FROM PATRIOTISM TO POPULISM: MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF NUCLEAR NATIONALISM IN INDIA

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Abstract

This study analyzes the way in which nuclear power has changed in the mainstream and digital media in India.Patriotism transformed into a populist nationalism through the discourse of a narrative of patriotism. It explores how the populist communication has been penetrated with nuclear achievements and security rhetoric,political leadership tactics, which defined the national pride perception and silence dissenting voices. The study is based on the theoretical premises of Social Constructivism that explores the ways in which the meanings of patriotism, strength and sovereignty are reproduced using discourse on the nuclear accomplishments and the defence policies and describes criticism of nuclear policy as anti-national or unpatriotic. Through examination of the media coverage of major events .The paper unveils the nuclear anniversaries, defence accomplishments and political speeches ,mechanisms by which nuclear nationalism makes populist legitimacy and by which it limits civic debate. Finally, the research adds to the understanding of the political impact of within the country. The nuclear discourse is the new trend in modern India where patriotism is getting mixed up with populist and majoritarian identity.

INTRODUCTION

The development of nuclear discourse in India is a process which demonstrates the successful change in national identity, media environment and political communication in India. In the past, the nuclear program of India was presented in terms of the scientific development, national independence and strategic need. The press reporting on the early tests, especially the 1974 "Smiling Buddha" and the series of 1998 Pokhran-II detonations, focused on the collective effort and scientific success of the tests as part of the framework of the reporting, leading to a foregrounding of scientists, engineers, and strategic institutions as its principal agents (Perkovich, 1999; Kapur, 2007). However, in the modern India, the nuclear capacity has taken a new symbolic connotation. It is not just being communicated as a signifier of sovereign defence anymore, but increasingly being entangled into a populist political discourse that Highlights charismatic leadership, national exceptionalism, and hyper-masculine imagery. This is quite a turn: nuclear power formerly projected as a field of strategic expertise, is now projected as an act of political will and national pride in the electoral and media rhetoric.

At the very center of this transformation is a wider change in the political communication climate in India, in which nationalism itself is now the primary currency of political legitimacy. Populist politics is highly dependent on emotional rhetoric and symbolic actions instead of institutional procedures and the specifics of policy creation (Moffitt, 2016). The invocation of nuclear capability as a symbol of group identity, the phenomenon of nuclear nationalism, has therefore provided the fertile soil of populism mobilization. Strategic assets become redefined under populist circumstances not as institutional success but as continuations of political leadership, which strengthens a myth about the strong leader acting alone to provide national security, status and international acknowledgment. Therefore, the question that the present paper will explore is not whether nuclear power will improve national security, which is an already determined fact in the grand strategic doctrine in India, but how nuclear capability is being re-constructed discursively through the media to be used to the domestic political agendas. The key to this change is deeper change of political communication situation in India whose most burning issue is nationalism today which is the currency of political legitimacy. Populism politics is based on emotional appeals and symbolic acts instead of policy information or the how and why of the institutions (Moffitt, 2016). The promotion of nuclear power as a symbol of group identity as a result of nuclear nationalism has therefore become a common area of populist mobilization. Populist conditions redefine strategic assets as not institutional accomplishments but as projectile of political leadership, underpinning a story of the strong leader, acting on his own, to provide national security, status, and international recognition. Based on this, the issue that this paper will explore is not whether nuclear energy boost national security, an issue that has been resolved in the grand strategic doctrine of India, but rather the question is how nuclear capability is being discursively constructed by the media to mobilize domestic political interests.

In order to critically examine this discursive change, this paper has used a qualitative approach based on social constructivism. According to social constructivism, security interests, national identity, and power perception are socially constructed instead of being natural or a priori (Wendt, 1995). When adapted to nuclear discourse, constructivism helps us to see the impact that ideas, meanings and stories have on the popular imagination of nuclear capability. In this model, media plays the major role of the place where identities including that of nuclear power, national pride or strategic vulnerability are created, recreated and even normalized. It is not a question of evaluating the technical truth of nuclear assertions thus but of evaluating the ways through which the media scripts define nuclear power as a political identity signifier.

This paper is analytical in four steps. First, it follows the historical change in the patriotic-scientific framing towards modern populist framing. Second, it looks at how the figure of the nuclear strongman is constructed which is a discursive figure that uses nuclear achievements to project them on to individual political leaders. Third, it examines the process through which a dissenting opinion concerning nuclear policy or a defence decision is securitized and delegitimized by using the label of anti-national. Lastly, it considers the wider social implications of this trend: the naturalization of violent speech, the shrinkage of the civic discourse, and the fact that citizens become more and more unable to differentiate between strategic communication and political propaganda.

Placing nuclear nationalism in context of the contemporary media-political environment of India, the paper will contend that nuclear capability has been turned into an instrument of domestic populism as opposed to being a part of state security. This change is not only in terms of the democratic discourse and media autonomy, it has long-term strategic culture effects on India, and symbolism can negatively influence the policy.

1.   The Historical Shift from Patriotism to Populism

The development of nuclear discourse in India could not be interpreted out of the context of the overall movement of the political, social, and

technological history of the country. During the early days of the nuclear policy, it was largely presented as a patriotic project that was also connected to the scientific pride. It was the first nuclear test in 1974, dubbed famously as the Smiling Buddha which was generally viewed as an assertion of scientific and technological independence by India and not a political show (Perkovich, 1999). Mainstream media (newspapers and magazines) covered at the time focused on the cooperative work of scientists, engineers, and organizations like the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). It focused on the national pride and success in the scientific community of the world, and not on the personal goals of political leaders.

This framing was an indication of a particular political and institutional spirit. The nuclear development in the Indian state of the 1970s existed in the context of strategic sovereignty, which favored self-reliance and defensive ability as a response to the insecurities in the region (Kapur, 2007). This ethos was reflected in media discourse which depicted nuclear tests as a scientific achievement and the demonstration of the ability of India to establish itself in the international arena. The state discourse was reserved and technical; media writing was very dependent on professional reasoning and did not feature sensational and hyperbolic depictions of nuclear power. These accounts made the scientist, and the institution, the leading character, drilling the further point that the nuclear capability was the fruit of national improvisation, and not the theatrics of the politician.

A transition occurred in the following nuclear tests of 1998. As they still emphasized scientific and institutional success, media discourses brought political framing in more. The position of political leadership in the coverage started taking more central roles, which indicated both the domestic population that was interested in the symbolic representation and the changed global environment after the Cold War. These tests were not without political rhetoric according to the analysts, which glorified the visionary leadership of the government, with patriotic pride mixed with

emerging populist undertones (Tellis, 2001). In this case, the seeds of a change were planted: nuclear capability was no longer the only symbol of state and institutional ability but also the place where the political legitimacy and the personal leadership could be staged.

This change was accelerated in the early 2000s and the emergence of digital media. As 24-hour news channels increased in number, and social media surfaced as a novel form of communication, the communicative policies related to nuclear tests and defence processes started focusing on immediacy and emotional appeal and visual fireworks rather than after-thought (Thussu, 2018). Political leaders came into the center of the coverage, and nuclear events were promoted as the demonstration of personal vision, decisiveness, and power of the ruling leadership, instead of the overall performance of the institutions. Such individualization of the nuclear discourse is a significant shift in view of the earlier framed scientific and patriotic anti-scientific discourse of the preceding decades. The same occurrences that used to be glorified due to technical skills are now being presented as legitimizing political power, a move which strengthens a discourse where national pride and political loyalty are now coupled.

This change can be interpreted through the social constructivist theory. According to constructivist, national strength and strategic capability are not entirely objective reality, and are founded on discourse, ritual, and symbolic representation (Wendt, 1995). Media narratives are one of the main places of social construction in the example of Indian nuclear nationalism. They establish the definition of what is a valid expression of power, who is the source of national strength and which are the actions worth a patriotic celebration. Media discourse can play a proactive role in redefining the collective understanding of strategic power, both through its act of foregrounding of individual political leadership and dramatizing nuclear capability, which feeds back on each other in a vicious cycle, where the symbolic and political aspects of nuclear capability dwarf its technical or institutional basis.

This is reflected in the tone, visuals and the wording used in the modern media, which covers the shift. We call our leaders heroes, the missiles have a personification, and the framing of the images tends to place political leaders either next to nuclear tests or military demonstrations, and a sense of individual power is created (Sridharan, 2016). These plots change the nuclear tests as institutional benchmarks into the very mediatized spectacles, which are not aimed at informing the audience but are created in order to inspire emotional devotion and strengthen devotion to political authorities. As opposed to previous portrayals of patriotic collective success, the current narratives cultivate the vision of national power that cannot be conducted in the absence of a figure of the leader, which can be attributed to the same phenomenon of populist political policies in other areas of Indian governance (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Moreover, this revolution does not just involve media itself. Modern nuclear discourse is helping to personalize national security by shifting the focus of the masses toward leaders, as opposed to institutions, and the personalization of national security may have its consequences on the adherence to democracy, the independence of the institution and the civil-military relations (Kapur and Ganguly, 2010). Patriots are urged to relate state strength and global respect to a handful of political leaders instead of larger institutions that control nuclear policy, entrenching political power and restricting the opportunity to critically examine the specifics of the policy.

Overall, technological and media evolution, along with the altering political environment, are the factors that led to the historical evolution of the Indian nuclear discourse towards populism in place of patriotism. However, where institutional success, scientific mastery and national pride were the dominant themes in the older narratives, political leadership, the emotional symbolism, and the spectacle of the media had become more eminent in the present discourse. This transformation with respect to social constructivism helps us to see that nuclear nationalism is not simply an expression of a strategic ability; it is a socially constructed phenomenon discursively reinforced by both political and media practices, which simultaneously shape and are shaped by.

2. Media Construction of the "Nuclear Strongman"

The image of the nuclear potential in modern India has grown to be more and more bound to the face of the leader. The issue of nuclear assets that used to be debated within the concept of strategic doctrine and institutional capability nowadays often becomes the subject of discussion as the means to exhibit the decisiveness, foresight, and charm of certain leaders. This process that can be referred to as the creation of the so-called nuclear strongman is not only a result of the changing media activity but also a purposeful political course directed at the consolidation of domestic legitimacy. Media discourses, both through broadcast television and print journalism and online, have been actively involved in this reframing, making people in power the main actors of national power instead of underlining the institutional and scientific mechanisms by which the nuclear power of India is provided (Thussu, 2018; Sridharan, 2016).

3.1 Media Alignment with Political Rhetoric

The most notable feature of this tendency is the alignment of mainstream media by the rhetoric of ruling parties in the situation of strategic and defence interest. Political speeches are often reflected in news channels, with their main theme being national pride, leadership, and strategic domination. As an example, the articles about the recent missile tests and nuclear drills in the media are full of statements that support the personal agency of the leader, including the statements like, under the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister, or, a show of the rising global stature of India under his rule (Jaffrelot, 2021). This tongue transcends the tone of neutral coverage, it actively engages in the process of crafting a political narrative where the leader is the strategic ability of the country. Such frames are repeated in a variety of formats, making their validity even more solid, as it quietly trains viewers to link national security and power to specific political leaders.

Selective sourcing also supports the association between the media and political leadership. Television panels, op-eds, and social commentaries predict commonly the voices that support government narratives and marginalize opposing voices. The military authorities, defence experts and independent analysts are usually placed in a way to support the image of the leader instead of giving him or her independent or critical evaluation (Kapur & Ganguly, 2010). This trend does not just concentrate the symbolic power of the leader, but also obscures the distinction between an independent journalism and a state-approved message, resulting in a network of media where the personalization of nuclear power becomes a matter-of-course.

3.2 Symbolism and Visual Construction

The role of visual representation in media construction of the nuclear strongman is extremely important. Publicity of political figures visiting missile bases, test firing, or inspecting strategic command posts give the impression of personal competence in the medical control of national defence. They usually involve cinematographic effects, dramatic camera shots, slow motion shots, and national flags being displayed right before the audience in order to create that emotional appeal and strengthen the authority of the leader (Thussu, 2018). The missiles and nuclear warheads, which were initially abstract technical items of the strategic policy, are turned into the symbolic extensions of the power of the leader. The symbolism is intentional: it lets the domestic and international audiences know that the leader is the guarantor of the national security, and is able to deploy the technological and military resources with accuracy and anticipation.

Narrative repetition and thematic framing is also used in constructing the nuclear strongman. Media sources tend to frame nuclear activities as a part of individual leadership with strategic choices being the outcomes of the vision of the leader and not a matter of institutional discussion. News teasers, headlines, and evening coverage often contrast national success with the face of the political person, establishing a causal relationship between the leadership and the success of the technology (Sridharan, 2016). The media builds the symbolic association between the leader and the strategic abilities of the country by associating nuclear competence with personal agency.

3.3 Personalization Over Institutional Achievement

The emphasis on leadership reduces the presence of institutional and scientific players. Although BARC, DRDO and Strategic Forces Command of Indian Navy continue to be in charge of both the technical and operational aspects of nuclear capability, the role played by such leadership is often driven to the periphery by media accounts, in preference of the dramatization of political leadership. This individualism is similar to populist approaches, in which the validity of the governance is based on charismatic power instead of institutional strength or bureaucratic effectiveness (Moffitt, 2016). The media also shifts nuclear achievements into performative practices through focusing on individual leadership that bolsters the cult of personality at the expense of traditional stress on collective expertise and technical merit.

The construction of nuclear capability as an individual success also influences the way the people are perceived about strategic threats. Media discourse on leadership creates a feeling of reliance of the leader to offer protection by connecting leadership to national security creating a combination of patriotism and political loyalty (Kapur, 2007). This carries significant consequences to democratic accountability since citizens are now motivated to assess national defence and strategic competence largely based on how the leader performs as opposed to evaluating the institutional transparency, deliberation of policies, and evaluation by experts.

.3.4 Media and the Politics of Spectacle

The media spectacle which takes the nuclear power absorbs more on personalization of nuclear power. Strategic events are marketed as mass mediated performances, the rhetoric, image and timed announcements are collaged together in such a manner that they have the most significant

effect on the people. The nuclear weapons tests, the missiles launching and the military forces drills are not only the technical achievements but also the opportunities of dramatizing the political power. It happens at an even more significant scale with the assistance of social media platforms, where processed photos, video content, and hashtags disseminate through the internet, developing the symbolic connection between leadership and strategic competence (Thussu, 2018). These spectacles are useful in the socialization of politics, and they are also used to shape the attitudes of people towards nuclear power and put limits on any form of analytical or critical thinking.

Moreover, the emotional economy in which national pride, excitement, and loyalty to the leadership are held in higher value than the detailed debate of the policy is also born out of the spectacle enhanced by the media. The news coverage tends to value the freedom to appeal to the feelings and slogans of patriotism more than the technicalities and the strategic implications, the emotional appeal to information-based analysis (Jaffrelot, 2021). It is in this light that the nuclear strongman becomes not only a strategic actor, but a archetypal kind of insurance of national identity, the strength of which is reinforced through the unstopping media mediation.

3.5 Implications for Strategic Culture

The nuclear strongman has far-reaching influence to strategic culture of India. The media talk of the nuclear capability in terms of individualization of nuclear power and linkage of the same with the image of leadership all combine to a securitized and emotionally tinged background within the policy debate that is overlaid with political iconic. The national power is instilled in the minds of the citizens concerning the national leaders power and this is why an open debate on nuclear doctrine, expenditure, or safety would be a problem (Kapur & Ganguly, 2010). Furthermore, the emphasis on individualization might influence the civil-military relationships since one can also perceive the strategic institutions as not being the actors in the

political sphere but as the tools to fulfill the political goals.

In total, it is the creation of nuclear strongman on the part of the media, which is the demonstration of how nuclear nationalism is not just the mere imitation of the technical competency or strategic policy, but a discursive process created by the political and media practices. The alignment of the news discourse to the rhetoric of leadership, the symbolic use of nuclear discourses and the order of precedence of individual agency over the institutional agency all serve to assist in the promotion of a populist perception of nuclear power. The cult of strong leader and undercutting independent critical discourse processes with potentially grave consequences of democratic accountability, civic engagement and the strategic culture of India, personalizing national security and attempting to add strategic capability as a kind of extension of political leadership, media discourses.

3.   Securitization and the Framing of Dissent

Indian media personalisation of nuclear capability is tightly bound up with securitization of discourse which is enacted by elite actors in politics and the media in which they create some issues as existential threats, necessitating extraordinary action and restricting critical discussion. Here, nuclear nationalism is not an act of just symbolic statement of state power; it is a rhetorical device that enables the establishment of external and internal enemies. Giving dissenting voices, critique of the policy or scientific caution a label of being anti-national or diminishing national security, policy critique or scientific care is reinforced by media discourses towards the suppression of rational debate and the establishment of populist political power (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, 1998). The product here is a very securitized media space where doubting the state or its strategic actions is synonymous with disloyalty or a lack of moral integrity.

4.1 Constructing the External "Other."

One of the basic process of securitization is the establishment of an external risk. Pakistan and

China have become commonplace in the Indian nuclear discourse as existential and immediate threats. Media discourses insist time and again to define these states as aggressive, unpredictable, or ethically questionable actors that force them to act with increased vigilance and strong nuclear preparedness (Kapur, 2007). Due to the focus on foreign menaces, the media coverage will not only be justified in the nuclear programs acceleration but also in the leadership personalization. The leader is presented as the guarantor against these enemies to offer security within the country as a decisive protector.

This framing has a twofold role to play. On the outside, it exacerbates this sense of strategic weakness, generating a sense of urgency among the nation of origin populations. It also directs nationalism at the political leadership, as opposed to the institutions, internally, establishing a psychological connection between patriotism and obedience to the ruling party (Sridharan, 2016). The extensive comparisons between nuclear protests and Pakistan and China actually create a story where political power and ability to act strategically cannot be separated, and any opposition is implicitly portrayed as a threat to national security.

4.2 Labelling Dissent as "Anti-National"

Among the most pronounced characteristics of securitized nuclear discourse, the termination of the dissenting voices comes out as anti-national. Those who are journalists, experts, or academics doubting the timing, cost, or safety of nuclear tests are usually ostracized, scoffed, or even presented as a danger to national integrity. The media discourse habitually confused criticism with moral or patriotic incompetence, implying that it is furthermore unfaithfulness to the nuclear policy to challenge it (Jaffrelot, 2021). Such labelling is observed especially when it comes to televised debates, opinion columns, and social media commentaries wherein those dissenting are not only assaulted on their positions but also on their perceived political sides.

These practices are typical features of the securitization theory of the extraordinary raising of the routine policy issues to the existential stakes

(Buzan et al., 1998). In presenting disagreement as a matter of national security, the media is able to further limit the amount of debate that can be acceptable, thus creating the atmosphere of fear where even moderate criticism can be labeled illegitimate. This has the side effect of creating a vicious cycle: journalists and commentators will have an incentive to conform to existing tales, and citizens will be trained to view dissent, and choose not to do so due to their perceived disloyalty, not because of rational debate.

4.3 Silencing Critics in the Media Landscape

The structural and performance features of Indian media also contribute to marginalization of the dissent. Television news discourses tend to be political theatre and not analytical discussions. Opponents of nuclear or defence policies are welcome to take part in debates, although the structure favors confrontational dialogue to partisan arguments, as opposed to evidence-based debate (Thussu, 2018). Such visual signals as interruptions with a fast pace, screaming commentary, or the use of repetitive catchphrases are used to give delegitimacy to opposing views and to give strength to the prevailing account of leadership-led national security.

The print and digital media are also culpable in this process. The selective amplification or social media censorship of opinion pieces and editorials that oppose government narratives is common, and the narratives serving the interests of the government tend to trend and dominate the news cycles (Sridharan, 2016). In this regard, silencing dissent is not just about silencing individual voices, or of censoring the whole discursive space, but of organizing this space in a way that promotes some interpretations of nuclear competence.

4.4 The Role of Rhetorical Devices and Symbolism

In order to create media securitization, certain rhetorical tools are usually used in order to increase the perceived stakes. Strategic necessity, existential threat, national imperative are some of these words that are repeated in the news on nuclear tests, on missile launch and on defence policy (Kapur & Ganguly, 2010). These words

serve to inform the audience that this is not a normal political discourse. This perception is supported by visual symbolism, such as maps of the neighbouring countries as aggressors, animated sequences of missile flight, or dramatized reports about the test launch. The verbal and visual stimuli create a certain urgency, sanction uncharacteristic political framing, and create a condition where opposition is not just an oppositional state of mind, but a potentially perilous one.

4.5 Implications for Democratic Deliberation

Securitization of the nuclear discourse has a considerable consequence on the democratic discourse and independence of media. The concept of a critical engagement as a moral or a patriotic failure presented in media discourse limits rational discourse, discourages institutional openness, and diminishes the influence of institutional expertise in forming the social perception (Moffitt, 2016). The citizens are motivated to see the nuclear strategy as a continuation of leadership charisma and decisiveness, and not the result of institutional deliberation or scientificity. This is a dynamic that will not allow informed civic participation and accountability in nuclear policymaking.

Furthermore, securitization strengthens the circle of feedback between populist leadership and the opinion of the population. The theatric display of outside dangers, coupled with the delegitimization of dissent morally, provide a politically advantageous climatic condition whereby leaders are applauded to make symbolic exhibits of strength, rather than prudent policy or efficacy in policy. Consequently, it leads to the rising popularity of emotional support of leadership over the rational assessment of costs, risks, or options in the public discourse (Thussu, 2018).

Nuclear discourse securitization in the Indian media is a process to consolidate political power, silences, and remodel the social consciousness. The media discourses on nuclear capability are turning nuclear capability into a political and moral tool instead of a neutral strategic resource by creating external adversaries, branding critics as anti-national, and dramatizing existential threats with rhetorical and visual techniques. This mechanism limits the room of independent investigation, silences the voice of science and the institution, and creates a situation in the society where the loyalty to the leader cannot be discussed outside the context of feeling of patriotism. This process of securitization needs to be comprehended when analysing greater processes of nuclear nationalism in India, and specifically its effects on democratic accountability, civic participation and the institutional integrity of strategic policymaking.

4.   Impact on Public Perception and Civic Space

The impact of media construction of nuclear nationalism and securitization of opposition has tremendous effects on the civic space and perception of the people in India. Media representations of nuclear capability as a gauge of leadership charisma and national power influence not only the citizens attitudes toward nuclear policy, but they also influence the citizens interaction with political and strategic matters. When mediated spectacle combines with emotional appeal and populist discourse, it creates a popular space where rational discourse is pushed to the background in favour of patriotic feelings, and critical analysis is defined as anti-patriotic or even as a danger (Jaffrelot, 2021). This section looks at the numerous aspects of this influence such as the normalization of aggression, the collapse of space to the informed discourse, and the objectification of the populist sentiment by means of social media.

5.1 Normalizing Aggression

The popularization of the aggressive rhetoric and the sense of constant strategic danger are one of the crucial outcomes of the modern nuclear discourse. Nuclear tests, missile launches, and military exercises are frequently portrayed as dramatic evidence of national will and, accompanied by images and words, are created to generate a sense of urgency, fear, and admiration of the decisiveness of people in power (Thussu, 2018). This coverage creates a mental condition

within which the risk of nuclear war is internalised as a constant reality.

The constant view of dramatized depictions of strategic capability may inoculate the populace to the seriousness of the effects of nuclear war. The images of war-rooms, the animation of the missiles path, and constant mentions of the enemy threats create an emotional appeal that values fear and admiration over critical thinking (Sridharan, 2016). Since the citizens are accustomed to the spectacle of violence, they may also be more accepting of the militarized policy decisions and less willing to critically analyze the strategic or ethical time-outs of nuclear operations. Such normalization of aggression has the effect of inculcating nuclear capability into the cultural imagination as something ordinary as well as something dramaticized as national identity, instead of something sophisticated, highly dangerous and something that needs to be carefully handled.

5.2 Shrinking Space for Rational Debate

Personalization and securitization of nuclear discourse narrows the realm of reasoned and evidence-based debate, as well. Since media discourse equates the loyalty of leadership with the act of patriotism, the questioning of the policy decisions, be it the cost, the strategic reason, or the environmental and safety issues of the nuclear development, is a social and political risk (Kapur and Ganguly, 2010). What follows is a public sphere where the citizens are not encouraged to critically reexamine the strategic issues and of course those independent experts or analysts are either marginalized or forced to take government-consistent frames so as to remain credible.

Media practices which emphasize sensationalism, more than a technical explanation, also assist in this dynamic. Debates on television, social media movements, and commentaries frequently simplify strategic decisions of controversial complexity down to emotional slogans or legend-like figures of speech (Moffitt, 2016). Thus, people prefer to treat nuclear competence as the manifestation of the power of leadership and not an outcome of the institutional competence and strategic calculations. The rational thought that

used to be a pillar of the democratic involvement in the national security matters is substituted by the emotional reactions and theatrical acts of patriotism.

5.3 The Echo Chamber Effect and Social Media Amplification

The emergence of social media has contributed to the increasing personalization and dramatization of nuclear discourse to the point where it is referred to as an echo chamber where populist ideas are constantly reinforced. Social media, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow spreading curated content faster, consisting of official messages, photos of missile tests, and symbolic representations of power of leadership. The algorithms have an interest in engagement, and therefore focus on sensationalist or emotionally evoking posts in preference to subtle analysis (Thussu, 2018).

Under such a setting, people will be subjected to the continuous repetition of the stories that associate nuclear capability with single-party political leadership. Hashtags of military success, memes about military strength, viral videos of political figures examining the strategic base make up a homogenous idea of national security and make it less exposed to the opposition to or the critical opinion (Sridharan, 2016). Not only does the effect of the echo chamber centralize the spirit of nationalism, but it also served to heighten the emotional and moral pressure to challenge policy, further reducing the civil space in which one can deliberate on policy independently.

5.4 Implications for Civic Engagement

Media spectacle, securitization, and amplification of social media have an important critical implication on civic engagement. First, it prompts the population to equate political loyalty to patriotic behaviour, which could restrict pluralism in national discourse (Jaffrelot, 2021). Second, it weakens the power and visibility of knowledge of experts when scientific and institutional contributions are shadowed by the dramatization of leadership. Third, it creates a political culture where an emotional appeal and representation

takes precedence over policy effectiveness or strategic accountableness.

The dynamics are especially important in the framework of a democratic system in India. Good democracy is based on an informed citizenry that can be able to critically participate in the complex areas of policy such as security of the country. By the media discourses that position nuclear competency as the main indicator of leadership charisma and moral command, citizens are disabled in terms of scrutinizing, questioning, or manipulating strategic policy (Kapur, 2007). It does not only create an ill-informed citizenry, but a narrow civic domain where dissent, rational discourse and institutional responsibility is systematically undermined.

The influence of media production of nuclear nationalism on the perception of people and civic space is complex and far reaching. The object of media discourse by legitimizing aggression, constraining the rational discussion, and exaggerating populist stories via social media transforms the cognitive and affective models by which citizens approach national security. The continual construction of nuclear capability as an indicator of leadership power, as opposed to institutional capability or strategic calculation, creates a popular space where loyalty, emotion and spectacle are elevated to higher regards than critical thought. These dynamics imply much on democratic responsibility, active civic participation and integrity of the strategic culture of India in the long-term.

5.   Conclusion

This paper has explored how the discourse about nuclear in India has developed over time, beyond a discourse of patriotic scientific success and one that is marked by populist spectacle, personalized leadership and securitized discourse. This analysis shows that the media is very important in establishing nuclear nationalism, in which strategic capability is not just an institutional or technical achievement but a personal political possession. This change has far reaching consequences in the eyes of people, civil space and democratic accountability.

The historical course starting with nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998 shows the early emphasis on the scientific skill, cooperation of the institution and the national sovereignty (Perkovich, 1999; Kapur, 2007). The modern coverage is, however, focused on political leadership, visual appearance, and emotionally charged accounts (Sridharan, 2016; Thussu, 2018). The alignment of the media with state propaganda, symbolic visualization of nuclear resources, the individualization of the success of strategic operations and operation are all contributing factors to the creation of the nuclear strongman, a discursive figure whose power is not independent of the national strategic personality. This individualism does not only centralize politics but also excludes institutions, scientists, the independent analysts, making the public less exposed to critical or technical ways of thinking (Kapur & Ganguly, 2010).

Securitization of nuclear discourse is another factor that supports this dynamic. Media discourses relegate the possibility of rational discourse and normalize the feeling of engagement led by emotions and loyalty by processing external forces like Pakistan and China as existential threats and dissenting voices as anti-national (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, 1998; Jaffrelot, 2021). The citizens are socialised into the thinking of strategic capability mostly on the basis of leadership performance, whereas critical participation, policy scrutiny, and institutional transparency are undermined. These effects are exacerbated by social media and online platforms, which form the echo chambers which reinvent the populist arguments and restrict the exposure to opposing points of view.

These processes have some serious implications on the Indian democracy and strategic culture. Normalization of aggression, marginalization of rational discourse and confusion of patriotism and political loyalty limit the civic space and undermine the functions of independent institutions. Spectacle, emotion, and symbolic leadership mediates the knowledge of nuclear policy among citizens as opposed to evidence-based analysis. Such atmosphere lowers the level of accountability, restricts the level of public control, and threatens the politicization of

strategic policy-making in the long perspective (Moffitt, 2016; Thussu, 2018).

Indian nuclear nationalism is no longer a form of scientifically and institutionally driven patriotic pride but an instrument of populism cinematized in the name of national security and believable language. Although nuclear competency is a vital constituent of national security, its symbolic adoption by the media and political elites makes democratic participation difficult, restricts civic discourse, and makes the power of the state an individual one. The future scholarship and policy should attempt to untangle the true spirit of patriotism and the political populism and create the space where the discussion of the strategic issues can be critical, informed, and institutionally based. The case in India reflects the wider issue of democracy in deliberation and media independence under conditions of intersection of national security, symbolism as well as populist politics.

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