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<th>Right to information: have information technology and communications improved the socio-economic life of the rural masses in India? - a case study from South India.</th>
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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Venkatraman, S.</td>
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Paper No. 34
S. Venkatraman
Director (Research)
Centre for Development and Research Training (CFDRT)

RIGHT TO INFORMATION: HAVE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS IMPROVED THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE RURAL MASSES IN INDIA? – A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH INDIA

AMIC 9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
THE DIGITAL MILLENNIUM: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASIAN MEDIA
June 29 – July 1, 2000, Singapore
RIGHT TO INFORMATION: HAVE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS IMPROVED THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE RURAL MASSES IN INDIA?-- A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH INDIA

- S. VENKATRAMAN
  Director (Research),
  Centre for Development Research and Training (CFDRT),
  23, Chinniah Street, T. Nagar,
  Chennai -600 017, India
  Tel: (044) 8250345
  e-mail: venkat2000@hotmail.com

(Paper presented in the 9th AMIC Annual Conference on “The Digital Millennium: Opportunities for Asian Media”, held from 29 June to 1 July 2000 in Singapore.)

INTRODUCTION:

1. Given the scenario of increasing globalization and its relevance to development efforts, the paradigm of right to information gets focused as a determinant of poverty alleviation and socio-economic development. In the global development context, particularly in the developing countries, right to information is increasingly recognized as a tool for empowerment of the poor. The question that naturally arises in this context is whether information technology and communication have improved the socio-economic life of the rural masses in the developing world? This paper attempts to find an answer through a case study in the context of Southern India.

THE BACKGROUND:

2. This case study relates to a development block where the author is doing intensive work in the district of Tiruvannamalai in the state of Tamilnadu in Southern India. The name of the block is Anukkavoor.

3. Tamilnadu is the seventh largest Indian state in terms of population, which stood at 55.6 million in 1991\(^1\), and ranks eleventh in terms of land area. The demographic indicators of the state compare very well with the all-India indicators and as compared to most other states in the country. The annual exponential growth rate between 1981 and 1991 was 1.43 in

\(^1\) Census, 1991, Registrar General of Census Operations, India.
Tamilnadu, making it rank second in the country after Kerala which recorded a rate of 1.34. Similarly, the state of Tamilnadu has achieved the second lowest birth rate in the country with 19.2\(^2\) after Kerala which recorded the lowest rate with 17.8\(^3\). Similarly, in the area of fertility, Tamilnadu ranked the second lowest in the country with a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.1\(^4\), with Kerala in the lead with a rate of 1.7\(^5\). Similar trends can be observed as far as certain indicators like female literacy (52.3\(^6\)) and institutional deliveries (61.3\%\(^7\)) are concerned. As for other indicators like Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Life Expectancy at Birth and Age at Marriage, though the state does not come on top ranks, it is still well above the national average, as may be seen from the table that follows.

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\(^2\) Sample Registration Scheme (SRS) of the Registrar General of India, 1996.
\(^3\) op.cit
\(^4\) Sample Registration Scheme of the Registrar General of India, 1994
\(^5\) op.cit
\(^6\) here, again, the state ranks second with Kerala in the lead with 86.9 as per Census, 1991- Right now, Kerala is reported to have already achieved 100% overall literacy.
\(^7\) Tamilnadu ranks second in the country with Kerala in the lead with 92.3% as per SRS, 1993
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2. SRS, Fertility and Mortality Indicators – 1993

4. An analysis of the above table reveals that even though the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala are well on top on the social and demographic indicators, they do not seem to be doing as well when it comes to economic indicators. The per capita income in 1995-96 at current prices gives only a fifth rank to Tamilnadu and an eighth rank to Kerala. This probably indicates that a better performance in the socio-demographic area does not necessarily result in a similar performance on the economic front, and vice versa. This debate is going on in India and elsewhere for quite some time now. However, the fact remains that poverty reduction in the state has not been commensurate with the gains achieved on the socio-demographic front. What could be the reasons? Several theories are afloat. I would like to look at one important aspect, that is, access to information on the part of the rural poor. There are several dimensions to it - the rights dimension, the social dimension, the economic dimension and the cultural dimension, to mention only a few. I propose to examine some of these dimensions in this paper against the background of my work in Anukkavoor block. I must admit that this paper will only raise certain issues and start the discussion; it does not purport to draw final conclusions at this stage, pending the completion of the experiment currently on at Anukkavoor. At best, it will serve as a pointer to an important direction that should be looked at by those working in the field of development. And, it has to do with information technology and how to make it accessible to the rural poor in order to empower them?

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8 see CFDRT’s study on the “City health management systems in the city of Cochin, Keral”, February 1999: p 3-14.
5. Let me now briefly examine as to what happens in a typical development scenario. On the one hand, there are those who have access to information and technology that will better human conditions, e.g., immunization against vaccine preventable diseases. On the other side are those who do not have such access, but who are in need of them in order to better their living conditions, e.g., the rural poor. What is worse is that the latter, more often than not, are also not aware that such information is available and that it will improve their living conditions. That is the sad part of the story. Anyway, what the development functionaries or providers of services try to do is to make efforts to reach such information and technology to the "identified beneficiaries" or the "target groups". The big question is whether there is a similar effort from the beneficiary or target groups? The answer depends upon how the receiver groups perceive such efforts. So, it is mainly a perception problem. One has to recognize the fact that there is indeed a perception gap between the "providers" and the "receivers". And, this gap is there mainly due to the socio-economic and cultural differences between these two groups.

6. In other words, one could state that most development efforts are in fact exercises in communication of certain messages with a view to bringing about behaviour changes in the target groups. Thus, it is communication for behaviour change. But it is also well recognized that bringing about behaviour change particularly in traditional rural communities is extremely difficult because such efforts run counter to long held traditions and beliefs; and perceptions and attitudes are conditioned by cultural value systems. Does the modern communication process take into account such subtleties of rural life? What is its interface with the traditional networks of communication in rural areas? The Anukkavoor experiment, inter alia, addresses this issue as well. It attempts to use local cultural expressions for development communication aimed at bringing about desired behaviour changes in the target audience.

7. The Indian Information Technology (IT) sector has grown at an average annual rate of 60 percent between 1992 and 1999, while the Indian software industry, which employs nearly 1,60,000 professionals, has emerged as one of the major export earners for India during the financial year 1998-1999. Encouraged by this trend, the Government of India have set itself to making India a global IT power by 2008. As a result, as many as 14

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9 Bajpai and Radjou: 2000, p.452-453
of the 26 major State Governments in India have already come up with their own IT policies. The Indian IT industry is currently concentrating on two key areas of IT, namely, electronic commerce (e-commerce) and IT enabled services. While talking about the technological outbursts and the importance of information “super highways”, one must try to position such a scenario within the wider social, economic and cultural context of the society where a good number, as explained above, still live below the poverty line. One must be careful in interpreting this notion of poverty line. How far it focuses on equitable distribution of minimum needs is still debatable. However, this point is considered to be beyond the scope of this paper. This paper attempts to situate the use of technology and communication against the backdrop of rural socio-economic life and see whether the issue concerning the “access to knowledge and information” through technology has any meaning to the poor? Has communication technology managed to cut across the socio-economic barriers posed by the society or has technology helped to widen the gap deeper between the “haves” and the “have-nots”? 

8. The phrase “haves and have-nots” is generally used to denote the economic difference between the rich and the poor. However, in the Indian context, as in Tamilnadu state’s context, one needs to re-examine this phrase in the socio-economic context. Before doing so, one need to look into the notion of caste within the Indian society to see how the economic gap often complements the ritual divide among the castes. The Indian caste structure is highly complicated and has been the central theme of study for many years for social anthropologists and sociologists. Roughly, the “Caste has been described as the fundamental social institution of India. In the past, each caste was associated with a distinct traditional occupation...The emergence of a large number of modern “caste-free” occupations has greatly weakened the specific association between caste and occupation, but there is still a general association, such that those in superior (“haves”) non-manual occupations are mostly from the upper castes, and those in inferior manual occupations (“have-nots”) mostly from the lower castes” (Beteille: 1996 (a): pp.90-91). Based on this definition, I would like to divide the “haves” and “have-nots” further into “traditional haves and have-nots” and “modern haves and have-nots”. “Traditional haves and have-nots” are based on the

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10 This was estimated at 35.03% of the population in Tamilnadu in 1993-94; "Tamilnadu - An Economic Appraisal 1996-97", Evaluation and Applied Research Department, Government of Tamilnadu.
economic advantage one gets due to caste affiliation. That is, many communities enjoy a better economic advantage over the others simply because they fall under the four jati's of the varna system like the landowning Vellala's, Vanniya's, the priestly caste of Brahman's and merchants and traders like Gownder's etc., while, those who fall outside the varna system formerly called the “untouchables” and the tribal communities will come under the “traditional have-nots”. Such communities which are at the bottom of the social structure because of their lowly caste status work mainly as agricultural labourers like the Paraiyar's, Pallar's and Chakkiliyar's who are collectively called as “dalit's” or “adi dravidar's”\(^{12}\). The modern “have-nots” are those who are economically termed “poor” living below the poverty line and found mostly in the urban slums and rural "colonies".

9. To this caste dynamics, I must add the status of women both within the caste groups and also across castes. In either case, women suffer from gender disadvantages. According to another study conducted by our organization\(^{13}\), such gender disadvantages are apparent from figures of adverse sex ratio, lower female literacy rate, lower age at marriage for females, and lower work participation rate for females. In addition, the study has found that work involving physical exertion, monotony and drudgery is usually assigned to women. The study goes on to reiterate that such gender biases probably have their origin in the historicity of the social and cultural contexts which have given rise to them. More importantly, the study has found that while participation by women in procurement of raw materials is comparatively lower than men in high-value industries like handlooms, it is fairly high in low-value and tedious-process involving raw materials like agave fibre. What is important to our context is the finding of the study, viz, overall, knowledge of the right raw materials, the places where they are available and knowledge of markets for such products play a crucial role in making such activities profitable; and women seem to play a far lesser role in these activities as compared to men. Similarly, in the preparation and production processes, wherever high physical activity and drudgery is involved, it is allotted to women, and as a rule; and mechanically-aided and "prestigious" processes are allotted to men. Same is the story with finishing


\(^{13}\) See report: "Study on Gender Issues Affecting Females in Household Industries in Vellore District of Tamilnadu", Centre for Development Research and Training (CFDRT), Chennai, 1999 - sponsored by the Department of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Programme Implementation, Government of India.
processes. Participation by women is higher in processes involving hard physical labour; and in areas where only a final touch has to be given to a product, it is the man who does it! Awareness of women of the several income generation programmes\textsuperscript{14} is woefully low. Women also face problems in marketing their products. Thus, women appear to be a special category of "have-nots" thanks to gender bias.

10. Economic advantage, due to one’s caste affiliations and/or due to one’s gender, over the others, is visibly present not only in the rural areas of Tamilnadu, but also in many parts of India. This socio-economic disadvantage of low castes\textsuperscript{15} is evident even in the physical make-up of a village, which is constructed on the upper caste, lower caste and “untouchable” categories. While the high caste people live in the main caste village called “ur\textsuperscript{16}”, the low caste people live in “hamlets\textsuperscript{17}” and the “adi dravidar’s” live in the “colonies”. Access to many things ranging from basic amenities like water, electricity, school, hospital, transport and markets are also made available around the main caste village.

11. The reason for my focus on the importance of social differentiation here is to highlight the fact that arguments that favour the importance of technological growth and spread often fail to take into account the “have-nots”. It is my opinion that the spread and accessibility of communication and technology will be complete only when the knowledge and information is both understood and utilized by the “have-nots” (both “traditional” and “modern” and the tribals, with particular focus on women).

12. It must be noted here that the field work related to this paper does not deal with the urban scenario where the word “haves” simply means “rich” who can be classified into the middle class and the richer class urbanites while the “have-nots” are the “poor”. The paper works on the basic premise that it is the rural areas where most of Indian population lives and is our main concern. From the angle of communication and technology, access to information and technology must cater not only to the rich and upper caste people, but should also reach the poor living in urban slums and those

\textsuperscript{14} for example, IRDP, DWCRA, TRYSEM, PMRY, K&VI programmes, NABARD refinanced programmes, etc.
\textsuperscript{15} For an excellent introduction to the concepts of “pollution” and “purity” in popular Hinduism see Fuller: 1992, 1996, Madan: 1991
\textsuperscript{16} the main part of the village where people belonging to the castes live
\textsuperscript{17} isolated settlements that are situated away from the main villages, but are administratively taken as part of the main or what are also known as “revenue villages”
living in the rural “colonies”\textsuperscript{18}. The method of making this possible can be achieved only if one begins to look into the rural context more closely and tries to understand it, using a multi-faceted approach.

13. It is beyond the scope or purpose of this paper to show all the underlying mechanisms that needs to be unraveled and studied in this context. However, it must be reiterated at this point that any development process which includes use of technology intended for dissemination of knowledge and information should take note of the important social distinctions and its economic implications within the Indian society. On the contrary, the rise in technology seems to benefit only the ones who are already well-off due to their economic status inherited either by their “caste prescriptions” or amassed though their work in the urban settings. Ignorance on the part of the planners and the governments to these issues may only increase the growing gap between the “haves and have-nots”. This paper will show how even the lack of basic communication facilities such as good roads and telephone can hinder the process of human development in many Indian villages, leave alone the unavailability of internets and computers!

THE PROJECT:

14. The data presented here are based on an on-going project that looks into the various forms of knowledge and information systems that operate in a rural context. The study focuses on how knowledge and information are passed on, who controls it, and how modern ways of communication affects a rural society and how such traditional communication networks and modern technology can be used for development purposes. The project is being currently implemented in Anukkavoor block, a Panchayat union block\textsuperscript{19} comprising 60 villages in a northern district called Tiruvannamalai of the state of Tamilnadu in Southern India. The main development issues that are of concern in this project are women’s health, child’s health, nutrition and education, and environmental problems with special focus on the people who live in the “colonies”, women and the elderly people.

\textsuperscript{18} It must be noted that although not featured in the data presented here, the Tribal populations are also included in my overall arguments, which talks about the “have-nots”.
\textsuperscript{19} A development unit marked by a union of Panchayats (or villages) with roughly about 60 to 90 villages and about 1,00,000 population.
THE PHYSICAL SETTING:

15. Tamilnadu is the southernmost state in India, defined on the north and the west by hills, on the south and the east by sea. Large rivers running from west to east cross the southeast portion, which create fertile valleys separated by plains. The majority of the population however still lives in the rural areas or in small towns, which serve as commercial, administrative and religious centres.

16. Tiruvannamalai is predominantly an agricultural district situated in the northern part of Tamilnadu. It is a relatively densely populated region; in 1981 the population density was 357 persons per square kilometer of land. It is also a relatively poor region within the State and India. The agricultural activity in the region accounts for nearly 40% of NDP (net domestic product). Within the agricultural sector, paddy, groundnuts, and sugarcane are the predominant sources of income. Given the shrinking area under agriculture, due to reasons like putting land for non-agricultural use, the non-farm sector has to bear the burden of generating the needed additional employment for the rural poor.

THE PROJECT AREA:

THE ANUKKA VOOR PANCHAYAT UNION/DEVELOPMENT BLOCK:

17. Anukkavoor Block is one of the 18 blocks that comprise Tiruvannamalai district. The above-mentioned project is being implemented at Anukkavoor Panchayat union block consisting of 60 villages. The total population of the block is 75,885 (1991 Census). The Block is connected by one state highway that intersects the block. The state highway connects two major urban centres situated on either side of the block, namely, Cheyyar and Vandavasi. The nearest major urban centre of the Block is Kanchipuram, about 45 kms away from Cheyyar.

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20 According to 1991 census the total population of the district is 2,042,979 of which 1,800,051 live in the rural areas. Total number of people belonging to the Scheduled caste or "Adi dravidas" are 438,390 and Scheduled tribe about 62,067. The total literacy rate of the district is about 53.07%. The literacy rate among the Adi Dravidas is about 21.46% and of Tribals about 3.04%.

21 See Harriss: 1982

22 The town of Kanchipuram is the district headquarters of the neighbouring district of Kanchipuram. And, Kanchipuram itself (about 90 kms from the modern city of Chennai) is an ancient city known to have prospered as the capital city of the Pallava empire around the 7th to the 9th century A.D.
18. Proper communication facilities like good roads, electricity and availability of latest technology like satellite connection, and computers will certainly enhance the living conditions of people. Especially, in rural areas, information ranging from weather reports to latest developments in the field of agriculture will certainly make a great difference to the lives of the people. Even in the fields of education, health and environment, technology can provide access to resources, information and skills that will be of immense help to people in the rural areas. However, the reality is contrary to this picture. For example, lack of proper roads and buses affects the lives of many in the villages, like, children who find it difficult to go to school; the sick are not able to go to hospital during emergency etc. On the other hand, lack of knowledge about the role of technology also has kept the poor away from even making an attempt to understand it. This is the reality that exists at Anukkavoor block.

VILLAGE AND COMMUNICATION:

19. In Anukkavoor Block, most “colonies” and “hamlets” are situated about 1-2 kms away from the main caste village. Since most land owning and merchant castes live in the “ur”, the main caste village is generally blessed with all the basic facilities like access to bus service, electricity, drinking water facility, primary school, nutrition centre for children below 3 years, bank, telephone connection and in some cases even satellite television connection. The situation in the “colony” is invariably just the opposite.

20. Many villages in the State have a common television viewing room called Community TV room, which is invariably situated in the main caste village. People from the “colony” seldom get to watch the TV situated in the main caste village. However, many “colony” houses rely mainly on radio as the source of both entertainment and information.

21. The use of print media like newspaper and magazines too is restricted mostly to the main caste village where most can read and write. Due to economic backwardness and low literacy level, reading newspaper by the “colony people” is not a common sight.

22. It is commonplace that any main caste village is well connected by tarmac road, while mud roads connect the hamlet and the colony. As a result, State owned and private buses ply only through these proper roads
connecting all the main caste villages in the block. Hence, anyone from the colony must walk to the main caste village bus stop to catch bus or walk a few kilometers to the nearest junction to catch bus. However, it is interesting to note that in Anukkavoor block most roads are so bad that even some main caste villages suffer from lack of bus facility. Richer families in the villages own two-wheelers.

23. Since bus is the only form of communication to go places, be it a high school, market, hospital or college, improper bus facility does have an impact on the social life of the poor. Especially, it affects the women and children who find it difficult to walk several kilometers in the hot sun to go to market, to buy provisions, to hospital or to school. As a result, the women tend to depend on their menfolk to bring home the provisions. Forced by the need to work and given the lack of facilities like higher grade schools near home, transportation and money, girls generally tend to drop out of school after finishing grade IV. In the Anakavoor block, nearly 70% of women living in the colonies have not gone to school beyond grade IV. However, nearly 60% of the women in the main caste village are educated at least till grade VIII.

24. The low literacy levels in the colonies and hamlets play a major role in the low utilization of the information and the technology. For example, introduction of new simpler techniques using latest low-cost technology for making home-based products like mats, baskets, textiles have not caught up with the people in the colonies. Similarly with information on intra-family feeding practices and how to enrich it nutritionally by resorting to locally available, low-cost or no-cost food items. The same can be said of several preventive and promotive health care practices.

25. In sum, the broad reasons that can be attributed for such behaviour pattern are as follows:

i) lack of awareness of information about the new technologies due to inability to read or write, and therefore, to access such information

ii) lack of awareness of the special concessions and loans available for women to start small household industries through bank finance,

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23 The entire Block has only three Primary Health Centres and the nearest general hospital is at Kanchipuram, 45 kms away from the block. The block has only three high schools and one college situated in the nearby town of Cheyyar and one Industrial Training Institute also at Cheyyar town.
iii) fear of approaching banks or government departments because the information given there will require literacy skills to understand them,

iv) dependence on a middle person to accompany them during this process in order to read and write letters and to cope with the forms that may be involved, and,

v) any training programme to build capacity will, once again, require literacy skills.

26. Thus, it may be seen that inability to read and write, lack of information or knowledge about how and where to get what, seems to be a major barrier that prevents many of the poorer groups in the block from improving the quality of their economic and social life. Invariably, this fear has further distanced the poor from modern technologies, as they are seen by the poor as part of the world belonging to the upper caste or the rich and educated living in towns and cities.

27. On the other hand, within the world of many richer upper caste people who live in the main caste village, the world of technological growth is slowly catching up. Many houses have now television, telephone and also are aware of the use of fax machines, and computers. In our survey, nearly 40% of the rich living in the main caste village are either aware or use fax machines and computers for receiving and sending and recording information. Among them, the youths who are educated seem to have a fairly good knowledge about the world of computers, e-mails and IT. It must be noted here that the availability of such facilities is restricted only to the upper caste people in villages who access it from towns and other urban centres. No village in this region has access to computers, faxes or Internets.

WILL THIS SITUATION CHANGE?

28. The world of IT is booming in the urban areas of this country, which has prompted many pundits to predict that this technological explosion will soon catch up with rest of the country. Many pundits have been very optimistic in putting a date to the day when it permeates every
household in this country, a climate when both the haves and have-nots will be able to tap the full potential of the world of e-mails to e-commerce. Taking into account the fact that India is still faced with problems of providing basic needs such as health, education and drinking water to millions living in the villages, any technological advancements today tend to benefit only the “haves” both in urban and the rural contexts, while, the “have-nots” like in Anukavoor block and in the rest of the country are faced with the grim reality of ever grappling with how to meet their basic needs and also live with the ever widening gap between them and the rich. Technology is becoming a synonym with prosperity. But this prosperity is linked to literacy skills that are a prerequisite for using these technologies (like Computer). Nevertheless, many policy makers feel that by making computers vernacular the information gap will be bridged. But, one must remember that vernacularisation presupposes an ability to read and write. The question here is about the access to primary education which is becoming difficult to certain sections of the society due to their caste positions, gender discriminations and the economic reality that forces more school drop-outs than encouraging school-going ones.

29. Hence, the world of communication and IT can be made use of sensibly by everyone only when the following issues are addressed by planners and the policy makers:

i) Identification of the “have-nots” within urban and rural contexts.

ii) More information need to be gathered regarding the socio-economic, cultural and political context of each region (the smallest unit of analysis can be a district) to study the availability and usage of communication technology.

iii) Study the quality of the provision of the basic human needs such as health, nutrition, education and safe drinking water and see how these can be met first using latest technology, which is both accessible and cheap.

iv) Gender sensitive approach that takes into account the position of women within the society and its views towards woman acquiring skills to access IT.
v) More awareness and knowledge must be passed on about the importance of education, and the use of technology for education and economic purposes through grassroots initiatives like community mobilization efforts. In Anakkavoor, such an effort is being implemented. The results are encouraging and have been the main thrust in writing these suggestions. *(more data on this issue will be presented using video during the presentation of the paper at the Conference).*

vi) When the desired knowledge is reached the appreciation and the utilization of technology becomes the next logical step forward in this process.

vii) Efforts should be taken towards making the poor realize that modern communication and technology are not necessarily caste-related, urban educated-related or exclusive to rich. The "have-nots" need technology for advancement of their lives. This is a wish that is desirable when technology turns "have-nots"- friendly!...

30. The Anukkavoor experiment works through volunteers who hail from within the village communities and who focus on addressing the above issues in their efforts at sustainable development. The project is trying to utilize their services to bring about such transformation in the ability of the villagers, particularly the poorer groups, to access information and technology for the betterment of their own living conditions.
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