

Bonjour! The Post Truth Politics

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Abstract

Today the very idea of liberal democracy is in a state of flux. The neo-liberal reforms have brought about lop-sided development across the world, instigating regressive and illiberal rightist forces to take centre stage. It has ushered in an era, labelled as post-truth in which Brexit was the beginning and Donald Trump's victory signalled its' definite arrival. The post truth gained currency on the crust of technology driven information revolution through social media that churned out "facts" eroding sacrosanct ideas such as transparency of information, necessity of participation, power of the public- ideas that made democracy an act of faith and trust. The present paper is an attempt to figure out the concept, nature, causes, theoretical basis, forms and effect of the phenomenon of post truth politics that makes facts look like illusion while illusion becomes facts. It is an attempt to discern whether it is the people's alienation from the official definition of facts or deliberate presentation of motivated "facts" to influence people's perception, and re-direct it in a desired direction.

KEYWORDS: post-truth, rightist, information revolution, social media,

Introduction

Truth and Politics are strange bedfellows. They rarely stay together at the same place and are seldom found at the same time. Where truth is held dear, politics makes a quiet exit and vice-versa where politics is reigning supreme, truth is conspicuous by its absence. Nevertheless, History had been witness to such greats like the Mahatama Gandhi, the Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln to name a few, who were pugnacious enough to bring the two- Politics and Truth- together. The tenacity of these leaders for truth was so overpowering that the greatest practitioner of truth, the Mahatama Gandhi delves into the inner most crevices of his predilections unmindful of how he is going to be judged in the years and decades to come. Today he may be alleged of being racist in his early sojourn in South Africa, but the messiah of truth never ceased to experiment with truth. He paid the price for being truthful in politics with his own life whereas the practitioners of '**post-truth**' are facilitated with power, pelf, premiership and prominence in political and social life which is controlled, influence and dictated by new media – Social Media.

Concept and Nature

The term '**post truth**' was coined by American blogger and journalist, David Roberts on 01 April, 2000 to signify the use of bad information as a weapon to appeal to individual's emotions to influence his behaviour. According to Oxford English Dictionary, post truth can be defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which

objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeal to emotion and personal belief.”

Post truth can be compared with a situation where “appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions” (Suiter, 2016). Post truth can be identified with “world of lies and deception supported and made possible through assertions of one truth or the other” (Sarukkai, 2016).

Post truth is “a combination of facts and illusions in a substitutive way. It is a drama enacted by a population that no longer trusts the old definition of the politics. It is a reinvention of trust, which makes society rewrite political facts. Facts are no longer empirical entities, but a kaleidoscopic mix of anxieties, misunderstandings and myths” (Visvanathan, 2017). Post truth is a rather grand name for something that has been present in politics all along. Today what we see is just a very special moment of the phenomenon. It is the failure of our liberal, secular progressive elite to speak the language of masses. Post politics is the people’s alienation from the “official” definition of facts (Yadav, 2017).

There were times when technology had two shades- black and white. Later on many more shades of colour came in vogue. Today, a whole gamut of colourful shades is available. Similarly in the process of development of human relations, at one time we had truth and lies. Today as per oxford’s word of the year, we have ‘**post truth**’ i.e something that is in between blatant lie and solemn truth. The euphemism for such an expression is abound like- “spendthrift with the truth”, “tweek with truth a bit”, “given a spin” etc. It has become a taboo to call someone a liar. Instead words like “misspeaking”, “poor judgement”, “spin doctor” are used. At times we say, “They are in denial of truth”. We are in the midst of the age of post truth politics. It is identified with blurring of distinction between words like truth-lies; honesty- dishonesty; and fiction- non- fiction. We move from one word to another in an umpteen number of times in a day without having slightest remorse or prick in our conscience.

The **post truth** as a general behaviour of a modern individual has a recent beginning. Though, it has been practised from time to time as a subterfuge or as propaganda during warfare to gain advantage over enemy. During Mahabharata period, it was used as a strategy to gain upperhand in the war of righteousness between pandavas and kauravas. We witnessed its application by pandavas to defeat Guru Dronacharya, when a rumour of His son Asvastahama’s death was spread. Guru Dronacharya confirmed the news of his son’s death in battle field through Dharmaraj Youdhistra who knowingly gave the confirmation of death of an elephant named Asvasthama, as a ploy to disarm Guru Dronacharya and subsequently kill him.

The beginning of post truth era began with interpretation of truth by post modernity narrative. Unlike modernity that was shaped by rationalism of Newton, Descartes, Kant and others, the post modernity is influenced by philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, and more recently, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, who were not only skeptical about the modernist belief that theory can mirror reality but also cautious and had limited perspective on truth and knowledge. Post modernist stressed that facts or truths are simply interpretations, that

truth is not absolute but merely the construct of individual groups, and that all knowledge is mediated by culture and language. The post modernism encouraged disdain for belief in universality of “truth”.

The flexible code of ethics and general fall in its standard; and the increase in incentive; and little penalty for improving the “narrative” of one’s life ushered in the era of post truth. The advent of information revolution and emergence of the internet as a mean of communication- text, pictures, video, live streams etc. and the rise of world wide web (www) in 1990s fostered the growth of new media in the beginning of new millennium called social media along with its various platforms like facebook, google plus, instagram, twitter, youtube etc. This brought about, in due course of time, era of post truth.

There is some truth in social media’s positive narrative. When thousands of Filipinos thronged streets of Manila in 2001, protesting against the shielding of corrupt president Joseph Estrada by loyalists in the Pilippine congress, alarming legislators to reverse course of action and allow the evidence against president to be presented, thereby forcing Estrada out of office. Similarly, when Spanish prime minister was made to bow out of office for inaccurately blaming the Madrid transit bombings on Basque separatists in 2004 also when the communist party lost power in Moldova in 2009 when massive protests co-ordinated in part by text message, facebook and twitter broke out after an obviously fraudulent election.

During 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, activists used every possible technological co-ordinating tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi, also when the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010 followed a similar social media path and occupied downtown Bangkok etc. it marked a positive impact of social media. However, its shaping into negative discourse is what has caused post truth spawning. It is the control of the internet through the recruitment of legions of trolls and unleashing of bots flood social media with bad information causing truth to be sidelined, and allowing lies to take centre stage. The bad information and lies are used to create anti- establishment sentiments, shaking pillars of liberal ideology through as World Economic Forum warned, “challenges by powerful authoritarian government and anti-liberal fundamentalist movements”, causing disruptions in politics, encouraging dark force of identity politics, intolerance, xenophobia.

The Brexit shock signalled the post- truth era. It signified return to the primordial, primitive, irrational challenges to logic of liberal, humanistic values of institutionalism. The forty fifth presidential elections in U.S was a clear display of working of post truth politics. It was explicitly about brazen lies and also about the indifference of the American voter to obvious lies. The real estate mogul Donald Trump who seemed to stand in utter contempt of the values Americans held so close to heart, won the coveted post of the most powerful man on earth. In France Mr. Hollande’s overtures pushed political mood to the right. Marine Le Pen of the National Front assiduously transformed his party from a fringe far right group to an almost mainstream party with some grass-root support. In Italy, nearly sixty percent voters said no to the government’s call for amending the constitution resulting in spike with sceptics of globalization, open border,

feasibility of an ever- close European Union, in short, a boost to the far right. Poland, Hungary and Israel are heading away from liberal era values.

In India, the right wing Hindutva force came to power in 2014 lok sabha elections taking advantage of whirlwind campaign on social media; and corrupt, inept and unresponsive liberal United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the centre. Soon after coming to power, it placed curb on dissent, criticism of government policies, secularism, freedom of expression and tolerance in the name of security, nationalism and patriotism. The Hindutava guided right wing forces unleashed a reign of terror against dalits and minorities through its identity politics and politics of intolerance. Students protesting intolerance and dalit exploitation were silenced with brute oppression and police force.

The narrative of de-monetisation that disrupted the livelihood of millions of poors across urban-rural divide, forced agriculturists to dump vegetables by the road side for the want of remunerative prices and also caused job loss to millions of daily wagers and their subsequent migration to home states. What is astonishing is that it has caused little concern in the corridors of power. All the same, yet again people have rewritten another narrative of solidarity, patience and stoic obedience to government's ever shifting rules and goal posts covering under Hindutva fringe elements vitriolic and abuses. Here again social media extolled government repressive actions, labelling dissent with anti-national and unpatriotic colour and brazenly displaying videos containing lynching and mauling dalits and muslims, stalking and trolling women.

Causes

So the question arises as to what is happening? Why it is happening? What can be argued is that we are witnessing a toxic combination of policy blunders on neo-liberal economic reforms, flagrant corruption of UPA regime and globalisation coupled with a new hybrid media and political system dominated by reality TV, social media and filter bubbles that has combined with phenomena of 'post-truth politics' wherein appeals to emotions whether religious, communal or patriotic are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions. This combination has led to emergence of swarms of voters guided by dangerous rhetoric and jingoistic fervors. There is a sense of unease against not just liberal economic policies but liberal political and moral order. There is a rise in the popular legitimacy for illiberal politics around the world. There is a transformation of people's anxiety into a scary opposition to modern values, namely, human rights, multi-culturalism, secularism, LGBT rights etc. combined with post-truth narratives- bred, nurtured and fostered by the technology companies. The social media has created the idea of 'bubble'- a safe haven for misinformation- that reinforces stereotypes, sucking into and encompassing more and more data consuming smartphone wielding middle class chatterati and twitterati, all are protected within this bubble from traditional investigative reporting sticks.

Various studies have revealed that neo-liberal economic reforms and the resultant pace of globalisation and de-regulation have left many losers in its march over the last twenty five years. The government sponsored welfare schemes for weaker sections of society under socialistic pattern of Indian Policy Making through planning commission

encouraged large scale corruption in public funding of these welfare schemes. The forces of globalisation further aggravate the grim situation by leaving aside and marginalising previously well-to-do sections of society. Recent studies by charity Oxfam (Milne, 2015) have shown that in the year 2010, only one per cent of total world population had 44 per cent of the world's wealth, which had come to 48 per cent by the year 2014. The most shocking aspect of the whole story is that in the year 2015 only 80 persons own same net wealth as 3.5 billion of population i.e half the population of the world.

On current trends, the richest one per cent will have pocketed more than the other 99 per cent put together next year. The 0.1 per cent has been doing even better, quadrupling their share of U.S. income since the year 1980s. This displays the ugly, disproportionate and pro-rich face of Liberalized, Privatized, and Globalized (LPG) induced pro-capitalist guided world economy. Now the evidence has piled up that not only is such appropriation of wealth a moral and social outrage. But it is fuelling social and climate conflict, wars, mass migration and political corruption, stunting health and life chances and increasing poverty. As Branko Milanovic (2016) of New York's city university argues that the rising inequality is so apparent across much of the developed world, forget about developing and under-developed world that it could lead to upheaval and even war. This is what happened when the first era of globalisation ended in 1914. The danger, he argues, is that history could repeat itself.

The political slogans deployed by National Democratic Alliance candidates and parties in 2014 general elections in India resonated with the masses which was fed up with pseudo-secularism, pseudo-socialist and corrupt practices of United Progressive Alliance dispensation at New Delhi. Elsewhere the centrist candidates and parties are found to be unresponsive to the anxieties of people caused by global financial deregulation of the 1980s and global economic recession of 2008 that shook the faith of people from global financial institutions as large swaths of people were removed from the security of the middle-classes. The combination of these factors resulted in a new ideological rupture, leaving the liberal economic order in disarray. It became increasingly difficult for centrist politicians to get voters to focus on the problems associated with financial globalisation and deregulation. Instead, populist focussed on what people can see: corruption, poverty, terrorism, religious differences etc intertwined with heady mix of half-baked truths, misleading news items through social media to polarise public opinion.

It was found in a recent empirical analysis by Graig Silverman of BuzzFeed News (2016) that hyper-partisan political Facebook pages and websites are consistently feeding their millions of followers false or misleading news items. The over archaic impact of these tendencies have helped undermine the legitimacy of the liberal order, opening the door to illiberal forces and enhancing the potency of populist and nationalist appeal.

Theoretical Basis of Post Truth

The ideological moorings of post truth politics can be drawn straight out of logical construct of post modernism. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his seminal work 'The Post Modern Condition' (1984) defined post modernism as an "incredulity towards metanarrative". The post modern narrative concentrates on existence, interplay or tension

of reality of indeterminate complexities erupting from process of capitalism and neo-globalization. These realities of indeterminate complexities among different societies, people and their cultural traits are attached to a bundle of chemicals in a cell, which Mr. Dawkins' (2006) book 'the Selfish Gene' equates it with biological compulsions. Thus the whole thing boils down to the fact that the adverse impact of the onslaught of neo-liberal reforms on different spheres of life led to accumulation of vast wealth in a hands of few, opulence in the midst of extreme poverty, denuding of natural resources, pollution led green house effect, sheer exploitation of fellow human beings etc are nothing but result of compulsion of our genetical make- up. Although that was not what Dr. Dawkins meant in his book, yet that is how he was read and understood. This logic was further taken ahead by Korean- German Philosopher, Byung- Chul Hen (2014) in his book, 'Psychopolitik' to link compulsion with freedom in his Neo- Liberal discourse. It tantamounts to suggest that we are being compelled to sell our labour, work extra, consume and obey the logic of the market- to fulfill our natural desire to be free.

It is this logic that is sustained by the return to a fetishisation of instincts in the social media platforms across the globe. Once accepted as a guiding principle philosophy, this logic puts neo-liberalism on a pedestal, enthrone it and justifies all the injustices and exploitation in the name of development. We can pollute the earth, be sexist or racist, belittle our opponents, tell blatant lies and indulge in anti- Muslim rhetoric and still get people's vote to be the presidents and prime ministers on the pretext that after all, we are just being compelled by our genes. Such a line of thinking has led to such sharp rise in inequality, so glaringly apparent across the developed world that, according to one estimate, today, only one percent of world population controls almost fifty percent of world's wealth and in India, the top one percent possess almost sixty percent of nation's wealth.

Perception as Guide

Perception is an ability to understand and interpret something in a particular way. This understanding is shaped by hearing and seeing about a situation in a certain manner which in return is influenced by news items, which in most of the cases, and with the advent of unverified, motivated and partial narrations in social media is wrongly labelled as news items. The news item that we find in reputed news papers is verified, balanced and based on facts. Whereas so called news items churned out by social media is not subjected to rigour of journalistic standard and morality. The biased, motivated and unsubstantiated news items leads to public discontent, like the purportedly true but false and misleading video of alleged lynching of a Hindu youth by Muslims played during tense atmosphere of Muzaffarnagar in 2013 led to riots causing death and displacement of thousands, which sometimes - arising out of non-responsiveness of system to anxieties of the people perceived to be left behind in the race of development, and at other times from the anger of demise of a well paid blue collar job- which is shaped by social and political condition in which an individual lives. Political scientists Pippa Norris, Ron Inglehart and Andrew Cherlin noted that sense of fairness in economic outcomes; feeling of relative deprivation vis-à-vis previous generation and feeling of well-being determine the level of public discontent. This could be in the form of upsurge in the grievances expressed by forward castes and economically well- off groups such as Jats, Patels,

Gujjars and Marathas in India formed false perception that dalit and OBC reservations in educational institutions and jobs are unjustly stealing their opportunities for college admissions and their own jobs.

Incidents like rise of women in social status or position of authority, emergence of lower castes or new emmigrant community in social hierarchy or collapse of traditional social relation, a feeling of loss of privilege enjoyed by their parents in bygone era are reasons responsible for expressive reactions of voters in the form of voting for those candidates whose policies are unlikely to benefit them. The poor workers of U.S united behind a billionaire who has specialized in taking advantage of the system to avoid paying taxes and fair wages to his employees. They express their discontent by voting for Trump or Faraegi. The ordinary voter is not to be faulted as he/she is merely a victim of adverse structural conditions which had been taken advantage of, by damoguges through social media. The right- wing forces manipulate legitimate anxieties to generate politically and ideologically useful xenophobia and hatered. Thereby taking advantage of perception of people formed by dishing out post- truth, perception based, and false information as facts.

Populist Potrayal

Citizens express their discontent through voting in elections. It is a known fact that voters vote as per their identity and constituency. Their voting decision is shaped by amount and quality of information provided to them. The forces controlling reality TV and social media influence the decision making of voters by dishing out selecctive, onesided and emotive aspect of news. Thus, they are shaper of views, not provider of news. The potrayal of news story is motivated, tweeked in the manner of its sharing in the media. The post truth media system called 2.0 hybrid media model includes social media, blogs, reality T.V and so on. It negates the older system where polticians and journalists were co-dependent for coverage and for content, with journalist playing a gatekeeper role.

The present model of social media, as per Andrew Chadwick- politicians no longer depend on journalist, they can now communicate directly to create stereotypes, influence certain perceptions and spread information across network and borders without having anyone to check contents and enforce ethical standard. We know from the work of Nobel Prize winner psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky that when truth is pitted against our biasness, we tend to hold fast to our beliefs and biasness.

In reality TV and news media, we are also to be blamed for maintaining “false balance” in news reporting or anchoring or hosting a TV show, by simply allowing both sides to argue with one another without asserting the facts. It means that truth treated on par with opinion or assertion and not with fact. The reality of the present media is such that it thrives in taking recourse to emotionl appeals to jack up TRP rating, tapping into a market for anger and unabashed partisanship through social media platforms. The bane of post truth politics is that truth is a matter of assertion.

Ensuing Corollary

The main purpose of politics in post truth seems to be to convince others of something or the other. Almost always, the obstacle to being convinced is not something called the truth but only one's commitment to certain belief, being presented as truth itself. We disagree with each other because we do not want to rethink our belief but express this always as a truth. It has clearly led to shrinking space of meaningful debate and discussion. No wonder not a single discussion took place in the winter session of parliament in India on momentous and highly disruptive issue of de-monetisation. In the bargain, the ultimate casualty is democracy and its representative institutions. The propagation of belief that policy measures like demonetisation and implementation of Goods and Service Tax (GST) have worked wonders for Indian Economy which, indeed, is completely on the contrary to ground realities and expert opinions. Further, wresting the legacy of Sardar Patel by labelling him to be anti- Gandhian and pro Hindutva, which again is falsification of Sardar Patel's Congress identity and nationalistic ethos of secular and pluralistic India. Our faith in democracy and idea of India – as a nation representing unity and diversity, plurality of cultural and multiplicity of belief - is shaken as reality TV and social media mughals spread poison among citizens exploiting their fears and anxieties and turning one against another confirming one subliminal prejudice after another. Types are cast or recast to confirm to stereotypes at the expense of pluralistic and secular fabric of the Indian nation state.

Truth and politics seem unusual and strange bedfellows in contemporary theater of politics worldwide, what is required today is empathetic consensus building as to which theory of truth is fit for politics and what should be the nature of truth that we need to play the game of politics with. The Gandhian principles of ahimsa, non- violence and truthfulness can go a long way in resolving as to what should constitute rules of the game of politics in post truth era. Having deep sense of personal truth based on principle of compassion taught since aeon through different religions preaching from time to time, and also making our utmost attempt to give a patient ear to our so called "Troller" and trying to win them over through dialogical approach instead of getting engaged in any kind of truth based on so called factual judgement of the other.

There is an urgent need to politically mainstream our dissent in a language and manner that promotes progressive politics and liberal ideas. Progressive populism is still a safe bet to redeem probity and shrinking space of debate and discussion in politics than the regressive populism of the right wing politics that post truth politics has come to acquire. So in the final analysis after an indepth study of word "Post Truth" the conclusion is that it is, indeed, deliberate presentation of motivated "facts" to influence people's perception, and re-direct it in a desired direction.

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