Media Literacy and Education in India During Times of Communication Abundance

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Abstract
Media literacy has been a persistent, but under-engaged concern in India despite its media explosion. This commentary examines media literacy against various dimensions like the public sphere, market, technology and access, civil society and citizen activism to identify the limitations and possibilities. In the process, it proposes inclusive, multi-pronged continuous approaches to build critical awareness, autonomies and empowered action.

Keywords
Media education, empowerment, participation, democracy, activism

Introduction
The profound explosion in information and communication in India is well documented. Media transformations have empowered rural publics, information and rights cultures and democracy (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013; Ninan, 2007; Rao, 2010; Thomas, 2011). Public participation has become visibly mediatized, interactive and spontaneous. Yet, increasing corporate clout, political nexus, middle-class bias, paid news and rampant sensationalism have raised concerns of being detrimental to democracy (Chaudhuri, 2010; Sonwalkar, 2002). Media pluralism, information abundance, global connectivity and interactivity co-exist with inherent contradictions. There are exclusions due to lack of access, basic literacy and structural constraints of caste, class and gender. Largely, the democratic benefits appear to be exercised by the privileged and middle classes. Some lament media expansion has marginalized media literacy movements (Nagaraj, Kundu, & Nayak, 2014). What are the challenges? What strategies would be relevant to encourage literate, healthy users in a digital era hyper-saturated with news, information, entertainment, sponsored and user-generated contents?

The over-abundance of media contents and digital culture mandates a thorough media literacy engagement. Yet, the failure to implement programmes and policies towards building media literacy and a culture of critical competencies is alarming. Media education makes for an active citizenry strengthening...
critical abilities and communicative skills necessary for empowered action and informed participation. Since media messages are largely constructed, they embody dominant ideologies that can be interpreted in many ways. De-constructing media reality and their meanings therefore empowers users to become ‘critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using images, sound and language’ (Jacquinot-Delaunay, Carlsson, Tayie, & José Manuel Pérez, 2008, p. 22). Unlike before, citizens have far more opportunities to co-produce content and drive public agendas. Acknowledging active instrumentality of ordinary people and their agency remains an essential component to advance agendas for media literacy in new media environments.

This article situates media literacy within communication abundance and critically looks at specific opportunities and challenges. Given that media is manifest in everyday experiences, consumption, the exercise of choices and competing representations and action, delineating some contexts can help indicate possible policies, pedagogical approaches and civic interest resources. A multi-pronged approach which recognizes spontaneous and continued engagements, critical awareness, autonomies and action is important for ‘enhancing citizenship and human rights values…in informal settings…and as a tool for sustainability’ in information societies (Frau-Meigs, 2008, p. 52).

Varying Definitions?

Media policies and education after independence had commonly oscillated between protectionist orientations and development initiatives. Today there is some confusion in the manner in which media education is defined in India. It encompasses a range of disciplinary and political meanings: being envisaged as professional training for media practitioners, learning through media-based technologies like ICT and critical media education for progressive social change. The nature of questions and resources that bear upon these three areas are different. However, all three encourage the normative objective of empowerment, progressiveness, participation, ‘development and liberation’ and ‘democratic communication’ (Das, 2009; Kumar, 2007) central to India’s democratic vision. The platforms for media education are scattered too ranging from academia, policy initiatives, practice-based to civil society engagements. One could argue that a lack of clear definition could in fact work as strength to build inclusive, multi-pronged strategy of information and communication literacies. Both contemporary literacy interventions that articulate broad concerns like ‘democratization of communication’ and specific practice-based, bottom-up pedagogies for local socio-cultural settings are equally relevant here (Asthana, 2008; Das, 2009; Kumar, 2007; Nagaraj et al., 2014).

Public Sphere and Media Literacy

One question that comes up in the context of challenges to empowerment as envisioned in media literacy is the relationship between media, public sphere and its socio-political structures. Despite institutional constraints, India has a history of information seeking behaviours, public agitations and civic practices which has enriched the public sphere. At the same time, it is also fragmented on account of diverse histories, political formations, language, technological access and education.

The predominant view appears to be that the 1990s expansion of media industries and globalization shrunk the public sphere. First, the withdrawal of public sector and deregulation despite technological advances has not resolved exclusions of poverty, caste and illiteracy. Media industries are dominated by transnationals and ties between politics and market. Television’s political economy is strongly tethered
to real estate industries, black capital, corporate and political ownerships. Public broadcast (Doordarshan) remains unimaginative and commercial. ‘Built-in disparity and unevenness’ of the press has increased ‘monopolistic tendencies and aggressive market practices’ (Ram, 2011, pp. 6, 10). Second, media contents have changed visibly. Development news has steadily declined. Entertaining formats like ‘infotainment’ dominate the press (Sonwalkar, 2002), while Television news is strongly influenced by polls, ratings, profits and middle class interests. Third, policy formulations transnational corporate media and economic concerns seem to weaken (Das, 2009, p. 68). Regulatory policies in broadcast, cinema and Internet and content regulation have not kept pace with technological transformations. The few regulatory frameworks have run the risk of blatant restrictions and indiscriminate, arbitrary usage that violate other rights. Also, comprehensive media literacy policy has not taken shape. The broader structural neglect of media policy in general has become acute in the absence of evaluation and poor consultative engagements with key stakeholders like research bodies, policy makers, civil society and universities (Das & Parthasarathi, 2011, p. 250). Fourth, new media and mobile phones have revolutionized user-generated contents bringing greater visibility and publicity to public’s engagements, sometimes with contradictory implications.

There are certain issues of relevance here for media literacy given that distinctions like public and private, state and citizens and inclusion and exclusions are increasingly blurred in elite-dominated mediatized public sphere. Even though the manner in which power, technology and information have been deployed stands transformed, the communicative visibility of voices and action that challenge inequalities has always been important as

...organized movements based broadly on demands for human rights, such as the right to school education, the right to food (and, in particular, to midday school meals), the entitlement to basic health care, guarantees of environmental preservation, and the right of employment guarantee...serve to focus attention on particular societal failures, partly as supplements to broad public discussions in the media, but they also provide a politically harder edge to socially important demands. (Sen, 2005, p. 202)

As Mouffe (2000, pp. 15–16) argues, agonistic pluralism and confrontation is the ‘very condition of existence’ of democracy as its ‘specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it’. Contextualizing media and deliberation, Mansell (2010, p. 265) too writes that the interplay of power and antagonism is a part of political practice in democracies with ‘diversity and difference’ which means ‘allowing passionate debate, providing the means for enabling conflict among adversaries to be expressed’ and therefore a vibrant public sphere. The media therefore has a significant role to play.

Second, this raises a related issue representation and participation in the public sphere. The middle-class public, who increasingly advocate the market and attack the idea of welfare state, is often projected by the media as the vanguards of neo-liberalism and globalization (Chaudhuri, 2010, p. 62). By contrast, others observe that the growing pressures by the middle class on issues of governance, corruption and gender are ‘deepening..., widening public sphere’, despite the ‘digital divide’ (Rodrigues, 2014). In what could be of relevance to a media literacy agenda, the increasing assertion of the educated among marginal groups has given them a new visibility. Besides, more avenues for citizen journalism have opened with ‘the rapid take-up of internet technology by a middle class..., and its potential to enrich civil society in the face of severe challenges faced in...education, health, rural development and human rights’ could exert ‘increasing influence in India’s public sphere’ (Sonwalkar, 2009, p. 380). The media literate citizen increases the possibility of being active in regulation and public initiatives too, as evidenced from public’s suggestions to the committee formed to amendment Criminal Law following gender violence of 2012 (Schneider & Titzmann, 2014, p. 11) and gender safety apps. Connecting existing community
media initiatives with the mainstream and building new media literacy initiatives that empower marginalized voices are important for an inclusive public sphere and agency-driven action for social change.

The third issue is about a broader architecture of rights which is a prerequisite for enhanced public participation in the public sphere. UNESCO, at the Toulouse Conference, 1991 advocated the expansion of regulatory frameworks, information transparency and access to information as a public right. Many of the normative goals of information literacy (institutional accountability and empowered awareness amongst the poor) have been met through policy frameworks like Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005, Right to Education Act (free and compulsory education to children) 2009, prevention of discrimination against minorities and through media actions. The media’s role is complex here. For instance, journalists may not rely on freedom of information laws to report on corruption. But news reports about activists, organizations, government workers and individuals who used the law have helped educate the public about the law itself (Relly & Schwalbe, 2013, p. 296). Also as Thomas (2011) contends, broader communication rights within the gamut of public sphere and rights is central, as people’s voice or the right to be heard is equally important notwithstanding the mediating influences of the state, the corporate sector, NGOs and other partisan interests. This mandates media education approaches that build ‘capabilities’ and ‘functionalities’ alongside rights (Das, 2009, pp. 72–73).

Lastly, one of the biggest constraints that scholars identify are threats from increasing religiosity and articulations of religion (Thomas, 2011). Despite the difficulties, both policy and intervention ought to build ‘cultural communication’ for intercultural dialogue as the centre of peace and a democratic public sphere (Tornero & Varis, 2010, pp. 53–54).

**Market and Media Literacy**

Media expansion can be contextually understood in two different ways, that is, implied pluralism and choice. The general contention is that market-led broadcast, dominated by ratings and infotainment has created a democratic deficit in the public sphere (Thussu, 2005). It has been argued that ‘Murdochization’ of media contents has promoted news about celebrities, cricket, crime and cinema in the industry (Sonwalkar, 2002). In contrast, observers contend that pro-market corporatization has accentuated contradictions. Even though political news may be presented as ‘infotainment’, they still challenge political authority (Rao, 2010). While commercialization is a reality, broadcast journalism has been able to seek accountability from the government, police and others who hold power, giving a voice to the voiceless (Rao, 2008, p. 193). Besides the expansion of regional language, press has brought local issues to the mainstream, boosting local media markets and democracy (Ninan, 2007).

In such contexts, market expansion with its blurred boundaries between political and economic interests, raises some complex issues around media-mediated public literacies. In certain ways plurality makes media literacy possible. For instance, in Tamil Nadu party-owned channels like Sun TV, Jaya TV, Kalignar TV and Makkal TV provide favourable coverage to their respective political parties which might appear to stifle democratic debate. However, ‘biased perspectives’ also offer audiences the opportunity to compare views, thus aiding media literacy and ‘deliberative democracy’ (Ranganathan, 2015, p. 55). Media observers also contend that in a scenario where the mainstream media has lost its power, ‘politically owned media’ might be the ‘only hope for any critical coverage’ and exposure of facts (Ninan, 2014). Digital technologies, independent media-monitoring websites and citizen journalism initiatives also counter the mainstream media’s lack of coverage of critical issues; being immediate, vigilant reactive and demanding public attention and government action.³

The question that arises for media literacy during times of communicative abundance is how to reconcile simultaneous and diverging information with educated critique and participation? Larger platforms
that provide multiple tools and resources including audience co-creations would help engage with the complexity and interpretations of media products.

### Issues in Education

A strong advocacy for critical media awareness is often pitched through liberal education. In India it follows two prominent paths. One professes formal media education for children/youth. The other concerns media training and professional communication education.

Despite long years of advocacy, media education and information literacy is yet to be a formal part of India’s educational system (Kumar, 2007, p. 20). In a country which has the world’s largest population of illiterates, the political stakes have always centred on improving access to basic education, leave aside media education. Certain states have incorporated it within the school curriculum, while others teach it after school hours (ibid., p. 4). The NCERT-introduced phased training initiatives include audio-video productions, media clubs and training projects (http://ciet.nic.in/MediaClub/index.html). Other out-of-school extension activities like *Shishu Panchayats* by NGOs like SIGNIS have demonstrated the salience of grassroots collective involvement to meet long-lasting critical awareness goals (Nagaraj et al., 2014, p. 298).

The government recently acknowledged the need to build life skills, promote capacities and goals of equity and inclusion considering the information saturated educative environment. The Draft National Educational Policy 2016 notes that education largely happens outside the classroom, mediated by ‘media, both electronic and print, information and communication technologies’ with greater access to ‘knowledge through non-institutionalized means’ (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016, p. 4). Regardless of having met with measured success, developing a separate subject appears unfeasible in the examination-oriented form of the learning system, given poor teacher training, political will and finances. Although children’s media is a booming entertainment industry, lack of parental awareness and demand impedes media education. In instances where it is imparted by media houses, the pedagogies are not neutral tools of literacy, as they are packaged to coerce/mould students to buy in-house media products (Kumar, 2007, p. 6). With such diverse motivations, it is imperative to identify core objectives of media literacy and build a collective platform for an educational agenda.

In higher education/university, media education has found some success through culture and media studies. But the capacity to forge democratic education in universities is constrained by similar issues as in schooling. Besides, spaces for critical and subaltern discourses have shrunk making it difficult to support critical pedagogies. Alternatively, enhancing information access has become a key element of media education. For instance, collaborative resource pools like the international University Network on Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (UNESCO/UNAOC-MILID) formed since 2013 provide networked, global support.

On another note, professional communication education remains challenged, being highly unregulated and commercialized with small skill-oriented programmes, media studies and media-house training courses. The most pressing concern of journalism education is to develop affordable education sensitive to the diversity of local experiences, caste, class and gender, while treading the erratic paths opened up by explosive media convergences, digital realities and user-generated contents. The UNESCO’s *Model Curricula for Journalism Education* (Banda, 2013, p. 5) suggests that journalism education has to accommodate changed socio-technical environment that permeates ‘contemporary newsrooms and classrooms’ in developing countries whose ‘financial and economic sustainability’ needs to be supported by ‘literacies in science communication, data mining, human trafficking and gender’. Given this, modes of empowerment envisioned by Dr B. R. Ambedkar could be a form of critical pedagogy to meet the
goals of media literacy too. He campaigned for rights-based information seeking political skill and activism encouraging the marginalized to register their own voices in public through direct participation in journalistic activities.

Educative strategies therefore remain highly important. But, it needs to differently address the unique needs of children, youth and adults through long-term initiatives. With states, education levels and curricula widely varying and the government being an overarching influence, any programmes need to be broadly conceived but locally rooted and development oriented rather than strictly media focused.

Technology and Access

Literacy for children and adults in a new media environment raises different challenges of needs, access and vulnerabilities posed by socio-cultural dynamics. Traditionally, ICTs have been a cornerstone of communication policies, education and governance in India. Although educationalists long suggested ‘comunication’ of media education for a truly empowered, participative public (Kumar, 1987), ICT initiatives have not been participatory, proactive and focused on content creation. Developing ICT infrastructure has received overwhelming attention at the cost of professed objectives to encourage education, technology-enabled learning and technology-mediated pedagogies (Yadav, 2015, p. 69). Building digital literacies has been a steady vision since The National Policy of ICT in Education, 2008. While gaps remain, the government’s open-learning educational resources, virtual labs, e-classrooms have been supplemented by NGO initiatives towards information literacy. For instance, Literacy India developed a game-based, interactive multimedia software Gyantantra Digital Dost to encourage computer literacy and self-paced learning. Alternate strategies in ICT learning like the ‘cybermohalla’ and ‘Compughar’ project for children from marginalized communities incorporate skills, literacy and active content creation through collective, informal, participatory media activities about localities, social issues and self-development (Asthana, 2008). Still infrastructural impediments, poor teaching skills, locally irrelevant content and cultural mindsets that prompt computers to be locked away in the average government schools are some issues that constraint bottom-up digital literacy movement.

A media illiterate population can be self-defeating, setting limitations for common participation in development. Digital literacy requires an agenda where understanding information, sensitivity to rights and developing skills that give back to the self and community goes together. ‘The Digital India’ initiative commendably advances e-governance and public Internet infrastructure in villages with an economic vision to promote local production of hardware-software, support start-ups and e-retail. But, illiteracy, poor digital literacy and lack of awareness are challenges. The National Digital Literacy Mission (See http://defindia.org/national-digital-literacy-mission/) intends to bridge the gap between access and use through empowering at least one adult from each of 147 million rural households to become digitally literate. While ‘rural info kiosks’ abound problems like non-existent internet connectivity persist. The bridge appears to be in NGLM’s collaborative engagements with NGOs to teach applied skills which draws benefits out of the civil society’s grassroots connections.

In a certain sense, minimal support infrastructure remains important to build ICT/digital environments like rural e-banking and e-education. The Akodara village, adopted by ICICI Bank under the Digital India Initiative is an example. ICT is also indispensable to sharpen policy interventions like in education analysing big data on gender enrolment and school retentions (School GIS systems and Digital Gender Atlases). But, improving ICT usage requires a host of related regulations like the free software movement and support eco-systems to benefit marginalized communities (Thomas, 2011). It is equally important to recognize that deep gender gaps in access, ownership and usage of Internet and mobile
phones co-exist with the expansion of mobile phones and internet user bases. For instance, a whole gamut of social practices and restrictive structures permeate women’s relationship with technology in the private and public sphere (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013, pp. 171–172). This reduces some of the presumed benefits of digital access. Therefore, a multi-pronged, rights-based, context-specific strategy for children and adults that bridges the gaps of gender and class is necessary alongside any initiative of skill enhancement.

**Civil Society and Citizen Activism**

In media-saturated digitally connected environment, pathways for empowered citizenship and informal public ‘understandings’ run through the media, public action, protest, everyday engagements, dialogue and exchange, civil society activities and citizen activism. Media literacy advocates observe that literacy is ‘generally spontaneous, informal, unsystematic and unprogrammed’ learned ‘everyday and unregulated by either conventions or institutions’, although the need for formal learning is not discounted (Tornero & Varis, 2010, pp. 85–86). Media convergences mandate a ‘critical interpretation of both old and new media both as technologies and as sources of information’ (Kumar, 2007, p. 7).

The combination of sustained activism, citizen involvement, pressures and concessions actively convened and mediated through the media demonstrates persuasive possibilities. Global alliances and solidarities made possible by media and activism have strengthened civic educative capacity. For instance, the struggle against Vedanta Bauxite mining industries in Orissa drew attention to the plight of tribals. The assertion of community rights by tribals and their rights to forest resources and culture have been seen as a victory for grassroots democracy. New media technologies have opened new spaces for both online and offline activism. The popular Dalit Camera on YouTube and Facebook raises citizen collated videos, songs, meetings, debates and protests against caste prejudice that sustains debate and a wider solidarity of Dalits against violence and caste-enforced violations of dignity like manual scavenging.

The media’s deconstruction of the media and the increasing user-generated contents can therefore build educative public resources. Many of these initiatives demonstrate that digital literacies can benefit by recognizing and accommodating traditional grassroots, word-of-mouth channels which enhance individual and community participation. Green, for instance, (2008, pp. 217–218) notes that campaigns like right to food, information and national campaign for employment guarantee have been initiated through a combination of traditional interpersonal, door-to-door public campaigns, demonstrations, protests along with sustained coverage and discussion in the media. Popular movements for gender justice and anti-corruption are other examples of media supported dimensions that promote (media) literacy. In 2013, the discourse for instant justice and death penalty changed into more reasoned debates after the successful persuasion and public intervention by feminist groups and civil society advocates (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 29).

The civil society thus actively intervenes to contend pressing issues in the public sphere, pressurizing both state and the market for greater accountability to public. In many instances, the media has functioned as an active partner in setting agendas for social change. For instance, the ambitious Free Basics application by Facebook in India faced stiff opposition from civil society, leaders and independent media activists. There were campaigns to educate stakeholders about the policies of corporates, new media technologies, access, net neutrality and differential pricing. Besides, as Rao and Mudgal (2015, p. 617) note, civil society often finds in media willing collaborators for articulating alternative imaginations for the common good as against those of the state and markets. In the development sector, just as in areas of the
Therefore, participatory communication and community empowerment remains the media literacy agenda for emerging economies (Das, 2009; Kumar, 2007, p. 6). Renewing the focus on community, studies demonstrate entertainment-education programmes (like gender equality, family planning) meet the idea of pro-social change if it ‘sparks various forms of dialogue among audience members’ (Papa & Singhal, 2009). Initiatives like community radios with their diverse histories, grassroots experiences and public participation have been able to transpose the barriers of illiteracy precisely because of committed collective action. They encourage local, community-based dialogues about agricultural extension programmes, empowerment and literacy. For instance, CGNetSwara in Chhattisgarh presents citizen stories about the problems of rural and tribal communities usually neglected by mainstream media. Other initiatives like Sangham Radio, run by Dalit Women and supported by Deccan Development Society gives a voice to Dalit stories, local news and folksongs. Behind such initiatives are decades of educative work in community radio movement, advocacy and policy transformation initiated by civil society, motivated individuals and communities. Notwithstanding the long history, problems like low staff retention, lack of new spectrum ranges for radio, the limitations and possibilities of low-power low-cost models, poor resources, problems in building a peer group of community radio practitioners and licensing in areas marked by conflict are persisting issues that have not been adequately addressed yet (Ground Realities, 2011).

Strengthening resources to communicate therefore needs to be accommodated within a broader media literacy agenda. Also, civil society’s liaisons with international organizations, government organizations, corporates, websites, community radio and activism generates diverse programmes and practice models. The difficulty lies in claiming a consensual interest, even if the agenda is media literacy alone, given varying interests like environment, gender, caste, human rights abuse which often conflict with the diverse socio-political interests. This can come in the way of broader media literacy alliance, although consistent media-social action has the potential for broad ideological and political consolidations.

**Beyond Empowered Action?**

Having said this, the moot question is what are the structures in place to support the actions of media-literate publics? While media literacy seeks to improve public understanding, transparency and use information for empowerment, the inadequacies of supporting infrastructures can discourage an agenda that seeks public legitimacy for media literacy initiatives. For instance, transparency in governance is clearly one of the biggest initiatives of proactive change through RTI. RTI and anti-corruption activism by citizens have undoubtedly made governments more accountable. However, political threats, deeply entrenched exclusions and violence against activists affect its success. Journalists too continue to negotiate and face political and economic threats in their quest to bring issues into the public domain. According to the Reporters Without Borders, India remains one of ‘Asia’s deadliest country’ for media personnel and there are no national plans in place to protect journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2015).

As another instance, the first ‘minority cyber-gram’ project in Chandoli village in Alwar, Rajasthan, launched in 2014 to provide Internet training to villagers shut down recently (Bhardwaj, 2017). With no reasons given, villagers believe, ‘the centre was closed because schoolchildren were shooting off mails to the district collector and top bureaucrats about absent panchayat officials, who met at the sewa kendra’ (Bhardwaj, 2017). This is a grim reminder that, while the bottom-up approach can embolden the
marginalized to fight for their rights, there are even lesser resources and solidarities that the vulnerable could rely on to combat political and corporate might. This absence of firm policy, regulations and political awareness seriously undermines a long-term literacy agenda.

**Conclusion**

This commentary briefly contextualizes the possibilities of media literacy in India. Media education needs to move beyond top-down approaches that assume media consumers as totally devoid of agency and instead acknowledge them as moving between a range of passivity and action. The classic vision of media education which seeks to enhance the people’s power through information literacy and proactive action needs to be integrated with socio-political initiatives and the agencies of public and media. As Green (2008, p. 54) optimistically observes, regardless of the concentration of media, the strong forces driving greater access to information ‘through a combination of (improved literacy, more assertive citizens, the spread of elected government) and supply (technologies that make knowledge more widely and cheaply available)’ could help the poor ‘gain greater access to knowledge and information, through an increasingly diverse set of traditional and new channels’.

One primary problem is that despite multiple avenues like NGOs, media resources, community radio, e-resources and activist initiatives, they appear to work in relative isolation. A connected engagement in media, educational institutions, building access and technologies is important to meet the goal of development which is the cornerstone of media education. Sharing experiences, resources, debating objectives, differences in perspectives and wider lobbying could help build a broader critical media literacy agenda. The media is not a standalone institution but is one that is closely connected to the state, the market, courts, interests groups, publics and sites of debates and change. Much as we are tempted to focus on the media alone when looking at media education, it would serve to explore the connective threads of structures, political relations, cultural norms and market relations that mediate literacies, awareness and empowerment. Such an integrated perspective on rethinking the connections in media literacy would help identify the roadmaps for media education and constraints in its path.

**Notes**

1. Section 66A of the Information Technology Act which prohibits the sending of offensive information through computers and mobiles has often been used to arrest and intimidate people who post controversial posts on social media.
3. See, for instance, www.videovolunteers.org
4. The panic over the recent spate of ‘Blue Whale’ suicide game has sparked some discussion about children, media and media education.

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**Author’s bio-sketch**

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