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Digitizing—The New Sanskritizing

Chandrbhanu Pattanayak

ABSTRACT

Through an exploratory study, this paper proposes to focus on the extent to which the digital is fast penetrating the nooks and the corners of rural India and the ways in which rural and tribal communities are not only accessing the “digital” but being affected by it.

All Asian countries are at different stages of development in their attempts to build epistemic societies, bridge the digital gap and improve access to services delivered through the internet. This paper will explore how Religion is using the internet in developing a complex system of social communication in communities which are already steeped in conservative and religious values. Since most Asian countries, especially India, are multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, it is normally assumed that the “digital,” in fact, is a great tool to maintain and nurture this plurality. This paper will, however, explore how the digital technologies actually help to homogenize societies especially in the religious space, rather than nurture heterogeneity, thus leading to the growth of religious fundamentality and right-wing ideologies.

A few days ago I received a Whatsapp message which read something like this:

Eight years ago, when I went to the temple, it was written “mobile phones prohibited.”
Two years ago, it was changed to: “Keep your mobiles switched off.”
Last year it was changed again. It asked you to keep your mobile in silent mode.
Yesterday, when I went, it was changed again.
“If you wish to take a selfie with Lord/idol, please pay Rs.50.00 at the counter” it said.

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This was meant to be a joke, but it is also something to think about. Even if one is sceptical of the timeline, it is important to look at the direction of change and how this change is helping change the mind-sets of people in India today.

The title of my paper has the term ‘sanskritization’ in it. This is a term coined by the famous Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas. He uses the term in a technical manner to explain a social process at a particular time. It stands for the upward mobility of people within the caste system. According to him, there are two dimensions to Sanskritization, one, cultural and the other structural. The first results in the mobile group introducing changes in its customs, ritual, ideology and lifestyle, while the second leads to a gradual entry into the Hindu fold in the case of outside or marginal groups, and to their upward mobility in the local caste hierarchy in the case of groups already within the Hindu fold.

I would like to argue here, that this process of sanskritization, which used to be organic and in a sense aspirational is now being engineered externally, using digital technologies by certain groups for specific purposes. I would also like to point out here, that digital technologies lend themselves to certain ideological groups using them to homogenize thoughts.

In an earlier paper, I have argued that the Internet and digital technologies are a democratizing process and that they have helped in promoting orality. The mixed blessings of literacy are apparent in the development of the academic community. Kaufer and Carley (drawing on the work of Charles Bazerman) explain that while print has facilitated distant communication, allowing individuals separated by geography to get to form knowledge communities despite being unable to meet face-to-face, it has also helped separate and isolate participants. Participation in academic discourse, for example, requires that authors “compose a text satisfying the requirements of both immediate comprehension and relative similarity for an anonymous and widely dispersed readership.” The lack of visual or conversational cues in print communication make informal discussions difficult. Thus, while print revolutionized the distribution of professionals, allowing the creation of a virtual community in which geographically dispersed readers could meet each other within texts, print also helped isolate members within that community.

Today, more than two millennia after Plato’s Phaedrus, electronic media is often hailed as Western culture’s salvation from print. Lanham (1993) argues that the humanities’ narrow focus on the printed text deprives literacy education of a critical understanding of electronic media, which in turn works to make literacy education irrelevant to modern life. Lanham sees a renewed appreciation of media among humanists as essential to insuring that humanistic values continue to inform education. In particular, Lanham argues that digital media will revitalize the study of literature:

The computer’s oscillation between reader and writer reintroduces the oscillation between literate and oral coordinates that stands at the center of classical Western literature. The electronic word will allow us to teach the classical canon with more understanding and zest than ever before.

and takes this advocacy of electronic media a step further than Lanham and Welch (or anyone else), arguing that computer-mediated communication represents not only an improved medium for scholarly communication, but the fourth revolution in human cognition. The first revolution, the advent of speech, allowed communication at a speed approximating that of human thought. Writing, the second revolution, is slower than speech, but is powerful nonetheless for its ability to make speech dependent upon the speaker or the memory of the hearers. The third revolution came with the widespread use of moveable type, which brought about a revolution not in the way people communicate, but rather in the way they conceive the world. Now, at the end of the millennium, we have what Harnad calls “electronic skywriting”—the “fourth cognitive revolution.” In this revolution, writing will allow us to communicate with speeds approaching that of speech, which is much closer to the speed of thought than other communication media. This revolution will be most profound in the scholarly community.

Certainly, communication technologies such as television, films, videos, sound recordings, computer games, are far more popular than the reading of novels, plays, or poetry. The popularity of the Kindle or the tab today and

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the fact that most publishers are venturing in a big way into e-publishing proves my point. We are entering a new era when the oral is more valued than literacy.\textsuperscript{5} In such a circumstance it seems to me quite foolish to posit the oral against the literate and place a value on either. Literacy, then, looked at from the stand point of orality is a very effective tool of oppression. From the point of view of someone coming from India, parameters and reports of the UN and other international agencies that point out how the only salvation of oral cultures is in becoming literate ultimately to become oral again which they were in the first place, seem quite intriguing to say the least.

While it is true that technologies that give credence to the written word is oppressive, when they reach small languages and small communities, they also exert pressure for getting rid of multiple channels for creation and transmission of knowledge and emphasize simple solutions of dominant mono-lingualism and mono-culturalism. Languages and cultures survive and are sustained through usage. Language use for creation and transmission of knowledge is language use for development and development of this kind would lead to a robust and vibrant culture of knowledge. When technology is viewed as a marketable, returns-based commodity, then technology development and culture development will take divergent paths. Language development is bound to take a back step and spoken (unwritten) languages are bound to lose on both counts.

The debate between ‘Orality’ and ‘Literacy’ is a very old one. However, it would be prudent to point out certain positions that maybe useful in this paper. One of the fundamental arguments has been that Orality has been equated with poverty, malnutrition, lack of education and healthcare, while literacy has been linked with growth of productivity, childcare and advance of civilization. While there is very little evidence to suggest that literacy has civilized mankind, and as Stubbs has pointed out, “we know precious little about the social functions of literacy”\textsuperscript{6} these positions continue to be held steadfastly. Olson has suggested that categories of analysis between the oral and the written traditions often overlap and involve a series of linguistic, cognitive and social changes.

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Pattanayak,\textsuperscript{7} in his book, Language and Cultural Diversity talks about how the vedic tradition in India, the Oral historians of Africa, the oral interpreters of epics in Europe and Asia, who maintained the oral traditions developed the metalanguage to talk about texts and propagated the tradition through ‘schools’ that would exemplify the categories postulated for orality.

If, as Donne wrote, letters as much as conversations can ‘mingle souls’, then to attribute to letters all the consequences of modernity is an act of oppression. As Helen Gardner\textsuperscript{8} put it,

Compared with the fruitful enlargement with the capacity to see, and think and know and feel, that the experience of reading gives to those who will make the imaginative and intellectual effort to attempt to apprehend the work as its author made it, the sport of ‘making texts’ and ‘importing meanings’ is a perverse and barren exercise in ingenuity, a reductio ad absurdum of the emphasis which the old New Criticism gave to the importance of readers’ response.

In India, there was a tradition of fixing texts orally and the written and the oral were mutually supportive. Between 800 BC and 200 AD, certain changes took place beginning with philosophers and religious leaders to thinkers from Greece to China who put in great efforts to create texts. However there was a creative tension between the oral and the literate texts which was based on the dual principles of reflection and technology. This is precisely the difference between what Illich distinguishes as scribal superiority of literacy over orality.\textsuperscript{9}

Oral tradition on the Internet includes a variety of areas: language preservation, oral history, storytelling, poetry, and new media (digital radio and webcasts). Each of these includes archives of papers, databases, and events, and for each group there are associations which are using the Internet\textsuperscript{10}

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to grow and to keep members informed. Finally, there are new collaborations that involve groups that would have never met before the Internet became popular. Some of these are online and some are offline but only last as long as the duration of the project or event. For instance, this conference used the web to call for papers, and the organizers and speakers used email to work out the details, submit papers, and keep informed about the agenda. This ability to link up, to collaborate will lessen the isolation of people involved in oral history, storytelling, and poetry projects around the world.

The example of language is also true for other aspects of culture. If one expects that technologies inherently possess the possibility to nurture plurality, it is not so. It is how technologies are used and by who they are used that matter. It is my contention to suggest here that technologies, and especially digital technologies, while they have been used most effectively as a tool of freedom in the fight against oppressive regimes—the greatest recent examples being the use of twitter and the internet in what has come to be known as the Arab springs, has also been used by forces holding specific religious and political ideologies to create homogenizing movements. I would like to point out here, that in both instances it is bringing together, large numbers of people to engage and believe in a particular point of view. The difference is on which side of the spectrum one stands.

In the realm of religion, I would like to take some examples from India to show how digital technologies have worked to diffuse plurality, rather than emphasise it. Many scholars have spoken of standardization as being the central issue when one studies the impact of modern media on religious culture.

When the printing press was brought by the Portugese to Goa, it was used by missionaries to propagate the Christian faith. By the nineteenth century, printing technology became a major factor in the transmission of both Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. My concern here however, is with the new media. While printing technology created a certain kind of homogenization by printing pictures of Gods in one form, it was described and justified by the proponents of technology as the logical explanation of the Hindu concept of darsana. It was believed that because central to Hindu religious observance is darsana, the auspicious seeing of the divine being, the mechanical reproductions of pictures of deities was acceptable. However, what this did was that it created a “oneness” of vision which defeated the whole purpose underlying the concept of darsana.

Similarly with the comic book form. Frances Pritchett in a study of the Amar Chitra Katha comic book series recounts how he once overheard two high government officials settle an argument about some point in the Ramayana by referring to one of the comics. Whatever else one may make of this, it is surely apparent, that the comic book has become the referent, at least for some classes in the cities as far as religious acculturation is concerned. What is interesting is that Pritchett points out that the worldview presented in the series is largely the worldview of one individual, the world view of its creator, Mr. Anant Pai. And yet, this worldview has translated into becoming the world view of an entire generation of urban middle class India growing up at a particular period of time.

Then of course, came the audio recordings. This was one of the most popular form of digitization and possibly the one technology that lent itself best to the the Indian and the South Asian context. Since India is primarily an oral culture, the audio technology led to the proliferation and popularization of several forms of performances. This also allowed for many voices and many traditions to grow and flourish without contest.

The revolution of the moving picture brought with it great promise of variety and pluralism. However, this was not to be. The protagonists of the film industry in India were people who came from a certain strata of society and therefore put on celluloid a series of images that confirmed to a particular cultural and religious tradition. These films came on the heels of a series of films made by British and American film makers who depicted India and its religio-cultural traditions in a typically “orientalist” mode. As far as I know, there were at least a hundred and forty films made about India before India became independent. These were films which highly exoticised Indian culture and its many religions. Indian religions held the fascination of foreign filmmakers right from the silent era up until today. Shirley Temple has made a film on India in 1923 and the Rudyard Kipling poem, Ganga Din, was made into a popular film in the 1950s depicting the dark and mysterious ugly religions of the East. The end of that film became the beginning of the Peter Sellers hit film of 1976, The Party. It was as if a tradition continues. In this backdrop, the middle class Indian film maker, in order to remedy the Orientalist point of view sought to project a single unified vision of Indian religion and culture.

The television which developed in the west as a people’s technology, reinforced the images of its predecessor. It is interesting to note that when Ramanand Sagar made the Ramayan on television, the country came to a standstill. When Ramayan was telecast, offices would shut down, public transport halted for the duration of the show and families stopped cooking to watch the show. This most popular show was largely based on a single vision of the Ramayan—the Tulsi Ramayan, which was up until then popularly only in certain pockets of North India. Ramayan, then became the staple, homogenized myth and epic of all India. At least two generations of youth in India learnt their Ramayan not from the story telling oral traditions of India but the singular version of Ramanand Sagar’s and Tulsi Das’s vision of Ramayan. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Delhi University introduced Prof. A. K. Ramanujan’s brilliant essay on Many Ramayans, there was great uproar and resistance and that had to be deleted from the course of study.

In my reckoning, I believe that India had finally found a single text around which certain right-wing religious positions could rally. Thus far religious fundamentalism in India had difficulty in taking roots because there was not one rallying image or text. India had finally found one. It is interesting to note that scholars have identified 360 odd versions of the Ramayan prevalent in India. All of them are the same story and at the same time significantly different. In fact the Valmiki Ramayan, which most scholars consider as the root text, has been given epic status because of its richness and variety. All characters, even though deified, have human qualities and human follies. Here, in the version that was popularised by the media, those precise qualities were sanitised. The characters were made “ideal”. We had an ideal Man, an ideal Husband, and ideal Wife, an ideal Brother, an ideal Bhakt or devotee, and even an ideal Foe. All of a sudden we were talking about India as the land of Rama the ideal nation, devoid of all plurality and where minority and the different needed to be mainstreamed.

This response is a kind of defensive attempt to redefine Hinduism as a ‘proper’ religion among Semitic lines and to make this redefined Hinduism the pillar of a second, nativised theory of modernization of mind and society in India. This form of modernization was squarely posited against the liberal-secular European model which was becoming more and more popular among the elite Indian. In this other form, “concepts such as nation-state, and technology continued to be important, but they were now to be pursued through a language that was Hindu in its new redefined sense. Simultaneously, the idea of nationalism was nativised in a form that was able to sanction the attempts to convert the Hindus into a conventional, European-style nation.”

Of late I have begun to realize that unlike the colonial encounter where the Other was being consciously Othered, we have begun to Other ourselves to achieve almost the same result. We have been some how caught up in a post-modern conundrum where in trying to exclude the other, we have excluded ourselves. We find ourselves caught up in the tussle between what we have learnt, which is the constant reinforcement of a “single moment” or the “modern moment”, as defined for us by western education and the legacy of the enlightenment, and on the other hand, the knowledge of the fact that our past clings tenaciously to our present, traditional India thrives in contemporary locales. For us history is not a contiguous single entity but many histories operating within many nationalisms. This is our strength rather than our weakness and this is our Modernity.

This new Hinduism—the political ideology of which was to be later given the name Hindutva—had two important features. The first defensively rejected or devalued the little cultures of India as so many indicies of the county’s backwardness and as prime candidates for integration within the Hindu/national mainstream. This Hinduism would be primarily classical, Bramhinic, Vedantic and therefore not an embarrassment to the ‘modern’ Indians in touch with the more ‘civilized’ parts of the world. It was this high culture that was projected as the basis of the new Hindu nation.

Second, the redefined version of Hinduism allowed those who saw the new religion more as an instrument of political mobilization. This part of the redefinition of Hinduism derived strength from the fact that Indian culture was primarily organized around religion and it seemed natural to some Indians, sold to the new myth of nation-state, to use Hinduism as a national ideology rather than as a repertoire of religious, cultural and moral categories in politics. This possibility was to be later developed by M. K. Gandhi. These two strands of Hinduism could never be reconciled. And fifty years after his death, Gandhi’s Hinduism continues to look to Hindu nationalists openly anti-statist, anti-Bramhinic, disaggregating, emasculating and hostile to modern science and technology. Even more dangerous, his Hinduism brings to politics a cultural-moral critique of Hindutva from the point of view of Hinduism as the living faith of a majority of Indians.

In the last half century most so-called modern developed societies have shifted from being a primarily textual culture to a hybrid culture that leans more toward orality and visual communication and are moving increasingly further from the intensive textuality of the first half of the twentieth century. This is what American social scientists are afraid of. This shift is evident not only in the new reliance on visual and aural sources of information (e.g. CNN, talk radio, YouTube, NPR) over textual ones, but even in the way in which these sources are packaged, edited, written, and recorded.

McLuhan states “today we seem to be receding from an abstract book culture towards a highly sensuous, plastic pictorial culture.”\(^{12}\) and this plastic, pictorial culture can be seen not only in the visual fixation of the cable news networks, with their token, unreadable text crawls—or in talk radio where volume and emphasis on florid word pictures often substitutes for substance—but also in entertainment media. Rare is a modern director who believes in dialogue over action, the long shot over the quick cut, character building over the car chase. As an exercise in contrast it is helpful to study the programming of the BBC. The British, it seems, still have a desire for textual constructs in their visual and audio entertainment (perhaps owing to the long tradition of literacy there). BBC programming often contains single shots that last thirty seconds, and dialogue exchanges that last minutes. By contrast the average American television program will not contain a single shot that exceeds five seconds, and dialogue is neatly concluded in twenty seconds.

This shift is not, however, the fault of the producers of the product as much as it is the fault of the consumer (if it is anyone’s fault at all—it is more likely just a natural progression); we want the blurb, the sound bite, the outtake. We don’t want to have to read the whole story—just give us the “nut.” Watch the whole program? Preposterous; we’ll simply TiVo it and watch the highlights. Don’t break out of the easily digestible formula, as Ong says “in an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms…would be a waste of time.”\(^{13}\) We are fast becoming a culture that wants to distill, compress, and condense only the most exciting bits of anything and then access those bits at our leisure on YouTube.

In our current culture we are fast shifting back toward easily remembered slogans and images so that we can regurgitate them without thought; homogenous diversity that is a false construct and an illusion of real, spontaneous diversity; an image fixated society that doesn’t want the boring examination, but rather the bulleted facts supplemented with visuals; a fast-food society that refuses to wait for the slow build, the extended resolution, the tension of text. We prefer the easily scanned, retained and transmitted ease of orality and imagery. What type of society will this neo-orality bring? Only time will tell…though I hope I don’t have to wait too long to find out.

Diversity is an often stated goal of the modern American culture and there can be little doubt that it is a noble goal, but one must wonder if what they are achieving is actual diversity. Politically correct, inoffensive, safe, non-threatening, sterile, and meaningless are all adjectives which (it could be fairly argued) describe not only modern speech, but modern thought in America as well. Marshall McLuhan states that preliterate societies are fixed and homogenous\(^{14}\), so we can state that post literate societies should see some shift back toward this fixed and homogenous status. We desire diversity, but only when it falls within the confines of the acceptable; we are open to alternative points of view, but only when they don’t seem to threaten the status quo. To paraphrase Ong, in this secondary orality we have decided to promote diversity not out of some spontaneous expression of difference, but rather because, through analytic reflection, we have decided that diversity is a good thing; we restrict our diversity in order to ensure that the right type of diversity is achieved\(^{15}\).

It is not only our ever-increasing homogeneity that is indicative of our creep toward an oral culture, but also our ever decreasing attention span. Ong states that “you know what you can recall”\(^{16}\) and increasingly our cultural recall is limited to the images that we have seen and the easily remembered bumper-sticker slogans which we have heard. Carefully written and researched polemics are rarely published, much less read, in this new environment. Today, those who wish to transmit a memorable message package it in the form of easily remembered slogans, catchphrases, and buzz. The advent of visual news media have created in the society a sort of collective memory based on powerful imagery instead of in-depth analysis.

Today, the discussion has moved further from the secondary orality that Ong had posited to another level of orality which is much more akin to


\(^{14}\) McLuhan, Essential McLuhan, 304.

\(^{15}\) Ong, Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media, 69.

\(^{16}\) Ong, Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media, 65.
primary orality than to literacy. This has been made possible by the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems. This new form of orality occurs in real-time and is asynchronous. Although based on text, the discourse in these computer-mediated forums exhibits many qualities of an oral culture. The existence of this text-based orality may imply that discourse need not be based upon sound in order to have oral characteristics. Rather, oral characteristics grow out of computer-mediated communication which gives participants greater independence over time and space than paper-based text communication. These CMC forums give rise to communities of people who participate with emotion, involvement, and expressiveness.

While it is true that the new digital media has helped enormously in the Arab springs movements and the free democratic movements around the world, has brought about the fall of tyrants and the reinstating of democracies, and helped in installing liberal leaders in positions of power, it has also been used by right-wing groups round the world to spread hatred and homogenize thinking to fanatic frenzy. While this same tool can be used by forces of democracy and civil and cultural liberty, it can very easily and effectively be used by its detractors to take them away. I feel that while we are swayed away by the great potential this tool has to give freedom, we must be aware of the same potential to take it away.

The Political Economy of Digital Propaganda of Islamists Against Liberal and Secular Writers and Bloggers and Their Social Movements in Bangladesh: A Critical Inquiry

Abdur Razzaque Khan

Abstract

The Islamic parties and their activists in Bangladesh have launched a massive propaganda against the liberal and secular writers/bloggers/artistes and progressive intellectuals through their digital means of communications for quite a long time. They openly term these progressive people as atheists and threat to kill them as their holy responsibility for the sake of Islam in Bangladesh via social media. Apart from this, these Islamist groups are very much critical of the ShahBagh Movement and the Ganojagoron Mancho (Stage for People’s Uprising)—a platform of bloggers and online activists in Bangladesh—that has initiated a social movement for the capital punishment to the war criminals of Bangladesh in 1971 since February 5th 2013. The brutal killings of bloggers Ahmed Rajib Haider, Dr. Avijit Roy and Wasiqur Rahman within a short space of time indicates that it becomes common practice of these Islamist groups who felt offended by the writings, posts or statements of those ‘atheists’ or non-believers and inspired to carry out such heinous acts to save holy religion, Islam. This paper will try to examine what is the political economy of these extreme Islamists in Bangladesh? Why, when and how these groups are using Islam for their political interest openly via different social media? In fine, what is their political motive behind these extreme criminal activities of their Islamisation process in Bangladesh?

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