

Contested Spaces of Reality, Identity and Participation in Social Media: An Unusual Case of Hadiya and Ashokan

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Abstract

Truths of everyday life have become digressive in a world of mediation, representation, and algorithms. Construction of identities by archaic value systems, conflicting and dominating ideologies, deterministic technology driven information ecology and pre-eminence of individualism have been cited as the location to discern the meanings of social media texts. Although meanings are arbitrary (Saussure, 1916) and *differant* (Derrida, 1963), it is imperative to look at it again and again to make sense of social formations and cultural paradigm shifts. Cyberspace represents itself as an all-encompassing democratic equaliser in the domain of ideation since it is an enabler of participation and free exchange. However, the socio-economic and political realm in which capitalists of cyberspace such as Facebook operate and its appropriation of realities, identities, and participation is somewhat instrumental in destruction and reconstitution, often in the form of refusal to 'modernity' and its principles.

The case of a father and daughter, Hadiya and Ashokan, from a village in Vaikom Taluk, Kerala, has raised intriguing debate on faith and identity, individual freedom, patriarchy, fundamentalism, international conflicts, secularism, nationalism and boundaries, and many other fluid areas. Hadiya's conversion to Islam has been challenged by her father Ashokan on many counts, while she vehemently embraced her new found peace and faith. Annulment of her marriage by the High Court of Kerala and subsequent restoration by Supreme Court of India raised further legal and constitutional issues on individual freedom. This issue was shrouded by national and international news titles such as 'ISIS recruitment', 'love jihad', '*Islamophobia*' etc., the veracity of which is yet to be known.

Facebook exchanges of this case surpassed the traditional media content in terms of both volume and diversity. Extreme emotions which replaced rationality and tolerance manifested in many such exchanges and cultivated antipathy and mutual mistrust in the so-called liberal and secular society of Kerala. This paper traces the socio-cultural

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premises of this case and tries to look at the ideation process in society with regard to the Facebook exchanges on the Hadiya case and attempts to distinguish how 'democratic' digital space can also be an instrument in polarising and dividing society.

Keywords:

Contested Spaces of Reality, Hadiya Case, Identity, Matriliney, Mediation of Realities.

Introduction

The 'Individual' in Kerala Society

Internalisation of hatred, battle cries and violence and identification with the blind folded beliefs of international conflict zones and actors have become not so uncommon among youths hailing from relatively peaceful, hospitable and inclusive village communities of Kerala. On the other hand, cementing hegemony of majoritarianism and its religion with the supplement of concocted visions of nationalism and intolerance against plurality, individual's choices in religion and faith are also thriving and flourishing here. People have started identifying themselves on the basis of their religion and caste more and more. Temples, mosques, and churches are being renovated by using large sums and more majestic ones are being constructed. Priorities have changed from 'maximum resources to minimum children' to 'maximum children regardless of resources' for all religions. *Bhagavatha Yajnas*, *Bible conventions*, *Quran sermons* etc. are seeing huge participation and influence. Secular content etched in all religions is slowly fading away to bring back compartmentalised identities which are mutually exclusive in nature. All these disturbing trends are happening in an outlier society in India which is considered as progressive, educated, healthier, modern and mobile.

Robin Jeffrey, through a series of papers has traced the uniqueness of 'Kerala model', which was rephrased as 'Kerala Experience' by Amartya Sen, through the lens of culture and history of the region. Matriliney, prevalent among majority of Hindus and Christians in Kerala till late 19th century, has given a certain amount of autonomy and freedom to the women and helped them to move out freely in society, according to Jeffrey (2010). This mobility among women was instrumental in high literacy and affirmative public action. Consequently, the collapse of matriliney has led to a void in the ideological space of caste Hindus and they found Marxism as a resort to fill up this vacuum. Literacy, migration and social renaissance movements were catalytic to this transformation. Since then, Marxism has had a dominant influence in Kerala's politics.

With the strong lineage of Marxism and Independence movement, politics of Kerala tried to emulate egalitarian and libertarian approaches with the

individual at its centre and its success can be visible in the achievements in welfare measures and better social indices. But, now, the 'individual' of present Kerala society is facing an existential crisis both in terms of ideology and politico-economic realities. Those who were happy with the Marxist-Anti Marxist binary opposites of Kerala politics, find puzzling incursions of religion, caste, temptations of capitalist development and technology mediated global citizenry on one side and marginalised sections, liberated women, liberal Leftists, LGBT communities, environmentalists and many others on the other. This crisis might have triggered an intense introspection and adaptation of new ideals. But it has also resulted in many disturbing trends such as embracing fundamentalism of all kinds, celebrating certain cultural practices which are not conforming to the principles of modernity such as dowry in marriages. While offering such crisis to individualism, the present social ecology reasserts its independence in myriad forms. It imposes morality, democracy, cultural values and utopian ideals to people in public offices and often disregards it in private spaces.

Crisis in Dealing with the New Paradigm

Monolithic capitalist models that have been vehemently pursued since post-Cold War era have challenged the ideological premises that shaped the Kerala society. Classical Marxists were often at loss while dealing with capital investments, profit-driven development models and prosperous middle class and its aspirations. In the domain of ethnicities neither they could honestly connect with the oppressed identities nor their fundamental needs nor define their positioning in class division based on Marxian dialectics. Although sweeping statements were made in terms of base-super structure binaries, it was inadequate to decipher the complexities of hierarchy in the social order. Similarly, anti-Marxist democratic forces were not bothered about constructing an ideological space which addressed the crisis of individuals in the post-Marxist paradigm. Instead, they followed neoliberal, capitalist models to tide over the economic crises and in that process often undermined its socio-cultural implications in the areas of equality, exploitation and masking of ethnicities.

Compounding these neglects, other tangible changes have occurred in society. A generation has bloomed with enough wealth sourced from foreign remittances, expanded service sector, capital markets, government salary, cash-crop economy, forward trading etc. in globalised Kerala. The economic independence enjoyed by this educated 'class' has compelled them for public engagement. But they were veiled by a flux in which ideologies and archaic value system provided by family and culture blurred and fused together.

Bewildered by the onslaught of 'globalitarianism'- a term coined by Paul Virilio (Nayar,2017), which states that 'global time', marked by its tremendous speed, reduces time for meaningful discussions- traditional Marxists started

celebrating religious expressions and undermining democratic principles. They were not ready to take the arduous, time-consuming route of ideological refinement on the basis of core values of democracy and humanism as they have become an institutional, power-craving oligarchy.

Realities of Life

Compulsions of socio-political engagement with the public on an individual in Kerala society has to be reckoned with both internal and external influential factors. The external aspect is the disenchantment with the dominant ideologies and the confused state of affairs as explained above. But the internal aspects need a closer look. Many have aspire to showcase themselves as liberal, modern, virtuous, indignant and progressive even when they had patriarchal mindsets, craving for social status, positions in hierarchies of power, voyeuristic sexual tendencies, love of money etc. This dichotomous expressions often surfaces in public arenas inadvertently. The internalised ideological void also compels them to reinvent and figure out their own perspectives based on their inherent features of identity such as religion and traditional cultural values. This happened in an extremely intricate technology mediated information sphere where the public and private spaces coalesce to create an illusion of reality and truth. Realities of everyday life of a Malayali are viewed from a virtual public sphere and they are digressive in nature. Although they pretended to be empathetic to the victims of mob violence and sexual abuses, they secretly nurtured legitimisation of 'killing a thief by an honest mob' and 'taking to task *feminichies*' (A derogatory usage promoted in Facebook to attack feminists and those who held liberal world view on gender relations).

The social realities are hence constructed only to be deconstructed again and again. Endless chains of meanings are present in texts of realities and these are evolved from difference and deference according to Derridean post-structuralist thoughts. When the real and present hegemonic structures exist, the representation of texts and the meanings they produce may construct entirely new social realities which are often not sanguine. Such realities represented through texts with countless meanings are often consumed at individual levels in this post-truth era.

Mediation of Realities

Mediation of realities is often read in terms of technological intermediaries and its interaction with the context. There is a broader consensus on the ability of such intermediaries to determine the texts and meanings. In a rhetorical sense, when the binaries of digital world, 0 and infinity, coalesce, produce algorithms and data which frame the human lives of 21st century. Social media messages have become big data. The patterns emerging from big

data of the cyber world offer both challenges and opportunities. For example, an algorithm developed by Google by analysing the pattern of searches from a particular geographical area could prevent H1N1 epidemic in the US in 2009 (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier, 2013). However it can also look at your private lives, politics and nitpick your aberrations in social life. Its claims of digital solutions to counter the disparities in wealth distribution and consumption have been tested and adopted by those who are in power across the world. It has portrayed itself as a platform for free expression and for asserting democracy. The digital media's capacity to mediate texts is insurmountable. As a matter of fact its exponential speed in creation and delivery of messages displaces democratic participation, according to Virilio. It is nudging for emotional-not rational- responses which are easy to produce and consume and amenable to mediation of all sorts. It creates near- to- absurd meanings while traversing at lightning speed to inboxes. In its entirety, this process itself creates an additional set of meanings which should be read- or consumed- in a given context. Facebook or other social media exchanges are yet to acquire postmodern conditions fully which reject meta narratives or totalitarian theories (Lyotard, 1984) as it encapsulates and appropriate dominant ideologies such as right-wing Hindutva, radical Islam, mechanical Marxism etc. through systematic and organised propaganda machinery. Its texts have become synonymous with hyper real which replaces reality with its replica and suggests these copies as 'more real' as envisaged by Baudrillard (1985). Facebook exchanges based on the curious case of Hadiya and her father revealed the complexities of realities of Kerala society and its lethal implications. It also threw light on the possibilities of undermining the values of modernity, politics, and democracy through distorted mediation.

In short, the individual of Kerala society had synthesized matriliney, partial autonomy of women, literacy, Marxism and movements for social renaissance and independence to frame and define her/his identity. The ideological vacuum created after the collapse of Marxist-Leninist governments across the world and the incursion of new social groups who are committed to fight marginalisation and displacement has created a void and existential crisis for the individual of Kerala. Globalitarianism, deterministic technology and mediated realities amplified this confusion and often offered chaos, confusion and rejection of modernity and democracy in public information ecology, particularly in social media.

Daughter, Father, their Private and Public Spaces

Hadiya, D/o K M Ashokan who hails from T V Puram village , Vaikom Taluk of Kottayam district of Kerala converted to Islam of her own free will in 2016 and married Shafin Jahan. Although a non-believer of any faith, her father objected to this marriage as he feared it was part of a 'planned conspiracy' for ISIS recruitment. The hue and cry erupted after this incident had triggered

intense debate in social media. Religious fundamentalists of both factions organised cyber attacks on father and daughter as the case may be. Exchanges in Facebook on this issue have been marred by mistrust, hate and propaganda. Various court orders, governmental actions and criminal investigations by various agencies were subjected to intense scrutiny. Since this issue involved faith and religion, newspapers and TV news channels initially had shown little interest in this case as they might have feared the antagonism of various organised religious groups. However, social media, particularly Facebook, was used as a platform by the citizenry to speak their minds. Religion and faith are still very close to the hearts of a majority of the people and it has the power to evoke extreme emotions. Facebook posts were reflexive of this social phenomenon and often neglected the very fundamental fact that religion and faith are subjective domains which address the internal crises of individuals and it should be confined in that domain only. The posts nurtured militant communal identities of both majority and minority and often poked the liberal mindsets to remind their archaic religious past. It was not empathetic to the well-deserved private spaces of father and daughter.

Events such as Kashmir and ISIS recruitment cases had created a global context to read this voluntary embrace of Islam. The shock and awe these events created in the minds of liberal thinkers was alarming and chaotic. Suddenly 'Islamophobia' found space in public discourses and it accelerated the infiltration of right wing ideology in polity. Mainstream Left and democratic forces were again late in unequivocal condemnation of efforts to curb individual freedom. They should have been asserted the rights of Hadiya to choose her faith and in choosing her life partner and should also have been empathetic to a father who feared radicalisation of her daughter. Truth is something which is very difficult to get hold of in this case.

Research Design

Through this paper, an attempt was made to enquire the 'readings' of social media texts of Hadiya/Ashokan case by following the reception analysis techniques proposed by Stuart Hall. In Hall's approach, every media text is to be read in three ways i.e., dominant, negotiated and oppositional. In dominant reading, the reception is passive and the messages are accepted in its original form as it shares similar culture, experiences and in most cases reflexive of reality. When the meanings of texts are received after addition of understanding of the audience, the reading will be negotiated and in this case, often the message won't be lucid. Oppositional reading is an all-out rejection of the text and the meanings are found from text which give diametrically opposite meanings.

The following aspects were enquired to complete this reception analysis.

- Public perception on Hadiya's assertion of her constitutional rights and her individual freedom to make choices with regard to religion and faith and its expression in Facebook.
- Public perception of Hadiya's father, Ashokan's stand-points and its expression in Facebook.
- Public perception towards the sub-texts such as love jihad and choice of marriage which enveloped the Hadiya case
- The role of Facebook texts in spreading hatred and falsehood and in provoking sentiments in connection with Hadiya's case

Here, a survey was conducted among 300 respondents recruited mainly from Vaikom and other places of Kottayam, Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram districts by including different socio-economic categories through a simple random sampling procedure with an interval of five. The profile is given in Table 1.0. The research instrument sought the traditional and social media usage habits, particularly Facebook and asked about perception of respondents towards various aspects of Hadiya and Ashokan's case. It also sought responses which could throw light into their readings of Facebook texts of this case.

Findings and Analysis

The profile of the respondents given in table 1.0 showed the representative nature of the samples. However younger age group (68.33%) and Hindus (84%) occupied significant proportions and it limited the scope of this study. The respondents were categorised as active, moderate, and passive according to their media usage and figures 1 and 2 showed the nature of news media and Facebook consumption among the respondents. It is striking to note that print media is still holding its forte with 78.4% of active users, whereas online news media and social media posts vigorously entered into the arena with 60.3% and 73% active users, respectively. Those who were never used Facebook among the respondents were only 12%. Among the users, the data showed active engagement with the medium with more than 50% of the respondents were active in liking (75.4%), sharing (58.3%) and commenting (54.3%).

Variable	Divisions	Frequency N	percent
Sex	Male	169	56.3
	Female	131	43.7
Age Group	18-30	205	68.33
	31-56	74	24.67
	57 and above	21	7
Education	SSLC	44	14.7
	+2	84	28
	Graduation	141	47
	Post-Graduation and above	31	10.3
Income	BPL	111	37
	APL	189	63
Religion	Hindu	252	84
	Muslim	18	6
	Christian	30	10
Residence	Rural	206	68.7
	Urban	94	31.3
Employment status	Student	122	40.7
	Government job	18	6
	Private sector job	88	29.3
	Self employed	40	13.3
	Retired	8	2.7
	Unemployed	24	8
Political affiliation	Unbiased	108	36
	UDF	39	13
	LDF	117	39
	BJP	27	9
	SDPI/Welfare Party	1	0.3
	Others	8	2.7

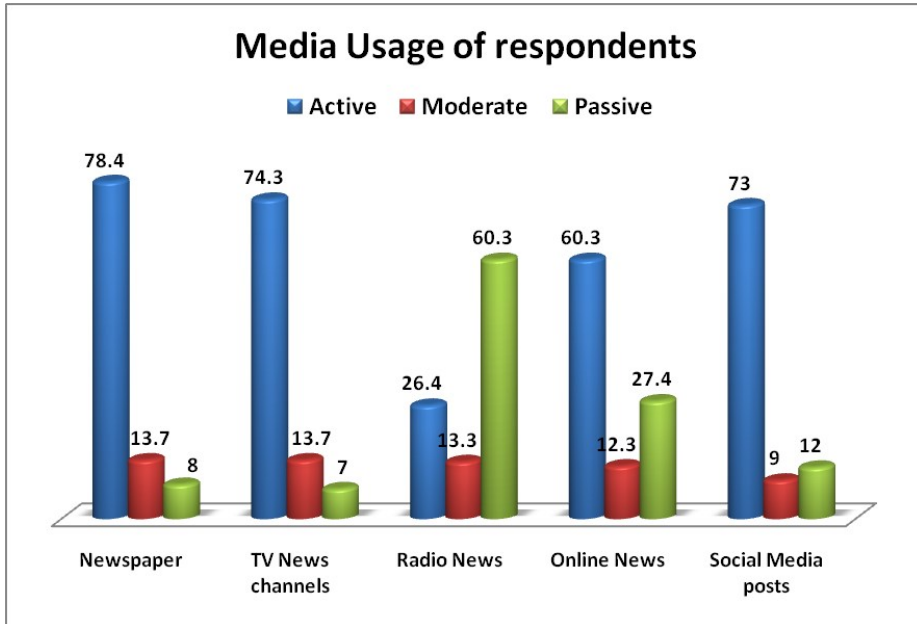


Figure 1

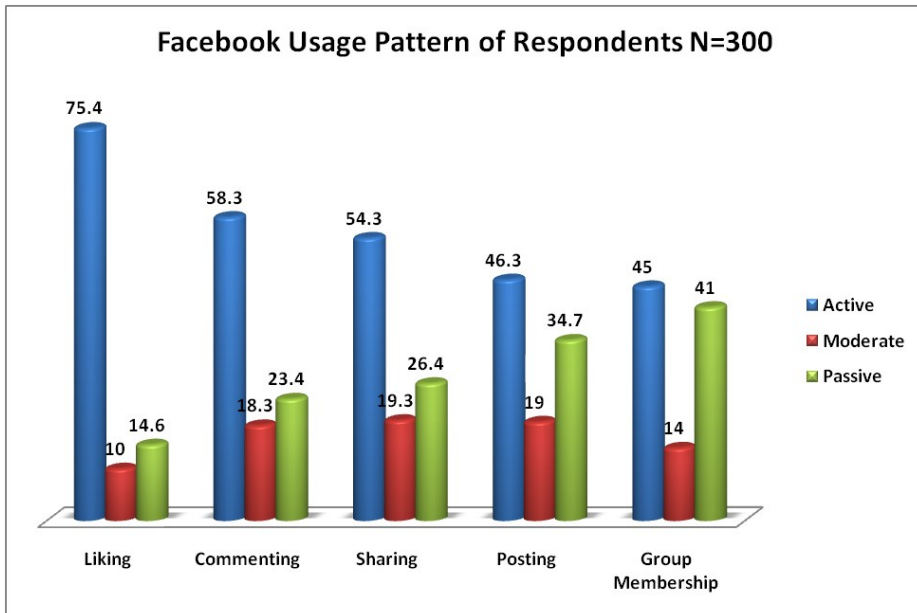


Figure 2

Hadiya and the Issue of Individual Freedom

Hadiya reiterated on many occasions that her conversion to Islam happened as a result of her own experiences, understandings, perceptions and feelings towards faith and religion. The Facebook texts of this conversion was constructed broadly by holders of liberal views, followers of Hindu and Islam religions and many of them were motivated by its interaction with politics as well. A question was posed to the respondents that, whether they think, Hadiya was denied her individual freedom which was guaranteed by Indian Constitution. 48.6% believed that her right to make choices in the matter of faith was denied while 32% of the respondents emphatically disagreed with this suggestion. 19.3% were neutral and the mean score showed 3.27 which pointed at the general trend among the respondents.

An independent samples T-test showed that there was no significant difference between males and females in their perception towards Hadiya's rights on faith $t(298) = -0.455$, $p = 0.217$. Similarly, a Pearson's Chi Square Test revealed insignificant association between the political affiliation of their respondents and their approach towards Hadiya's rights $X^2(N=300) = 13.332$, $p = 0.863$. However, it is to be noted that 31.6% of the LDF supporters disagreed with the statement that, Hadiya's constitutional rights were not protected.

Another question which sought the responses towards the Facebook posts which reasserted Hadiya's constitutional rights to accept Islam yielded 52% positive, 28.7 neutral and 19.4 negative replies. Here also, a majority of the respondents were liberal in their views of faith and individual freedom. However, Chi Square test of association showed statistically significant difference between various party followers on their view about the Facebook posts which supported Hadiya's constitutional rights $X^2(N=300) = 35.378$, $p = 0.018$. Similarly, T-test showed significant statistical difference among males and females in relation to their views on Hadiya's rights, $t(298) = -0.123$, $p = 0.008$.

Chi Square tests of association conducted among age groups with their perception on Hadiya's rights ($X^2(N=296) = 16.797$, $p = 0.032$) and on Facebook posts which promoted the same arguments ($X^2(N=296) = 19.785$, $p = 0.011$) showed statistically significant differences. Younger age group (18-30) was in favour whereas older age group defied Hadiya's rights. While comparing these results with their own unmediated perception towards Hadiya's rights, it was evident that opinions were largely born out of individual experiences and world view.

Sharing Ashokan's World View

'I think, Ashokan's (Hadiya's father) stand (which opposed Hadiya's marriage) is justifiable in this case' was another statement put forth among the respondents. 55.3% of them agreed to it, whereas 21% disagreed and 23.7% remained neutral with a mean score of 3.54. While juxtaposing these results with the statement which acknowledged Hadiya's rights, it was evident that there was a remarkable difference between the viewpoints of respondents. For example, Chi square test for association between groups which were classified on the basis of their agreement with the above-mentioned statements showed that there is a statistically significant difference between their perceptions ($X^2(N=300) = 54.069, p=0$). Spearman's correlation test revealed a significant negative relation between these two variables (Spearman's Rho = -0.246, $p=0$).

These results showed the polarized nature of public opinion on this issue. Among the respondents, Ashokan's views gained more acceptance than Hadiya's, although the difference was narrow. The Facebook posts which supported Ashokan's stand were received positively by 47.3%, whereas 18.7% of the respondents found it negative. 34% of them remained neutral. Predictably, in social media platform young Hadiya received more positive responses.

Perception towards Judiciary as a Mediating Agency

The respondents were broadly neutral ($M=3.26$) in their responses to a statement which says, 'Annulment of Hadiya's marriage with Shefin Jahan by the High Court of Kerala was absolutely right' (Agree- 47.3%, Neutral- 22, Disagree- 30.7%). But there was a clear agreement among majority of the respondents to a statement which says, 'The Supreme Court order which directed National Investigation Agency (NIA) to enquire (about the alleged terror links) is absolutely right' (Agree- 65.7%, Neutral – 24.3% and Disagree – 10%; $M= 3.86$). This showed the apprehensions and suspicions prevailing in Kerala society, created out of the manifestations of global conflicts in the state in the form of ISIS recruitment and so on.

'Hadiya's case is an evidence for (alleged) love jihads in Kerala' was another statement placed before respondents and it yielded neutral ($M=3.33$) response. A closer look showed that 44.7% of the respondents agreed to the statement while only 26.7% disagreed with it. If we read the results presented above together, the picture was less glossy. Although Hadiya's rights of faith and her individuality respected there was an element of mistrust visible among substantial number of respondents. They were skeptical about her marriage and her husband since they had suspicions about radicalization of girls and love

jihads. If allowed to grow further, such suspicions and thoughts will eventually attack the secular fabric of our society.

‘Religion is an individual choice. Nobody, including parents, has any right to interfere in matters of faith and belief’. This statement received positive agreement from 56.3% of the respondents, and negative response from 19.76% of them (M= 3.61). Although, fundamentalism has found some roots in Kerala society, data of this kind revealed its inherent strength for the preservation of modern and progressive values.

The Role of Facebook in Spreading Information/Misinformation of Hadiya Case

Majority of the respondents found Facebook posts with regard to Hadiya case as agents to spread communal hatred (Agree – 43.7%, Neutral – 35.7%, Disagree- 19.4%) and lie and falsehood (Agree – 56.3%, Neutral – 32.7%, Disagree- 11%). Similarly, many of them found it provocative (Agree – 56%, Neutral – 30.7%, Disagree- 13.3%). However 43% of the respondents had faith in Facebook’s ability to bring out truth in this case (Neutral – 38%, Disagree – 19%). Such responses summarised the potential threat of distorted texts spread exponentially through social media such as Facebook without undergoing any gatekeeping.

Conclusion

Readings of the social media texts of the plight of the daughter and father who were caught in between the deep emotional ties of family and the belligerent societal pressure exerted by groups with myriad interests cannot be fully understood without taking into account extraneous or rather confounding variables such as patriarchal values, insecurity and detest experienced by individuals in their familial order, power of organized religious groups etc. However, this paper did not attempt to do it. But it has thrown some light on the prevalent notions with regard to social media texts and their meaning.

Social media, with their inherent characteristics, is perceived as not very representational when compared with traditional media. It does not intervene in the message formulation process. It does not mediatize messages except making it more personal and close to heart. In sum, an organized attempt to create representations and constructions of meanings to thwart the objectives of ‘honest and straight information exchange’ is perceived to be absent in social media. But in reality, clustering of senders around an issue with an aim to propagate a particular view has become ubiquitous in Facebook and this phenomenon created several coalitions with and without vested interests who, in effect, hijacked a space for free exchange.

Emancipation and empowerment enjoyed by Kerala society by drawing the virtues of literacy, political participation and social renaissance still rivet them to liberal and modern values at least in the domain of public expressions. This observation has been validated by the positive responses to Hadiya's rights to assert her faith and the Facebook posts supported her. Producers of such posts were liberals and Hall's dominant reading of texts is visible here. Similarly, the empathetic responses in favour of Ashokan also showed similar readings. But when it concerns with the societal domain, campaigns of religious groups, mistrust imbibed from conflicts of other parts of the world, archaic value systems etc. come into play. Such contexts evoke negotiated meanings for social media texts. Then it was not just a matter of embracing Islam by an individual, but a deliberate and planned attempt to be part of organised propaganda of falsehood. When we look closer to the differentials such as gender, age group and political affiliation, there is a significant negotiated readings of the issue emerged.

Hadiya's case was a sub-text for the negotiated reading of love jihad, hate speeches, provocative arguments and spreading of lies. It was never oppositional. Unequivocal rejection of propaganda such as 'love jihad' was not to be seen in the picture. Thus, this study traced disturbing dichotomous coexistence of fundamentalism along with the liberal, modern and democratic principles that have been guided the Kerala society so far. The chances of mediation of Facebook or rather Facebook users and their groups might lead to an aberrant decoding of messages as Umberto Eco puts it. Jeffrey once asked; 'Literacy and power of printed word used for explaining the unusual social statistics, in the twentieth century, what will the television, cell phone and the web mean for the mobilisation of poor people in the 21st century?'. Of course the TV, cell phone and web have created an ambience of participatory democracy, global integration and adventurous expedition to unknown areas. But in this process, it has added more chaos, illusory realities, alienation and heavily fortified 'social islands' where options of dialogues are near to nothing.

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