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The Commodification of Suffering and Hope in the Context of Indian Platform Workers

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Abstract: *The process of turning personal suffering and aspirational ambitions into commercial objects is known as the "commodification of suffering and hope." Structure of Theory consists of three major theoretical structures—Postcolonial Theory, Critical Political Economy of Media, and Visual Culture Studies. The working people or the labour force of India is split between the formal (sometimes called "organized") and informal (also called "unorganized") sectors. Formal workers are primarily employed in the public sector, are subject to employment protection laws; whereas, informal labourers are self-employed, small business-based, subcontracted, agricultural, and primarily non-union workers. Ninety percent of Indian platform workers have no savings and experience economic instability due to algorithmic control, excessive revenue volatility, and a lack of social security. Therefore, precarity for Indian platform workers mostly arises from labour and income insecurity.*

Keywords: Commodification, Formal and Informal Workforce, Platform Workers, Suffering and Hope

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Introduction

India's fast expanding consumer economy has accelerated the commodification of human experiences, turning social bonds, personal anguish, and aspirations into traded commodities. Complex human emotions and problems are frequently reduced by this process to items intended for market profit, digital interaction, or consumption. This is the phenomena closely linked to narratives of hope and the systematic exploitation of vulnerable people in the Indian environment.

The ways that visuals of suffering and hope are shared, absorbed, and used to raise money, influence public opinion, and validate assistance groups are referred to as the "visual economy of development aid." Visual representations are vital in creating narratives about poverty, vulnerability, and progress in India, where caste hierarchies, economic inequities, and regional inequalities still exist. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and development groups all use emotionally charged visuals to promote policy changes and raise money. These pictures present ethical and epistemological issues even though they are successful in evoking empathy and financial support.

Commodification of Suffering and Hope

The process of turning personal suffering, trauma, and aspirational ambitions into commercial objects, cultural capital, or political tools—often losing its true, human depth in the process—is known as the "commodification of suffering and hope." This means that in today's society, painful events can be turned into fodder for consumption, and hope is marketed as a self-help item rather than a systemic, collective reform.

The sociological and economic process of turning human misery, trauma, and misfortune into marketable goods in order to make money, amusement, or political capital is known as the "commodification of suffering." It repackages human suffering as a consumable good or service, stripping it of its unadulterated, sacred, or historical actuality. Through several means, this is the phenomena appearing in contemporary culture, media, and institutional institutions.

The socioeconomic process through which the very human emotion of optimism, aspiration, and yearning for a better future is turned into a commercial commodity to be purchased, sold, and exchanged is known as the "commodification of hope." Hope is packaged by capitalism institutions into tangible goods, subscriptions, and sold experiences rather than serving as an internal psychological resource or a group instrument for social change. This change frequently takes advantage of people's weaknesses by claiming that prestige, fulfilment, and recovery are only a purchase away.

Methods and Materials

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The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the visual economy of development aid in India, with an emphasis on the ways in which hope and suffering are made into commodities through visual representations. It aims to comprehend how development organizations use visuals to create narratives, how these representations affect the people portrayed, and how donor views are shaped. It also intends to investigate the moral conundrums raised by the use of suffering and hope in narratives using visuals, investigating if these depictions strengthen or further alienate underprivileged populations. This paper offers a thorough examination of the relationship between visual culture, humanitarianism, and economic imperatives in the Indian development sector through the use of a qualitative research approach and narrative content analysis.

The visual economy of development aid in India is critically examined in this paper employing a qualitative research technique, with an emphasis on the commodity of hope and suffering. For this research, a qualitative approach is most appropriate since it enables a thorough investigation of intricate social processes that are impossible to measure.

Background Study

Structure of Theory: There are three major theoretical structures—Postcolonial Theory, Critical Political Economy of Media, and Visual Culture Studies—serve as the foundation for this study and offer a critical lens through which to view the commercialization of suffering and hope in development aid images. These structures allow for a thorough comprehension of how assistance campaigns' visual representations serve as ideological instruments, influencing attitudes toward poverty, development, and humanitarian involvement.

- *Postcolonial Theory*: The way the Global South is portrayed in Western discourses has long been criticized by postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Edward Said (1978). Said's theory of Orientalism shows how colonial powers portrayed non-Western societies as helpless, archaic, and in need of redemption—a notion that is still present in contemporary development narratives. The lack of marginalized voices in these narratives, which perpetuates hierarchical donor-recipient relationships, is highlighted by Spivak's work on the subaltern. Visual depictions of suffering frequently resemble colonial-era clichés, portraying destitute communities in India as defenceless and reliant on outside assistance, as may be shown by applying postcolonial theory to development aid photography. In addition to fostering empathy, these portrayals uphold a hierarchical structure in which charity recipients continue to be mute objects of Western or elite Indian generosity.
- *Critical Political Economy of Media*: According to Vincent Mosco (2009), media representations have a significant impact on the creation and dissemination of narratives since they are intricately linked to economic systems. Development imagery functions in a capitalist system where financing is obtained by commodifying emotional appeals. In order to maximize donations, aid groups carefully create visual narratives that match with donor expectations. For example, they may highlight hopeful developments to sustain involvement or emphasize suffering to boost donations. By highlighting the economic incentives driving development visuals, the critical political economics method raises concerns about whether the focus on suffering leads to a simplistic depiction of intricate socio-political realities. Additionally, this approach criticizes how narrative using images shapes public attitudes and financing priorities by making some communities more visible while making others invisible.
- *Visual Culture Studies*: According to Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015), visuality shapes social power and control. Studies of visual culture look at how pictures create meaning, affect feelings, and uphold ideologies. Instead of portraying the daily reality of marginalized people, visual tales function as persuasive tactics in the structure of development aid, portraying suffering and hope in ways that appeal to audiences.

This approach makes it possible to examine the ways in which visual aesthetics—such as composition, lighting, and framing—affect people's feelings during relief efforts. It investigates how development narratives are crafted to uphold global hierarchies, sustaining Western or elite Indian authority in defining progress and poverty, by analysing the symbolic power of these pictures.

The Indian Context

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Formal and Informal Sectors: According to Munck (2013), work has always been insecure from the standpoint of the global South. For example, the labour force of India is split between the formal (sometimes called "organized") and informal (also called "unorganized") sectors, with 409.6 million workers, or almost 90% of the labour force, being in the second category. Formal workers are primarily employed in the public sector, are subject to employment protection laws, and frequently belong to trade unions.

Whereas, self-employed, small business-based, subcontracted, agricultural, and primarily non-union workers are all considered informal labourers. They often endure sweatshop conditions, the lowest wages, and the harshest types of labour exploitation. Nevertheless, over the past 20 years, the formal sector's protections have also been severely challenged and attacked, in part due to the blurring of the formal-informal sector distinction (Noronha and Beale, 2011). In what is essentially India's informal labour market, online crowd labour has recently grown in popularity (D'Cruz, 2017; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016; Kathuria et al., 2017).

E-Commerce Platforms

A number of platforms that provide "work on-demand via apps," including Zomato, Swiggy, Urban Company, Uber, and Ola, have emerged in India since the 2007 launch of the e-commerce site Flipkart. These platforms cover ride-hailing, courier services, food delivery, groceries, and domestic and personal care services (such as beauty, carpentry, electrical or plumbing services), mainly to meet the needs of middle- and upper-middle-class consumers (Fairwork India Ratings, 2020; Raval and Pal, 2019; Seetharaman et al., 2021).

However, rising income levels, a youthful population, and the widespread use of smartphones and the internet support this expanding market for platform-based economy businesses in India (Surie and Koduganti, 2016). For example, one of the most important changes in Indian society after independence has been the expansion and differentiation of the middle class. It is no longer considered a tiny minority, with estimates ranging from less than 100 million to more than 250 million people (Béteille, 2017).

Furthermore, the United Nations (UN) estimates that between 2010 and 2040, India will add 300 million individuals in the working age range of 15 to 64, accounting for 25% of all new workers worldwide during the next ten years, making it one of the world's youngest populations (Singh, 2016). With 1,177.02 million subscribers as of January 2020, it should come as no surprise that India has the second-largest telecom network in the world. India's active internet subscription hit 530 million in 2018, despite tele-density increasing from 18.23% in 2016 to 87.45% in 2020 (IBEF/India Brand Equity Foundation, 2020).

Additionally, platform workers have benefited from increased last-mile access to reach customers, as a third of families possess a two-wheeler (Fairwork India Ratings, 2020). According to Fairwork India Ratings (2020) and Seetharaman et al. (2021), platforms are expected to absorb individuals who leave agriculture for the low-value-added unorganized sector with low educational requirements as the Indian economy gradually reduces its reliance on agriculture for employment. Approximately 300 million people are currently employed in the Indian platform economy (Fairwork India Ratings, 2020).

Precarity of Indian Platform Workers

The so-called platform work involves moonlighting or part-time (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2008a), and employees feel compelled to put in more time. It should come as no surprise that the majority of Indian platform workers are full-time employees who rely primarily on platforms for their income (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016; Fairwork India Ratings, 2020; Prabhat et al., 2019). On-demand workers put in more hours than the legally allowed 48-hour workweek (without overtime pay) in order to earn enough money to support themselves (Fairwork India Ratings, 2020).

In reality, delivery workers had to be "on-the-job" all the time, working unusual hours and on holidays and vacation in the hopes of obtaining enough orders to satisfy their daily goals since they were continually using the app. Furthermore, the long-term health effects of working long hours, workers who rode motorcycles and carried products that needed to be handled carefully were also exposed to the physical risks of heavy traffic and inclement weather.

When delivery personnel take ownership of an item until it is delivered or given to the end consumer, these concerns become much more relevant. To put it another way, employees were responsible for paying if the item was misplaced or lost (Sharma, 2017). In addition, the particular nature of the labour and the fact that it

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was frequently done at strange times of the day raised the risk of bodily harm (Seetharaman et al., 2021). Additionally, the platform work paradigm makes it difficult for employees to establish networks of solidarity. Employee isolation, atomization, and competitiveness are commonplace (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016; Fairwork India Ratings, 2020). In reality, platforms stifle any chance of collectivization and peer-to-peer communication by making it extremely difficult for employees to communicate with one another (D'Cruz, 2017; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016).

Ninety percent of Indian platform workers have no savings and experience economic instability due to algorithmic control, excessive revenue volatility, and a lack of social security.

Platform workers—estimated at 7.7 million in 2026—frequently deal with excessive hours, unintentional dangers, and sudden, arbitrary platform deactivations with little to no recourse, even if the gig economy offers flexible income opportunities. Because of this, platform workers—especially female employees who are subject to harassment and lack protection—often put in 10 to 14 hours a day simply to make ends meet, enduring severe workplace stress and high physical hazards.

Therefore, precarity for Indian platform workers mostly arises from labour and income insecurity, which is mirrored in their working circumstances and unclear identity restrictions. In addition to shifting daily expenditures to the workers, designating platform employees as "independent contractors," "partners," or "self-employed" allows platforms to avoid a legal employment agreement.

Conclusion

India's consumer economy has accelerated the commodification of human experiences, turning social bonds, personal anguish, and aspirations into traded commodities. It links closely to narratives of hope and the systematic exploitation of vulnerable people in the Indian environment. The process of turning personal suffering and aspirational ambitions into commercial objects is known as the "commodification of suffering and hope." Structure of Theory consists of three major theoretical structures—Postcolonial Theory, Critical Political Economy of Media, and Visual Culture Studies. These structures allow for a thorough comprehension of how assistance campaigns' visual representations serve as ideological instruments, influencing attitudes toward poverty, development, and humanitarian involvement.

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A number of platforms that provide "work on-demand via apps," including Zomato, Swiggy, Urban Company, Uber, and Ola, have emerged in India. These platforms cover ride-hailing, courier services, food delivery, groceries, and domestic and personal care services, mainly to meet the needs of middle- and upper-middle-class consumers. Ninety percent of Indian platform workers have no savings and experience economic instability due to algorithmic control, excessive revenue volatility, and a lack of social security. Therefore, precarity for Indian platform workers mostly arises from labour and income insecurity.

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