THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

New Media and Diaspora *Perspectives of Representation and Usage*

Dr. Sabeha Mufti
Associate Professor, Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir, Srinagar J&K, India
Asma Riyaz
Research Scholar, Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir, Srinagar J&K, India

Abstract:
Media is a space where interests, ideas and identities are negotiated. The nature and extent of communication, exchange and negotiation is explored by different people differently. It presents an interactive democratic platform for minorities especially the diasporic groups. The diaspora while living-in at some place they sustain their connection including political, social and cultural across the borders, largely through new media. This article argues that diaspora minority groups use the new media to make sense of their cultural and political belongings. This paper looks at the multi-spatial character of communication pattern and mobilization of new media age usage by minorities especially Kashmiri Pandits. They are an important ethno-religious minority displaced due to socio-political reasons from their native place – Kashmir in North India.

Keywords: Diaspora, New media, Kashmiri Pandits, digital era, Minority representation, Identity

1. Introduction

Media has a prominent role to play in modern society. By providing news and information, media has made the present era an information age. Having the potential of influencing social, civil, cultural, political and economic perspective of people, media attempts to change the outlook of its audience. Media educates the masses about their rights, moral, social and religious obligations and while entertaining, the mass media provides amusement. At the same time media helps to make decisions and formulate opinions. Media have undergone an entire metamorphosis from the traditional forms to the contemporary multi-media scenario. Such fast has been the pace of technology that it is hard to comprehend routine life without information and media technology.

New media is one of the most important developments of the postmodern world. The rapid diffusion and adoption of new media creates a great challenge for controlling and monitoring the media content. Social networking has become more popular among adolescents and has brought communities together which earlier were divided by geographical distances. [A. Basson, 2009]

New social media enables migrants to maintain contact with friends and relations who stay far away or for some reasons have left their home community. Social media due to its "rich content" and "interactive capabilities" enable a common experience that supports a shared commitment and common identity among its users. However, the experience is technologically mediated, all of which would be viewed, as reasonable characteristics of a community. (Dr. Lee Komito, 2011)

Cyberspace has become a new arena for the articulation of "politics of recognition" and has started new age of digital nations, virtual diaspora and other online communities of different ethnic and national orientation. (KaterinaDiamandaki, 2003)

The digital divide now cuts across socio-cultural and geographic boundaries. The ways of disseminating the information have been changing. Earlier the information which was circulated through word of mouth is today monitored in just a click. The avenues have grown exponentially with the advance of technology. Telegraph, newspaper, magazine, radio, television and now new media have added new dimensions to the flow of information in the masses.

2. New Media

New media is the most widely used mass media today. It has swept the audiences of other media as it possesses numerous benefits over traditional and other mainstream media like television, radio and print. A convergent medium - internet provides text, images, graphics, audio, video and possesses the quality of providing instant feedback. Besides, unlike other media, internet is not region-centric. It provides an expansive view of all the happenings in the world.

Another feature that it possesses is of being inexpensive and easily accessible. Internet is a simple tool that requires few skills to access. In the era of globalization, when numerous services are used to reach the largest number of people, Internet is being employed in almost all spheres of activity. So, it is no surprise that its usage is increasing at a fast pace all over the world, including India. The number of internet users worldwide will likely touch 500 million by 2020. India, in next three years, is expected to be the second largest population of internet users, says a report updated on NDTV's website. The report was updated by Internet and Mobile

Association of India on the website of NDTV on January 15, 2015, 00:49 IST. The number of online users will rise to more than half a billion by 2018. Besides, users in rural areas are expected to go up from 29 % in 2013 to nearly 50% in next three years.

The increase in the online users is significant and all these features including easy accessibility and less expenditure encourage more people to take advantage of this technology. The internet has tremendous potential to empower the population living on the margins of the society. Besides, it helps to provide a platform for representation of minorities and other groups from socio-economically marginalized sections of society or even gender groups.

The term diaspora carries a sense of displacement the population has after being separated from its national territory. RozaTsagarousianou (2004) writes that diaspora should be viewed as imagined communities, continuously reconstructed and reinvented. The term has been consistently associated with experiences of displacement, dispersal and migrancy.In 1991, William Safran asserted a criteria that a Diasporic group maintains "a myth or collective memory of their homeland; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true home, to which they will eventually return. Being committed to the restoration or maintenance of that homeland; and they relate 'personally or vicariously' to the homeland to a point where it shapes their identity." Over time, remotely separated communities tend to vary in culture, traditions, language and other factors. They often tend to assume a different course from that of the population living in the original place of settlement. The lost vestige of cultural affiliation in a diaspora is often found in community resistance to language change and in maintenance of traditional religious practice.In Diasporas, group of population shares an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history. It includes ethnic groups who have its own distinctive culture that includes norms, traditions, value- systems, and a defined language for communication with and among the members of the group.

Rogers Brubaker (2005) used the term diaspora to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space.

He emphasizes all the definitions and discussion of diaspora are firmly rooted in a concept of 'homeland'. They are concerned with a small set of core cases. For example, a core case of Jewish diaspora. Similarly Kashmir too has a displaced population of a significant minority- Kashmiri Pandits.

3. New Media and Minorities

New media has played a significant role in providing greater social equity and empowerment tothose sections of society which hardly get any representation. Advanced technology has made media access easy, and has made barriers like size of population and socio-economic status nominal. Pew poll showed a similar result viz-a-viz the American society. Pew Research Centre is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. They conduct public opinion polls, demographic research, content analysis and other date social science research.

In one of their studies they have analyzed Hispanics [originally from Spain] and African Americans [blacks]. Both exists as in minorities in United States of America and are considered to be non-native having relatively modest socio-economic status than the natives. The poll conducted in July 2010 showed that 51% of Hispanics and 46% of blacks use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33% of whites. The research further informs that 47% of Hispanics and 41% of blacks use their phones for e-mail, compared with 30% of whites. The figures for using social media like Facebook via phone were 36% for Hispanics, 33% for blacks and 19% for whites.

Minorities are a functional component of larger societies. They have distinctive physical and cultural characteristics which make them different from the majority population. They share their own characteristics.

One of the characteristics of any society is displacement. UNESCO defines displacement of people as a forced movement from their locality or environment and occupational activities. They assert it is a form of social change caused by a number of factors. The most common factor put forward by them is armed conflict. But natural disasters, famine, development, economic changes and urge for better prospects may also be a cause of displacement.

It has been observed that minorities are more prone to displacements. As Elizabeth Ferris and Kimberly Stoltz (2008) in their work "Minorities, Displacement and Iraq's Future" identify some cases where minorities have been repressed, killed or displaced by governments and other armed actors seeking to take over their territory, command their loyalty, and control their actions. It perhaps occurs in the context of nation-building as governments tries to assert the national control over areas traditionally ruled by minorities or is done to expel the minorities from a given territory or transferring populations from one region to another to ensure that they do not threaten the regime (Monica Duffy Toft, 2003). At times it takes the form of ethnic cleansing, defined by some as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove from a given area persons of another ethnic or religious group." (Hayden, Robert M. 1996).

But at times the minorities are displaced by state-sponsored attacks, as in the forced relocation of Kurds by the Saddam Hussein regime. Or are either displaced by other ethnic groups seeking to reclaim land they once occupied, as in Kenya or are displaced by conflicts between minority groups seeking autonomy and government forces, as in Sri Lanka. In human displacement or migration people move from one place to another with an intention of settling in a new location. Mostly, the movement is over long distances or from one country to another, but in some cases internal migrations also take place. The displaced humans get scattered across different places and give rise to Diasporas.

Diasporas are the scattered population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area, homeland. These are historical mass dispersions, such as the expulsion of Jews from Judea, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Europeans from North Western Europe, the Southern Chinese or Hindus of South Asia during the coolie trade, or the century-long exile of the Messenians under Spartan rule.

4. Diaspora

The term diaspora carries a sense of displacement the population has after being separated from its national territory. RozaTsagarousianou(2004) writes that diaspora should be viewed as imagined communities, continuously reconstructed and reinvented. The term has been consistently associated with experiences of displacement, dispersal and migrancy. In 1991, William Safran asserted a criteria that a Diasporic group maintains "a myth or collective memory of their homeland; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true home, to which they will eventually return. Being committed to the restoration or maintenance of that homeland; and they relate 'personally or vicariously' to the homeland to a point where it shapes their identity." Over time, remotely separated communities tend to vary in culture, traditions, language and other factors. They often tend to assume a different course from that of the population living in the original place of settlement. The lost vestige of cultural affiliation in a diaspora is often found in community resistance to language change and in maintenance of traditional religious practice. In Diasporas, group of population shares an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history. It includes ethnic groups who have its own distinctive culture that includes norms, traditions, value- systems, and a defined language for communication with and among the members of the group.

Rogers Brubaker (2005) used the term diaspora to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space.

He emphasizes, all the definitions and discussion of diaspora are firmly rooted in a concept of 'homeland'. They are concerned with a small set of core cases. For example, a core case of Jewish diaspora. Similarly Kashmir too has a displaced population of a significant minority- Kashmiri Pandits.

5. Diaspora and New Media Usage

It is believed that the alternative media have unintentionally created digital spaces and increased social networks which provide a sense of collectiveness and belonging to the existing members where distance plays no role and geographical boundaries are made irrelevant. It provides a facility to mediate and communicate pre-existing messages.This attribute of Internet has led to the existence of public sphere.

Ambiguous and complex environment of the public sphere has become a new arena for the articulation of politics of recognition. Besides, it has generated hybrid collective formations, such as digital nations, virtual Diasporas and other online communities of an ethnic/national orientation.

Internet's increasing reach has helped this technology to contribute in the political spheres especially, in the creation of their national identity and nation-building. Many researchers believe that apart from providing information, awareness, education and entertainment, as other media, internet plays some additional functions.

Internet offers communities one of the most effective means of reaching to its members, who may no longer live in the geographical area of their nation. Besides, it enables them to evade the authority and power of the oppressor. Thus, Internet is the most potent tool for creating and sustaining identities among people who are physically far removed from the nation. (Ranganathan Maya, 2003)

Besides, the advent of internet led to the democratization of content. Wherein, media has transformed into a democratic platform where content can easily termed as "of the people, by the people and for the people." The former digital divide has disappeared and now media users became the media content producers. People who were once on the receiving end ofone-way mass communication are now increasingly becoming the producers and transmitters. FromIndymedia to the future BBC, the distinction between information producers and consumers will become increasingly difficult to draw (Creeber and Martin, 2009). This role reversal has challenged the media hegemony theories.

New media plays a prominent role in the process of identity formation by diffusing information and offering the symbolic 'proto-material'- images, representations, discourses, and interactions - from which identities are made (DiamandakiKaterina, 2003). Researchers believe that identity is political. Identity creation is a process of negotiation, definition, and a social battle. It involves political recognition, law and discourse, inclusion and exclusion.

Diamandaki argues that the importance of virtual ethnicities and online communitarianism has increased. This is a result of fear of losing traditional identifications due to the trends of increasing mobility, globalization and pluralism. Besides, one of the main reasons for using internet as the preferred media is its easy availability for the manipulation and reconstruction of information. There is no pressure of the authority, in fact the online communities work with zero intervention of the authorities and enjoys immense freedom of speech. "In case of computer-mediated communication, what allows for the reconstruction of community and the place is the flexibility and the openness of the internet."

Acknowledging Diamandaki observations RozaTsagarousianou writes media run by diasporic communities has become a crucial factor in reproduction and transformation of their [diasporic] identities. She further argues diasporic media do not merely enable their audiences to be in two places at once but effectively give them the opportunity of producing new spaces where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronized.

Many diasporic communities like Jews, Palestinians, Kurds, Burmese, Tibetans etc, have used this new age media i.e. internet to build up new perceptions and identities. Further, it also strengthens the already existing identities or even has the power to manipulate and reconstruct it. All of them have made use of the technology to its fullest and have been impactful to a large extent. Kashmiri Pandits have also used internet for the same purpose.

6. The Kashmiri Pandits

Every society has its own distinctive identity and culture, Kashmiri society is no different. Migrations of all sorts, internal as well external, have taken place. Many people belonging to the diverse sections of Kashmir's society migrated to different places. People from upper reaches migrated to plains, many moved from Kashmir to other parts of India and World. This migration took place for a secure life, better education, more job opportunities and moreover for a better future. As Kingsley Davis (1968) puts it in the context, "...pressure to emigrate has always been great enough to provide a stream of emigrants much larger than the actual given opportunities."

After the 1989 socio- political turmoil started Kashmiri Panditsunderwent a mass migration from Kashmir: land of their ancestors. Many Kashmiri Pandit families started living in the migrant camps in Jammu region whereas many of them got settled in other parts of India and abroad.

History suggests that they over centuries occupied important administrative and decision making positions during different reigns may that be Afghans, Mughals, Sikhs or Dogras. Their better educational background had helped them to occupy these important administrative positions.

This affected the socio-political canvas of Kashmir and added an important dimension to the already complex narrative of more than six decade old Kashmir problem. Migration and the related issues have been debated in public space for a long time now but the way new media has been used to augment this debate is remarkable. Coinciding with the internet, interactive services have become accessible to the larger population. People have been using them for speaking out and KPs are highly vocal in the digital space.

7. Kashmiri Pandits and the New Media

Keeping in view the reach and impact of the technology, one of Kashmir's local communities - Kashmiri Pandits have also attempted to use internet. They have numerous websites and blogs in their name in which they claim to present their history, inherent culture, and memoirs which mostly put forward their respective point of view. While going through these websites and blogs a different version of history, preferably their own account is shared - Kashmir's resistant movement is portrayed as a specific religion oriented and local Muslimsare introduced as supporters of the movement and migration of Hindusfrom the valley.

The main purpose of diasporic cyberspaces is to build a home away from home on internet (DiamandakiKaterina, 2003) which is evident in cyberspaces run and managed by Kashmiri Pandit. For example, a website, Panun Kashmir, is introduced as the "Homeland of Kashmiri Pandits" or as the opening lines of one of the analyzed blogs – A soul in Exile is *Zuv' chumm' bramhaan' Ghar' gachaa*[My heart craves to go home]. Both these put across the same thought of longing to return to ones homeland. It seems that Kashmiri Pandits somewhere try to gather their lost inhabitants, their culture and place of dwelling.

The cyberspaces focused on the migrated community provide more or less same content but due to immense historical and political significance the content too has its own importance. The cyber content of one such websites, Panun Kashmir goes thus:

'We are carrying on a non-violent war through legitimate political means and by using the Internet to disseminate the truth about how Islamic interests have caused the near-extinction of our community in their zeal to convert the valley into the next Afghanistan. This non-violent war will continue until we win back our homeland and the right to live there without being subject to Islamic hegemony. We will also continue to use these non-violent means to ensure that the government of India does not barter our interests away in the process of placating Islamic terrorist groups in Kashmir.' [www.panunkashmir.com]

They through their websites and blogs present their mass migration which they call exodus as a communal issue and directly blamethe majority Muslim community and their ties with Pakistan.

For example, another website Kashmir Pandit Network explains the support of Muslims for the 'communal freedom movement' by referring to some Slogans which they claim were chanted by the Muslims of the Valley then;

Kashmir main rahnahai, Allah-ho-Akbar Kahnahoga (If you choose to live in Kashmir, you will have to say Allah-o- Akbar), *Allah-o-Akbar, MusalmanojagoKafirobhago, jehadaarahahai* (Allah-o-Akbar, arise and awake Muslims, buzz off infidels, jehad is approaching) Kashmir *kyabanega* – Pakistan (What will Kashmir be - Pakistan), *Zalimo O, Kafiro*, Kashmir *hamarachhod do* [Ye cruel Kafirs (infidels) vacate our Kashmir] etc .

And the following lines are the glimpse of their definition of the on-going freedom movement in the Valley (taken from Panun Kashmir)

'The goals of the bigoted religious terrorists in Kashmir whose vision of Azadi (independence) is to use religious dogma to exclude women, religious minorities, and secular-minded people from every kind of freedom in social and political life'.

The new media help Pandits to put across the thought of longing to return to ones homeland. It seems that Kashmiri Panditssome where try to express their sense of loss, strengthen their roots with their homeland and culture.

Kashmiri Pandits are a significant and progressive ethnic minority in the Kashmir region in India. The community has shaped up a multi-layered discourse in the media pertaining to several aspects of the Kashmiri society like politics, social, cultural or religion entirely from their own perspective. The contemporary form of new media has led to mass diversion of content and with limited gate keeping they have put forward their emotionally longing and affiliation for their homeland.

8. References

i. A soul in Exile:http://soulinexile.blogspot.in
ii. Brubaker, R. (2005). The 'diaspora' diaspora. Ethnic and Racial Studies 28 (1): 1-19.doi:10.1080/0141987042000289997.
iii. Creeber, G.,& R. Martin. (2009). Digital cultures: Understanding new media. Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill.
iv. Davis, K. (1968). The Population of India and Pakistan. New York. Russell and Russell.

v.   Diamandaki, K. (2003). Virtual ethnicity and digital diasporas: Identity construction in cyberspace. Global Media Journal, 2 (2), 1-14.

vi.   Dr.Komito, L. (2011). Social media and migration: virtual community. Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 62 (6), 1-33. doi:10.1002/asi.21517.

vii.   Ferris, E. and Stoltz, K. (2008). Minorities, displacement and Iraq's future. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2008/12/23-minorities-ferris#_ftnref2

viii.   Hayden, R. M. (1996) Schindler's fate: Genocide, ethnic cleansing and population transfers. Slavic Review, 55 (4), 727-748.

ix.   Kashmiri Pandit Network (KPN): www.ikashmir.net

x.   Panun Kashmir www.panunkashmir.org

xi.   Ranganathan, M. (2003). Potential of the net to construct and convey ethnic and national identities: Comparison of the use in the Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmir situations. Asian Ethnicity4 (2).

xii.   Safran, W. (2003). Recent French conceptualizations of diaspora. Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies 12 (2): 437–441. doi:10.1353/dsp.2011.0032.

xiii.   Toft, M. D. (2003). The geography of ethnic violence: Identity, interests, and the Indivisibility of territory. New Jersey: Princeton University Press

xiv.   Tsagarousianou, R. (2004). Rethinking the concept of diaspora: mobility, connectivity and communication in a globalised world. Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 1(1), 52-65.