

Religion, Culture and the 'New' Social Media in India: Critical Perspectives

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Kirthega Reddy, the head of Facebook India, claimed in a recent interview with *Business Standard* that “we’re the richest, most accurate database of people, their likes and their interests” (Kohli-Khandekar 2013). She went on to say that “no other platform has real user and real identity.” Out of the 120 million ‘users’ of the Internet in India, 71 million are Facebook users (ibid.). Other social networks that have a sizable following in India include LinkedIn, My Space, Google Plus and Twitter.

What Reddy did not talk about in the interview was how this ‘most accurate database’ was exploited by Facebook without the knowledge of the millions who share their ‘likes’, ‘interests’ and other personal intimate details of their lives with families, relations, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and peers, and even strangers within India and across the globe. Unbeknownst to most Facebook users, especially children, and to the people they interact with Facebook Inc. sells this rich personal data to marketers and advertisers, without permission or any legal sanction. This is termed ‘monetization’ of personal data. In reality, this is ‘free digital labour’ (in the form of ‘user-generated content’ or UGC) provided by social media users but which is exploited for profit by the social network sites (SNSs).

Prior to sale, of course, the data is ‘mined’, ‘aggregated’ and ‘segmented’ in terms of demographics, psychographics so that marketers can precisely target consumers of different products and services. Such extremely personal and intimate data is thus commoditized, purely for marketing purposes with little or no concern for the nature and type of self-disclosures they are, or for the privacy of individual users and their

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real-life social networks. The legality and ethics of such manipulative use of personal data freely shared in confidence and sometimes in all innocence, is of little concern either. Children are the most vulnerable to this large scale and global manipulation and unabashed deception. Indeed, even as young people look upon social media as a ‘confessional’ where intimate self-disclosures are expected to be kept confidential, others treat the social media as a ‘performance of the self’ for public adulation (hence the tall claims made regarding the number of ‘friends’, ‘followers’ and ‘likes’ garnered). How ‘real’ then are the identities (profiles) presented by ‘real’ friends and followers in the social media where ‘faking’ is quite widespread? This is both a religious and cultural question as much as it is a question of identities.

It is widely assumed that the new digital social media like Facebook impact upon the religious and cultural life of India. The hype about these new digital media (in the traditional mass media and among the urban educated elite) does not come anywhere near the reality. Certainly they have assisted in more efficient administration and governance, mobilized the educated urban middle classes against the national and state governments in raising issues like corruption in public life, safety of women in public, and acted as catalysts for speeding up economic development. Yet, less than ten per cent of the population has access to computers and the Internet; much fewer has access to the social media, though it’s true that this situation is rapidly changing with mobile phones turning ‘smart’ thereby giving every mobile user access to social media and other applications. With over 900 million mobile phones in India, it appears that almost every adult Indian now has access to a mobile phone. (Among those with access, personal computers, tablets and mobile phones are the primary devices employed). Globally, according to a recent UTI and Georgia Institute of Technology survey, only 30% of the world’s youth are digital natives (cf. Report in *The Times of India*, 8 October 2013, p. 1).

Much of the Indian research on social media carried out so far is dedicated to serving the market; social science research on the religious or cultural impact of these new technologies is in its nascent stage. The

few studies conducted relate to the ‘uses and gratifications’ (Krishnatray et al 2012) or to the political economy (Thomas 2012) of the social media. Derne (2008) looks at the globalization of Indian culture and the role played by the new media in this transformation, while Osuri (2012) throws light on the ‘anti-conversion’ debate in India in the context of religious freedom and the growing religious fundamentalism among both majority Hindu groups and minority Muslim and Christian communities (Cf. Thomas 2008 and James 2011).

This paper will raise critical questions about the practices of social media networks such as Facebook, and reflect on the social, cultural, religious and ethical implications of these activities for the Indian middle class. More specifically, the paper will analyse social media evangelism as reflected in websites, blogs, Twitter and Facebook activities of two religious communities of India, namely, the Hindu majority and the Christian minority. Thus, how the new social media empower (and often provoke and inflame) the urban educated class and help mobilize public opinion (mostly along religious lines) against various social/political causes, even as they divide religious communities (through hate-speech, for example), will be the main thrust of this paper. The challenge for India is how to balance freedom of expression and freedom of religion enshrined in the constitution with the unfettered freedom that an unregulated social media stand for and propagate. The paper concludes with an analysis of how far these developments are changing Indian religious culture, with particular reference to religious practices and expressions, and inter-religious relations.

Religion-Related News Reports

I’d like to share with you some news stories that caught my attention early this month; they are directly related to the theme of our Roundtable:

1. ‘Dalits embrace Buddhism at meet’ (headline in The Times of India, 14 October, p.5). At a rally in Rajkot, 60,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism ‘leaving behind the age-old caste

discrimination and untouchability’ which they were victims of as Hindus. Besides Dalits, people of the Koli community and other castes too embraced Buddhism. This was reminiscent of earlier mass conversions of the ‘untouchables’ to Buddhism, particularly the one in October 14, 1956 when more than 600,000, led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, turned their backs on Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. (Dalits comprise 17% of India’s population; 37% of dalits live below the poverty line).

2. News about Catholic/Christian bishops rarely makes headlines in the daily newspapers of India, except of course they happen to be involved in scandals or corruption. But October 3, 2013, the day following the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, was an exception. Two news stories on the retired and current Catholic bishops of Pune made it to the city page of *The Times of India*. The first was headlined: ‘At 80, Bishop connects with youth on Facebook’; the second: ‘Religious leaders should look beyond places of worship’.

The first story described how Bishop Valerian D’Souza, now retired, claims he has 2500 friends on Facebook, with a third of them under the age of 25. These young ‘friends’ of his asked him questions about religion. The second story reported on an inter-religious programme on ‘Religion and Faith’ organized to mark Gandhi Jayanthi. The headline was a direct quotation from the speech of Bishop Thomas Dabre of Pune. He had observed at the programme that ‘with the society riddled with communal problems, religious leaders should look beyond rituals and places of worship and take lead in educating their community to live in peace... All religious leaders should come out and be promoters of justice, peace and reconciliation in the society... the credibility of a religion or faith depends on the conduct of its followers.’ Muslim, Zoroastrian and Buddhist scholars also spoke at the programme.

3. ‘Now, RSS takes the social media route to reach out’ (Headline in www. rss.org, 15 October 2013). We are told that the ‘join

RSS' link on the site, got 12.115 requests in 2012 and as many as 19,312 requests till July 2013 (ibid.).

These news stories provide us just a glimpse of the contemporary religious scenario in India. None of these stories were on the front pages of daily newspapers but they told real-life experiences of people of different faiths of the country. The same events were reported in the digital versions of newspapers, and were possibly discussed in the social media.

The Indian Religious Landscape

The religious landscape of India is marked by infinite diversity, eclecticism and syncretism. While Hinduism clearly rules the roost with an overwhelming majority of 80.5% (or one billion) of adherents of the population, Islam has a sizeable 13.4% (135 million) and Christianity a mere 2.3% (24 million), while Sikhs comprise 1.9% (19 million) (Census 2011). Buddhists make up a mere 0.8% (or 8 million) but rank as the fifth largest religious group. Then there are 'multifarious little traditions of popular Hinduism and indigenous tribal faith expressions' (Thomas 2008, 193). Aside from these, there are the Jewish, Zoroastrian, Orthodox and the Sufi traditions. And not to be overlooked are the neo-Buddhists, largely made up of dalit and low-caste converts to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In 1956, over a hundred thousand Indians of the lowest caste converted to Buddhism.

However, the major religious traditions are not monoliths; each has its many divisions and sects. Hinduism, though not a religion in the Semitic sense but rather a 'dharma' or dutiful way of life, has diverse traditions and practices, primarily the Vaishnavite and the Saivites. The Sunni-Shia divide thrives in India as much as in West Asia. Among Christians, the Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox divide persists. While the Catholic Church is split by rites (Latin, Syrian, Syro-Malabar), the Protestant Christian community is dominated by Anglicans, Baptists and Lutherans but has several minor sects like the Pentecostal/

Neo-Pentecostal churches as well as Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Several of them have come together and formed two large groups, the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of North India (CNI). The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, largely under the influence of American churches, form the 'fundamentalist' far-right congregations, preaching what has come to be known as Prosperity Theology (Thomas 2008).

Religion in the 'New' Social Media

Religious TV channels reflect this religious divide. Out of the 35-odd channels, the majority are Hindu-affiliated (e.g. Astha, Sanskar, Zee Jagran, Disha, Bhakti) while Islam and Christianity run a small clutch of indigenous channels. QTV, Peace and Islam are the most prominent Islamic channels while God, Miraclet, CBN and Shalom are the best known Christian channels. The social media space has been taken over by the same religious groups. They have inundated the Internet with their history and literature in the form of text, graphics, audio and video. While most of the 'pages' of religious sites attempt to inspire and to elevate the human spirit, a small number disseminate suspicion and hate about other religions. Such are the sites of the fundamentalist groups (Kumar 2003, 36). More than 650 websites, 7 million blogs, 15 million videos on YouTube, and 20,000 'Internet Hindus' who tweet 300 times a day, besides making their presence felt on Facebook and other social networks. A significant proportion of these are sites are actively promoting the Hindutva ideology; they lose no opportunity to attack and mock Islam, Christian and Buddhist beliefs and practices. Some of these sites which foment hatred and threaten communal violence have been banned (e.g. hinduunity.org) by the national and state-governments. Other websites such as christianaggression.com targeted at Indian Christian churches, continue to operate freely. The website christianaggression.com is designed as a news site, replete with reports, features and articles, with the focus though on news related to Christian pastors who sexually abuse and murder minor girls. One telling headline reads: 'Militant Christianity – Evangelical Christianity:

Devils in high places’. However, nowhere on the site is it stated clearly who owns and runs the site; the ‘About’ Page merely lists three links: What Aggression?, Why India? and Contact Information. While the answers to the first two questions were spelt out elaborately in the linked pages, the Contact Information page just gave an unusual email address: iaca_master@yahoo.com. This is the kind of anonymity that social media sites thrive on.

The site appears to be extremely popular with advertisers. Flipkart.com is a major advertiser, so is Islam (islammatrimony.com) which carried a banner ad on the day I accessed the site. The day I browsed the site (October 15, 2013), pride of place was given to a recent book on the life of Pope Francis, advertised by flipkart.com, India’s foremost retail shopping site.

Under an image dripping blood, the banned site hinduunity.org names a variety of people for committing crimes against the Hindu nation. ‘This page exposes the evil forces that are against the Hindu people... Know your enemies! Know who will be responsible for the downfall of Bharat... and prepare yourselves for the duty towards your religion and nation.’ (Quoted in Thomas 2008, 142).

Among the indigenous Indian Christian websites are: indianchristian.org, nicministries.org (North Indian Christian ministries), indianchristianity.com, indianchristianmission.com. These sites are targeted at practicing Christians of different denominations; their primary objective being to provide factual news and prayers that inspire love and peace. ‘Rival’ churches or religions do not usually find mention on such sites.

The majority of Christian and Hindu social network sites (SNS) are targeted at loyal followers of the respective religious communities; however, each religious group manages specific sites which are unabashedly aggressive and hostile in address and tone when reporting or discussing ‘rival’ religions that are imagined to be competing in

the same space. The use of the social media by India’s many religious communities is on the rise. They were already active on print, radio and television platforms; now they have extended their ‘propaganda’ on to social media platforms.

Social Media and Changing Indian culture

Social media not only extend the power and influence of the traditional mass media but put power in the hands of groups and individuals whose views are not given voice to in the main stream media. Thus, for instance, religious minorities and the backward classes, though it needs to be acknowledged they have limited access to the new social media or the wherewithal to invest resources and time in them. Yet, these same media have the potential to be exploited to counter dominant and official views on political, economic and cultural issues, and even to mobilize public opinion and even participate in social movements against the hegemony of the dominant classes. Further, as Campbell (2013, 12) observes, ‘rather than being an alternate social space for a few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many’.

The social media have had a role to play in India’s changing culture, especially youth culture, over the last two decades. The aspects of Indian culture that have been affected relate to family relationships and values, personal relationships and privacy, and relationships among majority and minority religious communities.

Social media play only a peripheral role in bringing about changes in personal or community religious practices and religious expression. Religious discourses can be freely shared and downloaded via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social network sites. ‘Petitions for prayers’ can be sent to various shrines via websites. Information about religious feasts, pilgrimages, and timings of church services are disseminated through these same networks. In some cases, worship and rituals may be offered via these sites and applications. The application

for the Catholic practice of ‘confession’ has been launched in some countries, but for ‘absolution’, church members are asked to approach their church pastors. These practices exemplify what has come to be termed ‘digital religion’. However, ‘digital religion does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice’ (Campbell 2013, 12) (See also Special Issue on ‘Theological Reflection on Digital Culture and social Media’, *Communication Research Trends* 2013)

Conclusion

Religious culture in India has not experienced any dramatic changes. The forms of expression might have been affected in some ways, particularly among young people, but traditional religious expression through rituals, congregations and pilgrimages, for example, continue unabated. The social media perhaps facilitate religious expression and traditional practices. However, the most disturbing change has come about in the fomenting of communal tension between different religious groups, particularly through propaganda that is filled with hate-speech. Several such sites have had to be banned by the Indian government, to promote national integration, inter-religious understanding and communal harmony. What is however imperative is the coming together of Indian many religious communities, using social media for inter-religious dialogue and the immediate scotching of rumours to put a halt to panic situations and communal flare-ups as occurred recently in Mumbai and Muzaffarnagar in the wake of the dissemination of ‘fake’ videos of violence. Consequently, some regulation of ‘hate-speech’ on the Internet, particularly in communally sensitive countries like India, may go against the spirit of the largest ungoverned virtual space on earth, but is certainly called for if national unity and inter-religious peace and order are to be sustained.

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