Electoral campaign as a performative plebiscite: Mapping the changing nature of political communication in India

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Abstract

Political communication through the electoral campaign in India displays use of multiple media. The 2014 general elections saw political parties conduct an aggressive virtual campaign through social and mass media including robot-calls, holographic presence of the leader at various meeting venues matched by extensive use of traditional modes of campaigning such as rallies, foot-marches (pad-yatra) and mobilising a large number of young volunteers to undertake door-door campaigning to court the voters, reflecting what may be called “proximity” electoral campaigning\(^1\) or “retail politics” (Norris 2004). Classifying the 2014 campaign as one which was a performative plebiscite, the same may be defined as a campaign that capitalises on ‘popular sentiment at a particular moment which sets and shapes the mood of the nation’. While both virtual and real world campaigning allow for personalisation of the campaign, this paper argues that political communication is of the non-deliberative kind. Professionalization of the campaign through the use of advertising experts and campaign managers makes political communication of the performative kind, high on theatrics and rhetoric and low on substance. It is ironic that while politics is going local, the idea of development that sets the agenda is not just national but actually comes from universalisation of free market economy prototypes. A ‘thin idea of development’ manifests itself in ‘thinning of politics’ as political contestation and deliberation are replaced by unidirectional flow of ideas. Hence the purpose of this paper is to map the contours and changing nature of electoral and political communication from the perspective of the issues and techniques used by political parties and affiliate groups and suggesting the non-deliberative nature of the campaign which also reinforces the divide between what Manuel Castells (2000: 446) calls the “the space of flows” and the “space of places”.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part is an overview of selective literature that provides a comparative understanding of electoral campaigning. From a broad classification of campaign types the paper adopts a political-economy perspective to capture the change that liberalisation in India particularly adoption of a market economy and media liberalisation has had on creation of what has been called ‘political marketing’. The second part of the

\(^1\) It is argued that campaigning which involves strengthening of direct channels of communication between the party and the voters and engaging enthusiastic young volunteers as seen in Barack Obama’s Presidential campaign of 2008 and that of Morales in Bolivia in 2009 may have weakened clientelist networks involving political brokers and was one of the reasons for the success of the campaign (Wantchekon 2011)
paper fleshes out the campaign contours of the 2014 national elections which as is argued was unique in multiple ways but particularly so because of adoption of multi-media campaigning tools and techniques which was decisive in shaping and achieving electoral victory. Finally the paper decodes the nature and direction of these changes.

Contextualising and Classifying the Electoral Campaign

As a part of the electoral cycle, electoral campaigning plays a crucial role in agenda setting, building and exaggerating party and leader perceptions as well as winning over un-decided voters. Campaigning can be looked at in terms of the tools and techniques that are used to convey the political message as well as the nature of the message that is sought to be conveyed. In a comparative study aimed to classify global campaigning trends Plasser and Plasser (2002: 4 and 349) look at shifts in campaigning in terms of a three-fold classification namely pre-modern, modern and post-modern. Pre modern campaigning techniques focus on the local and personally reaching out to potential voters. Parties therefore focus on directly connecting with their constituents, however strong party affiliations become tenuous with a move towards modern campaigning techniques and the direct connect is replaced by ‘mediated linkages’ (Norris in Gibson and Rommele 2001) The party reaches out to voters through the medium of mass communication such as television rather than rallies and meetings and the campaign comes to be conducted in a centralised manner as nationalised partisan debates set the broad contours of the campaign. Post-modern campaigning is distinguished by the rise of political marketing and the campaign being run by professional campaign managers such that political parties are constantly in campaign mode. Professionalised campaigning by its very nature involves centralised decision making leading to concentration of power within the party machinery. Further features of campaigning seen in one phase may also persist in other phases. This typology of campaigns is instructive particularly as it highlights declining voter association with particular parties and the aspect of political marketing as an indispensible feature of electoral campaigning in the post-modern phase. Building on this Gibson and Rommele (2001: 33) argue that as partisan allegiances of voters wane, political parties now have to reach out to larger sections of undecided or ‘swing voters’. Campaigning has therefore become pivotal to the electoral cycle with parties using multiple communication techniques to reach out to the voter as well as employ extensive surveys and focus group methods to gauge voter sentiment. Declining voter partisan association is also expressed in terms of greater voter volatility wherein the voter is perceived as exercising ‘consumer sovereignty’ (Wring 1999) within the context of the political market. Therefore the aspect of communication became integral to politics in general and election campaigning in particular. Writing about the ‘marketing colonisation of political communication’ in Britain, Wring (1999) argues that the 1980s witnessed major societal and economic changes which were also reflected in the cultural sphere and were characterised by increasing commercialism typical of the ethos of the market. This was also reflected in the sphere of politics particularly with the rise of political advertising. The Labour party which was known to be critical of ‘consumer fetishism’ (Williams in Wring 1999: 5) acknowledged the importance of focusing on ‘......consumption politics as a popular strategy’ (Wring 1999: 5) and a move away from its traditional association with producer groups and the trade union
movement. The rise of political marketing is also linked to the increasing use of marketing in the non-profit, public and government sector wherein application of business models and approaches would improve delivery and reception of services also referred to as ‘social marketing’ (ibid).

Elections in India display certain striking features. They are held at fixed periodic intervals at the national and sub-national level and with relative regularity at the grass-roots level of governance which is the three-tiered panchayati raj. Elections are fiercely competitive with the number of regional and state parties registering an ever-increasing number in every subsequent election. Most importantly the Election Commission of India which is the national body that conducts elections is known to conduct free and fair elections and perceived as a neutral, non-partisan body. Also unlike the voter anomie that has been highlighted in western democracies particularly amongst the youth (Putnam 2000: 283-284) voter turnout in India particularly in the 2014 national election as well as at the sub-national level has registered historic highs.  

Applying the above sketched framework to the case of India one may argue that campaigning in India displays features typical to all three. In the Indian context, tools of political campaigning display great versatility ranging from use of advanced multi-modal communication means including television, radio, mobile telephony and the internet on the one hand to widespread and intensive physical engagement with the voter through rallies and street corner interactions. Strengthening of such divergent means of communication and campaigning may be explained by reason of the variegated nature of the electorate in terms of demographics, economics and regions with particular reference to the persistent differences between the urban and rural electorate. However while there have been various studies attempting to explain electorate behaviour (Jaffrelot, Banerjee 2014) and its possible impact on changing nature of electoral campaigning, in this paper one would like to look at the way political parties conduct the campaign with particular reference to the 2014 election campaign.

**Communications and Consumers: Emerging Contours**

Following economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s, communication technology grew multi-fold both in the areas of mobile telephony, internet usage as well as mass media of communication including radio and television. As per figures quoted by Sardesai (2014: 220)

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2 Voter turnout in the 2014 National level election was a historic high of 66.4% surpassing the 58.2% voter turnout in the 2009 National level election (Jain 2014, May 13). This election also marked the high point of what has been called ‘India’s electoral demographic dividend’ in which 10% of the total electorate were first time voters. In absolute terms this was equivalent to 2.3 crores young voters out of a total of 81.5 crore voters (Rukmini S. 2014 February 21)
in 2004 there were about 6 major ‘national channels’ while there were around a dozen regional channels. By 2014 as per numbers provided by the ministry of information and broadcasting there were 400 news channels both regional and national dedicated to telecasting news round the clock. Also the number of satellite-radio channels grew from six in the 1990s to 312 over the period of a decade (Satpathi and Roy 2011: 3). While internet users are about 16% of the total population, in absolute terms 243 million internet users in India exceeded those in the U.S, leading to the Indian internet user base being the second largest in the world after China.\(^3\) A statement made by the managing director of Google India and chairman of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) Rajan Anandan at an event is telling in this respect. He said that, “A lot of people talk about the last elections (2014 general elections) and how urban India was mobilised using the Internet. We have seen nothing yet in terms of what the Internet can do to every aspect of life, of society and of governance. By the next elections (expected in 2019) almost half a billion Indians will be connected through Internet. In terms of the kind of mobilisation, can you imagine what it can do?” (The Hindu 2013) He also noted that while the internet had taken a decade to increase user base from 10 to a 100 million, in just 3 years namely 2010 to 2013 the number of users had escalated from 100 to 200 million. With regard to mobile telephony, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) estimated that there were 933 million mobile telephone users in India by end 2014. Also quite interestingly, the same report also noted that while there was a marginal decline in subscription in urban areas, it was the rural sector which was leading growth in mobile telephony users. These figures quite clearly indicate that India is on the cusp of a communications revolution which while initiated in the 1990s, achieved rapid user spread only after two decades. This recent spurt in internet users has also seen a booming e-commerce retail trade which has registered multi-fold growth. Linking e-commerce to communication which while achieving increasing penetration is still limited to a certain section of society, a specific ‘class’ (if one may) also points towards societal flux and realignment.

**Communicating the campaign**

Professionalization of the electoral campaign was a marked feature of the 2004 national level election. The incumbent government led by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)\(^4\) engaged the services of Grey Worldwide, an advertising firm based in New York which conceived the ‘India Shining’ slogan for the NDA campaign. The ‘India Shining’ campaign cost the state exchequer 20 million dollars as it was telecast as a government advertisement rather than a party campaign. It was also the second most viewed advertisement between December 2003 and January 2004 while also the fourth most advertised newspaper insertion in national and regional newspapers (Satpathi and Roy 2011: 9). The ‘India Shining’ campaign was meant to project a buoyant growth story appealing in particular to the youth

\(^3\) Also of these 110 million were mobile internet users of which 25 million were in the rural areas. This number is 70% of the total internet users in the rural areas. Also the largest number of internet users are college students followed by young men (Times News Network 2013)

\(^4\) The NDA was constituted by 24 parties in 1999, the year that it formed the government at the centre. The coalition was led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a national party which is known to be a conservative, right wing party actively promoting the ideology of ‘Hindutva’.
and the new middle-classes which had made the most of the new opportunities of a recently liberalised economy. Also the active adoption of the Vision 2020 document as a part of the election campaign was seen as a conscious effort by the leading party namely the BJP to sidestep its image as the ‘mandir-wali’ (temple-oriented) party and firmly anchor the campaign on the plank of development (Deshpande and Iyer, 2004). Further ‘The issue of ‘development’ that the party sought to foreground was to be conveyed by extensive use of the media and information technology including sms, e-mail and customised telephonic speeches of the prime minister which could be heard by dialling a particular number’ (Kumar 2014). The ‘India Shining’ campaign it has been argued reflected India’s shift to a ‘post-modernist’ development discourse (Wyatt 2005:466 in Satpathi and Roy 2011: 10) The modernist discourse had been typical of the state directed and controlled economic development model adopted after India’s independence. The post-modernist discourse was based on a consumer driven economic model. Such a discourse relies on ‘economic imagery’ which as Wyatt (2005: 472) argues is built through advertising and branding. According to him India itself was being marketed as a ‘brand’ in the globalised arena reflecting what he calls ‘economic nationalism’ The main opposition party, the Congress (I) also diversified its campaign strategy. This included customising the campaign pitch to incorporate regional and local level concerns, collecting micro-level data relating to electoral constituencies and also voter mobilisation based on ‘road shows’ which were known to accord even greater media visibility than rallies as the visual frame constantly shifted akin to a spectacle in motion (ibid). Road shows became popular with the BJP too whose leader L.K. Advani also the deputy prime-minister embarked on a cross-country ‘Bharat Uday Yatra’ (the India shining tour) (Satpathi and Roy 2011: 11) Hence political parties were straddling the twin spheres of the virtual and real. The Congress party caught on to professional campaigning in the 2009 elections and also bought the rights of the song ‘Jai Ho’ which featured in the Oscar winning movie ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ to play up the achievements of the party. However it was the 2014 national level election that raised the pitch of political marketing multi-fold.

**The 2014 General Election Campaign as a Performative Plebiscite**

The 2014 national level election was unique with regard to the electoral verdict wherein a national party with an absolute majority of its own was returned to power after two decades of un-interrupted coalitional governments. This verdict marked a clear break from the trend of ‘bottom heavy’ coalitional governments comprising of a majority of regional parties which rallied around a national party to form the government at the centre. Hence the election was also characterised as a ‘critical election’ (Palshikar 2014) involving The election was also unique in terms of unprecedented use of mobile telephony and social media as well as exhaustive use of pre-modern techniques of campaigning such as rallies, road shows; motorised processions as well as *padayatras* (foot marches). It was the opposition coalition namely the NDA and its principal party, the BJP which led the charge creating a campaign which repeatedly played out the person and performance of its prime-ministerial candidate to

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5 Winning 282 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats the BJP had achieved a feat last seen only in the 1984 election. It was therefore viewed as system defining in so far as single majority parties had made a comeback. However the BJP’s vote share of 31% was the lowest for any party which had gained a majority in the Lok Sabha and was a notch above the Congress party’s vote share in the 2009 Lok Sabha election.
The 2014 election campaign launched by the BJP was preceded by anointment of a prime-ministerial candidate which by itself was an unconventional decision. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) of which the BJP was the political arm was not one to promote personality cults within the organisation. The campaign slogan too was person-centric and exhorted the voters to elect the government led by (Narendra) Modi (*Abki Baar Modi Sarkar*) as opposed to asking the voters to vote this time for a BJP government (*Abki Baar Bhajpa Sarkar*). Narendra Modi who was elected chairman of the BJP’s Central Election Committee ran a well choreographed campaign. Detailing this campaign Sardesai writes that according to Arvind Gupta who headed the IT cell of the BJP, the party had embarked on ‘multimedia carpet bombing’ through YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, mobile dial-ins and WhatsApp (Sardesai 2014: 242) Modi had joined Facebook and Twitter in 2009 though even after two years his followers were just 6 lakh. However post election in May 2014 he had an overwhelming 1.5 million ‘likes’ on Facebook, a number exceeded only by U.S. President Barack Obama. In fact Facebook was regarded as a ‘mother site’ for the social media campaign by Modi and his advisors. Also Sardesai notes that, ‘13 million people made 75 million Modi-related interactions during the two election months on Facebook’ (Ibid: 235 and 243). With regard to Twitter too Sardesai argues that the campaign was essentially ‘one-sided’ with Modi taking all the advantage. In the election, 56 million election related tweets were registered in which Modi was mentioned in 11.1 million tweets which Sardesai estimates to be ‘20 percent of the total traffic’ while the ruling party leader Rahul Gandhi was mentioned in only 1.2 million tweets ‘or 2 percent’ of the total (Ibid: 236). Deepinder Hooda, a leader from the ruling Congress party admitted that the party had initiated the social media campaign only in late 2013, barely six months prior to the election. In terms of followers too Modi had an overwhelming 4.27 million Twitter followers after the election. Further of the top ten election tweets, five had been sent from Modi’s account which included a victory tweet as well as a selfie with his mother (Ibid: 236). Mobile telephony was also extensively used by the party to reach out to voters. This included the ‘missed call’ system wherein on calling a certain number a BJP volunteer would call back and give the caller details of the campaign, solicit support for the party and could even enlist the caller as a volunteer for the party. The BJP is said to have gained 1.3 million volunteers in this manner. Another number allowed the caller to listen into a pre-recorded speech of Modi. While this system allowed party sympathisers to connect with the party, the party too created a voter identity data bank which even included details of booth level voters (Ibid: 240-241). The advertising campaigns too were nuanced. There was shifting emphasis from anger to hope as the election progressed and the element of ‘localisation’ involved creating multiple clips in regional languages with local content to reach out to a variegated electorate. Sardesai (Ibid: 

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6 The 2014 National level, sixteenth general elections were held over 9 phases beginning from 7th April to 10 May 2014
247) writes that the campaign too typified the ‘business-like approach’ of Modi’s team. The visual media too got implicated as the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) an independent media studies institute released data that in a survey of 5 particular news channels Modi received air-time equalling one-third of the total while the ruling party leader, Rahul Gandhi received a measly 4.33 percent, upstaged by the debutant party Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Arvind Kejriwal who got 10 percent of news coverage (Ibid: 255). It is noteworthy that the vigorous virtual campaign was matched by an equally extensive ‘real’ campaign. BJP’s undeclared prime-minister designate Narendra Modi who is said to have addressed 200 rallies between September 2013 and March 2014, embarked on another 185 rallies covering 295 constituencies over a period of six weeks. Hence Modi could be said to have covered 300,000 kms or ‘seven times the Earth’s equatorial circumference’ by the end of election campaigning (Ibid: 278-279). These rallies were also marked by the feature of ‘localisation’ as Modi tailor made his speeches to the local context and concerns. In contrast the campaign of the ruling party led by Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress was seen to have limited appeal. The leader was unable to put together a well knit campaign and his ‘town hall’ like meetings were contrasted with the ‘chai pe charcha’ (discussion over tea) that were popularised by team Modi wherein the local and culturally rooted ethos and practices were effectively leveraged by the opposition BJP. The leader was also dubbed as ‘immature’ as he was unable to effectively handle media interviews. The Congress election strategy remained in a state of flux, being offensive and defensive in turns as incumbency came to be viewed as disadvantageous. Heavy on jargon, it was unable to communicate its campaign lucidly and effectively.

The campaign performance of Narendra Modi was matched with the repeated exhortations of ‘maximal governance and minimal government’ as the single key electoral issue that the BJP sought to convey. For this Modi quite effectively marketed the ‘Gujarat model of development’ which as has been argued is a ‘…….more extreme version of neoliberalism than the version practised by the UPA, which retains elements of regulation and social welfare’ (Hensman: 2014, 19 March). While the BJP had been attempting to distance itself from its majoritarian religious and cultural moorings and adopt the secularising agenda of development since 2004, the 2014 model of development was unabashedly market oriented without being apologetic about the lack of socio-economic inclusiveness. As was succinctly argued by a Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, ‘…..the BJP had an idea of hope that revolved around an individual, Narendra Modi; we had an idea of inclusion that was based on issues like right to food. Their idea won. In an election, someone wins and the other person has to lose- why blame advertising for it?’ (Sardesai 2014: 25)
References


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