

A Discourse Analysis of Social Media Voices in #Release Thirumurugan

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Abstract

Article 19 of the Indian constitution lays down that all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, to assemble peacefully, and without arms, to form associations or unions, to move freely throughout the territory of India, to reside in any part of the territory of India, to acquire hold and dispose of property and to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business. The arrest of Thirumurugan Gandhi, amongst many, is an example of Governmentality in our state. Freedom of Speech and Expression is guaranteed in our democratic society. The advent of social media has greatly contributed to the possibility of being heard to a great extent, giving voice to the public. From mere opinions to strong points, social media serves as an accessible medium of the citizens. The arrest of Thirumurugan Gandhi, Human rights activist, garnered widespread social media attention through hashtag #Release Thirumurugan. This research is an exploratory attempt that aims to understand how online users are using Facebook and Twitter to spearhead the release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. In the light of Foucault's concept of Governmentality, this research uses discourse analysis to analyse posts in #Release Thirumurugan. The overall sentiment expressed through the Facebook posts and tweets favour the release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. The mushrooming and viral nature of social media is contagious and has the scope to build a revolution. More the suppression of voices, activism would intensify further.

Keywords: Social Media, Freedom Speech and Expression, Governmentality

Freedom of Speech and Expression

"The Constitution is not an instrument for the Government to restrain the people, it is an instrument for the people to restrain the Government." Patrick Henry (1736-1799)*

"When it comes to democracy, liberty of thought and expression is a cardinal value that is of paramount significance under our constitutional scheme." Supreme Court of India, Shreya Singhal v. Union of India, March 24, 2015.**

A state or society is said to be truly democratic when

the citizens can express their opinions without second thoughts, particularly fear of punishment. The law must guarantee such liberty and safeguard at all times. A society is not liberal if its citizens cannot openly express their opinion. Suppression of freedom of speech and expression is detrimental to the progress of the society. The Indian constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression through Article 19. It is noteworthy that the freedom of the press is also implicitly guaranteed in this article. The article lays down the freedom of speech and expression using which citizens can voice their opinion, assemble without arms, form associations or unions as

*Mehta KK. Freedom of Speech and Expression.2013.

** Stifling Dissent | The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in India [Internet]. Human Rights Watch. 2017.

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a mark of their solidarity, to move freely throughout the country, to live anywhere and so on. According to the first amendment, Freedom of speech is the right to express any opinion without censorship or restraint (Gracial & Viswam, 2018).

The right to express oneself is the collective right of the members of a society to be heard and informed. A democracy is said to be healthy and progressive only when its citizens express their support and dissent with no hesitation. Restricting free speech is a threat to democracy. It is therefore evident that freedom of speech is also a fundamental right that is the basis for Parliamentary democracy. The state has to safeguard this right to express oneself without any Hindrance or fear of punishment. Any freedom comes with accountability. The welfare of the state reflects the well-being of its citizens. No state can silence his right to advocacy. In the light of the above argument, French philosopher Michel Foucault (1991) discusses the concept of 'Governmentality'. He elucidates Governmentality as the practice which of its citizens that best suits the whims and fancies of the government. In other words, the government dictates the code of conduct for its citizens. Such an authoritarian approach affects the freedom a state has to mandatorily guarantee its citizens (Li TM, 2007). Dean, M (2017) explains Governmentality as a kind of power that connects government to self-government and elucidates liberalism and neoliberalism as an art of power.

Social Media and Activism

The proliferation of social media threw open a plethora of opportunities for users to express themselves on a variety of issues. Unlike traditional media, social media offers the scope to give instant feedback. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are the most popular platforms in which users engage to express themselves. From personal accounts to networking to voicing opinions, social media offers the scope for vivid multimodal expressions. "From trivia to disasters, information reaches people as events happen, keeping them engaged like never before. But how they express themselves or react thereafter, makes social media a double-edged sword" (Gracial & Viswam, 2018). The platform has become indispensable to such an extent even traditional media use social media platforms as secondary media outlets for better user engagement. The advantage of social media is its ability to go viral. In the light of network analysis theory and social penetration theory, social media plays a vital role in scaling the magnitude of vitality as multifold. Like the rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), content pertains to multiple entries and exit points that point to the direction in motion, with the nature of multiplicity and not mere units. Social Media is a world by itself, a virtual world where any individual from any place can express his opinions and beliefs without

fear of being silenced or conformity (John Perry Barlow, 1996). Social Media is thus contributing to a model of citizenship of the younger generations (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011) who identify themselves as digital natives or digital inhabitants.

Despite the constitutional guarantee of Freedom of Speech and Expression, free speech has come under scrutiny. In the past few years, arrests have been made on grounds of having expressed an opinion on grounds of defamation, sedition and so on when opinions were expressed through folk media, social media or any other form of expression such as protests. In 2015 and 2018, Folk singer Kovan was arrested for criticizing the Tamil Nadu Government and the Prime Minister respectively. After the arrest in April 2018, though he is out on bail, Mr. Kovan has been charged for promoting communal enmity. It is noteworthy that his folk song went viral on YouTube. Peaceful dissent is criminalized in the name of disturbing public tranquility on grounds of sedition. Also, Aseem Trivedi, a political cartoonist, was arrested in 2012 on charges of sedition for his caricature series against the government. The year 2016 was labeled as the year when sedition went viral and this year also witnessed 29 internet shutdowns. Figure 1 shows the surge in sedition cases (source: scroll.in). As Ashok Malik, Political Analyst and Commentator says, "we have the right to free speech, but we don't have the right to offend" (Prabhu, M., 2017). Kent Greenawalt (1989) states that:

"The Government should not suppress the communication of ideas. Indeed, this principle is frequently regarded as a cornerstone of liberal democracy (p.4) The idea that people should not be punished for thoughts alone is one of the most fundamental for liberal society (pp. 31)."

Though the constitution guarantees it and thought leaders have opined the importance of free speech, Governments, both at the centre and state, have constantly charged journalists, activists, cartoonist, and artists and so on. The first quarter of 2016 witnessed soaring number of cases on grounds of sedition, defamation and censorship cases for freedom of speech. It is widely criticized that loosely worded vague laws such as sedition are prone to be misused against the public for having expressed dissent. Social Media serves as a platform for activism. It has been widely and effectively used in times of need such as Jallikattu protest and Tuticorin Sterlite protest.

#Release Thirumurugan

Thirumurugan Gandhi is a Human Rights Activist who founded the May 17 movement. He was arrested on August 9th based on a lookout circular issued by Chennai Police after a viral Facebook post of his speech against police firing during a protest against Sterlite in Tuticorin at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Users voice out their opinion and concern. The arrest of Thirumurugan

Gandhi garnered widespread attention on social media under the hashtag #Release Thirumurugan.

This research is an exploratory study that aims to understand how online users are using Facebook and Twitter to express their voices to support the release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. Using discourse analysis, 150 Facebook Posts and 315 Tweets posted between 9th - 23rd August 2018 were analysed.

A dedicated Facebook page @Releasetirumurugan voices the support to release the activist. The trending posts were photos, memes, news clips, videos and researched data (of public issues such as Sterlite, GST, WTO agreement, Independent economy, Issues on 8 Greenways road). Videos posted pertain to news clips of the arrest, protest-related videos, documentaries, interviews, and open debates. There was also a video which was a collection of clippings of various issues the movement has been fighting for. Trending photos pertain to the protests when protestors were repressed and those taken during the time of arrest. Memes contained comparisons of current issues in comparison to popular movie scenes and dialogues. The images also included those of wall posters and handouts used in the field.

Posts under #ReleaseThirumurugan are posted by users who actively voice for political activism, supporters of the May 17 movement, politicians like Seeman and Tamil Nadu Digital Media Association. The content implied an attitude against the Dravidian parties and support towards NOTA.

The content presented a strong dissent to existing ideology as well as strong support to spearhead release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. Most of the textual content presented were in Tamil. The colour black was predominantly to strongly stand for protest. The visual content implicitly indicates the surging support toward Thirumurugan Gandhi. For example, A visual contained images of three children holding a poster stating "He speaks for us; we stand with him". This visual also had accompanying text that translates as "the voice to release activist Thirumurugan is turning into the voice of the public." The image in the poster held by these children was that of Thirumurugan with a child. Tamil Nadu Digital Media Association showed their solidarity through a video report. The colour tone of the video report is black. The video report by the Head of the Tamil Nadu Digital Media Association emphasised the importance to safeguard free speech and urged the release of the activist. A video compiled as a collection of graphics enlisted why Thirumurugan Gandhi was arrested. This video consistently adhered to the colours of black, red and white predominantly. Memes staunchly opposed the hypocrisy in the differential treatment towards Thirumurugan Gandhi who voiced for human rights as against a welcoming treatment towards a politician who insulted the modesty

of women journalist. This meme was titled "Happens only in India". Posts also mentioned the count of days in Jail. The Prime - Minister and S. Ve. Shekar was criticized in the posts while politicians such as Vaiko and Seeman expressed their support.

A post with a digital artwork of Thirumurugan Gandhi's portrait read a bold line "You can't arrest ideas". A variety of digital portraits of the comrade mentioning the hashtag were trending. This shows the contagious spirit of advocacy. Images of the activist were also accompanied by excerpts of court proceedings and enquiries about his well-being by a fellow comrade. These visuals were optimistic that the hearing on 3rd September 2018 will witness what's to come in their favour. Memes also condemned the arrest as "Fascism at its best". Screenshot of television news reports and newspaper clippings from such as Pudhiya Thalaimurai, News 18 and Dhina Thanthi were also posted to give news updates about the case.

A sentiment analysis of the tweets reveals strong condemning towards the arrest of Thirumurugan Gandhi. Anti-Hindutva sentiment is evident. Tweets raised questions on real democracy, injustice in the form of an atrocious arrest. It is alarming to note that few tweets expressed joy over the arrest of the activist, accusing him of conspiracy. The sentiments that reflected in the analysis are anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, trust, negative and positive. Figure 2 summarises the sentiment analysis of tweets. Some tweets also hailed the power of social media and expressed solidarity in using the same to bring about the release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. A particular tweet mocked the Government for underestimating the power of this "Gentleman" who traveled 3000km in ten days. Tweets also highlighted updates on the case.

Conclusion

The overall sentiment expressed through the Facebook posts and tweets favour the release of Thirumurugan Gandhi. Online users are vocal about their support and use the multimodal nature of social media platforms to express their opinion. Mainstream news media reflect as a source for updates on social media. The case is still in progress and simultaneously there is widespread criticism updated on social media. The overall sentiment, though not as yet, could head towards a reverse agenda setting approach. For that to take place, online activism must intensify. The subsequent hearing and progress of the case could alone influence the fervor.

It is evident that Governmentality has been used as a tool to suppress voices that work against the interests of the Government. In the light of Governmentality, social media voices exhibit no hesitation in expressing dissent. There has been widespread activism against atrocities incited to suppress freedom of speech. Social media is a powerful tool

Free speech related issues reported in 2014-2016

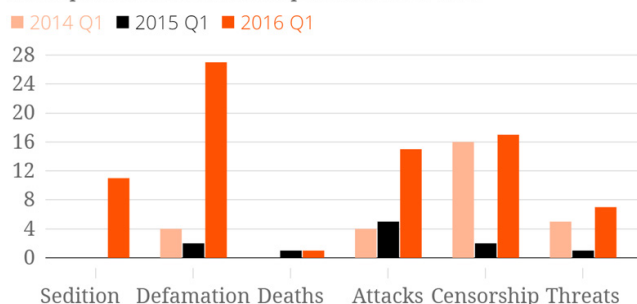


Figure 1

Sentiment Analysis of Tweets

	anger	anticipation	disgust	fear	joy	sadness	surprise	trust	negative	positive
1	33	28	14	33	20	30	12	45	63	63

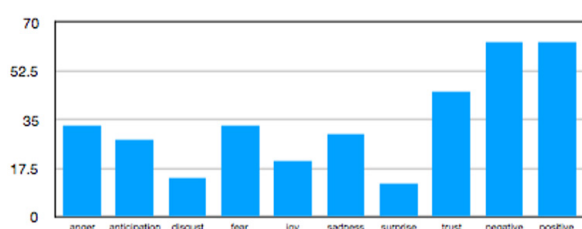


Figure 2

to voice opinions. In a democratic set-up, Governmentality cannot silence voices. The mushrooming and viral nature of social media is contagious and has the scope to build a revolution. More the suppression of voices, activism would intensify further.

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