

Social media v/s Print media: Social media as a primary source of information during Thoothukudi protests

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Abstract: *The earliest versions of social media were seen way back in 1990's. It is used for a variety of purposes by various walks of people and age groups. It is used more for awareness and information creation, dissemination and even transforming common people from being content consumers to the level of content producers. Apart from the aforementioned aspects, it is to be noted that a large quantity of information shared, created and consumed happens to be User Generated Content (UGC). Social media podiums play an important role in commoditizing attention because they allow users to share valued content freely and instantaneously in various forms and platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter etc. The recent incident in southern Tamil Nadu has pushed the cause for social media to be the primary news source apart and in the absence of traditional media. A big march was conducted by the people of Thoothukudi near the District Collector's office on 22nd May 2018. Protestors were demanding the closure of Sterlite Copper smelter for about 100 days. Protesters have had alleged that the smelter was affecting environmental disturbance by polluting ground water, air in their locality. It was also alleged that it had affected many people as they were suffering from cancer primarily caused by the pollution emanating from the Sterlite Company. On the day TN police took action against the protesters, Police personnel shot 13 people in Tuticorin district and the Collector's office area resembled a war zone. Most media outlets were not allowed into the spot for coverage. However, these messages were shared through the social media. The government of Tamil Nadu instructed the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to stop internet service in Thoothukudi. Despite all these restrictions, people from various districts like Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Madurai knew about the shooting incident that had had happened on that day through Whatsapp. The current research paper examines the outreach of social media by being a primary source of information by analysing the pictures, videos and news articles of shooting shared in Whatsapp and in the newspapers qualitatively through content analysis, framing and semiotics.*

Key Words: *Social media, Whatsapp, Print media, News, Thoothukudi, Shooting,*

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 Democratisation and social movements

The democratization wave of the 1990s opened a new range of research about the form and role of protest movements and their relations to regimes in authoritarian and post authoritarian conditions (e.g. Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998; Cook, 1996; Escobar, 1992; Escobar & Alvarez, 1992; Foweraker, 1995; Foweraker & Craig, 1990; Hipsher, 1996, 1998a, 1998b; Mainwaring, 1987, 1989; Mainwaring & Viola, 1984; Oxhorn, 1995; Sandoval, 1998; Schneider, 1995; Stokes, 1995). Linz and Stepan's (1996) detailed comparative investigations of democratizing states have identified the ways in which the specific character of the authoritarian state as well as the timing and sequence of reforms have shaped the trajectory of democratization and as well as ethnic conflicts and other social turmoil. Protest and social movements play crucial roles in these processes and are affected by them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Protest and Politics

The political process synthesis knits together political opportunities, framing and mobilization structures as an integrated account of the sources of social protest (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). There are growing attempts to theorize the dynamic interplay and interconnection between movements, parties, regimes and other actors as social change unfolds (Goldstone, 2002).

2.2 Framing and discourse

Recent concerns have been raised that framing concepts have been spread too broadly to encompass problems that are better treated with the concept of "ideology" (Oliver & Johnston, 2000) or "discourse" (Ferree & Merrill, 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY:

The methodology employed in this study is one of a qualitative nature by employing content analysis and semiotics. The news articles are analysed through content analysis and the pictures & videos are analyzed through semiotics.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To explore how social media served as a primary media source during the Thoothukudi protests.
- To compare the coverage between print media and social media in the Thoothukudi protests.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

PICTURES



PICTURE 1 & 2 Courtesy: *Indian Express*

Picture 1 shows the protests made by the people for the closure of Sterlite Copper. Picture 2 depicts the burning of Police vehicles and stone pelting on the part of the protestors in Tuticorin.



PICTURE 3 & 4 Courtesy: *Indian Express*

Picture 3 shows the protests happening near the Collector's office where the firing took place. Picture 4 shows the people dispersing after Police lathi charged the protestors who comprised of activists and villagers from Kumarattiyapuram village which had been protesting against Sterlite Copper over two decades regarding people affected because of the contaminated water due to its operations.

6. ANALYSIS OF NEWS ARTICLES:

Mohammad Imrannullah S. (2018) in his article in *The Hindu* on June 1st 2018, had spoken about how the DGP had defended the firing to be attributed to violence at five locations. He quoted the written response from the DGP to the Madras High Court that claimed 13 lives. "Violence erupted at five different locations on May 22 and 23, forcing Police to use firearms at four of those places and resort to lathi charge alone in the fifth." The above report was filed in response to a Public Interest Litigation filed by a group of three lawyers seeking a detailed inquiry by the Thoothukudi Principal District Judge. The report claimed that the protestors were shot to save the lives of Collectorate staff, families of Sterlite employees and policemen.

Praveen Paul Joseph J. (2018) in his article in *The Hindu* on May 22nd 2018, speaks about the events that unfolded on the day of the firing. He reported that around 60 persons including police personnel were grievously injured because of the stone pelting and at least ten people including a 17 year old were killed in the firing.



PICTURE 5 & 6 Courtesy: N. Rajesh, The Hindu

The news report also added that a few photo journalists were manhandled by the protesters including N. Rajesh of The Hindu newspaper. Many vehicles were torched and smoke was seen emanating from the Collectorate office. Despite various attempts by the Police to safeguard the officials, there seemed no respite from the protestors and so the Police had to resort to firing.

ANALYSIS OF VIDEOS

In one of the foremost videos, it can be seen that the protestors are very aggressive towards the Police personnel by pelting stones and the Police are running away (Pictures 7 to 10).



PICTURE 7 & 8 Courtesy: Whatsapp



PICTURE 9 & 10 Courtesy: Whatsapp

In another video, it emerged that the Police were seen waiting for one of the alleged protestors to come out of his hiding place. Once he comes out they manhandle him and beat him black and blue to take him away (Pictures 11 to 13).





PICTURE 11, 12 & 13 Courtesy: Whatsapp

The third video is on the grief and mourning of kin of a protestor who had lost his life in the firing. In this very short clip it can be seen that the wife is crying over the loss of her husband even as the doctor at the Government hospital is tending to the patient to see if he is alive or not (Pictures 14 & 15).



PICTURE 14 & 15 Courtesy: Whatsapp

The fourth video which is also very short shows a couple of alleged protestors who have grievous injuries sustained during the firing and lathicharged respectively (Pictures 16 & 17).

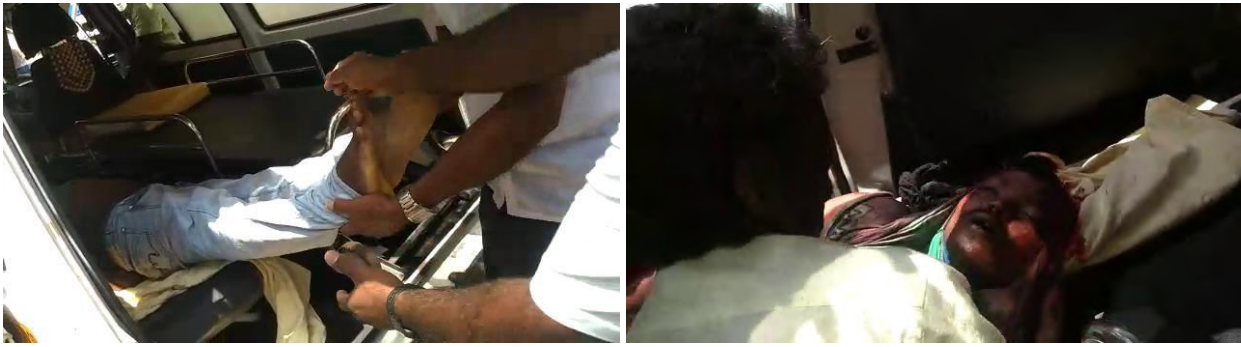


PICTURE 16 & 17 Courtesy: Whatsapp

The fifth and last video shows an ambulance rushing into the Government hospital. The visuals show people rushing in to tend to the injured along with the hospital staff. It shows two of the protestors who had lost their lives and are motionless and the staff along with people rushing them inside to get them treated. At the same time, the hospital staff are also duly checking for signs of life by pressing the toes and rush them inside to provide medical assistance (Pictures 18 to 21).



PICTURE 18 & 19 Courtesy: Whatsapp



PICTURE 20 & 21 Courtesy: Whatsapp

5. CONCLUSION :

Protesting or fighting for one's rights is not a crime but an entitlement for all the citizens of the country and is bestowed upon by the constitution of India. Peaceful protests especially have a special mention in the constitution which has had been subjected to intense debate and discussion across policy and law makers and the honourable judges in the Supreme Court. Sterlite Copper issue has had been going on for many decades. There were intense fight and protests from people for over a period of time almost since its inception in Tuticorin district. However, things didn't change for a variety of reasons. A non-committed effort from the governments and corporate power ensured that the issue was unresolved so far. It is inferred from the study that all the pictures and videos taken for the study happened to be the primary source of information for the public as mainstream media outlets were not allowed.

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Disclaimer: All the images used in this research paper work have been taken from the respective news articles and Whatsapp.