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Abstract

Malayalam-language newspapers published in the southern Indian state of Kerala are known for their contribution to the vernacular public sphere. However, while the popularity of commercial Malayalam-language newspapers has steadily increased over the past decades, “community-based” publications such as *Deepika* have experienced decline. Using the case of *Deepika* and drawing on the New Literacy Studies scholarship, we examine how print newspapers enter into the daily lives of people and analyze the reading practices associated with this tactile form of media in this part of the world. Our article contributes to Global South journalism studies by illuminating how literacy practices can provide an alternative theoretical framework to better understand the cultural meanings of print news media.

Keywords: Indian language press, print cultures, media audiences, Malayalam media, Kerala

Introduction

In September 2016, amid fears of closure of the print newspaper *Deepika*, Catholic bishops in the southern Indian state of Kerala circulated an urgent memorandum. It pronounced that all Catholics should subscribe to *Deepika*, even if they do not read the newspaper. Whether this declaration improved the prospects of the newspaper remains debatable, but what is of interest here is the way in which a religious sect was explicitly referenced in an attempt to revitalize one of India's oldest newspapers which, despite its Catholic origins and ownership, had long labeled itself as a "secular" publication. On the one hand, the case of *Deepika* illuminates the growing frictions between the secular and the religious in contemporary Kerala; on the other, it represents the travails of traditional publications to survive in the face of competition from more commercialized, mainstream newspapers.

Deepika or *Nazrani Deepika*¹ was first published in 1887 as the mouthpiece of Kerala's "Syrian Catholic" community (The label "Syrian" is used as the devotees practiced their mass in the Aramaic language, which originated in ancient Syria). This Malayalam-language newspaper historically promoted the social, political, and cultural uplift of Kerala's Christian community (Ahmed, 1986). Partly because of this reason, *Deepika* still has a coterie of devout readers from the Syrian Catholic community who buy, read, discuss, and archive the newspaper. As such, Kerala boasts of having a rich tradition of newspaper reading. With the highest literacy rate² in the country, Kerala is one of the largest consumers of print newspapers and publishes two of the

¹ The newspaper was initially named *Nazrani Deepika*, which was changed to *Deepika* in 1939. *Nazrani* ("Nazarene") is an alternate name for "Syrian Christians" (discussed in the next section).

² Literacy here is defined as the ability to read and write one's name.

top ten dailies with the highest circulation in India.³ These two dailies are published in the Malayalam language, Kerala's official language spoken by less than 3 percent of the Indian population (Census of India, 2011; ABC, 2014). Overall, print newspapers in Kerala continue to thrive amid rising internet penetration. People have several Malayalam- and English-language publications to choose from in an increasingly competitive market. In Kerala's villages and towns, Malayalam-language newspapers are often read in *chaayakadas* ("teashops"), barbershops, and bus stops. *Deepika*, however, is mainly read in private, in the quiet of home.

Building on Peterson (2010; 2003), we conceptualize this cultural practice of engaging with a newspaper as a form of news literacy. This conception allows us to see the selecting, buying, reading, interpreting, deliberating, critiquing, exchanging, and archiving of a newspaper as a set of literacy practices. This approach draws on a body of anthropological literature (e.g. Ahearn, 2004a; Hamilton, 2000; Street & Besnier, 1994) that views literacy practices as emergent in cultural and historical processes and embedded in specific social activities. Through our case study of *Deepika*, we seek to understand what people are doing personally and socially with community-based print newspapers in Kerala. "Community-based" newspapers refer to publications such as *Deepika* that derive their readership almost exclusively from one community within Kerala (in the case of *Deepika*, the Syrian Catholic community, for example). Unlike *Deepika*, the readership of "commercial" newspapers such *Malayala Manorama* is not limited to a single community within Kerala as these newspapers have instead adopted a "pan-Kerala" character, catering to the broader Malayalam-language speaking population.⁴ In this article, we examine how community newspapers enter into the daily lives of people, and thus

³ These two newspapers are *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* with an estimated daily circulation of 2.3 and 1.2 million copies.

⁴ For more on this aspect, see Nair (1997) and Arunima (2006).

present the cultural significance of and challenges to this tactile form of media in this part of the world. In so doing, our larger goal is to offer a modest contribution to Global South journalism studies.

Our focus on print newspapers as an object of study stems partly from the need to address the growing neglect of print media in contemporary journalism studies scholarship. With the worldwide proliferation of the Internet, scholars have rushed to focus on digital media, neglecting traditional forms of news media even in cases where print and digital co-exist and contribute significantly to the public sphere, such as in India. The singular focus on the digital in the Global South does not always provide adequate opportunity to investigate how social and cultural factors such as language, religion, class, and urban-rural divide challenge media engagement practices and mediate news publics, particularly given that a little over one in three people in India have access to the Internet. The short shrift given to vernacular language media cultures also reflects the imperialist impulse of the dominant development paradigm, which emanates from the idea that technological progress will ultimately free people from all natural and social constraints (Alzouma, 2005). Given the lack of attention given to social, political, and cultural contexts that constitute the challenges of development, the digital narrative paradoxically “replicates Eurocentric ontological domination even as it frames the technology in a culturalist language” (Dutta and Shome, 2018, p. 3970).

To address these concerns, this study situates the discussion of Malayalam-language print media in the socio-cultural history of the region. We first briefly explore the relationship between print cultures and Christianity in Kerala and the historical context in which *Deepika* was established. Next, we provide a conceptual review of literacies, or literacy practices, and establish a framework for thinking about newspaper circulation and engagement. Based on in-

depth interviews conducted with *Deepika*'s readers and editors in Kerala, we then present our findings.

Christianity and Print Media in Kerala

Although Christians constitute only 2.3 percent of India's population, the percentage rises to about 19 in Kerala. This state is also home to Syrian Christians, the oldest extant Christian community in India, numbering about 2.4 million. According to oral traditions of Syrian Christians, the apostle Saint Thomas arrived at Kerala's Malabar Coast in 52 A.D. to propagate Christian faith. He founded seven churches in Kerala and proselytized 32 higher caste, Brahmin families, to which the Syrian Christians trace their ancestry (Palackal, 2016; Vishwanathan, 1993). By the time the Portuguese "rediscovered" the Syrian Church of Malabar in the sixteenth century, bishops and Christian immigrants from the Persian Gulf had already become part of this church in a region notable for its spices trade. The Christian community in Kerala was further subdivided after the arrival of various missionary groups from Europe. However, a shared goal of all these mission groups was to increase the circulation of bible and educate the natives in Western instruction. This aim, the missionaries learned, could be achieved only through establishing printing presses.

European Christian missionaries therefore set up the earliest presses in Kerala in the 1820s. The Government Press in Thiruvananthapuram was formed with the help of Benjamin Bailey and Herman Gundert started the Basel Mission Press in Tellicherry. These presses, along with Devji Bhimji's press in Cochin, printed and publicized religious literature. By the mid-nineteenth century, these presses published the first weekly newspapers in Kerala (Arunima, 2006). Printed materials traveled seamlessly within Kerala, which was divided into the princely states of Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore. The growing availability of printed material in the

Malayalam language along with the missionary interest in schools expanded local-level primary education.

Around this time, Carmelite missionaries from London arrived in Kerala and encouraged native men to become missionaries and lead the Catholic church of Kerala. By recruiting native missionaries, Carmelites challenged the hegemony of European missionaries for the first time in Kerala's history. In 1855, Carmelites formed a congregation called Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), which contributed to the development of Kerala's literary public sphere, and later founded *Nazrani Deepika*. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the co-founder of CMI, formed a literary community that consumed books and newspapers on a mass scale. When he became the vicar general of the Syrian Catholic church in 1861, he proclaimed that every Catholic Church should have a school attached to it (Aykara & Mathew, 2012). With the growth of education and media, Kerala came to be defined as the most literate state in India according to the systematic government censuses beginning in the 1870s (Jeffrey, 2009). The founding of *Nazrani Deepika*, and three years later of *Malayala Manorama*, currently the most circulated Malayalam-language newspaper, marked the beginning of sustained journalism in Kerala (Jeffrey, 2009). While *Nazrani Deepika* represented the hold of religious and community forces, *Malayala Manorama* realized the possibilities of commercializing this ideological apparatus by exploiting its social and political prowess (Nair, 1997). A few thousand copies of these newspapers circulated in the libraries, reading rooms, schools, and teashops of Kerala.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Kerala's vernacular public sphere matured with educational institutions, debating societies, literary clubs, public libraries, and social organizations, including the news media, serving as institutional bases through which people discussed the ideas of liberalism and principles of democracy (Panikkar, 2015). These

institutional sites also accorded the newly emerging middle class the social and political space to envision its future. The rise of the middle class, greater availability of print, and birth of new literary genres, particularly the novel, ushered in a silent mode of reading besides the traditional practice of reading aloud in public spaces (Venkatachalapathy, 1994). *Nazrani Deepika*, partly because of its association with the church, was particularly associated with this silent mode of reading, while newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama*, *Deshabhimani*, and *Mathrubhumi* carried nationalist sentiments and were more often read aloud in public. The public reading of newspapers enabled nationalist thoughts to spread across a wide swath of the otherwise illiterate population.

In 1939, to portray the newspaper as more “secular,” the word *Nazrani* was dropped from the newspaper’s name. Yet, *Deepika*’s readership remained limited to Syrian Catholics who were mostly prosperous traders and land-owning farmers. After India’s independence in 1947, *Deepika* opposed Kerala’s newly elected Communist government to defend the “rights” of these farmers to cultivate paddy in reserved forests, which they acquired during the shortage of food grains in the Second World War (Aykara & Mathew, 2012). In 1961, the newspaper also showed support to farmers who were evicted to build a hydro-electric dam in Idukki district. Partly because of its focus on community and agricultural issues, *Deepika* garnered enough advertisements to find its place among the ten Malayalam-language dailies listed in the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), an organization that scrutinizes the circulations figures of its members to invite advertisers and set advertising rates (Jeffrey, 2009). *Deepika* was also the first Malayalam-language newspaper to start a digital edition, in 1997.

According to Jeffrey (2010), in the second half of the twenty-first century, India witnessed a “newspaper revolution” fueled by a range of factors including the new printing

technologies, an accelerated growth of literacy, more diffuse political environments that created a hunger for news, and new capitalist investments from a young generation of newspaper owners who invested in marketing and advertising through an aggressive strategy of localization (Ninan, 2007; Orsini, 2013). Major print newspapers in India started multiple editions to cater to local audiences. In Kerala, *Malayala Manorama* pioneered in reaping the benefits of these developments. Consequently, in an increasingly competitive media market, *Deepika* lost the circulation war to commercial newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama*, *Mathrubhumi*, and *Mangalam*. By the year 2000, *Deepika*'s subscriptions and advertisements nosedived, even though Malayalam-language print newspapers in the main experienced growth. Today *Deepika* survives due to its devout Syrian Catholic supporters and readers.

Media and Literacy Practices

Within linguistic anthropology and related disciplines, there has been a theoretical debate on how literacy should be defined and studied. This debate has generally resulted in two groups. The first group comprises scholars such as Goody and Watt (1963) who were exponents of the “autonomous” or Great Divide model of literacy (Street, 2001). According to this model, literacy facilitates basic changes in the makeup of both society and the individual because of its immanent properties (Street and Besnier, 1994), and such changes or consequences are the same irrespective of the society. The so-called consequences of literacy included transformations in the nature of knowledge and cultural tradition, in particular (a) a distinction between myth and history, (b) a distinction between opinion and truth (formalizable inquiry or logic), and (c) a distinction between acceptance of received tradition and a skepticism about tradition, which leads to individuation and democratic social forms (Collins, 1995; Goody and Watt, 1963). The Great Divide model thus conceptualized literacy in technical terms, treating it as independent of

social context, “an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character” (Street, 1984, p. 5). On the contrary, the second group called the “ideological model” view or New Literacy Studies saw literacy as diverse, historically, and culturally variable practices. Rather than seeking an overarching and context-free characterization of the cognitive and social consequences of literacy, proponents of New Literacy Studies focus on the activities, events, and ideological constructs associated with particular manifestations of literacy (Besnier, 1995). This approach examines the specific ramifications of the advent of literacy in each society, claiming that there are no universal attributes of literate societies and maintaining that it is impossible for literacy practices to be developed neutrally (Ahearn, 2001).

Emphasizing literacy as practice involves investigating literacy as “concrete human activity,” (Baynham, 1995) not just what people do with literacy, but also what they make of what they do, the values they place on it, and the ideologies that surround it. A result of the focus on literacy as a practice is that literacies are positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations that sustain them (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). “Literacies are situated. All uses of written language can be seen as located in *particular* times and places. Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices” (p. 1, emphasis ours). Avowedly ethnographic in orientation, this perspective inspired a range of studies in anthropology, education, and linguistics, including examinations of literacy practices in wider communicative repertoires, religious and ethnic formations and conflicts, and digital education in schools (e.g. Bhatt, de Roock & Adams, 2015; Barton, 2012).

Within the discipline of media and communication, scholars have adopted the premises of the autonomous model of literacy—without necessarily referencing the model itself—to study

what is now popularly called “media literacy” or “news literacy.” However, except for Hamilton (2000) and Peterson (2003; 2010), scholars have not employed literacy practices as theorized in New Literacy Studies for analyzing media. Anchored critically in New Literacy Studies, we believe that literacy practices can provide a useful vantage point to investigate the social and cultural meanings associated with reading newspapers, as these dimensions are sidelined, if not categorically ignored, in the autonomous model of literacy. This sidelining of the cultural aspects of literacy in the autonomous model is not accidental; it stems from an Enlightenment-based vision that fundamentally privileges rationality, science, and logic over culture and religion. The New Literacy Studies approach, on the other hand, aims to revive the cultural dimension in the study of literacy.⁵

Literacy practices also enable us to study in finer detail the related cultural activities—buying, discussing, and archiving a newspaper—that are typically understudied in a reception-based approach used in journalism studies.⁶ A literacy practice approach acknowledges that newspaper engagement involves a whole complex of knowledge and activities that link the fields of production (news media as social institutions) and consumption, other media genres, and the medium as a material object. We thus look at newspapers simultaneously as material objects and “congeries of messages embedded in a web of social relations” (Peterson, 2010, p. 170).

⁵ In this respect, the New Literacy Studies approach, like contemporary anthropological approaches, has a more complex and non-linear relationship with the Enlightenment ideas. Among other things, it questions the relegation of cultural and religious dimensions in critical scholarship. See, for example, Wolff and Cipolloni (2007).

⁶ Occasionally, the materiality of print newspapers does capture the attention of journalism studies scholars. See, for example, Boczkowski et al (2020), Fortunati et al (2015), and Zhou et al (2021).

Informed by these insights, this study examines the literacy practices associated with the reading of *Deepika*.

Methodology

Qualitative data for this case study was gathered in Kerala over three months, from December 2017 to February 2018. During this period, we conducted 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Briggs, 1986) in the Malayalam language with *Deepika*'s readers and editors in the districts of Kottayam and Thiruvananthapuram. These are locations where the newspaper is circulated widely, according to *Deepika*'s editor-in-chief and four senior editors. As literacy practices are situated within the context of social institutions, principally the media, we interviewed five editors to better contextualize the characteristics of the literacy practices of readers. The editors also provided their views on strategies for improving newspaper circulation and reader engagement. Of the 19 readers interviewed, eight were women and 11 men. The interviewees included both current and former subscribers of *Deepika*. The educational level of interviewees ranged from being functionally literate to doctorates. The average age of readers was about 50 years.

Each interview lasted for about an hour, and the second author transcribed and translated all interviews into English. We then closely read the interview transcripts several times to excavate emergent themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). After analyzing the interview transcripts, we discussed the themes that emerged from the data. Notably, the second author has been a regular reader of *Deepika* for more than two decades and belongs to the Syrian Catholic community in Kerala. The first author, though a native of Kerala, spent most of the time outside the state and had never read *Deepika* before embarking on this project. During data analysis, we also looked for specific examples that articulated the literacy practices of *Deepika*'s readers.

Thematic analysis of data revealed three themes, which are presented below along with the readers' exemplary literacy practices.

Newspaper Reading as a Matter of “Habit”

Interviewees who subscribed to *Deepika* repeatedly highlighted their “habit” of reading the newspaper in print. This habit was formed over decades, or was even a family tradition, carried over from one generation to the other, as one couple in their forties explained: “We are reading *Deepika* since the time of our fathers, for the last 85 years including our fathers. We are still reading it. We don’t want to change.” Mentioning the number of years for which the family has been reading *Deepika* and their intention to continue with the newspaper demonstrate the integration of *Deepika* into their reading habit. Another interviewee revealed that he subscribed to *Deepika* “not out of love for the community, but because my own ancestors read this newspaper,” adding that, “my father used to tell me to read news stories he found useful.” In this way, buying and reading *Deepika* was not mere an individual choice, but it was also shaped by kinship and connections to the past as well as their significance to the readers in the present.

As a result of growing news literacies in Kerala, our interviewees indicated that they subscribed to or read more than one newspaper. For the most devoted readers of *Deepika*, however, the newspaper became part of their personalities. “My father subscribed to *Deepika*...I read all newspapers. I am reading *Deshabhimani*, since [Communist] Party people insist. I also read *Mangalam* and *Manorama* regularly. But I must read *Deepika* every day. Otherwise, I feel strange.” In this description, *Deepika*, unlike other Malayalam-language newspapers, enters into a personal and emotional space for the interviewee and reading the newspaper becomes a daily activity. Another interviewee echoed this concern for not reading *Deepika*, as he remarked: “Every member in our family reads *Deepika*. It’s satisfying to read the newspaper. If I don’t read

other newspapers, I am okay. But not *Deepika*.” The interviewee further mentioned that he would grow agitative if the newspaper was not delivered. “Sometimes the newspaper agent delivers other newspapers, but then I go back to him and ask why you didn’t bring *Deepika*.” Home delivery of newspapers is common in most parts of India and is one of the prime reasons for stable print readership.

Several interviewees referred to *Deepika* as a “family newspaper,” suitable for “silent reading” at home. One interviewee who was a teacher stated that she read several Malayalam-language newspapers in school but read *Deepika* only at home. Similarly, an owner of a rubber factory said that “when I go to office, I bring along all newspapers with me, except *Deepika*. I read *Deepika* early morning at home.” Because interviewees saw *Deepika* as a newspaper that is not “progressive,” they rarely encountered copies of the newspaper circulating in public places. “In shops, schools, and public libraries, I see people read *Manorama* and *Mangalam*. *Deepika* is less common. Only traditional families issue this newspaper,” noted another interviewee. In one locality, however, a grocery shopkeeper subscribed to *Deepika* to encourage communal newspaper literacy practices, as another interviewee explained: “These days we don’t have the culture of teashops or bakeries subscribing to newspapers and people reading it there. But that Shibu, he is a big supporter of *Deepika*, and people read and discuss the newspaper in his shop.” Together, the “silent reading” of *Deepika* and, to a lesser extent, public reading of this newspaper, facilitated shared as opposed to individualized literacy practices in the community. This is because even when *Deepika* was read in private, the news stories were often recited orally to or discussed with family members.

Interviewees associated several literacy practices with *Deepika*: while for some the news stories, columns, and editorials served as a springboard for discussion within family, readers also

used the newspaper for more particular, instrumental uses such as improving language faculties. One interviewee, for example, archived news stories to improve her language skills and become a better writer, as she explained:

I marked and cut out with a scissor well-written articles in *Deepika* and secured them in my wardrobe. I have a rich collection of news stories. I particularly liked a column called *Chintha-Vishayam* (“Food for Thought”) by Father Panthaplamthotty. It contained quite a lot of literary words and phrases. I wanted to improve my vocabulary because I contributed articles for a magazine called *Kudumbadeepam* (“Lamp of the Family”). I wrote speeches for my children for various competitions and debates. I borrowed words and phrases from the pieces I collected to include them in my speeches.

This penchant for literary items in the newspaper was also shared by several other interviewees as they recollected their cherished memories of reading *Deepika*. A few interviewees asserted that *Deepika* increased their “public awareness” by reporting closely on social issues of their interest. For example, *Deepika* provided a detailed account of the casualties—mostly Catholic fishermen—suffered in the cyclone that hit parts of Thiruvananthapuram in December 2017, as one reader said: “During the Okhi cyclone disaster, *Deepika* raised its voice. On the 50th day after the disaster, the newspaper’s front page carried the photographs of all those fishermen who went missing in the sea. No other Malayalam newspaper did that.” Our interviews thus indicated that, for some readers, the newspaper’s focus on the Catholic community encouraged readership within that group.

The interviews further revealed the reader preference for print over online edition of *Deepika*, demonstrating that new technologies need to be “socialized” before they spread and

make an impact. Interviewees regarded the tactile form of the newspaper as more suited for intensive reading, although they rated *Deepika*'s layout and paper quality as inferior to other Malayalam-language newspapers. A few readers were "habituated" to reading in print; others residing in remote countryside preferred print because of erratic power supply and internet connection as well as inexperience with the new medium. Readers considered the print version more amenable to initiate discussions as it was more "authoritative." For instance, one interviewee referred to an editorial in *Deepika* to discuss the downsides of digital technologies with his family and friends, as he remarked: "Yesterday, *Deepika*'s editorial was timely. It described how Apple's CEO controls his children's cellphone use. I told everyone to read that editorial. I also warned my children not to access news on WhatsApp and read it in print." Although we did not interview anyone below 18 years, our interviews with adults indicated that millennials were inclined to access news in digital format and were less likely to read *Deepika*.

Newspaper Subscription as a Marker of the Catholic Faith

Many interviewees mentioned that they subscribed to *Deepika* because they practiced Catholicism or did not want to be perceived as socially deviant, particularly considering the priestly declaration, which demanded that all Catholics subscribe to the newspaper. Because the newspaper contained information on church events, rituals, and functions, *Deepika* also served to extend the faith of its readers, as one interviewee noted: "During lent season, the newspaper publishes spiritual messages, which is a good thing." Another reader claimed that "*Deepika* promotes the spiritual life of believers. It gives news about biblical seminars, retreat conventions, and church festivals, which a Catholic should know." Reflecting on their literacy practices, interviewees also believed that constant exposure to religious messages could bring about "positive" changes in an individual. For example, one interviewee explained:

Reading spiritual messages in the newspaper can influence people's spiritual practices. For example, during Christmas, from December 1 through 25, *Deepika* publishes articles by priests and others to help prepare us for Christmas. These articles are based on the teachings of bible. When people see the articles every day for 25 days, it may have some influence on those who read it.

As a Catholic newspaper, *Deepika* presented news with a Christian perspective, watering down the tone of stories that, in other newspapers, “grabbed eyeballs.” One reader asserted that “*Deepika* doesn’t carry news related to violence such as suicides or vulgar content which we wish children shouldn’t read.” The reader therefore made *Deepika* her “family newspaper,” encouraging her children to read. Another reader claimed that news in *Deepika* is “sincere” and that sometimes news stories were even published one or two days late to ensure accuracy. The relative sidelining of timeliness as a news value is something that runs counter to normative ways of thinking about newspapers.

As examination of literacy practices entails investigating the ideologies that drive those practices, we also spoke to *Deepika*'s editors. In our interviews, the newspaper editors emphasized their commitment toward presenting news that is compatible with Catholic values. “Our aim is to shape the faith of a reader according to the interest of the church—this is what we keep in mind when we prepare news,” explained one editor, adding, “We ensure that news is not scandalous so as to disturb the Catholic faith. We cannot suppress news, but give it only enough proportion.” In this way, as Carey (2009) noted in his influential book, *Communication as Culture*, the aim of the newspaper is not so much to impart information, as it is to represent shared beliefs, to maintain community in time. Indeed, those who religiously read *Deepika* believed that the newspaper was vital for community-building, as one reader asserted that

“people should subscribe to *Deepika* since there is no other publication to raise voice for our church and farmers.”

Our interviews with readers also indicated that an important literacy practice associated with reading *Deepika* was to learn about the death of Catholic community members. The newspaper carries an up-to-date obituary section spanning over two full pages. Death notices are accompanied with a photograph of the departed and the names of the surviving members of the deceased’s family. While Vilanilam (2009) in his study of five Malayalam-language newspapers⁷ argued that newspapers developed obituaries into an “art or necessity only catering to the vanity of the living relatives,” our interviews showed that, for a community newspaper such as *Deepika*, its average readers were interested in keeping abreast with deaths of their acquaintances or community members. For instance, one interviewee who read obituaries said that “when I am old, I will need *Deepika* to know whether my friends or people of my age group have died.” In fact, a few interviewees in our sample subscribed to *Deepika* exclusively for its obituaries and did not read other news stories. Our finding thus aligned with Thomas and Mitchell (2005) who discovered that St. Thomas Christians in Kerala read newspapers mainly for obituaries after the advent of television.

As stated earlier, the literacy practices framework enables us to consider not only the act of reading, but also of buying a newspaper. Although most interviewees bought the newspaper with the intention of reading it, there were also those who subscribed to *Deepika* solely as a token of adherence to social norms. In 2016, after the Catholic bishops issued notices to churchgoers asking them to subscribe to *Deepika*, a few people started buying the newspaper

⁷ These newspapers are *Deshabhimani*, *Kerala Kaumudi*, *Madhyamam*, *Malayala Manorama*, and *Mathrubhumi*.

without reading it. They bought the newspaper just to stay within the boundaries of what was considered socially acceptable according to their immediate circle of people. For example, one interviewee working in the church conceded that he did not have time to read *Deepika*, adding that, “I subscribed to *Manorama* earlier. Since the last two years, however, I am buying *Deepika* because the priests insisted. I am an office bearer in the church, so I had to obey. My children also don’t read the paper.”

Newspaper Avoidance as a Function of Shifting Literacy Practices

In the past two decades, *Deepika*’s readership base in parts of Kottayam and Thiruvananthapuram shrank and the overall circulations eroded significantly, even as the print industry in Kerala thrived.⁸ With the aim to arrest the decline of newspaper circulation, the editors formed Deepika Friends Club (DFC) in 2017. DFC consisted of church leaders who were accorded the task of winning back former subscribers that migrated to other Malayalam-language publications as well as strengthening the existing readership pool. One senior editor explained that DFC also monitored timely delivery of the newspaper. “Other news outlets can woo agents to deliver their newspaper instead of *Deepika*. When an agent doesn’t deliver *Deepika*, readers think why am I subscribing to a newspaper that’s not regular,” he said, adding, “but our vigilant Friends Club can look into such things and ensure that people are getting *Deepika* on time.” Despite these efforts, several interviewees expressed their discontent with the newspaper saying that the management was “unprofessional.” For example, one interviewee claimed that the

⁸ The editors we interviewed did not disclose the extent to which *Deepika*’s circulations had decreased. Recent readership surveys also failed to publish *Deepika*’s circulation figures. Some of our interviewees claimed that *Deepika* is no longer among the top five Malayalam-language newspapers in Kerala, indicating that the readership is below 0.4 million. See, for example, RDX (2021).

newspaper's customer care did not attend telephone calls. Another interviewee, a journalist working for an English-language daily, recounted his experience with *Deepika*:

In the 1980s, *Deepika* had a lifetime subscription scheme for 2500 rupees [approximately 33 USD]. But after 10 years, they sent a letter saying that they were wrong and that money is nothing to cover the newspaper cost. So, now we are paying monthly. No newspaper will do that. It shows the irresponsible behavior of *Deepika*, since they broke the trust.

Likewise, several interviewees disapproved of the Syrian Catholic church because of its connections to business barons many of whom advertise in *Deepika*. "They [Syrian Catholic church members] are the biggest corporates," claimed an interviewee adding, "They have wooed rich, Christian businessmen who give money and in return the newspaper gives them popularity. Some of these businessmen are included in *Deepika*'s editorial board." People also criticized the priests for issuing notices asking churchgoers to subscribe to the newspaper. "Priests shouldn't insist on reading a particular newspaper. Their duty is to look into the spiritual matters of people," remarked one interviewee. The overlap between religious and economic fields was thus unacceptable to the critics of the newspaper who believed the roles and responsibilities of a priest were limited to the religious domain. Similarly, another reader claimed that "priests wanted us to subscribe to the newspaper because it's a source of income for them." Despite church notices, there was little evidence to suggest that these reminders stabilized the newspaper circulations. While the editors believed that circulation increased after the issuance of the memorandum and the formation of DFC, our interviews with readers indicated otherwise. For instance, one reader said that although a few people subscribed to *Deepika* after the church notice, they "returned to the newspaper they liked within a year."

As most of *Deepika*'s news content is related to church (George, 2014), a few interviewees in our sample stopped subscribing to the newspaper years ago. Some of these former subscribers considered *Deepika* as a "church circular" rather than a newspaper. One interviewee complained that "earlier there was less church news, but now it is increasing," adding that, "People from other communities don't like to read *Deepika* because of its focus on church. Hindus don't give this much temple-related news in their newspaper." Nearly all former subscribers of *Deepika* and many of the current readers whom we interviewed noted that they wanted the newspaper to publish less church-related news and more "socio-political and international news." Most interviewees were thus opposed to localization of the newspaper and expected *Deepika* to move beyond a community newspaper. Circling back to Jeffrey (2010) to critique his argument about newspaper localization, launching multiple editions did not help in the case of *Deepika* because its news content remained largely focused on central and southern parts of Kerala, the heartland of Syrian Catholicism in India. Moreover, unlike commercial Malayalam-language newspapers, *Deepika* does not have an edition in India outside Kerala, or an edition in the Middle East where majority of the Kerala diaspora resides. *Deepika* thus offered its readers predominantly Kerala-based news, with an emphasis on the state's Syrian Catholic community.

Our interviews with former and current subscribers illuminated that, overall, *Deepika* fell short of catering to the changing literacy practices of its readers, and that was the chief reason for the newspaper's dwindling circulations. The literacy practices of the Syrian Catholic community not only started to adopt a more distant and critical view of one's own religion and traditions, they also exhibited a more open, cosmopolitan orientation toward their information needs. Our interviews thus also demonstrated that some of the consequences of literacies as outlined in the

Great Divide model of literacy—such as a skepticism of received traditions—held for the Syrian Catholic community in Kerala. As with Tamil-language newspapers (Cody, 2011), this shift in the literacy practices of *Deepika*'s reading community started long ago, when the teashop-based newspaper reading practices were replaced by silent reading at home on a mass scale. The latter, we argue, inevitably facilitated a certain form of class sensibility and an associated set of literacies, which were to become, sooner or later, irreconcilable with all that a church newspaper such as *Deepika* had to offer.

Conclusion

Our goal in this study was to map the literacy practices oriented to *Deepika*. In so doing, we also examined, in the tradition of New Literacy Studies, the social and cultural meanings that people attached to the literacy practices. An advantage of the literacy practices approach is that it enabled us to demarcate and scrutinize the different activities that people performed with the newspaper, such as subscribing, selecting, reading, discussing, archiving, subscribing but not reading, and avoiding (yet talking about) news. More generally, viewing these as different yet interconnected activities is helpful to better understand the “social life” of the newspaper (Appadurai, 1988). Using interviews, we demonstrated that reading a newspaper is not only a personal, but a deeply social act, one that is anchored in cultural norms and meanings of the community as well as their significance to the reader at a given point of time. *Deepika* remains embedded within the cultural fabric of the community that spans across generations and thus is a part of the public memory, which also explains its continuing hold on the readers. The interview narratives invoke an affective bond with *Deepika* in addition to the utilitarian rationale for reading the newspaper alongside others.

To account for the social forces that impinge on the practice of newspaper reading, Peterson (2010) forwarded the notion of “taking” the newspaper. “Taking” implies a commitment to the newspaper, perhaps even a compulsion. To *read* a newspaper is a social act merely signifying your interest in being informed; to *take* a particular newspaper is to use it as an emblem that says something about who you are in the society. Our interviews with *Deepika*’s readers similarly showed that, by using the newspaper for different cultural uses, the readers partook, to some extent, the character of the newspaper itself. The institutional affiliation of the newspaper, class and geographical associations, the kinds of news and advertisements it carries, and the private and public spaces where the newspaper is read—all these serve to place readers in a social milieu through the act of “taking” a newspaper, as Peterson (2010) suggested.

Based on the study of people’s literacy practices, we also offer a critique of Jeffrey’s (2010) argument that localization of news—what he sometimes called “getting close to people”—was the recipe for the success of print media in India, including Kerala. His observation that the launching of new production centers that trawled on local stories and used simplified prose raised newspaper circulations is true for mainstream, commercial newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*, but the proposition does not consider the experiences of smaller, community-centered newspapers like *Deepika*. As opposed to Jeffrey’s finding, our interviews with *Deepika*’s former and current subscribers demonstrated that they wanted the newspaper to be better aligned with their current literacies by combining local, church-related news *with* international news. The people’s literacies represent, in a sense, the growing tensions between the religious and the secular in contemporary Kerala, as while *Deepika*’s editors seek to tighten the newspaper’s focus on the Syrian Catholic constituency, most readers we interviewed wish just the opposite. With the editors unlikely to be implement

the readers' recommendations given several factors, including the limited staff that the newspaper possesses, we suspect that *Deepika* will continue to experience decline in the coming years in light of competition from large, commercialized Malayalam- and English-language dailies, which cater to people's literacies more closely.

In the final analysis, we have only managed to scratch the surface of the complexities involved in the literacy practices associated with a community-based newspaper in southern India. Nonetheless, we hope to have demonstrated the value of employing literacy practices as an alternative theoretical approach to study news media. While it is important to analyze news text, as much of journalism studies scholarship does, we also need the further dimension of print literacy as strategic, purposeful activity which (re)defines community. Bringing together all those who are engaged in "newspaper-acts" (Peterson, 2003), and viewing their activities as a set of literacy practices enable us to analyze the power of social institutions such as media in shaping people's beliefs, attitudes, and characters (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Ahearn, 2004a). Literacy practices help us understand the ways in which consumers and producers mutually imagine one another as well as the web of sociality that links media across time and space. As this interdisciplinary approach stems from an interest in the specificity of local experience and demands us to be sensitive to the social purposes, demands, and processes within which literacies are constructed (Ahearn, 2004b; Baynham, 1995), it can be particularly useful to for the cultural study of news, which has been typically sacrificed at the cost of universalization of (Western) media practices and knowledge.⁹ The cultural aspect is indispensable to study news

⁹ The problem of generalizing Western media practices and experiences on to the entire world continues to plague knowledge production, especially in the field of journalism studies. See, for example, Hanitzsch (2019) and Tunstall (1977).

media in transitioning countries or regions where Western notions of individuality are realized only partially and where print culture is still alive.

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