# Media Literacy and Indigenous Knowledge System of Tharu Community in Bihar

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***Abstract:*** *The purpose of this study is to find the need and prospect of Media Literacy in an indigenous community like Tharu of Bihar. In this research paper, the concept of Media Literacy and how this phenomenon can help in the development of Tharu community will be discussed in detail. Media Literacy is a set of skills required by a person to access, understand, analyze, evaluate and create the flow of information. Media literacy is directly related to a process of development as it is a course for mobilizing the thought process of people. It also enhances the different aspect of personal development such as consciousness, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Tharu people are part of an indigenous society and still living in a condition of underdevelopment. And one of the major reasons of this inadequacy is lacking the skill of Media Literacy. Because of which they are lacking the ability required for critically analyze the flow of information provided by Media. They are also getting less time and space in the media. This results in a misrepresentation or less representation of them in the society. Apart from this, they are also facing challenges in conserving their indigenous knowledge system in this modernized world. That's why they need a skill of Media Literacy. So, that they can raise their voices against this or may come up with an alternative media. Besides this, they also need Media Literacy for getting proper information about the government plans and policy which would help in their development process.*

***Key words:*** *Media Literacy, Development, Indigenous Knowledge System, Tharu community.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Media is not just a medium for people living in this country. It directly impinges in the lives of each and every one of them. It helps them to be informed, educated and entertained. Besides that, media also encourage and persuade them for the change.  And after the invasion of technological advancement, the scenario of media has been changed immensely and significantly. These new technological transformations make the Media even more powerful and imperative than ever in society.  This expansion of media industry originates a new dimension for looking towards the Media. Therefore, people need to be media literate for facing this bombarding of information in the age of technology. Especially for any indigenous community like Tharu, Media Literacy became a very important tool. As they already belong to a less fortunate section of the society. They are facing a lot of survival and reinforcement problem in their day to day life. In such a condition if they are unable to utilize the power of media then it can widen the gap of opportunity and closure.

This paper aims to identify the role Media Literacy in the development of Tharu Community and how media literacy help in the conservation of their indigenous knowledge system as well as to make them aware of the government driven plans and policies. Based on the existing literature, I discuss the different definitions of Media Literacy and try to explain the term in a general way. Besides that, I have tried to understand about the Indigenous Knowledge System of an Indigenous community and how media literacy fosters the process of development. Then, I examine the conceptual and theoretical framework with the collected data and draw a conclusion.

## 2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: About Tharu and their need for development:

About the origin of Tharu Tribe, different scholars pertain different beliefs. Many of them tried to trace the origin of this tribe by examining the etymological information.  The word "Tharu" is made by adding two words; "thar" which means hill and "ru" means near. Anthropologist Nesfield said that the tharu community name is derived from 'thare' meaning halted (after the alleged flight into the forest), and 'tarhua' meaning wet, an allusion to the swampy nature of place they live in. On the other side, W. Crooke (1896) presents views that the origin of the Tharus can be traced to the word "Tharu" signifying a 'wine bibber'. Besides this, Nesfield traces the origin to the word 'Thar' which in the local dialect of the local classes means 'a man of the forest'. He says that this is more suitably applicable to these people because it describes the status of the tribe.

Later on, Dr. D.N. Majumdar starts searching about tharus and carried out an anthropometric and blood group survey among them. His report settled down the controversy of their origin and differences of opinions with regard to the racial affinities and race mixture among the Tharus. They have come to the conclusion that the Tharus are definitely a Mongoloid tribe. Dr. D.N. Majumdar (1942) in his article 'The Tharus and Their Blood Group' has

repudiated the supposed Rajput origin of the Tharus. He gave this result on the basis of blood group tests carried out by him in connection with the census operations of the United Provinces, 1941.

So, the Tharu community has a controversial status on their origin itself, besides this, their condition in Bihar is also not very good. As till 2003, the government of India not gave them a status of schedule tribe in Bihar and they come under the category of Other Backward Class. Even they have all characteristics to possess a category of Schedule tribe. They have to fight for years to get this status. That leads them to more dreadful condition for survival in these years since independence. The Tharus of West Champaran were tended to lead a nomadic life. Like khanabadosh, they used to change their place in search of food, cloth, and shelter. Their settlements were scattered over the great extent of forest covered area. This all search for sustenance hampers their development process.

In Bihar, the concern which they needed for their development and which is their right is obstructed. As after the division of Bihar, most of the tribal population came under the regime of Jharkhand. With this, the concern for the tribal population is also left over to Jharkhand. After that, the development programs are interrupted at planning and funding level by the state government. Tribal development becomes an obstacle for the policy makers, administrators, and social workers. Although the central government has different development plans and schemes and later on state government also came up with concern but the condition of tribes are not substantial. They are still starving for a complete development.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
### 3.1 Media Literacy:
The term Literacy is generally defined as an ability to read and write. When the messages are metaphorically treated as a language to present any text, visual and sound, then the concept of Media Literacy came in existence. Here the term Literacy is extended to visual literacy, textual literacy, aesthetic literacy or Media Literacy as a whole. Media literacy is the expertise to understand how mass media perform, how they construct meanings, how they are structured and how to use them sensibly. The purpose of media literacy is to make people literate, who are able to read, analyze and evaluate the flow of information processed by a variety of media.

The term Media Literacy is conceptualized differently by Scholars and has failed to reach a broad agreement on the definition of media literacy. As Christ and Potter (1998) explain, a great variety of perspectives exists. Every social scientist has tried to define this term according to their expertise and demand of their discipline. Brown (1998, 44) states that "media literacy means many things to many people. Traditionally, it has involved the ability to analyze and appreciate respected works of literature and, by extension, to communicate effectively by writing well. In the past half-century, it has come to include the ability to analyze competently and to utilize skillfully print journalism, cinematic productions, radio and television programming, and even computer-mediated information and exchange (including real-time interactive exploration through the global internet)."

The term media literacy was defined in 1992 in a National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide 1993, xx). Whereas from a psychological information-processing point of view, Potter (2004, 58-59) defines media literacy as "the set of perspectives from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter." He focused on building up a good knowledge structure as the key to media literacy. For this, he means that people need to have the power to manage information media industries, media messages, media effects, the real world and the self. Also, to classify this information and systematize it, people need skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting. This development of knowledge system makes people aware of the context that will lead them to understand what they see. The skills of media literacy will also able to help people in achieving their goals. These skills will expand the ability of people to vigorously use the information in those knowledge structures during exposure to media messages and the more they will be able to avoid risks for negative effects.

### 3.2 Indigenous Knowledge System:
Indigenous knowledge is a unique form of knowledge of the society or culture. It is also called as 'local knowledge', 'folk knowledge', 'people's knowledge', 'traditional wisdom' or 'traditional science'. Indigenous knowledge on its part refers to what indigenous people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations – practices that evolved through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change (Melchias, 2001)

The Indigenous Knowledge is called as a system as it has been passed from generation to generation by using the word of mouth or cultural rituals. In the process of knowledge passing to other generations, there are no discriminations has been done by any community member. Knowledge of these elements forms a set of interacting units which is known as indigenous coping systems as the elder generation passed the information in a copying form to their next generation.

The Indigenous Knowledge System have enabled indigenous people to survive, manage their natural resources and the ecosystems surrounding them like animals, plants, rivers, seas, natural environment, economic,

cultural and political organization It also has been the basis for agriculture, food preparation, health care, education, conservation and the wide range of other activities that sustain societies in many parts of the world.

The concept of "Indigenous Knowledge" is usually used by the anthropologists, historians, and sociologist to explain the knowledge systems of a community. This knowledge system is extremely different from the scientific knowledge which is generally known as 'modern' knowledge (Ajibade, 2003). But this knowledge system is utilized by the indigenous community for making the decision on a local level. It has value not only for the culture in which it evolves but also for scientists and planners determined to improve circumstances in the indigenous community. As an integration of indigenous knowledge to climate-change policies can lead to the development of effective adaptation strategies that are cost-effective, participatory and sustainable (Robinson and Herbert, 2001).

The indigenous knowledge system provides a broad knowledge to live sustainably to the Indigenous people. As they are still living in the natural environment, so they don't need any scientific or modern knowledge for their survival. However, formal education systems have agitated the practical everyday life facets of indigenous knowledge and ways of learning. The modern education system has replaced the indigenous knowledge system with abstract knowledge and academic ways of learning. Today, there is a critical situation that much indigenous knowledge is being lost and, along with it, valuable knowledge about ways of living sustainably is also abolishing. So in this modern era, it is the demand of indigenous community to preserve and conserve their indigenous knowledge system for living a secure and safe life.

### 3.3 Media Literacy for fostering Development:

Development is an overall process of change and growth. It is not simply limited to the increase in economy of a person rather than it is about expanding the richness of their life. It is an approach that is focused on people and their opportunities and choices. As in 1990 Human Development Report gave the clear and fundamental articulation of the concept of human development. In this report, it was mentioned that "People are the real wealth of a nation. The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth."

Later on In 2001, the opening paragraphs of the UNDP report on 'Making new technologies work for human development' gave a succinct although not a novel account of human development: "Human development…is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means – if a very important one – of enlarging people's choices. Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities – the range of things that people can do or be in life."

To make this speculation real, media literacy can work as an important tool. As Edmund Carpenter, in his article "The Tribal Terror of Self- Awareness" (1975), writes, "A camera holds the potential for SELF-VIEWING, SELF- AWARENESS and, where such awareness is fresh, it can be traumatic. ...A photographic portrait, when new and privately possessed, promotes identity, individualism; it offers opportunities for self- recognition, self-study. It provides the extra sensation of objectifying the self. It makes the self-more real, more dramatic... Until a man is conscious of his personal appearance, his private identity, there is little self-expression" (p. 455, p. 458).

So, Media Literacy is important for Indigenous communities to understanding the flow of information.  Simply being exposed to many pieces of information continually will not make people informed citizens. They need to learn how to utilize the information effectively for their development. Besides this, too much bombarding of information can create a barrier to people life which is conceptualized as "Data Smog".

The condition of data smog is a very common phenomenon of the Information age. Especially an indigenous society requires a special skill to handle this fast increasing information, in order to use their indigenous knowledge and economic purposes more effectively. As due to the information explosion and data smog indigenous community face difficulties to locate, evaluate, use, and communicate information. Also, the expansion of internet services creates a sphere of information around them and they are unable to evaluate, unlike the printed sources. So, Media literacy is considered as the solution for the data smog (ACRL, 2006). Media literacy allows people to cope with the data smog, by equipping them with the necessary skills to recognize when they need information, where to locate it, and how to use it effectively and efficiently. Consequently, it will help in decision making and productivity which is beneficial to the society.

Media literacy is also utilized by an Indigenous community to understand the government plans and policies. As for the development of these communities government as well as nongovernmental organizations came up with several development plans and policies. But these policies are formulated in a very critical manner because of the situational problem. In this case, government utilizes media for disseminating the information regarding the problem by using a different medium. And if indigenous communities don't know how to understand media content; then, they are unable to understand, access and utilize this information for their development.

Media literacy is largely about empowering underrepresented populations by giving them a language to articulate their critiques of dominant media messages and a means of producing texts that challenge the stereotypical representations of themselves disseminated by the mass media. It has the power to provide recognition, and a will to resist, the power differential between marginalized communities and main stream media.

So, Media literacy helps an indigenous community for fostering their development by different ways. Firstly, to help them in conquering this overloaded information society. Secondly, to provide them skills for understanding the government plans and policies; thirdly, to render their critical analysis power for analyzing media content and empower themselves for creating media texts.

## 4. METHODOLOGY:

The primary aim of this research was to explore the need and demand of media literacy for the development of an indigenous community, with specific reference to their indigenous knowledge system and dissemination of government plans and policy. A qualitative exploratory research methodological orientation was utilized. Terre Blanche et al. (2006) state that qualitative researchers want to make sense of feelings, experiences, social situations, or phenomena as they occur in the real world, and hence researchers want to study such participants as individuals or groups in their natural settings.

The research design was informed by a series of semi-structured interview. Marlow (1998) states that in semi-structured interview situations there is more freedom to use hunches so the researcher can improvise the questions to be asked. Semi-structured interview schedules consist of general types of questions to ask, but they are not in a questionnaire format. Besides this, content analysis of a daily newspaper has done for accessing the coverage about the indigenous community.

For this study, I have chosen the Tharu community as an Indigenous community. This is the only community of Bihar for whose development government has made a special society.  This study was conducted in West Champaran District of Bihar. As Tharu Community reside only in that particular area of Bihar. And I have chosen Harnatar village of the Bagha division in West Champaran District which is densely populated by the community members. Besides this, for content analysis I have chosen the subscription of Danik Jagran in the month of December 2016 as this is the only newspaper which publishes special edition from this region. Along with that, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with the government officials of Samketik Tharuat Vikash Abhikaran, chairperson of Tharu Pragatishil Sanstha, the member of Tharu Youth development organization and other community members.

### 4.1 Research Question:

The research problem dealt with the following questions:
- Why is Media Literacy needed for the development of Tharu community?
- Would media literacy help Tharu community in the conservation of their indigenous knowledge system?
- Would media literacy help Tharu community to make them aware of the governmental plans and policies?

## 5. DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS:

### 5.1 Media Coverage of Tharu Community:

Table 1 show that there is a less coverage on tharu community in a daily newspaper in the month of December 2016. As there are only79 news items are published about them.
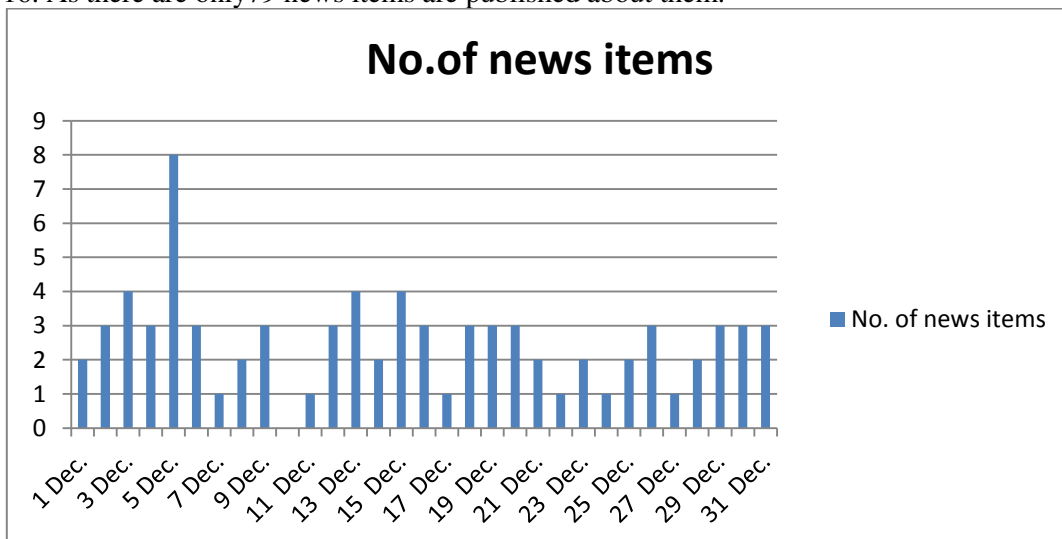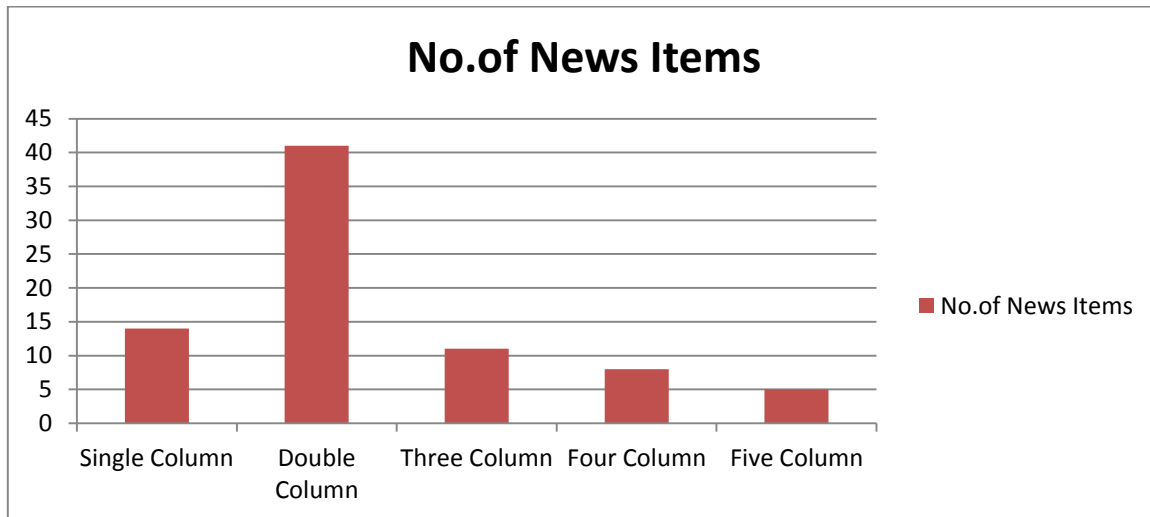


Table 2, shows that less space has been given to these news items as most of the news items are doubled columned only.

## No.of News Items



To know about the news items for coverage of tharu community are related to which category. It is differentiated as Crime, Political, Education, Development, event, others. Table 3 shows how many news items are published under these categories.

## No. of news items
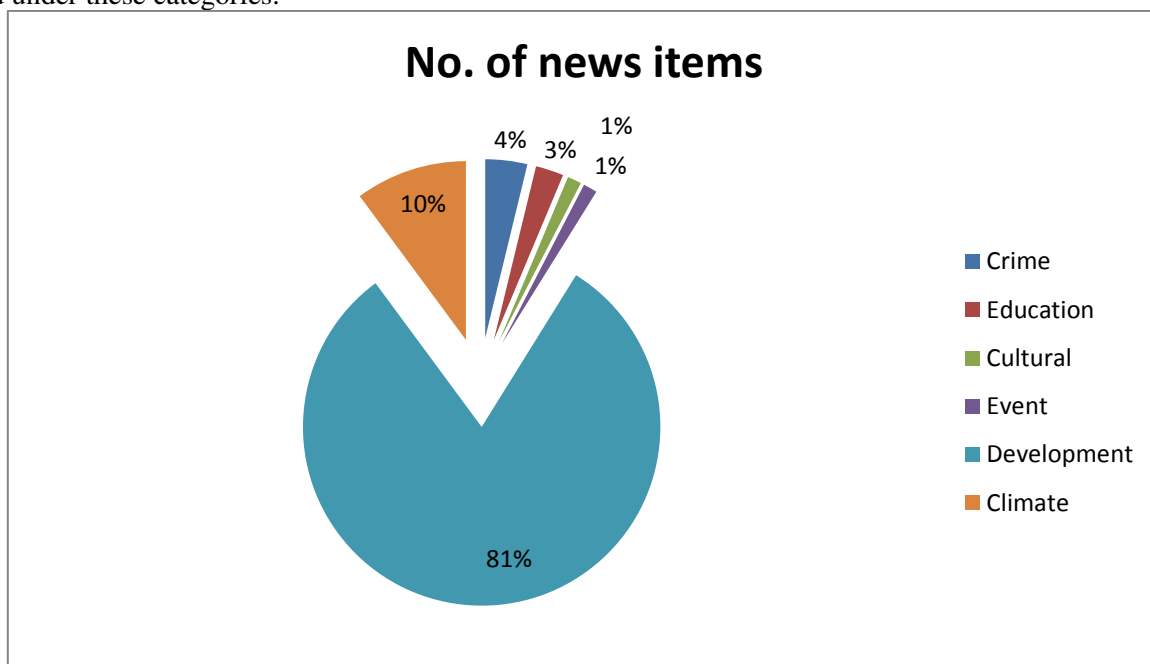


## 6. DISCUSSION:

The three major themes that emerged from data and literature were: media literacy and its link with the development of an indigenous community. Secondly, need of media literacy for conserving indigenous knowledge system. Thirdly, need of media literacy to access information related to government plans and policies.

## Theme 1: Media Literacy for development

In this situation, media literacy is refers to a key factor for the development of an indigenous community. Once Wilbur Schramm has also said that "By making one part of a country aware of other parts, their people, arts, customs, and politics; by permitting the national leaders to talk to the people, and people to the leaders and to each other; by making possible a nationwide dialogue on national policy; by keeping the national goals and national accomplishments always before the public--thus modern communication, widely used, can help weld together isolated communities, disparate subcultures, self-centered individuals and groups, and separate developments into a truly national development." So, he or she should be actively involved in learning the skills of media literacy which impact on his or her future and well-being. The premise is that media literacy helps people to understand and analyze the media content which is published about them.  As we can see that there was a very few media coverage has been done about them. And most of the news items are related to their need for development only. So, if they have a sense to critically understand the perspective of media about them, that how media is representing or misrepresenting. Then, they can voice out for their development and representation. This need for media literacy was also expressed by a community member; Mr. Digvijay Kumar Rana said that "in our village, there is lots of scope for development as we

are still living in poor condition. Our complaint about the bad living facility is not heard by the government officials. So, Newspaper is the only channel to communicate with the government and ask for help."

## Theme 2: Indigenous Knowledge System and Media Literacy

The research problem in this paper indicated that Indigenous Knowledge system plays intricate roles in the Development process. Indigenous Knowledge as a system permeates the lives of people in profound ways. The penetration of Indigenous knowledge system in the tharu community plays an important role in the development process more so where the media does cover only about the need for economic, infrastructure and political development. There is almost no media coverage has been done regarding their cultural needs. So, if the Tharu community member has the skill of media literacy they can come up with an alternative medium for prospering and conserving their indigenous knowledge system. As Lim and Nekmat (2008) said that "the media-literate individual is someone who has an appreciation for those who control media content, and how the political economy of the media industry is reflective of and influenced by geopolitical trends, a realization of why some content types are excluded from media messages, while others are intensively amplified, a sensitivity to one's own conscious and subconscious responses to mass media, and an awareness of the effects these media can have on individuals."

Likewise, Duran, Yousman, Walsh, and Longhore (2008) argue for a holistic approach to media literacy, "one that encompasses both textual and contextual concerns within a critical framework. […]. Hans Martens (2010) has also added his perspective regarding this as, "in addition to being able to skillfully deconstruct media texts, the person who is truly media literate is also knowledgeable of the political economy of the media, the consequences of media consumption, and the activist and alternative media movements that seek to challenge mainstream media norms." This viewpoint was captured by Mr. Deepnarayan Khatahi, Secretary of Tharu Pragatishil Sanstha that "our cultural norms and values are degrading day by day. Community members themselves are not willing to follow our culture. More over this, media has also just focused on modernization as a process of development. So, we need a medium through which we can connect our community member with our culture."

## Theme 3: Media Literacy and Governmental Plans

Indian Government categorized Tharu community as a Scheduled Tribes according to the Constitution. That's why the government has started many plans and policies for the rigorous development of them. A government official, Mr. Roshan of Samketik Tharuat Vikash Abhikaran has said that "we have many developmental plans like building roads, library, schools; providing employment skills; providing health facilities are there for this community……… We mostly informed people about the plans through placing advertisements and notices in newspapers." So, many developmental plans are formulated but there is a problem in its execution. As for spreading awareness about the plans among the community members, government utilizes mediums like newspaper and television. That's why community members are not able to access information about the governmental policies. This experience was expressed by many community members. Expressing such sympathy very touchingly one of the community members, voiced the frustration clearly: "we don't know about any government plans are there for us. Most of the members in my community are illiterate and many of them don't have television and radio." The need for accessing information required to be consulted and the reason behind this problem should be addressed. As government has developmental plans and policies for them. But they are not able to access that information because of lacking media literacy. So, if the community members are media literate then, they can enjoy benefits provided by the government for their development.

## 7. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, Media Literacy as a tool of the developmental process has the potential to develop an indigenous community that seems to be difficult to achieve and which appear to be in a problematic situation. This can be achieved by providing them a facility to learn media literacy skills as an underpinning process of development provisions. As media literacy would help them to become a producer of media content merely of being a passive media consumer. And also encourage them to protect their indigenous knowledge system which helps them to survive in their cultural environment. Besides this, it will also provide an opportunity for access information related to their development. Media literacy would also facilitate government officials in successfully executed their governmental plans. The community has also need to understand that their participation is desired in developing media literacy skill in them. As this can widen up gaps between the media literate and media illiterate which would lead the social, political, economic gaps and ends with the "digital divide" phenomenon in this indigenous community. So, a media literate community has the potential to fulfill all kinds of the gap which comes in their development process.

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