Impact of New Communication Technology on the Shias of South Asia

Nadeem Hasnain

Introduction

South Asia has the largest Muslim population in the world. It is estimated that around 40 percent of the Muslim population lives in this region mainly in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In terms of sectarian composition, India and Pakistan have the largest Shia population after Iran and Iraq. It is estimated that 10-15 percent of the Muslims of South Asia are Shia. There were only a few Shia ruling dynasties in India and among them the Nawabs of Oudh in the North and the Qutubshahi dynasty in the South are the most important in terms of power and grandeur. Lucknow, the capital of Oudh, has been the center of Shia culture and politics and hub of Shia intellectual life.

Changing Religious Communication

The ways of religious communication have been changing through the ages. Making the journey from oral to audio, audio-visual, satellite television and Internet. The medium and the message have both changed. The ‘cyber Islamic environment’ has produced and coined new terms—‘E Jihad,’ ‘digital sword,’ ‘online fatwa,’ to mention a few. Like others, thousands of Islamic groups are also using the television and the Internet. Thus, for the first time in its history, we have ‘Islam online’ and different religious groups have waged a war in cyberspace. Lack of control or censorship has facilitated the propagation of different versions and interpretations of Islam.

A typical feature of Islamist or Islamic missionaries has been ‘Daawaa’ (Daawat/ invitation) because they think that it is enjoined upon them to invite
people to Islam’s fold. In order to invite and attract non-Muslims to Islam they not only present their point of view/interpretation as the ‘true’ and ‘authentic Islam’ but condemn or malign others as ‘fake’ and ‘distorted.’ Thus, rhetoric and polemics degenerate into mud-slinging and obscenity. Several radical Sunni groups describe the Sufis, Shias, and Islamic liberals as kafir (infidels), ‘deviants,’ and sometimes, ‘internal saboteurs.’ In retaliation, these groups accuse Sunni as Takfiri (one who believes that only he/she is a Muslim while others are worthy to be condemned and, annihilated).

Thus, in the realm of Blogosphere one may come across the mind boggling multiplicity of ideas and interpretations which may only confuse the naive and gullible who have neither the time nor the inclination to read the original sources themselves and come to their own conclusions. Gary Bunt (2009) makes a very relevant observation when he says that “the Internet has profound contemporary impact on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the twenty-first century. While these electronic forces appear new and innovative in terms of how the media is applied, much of their content has a basis in classical concept…specific forms of online or digital Islam, distinct from offline or analogue Islam, has developed.” Internet TV and satellite TV channels through audio-visual medium are also impacting the Muslims in a variety of ways. ‘Virtual Haj,’ ‘Virtual Ziarat’ of sacred places and tombs, online Khutba (sermons) and Majlis (mourning congregation of the Shias) and ‘Virtual Urs’ of the Sufi saints are the contemporary reality of the twenty-first century.

Other Islamic Groups

The Shias, like other Islamic groups, have also come under the influence of the new communication technology. But besides technology, the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 radically changed the Shia discourses. His writings, recorded speeches on audio and video cassettes and sermons on television virtually transformed the Shias of the world including the Shias of South Asia. From a defensive and persecuted minority, they became a community confident of their identity, position and power. Khomeini, significantly, never talked of Shiaism in his discourses and sermons but asserted his ‘Islamic identity’ and advocated unity between different sects of Islam especially between Shias and Sunnis. He made a conscious attempt to tone down the religious differences between sects.

With the increasing access to the Internet and Satellite TV their visibility increased. For the first time many Shias came to know of the presence of Shias in several regions of the world. Television images of Shias of different ethnic groups with varying physical features fascinated them. The Shias of Kargil (Jammu and Kashmir), Hazara tribe, spread over Balochistan in Pakistan to Afghanistan, the Arabic speaking Shias of UAE were ‘new discoveries’ to many of them. Thus the idea of ‘Shia Ummah’ (Shia universal community) also took shape in the mind and imagination of many Shias of South Asia.

Shias and Internet

Shias enjoying access to the Internet have been exposed to a new world of advice and fatwas. Websites such as ShiaChat.com, Shia.com, Al-Islam.com and ShiaSource.com are full of information and raising questions they never thought of. The ‘helpline’ maintained by several of them facilitated access to interpretations and explanations they were never exposed to. This has raised new questions in their mind about their stand, understanding and status in the societies they are living in. Thus, the Internet has come as a new Shia Islamic tool in the local, regional and global context. Before it has a very low level of access to Internet and almost total absence of non-English content. Now, several of these websites offer content in Persian and Urdu and with the technological innovation of instant translation into different languages and increased access to Internet have changed the whole scenario.

Surfing/use of the Internet becoming cheaper and cheaper and the expansion of the Internet facilities to small towns and even villages have virtually brought a revolution in communication. Yet, the striking feature in the Indian society (for that matter even Western societies) is the lack of interest in the use of this new communication technology among the elderly and persons sixty years old and above. Thus, it can be inferred that the content of the Internet is impacting only the relatively younger generation. But at the same time, it cannot be ignored that in a number of cases the younger members of the family share the content with the older members or operate the Internet and do surfing for their parents and other older members. Thus, the ‘digital divide’ between users and non-users is narrowing.

Shia Websites

There are a number of Shia websites offering to display matrimonial advertisements free of cost or for a nominal fee. This is changing the very face of ways of choosing a spouse. Earlier, the ‘catchment areas’ were consanguineal...
and affinal kins or the circle of friends and acquaintances. Now, marriages are being performed with strangers. It never happened before. Moreover, the open matrimonial sites and newspapers, even in vernacular languages, display these ads classifying the aspirants into castes, sects and regions. We also see interesting and funny advertisements of such matrimonial agencies and websites on popular TV channels.

In terms of religious discourses and sermons Internet TV channels such as Shia TV offer a variety of programs of religious nature. Majlis (mourning congregation) is an integral part of Shia religious life throughout the world especially in South Asia. Before the advent of the Internet the Shia mourners (during the mourning months of Moharrum or on the occasion of death in the family) were never exposed to the majlis speech and nauha recitation (mourning rhymed poetry with beating of chest) of Zakir of other regions or countries. Now, they are watching recorded majlis by so many different scholars and speakers and live majlis during the mourning days of Moharrum.

Sites, such as the popular YouTube, have had a profound impact on the Shias. Hundreds of videos uploaded on it are captioned ‘Shia Kaffir’ (infidels) and exhortations to eliminate them or declare them non-Muslims. Inspired by the Wahabi version of Islam, several fundamentalist and militant groups of extremist Sunnis especially of Pakistan and Afghanistan are responsible for it. Perhaps the most glaring example is a video in which the Shia pilgrims returning from Iran by road are ambushed in Baluchistan, taken out from the bus and shot in cold blood amidst the chant of “Allah o Akbar” and “Shia Kaffir.” The cruel and bizarre portrayal makes the Shia of elsewhere more rigid and stubborn in their points of view and ideology and gives them a ‘halo of martyrdom.’ The most frequent reaction among them is in the form of a question: “Who are these organizations to decide whether the Shias are Kaffir or not? Even it is conceded that they are Kaffir, where does the Quran or the Prophet say that Kaffir has no right to live and must be put to death?” The most frequent reaction among them is in the form of a question: “Who are these organizations to decide whether the Shias are Kaffir or not? Even it is conceded that they are Kaffir, where does the Quran or the Prophet say that Kaffir has no right to live and must be put to death?" Such propaganda makes the task of those working for reconciliation between different Islamic sects more and more difficult.

**Impact of Television**

Satellite TV and cable TV are the new Islamic tools. Several channels of religious TV also give space to Islamic programs including those of the Shia. In the context of India, not only this, there are several channels such as Zee Salam which seems to be totally devoted to programs of Islamic nature and also gives space to the Shia point of view. Besides these the state-owned DD Urdu and ETV Urdu also telecast programs of Shia interest especially during Moharrum days. These channels have immense reach among the Shia too. They also watch the Islamic TV Channels from Pakistan wherever they have access to these in India.

As compared to satellite TV and cable TV, the local cable TV provided by a local cable operator has a stronger impact at the micro level. For instance, Lucknow can boast of having 3-4 local channels which are in good demand in areas inhabited by Shia Muslims. During two and half months of Moharrum mourning, these channels telecast non-stop majlis speeches, nouha, mersia, and salaam recitation. Besides these programs, factional politics of the Shias also figure on these local channels and various factional leaders and Ulema present their point of view on religious as well as secular matters. Scorces are also settled between not only among the various factions of the Shias but also on sectarian matters of Shias and Sunnis. All sorts of rhetoric and polemics may be seen on these local channels.

**Shia News Agencies**

Among several other news portals, Jafariya News and Ahl-al Bait News Agency cover all the events and happenings in the Shia world extensively. Most of the interested Shias using the Internet, instead of visiting these websites regularly, prefer to go for a ‘Google alert’ using the keyword ‘Shia’ and receive all the happenings in the Shia world in their mailbox.

**Conclusion**

Interface with the new communication technology is rapidly changing, like others, the response of the Shias in a variety of socio-religious spheres. On the one hand it may be seen as the Shia political expression online and on the other hand it is also inducing some rethinking in Islam/Shiaism. It is also serving, in a way, as a force of democracy through free speech panacea. To an extent it may also be contributing to the radicalization of educated youth among the Shias who do not attend religious congregations, especially in metros and big cities, and prefer to go by whatever is available in the cyber environment and engage in dialogue in ‘blogosphere.’ A very significant point that needs to be further researched and probed is: Can the new communication
technologies make *Ijtihaad* (independent judgment based on authentic Islamic sources in the light of changing times) easier? There is no doubt that instant availability of all sources including original ones and their multiple explanations and interpretations can make the clerics, going by their vested interests, irrelevant. Thus, there is a range of possibilities vis à vis the new communication technology.

**References**


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**Communicating Religious Dimensions of Culture in the Traditional and New Social Media: The Christian Experience in India**

Keval J. Kumar

Infinite diversity, plurality and multiplicity are the primary features that mark popular Indian culture and religion. This culture and religion have come about through centuries of absorption, integration and acculturation as the subcontinent evolved at its own leisurely pace engaging with invaders, settlers and colonialists who brought with them their own audio, print and visual cultures. Conversations and exchanges with these different cultures and religions over two millennia gave rise to the ecumenical, syncretic and hybrid cultures of contemporary India. There were along the way many conflicts and resistances, narrow chauvinisms, nativism, and even fundamentalism.

These tendencies also contributed to and in some ways vitiated attempts at fusing the many strands that make for any national culture and its expression in religious beliefs and practices. The fine and the plastic arts, applied arts, performing arts, literature, and the numerous local and regional folk art traditions contributed to this cultural and religious evolution. True, some cultures and religions dominated in each space. Others fell by the wayside, most just plodded along, happy to be left alone. The Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, Syriens, Sakas, Hunas, Turks and Mongols, and finally the Europeans (mainly French, Portuguese and British) came as explorers, traders, missionaries, and invaders: some left in a hurry, others stayed on for some time, while still others settled down among the natives and made the country their home. The colonizers from Central and West Asia stayed for more than three centuries (1526-1857), though many came, plundered and went away.

*Keval J. Kumar, PhD* is adjunct professor at the Mudhra Institute of Communication Ahmedabad, India.