

Gaslighting in Indian Politics to affect Minority Communities

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Abstract: The concept of gaslighting applied in this paper is derived from the paper titled ‘Gaslighting Citizens’ by Eric Beerbohm and Ryan Davis¹. The paper aims to apply the model of political gaslighting adopted in the aforementioned paper and apply it to the Indian political model and explore how this phenomena plays a fundamental role in the increasing communal tensions in the country, thereby highlighting the universality of the concept as well as underscoring the cardinal defect in the exercise and reception of political expression in India. The basis of this paper is further concretized by the high levels of polarization and partisanship in both the nation- in the States it takes a political stance and in India it arises out of the differences between communities.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

On December 22, 2019 the Prime Minister in his famous Ramlila Maidan speech asserted that he was not a communalist, despite the founding ideologies of his party negating it. Further, his comment “They (Arsonists/rioters) can be identified by the clothes they are wearing²,” when referring to Muslim student protesters was transparently negated.

While India witnessed the highest voter turnout in the 2019 General Election (which the Ruling Party won by a majority of 303 seats), there was a fundamental issue: misinformed citizens and a political rhetoric that might cause irreversible fractures on the Indian social fabric. As minority communities start to feel increasingly threatened, the role of the political rhetoric in the country becomes increasingly imperative to this process. Thus, this leads us to question how Gaslighting affects the Indian political system, with emphasis on minority treatment and the supplementary wave of ‘Saffronisation’ that has hit the country. When we espouse the concept of Gaslighting as expounded by the authors of the aforementioned paper, the correlation becomes obvious: in the denial of the facts attached to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and the National Register of Citizens that have led to ensuing havoc in the country, the ‘integration’ of Kashmir, and the treatment of minorities in the ‘Hindi Heartland’ through policies such as the beef ban and ‘Love Jihad’. More worrisome is the rhetoric and the glorifying speeches enjoined to them, which has caused Indians to turn a blind eye to the gaps in these policies that are ‘fundamentally unconstitutional’ as dubbed by Shashi Tharoor, and their willingness to accept these for the ‘betterment of the nation.’

This paper will broadly be divided into the Ruling Party’s partisan rhetoric towards minority groups in India, the effects on the two major communities and identifying ways in which the electorate may find a balance between remaining hopeful, yet relying on evidence to form its belief systems.

I

The key component in Gaslighting, as identified by Beerbohm and Davis, “involves manipulating another person into questioning their perceptions” and that it brings about a sense of induced helplessness³ among citizens. The Gaslighting authority is acknowledged as hostile to any perceptions that are contrary to his or her beliefs and insist that any counter-evidence to his claims is baseless and lack concrete evidence. The authors argue that gaslighting is a “form of undermining another person’s membership in the moral community⁴,”

The Partisan members of the Ruling Party have frequently used this manipulative form of rhetoric to alienate the minority groups in India, and have produced such claims that have served to mobilize the masses

¹https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/beerbohm/files/eb_rd_gaslighting_citizens_apsa_2018_v1_1_0.pdf

²<https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/12/15/modi-those-indulging-in-arson-can-be-identified-by-their-clothes.html>

³Ibid.P.2-3

⁴Ibid. p 6

through eloquent reasoning and painfully false and contrary claims- a culture that has now become frequent in the Political fabrics across the world.

The trend of Gaslighting has been painfully obvious in the Party rhetoric in the last four months itself in light of the recent issue of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and the National Register of Citizens which have led to protests and riots in different pockets of the nation. The fiery debates on this issue have led to various speeches by the senior officials of the administration, all which are visibly contradictory in nature- however, the Prime Minister's conviction and his degradation of the youth protesters across the nation to "not to fall prey to the rumours being spread by the Urban Naxals and the Congress"⁵ befit the definition of gaslighting as expounded by Beerbohm and Davis surprisingly well. Through this statement the Prime Minister has seeks to undermine the epistemic ability of the protesters and not-so-subtly claims that the foundations of their perspective are baseless and asserts his point of view as the correct one- a typical method of gaslighting. Further, it leads to a loss in faith of citizens on each other and 'subverts their authority' in the process of politics, thereby implicitly asserting himself as the prime source of reliable and 'correct' (if I may say so) political evidence. The Prime Minister's tweets issuing warnings to "everyone to stay away from any sort of rumour mongering and falsehoods"⁶ further the case of the argument. His repeated appeals of caution against the 'lies' spread by the 'Urban Naxals' and the Opposition supplemented with India securing the 140th rank of 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index as opposed to 133 in 2016 serve to show the Ruling Party's hostility to claims that negate their stance, thereby allowing them to assert that opposing claims are baseless and unjustified.

Further, the Ruling Party has frequently contradicted its own claims and has lied in the face of concrete evidence- unfortunately, the method of gaslighting employed by them has successfully fulfilled the intended aims when such styles of rhetoric are adopted: they have created a doubt in the partisan members of the community regarding their own sensory input, who have, consequently come to rely on the claims made by the authority⁷. In his famous Ramlila Maidan speech delivered on December 22, 2019 the PM stated, "The citizenship law or the NRC has nothing to do with Indian Muslims"⁸. His claims have been contradicted by the following clause of the Bill (now Act) that provides that "any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan"⁹ will be granted citizenship, provided they arrives in India before 2015. Moreover, his claim "Since my government has come to power, since 2014 to now, I want to tell [1.3 billion] citizens, there has been no discussion on even the word NRC"¹⁰ has in an unexpected turn of event seen negated by his own Senior Party Official Amit Shah who had laid out the NRC and CAA plan in April 2019. The unfailing partisanship among the members of the nation that stands testimony to the erosion of belief that The aforementioned instances, when viewed in the light of the authority-subject model created by Beerbohm and Davis serve to prove fulfil their case which asserts the 'monopoly' of epistemic evidence and negating all other channels of sensory input¹¹.

On another instance, acknowledging that the Ruling Party and its legislators need to win the trust of Muslims on May 26, 2019, the Prime Minister blamed "vote bank politics" for "deceiving" the country's "minority" into being fearful about their situation and not addressing the educational and health needs of the community¹². This style of rhetoric is aimed at the Government modelling itself as the 'epistemic authority'¹³, consequently undermining the minority citizens' authority and casting a doubt on their epistemic capabilities. This is a glaring example of the 'Janus-Faced' style of arguments that Gaslighters tend to make, according to the definition adopted by Beerbohm and Davis- The PM has, through the aforementioned statement, sought to negate the authority and credibility of the non-ruling parties by asserting his own claims over theirs, thus disallowing his position of authority and credibility to others- another component recognized by the two aforementioned authors. In the same Ramlila Maidan speech that has been referred to, the Prime Minister also aroused the masses at this rally against the vocal Chief Minister of Bengal, who has challenged him on many

⁵http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/72924468.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁶https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/nrc-cao-narendra-modi-fact-check_in_5e0050aee4b0843d35fe1e65

⁷Ibid.

⁸https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/nrc-cao-narendra-modi-fact-check_in_5e0050aee4b0843d35fe1e65

⁹<http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>

¹⁰<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/india-modi-defending-citizenship-law-protests-continue-191223075630465.html>

¹¹Ibid. p. 9

¹²<https://thewire.in/politics/modi-nda-mps-address>

¹³Ibid. p. 5

points in the past, Mamta Banerjee accusing her of appeasing for vote banks. He even accused the Congress Government of implementing NRC and called out to the former PM Manmohan Singh, who was a member of the Opposition Party. These direct attacks and the claims of “rumours” only further his intent of affirming himself as the only credible source of input and information.

II

Thus, instances in just the last four months have made it evident that the Party in power have been gaslighting citizens and that the public mandate for governance by the Party rests on this form of rhetoric. The next section aims to analyse the reasons for the success of the party and the manner in which the Indian political climate has been affected.

The manner of gaslighting which has been employed by the Ruling Party has been successful for a variety of reasons, religion and communalism being a major factor. India, which has been a historically diverse nation, has been polarized since the time of the British Raj. In 2014, when the Ruling Party came into power, the majority communities got a boost as the Party has its origins in the ‘Rashtriya Sevak Sangh¹⁴’ and has implemented a series of communal policies that serve to show its religious affiliations. The reason for the success of the gaslighting roughly points to a combination of these two factors as the aftermath of the seeds of communalism sown during the time of the British are evinced today, as political parties are being created on communal rather than ideological lines. The political atmosphere in India is similar to the case in the US as both countries are infested with high levels of polarization¹⁵. This polarization in India has divided the nation into the critics of the Ruling party and the staunch supporters of the party. Moreover, this longstanding polarization of communities into ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ has led to the development of ‘hardened perspectives’ which have been rooted in the grassroots level of the Indian political community. Due to the deep-rootedness of these beliefs, the subjects (the word ‘victim’ is not used here as a conscious effort in a bid to acknowledge the subjective nature of the process of gaslighting, which will be further touched upon later) are “resistant to revising them”(Gaslighting Citizens, Beerbohm and Davis) even when faced with concrete evidence that differ from their strongly held perspective. The capitalization of the entrenched belief systems and their subsequent exploitation, have led to the culture of misleading the politically active members of the community¹⁶.

India further poses a favourable climate for gaslighting due to the widespread ignorance among the majority of the Electorate and the erosion of independent sources of News. That political knowledge is imperative for an informed and rational practice of Democracy in any nation has been reiterated by political experts on numerous occasions. However, 21.9 per cent of the Indian electorate lives below the Poverty Line¹⁷ and do not even have access to proper means of livelihood, while the Literacy rate flirts with the 70% threshold . This leads to uninformed voters who insist on voting along communal and religious lines, thus rendering the problem of mixing Politics and Religion almost impossible- mob lynching and beatings are common in small villages in the Northern part of the country due to the controversial ‘Beef Ban’ policy adopted by the Government.

Further, the discriminatory remarks made by the officials of the Ruling Party are also welcome by the masses as it fulfils their religious and communalist aspirations. The capitalization of Religion also serves as a mobilizer for the majority of the electorate as gaslighting has led to subjects abandoning their beliefs and adopting the belief system emphasised by the gaslighter¹⁸.

The epistemic reliance on “those who share a common partisan identity¹⁹” or mob mentality, in the layman’s words, has also contributed to the ease with which gaslighting is wielded by political authorities to influence the Indian Electorate. The Dadri case²⁰ serves as an example to highlight this deep- deep-seated trend in the Indian political culture.

¹⁴The RSS is a pro-Hindu political party which is the father party of the Bhartiya Janta Party. The aim of the Organization is to strengthen the Hindu Community.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 11

¹⁷(htt)

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰This case was a mob lynching incident which resulted in the death of the 52 year old Muslim man Mohammed Akhlaq who was beaten to death by the members of his village in Uttar Pradesh due to being suspected for having killed a calf and having eaten it. Cows are considered sacred by the Hindu community. The mob was incited by an announcement made by the microphones installed in the village temple. This incident took place on 28 September 2015.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of Gaslighting focussed on communalism has created a state of helplessness for those who challenge the falsehoods but realize the futility of doing so due to the stubborn stance adopted by the gaslighters and the subjects of the same²¹. The protests that are ensuing in India as of February 2020 the news reports of the deaths that have occurred as a result of these protests serve to prove the aforementioned claims.

The most compelling effect of the Gaslighting exercised by the Government in India is, as Beerbohm and Davis have stated is the fundamental shift in the concept of the “common good”. When India’s founding fathers were framing the Constitution and articulating the ideologies of the Indian nation, secularism was given utmost importance and all rights and Directive Principles were framed, keeping the protection of minorities in mind. Till the 1950’s India was struggling to accommodate refugees from neighbouring states. The word ‘secular’ was explicitly added to the Preamble of the Constitution in 1976. However, in view of the present politics, the ideals of Secularism and pluralism are being completely negated, and a majority of Indians willingly comply with the policies employed by the Pro- Hindu Party in power, despite a painfully evident violation of the Constitution- The Constitution states that Religion is not a criterion for citizenship eligibility, a clause that is clearly being violated by the December Amendment. Yet, this paradigm shift in the perception of the Indian people towards Secularism and the willingness to demarcate between *us* and *them* has ensued as a result of the effective reception of gaslighting that India’s history, demographics and current political scenario permit it to be.

III

It is imperative that the Indian Electorate employs the method proposed by Beerbohm and Davis, during the process of the acquisition political knowledge. The political authority, too, should be mindful of not discounting the other parties’ perceptions despite asserting their claims and beliefs- the choice of choosing which statements to believe should be left to the voters, and should not be for authorities to self-proclaim. If this practice is adopted, the electorate will effectively become more informed and aware as political evidence will be sought to supplement the claims made by the parties.

The fault, however, cannot be wholly attributed to the gaslighters. In order to extradite the culture of gaslighting, it is imperative that the voters are more reflective and are able to adopt a more objective point of view²². Voters should not blindly reject claims that contradict their previously held perceptions and should be able to spot the shortcomings of the viewpoint that they might favour. Already a growing trend in Indian democracy, this compulsion for objective points of view has led to a steady rise in the number of online news sources that are independent of party affiliations and biases- to the extent that the human mind allows us to be.

Further, the electorate, in order to remain the finally voice in deciding the government and not become mere means of vote-bank politics, must resist the temptation to hold ‘audacious beliefs’ that are entirely removed from the epistemic reality or to submit to only epistemic evidence as this leaves no scope for change or political movement²³, rendering the political community stagnant, thereby defeating the purpose of a democratic institution. The protests in India against the recent policies seem to have stemmed from roughly the aforementioned grounds- for the critics demonstrate an evidence- based formed belief and have demonstrated a rational ‘epistemic resilience’ to gaslighting employed by the Government.

Thus, the only path that the electorate can now follow is to be as objective as possible to the rhetoric used by the Ruling party and to employ basic rationale and common sense when hearing a claim- without entirely submitting to the possibility of the helplessness and hopelessness one might feel in the event of lack of any political evidence that might indicate positive results. The Electorate cannot submit to propoganda and should seek to obtain epistemic evidence form reliable and credible sources. Moreover, when faced with epistemic evidences that might challenge one’s faith in one’s own ‘audacious beliefs’, one should employ the use of ‘epistemic resilience’ with caution and rationale²⁴.

II. CONCLUSION:

The subjectivity of Gaslighting is not lost on me even as I write the paper- while *A* might consider *B* a victim of gaslighting; *B* might hold the same perception towards *A*. However, the pressing concern in a historically diverse nation like India arises when the members of the electorate blindly believe any claims made to them, without even attempting to supplement it with any concrete evidence. This becomes especially dangerous in a nation like India as communal violence and ensuing deaths have been a sad reality that has plagued the nation in the last seven decades- and more so today.

It thus, becomes imperative that the rhetoric of political gaslighting is put to an immediate stop; both in order to combat the rise of increasingly polarizing political authorities that endanger the Constitutional

²¹Ibid. p. 10.

²²Ibid, p 27.

²³Ibid. p 24-25.

²⁴Ibid.

foundations of India and to ensure that voters are not misled by communal and religious lines. While the process cannot be eradicated by the subject or the authority alone- and both will have to work in cooperation with each other- there has to be starting point- be it through the procurement of unbiased news sources, through resilience or even through beginning to smudge the boundaries between *us* and *them*. As I see it, gaslighting is not a symptom of inefficient and a failing democracy but the result.

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