

Communication Media and the Ensuing Social Activism

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Abstract

Communication media are crucial to the development of any mass movement (Palmer, 1971). This paper is an attempt to study, quantitatively, the behavioural changes occurring in the millennials belonging to the Union Territory of Pondicherry, caused by the increasing use of WhatsApp and other social media as the sole source of information and a platform for their daily interactions. This paper studies the socio-political awareness in the millennials, created by the social media, and the resulting mass mobilization, social aggregation and social activism evidenced in the agitations of #Jallikkattu, #Neduvaasal and Ban Sterlite movement. Adopting Social Cognitive Theory as the conceptual framework, this paper studies the reciprocal determinism in the recent historical events to register dissent.

Keywords: Social activism, Jallikkattu protest, Sterlite protest, Student mobilisation, Whatsapp

Introduction

Tamil Nadu, a State in southern India has witnessed numerous protests in the recent past, such as the Jallikkattu Agitation, popularly known as the Marina Revolution; a year-long protest against the hydrocarbon extraction projects in the Cauvery delta region; similar protests against oil extractions in Kadiramangalam village in Tanjavur district, and at Nannilam, Mannargudi, Neduvaasal, where the agitations are continuing for more than 175 days and Ban Sterlite protest that continues for more than seventy five days in a small village called A.Kumarareddiyapuram in Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu, to name just a few. This gives rise to the questions, "Are we seeing a sudden exponential increase in the number of protests?" or "Is it just that the visibility of and the publicity given to the protests have increased?" Of particular interest, is the fact that, of late, agitations appear to have become, rather, ubiquitous. Each day appears to bring in its wake a protest of some form or other in some district or taluk or village in Tamil Nadu.

Herbert Spencer views, "evolution as a historical trajectory leading uniform human aggregations, with groups and individuals performing similar functions, towards

differentiated aggregations, in which functions are diverse but complementary. Uniform societies are said to be organised in an authoritarian fashion, which makes cooperation compulsory, while in differentiated societies voluntary cooperation is said to predominate." (Spencer, 1873, as cited in *Social Movements, a Reader*, Ruggiero, Montagna, 2008). The aim of Spencer is to demonstrate the superiority of liberal democratic systems and their ability to distribute resources and neutralise conflicts (Harrington, 2005, as cited in *Social Movements, a Reader*, Ruggiero, Montagna, 2008).

As Marx puts it: "Social classes impose themselves by fighting against the dominant groups, until societies become totally cooperative aggregations. Oppressors and oppressed, in every type of society, have always engaged in hidden or open fight." In his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)*, Marx wrote: "the point is made that when the oppressed engage in the transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, they take inspiration from previous struggles and rebellions, adopting the language of their predecessors. They draw on a repertoire of action established by those who have been oppressed before them, so that 'theresurrection of the dead serves to exalt the new struggles', as elucidated about

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social movements by contemporary theorists" (Ruggiero, Montagna, 2008).

One such struggle, the 'Jallikkattu Agitation' (a popular agitation in support of the bull-taming festival conducted during the harvest festival of 'Pongal' in Tamil Nadu), appears to have infused a tremendous amount of trust in the minds of the citizens in public protests. Over a lakh of people gathered at the Marina beachfront, in Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, for more than seven days and protested against the move by the Government of India to ban the conduct of the sport. Those who could not travel to the Marina had protested in smaller groups in different parts of the State of Tamil Nadu and the adjacent, Tamil-speaking, Union Territory of Pondicherry. This protest was mainly spear headed by the youth of Tamil Nadu. In a phenomenon of social change, Marx says that consciousness takes shape and people's existence determines the shaping of consciousness and it is not the other way round. Some youth have created their own youth-led organisations (Gordon, 2007), in which adults either play peripheral roles or are excluded altogether (Elliott, Earl, 2018).

Historically, mass movements have emerged as an expression of popular discontent over real or perceived oppression and gross injustice. These are, generally, organized and steered by people who are, primarily, affected by the 'unjust' treatment at the hands of the oppressor. Those, who are unaffected by the issue, may remain indifferent and stay away from the protests. However, the 'Jallikkattu Agitation' gains historical significance as a popular mass movement that mobilized people from all walks of life, even those who had never witnessed the sport of Jallikkattu. The rural sport of 'Jallikkattu', all of a sudden became a rallying point, bringing together the rural and the urban youth on a common platform. This mass movement shook India, like no other in the recent past, and its resonance could be felt all around the world. The popular protest in support of a native cultural phenomenon gained the attention of scholars, activists, political leaders, and the public from different parts of the world. The protest led to the promulgation of an ordinance to legalize Jallikkattu, as a sport. This success, however transient it may have been, gave rise to a whiff of victory and, without a doubt, provided an impetus to subsequent protests on various socio-political issues.

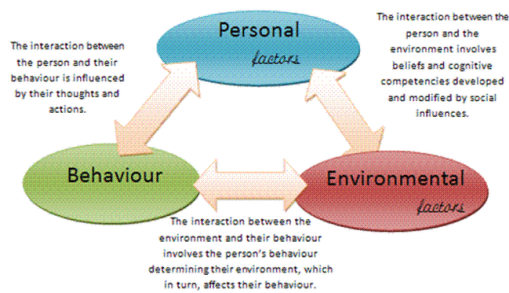
In the case of all these protests, the critical role played by the social media platforms such as the WhatsApp and Facebook assumes significance as a prime disseminator of all forms of communication. As "dialogue occurs across place and space in social media... weapons have moved beyond the physical to include virtual and discursive spaces. Social media creates a virtual space to challenge, reframe and reinscribe representations of who is victimized.

More than building awareness, they are used to facilitate the organization and planning of protests against racial profiling and to build solidarity in different parts of the world" (Cumberbatch, Pagan, 2016). "Marx and Engels suggest that the outcome of struggles is found in the ever expanding political consciousness of workers and the growth of their organisations and such growth is facilitated by the improved means of communication....., which allow workers from different localities to establish contacts with one another" (Ruggiero, Montagna, 2008). In a study on the role of twitter in organizing protests against the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the United States in 2013, authors Cumberbatch and Pagan records the role of social media like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumbler, Snapchat, You tube etc. in organizing multiracial protests and discussing their experiences. In the contemporary society, young people have the ability to seize upon a globally connected voice that is more participatory and unmediated by traditional institutions (Cumberbatch, Pagan, 2016). This study hypothesises that the medium of communication and what is being communicated plays a vital role in all the social outbursts that is, presently, on view in Tamil Nadu.

Frederick Engels in his work *The Communist Manifesto* writes that the analysis of such constant fight is provided in the light of what is described as a progressive 'splitting up' of society into two great hostile formations: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. Only rarely is the proletariat victorious, but the effect of labour conflicts is not measurable in terms of immediate results. These protests, whether successful or not, gain a lot of social significance. This phenomenal growth in the number of protests, the never ending trust that these protests have come to enjoy in the public imagination and the role the social networks are playing in these protests is the subject matter of study.

Conceptual Framework

The theory on which this study is modelled is the Social Cognitive Theory (1986) by Albert Bandura. In a social context, learning, according to this theory, takes place with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the person, environment, and behaviour. Here, we use this theory to study the use of social media to create awareness about the contemporary issues and how it arouses their consciousness and increases their self-efficacy. The theory emphasises on social influence and the external and internal social reinforcement. The social environment in which individuals behave in a particular way; their past experiences that influence the behavioural action; the reinforcement, expectations, and expectancies of these past experiences that shape the behaviour and the reasons why a person engages in such a behaviour are all taken into account, while analysing the behaviour.



Model figure source: <http://motivation-project.wikispaces.com/Socio-cognitive+Theories+of+Motivation>

Methodology

A quantitative survey method is used as the tool to conduct the study. A questionnaire was constructed to examine the patterns of usage of social network and the role it played in creating socio-political awareness and political participation among the audience. The Sampling technique used for the study is purposive sampling. Millennials (aged 21 to 36) using any of the social media platforms, discussed above, for communication were chosen as samples.

Samples

Samples for the study were chosen from the Union Territory of Pondicherry. Bound together by a common mother language, viz., Tamil, and common cultural values, Pondicherry identifies itself, closely with Tamil Nadu on all socio-political issues. Therefore, this paper aims to study the behavioural patterns of the millennials of Pondicherry in their reactions to these social issues and the role of social media in influencing their behaviour.

The questionnaire was given to 100 samples and 99 completed questionnaires were used for the analysis. All the respondents belonged to the age group range of 21 to 36. The respondents were randomly chosen, with the basic eligibility being Social Media usage. There were 60.6% of Male and 39.4% of Female respondents, of whom, 63.6% were students and 36.4% were professionals. Facebook (FB) users accounted for 77% of the respondents, of whom 27.3% rarely used Facebook and 24% of them used FB daily. WhatsApp users accounted for 87%, of whom 15% use WhatsApp rarely, 51.5% of the respondents use WhatsApp frequently and the rest of them using it many times a day.

Findings and Discussions

Sampling showed that the number of WhatsApp users among the samples are more by at least 10% when compared to FB users and users of WhatsApp use the medium so very frequently than FB. The samples' response showed that more than 35% of the samples are members of more than 3 to 5 WhatsApp groups and almost 32% of the respondents are members of 1 to 2 groups. 29% of the

respondents have responded that 'All' the members in their WhatsApp groups send messages on social issues, which is much more than the average frequency of exchange of messages on social issues in FB.

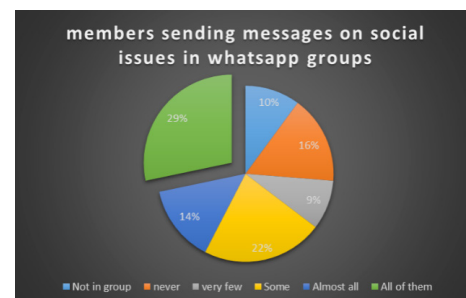


Figure 1.1. Frequency of respondents' WhatsApp group members sending messages on social issues

38.4% of the respondents felt they were receiving 'some responses' to messages shared on social issues in WhatsApp groups, and 21.2% of the respondents were 'not receiving any response'. While, 29.3% of the respondents were receiving messages on social issues in FB, 'everyday', 22.2% receive 'once in 2-3 days'. Alternatively, 53.5% of the respondents said they used other traditional media 'everyday' and 21.2% of the respondents used them 'occasionally', to acquire information on social issues.



Figure 1.2. Frequency of respondents receiving messages calling for protests

Role of Social Media in protest mobilization

More than 50% of the respondents received messages often inviting them to take part in protests. There appears to be a very positive correlation between the receipt of these messages and their participation in protests.

Table 1.1. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Receiving messages inviting for Protests through WhatsApp' and 'Participation in Protest'

	Receive messages inviting for Protests through WhatsApp	Participation in Protest
Receive messages inviting for Protests through WhatsApp	1	0.515**
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Receiving messages inviting for Protests through WhatsApp' and 'Participation in Protests' is 0.515, which indicate 51.5% positive relationship between the factors and it is significant at 1% level.

Table 1.2. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Sending/forwarding messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups' and 'Participation in Protest'

	Sending/ forwarding messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups	Participation in Protest
Sending/forwarding messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups	1	0.374**
		0.000
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Sending/forwarding messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups' and 'Participation in Protests' is 0.374, which indicates 37.4% positive relationship between the factors and it is significant at 1% level.

Table 1.3. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Frequency of receiving messages on social issues in Facebook' and 'Participation in Protest'

	Frequency of receiving messages on social issues in Facebook	Participation in Protest
Frequency of receiving messages on social issues in Facebook	1	0.395**
		0.000
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Frequency of receiving messages on social issues' and 'Participation in protests' is 0.369, which indicate 36.9% positive relationship between them and it is significant at 1% level.

With the findings of the above Correlation Coefficient tables, we can assume that social media messages calling for protests and forwarding the same messages to groups has a significant impact on the respondents joining the protests. Whereas, the results of a correlation test of 'Age' and 'Participation in Protests' showed an insignificant relationship. Though, 63% of the respondents are students, while correlating the factors, it is understood that people take part in protests irrespective of age. Results also show a significant difference in participation in protests while

categorizing it based on gender. Only 48.7% of the women respondents have joined protests and 73.3% of men have taken part in protests. The probability of men taking part in protests are more than women. This reflects the general conservative construct of the society that abstains the female members of the society from any active involvement in the socio-political issues.

Social Media Literacy

Table 1.4. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between the factors of 'Frequency of receiving social issue messages in social media' and 'Verify news from Social Media with traditional media'

	Frequency of receiving social issue messages in social media	Verify news from Social Media with traditional media
Frequency of receiving social issue messages in social media	1	0.213*
		0.034
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Frequency of receiving social issue messages in social media' and 'Verify news from Social Media with traditional media' is 0.213, indicates 21.3% positive relationship between them and it is significant at 5% level. 72.7% of the respondents affirm that they always/frequently/sometimes (cumulative percentage) cross-verify the news on social media with traditional media like Newspaper and TV or other websites to check the veracity of the news item that they get on social media. Here, we can assess that social media users are increasingly becoming more aware of the rising frequency of 'fake' messages and they tend to verify the data that they receive on social media on a case to case basis.

Validating the Variables of Social Cognitive theory

Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Human behaviour has often been explained in terms of one-sided determinism. In such modes of unidirectional causation, behaviour is depicted as being shaped and controlled by environmental influences or driven by internal dispositions. Social cognitive theory explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986). The term causation is used to mean functional dependence between events. In this model of reciprocal causality, internal, personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events; behavioural patterns; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally (Bandura, 1999).

Personal factors

31.3% of the respondents 'agree' and, another 31.3% 'strongly agree' that protests can resolve or bring about a solution for social issues, while, 20.2% remained 'neutral' in their response.

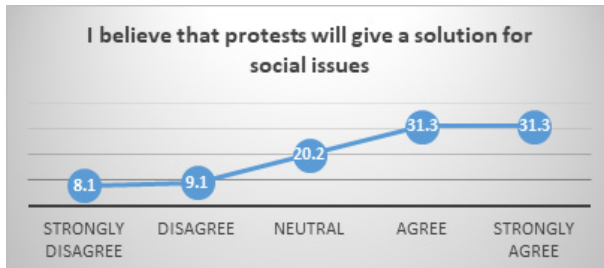


Figure 1.3. Frequency of respondents' belief/trust in the effects of protests

Table 1.5. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Access to other media to know about social issues' and 'Participation in protest before using WhatsApp & Facebook'

	Access to other media to know about social issues	Participation in protest before using WhatsApp & Facebook
Access to other media to know about social issues	1	0.202*
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Access to other media to know about social issues' and 'Participation in protest before using WhatsApp & Facebook' is 0.202. Though these factors only have 20.2% positive relationship, yet, it is significant at 5% level. 54.5% respondents stated that they used to participate in protests even before the use of social media.

Table 1.6. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Frequency of forwarding messages on social issues' and 'Belief that protests can resolve social issues'

	Frequency of forwarding messages on social issues	Believe that protests can resolve social issues
Frequency of forwarding messages on social issues	1	0.295**
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors 'Frequency of forwarding messages on social issues' and 'Belief that protests are a way to find solution for social issues' is 0.295, which indicate 29.5% positive relationship between them and it is significant at 1% level.

Environmental factors

From the correlation Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 it is evident that receiving social media messages, calling for protests and forwarding the same messages to groups has a significant correlation with the respondents joining the protests.

Table 1.7. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Participation in Protests' and 'Friends and family believe that protests are a way to resolve social issues and will be good for the country'

	Participation in Protest	Friends and family believe that these protests can resolve social issues
Participation in Protest	1	0.412**
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Participation in protests' and 'Friends and family believe that protests are a way to find solution for social issues and it can do good for the country' indicates 41.2% positive relationship between them and it is significant at 1% level.

Table 1.8. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'sending messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups' with 'Overall participation in protest'

	Sending messages on social issues in WhatsApp groups	Overall participation in protest
Sending messages on social issues in WhatsApp group	1	0.363**
	99	99

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient between factors of 'Sending social messages in WhatsApp groups' and 'Overall participation in protest' is 0.363, indicates 36.3% positive relationship between them and it is significant at 1% level. Here, Overall participation includes protests against banning of Jallikattu, Neduvassal hydrocarbon project, NEET exam, Anitha's suicide (condemning) (details follow), Sterlite copper issue in Thoothukudi, Asifa murder, etc.

Behavioural factors

Table 1.9. Frequency Distribution of 'Frequency of forwarding messages on social issues'

Forward messages on social issues	Percent
Never	17.2
some times	37.4
Frequently	18.2
Always	27.3
Total	100.0

Table 1.9 conveys the fact that many respondents, after continuous exposure to messages on social issues, have started advocating social consciousness or forwarding messages pertaining to social issues, per se, to others. While, 37.4% of the respondents forwarded messages, 'sometimes', on social issues, 27.3% 'always' forwarded such messages and 18.2% of the respondents 'frequently' forwarded messages on social issues.

Table 1.10. Frequency Distribution of 'Messages from WhatsApp/Facebook provoked me to join protest'

Messages provoke me to join protests	Percent
No	70.7
Yes	29.3
Total	100.0

Though, only 29.3% of the respondents have said that the Messages from WhatsApp/Facebook has provoked them to join protests, it is not a negligible sum.

Table 1.11. Frequency Distribution of 'Messages from WhatsApp/Facebook influenced me to do social service'

WhatsApp/Facebook Messages influenced me to do social service	Percent
No	49.5
Yes	50.5
Total	100.0

Here, we should consider the results of the correlation Table 1.6, which proves that there is a significant relationship between 'Frequency of forwarding messages on social

issues' and 'Belief that protests can resolve social issues' and the results of Table 1.1 and 1.2 showing significant relationship between forwarded messages on social media and social activism (in the form of protests for social issues).

From the above table, it may be observed that 50.5% of the respondents have said that the messages from WhatsApp/Facebook have influenced them to engage in social service. An equal percentage of respondents agree that social media messages have made them socially active and has prompted them to think and do something for the society. Table 1.8 also explains about the impact of social media on behaviour related to overall participation in protests out of concern for the society. There is a positive and significant impact of socially responsible messages on overall participation in protests to register dissent on various social issues. Whereas, we also found that with a good number of respondents being students, 48.5% of the respondents have taken part in protests fighting the issues related to students. This is evident from the protests against NEET exam (Common Medical Entrance test) condemning the suicide of Anitha, the girl who met a tragic death, having failed to get admission into a medical college through this competitive exam. On the contrary, lesser number of respondents have taken part in protests related to other issues. Since, Jallikattu was one major protest that attracted many people to participate, 42.4% of the respondents have participated in it and that ranks as the second largest participation among the respondents.

Table 1.12. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between factors of 'Messages on social issues from WhatsApp/Facebook and Participation in Protest'

	Participated in Jallikattu protest	Participated in Neduvasal protest	Participated in NEET/Anitha suicide protest	Participated in Ban sterlite protest	Participated in Asifa Murder protest	Not participated in any of the above protest
Participated in Jallikattu protest	1.000	0.199*	-0.106	0.143	0.095	-0.482**
Participated in Neduvasal protest		1.000	0.163	0.253*	0.227*	-0.136
Participated in NEET/Anitha suicide protest			1.000	0.185	0.205*	-0.547**
Participated in Ban sterlite protest				1.000	0.488**	-0.144
Participated in Asifa Murder protest					1.000	-0.152
Not participated in any of the above protest						1.000

Note : 1. ** denotes significant at 1% level
2. * denotes significant at 5% level

Moreover, there is a visible difference in the participation in protests before and after using Social media. 54.5% people agreed to have participated in protests before social media use and 63.6% respondents agreed to have participated in protests 'responsibly' after using social media.

The correlation coefficient between factors of Participation in Jallikattu protest and Participation in Neduvasal Protest is 0.199, which indicate 19.9% positive relationship between them and is significant at 5% level.

The correlation coefficient between factors of participation in Neduvasal protest, NEET protest, Anitha Suicide protest, Ban Sterlite protest and participation in Asifa murder protest are 0.227, 0.205 and 0.488 respectively. Which indicate 22.7% (significant at 5% level), 20.5% (significant at 5% level) and 48.8% (significant at 1% level) positive relationships between them.

All the above correlation tests performed have proved that the personal, environmental and behavioural factors have bidirectional impact or reciprocally determine each other, as suggested by the Social Cognitive theory.

Inference

The study proves that the communication medium used by the youth of Pondicherry plays a major role in creating socio-political awareness among them and is also vital in pushing them to action. As suggested by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, it is also evident that personal factors such as self-esteem and beliefs of an individual play a major role in the way he receives and handles information in the social media. The affect created in an individual by the medium and the message depends very much on the personal traits of the individual as well as the environmental factors that impact on him.

Though, 70% of the respondents denied social media having provoked them to take part in protests, the data analysis shows significant links do exist between the 'frequency of receiving and forwarding of information on social issues, social emergencies' and the respondents' 'participation in protests.' Similarly, there seems to exist a positive correlation between the 'impact of personal belief on protests' and their 'family/friends' opinion about protests', on the one hand, and the earlier said variables with the respondents' 'participation in protests', on the other. This demonstrates a substantial influence of the environmental (inclusive of social media use) factors and personal attributes on behavioural responses of the subject individuals.

When a particular issue is constantly and consistently agitated by the civic society around an individual he/she tends to engage with it more seriously and is impelled to act on it. His/ Her reactions to the environmental influence

is apparent from how he/she perceives the forwarded messages, the way he/she observes the opinion of his/her friends, peers and family in the case of protests, their stand on protests and their involvement in protests. From the different analyses carried out with the observed data, it becomes evident that protests as a means to resolve socio-political issues is gaining increasing acceptance in the society. There is definite evidence pointing towards a growing affinity of individuals towards the society. A greater sense of belongingness and an increasing feeling of togetherness seems to have been ushered in by the instant and constant exchange of information between geographically separated societies. Half of the respondents have affirmed that constant influx of information that the social networking medium has brought in, has made them socially aware, active, involved and responsible. The findings of this study, thus, provide ample proof of how the social media has come to embed itself into and inform, influence, inspire and impact the lives of individuals in a dynamic social setting and, thereby, find resonance with Marshall McLuhan's phrase 'The Medium is the Message' (1964).

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