



A SHIFT FROM FOLKLORE TO NEW MEDIA AS A TOOL OF SATIRE IN KASHMIR

Shahi Shaika

Amity School of Communication,
Amity University Noida, UP, India

Abstract

The culture of a specific region is increasingly going on the internet and it is becoming a new medium and public space for the old folk media. This change of medium has changed the viewing pattern, the makeup of message and has come up with new types of routine in terms of searching, accepting, forwarding and liking a particular message. Hence in a fraction of seconds, a message is spread to a million minds. Folk forms are an inseparable part of the culture of the masses; it does not play any role at present in the regulations of our lives but instead is used as a souvenir in some theatrical performances or television and radio broadcasts. Every place has folklore as a distinctive part of their culture and Kashmir has a rich history in terms of folk arts. Kashmir's folk theatre *Bhand Pather* has a history of more than 500 years and since then it has been a major source of amusement and information for the people in Kashmir. *Bhand Pather* is the combination of two words *Bhand* and *Pather*, *Bhand* means –jester and *Pather* means –dramatic performance. The Internet revolution has made YouTube and video app channels as a slice of life for everyone and this is one of the most common channels of expression and medium of reach for the people to express their views freely without any scrutiny.. Internet is used to express and incept the ideas and revolutionise. People in Kashmir are using this medium to satire various political and social issues. Some YouTube channels, Personalised Instagram pages are using subtle ways of making a satire of the present situation and this is becoming a part of information and entertainment dose for the public which was earlier filled up by *Bhands* by their entertaining and informative *Pathers*. This paper will analyse the effect of New Media on folk theatre and the effectiveness of the message conveyed through it.

Keywords: Folk Media, Kashmir, Folk Theatre, New media, Bhand Pather, Internet, Ladi Shah

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:	RESEARCH ARTICLE
<p>Shahi Shaika Amity School of Communication, Amity University Noida, UP, India E-mail: shahisam11@gmail.com</p>	

Introduction

Every place in the world has some form of folklore that has been part of their history and is transmitted over to the next generations. Folk media is an essential part of the culture of a place to which it is born and distinguishes it from the rest of the cultures. Even before the intervention of modern forms of mass media channels people have been using a wide range of folk forms –dance, music, theatre for entertainment, education, information and awareness about social and political concerns (Michalopoulos & Xue, 2021). Folk theatre is one of the most strong forms of traditional media that has been used as a means to protest a wide range of issues and powerfully communicating them. Theatre has been used as a tool around the world to make the people mindful by portraying the reality of the society which in turn arouses an instant action from them to bring about a social change (Warner, 2011). Whether it is a single person, a small group, or a jamboree with a variety of big props, a folk theatre is always a delight to watch. From Henrik Ibsen’s dramas about the society to Shakespeare’s interpretation of Monarchy theatre has been used to put across the opinions and shape the attitudes toward the themes enacted in the performances. Russian folk theatre is one of the oldest ones and dates back to the 1600s and even today across the world people are using the different folk form to protest a wide range of social upheaval (Sundar, 1989). Powerful poetry used in folk songs, theatre performances, folk tales have been used at a grassroots level to change the opinions on even the contentious topics as folk media engages the audience on cultural, emotional and a personal level with an added entertainment element to it. Folk media has a personal appeal as it establishes an immediate rapport between the performers and the audience so; it becomes the best choice of medium to propagate ideas and information about various subjects in that culture.

Folk Theatre in India

Folk theatre has been used in India from the primordial times for social, religious and political problems. Theatre was not the sole element of entertainment but was rather used as a powerful tool to bring about the change by imparting information on different problems that were prevalent in the society. India has a rich history of folk theatre which is more than 5000 years (Das, 2013). Theatre in itself is a complete form of art as it includes in its structure dialogue, dance music and poetry. Different forms of folk theatre have been used time and again to either bring a change or to propagate a certain ideology. In 1944, Bijon Bhattacharya staged the first street theatre ‘Nibanna’ to bring forth the exploitation of peasants by Bengali landlords. Safdar Hashmi regarded as the Father of street theatre in India has staged many theatre performances mocking the government and various other social concerns. Habib Tanvir and Utpal Dutt have used street theatre and *Jatra* in their plays as a vehicle to political education (Kumar, 2020). Mohammad Subhan Bhagat, Ghulam Ali Majboor, and Ghulam Mohudin Ajiz have used *Bhand Pather* for the people in Kashmir to propagate socio-political education and satire the hostility of the People at the helm of affairs. Various governmental and social groups have been using puppetry across India as an effective medium to entertain people with the shows which have information and education about various policies and societal challenges (Jarrett, 2021). Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to

inform the people about the social unrest, to protest the oppression by the rulers and entertainment of the masses. India being a multilingual and a multicultural place has different forms of folk theatre which are being staged at festivals, prayers and fairs reflecting the social fabric and perceptions. The various Folk theatre forms are described below.

Tamasha: is a traditional folk theatre form of Maharashtra with a history of over 400 years. It has three main elements *Gan-* a starting prayer to Lord Ganesha, *Gaulan-* the songs and dances to enact Lord Krishna and his Gopis and *Vag-* the most important element where the actual dialogue delivery with some music and dance takes place. *Vag* is satirical in nature which talks about socio-political issues in the society.

Nautanki: is the folk theatre of north India which comprises of dance, music and drama. The themes dealt with are social, religious, historical, contemporary events and are delivered in a lyrical form.

Yakshagana: is the famous folk theatre of Karnataka and is based on the stories of Ramayan, Mahabharata and other religious tales. It is descriptive in nature and is performed from morning to sundown.

Jatra: the folk theatre of Bengal and Orissa got its name from the travelling practice of its performers. It portrays the social and cultural issues of people and has been often used as a medium for political education. Initially, *Jatra* was more musical but later elements of strong dialogue were also introduced. Its basic style and structure includes high pitched dialogues and loud music.

Puppetry: is another form of traditional theatre where inanimate objects in the form of puppets are used to deliver messages regarding various issues in society. They are very colourful and the puppeteer gives life to a puppet with his voice.

Powada: also known as *Pawala* a folk ballad of Maharashtra emerged in the 16th C. Powada uses elements of poetry and prose to narrate the heroic stories of men and women in an inspiring way.

Harikatha: is a form of storytelling, poetry, drama, music and dance narrated by a person called *Haridasa*. Believed to have spread from Maharashtra to Karnataka and Tamil Nadu about 150 years ago, There are three types of *Harikatha*: *Naradiya Harikatha* (Traditional one), *Warkari Harikatha* (the more religious one) and *Nationalist Harikatha* (used by government to educate the people on different social issues).

Bhavai: is the traditional theatre of Gujarat which starts with a devotional song and prayers to goddess *Amba*. The jester is called *Ranglo* who makes comments in a satirical way on the current social and political issues and the narrator is called *Naik*.

Therukoothu: is the most famous folk theatre of Tamil Nadu. It brings together dance, music, poetry and drama. It was the male-dominated street theatre where the female roles were also played by males (Sultana, 2017). Around 12-14 people are part of the group and the performance starts from late night to early morning hours.

Street Theatre: also known by the name *Nukkad Natak* in India which is performed in market places, streets corners and on the roads. With the use of minimal props this form of theatre uses a loud voice to educate and inform the people on various issues like dowry, sex, caste system, political education and other issues which are prevailing in the society.

Bhand Pather : is the traditional folk theatre form of Kashmir which is a unique combination of dance, music and dialogue. It is one of the oldest theatres in Kashmir and talks about issues like child marriage, ecological balance, polygamy, pollution and other socio-political issues (Shaika & Mishra, 2020).

Folk as a tool of satire in Kashmir

Kashmir's indigenous folk theatre *Bhand Pather* is a blend of dance, discourse, music and is satirical in nature. It is sarcastic in nature and has been used as a tool to inform and entertain the people for ages. There are about ten types of *Bhand Pather* which deal with different issues, for instance *Dard Pather* talks about oppression of Afghan rulers on Kashmir, *Gosaine Pather* focuses on religion, *Buhir Bata Pather* deals with the issues of corruption, environmental issues are dealt with in *Shikargah Pather*, *Raze Pather* is about the oppression of Kashmiris by foreign rulers, *Aarem Pather* themes are child marriage and forced labour, in *Waatal Pather* issues of polygamy are taken up, in *Bakarwal Pather* exploitation of lower-class by people in power is the theme dealt with, *Angrez Pather* talks about the oppression of Englishmen (Jatoo & Sudhir, 2016). This open-air theatre has been used in Kashmir from more than 200 years as an expression to protest against the oppression by the people in power, as a tool for information about the social evils and as a means of entertainment by the people (Lawrence, 1895). Kashmir has been under the oppression of different foreign regimes and as a result, people have used *Bhand Pather* to replicate symbolically the feudal exploitation and social inflexibility. By ridiculing, though subtly powerful people of the Kashmiri society, these *Pathers* had attained great recognition among the common masses. *Bhand Pather* had such a deep impact on the minds of the people that famous poets Lal Ded and Sheikh Nor-u-Din Rishi have referred to the *Pather* characters in their poetic expressions during the 14th and the 15th century (Fayaz, 2008). During the autocratic feudal systems, *Bhand Pather* was used in a restrained way to stage the pain of the people but some concealed verbal expressions were used which was understandable to the local masses to avoid the bureaucrat fury. The people of Kashmir have been sensitive about their cultural and political identity and being under the oppression of foreign rulers, people have enjoyed no liberty to share their concerns with the ruling powers. Under such situation, *Bhand Pather* played a major role to communicate the plight of people in a humorous way though. Since there is a personal and immediate communication between the actors and the audience so *Bhand Pather* enjoyed the acceptance among the masses and has played a key role in promoting social awareness regarding child marriage, women empowerment, environmental protection and a critique of state policies (Bhagat, 1979). Apart from *Bhand Pather* a traditional balladeer *Ladi Shah* used to sing on natural calamities, social evils and political exploitation. *Ladi Shah* is a form of street theatre where a single male performer sings satirical compositions in a specific style. The performer has a rod with metal discs on it known as *Dhukar* and he keeps playing the rod while singing the sardonic notes. Dressed in a *Pheran* (long gown, a traditional dress of Kashmir) and *Dastaar* (Turban) *Ladi Shah* would go from place to place, start his performance with a very serious expression and lampoon in a humorous way (Singh, 2022). Some extracts from the popular *Ladi Shah* compositions are given hereunder:-

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*As salaam u alaikum Ladi Shah aaw
Kadam thav pathar te kan me kun thav
Faate te raadha maal karaan az graav
Panjaib tomul yen ghatu aav
Tanna chukh myaduss yerwein- naav*

[The above lines were used as a satire to the resentment of Kashmiri people to the subsidized rice from other parts of India. They felt that this cheap rice has brought trouble to their digestive system].

*As salaam u alaikum ladi shah aaw
Kadam thav pathar te kan me kun thav
Tul palav wath Tchalav mulke Punjab
Noon rous zinde rozun che azaab*

[During the reign of Maharaja Hari Sigh in 1947, Pakistan stopped the rock salt supplies to Kashmir and *Ladi Shah* used this problem of people in his rhythmic composition to convey their plight. He used the rhyming words by saying that let us pack our clothes and move to Punjab because it's painful living here without salt].

Folk has been the main source of expression for the people since ages in Kashmir to share their grievances against the state and the evil practices in the society. Since the performers were using the vernacular language and were among locals so, people could easily relate with them and these folk performances were thought of as the most reliable and exquisite ones.

Satire through New Media

Ladi Shah has lived as a household name in Kashmir and with time the actual character of *Ladi Shah* has died but his name has stayed. And very rarely it can be seen in the cultural festivals as an enactment will be done by a performer and new generation will get an idea of his character. In recent times a new form of *ladishah* was introduced by an anonymous performer calling herself *Meeme Laaleh* on social networking handle Instagram and people in a no time started connecting with the number of followers to several hundred thousand in just a few months. She is a modern version of *Ladi Shah* and satires the socio-political situation of Kashmir in a very elusive and humorous way. Using Kashmiri as a language to put forth the satirical messages makes her more attention-grabbing as people could easily relate to the verbal expressions often used in her narration. Following are the examples taken from the mocking posts by *Meem Laaleh* from Instagram:

*As salaam u alaikum
Raath aaes termekh hamsaayan hinz nich
Me dopmus mea dite yeth hacish moth
Dapaan hoch kya hota hai
Mai aayo yoth taam
Magar path poyoom Ahade Raaz yaad
Che khudai raich karnai
Chounth wat.*

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[Kashmiris believe that there is a lot of effect on the native language and the new generation have forgotten the value of their mother tongue and don't understand it appropriately now. Here a young girl is not able to understand what *Meem Laaleh* is saying and rather questions about what that word in Kashmiri means].

*As salaam u alaikum
Mai aaes koonz themech khabar kot gai
yati aaes weni aaes yeti khabar kot gai
Aaj cha na bodhwaar
Me doph highwayas mechrawaha haankal.*

[There was a highway ban imposed in Kashmir during April 2019 and the local traffic was not allowed on Wednesdays. So, *Meem Laaleh* used this issue in her post and a message in a cloaked way is conveyed by saying that I am looking for a key as I have to open the lock of the highway as its Wednesday].

A young rapper MC KASH used the internet (YouTube) as a medium to reach the people and with his rapping about the human rights violation in Kashmir and various other issues; he became a voice of the people from the Valley. From singing on the banks of river Jehlum to the Trafalgar square in London he reached his audience via internet. His reason to use the English language for his rap was quite obvious to get the international attention as English is the most understood language and this made the acceptance for his words not only locally but internationally. His song 'I Protest' during the 2010 unrest in Kashmir became a national anthem of dissent. Mohammad Muneem a singer, poet and a musician from Kashmir has used the power of his words and strong voice through the internet to portray the message of injustice, social values and customs. He is an award-winning artist and is internationally applauded under the name 'Words of Alif'. He has been writing poetry, composing and performing songs on the violations in Kashmir and various other social issues. An extract from his sarcastic song is given below.

*Kya karie koshur kya zamaano
Eik roun maaz quintal
Bek roun ze quintal ho
Dekha dekhi karekh
Kya karie kori mol
Naaras diya narie mol*

[*Wazwan* (a multi-course meal in Kashmiri cuisine) is served traditionally but nowadays unnecessary practices and rituals have been added to it and it has lost its simplicity and become more of an extravagance. It is getting difficult for people especially the middle class to come up to the expectations and meet the bar set in the society which keeps on raising every time.].

Review of Literature

(Lawrence, 1895) the book 'The valley of Kashmir' is the outline of the authors visit to Kashmir. It is an account of the hardships faced by the people of Kashmir during the tenure of Dogra rulers. This book has deliberated upon how *Bhand Pather* has been used as a tool to talk about the oppression at the hands of rulers. It also focuses on the geography, culture and life of the people. The author has given a detailed account of *Bhand Pather* artists and their satirical performances. (Bhagat, 1979) the author being the folk theatre artist has given a detailed account of the history of *Bhand Pather* in Kashmir. The author has extensively given a comprehensive description of the plight of the people under authoritarian foreign rulers and how *Bhand Pather* has played an important role to become a voice of the voiceless. The book reveals the power of folk theatre in Kashmir as the most cherished forms of entertainment and information for hundreds of years. Giving an in depth narrative of the dramatic performances of different *Bhand Pather* artist across the valley and the status they enjoyed in the society. (Sundar, 1989) has stressed upon the use of theatre for expressing and communicating protest against the injustice, exploitation and oppression. The author has suggested theatre as a more potent channel of communication to bring about a political change as compared to books and films. The term 'protest theatre' has been used as a synonym for political theatre which has a wider scope of raising consciousness among the people about various social issues. There is a detailed history about the use of theatre in Europe, Russia and USA for bringing changes at different levels in the social system. Also in India theatre was used as a tool by Indians to oppose the British establishment and every state of India has used theatre to bring about the socio- political change and protest the anarchy. Theatre has been used by women in India to bring the issues like domestic violence against women, rape or equal status with the male counterparts to the forefront. (Kumar, 2005) has given a meticulous explanation of mass communication in India with a dedicated chapter to folk media where the author has discussed the patrons of folk theatre and how they have used folk media for social development. All the forms of folk media practised in India and their elements have been dealt with. According to the author folk theatres like *tamasha* , *jatra* and *nautanki* have been used for hundreds of years as tools of entertainment by the people. Also the various issues in the Indian society have been the choice of themes for these folk theatre performances and have brought a lot of change in the social makeup of India.(Fayaz, 2008) in the book 'Kashmir folklore: a study in historical perspective' has dealt with the various aspects of folklore and the cultural history of Kashmir. The book encompasses an exhaustive history about *Bhand Pather* and various aspects of Kashmiri society portrayed through folk forms. An account of the socio-political satire through various folk forms under different autocratic regimes in Kashmir. According to the author folk media has been used for more than 200 years in Kashmir as a medium of protest against various issues like polygamy, child marriage, ecological balance, cast system and hostility of foreign rulers on Kashmiri people. (Das, 2013) has discussed extensively the history of folk theatre in India with special emphasis on the use of folk theatre for development. The author has suggested that *jatra*, *nautanki*, *puppetry* and *tamasha* are effective tools for conveying message about social, political, cultural development which ultimately leads to the national development. (Jatoo and Sudhir, 2016) have summarised the value of *Bhand*

Pather and its themes to the present day audience and illustrated the historical, cultural and performative perspectives of folk theatre with a detailed description about each type of performance and the themes dealt with. According to the authors *Bhand Pather* is a living art and there is a lot of scope for its preservation and promotion. Different types of *Bhand Pather* have been discussed and the authors have given a detailed account of the history in terms of this folk theatre as one of the most used mediums to satire the situation in Kashmir from the time of Afghan rulers, Sikh rulers, Dards and other foreign rules. According to (Akhtar, 2017) *Ladi Shah* is an independent genre whose contribution to the history of Kashmiri folk arts is unmatched. Author has given a brief account of history of *Ladi Shah* and its importance as one of most significant characters to satire the political status of Kashmir. An analysis of the compositions of *Ladi Shah* has been made where the elements of music, humour, strong words and satire together make the performance impactful and entertaining. Discussing about different types of folk theatres in India (Sultana, 2017) asserted that folk theatre has the potential to bring about the change in the society. The author suggested that for any development the message has to reach the grass root level and for that a cultural approach is necessary. Folk theatre can be used as a powerful tool to reach the audience and bring about the remarkable social change.

Theoretical Framework

This study on the shift of medium from folk to new media is supported by Uses and Gratification theory given by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch which takes into account the needs of audience and the gratification they seek from the media. It talks about the media preference of the audience and choosing one channel of communication over the other to gratify one's need of information. The basic assumption of this theory is:

- Media and content choice is generally rational and directed towards certain specific goals and satisfaction (thus the audience is active and audience formation can be logically explained).
- Audience members are conscious of the media-related needs which arise in personal (individual) and social (shared) circumstances and can voice these in terms of motivations.

Broadly speaking, personal utility is a more significant determinant of audience formation than aesthetic or cultural factors. (McQuail, 2000)

Today we have more channels of information sharing and individuals have more options accessible and thus the medium which will take into account the individual need will be liked and quicker channels of communication become a decision over a time bound medium.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the space occupied by folk theatre as a medium of communication.
- To understand New Media Platforms as strong tools of satire.
- To study the change from Folk media to New Media.
- To analyse the effect of new media on folk theatre.

Methodology

The research study is descriptive in nature. The methodology used is mixed where the content analysis of various secondary sources has been consulted such as books, journals and research papers supplemented by exhaustive internet research and through purposive sampling technique a tool of questionnaire was used to collect the opinions of the respondents. The quantitative approach was adopted to reach the objectives. The research population is composed of postgraduate students of Kashmir University and using a purposive sampling technique a sample of 200 respondents was selected in an equal proportion of male and female. The age group of respondents was between 20-25 years and all the students of this age group are the users of new media. The purpose of the study was to identify the percentage and frequency of the questions asked to the respondents so for that a close ended questionnaire was distributed. The reason behind selecting the respondents from Kashmir University is that the folk forms being talked about in this study are localised in approach because of the regional language and the respondents were well equipped with this language. Information was collected by meeting the respondents and collecting the response of the questionnaires in person by the researchers. The responses of the questions were evaluated and represented graphically.

Results

Following are the Questions with their respective answers.

1. Have you participated in any social media Campaign?

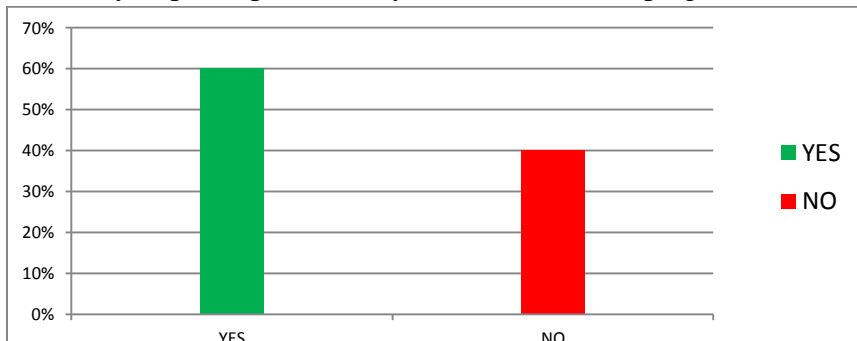


Figure 1: Percentage of participants in any social media campaign.

2. Which medium do you use to share your views about the Socio-Political situation in Kashmir?

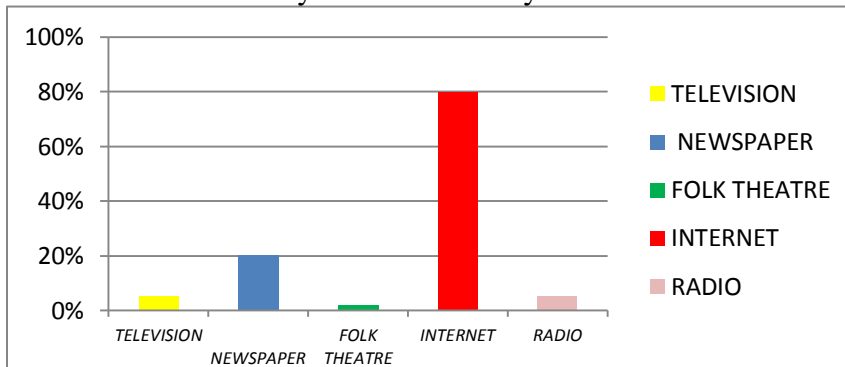


Figure 2: Most used medium to share the socio-political ideas.

3. Do you agree that messages conveyed through new media have more impact?

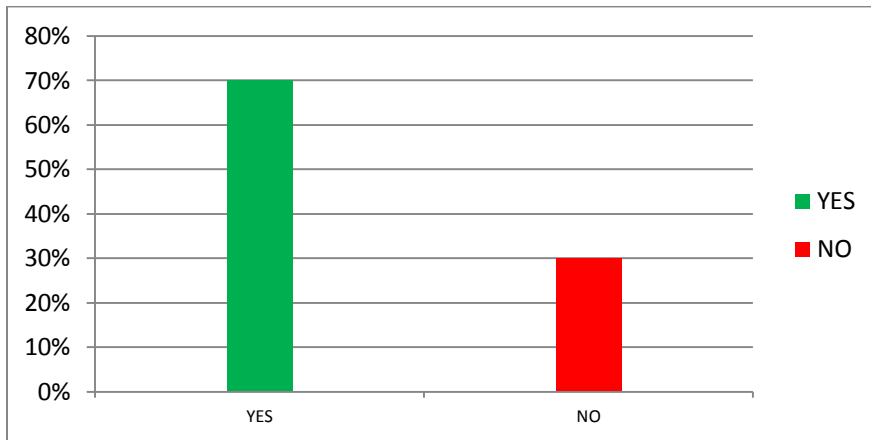


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who believe new media is more powerful.

4. Which new media platform do you use the most?

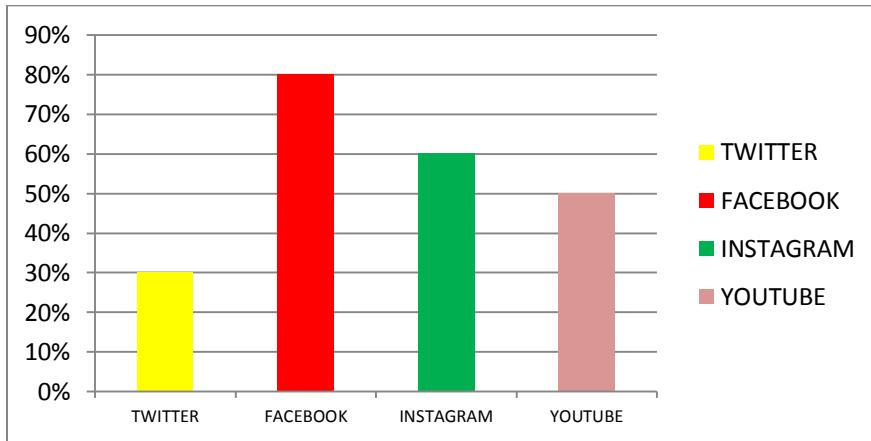


Figure 4: The most used new media channel by the respondents.

5. Which medium is best to satire the socio-political situation of Kashmir?

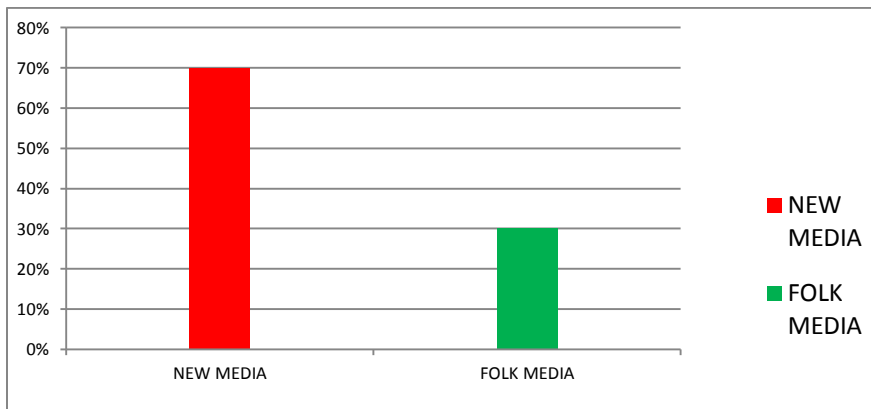


Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who believe new media is a better tool for Socio-political satire.

6. Do you follow *Meem Laaleh* on Instagram?

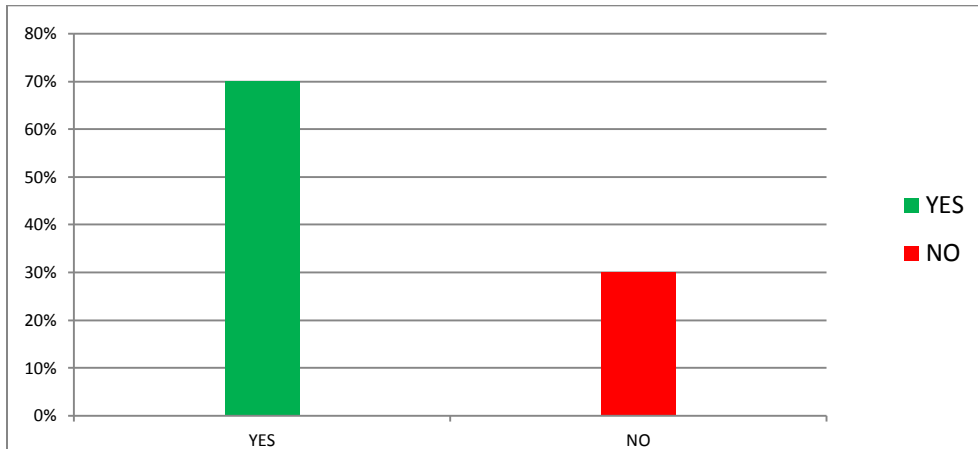


Figure 6: Percentage of followers for Meem Laaleh on Instagram.

7. How often do you receive a link on any social or political issues of Kashmir?

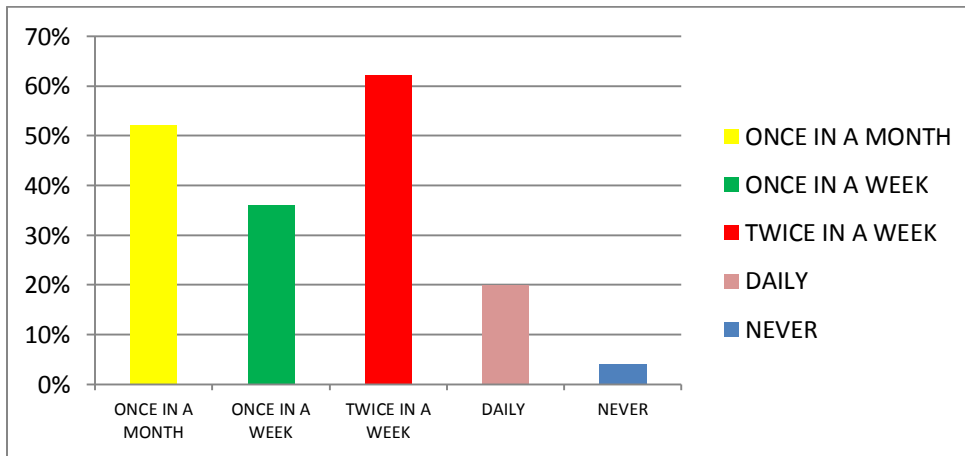


Figure 7: Time period of links received on socio-political issues in Kashmir.

8. Have you listened to the compositions of Mohammad Muneem?

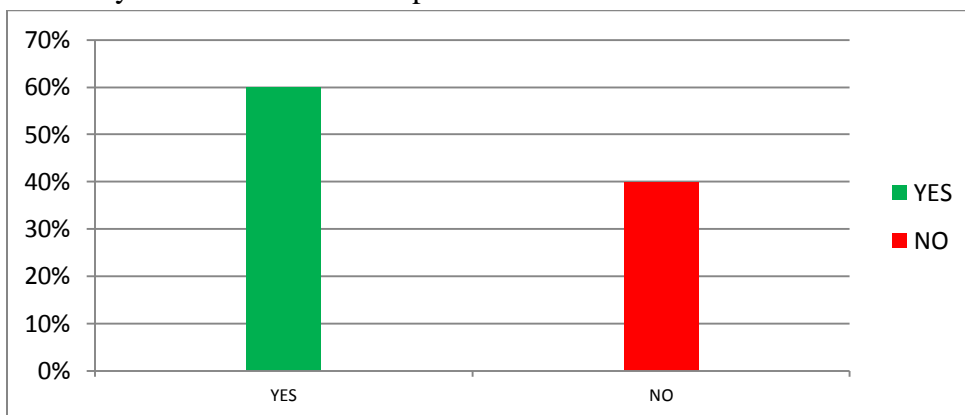


Figure 8: Percentage of respondents who have listened to Muhammad Muneem's Compositions.

Findings

1. Participation through social media campaigns on socio-political issues is increasing.
2. Internet is the most used medium for sharing socio-political views as compared to Newspaper, Radio, Television and Folk theatre.
3. Messages conveyed through new media have more impact as compared to the messages propagated through other mediums of communication.
4. Among the new media platforms Facebook is used the most followed by Instagram, Youtube and Twitter.
5. *Meem laaleh* which is a modern form of folk on internet is followed by more than 70% of the respondents.
6. 60% of the respondents receive links on socio-political issues on internet twice a week, 35% receive once in a week and 1% never receives it.

Discussion and Conclusion

The people of Kashmir have used folk art to express ideas, concepts, even revolt or protest and eventually making folk theatre as one of the main sources of protest and resistance against oppression, corruption and social evils. Lamprooning though *Bhand Pather* and *Ladi Shah* has continued in the valley for hundreds of years but change is the law of nature and with the advent of technology, the *Pathers* and the *Ladi Shah* lost their space among the masses. The satire to criticise the policy of the government or protest against any social issue was limited earlier and took a lot of time to get processed. This gap was filled by more fast means of communication which would start to mock an issue even before it is faced and discussed. The satire has always lived in every society and thousands of artists in Kashmir started sharing the mimicry of politicians, officials and taunted them in the stints of sarcasm. The voice of valley is on a new platform and many artists staying anonymous so that they don't have to bear the backlash of power are using new media as a strong tool of liberation for a common man's voice. Before the boom of the Internet revolution, people were only content consumers but as the social network hit the internet, everyone has got a platform to express and people started becoming content creators from content consumers. Also due to the political situation of Kashmir, it is not easy for the folk artist to assemble and stage a theatre performance in open-air circumstances due to which new media becomes a medium of choice to put the ideas across through it. Instagram, Facebook, Youtube are more personalised social media handles and preferred ones among the masses as they can reach to millions of minds in no time. These handles are being used to satire the political and social condition of Kashmir in a very subtle way either by postings artworks in the form of paintings and photographs, writing poems, composing songs, memes, and obvious ways by posting direct comments as on twitter. Though Folk media is an important part of the culture of any place but the linguistic barrier makes these channels restricted to understand for the global audience. On the other hand, new media mostly uses English a universally understandable language and the messages conveyed through it has more number of audience who can actually understand what is being conveyed. With the use of new media as a tool of satire, the issues in Kashmir have a global recognition now, which was impossible earlier when portrayed through folk theatre.

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