CYBER ATTAPPADI AND SPATIAL IMAGININGS:
A STUDY OF CYBER REGIONAL (RE-) CREATIONS

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Abstract

The proposed paper intends to analyse, using the theories of cultural geography and virtual ethnography, the strategies underlying the online creation of the region called Attappadi. The technology-augmented space of the internet has proven to be a rich terrain of diverse multi dimensional socio-cultural relations and communications that can be directed to the generation of new meanings. A study of this space and its relations can hence reveal the hidden agenda of meaning creations associated with the space of the internet. Seeming replica of many offline regions are added to the space of the internet every now and then. Whether these online reproductions of offline regions are simply representations or are there any hidden deeper spatial concerns, can only be revealed through a study of the strategies involved in the cyber transformation of offline regions. Hence, this paper ventures to analyse the nature of cyber spatial imaginings, with particular focus on cyber regional community of Attappadi, a tribal region of Kerala. The paper proceeds by working on how Attappadi region is given a location and a space in the internet. Through analyzing the various strands of cyber Attappadi creation using select websites and internet information, Facebook pages on Attappadi etc., this paper

tries to understand the nature of cyberspace's appropriation of regional geographies and social relations.

Key Words: Attappadi, Cultural Geography, Cyberspace, Spatiality, Virtual Ethnography.

Cyberspace has provided a new platform to generate multi-directed discussions on various offline concerns and cultural artefacts. It is a technology directed space with a deeper cultural significance. Cyberspace provides users with ample opportunity to create alter spaces for conducting and carrying out otherwise time and space restricted communications and social interactions. The spatiality of cyberspace imagines a technology-augmented platform to provide meaning and significance for modern human beings' existence. The social interactions and relations generated within this platform render this imagined space an aura of reality. The virtual communications in fact gain the real life significance because the nature of the cyberspace makes it so.

> CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool individuals use to enter that space. Consequently it is more than the context within which social relations occur (though it is that, too) for it is commented on and imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by individuals and groups, via software and hardware designed and modified by numerous people. (Jones 12)

The nature of the online space and a study of cyber spatiality probe deep into the nature of cyber-mediated communication and the specificities of meaning evolved as a result of this cyber interaction of online members. The offline social beings and their multi-dimensional spatio-temporal activities and their influence and impact on the cyber transmission of offline lives and artefacts are also questions to be considered while analyzing the spatiality of the cyber world.

> The difference between those on the Net and those on the street is encompassed in a distinction made by Edward Soja (1989). "Just as space, time, and matter delineate and encompass the essential qualities of the physical world, spatiality, temporality, and social being can be seen as the abstract dimensions which together comprise all facets of human existence" (p. 25). In cyber-space, spatiality is largely illusory in its apperception (at least until Gibson's accounts of its visualization are realized), and temporality is problematized by the instantaneity of CMC and the ability to roam the Net with "agents," software constructs that are automated representatives able to retrieve information, interact on the Net, or both. What is left is social being, and that too is problematic. Is the social actor in cyberspace mass mediated, a mass mediator, a public figure, or a private individual, engaged in close, special interrelation? (Jones 12-13)

Cyberspace, along with promoting new fields of technological advancements, also functions as a cultural terrain to showcase as well as carry out the traditional offline cultural practices and systems social interconnections. Offline lives and activities that have formulated as well as moulded the meaning and existence of offline social lives are given a place in the so-

called modern technological terrain of cyberspace. Internet, here, serves as a medium to connect and relate two extremes of life styles, that of local as well as of global. There are instances where both the online and offline lives get intermixed, and at another instances they do not. "The systems of cultural significance and methods of social control in on-line worlds in some instances parallel ones we are already accustomed to and in some instances they do not. In all instances, though, they do form a new matrix of social relations" (Jones10).

In the case of cyber regional communities, often, an attempt to re-create an online replica of offline regional experience is attempted. But this attempt to reproduce an exact copy of offline social relations and experiences of offline regional experiences are mostly deviated or misguided by certain internal as well as external influences related to social, political, cultural, and ideological elements. These cyber regional communities also function as independent spaces with its own spatial features.

> Sandy Stone's (1991) definitions of virtual communities and virtual space are most helpful, as for her they are, "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face- to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'... [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated" (p. 85). Thus cyberspace hasn't a "where" (though there are "sites" or "nodes" at which users gather). (Jones 15)

Hence, as Carey says, as quoted in *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* by Steven G Jones, it is knowledge and information that have predicated the spatiality of cyberspace. And those customs, rituals, practices, systems of beliefs deduced from the physical space provide the source of the knowledge and information that

have formulated the cyberspace. A portion of this knowledge is based on the simple knowledge to traverse through cyberspace. "But the important element in cyberspatial social relations is the sharing of information. It is not sharing in the sense of the transmission of information that binds communities in cyberspace. It is the ritual sharing of information (Carey, 1989) that pulls it together" (Jones 15).

In this paper, a detailed discussion on the region called Attappadi, located in Kerala, is conducted. But the discussion completely centres on the Attappadi in the cyberspace. The paper tries to find out the geography and spatiality of the Attappadi as envisaged by the space of internet. It tries to focus on general website information on Attappadi, Facebook pages on Attappadi, online news reports and articles on Attappadi etc. to locate the region in cyberspace.

The paper tries to conduct a detailed analysis of cyber Attappadi to understand the projected as well as missing dimensions of its construction. It starts with an innocent move to position the geography of Attappadi in the virtual world, by conducting a simple Google search on the term "Attappadi". It then proceeds by finding out how the search results vary from each other on the basis of the nature of the content promoted by different websites and Facebook pages on Attappadi. It also works on why certain concepts of a particular region get showcased at the cost of forgetting some other important concerns.

A general search on any term in Google normally brings out a Wikipedia page as its first result. Likewise, here also, the first result that came out when I have googled the term 'Attappadi' is a Wikipedia page, where Attappadi is defined as follows:

> Attappadi is an extensive mountain valley at the headwaters of the Bhavani River nestled below the Nilgiri hills of the Western Ghats. It is bordered to the east by Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, on the north by the Nilgiris, south by the

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Palghat taluk and on the west by Karimba-I and II, pottassery-I and II, and Mannarghat revenue villages of Mannarghat taluk of the Palghat District and Ernad taluk of the Malappuram district. ("Attappadi")

A Facebook page on Attappadi describes it as "situated in the Palakkad district of Kerala, is bordered by Nilgiri district and Coimbatore of Tamilnadu on its North and east respectively and Malappuram district of Kerala on the west. On its south is the Mannarkkad taluk of Palakkad district" (Attappadi).

A website www.kerala.com says,

Attapadi, a sprawling stretch of hills and valleys at the border of Tamil Nadu and Kerala is a perpetual source of fascination for vibrant travelers. With mooring clouds, contemplating hills, turbulent wild virgin rivers, meandering glowing streams, maneuvering climate, brooding vast valleys, covertly deep forest, exotic flora and fauna, herds of wild animals the land is an "an open sesame" to the exuberant treasure of nature. ("Attappadi, a celestial dream land of nature")

An analysis of these three descriptions renders the view of Attappadi as scenic landscape in Kerala blessed with its rich flora and fauna. A deeper analysis would provide an understanding on how the region is located in the space of internet. An offline region almost always gets established in cyberspace through positioning its location using geographical markers. In order to place the region, its territorial positioning, its boundaries that can separate it from others, its generally accepted features are shown to make the online user to believe that it is an exact replica of an offline region. Such ideas of geographical conformity to locate a region in the cyberspace arise from the view that a region becomes a region only because it has a geographical territory and boundary to separate it as an independent locality. Such

geographical markers, though appearing as mere discriminating agencies in the offline context without much notability, get transformed as one of the most powerful ideological tools when it comes to the field of internet regional communities. And it thus establishes a particularly dominant vested view point to achieve some hidden benefits.

In the offline space, a territory for a region is a visible mark that can be watched and understood. In the case of cyberspace, most often these territorial boundarizations come up coupled with a play on the narrative styles adopted by the maker of that particular content. Within this carefully picked up words to transfer an offline geographical boundary to online space, a meaning is also in the process of making. The meaning that is created normally showcases the view that the creator of the content wants the online members to follow.

For instance, in the case of the above mentioned descriptions of Attappadi, this place is described as simply a geographical entity with its own borders and territorial differentiations. It is also described as an exotic place with beautiful forest. But apart from these definitions, there is another Attappadi with burning issues. The poverty and malnutrition problems of Attappadi tribal people, their ill health, their under developed sanitation concerns, and other issues have been continuously debated. But none of these issues have been taken up for discussion by any of these websites. The Facebook page on Attappadi says about this place's people in one part of its discussion. It reads thus:

> It is believed that the immigration of the tribesfolk into Attappady began before the 15th century. There are three different tribes in Attappady: Irulars, Mudugars, and Kurumbars. Attappady is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. The Nilgiris form a complex topography, which is isolated from after high ranges.The mountains in this range are some of the oldest geographical

formations in South Western India. About 80 percent of the area of attappady is under forest, (mostly denuded) as against 27percent in the state. About 210 sq. km are covered by revenue forests. Bamboo is a very common plant in the area. ("About Attappadi")

And this turns out to be a shockingly "objective" description of the population with just a mentioning of the types of tribes living there. Wikipedia also details about the population of Attappadi in the similar manner where it says: "There are 192 hamlets in Attappadi. The population of the valley is mostly Muduga, irula, Kurumba tribal people, a few Badagas and a section of settlers from Tamil Nadu and Other Districts of Kerala" (Attappadi).

But at the same time, one should not ignore the fact that in the reference section, the first reference mentioned by Wikipedia is an article by Suchitra M. where, in the original article the writer actually talks about these "unnoticed" issues of Attappadi. She says, "When 12 children die in every thousand births in mainstream Kerala, infant mortality including those stillborn is 66 for Attappadi. Eighty percent of the newborn babies are under the normal weight of 2.5 kgs. The real picture could be worse than the one statistics reveal" ("Remote adivasis face health care chasm").

Though this article finds a place in the reference part of the Wiki page on Attappadi, the article completely ignores the concerns raised by the author Suchitra. And, if one reads the description given by www.kerala.com, one gets a different image of Attappadi. It reads thus:

The primitive tribes sort Irula, muduka, kurumba who are yet to be reluctant to become a part of civilized world are the inhabitants of Attappadi hamlets. The expedition to the hamlets in the inner forest is the real zeal of the adventure. The best instance of the sort is the journey to the kurumba hamlet kinattinkara.

> Crossing the ardent river Bhavani one could seek the way to kinattinkara. Dense forest with wild flamboyant flowers, wildly running river with its giggling roar, sanctified cold water flowing through the untouched mysteries of the forest, the nature nurtured beautifully, pruned rockeries are found on the way to the hamlet. ("Attappadi, a celestial dream land of nature")

The Facebook page on Attappadi also reveals the same picture: an Attappadi of unparallel beauty, where its inhabitants are presented as a part of tourist attractions. www.keralatourism.org promotes this view of tribal people in a blunt manner. It says in an article on titled "Attappadi":

> Situated on the north-eastern side of Palakkad district and spread over an area of 745 sq km. Attappady or Attappadi is one of the largest tribal settlements in the State. The grandiloquence of this great symphony of forests, rivers and mountains is awe inspiring…Many tribals like the Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbar live here, though the density of their population is very low. The tribals worship the mountain peak 'Malleeswaran' as a huge 'Siva-linga' (the Linga is the venerated image of Lord Siva) and Sivarathri at the Malleeswaran or Malleeswaram temple is the most important festival celebrated by the tribals.

The page also provides a picture of a tribal woman in front of her hut, but what one can see in her eyes is pain, dejectedness, and hapless confusion.

But there are other web pages that project the darker side of Attappadi, but undoubtedly all these pages are online news websites, namely The Indian Express, Janayugam, Mathrubhumi, One India Malayalam etc.

The portrayed and projected Attappadi is a different from what it is in actuality. An image of Attappadi from the light of tourism and economic benefits is projected by hiding or even misrepresenting some darker sides of the same region. And in the cyberspace, the projection of desired social relations and covering of unacceptable ones are easier, as the nature of cyberspace always have faced issues related to authenticity. "The social construction of the reality that exists on-line is, however, not constituted by the networks CMC users utilize, it is constituted in the networks. It would be far easier to understand the physical, or hardwired, connections than to understand the symbolic connections that emerge from interaction" (Jones 5).

The nature of this space inevitably carries along with its positives, some "not willing to admit" demerits also. "The Internet has what seems now long ago become less of a public works program and more of a worldwide experiment in organization for commercial gain"(Jones 2). In the construction of cyber regional communities also this continuous to and fro between the desirable and undesirable features of cyberspace appear. The spatiality of an offline region, rather than getting represented, is actually re-worked, and a newly-imagined region is constructed through the space of internet. In that manner a new spatiality for an already-existing offline region is ascribed in and through multiple cyber regional communities.

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