



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE NEW MEDIA AND TAMIL DIASPORA IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF JALLIKATTU PROTESTS

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ABSTRACT

The new media spring has brought several issues including the Diaspora community into the limelight thus making the presence of citizen journalists felt. The minorities generally do not find a place that easily on the television but the internet and other new media do map their representation. It is said that after the internationalization of the media occurred, there are no long distances. Hence this paper analyzes the news articles on how the Tamil Diaspora community across the world reacts towards the *Jallikattu* protests which happened from 8th to 23rd of January, 2017 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

The main objectives of the research are:

- To analyze new media's crucial role in bringing the "Tamil Diaspora community" to limelight.
- To examine the cultural identity of Tamil Diaspora represented through the new media in reference to selected *Jallikattu* related articles.
- To understand the human rights issues involved in the *Jallikattu* protests by the Tamil community.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization plays a vital role in shaping up the developing countries, especially the Indian sub continent. It helps in breaking the borders across the nations and has literally shrunk it into a global village like how Marshall McLuhan likes to call it. In fact theories say that one of the key resultants of globalization is the Diaspora. "Diaspora" is the term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational' - that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks across the borders of the nation-states or, indeed span the globe" (Vertovec, 1999) Many scholars have understood that the Diaspora community's presence cannot be ignored and thus the importance of Diaspora literature can be mapped. According to the definition given by scholar Martin Baumann, "The idea of Diaspora has been celebrated as expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity, fragmentation and (re) construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locality, and so forth" (Baumann, 2000). Hence there tends to be a constant identity crisis around the Diaspora community that needs to be addressed. A similar growing trend like the Diaspora studies is the new media and digital technologies. Off late it has become the most used public

forum where the people tend to discuss about their all walks of life, and get benefitted out of the various aspects of Web 2.0 (As given by scholars Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty) such as the Blogs, wikis and the RSS. "People treat Computers and New media like they are real people and places" (Reeves & Nass, 1996) *Jallikattu* or *Sallikattu* is a traditional sport which is typically practiced in many parts of Tamil Nadu especially during the *Thai* harvest festival, where an indigenous breed bull is set free at the *Vaadi Vasal* or the gate, and human males are allowed to combat with the animal male and winning over the animal by stopping it eventually makes the winner. Many animal welfare associations were much concerned about the safety of the animals used in the sport and also questioned about the public's safety during the sport and after filing a case towards it; the Supreme Court of India issued an outright ban on the traditional sport, *Jallikattu*. One cannot turn a blind eye towards the global wide protests in order to call off the ban and to continue the sport where the demonstrators and the protests grew up to gain so much attention during the time period of 8th January to 23rd January of 2017 in which the Tamil Diaspora also played a major role. Hence, combining the new two emerging trends of Diaspora and New media with special reference to *Jallikattu* the present study aims to find out as to how the Tamil Diaspora community intends to look at their identity through the new media, through the protests for *Jallikattu*. The study also delves into the human rights perspective that is involved in the protests and how is the new media's role in elevating the issue to the common public.

Identifying the Literature review

The etymology of the word Diaspora comes from Greek word *Diaspeirein* where “Dia” means across and “speirein” means to scatter. The Wikipedia definition for Diaspora states that it denotes a set of scattered population who originally belong to a smaller geographic location, dispersed because of voluntary reasons such as better living or compelled reasons like natural disasters or wars and conflicts in their homelands. According to scholar Eliezer Ben Rafael, the Diaspora community might wish for themselves to be absorbed by their new homeland, but when they attach to their dispersion, they have a sense of enduring loyalty, and thus want to remain away from the “others”. (Rafael, 2010) According to John Durham Peters, “Diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation or state or the geographical location they pertain to, and relocation in one or more nation or states or countries. He also says that originally the word Diaspora only had the meaning of Jews living outside Palestine, although which today has gathered a hybrid spectrum of meanings. (Peters, 1998) Steven Vertovec quotes about the three different meanings that can be assigned for the word Diaspora especially among the South Asian religions, namely Diaspora as a social form where he traces about their history and geography of the immigrants come under, Diaspora as a type of consciousness, where he analyses on their identity and behavior, and the third one being Diaspora as a form of cultural production where he looks at their (re) production of social and cultural phenomena. (Vertovec, 1999) But the definitions given by Homi K. Bhabha, also speaks about the issues of Diaspora and identity, where he says, “In the process of their juggling act of two or at times more than two nation-states, they become the cultural hybridity that prevents national territories and entertains differences without any stipulated hierarchy.” (Bhabha, 1994) Though the Diaspora as a community is very homogeneous in nature, scholars have tried to analyze a pattern within them. Robert Cohen in his study on *Global Diaspora: An introduction*.

Gives the general characteristics of Diaspora as follows:

- Dispersion from their original homeland often traumatically, to two or more foreign nations.
- A collective memory, myth about their homeland, which includes their history, location, suffering and also achievements.
- A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long period of time based on distinctiveness, a common history, a transmission of common grounds of culture, and heritage.
- A possibility of distinctive, creative, enriching life in their host countries with a tolerance of pluralism. (Cohen, 2008)

Another renowned Diaspora scholar explores about the theorizing the Diaspora paradigm and the cultural identity associated within it. In his essay, he denotes that the upward mobility, the irresistible flow of capital is very high in rate in the twentieth century and people thus on one hand people tend to destabilize the quintessential identity paradigm, which leads to a static sense in the cultural identity. Whereas on the other, “localism” or “nativism”, simultaneously increases as resistance to the global forces from the locals does. (Chiang, 2010)

In William Safran’s essay on *Diaspora: myths of homeland and return*, he traces the qualities that goes in pattern with the

expatriate minority community. 1. Their own or their ancestor’s dispersion from a specific homeland to another country or place. 2. Experiencing a feeling of antagonism and alienation from their host culture and a constant feeling that they will never fit in. 3. Have a commitment to the maintenance or the restoration of the homeland. 4. Treasuring the collective past. (Safran, 1991) To narrow it down further to prove a pattern for the present study, scholar Martin Baumann who conducted a research on Tamil Diaspora in the part of East Germany concluded by saying that, “The Tamil Diaspora in the above said geographic location, enter into their third decade of living in their new homeland, and they purposely intend to root their culture and traditions in the adopted country of residence. The building of temples in a foreign nation is a classic example” (Baumann, 2000) *Jallikattu* or *Sallikattu* (in Tamil) has to be traced back for more than 4000 years ago, or at least roughly four millennia back. The Wikipedia states the other names of the traditional sport as *Manjuvirattu* which means bull chasing or *Eruthazhuvuthal* which means embracing the bull. According to Iravatham Mahadevan, who is a specialist in Indus and Brahmi scripts a very well preserved seal was found at Mohenjodaro, in the 1930s which proved the traditional sport initially originated from the Indus valley civilization. (As said to Mr. T.S.Subramanian, *Evidence of Jallikattu in Indus valleys, The Hindu*)

The above said is verses of *Kalithogai*, which is considered as one of finest Sangam Tamil literature texts. The rough translation for the above said would be “This cowherd girl will not hug him he who fears the sharp horns of a killing bull, even in the next birth.” The meaning of the name *Sallikattu* can be seen as two words compilation, *Salli* meaning silver or gold and *kattu* is to tie. *Sangam literature* has mentioned about the traditional sport where, it is actually played to select the bridegroom wherein the tamer of the bull is said to be the winner. The evidences of the traditional sport in TamilNadu were found in the place called Kaikiyur near the Nilgiris, by an art historian, Mr. Gandhirajan in the year 2004. According to him, “To look through the socio political context, the traditional sport *Jallikattu* was aided or tailored in favor of the Zamindari system because during those days many zamindars who wanted to demonstrate their power, converted it into a gallery sport, which was not the case initially during the Nayakars rule in Tamilnadu over 500 years ago. (As said to Mr. T.S.Subramanian, *Bull chasing, an ancient Tamil tradition, The Hindu*) He also adds up saying that in those days, in the Tamil *ethos*, the taming of the bull has stood for the meaning of a powerful man and virility. To take a closer look on why the *Jallikattu* ban was taken more seriously in local sense, one has to look into the context of indigenous animal breeding. According to Mr. Karthikeyan Sivasenapathy, Managing Trustee of Senaapathy Kangayam cattle research foundation there are umpteen reasons which contribute to the decline of the indigenous breeds is that the Animal Husbandry department is not supporting much to protect the native breed of bulls of Tamilnadu. He also says that there have been many corporate biggies whose greed in conquering the local milk industry to call out for the ban of the traditional sport, *Jallikattu*. Right from Arab Spring, to the good bye videos from Aleppo, Syria, it is the internet or the new media which is playing a major role in advocating the public to participate in every ongoing movement to create and tailor social changes. The methods of activism keeps evolving just like the technology and like how the co founder of Twitter

Biz Stone said, "The internet reduces the number of barriers of an individual to participate in activism global wide". As early as in 1930s, the Frankfurt school of thought scholars had already analyzed that there would be new forms of media which would take over the mass culture. The Frankfurt school of thought also generated one of the pioneering models of critical cultural studies that analyses the processes of cultural production, political economy, and the audience's usage of cultural artifacts through the new forms of media"(Kellner, 1995)

To throw more light on the usage of social media for activism or movements to create social changes, one can look at the essay *Social media as a tool for protest* by Marco Papic and Sean Noonan. "The key to inspire any protest movement is to inspire and motivate individuals to begin from their comfort zone like homes, to the chaos of the streets and faces off against the government. Social media allows the organizers of the protest to do all the above said in a cost effective manner. "(Papic and Noonan, 2011) According to John Michael Roberts in his essay *new media and public activism*, new media is a *snapshot* of modern political and participatory society by the way of political economy- with just a dash of deliberated attempt of democracy thrown in for a good measure. (Roberts, 2014) To dig deeper, the word Internet activism itself is found in various names, such as Cyber activism, online activism, digital campaigning, electronic advocacy, clicktivism or hashtag activism. One of the pioneer e-campaigns which used hashtag activism as its method to reach out for more people was often associated to *2014 Chibok kidnapping* where an Islamic extremists group had kidnapped a group of school girls in Nigeria. The hash tag used was #bringbackourgirls which received almost 2 million tweets. Scholar Sandor Vegh in his essay on online activism: the case of cyber protests against the World Bank, categorizes online activism into different types namely: advocacy/ awareness, organization/mobilization and action/reaction. According to Athina Karatzogianni in her article "*beyond hash tags: how a new wave of digital activists is changing society*," Digital activism is becoming an everyday occurrence where we have even new forms of digital activism emerging. Instead of simply bypassing the political movements, it takes the advantage of new technologies and thus provides an alternative way of organizing the economy. One such example would be live streaming of videos from wherever and whatever one wants to show the world. (Karatzogianni, 2016)

Theoretical framework

The present study uses Louis Althusser's Ideological State apparatuses theory, which is considered to be the most influential works done by the French structuralist Marxist scholar. The theory speaks about how a society as a model functions in reproducing the relations of production by which they function. According to Althusser, the state apparatus is complex but consists of two distinctive apparatuses namely Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus. (ISA and RSA) ISA are the assortment of institutions in ideological practice including religious, political, legal, media and literary agents which will foster an ideology that would be sympathetic to the desires of the state. On contrary, RSA can be classified as the one which massively and predominantly function by repression, including the government, police or the army for which Althusser states that "this is done by the state functions by violence" Although they are mostly overlapping,

the predominant difference between the state apparatus is the RSA chiefly functions in the public domain whereas the ISA functions within the private domain. For example: If one fails to go to church, he/she tends to become an outcast in one's community and might not be accepted in the society. Hence, the fear of not being accepted in the society can be considered as the ISA whereas the fear of violence can be categorized as the RSA.

Theorizing ISA and RSA with present study

Though the theory of state apparatuses is as old as 1970, it can be easily applicable even today due to its ever-evolving nature. As said by Althusser media also plays the role of institution in ISA by disseminating dominant ideologies. The new media which is consumed by the public also is pregnant with a lot of ideology markers such that the public's opinion is largely shaped up. To fit in the present study, the example of Tamil Diaspora community is taken. The usage of ISA through new media can be seen when a Tamil Diaspora person, fearing if he does not participate in the protest for Jallikattu he might not be considered as a Tamilian or might not be accepted in his society, which is hybrid and minority already in his new homeland. The RSA through new media can be seen when the protests were immediately called off after the unverified videos where police were seen to torch the public property and harm the public. No opposition protest was filed or recorded from the side of the Tamil Diaspora community after the videos went "viral". Hence it is evident that the RSA is being overtaken the ISA as Althusser rightly says that "State functions by violence".

Methodology used

Content Analysis of selected online articles, videos, which are related to Tamil Diaspora protesting for Jallikattu and Human rights violation which happened post the protest was taken. The timeframe is during the month of January 2017.

Parameters of the articles are as follows:

1. Content and details of the article
2. Vocabulary, word choice and complexity of the language (Jargon usage)
3. Tone of the news article
4. Stance of the reporter or agency
5. Identifiable agenda of the news item
6. accompanying picture or infographics and its influence
7. The details of the protest(place/people/method of protesting)
8. Function of the article
 - To entertain
 - To inform
 - To persuade
 - To examine or explore the issue
 - To describe or report
 - To instruct

Unit of analysis are as follows:

1. Head line and Lead line
2. Article's content
3. Photographs and Infographics
4. Sound bites and visuals/video footage

Research findings

- Out of the online articles analyzed, all of them used the word “Diaspora”, “Expression of solidarity”, and “Tamil Pride” through which the categorical marking can be taken as the Tamil Diaspora across the globe wants to seek kinship, wants to have a sense of togetherness, a home away from home by either demonstrating or participating in the protest.
- Like any other minority community, the Tamil Diaspora across the globe faces insecurity thus resulting into an identity crisis could also be seen the aphorism of the protest for Jallikattu.
- According to the famous semiotician, Ferdinand De Saussure, “No term has its meaning independently but rather acquires it in relationship to and nuanced difference from related others” It can also be substituted in the case of Tamil Diaspora’s protest for Jallikattu. Together they came forward in the form of protest to transform into something else that stood to say that their struggle for identity is real.
- According to William Safran in his book, *Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return* “he says any Diasporic person is a dyadic model of two self: new and old. He desperately tries to become the new without actually letting go of the old self”. Similarly the course of protest can also be seen where, they do not want to let go of their old self, hence came forward for anything that reminded of their Tamil pride and culture.
- According to Robin Cohen in his definitions of common Diaspora characters, “A diasporic person always has a strong ethnic group consciousness and troubled relationship with his present host society” This could be visibly seen in the Tamil Diaspora protest for Jallikattu where many of the demonstrators wore Dhoti or the *Veshti* and *saree* even if they might lack a sense of identity in their new homeland. Also many placards shown in the visuals were showing Tamil slogans, again symbolizing their collective history in a foreign nation.
- The protest which was seen through the analyzed articles saw a combination of all three types of internet activism, namely 1. Awareness/advocacy when the Tamil Diaspora spoke about the Jallikattu ban and the corporate greed behind to conquer the local milk business and to create an artificial decline on the native breeds of bull. 2. Organization/mobilization when words like “We are expecting more crowd to join our protests” or the invites which called for the Tamil Diaspora to take part in the protests. And 3. Action/reaction when the videos of them picketing or marching were shown.
- The places of the protests can be traced out of the analyzed articles, which were mostly seen to be as either Indian embassy of that particular nation or Consulate General etc. If the mob was bigger and displaced in nature, they moved to parks and open arenas. The next priority of the place of the protest chosen was in front of any famous buildings of their respective nation. This could also be seen as their dire need to get registered in the history of new homeland but s a representative of their old home.
- The method of protest unlike the Indian case was very silent. The procedures followed were picketing, placard holding, silent marches. There was no hate speech against the Government, or the state actors, or defamation of any individual. In only 1 instance, there was slogan shouting reported in the protest staged in front of the PETA headquarters in the US in order to gather their attention.
- According to Yun Chiang, identity paradigm was a way of objectifying the collective meanings, because at times it also involves the claims of authenticity for many selective cultural symbols. This was also evident from the articles where there were 3 news items which quoted people pertaining to Tamil Diaspora saying that Jallikattu was a Tamil identity and not as Indian identity.
- The Tamil Diaspora that protested from various parts of globe was homogenous in a way unlike the crowd Marina or Thamukkam Maidan saw. The demonstrators were elite class literates, who either worked for MNCs or were Indian students studying in foreign institutions. While they were protesting, the anger they had for their identity struggle was not shown on their faces unlike the case of Chennai protests. Instead only written slogans or placards spoke for it.
- The agenda of the protesters at times even went off the track from Jallikattu. They also spoke for animal breeding, and some against corporate culture and the multinational companies’ greed of conquering the local milk business in India and many other counties. William Safran, in his book, *Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return* also say that a Diasporic person is most common to feel a sense of alienation and antagonism towards his host society for the fear that they might not fit in there. Similarly, even when many of the demonstrators were actually a part of MNCs or the corporate biggies, they said they were against it in their protests’ agenda.
- All the analyzed articles had followed hashtag activism a.k.a clicktivism. The keywords which were converted into hashtags in order to make it even viral were #SaveJallikattu, #JusticeforJallikattu #SaveTamilpride #Tamizhanda.
- Articles followed hypermediacy technique since they were online news articles, attaching of several sound notes, videos, photos were simple. Videos of the protest arena, and mostly silent marching with the placards were seen. Also in reply threads, there were posts demanding for coverage for similar Tamil Diaspora protests across other countries.
- The vocabulary used for almost all of the articles analyzed, used simple languages, no jargons. At times even repetitive words were used, they were “Tamil Diaspora”, “cultural pride”, “to our brothers and sisters” which again can be related to the tendency of a Diasporic person to cherish or treasure their collective past.
- The tone of the articles analyzed, expressed the stance of the news items as pro Jallikattu and it also had the function of “to instruct “people to join the movement and express their solidarity morally. The agenda of the article was as such to tell that the Tamil people who were protesting in various parts of Tamilnadu and not alone in doing so.

- The articles were also analyzed on the human rights perspective. It goes as follows:
 - a. The articles in relation to the “unverified” videos of the TN police indulging in vandalism had the function of “to educate “the public about the human rights issues involved in it. The articles reported on the damage of the public property and how the Tamilnadu police simply started attacking the common public without prior warning thus playing the role of educator of human rights.
 - b. Any mass mobilization for that matter should be decoded through the lens of human rights. The whole protest itself can be seen as a protest against cultural imperialism, and anti hegemonic activism. Thus in here, the media plays the role of defender of human rights through the articles analyzed.
 - c. In countries where the press was regulated by the state actors, especially in the south of China and Singapore, there were articles which spoke about how the authorities did not permit the demonstrators to assemble in the public places for protest, but how they wanted to morally stand up for the Tamil community. This again proved that the individual’s right was intervened and the media stands as the protector of human rights.

Conclusion

The new media spring has surely made a vast difference in people’s ways of consuming information. It has brought out many innovations to bring equality in the current capitalistic world. Though the digital technologies are being criticized for their big data or other criticisms like virtual virtuousness will not help solving any crisis, in recent times, many youth and students’ protests are actively initiated by the new media. The present study states that the new media has played a dynamic role in bringing the minority community of the globe, the Tamil Diaspora into limelight during their Jallikattu protest through hash tag activism. An active website for web analysis and statistics states that during the month of January there was around 1.5% of the people had used the world Jallikattu in their networking pages. Also the present study has delved into how the cultural identity of the Tamil Diaspora community was seen during the protests through the news articles. Thus it is understood that the new media had actively advocated for the role of educator and defender of human rights and had given a positive representation of the minority community.

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