
Election and Media: (Mis) representing Democracy in India

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Jean Baudrillard earned notoriety when he announced that the Gulf War did not take place. Those who opposed him on the ground of a deplorable insensibility which he has written with ignoring the dimension of human suffering missed the argument of Baudrillard that it is the manufactured reality which television caters to us, and not reality *per se*. The very idea of real is a postmodern problematic because in this image-dominated (televised) hyperreal stage it is impossible to deduce any idea of real by following a simplistic logic of representation mirroring reality. What the television and media in general present to us is a nebulous form of the real whose authenticity can no longer be established because such representations operate on the level of signification without an immediately available signified. Postmodern culture, especially media culture, is marked by a distortion of the real. The distortion does not arise from some technical constraints inherent in the medium; rather, this is deliberately architected to render the events obscure so as to serve without being seen to serving the interest of those who control its resources.

The increasing access of the common people to digital media, especially television, since the last quarter of the twentieth century has been a crucial event in the public sphere. Television news digitalize the representation of ostensibly “real” events to make them available to common people, but what they telecast are not innocent

incidents, either in selection or in deployment. Although John Fiske argues in his studies of television culture that there is no reason to believe that viewers of television are indiscriminating, homogenous, culturally duped mass, he acknowledges, at the same, the role of ideology in shaping the representation of social codes when they are transmitted into television's technical codes. Fiske seems optimistic to concede that people are viewers and makers of meaning of television programmes rather than passive consumers, but he is not mentioning TV news in this regard. Moreover, television channels telecast various programmes and the interests of viewers also immensely vary. And it is needless to say that the medium itself is not an objective one. Here comes the notion of "effectivity" of television:

Television and its programs do not have an "effect" on people. Viewers and television interact. [...] Television does not "cause" identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others. This ideological work may be more or less effective, according to many social factors, but it is always there, and we need to think of it in terms of its effectivity in society at large, not of its effects upon specific individuals or groups. "Effectivity" is a socio-ideological term, "effect" an individual behavioristic one. (Fiske 20)

The effectivity of popular media in shaping public life and opinion is paramount in recent times. This is evident from the introduction of the post of "media advisor" among the entourage of heavyweight political leaders. The role of the media advisor is to guide the leader through the dicey paths of publicity and to direct the attention of the public to the latter's political aspirations. The very notion that media shape public opinion is sequestered by the political parties to utilize

the media in controlling and regulating public to their favour. The machinery preempts the possibility of a dissent at least on the simulated stage by resorting to illusions of various types, ranging from the promises of a better democratic ambiance to employment, reduction of corruption to better services at government offices.

One such illusion which is announced and performed at regular interval is election in Indian which is the foundation of its “democracy”. Indian political leaders and media personnel infinitely iterate the truism that India is the biggest democracy in the world which accommodates diversity in tolerant co-existence. Democracy is usually defined as the threshold to socialism—the latter announces its onset at the parlance of democracy. Although absolute freedom, justice and equality are absurd concepts, it is in democracy that common people enjoy independence and opportunities with minimal restraints. But it would be a fallacy to make such a hasty judgement that democracy is beneficial in every respect. Democracy, too, especially in postcolonial countries like India, is dominated by the ideologies of those in power who need the mass to validate their authority but at the same time arranges to exclude them from access to power. On this strange one-way traffic is situated the pivot of democratic mechanism of India with election fortifying it. And in the contemporary era when the dark cloud of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, intolerance, regionalism, global recession, unemployment, corruption are rumbling over the country, the political leaders have found in the promise of a fair democracy a point to be buttressed time and again.

Election is the means of establishing mass-elected government in democracy which is supposed to consolidate the rule of people and look after their well-beings. In the words of Beng Huat Chua, “in political science theories of democracy, elections are rational procedures by which competing candidates for public offices present

themselves to the electorate as the persons best able to execute a set of proposals for future developments, invoking their past records of achievements as evidence of competence and social responsibility” (1). But modern democracy is largely fictional, Chua continues, because: firstly, election alone can not give solidarity to elected government; secondly, in recent times voters’ turnouts are declining, and hence, the representatives are selected by only a section of adult voters; thirdly, in the federations of states major political parties often rely on support from regional parties to form government, and thus, sacrifice “national” interests for the sake of parochial ones; fourthly, elections are not merely about information dissemination, but often unleash violence; sometimes voters are coerced to vote for a particular candidate which make the idea of “people’s choice” a farce (2).

The inexorable profligacy associated with election in India helps mask the hidden agenda of political parties. But election itself has become in the new millennium a simulated process operating in the images and videos thanks to the advanced media. With apologies to Baudrillard it can be said that election in India does not happen but for the media. The role of media in the new millennium has grown incredibly unforeseen in the history of its trajectory. With the growth of technologies and communication system media have assumed unprecedented role in not only dispersing events but also intervening in the power-play worked out in the name of election. The role of media in collecting, organizing and dispensing news from a wide spectrum of society is already asserted. But what can not be established is the impartiality of media. And the allied reality of what is only assumed to be real only densifies the complexity. Media’s neutrality is a “myth” (in a Barthesian sense accentuating the role of bourgeoisie to sanction mythhood to something) which has long been suspected, especially in recent times with the mushrooming of new

channels. The broadcasting of countless TV news-channels and circulation of newspapers which present occurrences dissimilar, and even antagonistic, to each other, make the events of election a televised reality duly shaped before being catered to the public. Indian media, one of the most complex systems in the world, perform theatrical role in collecting, editing and disseminating news from almost every sphere of Indian life, and politics in particular.

The changes in the Indian media during the 1990s, according to Daya Kishan Thussu, signalled a significant shift from “state-controlled monopoly to a multiplicity of private television channels,” and “the expansion and consolidation of the operations of the mainly Western-based transnational media corporations have transformed India’s media landscape and significantly affected broadcast journalism” (54). Politics seems to be the choicest area of broadcasting media which, however, make dexterous use of the unconstructive vogue of connecting every dispute or conflict invariably with politics. But politics has been a constant companion of Indian television, as Thussu points out, the aims of the introduction of television in India in the year 1959 (*Doordarshan* being the first channel) were to disseminate state policies and to impart nationalist feelings among people (56). The emergence and speedy growth of transnational media in India during the 1990s made the media world susceptible to commercialization. In the competition market, the news channels started combining news with entertainment (“infotainment”) in order to increase the consumption-rate of their circulated news. The immediate implication of this commercialization of broadcast media was the precedence of style over substance, representation over reality. Thus politics too came to be moulded by populist media paradigm:

During the election campaign news channels vied with each other to give air time to film stars campaigning for major

political parties – focusing on their personalities, antics and popular rhetoric. Many film stars contested the elections, giving journalists ample ammunition to spice up their reports with quotes and misquotes from the matinee idols in a country where films are an integral part of popular culture. (Thussu 63)

Hence, it is pointless to rely on any of the news channels while their political commitments become intelligibly outspoken. Even though the role of electronic media in speedy circulation of news is acknowledged, the “endorsement of popular journalism in a market-driven media environment [...] is increasingly threatening the quality of public debate in a developing polity” (Thussu 65).

Election in India is a flamboyant show rehearsed dramatically over media charade. Election is representation without an original. This does not necessarily mean that election procedures, state machinery’s involvement and election personnel’s labour have not significantly contributed to the making of the event called election. But, rather, the system in its entire transparency is not accessible to the public who are kept out of the way. Most a common person experiences election is in the form of media representation. This representation is a misrepresentation of democracy whose inconsistencies and perversions are conceded as true in the guise of an egalitarian carnival. This is not a carnival in Bakhtinian sense where authorities are thwarted, restrictions are imploded and preprogrammed roles are subverted. But this carnival is ideologically manoeuvred in televised simulation as a festival of the populace while its real motifs are in fact reverse. The misrepresentation commences in a sequence—firstly, by the political parties, and secondly, by media. Let me elaborate these to an extent.

The political parties arrange rallies and mass congregation to chart their achievements, to announce their future agenda, to threat and

scoff their opponents, and thus to persuade people to secure their support. These road-shows and conferences serve the means of convincing people of the reliability and efficiency of a political party which are in fact brainwashing. Political leaders in such programmes circulate a cluster of non-verifiable data which are used as tricks of deception to represent the artificially forged situation. The lectures and promises of political leaders are, to borrow from Shakespeare, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Moreover, the dubious and often aimless but extravagant situation of political gatherings can further be discerned as celebrities from the screen or music world, or sportspersons, give their gorgeous appearance in such gatherings. It is assumed that the “heroes” of the screen would retain their acceptability as the protagonists in the battle of election where a nefarious party requires defeat by a good one. The parallelism between the victory of good over evil on TV screen or cinema hall and that of the “good” political party over “bad” political party is psychologically fictionalized to capture popular attention. Such stage-appearances of screen presenters very well deceive the gathered mass who are supplied with easy entertainment at the cost of their votes. A colourful but insubstantial carnival is thus enacted with the excuse of election.

The parties make people believe that it is their democratic right to cast vote and thus elect their choicest persons to speak for them in the legislative assembly or parliament. But what is never told is that their choice is curtailed before the commencement of election because the nominated persons are not selected by the mass, but the party high-commands. Here comes the debate on another sort of representation—that of selection of the candidates as representatives of the people. Anthony Birch points out three kinds of public dispute about representation to legislative assemblies in modern democracies: firstly, who should be represented, secondly, how

representatives should be chosen, and thirdly, how elected representatives should behave. While the first dispute, notes Birch, has been somewhat resolved by “a combination of campaigns by groups who were excluded from the franchise, prudence on the part of ruling groups, and propaganda by reformers and political theorists. It is now accepted that all adult citizens should be represented through the electoral system” (Birch 134). But the other two questions are still heavily disputed. However, Birch argues that “the world has never seen a representative assembly which is fully representative in a microcosmic sense, but party managers are well aware of the criticisms that may be levelled against their party if no serious attempt is made to at least reflect the main social divisions of the electorate in their choice of candidates” (137), nor do the representatives always work solely for the public interest rising beyond his personal interests and the interests of his/her affiliating party.

What these details highlight is that the celebration of election as democratic festival is in fact mass deception sketched out on a vast canvas. Common people are duped by the beguiled package called “democracy” while the real rights remain at the hands of the facilitated elite classes. Even after more than sixty years of Independence, a large section of people in India remain heavily deprived of the minimum requirements of life. Children in slums and railway platforms remain hungry and they are denied of education. Oppression on Dalit and minority communities, exploitation of the tribals, violation of women’s honour are everyday incidents. We do not need statistical data to prove all these, but daily situations which we observe or hear of are adequate empirical evidences. These incidents reflect the utter hollowness of Indian democracy which has failed to secure fundamental rights for the Dalits, tribals, women, lower class gentry, plebian classes, and minority communities.

The second agency of deception is media which further distance the nature of true democracy. By distorting the events of political messages, that is, falsely decoding the already false encoding, media once again misleadingly represent Indian democracy. The newspapers, TV news channels and online sites all have their individual political-institutional ideology with which they function. As such, they disfigure and pervert truth, and convey simulated messages to the public. Media make election a cinematic show in which political parties take part, wage war against each other and play with public issues. The political parties often retort to each other and forge spurious allegations out of a sense of unhealthy antagonism, and media only make the situation more complex. In contemporary times, only a few media of repute undertake the serious task of investigating a case while the majority of media borrow news from others, often unreliable sources, as Susan Moeller says:

There is no media anymore that can afford to be truly deliberative always. The public demands its news “now,” anytime, around the clock. [...] the new technology and the ubiquity of the Internet has on one hand augmented investigative reporters’ ability to rapidly locate facts and draw information from a broad range of sources, but that same pace too often turns hysterical, blurring solid reporting with rumor and rants into an indistinguishable and, at times, toxic slurry. (175)

The democratic structure of India confers on media the similar rights which are supposedly bestowed on common people. But media are in fact given more freedom to garner and communicate messages which paradoxically are at once the ultimate advantage and worst blunder of the democratic structure. Media have acquired a very influential, almost indispensable, part of Indian life in contemporary times at the

pretence of their self-declared commitment to convey genuine news to common people. In reality, their purpose is no longer to convey news but to ideologically contrive, control, and to an extent, deceive public opinion. Behind the guise of catering objective “truth,” media subtly infuse their interests or the interests of those for whom they work. “Due to mergers and the consequent demand that news operations see profit and not public service as their bottom line, broadcast and even print news outlets are increasingly part—and understood to be part—of the entertainment circus that the “media” business has become” (Moeller 174). Political news, especially those of election, occupy the primetime of this “entertainment circus” in all news-based digital media. The gulf between reality and falsified simulation in the representation of political events and occurrences on media, which misrepresents the already precarious nature of Indian democracy, can be discerned but can not be unobtrusively dislodged because the context against which to debate it has become misty by the simulated version of reality which denies the entry of the mass.

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