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The Last Clearance Sale on Earth, “It is Getting Louder” © Nityan Unnikrishnan

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Editorial Note

The phenomenon of post-truth has had a longer life than what it is ordinarily made out to be. The critical traditions in media studies have clearly demonstrated that the political and the economic elite have the means to create salience around particular narratives that reproduce and entrench their power at the cost of public interest. The contemporary use of the term post-truth refers to the same phenomenon however now no longer relying on the repertoire of spin and propaganda techniques but rather masquerading unconcealed and emboldened as ideological supremacy where facts and evidence are of little consequence. Various non-liberal and populist projects that militate against the progressive ideals and procedural norms enshrined in the constitution not only remain invested in the phenomenon of post-truth but are increasingly working to expand its boundaries beyond the realm of 'fake news'. Wielding resentment and outrage as political tools, they seek to turn even ordinary aspects of public life into ideological contests. It is this dimension that the authors have focused on and critically analysed in this issue.

The essays published here were first presented at the Frames of Reference 2018, the national post-graduate student seminar of the School of Media and Cultural Studies. Titled, "Does the Nation Want to Know? The Politics of Post-Truth", the seminar saw participating scholars respond to the theme by holding to scrutiny hegemonic discourses in the areas of knowledge production, caste, and sexuality; exploring practices of resistance and counter-mobilisations; and unpacking the politics of erasure and violence.

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

Anushree Gupta and Chinar Mehta

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.

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

Introduction

> *What makes Kuhn'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 "adulting", "woke", "alt-right", and "Brexiteer", 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.[1] 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 publics 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.

[1] 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[2] 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

[2] 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,[3] 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.

[3] 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.[4] Pitroda's use of rhetoric to imagine ICTs 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),[5] Larson outlines the dialectical nature of the "functional rationality" in modern industrial societies.

[4] "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)

[5] 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 Zaheer, 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 technobureacratic 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 technobureacractic 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,[6] 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.

[6] 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.[7] 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

[7] 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 disbursal 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.

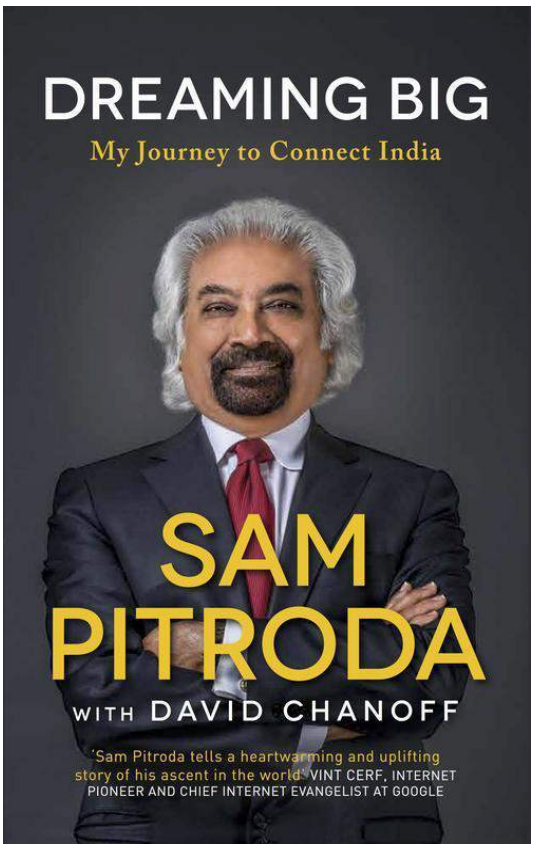

Image 1: Dreaming Big *by Sam Pitroda with David Chanoff. Taken from: https://www.sampitroda.com/books/*

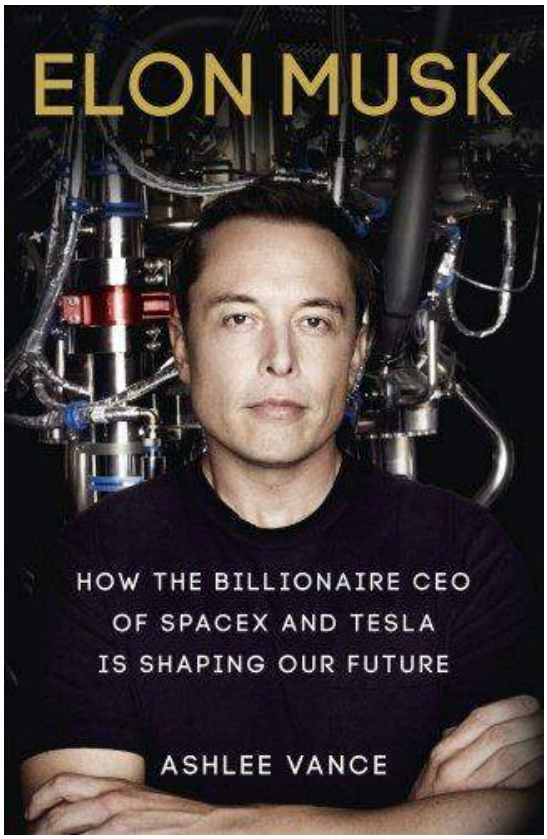

Image 2: Elon Musk *by Ashlee Vance. Taken from: https://www.amazon.in*

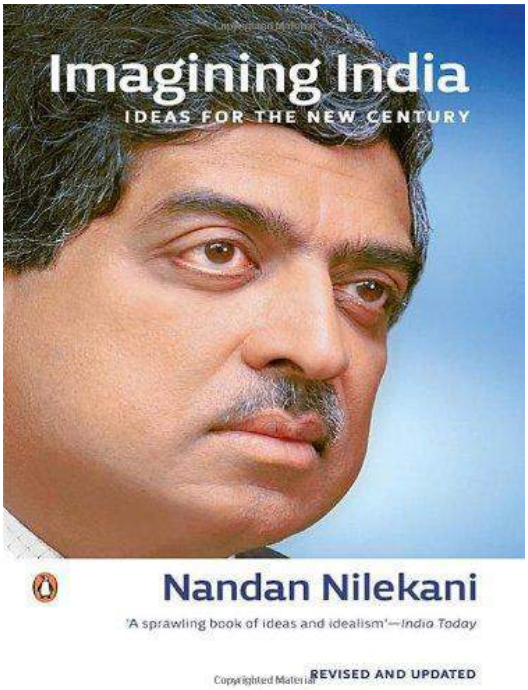

Image 3: Imagining India *by Nandan Nilekani. Taken from: https://www.amazon.in*

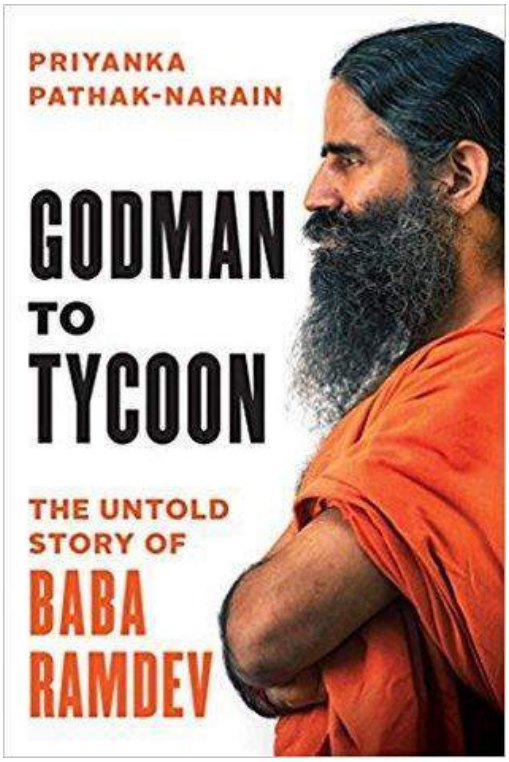

Image 4: Godman to Tycoon *by Priyanka Pathak-Narain. Taken from: https://www.goodreads.com*

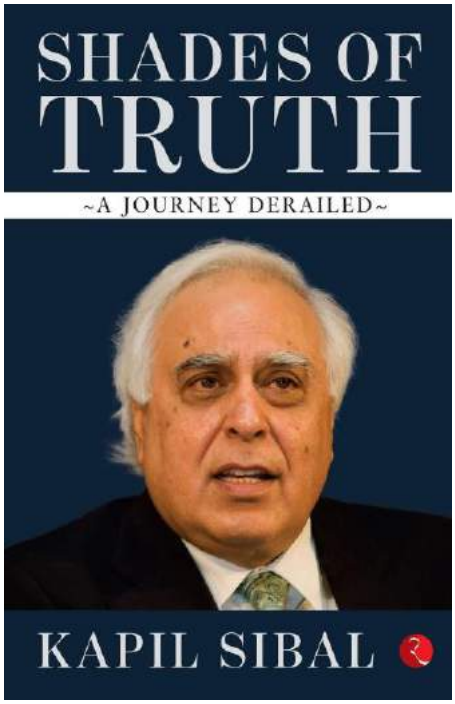

Image 5: Shades of Truth *by Kapil Sibal. Taken from: https://www.amazon.in*

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[8] 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),

[8] 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), *Yuva* (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.

Anushree Gupta is a PhD scholar at the Department of Liberal Arts, IIT Hyderabad. She is interested in exploring technologies as cultural artifacts, and their intersections with labour and place-making. Her current research focuses on techno-entrepreneurialism in the urban context.

Chinar Mehta is a PhD Scholar in Communication at the University of Hyderabad. Her research interests include feminist STS, cultural studies of science and technology, and digital media. She also received the Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Fellowship to collaborate at the Human Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, US.

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SUB\versions
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Muzaffarnagar: The Politics of Post-truth and Hindu Nationalism

Suparba Sil

Abstract

The following paper is an attempt to explore the dynamics and power of the rhetoric of post-truth, keeping the Muzaffarnagar riots as the locus of discussion. Tracing the communal history of western Uttar Pradesh through incidents such as the Ayodhya–Babri Masjid issue, the paper discusses the manner in which communal conflicts were concocted through a post-truth rhetoric in post-Independence India in an attempt to create an 'imagined Hindu community' within the larger framework of a Hindu national consciousness. Punctuated by narratives of the victims displaced by the riots, the paper attempts to investigate the ramifications of post-truth for the displaced population that is now restrained within the space of a 'need economy'. Within a framework of electoral politics of Uttar Pradesh, the paper attempts to understand how post-truth leads to the proliferation of discourses of power that controls subjects for the purpose of 'effective governance' and securing a vote bank.

Keywords: post-truth, Hindu nationalism, electoral politics, communal riots, rehabilitation, need economy

Introduction: Muzaffarnagar Riots and the Politics of Post-Truth

Muzaffarnagar, a district in western Uttar Pradesh, witnessed the most significant riot of the last decade in September 2013. On 27 August 2013, an altercation between Shahnawaz (a Muslim youth from Kaval village) and two brothers, Gaurav and Sachin (Jats from Malikpura), turned violent after Gaurav and Sachin stabbed Shahnawaz on grounds of eve-teasing a girl related to Sachin. Subsequently, a crowd gathered in the area and started using sharp-edged weapons on the two youths, ultimately leading to their death. Even though the state government authorities stated that there was no clear evidence of eve-teasing, the local media reported the incident along those lines. Soon after, to instigate communal sentiments further, a video was circulated on social media platforms by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Sangeet Som that portrayed the murder of a Hindu youth by the hands of two Muslims (Anhad 2013). Even though the Akhilesh Yadav-led state government was slammed on social media for having blamed the video for perpetuating the riots, it was later discovered that the video was from several years ago,

of an incident that happened in Sialkot. Instead of exploring the veracity of the video, public meetingswere organised by both the communities soon after, followed by a bandh being organised by theBJP on the 5 September. While the local leaders were being pitted against one another, the Khap Panchayat, aided by the local BJP unit, organised a "beti-bachao" rally, in which communally provocative speeches were delivered by the local Hindu leaders. The mahapanchayat, held on 7 September, was organised in Nagla Mandaur village, not too far from Kawal village, where the situation was already tense and pre-episodes of "communal" violence had already taken place. It is reported that Jats[1] from Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Bagpat, Budhana, Ghaziabad, District Bijnor, and Haryana reached the location on 7 September, by and large in tractor trolleys ((Rao et al 2014). The mobilisation was mainly of Baliyan Jats (corroborated by the fact that no violence took place north of Muzaffarnagar, where these two Jat communities are not dominant)

We had been hearing rumours of attacks for some time, but on the 7 September, we received a phone call from my relative, who told us to run. And, we did not think of anything further. *"Bhag nikle hum to, ghar, gehne samaan sab kuch chorke, kuch bhi nahin le aye hum; chappal bhi nahin pehne,"* (We just fled, left our homes, valuables everything; we were not even wearing our slippers) says one of the victims[2] a resident of the village of Kakra.

"Hum toh kaisey bhi jaan bacha ke bhag nikle, piche piche sarey Jat chaku aur rod le ke bhag rahe the; humara ek lorry hain, use mein uthke nikal gaye," (Somehow, we managed to save our lives and run, we were being chased by Jats carrying knives and rods; we have a lorry, we just got onto it and ran away) elaborates another Muslim victim.

"Jaise hi humko dange ke barein mein khabar mili, hum samaan band ke nikal parein. Chalte chale piche se goli ki awaaz ayi. Piche murke dekha toh meri saas ko goli lagi thi or who niche gir gaye the. Baccho ki zindagi ke barein mein soch ke hum wapas nahi ja paye unke liye." (As soon as the news about the riots reached us, we packed our bags and left. While on our way, we heard gunshots and turned around to see that my mother-in-law had been shot. Thinking about our children, we couldn't go back for her) states a Muslim woman from Kutba.

[1] It should be pointed out that the conflict that took place in Muzaffarnagar can be called a Jat–Muslim conflict. The Jats are a dominant Hindu caste in the area having a great hold over the agrarian resources. However, in the context of the Muzzafarnagar riots, caste and culture differences were subsumed under the larger umbrella of Hindu identity and hence, Jat–Muslim conflict, in this context, resonates with Hindu–Muslim conflict (Ahmed 2013).

[2] The narratives of the victims cited in the paper are primary data that has been gathered by the author, with consent from the respondents during the process of a fieldwork for the purpose of a fellowship.

Drawing from his ethnography of communal riots in Aligarh, Brass (2003) elaborates that the occurrence of riots is almost never accidental; in retrospect, what emerges is the complicity of the State and political actors in engineering riots, especially as a vote-consolidating mechanism in the face of upcoming elections. In this instance, the immediate incident at hand could be understood as an attempt by the local wing of the BJP to instigate nationalist sentiments premised on a Hindu community identity in order to gain electoral incentives. Wilkinson (2004) argues that parties representing the dominant community in a region invariably make use of polarising anti-minority events in an effort to persuade fellow members of their community to identify with their party.

While the above narrative points to the fact that the principal precipitant of large-scale riots is the political manipulation of local conflicts in an attempt to transform them into a fledged communal conflict (Brass 2003), this paper will attempt to explore and explain the manner in which the political manipulation of the objective reality occurs to instigate and arouse communal sentiments, with the aim of consolidating a Hindu national identity. With the above incident as a starting point, the paper will outline the manner in which rumours, fake news, and provocative speeches have been used over the years in western Uttar Pradesh to create a communal divide while attempting to create an imagined community that resonated with Hindu ideas of nationalism.

The word "post-truth" was introduced in the Oxford dictionary in 2016 to denote circumstancesin which the objective facts are less influential in shaping circumstances as opposed to emotions and personal belief. The idea of post-truth is premised in a Machiavellian ideologue in which "politics" and "truth" interact with one another differently than in a socaiety governed by a rhetoric having its foundation in reason and objective facts. In the post-truth era, alternative narratives are often created and disseminated through the use of media and rumours. Following McComiskey(2017), such alternative narratives are an insidious form of post-truth that offer meaningful and attractive interpretation of situations irrespective of however far-fetched, factually incorrect, orempirically biased they are. What is more significant in this regard is not the use of unethical rhetoric but the ready consumption of that rhetoric by the masses.

Be it the incident in Kawal that was grounded on unverified claims of eve-teasing or the circulation of the fake video from Sialkot (in which a Hindu youth was being murdered at the hands of the Muslim youths), the representation of the matter at the "beti-bachao" mahapanchayat points to a re-legitimation of arguments based on emotional appeal and symbolic value grounded in an idea

of a Hindu nation and its dominant community identity pitted against that of the minority identity. The conjecture that can be drawn from the same is that the public that is a part of the 'post-truth' discourse does not seek information on the basis of which it would form its beliefs; it seeks information that supports its beliefs. The significance of social media in this regard is immense as it helps generate an alternate truth, albeit without a logical epistemological premise, alongside facilitating widespread dissemination of the same. Ahmed (2013) points out the manner in which technology was used in the Muzaffarnagar riots as an instrument to reinforce community stereotypes. The use of live and still images of alleged ethnic conflict in such a context triggered community sentiments premised in arguments of emotional appeal.

However, the incident at Kawal cannot be regarded as an isolated incident that attempted to stir communal sentiments in the process of awakening a Hindu national consciousness. While the power of post-truth is significant, the occurrence of such a large-scale ethnic violence can only be understood in its entirety once we delve into the history of communal violence in western Uttar Pradesh, the origins of which can be traced back to the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism in postcolonial India.

Post-truth Imaginings through a Brief History of Western Uttar Pradesh

The history of communal conflict in post-Independence India began with the dispute over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, situated in western Uttar Pradesh. The Ayodhya–Babri Masjid dispute rested on the belief that a temple that existed to commemorate the birth of the Hindu God Ram was demolished by the Mughal Emperor Babur to construct the Babri Masjid in the ruins of the temple. While a controversial debate still continues about the archaeological evidence of the existence of the temple, the Ayodhya–Babri Masjid issue has become a matter of contention for the Muslim and the Hindu communities, over the years following Independence.

The roots of communal divide were sown as early as December 1949, when some Hindu Pandits smuggled an idol of Lord Ram inside the Masjid, which was at that time a place of regular worship for the Muslim community. The incident was portrayed as one of divine intervention, in which the idol had magically appeared one night inside the temple. The power of rumour and media was such that with the circulation of the news, a crowd gathered outside the temple the next morning to see the appearance of Lord Ram inside the mosque. Needless to say, the objective facts premised in the veracity of events were of little importance here, as opposed to emotions and belief.

McComiskey (2017) identifies how, in instances governed by a post-truth rhetoric, any linguistic reference to facts or truths are disregarded in the face of "ethos" and "pathos"; the "logos" no longer remain important.

Even though it was subsequently revealed that the idol had been purposefully placed inside the mosque by some Hindu priests, the seeds of communal divide premised in a post-truth rhetoric had already been laid. Even though the gates of the mosque were closed off by the police under instructions of the state government, District Magistrate K.K. Nayar refused to remove the idol from inside the mosque, working on orders of the chief secretary of Uttar Pradesh. While the situation awaited legal decision, no further initiative was taken on the local level in fear of instigating the majority community. The political climate changed in the 1960s, with the birth of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organisation that aimed to consolidate and strengthen Hindu solidarity. The VHP did not gain much ground until the 1980s, but in 1986, they started a procession to Ayodhya from Sitamarhi (the birthplace of Sita), under the banner "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" (Hail Mother India). The procession gained ground in Lucknow, but by the time it reached Delhi, the issue receded to the background as the national attention became focused on the murder of Indira Gandhi. Nevertheless, the VHP kept on pressuring the district court of Faizabad for opening the temple, resulting in the biggest communal protest in India, staged by the Muslims in New Delhi in 1987 (Van der Veer 1992). It would be incorrect to say that the Babri Masjid issue did not receive support from the Congress prior to the elections of 1989, but the BJP made it their central agenda, making their political alignment with the VHP obvious. September 1989 saw the VHP engaging in the worship of "bricks of Lord Ram" in several North Indian villages, from where processions of people carried them to Ayodhya for the construction of the Ram Mandir from different parts of the country.

The following year, the fateful march to Ayodhya was initiated by the BJP leader L.K. Advani, with the aim of constructing the Ram Mandir by the end of the year. The subsequent arrest of Advani by the Mulayam Sign Yadav government, as soon as the procession entered Uttar Pradesh, did not stop the kar-sevaks (religious volunteers) from marching to the temple, even in the face of police firing. The BJP utilised the incident to continue its campaign, this time, through the use of video and audio cassettes that claimed that thousands of "martyrs" had been killed wrongfully by the police fire, and that their ashes were being carried through the country in asthi-kalashas (ritual pots) for immersion in sacred waters (Van der Veer 1992). The march to Ayodhya was the watershed incident that turned the BJP from a peripheral right-wing party to a powerful electoral

force and the primary opposition of the Congress. An analysis of the Babri Masjid situation takes us back to the argument about post-truth rhetoric premised in 'ethos' rather than facts, fostering community sentiments.

There have been several debates among scholars about the present-day Ayodhya being the Ayodhya of the Ramayana, with Sanskrit scholar Hans Baker arguing that the present-day Ayodhya was actually called Saketa and was renamed by a Gupta king as Ayodhya in order to establish a link between his rule and that of the mythical Hindu ruler (Van der Veer 1992). Such was the strength of Hindu consciousness premised in emotional appeal that the time appropriate casting of the televised version of Ramayana in 1987, was met with extremely popularity and devotion. Inevitably, the telecasting at that point was yet another attempt to reassert the rightful claim of the Hindus over the Babri Masjid, using narratives traceable to myths rather than verifiable truths. While, rhetoric, part of an epistemological continuum, constitutes facts, realities and truths as epistemic counterparts, (McComiskey 2017), in a post-truth scenario, facts, realities, and truth lose their significance and no longer form a part of the epistemological continuum. Devoid of the foundational premise, the post-truth rhetoric becomes an empty signifier, where language assumes the role of strategic medium without reference to anything, other than itself. The rhetoric of post-truth manifests itself through a de- establishment of "truth" and resonates with extremist ideologies that find a voice within such contexts.

The incident in the winter of 1949 was simply the beginning of a long history of communal strife in western Uttar Pradesh. Fuelled by the consistent efforts of the VHP campaigning for the liberation of Ram's birthplace, western Uttar Pradesh saw a series of communal troubles in the latter half of the 1960s. One of the most prominent instances of conflict triggered by the Babri Masjid dispute would be the Hashimpura Massacre that occurred in May 1987, where Meerut in western Uttar Pradesh was wrecked by communal violence (Mander 2018). The Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) and the army were launched to bring the situation under control, but instead they rounded up 40–45 Muslim men from the Hashimpura locality and under the pretext of taking them to the police station, took them to a canal near Ghaziabad, where they were shot dead by the police. Thirty-eight people died, while 11 bodies were identified (Ashraf 2018). The accused were acquitted in 2015 by the trial court on account of lack of evidence and it was only in 2018 that the Delhi High Court overturned the judgment of the trial court and convicted the accused on charges of murder and conspiracy (Rashid 2018).

The mass murders in Maliyana, Uttar Pradesh, that happened a day before the Hashimpura Massacre were one of the largest instances of custodial killing, where 72 Muslims were killed by the PAC when they opened fire in a locality in Maliyana after closing off five exit points. Following a report by the Times of India, 106 out of 214 houses were burnt down at a time, when Meerut was strife with communal riots premised on the Babri Masjid dispute (Rai 2015). The custodial killings of Muslims in both the instances point to the utter disregard for the lives of the minority community who were trapped in the wrong side of the power conflict.

The communal tensions in western Uttar Pradesh after Independence can be understood as a step towards strengthening the identity of the Hindu community in order to build and consolidate an idea of nationalism that resonated with a Hindu nation. Following Van der Veer (1992), the only narrative that appealed to the Hindu nationalists was one that reflected notions of community identity built within the framework of a Hindu nation.

Hindu Nationalism and the Creation of the "Imagined Hindu Community"

Hindu nationalism could roughly be categorised into two phases: the first is a transition from an inchoate Hindu world without boundaries to one with a sense of unified nationalism in the context of unified integrative communication, administration, etc. The second transition that occurred roughly in the mid-1920s attempted to crystallise an aggressive Hindutva ideology. As noted by Menon and Nigam (2007), the second phase of Indian nationalism, which began in 1925 with the formation of the political organisation known as the Sangh Parivar, with the RSS at the centre, served as the ideological fountainhead of Hindutva politics.

Territoriality was a starting point in Hindutva ideology: A Hindu, as understood by Savarkar, was one who considered the Hindu nation as their pitribhumi (holy fatherland). The Hindutva ideology aimed at a complete restructuring of the nation followed by a reconversion and subsequent assimilation under the Hindu fold. Only Hindus could therefore, be true patriots of their fatherland. Thus, following Sarkar (1996), the entire discourse of Hindutva attempted to discretely use culture as an intermediate term invested with Hindu religious meanings and associations.

Sarkar's notions find resonance with Gellner's theory of nationalism, where Gellner ([1983] 2006) describes nationalism as a force that attempts to homogenise cultures, striving to establish political boundaries congruent with cultural boundaries. Gellner ([1983] 2006) notes that the formation of nations is simply the result of nationalist propaganda founded on a fallacious belief of nationalist

mythologies. Anderson (2006), critiquing Gellner, points out that while Gellner understands the creation of nations through falsity and fabrication, the foundation of nations can also be imaginary. The nation, according to Anderson (2006: 7), is an "imagined political community" of "deep horizontal comradeship", wherein the imagined community exists to define a distinction between "us" and "them". Nationalism in such a context entails patriotic sentiments for one's own imagined community. Anderson associates the rise of nationalism with the advent of print capitalism and the calendrical coincidence of events in newspapers. The newspaper reader, while reading the news and carefully observing that exact replicas are being read by other readers around him/her, is assured of the veracity of the imagined world that is essentially rooted in his everyday life. By reading the same news that millions of other readers of his/her community are also reading, the reader feels a sense of belonging with his/her community, one that is not premised in territorial proximity.

Even though Anderson (2006) understands the creation of an imagined community within the framework of print capitalism, this paper assumes that the creation of an "imagined political community" can occur by the dissemination of a narrative/news through any medium that has a significant reach. The narrative or news in question need not have its premise in objective facts and may very well be a post-truth rhetoric that finds its way to a large segment of the population, becoming the basis for the formation of their imagined community. Let us for instance go back to the incident of Muzaffarnagar, where the fake video of two Muslim youths lynching a Hindu youth was circulated widely. That incident can be regarded as an instance of re-assertion of an imagined political community that is solely based on an argument having as its epistemological counterpart emotional appeal, rather than facts. Thus, in my opinion, electronic media can be regarded as an instrument that perpetuates the creation of an imagined community by ensuring access to the same video/audio content by people across the country, through the use of different social media platforms. The fact that an imagined community presupposes a horizontal comradeship, ensures a fool-proof post-truth rhetoric that does not have its basis in objective facts. However, the instance of communal conflict in Muzaffarnagar can be understood as a call for the re-assertion of the community identity rather than the creation of it.

The rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism through the creation of an imagined Hindu community can be traced back to the Babri Masjid dispute: the rumours of the appearance of Ram, the consistent attempts of the VHP to liberate "Ramjanmabhoomi" (birthplace of Ram) never let Ayodhya become the news of yesterday. The call to liberate this site rested on the VHP's motive

of destroying or moving the mosque so that a new temple could be constructed on the site to house an enlivened image of Ram. Posters announcing a rath yatra (journey of a chariot) in Delhi referred to this programme in condensed imagery with two illustrations of the bow-wielding deity and an architectural model of the proposed temple (Davis 1996). The fact that such a large crowd from all parts of the country turned up for the march to Ayodhya in 1990 was again a proof of the existence of the imagined Hindu community that the protestors felt that they are a part of.

The march to Ayodhya, which received a wide range of support, was the culmination of successful mobilisation and adept manipulation of cultural symbols that hinted at an imagined Hindu community. Anderson (2006) also points out the importance of signs that help create and unite the political community, i.e., the nation, through the use of language and signs. Following Erwin Panofsky, Richard Davis (1996) elaborates on the motifs and symbols that form the premise of the Ayodhya narrative in an attempt to elucidate on the underlying principles that reveal the basic attitudes of a nation, a period, a religious persuasion, etc. Davis (1996) understands the Ayodhya narrative as a cultural performance of great emotional appeal, one that evoked intense nationalistic sentiments. During the rath yatra to Ayodhya, several images, such as that of the lotus, weapons and Ram himself, became points of interpretive contention. The images circulated were more strategic than representational. Davis (1996) stresses on the performative character of those involved in the yatra in addition to their conscious agency. In selecting a heterogeneous assortment of Hindu symbols previously not put together before, they were creating a language for the imagined Hindu nation, which the members of the community understand and associate with. Following Anderson (2006), this was the manner in which languages of power were created, with certain signs and signifiers being associated with the idea of the nation and, subsequently, nationalism. The language created lacked any reference to facts, truths, or realities; it became a purely strategic medium to generate the desired result. The creation of such a language only makes sense within the post- truth rhetoric. The desired result was the creation and consolidation of the imagined Hindu community that operated within a discourse of post-truth.

Once the formal model of the Hindu nation was imagined, the same was easily exploited in a Machiavellian spirit, as the communal conflicts in the following years signify. The aim of Ayodhya and subsequent retrieval of temples in North India were carried out with the aim of constructing a unified nation: one that operates on a singular Hindu ideology, one that is intolerant of the "other", the Muslim. Following Sarkar (1996), communalism could be understood as a labelling exercise on part of secular nationalists to brand community identities. Communal politics, with the

rhetoric of post-truth, thus helped consolidate a Hindu national consciousness. In the context of Muzaffarnagar, such a rhetoric came at the cost of large-scale death and displacement for the Muslim minority living in the area.

Conclusion

The re-assertion and consolidation of the imagined Hindu community through the use of a post-truth rhetoric in the context of Muzaffarnagar had a far-reaching impact in terms of electoral politics. While the BJP was using rumours and fake news to consolidate a Hindu vote bank, the Samajwadi Party was reeling under the pressure of ensuring their place in the upcoming general elections of 2014. Following an article by Srivastava (2013), the electorate in the district consisted of 52 per cent Jat voters and 22 per cent Muslim voters. The reaction of the Samajwadi Party to the occurrence of the riots hinted at the fact that the state government did not want to lose out on the support from the Jat population, which was a significant proportion of the electorate. Following an article by Kirpal (2013), after the incident on 27 August, senior bureaucrats and police officials in the district and in Lucknow had a very clear sense of the direction that things could take if the situation was not brought under control. When the situation started getting tumultuous, the District Magistrate slapped Section 144 in the area, preventing the assembly of people. However, between 31 August and 7 September, no action was taken by the Samajwadi Party government to prevent the mahapanchayat from happening (Kirpal 2013). As noted earlier, the situation turned into one of a full-fledged riot post the occurrence of the mahapanchayat.

Civil society reports state how the villagers ran for their lives as the violence spread to the rural areas. Women have narrated how they had to carry their little children and run, with no police personnel in sight (Rao et al 2014). Even during the occurrence of the riots that led to the displacement of so many victims, the Samajwadi Party government did not do much to prevent or control the riots. While the area was overwhelmed by communal strife, the senior superintendent of police of Muzaffarnagar was changed five times. The fact-finding report by Rao et al. (2014) states that throughout the occurrence of the riots, mobile patrols and static pickets were absent, even when the probability and extent of the violence was known post the mahapanchayat. The absence of police in areas of violence was particularly striking since the situation was already being controlled from Lucknow by then.

What emerges is the complicity of the state government in the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim-populated Hindu villages in the area. The Samajwadi Party government has been vehemently criticised on social media for not being able to deal with the violence better. But as Wilkinson (2004) has very rightly pointed out, electoral incentives happen both at the level of local constituency as well as level of government. The reaction of the Samajwadi Party to the riots points to the fact that the only way in which the state would have intervened and stopped the ethnic cleansing, that led to the subsequent displacement of Muslims, was if they were not dependent on Jat votes to secure a large percentage of the 80 seats from Uttar Pradesh at the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Additionally, the Samajwadi Party has always been in a political tassel with the Bahujan Samaj Party, and a conjecture can be drawn at this point that given the rising power of the BJP in the area, they did not want to lose out completely on the votes from the Jat community so close to the elections.

As a direct result of the state government's indirect compliance to the rhetoric of post-truth that instigated the riots, 40,000 people (most of them Muslims) were displaced from their homes, along with damages to property and livelihood. The official death toll stood at approximately 52 people, out of which only a very small percentage of people were from the Jat community (Rao et al 2014). The impact of the riots was however not uniform across villages. While members of some villages like Kutba and Kuthbi primarily faced casualties, members of other villages such as Kakda and Lisadh faced indirect impacts, whereby the residents ran away in fear of the impending consequences of the riots. Inadvertently, an atmosphere of great despair, grief, and loss clouded the lives of the many who survived. Majority of the people who died were from the Muslim population.

"Is bacche ka ma baap mar gaye dange mein, ab hum isko kaise akele pale batao?," (This child's parents died in the riots, how will I bring the child up by myself, tell me?) states the grandmother of a five-year- old grandchild, after being displaced by the riots from their village in Lisadh.

"Humara ghar, humara gao sab humse cheen liya gaya. Ab hum kitne din iss haalath mein rahe iss basti mein," (Our home, our village was taken away from us. How long do we stay in this condition, in this camp?) laments a Muslim woman from Kakra.

Coming out of the village was a compulsion for them. *"Hum to darr ke maare bhaag aaye.) Pehle toh sab acha tha,"* (We were so scared that we were forced to leave our village. Earlier, everything was fine [between Jats and Muslims]) elaborates a respondent on being asked why they left.

The Muslim minority that was displaced in the camps, however, had no option but to turn to the Samajwadi Party-led state government. Following a fact-finding report by Rao et al (2014), the victims had been living in refugee camps under very difficult conditions: winter had set in, and mothers with babies were entirely dependent on the goodwill of those around for milk and medical facilities. There was neither any doctor in the camps nor any police official found at the site of any of the camps. The local community and civil society organisations were the ones providing food, bedding, clothes, etc. to the victims, even though the District Magistrate stated that the district administration had been arranging for relief facilities.

"Humare bacche khaane ke liye rote rehte hain, aur hum kuch nahi kar pate," (Our children keep crying for food and we can't do anything) laments a young mother of 3 children.

"Humare bacche khauf se so nahi pate. Allah kabhi inhe maaf nahi karega," (Our children can't sleep at night out of fear. Allah will never forgive them) narrates another young mother from Kutba.

However, given the fact that the District Magistrate shared a dais with Muslim leaders right before the mahapanchayat, the Samajwadi Party government did not really have the confidence of the Jat population post the riots (Kirpal 2013). Therefore, in October 2013, the state government declared a one-time compensation of INR 5 lakh to the families displaced by the riots (Agarwal 2013). A conjecture can be drawn at this point that such a step was taken to appease the Muslim minorities, who, at the end of the day, did constitute 22 per cent of the electorate. Once the riots were over, the Samajwadi Party government felt the need to pacify the displaced Muslim population, since they knew that they could never simply win only with the Jat votes against the BJP in the picture. However, the manner in which the compensation packages were rolled out by the Samajwadi Party government was also problematic. The victims who were deemed eligible for the same had to sign documents stating that they would never return to those villages (Agarwal 2013). Following a news article by Khan (2017), the state government defined a family as a group of people who use one common kitchen and constitute one household. However, in several cases, even members of large families who were able to prove through legitimate verification that they lived in different households did not receive any compensation from the government, even after showing different

address proofs. In addition, villagers were forced to leave every possession they owned in their villages once they signed the documents. Further, the state government conveniently categorized the population into two distinct halves of those directly affected[3] and those indirectly affected by the riots, a factor that determined the amount and kind of compensation that the refugees would be able to avail. The displaced population was further rehabilitated in such a way that it does not have access to alternate means of livelihood and is forced to be dependent on the government for its subsistence. The compensation packages were meagre, a means of temporary sustenance.

So, on the one hand, the primary producers such as peasants and craftspeople lost their lands and means of production, while on the other hand, they were not rehabilitated by the government in a manner that would enable them to find alternative means of subsistence making them part of the capitalist system of production. Sanyal, in his reimagining of the unification of capital, speaks of a scenario whereby all those who are dispossessed do not find a place within the capitalist system of production. These people exist within the system of capitalism but beyond the purview of capital (Sanyal 2007). The inhabitants of the wasteland are stuck in a space between the traditional subsistence economy and modern commodity economy that Sanyal (2007) refers to as "need economy". These people exist within the system of capitalism but beyond the purview of capital (Sanyal 2007).

Following Chatterjee (2008), this process can be understood as a reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation where on one hand, the members of the political society[4] are restricted from participating in the process of primitive accumulation while on the other hand, they are offered help in the form of anti-poverty programmes that are allegedly initiated for their benefit (Chatterjee 2008). The government keeps the population in check by ensuring their distance from processes of primitive accumulation, throwing in subsistence packages from time to time to ensure the minority votes from them. This resonates with "art of principality" practiced by the Machiavellian

[3] Directly affected implied those whose families have suffered casualties on account of the riots. This information was gathered on the ground while conducting fieldwork by the author.

[4] "Political society" is a term introduced by Chatterjee (2004), which he uses to refer to a target population for welfare schemes, a space of political management of the non-corporate capital. Political society, within the space of Muzaffarnagar refers to the Muslim population, given that the Jat community is a wealthy dominant caste in the region. However, it is essential to point out that "political society" is not a homogenous category. It has inherent heterogeneity in the form of multiple religions, caste, etc. Such heterogeneity has been used as an instrument by the political parties in this instance to create fragmentations and mobilise different religious communities against one another. The above instances of reference to the members of the political society as victims of primitive accumulation primarily refer to the Muslim population who were displaced and marginalised on account of the riots.

prince, where the objective of the exercise of power was to protect the territoriality of the prince at all costs. Following Foucault (1991), the art of governing in this regard entailed the introduction of economy into political practice. Governing a State subsequently implied setting up an economy at the level of the entire State, where the behaviour of the subjects would be under constant surveillance. Such surveillance was ensured through the instrument of sovereignty where the common welfare was guaranteed in return for obedience of the laws of the State.

Thus, the post-truth rhetoric, in the context of Muzaffarnagar, led to the creation of multiple discourses of power, engendering subjects through the use of language, emotional appeal, and violence. While on the one hand, the response to the post-truth rhetoric created a right-wing discourse that led to the reassertion and consolidation of the imagined Hindu community, on the other hand, the response to the same post-truth rhetoric (within the large structure of electoral politics) led to the creation of a discourse of need economy for the Muslim population, whereby they were left at the mercy of the government for their means of sustenance. Thus, post-truth could also be attributed to the proliferation of discourses at the local level of governance, wherein, its weaponized information, leading to the creation of subjects through a practice of separation and distinction (Foucault 1978).

For the displaced Muslim population, the discourse of post-truth was inflicted in such a manner that they were transformed into powerless victims stuck within the space of a need economy playing the only kind of politics known to the governed. This facilitated the Samajwadi Party government's agenda of consolidating the Muslim electorate for the upcoming general elections of 2014.

In conclusion, the reaction of the Samajwadi party to the occurrence of the riots can interpreted as their response to the post- truth rhetoric- perpetuation for the sake of larger electoral politics. The Samajwadi Party government did not want to lose out on the votes from the Jat community, neither did it want to risk losing out on the 22 per cent Muslim voters in the area. Additionally, the government thought it best to restrain them within the space of a need economy, so that the displaced population could be kept in check while also being dependent on the government for livelihood opportunities. Thus, this paper has tried to outline how the post-truth rhetoric was a means to locate the forms of power and the channels it takes, creating discourses in its wake to control the subjects for whom "truth" is the narrative produced within the discourse.

Suparba Sil is Doctoral Candidate at the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her area of expertise is in the domain of Reproductive Health, Policy Studies, Political Theory, and Displacement and Rehabilitation. She is also a development professional, and has worked with several international NGOs and research organizations, in the capacity of a qualitative researcher.

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FIR, Media, and the Criminal Justice System: Case Studies from India

Twinkle Siwach

Abstract

The paper attempts to understand an aspect of the intersections of the media and the criminal justice system by examining the relationship of a first-hand information report (FIR) of an occurrence of crime to the larger web of institutions that are legal, social, and political. This paper studies the processes of investigation, inquiry, and trial through which a FIR report first, is processed in the criminal justice system, and second, colours the boundaries of information to be transmitted in the society via media. The selected cases, Bhateri gang rape case (1992) and Delhi gang rape case (2012) are significant for the study given their legal history and the course of social movement. The case studies selected in two different periods allows for a critical analysis of, one, the FIR as a depository of crime reports and a system of reporting that has evolved; two, the media practices that have gone through a major transformation; and three, how the public's sense of informational universe has emerged around the cases of crime and violence in contemporary India.

Keywords: FIR, Media, Criminal Justice System, Bhateri, Delhi, Gang-rape, Crime Reporting, Trial, Informational Universe

Introduction

In contemporary times, we live in a society that is heavy on information due to the availability of huge amounts of data easily accessible through different forms of media. However, there is a very thin line between information and misinformation, particularly in a context where information is circulated without providing an authentic source of the information. For instance, the information circulated over social media platforms like WhatsApp about the Ganesha idols drinking milk has no single authentic source (BBC 2016). And yet, the information is amplified once it reaches the public. The presence of global positioning system (GPS) chip and radioactive ink in the 2,000-

rupee note was another such misinformation circulated over social media without verifying the source (Bhaskaran & others 2017). The information in such cases is personalised along the lines of particular perspectives, ideologies, and beliefs (patriarchal, religious, gendered, and caste-based), with an objective to influence rational and scientific temperament, especially since there is an unchecked flow of information over technology-enabled digital platforms.

Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher and sociologist, in his concept of "lifeworld", suggests that in a "linguistically organised stock of interpretative patterns" (Habermas 1987), we reproduce meanings situated in a particular cultural context. He calls it a "politics of meanings" and the production of these meanings arise from the common experiences "in the objective, social or subjective world" *(ibid)*. In this context, Manuel Castells, a social scientist examining communication theories and the emergence of the new public sphere, talks about "multiple nodes of communication" (Castells 1996) that are made available through social media platforms that generate and share content, images, and videos overtly.

Source, therefore, is important to trace. Thus, a first information report (FIR), becomes an important source to study cases of crime and violence. A FIR is a report recorded with the local police about a cognisable offence. The criminal investigation process, as is widely understood, is a significant set of procedures that require deeper inquiries into the details of the offence, identifies the culprit, and based on the evidence, brings the accused before the trial. In this process, official documentation of the first information report remains a locus point in selecting or rejecting the discourse set otherwise by the court or the media.

In the processes of the criminal justice system, because of the ways in which the information is gathered and documented, the journey of the case involves piling up of papers and files (Cornelia 2008). These files are the variables in the universe of writing the law and trial of a case. The files are processed as important records as they are the stock of all the information. The people heading the case or the officer investigating the case may change but the files remain archived, documented bound to produce evidence in the court of law. It is in this sense that the files function as recording devices and carry truth claims as independent sources of information. As these files traverse or transact the information further in institutions of legal and social importance. However, the information that they contain is often studied differently.

The files are filled up with information in the forms of charge sheets, witness statements, forensic and medical certificates, other objects identified, and so on. These files also have a life cycle as they are "copied, transcribed, translated and reorganised" (Motha and Rijswijk 2016). The trial only adds information to the existing set of data, and yet no judgment can ever provide a just decision as the files cannot contain all the information necessary to understand a situation. Scholars like Carlo Ginzburg (1999) insist that language cannot give us a satisfactory image of reality and, therefore, reading the source and understanding the micro-histories in which the document or the source is located is a necessary methodology. Otherwise, everything that is written can be interpreted differently given subjective understandings of the subject matter.

The criminal justice system therefore, requires analysis to see whether justice is easily attainable. Many a time, speaking objectively, the victim or their relatives stand clear chances of demanding and getting the legal and judicial confirmations of their need for justice and yet keep awaiting. The quest for justice is natural and yet presents a serious battle from the filing of primary report to court trial. Simultaneously, Indian law has developed with the emergence of human rights and constitutional rights (Kannabiran and Menon 2007). However, the relationship between the two has not been clearly defined except that violence prevents one from anchoring justice in a social setup. For instance, the cases of Mathura and Rameeza brought human rights campaigns into the central discourse of women's movement. Yet, both cases illustrate biases shown by the judges.

Different branches of the criminal justice system function differently, often independently, yet in compliance with each other and power is arranged systematically in all these branches. The foundation of the criminal justice system is to ascertain facts about the cases reported. Yet, as the case proceeds to trial, different understanding of the case emerges, enlarging the canvas of the informational universe. As we study the cases, we find the issues become complicated.

Moreover, the phenomenon of violence is deeply rooted in the systematic patterns of socially "gendered" relations. According to Kannabiran and Menon (2007), the collectivised sexual violence by communities (like caste panchayats), agents of the State (like in the cases of Manorama and Kunan-Poshpora) and caste group (like the case of Bhateri) is the most intractable form of violence against women. Moreover, many cases of domestic violence are unreported, and the Indian law does not recognise marital rapes legally. Hence, these cases have grabbed the attention of scholars due to a pattern that has a reoccurring status by the virtue of inherent gender and social

bias. Certain welcoming changes such as amendments around rape laws are also a result of massive insights coming from reflections on previous cases and the issues raised around them by civil and human rights organisations. In this regard, emergence of the judicial order has been crucial, including the coming of *Mahila thanas* (emphasis added) in providing women a space for registering complaints of crime and violence against them to seek justice (Mody 2013).

In this context, Pratiksha Baxi's work on courtroom trials, talks about how rape trials in particular are "privileged sites of the production, negotiation, and management of public secrets" (Baxi 2014). She looks at courts as "public spaces" that destroy evidence, which we explore further in this paper. She suggests that testimonies of rape survivors often suffer as they are silenced; men speak on their behalf, advising them what to do, whether to report, etc. Baxi, who has witnessed some of the trials in the courtroom, shares how every lawyer in the courtroom is aware that testimonies of the survivors are "distorted, disciplined and misrepresented" (*ibid*). Our case studies further provide us the template to study this phenomenon where the law incites power in the socio-legal processes that underlie the making of the testimony of the survivors.

Reporting Crime and the FIR

The information received by the police regarding a cognisable offence—oral or written—constitutes an FIR. Any person who is the first to give information about the offence to the police is the first informant. The police cannot refuse to register an FIR because even if it is out of their jurisdiction; they should register the complaint under ZERO FIR and forward it to the concerned police station. The FIR should have all details about the crime: name of the suspects or the accused, crime description, etc. A police investigation follows, on the basis of which a charge sheet is prepared, and it must ascertain the information in the FIR, collect evidence, examine suspects, search the place of occurrence of crime, and seize objects that may contain fingerprints, blood prints, footprints, etc.

The investigative process is important as it helps in understanding the facts of the case as it evolves in the criminal justice system (Taylors 2016). If the information filed in the charge sheet appears to be parallel to the FIR, then it is favourable for the case. Otherwise, it sets an order against the information reported in the FIR. The purpose of the charge sheet is to enable the trial in the court. Hence, along with it, copies of the FIR, forensic and medical reports, and information about seized evidence are attached for the court proceedings. However, at all these stages, the information is

layered, changing the nature of the information. Therefore, the information that may appear crystal clear in the FIR goes on to change its form while crossing through different spectrums (legal, social, political).

The police file complaints, carry out investigations, and bring cases to court. In the process, in certain cases, they also develop a relationship with the media to report about the case. Likewise, medical practitioners and forensic experts diagnose, analyse, and testify in courts with proper documentation (Baxi 2014). The law retaining its power here annexes all these documents to authorise truth claims and build the universe of information about the case. Meanwhile, courts "sit" and "rise": they go on to hear multiple cases in a day, determining the element of "truth" as and when it is produced in the court. Because the documentation and evidencing with the support of "documents" is central to the court trial, oral testimonies by themselves do not have any sanctity. Meanwhile, powerful lobbies control the means and mechanisms of the law, influencing the outcome of trials (Taylors 2016).

The FIR as a document of crime reporting thus leaves scope for interpretation with its readers who could be laymen, police, lawyers, journalists, and researchers. One also understands that the information stated in the FIR is not the ultimate truth but a statement to be supported by the corroborating "documents" testifying the same set of information. It is in this process of un-layering the information, primarily filed in the FIR, that the essence of the crime itself as an incident of violence gets to be examined.

Media and the Universe of Information

Media reporting of crime and violence plays a crucial role in building the universe of information. Media, in its representation of criminal activities and law, constitutes social realities of justice and social order. It acts as a major source of dissemination of knowledge about people's understanding of crime, law, and justice by connecting the public with courtroom proceedings and judgments. Since the public "lack the time, motivation and legal expertise to make required sense of Court's decisions" (Zilis 2015), they depend on media for legal analysis of any case. Otherwise, the link between the court and the public might be indirect. Media thereby simplifies the legal jargon of the case for the public by giving them direct access to court procedures, but it may also misrepresent the ruling of the Court. Such as it reproduces dominant ideas and hegemony in the ways of mediation and creation of the public opinion. Hence, the ideas of the elite and powerful

are communicated through twisting of facts (Herman and Chomsky 2010). Here, knowledge is often colored by specific agendas serving the majoritarian interests. The representation of a case thus comes with "prior set agendas", where facts are manipulated and an attempt is made to develop consensus based on dominant paradigms or ideological positions which is often influenced by the ruling class (Saeed 2013).

The audience's curiosity in cases of crime and violence is for two reasons: to learn about the causes and to learn about ways of prevention. To answer this curiosity, media as an institution interacts and intersects the administrative and the legal administration. Simultaneously, it also operates as a vigilante over state agencies examining the police and the ways of policing. Police performs various tasks such as guarding the process of elections, courts, massive events, as and when it is tasked (Newburn and Peay 2012). However, in obeying state, they also perform unpleasant tasks such as handling the crisis. During the COVID-19 lockdown, various news media outlets reported about the police brutalities on citizens, street vendors, and delivery agents (Purkayastha 2020). Another example could be how on the directions of the state, police often use *lathis* (batons), water cannons and teargas on protesting groups (Shah 2017). In these ways, media brings information about the daily activities of the police (Schultz 2019, Rucman & Mesko 2006). At times, the gaps in reporting are also filled in by the human rights or civil rights organisations. However, now-a-days, police are also using social media platforms to communicate and engage with the broader public.

Crime reporting by media, as we see today in television journalism, is farcical. News stories are spiced up to the extent that entertainment is added to information in reporting of the crime scene. The narration of the crime scene is dramatised; the news story is fictionalised. The coverage of Tablighi Jamaat during the lockdown period in India is one such example (Daniyal 2020, Iyer & Chakravarty 2020 & Kumar 2023). In addition, the news is telecasted in a manner that adds suspense and fear of crime (Cohen 2002). The rational notion of equality and justice becomes elusive in these forms of narratives, given the larger contemporary context of the political economy of the television news media (Herman & Chomsky 2010, Mosco 1996 & Winseck 2011).

As far as crime shows are concerned, the focus is often on accused rather than victims and on how the crime occurred. *Crime Patrol*, for example, uses fictional names and characters while claiming that the cases are based on real-life situations. Sometimes, the crime shows and web series adaptations of real-life cases claim to be based on case files but add fictional description to the

details. For instance, *Delhi Crime* (2019), based on Delhi gang rape case (2012), portrays the story of crime and violence from the police's perspective alone. The BBC documentary based on the same case, *India's Daughter* (2013), covers horrific details of the crime from the perspective of the accused. Therefore, there are certain details that will be left out in the mediated re-creation or representation of the crime. These representations are then only surreal. From the incidence of crime and violence in real space and time, the case becomes a story or an episode, losing its severity.

In each of the trajectories of information across mediums, as the news travel further, the event of the crime itself becomes a myth as layers of meaning maybe attached to it by different agents involved). A prominent example is the Noida double murder case (2008). A 14-year-old girl was murdered in her room while her parents were sleeping in the adjacent room and the body of the house help was discovered by the police a day later, on the rooftop. There were no witnesses in the case, and yet everyone, particularly the media, had theories about how the crime may have occurred. These theories differed across news channels. The victim's father was arrested at first by the Noida police as a suspect in the case but no evidence could be linked to him. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) took over the case and found the suspect innocent. But the trial by media had declared first, the helper as accused. When he was found dead on the roof, the blame was shifted to the father (Sen 2015). Following the case, cinematic adaptations too have been made with different theories of how the murders may have happened.

Media trials in many such cases have become a regular fixture as witnessed also in the case of death by suicide of Sushant Singh Rajput (2020) where media persons had reached outside the house of one of their acclaimed accused persons revealing details of her personal life (Ara 2020). The coverage involved a lot of personal attack maligning her reputation in the public and biased reporting so much so that a particular journalist was booked for manipulating the TRPs (India Today, 2020). In such cases, Media exercises the freedom to dig into the personal lives of the victim, suspects, friends, colleagues, and their family histories and social circles to build opinions in the public imagination about cases and investigations, while also influencing court trials.

The Noida double murder is a case in which insensitive media approach led to the mishandling of the case and evidence (Mehra 2017). Whereas, in the latter case, instead of "puncturing falsehood" or focusing on crucial issues such as pandemic, economic crisis, loss of jobs, crisis of the migrant population, news media stooped to new low "using soundbites from those who had no clue of the

intricacies of the case" (Shukla 2020). Both the cases became high-profile cases covering the details of personal and social lives of women involved in the case bringing minute-to-minute dramatisation on the television screen (Lidhoo 2020). The shocking factors from the reporting of these cases was media's access to the WhatsApp chats and emails of the victims and the suspects, bank statements and call records. Yet, it is hard to say, if any lessons were learnt or much heed was paid to the violation of one's privacy.

On the other hand, it may be a challenging task for media houses to access crime scenes. While chasing crime news, they manage to catch a few. These few criminal incidents are then filtered and certain criminal incidents are selected based on their newsworthiness. For instance, cases closer to threats to the collective consciousness or moral integrity of the community become news (Katz 1987). White-collar crimes involving names of big politicians and businessmen trapped in cases of fraud and corruption charges; rape and murder, which raise the issue of moral pressure; organised crime; and reputational damage: all these become breaking news. However, in the presentation of news, there are certain "media ethics" as discussed by media practitioner and scholar Paranjoy Guha Thakurta (2009), like "truth, fairness, and objectivity". He brings into discussion three theories: *correspondence*, which holds our notions of what is true; *coherence*, the determination of truth in coherence with our world views; and *consensus*, the truth that is affirmed by other people. Another scholar, Stephen J.A. Ward too has published on media ethics and the disinformation age. He argues that, "media ethics is not anti-thetical to the freedom to publish" (Ward 2020) Therefore, though press freedom is a necessary condition for a democracy, yet the ground shall be set for responsible and ethical reporting.

In the next section, the paper makes an attempt to argue for the challenges and loopholes in the criminal justice system, particularly in the cases of crime and violence against women wherein delayed, defective and biased investigations often impact the trials and the judgments.

Loopholes in the Criminal Justice System

Case trials act as laboratories for judicial reform, and when it comes to rape trials, we see a repetition of unfair forms that appear extraordinary but similar. For instance, "consent" is still misunderstood in many cases. The blame is often put on women. The restrictions around mobility are imposed upon them. Besides, the violence is also embedded in formal mechanisms and structures of hierarchy. These biases get implicated in the processes of investigation, in the trial

itself, and in how justice is either delayed and/or denied. In such cases, the judgment is often inclined towards the dominant social and/or political group.

In addition, the attitude and behaviour of police and administrative bodies create situations that are not encouraging for women to approach them and report the incidence of sexual violence committed against them (Shukla and Bhattcharya 2021). Moreover, certain women have their fears, beliefs, reluctance, patterns of ignorance, tolerance, lack of legal knowledge, and limited access to institutional support. Out of the total proportion of crime cases reported, the crimes inflicted by strangers are reported more than the ones inflicted within the homes or by known persons (Williams 1984). The reasoning for the same is that women are encouraged to remain silent and not report. They become further discouraged by the already pending trials in courts. For instance, the case of Bhateri gang rape (1992) which forms the backbone of the Supreme Court's landmark 1997 Vishaka guidelines (later modified as Workplace Harassment Act) has not yet reached to any conclusion in three decades (Siwach 2022, Saini 2021, Pandey 2017).

In their study of evidencing during rape trials, Durba Mitra and Mrinal Satish (2014) have made suggestions about the "systematic disbelief" that occurs in women's reporting of crime. The lack of cohesiveness in their statement is often taken into doubt. Different effects of power and knowledge coalesce to disqualify the testimony of rape victims at various sites, including the police station, forensic science laboratory, hospital, and court, as also suggested by Baxi (2014). For instance, in the Bhateri gang rape case, while reporting the FIR, the emphasis was put on what "rape" meant. The complainant was asked to explain the meaning of rape multiple times (FIR No. 399/92).[1] In the case of the Delhi gang rape, the FIR was collated in three rounds as the victim underwent multiple surgeries and her condition was too unstable to be able to report the details of the crime (FIR No. 413/2012).[2] Yet, the names of the accused and content filed in the FIR were contested in the courtroom.[3] The defence counsel accused the police of "interpolating the

[1] Available in the Archive Section, Jagori: Women's Research and Documentation Centre, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi.

[2] The author had approached the concerned police station to get an access to the copy of FIR in the Delhi gang rape case. The author was denied citing, "the details of the FIR are too sensitive and therefore cannot be revealed to the public" unless a request is issued by the Magistrate. However, the FIR number and other details could be accessed from the cited excerpts in the respective court judgments.

[3] In the Supreme Court of India, Criminal Appellate Jurisdiction, Criminal Appeal No. 607-608/2017, Mukesh & Ors Vs. State with Criminal Appeal No. 5027-5028/2014. https://indiankanoon.org/doc/68696327/ [Accessed 12th December 2021]

document" as the names of one of the accused was spelt wrong in the testimony of the victim (*ibid*). The other accusation raised by the defence counsel was the inconsistency in description of the crime scene by the victim. It is obvious that due to the brutality unleashed on the victim of the case, medical treatment was given priority, and the statements were gathered only when she was medically stable. Otherwise, as the details of the crime were unfolded, it appeared like an open and shut case. The judgment, in this case, notifies how an FIR cannot be "an encyclopaedia of facts" but an initial statement provided to collect the details of the crime (Supreme Court of India 2017). It further adds how an FIR is the "voluntary narrative of the informant" and the first statement about the crime and can possibly miss on some information about the crime even in ordinary circumstances (*ibid.*). The Supreme Court had concluded that the presence or absence of a name alone cannot declare an FIR as "fabricated" or "implicated" information. The statement of the only witness, the victim's friend, becomes important as he was the prime witness who had provided important leads in the case before the victim's statement to the police. This reflects the importance of the FIR and the sanctity it holds during the trial.

But mishandling of the evidence is revealed only at the stages of the trial in the court. For instance, the lower court in the trial of the Bhateri gang rape case indicated that the semen sample of neither the husband nor the accused men matched with the semen sample collected from the complainant's clothes. The court, instead of focusing on such a lapse, blamed the complainant for reporting a "false case". Later, it is due to the intervention of civil and human rights groups that information regarding the loose handling of the samples comes out in public domain.[4]

The court's statement in the Bhateri gang rape case takes us back to Mathura rape case of 1972, where a policeman raped an Adivasi teenager while another sexually assaulted her under the influence of alcohol. Due to the lack of evidence and older ruptures in the hymen, the court questioned the survivor's virginity and character. The loopholes were again highlighted with the

[4] Twenty-four doctors had signed a statement supporting Bhanwari Devi, who argued that the medical examination report is flawed, subsequent delay in the case's proceedings, and arrest of the accused persons. The statement was also circulated in Hindi, signed by doctors, physicians, Orthopaedic surgeons, faculty members (Dr. Mohan Rao & Dr Imrana Qadeer at Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health at the School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, at New Delhi. A statement (1993, March 3) by concerned doctors on the gang rape of Bhanwari Bai, "A *saathin* of the Women Development Programme of Government of Rajasthan," (September 22, 1992

intervention of civil and human rights activists.[5] The court suggested the complainant was a "liar" and the act was "consensual" instead of a "forced one" given the "absence of physical injuries" (*Tukaram and Anr* v. *State of Maharashtra*).[6] The flawed interpretation of the two-finger test (used to determine the elasticity of survivor's vagina and rupture of the hymen) was highlighted in the case by the feminists and civil rights organisations.

However, in 2003, Indian Parliament repealed section 155 (4) of the Indian Evidence Act (which asked a rape survivor about her past sexual history), declaring it as "illegal". In this context, Baxi's insistence that in a rape trial, the judges "seek to determine" the occurrence of present and past sexual intercourse, the intactness of the hymen, and the how's of the penetration, bringing the whole episode of trial closer to the scrutiny of the female body is relevant. Besides, during the medico-legal examination, the female body or the body of the complainant/victim is put under scrutiny to extract evidence for the court trial. This is done in a manner, as already discussed, to give prima facie advantage to the oral testimony because "documents" carry weightage over oral testimonies. (Engage n.d.).

The information order, in the Bhateri case, had replicated the social and the political order that, on one hand, promoted moral values and, on the other, prepared alternative information to hide the caste-based discrimination that remains a dark reality in our society. Different versions of the incident were provided by the villagers to the media persons and civil rights activists who went to the village to prepare case documents. In the first version, a reporter was told that Bhanwari and the two prime accused men were not in the village on the day of the rape incident.[7] In another version, Mohan had met Sharvan Sharma and Ram Karan in the field where they all took their cattle for grazing, where an exchange of some comments led to a fight between them and Mohan had slapped Sharvan. The FIR mentions that Mohan had gone to relieve himself in the open field where the other men had objected over some dispute of land and beaten him up, hearing his screams, the wife had rushed to the spot where she was gang-raped in front of the husband.

[5] Upendra Baxi, Vasudha Dhagamwar, Raghunath Kelkar and Lotika Sarkar (1979, 16 September) An Open Letter to the Chief Justice of India. https://aud.ac.in/uploads/1/admission/admissions2014/open%20letter.pdf
[6] The rape of a rural lower-caste woman by upper-caste man is normalised under social and political pressure. Also, a woman's rape is considered as a matter to be kept secret rather than be exposed to a legal fight.
[7] As per FIR No. 399/92 filed on 23rd September 1992 at 2.30 p.m., the accused in the Bhateri gang rape case were: Gyarsa Gurjar (60 years old), Badri Gurjar (40 years old), Ram Karan Gurjar (55 years old), Ram Sukh Gurjar (50 years old), and Shrawan Pandit (55 years old).

Apart from the documents presented in the court, there is also a parallel informational universe that media or alternative media platforms create with the help of civil and human rights organisations, as was the case with this episode. For instance, women's organisations based in Jaipur and Delhi coordinated to release information matching with the contents of the FIR through press reports, pamphlets, slogans, street theatre, and public meetings.

On the other hand, in the Delhi gang rape case, the normativity of the circumstances in which the woman was raped was itself shocking as compared to the brutality with which the crime had occurred. The chauvinistic understanding that for a woman to be safe, a man should accompany her if she is outside, wear a salwar suit (fully covered clothes), and travel in public transport in the prime hours was busted as the affected woman in this case had fulfilled all these conditions and yet had faced horrific brutalisation.

However, the media had carefully maintained its updates on the medical condition of the rape victim along with the positive reportage of the case. Visual and social media played quite an active role in spreading the news and creating public sentiment about the case and the victim as "a medical, middle-class student".[8] As it was noticed in the case, the media was quick to report much prior to even the reporting of the FIR. Moreover, the police mediated updates about case proceedings using press interviews and used social media platforms in particular to update the public on relevant information through their official handles. Media, likewise, given the massive public outrage, was careful and sensitive in responding to the case and overall projection of case details. However, one can argue that the informational universe in this case was building up independent of the FIR due to media's active interest.

[8] Many pictorial and animated styles of representation were used other than verbal and visual forms to depict the story. See https://i.ytimg.com/vi/alW8O7CODas/hqdefault.jpg [Accessed: 17th October 2021]; http://media2.intoday.in/indiatoday/images/stories//2012december/gangrape_660_122912095616.jpg [Accessed: 17th October 2021]; http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/delhi-gangrape-victim-dies-in-singapore-mount-elizabeth-hospital/1/239921.html [Accessed: 17th October 2021]; https://userscontent2.emaze.com/images/3cd42e2b-c164-439e-9370-32c94911e7aa/9f6ec614e405e2587130fd78625e3152.jpg [Accessed: 17th October 2021]; and https://i.ytimg.com/vi/bDnLz5jgx3s/hqdefault.jpg [Accessed: 17th October 2021].

The role of hospitals is also very significant in the ways the cases of crime and violence are handled, particularly cases of violence against women (Chopra 2022). As discussed before, the medico-legal reports are important documents of the case. Thus, delayed results or examinations can affect the process of evidencing. In the Bhateri gang rape case, as per the fact sheet filed on 13th November 1992, the complainant had to run around a lot to get the medical examination done. At first, she refused to be examined in Bhateri in the absence of a female staff member. Then, she travelled to Jaipur to be examined in a government hospital but by the time she reached, the hospital was closed. Additionally, she had to take a permission from the magistrate who, instead of the rape examination, recommended an age determination test. This reflects the apathy of institutions, where immediate care was not provided to the victim. By the time the samples were taken, it is possible that the semen on her body was interfered with by sweat due to humid weather conditions, due to which the medical report could have concluded that the semen did not match either of the accused men or her husband. Moreover, the Medical-Legical Certificate (MLC) records the history of strangulation marks alone, which does not measure the cost of affect in the real sense. For instance, the signs of force, fear, pain, etc. are not recorded on papers, instead the survivors are asked to verbally narrate it at multiple stages in order to prove that a case of crime and violence has occurred – in the police stations, in the judicial trials, in the media, in the public forums, however it does not become a recorded evidence unless supported through documentation.

However, in the case of the Delhi gang rape, the victim was taken to one of the best government hospitals in proximity to the crime scene to avoid any delays in her medical examination. She was handled with sensitivity by the hospital staff wherein her medical treatment had taken off immediately, given the severity of the case. Unfortunately, almost a week later, due to internal organ failure, the victim succumbed to death. However, we do acknowledge that such support mechanisms and a safe and conducive environment are not always available for the survivors. Here, the geographical location, infrastructure (rural or urban), access to material and technological resources, and the knowledge of procedures play a critical role. In the latter case, the location of the case made the difference along with the sensitive approach of the people included at this stage, especially since proper protocols were followed to take in the statement of the victim, so that in case of any casualty, the case still stands in court and gets a fair trial.

However, the judgment in the former case was based on caste-based discrimination, in contrast to the information reported by the complainant in the FIR, while in the latter case, the judgment was influenced by the larger informational universe in which the massive protests had occurred. The judgments in both cases, thus, cannot be seen in isolation but must be located within the larger paradigm of issues and concerns that were raised in the public sphere.

Conclusion

This paper presents a general analysis of crime and violence against women but also particular cases. Some of the cases were cross-referenced besides our two case studies to build a context in which the arguments are presented. The case studies give us a historical and social background about the evolving nature of FIR, media, and the criminal justice system. It also gives us a hint about the changing nature of public discourse and how the informational universe is shaped.

The technologically enabled different forms of media have created new avenues for generating and sharing information. However, in Marxist-feminist framework, we understand that these approaches are rather individualistic than collective. Additionally, the information is presented in the case files in a crystallised form, but once it is unleashed in the public sphere, it is coloured by various factors and inherent social, cultural, religious, economic, and political biases. Likewise, a parallel universe is created, transmitting information from one institution to another in selective cases that are in closer proximity to the spaces of networks and resource mobilisation groups.

The media engagement and reporting of these cases were to some extent positive and sensitive, but we also acknowledge the media's mishandling of the cases and their mistrial in many other cases. In addition, the changing media markets are influencing new media practices, where the source is side-lined and information is twisted to suit majoritarian views. This results in circulation of unverified information. However, the media's democratic nature has much more potential over paid news journalism and yellow journalism. Regarding this, the "media ethics" as also suggested by Thakurta (2009) and identification of the news with the "source" appears to be the way of a mature and responsible reporting of the news.

Moreover, the diverse and intersectional experiences of the women needs to be grounded theoretically in academic discussions, legal debates and the field of law. The documentation of

these experiences allow us to understand the pattern of the violence and analyse judicial responses. It is in these sharing of the experiences, women listening to other women, that a commonalty is derived towards strengthening the discourse of equality, movements and development.

Dr Twinkle Siwach teaches Sociology at the University of Delhi. Her research interests are first information reports, crime, policing, judiciary and the media. She has published many research articles, and book reviews in national and international journals.

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SUB\versions
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Maratha Protests in the Post-Truth Era[1]

Shriranjan Awate and Rahee Shruti Ganesh

Abstract

India has witnessed several dominant caste mobilisations under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government post 2014. The Maratha protests in Maharashtra, which began in 2016, and the government's response to them have given birth to a renewed politics of caste polarisation. When the Marathas are consolidated as one caste bloc and other castes together form a polarised political scenario, the Bharatiya Janata Party is seen to be benefiting from such an arrangement. Starting with the mammoth protest marches following the Kopardi incident in 2016, and through the Bhima Koregaon incident in 2018, the politics around the Maratha Kranti Morcha has intensified the rift between the Marathas and other castes. The paper examines the changing narratives in Indian democracy and politics around the case of Maratha protests in Maharashtra.

Keywords: Collective action, polarisation, post-truth, dominant caste

Introduction

The year 2019 began with a historical event in Indian politics: The ruling government granted 10 per cent reservation for economically backward upper castes ahead of the general elections. The tenure of this government saw protests by dominant upper-caste groups from different regions demanding reservations from the respective state governments. The Jats from Punjab were followed by the Patels from Gujarat, and the Marathas in Maharashtra joined the league in 2016. Maharashtra has seen a wave of Maratha distress during the last decade given the depletion in employment in government jobs and a raising agrarian crisis, resulting in relative loss of status

[1] The authors' personal conversations on and exposure to various social media platforms primarily including WhatsApp and Facebook during 2014 and 2018 were recalled for this article.

power with the prospective collapse of the feudal agrarian rural order. However, the distress was articulated in the vocabulary of caste-specific deprivation only in 2016.

Since the Lok Sabha election in 2014, protests by dominant castes demanding reservations in public sector were observed in various states of India. The Marathas from Maharashtra organised silent marches all over the state. They constitute almost 33 per cent of the state's population. It is a dominant upper caste with significant political representation across different political parties and institutions. The social base of two parties in Maharashtra, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), is significantly centred on the Marathas (Palshikar 2014). In the history of Maharashtra politics, more than one thousand MLAs in Maharashtra State Assembly have been Maratha (Deshpande 2014). Currently, about 50 per cent of members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in Maharashtra are Maratha. Despite these numbers, the Maratha community has been on the streets due to a deep-rooted political discontent and socio-cultural distress. This incoherence underlines the necessity of in-depth scrutiny of a series of events which revolved around the Maratha marches.

Are the Marathas historically ignored by their own representatives or is there a larger political project at play, changing the political discourse of Maharashtra with new equations? Is the Maratha Kranti Morcha (henceforth referred to as MKM, denoting the marches as well as the organisation that coordinated the marches) an issue of social justice based on socio-historical facts or is it an instance of change in the political narrative, based more on emotional appeal and layers of fabricated victimisation? While leaning towards the possibilities in the latter halves of all these questions, this paper attempts to analyse the Maratha marches in the reference frame of post-truth politics.

Three significant events in Maharashtra have to be discussed in order to grapple with the narrative of the MKM: first, the response to *Sairat* (2016), a widely popular movie directed by Nagraj Manjule; second, the brutal incident at Kopardi, Ahmednagar; and third, the outbreak of violence at Bhima Koregaon on 1st January 2018.

History of the "Political Marathas"

The Marathas have been closely attached to positions of power since Indian independence. The feudal claim of Marathas to political power on various territorial units from pre-colonial history sits well in the collective imagination of Maharashtra, where the Marathas are considered as

Kshatriyas by non-Marathas and Marathas. In the arena of politics, the Marathas have often identified themselves with various mythological and historical kings and emperors. Their political identity has been articulated in the history of Maharashtra as 'custodians of Maharashtra' since the history of the regime of Shivaji is widely known as 'Maratha history' through the simplistic British epistemology. The rise of Hindutva politics in Maharashtra articulated this 'Maratha history' in terms of anti-Muslim and anti-minority politics (Daniyal 2014)

The relationship of the Marathas with the reservation policy has seen major upheavals. The reservation policy was conceptualised in Maharashtra, when Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur reserved 50 per cent posts in his state's services for backward communities, including the Marathas. The decision had followed the Vedokta controversy in the late nineteenth century, when many Maratha ruling families in Maharashtra were denied their claim to the Kshatriya status, and consequently their scriptural right to rule.

Following Indian Independence, the Marathas have been largely vocal against reservations. Mridul Kumar (2009) observes that in 1982, an active Maratha outfit, Maratha Mahasangh, led by Annasaheb Patil, had opposed caste-based reservations and the Maratha leader Shrimant Kokate admitted his participation in the anti-Mandal agitations. This outward rejection of reservation only took a different direction in the new millennium, when the demand for Maratha reservations in the other backward classes (OBC) category arose.

The Maratha community is not homogenous. There are numerous diversities that can be observed within the community. The Marathas are divided among rural and urban regions, with varying degrees of land ownership and varying ritual positions (endogamous sub-caste groups) disallowing inter-marriages. Despite these differences, the Marathas perceive themselves as one cultural group with common cultural history. The rural land-owning families among this diverse population of the Marathas have dominated politics in Maharashtra since Independence. In answer to a public interest litigation (PIL) from 2014, it has been stated that there have been 18 Maratha chief ministers in Maharashtra and more than 1,000 Maratha MLAs (Deshpande 2014). Research by Anderson et al (2016: 15) state that

> *If Marathas are present in the village, they almost always fill the gram pradhan position if there are no reservations in place for the lower castes.*
>
> *Maratha gram pradhans are typically larger landowning cultivators—the majority of them own more than five acres of land and almost all of them (84%) depend on cultivation for their primary livelihoods.*

This points to the fact that although the Marathas dominate the political landscape of Maharashtra, the class character of these leaders is well demarcated. There exists a small "ruling elite" within the Maratha community with a very different economic situation than the majority small and impoverished rural and urban Marathas. The ruling class does not seem to take the agricultural collapse in the state or the aspirations of youth for service sector (like IT) jobs and the necessary education for the same into account. Anderson et al (2016: 16) also note that in spite of the Marathas owning 58 per cent private colleges in rural Maharashtra, those Marathas who are in need of higher education clearly do not benefit from these colleges.

The history of the Maratha community and its relationship to the contemporary realpolitik has made it vulnerable to be perceived as aggressive and feudal. The perception of an assault on the dignity of Maratha women is seen as the highest level of assault for Maratha honour. Maratha women marrying men from other, especially lower castes is also counted as an 'assault' in this sense, even when the marriages have occurred with the consent of the women. For this reason, the blockbuster movie 'Sairat' aggravated the Maratha community in Maharashtra.

Sairat: "Anti-Maratha" Movie

Sairat, the superhit movie of 2016 directed by Nagaraj Manjule, revolves around a love story of a Dalit man and a Maratha woman. The storyline of the movie reveals that Archi, the Maratha protagonist of the film who elopes with her Dalit lover, is a daughter of an influential village-level Maratha leader. The woman's family has the couple assassinated in the name of caste honour and political prestige.

The movie was commercially successful and critically acclaimed in and outside Maharashtra and Manjule, a Dalit himself, was hailed nationally. However, the plot of the movie seemed to offend the Marathas due to the hypogamy practised by the female lead, "staining" the honour of her Maratha caste. Various social media platforms were used to convey that *Sairat* hurt the feelings of the Maratha community (Joshi, 2016). The political leadership of the Marathas expressed their dissatisfaction with Marathi movies (with special reference to *Sairat*) that generally demonise the Maratha community. Several Maratha groups and outfits appealed to the Marathas to boycott the film that injured the prestige of the Maratha community.[2] *Sairat* is based against the backdrop of Karmala, a Tehsil from Solapur district from the Maratha-dominated western Maharashtra.

[2] This was revealed through various messages that were circulated widely on various social media platforms after April 2016.

Manjule could not hold *Sairat*'s premiere screening in Karmala, which also happens to be his own native place.

The film was released in April 2016. Yogesh Joshi from *Hindustan Times* reported that around June and July, Maratha outfits protested the film by stating that it allegedly portrayed a "one-sided" story. ""The film has done injustice to the Marathas by portraying them as villains. While honour killing is the reality in many communities, Marathas are being singled out and deliberately targeted', said Rajendra Kondhre, the president of the Akhil Bhartiya Maratha Mahasangh" (Y. Joshi 2016). None of the electoral parties officially opposed the movie. However, several organisations associated with some parties took a stand against the movie. The NCP or the INC did not officially take part in the MKM events but avoided challenging MKM through a strategic distance while keeping an eye on the electoral arithmetic. It played out against their favour in local elections. These protests and agitations created a solid pitch to consolidate discontent in the Maratha community which got culminated in the MKM on the backdrop of the brutal rape and killing of a young Maratha girl residing in Kopardi.

Kopardi and the Irreparable Stain on Maratha Honour

The incident that triggered the rage of Marathas in the form of the MKM all over Maharashtra was the gang-rape and murder of a fifteen-year-old Maratha girl from the Kopardi village from Ahmednagar district in Maharashtra. On the evening of 13th July 2016, the schoolgirl was allegedly raped by three men, all Dalits, and subsequently brutally murdered. The incident soon hit the headlines and was heavily discussed in all regional media outlets. In a couple of days, all three accused were arrested and, within a fortnight, the then chief minister of Maharashtra, Devendra Fadanvis, visited the family of the victim.

On 9th August 2016, within one month of the incident, the first Morcha (march by the MKM) was organised in Aurangabad, drawing the participation of over 300,000 people. The rally articulated the rage of the Maratha community for destroying the "honour of their sister" and demanded capital punishment for the three accused. The hurt sentiments due to the portrayal of the hypogamous choice of the Maratha protagonist (the female lead) of *Sairat* was turned into "enraged sentiments" of the community. It was as if the community lamented the tainting of Maratha honour due the choice of a lower caste partner by the daughter of the caste-community (Archi, the female protagonist of *Sairat*) and was enraged when the honour was tainted again with the physical abuse of a young woman (another daughter/sister) of the caste-community. It is

important to note that this tainting of honour in "community sentiments" takes place regardless of a woman's consent to the sexual encounter with a lower-caste man. The rape is in a way equated to elopement by choice. The woman's consent does not matter to the others in the community who view any heterosexual sexual encounter between a Maratha woman and a man from another caste as the man's triumph over the woman and her community. The woman's choice in exercising her own sexuality is in a way invisible to the mind of the community.

Given the underlying caste polarisation between the Marathas and the Dalits, especially stark in the Marathwada region where the first march was organised, the MKM soon expressed the divide aggressively, by adding two significant demands to the initial demand of punishment for the men who assaulted the honour of the community. These two demands were that misuse of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, [3]should be stopped and that the Marathas should get reservations. Within one year, more than 50 rallies were organised in all 36 districts of Maharashtra. The monsoon session of the year 2016 also had to address the Kopardi incident and the state government assured the protesters to give justice to the victim by hearing the case in a fast-track court and appointing the Padma Shri awardee of that year, Ujjwal Nikam, as the public prosecutor. Within a year, the three accused were sentenced for life in the fast-track court in Ahmednagar.

However, within this one year, the MKM had added to its charter of demands from the government again. The demand for reservations had now occupied the centre-stage and was being discussed in line with the Jat and Patel agitations in the country.

Journey of the Maratha agitations starts with the incident of rape and murder of a Maratha girl by three Dalit men. The MKM, an organisation now with a website and active social media mechanism, started demanding justice for the deceased "sister". This became the initial rallying point for people against the misuse of the Atrocity Act. A demand for reservations for the Marathas was also strongly put forth with this. The MKM's narrative of the dominant caste consolidation focused on the Dalits (and those who are shielding them: government and the bureaucracy) who were seen as primary beneficiaries of reservations armed with the Atrocity Act.

The Kopardi incident, the immediate response to it, and the subsequent eleven-month trial raised several questions about the series of events from 12th July. A story in *The Week* by Niranjan Takle

[3] For more information see: Maratha kranti morcha. (2017, November 17). Times of India: India Times. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/miscellaneous/maratha-kranti-morcha/articleshow/59971139.cms

even argues that several facts about the rape and murder, as recorded officially, do not add up (Takle 2017). By highlighting the caste locations of both the victim and the accused, the caste divide between the Marathas and others was deepened. While rape cases are a painful social reality of India, it is important to note that only some acquire media attention and while Dalit women's rapes are normalised and rendered insignificant by the media, certain rape cases of upper caste women become rallying points given their social location.

The MKM's Obscurantist Politics and Electoral Arithmetic

The Maratha mobilisation gained momentum after the Kopardi incident. From the demand of retribution for the culprits in the rape case, the mobilisation emphasised the caste locations of the alleged culprits and victim. This can be seen in contrast with the brutal rape case that took place in Delhi in December 2012.In the Delhi case, politics of the region did not mandate such caste polarisation and, hence, castes of the victim and the accused were rarely a matter of overt discussion. In this case, the victim was called Nirbhaya, which can be translated as fearless. However, it is interesting to note that the victim from the Kopardi case was repeatedly referred to as "a daughter of Jijau", (Queen Jijau was Shivaji's mother). In the modern political history of Maharashtra, Shivaji has often been portrayed as the greatest embodiment of Maratha pride and pride of the Maratha is often equated with the pride of being Marathi, that is, being Maharashtrian. The alleged culprits were repeatedly recalled with an emphasis on their Dalit identity. Hence, the entire incident of Kopardi was portrayed as an assault on the Maratha by the Dalits. The MKM emphasised this narrative by demanding a stop to the abuse of SC/ST Atrocities Act. On 28th August 28 2016, Sharad Pawar, a Maratha leader and the chief of NCP, said, "Demand for the scrapping of the act is a social reaction which needs to be considered seriously" (P. Joshi 2016). Further, he added that this Act is being misused. After a day or two, he clarified that he wanted to say that this act is misused by Savarnas. Such politics of obscurantism intensified the rift between the Dalits and the Marathas. On the face of it, it appeared as if the agenda of the MKM was to destabilise the state government.

The claim of misuse of SC/ST Atrocities Act by Sharad Pawar stands in contradiction with the surveys of implementation of the act. While most of the cases are not reported, the act remains unimplemented for a significant number of times. It would be noteworthy to observe the Supreme Court observation to the petition filed by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) seeking direction from the Court for the government with regards non-implementation

of the Prevention of Atrocities Act. In his article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* on the Mahajan Judgment, Nitish Nawasagaray (2018) has quoted the Supreme Court in this regard. The Supreme Court has observed that:

> *We have carefully examined the material on record and we are of the opinion that there has been a failure on the part of the authorities concerned in complying with the provisions of the Act and the Rules. The laudable object with which the Act had been made is defeated by the indifferent attitude of the authorities … The abundant material on record proves that the authorities concerned are guilty of not enforcing the provisions of the Act. The travails of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes continue unabated. We are satisfied that the Central Government and State Governments should be directed to strictly enforce the provisions of the Act and we do so. The National Commissions are also directed to discharge their duties to protect the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.*

In the backdrop of this reality, the statement by Pawar created enough space for ambiguous political interpretations. As in the case of all post-truth politics, facts and emotive appeals do not coincide, and in many cases (just as this one), they run in opposite directions. Pawar later appeared to correct himself by subverting this statement. However, he played a win-win game by making an ambiguous statement open for opposite interpretations.

"Faceless" Leadership and "Drone" Crowd

Unlike the Patel agitation in Gujarat, the Maratha protests from Maharashtra were without any concrete leadership. Different contemplations and interpretations were made in the last two years, but it was difficult to locate the political leadership of the MKM. One contemplation was that the social media is the faceless leader of the MKM (Ghadyalpatil 2016). This was true as far as social media could be seen as a galvanising force for the mobilisation of lakhs of Marathas. On the other hand, facelessness seemed to be a strategy of the MKM for playing out (dominant caste-based) identity politics without revealing its own (political) identity. The official Twitter handle of the MKM could get hardly 13,000–14,000 followers, whereas their Facebook page attracted more than 200,000 hits (as of October 2018). This reveals the socio-economic demographic profile of the MKM. Since Twitter is a space with an almost exclusively economically affluent membership, while Facebook has relatively greater and more inclusive (although limited) membership, it is clear that the MKM drew its participation mainly from the non-elites. Almost every march was covered by drones and later the technology assisted in creating an illusion of crowds of lakhs. With the slogan

"Ek Maratha, Lakh Maratha" (One Maratha means Lakhs of Marathas), mobs of Marathas were organised and orchestrated systematically. Even though sizeable crowds could be drawn on the streets, the appeal of the MKM and technological gimmicks accompanying it made it more impactful than the efforts on the streets.

Narrative Shift

Among the initial demands put forth by the MKM was the appeal to stop the abuse of the Atrocity Act and reservation for the community. Both these demands were not directly related to the Kopardi incident, but the incident was used as a catalyst to mobilise all Marathas. The aforementioned story published in *The Week* about the dubious narration of the Kopardi incident highlights how emphasis on selective facts or false information is used in contemporary right-wing politics to animate people's emotions like caste loyalties. This is concurrent with the very idea of post-truth politics where emotions and perceptions are more powerful than the truth or facts. After 58 marches, the MKM added three more demands during the massive march of 9th August 2017 in Mumbai. These demands were: construction of a *Shiv Smarak* (King Shivaji memorial monument) in the Arabian Sea; formation of the institution Shahu Research and Training Institute (SARATHI) for the betterment of Maratha youth on the lines of Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Technical Institution (BARTI); and reconstruction of Annasaheb Patil Financial Development Board. These demands were made to compensate for the demand of reservations as the policy of reservation could not be adopted because of judicial restraints (as of October 2018). Some tangible demands seemed well-suited for the state government as well. Erstwhile Chief Minister Devendra Fadanvis proactively followed up the demands of the Shiv Smarak and SARATHI, while assuring that justice would be delivered to the Maratha community by also providing reservations.

The Maratha pride was repeatedly emphasised in this mobilisation by establishing a nostalgic link with the army of Shivaji Maharaj and pitching it against the modern reality of the Dalits abusing this feudal Maratha pride. Portrayed as a group equipped with the reservation policy and armed with the Atrocity Act, the Dalits became the principal offenders, the prime enemy, in this narrative.

Electoral Arithmetic

Even though there is no evidence to suggest any overt linkage between the MKM and the BJP, it is clear that after multiple marches by the MKM, the BJP emerged victorious in rural as well as urban Maharashtra during the civil polls conducted in January and February 2017. The BJP's performance was stunning as politics of western Maharashtra is dominated by the Marathas and

the MKM had an unprecedented response from these parts. In Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad, the BJP unseated the NCP, which enjoys the support of the Maratha community, while in Solapur, the BJP ended the forty-year rule of the Congress by winning the civic body elections. The party also swept the countryside by winning almost half of the total twenty-five Zilla Parishads that went to polls. The party won 398 seats against the 187 that it had bagged during the previous elections.

These outcomes clearly underline that the unprecedented gatherings of the MKM were a complementary move for the BJP as it divided the voting base of the opposition parties, namely, the INC and the NCP, with the help of caste polarisation tactics on the foundation of a political narrative of Maratha pride against the modern social justice measures in the favour of the Dalits.

Bhima Koregaon and the Politics of Narrative Subversion

The caste polarisation after 2016 also resulted in *prati morcha*s (counter rallies) by various caste groups, including the Dalits and nomadic tribes. The MKM responded to these interjections in two ways: either with appropriation or with increased aggressiveness. Certain caste/community groups like Muslims and various OBC groups were incorporated in the MKM events, showcasing their symbolic representation on the MKM platform (Kulkarni & Singh 2017). However, the MKM responded to Dalit prati morchas with a show of more strength and aggressive anti-Dalit demands. One particular Dalit agitation amid this series of rallies and marches drew the most aggressive response from the Marathas and the state government. This agitation was the Elgaar Parishad, which was followed by the violence at Bhima Koregaon celebration in the beginning of 2018.

Commemoration of the victory of the Mahar soldiers over the Peshwa army in the last Anglo-Peshwa war on 1st January is a routine celebration in the Ambedkarite community in Maharashtra. The year 2018 marked the 200th anniversary of this historic victory of the Mahars and the anniversary was celebrated with much vigour by different Ambedkarite groups that gathered at the historic site on 1st January. This event was preceded by a mammoth Elgaar Parishad in Pune's Shaniwarwada, the symbolic embodiment of Peshwa rule. Different Dalit groups, along with some progressive Muslim groups, came together for the Parishad and shared the stage with national leaders. As Probodhan Pol explains in his article in *The Hindu* on the Bhima Koregaon event, "The gathering declared a renewed struggle against the Hindutva rule over Maharashtra and India, by conceptualising the present evil to be the 'new Peshwa'" (Pol 2018). He further notes that with

leaders like Jignesh Mewani, Radhika Vemula, and Umar Khalid occupying the stage, alongside Prakash Ambedkar, the anti-Hindutva agenda of the Parishad was evident.

A couple of months before the Bhima Koregaon celebration, there was another confrontation in the village of Bhima Koregaon. The site where Sambhaji Maharaj, the son of the Shivaji Maharaj, was cremated is near Bhima Koregaon. A sign near the site, remembering a Dalit man who arranged Sambhaji's last rites, suddenly became a site of confrontation. A few Maratha households filed a complaint against the Dalits who put up the sign, claiming that there is no historical evidence of the fact that Sambhaji was indeed cremated by a Dalit and that it was illegal to put up such a sign.

On 1st January, during the celebrations at Bhima Koregaon, there was an outbreak of violence between the people celebrating the Bhima Koregaon bicentenary, consisting mainly of Dalits and Marathas. The violence resulted in one death. Organisers of the Elgaar Parishad and Bhima Koregaon celebrations accused Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote for instigating the violence. Sambhaji Bhide considers himself a carrier of the heritage of Shivaji and Sambhaji, the two icons of Maratha pride. Bhide has a history of cases against him for instigating riots. The followers of Sambhaji Bhide were accused of assaulting Ambedkarites gathered for the celebrations, since they viewed Bhima Koregaon as a site of Maratha pride and not Ambedkarite/ Dalit/ Mahar pride.

Upon the row over the violence at Bhima Koregaon the erstwhile chief minister of Maharashtra, Devendra Fadanvis, said that Sambhaji Bhide could not be arrested due to lack of evidence of his involvement in the case. A number of human rights activists now termed as "urban naxals" were named as conspirators by the government and arrested for the violence during Bhima Koregaon celebrations.[4]

The state government attempted to articulate the violence during this Dalit-led agitation in terms of violence created by the far-left. The Dalit organisers of the event also came under the government scanner as "Maoists". At a time when both the state and central government are ruled by a Hindutva party-led alliance, the Dalit–Maratha polarisation in Maharashtra was exploited by the governing party to sustain its power. The consolidated Maratha vote bank became a new

[4] For more information on the timeline of the Bhima Koregaon Case, see: Bhima Koregaon Case: A Timeline of What Has Happened So Far (2023, July 28). *Outlook India. https://www.outlookindia.com/national/bhima-koregaon-case-a-timeline-of-what-has-happened-so-far-news-306463*

majority due to this polarisation and was captured by the Hindutva forces, as it is evident from the Bhima Koregaon episode.

Conclusion

it is evident that the post-truth politics of the MKM directly or indirectly helped the right-wing politics of the BJP. The root causes of Maratha distress and discontent including a massive agricultural crisis, severely depleting opportunities in education and employment were not addressed (Palshikar et al). Rather, while ignoring all these concerns completely, an over-aggressive dominant caste identity politics with its decidedly anti-Dalit narrative occupied the centre-stage, creating a rift and changing the electoral arithmetic as well as the caste-based perception of the social fabric of Maharashtra.

The caste-based polarisation by consolidating Marathas under the MKM and reconstructing the narratives underlying the reservation policy and caste assertions has significantly altered the political dynamics in Maharashtra. The exponential rise in unemployment, the agricultural crisis in the state, and the socio-political anxieties arising out of the popular cultural discourse in the era of post-truth have resulted in a multi-faceted turmoil. At a time when new vocabularies of caste-based assertions are constructed alongside the renewed projects of religious polarisation across India through the platforms of social media, narratives behind various democratic processes are being altered. The language of social justice, which essentially accompanies the reservation policy, is suffering from epistemological violence, resulting in retributive notions of justice. Reservations have come to be associated with compensatory measures to correct the inequitable distribution of government schemes. The values underlying representation and the understanding of the distribution of socio-cultural resources have significantly altered.

At a time when the neoliberal economy has already shrunk the scope of the public sector and subsequently of reservations in the public sector, the introduction of reservation for the upper castes on economic basis, makes the whole schema of affirmative action useless. The logic of compensation of social injustice is completely shattered with this move. The core nature of caste system is hierarchy, which is invisiblised by projecting castes as competing interest groups striving for material gains from the State. Politics in India in the post-truth era articulates itself by challenging the core values of liberty, equality and social justice in the Constitution of India by reinterpreting the society, erasing the reality of existing hierarchies, and demarcating identity groups, ever-reducing in size, until ultimately only one individual with endless watertight identities

is left to fend for herself. This perfectly complements the neoliberal logic of the economy. As consciousness of material realities of class position is obscured by repeated appeals to caste loyalties in rallying calls for "preserving feudal pride", the trend of impoverishment of non-landowning Marathas further fuels this post-truth scheme. The more impoverished the members, the more they blame the systematically identified enemy—in this case, the Dalits.

In terms of political temporality, the post-truth era has given a new point of entry for investigation of several age-old assumptions about dichotomies of reason and emotion, autonomy and control, public and private, and so on. The shift in political narratives of caste mobilisations in Indian democracy offers another array of dichotomies and rhetoric to be questioned including that of the group and the individual.

Shriranjan Awate works as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Savitribai Phule Pune University. He completed his Ph.D. from the same department in 2023. Awate has written a book in Marathi on Twentieth-Century Political Thought (Visavya Shatakatil Rajakiy Vichar), translated two books on electoral politics for Sage Publications ('Measuring Voting Behaviour in India' and 'Indian Youth and Electoral Politics') and co-authored a Marathi book on the philosophy of the Indian Constitution ('Aapla I-Card'). His novel 'Single Mingle' received the State Government award in 2017.

Rahee Shruti Ganesh is a doctoral student at the Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has co-authored a Marathi book on the philosophy of the Indian Constitution ('Aapla I-Card'). She was awarded the Australia India Research Student's Fellowship by the Department of Education, Government of Australia in 2023. She writes periodically in academic and popular media on education, political philosophy and literature.

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A Continuum of Post-Truth Phenomenon: A Study of the Karbi Anglong Mob Lynching in Assam

Simona Sarma

Abstract

Given the recent spate of mob violence in India, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of such mobilisations and the ways in which social media, as a purveyor of post-truth narratives, frames and legitimises such actions. Taking the case study of the Karbi Anglong mob-violence of Assam on 8 June 2018, the essay will analyse how the phenomenon of "post-truth" follows a path of continuum. That is, while the prevalence of a "post-truth" may incite violence, the discussion around the violence also often revolves around the discourse of post-truth. Unlike the conventional understanding of post-truth as a "performance by the powerful", this essay will attempt to reveal how the source/instigator of post-truths may shift to include anonymous individuals who gain power through social media. Through an analysis of media reports and the larger public discourse on the Karbi Anglong lynching incident, the paper will deal with the inter-linkages between social media, post-truths, and mob-violence.

Keywords: post-truth, social media, mob lynching, Karbi Anglong, Assam

Introduction

The term "post-truth" refers to situations where we tamper with the truth and "routinise dishonesty" in a way that apart from "truth" and "lies" now, there exists another category of "ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie" (Keyes 2004: 16). It was after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States in 2016 that the term "post-truth" was declared the "Word of the Year" by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is believed that Trump won the election not based on facts but an appeal to emotions and personal beliefs. The large-scale discarding of objective facts was witnessed for the first time in a manner that stunned the entire world. Interestingly, the situation in India was, and is still, not much different. The cult status of our political leaders; work precisely on these emotional pleas where the public is wooed to believe some of their statements as *the* truth. Apart from the function of

the charisma of a particular individual in position, the ever-increasing power of the media (including social media) also plays an integral role in dissipating post-truth in our everyday lives. Therefore, the politics of developing post-truth claims rely heavily on journalistic devices that corroborate those claims along with psychological mechanisms that use emotions and sentiments to persuade the public. The social construction of post-truth is blatantly evident in the Indian context, which makes this essay quite relevant for our time. The environment of post-truth has several political, social, and economic implications, one among them being mob-violence. For instance, the Karbi Anglong's mob lynching of Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath on 8 June 2018, on which this essay is based, was a consequence of fake news/rumours being circulated on WhatsApp about them being "child-lifters". Hence, this essay will attempt to essentially draw this link between post-truth and mob violence.

Mob Lynching: How Has It Become a Phenomena?

Alex Alvarez and Ronet Bachman (2008: 224) have defined mob lynching as "a type of collective violence in which a group of individuals circumvent the law and punish individuals for real or imagined crimes". After the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the 1860s, extra-judicial killings of African Americans by White Southerners became common, and so did lynching (Alvarez and Bachman 2008: 226). This historical context affirms the fact that lynching often has a social, economic, or political goal.

In contemporary India, mob lynching has become a common phenomenon since the last decade. Visuals of men being beaten up by an unruly mob are routinely visible. Such forms of barbaric violence make it difficult to comprehend the level of atrocities that humans can bestow upon others. Over the past six years, mob lynching has increased at a tremendous rate. An *IndiaSpend* analysis of news reports of mob violence across India has shown 4.5 times rise in attacks and a two-fold rise in deaths from 2017 to 2018 (Saldanha, Rajput, and Hazare 2018). In a report compiled by *The Quint,* a total of 113 people have been lynched from 2015 to 2019.[1] The first incident of lynching that was reported in national media and garnered widespread attention was the Dadri mob lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in September 2015. Largely citing the reason for cow-slaughter, Akhlaq was dragged from his house by a mob and killed in cold blood among the gaping spectators (Kumar 2017). This pattern of "cow vigilante" killings, targeting marginalised communities like the Muslims and the Dalits for cow slaughter, has become particularly dreadful.

[1] https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/lynching-in-india/ [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people, including 36 Muslims, were killed in such attacks. In fact, the commonality of such incidents prevents us from belittling or ignoring this phenomenon. Accordingly, the Supreme Court of India issued a series of preventive and punitive directives in July 2018 to address lynchings, such as fast-track courts, victim compensation system, and designation of police officers in every district to prevent mob violence (*Human Rights Watch* 2019). Currently, only three states of India—Manipur, West Bengal, and Rajasthan—have enacted laws against mob lynching (Deswal 2020). Given the communal pattern of such violence, lynching is often considered a corollary of religious fanaticism. However, apart from religion, several other factors like ethnicity and nationality may also induce such forms of violence which require further introspection. Penetration of social media and the widespread apathy of both politicians and the common masses have multiplied such crimes manifold.

Interestingly, some of the events of mob lynching are not the direct effect of "performance by the powerful" but rather set ablaze by the common men. The Karbi Anglong mob lynching of June 2018 points precisely toward this form of post-truth play where the perpetrators belonged to a marginalised ethnic community while the victims belonged to a middle-class family from an urban cosmopolitan city of Assam. In theories of collective violence, while "violence 'from the bottom up' by socially subordinate groups tends to be portrayed as reasonable and possibly even worthy of sympathetic understanding, that 'from the top down' by dominant or majority groups against minorities, the poor, or members of labor movements, is not" (Roche 1996: 99). However, it is important to theorise and understand the political economy of even "bottom-up" violence and develop a broader understanding of the issue.

Based on textual analysis of news reports and social media (Facebook) posts and WhatsApp forwards that were published in the aftermath of the killings, the broader public discourse on the incident will be brought to the fore. Accordingly, through a case study of the Karbi Anglong mob lynching incident in Assam, this essay will attempt to locate such violence within the purview of social media and the discourse of post-truth. By exploring what happened before and after the incident, the connection between post-truth, social media, and mob violence will be drawn.

Karbi Anglong: A District in the Margins?

Before examining the lynching of June 2018 in detail, it is important to first explore the district of Karbi Anglong to understand the socio-political history of the district and its people itself. Such

exploration will help us to contextualise the violence within the space of the district (See Figure 1).

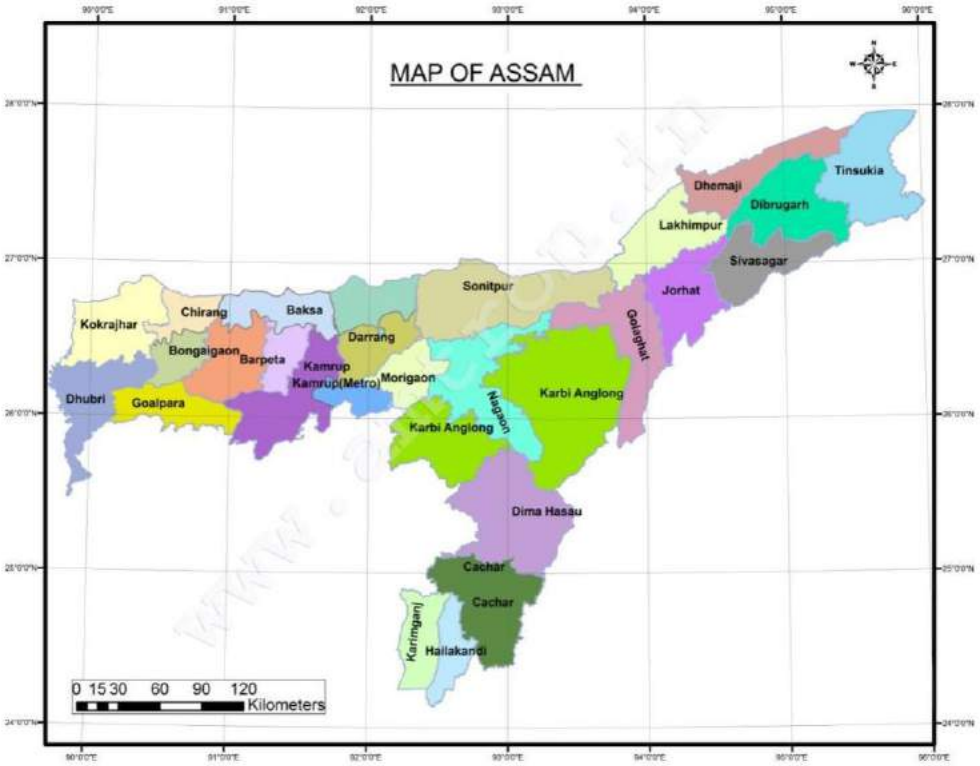

Figure 1: District map of Assam

***Source*: assam.gov.in/assam-maps**

Situated in central Assam, Karbi Anglong is the largest district in the state of Assam. While the Karbi community forms the majority group in the district, several other ethnic communities (earlier known as "hill tribes") reside in the district, including Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, Kukis, Tiwas, Garos, etc. The formation of the Karbi Anglong district has a long history of struggle among the people residing in the area. Before British colonisation, the hill tribes of Northeast India neither belonged to India nor Assam. They managed to maintain their independent identity. It was after the colonisation of the whole of Northeast that the British separated the hill tribes from the plainsmen of Assam under the Government of India Act of 1935 (Hussain 1987: 1329). According to P. K. Nath (2014: 125), "Under the colonial scheme of classifying peoples and geographies, the Karbi settlements were initially subjected under the policy of *Inner Line Permit* in 1873 and finally segregated as *Partially Excluded Areas* in 1935." The Government of Assam had no jurisdiction over

these excluded areas which were administered under the special power of the governor (Hussain 1987: 1329). The advent of Christian missionaries into the Karbi hills during the latter part of the nineteenth century led to the rise of a small minority of educated tribal people who led social and political change in their society. These educated elites began to realise the "underdevelopment" and "backwardness" that is characteristic of the region. Hence, the Karbis eventually began to raise demands for a separate district. Ultimately in 1951, a separate district under the name of the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was established. Later in 1970, this district was bifurcated into Mikir Hills and the North Cachar districts. Following this bifurcation, in 1976 the Mikir Hills district was renamed Karbi Anglong. In accordance with the 1935 Act, the Indian Constitution, after Independence, provided each hill district an autonomous district council with large autonomous powers under the 6th Schedule (Hussain 1987: 1329).[2] Under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution, Karbi Anglong is currently administered by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

However, the demands did not stop at the separate district being formed. Gradually demands for a separate state began to emerge. The rise in Assamese sub-nationalistic tendencies since the middle of the nineteenth century proved to be an important factor in determining the political history of Karbi Anglong. Assamese sub-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century with the assertion to establish Assamese language and culture as distinctive and autonomous, against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal (Baruah 2005: 127). This project of micro-nationalism got exacerbated with Assam finding itself in a turbulent relationship with Bangladeshi immigrants since the partition. Identity crises, resource over-use, alienation, and economic concerns ultimately paved the way for increased regionalism and the rise of insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that started fighting for an immigrant-free Assam (Hazarika 2000). Neglect from the centre and its location at the periphery also kept these micro-nationalist sentiments alive. These sub-nationalist practices led to several homogenising practices like the introduction of the Language Bill in 1960 that established Assamese as the state language. With policies such as this, the ethnic community in Assam began to gradually feel marginalised (given that they adhered to completely different languages and

[2] Passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1949, the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution helps the tribal population of the country to maintain their autonomy. This autonomy is provided through the constitution of Autonomous District Councils (ADC) that are empowered with civil and judicial powers.

cultures and followed diverse ethnic practices). Therefore, demand for a separate hill state began to rise in the Karbi Anglong district around the 1980s.

Apart from Assamese hegemony, the Karbi community also started recognising the inadequacies of the 6th Schedule. The KAAC, for instance, has failed in developmental efforts. Along with a lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of KAAC, even the limited budgets prepared by them are seldom met (Sharma 2016). These issues too led to a demand for a separate state among Karbis (although the non-Karbi dominated areas of the district have led several protests against separate statehood). Along with democratic movements, armed struggle also emerged in Karbi Anglong with the formation of Karbi National Volunteers and Karbi People's Force in 1994. Eventually, they entered a ceasefire with the Indian government in 2002 and laid down their weapons. Nonetheless, a section from them, called the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLF), was formed in 2010 to keep the armed struggle for a separate state going (Sharma 2016). Interestingly, the other ethnic groups living in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts formed their own insurgent groups leading to several ethnic clashes happening within the district as well. For instance, several clashes happened between Karbis and Kukis between October 2003 and March 2004, along with similar clashes ensuing between Karbis and Dimasas in 2005 (Nath 2014). As Nath (2014: 148) argues, "The present political scenario in this hill district of Assam is marked by fragmented activities, both violent and non-violent, by various groups of this kind which are multiplying in number."

Apart from such political instability, the remote areas of Karbi Anglong lack access to even basic amenities like health, education, connectivity and have an extremely slow rate of development (Sharma 2016). As per the 2011 Census, only 73 percent of the population was literate.[3] Apart from that, according to the Assam Human Development Report of 2014, the value of the Employment and Livelihood Quality Index (that considers employment and income parameters to reflect on the sustainability of livelihoods) is one of the lowest in Karbi Anglong i.e. 0.09. In fact, it has been observed that the EQLI has a strong negative correlation with the proportion of the population being SC/ST in a particular area (which is also the case with Karbi Anglong, given the majority of hill tries belong to the category of Scheduled Tribes (ST)). Karbi Anglong is also one of the districts with the highest rates of poverty, standing at 42.5 percent.[4]

[3] https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/assam/Paper-1-I.pdf [Accessed: 20th June 2021].
[4] https://sita.assam.gov.in/portlets/assam-human-development-report-0 [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

It is within such a socio-economic and political scenario that we need to locate the 2018 incident of mob lynching in Karbi Anglong. The identity conflict in the region, the lack of education, and the "tribal" versus "non-tribal" dynamic are some of the pre-conditions leading to lynching. As written by Sampurna Bordoloi and Pinak Pani Dutta, it is as if the "spectre of the 'other' is veritably created to lynch" (Bordoloi and Datta 2018). One must understand that the rumours of child-lifting might essentially be a function of misrecognition or threat that the tribal population feels towards an "outsider".

It is also important to mention that this isn't the first instance of mob lynching in Karbi Anglong. Jhankar Saikia, a 16-year-old college student, was similarly lynched in front of his father by a few auto-rickshaw drivers after they refused to pay INR 30 instead of the regular fare of INR 20 in 2013. It is only in February 2020 that 12 people of the 16 accused have been convicted and awarded life imprisonment for the same (Nath 2020). The history of delayed justice, therefore, might also lead to the perpetration of similar events. Hence, as suggested by Miguel Das Queah, a Guwahati-based child rights activist, "Ghettoisation of the communities, fear of the outsiders and the real issue of trafficking of children may have all contributed to the lynching" (Naqvi 2018).

A Brief Insight into the Event of 8 June 2018

On 8 June 2018, two Assamese youth, Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath, travelled from the city of Guwahati to Kangthilangso waterfalls in Karbi Anglong. News reports later conveyed that the two had gone to enjoy a peaceful evening amidst beautiful nature and collect some ornamental fish. Apparently, while in their adventure, a young man from the Panjuri Kachari village identified them as *xopadhora*[5] or child-lifters. There were rumours doing rounds for the past couple of weeks in the area that five child-lifters or *phankodongs,* the Karbi term for child-lifters, from Bihar were on a kidnapping spree and have already attacked a few children in the district capital of Diphu (Saikia 2018). Not completely baseless, government records reveal that Karbi Anglong accounts for one of the highest cases of child trafficking in Assam, which itself has routinely recorded the highest number of child and women trafficking cases in India (Baruah 2018). Accordingly, the young man informed others in the village to stop their car and attack them. Based on WhatsApp forwards and Facebook posts, a mob of around 200 people gathered in the area and stopped their black Scorpio

[5] *Xopadhora* is a mythical character that figures in Assamese folk tales and it literally means "to gag and kidnap" in English. Apart from being in the folktales, the character was often used in the day-to-day conversations to generate fear among children and keep them away from strangers. Hence, it essentially began to be understood as "child-lifters".

car. After attacking their car, they pulled both Das and Nath out and brutally thrashed and killed them (Naqvi 2018). A senior police official later remarked that two musical instruments were found in the car, both of which might have been alien to the village people. The video of the lynching went viral on social media right after the incident, which, along with the violence, also showed Das pleading for mercy the whole time.

Rumour and Its Corollaries

Based on how the event unfolded, there is a need to understand the social function of rumour in a critical way. Until quite some time, the story remained that the incident was sparked by WhatsApp rumours (that were in circulation for a few months in 2018 up to the time of the lynching) of child-lifters (xopadhora) roaming in the area. The rumours were largely precautionary and centred around how xopadhoras look, what do they do, when do they emerge during the day, among others. The tales of xopadhora often exist within a "ghastly imagination". Quintessentially male and belonging to a different community than the host community, a xopadhora is believed to have long braided hair and large shining eyes and kidnap children. Coincidentally, one of the victims of this lynching, with his Rastafarian dreadlocks, aligned perfectly with the "imagined" image of the xopadhora. This immediately marked him out as the "other", ultimately leading the mob to identify the youth as child-lifter.

Here, one can gauge the power of rumours within the overarching reach of social media. It also shows how rumours and myths can come together to create deadly possibilities. Mythical imaginations then tend to get a renewed significance within a digital environment spewing hate and uncertainties. As Ralph Keyes (2004: 153) has rightly suggested, "Human beings have always used myths to counter anxiety, but the internet expands exponentially our ability to disseminate fables and do so fast." Hence the result is, as Anne P. Mintz calls, an "age of misinformation" (cited in Keyes 2004: 152). In this age of misinformation, when a rumour is circulated as "truth" via social media, it may result in the eruption of violence. This has been seen in many other instances like the "Northeastern exodus" of 2012 when thousands of people from Northeast India left from Bangalore following fake social media posts insinuating violence against them (Srivatsa and Kurup 2012), or the Muzzaffarnagar riots of 2013 triggered by fake videos circulating on social

media.[6] In fact, a wave of mob attacks and lynching occurred in 2017 and 2018 based on "fake news" of child abductions circulated via WhatsApp (IndiaSpend 2018). These lies/rumours shared on social media platforms with *intent* can easily take the shape of post-truth and "fan a medieval barbarity within us" (Mitra 2018). Hence, it is especially important to tackle the issue of rumour in the world of post-truth where "rumour" often equals "truth". Since a mob may revel in anonymity and get empowered by this anonymity, it becomes imperative to trace the source that sets off a mob. In other words, the origin of inflammatory messages and the motivation behind them must be studied (Anima 2018).

In this case of "constructing the other" one can realise how deviation from ideas of "normalcy", in terms of appearance, can also result in such grievous occurrences. However, it is worth noting that these "norms of appearance" come into play largely through news and social media. Thus, we can see how post-truth often feeds on the "normalcy" quotient and stems from an attack on "cultural deviance". "Collective violence, then, is commonly a moralistic response to deviant behaviour" such that it often gets termed as "popular justice" (Roche 1996: 98). Can this violence be attributed to both social media as well as circulation of particular discourses through other facets of the media?

Social Media and Anonymity

As rumours were the primary reason for the incident, we must consider who or how these started in the first place. Popular understanding of post-truth often attributes its genesis to "modern institutions of truth-telling (the courts, the press, universities, and laboratories) which no longer serve as universally acknowledged store of reliable knowledge" (Rider and Peters 2018: 5). However, lack of education, poverty, sensationalised news, and gullibility of citizens with excess information also leads to post-truth conditions being promulgated by ordinary citizens belonging to all strata of the society. This is especially true now when social media has become one of the major players in the contemporary political economy that guarantees anonymity. It has been found that social media has been widely used in the dissemination of misinformation in India. With over 200 million registered WhatsApp users and 250 million registered Facebook users, the situation becomes even more distressing (Gupta 2019: 154).

[6] The fake video that was found instrumental in spreading the violence claimed to depict the lynching of two Jat (a dominant caste group of North India) boys by a Muslim mob in Kawal village, Uttar Pradesh. Later, the video was found to be an old one shot in Pakistan (see Trivedi 2019).

The traditional gatekeepers of information flow, which included editors of newspapers, radio, and television, are no longer present in the new media technologies. As a result, WhatsApp messaging services have frequently been the cause of several instances of mob violence. "Lynching incidents sparked by 'WhatsApp forwards and messages' are so common that the term 'WhatsApp Lynching' is now used to collectively refer to such incidents" (Gupta 2019: 168). The primary cause for this is anonymity and a lack of information regarding the source of a particular message. Interestingly, though, this anonymity does not work in a vacuum but functions precisely because the anonymous individuals are aware of other anonymous individuals who will help them reach their cause. In other words, the possibility of "networked anonymity", a concept introduced by Tzlil Sharon and Nicholas John (2018), enhances the use of social media as a purveyor of post-truth politics. According to them, networked anonymity "account for the ways that anonymous actors imagine one another as 'someone, rather than as an unknown 'anyone'" (Sharon and John 2018 4177). It is the existence of familiarity within the veil of anonymity that post-truth politics survives and sustains itself. As Alfred Hermida (2012: 311) argues, social media technologies "empower users to interact with each other, and participate and collaborate in the making of media, rather than just consuming media". The difference between producers and consumers is fast narrowing in this digital environment and post-truth narratives feed on this contracting gap. Although WhatsApp limited its forwarding of messages to five chats at a time in July 2018 to curb rumours leading to lynching (Pathak 2018)[7], not much has been achieved even after that. Given that the source remains anonymous still, fake news and rumours continue to circulate in a digitally mediated world.

Anonymous instigators in the world of social media raise several other complexities. Such incidents turn the very idea of post-truth as "performance by the powerful" on its head, while still perpetuating violence. Post-truth is, therefore, also a weapon for the marginalised to draw attention and take justice onto their hands, which may prove deadly. Putting up the video on social media by the perpetrators themselves and hence, *claiming* the brutality, has shown how the perpetrators do not deny their responsibility in the incident. Such claims have also been possible due to the opportunity of creating fake accounts on social media platforms. Thus, it is important to theorise post-truth from the perspective of the "voice-less" to prevent such kinds of violence in the future.

[7] This limitation is different in India than the rest of the world. While one can forward messages to up to 20 chats globally, in India, it is limited to five.

Violent Visuals: An Addition to the Post-truth Narrative

The very fact that the video of the mob attack of Karbi Anglong went viral on social media right after the incident shows how "violent video sharing", which is also a violent act, has become a means to address justice and hence, showcase the "truth". In the early twentieth century, literary and political texts by Black Americans often expressed their fear by portraying lynching in graphic ways (McTaggart 2014: 793–4). In these visual depictions, the people who support the lynch mobs (in this case the mute spectators and policeman present at the scene) are seen to enjoy voyeuristic pleasure, re-affirming the atrocity and complacency of the mob. Although visuals are considered necessary to represent the heinous crimes as closely as possible, one must understand that these photographs and videos are much more than just an aesthetic element. They help in telling stories in a way that might overpower all other variations in a narrative. It is imperative to pay attention to the way the visuals are utilised by the mainstream media in framing these stories to "manufacture consent" (Herman and Chomsky 1988) among the public. Almost all the news channels that were covering the lynching were constantly playing this video in the background to repeatedly 'confirm' the occurrence of the incident (Prag News 2018). Such forms of reiteration might also be a way to imprint the Karbi Anglong lynching in the "national collective memory" (Kurian 2015: 25). This visual was also shared widely by social media users through WhatsApp and Facebook. Repeated watching also leads to a kind of "owning" of the victims to empathise with them. As written by Jenni and Loewenstein, "identifiable victims seem to produce a greater empathetic response, accompanied by greater willingness to make personal sacrifices to provide aid" (cited in Kurian 2015: 26). The repeat telecast of the lynching accompanied by a close focus on the faces of the perpetrators as well as the victims, also aided in confirming the stereotypes of the tribal perpetrators here as "wild" and "barbaric". The tone of the news anchors too unambiguously expressed their judgement (Prag News 2018).[8] What does this whole fiasco tell us about the circulation and consumption of violence in television as well as social media? In the post-truth environment, it is crucial to consider how visuals of brutality may operate in critical ways to keep the post-truth continuum running, by not letting the appeals to emotion subside in the public discourse.

Lynching and the Question of Identity

[8] In this news announcement of lynching at Prag News (a popular Assamese news channel), the anchor's tone reek of disappointment, shock, and judgement. Words like "animalistic" and "barbaric" are a part of the bulletin.

Given the socio-political history of the region, the threat of such post-truth mechanisms became almost immediately imminent. Questions of ethnic identity eventually started getting tied to this event of mob lynching. Several studies have looked at the connection between rumours and ethnic violence. In a 2009 study by Ravi Bhavnani, Michael G. Findley, and James H. Kuklinski, they argue that rumours are a prerequisite to ethnic violence and violence-promoting rumours are often similar across time and contexts. They note that such rumours are, "extreme and threaten individuals through their group identities" (Bhavani, Findley, and Kuklinski 2009: 877).

Such an explanation can be linked to the Karbi Anglong lynching as this violence has also been tagged as "ethnic" in its epistemology by both news media as well as social media discourses. It is the socio-political construction of the discourse around this lynching that identity markers began to be associated with all those involved. In the viral video of the lynching, one of the victims is seen pleading for his life by saying "*Moi Axomia hoi*" [I am an Assamese]. This phrase was repeatedly brought to focus by the media such that a binary between "us" and "them" was constructed. The narrative, "How was an 'Assamese' killed within Assam?", became the dominant narrative in discussions among the public. Therefore, this act of lynching was increasingly viewed as an act of ethnic conflict by many in Assam. The protest marches held in Guwahati after the incident also saw similar placards hinting at the question of Assamese identity (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Thousands of Protesters in Guwahati on 10 June 2018

Source: https://scroll.in/latest/882130/assam-protests-in-guwahati-against-lynching-of-two-men-on-suspicion-that-they-were-kidnappers [Accessed: 20th June 2021].

In the picture above, the placard says, "I am an Assamese. My father's name is Gopal Das and my mother's name is Radhika Das", the very words that one of the victims kept on uttering to save himself from the mob. Re-iterating the exact phrase within the space of a protest march has a symbolic value of insinuating the "ethnic clash" narrative that was being established through media technologies and everyday conversations. A WhatsApp group called "*Aami Axomiya*" [We Are Assamese] was formed with nearly 1,000 participants to gather people for the protest (Agarwala and Saha 2018), which in itself is exclusionary in character. It is also important to pay heed to the "everyday" while talking about post-truth contexts. It is through the medium of everyday conversations that identities get solidified and discourses tend to form. Karen Tracy and Jessica Robles have looked at this link between everyday talk and identity work. They define "identity work" as the "process through which talk makes available to participants and observers who the people doing the talking must be" (Tracy and Robles 2013: 7). So, through the person's choice of how to talk, identity work is accomplished. In several of my conversations with Assamese people in Guwahati city after the incident, I could observe a hyper-nationalist Assamese identity being hailed while condemning the incident. This tendency to bring in markers of ethnicity in some cases while religion in others, can spark off rumours that may prove fatalistic in nature.

Aditya Sharma has aptly pointed out how the "act" of this lynching gets social significance by associating "identity" to it. With the predominance of identity markers that separate "us" versus "them", the act of lynching stands to become a "slayer of 'x' and the slain of 'y'" (Sharma 2018). Rumours and mob mentality benefit most from such ascription. Connecting one's identity to either the victim or the perpetrator also results in stereotyping the entire community to which either belongs. This, in turn, can easily fuel other acts of violence rather than bring justice to the original act of violence. For instance, after the news of the Karbi Anglong lynching became public, several Assamese youths sought to seek "revenge" by targeting the "perpetrator community". According to an *Outlook* report on 11 June 2018, a group of youngsters also went "live" on Facebook as they drove through the town of Nagaon in Assam looking for Karbi and Bodo people (Bordoloi 2018). Social media was flooded with posts that started abusing and stereotyping the Karbis as *junglee*s [wild]. An analysis of Facebook posts and the comments therein, showcases a sense of "shared blame" that implicated the Karbi community as a whole, as the incident happened in the district

of Karbi Anglong (The perpetrators, however, included people from both the Karbi and Bodo communities) (see Figures 3 and 4). In Figure 3, a screenshot from a Facebook post, the first comment reads, "They look like drug addicts, I have heard that many people in Karbi Anglong are drug addicts because drugs are cheaply available in the form of tablets."

Figure 3: Screenshot from Facebook post

Source: https://www.facebook.com/guwahatiplus/posts/1807553632643741

Figure 4: Screenshot from Facebook post

Source: https://www.facebook.com/guwahatiplus/posts/1807553632643741

Such comments describing the perpetrators lead to a publicly shaming of the community in social media platforms. Bringing in the "tribal versus non-tribal" rhetoric also creates divisions within various communities in Assam. Such incidents of "community shame" bring forth an identity politics that is re-moulded with changing circumstances (see Figure 3).

Therefore, although Keyes (2004) has described "community" as making dissembling difficult, this incident reveals something quite different. In the world of social media, the community as a whole can often get entrenched in the discourse of post-truth and make mob violence possible. In this case of lynching too, the community did not lead to any deterrence in the lynching and rather gave in to the rumours operating in this post-truth environment where social media dominates. In fact, the sense of shared community values, which was responsible for the lynching, was later re-emphasised while talking about the incident on different media platforms.

Media and Post-truth

According to Ralph Keyes, media is one of the most important forums through which the post-truth condition may dissipate. He argues, "With its insatiable appetite for colourful copy and high-profile writers, the media are a primary enabler of post-truthfulness" (Keyes 2004: 124). Through an analysis of news reports and social media posts, it is evident that the narratives circulating in the media regarding the *why* of the incident have been extremely varied. Some have spoken of a political motive to incite ethnic violence between the Karbis and so-called "mainstream" Assamese people while some others argue that the killings happened as the duo got an inkling of the illegal granite smuggling of Karbi Anglong, involving several political personalities (see Figure 5).

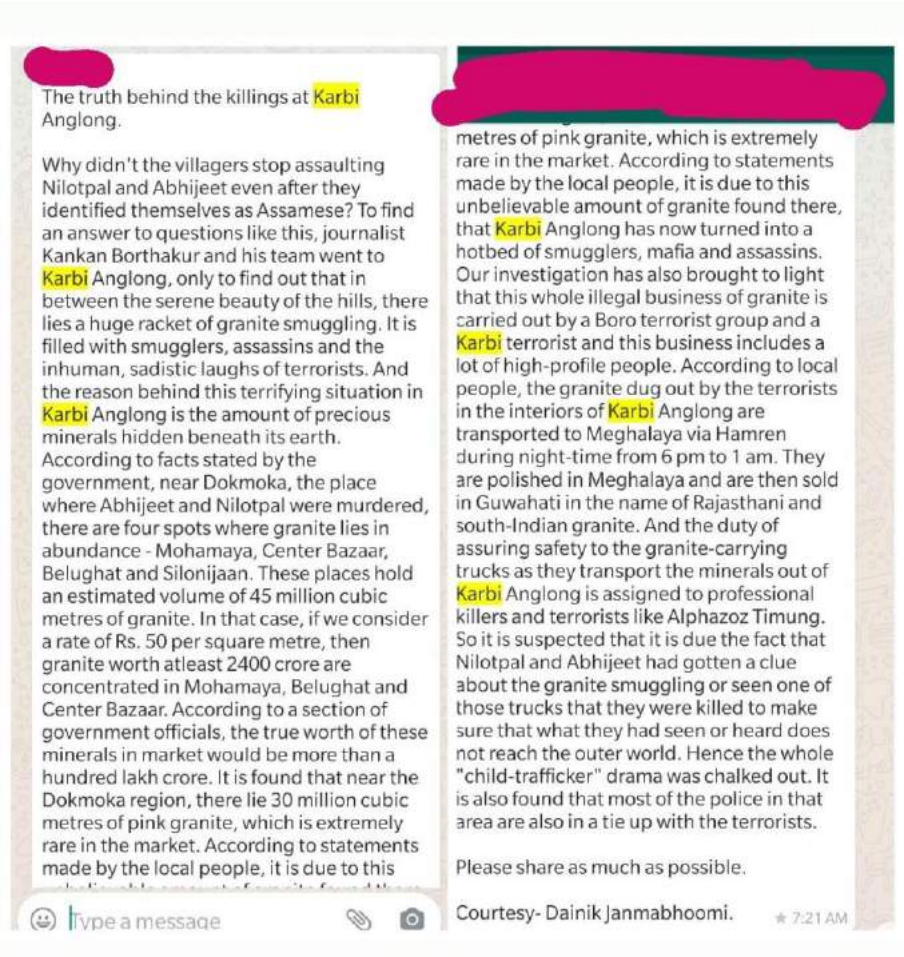

Figure 5: Screenshot of a WhatsApp message doing rounds during that period

Source: WhatsApp.

This news was fuelled by the presence of a policeman in the viral video where he was seen taking video of the lynching rather than trying to stop the violence. In the WhatsApp message shown above, there are details of such a syndicate and the source given is of *Dainik Janambhoomi*, an Assamese daily. Another news report suggested that Alphajoz Taimung, the principal accused in the mob attack, had a fight with the men in the car near the waterfall and stoned their car before calling in the villagers for help (Choudhury 2018). Despite these speculations, media reports on the issue often start with the words, "Truth behind the Karbi Anglong incident". Such an emphasis on the term "truth" shows that there is a re-assertion by various groups to establish certain plausible reasons as *the* truth. What is the reality though? "Reality", as it were to mean in a situation like this, becomes extremely important. To consider "truth" as a social construct from a post-modernist perspective does not give us the right to take away justice that only "objective facts" can sometimes provide. As Jeff Malpas (1992: 295) writes:

> *Post-modern abandonment of truth…is not itself essentially relativistic. The post-modern reaction is more radical than this. It is a crucial mistake to treat post-modern truth as relativised truth. The mistake is in the very idea of such a thing as "post-modern truth". The post-modern reaction does not relativise truth, for that suggests that there is a notion there to be relativised. Instead, it rejects the very possibility of the notion.*

In other words, post-modernists believe that there is no notion of "truth". What is present is a play of power, discourse, and meaning. In this power-play, we must, therefore, look for "deliberate falsehoods propagated consciously with intent to deceive" (Keyes 2004: 103). That is, the eruption of violence does not necessarily take away the "post" from post-truth. Speculations continue to thrive in this socially mediated world. That is, information disseminated through social media and those broadcasted in news media tend to go hand-in-hand. Both assist one another in formulating news and transferring information to the citizens. It is this "double-trap" that helps spread fake news resulting in deadly consequences. As Hermida (2012: 309) argues:

> *Powerful digital communication tools, often identified by the catch-all phrase of social media, are transforming the way media is gathered, disseminated, and consumed. A generation of Internet technologies, collectively described as Web 2.0, has facilitated the involvement of citizens in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution, and interpretation of events. It has become commonplace for the citizens caught up in the news to provide the first accounts, images, and video of events unfolding around them, sharing their media on services such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.*

The politics of post-truth, therefore, emerge and sustain due to the socio-political environment within which we live making it thrive within a circle of continuum.

Conclusion

To conclude, the essay has attempted to bring forth how the Karbi Anglong mob-lynching incident was sparked by rumours on social media. Trying to provide a basis for the rumours (in terms of the socio-political scenario) before the lynching, the essay has shown that these rumours still run profusely in the post-truth environment, even after the lynching. In other words, the occurrence of the violence has not been able to do away with post-truth politics as numerous speculations continued on the incident for a long time. So, the question that needs answering is, where do we

seek justice? By repressing the former or solving the latter or both? As Nandana Dutta argued, it is only in the narrative existence within people's consciousness that any event becomes accessible. That is, any event becomes accessible to us based on how it is mediated in particular ways by particular individuals, such that the reality might sometimes get lost. With the multiple narratives that have emerged after the Karbi Anglong lynching, speculations remain high. Social media adds fuel to these speculations resulting in a continuum of post-truth phenomena. This is a very perilous situation to be in where the media and the public become both the victims as well as the instigators of this culture. To remove ourselves from this conundrum, it is imperative to place stricter policies on digital sharing, increase quality education among people so that one can comprehend the difference between "real" and "fake"[9], improve the legal machinery to quite an extent, and make media more and more ethical. As Petar Jandric (2018: 109) points out:

> *Post-truth ignores truth at all levels: data is falsified, information is misprocessed and knowledge is distorted. Post-truth data, post-truth information and post-truth knowledge inevitably lead to post-truth wisdom… However, wisdom provides guidelines for human behaviour—it looks straight into the future. Therefore, post-truth is a poisonous public pedagogy oriented towards raising future generations of people with distorted worldviews, opinions and ethical judgements.*

Now that we are aware of how a post-truth condition can result in real violence, we must be wary of such situations. It is important to understand that post-truth does not operate in a social vacuum. Recognising these situations is an important task at hand and given the current political climate, we can expect a surge in such post-truth claims which needs to be strategically dealt with for a better future.

Dr. Simona Sarma has completed her PhD from the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies under the School of Development Studies in Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She works in the area of performance studies, popular culture, folklore studies, and cultures in Northeast India. Her specific interest lies in looking at the interconnections between music, gender, sexuality, and nationality. She has published papers in distinguished journals like *Feminist Media Studies* and *Economic and Political Weekly*. She is currently working as a Senior Research Manager in Kantar, Mumbai. Research in any form is her passion!

[9] https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2019/11/11/whatsapp-vigilantes-an-exploration-of-citizen-reception-and-circulation-of-whatsapp-misinformation-linked-to-mob-violence-in-india/

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