

## The Pundits of Technology: The Construction of Masculine Authority in Socio-technical Projects

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### Abstract

Political developments have been prominently described using the term “post-truth” in the recent past. Claims have been made about this being a newly emergent phenomenon, a product of the tendencies to reject factual knowledge and scientific thought. We argue that political rhetoric has always included “post-truth” strategies to construct facts in public discourse. Specifically, we examine the character of the rhetoric around scientific knowledge by way of its proponents and in the context of their social locations. Through an analysis of discourse around science and technology policy in independent India, we argue that much of the discourse reveals a nexus between masculine power, scientific authority, and political clout. This nexus gets operationalised as the cult of personality around certain individuals who are legitimised as technocrats, embodying the personalities of the expert, the social entrepreneur, and the masculine authority.

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**Keywords:** post-truth, science, technology, facts, discourse, policy, masculine, authoritarian, technocracy, rhetoric

### Introduction

*What makes Kubn’s account of science “post-truth” is that truth is no longer the arbiter of legitimate power but rather the mask of legitimacy that is worn by everyone in pursuit of power. Truth is just one more—albeit perhaps the most important—resource in a power game without end. In this respect, science differs from politics only in that the masks of its players rarely drop.* (Fuller 2016a)

David Roberts (2010) used the term post-truth as “a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)”. Popular usage of the word increased manifold during 2016–17, according to Oxford dictionaries, which declared the word to be the “international word of the

year”, selected from a list consisting of other words like “adulging”, “woke”, “alt-right”, and “Brexitteer”, among others. However, instead of taking “post-truth” as a given, we maintain that ideological truth has always been under contestation. Hegemonic truths, we argue, are constructed due to the cult of personalities developed around individuals owing to their status or locations in power hierarchies.

We qualitatively analyse the media discourse about some key figures in the history of technology in India. We argue that many truths or facts are constructed through the masculine authority with which these figures are portrayed in culture. The key themes that emerge in this analysis have to do with the technocrat being positioned as an authority through the construction of the technocrat as an expert, a social entrepreneur, and a masculine figure.

### **Theoretical Foregrounding**

We draw our understanding of facts from the perspective of the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge (Bloor 1991). This theoretical foregrounding rejects the idea that “true” beliefs exist due to rationality and logic, but when there is human error that diverges from logical thinking, the belief is unreasonable and, therefore, false. Within approaches from the social construction of technology and the social shaping of technology in science and technology studies (STS), we do not dwell on the truthfulness or falsity of claims, but propose to look beyond actual truth to *perceived* truth (Bijker and Law 1992; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). In other words, it may be so that certain facts are true, but what is more of a concern is the sociological explanation for why and how truths emerge. Particularly, this essay seeks to argue that the ways in which individuals make claims that are accepted in larger society has much more to do with the power that the individuals possess. This power is also provided to individuals based on their expertise in the fields of science and technology, as we will argue in the next sections.

Post-truth, within this foregrounding, is not a matter of the current times, but has been a historical reality, particularly in Indian national politics, coupled tightly with the techno-industrial complex. There are varying perspectives regarding post-truth as an opportunity to examine the nature of epistemic constructions. Sismondo (2017) starts his editorial with foregrounding the Trump campaign as an axis around which the term “post-truth” possibly needs to be studied, which has also been the case when the term is used in popular news media. He is critical of what Fuller (2016b) considers to be an opportunity for STS to “embrace responsibility of a post-truth world”

and find ways to use it creatively. He asserts that the symmetry thesis has been used by climate change sceptics, creationists, and other candidates to usher in the post-truth era. Fuller, a philosopher of science and technology, like Sismondo himself, argues that a post-truth world is an inevitable outcome of “greater epistemic democracy”, where the methods of knowledge production themselves are democratised and made available for all. This in turn results in a rejection of the hierarchical nature of knowledge production. Sismondo writes that if post-truth discredits existing knowledge structures, especially scientific institutions, it would lead to authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the goal of STS should be to examine which parts of the truth are valid from *other* epistemic systems, especially those that are not hegemonic in nature. Within this debate, Fuller seems to be more sensitive to the way in which epistemic democratisation is a more equitable form of knowledge production. This essay, however, also seeks to suggest that today, we need to recognise the post-truth character of knowledge itself, and how, at various points in Indian history, this has been used to keep power structures in place, particularly drawing from Fuller’s ideas. This has been made possible due to the various individual authorities that have been established due to the virtue of masculine leadership, narratives of “self-made” men, and an unwavering faith in technical solutions to social problems.

### **Post-truth as Rhetoric**

Political speech has employed “post-truth” claims as rhetoric device historically and this continues to be so. Rhetoric can be defined as the science of argumentation, and rhetoric studies can be a study of power, and particularly, “power as persuasion” (Nelson 1987, pp. 206). McComiskey (2017, pp. 6) articulates that in popular usage today, “post-truth” is when language “lacks any reference to facts, truths, or realities and becomes a purely strategic medium.” He asserts that until recently, rhetoric has always been understood to take positivist truths determined by science and use them as the foundation to be persuasive and engaging. It would consist of the way in which public concerns are communicated to the public officials, how the public interacts amongst each other, and how policies are communicated to the public. Rhetors, therefore, must know the truths in order to be able to lie. McComiskey writes that the project of the post-truth rhetor would be to destabilise the idea of truth itself and have truths drop out of the epistemic continuum entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> Sismondo briefly brings out the role of social media in the emergence of a post-truth political discourse, saying that a Twitter account, for example, “does not make what we may call knowledge” (Sismondo 2017, pp. 3). The argument that can be understood here is that “epistemic competition” is also about figuring out the truthfulness or the falsity of all claims because this has important political (and otherwise) consequences. If this is not accomplished, all truths become false.

Individual claims would then become rooted in larger ideological systems that will hold firm even if individual claims are proven to be false. While attempting to critically study media, it is more important to examine which truths are peddled and by whom, especially since those with power will have greater resources to persuade. The conversion from a language of technology to a language of politics that is used by the public administrators to formulate a narrative of progress is central to our analysis of technocratic power in the next section.

There has never seemed to be truth in political speech. Instead, rhetoric is the tool via which truths become convincing or not. Thomas Weyn (2017) turns to an Arendtian understanding of post-truth politics. In *Truth and Politics*, Hannah Arendt (2010) argues that in the political sphere, it is through publicity, plurality, and discourse, groups of people can come to a conclusion of a shared reality or a truth. Weyn exemplifies this by saying that global climate change may be a truth in the scientific sphere, but once it enters the political sphere, it is up for debate. And this has, to an extent, always been the case with political speech. To then claim facts being the truth by the mere virtue of rationality is to fall into the trap of not paying attention to how truths are dressed up. If people believe climate change to be a hoax, they have not been brainwashed by so-called lies but *convinced* by rhetorical argumentation. When discussing post-truth politics in contemporary times, to say that certain “fake news” is fake and others are not by the virtue of them being true is circular reasoning. Social media has been understood to be a primary vehicle in peddling “fake news”, especially algorithms that already set users up in a “filter bubble” (Beer 2017). However, from within the discipline of communication, further questions need to be asked of *why* and *how* “fake news” becomes convincing.

A close examination of political discourse demonstrates that the arrangement of truths is how rhetoric emerges. In an opinion piece written by Narendra Modi (2018) in the *Indian Express*, he speaks about Sardar Patel and his contribution in “uniting” the states within the boundaries of what we now understand to be India. These contributions<sup>2</sup> are not lies, but they are carefully picked truths to establish nationalistic renderings of India. This has, in fact, always been the case with the politics of audiences and media, and even for the scientific mode of enquiry as well. The ideological

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<sup>2</sup> The contribution that has been highlighted the most in this piece has to do with Patel’s negotiations with the princely states in order to assimilate them into a nation. Patel has had a long career as a barrister and a statesman, but this aspect of his work is highlighted especially in relation to the building of the Statue of Unity. This particular contribution of Patel for creating a united India is also expressed in the advertisement for the Incredible India campaign (DeshGujaratHD 2018).

system remains intact, and there is no requirement to lie. In fact, in authoritarian states, instead of relying on censorship (which would be difficult to implement or control), the media is overwhelmed with several facts (Weyn 2017). These are facts, after all, but they seek to hide other facts. The purpose of this paper is to bring to focus the many examples from Indian politics where rhetoric persuasion becomes the key in managing discourses. Through advertising on television and other media channels,<sup>3</sup> there is a constant reiteration of the rhetoric of a united India. The CEO of L&T, S.N. Subramanyam, said about the construction of the statue (*The Hindu* 2018), “Our engineering and construction teams along with the architects, the sculptor, and reputed global consultants, have realised this dream of Prime Minister to reality in a record period of time.”

Ideologies are perceived truths, displayed repeatedly through visual cues and imagery. Drawing attention to the symmetry thesis by Bloor, *correct* (or what McComiskey might call serious) research claims also need to be read within the context of the political climate that influences. A series of ads by Patanjali Ayurved on YouTube follow a pattern of asserting validity to the claims they make (Patanjali Ayurved 2018a, 2018b). In all advertisements of this series, Baba Ramdev begins by claiming the harmful effects of products due to chemicals, and then goes on to say that Patanjali products are developed from “a thousand years of scientific Ayurveda tradition” and research. First, the advertisement shows a hand using a mortar and pestle, with various herbs visible in the foreground. It moves to showing a lab-coat clad scientist in a laboratory setting. Such claims are commonly made by various Fast-moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies through advertising, and points to the construction of what is “scientific” or true. Scientific rhetoric is a part of public communication regarding research in science. “Bogus research”, such as that delinking cancer and smoking, and disproving the addictive nature of nicotine, which is funded by tobacco corporations, has been studied and established widely (McComiskey 2017). In trying to classify research as bogus or true, the epistemic validity (and how it is conveyed to the public) is what we are concerned with.

In this paper, we analyse popular discourse about key individuals within the techno-political bureaucracy of India, which include news reports, press communication, books, and other media artefacts. Specifically, we have identified individuals who were part of science and technology policy formulation in post-Independence India and had a significant presence in popular discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> We are referring here to two media artefacts.

- i. The Incredible India advertisement about the Statue of Unity (DeshGujaratHD, 2018).
- ii. The question about the height of the statue in Kaun Banega Crorepati Season 10.

We argue that it is through the authority provided to certain individuals (as “technocrats”) in cultural discourses that acceptance about science and technology policy is generated among publics of a democracy.

We organise our analysis around three major themes. First, we consider the technocrat as an expert, whose scientific temper and rational way of thinking implies that he is the speaker of truths. Second, we examine the technocrat as a social entrepreneur in a post-liberalised India of the 1990s, who provides solutions to social problems with technology. Finally, we argue that it is the myth of masculinity and merit that confers authority upon these personalities. Putting these together, we argue that rhetoric regarding the social benefits of technological infrastructure makes use of “expert” knowledge, and this is legitimised by masculine authority.

## **Discussion**

### *Technocrat as an Expert*

Sam Pitroda has been considered by many to have been at the forefront of the telecommunications revolution in India. As a telecommunications engineer and an entrepreneur, he has been a part of several committees and advisory panels to the government formed by the United Progressive Alliance in the 2004 elections in India. Even prior to this, he was an advisor to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and was the founder of the Indian Telecommunications Service. When Dataquest awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002, they highlighted that:

*His vision, and his technology, helped connect the people of India—in its far-flung regions and remotest corners, to each other and to the world... He battled conventional wisdom and lobbies that questioned why impoverished people needed telecom... As a young man, he battled stiff opposition from the “roti, kapda aur makaan” lobby, which was against the concept of a “connected” India. But this young man stood his ground, making the case that telecommunication—along with substantial food, clean water and adequate shelter—was a fundamental component in the process of modernization. (Dataquest 2002)*

The telecommunications revolution seems to be hinging on the singular personality of Pitroda. He becomes a social entrepreneur, providing telecommunication access to impoverished people. In his book *Vision, Values, and Velocity*, Pitroda evokes Gandhi’s view of rural development and self-sufficient communities, writing that because it isn’t a reality yet, people move from villages to cities

for jobs, power, water, and other advantages. It follows that the solution for increased rural to urban migration lies in connecting rural areas to communication systems.

*Creating new Internet infrastructures that run through rural India will enable people to do work and business from wherever they are, reducing the load on several, already stressed, systems. By using new technologies to provide everything at our fingertips, we may see people moving back to where they came from, and to the advantages of cleaner air, uncongested streets and a better way of life. (Pitroda 2001: 19)*

However, subsequent census data shows that the number of migrant workers has only increased between 2001 and 2011.<sup>4</sup> Pitroda's use of rhetoric to imagine ICT's as a solution is then a part of a technocratic society:

*in which those who govern, justify themselves by appeal to technical experts who, in turn, justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge. And beyond the authority of science, there is no appeal ... While daily political argument continues within and between the capitalist and collectivist societies of the world, the technocracy increases and consolidates its power in both as a transpolitical phenomenon, following the dictates of industrial efficiency, rationality, and necessity ... The technocracy is not generally perceived as a political phenomenon in advanced industrial societies. It holds the place, rather, of a grand cultural imperative which is beyond question, beyond discussion. (Larson 1972)*

A Weberian framework of analysis posits rationality as the basic premise for bureaucratic administration in scientifically advanced societies. Larson (1972) argues that this is accompanied by an exponential increase in specialisation and the concentration of power within a group of technical experts. Explaining how a technocratic government “depoliticises the masses” (pp. 29),<sup>5</sup> Larson outlines the dialectical nature of the “functional rationality” in modern industrial societies.

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<sup>4</sup> “Over 45.58 crore Indians were found to be ‘migrants’ for various reasons during the enumeration exercises of Census 2011. The previous Census (in 2001) had recorded the number of migrants at 31.45 crore—more than 30% lower than the 2011 figure.” (Yadav 2019)

<sup>5</sup> Discussing the depoliticisation of masses in the face of technocratic governance, Larson (1972) describes the helplessness of the “modern average man” given the nature of scientific progress in industrial societies where “the social world becomes more rather than less subject to forces which to him appear to be incalculable and beyond his control (pp.3).” Citizens increasingly depend on the government which represents their interest through representative democracy and a highly efficient bureaucracy which supposedly executes the political will of the people. Modern democracies then transform their citizens into agents who are talked down to by the class of political experts who always seem to know much more and appear better equipped to deal with problems of all kinds, given their technical specialisations. This is also a key feature of the functional rationality that characterises modern industrial societies.



Ruling-class elites derive their power from the structures of bureaucratic governance and the functional scientific rationality which serves to *legitimise* their actions. A technical world view provides the vocabulary to articulate and safeguard the perception of expertise, which promises progress given its epistemic superiority. Any social conflict is then automatically resolved on the grounds of *pure reason and logic*. Conversations about social or economic progress are not just political in such societies; they are now concerned with the truth of technology. Consequently, a natural universality appears to be associated with the promise of techno-solutionism for addressing development challenges, especially in postcolonial contexts such as India.

The precedent for technocratic politics in India lies in the conflation of technology with the bureaucratic state. Newly independent India retained the bureaucratic order of the colonial regime, along with the strong belief that science and technology were critical for nation-building. Nehru's vision for independent India, for instance, recognised the social significance of technological capacity in its potential to tackle the pressing issues of poverty and hunger. Renowned scientists and technical experts were key agents within the state machinery, indicating the strength of this vision. The special study group in the National Planning committee in 1939 consisted of leading scientists under the chairmanship of Nehru himself and was explicitly aimed at "tackling industrialisation, education and scientific research pertaining to the future needs of India" (Ahmad 1985, pp. 234). In commenting on the scientific community in India, Morehouse (1976, cited in Ahmad, 1985, pp. 238) observes:

*It has sometimes been said that India's science policy, as long as Nehru was alive, was essentially based on a series of personal interactions between Nehru and a small group of scientists holding senior posts in or serving as advisers to government, including Homi Bhabha in atomic energy, S.S. Bhatnagar, the first director general of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, S. Hussain Zabeer, the third director general of CSIR, Professor P.C. Mahalanobis, a member of the Planning Commission and India's most eminent statistician, and J.C. Ghosh, also a member of the Planning Commission.*

A "technobureaucrat" often claims to be well-versed with both with technical and social complexities, possessing a sound "awareness of the human factor" (Larson 1972, pp. 12). However, Larson denies that the technical expert has both "specialised knowledge" as well as "strategic social knowledge", arguing that the latter is, in fact, derived from the concentration of



social power. The functional rationality within technocratic societies then deems technical knowledge truthful, no matter what, reaffirming the necessity of technocratic expertise for socioeconomic growth. In other words, technocratic rhetors suggest that by the virtue of science being *scientific*, technocratic solution is more effective and, hence, technocrats are better equipped to solve social problems.

The technobureaucratic state in post-colonial India flourished under the Congress Party's rule, with persistent attempts to place technocrats in leading development interventions and projects. The presence of a select few individuals from the scientific community in planning committees and advisory bodies meant that they had a place at the decision-making table alongside political elites. Political patronage for scientific research and development provided the base for it to grow uninhibitedly and relatively independently. The scientists and technologists, therefore, transformed their technical expertise into an instrument of power.

Aspirations and visions of development are intimately related to the cultivation of a scientific temper, analytical thinking, and logical rationality. This functional scientific rationality lends itself to a technological solutionism that refutes the possibility of failure, while emphasising the immense potential that technologies possess for addressing development challenges. While the technoscientific argument appears universal and advocates for an apolitical vision of progress, we argue that a technocracy depends on placing the right people in the right places, which is, in fact, deeply political. A technobureaucratic organisation necessarily takes into account ideological orientations, often aligning with hegemonic visions of progress. It is within this historical context and trajectory that socio-technical projects in India today must be understood, with importance placed on the personalities who seem to lead these projects.

### *Technocrat as a Social Entrepreneur*

The contemporary technobureaucracy, particularly regarding digital technologies, traces its roots back to the colonial administration. In the early decades of Independence, there was a dramatic rise in the demand for, and thereby the education and training of civil engineers, given the heavy emphasis on infrastructure building. The importance of engineering as a profession in contemporary times follows from this historical trajectory; only now the emphasis is on software engineering and digital technologies. Examining how political discourse frames the utility of digital

technologies, making it the poster child for upward mobility, can help understand how this shift has occurred.

As digital technologies get equated with modernity, political rhetoric strengthens what Pal (2017) calls the “symbolic value of technology (pp. 3).” He refers to this as the abstract notion about what ownership of technological artefacts means and what they can enable individuals and collectives to do. Public discourse regarding technology is constructed by various agents in the public sphere, namely, the government, the media, and the individual citizens. In the Indian context, Pal finds the hopes and imaginations associated with technological interventions in the narratives of “leapfrogging” and catching up with Western economies. Digital technologies, it has been argued, can be used to reach the last mile, enabling growth in rural economies and other remote areas. Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICTD) projects talk about decentralised governance practices and capacity building in the same breath as the requirement of infrastructure for communication technologies to reach these regions and help make them self-sufficient. So, when politicians promise free laptops,<sup>6</sup> they draw on a functional technocratic rationality and the symbolic value of technological ownership that represents the promise of socio-economic growth and development. Similarly, international agencies, bodies and independent transnational actors have backed several ICTD projects across the developing world, providing them with significant financial investment and support. Talking about ICTD interventions at the G77 South Summit in Havana, Cuba, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan observed that

*This [information] technology is far less capital-intensive than old industrial technology, and therefore may enable poor countries to leapfrog some of the long and painful stages of development that others had to go through. ...many developing countries are already showing the way. (Pal 2008; pp. 3)*

However, Pal discusses the case of a computer centre setup in a Rajasthan village just before Bill Clinton’s visit, emphasising that it shut down almost immediately after his departure. In this way, the promise of uplifting the underprivileged hides the absence of the larger infrastructural setups required for the efficient deployment of technological interventions (Mudliar and Pal 2013). In this section, we centre two technological interventions in India and analyse the rhetoric of development associated with it.

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<sup>6</sup> Karunanidhi gave away laptops at staged and televised events, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu was known for publicity pictures with him using computers or appearing with people from the tech industry (Pal 2017).

*Aakash Tablet*

State-led projects built on techno-scientific optimism have often mandated a technocrat at the helm of the project, building momentum around it by publicising its benefits. For instance, the Aakash Tablet project sought to capitalise on the potential of technology for mass education with its commitment to affordability. It was promoted as an indigenous innovation, or as a *jugaad* (trans. “makeshift”), suggesting that if there is demand for a cheap tablet, it will be made. Based on a “teach man to fish” ideal, it was conceptualised as a low-cost device with bare minimum hardware specifications, allowing its users to access e-learning services. Kapil Sibal served as the organisational head and the public face of the project. The project gained currency due to the increasing emphasis on technological development in India and its special focus on increasing the potential of the rural and underprivileged masses.<sup>7</sup> It was the perfect technocratic dream which catered to “the people” and thrived on substantial technological origins. Kapil Sibal popularised this belief through various appearances in media conferences even when the project was in its nascent stages.

Evaluating the Aakash Tablet after its failed reception and production brings to fore the realities of the techno-scientific dream behind it. The feedback on the first round of the tablet criticised its cheapness and the inability to do most things that a proper computer could do. Further, DataWind, the associated manufacturer, failed to produce adequately and was found to have Chinese subcontractors, which demolished the nationalistic pride using which the Aakash Tablet was promoted (Mudliar and Pal 2013). Similar to the computer centre and many other ICTD projects, it failed to address the deeper infrastructural issues with the provision of a tablet to extend the reach of education. Phalkey and Chattopadhyay (2015) also point out that the transfer of power through the shifting of key individuals from different institutes (like Prem Kumar Kalra from IIT Kanpur to IIT Rajasthan and Kapil Sibal moving from MHRD to information communication ministry) “foregrounds the dependence of the technological imagination to individual champions as opposed to institutional agendas (pp. 471).”

Reference to the Aakash Tablet as Sibal’s unfulfilled dream and a personal failure bolsters our argument about technological ventures in the political realm being centred on individual authority figures. A narrative of fighting against the odds to realise the vision of a single visionary individual

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<sup>7</sup> A dominant part of the discourse was to bring up the image of the rickshaw *wala*, maid, and the watchman making use of the cheap computing devices to unleash the potential that was within the internet as a commercial tool (Mudliar and Pal 2013).

(*Financial Express* 2013) resurfaces as it does in Pitroda's account. Similarly, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's statements about the 1988 nuclear tests being crucial for national security coupled with his technical credentials as a scientist helped provide legitimacy to the tests. The celebrations that followed the tests across the country, in spite of the falling value of the Indian rupee in the international market, indicated that people were convinced by the argument that the tests, and therefore technological competence, were essential for India to progress.

*Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI)*

In his foreword to the book *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* by Nandan Nilekani (2009), Thomas Friedman writes the following about the author:

*There are not a lot of executives around the world who are known simply by their first names. Silicon Valley has 'Steve'—as in Jobs. Seattle has 'Bill'—as in Gates. Omaha has 'Warren'—as in Buffett. And Bangalore has 'Nandan'—as in Nilekani (pp. iv).*

Friedman establishes the position of Nilekani as an individual in the worth of his corporation's work, suggesting that Nilekani and his co-founders single-handedly brought about the IT revolution in the country by making Infosys a successful enterprise. Additionally, he writes,

*Nandan repeatedly and usefully reminds us that India's economic revolution since 1990 has been a 'people-driven transformation'.... It did involve a society throwing off something huge—throwing off the shackles of a half-century of low aspirations and failed economic ideas imposed from above and replacing them with its own energy and boundless aspirations. And it wasn't just the famous software entrepreneurs like Nandan who were engaged. They started it. They showed what was possible. But they were soon followed by the farmers who demanded that schools teach their children more English and the mothers who saved for their kids to have that extra tutoring to get into a local technology college... (Nilekani 2009, pp. 33)*

The general atmosphere of the post-liberalisation period in the 1990s was one of raised expectations from private enterprises in tackling the problems of the country. Friedman seems to be suggesting that the economic revolution was consented to by a vast majority of the public and ignores the international politics of the time. This kind of an economic transformation is perceived to be almost inevitable. The sentiment here is that after years of "low aspirations", the people of India found a way to "breakthrough" because of the spontaneous success of Infosys and Wipro, and consequently, Nilekani, among other individuals. Nilekani, on the one hand, is compared to

Jobs and Buffett, who are predominantly business owners, but on the other hand, he is hailed as the individual who led to the betterment of countless Indian citizens. His authority is built not only through his expertise as a technologist but also as a social entrepreneur who knows how to run a *sustainable* business.

This kind of a rhetoric ignores an important idea—that the success of corporations like Infosys is not an inevitable consequence of Nilekani’s greatness, but a range of sociocultural factors that characterised post-Independence India (as we have argued in the previous sections). In fact, as Pal (2017) points out, the inclusion of marginalised people in technology enterprises such as these “has often only laid bare the deeper underlying social issues that technology does not address (pp. 7).” Nonetheless, the rhetoric manages to portray Nilekani as an individual who not only has technical expertise but is also aware of the social problems of the country. He becomes what Larson would term a “technobureaucrat”. The drive to cover the entire nation under a biometric system of identification through the Aadhaar project has gained significant momentum under his leadership. This is to the extent that the UIDAI chairman’s position was created especially for Nilekani (*The Internet Archive* 2009). The project owes its conception and continued existence to the Infosys co-founder and has spanned across political regimes in the country under his executive leadership (Dhoot and Rajshekhar 2014).

Toyama (2015) writes a passionate critique of the ways in which the idea of the “social enterprise” is constructed. This is when start-up businesses attempt to serve a social good while also running a profitable business, and Toyama is deeply sceptical of this notion. While UIDAI is not a private enterprise, by placing Nilekani at the centre of the project, there is an indication that government projects need experts from the technocratic realm to kick-start a new and more efficient phase of overall development of the country. In September 2018, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of the Aadhaar Act, asserting that it is in the interest of the public. This is why the parts of the act that were upheld were those that made the Aadhaar card mandatory for any government scheme that draws from the consolidated fund of India (Pereira 2018).

The point of this essay is not to dissect the validity of the petition or the judgment but to reveal the way in which the discourse of public interest is stable and unquestioned within this scenario. We argue that the reputation of a technocrat such as Nilekani has supported the notion that only a technical system like Aadhaar can mitigate the issues related to disbursement of government scheme

advantages. Phalkey and Chattopadhyay (2015) take the example of ICT@Schools, a government scheme implemented in the mid-1990s. They argue that during this time, questions of content, infrastructure, and human resources training in the education sector took a back seat. Similarly, the overarching rhetoric of Aadhaar claims that it is in public interest, but no solutions have been provided for the issues that have been brought up (Dreze 2018; Khan 2018; Ranjan 2018). While proponents of Aadhaar have been quick to dismiss these incidents as lies or misunderstandings, this dismissal itself is a post-truth occurrence. However, it is convincing because of the construction of the infallibility of technical systems, and more importantly, the individuals behind them.

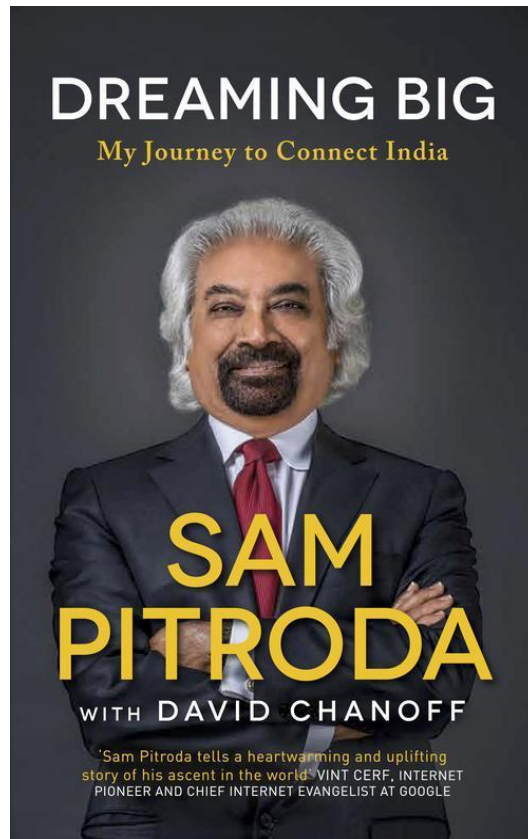
### *Technocrat as a Masculine Authority*

*Men are seduced, like the young Dr. Frankenstein, by technology's promise of transcendence. Their clever invention affords them a step above the humdrum, an escape from immanence. Meantime, capital exploits men by means of their masculine sense of self. Men dislodge each other in the capitalist and patriarchal rankings of labor. The feminine is diminished. And technology is applied to inhuman ends. (Cockburn 2009, pp. 271)*

In this section, we argue that through myths, the male technocrat imbibes what is understood to be “hegemonic masculinity”, which emphasises their status as authority. In actions and imaginations that are performed in the everyday, it contributes to keeping women subordinate to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity might not be such that is enacted by a majority of the men, but it is a frame of reference around which various gender identities would be positioned. We elaborate on two aspects of this positioning. First, through visual imagery, technocrats are afforded social weight and power; second, the myth of merit imagines the technocrat as being epistemically superior.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony is based on consensus around an idea, and not necessarily on conformity of behaviour (Lie 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is contingent on cultural imagery and circumstance. Masculinities are constructed via icons and symbols, as opposed to real capacities of men. Technocrats are powerful as unchallenged authorities, both by virtue of being “self-made” and also as representatives of hegemonic masculinities. Instead of viewing these individuals as subjects, we view the construction of personality as also constructing this masculine authority through imaginations.

The gendered representation of the male technocrat (or more generally, the male authority figure) makes and unmakes myths of progress. Barthes (2015) conceptualises this highly complex semiological system of myths constructed through images and icons. We present some examples of such images.



*Image 1: Dreaming Big by Sam Pitroda with David Chanoff. Taken from:*

<https://www.sampitroda.com/books/>



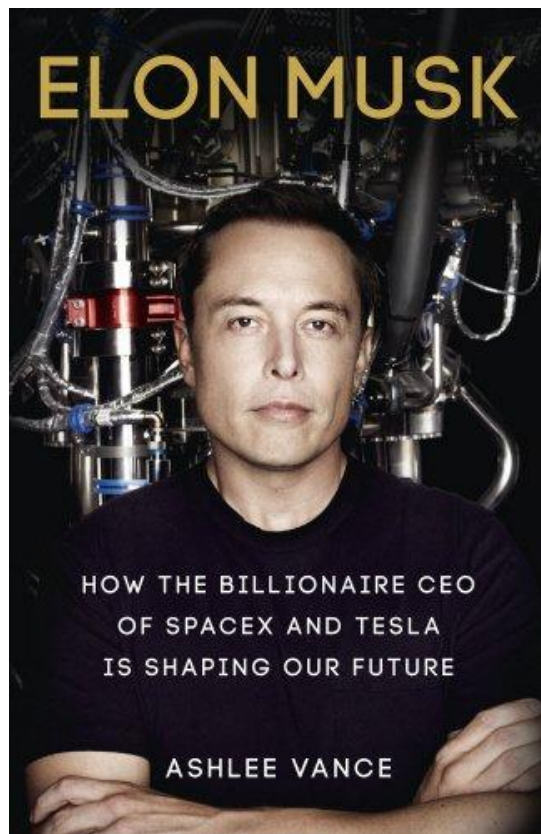


Image 2: *Elon Musk* by Ashlee Vance. Taken from: <https://www.amazon.in>

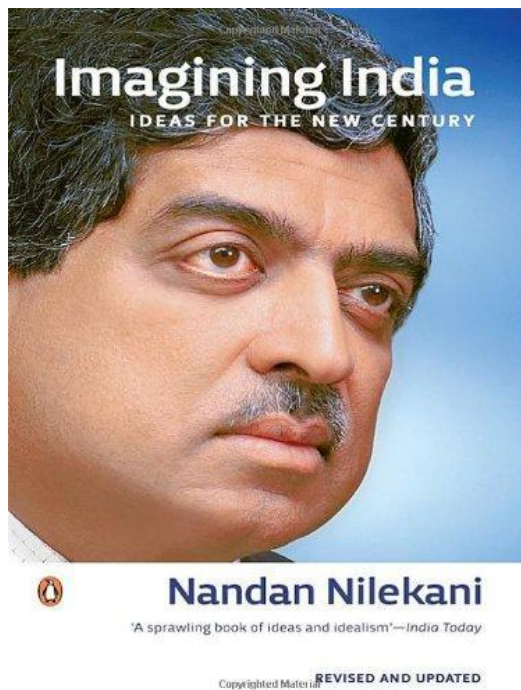


Image 3: *Imagining India* by Nandan Nilekani. Taken from: <https://www.amazon.in>

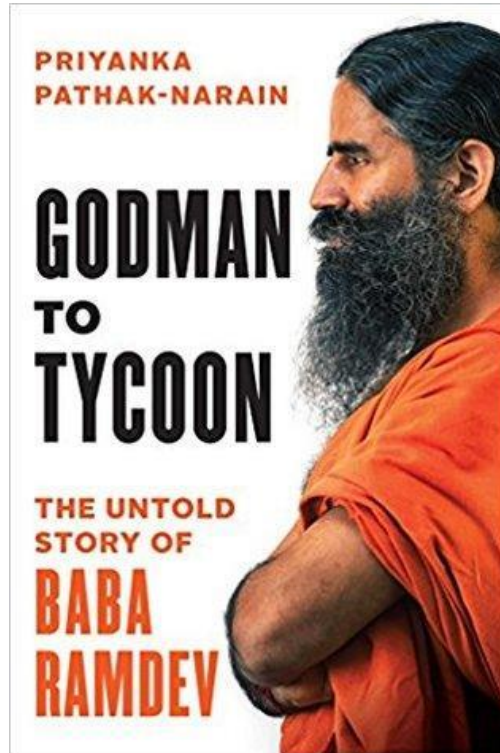


Image 4: Godman to Tycoon by Priyanka Pathak-Narain. Taken from: <https://www.goodreads.com>

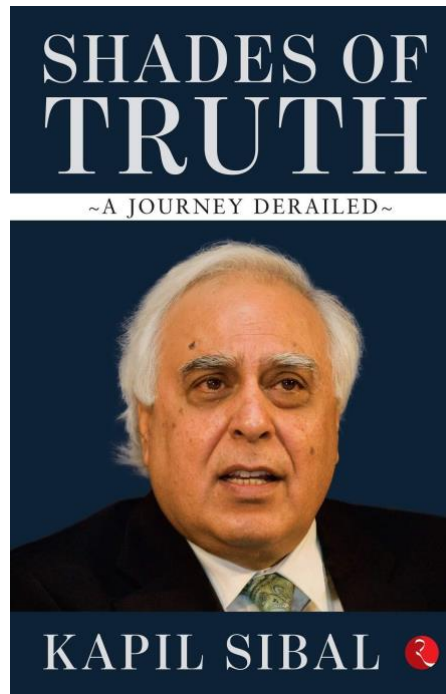


Image 5: Shades of Truth by Kapil Sibal. Taken from: <https://www.amazon.in>

These are only a few of many examples, where the images of masculine figures are used to denote authority, intelligence, and truthfulness. Erving Goffman (1979) writes of the way in which social weight is echoed in social situations (and for our purposes, cultural artefacts) via relative size in

images. Social weight here could mean “power, authority, rank, office and renown (pp. 3)”, and individuals with these virtues would be expressed with greater girth and height. While Goffman writes about *relative* size, especially when women also constitute the image, and particularly in advertising, there is merit in the idea that as personalities, those in the above pictures are shown in authoritarian poses: arms folded, standing tall, or in the primacy of their face, singular and unflinching. These individuals are not necessarily fascistic, which Adorno et al. (1950) also address when writing about the “authoritarian personality”, writing that instead, individuals can be *potentially* fascistic, such that they do not explicitly belong to fascist organisations but can still be ideologically inclined towards it. This has been true of individuals across political parties, popular media and corporate control.

With regard to post-truth media, we draw attention towards how individuals become vehicles to propound certain truths. An unbiased, scientific man becomes the perfect symbol to persuade publics of a version of development rooted in technical progress. Catano (1990) writes about the myth of the “self-made man” in the US, suggesting that it has had several versions: one of the protestant ethics of individual hard work, virtues as constructed by Franklin and Jefferson, and also the popular vision of the self-made entrepreneur. The myth is concerned with giving little merit to the origin of an individual, declaring instead that the road to economic power or a truly expressive voice is via virtues like hard work, perseverance, and honesty, not by birth or class. This is the rhetoric of masculinity that posits other identities are being simply a coincidence. This description of the myth, Catano writes, “conveniently forgets that the institutionalization of credit fostered the rise of the supposedly independent, self-made magnates of the industrial age (pp. 426)”.

The myth of the self-made man is reminiscent of the myth of merit in the psyche of the forward caste Hindus, such as the one that became apparent when V.P. Singh announced the decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (Balagopal 1990). The accumulation of social capital that has benefited the upper-caste communities is hidden by the rhetoric of hard work and merit. There seemed to be an onslaught of pro-merit<sup>8</sup> content across news, art, and politics, including cartoons and speeches. Regarding films, for instance, Chandra (2010) writes of youthful anger, perpetuated by films with a nationalist message such as *Rang De Basanti* (2004),

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<sup>8</sup> In India, anti-reservation in education discourse centers around the “meritorious” quality of students belonging to the upper castes; in that, students from unreserved categories get seats in educational institutions through their hard work without affirmative action (Roy 2020).

*Lakshya* (2004), *Yuna* (2004), among others. This was evident in the (mainly upper caste) group Youth for Equality (YFE) during 2006, with the rhetoric of a heroic and youthful individual becoming the representative of civil society and ensuring justice specifically against caste-based reservation in educational institutions (Chowdhury 2019). This individual is removed from petty politics of gender and caste identity, and only cares about the well-being of his loved ones (and consequently, the nation).

The overflow of information regarding the dilution of merit in educational institutions and public offices is akin to claims made in a post-truth era, wherein knowledge construction is about structures of power. This has been possible due to the apparent epistemic superiority of upper caste men, who have been placed in positions of having expressive voices in every institution within the civil society and the state apparatus. Technocrats become, via the political speech and demeanour they employ, speakers of unbiased truth.

## **Conclusion**

What we hope to bring to light with this essay is the notion that the post-truth era never began, but that it exists in the way that epistemic value is created. Meanwhile, the dichotomy of true and false keeps hidden the subtle rhetoric of hegemony, whereby ideological states remain untouched, but there is fervent debate about the truthfulness or falsity of claims. This has been particularly true of technological projects led by the state, where the image of the well-meaning and intelligent technocrat takes precedence over any kind of dissent. The technocrat seems to fight corrupt political power and systems of governance which are extremely inadequate to solve the social problems at hand. He then emerges as an individual who achieved success in spite of difficult circumstances in life, through his innate virtuosity. Who better to lead the country's progress than such a man?

We propose that it would be beneficial to destabilise the cult of personality around men of science and technology. This does not mean a rejection of scientific truth or technological progress but to shake the glorification that individuals receive within these institutions. Additionally, for a world in which media presence is almost ubiquitous, it would also be beneficial to be aware of the ways in which personalities become associated with technical projects. This cannot be with disregard to the political affiliations of these personalities, but what needs to be noted is the quickness with which their word becomes the last word. The constructed authority of these personalities in

matters of science and technology is very easily extended to their superiority in solving all kinds of problems. Negotiations through social and political collectives are bypassed when technical expertise is privileged over the narratives of the recipients, which is often the case when it comes to welfare oriented technological projects. We argue that these linkages need to be highlighted and myths around the all-roundedness of technocratic policies and projects need to be debunked in order to better understand the conflicts during their implementation.

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