TIKTOK-POLIS: A CITY FOR GEN-Z?

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Emperor Akbar could not read, so it says in numerous histories. He would play truant during his formal childhood lessons. His period of reign was just tumultuous and a biography on him by Abu Fazl details the mechanics of it in voyeur's detail. Reading it for the first time, there is a sense of peeking into a private sphere. What followed were prescriptions on dividing the living quarters from the court, instituting several changes to distinguish between the private and the public sphere. One of his greatest political challenges came from his private life though. He had difficulty conceiving a son for an heir, and then Salim came - and with him, an expected turnaround in fortunes. The succession was complete. The upcoming generation was in safe hands.

That's the story of almost every household, where the youth is both sacralized and feared, moderated and feared. The latest on that front right now is a TikTok renaissance, which has become a bit of an outcast movement too. It's a unique rebellion, where working class individuals are labeled 'chhapri' at ease and considered pariahs for their socially uncouth and illiterate impressions. Suddenly it was Akbar's Court all over again. The dirty, messy realities of those kept outside the discursive public were brought out through a channel accessible to everyone: TikTok.

Similarly, it is the platform's role in creating a public-private sphere where norms of behavior are subverted through TikTok. The backlash against this is immense: sometimes it is also reflected in the growing din of criticism of 'modern' values, the desecration of moral as well as artistic values that a generational leap in tech has casted beyond the shores of the youth's imagination. This baton of blame has a habit of being passed down, partly after this idea of civilisation moving towards some kind of ultimate ideal place.

I can't help but wonder if there were a social media during the Pakistan Movement. It would also go on to show how democracy itself is hegemonic; even reading and writing can be hegemonic as evidenced by the selective education programs for women selected by the Aligarh Movement. The colonising tendencies that it would leave its subjects was the daunting task of an exorcism for the colonised. It is a reflection that is increasingly found on TikTok, with various catharsis and 'decolonising' shorts aimed at 'uncovering trauma' and dealing with it through 'self-care' which itself takes on many forms. And everyone can participate! This is opposed to the Nationalism which was the bedrock of the Pakistan Movement but would also become the grinding stone for women, as it backed them into specific roles apropos to the vision of a post-colonial state reclaiming its distorted past.

Without a way for a body to name its pain, they are also deprived of a way to articulate their consent. This silencing accompanied feminised notions of 'modesty', 'restraint,' 'acquiescence' which was reified post-Independence. It's a perception that accompanies 'TikToker' too — as the opposite of modest. To this day, women's subjectivity sticks out as a sore thumb in the Pakistani hinterlands because it does not tie into any mass movement or revolution anymore: the NGO-isation of feminism and the absence of Zia's countervailing force later may have contributed to the relocation of women's activism. These centrifugal actions to separate marginalized voices from the public-discursive zone was anathema to the revitalisation of a women's issues.

But the writing was also in the literal writing on the wall — the mode of history writing which accompanied the Pakistan Movement. The expansive participation of women in the Pakistan Movement aside, in the declamatory (where women were not active agents) expressions of Women's Movements, there is a concealed undifferentiated historical subject who does not reveal himself but is present in all historical accounts, and is invariably of the male gender. Thus, representation was mediated, communicated, and put forth in an overarching structure, and tied into that structure is a disciplinary convention which obeys the origin stories created by and composed of men. Even though women's histories have come on the back of women's struggles — so there is a political background that is leading to these struggles — certain questions that bedevil the present state of women's politics in the rest of the world is absent when it comes to Pakistan; when does the suffragette movement start, e.g., which was not the result of a natural organic movement in the divided subcontinent but a political expediency. It often is regarded as an article of faith that the path to history opens up the way to the future towards which we are always moving in a linear direction. Because of the circuitous nature of marginalised voices and their liberation during the Pakistan Movement— at least, temporarily — in a time of political crisis, this linearity that there is a utopian future to be claimed, is perhaps shaken up in the 21st century by the multivalent content on TikTok. There are more storylines, narratives, and possibilities afforded by the content-sharing platform than ever now. Surely, TikTok is an archive of data and material erstwhile confined to the private sphere.

It is a polyphonic landscape instead, composed of skits, carefully-edited arch-comics, dancers choreographing a song, singers slicing a dance. Everything from finance guides to social studies lessons — i.e. politics of entertainment/entertainment politics allow this platform to mix both the solemn and frivolous together. That's a lethal mix for censors, and political dynamite. A lot of it is owed to the mode TikTok operates in: fluid, counter-narrative, fragmented, revised, subversive. In short, it encourages participant reality, which is much more

potent politically than mimetic warfare. We all see ourselves as relations of time/place; that is how we all understand ourselves as subjects, i.e. our subjectivity. This 'subjectitudes' produced as a result of a particular timeline of events, a timeline that creators online have been able to set to their own rhythm, timing, music, and experiences. In such a format, traditional media narratives are also a function of distance and time — authority bestowed on an individual (reporter), but it is much more stagnant and fairly closed off to participation beyond simple viewing by the public. TikTok on the other hand, is a public medium but it has many of the same assumptions as primary discourse (personal experience), which makes it crucial.

It filled a gap in contributory histories. In our notion of histories, the sphere of the political presumed certain bodies over other bodies — for example, the task of rearing up children, a task of women, is not seen as important; if those bodies are menstruating bodies, or are child-rearing bodies, then they are not sufficient bodies and are cast somewhere outside the political. While the testimonies beyond contributory history allow us to re-centre knowledge — who belongs insufficiently and who belongs completely? This new platform is a plot twist in that stream of history-writing, where suddenly technology has advanced curated and spontaneous forms of public disclosure of private actions. It allows us to leave room for that, between the structural world and experience — whereas earlier, women's voices were mediated by men through the imposition of a private sphere. These 'feminisations' of certain spheres also delude us through their claim of being 'natural', that this is the way that things are and this is the way things have always been — which makes a system of power enduring, pervasive, self-perpetuating, by making an appeal to being 'natural'. This might be the main question in the properties of women's subjugation vis-a-vis feminised spheres: Nature v. Culture. Long hair, not short, is a simple act of inconvenience which precludes access for women as much as hinders mobility in case of a bike ride. It also labels them immediately as a 'woman' and thus susceptible to the glare of the public sphere. Platforms though, are not gender-specific.

As a much more engaged and immersive experience than conventional mainstream media, TikTok is an incredibly less factitious mode of storytelling/narrativising. It is in its breaking of the public/private divide — diffuse, diverse population from different communities interact with each other — that a progressive young 'woke' politics is largely being fermented. The fact that there is seemingly a more personal soundtrack to political analyses therein just contributes to its nature as a 'spectacle of the personal'. It also builds towards what Wrenn called the 'engaged uncertainty' of TikTok viewing that has created discursive/reflective public spaces which are nevertheless subject to the community policing and virtue-signalling too. The comment section does a great job of playing this blame-game. Since the ages under 20 are the fastest growing constituency on the platform, one can imagine the generational blame-game that often pervades TikTok.

That's all good for a public expression of private desires and beliefs, but does it really and radically alter the fabric of politics? It's a topic discussed in depth by theoreticians but the 'simulated' public politics of TikTok still catches me out for its concise description of its simulated environment. Which has resulted in the public management of private communications — a political manifestation of personal values — throughout major election campaigns in the US, most notably in the widely-derided revisionist approach in Trump's 2016 campaign. Whether or not one side is culpable, the investment in informal channels of public communication have paralleled the decline of US's soft-power in the world.

The negative soft-power is definitely being replaced by the positive soft-power accorded to public women on TikTok, through Thunberg, and recently, Mahsa Amini. Allowing us to look at the micro-dynamics of oppression, there's a merging of public and private responsibilities. Whereas previously, the double burden of a 'private' (mostly unrecognised) struggle tracked on to the public one, was the Cross they had to bear. Now we know that the discursive political potential of personal and private experiences and TikTok shorts, both have a stickiness to them that tends to outstay 'breaking new' headlines of legacy media.

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