

Political Communication of Digital Banner in Chennai

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Abstract

In the age of internet in states like Tamilnadu political communication is enacted primarily through medium like digital banners. In this context, studying political banners with political economy approach is relevant and important.

The political economy studies, according to Vincent Mosco, also grew in response to the expansion of government as a producer, distributor, consumer and regulator of Communication. Masco's concepts are relevant for this study and for the context of Tamilnadu as the state's politics has a history of utilising media for political purposes, and more specifically state owned production, distribution, consumption and regulation of communication. The Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu harnessed the potential of mass media for propaganda to propagate its ideology even before India was a free nation. At present, all the major political parties in the state own television channels and newspaper publications. Every new media has been appropriated and put to use by both ruling parties and the opposition parties, including digital banners.

This paper examines the key characteristics of digital banner as a medium of communication in the city of Chennai using political economy approach. A cross section of the state holders including producers of the banner, owners of the digital banner units, workers, designers have been subjected to qualitative in-depth interview.

Keywords: Political Economy, Political Communication, Digital Banners, Marxist approach, Vincent Mosco, Tamilnadu and Chennai

Introduction

Digital banner culture is spreading widely in Chennai. Fast, customised and multicolour production, portability, durability and low costs have made them a popular product. Flex prints are replacing laborious, time consuming and expensive manually produced banners and signboards.

Digital banners are employed for various purposes, including advertisements, film publicity, political propaganda and image building exercises, and personal publicity purposes. They are employed for product promotion, branding, power display, propagation of ideology and publicity.

While Digital banner communication is evolving in a big way as a propaganda tool for political parties, it is not at cross

purposes with other media. In this context of flourishing flex (the material with which digital banners are made) trade and proliferation of flex banners, the present study aims to investigate the political communication of digital banner in Chennai through an explorative research.

Political Communication in TN/Chennai

Key Characteristics and Trends

Political digital banners mounted on both sides of artery roads and even long stretches of median are a common sight in Chennai. The display of digital banner is directly proportional to the power of the party or the individual political leader. The higher the echelons of power the more is the flex boards/banners on the road.

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Mosco has observed

political economists of communication began to document the integration of communication institutions, mainly businesses and state policy authorities, within the wider capitalist economy, and the central role of new information and communication systems in the neo-conservative agenda for promoting commercialization, liberalization and privatization.

I argue here that Mosco's concepts of the integration and collusion between businesses and state policy authorities and their central role in promoting LPG policies are applicable to flex media in the context of Tamilnadu politics. As the flex culture is becoming more and more integral to politics, I argue, the prospects of prominent politicians setting up their own flex printing units are high and businesses promoting state driven policies are also high.

Flex Space War, Political Stature and Appeasement of CM

The ruling party reinforces its political stature by exhibiting plenty of digital banners during every official function, every scheme launched and every other occasion of public importance, including birth and death anniversaries of key political figures and popular festivals. The opposition parties and others compete with them and maximise their digital banner exhibitions. A kind of a nascent space war for digital banner display can be observed.

The competition on exhibiting digital banners doesn't stop with political parties but grows further into the rank of the parties. When Jayalalitha was alive leaders of ruling party AIADMK keep vying for banner spaces with better display potential for the banners they sponsor or the banners with their names identified in it to seek late CM's attention. Leaders invest huge sums of money in digital banner production to appease the CM.

A case study was conducted on 23 December 2013, then CM Jayalalitha launched five programmes through video conferencing. The five programmes were

- Inauguration of 10,867 multi-storeyed tenements across the state, constructed at a cost of Rs.441.50 crore
- Inauguration of drinking water projects in six districts, established at a cost of Rs.21crore.
- Laying foundation for a mega auditorium to be constructed at a cost of Rs. 61 crore at the Government Estate in the city.
- Unveiling of a memorial for late freedom fighter Dheeran Chinnamalai in Salem, built at a cost of Rs 60 lakh
- Unveiling of Vanchinathan memorial in Sengottai.

The road stretch from Poes Garden exit to Secretariat was cramped with banners on both sides. Even the medians and overbridges were no exceptions. A total number of 188 banners were displayed on either sides of the road, covering a distance of 7 km. In addition, 130 banners were placed on the median. A total of 144 banners had same message. About 72 banners had printed the contact number and name of flex units. Altogether 11 flex units were identified in those banners. The remaining 246 banners did not identify with any flex production unit.

Dynasty Politics, Political Allegiance and Legacy of Dravidian Movement

The opposition party DMK's tug of war on succession through posters is by now well known. The tussles within the dynasty politics of DMK is setting a platform for flex banner exhibitions. Rivalry, competition, discontent, loyalty, display of power are finding expressions in the digital banners. Reflection of ideological positions, ideals and values can also be witnessed in banner communication. Mr. Alagiri's posturing as Periyar, Che Guevara and Abdul Kalam in digital banners is a case in point. It can also be observed that Mr. Stalin posing with Mr. Karunanidhi in the background, foreground or middle ground helped him to claim the position of successor.

Political allegiance is illustrated by displaying great leaders like Periyar, Anna, MGR or Kamarajar by different parties. The political parties reclaim their historical roots and appropriate certain legacies - progressive, linguistic or dynastic through these digital banners. On the occasion of birth and death anniversaries of such great leaders, in the pretext of remembrance and paying respect, the political parties claim their legacy.

Political Opinion, Campaigns and Publicity

Digital banners are used as a tool for political opinion and commentary - showing their stance/demands/protest in Cauvery dispute, Srilankan Tamil issue, Sethusamudram project, Kudankulam nuclear project and other such controversies or issues of popular public sentiment. At the time of election, digital banners are used to promote candidates and publicise the party, often, flouting the election code. Rallies, campaigns and protests make extensive use of digital banners.

Identity Politics and Populism

Party leaders can be seen in banners with specific religious outfits or festival outfits during festivals to identify with certain communities or occasions of celebration. CM Jayalalitha posed as a Muslim woman in prayer during Ramzan is one such example.

Politics of Design and Design of Politics

When MP and son of former AP CM Rajashekar Reddy, Jagan Mohan Reddy, visited Chennai to seek support on Telangana issue, on 2 Dec 2013, two thousand flex banners were placed for him. The impressed leader invited the designer, Jai, to assist in his future endeavours. Jai, the designer and owner of Jai Arts, says even MLA's come and sit with him and give instructions. The Opposition leader himself calls and instructs him. Leaders like Tirumavalavan show personal interest in designing posters.

The placement of photos of leaders, background details, text and composition in itself becomes a political communication. For instance, a leader with a tiger to project certain political character, senior politician in front of Parliament etc. Political banners have become the tools that showcase the power within the party and among the party. From party members to top party leaders, digital banners are used to negotiate power, reinforce stability and seek support within the party and outside.

Centralised Control and Hegemony within the Ruling Party

Carefully selected photos of present ruling party leaders are released from the Secretariat and only those are to be used in the banner. These photos are also available in the internet. In case of any other photo usage, the leaders will be answerable for their decision. Also, the ruling party restricts the publication of photos, other than the CM, in the banner when Jayalalitha was alive.

Flexing Nexus between Politicians and Business

In the case study, it is observed that many banners do not contain the details of flex production. This shows a possibility of:

- either the politicians/businessmen promoting it may have their own flex units
- it could be a government publicity
- it is sponsored by the political party itself
- some flex units are sponsoring banners for political parties (out of business interests or political compulsions) or evading tax payments

This lack of identification of the flex units in itself raises several questions about the politician – flex business nexus and corruption. It poses questions about huge contracts for flex printing, the commissions involved and tax evasion.

Role of Political Parties in Display of Digital Banners

Political banners, especially those meant for functions, have a lifespan of one day and hence, have to be put to best use.

Party leaders survey the location before the digital banner is mounted. They select spaces with high visibility and decide the angle in which it should be mounted. Often, there are competitions among leaders for getting high visibility spaces and contractors negotiate and fix the places for their political clientele. Throughout the night party workers keep an eye on the banners to safeguard them from any theft. Sometimes party followers themselves (mostly from lower class) do the fixing and mounting of flex banners without any wages. The flex banners are then removed and the sticks are stored for future use in the party office. In case the sticks were hired, they are returned. If the banners are few, they don't collect the sticks/reapers as the transport charges will be higher than its value.

Other Findings

Cultivating Flex Consumerism

Political parties sponsor digital banners for families who lost their beloved ones and thereby, promote their party and indirectly cultivate a new culture of banner consumption for personal purposes. Also, by putting up digital banners of leaders during their birthdays, weddings, other celebrations, deaths, birth anniversaries, death anniversaries and so on, the political parties set up a model for their followers and common people to emulate. As Vincent Masco notes:

One of the central goals of transnationalized companies and their government supporters was to press for the introduction of commercial media systems to permit advertising and programming that would cultivate consumerism.

Common people have started opting flex prints for their family functions and make it public for the passersby to notice. People feel alienated if they don't go along with the popular trend. Birthdays, weddings, personal achievements and even deaths and death anniversaries are announced using digital banner. Even low income groups spend their hard earned money for digital banners on such occasions.

Secondary Usage

Digital banners are resold and reused for many purposes. They are used as shields on top of buildings, to cover paddy in fields, to cover parcels and lorry loads, and rain shield on huts in slum areas.

Environmental Hazard and Public Nuisance

Flex material is not biodegradable and hence, has to be used sparingly with caution. The placement of banners distracts driving people and at times, obstructs the movement of pedestrians. Sometimes the flex banners fall on the road, as the frame size and the banner size don't match.

In Lieu of Conclusion

As Masco has observed in the context of emergence of political economy studies, with respect to digital banner communication in Tamilnadu, there is an expansion of government as a producer, distributor, consumer and regulator. The research points to an emerging nexus of politics and business in the flex industry in Chennai for hegemonic and super profit purposes. This ruling class nexus is thriving on the exploitation of poor working class and large scale corruption. More in-depth political economy studies needs to done to probe it further.

References

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