

The Grammar of Consent: Rhetoric, Persuasion, and the Unfolding of Political Power in India's Electoral Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Indian elections are won and lost in language long before they are settled at the counting table. This article examines the persuasive architecture of Indian political communication, treating rhetoric not as ornament layered over “real” politics but as one of the constitutive practices through which political power is assembled, legitimated, and occasionally dismantled. Drawing on classical and contemporary rhetorical theory, on the discursive approach to populism, and on a now substantial body of scholarship concerning Indian media and mobilisation, the analysis identifies a working repertoire of persuasive techniques that recurs across ideological camps: the compressed slogan, the constructed antagonist, the biographical proof, the vernacular register, the numerical performance of governance, and the embodied rhetoric of the yatra and the rally. Each is examined through specific episodes drawn from roughly seven decades of Indian electoral history, from Shastri's wartime couplet and Indira Gandhi's poverty slogan to the Mandal-Kamandal confrontation, the Dravidian oratorical tradition, the Bahujan idiom of dignity, the marketing of India Shining, and the saturation campaigns of 2014 and 2019. The article then considers how successive media ecologies, the Indian-language press, satellite television, and now encrypted messaging, have altered the reach and the texture of persuasion without displacing older oral forms. A concluding discussion addresses the limits of rhetorical explanation. Rhetoric that ignores lived material conditions tends to fail, sometimes spectacularly, and voters retain an interpretive agency that discourse-centred accounts can underestimate. Persuasion, the article suggests, works best when it names something that audiences already half believe.

Keywords: Political communication, Rhetoric, Persuasion, Indian elections, Populism, Political discourse, Media and democracy

INTRODUCTION

There are a particular sound and vibration module which symbolises Indian election season. Loudspeakers strapped to the roofs of hired jeeps, the same four-line jingle looping through a market lane until the vegetable sellers know it better than the candidate does, a helicopter descending on a dusty maidan while forty thousand people wait in the sun. Anyone who has stood in such a crowd knows that something is happening there that a purely instrumental account of voting cannot capture. People are not simply receiving information about policy alternatives. They are being addressed, named, flattered, warned, and enlisted. They are being told a story about who they are and who stands against them. That process of address is the subject of this article. The claim

advanced here is fairly simple to state and rather harder to demonstrate: rhetoric is not the decorative surface of Indian electoral politics but one of its load-bearing structures. Political power in India is built partly out of caste arithmetic, partly out of organisational muscle and money, partly out of state capacity and welfare delivery, and partly, though this last element is the one most often waved away as froth, out of language. The waving away is understandable. Scholars of Indian politics have spent decades demonstrating that elections turn on social coalitions, on the mechanics of the first-past-the-post system, on candidate wealth and criminal records, on the local dominance of particular communities (Chandra, 2004; Vaishnav, 2017; Yadav, 1999). None of that is wrong. What such accounts sometimes leave underexplored is the question of how coalitions get

assembled in the first place, how a heterogeneous set of jatis comes to think of itself as a bloc, how an incumbent's failures get reframed as sabotage by hidden enemies, how a leader who governed a single state for thirteen years becomes, in the space of one campaign, the embodiment of national aspiration. Those are the pertinent questions about the concept of persuasion. Rhetoric here means something broader than eloquence. Following the classical tradition and its modern reworkings, rhetoric is understood as the available means of persuasion in a given situation, encompassing the appeal of the speaker's character, the arousal of audience emotion, and the deployment of argument, but also, in Burke's (1969) crucial extension, the production of identification, the making of a "we" out of people who had no particular reason to feel joined. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) pushed further, arguing that argumentation in public life works through adherence to values rather than logical demonstration, and that the effective orator must begin from premises the audience already accepts. That last point matters enormously for India. The most successful Indian political rhetoric has rarely invented new values. It has taken existing moral vocabularies, dharma and nyaya, izzat and sammaan, seva and tyag, garib and sarkar, and reorganised them around a particular political demand. A second conceptual thread runs through the analysis. Laclau's (2005) account of populism treats political identity as something produced through discourse rather than reflected by it, with the "empty signifier" functioning as a term capacious enough to gather unrelated grievances under a single name. Whether or not one accepts the full theoretical apparatus, and there are good reasons for hesitation, the mechanism it describes is visible everywhere in Indian campaigning. Garibi Hatao in 1971 was not a policy document. Achhe Din in 2014 specified nothing. Their power lay precisely in their vagueness, in the way a landless labourer in Bihar and a shopkeeper in Surat could pour quite different hopes into the same two words and both feel spoken to. Moffitt (2016) usefully shifts the emphasis from content to style, treating populism as a performative repertoire involving bad manners, crisis dramatisation, and the display of ordinariness. Indian politics offers an unusually rich archive for testing that proposition. The article follows an interpretive and analytical study rather than an empirical one. It works with a purposive corpus of campaign slogans, speeches, party publicity, and secondary scholarly accounts, selected for their salience

in the historical record rather than sampled randomly. This carries obvious costs. Selecting memorable rhetoric and then explaining why it was memorable risks a circularity that the analysis tries to guard against by attending to failures alongside successes, though the guard is imperfect. The article also draws examples from across the ideological spectrum, from Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Dravidian parties, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Left, the Trinamool Congress, and the Aam Aadmi Party, on the view that rhetorical technique is a shared craft rather than the property of any one formation. The intention is analytical rather than evaluative. Understanding how persuasion works in a democracy is not the same as endorsing any particular instance of it, and readers looking for a verdict on which party deserves power will not find one here.

Mapping the Field

Three bodies of scholarship converge on the questions raised here, and they do not always subscribe to the views of one another. The first one in this regard is the use of rhetorical theory. Aristotle's (2007) division of proofs into ethos, pathos, and logos remains stubbornly useful, not because Indian politicians have read the Rhetoric but because the categories name something recurrent about how humans persuade one another in public. Modern rhetorical scholarship has complicated the scheme considerably. Burke (1969) relocated the centre of rhetoric from persuasion to identification, arguing that the orator succeeds by convincing the audience that his interests and theirs are joined. Bourdieu (1991) took a sharper line, insisting that the efficacy of political speech derives less from its internal properties than from the institutional authority of the speaker, so that the same sentence carries different force depending on who utters it and from what platform. Austin's (1962) analysis of performative utterance supplies another piece: some political statements do not describe the world so much as attempt to bring a state of affairs into being. When a leader declares a community to be the nation's authentic core, the statement is not really a claim to be fact-checked. Metaphor has also attracted particular attention in the polity. Lakoff (2004) argued that political conflict is substantially a struggle over frames, and that once an opponent's frame is accepted, arguing within it is already a form of losing. Charteris-Black (2011) developed a more careful account of how metaphor works in political speech, showing how it operates

simultaneously at the cognitive, affective, and ideological levels. Entman's (1993) formulation of framing, which involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in order to promote a particular problem definition and causal interpretation, has become the workhorse concept of the field, perhaps to the point of overuse. Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2006) brought a critical inflection, treating discourse as a site where power relations are reproduced and naturalised. Wodak's (2015) work on right-wing populist discourse in Europe, particularly her attention to the discursive construction of threat and the calculated ambivalence that allows deniability, has clear analytical purchase in the Indian setting even though it was developed elsewhere. The second body of work is political communication as a social-scientific field. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) described a "third age" characterised by media abundance, professionalisation, and the pressure of continuous news, and much of what they anticipated has arrived, though in forms they did not fully foresee. Strömbäck's (2008) four-phase model of mediatisation offers a way of tracking the degree to which political actors internalise media logic, adjusting not merely their presentation but their substantive choices to what will play. Chadwick's (2017) concept of the hybrid media system corrects the tendency to treat old and new media as successive stages, showing instead how television, newspapers, and digital platforms interact in continuous loops of amplification. Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) offered a more pessimistic diagnosis, arguing that the disruption of legacy gatekeeping has fragmented the public sphere in ways that reward strategic disinformation. Alongside these sit older and still valuable resources: Edelman (1964) on the symbolic uses of politics, Kertzer (1988) on political ritual, Iyengar (1991) on television framing, and Zaller (1992) on how citizens actually process elite messages, which remains a healthy corrective to the assumption that persuasion is a simple matter of transmission. The third body pertains to classical Indian literatures. The foundational move belongs to Rajagopal (2001), whose study of the televised Ramayan serial and its relationship to the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign demonstrated how a state broadcaster's religious programming reshaped the terms of public discourse and created what he called a split public, in which English-language and Hindi-language audiences were addressed in substantially different registers about the same events. Jeffrey (2000)

documented the Indian-language newspaper revolution of the late twentieth century, showing how the growth of Hindi and regional-language dailies expanded the political public well beyond the metropolitan English-reading elite. Neyazi (2018) extended this line, arguing persuasively that vernacular media did not simply carry political messages but actively shaped the terms of mobilisation, generating what he describes as a distinct kind of vernacular public sphere. Udupa (2015, 2019) has examined how news production and, later, online nationalist speech operate as everyday cultural practice, with her account of "fun" as a metapractice of extreme speech capturing something that more solemn analyses of online abuse tend to miss. On the specifically rhetorical side, Bate's (2009) ethnography of Tamil oratory stands somewhat apart and deserves wider attention than it has received outside South Asian studies. Bate showed how the aesthetics of Tamil political speech, its ornate literary register, its cadences drawn from devotional and Sangam traditions, functioned as a claim about the dignity of the language and therefore of its speakers. Political persuasion, in that account, is inseparable from aesthetic pleasure. Pandian (1992, 2007) analysed the Dravidian movement's manufacture of political charisma through cinema, tracing how M. G. Ramachandran's screen persona as protector of the poor was systematically converted into electoral appeal. Michelutti (2008) coined the useful phrase "vernacularisation of democracy" to describe how democratic ideas get translated into local cultural idioms, in her case among Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, becoming embedded in caste narratives about kinship and political entitlement. Scholarship in the last two decades has clustered heavily around the Bharatiya Janata Party's communication strategy, for understandable reasons. Chakravartty and Roy (2015) analysed the 2014 campaign as an instance of mediated populism, drawing attention to the coordination between commercial media incentives and campaign messaging. Jaffrelot (2015) provided a detailed account of the campaign's techniques, including the use of holographic projections to place a single candidate simultaneously at hundreds of venues, which is a rather literal instance of rhetorical ubiquity. Pal (2015) examined the political tweet as a genre. Sinha (2017) argued for reading social media dominance as competitive electoral populism rather than as a straightforward story of technological advantage, and Rao (2018) traced the emergence of what she termed

selfie nationalism. Kaur (2020) analysed the branding of the nation itself as a project, connecting political communication to capitalist promotional culture in ways that go beyond the usual media-effects framing. Chaturvedi (2016) offered a journalistic but well-sourced account of organised online partisan operations, and Chopra (2019) and Banaji and Bhat (2022) have examined the circulation of hostile content through closed messaging networks. The primary focus on the subject of Hindu nationalism, especially Hansen (1999) and Jaffrelot (1996, 2021), has attended closely to the movement's symbolic repertoire, its processions, its invocation of humiliation and revival, its capacity to convert religious idiom into political demand. And work on caste politics, particularly Jaffrelot (2003) on the rise of lower castes in north India and Ambedkar's (2014) own writings as a rhetorical archive in their own right, illuminates a counter-tradition in which persuasion serves claims to dignity rather than claims to national greatness.

What is missing from this otherwise rich landscape is the integration part. Rhetorical theory tends to be applied to Western democracies, and Indian political communication scholarship, though excellent, has more often been framed through media sociology or through the politics of Hindu nationalism than through a sustained analysis of persuasive technique as such. Sen's (2005) argument about India's long tradition of public reasoning and heterodox debate gestures towards a rhetorical history of the subcontinent, but it operates at the level of intellectual history rather than campaign practice. There is also, one might note, a certain analytical asymmetry in the recent literature: the communication strategies of the currently dominant party have been studied intensively, while the rhetoric of Congress, of the Left, and of many regional formations has received considerably less attention, which risks producing an account in which only one side is understood to be doing rhetoric at all. The present article tries, imperfectly, to correct for that.

The Repertoire: How Indian Politics Persuades

Consider the slogan first, because it is the most compressed and, in some ways, the most revealing unit of Indian political language. A good Indian slogan is short enough to be shouted, rhythmic enough to be chanted by people who cannot read it, and vague enough to survive contact with contradictory realities. Lal Bahadur Shastri's 'Jai Jawan Jai Kisan', coined during the food

and security crises of the mid-1960s, did an extraordinary amount of work in four words. It yoked the soldier to the farmer, dignified two constituencies that had little else in common, and defined national purpose as the sum of their labour. There is no argument in it, strictly speaking. There is a proposition about who matters. Indira Gandhi's 'Garibi Hatao' in 1971 is the more instructive case, though, because it shows how a slogan can restructure the terms of political competition itself. The opposition had campaigned on 'Indira Hatao', remove Indira, which made the election a referendum on her person. Her response reframed the contest as a choice between removing a leader and removing poverty, and in doing so made her opponents look self-interested by comparison. The rhetorical move was elegant. Whether it was honest is another matter entirely, and the subsequent decade suggests that the promise outran the delivery by a considerable distance. What is analytically interesting is that the slogan's vagueness was its strength. Poverty removal specified no mechanism, named no timeline, committed to no fiscal number, which meant it could not easily be falsified in the way that a concrete pledge can be. Laclau (2005) would call this an empty signifier doing its work; one might more plainly call it a promise structured so as to be unbreakable. The same pattern of style recurs. 'Congress ka haath, aam aadmi ke saath' rhymed the party symbol into an alliance with ordinary people. The BJP's 'Ab ki baar, Modi sarkar' in 2014 was almost aggressively contentless as a policy statement, functioning instead as an assertion of inevitability, and inevitability is itself persuasive. Bandwagon effects are real, and a slogan that presumes victory invites the listener to join the winning side rather than argue with it. 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', later extended with 'Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayas', performs inclusiveness at the level of form through its parallel construction while remaining silent on distributive questions. The Bahujan Samaj Party's older slogans worked differently and rather more confrontationally. 'Tilak, taraju aur talwar, inko maaro joote chaar' named the upper castes through their occupational emblems and prescribed humiliation, which was shocking by design; the party later softened its public idiom considerably as it sought upper-caste allies, a shift that itself tells us something about how rhetoric tracks coalition strategy rather than fixed conviction. Mamata Banerjee's 'Khela Hobe' in 2021 borrowed the language of a football match to convert a high-stakes state election

into a contest of local grit against outside money, and it spread as a chant, a song, and a meme more or less simultaneously. Slogans, can be interpreted and assessed as compression devices. They encode an entire argument, including its premises, in a form that requires no argumentation to transmit. That efficiency is precisely what makes them powerful and what makes them suspect.

The construction of an antagonist is the second recurrent technique, and it is close to universal in competitive politics rather than peculiar to any Indian formation. Schmittian friend-enemy logic is crude as political theory but descriptively accurate about campaigns. What varies is who gets cast as the antagonist and how explicitly. In Indian practice one can distinguish several antagonist types. There is the corrupt insider, deployed by Jayaprakash Narayan's movement in the mid-1970s, by V. P. Singh over Bofors in 1989, by the anti-corruption mobilisation of 2011 that produced the Aam Aadmi Party, and by the BJP against Congress in 2014. There is the dynasty, an antagonist that has proved remarkably durable in Indian rhetoric precisely because it allows an attack on privilege to be made without any redistributive commitment. There is the regional other, visible when Dravidian rhetoric constructed north Indian Brahminical dominance as the obstacle to Tamil self-respect, or when Shiv Sena built its early appeal around south Indian migrants in Bombay before shifting targets. There is the class antagonist of Left rhetoric in Kerala and West Bengal, the landlord and the monopolist. And there is the religious other, the most consequential and the most contested, whose rhetorical construction has been analysed at length by Hansen (1999), Jaffrelot (1996), and Brass (1997), and which operates through a grammar of historical grievance, demographic anxiety, and appeals to a wounded majority. The technical mechanics deserve attention independent of the moral evaluation. Antagonist rhetoric typically works through three moves. It generalises, converting particular actors into a category. It historicises, locating present grievance in a long narrative of injury so that current claims acquire the weight of accumulated debt. And it inverts victimhood, presenting the numerically or structurally dominant group as endangered, which allows aggression to be experienced as defence. That third move is the analytically subtle one, and it is not unique to India; comparative scholarship on majoritarian mobilisation finds it in many settings (Wodak, 2015). Legal regulation has attempted to constrain the most explicit forms.

Section 123(3) of the Representation of the People Act treats appeals to religion, race, caste, community, or language as a corrupt practice, and the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling in *Abhiram Singh v. C. D. Commachen* adopted a broad reading of that provision. In practice the constraint has been leaky. Politicians speak in coded registers, use surrogate speakers who can be disowned, and shift the most inflammatory material to channels that the Model Code of Conduct was never designed to police.

Ethos, the persuasive force of the speaker's character, may be the most heavily worked resource in Indian campaigning. Biography functions as argument. Consider how frequently Indian leaders foreground origin stories: the tea seller's son, the farmer's daughter, the schoolteacher, the man who slept on a footpath. Narendra Modi's chaiwala narrative in 2014 is the most discussed instance, and its effectiveness lay in how neatly it inverted the opposition's line of attack. When a Congress spokesperson referred dismissively to the claim, the BJP converted the insult into a nationwide programme of tea-stall meetings, which is a textbook example of what rhetoricians call turning the argument. Ostiguy (2017) would read this through the high-low axis, in which the politician who displays low sociocultural markers, accent, food, manner, dress, thereby claims authenticity against a cosmopolitan elite. The move is hardly new in India. Lalu Prasad Yadav built an entire political persona out of rustic idiom, deliberate grammatical roughness, and jokes at the expense of the polished, and Kanshi Ram's organisational rhetoric similarly valorised the untutored over the credentialed. Ethos also gets manufactured through sacrifice and asceticism. The Gandhian repertoire of khadi, fasting, and voluntary poverty established a template in which renunciation certifies sincerity, and later politicians have drawn on it with varying degrees of conviction. The unmarried leader who claims to have no family and therefore no dynastic interest, the leader who describes governing as *seva*, the leader who works punishingly long hours and says so, are all making the same underlying argument: my character guarantees my intentions, so scrutiny of my policies is less necessary than you think. It is worth noticing how this substitutes for *logos* rather than supplementing it. When ethos is strong enough, evidence becomes optional, which is a problem for democratic accountability even when the character claim happens to be true. Register and language selection constitute a fourth technique, and here India's

linguistic complexity makes the analysis unusually rich. The choice of language is never merely instrumental. Nehru's English oratory addressed a particular imagined public, cosmopolitan and constitutional, and his Hindi was serviceable rather than lyrical. That choice signalled something about the kind of nation he was describing, and it also limited whom he could reach. Vajpayee's Hindi was of a different order, drawing on poetic cadence and, famously, on strategic pauses that made audiences lean forward. Modi's Hindi is different again, shorter in its sentences, heavier in its use of rhetorical questions and direct address, and structured around call-and-response sequences that convert an audience into a participant. In the south, as Bate (2009) showed, the aesthetics of Tamil oratory carried an explicit political claim about linguistic dignity, so that the manner of speaking was itself the argument. Code-switching does further work. A leader who opens in English for the television cameras, shifts to Hindi for the crowd, and drops into Bhojpuri or Marathi or Kannada for a joke is performing a claim about belonging, and audiences read these shifts with considerable sophistication. Vernacularisation extends beyond language to metaphor. Agricultural imagery, kinship terms, references to specific foods and festivals and film songs, proverbs that a particular region will recognise and another will not, all function to mark the speaker as an insider. Michelutti (2008) documented how democratic vocabulary itself gets absorbed into caste narratives, so that political entitlement is expressed through stories about ancestry and martial tradition. The persuasive gain is substantial, though there is a cost that campaigns increasingly encounter: what is intimate in a local rally becomes evidence of parochialism when clipped and circulated nationally, and the same speech now has multiple audiences it cannot control.

A fifth technique is the rhetoric of numbers, which has grown markedly more prominent since the 1990s. Development discourse arrives with statistics attached: kilometres of highway, crores allocated, households electrified, toilets built, beneficiaries covered. The numerical mode has a curious rhetorical property. It appears to be logos, offering verifiable evidence, but functions largely as pathos and ethos, because almost no listener is in a position to audit the figures, and the sheer accumulation of them produces an impression of competence rather than an argument for it. Kaur (2020) reads this within a wider promotional culture in which

the nation is branded like a product, complete with logos, launch events, and aspirational taglines. The technique is bipartisan. Congress governments announced schemes with acronyms and beneficiary counts, and the party's 2019 NYAY proposal was constructed around a single memorable figure of seventy-two thousand rupees a year. Whether voters found it credible is a separate question, and the evidence suggests many did not, partly because the ethos supporting the promise had eroded. Related to this is what might be called scheme nomenclature as rhetoric. Naming a programme after a revered figure, or giving it an acronym that spells a virtue, embeds a persuasive claim into the machinery of administration itself. Deshpande, Tillin, and Kailash (2019) found that welfare delivery under such branding contributed to electoral support in 2019, though they were careful about the causal claim, and the mechanism appears to involve visibility and attribution rather than gratitude alone. A beneficiary who receives a cylinder in a box bearing a leader's photograph is being addressed rhetorically, not merely served administratively.

A sixth technique, closely related but analytically distinct, is naming. Indian political discourse is unusually productive of epithets, and the epithet is a compact rhetorical weapon because it does its work before any argument begins. To fix an opponent with a diminutive nickname is to pre-empt serious engagement with anything that opponent subsequently says. The sustained circulation of the label Pappu against Rahul Gandhi is the most studied recent instance, and its efficacy lay less in any single deployment than in sheer repetition across cartoons, television panels, and forwarded images until the association became reflexive. Counter-naming follows the same logic. 'Chowkidar chor hai' in 2019 was an attempt to turn a leader's own chosen self-description, watchman, into an accusation, and the response, in which supporters prefixed the word chowkidar to their own names. It was a rhetorically deft appropriation that converted an attack into a mass identity claim. Something similar happened with the phrase 'Maut ka saudagar' in 2007, an attack that appears, by most accounts, to have consolidated support for its target rather than damaging him. The lesson recurs often enough to be worth stating as a general proposition: an attack that can be reframed as an insult to the audience rather than to the leader tends to backfire, because it converts a political criticism into a question of respect. Humour and mockery deserve separate mention because

they occupy a peculiar position in the persuasive economy. Satire lowers the cost of political criticism, allowing things to be said that would sound shrill if said seriously, and India has a long tradition of it, from the cartoonists of the mid-twentieth century to contemporary video and meme cultures. Udupa (2019) makes the important observation that online abuse is frequently experienced by its producers as play rather than as aggression, which complicates any regulatory response framed around civility. The same ambiguity operates offline. A joke about a rival's dynastic incompetence, delivered from a rally stage to laughter, communicates contempt while retaining deniability, since anyone who objects can be told that they have failed to take a joke. Deniability is itself a rhetorical resource, and Wodak (2015) describes its systematic use in comparable settings. The calculated ambiguity of a statement that can be read as either a policy claim or a communal signal is not sloppiness; it is design.

The structure of the speech occasion also matters and has changed in ways that reward attention. Indian national politics has never developed a tradition of televised adversarial debate between candidates, unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, and the absence is consequential. Persuasion therefore happens overwhelmingly in formats the speaker controls: the rally, the roadshow, the recorded monologue, the selectively granted interview. Mann ki Baat, the radio address begun in 2014, is worth examining as a genre precisely because of what it excludes. It is intimate in register, largely apolitical in explicit content, addressed to listeners as citizens rather than as voters, and entirely free of interruption or rebuttal. Its rhetorical function is the accumulation of ethos through non-political contact, which is arguably more durable than ethos built through partisan argument, because it does not activate the listener's defences. Opposition leaders have attempted comparable formats with much less reach. Meanwhile the pressure of continuous news has produced an intermediate genre in which the television anchor becomes a rhetorical actor in his or her own right, staging confrontation as entertainment, and the panel discussion functions less as deliberation than as a nightly performance of antagonism whose form communicates more than its content.

Finally, there is embodied and spatial rhetoric, which the field's textual bias tends to underweight. Indian politics has an old and continuous tradition of the

political journey. Gandhi's Dandi march in 1930 turned a legal argument about a salt tax into a physical narrative that could be photographed and followed day by day. L. K. Advani's rath yatra in 1990, with its Toyota converted into a chariot, mobilised the visual grammar of religious procession for an electoral purpose and, whatever one concludes about its consequences, remains one of the most rhetorically consequential campaigns in independent India's history (Jaffrelot, 1996). Chandrashekhar's Bharat Yatra, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy's padayatra in Andhra Pradesh, and Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra in 2022 and 2023 all draw on the same repertoire, in which walking functions as an argument about sincerity that cannot be made in words. The rally itself is a rhetorical form: the scale of the crowd is evidence, the arrangement of the stage is hierarchy made visible, and the leader's late arrival by helicopter is not merely logistics. Dress, gesture, and object belong here too. The Gandhi cap, the Nehru jacket, the saffron robe, the blue of Ambedkarite politics, the broom of the Aam Aadmi Party, the bicycle, the elephant, the hand. Party symbols in India began as a practical solution for a low-literacy electorate and became dense carriers of meaning. Kertzer (1988) argued that ritual and symbol allow political solidarity to be built among people who disagree about specifics, because symbols permit multiple interpretations to coexist. That seems right, and it explains why parties fight so hard and so litigiously over the ownership of symbols after a split. The symbol is not a label attached to a coalition. It is part of what holds the coalition together.

Machines of Amplification

Rhetoric does not travel on its own. Whatever a politician says in a village square reaches a wider public only through some infrastructure of circulation, and the character of that infrastructure shapes what kinds of persuasion succeed. India has passed through at least four distinguishable media ecologies since independence, and each rewarded a different rhetorical style. The first, running roughly from 1947 to the late 1970s, was an ecology of scarcity. All India Radio was a state monopoly, newspapers were mostly urban and English or elite-vernacular, and the dominant mode of political contact was the physical meeting supplemented by party workers going door to door. In such a setting, oratory in the older sense mattered a great deal, and so did organisational depth, because a message spread through people rather

than through devices. Kothari's (1964) account of the Congress system describes a party that functioned as an arena of accommodation among factions, and the rhetoric of that period reflects it: broad, integrative, often abstract, addressed to a nation being persuaded that it existed. It is worth noting how much of Nehruvian rhetoric was pedagogical in tone. The leader explained. That posture assumes a particular relationship between speaker and audience, and it has more or less disappeared from Indian campaigning. The second ecology arrived with television and, crucially, with the expansion of the Indian-language press. Jeffrey (2000) documented how Hindi and regional dailies grew explosively from the late 1970s, driven by rising literacy, cheaper printing technology, and advertising revenue from consumer goods. The consequence was a much larger and much less metropolitan reading public. Political rhetoric responded by becoming more locally inflected and more attentive to caste and community as explicit categories of address. Doordarshan's monopoly meanwhile gave the state broadcaster enormous framing power, and Rajagopal's (2001) analysis of the Ramayan broadcasts of the late 1980s remains the key study of how entertainment programming can reorganise political imagination without any explicit political content. His concept of the split public, in which English and Hindi audiences receive substantially different accounts of the same events, describes a fracture that has not healed and arguably has deepened. The third ecology, from the early 1990s, was one of satellite television and competitive news. Liberalisation brought private channels, then twenty-four-hour news, then the ratings-driven imperative to fill airtime. Strömbäck's (2008) mediatisation framework is useful here because the change was not simply that politicians had more outlets but that they began adapting to media logic, designing events for coverage rather than seeking coverage of events. The sound bite shortened. The controversy became a resource rather than an accident. Chakravarty and Roy (2015) argued that the commercial incentives of Indian television and the messaging strategy of the 2014 campaign fitted together with unusual snugness, each supplying what the other needed, and their account is persuasive though it perhaps underplays the extent to which television also amplified opposition mobilisations, as it did during the anti-corruption agitation of 2011. The fourth ecology is the one now in place, and it is genuinely different in ways that go beyond speed.

Roughly speaking, three features matter. First, the shift from broadcast to network means messages travel through personal relationships, which changes their credibility structure. A forwarded message from an uncle carries a warrant that a television anchor does not. Second, encrypted messaging platforms are largely closed to observation, which means that rhetoric circulating there is difficult for journalists, researchers, or the Election Commission to see, let alone assess. Third, the economics of attention reward emotional intensity over accuracy, a point Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) develop for the disrupted public sphere generally.

Chaturvedi (2016) described organised digital operations designed to shape trending topics and to target critics. Sinha (2017) argued that social media advantage in India should be understood as one component of competitive populism rather than as a technological trump card, noting that opponents adapted quickly. Udupa (2019) analysed how online nationalist speech is often experienced by its participants as fun, a form of play, which helps explain both its stickiness and the difficulty of regulating it through appeals to civility. Banaji and Bhat (2022) examined how misinformation circulating on messaging platforms has been linked to real-world violence, and Chopra (2019) traced the assembly of a networked religious-nationalist public. Pal (2015) noticed early on that the political tweet functions less as argument than as presence, a way of being continuously in the audience's field of vision. There are two qualifications that are worth entering against the more excitable versions of the digital argument. The first is that India's older rhetorical forms have not been displaced. The rally is bigger than ever, not smaller. Door-to-door canvassing remains central, and parties invest heavily in booth-level organisation for reasons that have nothing to do with data analytics. What has happened is closer to what Chadwick (2017) describes as hybridity: a speech is delivered live to a crowd, clipped for television, cut into vertical video for reels, converted into a forwarded image with text overlaid, and possibly distorted at each stage. The same utterance therefore exists in several versions with different audiences and different meanings. That is a genuinely new condition, and campaign managers now write speeches with the clip in mind, which changes their internal structure. A speech built for clipping is episodic rather than cumulative, a sequence of detachable moments rather than a developing argument. The second qualification

concerns in relation to effects. It is tempting to move from documenting the circulation of persuasive content to assuming its efficacy, and the literature does not really support that leap. Zaller's (1992) model of opinion formation suggests that message reception depends on political awareness and that acceptance depends on predisposition, which implies that most political communication reinforces rather than converts. Empirical work in the Indian context is still thin on this question, partly because measuring exposure on encrypted platforms is close to impossible. Sircar's (2020) analysis of the 2019 election argues that *vishwas*, a relational trust in the leader, was doing substantial work, which is a claim about accumulated ethos rather than about any particular message. The honest position is that scholars know a great deal about how persuasive content is produced and circulated in India and considerably less about what it does to people who encounter it. That gap should temper the confidence of arguments in every direction, including this one.

From Persuasion to Power, and the Limits of Both

How does any of this become power? The conversion is neither automatic nor mysterious, and it appears to work through at least four mechanisms. The first is coalition assembly. India's first-past-the-post system rewards whoever can stack together a plurality, and in a socially fragmented electorate that requires bridging groups with no natural affinity. Rhetoric is the cheapest available bridging technology. Consider the Mandal-Kamandal confrontation around 1990: the implementation of reservations for Other Backward Classes generated one axis of mobilisation organised around social justice, while the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign generated another organised around religious identity, and the second was in significant part an attempt to construct a Hindu constituency that would cut across the caste divisions the first had sharpened (Jaffrelot, 1996, 2003). Neither project was purely rhetorical; both involved organisation, patronage, and in the second case violence. But the rhetorical work of supplying a shared vocabulary was indispensable. Chhibber and Verma (2018) argue that Indian party competition is structured by ideological dimensions concerning the state's role in social and economic redistribution, which suggests that the vocabularies parties use are not infinitely malleable and must connect to something voters already hold. The second mechanism is agenda control. Setting the terms

of debate is close to winning it, and a campaign that succeeds in making an election about one question has already excluded others. The 2019 general election is instructive. Through much of 2018 the opposition was pressing on agrarian distress, unemployment, and the aftermath of demonetisation, and it won three state elections on that terrain. After Pulwama and Balakot in February 2019, national security became the organising frame, and the earlier questions did not disappear so much as become harder to hear. Whether the reframing was decisive is contested among analysts, and the counterfactual is unavailable, but the shift in agenda was real and visible in campaign content. The third is the legitimisation of exercised power. Rhetoric does not only win office; it explains and justifies what is done with it. Demonetisation in November 2016 is perhaps the clearest recent case. An economically disruptive measure was presented through a moral frame involving sacrifice, the punishment of the dishonest, and a shared national ordeal, with the leader asking for fifty days of patience. The framing was resilient enough that political damage was limited even as the economic rationale shifted over time from black money to counterfeit currency to digitisation. Edelman (1964) argued long ago that political language often functions to reassure publics rather than to inform them, and the observation retains its bite. The fourth is the suppression of alternatives. When a governing narrative becomes sufficiently dominant, opposing arguments have to be made in its vocabulary, which weakens them. Lakoff (2004) made this point about frames, and it applies well to Indian opposition parties that have found themselves contesting nationalist claims by asserting a superior nationalism, or contesting religious appeals by demonstrating their own piety. Rahul Gandhi's temple visits in the Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh campaigns are a plain instance. The tactic may be electorally sensible in specific races. It also concedes the premise, and over several cycles that concession compounds. A fifth mechanism, less often noticed, is the management of time. Campaign rhetoric does not only make promises; it structures expectation, and the structuring determines how long a government has before the promise falls due. Aspirational slogans of the *Achhe Din* variety are typically followed, once in office, by a rhetoric of inherited damage, in which the scale of the predecessor's failure is invoked to extend the period of patience owed to the incumbent. This is not distinctive to any one party. Congress governments explained

shortfalls through the constraints of coalition partners and global conditions; state governments routinely explain them through central neglect. What the rhetoric accomplishes is a decoupling of accountability from the electoral cycle, so that the question put to voters shifts from what has been delivered to whether enough time has been granted. The counterpart technique is the announcement of a horizon, a target year attached to a national ambition, which places the accounting comfortably beyond the term of anyone making the promise. Whether audiences are genuinely persuaded by such devices or merely lack an alternative is difficult to establish, and the honest answer is probably that it varies a great deal by how much of the promise is visible on the ground.

It is worth pausing on a caveat that runs through all five mechanisms. Rhetoric does not operate alone, and treating it as an independent variable would reproduce exactly the error this article criticises in reverse. Persuasion in Indian elections is entangled with organisational capacity, since a message reaches voters through booth agents, local intermediaries, and party structures that vary enormously in density; with money, which buys airtime, hoardings, vehicles, and increasingly targeted digital placement; with incumbency and the visibility of state resources; and with the social composition of a constituency, which sets limits on which appeals are even hearable. Vaishnav's (2017) findings about the electoral value of candidate wealth and muscle sit uncomfortably alongside any purely discursive account, and rightly so. The reasonable position is interactive: rhetoric determines what an organisation can be mobilised to say and what money can be spent amplifying, while organisation and money determine whether the rhetoric arrives at all. Neither is reducible to the other. Yet the emphasis must not become deterministic, and the failures are as instructive as the successes. India Shining in 2004 remains the standard cautionary tale. The campaign was professionally produced, heavily funded, and confident, and it lost, apparently because its cheerful account of national prosperity did not correspond to what large numbers of rural and poor voters were experiencing. Rhetoric that contradicts lived material conditions does not merely fail to persuade; it can actively insult. The 2015 Bihar assembly election offers a second case, in which a national campaign with enormous resources was defeated by a caste coalition assembled locally, suggesting that

the rhetorical superiority of one side is often less important than the arithmetic assembled by the other. West Bengal in 2021 provides a third, where an intensive campaign led by outside leaders was countered by a regionalist appeal built around insider status and personal injury, with a candidate campaigning from a wheelchair as an image doing more work than any slogan.

There are several structural limitations as well in this regard. Rhetoric appears to be most effective when it names an existing feeling rather than manufacturing one, which is essentially the Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) point about starting from the audience's premises. It has a shelf life, because aspirational promises eventually require an accounting, and the rhetorical strategies available to an incumbent seeking a third term differ from those available to a challenger. It faces counter-rhetoric, since opponents also have language, and the Bharat Jodo Yatra's relative success in altering public perceptions of one leader, whatever its eventual electoral yield, indicates that embodied counter-rhetoric can still work. And it encounters the interpretive agency of voters, which discourse-centred accounts consistently underestimate. Banerjee's (2014) ethnographic work on why Indians vote found that voters attach considerable moral seriousness to the act of voting and are frequently sceptical about the claims made to them. Mehta (2003) made a related argument, that Indian democracy has been sustained by a popular investment in its procedures that coexists with widespread cynicism about its practitioners. People are not dupes. They discount, they compare with what they see around them, and they sometimes vote for a leader whose rhetoric they find hollow because the alternative seems worse. There is also a normative question that a purely analytical treatment risks bracketing away. If persuasion in a democracy increasingly relies on ethos and pathos while logos withers, the deliberative quality of public life suffers regardless of who benefits in a given cycle. Sen (2005) located an argumentative tradition in India stretching back to Buddhist councils and Mughal debates, and whatever one makes of the historiography, the normative point is worth preserving: a politics conducted entirely through identification and antagonism loses the capacity to correct itself. The concern applies across the spectrum. Opposition rhetoric that reduces governance failures to the villainy of one individual, and government rhetoric that reduces criticism to disloyalty, are versions of the same impoverishment.

Plural Idioms: Counter-Rhetoric and the Regions

An account of Indian political rhetoric that attends only to national campaigns and to whichever party currently dominates them will produce a distorted picture. India's states have generated persuasive traditions of their own, some of them older than the national forms and several of them more sophisticated in purely rhetorical terms. Three deserve extended treatment, and a fourth is worth noting briefly. The Dravidian tradition in Tamil Nadu is the richest case. Its rhetorical foundation was laid by E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, whose Self-Respect movement inverted the moral hierarchy of caste through relentless, deliberately offensive public argument, and by C. N. Annadurai, whose oratory fused literary Tamil with political demand in a way that made listening to a speech an aesthetic experience in its own right. Bate (2009) argued that the ornate register of Tamil political speech, sometimes dismissed by outsiders as verbose, was making a claim: that Tamil was capable of the highest expression, and therefore that its speakers deserved dignity and autonomy. The anti-Hindi agitations of 1937 and 1965 gave that claim a concrete political object. What followed was an unusual fusion of oratory and cinema. Pandian (1992) traced how M. G. Ramachandran's screen roles as the protector of the poor were converted, through dialogue written by party-linked screenwriters and through the physical circulation of film across small towns, into a durable political persona. The mechanism is worth stating precisely, because it is often described loosely as film stars entering politics. What actually happened was that a party used cinema as a rhetorical medium, embedding political vocabulary into popular entertainment, so that the persona was already politically legible before any election was contested. Karunanidhi, a screenwriter before he was a chief minister, is the clearest evidence that the two crafts were continuous. The Bahujan and Ambedkarite tradition constitutes a second counter-rhetoric, and it operates on quite different premises. Where Dravidian rhetoric worked through aesthetic elevation, the Ambedkarite idiom has tended towards argumentative confrontation and the refusal of consolation. Ambedkar's (2014) *Annihilation of Caste*, written as an undelivered address, is among the most formally interesting political texts produced in modern India precisely because it declines the standard rhetorical courtesies, telling its intended audience that reform within the existing framework is impossible. Kanshi

Ram's later organisational rhetoric translated that argumentative posture into electoral form, coining formulations about the proportion of the population and the proportion of power that functioned as arithmetic and as accusation simultaneously. Mayawati's speeches added a distinctive element, the public assertion of a Dalit woman's authority through spectacle, including the statues and memorial parks that critics read as vanity and supporters read as the occupation of public space that had always been denied. Jaffrelot (2003) analysed the broader shift in north Indian politics that this rhetoric accompanied. It is a tradition centrally concerned with *samman*, with dignity and recognition, and one that has struggled in recent cycles as competitors have absorbed parts of its vocabulary while offering material benefits alongside it. The Left's rhetorical tradition in Kerala and West Bengal represents a third idiom, built on class categories, organisational discipline, and a distinctive vocabulary of struggle. Its persuasive strength lay in the density of party institutions, the local committee, the union, the reading room, which meant that political language circulated continuously rather than seasonally. Its weakness, arguably, was a certain rigidity of register. Class vocabulary translated poorly once the agrarian questions on which it was built receded, and in West Bengal the Singur and Nandigram episodes exposed the awkwardness of a party of the peasantry defending industrial land acquisition. Trinamool Congress's counter-rhetoric of *maa, maati, maanush, mother, land, people*, worked partly because it reoccupied moral ground the Left had abandoned, and it did so in a register that was affective and rooted rather than analytical. The fourth idiom, more recent, is the civic-managerial rhetoric of the Aam Aadmi Party, which emerged from the anti-corruption mobilisation of 2011 and built its appeal around the figure of the ordinary citizen as auditor. Roy (2014) analysed the party's early formation and the class politics embedded in its language. Its distinctive rhetorical move was to present politics as a matter of honest administration rather than of ideology, with the broom as symbol and the demonstrated improvement of schools and clinics as argument. Whether that constitutes a durable rhetorical tradition or a transitional formation remains genuinely unclear, and the party's gradual adoption of more conventional nationalist and religious idiom suggests that a purely civic vocabulary may be difficult to sustain in Indian electoral competition.

Regional rhetoric more broadly deploys a recurring

structure of centre-periphery grievance: the state that pays more in taxes than it receives, the language that is being subordinated, the outsider party that does not understand local culture. Andhra Pradesh under N. T. Rama Rao mobilised Telugu *atma gauravam*, self-respect, against a national party perceived to have humiliated the state. Assamese, Marathi, Kannada, and Punjabi politics have each produced variants. These appeals are neither inherently progressive nor inherently reactionary, and their content depends heavily on who is cast as the outsider, which can shift from a distant capital to a linguistic minority within the state itself with uncomfortable ease. One further dimension cuts across all of these and receives less scholarly attention than it deserves: the gendered structure of Indian political rhetoric. Women leaders have often been addressed and have addressed audiences through kinship metaphors, as mother, sister, or daughter, and the maternal frame confers a particular kind of moral authority while simultaneously constraining the range of positions that can be occupied without penalty. Indira Gandhi's rhetorical persona drew on this ambivalently, combining maternal imagery with a decidedly unmaternal projection of toughness. Jayalalithaa was addressed as Amma, Mamata Banerjee as Didi, Mayawati as Behenji, and in each case the kinship term did real persuasive work while also reducing a political programme to a relationship. Meanwhile the rhetoric addressed to women voters has shifted noticeably as parties have recognised the growth in female turnout, moving from protection towards a language of direct transfer and household benefit. The persuasive vocabulary of Indian politics remains, on the whole, strikingly masculine in its metaphors of strength, chest measurements, bulldozers, and surgical operations, and the tension between that vocabulary and the growing electoral weight of women voters is one of the more interesting unresolved questions in contemporary Indian political communication.

Conclusion

The argument developed here suggests that rhetoric in electoral politics is not epiphenomenal. It performs identifiable structural work: it assembles coalitions across social divisions that have no other basis for unity, it sets the terms on which elections are contested, it legitimates the exercise of power after it is won, and it constrains the vocabulary available to opponents. The techniques through which it does this are reasonably

stable across parties and decades, comprising the compressed slogan, the constructed antagonist, the biographical guarantee of character, the vernacular register, the numerical performance of competence, and the embodied rhetoric of journey, symbol, and crowd. What changes is which actors deploy these techniques most skilfully and what content they carry, not the underlying grammar. There are certain implications which also needs to be considered over here. For scholarship, the persistent separation between rhetorical theory and Indian political communication research seems increasingly unhelpful, and the field would benefit from more systematic comparative work on persuasive technique across parties rather than the current concentration on a single dominant formation. There is also a striking empirical gap concerning effects. The production and circulation of political persuasion in India are now well documented, while its actual influence on individual voters, particularly through closed messaging networks, remains largely a matter of inference. Research designs capable of addressing that would be difficult, expensive, and valuable. The techniques that work best are not the ones that serve deliberation. Ethos substitutes for evidence, antagonism substitutes for argument, and the numerical mode simulates verification while defeating it. This is not a peculiarly Indian problem, and it would be misleading to present it as decline from some earlier golden age of reasoned campaigning that never quite existed. Nehru's pedagogical oratory was also a rhetoric, with its own exclusions. Still, the direction of travel in a hybrid media environment that rewards intensity does seem to compress the space in which a politician can say something complicated and survive. There is a countervailing observation worth ending on. Indian voters have repeatedly demonstrated that they are not simply persuaded objects. India Shining lost. Powerful national campaigns have been defeated by local arithmetic and by regional counter-rhetoric. Turnout has risen most among precisely those groups with the least reason to trust political promises, which Banerjee (2014) reads as evidence of a serious popular commitment to the act of voting itself. Rhetoric shapes power, then, but it does not simply manufacture consent, because the audience is doing its own interpretive work and comparing what it hears against what it can see from its doorstep. That gap, between the promise in the loudspeaker and the state of the road outside, is where Indian democracy has repeatedly done its correcting.

Whether it continues to do so is not a question that a study of rhetoric can answer, though it is the question that makes studying rhetoric worthwhile.

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