The role of digital media in creating a parallel culture: an enquiry based on the current cultural and socio-political scenario in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Digital technology has advanced to the extent that it has almost become impossible to lead a life sans digital literacy. It provides voice to the voiceless and promotes the marginalised from periphery to the centre of power politics. In the present scenario people are born into the world of digital media, breathe social networks and die in some channel debates. World is now at a point where the media shape reality and not vice-versa. India as a democracy is passing through a tough phase politically, socially, religiously and financially. Media plays a central role in turning the spotlight on current problems, thereby subjecting them to legal jurisdiction. Honour killings have become common, "Gomatha" is the unacknowledged goddess of India, an internal colonization is getting naturalized where Dalits and women are victimised. Recent reports from Kerala suggest that despite the high literacy rate, different political ideologies and developmental initiatives, "God's own country" is also vulnerable to such issues. Within the past one year a number of Dalits got killed in various parts of Kerala, a recent one being Kevin from Idukki who was kidnapped and later, murdered by the relatives of his wife. This along with the child abuse that took place in a theatre in Malapuram revealed the corruption in the police department who backed the criminals. These instances grabbed more attention as a result of the popularity and responses they had garnered in the digital media. This paper tries to illuminate how "hash tags" provide a platform to the religious minorities and other underprivileged to voice their grievances and to fight for their rights. A study based on the recent attacks against lower caste people in Kerala is carried out to analyse the role of digital media in subverting the concept of caste and in creating a new parallel culture. How gender roles get merged in this situation is examined in order to evaluate the opportunities given by media to women and thereby media's role in liberating women. Along with the appreciative efforts of media, a glance at media's quest for the sensational, which often forget human values, is also studied to point out the intrusion of digital world into the private world.

Keywords: Caste, religion, gender, sexuality, parallel culture.

Introduction

The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses[1]. - Malcolm X.

Digital media influence and impact the contemporary generation by transforming the cultural and power structure. Digital technology has modified several institutions belonging to various strata of the society such as education, profession, entertainment etc., which reveal the tremendous influence that the new media enjoys when compared to any other inventions of humanity. Also, digital media have revitalized culture by including the marginalized sections of the society who gained social mobility from periphery to the centre. This has in turn contributed to the development of a parallel culture which counter stereotypes the existing norms regarding such sections. It has become all pervasive to the extent that it is almost impossible to ignore its growth and development. In the present scenario people are born into the world of digital media, breathe social networks and die in some channel debates. As McLuhan has rightly observed, medium is the message and the messages conveyed through the media are manipulated and used for the benefit of those who control the digital world. These tycoons create a virtual culture and impose it on the masses who perceive and practice it faithfully. That is, people are more concerned about the hash tags in facebook and are only vulnerable to those glossy images in television and viral clips in you tube rather than what happens right in front of their eyes. Giving catchy taglines and taking our consent without even making us aware of this; is a part of the naturalization of the same media culture.

For instance, one of the famous mobile companies had their tagline as "connecting India". This tagline is quite ironical because when media connect people from faraway places they disconnect the people who are not geographically separated. This paradox in connecting and disconnecting people is utilized by the digital world to create a virtual reality and in making the common man to believe that media is an essential element in their daily life than the relations around them. Hence, it could be

seen that while digital literacy has brought about a revolution in the world of information gathering and transmission, it has also resulted in the creation of a mass culture dominated and propagated only by those in power. On the one hand, the emergence of social media has provided a platform for the layman to participate in the discourses that would change and shape our culture, socio-political scenarios etc., while at the same time giving voice to the grievances of the otherwise ignored marginalized like women, Dalits etc. So just as in all cases there are two sides for this coin (digital media) as well.

The 1922 Walter Lippmann classic, *Public Opinion*, which began with the title "The World outside and the Pictures in Our Heads", contains the following:

The media are primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is 'out of reach, out of sight, out of mind' and what we know about the world is largely based on what media decide to tell us[2].

A modern man spends almost 50 – 60% of his time in a day in front of any one of the digital media and therefore he/she cannot avoid or stay intact by the influence from the same; may it be positive or negative. Media provides a wide range of information about all things in the universe. It is not our needs which make us buy a product but the super stars in the advertisements, it is not the doctor who diagnose disease but the search engines in the internet, we don't know what happens next door but we know the foreign policy of Pakistan and China. What can be inferred from this is that the reality of every man in the present day at some point or the other is shaped by digital technology that in turn gives the control of the whole world to a minority without even attempting to make the majority understand it. This unconscious naturalization has a positive side which is slowly getting utilized now. In one of his interview retired chief justice of Kerala high court Mr. Kamal Pasha made a statement that it cannot be right to say that media influence judiciary rather media helps them to know the popular public interest. Media is able to turn the spotlight to those issues which fail to reach the judiciary. So, the bright side of the above-mentioned naturalization is that media helps to build a parallel culture where the so called marginalized and underprivileged are accommodated and voices for those people are taken into consideration.

Kerala

Digital media has performed a momentous role in the progress of states like Kerala which boasts of high rates of literacy. Malayalee often make use of the digital platform to respond to the issues around them and this has resulted in an increased awareness about the contemporary matters. The first organized movement in Kerala that took place as a result of campaigning through digital media, was against moral policing and was named as "Kiss of Love". After this incident other similar protests were organized through digital media on various

causes. Kerala was less vulnerable to those "petty" cases regarding honour killings, cast issues, custody deaths etc. But now the trend has changed even in "God's own country". The recent rise in the atrocities committed against the Dalits, women, children and other such marginalized sections of the community have generated alarm amongst the so-called intellectuals of Kerala.

The monstrosity of the crimes against Dalits in Kerala got recently exposed with the lynching of the Adivasi youth Madhu by a mob in Attappadi hitting headlines. According to NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) about 81,322 crimes against STs were reported from 2006 to 2016, with the highest increase in crime rates recorded in Kerala, Karnataka and Bihar. This alarming rise in the crimes against the Dalits in Kerala was highly criticized in the digital media which was mainly used as a platform to protest against such injustices and to fight for their rights. Campaigns were organized through facebook and other similar social media platforms. Dalits who were unable to voice their grievances aloud found strength and space to speak through the digital media and gathered together as never seen before.

Even the protest against the recent dilution of the SC/ST Act garnered much attention as a result of the publicity through digital media. The recent issue of honour killing in Kerala, occurred as a result of a girl (Neenu Chacko) getting married to a Dalit boy (Kevin P. Joseph). When love gets branded and discriminated on the basis of caste, creed and wealth the very essence of human existence gets questioned. Whether it is the story of Madhu, who was killed by a lynching mob in Attappadi, or that of Athira, whose father murdered her for falling in love with a person from a different caste in Malapuram, or the Latvian woman who was killed in Thiruvananthapuram, or the little girl who was sexually abused inside a cinema hallor Sreejith who died in police custody in Varapuzha, such horrific cases of human apathy were alien to the shores of Kerala and were widely condemned by the digital media and print media alike.

Few months after the infamous honor killing of Kevin, a newlywed couple in the state complained that they faced death threats from extremist groups. The incident came to light through a video uploaded by the couple on social media. After their marriage the groom named Harrison, a Christian boy posted their photos on face book and later threats were coming from organization named SDPI; they even said that they would kill their parents. What is to be noted here is, the whole issue began from media and the solution was also given by the same. The video ends by Harrison saying that he doesn't want to end up as news in the paper like Kevin[3]. Even police knew about the incident only after seeing this video which in turn shows the potential of media to prevent crimes.

The recent incident in Kerala where a prominent actress got molested in a moving vehicle and her courage to open up about it, stands out as an example of how women are capable of

reconstructing a patriarchal society. The actress gained support from the digital media for voicing her grievances and was sung as a real heroine who represented millions of Indian girls who were forced to remain silent about the sexual abuse they had to face from household, professional space etc. Many public figures responded online in support to her creating a hashtag movement "avalkoppam". As a result of this incident a new organization was formed in order to provide a platform for the women working in cinema to address the issues they face. This organization makes use of the digital media to communicate with the people. This could be seen as a reflection of the international campaign "me too" and has had its reverberations in other southern film industries as well.

"Third space" or parallel culture

The potential of the digital media to create a parallel culture that incorporates every section of our society has to be exploited to a greater extend in order to develop and sustain an egalitarian society. Digital literature in Malayalam that is gaining popularity through social media could be utilized as a tool to propagate a new culture. Websites and social media pages that incorporate radical thoughts and ideologies are drawing more followers and often the impact they have on the readers are affirmative in nature. *Verukal*, *Kilimaram*, *Kalipattam*, etc. are sites that not only contain literature but also respond to the current socio-political and cultural scenarios in Kerala. The creation of community blogs, pages and websites based on gender, locality etc. are also helpful in gathering and disseminating similar and diverse ideas on the issues that they face as a group.

The Location of Culture (2004) by HomiBhabha categorizes the evolution of digital media as the "third space". It refers to the gaps between overlapping cultures, a liminal space where "the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation and representation". In simple terms as presented in Wikipedia, the Third Space Theory can explain some of the complexity of poverty, social exclusion and social inclusion, and might help predict what sort of initiatives would more effectively ameliorate poverty and exclusion[4]. Digital media play a vital role in transforming and reshaping culture and identities which were earlier considered as fixed and stable. Now culture is understood as fluid and metamorphic which again is an outcome of the collective changes that are brought about by the transformations in the political, economic and social hemispheres. This dynamic nature of culture is now getting explored by the Keralites with the help of digital media. Attempts are made through online awareness campaigns to subvert the notions of caste and to incorporate the outcastes in policy making discourses. The contemporary youth are more flexible and the enormous response and protests they organized through digital media platforms against moral policing, gender and caste-based discriminations point towards the emergence of a new culture that is all-inclusive in nature.

Digital media has revolutionized the lives of the trans-genders by providing them a platform to give an account of their real life rather than the artificially constructed narratives that were embedded on the Malayalee psyche for generations. With the growth of digital media's influence trans-genders were able to fight for their rights in Kerala to the effect that they were able to assert their identity in the state. Several laws in favour of the trans-genders were passed in Kerala along with Kerala being the first Indian state to open a trans-gender school. Also, the first legally registered trans-gender marriage took place in Kerala which grabbed a lot of media attention and they were widely accepted and appreciated by the digital world. A recent Malayalam movie entitled *NjanMarykutty* gave a realistic portrayal of the trans-sexuals thereby breaking the myths and superstitions associated with such sections of the society. Malayalam film industry has taken a bold step in casting a trans woman as the female leadin an upcoming movie. The Malayaee psyche have changed to the extent that they are now able to understand and accept the trans-individuals as part of the society and digital media is largely responsible for such positive changes.

Liberation and emancipation of women are also achieved as a result of digital literacy among women. Women are now able tostand up for their rights themselves through various digital platforms that are available to them. While earlier the rape survivors were condemned, now they are provided an opportunity to account their experiences and trauma through digital media. The television news channels have played a dynamic role in bringing out the narrative of the survivors and in bringing out the viewpoints of not only the traditional and the conservative but also of the modern and the radical thinkers. The immense support the survivors gather and the discourses that are initiated on rape shows how digital media has revolutionized "taboo" topics like rape and female sexuality. Besides this television as a digital media has succeeded to cater to the needs of both the young and the elderly at the same time. Television programs and documentaries act as powerful tools in creating a space for the people who would have been otherwise ignored and left as outcasts.

The other side

Big Brother is watching you. 1984, George Orwell.

Digital media have undoubtably changed our lives to the extent that it has become almost impossible to lead a life sans digital literacy. However, this all-pervasive nature of digital media has adverse effects on the users as well. Digital media is widely used as a tool of surveillance and as a platform to promote extremist views and propagandas. For instance, recently the social media giant facebook had to face legal action in the Federal Court of Northern California as a result of which they acknowledged that they logged the call and text history of some users illegally. Even in India, the digitalization of identity recently garnered much criticism. An incident where

TRAI(Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) chairman, R.S. Sharma, disclosed his Aadhar number and challenged in twitter to find his personal information using it, backfired when people revealed his personal details which in turn revealed insecurity a common man face in his/her daily life[5].

According to media ethics it is wrong to reveal the identity of a rape victim but in the case of the actress who was sexually assaulted in Kerala knowingly or unknowingly a channel owned by a leading political party revealed her name and this question the ethics of such digital platforms. Malayalam actress Rima Kallingal lashed out at the channel saying "when a human being is going through a biggest horror of her life you had time and nerve to find sensational stories for your air time"[6]. The quest for this sensational often merges the line between public and private life. It mainly happens in the case of celebrities where media intrudes into their personnel affairs without any basic civic sense. But now it happens in the case of common man also. When the victim of honour killing in Kerala, Neenu Chacko, was emotional shaken by the death of her beloved Kevin, one of the channel reporters insensitively ask to respond just for the sake of creating a sensation. Such inhuman behaviors are always visible from the side of media reporters as their prime intention is only to increase their TRP (Target Rating Point).

Online trolling is another backlash arising as a result of rapid growth of digital media. While digital media provides a platform to raise our voice against injustice it also permits anyone who has an internet access to respond to anything virtually, resulting in online trolling and bullying. This often leads to the display of personal grudges and biases as well. While before only the celebrities had to face trolling now even common people turn against each other. Recently a famous Malayalam film actress criticized a leading superstar's movie for its anti-women content for which she was trolled online by his fans and her films were also trolled and excluded. Kerala Police has now started an online trolling site for the sake of controlling online trolls.

The comfort of responding to any issues by hiding behind the safety of the four walls has made everyone a critic of everything. Anonymity, identity theft, phishing scams, spreading Trojan horses and viruses etc. are all the side effects of vast digitalization. In order to analyze the psychology of the online users a new field of study has emerged known as cyber psychology. Cyber psychology studies the impact and modifications that the cyber world has on the common psyche of the society by analyzing an individual's psyche[7].

Conclusion

The pace at which people are taking to digital technology defies our stereotypes of age, education, language and income[8].

- Narendra Modi.

Digital media have made drastic changes in all fields of human life. It has made things easier, has erased geographical barriers, has given a new dimension to education and knowledge, has fastened the realm of communication, and has provided a better platform to the voiceless. In the present socio cultural and political scenario of Kerala it becomes more evident i.e., every person is opened to the nook and corner of the state giving them the opportunity to come up with their opinions at any point of time from any place. Keralites resisted and trolled intolerant movements that propagated throughout the country by making use of digital platforms. However, just like any other developmental initiative, digital media too have its own adverse effects on its users. While providing the scope for developing a parallel culture that is all inclusive in nature, digital media also disrupts the existing cultural norms. The world has become one global village which in turn has resulted in issues of cultural identity in a global fluid society. So, in the present scenario digital media have the potential to either make or mar the future of Kerala.

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