

**Shriram Venkatraman, *Social Media in South India: Why We Post***

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This is the first ethnographic study of social media use in Tamil Nadu that I am aware of, focusing on an area that was until recently agricultural and recently became a site where the IT industry came to be located. The author has assembled a trove of information, including messages on Facebook, WhatsApp, and SMS sent by people to their acquaintances and friends. The author has sought to catalog what kinds of stimuli have led them to communicate in this way and also to inquire into what is gained and what is lost by the addition of new technologies.

The field site near Chennai was chosen due to the recent arrival of the IT industry into a rural area. Alongside the educated workers in the industry were rural folk, whose interactions with social media make for an interesting comparison.

One of the main findings Venkatraman offers is the continuity between online and offline spaces: “claims to continuity are themselves a fundamental part of Indian cosmological thinking” (3). Rather than new technologies modernizing their users and inculcating empathy in them, as for example prophesied famously by Daniel Lerner, the author finds in most instances that tradition has the upper hand, or at any rate that users assert continuity with extant norms and practices, while decrying or denying rupture. One example Venkatraman provides is the habit of posting god pictures or religious sayings early in the morning to one’s friends. One informant reports: “I know that I have built the necessary good karma for the day; and I am sure that as they ‘share’ it with others, it will not only help build their karmas, but also mine, as I help build theirs” (92). At the same time the author notes the preponderance of what he calls network homophily, or befriending people from similar backgrounds, especially of caste and class. Cheaper technologies have expanded access, but Venkatraman argues that digital inequality prevails rather than egalitarian empowerment. The author provides ethnographic insight to underline this point: in-group behavior of social media users “gives rise to the sense of online ‘otherness’ as represented by everyone else. Interactions with the latter are then viewed as essentially functional rather than social” (4).

The author found at the time of his research that Facebook was favored by younger people. He records an interesting contrast in responses to the platform from two older users, however. One gentleman was offended by the absence of formality and the mounting casualness with which inter-generational interactions were being conducted, for example, invitations that would normally require a house visit being posted on a young relative’s Facebook page. Those who could not adjust to this loss of ritual courtesy turned away from the medium, Venkatraman finds, whereas others welcomed the ability to connect with a larger circle of family members whatever the terms of exchange (44).

Gender, readers may not be surprised, was a major determinant of social media use. Younger, unmarried women from less educated backgrounds were constrained by their family members from use of social media, or else due to their economic circumstances. After marriage, access became easier.

Venkatraman discusses what he calls “polymedia,” i.e., the use of multiple platforms. The nature of communication over platforms themselves, he finds, centers on the

expectations of the network that users maintained. For example, Facebook was often perceived to be meant for external communication while WhatsApp was seen to be a more private platform. The line between private and public was of course shifting and contextual. Thus, nested circles of privacy could be maintained on any social medium, the author notes.

Venkatraman elaborates on the relationship between society and the larger IT industry, which has become symbolic of upward mobility, especially for the less affluent. He shows to what extent media use and knowledge acquisition tend to be oriented toward the goals inculcated in this context and toward social improvement, understood both in educational and in economic terms (172).

Having begun with a confident sense that the encounter between tradition and modernity, as viewed through the use of the latest communication technologies, would be revelatory, the author concludes on a note of some disappointment, asserting that cultural continuity, at least for the region he studied in Tamil Nadu, is real and powerful. “Social” in India is synonymous with society and remains tightly organized “by traditional principles such as kinship, age, gender, class and caste” (206).

Remarkably, Venkatraman has few significant “effects” to report from media use and admits that he contradicts the original intentions of his project, which were presumably to demonstrate the power and virtue of technological modernization. In terms of the older media studies literature, Venkatraman’s findings accord with the “uses and gratifications” approach that was influential between the 1950s and 1980s among many scholars. The irony is that such an approach was never envisioned for the Global South by two generations or more of media scholars, from Wilbur Schramm to Everett Rogers and Tamar Liebes, the latter convinced that modernization would follow from the introduction of “communication.” In Venkatraman’s conclusion, modernity itself acquires a question mark. What can the term mean when the individuals working in IT and using so-called modern media aver the values of tradition? This is not a question Venkatraman explicitly poses, nor does he focus very much on contemporary concerns, including fake news and hate speech, which are arguably non-traditional. The virtue of his study, however, is that he forces us to acknowledge the limitations of some of the core conventions of media studies scholarship.

The book would be of most interest to those requiring an introduction to the social media landscape of Tamil Nadu and who lack a background to the broader issues of South Asian anthropology. It provides a detailed description of media practices in the present-day urbanizing landscape, but by avoiding an assessment of the evidence until the very end, the book does disappoint those who came to it expecting perspectives on the interaction of tradition and modernity via technology. The author’s conclusion, where he asserts that traditional rules and modernity are not analytically relevant for his purposes, is hard to reconcile with what one knows about the region and poses the question as to whether Venkatraman is applying his categories too rigidly and not taking into account the fact that tradition is itself a modern category that arrives in the course of Enlightenment polemics on historical change.

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