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MAPPING THE SPIRITUAL SENSORIUM: AN ACCOUNT OF RELIGION AND MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES IN NORTHERN INDIA

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The question of religion and its location within contemporary history is at the heart of this paper. While engaging with the after effects of the modernity project in post-colonies, much has been written about the peculiar and often conflicting shape that nationhood took in countries like India. Religion often serves as a site to confront and respond to the changes ushered by Modernities in State policies on education reforms, conjugal conduct, entertainment and other domains in India. It is then, necessary, to probe the role of religion as a social force in forming the public sphere and also to ask whether the binary of religion/science or religion/modernity holds. At the same time, new(er) forms of religious participation involving the consumption of religious media objects have evolved. These “micro-practices” of faith, sharing, belonging and affinity through consumption also pose a serious challenge to the notion of religion as transcendental only. Drawing on the framework of “aesthetic formations” or dynamic communities bound through sensorial experiences, as explained by Birgit Meyer (Meyer 2009), I attempt to map religious practice across Hindi speaking peoples from northern India and the diaspora to discover the throbbing parallel life of spiritual practice through decades in the post-colony.

Before one can engage with the transformation of religious practice, it is necessary to critically consider how religious practice itself becomes a space, a site of articulation and interaction with the contemporary political, legal and the idea of modern. How can we study religion, not as a site of resistance, superstition and the natural binary opposite of all modern projects to go beyond and look at exciting practices of faith that mount their spectacles through media technologies and consumer bodies alike? Also, in the scholarship around religion and methodology, there is an urgent need to reframe the relationship of religion and media, both categories central to our discussion as “not ontologically distinct” spheres that collide with the arrival of new technologies.

Also, I find it necessary to clear up the space of the “technological” and repurpose it for my paper. It is problematic to chart social practices (including religious/spiritual practices) along the lines of the novelty of technologies because that constantly leads us to attribute new bodily and psychological experiences produced by a new technology to the drive towards modernity, hence demanding a new body of theory to make sense

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of any mass media participation. This is a thread I only wish to begin here slightly to start hinting at questions of aura and charisma, or as Walter Benjamin put it “the one-timeness” of an object (Benjamin 2008). While I revisit the construction and role of charismatic figures in religious communities in a longer essay, in the context of mass media technology debates here, two words – novelty and utopia become central. With the ushering of a new technology, like television for instance, popular visual culture was bombarded with vignettes of convenience, ease and speedy access to information resources. However, these utopic vignettes gloss over the fact that actors/consumers/people still remain implicated in their social, political and economic realities that are not rendered defunct merely by their televisual participation. It is probably in these conflicting visions of what exactly television, radio or the Internet is meant for that we begin to understand a cycle of rise and fall of hope and continuities or discontinuities that mass technologies facilitate in a society’s workings.

Theorist Herman Bausinger argued in *Folk culture in a world of technology* that, folk culture and tradition are very much alive in the world of modern technologies and “busily recruiting and adapting new technologies to old purposes.” (Bausinger 1990) Not only this, but what we call as tradition or culture is itself a device for negotiating our existence, understanding the self and modes of expressing our subjectivities – hence aligning the seemingly two different spheres of media and religion at the centre of this inquiry as not in complete disjunct but consistently bound in the logic of mediation. If mediation is indeed an inherent function of religion, and if we agree that new media are not just technological innovations but as Shaun Moores says, (in the process of creating) “continuous cultural and social spaces” (Moores) this paper finds it productive to explore the seamlessness and transparency of mediation – a landmark feature of the networked society to understand what it means to be religious today.

The ‘India’ I am engaging with is a post 2000s nation state and the religious phenomena I am addressing pan across urban, peri-urban and diasporic India – basically “an imagined community”¹ of belonging loosely bound in language(s) and cultural production/consumption. It is convenient to map this community as symbolic of a certain decade of change, a repository of lived experiences after the entry of globalization, transnational cultural consumption and a moment after satellite television became a household reality in many parts of India. It is then necessary to ask an important question – whither stands the imagined community of a nation in the face of these changes?

To contextualize popular religious discourse emerging from the above mentioned terrain of public and private experiences, most claims from believers, followers and opponents relegate religious practice to the realm of the esoteric, illogical, as the binary opposite of scientific prowess and by consequence, antithetical to modernity. On the other hand, as

¹ Birgit Meyer, in her introduction to *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (2005) begins with Benedict Anderson’s proposition of the nation as an imagined community and goes beyond the time of print capitalism to expand on the range of imagined communities that could exist. Also, see: “*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition. London and New York: Verso.” (1991).

explained earlier, every new technological invention is associated with a redemptive quality, as if capable of mass enlightenment and advancement of a community. Thus, religion and media – the two categories at the centre of this chapter come to be indirectly posited in a “puzzling antagonism in which two ontologically distinct spheres – spiritual and technological – collide. To resolve this apparent contradiction, I look at the striking commonalities in the way religion and mass communication technologies organize communities to translate the imagined to the embodied through media objects, bodies and language.

In order to understand the extremely complex constellation of religious practice in the contemporary Indian context it is important to understand who the big players of spiritual media are. Aastha TV started in 2001 by Kirit Mehta and Madhavkant Mishra inaugurated a new phase in the discourse on religious publics. What initially began with the idea of a dharam-karam² channel for Mehta was shaped based on Mishra’s experience of editing five Hindi publications. For Mishra, as he states in a news report, the goal was “re-establishing old wisdom” and he realized television could take him to places print couldn’t reach (Bhatia, 2011). Almost more than a decade after Aastha TV, today the dharam-karam segment is populated by more than eleven quasi spiritual channels with a focus on Hinduism in the North Indian region and more in other parts and religions of India. Some of the other popular channels are Sanskar, Aastha Bhajan, Divya, Zee Jagran Shradha MH1, Disha Channel, Darshan 24, Sangam, Sadhana and Zee Smile. Aastha TV was not only the channel that initiated dedicated religious programming but was also the platform responsible for the rise of Swami Ramdev, touted today as India’s Yoga guru and described by the New Yorker as “an Indian, who built Yoga Empire, a product and symbol of the New India, a yogic fusion of Richard Simmons, Dr. Oz and Oprah Winfrey, irrepressible and bursting with Vedic wisdom”. (Polgreen 2010)

In my presentation, I hope to illustrate the above mentioned formulations of spatiality and mediation through religion and media objects that leaders like Swami Ramdev and television channels/online platforms like Aastha TV actively engage in. I will also attempt to show how through linguistic signification, repurposed rituals and bodily performances, these actors stage religious and political discourses within rural, semi-urban and urban audiences. Dharam-Karam is popular colloquial phrase in Hindi denoting practices relating to dharma which in Sanskrit means duty or religion and Karma means actions. The colloquial phrase in this context refers to everything pertaining to the religious or spiritual.

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