

Social Media in South India

By Shriram Venkatraman
UCL Press, 2017. 258 pages.

Shriram Venkatraman's compelling book is a narrative description of a 15-month long ethnographic study of social media in a peri-urban area called Panchagrami, located near Chennai in Tamil Nadu. The book is a product of his research as part of a massive project called "Why We Post - The Anthropology of Social Media", dedicated to understanding the impact of social media in various field sites spanning from Brazil to China. This non-judgemental book sticks to its intention of not evaluating social media and provides detailed evidence of different use cases of social media and its local consequences. Based on his participatory observation and statistical analysis, Venkatraman convincingly argues that social media in Tamil Nadu has become a reflection of Tamil sensibilities and structures. The peculiarities that the location offered did not matter, as the various social categories just reasserted themselves online.

Venkatraman's choice of location is laudable. With the radical juxtaposition of modern IT workers and long-term villagers in one place, Panchagrami is a microcosm of modern India as an emerging and knowledge economy. Chapter 1 establishes the class, caste, age, gender and political complexities of Panchagrami. The next chapter traces the history of media usage in Panchagrami, with a particular focus on social media.

Chapter 3 explains another valid finding of the increased usage of visuals instead of text on social media. This chapter offers a granular assessment of the visuals posted by users by dividing the users based on class and caste, and further dividing the visuals as public, private and in-betweeners. By intertwining the study of offline visuals with online visuals, and exploring the history of visuals in Tamil Nadu, Venkatraman presents a strong idea of *continuity* of the offline world to the online world.

The overarching theme of Chapter 4 is intergenerational, filial and siblings' communication using social media. A significant take-home point is that families intelligently use social media to gain respect and maintain honor. Crucially, this points out a limitation of social media - families don't use *online* social media (read Facebook) to express love *among* themselves. Instead, they use Whatsapp which is perceived as an *offline* service.

Chapter 5 deals with the IT work culture in Panchagrami, and how social media is undermining the boundary between work and non-work. Darshan and Naga's example (p. 161) of using social media to proactively recruit members of their caste and the analysis on whether it has to be seen as a sign of nepotism or social mobility is illuminating. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on how schools, teachers, and students

perceive social media. Less affluent schools see social media as a symbol of social mobility whereas the wealthier schools see it as a distraction.

Venkatraman shines in conveying what makes this site unique. He makes a sharp observation that offline inequalities are not washed away by social media; instead, social media only creates equality of presence online. Communication occurs *within* socioeconomic groups and not *between* them, and as the gap between the two groups increases, communication becomes more functional than social. He backs his claims with sufficient research and evidence. Notably, as the chapters on visual communication, work cultures, and education show, there is no difference in the impact of social media on these socioeconomic groups. Members of all groups post about cinema, politics, pictures of Gods, and overtly display affection for their families online. They all share commonalities and are influenced by the Tamil ideals of culture and kinship.

The book is written in an accessible and open style. The fact that the author has lived, worked and interacted with the people in local language, and the added benefit of him being a professional statistician, reassures the readers of the authenticity of the information provided in the book. The book is free of comparisons and judgments and is empirically strong in presenting a clear and concise picture of social media usage in Panchagrami. Through social media, Venkatraman takes the readers through a wide spectrum of issues like gender, caste, class, education, work, etc. which show how deeply intertwined and influential social media is on the Tamil society. He smartly avoids religious differences accounting for the fact that there are conversions and caste divisions that cut through religions in Panchagrami.

Venkatraman seamlessly introduces complicated terms like social scalability, polymedia, and media multiplexity only after illustrating each with an exhaustive set of examples. Some stories are very heart-warming, for example, Ranjith and Sreelatha's story (p. 124) which deals with how Ranjith realizes the value of his sister Sreelatha. The choice of exploring IT work cultures deserves appreciation. IT sector seems to be the target of today's youth. Young readers who aspire to join the IT industry will find the stories of Panchagrami's IT workers eye-opening. With focussed analysis on social media usage by students and teachers alike, Venkatraman helps the readers peep into

the future of education in Tamil Nadu.

To be sure, there are some weaknesses in the book. The absence of religion-based political groups shows the uniqueness of Panchagrami (p. 22). However, this might disappoint readers who want a perspective on India's religion-based politics. Some points in the book are repeated at multiple places. Venkatraman takes the example of a 65-year-old middle-class man in Chapter 2 and his preference for voice communication over social media indicating a hierarchy in communication. The same example is repeated in Chapter 4, in greater detail. Similarly, surveillance of female social media users is repeated in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. Indeed, taking these examples at multiple places ensures completeness of the chapters. But the repetition of the same ideas is both redundant and jarring.

Given the scale of research, it is challenging to explore all areas of social media. The field is rapidly changing, with new technology emerging almost daily. Nevertheless, there are some notable areas which deserved analysis. It is surprising that the author has not included a review of Facebook Messenger, which has been mentioned in the book only once (p. 124). A few lines about why WhatsApp is considered more *private* than Messenger would've provided a complete picture of the assumed affordances of these social media services. Sri Lakshmi and Karupiah's story (p. 118) offered a fascinating insight into the use of emojis by lower socio-economic groups. This emoji use should've been analyzed further given the rising prominence of visual symbols over text. The comparative book¹ of "Why We Post" series has a small account of Venkatraman explaining the E-commerce scene in Panchagrami (p. 96), and why men from lower socio-economic classes prefer online purchases. E-commerce usage should've been addressed in the present book too. While student usage of social media was explored in great detail in Chapter 6, it lacked the mention of addiction to pornography.

Venkatraman did touch upon actors' fan clubs and memes in Chapter 3, but only superficially. Memes², fan wars³ and anonymous trolling are on the rise in Tamil Nadu. It seems as if teenagers communicate exclusively through Tamil memes and film dialogue references. Fan wars involve teens fighting in YouTube comment sections and hurling abuses against each other. Posting morphed images and videos of their rival actors has become a norm in these fan pages. Things are getting uglier with this troll culture seeping into the regime of Tamil politics. Hence, Tamil Nadu's troll culture warranted a stronger analysis in the book.

To reiterate, we must acknowledge that some topics are bound to be missed out given the enormity of conducting ethnographic research. Venkatraman has done a fantastic job in stacking the book with rich content, and it leaves the readers with many ideas to ponder over. The book is a must-read for anyone who wants to get a clear picture of social media in Tamil Nadu.

References

1. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1474805/1/How-the-World-Changed-Social-Media.pdf>
2. <https://swarajyamag.com/politics/how-memes-and-whatsapp-forwards-are-nudging-tamil-youth-into-violent-activism>
3. <https://scroll.in/reel/829643/fan-clubs-or-fight-clubs-the-online-rivalry-between-ajith-and-vijay-is-taking-new-shape>
4. <http://owll.massey.ac.nz/pdf/sample-book-review.pdf>