Partisan Media Under Modi: Nationalism a Driving Force Behind Fake News in India

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Abstract

In 2014, the media in India became a dominant mode of communication and information during the elections. The victory of Narendra Modi was possible due to the social media campaign that made him the first social media prime minister. Media, considered the fourth pillar of democracy, has undergone politicised pulsations under Modi. The media policy adopted by Modi turned out to be a double-edged governance strategy. This strategy has been used by the BJP government to implement its ideological principles of Hindutva under the garb of nationalism. Besides the personalised dissemination of information through the traditional and electronic media, the Modi government has employed intimidation to silence and control it. Similarly, the forthcoming electoral campaign of Modi and his party has been following the same pattern of playing every card to succeed. The media under the greater nationalistic agenda of Modi has used all kind of measures for his popularity among the general public. This paper explores the way the democratic media has been transformed into a partisan one. Furthermore, it explores how the Modi regime is using its influence to impose its nationalistic and Hindu religious doctrine on Indians.

Key Words*: Hindu nationalism, yellow journalism, Lok Sabha elections 2019, media sensationalism, brand Modi*

Introduction

Narendra Modi became India's first social media prime minister in 2014. His victory changed the latitude of Indian media. The winning tweet of Modi, "India had won! Good days are coming," at the time became the most retweeted post in the Indian history, with more than 70,000 and counting, confirmed the momentous role social media

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would be playing. Besides the conventional political campaign, social media for the first time became a dominant medium of communication and information during the elections of 2014. The imminent social media strategy platform provided the local pulse for winning the 2014 elections, amplified its scope under Modi to transfer his ideological notions and policy approach through his governance. Hence, a new style of personalised policy penetration emerged that disseminated messages via the traditional mode of journalism both print (newspapers) and electronic (television and radio networks) as well as digitalised social networks (google, twitter etc.), to pick up instant pointers for the very policy and programmes the government intended to introduce to construct the favourable consensus. "Now we are going to use this [social media] as a tool for listening," said Vinit Goenka, the national co-convener of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) IT unit. Did they listen? Was the feedback impactful enough to change the mindset of Modi's belligerent policy orientation within and across the borders? The phenomenal use of different modes of media, which brought Modi in power in democratic India, endured politicised autocratic vibrations under him.[1] The media strategy Modi adopted turned out to be a double-edged sword for his governance, which exposed him and his religious and political partiality to the people. The Modi-led BJP government faced criticisms and challenges through social media and the government used intimidation to control journalism and media outlets.

With the 2019 Lok Sabha elections looming, Modi, once again, is determined to play the game of Brand Modi. With his 2014 landslide win in elections, Brand Modi, a regional brand turned into a national and redefined brand in the Indian politics, capturing the popular imagination. Aspiring a similar victory in 2019 by reasserting his brand has been overshadowed by his decisively wide-ranging policy of nationalism, which he amenably propagated. The two arms of this policy were aimed at netting inland propagation of Hindu nationalism

and meddling with foreign policy in the garb of nationalism. In this context, the utilisation of nationalism was mainly practised in its relations with Pakistan under the notion of redefining Indian national security via a media stratagem. Partisan media marked by yellow journalism and fake news played a significant role both at home and across the border. At home in the form of spreading Hindutva and across the border in the form of power projection of superiority against Pakistan. The five years of Modi rule have been nationalism theatre in alliance with Media clout. Whether Modi can triumph over his aggressive policies of the five years by diverting popular criticism from himself to faking Indo-Pak tensions to get away as he did in the past from his tainted governance as Chief Minister of Gujarat state, which saw the ruthless 2002 anti-Muslim riots before winning 2014 elections, is yet to be seen. For now, media in the forthcoming electoral campaign of Narendra Modi has already begun to play every card as a game-changer for Modi and his party to succeed.

Indian Media and Modi

The media, as many political experts claim, is the fourth pillar in a democratic state since it has the power to make and break opinions. It acts as a substantial tool in shaping the national narrative and in realising this responsibility it should report objectively without bias. Their responsibility is to report facts and inform the masses. However, the case of Indian media under the Modi administration has been different from the traditional mode of responsibilities the institution has. Modi administration exerted its influence and intimidation on media for the political captivation of his popularity in the minds of Indians. Media under Modi became a case of fake news reporting, transforming journalism into yellow journalism for their benefit.

Journalism exists in several forms, print journalism includes newspapers and magazines, broadcast journalism covers television and radio news, and cyber journalism includes the widely used

internet. Yellow journalism and fake news paint a picture of today's media under Modi in India. The concept of yellow journalism can be defined as follows:

> Yellow Journalism is a term used for the use of negligent and flamboyant newspaper reporting, without regard to facts. With yellow journalism the truth is usually misrepresented or concealed, more often than not, there may be no truth to the story at all.[2]

Modi government benefited from this kind of yellow journalism to report situational tales and make the people believe them via faking news with the use of digitalised and electronic media. Modi and his government sensationalised news to build his persona as a saviour of modern India. What sensational fake news does is:

> Sensational news ... involved people in what was going on in the world and so painted those events in a particular way as to assure that the public took a particular side based upon a specific sentiment regarding [those] events.[3]

Moreover, fake news, as defined by Neil Levy (University of Oxford) is, *"The presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations."*[4]

In short, as William Randolph Hearst and his *New York Journal* illustrated, the most skilful harnessing of yellow journalism's power is the power to both maximise profits and fulfil a political agenda.[5]

In the past five years, Modi and his followers made maximum use of news houses to ensure that their nationalism doctrine and ideas get conveyed to the masses, else they were subjected to pressures and interdiction. As it stands out today, media under the government's influence has a position of distorting events with sensational headlines

and inaccuracies knowingly at the cost of being labelled as less credible. The media outlets for their interests succumb to government pressures as well and spread false news and propaganda to earn Television Rating Points (TRPs). Speculative reporting for a speculative audience leads to diminishing of reliability of news, as witnessed during the end of 19th century when yellow journalism served leading government agendas rather than delivering factual information. The media in India has embodied these traits to an extent of becoming a meaningless press, characterised by 'prominent headlines' that 'scream excitement' with 'lavish use of pictures', and subdues 'campaigns against abuses suffered by the common people' like in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) by presenting official policy narrative.[6]

Indian Media: Free Expression or Owned to Fake?

Controlling press and media in India has been a practice for some time now because of its politicised nature. Notable Indian press and media houses are either owned by political parties or by business classes affiliated with politicians and their parties. The Radia tapes controversy of November 2010 not only exposed the then ruling coalition of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) but made media limelight for revealing corrupt journalistic ethics, mainly that eliciting information gets primacy with no thought given to the means opted. Investigated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), recorded between 2007 and 2009, the tapes included around 5,000 conversations[7] between Nira Radia, a political and entrepreneur lobbyist, and prominent politicians, which uncovered a wide nexus among businessmen, politicians, and journalists who play a role in manipulating news. Senior and eminent journalists like Barkha Dutt, Prabhu Chawla, and Vir Sanghvi appeared to be a part of the nexus. But with standard media ethics in jeopardy and public trust eroded, they continue to hold high positions, even when public trust eroded in them. The corporate sector has taken over the moral and social aspects of news as paid news has become the norm.[8] Like business

interests, even the Bollywood and sports industry get paid to publicise political news and agendas, as it became very obvious during the India-Pakistan tensions over the Balakot airstrikes that escalated to concerns of a nuclear conflict. Modi urged the Bollywood and other notable celebrities and journalists by tagging them on social media to spread his vote awareness message, '#VoteKar' campaign.[9]

In India, the prominent newspapers, news channels, and publishing and media houses are owned and controlled by politicians belonging to different political parties. *The Tribune*, a centrist newspaper is known for pro-Congress attitude. *The Pioneer* is known for pro-BJP right-wing nationalist ideology focusing more on pro-right movements emerging from urban middle-class sections. The owner and Editors-in-Chief of the paper is a member of the BJP as well. *The Statesman* is highly supportive of left-wing communists and anti-establishment approach. *The Hindu* is open about its communist party affiliation and ideologies. Ramnath Goenka the founder of *The Indian Express* was a member of the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Later with the split of the paper group into two, opposite loyalties emerged: *The Indian Express* with support for Congress and *The New Indian Express* continuing to support NDA and right-wing ideologies. *Hindustan Times*, regarded as a worst-case of partisan media has been a Congress party propaganda pawn. Managed by notable industrialist KK Birla's daughter, who was also a Rajya Sabha member of Congress until 2012. *Times of India*, the leading English-language newspaper has shown bias towards the UPA now and then. Although at times it claims to be a public voice, business gains count.[10]

The alliance between the media and influential politicians has massively impacted the quality and independence of news channels. According to the 2012 report of *Business Standard*, more than a third of news channels in India are owned by politicians and political affiliates who exert their powerful position via their channels as 'political vehicles' to sway the course of local elections. Parthasarathy

in his article said that "owning a news entity has become a practical necessity for political parties in India." Channels like Sun TV, Kalaingnar, Makkal TV, etc. owned by politicians and their families, broadcast favourable news coverage for the party of their choice. At times these channels refrain from covering issues that may cause criticism. Furthermore, nearly 60 per cent of the cable distribution system is owned by local politicians that block telecasts of channels politically unfavourable. Overall, a practice has been established to stifle independent voices, which has divided the media within itself by becoming a partisan puppet of the funding support they receive.[11]

Election Fever and Fake Propagation

According to a research study carried out by Oxford Researchers[12] India concluded that cyber-troop activities are particularly tied to elections. The study found evidence of political parties spreading propaganda via social networks during elections. Moreover, WhatsApp was found to be the key source of disinformation spread across the country, besides the popularity of Twitter and Facebook messages. Even hired political campaigners or consulting firms to spread online propaganda through these networks, which facilitate the Indian public to broadly connect as a community, resulting in the spread of distorted news. The ruling BJP, in the forthcoming 2019 elections, has reportedly set up thousands of WhatsApp groups to reach out directly to their electorate. Amit Shah, the BJP president, is a member of every group. During the 2014 elections, the BJP was accused of starting internet trolls and fake image forwards scheme. Similarly, this year, in some of the state elections, WhatsApp reportedly lodged widespread misinformation from multiple political figures was disseminated through WhatsApp. Twitter, another platform being tested and tried for acquiring successful outreach, has become vital for the politicians and political parties to promote their supportive campaigns and agendas. Recently, Twitter's removal of fake accounts, where Prime Minister Modi lost

300,000 followers and Congress chief Rahul Gandhi lost 17,000, showed the dominant customary attitude among Indian political candidates.[13]

Media Model of Narendra Modi

Modi's Prime Minister's Office (PMO) opted for a social media communication strategy over the conventional method of communication to connect directly with the electorates. While New Delhi's PMO media strategy was new as it retained distance and information dearth, this was Modi's style of media model to function even when he was Gujarat chief minister. Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, author of *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times*, writes, "[Modi's] media policy now is a national extension of how he dealt with the media in Gujarat." Modi's definition of news is plain information with an absence of analysis and opinion. Mukhopadhyay further elaborates, "He has been escaping dialogue and prefers monologues. He uses media as an amplifier of his achievements. If he had his say, he would not want editorial pages in the newspapers and want them only as a litany of events."[14] It became more visible with television news, primetime news anchors, panel discussants, and speeches of Modi were all broadcasting Hindu nationalist agendas. In the past years of Modi governance, the media received directions from the PMO. The staff there monitored and devised the media strategy on how media should report on Prime Minister and his government actions.[15]

Any office is what the holder makes of it, so Modi made the PMO an over-zealous, micromanaging decision-making body with clear Constitutional deviation, making it look more like a presidential-style PMO. Modi won as the harbinger of change and he altered the media culture and milieu to provide the script suitable to his wider policies. The tailored media approach favourable to the PMO destroyed a cohesive sense of purpose behind media expression.[16] In short, media in the hands of Modi and his party converted the Prime

Minister's Office into what Rahul Gandhi called the "Publicity Minister's Office."[17]

A Cat and Mouse Game of News Scooping from the PMO

A key pillar of democratic India had always been its free, diverse, and vibrant media industry. It began to crumble under governmental pressures of Modi's media style of controlling information. The upshot for the reporters had been that they became exhausted in getting tuned up with the new media culture, where information got hard to come by. Presumably, the PMO was advised to refrain from spending time with journalists, which made the news hard to be confirmed or verified. In contrast to the previous setup, journalists were fed Modi's speeches, statements, and tweets. Even on foreign trips, Modi chose to travel with reporters from public service broadcasters like Doordarshan and the All India Radio, unlike his predecessors who took more than 30 correspondents with them. A deliberate effort was made to bypass traditional media. The new media model was made to look out for new techniques to get 'the news' to tow their lines. The broadcast was done to make a piece of unverified news into a world of make-believe. For journalists and reporters, the challenge was to write stories matching PMO's account. Moreover, in the case of a reporter getting the lead but unable to receive concerned branch's confirmation, he/she were left speculating. At times, this unconfirmed news would become a news piece.[18]

Introducing Fear of Expression

Modi's resentment towards journalists and distrust towards the media grew in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots. Hence, Modi and his party never missed an opportunity to degrade them. Government spokespersons would boycott television channels that failed to maintain the dictated lines. The measures to silence media were favourable to the Modi government on marking the limits to freedom of expression. The displeasure of the Modi government had

been a reason for many prominent high-profile journalists' exits. One of the reasons *Hindustan Times* editor Bobby Ghosh resigned was government's annoyance over his online feature *Hate Tracker*, that listed reports of hate crimes across India. Since Modi came to power, a noteworthy number of hate crimes and targeted attacks largely against Muslims and Dalits by cow vigilantes increased. Modi chose to remain silent and failed to use his powers to condemn lynching and vigilante violence. The linking of Modi's silence to the regular incidents irked him and after Ghosh's resignation, the *Hate Tracker* disappeared from the newspaper's site. The Modi loyalist media personalities also remained conscious of the limits within which they worked by balancing Modi's sensitivity over public and media criticism and the fictionalised news he wanted to be propagated.[19]

In another conspicuous case, the voice of first-rate journalists like Karan Thapar was also silenced for questioning the government. The famous interview Karan Thapar had with Modi, did not last for more than a few minutes as it was terminated by Modi himself, because of Thapar's probing questions about the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat state under Modi's watch. It resulted in finding him out of television and any favourable circle with the BJP. BJP members refused to give him interviews or attend his panel discussions. Since that interview, Modi's political journey took him to the zenith of power while in contrast Thapar's career as a television show host hit a brick wall. His contract never got renewed once expired in 2014 with the CNN-IBN and in 2017 *India Today*, due to management's fears of being boycotted. Abhisar Sharma, another senior anchor, was taken off-air for 15 days after he questioned the management's decision not to criticise Modi on his shows. Similarly, many more journalists have come under constant attacks from members and affiliates of the larger Hindu-nationalist network. Offices of New Delhi Television (NDTV) were raided by the CBI in an attempt to restrain the network from criticising Modi. Gauri Lankesh, editor of the Kannada newspaper was

shot dead because she was reportedly anti-Hindu. The ABP News TV channel came under attack when a fake paid news to a village woman about her increased wages due to Modi policies was fact-checked by the channel. This explains how systematic political pressures under Modi government meddled with journalism.[20]

Over the past four years, frequent arrests for sharing cartoons, images, messages, memes, and any critical social media post have appeared at alarming regularity since Modi swept to power in 2014. The arrested included students, teachers, businessmen, even police officials on complaints registered by Hindu nationalist organisations like Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena, Samajwadi Party, BJP etc. concocted under Section 153-A for 'promoting disharmony'.[21] Modi made sure he became a supreme face of the BJP and the Union Government. He took ownership of every policy and scheme proclamation. The moment a journalist became critical of Modi's policies or expressed disappointment in his scheme, the temperature would build up for arm-twisting them with a boycott of the channel. Journalists also saw themselves fired or resigned under threats and intimidation or refusal of communication, increasing amount of censorship, etc.[22] In its annual World Press Freedom Index, the Paris-based *Reporters Without Borders* said that Hindu nationalists were trying to purge all displays of anti-national thought from national debate and that self-censorship had grown and mainstream media journalists had become targets of most radical Hindu nationalists.[23] The *de facto* policy of the party's media mechanism has been to build Modi's image, else be labelled anti-national. Unfortunately, the result of this policy projection had been a distrust in India's professional media that erased the distinction between fake news and fact.

Nationalism and Blind *Bhakti*: Election Tactics and Fake News Driver

As a publicity stunt for 2019 elections, under the National umbrella, Modi came up with a 'MainBhiChowkidar' campaign slogan.

For this drive, Modi even renamed his Twitter profile account to 'Chowkidar Narendra Modi'. Similarly, as a coordinated campaign launch, the slogan was followed by his party members, also advertisement videos about people being shown as chowkidar were broadcast.[24] Modi and his party are all set to fiercely campaign via media for promoting 'Brand Modi' and pulling down any opposition alliance or criticism against them. In 2014, Modi and his party benefited from media connectivity openly supportive of him for economic gains at a larger level similar to his Gujarat model, so that no one dared to question his critical policies against minorities.

Unable to contest on economic and development platform in 2019, Prime Minister Modi and his party are depending on Hindu nationalism and populism cards as an election ploy. Modi failed to implement his policies successfully to bring 'good days' to Indians, he remained a performer rather than a reformer. Hence, new techniques and old tactics of using nationalism and populism to sensationalise sentiments of the majority come into play. Throughout his governance, Modi kept his nationalism doctrine thriving, most crucial policy to be exploited anytime when needed both at home and beyond borders with Pakistan to scale up popularity ratings.

Modi Doctrine of Nationalism

Nationalism in Modi's India centres on Hindu nationalism at home. The concept of Hindutva, a vital element for the emergence of Indian nationalism is a desire and a political belief to see only Hindu with the highest sense of his or her unique identity to be an Indian nationalist.[25] Hinduism, according to hardliners like Modi and the RSS, should replace secularism as the guiding code of Indian society. Hinduism, despite its overwhelming demographic presence after independence, never became India's Constitutional religion and the country officially embraced secularism. The architects of the secular and pluralistic Indian nationhood aimed to embrace their diversified communities of religious minorities, i.e., Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and

varying philosophies and sects. However, today a surging wave of Hindutva nationalism has challenged this foundational philosophy of Nehru and Gandhi, by bringing the national political identity of the majority Hindu community in the mainstream national debate. The intolerant debate has pitted traditional pluralism against a narrowly religious-based conception of Indian nationhood.[26] Congress leader Shashi Tharoor spoke on the touchy subject and maintained that Hinduism and Hindutva were different from each other. "Hinduism at large vastly encompasses religion with a tremendous amount of choice of freedom within it, while Hindutva is a narrow concept which reduces religion and attaches it to political identity. The issue with Hindutva is that it believes its way is the only way and everyone is either inferior or excluded from it."[27]

Narendra Modi embodies the past, present, and future of the Hindu nationalist movement. Hindu nationalism plays a crucial role in Modi's constituency. One important wing of BJP focuses on religious loyalty and the other one on economics. While the business and middle class preferably focus on economic reforms facilitating their businesses, the religious-minded Hindu voters put their ideological interests at the top. Hence, Modi manoeuvred these religious faultlines for political gains and is bent on doing so in the 2019 polls. For example, in early 2015, to win state elections, Modi warned of an increase in the possibility of cattle slaughter, knowing clearly how sacred it is to Hindus. These statements meant to instigate Hindu vote by stigmatising beef-eating Muslims.[28]

A Hindu nationalist prime minister in a secular India was expected to emphasise its party's traditional ideology to make India an inherently Hindu country from being a secular one. To blanket Hindu religious superiority under the cloak of nationalism, Modi and his government reached out to the Hindu majority through every press and media platform. The ruling party secured hardline Hindu nationalism agendas with their barbaric cow protection laws, the

appointment of extremist Hindu nationalists/*Bhakts* to powerful positions of the highest level, and atrocities against Muslims in the garb of patriotism. The nomination of controversial demagogue Hindu monk Yogi Adityanath for the Chief Minister's position of the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh explained Modi's priority shift from economic to Hindutva for future electoral enticement as a backup policy to contest on. Nativism in the form of reviving Hindu identity has become a strategy to make people believe that failures of Hindu nationalism have been a major cause needs remedy. The volunteers of nativist parent organisation RSS are being compelled to mobilise voters by intensifying their Hindu nationalist agendas for whom it is acceptable to rely on polarisation.[29]

Personalised Politics of Symbolism

To understand the electoral politics of Modi and his party under the nationalist drive of building a new image of India, Prime Minister Modi constructed the 305-foot statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel called the 'Statue of Unity' on a river island in the Narmada River in Gujarat: the native state of Gandhi as well as Modi himself.[30] Modi honoured Patel with his speech laced with symbolism, political hints, and electoral considerations, calling him a national hero who remained true to Hindu roots of keeping the nation united, to overshadow Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Modi's message of standing for united India under the BJP was an unmistakable call to his vote bank ahead of polls.[31] Another statue under construction in Mumbai is a massive 700-foot memorialisation of the 17th-century warrior king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. The identity politics of the BJP government with iconography and its linkages with Hindutva ideology is carried out through the monumental buildings. The idea behind such political ambience is to transform the Nehruvian idea of secular India into an image of a homogenous identity representing Bharat Mata (Mother India) emblem with patriotism free from colonial past. The politics of symbolism, greatly covered by the media, is an effort to

gain an edge over Congress by devising a different set of heroic symbols, which present Indians with a message of Hindutva and an ideology of Hindu cultural nationalism free from pluralistic and secularist image of Nehruvian ideological inheritance. The symbols in a cocktail of political moves will elevate Modi and his party.[32]

The ancient Hindu past has been glorified with a campaign to rebuild Somanath Temple, now located in Gujarat. In the past, the destruction of the temple was given a communal angle and its restoration was associated with the pride of Hindu right. The second important symbolism of Hindutva pride was in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, where the Babri Mosque, built as a 'victory monument' by Mughal Emperor Babur, was located. Hindu hardliners claimed the birth of Lord Ram in the place of the mosque, which was destroyed in 1992 by fanatic Hindu Kar Sevaks. This politics of symbolism through monuments is linked with mobilisation and polarisation of Hindutva constituency.[33] A nationwide agitation campaign and hype has been demonstrated focusing on building the Ram Temple in place of the destroyed Babri Mosque. Even though it is known that the archaeological evidence does not support this claim of the BJP, Hindu hardliners demolished the mosque to gain populist satisfaction. Furthermore, the BJP assumed power in 1998 despite instigating communal riots and segregating Hindus and Muslims.[34]

The Indian Supreme Court insisted resolution of Ayodhya dispute through mediation between Hindus and Muslims. Expectedly, the loudest opposition has come from the politicians, religious bigots, communalists, and treacherous communal politicians. The politicians have used the dispute to further their political ambitions to gather votes. Since the BJP failed to construct Ram Temple, the symbol of Lord Ram has returned to electoral politics in 2019, which is why the Supreme Court of India was pressurised to legalise temple construction. Religious bigots and communalists have an understanding to bank on faith for more power without giving a

thought to how dangerous the national path for India has become. Aligned with this group of cadres is none other than the Indian media on reporting their voices and inviting them on prime time television to create controversial interchanges for good TRPs.[35]

In a grand show of Hindutva symbolism, the political and ideological superiority has reached ordinary Indians with the glorification of Hindu leaders through the stage of Bollywood industry. The Hindu mythological and devotional show has taken up a larger than life place with the help of Indian cinema. Just a week before the Lok Sabha polls in April 2019, with the blessings of the BJP, Modi biopic with a poster tagline "My love for my country is my strength" will be released. It will be followed by a trailer of Rahul Gandhi biopic RaGa with his famous wink as well.[36] The political nexus with the cinematographic world of Bollywood is known. Throughout the years of Modi government, Hindutva dogmas have been channelling clear policy preferences of Modi and his party affiliates. In a recent movie *Manikarnika*, she saves a calf from becoming a steak of the British, supplementing the ideas of Hindu hardliners who consider the cow sacred. An integral part of Modi's flagship policy of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign) a movie *Toilet* was picturised, admiring the sanitation and social revolution campaign of Modi indirectly. Another Hindi movie *Sui Dhaaga* (Needle and Thread) was released, which upheld Modi's 'Make-in-India' and 'start-up India' campaigns supporting small entrepreneurial ventures, as promised by Modi of creating 10 million jobs for Indians. In general, a noticeable increase in nationalistic films about Hindu political personalities, love stories, sports, and national security themes under Modi has been observed. Moreover, Bollywood celebrities have become directly accessible to Modi gatherings as media keeps covering details of a nexus between cinema and the political world.[37] The BJP president Amit Shah also echoed such historical symbolisms in his speeches. Amit Shah equated the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 to the Panipat

battle, which in case of their defeat would enslave Hindus. Modi also called Congress rule as Sultanate and blamed them for ignoring India's glorious civilisation. Modi even recently called Rahul Gandhi, Emperor Aurangzeb, a comparison meant to humiliate Hindus.[38]

Identity Supremacy and the Media Tide

The flurry of statements based on mythical Hindutva philosophies is necessarily interpreted as an important component of the political strategy to transform India's domestic political and constitutional order to Hindu ideological norms. The nationalist move under Modi in India is linked to long-desired early ideologues of Hindu supremacy. Modi and his hardline organisational partners sensationalise people's feelings that India's success on the global stage depends upon the forging of a monolithic Hindu nation.[39] One key factor behind right-wing Indians sharing social media content is their desire to express their 'socio-political identity'. This right identity prerogative is often linked to national pride and Hindu pride. The narratives put forth in fake news messages endorse values of 'Hindu power and superiority' and 'preservation and revival', 'validation of identity trumps verification of facts'. According to researchers, the multiple identities among the right-wingers are bound by common narratives whereas the left endorse 'micro identities' manifested by religion, language, and caste.[40]

Hindu nationalism is a political ideology expressed differently by various groups that are banded together as a Sangh Parivar, i.e., 'the family of organisation', with roots in a 19th-century confrontation between colonial British and Indians who fought for their own national identity.[41] Muslim identity has become a political mobilisation instrument among the Hindutva constituency. The Muslim representation, over the last five years, has been eroded from Indian politics to near invisibility. In 2014, only 22 Muslim parliamentarians got elected to the house of 543.[42] In a 14.2 per cent Indian Muslim population, a study in 2018 found that there were only 4 Muslims out

of 1,418 BJP Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs).[43] In the state election of Uttar Pradesh, which has 403 legislative assembly seats, BJP gave no ticket to Muslims in 2017. The message of BJP was clear that they did not need Muslim endorsement, Hindu majoritarian support would be enough.

A BBC research, on the way the ordinary citizens engaged with and got involved in the spread of fake news, reported that the rising tide of nationalism was driving common citizens to spread fake news. The facts have become less important as an emotional desire to augment national identity has taken a higher place. Social media analysis suggest that the right-wing networks are well-organised than the left in pushing nationalistic fake stories further to an extent of having an overlap of fake news sources on Twitter and other supporting media networks of Prime Minister Modi. The series, *Beyond Fake News*, aired on television, radio, and digital media was aimed at examining how disinformation and fake news affected people around the world. The findings were that in India distrust of mainstream news outlets pushed people to spread information from alternative sources without even verifying and blindly trusting them, believing it to be a sense of duty to spread the real story. These kinds of fake news spread via digitalised systems had increased violence in India.[44] In a mob democracy, such stunts work well for the political elite.

Hate in the name of religious-based nationalism is one of the easiest and fastest things to sell and, in the 21st century, demand for this phenomenon is rising day-by-day. For years, people's minds have been tainted by indiscriminate usage of terms against Islam and Muslims. The 21st-century journalism is the biggest reason the world has people like Narendra Modi and Donald Trump. The two leading democracies in the world and hand-in-hand with nationalistic supremacist. The rise of far-rightist groups is attributed to mainstream journalism, which created an environment of fear, mistrust, and hatred in one community towards the other. Perhaps, that is why Modi gets

accommodated and has low-key support in the international community while following his nationalistic policies at home. The visible concern over the rise of populism and far-right political supremacy in India is perplexing for the left. The spiteful tone used against the non-Hindus, especially Muslims, in India is supported by mainstream Indian media and Modi is only one among many who want to capitalise on the minds corrupted by it.[45]

Indian media helped in wiping away or putting under the blanket what Modi's legacy of communalism and polarisation had been in Gujarat as the state's three times chief minister. The economic part of his ideological organisation helped him pursue his electoral aspirations via pro-business persona. Big business leaders and industrialists like Ratan Tata and Ambani Brothers praised Modi and his administration in the Gujarat state. The right image for Brand Modi was put up as a progressive leader with the ability to deliver economic progress. It allowed Modi to shun secular ideals in favour of caste bias and polarisation. The media marketing opted by Modi and advocacy of corporate world transformed the blood-stained image of Modi into an excellent orator and face of the future economic boom. Modi's speeches touched the necessities of urban class while blaming the Congress party for all the problems. Once the elections were announced, his marketing team bombarded voters with print, television, and radio advertisements with similar themes. Media campaign reached voters through text messages and his recorded voice sought votes for him. Social media platforms also highlighted his rightful image on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to magnify the impact of the advertising and branding campaign.[46]

Shady *Bhakt* Syndrome

The reality of Hindu nationalism in India other than what the politicians narrate is that the nation is in the grip of 'Blind *Bhakti* Syndrome', which is in contrast to one's dedication to God. The blind *bhakti* is a political hierarchical phenomenon, which gets stronger with

the majority political party in power. The government in power tends to act autocratically and even the conventional media hesitates from criticising. Under Modi, the situation for everyone is like either you band with blind *bhakts* or be ready to become outcast, even labelled as anti-nationalist by anarchists. Due to unjust policies of the Modi government and Hindu *bhakts*, the radicalisation of society has become a frightening norm. The manner in which Kashmiris are being pushed and freedom fighters are growing is an outcome of Hindu nationalists' radicalised attitude. Yet authors continue to write what the government in power tells them to and show that the government has done nothing wrong.

The rapidly growing insecurity and apprehension among the minorities such as attacks, lynching, violent incidents, threats etc. over the last five years, especially in the India-Occupied Kashmir (IOK), are not reflected in popular discourse. The political parties and government in power have their own cadre of blind *bhakts* who maintain their hierarchy of knowing and keeping the ground realities to themselves.[47] While the farmers kept committing suicide and Muslims were falsely accused of eating beef, media was only talking about how great things happened under Modi.

Modi Doctrine: At an Embryonic
Stage in Indian Foreign Policy

At the foreign policy level, nationalistic drive through fake news was seen between India and Pakistan in the recent post-Pulwama airstrike on Balakot. With no official Pakistan policy from the start, the Modi government had an opening to manipulate the situation with Pakistan under the flag of saffron nationalism. Despite having an upper diplomatic hand over Pakistan in the initial phase of relations between New Delhi and Islamabad, Modi faltered in the end. Pakistan from terror supporter to supporting Indian political parties remained a dominant element of media headlines in India under Modi. The national security doctrine, underwent a radical change under

Modi, reflecting aggressive, unapologetic, and nationalistic tones. Escalation with Pakistan during the forthcoming elections was expected in both the countries. It was just a matter of time. In the aftermath of the Pulwama attack in IOK, the Indian Air Force (IAF) launched pre-emptive strikes inside Pakistan after nearly five decades. IAF claimed to target a Jaish-e-Mohammad training camp inside Pakistan, a banned terrorist outfit that had claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Pulwama in which 40 Indian security forces personnel were killed. Experts viewed the situation as Modi's designed strategy to play the Pakistan card for shoring up political support nationally just weeks before the general elections, by showing nationalistic strength and strong leadership.[48]

With the international disclosure, public speeches, official statements, and behaviour of BJP leaders could not enhance the credibility of India. The post-Pulwama strategy of the BJP government for the forthcoming polls became clear to everyone. Demonstrated by several BJP office-bearers like B.S. Yeddyurappa, who claimed to win 22 seats in the Karnataka state after the strike or the Jharkhand BJP president who claimed to win 14 seats in the state. Similarly, Delhi BJP chief tried to flaunt army uniform as a party flag. Efforts are being made to convert the democratic exercise into a nationalism parade where national security is restricted to what the Modi narrative is and where all the rest of the debate is regarded as anti-national: a convenient way for the ruling party to shut public anger mounting against Modi and his fake promises of good days. The satellite media did everything possible to muster support for this strategy of Modi; to stir-up a war hysteria by glorifying forged government claims, and to market lies and fake stories without even the pretence of an independent check. The cross-border clashes exposed the bias of Indian media to the extent of reporting in utter confusion and embarrassment globally.[49]

Amit Shah claimed that 250 terrorists were killed in IAF airstrikes in Balakot, inside Pakistan, while SS Ahluwalia, a minister in Modi government, said that the aim was to precisely avoid human casualties in the Balakot strike, as it was only meant to send Pakistan a message.[50] Hence, the lying continued. The foreign Secretary asserted that terrorists, their trainers, and infrastructure were destroyed, while the IAF chief contradicted it by stating it was not the job of the armed forces to count casualties. The authenticity of the casualties and damage claims were questioned by the international press as well. However, Prime Minister Modi skipped the meeting of opposition parties and later his government refused to share the information followed by silencing queries with intimidation and bullying. The Indian political discourse got toxic because of the impact of fake news both at the domestic and international levels. The long dramatic talks about combating terrorism by Modi—as he said he would "settle all scores with terrorists" and *hum unke ghar mein ghus ghus kar maarenge* (we will go into their homes and kill them),"—were all presenting the right Brand Modi to the people. Modi targeted the opposition on their enquiries with accusations of having softness towards Pakistan. He indulged in self-praise by claiming himself to be a man thinking only of his country while ignoring the heavy-handed security tactics applied against Kashmiris during the past five years. Blaming Pakistan has become too easy a tactic to gain voters' attention. However, avoiding disastrous policies in Kashmir based on ideological and political agenda of Sangh Parivar and refusing to open for mediation is not possible. In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Home Affairs Hansraj Ahir shared that there were 1,708 terrorist incidents between 2014 and 2018.[51]

In a cross-border media confrontation, Pakistan blocked Indian media's reporting of Balakot airstrike as the BJP's propaganda machine. Without any verification, the Indian news media reported that 300 terrorists were killed. Pakistan, on the other hand, rejected the

Indian claims and responded that the area was mainly deserted and wooded and that no casualties or damage had been inflicted. Hence, the inconsistency created confusion and spread of misinformation among the people. Mass media in India had many contradictory reports, biased, provocative, and unverified as news organisations attributed their information to 'government sources', 'forensic experts', 'police officers, and 'intelligence officers'. No independent investigations were carried out to address the serious questions of intelligence failures. Modi did not bother to address the country directly amid tensions while two press briefings by the foreign secretary and the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson were held without allowing press questions. Sadly, even after the Pulwama attack, no news site rectified the errors in their reporting as a matter of public record. The Indian media self-transformed itself into a propaganda machine of the Modi government, where anchors began to assess military technology and strategy. Speculations were repeated and many journalists even took to social media networks like Twitter to encourage the Indian army. With this media promotion of government positions on the crisis, other crucial issues dropped out of public attention like the controversial Rafale deal and corruption charges against the government, the plight of Kashmiris, and economic failures of Modi's policies. The whole political drama raised the chances of an election victory for the BJP.[52]

Truth, as it is said, is the first casualty of war. The stimulating thoughts in the mind of the general masses were: how the media realistically knew, except for the official handout, that there was a targeted bombing in Balakot; or how would anyone come to know of the attempted bombing that misfired; or that Indian planes merely fled with randomly dropping their payload. The facetious and hilarious situation appeared with screaming Indian TV anchors painting a picture of details with confidence as if they were eyewitnesses from the Mirage planes. Hardly any journalist or TV anchor in India

compared the narrative from both sides. Even no pictures of the attack on Balakot were shown. Instead, they chose to keep showing patriotic abilities from the newsrooms. What else is expected in such situations under Modi government, especially when the channels are owned by politicians and their affiliated businessmen? Hence, a professionally crafted statement for the media was delivered.[53] When the government and the media nourish each other, the result is a nationalist media that takes upon itself to deliver nationalistic ideas and shame, punish, and deter independent thinkers.

In a move of nationalist preservation, Indians from all backgrounds across the globe started sharing Jai Hind hashtag messages via social media networks to show patriotism and solidarity in standing with Modi without any inquisitive debate. National security issues, especially with such dramatic show, tend to benefit the ruling party of BJP against the opposition alliance led by Congress. The sensationalisation of the incident compelled the Indian celebrities to condemn and criticise Pakistan. A celebrity, Kangana Ranaut, even made a show of calling for the destruction of Pakistan[54] without having a realistic check of the situation, which was nothing but an election trick. Under national security protection, cross-border cultural exchanges, as well as Pakistani films, TV shows, and artists were banned in India. It was already in the nationalism pipeline to ban Pakistani art and culture spread in India due to their immense popularity among Indians and viewed as undermining Hindu cultural supremacy. All India Cine Workers Association (AICWA) announced a blanket ban on Pakistani artistes working in the Indian film industry and the organisations that aspired to work with them.[55]

A section of 'Arma 2' video game was widely shared along with a clip of flypast on Pakistan's Independence day. ABP journalist Vikas Bhadauria was among those who circulated the clip with a caption saying "something like this must have happened." The clip was circulated on both Twitter and Facebook with the unverified claim of

depicting the airstrike. Similarly, Twitter user Ajay Kushwala, followed by Modi on Twitter, posted the video clip on his timeline with the message, "India strikes again. This is new India under Leadership of Honourable PM Shri @narendramodi ji. India's air force destroyed terrorist camps in Pakistan and more than 200-300 militant have been killed according to souces. @ImranKhanPTI how's the josh ??#Balakot #SurgicalStrike2" However, the faint English commentary in the background raised doubts among the sane-minded. Therefore, a thorough search of gaming videos on YouTube by Alt News using different keywords found a 2015 clip of a video game 'Arma 2'. Furthermore, as the video kept spreading, many people started casting doubts and one Twitter user finally showed a side-by-side comparison of the visuals from the two videos, which turned out to be identical where a flypast by Pakistani Air Force on Pakistan's Independence Day was seen.[56]

The media belligerence towards Pakistan and the determination of fuelling the Modi wave of nationalism among the citizens faced a huge setback because of the baseless reporting of the Balakot incident. The international experts closely monitoring the incident exposed the reality of the Modi government's fake stunts. The opposition joined hands in taking down Modi's electoral tactic with a spread of old pre-poll campaign videos of Modi in which he had questioned the Manmohan Singh government on terrorism. The old speeches came to haunt Modi in the wake of the terror attack at Pulwama by the opposition over his security policies and attacks under his watch. Questions popped up like how 150-200 kilograms of military-grade explosives crossed the border under a 'strong' Modi government and how did its intelligence failed to stop a young attacker from getting explosives. Or while Modi and his ministers and other BJP leaders massively capitalised on this opportunity to make political gains, why Modi remained invisible from party meetings. It exposed the doublespeak of BJP before the logical minds.[57] On top of

this reality, BJP kept its ongoing political schedule of campaigning intact to advertise Modi as the strongest leader India could have to wipe away terrorism and make India a superpower. Modi conducted the largest video conference as part of *mera booth sabse mazboot* program, meaning 'my booth is the strongest' to interact with workers and volunteers in 15,000 parts of the country without getting affected by the possibility of war with Pakistan and Indian pilot being captured in Pakistan.[58]

The inconsistencies between New Delhi and Islamabad on the account of both surgical strikes claimed by Modi government compels one to look into the truth. Back in 2016, New Delhi carried out a 'surgical strike' in Pakistan where Indian troops were sent across the *de facto* border to hit terrorist targets in response to an attack on the Indian military installation in Indian Kashmir though denied any such intrusion across the border other than an exchange of fires between two sides, while India under Modi continued to account the tale to intensify nationalistic fervour at home. The widely spread misinformation led to an intensification of Indo-Pak tensions. However, this time around, the bold claims of Indian airstrike killing large numbers of terrorists were uncovered by the world.[59] The international media exposed Modi and his lies for winning votes as well as his blind following by the media without their investigation into such huge claims. To counter the humiliating narrative, Modi and his government presented the whole strike as a show of political symbolism to demonstrate India's actionable strength.

Domestically, showing toughness towards Pakistan helps Modi politically. With unfulfilled promises, and a Pandora box full of sharp drift between the government and people, massive intolerable communal violence, a visible divide between communities, exploitation of religious sentiments, heavy losses at the expense of demonisation policy, Modi had Pakistan card as a last resort to contest 2019 general elections in the name of nationalism. As Modi's BJP

suffered heavy losses in a series of crucial state-level polls in December, the macho trick was played as an opportunity to present Modi as a strong nationalist leader on national security front who could keep the country safe from the evil eye of the neighbour. Politically, the fake electoral tactics might give Modi or his party another chance from nationalist supporters but geo-politically the risk of escalation remains real in the minds of people.[60]

Critically looking at the India-Pakistan picture throughout Modi governance, it becomes clear that Modi intentionally kept the analysts wondering about his true intentions overbuilding bilateral ties with Pakistan. While Pakistan constituted a very small part of Modi's campaign of 2014, it was clear that Modi being a hardliner had no sentimental notion about Pakistan. It was expected of him not to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors in developing sociable ties with Pakistan. Generally, mention of Pakistan remains an aspect of Indian political parties' election manifesto while covering foreign policy agendas. The anti-Pakistan sentiments flared from time to time by Modi's nationalism over the past five years on multiple occasions prompted many of Hindutva and BJP supporters to attack anyone considered anti-national with the slogan of 'go to Pakistan'. Even Shashi Tharoor, over criticising Modi government, was told by BJP Yuva Morcha (the youth wing of BJP) to go to Pakistan. In September 2018, the University Grants Commission (UGC), issued a directive to all higher educational institutions across the country to mark 29 September as the 'Surgical Strike Day', to mark and celebrate Indian armed forces special operation inside Pakistani Kashmir to eliminate militants. Under the political atmosphere, Pakistan's relevance with the uprising in IOK remains alive. If any Indian soldier dies, uprising gets intensified, or an outraging protest is carried out, politicians are quick to point fingers at Pakistan. An average Indian voter's suspicions of Pakistan fed by delusion through political speeches and media coverage are seen advantageous by the politicians.[61]

Conclusion

The media displays a sense of power and confidence in its ability to become an instrument in the hands of a few over the rest. Under the Modi government, this sense of control became a matter of concern, as it led to increase in violence and impatience towards other communities and to a level of national security challenges reflecting changing Indian political practices. Both the print and electronic media covered and delivered fake and unverified news ranging from national to regional importance. Yellow journalism of sensationalising the events became a power consolidator of Modi government through selective censorship, manipulation of information by influencing opinions and spreading lies to maintain a favourable status quo. The practice resulted in 'internet bubbles' of the likeminded, ideologically connected to a Hindutva wavelength of supremacy and fighting against opposing thoughts. The loudest voices became the truth setters, making the bubble group assume their opinion is authentic, gradually developing into fake news.[62]

The nationalism-driven tenure of Narendra Modi as the Indian Prime Minister has been marked by the debatable struggles over who is fit to be considered an Indian nationalist. Modi and his hardline supporters have divided the nation between 'Muslims' and 'Hindus', where Muslims are looked upon as 'infiltrators', while the Hindus as the rightful natives of India who are viewed as refugees if happen to be in the neighbouring countries. Media played a central part in the Hindutva politics at home to unfurl the saffron air to an extent of fuelling caste politics by intimidation via press and media coverage. On the one hand, Muslims were targeted for being non-Indians, Hindus questioning Hindutva's ideological aggression found themselves labelled as anti-national. Modi and his government chose to remain tight-lipped over the assimilationist policies forcefully pursued by the Hindu *bhakts*. This repression against the Kashmiris has transformed their freedom movement into an Indianisation of

jihad in Kashmir. Justifying nationalism by spreading false stories touched across borders and became a routine. As Hindu nationalist leader Subramanian Swamy's claims of Pakistan seeking to break India into four pieces are nothing but fictions for ignorant.[63] Modi, the BJP, and the RSS have been the beneficiaries of the communal intolerance to politically consolidate at the risk of undermining national unity.

Another policy under the cloak of nationalism alongside misinformed media, which exposed the Modi government's double face has been Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi, throughout his tenure, kept Pakistan at a non-engaging distance behind multiple excuses of non-cooperation. Strategically, if engaging ties had been built, Modi would not have had a chance to intensify a nationalistic policy at home among his vote bank. The fear of losing his vote bank has been orchestrated in such a way under the nationalistic slogan by Modi that even the opposition parties hesitate to embark on improving relations with Pakistan in their election manifesto. After the panoramic strike show in Balakot at such a prime time, Pakistan will remain relevant to 2019 manifesto in India. Directly or indirectly it is going to impact the vote bank. In the run-up to the 2019 polls, stirring up nationalism through a media campaign is the winning ticket that the Modi and his party are banking on. Despotism has reached its peak, as Modi and his party have got caught in the web of their lies. Silencing all independent voices in the media through misleading propaganda news, with yellow journalism at its peak and media houses closely aligned with the Modi government, displayed the eagerness of the BJP in marching with the nationalist fever of unverified information. In short, the diplomacy of violence, flirting with the cataclysm, and the enemy within in the form of uninformed media is what one can sum up under Modi and his nationalism drive to seek power.

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