discussions were initiated with the set of people available and others joined the discussion, in some cases giving new information or validating the information provided by other sets of people. This process of new information, consolidation and validation continues as new respondents come in to participate with their thoughts and the researchers

go back to basic questions. The researcher ensures that the information is clustered, and if possible relates to Socio-Economic Classification (SEC) and occupational behaviour. The villagers are aware of their ecosystem and the community needs. This helps in drawing fairly accurate maps for their resources, access points and their daytime behaviour.

The study was designed to interact with rural mobile service consumers and non-consumers in their village and understand their awareness of telecom services, market access and preferences. The market access and mobility map was used for this purpose. The map allows us to understand the mobility of consumers in and around their village for accessing products and services. This helps to identify 'pain points' and need gaps. The second tool used was a daily activity clock, which captures the economic and social activities in their daily lives. This helps to identify time windows for communicating with consumers or potential consumers.

Results and implications

Market access map

Mobility pattern
From the market access maps depicted in Figure 1, it was found that the consumer travels to different locations to access government services in one town, banking services in another, agri-input and other products from a town with commercial activity, a *mandi* (wholesale) town to sell agri-produce and possibly to some other town for health or education.

Service availability
Telecom services available to the villagers were mapped and it was found that not all service providers had a signal in the village. Consumers purchased the mobile connection that had the best signal coverage. However, it was also found that the same services did not function beyond a certain geographical area. Consumers had adapted to this pain point by having more than one mobile service connection. Most of the villagers were aware of the telecom service providers that offered the best signal coverage.

Service awareness
The villagers are aware of the number of mobile towers in their locality even if these are 10–15 km away. This information helps them assess the quality of signals, and they relate this to call drops and calls not going through (tower congestion). Such a service map is represented in Figure 2.
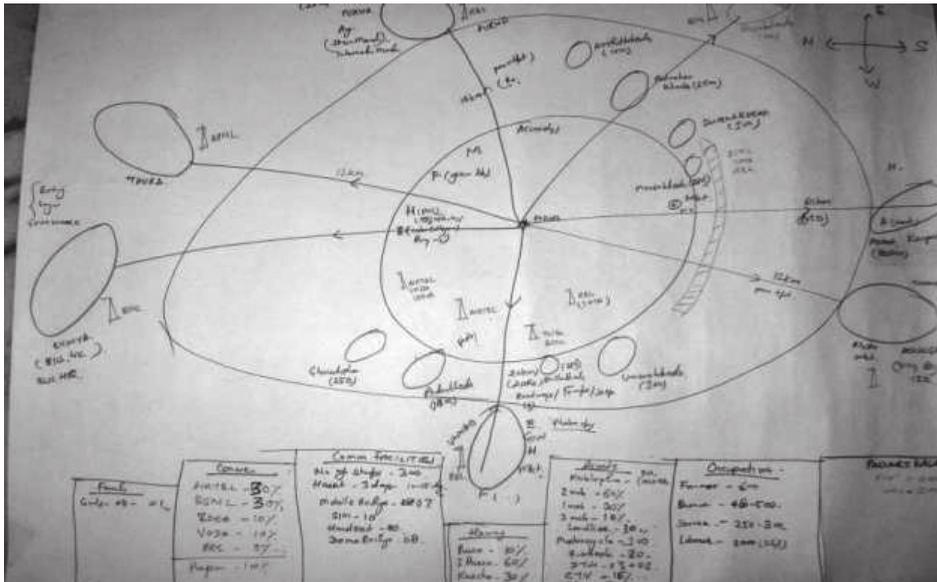
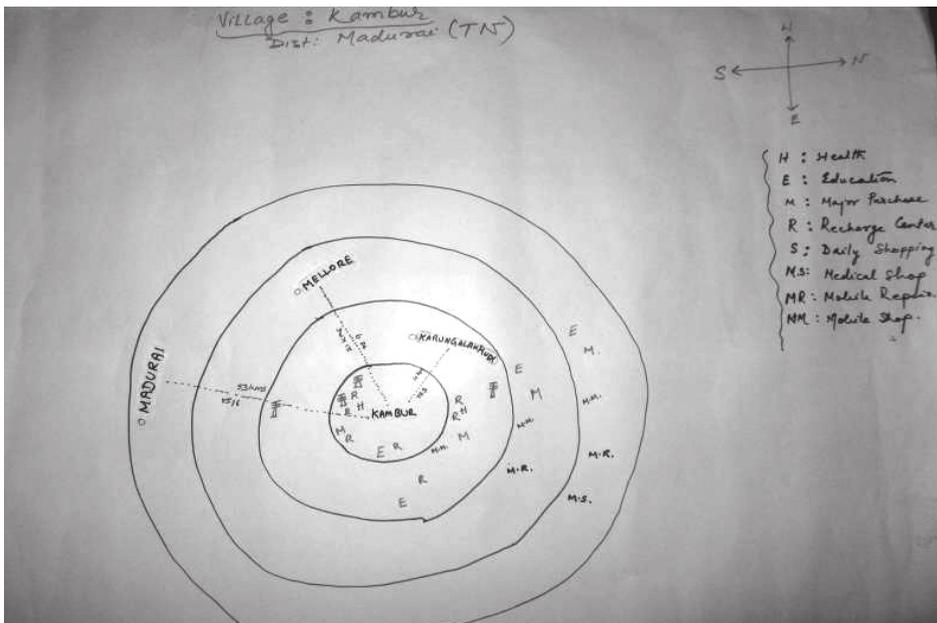**Figure 1** Market access map, Padhari Kalan, Unnao, U.P. (India)

Figure 2 Service awareness map, Kambur Village, Madurai, T.N. (India)

Purchase location

The mapping of locations by the participants in the research process indicated their preference for bigger towns, even 25–30 km away, for mobile handset purchase. They wanted choice and a bargain price for the handset. The town retailer is often the preferred outlet for an entire village; this may be because the retailer is either a friend or an extended family member of a family residing in the village.

Circle of influence

The PRA mapped the 'circle of influence' for the customers and 'to be' customers, and led to identification of different influencers, their level of influence and the time taken to arrive at a buying decision. The decision as to brand is based on several consultations with members of the family/ friend group who own the handset, and also the *ustad* (expert). The mobile *ustad* is usually an educated village youth who has either gained the skills to repair a handset or is very much aware of brands, service providers, connection activation and connection plans.

Service purchase behaviour

The consumers mapped their preference for getting the mobile service connection from their village or the nearest location available, which is usually less than 5 km. They felt that the mobile service requires frequent support from retailer as they have to get updates on schemes, recharge their phones and sometimes find ways to deal with sales promotion calls.

Daily activity clock

The daily activity clock mapped the different occupational groups for their schedules through the day. The map also recorded the period during which they made phone calls and the quality of the calls they experienced. The first stage of the PRA discussion led to the identification of four occupational groups – shopkeepers/traders/agents, salaried class, students, and farmers – who are major users of mobile phones.

The shopkeepers/traders and agents of companies made the highest use of mobile phones between 8 am and 1 pm, and then again between 4 pm and 8 pm. Farmers are the next highest users of mobile phones. While their calls started at 6 am, they reached a high level between 9 am and 12 noon. Students emerged as an important segment of mobile phone users, who also significantly influence the ecosystem. Their major call periods were between 8 am and 11 am, and then again between 3 pm and 5 pm. Most
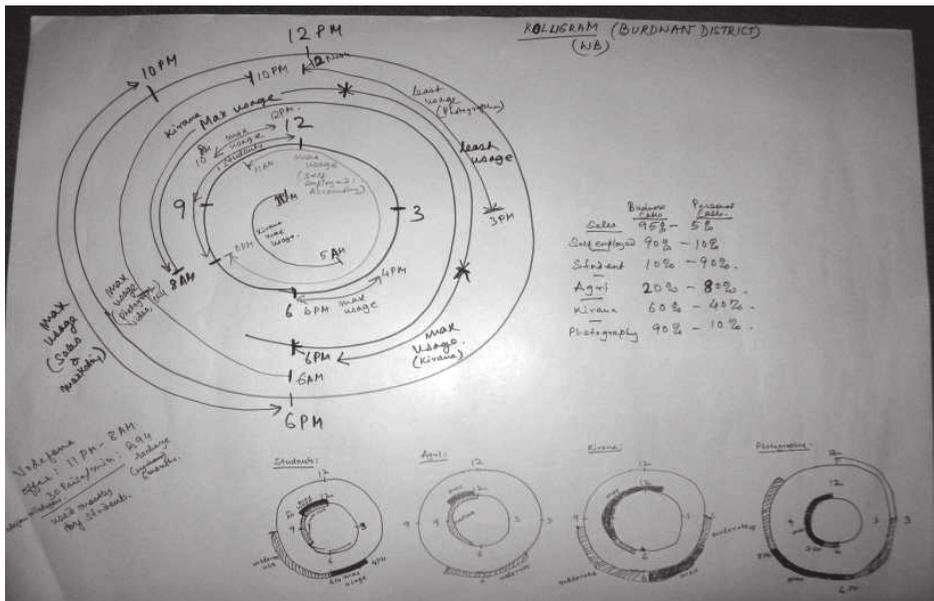
Figure 3   Daily activity clock for different occupational groups

calls were for socialising and connecting with friends. The labour segment is also a user of mobile services as they seek employment with contractors, agri-markets, and small and medium-sized enterprises in the locality. Their calls were mostly in the early-morning hours between 7 am and 9 am. The user segment uses the mobile services in a shared approach. One member in a group of labourers owns a mobile phone and he shares his handset with his community members.

Conclusion

PRA has been a revolutionary technique in offering deep insight into the lives of rural consumers. The non-conventional research approach used with PRA is consumer-centric, where the facilitator allows the discussion to happen in the way the consumer understood with regard to his mobile phone and his experience. The discussions were not controlled in terms of areas of information as defined in the research objectives. The respondents were not forced to think to respond to only select aspects of telecommunications. The research process ensured validation of the findings with the community.

   The tool, though derived from the social research process of PRA (designed for village development), deals with the consumers of products/

services, and we would therefore suggest calling it Participatory Rural Consumer Appraisal (PRCA). Thus – unlike FGD and Depth Interview (DI) – PRA allows the consumers to think and discuss in their natural setting, which is very important for a rural dweller.

Further, the results go a long way in understanding user behaviour with mobile services in a rural setting. Not only are there some very interesting findings in terms of mobile purchase and usage behaviour, the PRA tools used also provide deep insight into the support services as well as service expectations. The daily activity clock map clearly identified time zones when the signal services offered by service providers needed to be high and reliable during the day, without which dissatisfaction could creep in.

Limitations and future research

This study aims to demonstrate the innovative use of PRA in a particular context, but it is not completely without limitations. While the findings derived from the study using PRA methodology are interesting and useful, the limitations of insight generated from the study will be questionable in the absence of a representative sample. The reliability and external validity of the findings are yet to be established with a larger sample across different villages. Thus the findings of this study need to be taken with a pinch of salt as they may be contextual. The diversity of India from north to south and east to west ensures that rural consumer behaviour displays sufficient disparity to prevent one from accepting the findings of this study and using it to apply marketing strategies elsewhere. We encourage further theorising, empirical testing, replication and extension of our work across various regions and product categories representing diverse socio-economic characteristics samples, so that greater confidence can be placed in its implications.

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