The Rise of Political Symbolism in Post-Truth Era Democracies: Case Study of India during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The Post-truth era, also called post-factual politics, has resulted in a new kind of political culture in which debates are framed largely by appeals to emotion which are disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored. Post-truth can, thus, be understood as a shift from reason to emotion, where the emphasis is given to exaggerated feelings rather than logic. Post-truth politics largely rests on political symbolism. Symbols are created to enforce an artificial support system where emotionally charged issues are discussed and debated while ignoring the facts. It offers only one option, which is supporting the system; opposing it or staying neutral is not considered acceptable. Democratic rights like freedom of speech and expression threaten the whole idea of post-truth politics, which encourages citizens to ask pertinent questions about the policies and state matters. To impose the prominence of symbols credibility of important questions is put at stake (Najmi, 2017a).

A symbol can be defined as a person or a concept that represents, stands for, or suggests a particular idea, rituals, myths, belief, action, or material entity. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas, or visual images and are used to convey approved/accepted ideas and beliefs of that particular period. The recent outbreak of coronavirus has yet again established this narrative especially in South Asia and particularly in India. Religious symbols and nuances like banging plates or lighting earthen lamps/candles or saying that it is God's wrath because we have stopped following righteous path has resulted in the pandemic. Promotion of non-scientific ideas like drinking cow urine or taking bathe with cow dung can cure the disease as it has the symbolic holy cow attached to it. This practice has suddenly become a 'new normal'. People found these ideas more appealing and lucrative than visiting the medical practitioners or following the guidelines issued by competent authorities. It was easy for the leaders to unite and build trust by defying the scientific logic and bringing symbolism to the fore.

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Historical Disposition

Earlier historians and sophists use to create the symbols by praising the icons related to the kingship. The primary aim of these efforts was to make the king revered and important in the eyes of people. Such symbols also gave prominence to the ideals associated with the monarchy or even dictatorship. We find temples and shrines of kings in almost every part of the world, which are replete with such symbols. The symbols were enough to inform the people about laws, duties, punishment, rules, regulations, and expectations from citizens through them. Symbols spoke volumes about the glory of the King, his ministers, troops, and their achievements. Even the currency used at that time displayed the symbols of prevalent kingships of the time. Mummification of dead kings and pyramids were part of popular culture in Egypt. We all grew up listening to the stories of valor and pride of our ancestors and forefathers. Such stories or folk tales signify the importance of the symbols which we are carrying since ages like surname or family name. To be precise, symbols have played a really important role in uniting and dividing the human species (Najmi, 2017b).

Present Scenario

With the advent of the internet and the improvement of telecommunication, the world seems interconnected the way it has never been. It is easier to reach out to a larger audience at one click. The idea of globalization united the world by providing popular symbols to work as a unifying force against the things/ideas which created fragments in the world. The stress was shifted on the market economy which saw the world only as divided between buyers and sellers. To sell a thing or idea symbols were required which were beyond the notions of true and false. Media was used enthusiastically to create and capture large markets. The idea of globalization supported the ideals of democracy, which was all about public will and free choice. Sellers entered into the homes of prospective buyers to sell their products through vigorous advertising. Stress was given on the interaction and intermingling of people beyond boundaries. Social media made it easier and gave an interactive platform to different communities like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. But as the recession hit the world during 2007-08, the idea of globalization came under the scanner. The idea which united the world as a global village was being questioned. Natives were losing their rights to the outsiders for-profit and business. The concept of globalization was vehemently rejected after the recession hit the world and new political leaders started demanding rights for the citizens. They questioned the allocation of jobs and resources to the alien workforces for cost-cutting. Newly emergent and right-wing

parties started focusing on the rights of citizens; importance was given to the historical symbols depicting majoritarian culture, tunes of hyper-nationalism started being played, and those who questioned it were declared anti-nationals.

Ralph Keyes, in his book, *The Post-Truth Era* writes:

> *At one time we had truth and lies. Now we have truth, lies, and statements that may not be true but we consider too benign to call false. Euphemisms abound. We're "economical with the truth," we "sweeten it," or tell "the truth improved." The term deceive gives way to spin. At worst we admit to "misspeaking," or "exercising poor judgment." Nor do we want to accuse others of lying. We say they're in denial. A liar is "ethically challenged," someone for whom "the truth is temporarily unavailable* (2004, p. 21).

Generally, issues having emotional connection are used as symbols in India and everywhere else, so that large masses are attached and attracted to them. If one has certain religious/social or political affiliations, then he/she must flaunt symbols to reaffirm and showcase his/her faith in those ideas. The relationship of symbols to the functioning of the state is also emerging as an important aspect of politics today in the post-truth era, which puts a question mark on the democratic process. Democracy in itself is a broad concept that allows people to participate in selecting and electing their representatives. It celebrates free will whereas post-truth politics is averse to alternative ideas.

As there is an outbreak of pandemic COVID-19 all over the world these days, the way different governments are dealing with it is making all the difference. Coronavirus is forcing governments to think about their citizens and for democracy itself. Since democracies give a lot of stress on individual rights, human rights, right to movement, etc., they were hesitant in putting lock down effectively. As it spread at a fast rate, the democracies turned out to be the most affected by the outbreak. Suddenly, they were faced with unprecedented disruption to the decision-making machinery of government – including travel bans and social-distancing restrictions on large meetings. All officials in capitals worldwide have started to adopt new working methods, including meetings by videoconference, and remote voting by ministers and parliaments. The new coronavirus pandemic is not only destroying the public health and the global economy but disrupting and questioning the idea of democracy worldwide. It has hit at a time when democracy was already under threat due to the rise of right-wing politics in the post-truth era, and now this pandemic risk is exacerbating democratic backsliding and authoritarian consolidation. Some governments have already started using the pandemic to expand their control, executive powers, and restrict individual rights. The coronavirus

pandemic is likely to transform other pillars of democratic governance – such as electoral processes, civilian control of militaries, and civic mobilization – and potentially reset the terms of the global debate on the merits of authoritarianism versus democracy (Edwards, 2020). In this background, an effort is being made to study India, democracy, and developing the nation's response to this pandemic.

Democratization Process in India

To begin with, we need to look at India's tryst with democracy itself. As we go back to 1947 and the adoption of democracy as a form of governance, we find many confusions, issues, chaos, and problems. As Indians were habitual of living under the monarchy and then under company rule, things did not change for them, but with the advent of democracy, they received a lot of rights. Actually, it took many years to understand the power they had received with democratic ideals. Earlier politics was all about the elites sitting and discussing the policies in the clubhouse or parties. Democracy changed the whole idea of politics in India. The poorest of the poor and the lowest of the lower classes got the right to vote and began participating in the elections after independence. Elections in a way empowered them by breaking the age-old shackles of caste and religious prejudices. Initially, the political leaders tried to focus on developing scientific temper along with strengthening the ideals of democracy.

The industrialization process started alongside the opening of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), new universities, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), and several research organizations that were inaugurated. All this was taking place, while the prejudices and traditions were still prevalent in the roots. Unlike the British Raj, people were made to trust the government and the ideal of a welfare socialist state was introduced. Schemes like ration cards, subsidies, pensions, free medical, and educational facilities were introduced by the government, bringing trust in the government. It was a shift for the masses from being ruled to the equal citizenry. With the advent of universities and free education, people started knowing the importance of their voting rights. They understood that if they are poor, it is the failure of government and the necessary conditions need to be created by the government to manage the affairs. For a poverty-ridden country with a dense population like India, this awareness was not considered as a good sign by the political elite, and hence emergency was forced by then PM Indira Gandhi to take things under control. Later on, she lost the elections and had to face the criminal charges. When she again contested elections, she brought emotionally charged symbolic issues and slogans and swayed the results. It can be seen as the

beginning of the erosion of democratic institutions which is still going on. With the rise of the pandemic, we can see how an issue of medical emergency is subsided by the politicians into symbolism like banging of thalis or making noise and claiming it to be killing the virus. The worst part is that instead of questioning the ridiculous insertions, the public is participating in these theatrics purely out of emotion.

Vote-bank Politics

In the course of time, the right to vote also came under the shadow of poverty, under-development, caste, and social-religious prejudices. The politicians gradually started working to maintain their respective vote banks, ignoring the other sections of the masses. Instead of strengthening and uniting the nation, it began dividing the country on a different basis. Vote bank politics started dominating the politics of countries. Vote banks mean the loyal block of voters who vote enmass for a particular party, candidate, movement, cause, caste, or religion. This also depicts the collective emotional and attitudinal bias or mood of the section of people cited. Such behavior is often the result of an expectation of real or imagined benefits from the political formations, often at the cost of other communities. Generally, the poor get attracted to such politics, who find it the only way out of their problems. They vote enmass for political parties in return for some promises and short-term gains. This degradation of politics has shown its worst possible threat during the outbreak of the pandemic. Muslims were shamelessly characterized by media as carriers of disease due to the event by Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi where foreign nationals participated as delegates. There were cases where appeals were made by the politicians to boycott Muslim vendors and not to give them any job. Media, instead of questioning the government for allowing this even to take place, raised questions on the entire community supported particular political parties in order to keep vote banks intact. But when the priests and policemen of Ayodhya temple get affected by the virus because of lax attitude and not following the guidelines, media and politicians have not attacked their religion. It was simply a sad case of COVID-19. The majority of the community is transformed into a united vote bank against the minorities by creating such issues. Day and night, they are being told that 80% population is under threat by 15% minority. A symbolic demon surviving on hatred is created in the minds and hearts of the common populace to build a strong vote bank.

The Prominence of Political Symbolism over Reason

A new narrative has intruded the Indian politics that you cannot question the government; in case you do, you are anti-national. To prove oneself as a nationalist, he/she has to agree and

follow all the commands. The public servants are now the rulers and democracy is gradually transforming into demagogy. A huge amount of money is spent on project Vista when a common man is suffering from corona without proper treatment and facilities. Migrant laborers are stranded in different states but are not able to reach home. Doctors, nurses, and hospital staff are getting infected while treating patients due to a lack of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). It is surprising that all these things are not even part of our demands. We were told by the prime minister as a nation to show reverence towards the medical professionals by coming out and clapping or banging the plates in the evening, which was a gesture of being thankful. Some so-called intellectuals sitting on media channels started telling that banging plates in the balcony will create vibrations and destroy the virus as it is an age-old Indian tradition. Suddenly, a religious angle was inserted and from a symbolic gesture, it turned into a religious event defying all ideas related to social distancing. On the second occasion, the PM asked the nation to switch off the lights and light earthen lamps or candles to show the solidarity in the dark times of the pandemic. Again, it was transformed into a hyper nationalistic and religious event, citing examples from the past with the argument that it will kill the virus. Those who decided not to participate in the event were ostracized in the society, ridiculed, and in some cases were attacked by their neighbors. A misconception was filled in common man's thought process that these symbolic gestures will eradicate the pandemic.

Edward Watts, a historian at the University of California, warns in his book *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell into Tyranny*, that if citizens will not save their democratic political institutions, it will only strengthen the rulers as has happened in the Roman empire earlier. It will result in democracy changing into tyranny. History has a tendency to repeat itself if we do not take lessons from it and mend our ways. As we witness the erosion of democratic institutions of India especially in the backdrop of COVID-19, we find that the sane voices are being forcibly made silent by putting them into prisons or enforcing legal actions against them at the behest of the state. The PM care fund was collected to fight the disease but citizens are not allowed to ask for its accounts, as to where it is being spent. The country was under lockdown as a necessary measure to stop the outbreak but it has brought with-it large-scale migration, unemployment, poverty, domestic abuse, communal attacks, mob lynching, social fragmentation, and anxiety especially among the poor. Sadly, they do not use social media or raise their concerns in big rallies. They are just vote-banks that will be used in the next general elections. Doctors who raised the issue of non-payment of salary or medical equipment are forcibly removed by the hospitals. Courts are taking cognizance of Facebook and Twitter posts

but not about the conditions of the poor. The country is made to believe that everything is fine when it is not. Despite the looming medical emergency, the entire nation is busy celebrating the foundation ceremony of Ram Temple. It is clear that imaginary political symbols with unrealistic ideals have taken prominence in India where the educated class instead of questioning the policies is busy banging plates, taking selfies, and uploading them on social media. The future of democratic symbols seems under threat from these political symbols.

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