

The personal blog an ‘adda’: Empathy and the conversational element in the Indian blogosphere

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Abstract. Personal weblogs focus primarily on the personal and the intimate. Studies on personal blogs have taken the form of studies on online journals or diary blogs. In the context of the question, ‘for whom do you blog?’ the popular refrain is ‘I blog for me’ [1]. This statement is statistically backed by the findings of Lenhart and Fox [2] wherein 52% of US bloggers said that they blog mostly for themselves, not for an audience and only 32% said that they blog mostly for their audience. This is not true of the Indian blogosphere. This paper examines the blogs of Indian personal bloggers writing in English and finds that the posts are varied in nature and bloggers do not exclusively blog for themselves. The posts do not focus only upon the inner state of the blogger’s mind nor do they minutely catalogue the daily life of the blogger. It was found that these bloggers engaged in gaining feedback from blog readers, and empathizing and socializing with fellow bloggers. This paper looks at the conversational element and empathy that is generated in the Indian blogosphere. The comments are the generators of active conversation and enliven the process of blogging. The paper comes to a conclusion that readers play a pivotal role in keeping the blog post ‘alive’ with ‘real’ interaction; thereby turning the blog into an ‘adda’ – a popular word used in Hindi to mean a place where people gather for light conversation.

Keywords: blogs, personal, empathy, conative, conversational

1. Introduction

The personal and the intimate are the key elements of personal weblogs. Self expression is the key element on personal blogs. To find a definition of the personal blog upon which we have a general consensus is difficult, except that all would agree to the fact that the focus is on the daily life and inner thoughts and feelings of the blogger [3]. The Pew Internet and American Life Project Report released in July 2006 asserts that the American blogosphere is dominated by blogs used as personal journals. Though the bloggers blogged on a variety of topics; when they were asked to choose one main topic that they wrote mostly about, 37% of them cited ‘my life and experiences’ as a primary topic of their blog. In the context of the question, ‘For whom do you blog?’ the popular refrain indicated is ‘I blog for me’. This statement is statistically backed by the findings of Lenhart and Fox [2] wherein 52% of US bloggers said that they blog mostly for themselves, not for an audience and only 32% said that they blog mostly for their audience. Like the diarist, writing in an attempt to reflect on one’s life, the pioneers of the personal blog – Carolyn Burke, Justin Hall and Peter Merholz – kept a record of the inner thoughts of the blogger’s life. Thus Peter Merholz’s blog is called: peterme.com: Links, thoughts, and essays from Peter Merholz. Carolyn on her blog, Virtually Yours: Carolyn L Burke, subtitled My Cognitive and Physical Landscape, welcomes the readers to her cognitive landscape. Carolyn Burke writes unabashedly about herself online because of her belief, ‘in the power of good that results from free expression, free information exchange, and open and honest communication between people’. The weblog, for Burke, is a place that exposes the ‘private mental spaces to every ones ‘scrutiny’ giving ‘a snapshot of what a person is like on the inside’. She further reiterates, ‘This diary is for *me*. And that others peek in it isn’t important.’ [4]

Justin Hall’s blog – Justin’s links [5] - is almost a ‘life log’ that elaborates upon his life in school, the friends he had, his teachers, girls friends and the intimacies he shared with them, his tryst with drugs, his passion for computers, his fathers’ suicide, his step father and the development of their relationship, the near nervous breakdown he suffered and the physical ailments that he went through. Both Carolyn Burke and Justin Hall engage in self disclosure and self introspection. The computer, like the mirror, helps

reflect upon their inner thoughts and beliefs. The blogger is the writer and the reader of his thoughts. Public enunciation of ideas helps to consolidate them. This is akin to what Peter Elbow [6] calls 'private writing'. But the personal blogs written by Indians in English differ from that of Burke and Hall.

The present study analyzes twenty personal blogs shortlisted through a Snowball sampling method. The criterion for selecting these blogs was that the blogs be updated at least once a month in the year 2012-2013. The blogs were shortlisted taking the help of a few popular blogs and then looking up their Blogrolls and comments. Popular personal blogs on Indiblogger and BlogAdda were also taken into consideration and accordingly 20 blogs (of 10 male and 10 female writers) were shortlisted. The blog posts of the following blogs from January 2012 to May 2013 were studied in detail: Chronicwriter, Gaurav Parab Says, My attempt to write, I Rhyme without reason, I Speak-Aditya Bhasin, Jeevan's World, Lucifer House Inc., Subho's Jejune Diet, Destination Infinity, Cigarettes for the soul!, Daily dose of chaos, Rachna Says, Little Moments of Bliss, A-Musing, Compulsive Confessions, Pages from a Young Diary, BlogwatiG, Lazy Pineapple, The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker and Cyber Nag. For these bloggers the reader is crucial to the blogging process. The importance of the reader is acknowledged by the blogger in a variety of ways: Aditya Bhasin of I Speak-Aditya Bhasin in the post 'Why I Blog' asserts, 'My idea of blogging is that people who read the stuff here should benefit themselves by reading my experiences and my views.' [7] Hitchy of My attempt to write, says, 'The idea is to come up with something funny to spread a smile'. [8] The blog, Lucifer House Inc., [9] is introduced as a production house of an idle mind doling out its wares to the readers so as to keep them entertained in their leisure time. Subhorup Dasgupta of Subho's Jejune Diet asserts that the 'Jejune diet' that his blog provides his readers with is 'a tested way to happiness, contentment, and success in a world overrun by vanity and greed'. [10] The bloggers thus have some notion (even if it is sometimes vague and ambitious) of the effect they want their blog to have on the reader. The reader is therefore very important. The two elements that are predominant in garnering readership on the blog are the conversational element and empathy.

2. The Conversational Element

The personal essayists, like Montaigne, regaled in a writing style that was informal and 'familiar'. This style allowed the essayist to bond with the reader. Lopate [11] notes that Montaigne was the first essayist to talk to himself 'convincingly on the page' and the reader was made privy to the thoughts of the writer so much so that the reader feels, in the words of Lopate [11], 'to be eavesdropping on a mind in solitude'. The personal blog is the digital essay of our times. The blogger is the online essayist. The colloquial and informal tone of the blog posts indicate the blogger's attempts to connect with the reader. Leo's home page of I rhyme without reason [12] welcomes the bloggers as one would welcome a guest, first by introducing the blogger and then acquainting the readers with the matter they can expect on his blog. As he urges his guests to enter the space that is sacred for him, he assures them that while they leave the space it would leave them definitely happier than before. This direct interaction with the reader is a hallmark of personal bloggers writing in the Indian blogosphere.

A veteran blogger - Zephyr of Cyber Nag on a blog post titled 'Thank You', [13] dated 2nd February, 2013, thanks the readers for 'staying' with her for the past three years and gives all credit to the readers for adding value to her 'sometimes incomplete posts' and 'bringing in fresh insights and perspectives'. Zephyr also claims to cherish all comments that she receives specially those that criticize her posts for according to her, 'these are the ones that make me realise afresh that I still have a long way to go to become a better writer. Besides they keep me from getting a swollen head!'

On the BlogAdda Forum, answering the question posted by a fellow blogger: 'How important is readership for a blog?' [15], all the eight bloggers, (ishouvik, shimmeshine, RisingColors, Woodooz, Remoonline, abhyu00 and Trupz) who replied to the question, were of the opinion that readers are important for the blogger. Striking an intermediary note abhyu00, a blogger, was of the opinion that the blog is not a personal secret diary. Woodooz, another blogger, reiterated the same by asserting that 'anyone (particularly one with a publicly visible blog) that says, 'I write for myself, I don't care about who reads' is lying.' But at the same time all bloggers agreed to the fact that blogging is not purely driven by readership though it is one of the prime motivating factors; as abhyu00 puts it:

But you cannot address it as a stage with millions of people sitting in the crowd because that takes away the ruminating, reflecting, musing part away. It leaves it as just an agenda driven speech. So, in my view the key is to write for an audience but to pretend as if you're talking to yourself (while making sense).

The same sentiment was voiced by Raindrop, another blogger, when she said that blogging for her has been like: 'hugging atree(sic) and telling/yelling your story to the breeze'. If it carries it to neighbouring habitation, great. If not then I am happy letting it out into the universe and moving on. But as per my observation, someone will always connect with you.'

Connecting with somebody out there is a very important facet of blogging. Woodooz's assertion that blogs 'published in the 'public domain' (not protected by passwords or require special invites) deserve to be read and are created solely for with that intent!' clearly indicates that readers play a very important role. In an interview with Anusha Parthasarathy (the Sub Editor/Reporter at The Hindu and a student Reporter at Ergo, published on 28th October, 2008, in The Ergo, an all-colour tabloid, a publication from Kasturi and Sons, the publishers of The Hindu) Chriz of Chronicwriter admits that, 'I have to pull my readers and make them read my crap. In order to do that, I spice my posts with audio, video, pictures and controversial topics packed with humour.' The bloggers thus play to the gallery at times in order to attract the readers to their blog.

The comments in the comment section play a pivotal role in the blogging process. They are the generators of active conversation and enliven the process of blogging. Blog readers are of two kinds: active and passive. The active bloggers are those that give feedback through comments and the passive ones, also called lurkers, are the ones who read posts without commenting. Comments are indicators of active readership. Other technological features or widgets installed by the blogger that trace the traffic of their feeds keep a track of the passive readers as well. The presence of the traffic locator, the like feature, comments urging readers to join on Facebook, urging them to comment, all indicate that the reader plays a predominant role in process of blogging.

The blog posts are the road maps of the mental landscape of the blogger. The readers navigate into the personal life of the blogger taking help of these posts. The blog post 'I wish to declare peace with my father' posted by Aditya Bhasin of I Speak-Aditya Bhasin[7] on 21st October, 2012, which is later taken off from the blog citing personal reasons, gives the readers an access to the blogger's personal problems. But the comments that follow the blog post, giving him suggestions to solve the problem, give the post a conversational turn; comments like : 'dea... u can even tried to convey ur feelings in wriitten... no need a big cards , can on small piece of paper.... i know it is lil kidish bt u can try it' are posted, which alters the blogpost into a space envisaged by the Tim Berneers Lee – 'a collaborative medium, a place where we [could] all meet and read and write'. [14] The blog post is used by the blogger to start a conversation and debate. The post of 7th October, 2012 – 'What's Love Got To DoWith It?' by Subhorup Dasgupta[10] ends with, 'I am looking forward to the wisdom of my readers to give this discussion greater depth and perspective in the comments'. The comment section that follows the blog post is a ground throbbing with a variety of inputs from diverse readers. The readers thus play a pivotal role in keeping the blog post 'alive' with 'real' interaction.

The personal blogs written in English by Indians start as a personal endeavour to express themselves creatively and share their experiences; but the readers sustain their motivation to blog. Their comments augment the deliberations that take place on the post and provide the reader with additional experiences and views on the topic that is under scrutiny. A post titled – 'A disgusting, almost diabetic type post on the state of my love life, which I suggest you skip'. (7th August, 2006) by Meenakshi Madhavan on Compulsive Confessions[16] admits that she has been told by her lover not to blog about their relationship but cannot keep herself from talking about it, albeit, discreetly as she wants her feelings to be chronicled on the blog for the sake of posterity. The post is also intended to keep the readers updated about her life as she adds: 'But, before you worry, gentle reader, my life is actually pretty much the same.' The comments that follow not only are in the congratulatory mode but also in the confessional mode as the readers share their own experiences. This feature is what makes the blog distinct from the essay form in print. The technological

feature of providing feedback which was hitherto unavailable for Montaigne and other personal essayists is now made available to the digital essayist – the personal blogger.

3. Empathy

Empathy is a complex construct. Researchers define empathy in various ways and there is a great amount of ambiguity in the classification and explanation of the concept. Levenson and Reuf[17] lament the fact that experimental and theoretical literature has failed to come up with a single definition of empathy. There has been much debate on the issue of whether empathy is primarily a cognitive or an affective phenomenon. Recent research in the field focuses on the multidimensional approach towards understanding this complex concept. The affective versus cognitive debate was laid to rest by the multidimensional approach that focuses on understanding empathy not as a ‘state but as a process’[18]. Wispe[19] defines empathy as ‘the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self.’ The same is echoed by Rogers[18] who believes that being empathetic is a ‘way of being’ wherein one enters the ‘private perceptual world of the other and becomes thoroughly at home in it’. Being empathetic implies that the person is sensitive to the minute changes in emotions felt by the other – whether it is anger, fear or confusion. For Rogers (1975) ‘it means temporarily living in his/her life moving about in it delicately without making judgments.’ Ickes[20] defines empathic inference as ‘a form of complex psychological inference in which observation, memory, knowledge, and reasoning are combined to yield insights into the thoughts and feelings of others.’ In this paper, empathy is used keeping in mind Ickes’ definition. It was noticed that the comments on the blog posts saw a definite increase in situations where in the blogger was in distress, confusion or pain – physical or mental.

Let us examine the role of empathy on the personal blog. Firstly, the empathetic responses indicate that the readers are listening attentively to the blogger’s flow of emotions. Responses like: ‘Loved the imagery’, ‘Beautifully written’, ‘Poignant’, ‘some pretty beautiful expressions above.. . enjoyed’, ‘Touching, achingly sad’, ‘Profound and can feel the pain:’, ‘Filled with pathos... moving!’, ‘Its serene.. its sad... its beautiful’, ‘very nice and impactful’ are commonly found in the comment section. They are indicators of the reader’s active presence and involvement in the blogging process.

Secondly, the responses help to ‘dissolve alienation’[18]. Jeevan who suffers from muscular dystrophy shares his painful moments sometimes on his blog – Jeevan’s World [21]. The post script to the post titled ‘Depressed yet impressed’ dated 13th April, 2013, reads: ‘These phrases come to mind by 3 am, while I deeply distressed. But I don’t want to reveal what caused me so depressed . . .’ The readers in their own way try and console Jeevan which thereby help him realize that he is not alone and there are people out there who are concerned for his wellbeing. While most of his readers hope that Jeevan may gain peace of mind soon, a comment from Rajesh K. of Destination Infinity provides him with a solution which he has tried for himself: ‘If you feel painful/depressed, just listen to oovoru pookkalume song... I listen to it when I feel down. It’s an awesome song that can transform our moods...’ Thus readers play the role of counselors who make attempts to allay the fears of the bloggers. Jeevan claims that blogging has changed his life because of the virtual friends’ support, care and love.

The virtual friendships forged in the virtual space are sanctimonious to the blogger. Stating the importance of virtual friends, Hitchy of My attempt to write in an interview with BlogAdda[22] asserts:

I have found some really wonderful people to connect through my blog some unbelievable people. Its hard to describe how people who you never met become a part of your life so much and also influence the way you think. It also provides an amazing insight into so many different individuals from different backgrounds. For me its discovery of people.

The blog friends Hitchy talks about are virtual friends he has never met, but in the case of Jeevan, of Jeevan’s World[21], the virtual friends transform into ‘real’ friends by not only sending him a cake on his birthday but by also visiting him (post dated August 04, 2009 - Late unearthed Birthday). Jeevan was also invited on the occasion of his blogger friend’s wedding. (‘My heart full wishes’, Jeevan posts a poem wishing his blogger friend, Prasanna, who blogs at <http://techsams.blogspot.in/>, and expresses his inability to attend his wedding.) Thus the divide between the virtual and the real is obliterated in the case of these

bloggers. The 'Blogger Meets' arranged by Indiblogger and other corporate houses play a supplementary role in helping bloggers to get acquainted with other bloggers in 'flesh and blood'. Thus the empathy does not confine itself to the virtual realm alone; it spills out into the 'real' world too.

The highest expression of empathy is total acceptance without being judged. But this doesn't happen all the time, some readers empathise wholeheartedly whereas some post derogatory comments, some even send hate mail in response to the blog posts. The comment moderation policy allows the blogger to control the publishing of comments. The derogatory comments though are not published on the blog; they do give the blogger a lot of stress. Meenakshi Madhavan of Compulsive Confessions[16], had to face a lot of flak because of her explicitness especially on topics concerning her sex-life, her drinking bouts and smoking. Meenakshi through her revelations fails to live up to the expectations of the readers; and thus they post disparaging comments. The other readers do not keep quite on reading the denigratory remarks but take up the cudgels on behalf of Meenakshi and fight out. The comment section turns into a battle-ground where readers berate the slanderers on behalf of the blogger. The post – 'An Open Letter To My Not-So-Nice Anon Commenters' dated 11th December, 2007, is an open letter by Meenakshi Madhavan, written in response to a snide remark posted by a reader on the post dated 29th November, 2007. On the post she expresses her feelings as to how hurt she was on receiving a derogatory comment. She also clarifies her views on her attitude towards trolls and warns them of dire repercussions if they continue with their wayward behavior. In the comment section of the same blog post, surprisingly, the anonymous commentator who had posted the derogatory comment not only confesses his doing but also reveals his identity and tries to justify his behaviour. Pinochoyo, another reader, in answer to the anonymous commentator's justification jumps into the conversation and then ensues a long verbose battle into which many other readers draw their swords, take sides and fight, calling each other names and justifying their tirade.

The camaraderie that the comment section generates is a hub of online empathy. Bloggers share their joys and sorrows online and the readers react accordingly through the comment section as they would have done in a face-to-face, offline situation. The post 'Where I tell you a little bit about THAT YEAR' dated 20 April 2011, wherein Meenakshi of Compulsive Confessions[16] gets nostalgic about the break-up with her lover finds her readers confessing about their relationships and the manner in which they are trying to cope with the same problem. The comment section is rightly titled – 'Confessing Back' wherein 12 comments out of the 23 are empathetic to the extent of expressing their inability to help her cope with the heart-break as they claim to have gone through similar situations. We find comments like : 'am there now...and doing my best to move on...'; 'I so agree with how you feel remembering the bygone days.'; ' It's like you've taken a page out of my life & put it in words, probably better than I could. It's surprised me to know that you & I went through the same gut-wrenching experience around the same time, in different cities, . . .'. Others wish her all the best to cope with the crisis. Empathy is the crux upon which conversations sustain in the blogosphere.

The blog is a sanctimonious place, akin to a home, for many bloggers and readers are treated as guests visiting their homes. It is common to hear the refrain – 'thanks for visiting my blog' – in the comment section. Vibha of Daily dose of Chaos[23] welcomes bloggers to her 'nest'. Ayushi of Little moments of bliss[24] asks the readers to 'Grace the couch and share a cuppa!' The expected behaviour of the readers, in the form of the comment policy, is also clearly defined by the bloggers either as a separate tab or in the 'About me' section. Ashna Banga in a post script to the 'About me' page makes it very clear that she would not tolerate any spam, she warns the reader who would indulge in such practices: 'I'm going to pull you out, drag you by your hair and feed you to an angry and hungry troll!' [25] The blog posts are thus incomplete without the readers' comments. The comments provide the three dimensional critical perspective to the ideas and feelings presented on the post by the blogger thereby transforming the blogging phenomenon into a dynamic reading-writing process.

4. Conclusion

In an interview on BlogAdda[22], Hitchy of My attempt to write says: 'we bloggers are attention craving READ comment seeking maniacs... however apart from just getting comments on the posts... our comment sections has(sic) also become sort of chat rooms... like I keep saying its our adda...'. The notion of an

‘adda’ – a place where people gather for conversation – is what the blog is all about. Hitchy in the same interview asserts, ‘I frankly feel that the comments section in my blog is probably more interesting than the post itself.’ Personal blogging in the Indian context thus is a personal form of publishing that focuses on the emotive aspects of the self that yearns for social interaction. Like the personal essay form it focuses on the personal likes, dislikes, opinions and ideas of the writer, but the writing is not purely in the autobiographical mode. These bloggers attempt to create an online identity through their blogs which is more like a social front that is valued in the bloggers’ community for their ideas and thoughts and the clarity with which these are put forth. They focus on interaction and maintaining social relationships. Unlike the blogs of Carolyn Burke and Justin Hall, who blogged extensively about their personal lives; the personal blogs by Indian bloggers are interactive in nature with the purpose of connecting with like-minded people. The reasons why Indian bloggers engage in personal blogging are more social in nature.

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