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Joyojeet Pal, Meera Lakshmanan and Kentaro Toyama, "My Child Will Be Respected: Parental Perspectives on Computers and Education in Rural India," *Information Systems Frontiers* 11(2009), pp 129-144.

**Summary | Emily Puckett | SI 657 | March 22, 2010**

In this piece, Pal et. al. discuss the cultural milieu in which ICT activities take place, specifically examining computer-aided learning (CAL) in primary schools in India. Through a series of interviews with parents in four states in India, they discovered that there is a vast discourse around technology that permeates the perceptions of its value toward the individual, the school and the community. This work is meant to begin addressing the dearth of research on second-order impacts of technology activities as well as establishing a framework for "providing empirical evidence of poverty alleviation for people working in primary sectors as an outcome of injecting technological innovations in their lives" (131).

Through this research, they found the following:

**Themes:**

1. The issue of an existing crisis in agriculture and a consequent interest in investing in children's schooling
2. Familiarity with the idea of computers, but a very limited understanding of a computer's function

**Issues:**

1. A belief that the CAL program was increasing their children's interest in school
2. The computer as an artifact of pride in the village, and a symbol of the school's rise in status
3. Gender dimension to the use of computers—such as selective willingness to spend for computer classes by gender, concerns about the dowry implications of computer education

Parents' differing concepts of ownership, agency and association with computers and technology were also revealed in this research. The researchers found themselves representatives of the technology they were there to study to the communities they were working with, meaning they also part of the discourse. Most parents expressed a desire for their children to migrate away from agriculture to government jobs in more populated areas (section 4.1), meaning more stability and higher income to the parents (135). In this case, the computer is an indicator of modernity, not a tool (136). Factory workers whose children had access to CALs indicated that English, rather than technical skills were more important factors of success and economic mobility (section 4.3).

Computer use and CALs are also associated with government entities and thus not seen as the responsibility of the parents or community to maintain (section 4.5), contrasting with the simultaneous view that computers were a public good and should be communally used (section 4.6). This reveals itself as an important factor in efforts among NGOs, government and private companies' ITC efforts toward sustainable programs. As Surana notes, "to leverage the range of skills and availability of potential support personal [for our projects] we have created a three-tiered support system:" local staff, local network integrators and a remote management team (54). While these features are important in many projects, Pal et al's research reveals that it is also the perception of agency within a community regarding the technology that can ultimately determine the stability and evolution of these projects. They write, "although the general perception of usefulness of computers is positive, the quality of initial experience with computers can be particularly important in setting expectations and opinions about the values of technology in the long term" (140).

While efforts like the framework paper *Improving Health, Connecting People* provide overarching guidelines for the development, implementation and maintenance of ICT projects, it is clear that there is no standardized method of project implementation and management, especially with regard to different institutional sector activities and failed projects can have lasting impacts on the way in which technology gets incorporated into the cultural structure of a community. Pal. et al illustrate these discrepancies in their research, highlighting the Powerful symbolic value of the [technology programs] in the rural space" (142).