FRAGMENTED REALITIES: AFFECTIVE PUBLICS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN INDIA'S DIGITAL AGE

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

As is observed elsewhere in the world, social media in India is divided across socio-political lines. Not only do the political media contents we consume differ drastically, but the underlying premises and priorities for such politics also run counter to each other. However, such fractures are not only along the political axis. As Thomas Blom Hansen notes, social media has accelerated the rise of fragmented and parallel publics, "each addressing and projecting communities of religion or caste" (Hansen 2021). Essentially, the media content that a person consumes is increasingly determined by their socio-political location. While there are technical and algorithmic reasons underlying the homogeneous nature of what we consume (Mosseri, 2018; Sunstein, 2018; Pariser, 2012; Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015), the project is interested in the socio-political underpinnings. The project aims to gain a deeper understanding of how the "fractures' or fragmentation of our media consumption (Hansen, 2021) is maintained and its impact on our subjectivities. The PhD undertakes a comparative study across socio-political divides through a multi-sited ethnographic study of the 'public sphere' in Shaheen Bagh and Madanpur Khadar – two nearby localities with primarily working-class Muslim and Hindu communities, respectively. Ultimately, through this PhD, the project aims to enhance our understanding of how social media perpetuates a divide in our content consumption and how that, in turn, impacts our sense of identity.

As the literature review shows, there is scarce work that examines the impact of social media platforms on polarization and subjectivity formation in the Global South. Hindutva rhetoric is not only passively consumed but also remediated, made relatable, and reproduced on social media; however, its impact on the people participating has gone relatively unexamined. How does interaction with such content in an affectively charged medium affect the people engaging with it? As Papacharissi's (2014) affective publics are formed along different political issues, what subjectivities are forefronted or activated? What happens to these identities once the networked publics fade away and new ones emerge? Through focusing on particular communities examined, with a focus on affect, the project adds to this growing literature on media and subjectivities. The research questions (RQ) that need to be addressed are:

RQ 1: What kinds of media and social media platforms are the upper-caste communities in Madanpur Khadar and the predominantly Muslim communities in Shaheen Bagh engaging with? What are the empirical and characteristic differences between the content circulating amongst different communities?

RQ2: How is ethnopopulist rhetoric consumed, negotiated with, transformed, and reproduced across the communities in Madanpur Khadar and Shaheen Bagh?

RQ3: What is the role of affect in the circulation of content and maintenance of these differences between the two spheres? How does the circulation of affective and contrasting content on social media affect a person's sense of identity?

RQ4: What can we extrapolate from the study of Shaheen Bagh and Madanpur Khadar's affective public on the broader national public around issues of nationalism and religion?

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

An approximate timeline for the doctoral research is as follows:

Year 1: Taking theories and methods courses, and engaging deeply with research methods, especially ethnography and social media analysis. Finalising methodological approach and preparing a first draft of the Literature Review.

Year 2: Prepare for Qualifying Examination and Ethics application, followed by 10 months in these field sites, doing in-depth observation and interviews, ethnography, and collecting various kinds of discursive material. Preparing a first draft of the methods chapter, analysing the different types of data.

Year 3: Continuation of data collection and finishing analyzing the different kinds of data. Revisiting the literature and methods chapter.

Year 4: Writing the empirical findings chapter.