NEGATING THE HEGEMONIC POWERS OF PRINT NARRATIVES: A STUDY OF COUNTER-PRINT CULTURE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Print, as global phenomena was a trend that clearly emerged out of the various facets of Modernity. Thus Print and its development was a major turning point in the history of dissemination of a wide plethora of discourses and epistemological systems across the globe. Within the Indian context, like in any other part of the world, the evolution of print culture had, since the advent of technological and scientific advancement, been a major intervention in the modern age which made it possible to archive a large reservoir of oral knowledge. This paradigm shift from the purely oral to the print forms was rather a significant marker in Indian history which in a sense changed the face of not just literature but also the production, acceptance, and reception of all other Indian knowledge systems. Keeping in view and being fully aware of the importance and widespread reach that Print holds in India, this paper attempts to look closely at a trend during the 1970s which in a sense countered the print culture that had become a dominant form of exchange of knowledge. Here, it becomes rather important to delve a bit deeper into the period which is in common parlance called the 1970's. Contrary to the general understanding, in the Indian context 1970s refers not just particularly to the decade i.e. from 1970 to 1979, rather to a trend that emerged much before 1970 in the Indian context. Thus, the specific reference here is to the 'historical moment' in Indian history called the Emergency, which for the first time since the emergence of the Print Culture faced censorship being imposed on the Press, an event which posed a major challenge and in a sense undermined its purpose itself at a time when it was in its boom and had acquired wide acceptance. This study focuses on those tendencies within the period which sought to find alternatives to print forms of resistance and seeks to delve deep into those alternative counter-narratives, mostly in the oral form that went on to challenge the established supremacy of Print. Thus, the focal point of the study is on a counter-print discourse, a trend which came as an offshoot of the excesses of the Government during the Emergency.

KEYWORDS: Advent of Technological and Scientific Advancement, Possibility of Resistance, Public Spectacles to Express

INTRODUCTION

It was on 25th June 1975 that the then President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, on the directions of Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, officially declared a state of emergency in the country under Article 350 of the Constitution citing the prevailing "internal disturbance" in the country. The order bestowed upon the Prime Minister the authority to rule by decree and civil liberties to be curbed. This paper attempts to look at this period from June 1975 to March 1977, which was a dark

moment in the post-independent history that checkmated the ideals of Democracy. The declaration of Internal Emergency immediately led to the suspension of the civil rights of citizens as well as imposed censorship on the Press. Thus, the fourth pillar had to bear unprecedented onslaughts during one of the darkest hours of post-Independent Indian Democracy. This censorship came at a time when, as an aftermath of the development of printing, the Print media had begun to play a significant role and contributed to opinion making as well as posed serious questions pertaining to the faulty Government policies and citizen's issues. The censorship imposed on printing as also on the Radio and Press was a serious challenge which sought to close down the avenues available to the general public to express their dissatisfaction with the functioning of an 'autocratic' Government. This was a strategic and calculated move on the part of the Government to keep the citizens oblivious of what was happening in the country. Mrs. Gandhi tried to arm-twist the press by forcing them to print and publish only that news which glorified and eulogized the existent and more often than not, non-existent achievements of the Government. Similarly, the control over the allotment of 'news print' was completely vested in the hands of the government and the authorities increased or decreased the quota depending on the stand taken by the respective newspaper establishments. The policymakers realized that the only way to keep any kind of resistance against them at bay was possible only if the fundamental rights of the people such as freedom of speech and expression and the freedom of Press are restrained and suspended. As Scammell puts it, "censorship is the handmaiden of power". The censorship of Press came as a major setback not just to the newspapers which printed anti-Government articles thereby criticizing Government policies, but also to the general public for whom the only possible way of knowing about the grave situation in the country was closed down. Thus each pocket of the country seemed disconnected from the other as the inflow of true information was totally screened which paved way for a form of government which was authoritarian in its approach. The entire country was, to use Foucault's term, under the 'panoptical gaze' of the Government and any attempt to go against the Government was dealt with in the form of unwarranted arrests and torture.

In a situation such as this in which the possibility of resistance through writing and retaliation by peaceful means to the injustices meted out on the public was thwarted, the protesters began to look for alternative forms of resistance. Thus, the age which saw the establishment of the Print Culture also paved the way to promote a parallel mode of resistance that sought to fill in the gap that was created with the new censorship laws. The protesters resorted to holding street corner meetings under the cover of darkness to exchange information and plan strategies to counter the Government's draconian rules. Apart from such undercover meetings and presentation of street plays, many alternatives to printed forms of resistance such as handwritten notices and pamphlets were clandestinely cyclostyled and distributed.

Another significant indigenous form of resistance that emerged during this period was the 'poetic performances and recitals' that were staged on the streets in the midst of the public. As pointed out by Ameet Parameshwaran, "the performance practices from the 1970s posited an ontology that instituted, made manifest and offered a critique of or even an alternate potentiality to what Agamben calls the 'essential fiction'. The reading out aloud of poems in the public became a trend that was followed more and more by the poets who also faced the brunt of censorship as they too were rendered 'silent'. Studies throw light on the fact that this turned out to be a pan Indian feature as various protestors resorted to and staged such public spectacles to express their dissatisfaction and anger against the government.

'Poetry recitals' as a new alternative form of resistance was a noteworthy movement particularly in the southern-most state of Kerala which gained fruition with more and more 'youth' taking charge of the situation and getting involved in mass protests. In the wake of the fact that any attempt on the part of the poets and writers to criticize or question the government or the excesses committed was dealt with in the most horrendous manner and that now they arrived at other forms of resistance in which their poems could be read out turned out to be a popular method practiced by the various poets who in order to evade censorship, resorted to the use of allegories, fables, and myths and borrowed liberally from the entire tradition of the folk culture. The poems by Malayalam poets of the time such as Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, K. Sachidanandan, Balachandran Chullikad, translated version of poems of Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht, bear testimony to the use of images and symbols in their poems which attempt to subtly attack the Government. Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan better known as 'the people's poet' popularized the concept of poetry as 'orature' as he 'performed' his poems. Some of his poems written in the backdrop of the Emergency include, Kurathi, Shantha, Aikamathyam Mahabalam. "The central character named 'Kurathi' in the poem by the same name, who represents the marginalized, stands as the 'spark that spreads to become wildfire', a peculiar charge that assumes centrality when seen in the context of the internal emergency of 1975. The main slogan of the state to curb the 'resistance' of the people during the Emergency was 'talk less work more, the slogan which is used directly used in the poem as a reply by the upper classes to the concerns of the subjugated". (Parameshwaran 10). Although Kadammanitta writes the poem in the mold of a folk performance style of Kerala called Padayani, the questions raised by Kurathi are actually directed at the Government for its ruthlessness and disregard of the citizens. Questions raised by Kurathi such as

' ningal ende karutha makkale chuttuthinnunno. . .

Ningal avarude niranja kannukal choozhnedukkunno?

ningal njagade kuzhimadam kulam thondunno?. . . .

Ningal orkukka ningal engane ningal aayennu?

loosely translated as:

'you burnt and fed on my dark children?

Did You gouge their glowing eyes?

You wreck, ravage our graves?

You recollect, how you became what you are?

is a clear reminder to the people corrupted by power that it is those very people whom they are torturing and silencing that voted them to power, which is the basic ground on which Democracy thrives. Thus, Kadammanitta uses Kurathi as a mouthpiece to express his opinions and voice his anger and frustration at the contemporary political situation in the county. Poems such as these which literally do not seem to have any political undertones often carry underlying meanings which suggest a highly politically loaded imagery voicing the protest of the public, a trend which gained popularity owing to their large scale recitals in college campuses, open fields or streets and not by it being printed and read by the audience. Thus, this mode of presentation deconstructed the popular belief that poetry is a purely personal activity in which the reader has a one to one engagement with the poems in solitude as this new trend opened up the possibility of reciting the poems loudly in the public. The choice of the sites such as college campuses and open streets where these 'performers' sought to present their

poems were rather deliberate and had a larger political underpinning as this also crystallized the emergence of a new youth culture which was headstrong on questioning the injustices faced by the people as a result of the government's excesses. These forms of 'voicing' their dissatisfaction with the undemocratic situation and inhuman acts levied by the government officials seemed to counter the policies of the government which aimed at 'silencing' the dissenting voices which were anti-establishment. Thus, to quote KG Shankara Pillai, eminent Malayalam poet, "poetry was making the sound, rather than meaning." Performances and recitals such as these served as alternatives to dominant form of resistance through the print medium and ended up in arriving at what one might call counter-print forms of protests that sought to fill up the void which was created with the enforcement of censorship on Print media during the dark hours of Indian Emergency which aimed at muzzling any voice that spoke against its functioning.

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