Islam in the Cyber Space of Keralites: Exploring the Questions on Authority and Ideology in a Counter Public Sphere

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Abstract

As one of the seminal works on the presence of Islam in the cyber environment of Keralites, this study strives to place this discourse in an international frame work by drawing analogy with scholarships on new media in general and new media and Islam in particular. It draws upon cyber ethnography and field ethnography, in between October 2013 to January 2014. Followed by it, the researcher argues that internet and its surrounding technologies are not challenging the mediated understanding of Islam and its knowledge system, rather they extend this practice from geographically or culturally limited sources; and introduce multiple sources as well as ways to it.

Keywords

cyber space, Islam, public sphere

Introduction

This study uses the term Islam in the cyber space of Keralites to refer the all process of how the cyber space is being re-shaped by some Islamic groups, Islamic seminaries and lay Muslims in Kerala as a space to articulate and debate their understanding of religion through blogs, websites, social media, online radio, online Islamic class rooms and chat rooms.

Manuel Castells termed cyber space as a "space of flows", without having any geographically limited boundaries (Castells, 1996). Agreeing to it, this study prefers the term "cyber space of Keralites" than cyber space of Kerala as it would be more appropriate to represent the Keralites spread across the world.

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The term Islamic organisations used in the sense of the organized forms of different factions within the Islam which emerged mainly because of the difference in their frame work of understanding about Islam influenced and shaped by orthodox and reformative thoughts about it emerged in different periods or organizational rifts. Two factions of the Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulema, an organization of traditional Sunni Muslim scholars and their student and youth bodies mainly targeting lay Muslims, two factions within the Mujahids, also referred as Salafis or Islahis , and Jamahate Islami Hind (JIH) are the important Islamic organizations in Kerala. These groups are professionally organized, highly networked; and directly as well as indirectly associated to many social and educational enterprises including print and broadcasting media houses.

The term Islamic scholars denote those who completed their religious studies from mosque based traditional religious learning system as well as those who graduated from Islamic Seminaries. Islamic seminaries denote the centers where religious knowledge is taught and grants graduation to scholars.

Islam in the cyber space and diaspora Muslims

Kerala, as a state where only 6.3% households have access to internet in 2011, use of cyber space by Malayali Islamic scholars for religious communication and preaching since 2002 may sound as illogical. The fact of the matter is that the inquiry on Islam in the Malayali cyber space need to depart from the Malayali Muslims working in Middle Eastern Arab countries than from the Muslim believers in Kerala as the latter is the major factor which necessitated the use of cyber space for communication and preaching about Islam in the specific context of Kerala.

Now nearly 11.5 lakh Malayali Muslims are working in Middle Eastern Arab countries (The report on Kerala Migration Survey 2011). It constitutes 13.5% of the total Muslim population of Kerala; and more relevantly a good share of Muslim men from the state. For Islamic organisations, internet and surrounding technologies help to easily and immediately address this large community. Ilyas finds two reasons behind internet are appealing to Ulamas or Islamic scholars. Firstly, economic aspects like easy to launch and secondly, to reach Malayalis in the Gulf (Ilyas, 2012).

Throwing light into the consumption side of Islam in the cyber space of Keralites, Swadique Misbahi, an Islamic scholar who has been working as the chairman of Kerala Malabar Islamic Class Room (KMIC), an online podcasting, for the last 12 years says "Majority of our visitors are Keralites working in Middle Eastern Arab countries. Those Muslims in Kerala are yet to know about our online initiative. Unlike the Malayali Muslims in Kerala, those who are working in abroad have access to internet and can spare some time for religious knowledge."

Theoretical background

The presence of Islam and Muslims in the new media, especially in the internet has become an area of academic investigation since the second half of the nineties. Islam in general and Islam and Muslims in the cyber environment in particular got wider academic attention followed by the September 11 incident. Charles Hirschkind (2012) classifies the existing scholarship on Islam in the cyber environment into two broad categories. According to him, the first category of scholarship considers "use of the Internet as a vehicle for religious and political mobilization, including as a tool of militant recruitment by jihadist groups." He finds "the second body of literature has focused on how mediatization in general and the Internet in particular have reshaped the sociology of Islamic knowledge, including the norms and institutions of religious authority". He places and terms his work as part of a third new category of literature on this area which explores the representation of Islam and Muslim identity in the cyber space drawing examples from specific contexts, both west and non west.

For me, while drawing this distinction between two dominant scholarships on Islam in the cyber environment, what Hirschkind left is the scholars who dissented to these two dominant paradigms. The first category of scholarship who argues moderate Muslims are using internet to weaken extremist sections in it (Mandavelle 1999; Brinkerhoff 2006). Some scholars, especially outside the west dissent to the view of Muslims are using internet to re-structure and challenge religious authority (Malik, 2006; Scholz, Selge, Stille& Zimmermann, 2008).

Referring to an emerging public sphere in the Muslim world, Anderson and Eickleman (1998) argue that the communication in this new emerging public sphere comes in to contrast with the concept in the top down model of communication that shared views and context as the requirement of communication. They say new media facilitates variety of views including alternative views and dissent to enter into this public sphere. Old communication with few senders and many receivers are giving way to a participatory new public space with nearly as many senders as receivers.

Agreeing to this paradigm, Mandaville (1999) observes Muslims are increasingly taking religion into their own hands through various popular news groups and e-mail discussion lists. New forms of virtual communities or a re-imagined Umma emerged in internet helps Diaspora Muslims to find likeminded people. The hybrid discursive spaces of the Muslim internet can give rise, even inadvertently, to new formulations and critical perspectives on Islam and the status of religious knowledge.

Following the existing paradigm on Islam and cyber space, Garry Bunt (2003), emphasizes the relevance of cyber Islamic environments that without the Internet, Islam as a religion may not lose anything that is intrinsic or central to beliefs, but Cyber Islamic Environments have the potential to transform aspects of religious

understanding and expression within Muslim contexts, and the power to enable elements within Muslim populations in minority and majority arenas to dialogue with each other.

Contesting to the existing frame work of understandings on Islam and cyber space, Scholz, Selge, Stille and Zimmermann (2008), based on a study about four Islamic podcasters, argue that Islamic podcasters might also become an important instrument for the deconstruction of religious authority.

Making a critical account of the scholarship on Islam and cyberspace, Malik (2006) argues that Media usage among Muslims in the Diaspora is primarily discussed from a negative point of departure. Muslims in the Diaspora are automatically classified as prospective Islamists and thus terrorists whenever they turn to Arabic, Islamic and other non-west media.

Islam in the cyber space: studies in the context of Kerala

Specifically looking at the Muslim scholars' engagement with new media in Kerala Ilyas (2012), places the discourse in the Nancy Fracer's concept of counter public sphere, a space in which different marginalized groups seek to contest exclusion and to circulate counter-narratives to the hegemonic versions of 'truth'. His argument, the Islamic cyber space of Kerala is mainly used by modern and traditional Ulamas or Islamic scholars comes into conflict with western scholars' (Garry R. Bunt, Jon W. Anderson, Dale F. Eicklemann & Peter Mandaville) frame work of understanding with regard to the cyber Islamic environment, which mainly argues "Muslims are taking religion into their own hands using new media technologies". Disagreeing to the security concerns about the Muslim internet use, he argues there is a conceptual danger revolving around the Orientalistic perspectives while discussing the new found technological sophistication among Muslims.

Hafis (2012) suggests the counter public sphere of Muslims in the cyber space is a "neo- public sphere" with two functions, which addresses Muslims and secular public sphere simultaneously. He argues this neo-public sphere creates an "alternative modernity" through indigenous cultural products.

Methodology

This study used cyber ethnography and field ethnography as the methodology. Employing techniques like participatory and non-participatory observation, focused interviews with persons in the production side of discourses on Islam in the cyber space and online interviews with those who are in the consumption side; this study explored its focused areas in between October 2013 to January 2014.

Formal voices on Islam

Mark Poster's (1995) argument of "internet extends existing social institutions and their functions in new ways" clearly reflects from the engagement of Islamic organizations and Islamic scholars in the cyber space of Keralites, as they extend their role into this new space.

For Manuel Castells (1996), "technological innovation emerges to fill the gap in previous one". In the case of Islamic organizations and Islamic scholars in Kerala, online media provides a better alternative to reach more audience at low cost and immediately than their offline religious communication tools like video or audio cassettes of sermons, printed publications etc.

What is quite interesting is that, they continue to use oral discourses as the major method of religious communication. Marshal Mcluhan (1989) in his tetrad of media effects explains how does a new medium enhance or retrieve a practice in a society. Similarly, while paying a closer attention to the cyber space of Keralites, it is apparent that, its characteristics like easy and free access, platform to the user generated content etc enhances the scope and retrieves the oral religious discourses in the Islamic tradition of Kerala.

Online Islamic class rooms and pod casting

Carolyn Marwin (1999) says "User plays an important role in inventing the use of a technology. Sometimes, it even goes beyond the imagination of inventor himself". How Beyluxe Messenger, a voice and video chat programme, is reshaped by Islamic organizations in Kerala as a technique to develop online Islamic class rooms is an example in this regard.

Online Islamic class room is an extended version of traditional Islamic learning method around an Islamic scholar. Persons from any part of the world with access to internet can take part in these class rooms. Though, opportunity to ask question is allowed in this platform, there is a set of unwritten normative values prevails in each Islamic class room with regard to the behavior of participants. It is also used to podcast congregations and conferences organized by Islamic groups in Kerala mainly to Malayali Muslims working in Middle Eastern Arab countries.

Beyluxe Messenger, as a free voice and video chat programme, helps Islamic organizations and their followers to freely communicate each other, taking advantage of the architect of this medium. Kerala Malabar Islamic class room (KMIC) started by traditional Sunni Muslims (Kanthapuram faction) in 2002 is the pioneer in this area. Kerala Islahi class room of Salafi Muslim organization and Kerala Islamic class room of EK faction of traditional Sunni Muslims are the other major online platforms which employ Beyluxe Messenger.

Web portals on Islam

Web portals have been used by major Islamic organizations and Islamic seminaries in Kerala as a mean to religious communication and propagation in the cyber environments. It has the potential to address a wider audience as the links on it can flow through the social media, especially Facebook. Commonly these web portals provide online religious decrees and databases on Islam consisting software of Quran interpretations and recitations, fundamentals of Islamic belief etc. They cover up global, national, and state level news from Muslim world, review on significant Islamic movements, new trends in Islamic education, Islamic family conceptions, science and religion, interviews, profiles of world known scholars, information about education and employment, Islamic philosophy and history etc.

Islam on live run by D4 media, digital wing of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, Islam on web.net and Muslim path associated to EK faction of the traditional Sunni Muslims, Dawa voice by Salafi Muslim organization, Islam on site run by Darul Huda Islamic university etc are the major web portals on Islam in the Malayali cyber environments.

D4 media associated to Jamaat-e-Islami pioneered the new communication method of Animations about Islamic history and messages. It also marks a significant change in the medium of religious communication among the Muslims of Kerala.

Rejuvenation of a sermon culture in the cyberspace

Internet and its surrounding technologies helped for the rejuvenation of sermons on Islam in general and Vahl, an indigenous form of sermon with the style of music in particular, by extending the audience base without having any additional costs.

A case study on Hafiz Ahmed Kabeer Baquavi, an orator of Islam; and one of his speech uploaded in YouTube in 2011 got a viewership of 974,874 or nearly one million, shows how internet and its surrounding technologies rejuvenated a new sermon culture. Hafiz, an Imam or cleric at a mosque in Trivandrum has been delivering speeches on Islam for the last 15 years. Usually his audience was limited to believers gathered in the mosque and venues specially arranged for sermon in his region. Uploading of his speeches in YouTube extended his audience base from believers of a particular region to all Malayalam speaking Muslims across the world who depend YouTube to listen sermons. For believers, internet and its surrounding technologies like you tube give access to multiple sources and understandings on religion at little or no cost.

Ulama or Islamic scholars in the online: problematising a term

I agree, in the context of Kerala, the argument of the interpretation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge via online is largely controlled by traditional

and modern Islamic scholars, as it is in the "offline" (Ilyas, 2012). But my argument is that western understanding of clergy or traditional understanding of religious scholars is not sufficient to identify a new generation of Islamic scholars, who may even give religious decrees in the online. The new generation of Islamic scholars are benefitted from the modernized syllabus of many of the Islamic seminaries and trained in variety of professions. They not necessarily continue as an Islamic scholar by profession in the offline different from as it is in the online.

The web portal Islam on web net is an example to it. This concept was proposed by mainly a group of graduates from Islamic seminaries, though they are engaged in professions other than Islamic scholar or cleric. For them, this platform helps to fulfill their quest to communicate on religion and share their knowledge on Islam according to their convenient time and space. In short, it is problematic to define the Islamic scholar in the online using the parameters of offline.

Going beyond the traditional sources

While paying a closer attention to the Islamic cyber environment in Kerala, The significant change in the religious orientation of some educated, English speaking Muslims from Kerala and their exploration of new sources of Islamic knowledge is clearly apparent. A Kerala Muslim listening to American Islamic scholars to know about Islam may sound as unbelievable. But it is a fact evident from the Facebook posts of many. Facebook posts or profile pictures by Kerala Muslims with either videos or quoting of American Islamic scholars like California based Hamza Yusuf and Texas based Nouman Ali Khan or Yusuf Estes can be seen in the Malayali cyber environment. Comments and videos of Dr. Zakir Naik, a televangelist and an international public speaker on Islam from India are one of the common posts in Facebook.

In a way, it marks the beginning of change in the sources of Islamic knowledge in the case of educated and English speaking Muslims from Kerala, which may govern their social and religious life, from traditional sources influenced by local contexts to sources of religious knowledge made keep in mind an international audience.

While globally exploring Islam and locally living

Islam, as a religion which gives importance to the interpretation of religious texts based on the locale contexts, the central question with regard to internet based universalized and homogenized understandings of Islam would be how this monolithic understanding can negotiate with the local context and religious understandings. How the young Muslims in Kerala approach the Islamic Music with western influences both in instruments and style, is an interesting case in this regard.

The popularity of Islamic music composed by Sami Yusuf, Maher Zain among Muslim youngsters from Kerala is evident from their Facebook posts, comments

and likes. According to the understanding of traditional Sunni Muslims, they find wrong with the use of western musical instruments in their songs, though agrees to its content. Salafi Muslims in Kerala find wrong with the elements in this music with mediation in the prayer to God and considers it as an innovation in religion. But, when spoken to many youngsters who belong to these two factions, they consider this music as an easier way to be more close to God and invoke millions of believers listen to it across the world as an evidence to support their argument. In short, it is an area deserves serious academic investigation.

Conclusion

The continuation of oral discourses as the major method for the communication about Islam in the cyber space of Keralites underscore mediated understanding of Islam and its texts is not challenged in the cyber space. Instead, oral practices for mediated understanding are rejuvenated and even retrieved in the cyber space. Rejuvenation of a sermon culture in the cyber space and retrieval of traditional Islamic learning method around a teacher in the form of online Islamic class room are the examples to it, as in both cases a person depends or mediates someone else to understand the texts and messages of the Islam.

Internet and its surrounding technologies have the potential to extend the practice of mediated understanding from geographically or culturally limited sources, as it can introduce multiple sources as well as ways to it like Islamic scholars across the world. The understandings arrived from such a mediation may partly or wholly come against the locale understandings, as it happened in the case of Islamic music influenced by western music.

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