Book Review
ICT and Indian Social Change: Diffusion, Poverty, Governance

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ICT and Indian Social Change: Diffusion, Poverty, Governance
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It is too commonplace to rehash that ICTs have widely and deeply penetrated in all spheres of life and work in any modesty modern society. From defense to religion, governance to research, medicine to entertainment, academies to industry, banking and commerce to crime, art to design and manufacturing nothing is beyond their preview. It has become an agent of social change which encompasses economy, technology, education, life and work styles, and what not. ICTs provide development and delivery toolkit. Access to ICT is access to sustained social development as technology overcomes the paucity of natural resources – information is a meta resource.

India’s relation with IT has been somewhat special and unique. Initiated in mid 1980s by the young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1944-1991) it moved sluggishly in India due to poverty, illiteracy, weighty bureaucracy and socialist economy of pre-1990 era, but abroad it made its presence felt and earned a name and wealth for India in software industry. Speaking on other (by no means flip) side IT technicians in India literally worship computer machines on specially marked occasions in a year. India, being in a fast transitional phase from low to high economic growth, has started many ICT driven initiatives to generate and deliver services and programmes in public and private sectors which have created a unique social milieu. That is the focus of this book which is a sequel to the ICTs and Indian Economic Development (Sage, 2005). Both the volumes are based on sets of papers from international conferences funded by Indo-Dutch Programme for Alternatives in Development (IDP/AD) which has also funded publication of these proceedings. The first conference was held in Bangalore in 2002, while the year of the conference from which present papers have been taken is not disclosed – purposely for commercial reasons?; it seems to be between 2004-2005. The included papers though claimed to be “extensively revised” (Preface, p.10) are bit dated. For examples, growth of telephones is up to April 2005, and teledensity is up to December 2004, while expenditure on elementary education in India is given for the fiscal year 2003-2004. Such data could have been easily updated from the websites of respective ministries and departments. It should be viewed as speedy spread for the ICT goings on in India, “This volume also includes a few additional papers that address important facets for the theme” (Introduction, p. 33). Yet again the newly added papers are not identified, through one could make some
guess from the decency of references at the end of those chapters.

The book is focused on India, as too obvious from the title, yet its perspective is international; no nation or its development is isolated in this globalized world. It is a collection of sixteen papers by twenty one contributors including the editors. The first chapter by first two of the three editors sets the tone. It presents a skilled synopsis of the description and discussions to follow. Indeed it is a brilliant socio-philosophical analysis and an overview of the entire work. In rest of the chapters topics taken up include socio-cultural bearing of IT, rural development and alleviation of poverty, e-governance and its impact, e-democracy, rural connectivity through the Internet, development of IT industry, software trade, emergence and effectiveness of community radio for information, enhancement of public accountability, rise of middle class, women empowerment, fast emergence of young, urbanite English speaking high income professionals, IT and managerial jobs, transnational NRIs, migration of IT workers and political impact of diasporas on the mother country. The last chapter is on growing e-piracy and weak or ineffective measures to control it, far from eradicating it. The purview of social change being too encompassing, obviously many more issues seem omitted than covered in this volume. Indeed it would be futile to cover this encyclopedic subject in one slim volume. Some of the visible omits are IT Act (2000), e-commerce, digital divide, IT and higher education, and info networks. Minor or sideline omissions can be numerous ranging from computer education to telemedicine. It mentions the National Institute of Information Technology (NIIT) (p.374) but makes no mention of Indian Institutes of Information Technology aspiring to replicate the aura and awe of IITs of India. On the other hand overlapping of topics in such a composite text is inevitable. Nevertheless, what is presented here is authentic and readable by experts drawn from all over the world, who are a name in their field.

Editorial work is to be commended. Each chapter dotted with figures, tables and anecdotes has been divided into labeled sections, and ends with a conclusion (in most of the chapters), and invariably with notes and references. List of tables and figures are there but no list of abbreviations has been given though used profusely in the text. For example, ITES occurs at pages 6 (Table of contents) and 10 (Preface), but only at page 262 I could make its meaning as IT enabled services. Index too lacks professional touch.

Overviewingly, it is a scholarly work with world class production standards. It will be useful to the economy planners, academicians and IT leaders.

M. P. Satija, is a professor in the Department of Library and Information Science, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India. Having done his PhD on Ranganathan studies, he has been instrumental in interpreting and propagating Ranganathan’s works and ideas to the new generation. As an author of more than a dozen books, 150 papers and 200 book reviews and many conference papers published in India and abroad. He has visited Germany, France, Finland, England, Nepal, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sri Lanka in connection with professional work. In 2005 he was invited for a year by the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka to serve as a visiting professor. There he was instrumental in instituting library and information science doctoral programme in the Department of Library of Information Science which is the first ever research degree programme in the country. Since April 2007 he is a member advisory board of the UDC Consortium, the Hague.