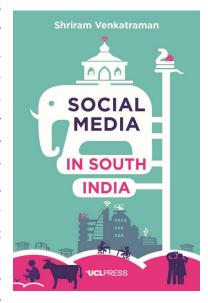# Book Review:
Social Media in South India

Shijina A V

'Social Media in South India' looks into the consequences of social media in a semi urban area of Tamil Nadu. The book by Shriram Venkatraman is a part of the global project popularly known as 'Why We Post - The Anthropology of Social Media' dedicated to analyse the impact of social media in nine different field sites in different countries across the world. The fifteen months long ethnographic study gives a detailed description of the Indian social structure based on caste, class and family hierarchies related to age and gender. The book narrates well on how the same is reflected and reaffirmed in their online spaces. The research site 'PANCHAGRAMI' is a semi-urban area in Tamil Nadu with an established IT sector. The region includes two categories of population: the IT employees and the long-term resident villagers. However the author steps back from the dichotomy of IT employees and villagers as it became apparent that in the Indian context deeper layers of traditions influenced by social categories such as gender, kinship, age, class, religion etc govern the use of social media in both categories.

The book stresses on the notion of continuity between offline and online spaces in the Indian context and relates it to the Indian cosmological thinking, citing the regional death anniversary ceremony. The ceremony includes the ritual of offering food to the departed soul along with other items. In author's words, This notion of continuity between offline and online spaces is nothing new in the Indian context; indeed claims to continuity are themselves a fundamental part of Indian cosmological thinking(p.3). 'Panchagrami' the field site is a representation of the traditional Indian society organized around castes, a social status assigned to an individual from birth, where marriages are endogamous and mostly happen among extended families. Offline tradition of the network of homophily, the concept of friending people from similar backgrounds extends to online too resulting in a sense of 'online otherness' where each group views everyone else as an 'other'. Most of the participants had online friends whom they already knew offline and were from the same social backgrounds. However, the author refers to this trend as an 'unconscious choice' influenced by offline contacts. The first two chapters discuss the offline and online characteristics of the village independently. History, people, tradition, the transformation from a rural to semi urban space and governance in Panchagrami are well narrated. Subsequently, the book deals with how people adopt mobile phones, internet and social media.

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Continuity of visual culture

Panchagrami has the tradition of exhibiting visual culture proved by the coloured posters of cinema stars adoring public walls. At the time of a political event, banners of political leaders too spring up around the main roads of Panchagrami. This tradition of visual culture as such is continued in the facebook walls as well. Both young men and women use pictures of actors and actresses as their profile display pictures. Cutouts of the banners of political leaders are reproduced online in either Facebook or WhatsApp. A major portion of the chapter is devoted to cinema and politics alone. Regarding other visuals the book specifies "however, this does not preclude people from putting up posters that highlight other social issues, for example alcoholism or corruption. Posters such as these are often either satirical or show concern; they attack only the top state or national party leadership or are sometimes even related to international issues that might affect the state or the nation (p.76). The private photos are focused on the individuals which are not selfies but taken by someone. These photos are formal in nature, taken in a well dressed and dignified manner. Men usually post these kinds of photos while among women those belonging to upper middle class alone post their photos. The absence of selfies in individual photos is notable which might be an act of conforming to the regional culture; however the study has not examined this aspect which is a deficiency particularly in an age of youths being obsessed with selfies.

Communication patterns, work culture and choice of media

Communication patterns undertaken depend on the socio-economic status, family hierarchies and social structures in the form of caste and gender. The chapters on kinships and relationships narrate in detail about the intra-family communication and communication with other people.

In-depth analysis of intra-family communication patterns has been borne out by intergenerational communication and communication among couples. The elderly people prefer voice communication and consider it respectable than texting via messenger Apps like WhatsApp. Intergenerational communication happening between grandparents and grandchildren are more intimate with voice calls and video calls through skype. Married couple and youngsters differ considerably from them as they choose texting over calls and appropriate WhatsApp considerably well to mediate their personal and professional lives. This choice of intimacy is reflected in the media they use as well. For instance, author cites, Twitter was perceived to be a platform on which one had to be normative and politically correct. In contrast it was easy to be your true self on Facebook, and even more so on WhatsApp(P.53). WhatsApp is viewed as having more privacy as you can post photos in selective groups and is seen as family-friendly. Facebook is used to share the photos of family members only during special occasions to a wider society, only after ample discussions with family members take place in the WhatsApp group. The finding that the choice of media depends on kinships, family and work purpose is conforming to normative expectations of the social networks ensuring privacy and intimacy.

Gender discourses in social media use

Women from upper middle class families use WhatsApp more to coordinate their daily needs like organizing community functions, programs at local churches or even kitty parties while women from lower classes are not familiar with these practices. Surveillance of facebook profiles of women in the community by imposing space and time restrictions is cited as an instance where social structure is maintained in the notions of gender. As the author puts it, a constant surveillance or imposing of restrictions upon women accessing social media by kin and family circles was in effect influenced by caste-based ideals and normative discourses (p.203). However, reflection of women respondents on being controlled by the men in using facebook is not mentioned which is a considerable flaw in the book.

Work, non work and social media

Introducing the concept of work from the approach of anthropology, the study goes on narrating the historical Indian view regarding work and how the social media has altered it substantially. Anthropological views on the concept of work are different from the conceptualization of work in binary terms of work and non work. Anthropology begins by differentiating non work itself, but rather the spheres or domains of life in which work is performed, acknowledging that these spheres overlap and are very culture specific (p.138). Work patterns in India are considerably different from the western countries as it was traditionally performed in an environment of family, kin and caste. Historically, work in India was performed in an environment of family, kin or caste, which did not consider the spheres of work and home as being mutually exclusive or dichotomous nature (p.141).

The introduction of IT sector in 'Panchagrami' has brought restrictions and regulations among the employees for accessing social media which they often bypass with relative ease. While taking work home is seen as a social conformance to expectations of the modern workplace, managing non-work matters at work is generally viewed with disapproval. However, such 'dissent' actually conforms to the historical ideology of work in south India, where traditionally such boundaries did not exist; constant interactions with non-work space were considered a part of everyday sociality (p.204).

A typical everyday routine of middle class working families is described through the cases of a nuclear family like that of Shwetha, Ravi, Vishal, and Anu. The details elucidate the emotions that such couples undergo and their lives as nuclear households. They use WhatsApp to mediate their everyday life which is almost a characteristic of any working couples of IT sector in Panchagrami. These details of social media mediation in the lives, of working couples, co-workers and friends have thrown light on polymedia. Smartphones, WhatsApp and Facebook. help users to mediate everyday life along with expressing the myriad emotions of love, guilt and frustrations that occur in working days. Personal life intrude in their work lives but social media such as WhatsApp help in managing work life well ensuring communication in the spheres of work and domestic life.

The influence of socio-economic status is demonstrated in the surveillance of mobile phones among children. There is considerable difference in the perception of affluent schools and non affluent schools regarding students owning mobile phones. While the former has concerns over distraction caused by social media on students; the latter views it as an opportunity for them to explore and make use of the platform for gaining technical skills thereby assisting social mobility. Teachers from these different schools have different views about friending their students on social media showcasing the online differences in caste and class, generally

of equality. This chapter also, like the previous ones, reinforces the findings that online space reaffirms the traditional offline culture and social structures. Even the study has focused on how the offline social structures are emphasized in online too and has limited it by hiding the emancipatory activities in India in the issues of caste, class, gender etc.

The book concludes depicting India as an organized country in its social structures involving class, caste, hierarchies of age and gender and a space that is intensely social. "All conspired to make these 'social media' more often a reflection of wider Indian sensibilities and structures which remain rather different from those found in other societies"(P.207). It is mentioned that dissent is expressed as indifference or silence on social media. However, the study is confined to a particular village in Tamil Nadu and has not explored into other religious groups though the presence of other religious communities on the site is mentioned in the book. However, perceiving a multi-cultured nation like India as a structured society conforming to the tradition, from the regional context of a semi-urban village alone is not substantial.

The free pdf version of the book can be downloaded from: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/social-media-in-south-india