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PHONES, FORESTS, AND FUTURES: TRIBAL YOUTH AND THE DIGITAL IMAGINATION IN JHARGRAM, WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract
This paper explores how tribal youth in Jungle Mahal—particularly those living in Kankrajhor, Amlasol, and Amjhorna—make sense of digital technologies within their everyday forest-based lives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with Lodha–Sabar, Bhumij, and Kurmi adolescents aged 14–21, the study examines how mobile phones extend existing experiences of belonging while simultaneously opening new imaginaries of work, mobility, and selfhood. Rather than treating youth as passive recipients of technology, the analysis foregrounds their creative, cautious, and often subtle ways of navigating online platforms. Reels of festivals, WhatsApp groups alerting elephant movement, and YouTube-driven learning illustrate how local cultural rhythms and digital flows intersect. These practices reveal a form of "digital–forest modernity" in which aspiration, ecological knowledge, and cultural pride coexist. By situating these narratives within broader debates on mediatization, reflexive modernity, and indigenous self-representation, the study highlights the need to understand rural digital life not only as an issue of access but as part of the intricate social worlds through which young people imagine their futures.

Keywords: *Tribal Youth, Digital Imagination, Jungle Mahal, Mediatization, and Indigenous Belonging*

Introduction

Youth in India have rarely been granted serious sociological attention. Despite being one of the world's largest youth populations, their everyday lives—especially those of young people from tribal and forest-dwelling communities—remain understudied. Much of the existing scholarship tends to view youth through the narrow frame of "social problems," describing them as passive recipients of unemployment, delinquency, or deviance, rather than as individuals navigating complex social worlds. Such portrayals flatten intersectional differences of caste, tribe, gender, and geography, producing a homogenised figure of "Indian youth" that obscures lived diversity. For young people of marginal communities, this scenario is even more visible.

The region known as *Jungle Mahal* exemplifies this silence. In 2004, *Amlasol*—a small Adivasi village under the *Kankrajhor* post office—drew national outrage when five residents reportedly died of hunger and malnutrition, exposing deep structural neglect in West Bengal's forested belts (Sarkar, 2023). At that time, the area was also marked by Maoist insurgency, a framing that often overshadowed everyday struggles rooted in poverty, displacement, and fragile livelihoods. Successive governments pledged transformation: the Left Front announced development schemes for over 8,000 underdeveloped villages, and Mamata Banerjee later promised to turn *Amlasol* into a "model village." Today, infrastructure has improved, and ration supplies are more dependable, yet the most striking shift lies in how the region is imagined. Weekenders from Kolkata now arrive seeking the "quiet" and "untouched" charm of *Kankrajhor*, while local youth increasingly appear as guides, helpers in tourist cottages, photographers, and reel-makers capturing forest life (Sarkar, 2023).

Yet these surface changes tell only part of the story. As scholars warn, access to digital technology does not automatically generate empowerment; rather, it reshapes identity, imagination, and community relations in uneven ways (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013; Rangaswamy & Arora, 2016). In indigenous contexts, these tensions deepen as young people negotiate ecological belonging, aspirations for mobility, and the performative worlds of social media (Salam, 2020; Jain, 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study explores how *Lodha–Sabar*, *Bhumij*, and *Kurmi* youth use digital media to navigate identity, aspiration, and risk within the changing landscape of *Jungle Mahal*.

Literature Review

The expansion of digital technologies into rural and forested regions of South Asia has generated a diverse body of research across sociology, anthropology, media studies, and development studies. Yet, studies rarely examine how tribal youth in politically sensitive and ecologically fragile regions—such as West Bengal's Jungle Mahal—rework their cultural worlds through mobile phones. Existing scholarship tends to focus either on the political history of these regions (Shah, 2010), or on structural issues like land alienation, forest rights, and displacement (Fernandes, 2009). What remains understudied is the subtle every-day shift created by smartphones: how young people imagine their future, interpret their identity, and re-negotiate their relationship with the forest. This section reviews four interconnected areas of literature: digital technology in rural and indigenous settings, digital media and cultural identity, Adivasi life and ecological belonging, and youth aspirations in late-modern India. It concludes by identifying clear gaps that justify the relevance of the present research.

Digital Technology in Rural and Indigenous Contexts:

Globally, studies on digital access among indigenous and marginalized communities highlight the non-linear and often contradictory impact of communication technologies. Digital inclusion is rarely reducible to "access"; instead, it mediates power, visibility, and inequality (Cinnamon, 2020). Research from Australia, Latin America, and Africa shows that smartphones open new opportunities for education, mobility, and self-representation while simultaneously exposing communities to surveillance, misrecognition, and commodification (Radcliffe & Westlund, 2020). Many scholars argue that digital technologies reshape indigenous lives in ways that combine tradition, aspiration, and experimentation, rather than simply marking "modernization" (Ginsburg, 2008).

In India, the spread of affordable smartphones and mobile internet has significantly altered social and economic practices across rural regions. Jeffrey and Doron's (2013) pioneering work demonstrated how the "cheap mobile phone" became a disruptive tool that reorganized politics, communication, and the rhythms of everyday life. Later studies have documented how youth use mobile phones to create hybrid forms of leisure—by mixing global digital content with local cultural forms (Rangaswamy & Arora, 2016). In low-income or remote communities, digital infrastructures emerge gradually and unevenly. Medhi-Thies et al. (2020) show that young people in tribal and low-income areas often learn digital practices informally—through peers, schoolmates, tourists, or NGO workers. These practices include information seeking, entertainment, learning, and micro-entrepreneurial activities.

A smaller but growing literature specifically explores how tribal youth engage with digital media. Salam (2020) notes that in central India, tribal youth use mobile phones to navigate "multiple worlds"—local village life, forest-based work, and aspirations for mobility in urban centres. Jain (2021) similarly argues that smartphones allow tribal youth to expand their sense of identity and belonging, particularly through visual media that celebrate cultural memory. These studies, however, largely focus on central and northeastern India. Very little attention has been paid to Bengal's forested western districts, despite their long history of political marginalization and state intervention.

Digital Media, Identity and Cultural Belonging:

Digital media has transformed how cultural life is documented, circulated, and remembered. In many indigenous societies, young people record dances, rituals, songs, and forest practices—not only for entertainment but also as a form of cultural preservation (Clemens, 2021). Indigenous media activism—such as sharing cultural performances online—often becomes a way to assert visibility in national and global spaces (Wilson & Stewart, 2008). Among rural youth in India, the rise of reels, short videos, and informal platforms has encouraged a new form of "vernacular creativity" (Mitra, 2020). These digital expressions mix humour, cultural pride, aspiration, and local identity.

Scholars have noted that identity formation online is both expressive and performative. Youth often present a curated version of their cultural identity for outside audiences, especially when their villages become tourist destinations (Mishra, 2019). This resonates in regions like Jungle Mahal, where tribal identity has historically been portrayed through stereotypes of backwardness or violence. Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that digital platforms reconfigure the social world through "deep mediatization," where the line between offline and online cultural life becomes increasingly blurred. For Adivasi youth, this may involve simultaneously preserving cultural pride and adapting cultural forms for digital circulation.

Forest, Ecology, and Adivasi Life in Eastern India:

Adivasi communities in eastern India have historically maintained a deep relationship with the forest—materially, emotionally, and symbolically. Studies by Baviskar (2005), Sundar (2016), and others show that forest spaces act as zones of work, ritual life, ecological knowledge, and cultural reproduction. In Jungle Mahal, this relationship has been complicated by political violence, forest restrictions, wildlife conflict (especially elephants), and the emergence of eco-tourism. The forest is not merely a resource but a living presence that shapes cultural memory and everyday rhythms.

The history of Jungle Mahal is marked by a combination of state neglect and episodic intervention. Scholars such as Duyker (2008) and Roy (2013) note that the region became a theatre of both insurgency and development, where welfare schemes, policing, and NGO activities often coexisted in uneasy ways. Despite improvements in infrastructure, livelihood insecurity and ecological vulnerability remain central concerns. Fernandes (2009) argues that development interventions often overlook how tribal communities articulate their own aspirations—especially the youth, whose desires no longer fit neatly into old narratives of subsistence or resistance.

More recent studies highlight how tourism reshapes tribal regions by producing new moral geographies—where outsiders view forest villages as "exotic," "simple," or "untouched" landscapes (Bandyopadhyay, 2021). This external gaze encourages local youth to use mobile cameras and social media to produce their own representations—sometimes challenging these outsider views, sometimes accommodating them. Digital photography and reels thus become tools for renegotiating the meaning of place, belonging, and dignity.

Youth, Aspiration, and Late Modernity:

Anthony Giddens (1991) describes late modernity as a period marked by expansive aspirations, new risks, and heightened reflexivity. Young people must constantly re-evaluate their life choices, often through exposure to global flows of images, information, and desires. For tribal youth in rural India, aspiration increasingly emerges through digital encounter—watching online classes, following influencers, exploring migration possibilities, or imagining marriage and lifestyle choices differently (Jeffrey et al., 2018). Studies show that smartphones widen their sense of what the world could be, even when structural inequalities limit actual mobility (Sharma, 2020). In places like Kankrajhor, young people use mobile phones to navigate: forest-based everyday life, informal labour markets, migration networks, romantic communication, digital performance of cultural heritage, and online learning and future-planning. This intersection of digital aspiration and ecological belonging is still a relatively new research terrain.

Research Gaps in Existing Scholarship:

A review of the literature reveals several clear gaps: Jungle Mahal is understudied in contemporary digital anthropology and media sociology. Most work on the region focuses on insurgency, poverty, or state policy—not digital life. Adivasi youth perspectives are marginal in research on digital transformation in India. Existing studies often treat tribal communities as passive recipients of technology. The relationship between digital practices and ecological belonging is rarely explored. Hardly any studies examine how smartphones interact with forest knowledge, wildlife conflicts, and ritual life. Tourism–digital media connections in forested tribal landscapes remain poorly understood. The shift from "Maoist zone" to "weekend destination" has changed how Adivasi youth see themselves—and how outsiders see them. Kankrajhor-specific scholarship is nearly absent, despite its symbolic place in Bengal's political and developmental narratives. This research therefore fills a significant gap by documenting how digital technologies shape identity, aspiration, and forest relations among Lodha, Sabar, Bhumij, and Kurmi youth in a region undergoing long-term socio-political transformation.

Objectives of the Study

This paper has two specific objectives. *First*, it explores how smartphones and mobile internet are reshaping the ordinary routines, ambitions, and social relationships of tribal youth—particularly in the domains of education, entertainment, labour, and future-making. *Second*, it examines how digital media practices influence cultural identity, belonging, and the relationship with the forest—an element central to Adivasi life in *Jungle Mahal*.

By grounding the analysis in extensive primary fieldwork conducted between July and October 2025, the study contributes to broader debates on ethnicity, digital modernity, and forest-based livelihoods in eastern India. More importantly, it foregrounds the voices of young people whose narratives rarely enter academic or policy conversations, even though they stand at the centre of *Jungle Mahal*'s unfolding future.

Methodology

This study adopts a *qualitative ethnographic design*, which is appropriate for understanding how tribal youth in forested regions interpret digital technologies within their everyday social worlds. Considering the historical and ecological specificity of *Jungle Mahal*, an ethnographic approach offered the most sensitive and contextually grounded framework for documenting the subtle ways in which young people relate to mobile phones, the forest, and their cultural identity. Fieldwork was conducted in three villages under *Kankrajhor* post office—*Kankrajhore*, *Amlasol*, and *Amjhorna*—located in the Belpahari Block of Jhargram district, West Bengal. These villages are predominantly inhabited by Lodha-Sabar, Bhumij, Kurmi, and Munda communities and have historically experienced a mix of economic marginality, state intervention, and more recently, the slow expansion of eco-tourism and digital connectivity.

A total of 20 participants—10 boys and 10 girls, aged 14 to 21 years—were selected using purposive sampling. The aim was not demographic representation but depth of insight across gender, village location, and tribal affiliation. The research involved extended *participant observation*, where the researcher spent time in community spaces, village festivals, tea stalls, forest edges, and tourist cottages. Occasional *non-participant observation* was used during community rituals or crowded gatherings where participation was not appropriate. The researcher has been familiar with the region since 2017, which helped build rapport and cultural sensitivity. Each participant was interviewed using a *semi-structured schedule* and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in Bengali and occasionally in local dialects.

The analysis followed a thematic approach, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative model of identifying patterns within qualitative data. Transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly, coded manually, and clustered into thematic categories such as *digital labour imagination*, *vernacular creativity*, *forest alerts and risk negotiation*, *cultural visibility*, *gendered constraints*, and *aspirational mobility*. The analysis prioritized interpretive discussion, connecting participants' narratives with broader theoretical debates on mediatization, late modernity, and indigenous belonging. Participants were informed about the purpose of

the study, and verbal consent was secured in accordance with local norms. Pseudonyms are used throughout the research. For the sake of academic integrity guidelines, the present author acknowledges that AI tools (*ChatGPT 5*) were used only for language refinement and organizational clarity during the writing stage, after the completion of data collection and manual analysis. No part of the data, interpretations, or conceptual arguments was generated by AI. The interviews, observations, coding, and thematic interpretations were conducted solely by the researcher.

Findings and Analysis

The socio-demographic profile reflects a transitional generation living at the intersection of forest-based livelihood, state development initiatives, and expanding digital connectivity. Although the respondents represent four distinct tribal communities—Lodha–Sabar, Bhumij, Kurmi, and Munda—their lives converge through shared experiences of ecological dependence, limited economic opportunities, and uneven access to formal education. Most respondents fall in the 15–19-year range, an age that coincides with rising digital curiosity and early encounters with adulthood. Gender sharply structures digital and social possibilities. Boys enjoy greater spatial freedom, moving across villages, forest edges, and sometimes migrating seasonally for work. Girls' mobility remains restricted, shaped by safety concerns, household responsibilities, and parental surveillance. While 60% of respondents are in Classes VII–IX, formal educational continuity is uncertain. Boys frequently drop out due to economic pressure, while girls continue schooling but face invisible barriers to higher education. The nearest college is far, transportation is poor, and parental norms discourage long-distance travel.

Tribal identity remains foundational. Whether Lodha–Sabar, Bhumij, or Kurmi, all respondents described intimate connections to the forest, rituals, festivals, and kinship routines. Yet these connections now pass through digital mediation. Many youth film *Karam Puja*, *Chhau dance*, or forest landscapes to share online, echoing Indigenous Media Theory's emphasis on self-representation as cultural sovereignty (Ginsburg, 2008). All respondents come from households reliant on forest collection, daily wage labour, and small cultivation, with incomes ranging from ₹9,000–₹25,000. Economic precarity shapes decisions about schooling, migration, and phone usage. For many, paying ₹250–₹300 per month for data recharge is a meaningful cost, and device repairs often depend on fathers' or brothers' earnings. Yet it is precisely in this insecure environment that youth use digital media to manage what Beck (1992) calls the risks of modernity. Boys watch videos about masonry, electrical work, or machine operation; girls explore nursing or teaching aspirations through digital content. Migration decisions—especially among boys—are often taken after WhatsApp calls with workers in Gujarat or Mumbai. Here, digital networks become informal infrastructures of survival. The socio-demographic table also underscores a critical pattern: ownership vs. access.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 20)

Variable	Categories / Description	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Boys	10	50%
	Girls	10	50%
Age Group	14–16 years	7	35%
	17–19 years	9	45%
	20–21 years	4	20%
Village	Kankrajhore	8	40%
	Amlasol	7	35%
	Amjhorna	5	25%
Tribal Affiliation	Lodha–Sabar	8	40%
	Bhumij	5	25%
	Kurmi	5	25%
	Munda	2	10%
Education Level	Class VII–IX	12	60%
	Class X–XII	6	30%
	Dropped out (before Class IX)	2	10%
Household Occupation	Forest work, wage labour, poultry rearing, small cultivation	20 households	100%
Monthly Family Income	Approx. ₹9,000–₹25,000	—	—
Phone Ownership	Personal smartphone (boys)	12	60 %
	Shared family phone (girls)	7	35%
	No personal access (rare cases)	1	5%
	All respondents	20	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

Where boys (9 out of 10) have personal smartphones, girls (7 out of 10) depend on shared devices. This distinction influences confidence, skill development, and visibility. Boys treat the phone as a personal companion; girls negotiate usage within

household rhythms. Yet girls also display remarkable creativity within constraints—recording rituals, following motivational videos, or observing fashion trends discreetly.

The socio-demographic profile thus reflects a generation navigating tradition, precarity, and technological possibility. They remain rooted in cultural identities while embracing digital tools to imagine futures beyond the geographic and economic boundaries of *Jungle Mahal*.

Research Objective 1: *To understand how tribal youth use digital technologies to imagine, negotiate, and reshape their everyday lives and aspirations in Jungle Mahal.*

When I walked through the forest paths of *Kankrajhore*, *Amlasol*, and *Amjhorna* during fieldwork, the first thing that struck me was the rhythm of young people's lives—the sound of cattle bells mixing with the sharp, unexpected ring of a phone; the sight of boys sitting on low mud walls scrolling through reels; the careful way girls handled their father's or brother's phones, wiping the screen before returning it. The phone did not feel like an intruder in this landscape. Rather, it had become a quiet companion moving through the hills, streams, and laterite soil. What follows is not just "themes," but traces of everyday life—the moments, gestures, hesitations, and small conversations through which digital aspirations take shape in *Jungle Mahal*.

The youth of these villages often used the phrase *Baire'r Lok* (previously called *Diku*)—people from outside—to talk about anyone who lived beyond the forest. The smartphone, as several boys said quite casually, "takes us there." When Rajib showed me a YouTube video on JCB operation, he held the phone almost reverently, as if the screen carried a world bigger than the narrow, winding road outside his house. *Rahul*, barely sixteen, spoke of distant cities he had never visited but felt familiar with because "I see them every day on mobile". For the girls, the sense of "elsewhere" was softer, sometimes wistful. One girl from *Amlasol* told me: *"Ami Kolkata dekhi phone-e, kintu jete pari na"*—"I see Kolkata through the phone, but I cannot go." She said it without bitterness, but with an honest acceptance of the boundaries drawn around her life. These everyday encounters echo Appadurai's (1996) idea of the *social imagination*: futures are stitched together not from textbooks or formal counselling, but from fragments—videos of city roads, short clips of women teaching in schools, photographs shared by cousins working in construction sites. In these moments, a phone is not a device; it becomes *a small portal* through which a forest-born youth tests the edges of a larger world.

School attendance in these villages is irregular, not by choice but by circumstance. Distance, family pressure, and intermittent migration shape how long a child stays in school. Yet, during fieldwork, I saw a boy with a cracked vivo screen watching "Khan Sir" explain history; a girl watching a Bengali grammar video quietly after finishing her household work. Somnath, who had left school in Class IX, told me: *"Amar school ekhono mobile-e cholchhe."* ("My schooling still continues on the phone."). This kind of learning illustrates Couldry & Hepp's (2017) notion of deep mediatization. Knowledge is no longer tied to formal classrooms; it flows through digital cracks, circulating across forest paths, tea stalls, and village courtyards.

Most families earn between ₹9,000 and ₹25,000 a month, and the youth feel this constraint intimately. Boys often spoke of their phones with a seriousness that came from knowing its cost. A cracked screen was not just an inconvenience—it could delay job calls or access to online learning. Girls repeated, almost like a rule, "Phone ta amar na"— "The phone is not mine"—as if reminding themselves not to overstep. Yet aspirations persist.

A boy from *Amjhorna* pointed at a reel of a Chennai construction site and said, "*Ekdin amio joboi*"— "One day I will also go for this." A girl whispered that she wanted to be a nurse but admitted that she had never met anyone who took that path. This delicate balance between hope and hardship reflects Beck's (1992**)** risk society: in precarious contexts, individual dreams are shouldered alone, often without systemic support.

Conversations about friendship and romance revealed another layer of digital life. Boys spoke more openly about chatting with girls from Purulia or Bankura, often contacting them through mutual friends or gaming groups. Girls, however, described an invisible geography of restriction. They were wary of being "seen" online, especially by relatives or neighbours. One girl told me: *"Bondhuder shathe group-e kotha boli, kintu amader sadharonoto photo thake na."*- ("We talk with friends', but generally our photos are not shown."). Giddens (1992) writes about the transformation of intimacy in late modernity, but in *Jungle Mahal*, intimacy is soft, hidden, and careful, shaped by the weight of kinship norms and the vulnerability of girls' online presence. The digital field becomes a place where desire hums quietly beneath caution.

One afternoon, I watched three boys making a short reel of a drum performance during a village gathering. After recording, they replayed it repeatedly, laughing and adjusting sound filters. Later, a girl from *Kankrajhore* proudly showed me festival videos on her borrowed phone, pointing out the dancing figures and forest backdrop. These practices embody what Ginsburg (2008) calls indigenous media as *"cultural activism."* Youth are not passively consuming urban content—they are producing local culture, reframed through digital eyes. The forest becomes a backdrop not only for livelihood but for storytelling and self-display. Rituals, dances, and landscapes are now archived in pixels, circulating across WhatsApp groups and Instagram pages.

In *Jungle Mahal*, risk has always been part of life—particularly due to elephant movement. Youth spoke repeatedly about block-level WhatsApp groups that warn villagers of elephant sightings. A boy from *Amlasol* pointed to his screen showing a grainy night-time elephant video and said, "*Ei bhabe amra bachchhi*"— "This is how we save ourselves." Phones thus operate both at the edge of aspiration and at the heart of ecological survival. This dual role echoes Beck's (1992) argument that modern technological worlds blur the line between empowerment and vulnerability. In *Jungle Mahal*, a phone is both: a tool of imagination, and a tool of safety.

This ethnographic reading of Objective 1 reveals the youth are not only a passive recipient of modernity but an active world-maker navigating aspiration, precarity, and belonging through the glow of their small screens. Digital life here does not replace indigenous belonging; rather, it becomes woven into it, forming a hybrid mode of living—what might be called *a digital-forest modernity*.

Research Objective 2: *To examine how tribal youth negotiate cultural identity, ecological belonging, and digital representation through everyday media practices.*

During fieldwork in *Kankrajhor*, *Amlasol*, and *Amjhorna*, I noticed that cultural identity is not something the young people "claim" in formal statements. It surfaces instead in small gestures—how they handle a drum during *Karam Puja*, the way girls describe ritual songs sung by their mothers, or how boys record a clip of forest hills after rainfall. Their belonging to *Jungle Mahal* is felt through soil, kinship, the rhythm of festivals, and now, increasingly, through the digital traces they produce and circulate. Below are the key thematic patterns through which cultural identity and ecological belonging take shape in everyday digital life.

For the youth of *Jungle Mahal*, the forest is not an abstract space; it is a lived environment connected with their daily movements. *Rahul*, *Joy*, and *Rajib* described the forest as a place where they grew up learning which paths lead to streams, where elephants usually cross, or how the smell of mahua blossoms signals seasonal shifts. Even girls, who move less freely, spoke of the forest edges with familiarity— "*amader jayga*"— "our place". So, digital media does not detach this sense of belonging. Instead, it becomes another way to hold onto the forest. Boys often showed videos of hills, streams, or quiet morning paths. These were not tourist-style recordings; they were intimate, almost affectionate portrayals of the landscape they knew by foot. This resonates with Indigenous Media Theory (Ginsburg, 2008), which emphasizes that media can function as a continuation of indigenous world-making, not a break from it. Here, the digital camera becomes a new tool of attachment—a way to honour the forest through a lens.

Festivals such as *Karam Puja*, local collective dance and drum biting evenings, and small neighbourhood gatherings appear frequently in the youth's videos. *Anupa*, a *Kurmi* girl from *Kankrajhor*, proudly showed me recordings of a drum circle and dance from last winter. Each clip carried not only sound but memory—faces, movements, glances, the glow of lights. Girls especially used these recordings to send updates to relatives who had married into distant villages, turning digital circulation into a kind of cultural kinship. Boys, however, used a slightly different style—recording dance, group poses, or festival decorations to share on Instagram and WhatsApp. *Rohit* from *Amlasol* affectionately referred to a friend as "*Hello guys boy*" because he always started reels by greeting viewers in a comic English accent. His playful performance echoed a hybrid digital identity—part forest youth, part self-styled influencer. These digital expressions reflect what Couldry and Hepp (2017) call the mediatized shaping of cultural life—where rituals are not simply performed locally but re-lived, re-circulated, and reframed through digital storytelling. In *Jungle Mahal*, digital media becomes a "second stage" where cultural identity is gently, often humorously, performed.

Several youths, particularly girls, expressed discomfort when tourists photographed them without consent. *Priyanka* from *Amjhorna* said, *"Ora to amader lok na. Toh chhobi tule keno?"* ("They are not our people. Why do they take our photos?"). Her objection carried the weight of a long history in which tribal communities have been seen, framed, and interpreted by outsiders—from colonial ethnographers to urban tourists. For many girls, digital visibility felt like both an opportunity and a risk. They enjoyed sharing reels among friends, but resisted unwanted visibility triggered by strangers' cameras. Indigenous Media Theory helps to interpret this ambivalence. According to Ginsburg (2008), media can be used to resist the *colonial gaze* by enabling communities to become their own narrators. Youth in *Kankrajhor*, *Amlasol*, and *Amjhorna* negotiate this by choosing who sees them, how they appear, and what they record.

One of the most striking insights from my fieldwork was how deeply ecological awareness shapes digital behaviour. Every respondent mentioned WhatsApp groups dedicated to elephant alerts—groups that included villagers, local youth, forest guards, and sometimes block-level officials. Videos and pictures of elephants, fire outbreaks, or fallen trees circulated fast. A boy from *Amlasol*, *Bubai*, pointed to a night-time video of elephants moving across a field: *"Ei video pele amra shobai sojag hoye jayi."* ("When we receive such videos, we all become alert."). This practice reveals a hybrid knowledge ecology—traditional forest understanding combined with digital communication. What Beck (1992) describes as *reflexive modernization*—society adapting to new risks—is visible here in a deeply rural setting. Phones are not separate from forest life; they are embedded within it as tools of collective safety.

For many respondents, especially girls, cultural identity is practiced through a delicate balance—modesty, pride, and protection. They often shared reels of festivals or landscapes but hesitated to display their own faces. *Sima* from *Kankrajhor* explained: *"Amra culture dekhai. Kintu nijeder sob bar korte bhalo lage na."* ("We show our culture. But we do not like to show too much of ourselves."). This distinction—between showing the community and showing the self—reveals how cultural identity is mediated through moral values, kinship expectations, and gendered dignity. Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity the self becomes a reflexive project, shaped through choices and self-presentation. Yet among tribal youth, selfhood remains socially embedded, carefully negotiated through community norms. Digital media offers space for pride in identity, but within the moral boundaries of village life.

Digital media allows youth to move between spheres—between ritual and play, between local identity and global aesthetics, between forest paths and online landscapes. They are neither rejecting tradition nor blindly embracing modernity. Instead, they

are crafting what might be called *a moving identity*, shaped by both memory and aspiration. For boys, digital platforms often support an expanding sense of possibility—experimenting with fashion, music, humour, or cinematic poses. For girls, cultural identity is expressed more cautiously, tied to kinship and emotional bonds, yet still creative in its own quiet way. Appadurai's (1996) imagination framework helps explain this fluidity: cultural identity here is not static but a verb—something continually made, remade, and felt through digital circulation and everyday practice.

The cultural identity of youth in *Kankrajhor*, *Amlasol*, and *Amjhorna* is neither frozen in tradition nor dissolved by digital exposure. Instead, it is performed, protected, and reimagined through mobile screens. This is a story of youth navigating modernity with grounded feet, forest memory, and a glowing screen—crafting, in their own subtle way, a *digital-ecological belonging* unique to *Jungle Mahal*.

Conclusion & Policy Implications

The experiences of tribal youth in *Jungle Mahal* remind us that digital life does not unfold in abstraction but is woven through the textures of forest work, kinship obligations, gendered mobility, and the memories of a region long marked by deprivation. What emerges from this study is not a story of dramatic technological transformation, but of young people slowly and thoughtfully incorporating mobile phones into their everyday lives. The device becomes a companion in the forest, a tool for negotiating risk, a quiet space for aspirational dreaming, and an informal archive for cultural expression. For many, it is also the only bridge connecting them to distant educational or vocational possibilities.

These findings offer several policy directions. First, digital interventions in tribal regions must move beyond the narrow metric of "connectivity." Young people require stable signal coverage, affordable data plans, and access to well-maintained public digital spaces where girls, in particular, can participate without surveillance or stigma. Second, educational policies should recognise the role of informal digital learning. Creating locally relevant digital learning materials in regional languages—and ensuring these are accessible on low-cost devices—would support existing practices rather than replace them. Third, given the rising tourist presence in *Kankrajhor* and neighbouring villages, there is a need for community-led guidelines that protect young people from intrusive photography and encourage ethical representation.

Finally, local governance bodies and forest departments should strengthen digital systems for ecological safety, especially elephant-movement alerts that have already reduced harm. Any digital policy in *Jungle Mahal* must begin with the recognition that youth are not passive users but active interpreters, negotiating technology with care, creativity, and a deep sense of belonging tied to their landscape. By listening to their narratives, policy can move closer to the lived realities of those it seeks to serve.

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