

ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTY MOUTHPIECES IN DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:***A study of Congress Sandesh and Kamal Sandesh*****O PAPEL DOS PORTA-VOZES DOS PARTIDOS POLÍTICOS NA COMUNICAÇÃO****POLÍTICA DIGITAL: Um estudo do *Congress Sandesh* e *Kamal Sandesh*****Rutvi Dattani³****Nidhi Shendurnikar⁴****Abstract**

A party mouthpiece is a newspaper, broadcast channel, media outlet, or any medium of communication that expresses the opinion of the government, political party or any political organization. The study focused on digital content analysis of mouthpieces of two ideologically opposing mainstream Indian political parties - Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with respect to key political developments in 2019. The events selected for study were – Lok Sabha Election Results 2019, Amendment of Article 370, Ram Mandir Verdict by the Supreme Court of India and the passage of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The e-version of the mouthpieces *Congress Sandesh* and *Kamal Sandesh* were chosen for the study with an aim to determine the nature of digital political narratives constructed around these political events. *Congress Sandesh* (directing to National Herald) was actively seen providing an oppositional narrative to BJP's "majoritarian nationalism" using rhetorical communication as it accused the BJP of being divisive. *Congress* is projected as a party that represents interests of religious minorities; safeguards Indian democracy and its secular values. Contrary to the INC's political narratives in the digital space, the BJP through *Kamal Sandesh* identified itself as the only corruption free government since independence, a party that opposes sectarian vote bank politics, dynasty politics, advocates religious rights of the majority and promotes meritocracy. The study demonstrates how political actors use digital spaces other than social media platforms to further their political agendas and establish a community of digital audiences who consume such content to reinforce their political beliefs and identities.

Keywords: Digital narratives; Mouthpiece; Political party; Political communication.

Resumo

Um porta-voz partidário é um jornal, canal, veículo ou qualquer meio de comunicação que expresse a opinião do governo, partido político ou qualquer organização política. O estudo focou na análise de conteúdo digital de porta-vozes de dois partidos políticos indianos de ideologias

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opostas – o Congresso Nacional Indiano (INC) e o Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), em relação aos principais avanços políticos de 2019. Os eventos selecionados para o estudo foram o resultado da eleição de Lok Sabha, em 2019, a emenda do artigo 370, o veredicto do Ram Mandir pela Suprema Corte da Índia e a aprovação da Lei de Emenda à Cidadania (CAA). As versões eletrônicas dos porta-vozes *Congress Sandesh* e *Kamal Sandesh* foram escolhidas para o estudo, com o objetivo de determinar a natureza das narrativas políticas digitais construídas em torno desses eventos políticos. *Congress Sandesh* (direcionando ao National Herald) foi visto ativamente fornecendo uma narrativa opositora ao “nacionalismo majoritário” do BJP, usando comunicação retórica ao acusar o BJP de ser desagregador. O Congresso é projetado como um partido que representa os interesses das minorias religiosas; salvaguarda a democracia indiana e os valores seculares. Em contraste com as narrativas políticas do INC no espaço digital, o BJP, por meio do *Kamal Sandesh*, identificou-se como o único governo livre de corrupção desde a independência, um partido que se opõe à política de voto sectário, política de dinastia, advoga pelos direitos religiosos da maioria e promove a meritocracia. O estudo demonstra como os atores políticos utilizam espaços digitais além das plataformas de mídia social para promover suas agendas políticas e estabelecer uma comunidade de públicos digitais que consomem esse conteúdo para reforçar suas crenças e identidades políticas.

Palavras-chave: Narrativas digitais; Porta-voz; Política Partidária; Comunicação Política.

Introduction: Digital political communication

The relationship between politics and technology has been of immense interest to scholars and practitioners of new media, political communication as well as to actors in the public sphere. Ushering of digital spaces and growth of digital technology has impacted all walks of life culminating into what is called a “global network society” (Siapera, 2012). Political life is not untouched by digital influence as new media offer “infinite repertoires of possibility” to the masses (Bourdieu, 1993). Not only do new media open multiple avenues for politicians to communicate with citizens; they also propel the democratization of political communication activities otherwise operating in a traditional, unidirectional, hierarchical, linear format. Instantaneous, interactive, and convergent communication brought by the internet has led to the emergence of professionalism in political communication (Negrine; Lilleker, 2002). Thus, it is imperative for political actors to adapt to newer and innovative techniques of messaging, campaigning and strategizing to achieve political power. While traditional forms of political outreach such as speeches, rallies, meetings, leaflets, pamphlets etc still hold strong ground; digital spaces satiate public quest for democratic political participation and free flow of information out of politics to the public (Lilleker, 2006). Traditional/legacy media are limited in their potential to facilitate communication which



grooms an “active citizen” – a term employed by Nic Newman, digital strategist and research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford to describe a trend in which news consumers are increasingly becoming news creators (Newman, 2015).

Use of digital media in electoral campaigns spearheaded by Barack Obama (2008, 2012), Narendra Modi (2012, 2014, 2019), Donald Trump (2016), Jeremy Corbyn (2017), Leo Varadkar (2017) demonstrate how new media technology is well-integrated into the formal political process (How Social Media Can Enhance Political Campaigns, 2018). Digital political communication defined by Dhawraj (2019) as “all political messages communicated over digital platforms by political parties and other relevant actors such as politicians, ordinary citizens and the media to exchange political ideas” is advantageous to the political sphere in many ways. It facilitates competition, challenges existing political hierarchy and elite monopoly over communications media, leads to decentralized politics, allows politicians to devise specific messages for target audiences, and enhances deliberative scope of the public sphere (Abramson, Arterton & Orren, 1988; Rheingold, 1993; Grossman, 1995; Browning, 1996; Rash, 1997; Tsagarousianou, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001). The ability to use media and information leading to globalized politics, delinked from territories and national politics is referred to as “informational politics” (Castells, 1997). Specifically for political parties, focus of the present chapter, digital political communication helps them achieve three goals – 1) administration – provide and manage information about themselves and their goals, manifestos and political positions 2) campaigning – an online presence helps political parties to recruit new members, attract potential voters, set the election agenda 3) internal organization – discuss, deliberate on pressing political issues and raise funds for electoral campaigns (Gibson & Ward, 2003). An instrumental function of “Politics 2.0”⁵ is to help political parties accumulate knowledge about demographics and preferences of individual voters, which then helps them to craft clever and targeted political campaigns promising to reap electoral benefits.

⁵ Politics 2.0: The use of internet and advanced communications technology as a powerful political tool, meant to address collective social and political problems, and foster political change.



Party Mouthpiece - Historic references, present positioning

A party mouthpiece concerns the creation of ideas and opinions between citizens and political parties. It serves as an important political communication tool that facilitates the relationship between citizens and politics through modes of persuasion. A mouthpiece plays a crucial role in shaping the political discourse in the country by helping the party establish an image among the citizens and transmit party values, ideas and ideology (Zhao, 1995). Huang, Davies and Knight (2002) in a comparative analysis of party media vis-à-vis commercial press in China refer to party mouthpieces as important cog in the wheel of an authoritarian political and media system. They observe that the function of a mouthpiece is to ensure monopoly of political power and ward off any challenge to authoritarian political communication. Mouthpiece is a traditional party organ with little freedom and can be rolled back by the party anytime. Hence, the study of party mouthpieces, especially in their 'digital avatars' is important to understand the nature of political information disseminated by political actors as well as the media's propaganda functions.

Historical references to party mouthpieces point out to 'Pravda' (*Russian: "Truth"*) – the official newspaper of the Communist party of Soviet Union, which reflected the values of the revolutionary proletariat. Pravda published its first issue on May 5, 1912, in Saint Petersburg (Elwood, 1972). Founded as a workers' daily, the paper eventually became an important tool of the Bolshevik movementⁱ, and Vladimir Lenin exercised broad editorial control. Being repeatedly suppressed by the Tsar's police, it reappeared each time with a different name, until it finally emerged in Moscow in 1918 as the official party paper (1918 to 1990). It used officially sponsored/approved materials to indoctrinate and inform its readers on communist theory and programs. During the Soviet era, Pravda was distributed nationwide, with articles extolling the virtues of the worker and railing against capitalism. The paper is now run by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the country's modern Communist party and comes out with much lesser circulation (Roudakova, 2017). Another prominent mouthpiece in present times is 'People's Daily' of the Communist Party of China. 'Baidu' - China's digital search engine, in collaboration with People's Daily provides an array of new technologies such as AI-powered algorithms to help the newspaper build an online content ecosystem. The two work together on developing algorithms that can push the



“right news content” to the newspaper’s core readers and filter content on the web as desired by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Phillips, 2016).

Indian political party mouthpieces

Since the present study is located in the Indian context, it is pertinent to discuss recent developments related to party mouthpieces in the country. In the case of Tamil Nadu, major political opponents are seen fighting their personal and political battles over media networks such as Jaya TV, Sun TV and Kalaignar TV. There have been recurring instances of Sun TV owned by Sumangali Cable Network to have wriggled out the coverage of uncomfortable political fallouts in Tamil Nadu and opposition’s criticism towards DMK Chief M. Karunanidhi (Srinivasan and Vijaykumar, 2011). The more recent and lesser-known case is of Fastway Cable, backed by Punjab deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal and the Shiromani Akali Dal trying to monopolize the television scene in Punjab (Pubby, 2017). In 2019, party owned media outlets were used by political candidates to declare criminal records. If it were not for party mouthpieces, contestants would have found it difficult to keep to the Rs 70 lakh expenditure cap guideline issued by the Election Commission. Party supportive media such as *Veekshanam (INC)*, *Chandrika (Indian Union Muslim League)*, *Janmabhoomi (BJP)* and *Deshabhimani (CPI (M))* were used to issue advertisements (Ameerudheen, 2019).

In a detailed analysis of party owned media in different states of India; Ghatak & Thakurta (2012) discuss the history, origins and expanse of party owned publications whose political leanings are publically evident. Several party run media examples such as - *Lok Lehar (CPI(M))*, *Saamna (Shiv Sena)*, *Organiser (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)*, *Sakshi TV (YSR Congress Party)*, *Sun TV (DMK)*, *Sambad Pratidin (TMC)*, *PTC News (Shiromani Akali Dal)* are cited in the article. Party mouthpieces are dynamic in nature and while some have sustained the tide of time and onslaught of digital technology, others have succumbed to market demands and a global digital polity. The case of the Bengali mouthpiece of Communist Party of India (CPI), *Kalantar* which shut down in October 2018 due to paucity of funds is an example of how party mouthpieces will either need to adapt to the transformative media landscape or face extinction. ‘Kalantar’ sold more than 50,000 copies in the 1990s (Singh, 2018).



Past research on party mouthpieces

Substantial literature on party mouthpieces is located in an authoritarian political context. Much of the research on mouthpieces emanates from China's use of party media to propagate communism and communist values. Concepts such as bias, trust, propaganda, elite politics are commonly referred to in past studies. A few noteworthy studies are enumerated in this section.

Beyond Party Propaganda: A Case Study of China's Rising Commercialized Press (2002) studies the phenomenon of increased media commercialization in China since the past two decades. The authors undertake a comparative content analysis of two Chinese newspapers - one of which is a party mouthpiece and the other a commercial entity. Results demonstrate the differences in content and journalistic techniques employed by both newspapers. While party media focus on serving the party state's⁶ propaganda goals, commercial press delves into the realm of soft and entertainment news. However, even party media are attempting reorientation by expanding content beyond propaganda and embracing professional journalistic tools. Their core function nevertheless remains to act as a support to regime policies (Huan, Davies, & Knight, 2002). Anne-Marie Brady's book titled *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* places on record CCP's use of propaganda to create legitimacy for its rule. Brady calls it "popular authoritarianism". She describes the functioning of Chinese media where party cadres regularly instruct editors about media content to be highlighted or avoided; strict regulations control political expressions for politically sensitive matters and senior party cadres monitor all media content at central and provincial levels to ensure compliance. Media outlets that transgress rules face punishment. Brady observes that even as the Internet has increased opportunities for Chinese users to access alternative sources of information, to express controversial political views and to expose the abuse of power by local officials, the CCP is also venturing into the digital space to enhance footprints of its propaganda (Brady, 2007).

⁶ In November 1917, Russia's Bolshevik movement started in which forces led by Vladimir Lenin overthrew the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky, the Russian monarchy and established the Soviet Union in 1923. For more on the Bolshevik movement see: [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/gi-roundtable-series/pamphlets/em-46-our-russian-ally-\(1945\)/what-was-the-bolshevik-revolution](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/gi-roundtable-series/pamphlets/em-46-our-russian-ally-(1945)/what-was-the-bolshevik-revolution).



Other significant studies such as *Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC* (Brady, 2002), *Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the People's Daily* (Wu, 1994) and *Bias and Trust in Authoritarian Media* (Truex, 2016) discuss the use of propaganda by party mouthpieces to publicize government activities and educate citizens into the ideological fold. Techniques include news manipulation in addition to adoption of new technologies and approaches by embracing advertising, internet, TV and other mediums. The academic discourse on mouthpieces helps understand how media are employed for organization, mobilization and control, how elite political discourse is reinforced and strengthened. Finally, citizen perceptions about party mouthpieces are also interesting to explore. As elucidated by Rory Truex (2016), citizens who read an official mouthpiece acknowledge its pro-regime bias yet put trust in these outlets – lending them credibility and brand recognition.

The sole study reviewed from an Indian context was *The Rebirth of Shiv Sena: The Symbiosis of Discursive and Organizational Power* (Katzenstein; Mehta; Thakkar, 1997). The paper traces the history of Shiv Sena, an Indian political party from the state of Maharashtra and its adherence to and use of religious nationalism for ascendance to political power. The paper doesn't dig into details of Shiv Sena's mouthpiece *Saamna*; however, it briefly mentions use of media tactics by the party to spread its message and promote a political narrative that suited the party. In 1965, the party's Marathi weekly *Marmik* took up issues such as the dominance of outsiders in the state, dangers of communism, threats posed by Pakistani infiltrators and severe economic injustice suffered by native Maharashtrians. This catapulted the mouthpiece to doubled circulation and wide readership. Additionally, the authors refer to the party's media clout as reflected in the popularity of its contemporary mouthpiece (*Saamna*) first published in 1989 in Marathi and then expanded into a Hindi edition in 1993. *Saamna* is said to have an enormous circulation of between 150,000 to 300,000 copies (Rattanani, 1995). The mouthpiece is said to be crucial to the success in broadcasting the party's doctrine.



Research gap

Some evident research gaps found through a critical review of literature led the researchers to undertake the present study. Majority of the academic discourse on party mouthpieces is strongly rooted in an authoritarian political context, leading us to assume that mouthpieces serve important functions merely for authoritarian leaders and systems. So far, we have not come across a systematic study on political party mouthpieces in the Indian context and this is a crucial research gap we intend to address. Mouthpieces function differently in democratic frameworks and we intend to examine their content, relevance and role in the larger democratic political discourse. Also, previous studies focus on traditional mouthpiece content and do not address how mouthpieces have adapted to the digital landscape. E-versions of mouthpieces are being used by political parties to promote their political message and win over their constituents. In this context, the present chapter contributes to analysis of mouthpiece content, and examines their role in promoting, sustaining and reinforcing strategic political narratives in a politically shrill, polarized media environment that is often used by political actors to fight the ‘battle of narratives’.

Present study – Concept, rationale and method

Statement of research problem

The study focused on digital content analysis of mouthpieces of two mainstream Indian political parties – Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) with respect to key political events in 2019 i.e. Lok Sabha Election Results, Amendments to Article 370, Ram Mandir verdict by the Supreme Court of India, Passage of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The mouthpieces chosen for the study were *Congress Sandesh* and *Kamal Sandesh*. The research focused on aspects of design, format, content found on mouthpiece websites to understand the kind of political narratives being advanced. The researchers also compared treatment given to similar issues of political and national concern by e-versions of both mouthpieces.



Rationale and significance

The role of a party mouthpiece is essential in internal political communication for ideological and political consolidation. As discussed in the literature review section, so far, there has been no research study conducted on the role of mouthpieces of mainstream national parties in shaping political discourse in the country. The functioning of party mouthpieces has hardly been highlighted in mainstream media commentary on national politics. Thus, more knowledge needs to be developed and articulated on this front. 2019 is considered a year of dynamic political developments with greater involvement, mobilization and opinion-expression of masses in political events. Hence it becomes important to study key political events from May to November 2019 and examine the nature of digital political narratives in select party mouthpieces.

Research question

What kind of digital political narratives were disseminated by *Congress Sandesh* and *Kamal Sandesh* with respect to key political events in 2019?

Methodology

The approach chosen for the study was qualitative as part of which content analysis of e-articles pertaining to select political developments from May-November 2019 was carried out. Content analysis of media texts is a popular and time-tested method to uncover meaning out of a text and present it in form of themes (Macnamara, 2005). The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature since it attempts to investigate a less studied media format and describe its content. The study analyzes 42 e-articles [18 from *Congress Sandesh*⁷ and 24 from *Kamal Sandesh*] for the four political events mentioned earlier. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed to select articles from both mouthpiece websites.

⁷ Since the *Congress Sandesh portal* has been inactive since 2018, the researchers analyzed articles from *National Herald*, a sister mouthpiece.



Research limitations

- The study is confined to 2019 and four major political developments during that year. The period before May 2019 and after November 2019 was not taken into consideration due to limitations of time and resources. This also resulted in constraints on the number of e-articles that the researchers could analyze.
- The study uses a single method approach i.e. analysis of already existing e-content and hence results derived from the data set have not been corroborated using other supportive research methods.
- The study is limited to analyzing content of mouthpieces of two mainstream national political parties in English. The research does not include within its purview regional language mouthpieces produced by the same parties.
- The study is limited to mouthpieces of national political parties i.e. INC and BJP, since these two parties dominate contemporary political-media landscape and are also responsible for driving the media's agendas and political narratives.

Data analysis and presentation of digital political narratives

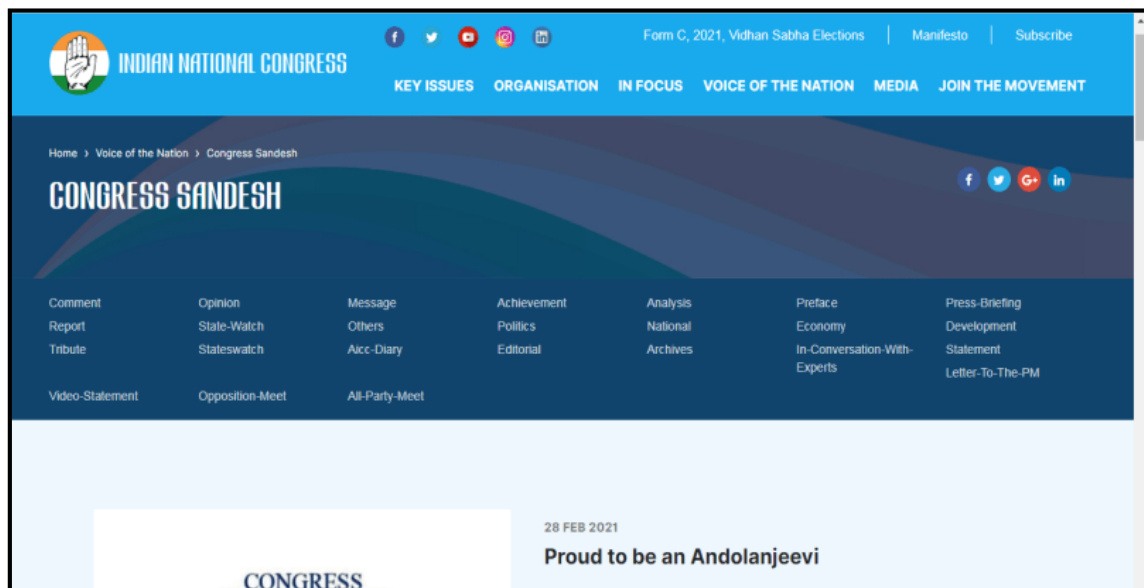
***Congress Sandesh* – Web design and structure**

The *Congress Sandesh* web portal consists of five tabs, namely – ‘key issues’ (focuses on economic and foreign policy of the INC in the past), ‘organization’ (consists of Congress’ Constitution, history and foundational values); the ‘in focus’ tab throws light on activities and decisions taken by the ruling party. The fourth tab i.e. ‘voice of the nation’ directs viewers to a parallel Congress mouthpiece (National Herald) and the ‘media’ tab comprises important press releases and audio-visuals relating to INC rallies.

A personality profile of the longest serving president of INC, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, is found on the homepage of the portal, accompanied by inspirational stories about senior and prominent leaders who served the party. Audio-visuals of INC rallies and public addresses, graphics which showcase the socio-economic trajectory of the nation during United Progressive Alliance’s (UPA) rule and monochromatic pictures from Indian independence movement are used on the portal. Hues of blue have been used in the web design for visual appeal. Readers have been provided with scope for interaction in



the comments section. Archives are unavailable as *Congress Sandesh* has been inactive since 2018.



Navigating through content components

Prominent political actors featured in the mouthpiece ranged from former Party presidents, leaders acclaimed at the global level, social and political activists to political analysts, lawyers, authors and sociologists. The digital narrative also featured the Supreme Court of India, national and international media and religious and demographic minorities. Out of the eighteen articles analyzed, nine referred to historic events, backed by legal arguments whereas five relied upon factual and statistical information. Seven articles were found to be theoretical in nature quoting international media and left leaning parties. Visual content used in the web articles was found to be politically and ideologically striking. For instance, an image of social activist Aruna Roy was used in one of the commentaries, wherein the background poster read 'Dalit Adivasi' accompanied by Dr. Ambedkar's photo. The image symbolized welfare and empowerment of dalits and tribals and aligned with the NYAY (Nyuntam Aay Yojana)⁸ⁱⁱ scheme floated by the party in the 2019 general election manifesto.

⁸ NYAY - The Congress Party's 2019 election manifesto promised a 'Minimum Income Guarantee Scheme' (MIGS), formally called Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY), to five crore 'poorest families' covering 25 crore people by assuring them a guaranteeing minimum income of ₹6,000 per month or ₹72,000 a year. See: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/the-nyay-scheme-is-a-game-changer/article26822386.ece>

The Saffron Splash – Lok Sabha election result day

Headlines framed for Lok Sabha Elections 2019 were assertive and investigative in nature, represented with use of words such as *'aggressive'*, *'fascist'*, *'decoding verdict'* etc. The Congress stressed on the possible tampering of EVMs post the BJP's landslide victory and accused it of adopting a non-transparent electoral process. It questioned both the policies of the ruling government and the rationality of voters who chose their representatives in the democratic system. It held that Indian voters have succumbed to fascism (*'Friendly' fascists can overwhelm inclusive culture and liberal institutions*⁹).

The mouthpiece reiterated that Congress is a party established on the ideals of socialism, secularism, democracy, liberty and equality. It asserted displeasure over the fact that Indian masses instead chose to vote for machismo, a hate fueling Hindutva ideology over egalitarian values and developmental prospects such as employment. The editorial viewpoint outrightly rejected market friendly governance and privatization policies of the ruling party, offering a contrast in the 'values' tab; i.e. the formation of a socialist state based on parliamentary democracy. It contended that the ruling government is anti-minority, patriarchal, divisive and has been using national motifs (Balakot and Pulwama) to gain political capital. Providing a counter, the 2019 Congress manifesto promised women's empowerment, introduction of the women's reservation bill¹⁰ in Parliament, upliftment of women through government schemes, protection of rights of religious and linguistic minorities threatened by the ruling dispensation.



⁹ See: <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/friendly-fascists-can-overwhelm-inclusive-culture-and-liberal-institutions>.

¹⁰ Women's Reservation Bill is a pending bill in the Parliament of India which proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33 percent seats in the lower house of the parliament, Lok Sabha, and in all state legislative assemblies for women.

Silencing dissent: A BJP thing – Amendment of Article 370



The coverage of amendment of Article 370 expressed caution, revelation and interrogation with use of words such as ‘*adverse effect*’, ‘*know all*’ etc. The amendment was framed as unconstitutional and a dent on the democratic fabric of the country (*Priyanka Gandhi calls manner of Article 370 revocation ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘undemocratic’*). It viewed the ‘constitutional reform’ to be a grave violation of human rights of the residents of Kashmir (read Muslims) by a regime that espoused a Hindu-centric nationalist political ideology. The party

reinforced that Article 370 was never instrumental for insurgency, separatism or violence and promised to make necessary amendments to the article while ensuring security as well as autonomy if voted to power. Historical references to Sardar Patel and Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee were made by the mouthpiece to counter the dominant right-wing claim of ‘PM undid Nehru’s historic blunder’ and to show that the decision about UN’s role and plebiscite in Kashmir was a collective one in Indian history, not simply steered by Nehru as the BJP would like people to believe (*Watch Srinath Raghavan on Kashmir: Sardar Patel was architect of Article 370¹¹*).

¹¹ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/amp/story/india%2Fhistorian-nails-the-pms-lies-sardar-patel-was-the-architect-of-article-370>.

Secularism is dead – SC verdict on Ram Mandir

The nature of headlines used for the event reflected discontent and accusations in the use of words ‘not a victory’, ‘how SC justified the verdict’ etc. The editorial team viewed the verdict as an assault on the constitutional fundamental of secularism. The Congress accused BJP of instigating communal hatred against minorities. It also questioned the integrity of the apex court which toed government line and compromised the ideals of justice (*How Supreme Court justified the verdict in favour of a temple at Ayodhya*¹²).



The narrative on the portal established that Babri mosque demolition was a pivotal moment in the failure of secularism and religious inclusivity in India, fracturing the country down on religious lines. The mouthpiece also alleged that the event has been politically exploited ever since.



¹² The *Congress Sandesh's* narrative on CAA relied on factual data and indicated that 10 million people die every year of chronic hunger surviving on less than Rs. 32 a day. It argued that passing the Citizenship Bill would invite extra burden for the nation that will be borne by the common people of the country. Reminding the audience about the Assam Accord of 1985, it stated that The National Register of Citizens (NRC) which has cost Rs. 1220.93 crore up to December 31, 2018 now becomes a grand waste of money, paper and resources with the enforcement of CAA.

The politics of Hindutva Constitutionalism – Citizenship Amendment Act

Headlines framed for web articles on CAA were emphatic and domineering in nature with words such as ‘tell me why’, ‘ideology at the cost of nation’, ‘second partition’, ‘against Ambedkar’s Constitution’ and ‘Hitler’s law’. The editorial team viewed it as the government’s tactic to distract and divert people’s attention from core issues concerning the nation. The mouthpiece remarked that providing citizenship to non-Muslims who entered India before December 31, 2014 was a

political tool to attract a fanatic Hindu voter base and incite communal hatred. The party narrative on CAA relied on factual dataⁱⁱⁱ. It argued that CAA invited extra burden on the nation to be borne by common citizens. The party viewed the bill to be BJP’s stride towards RSS’ dream of creating a Hindu Rashtra. It reinforced that Congress, since independence, has promoted secularism and equality for all whereas the bill marks an end to secular and democratic values of the country and discriminates with people on religious lines.



Kamal Sandesh - Web design and structure

The *Kamal Sandesh* web portal consists of ten tabs such as – ‘home’, ‘news update’, ‘editorial’, ‘organizational’, ‘government’, ‘vaichariki’, ‘our publication’ etc. These sections cover a wide range of issues such as current happenings, party’s stand on major political developments, party composition and working, success of government welfare schemes and ideological moorings of the party. Links to regional mouthpieces and magazines are also available on the portal. Several writing formats such as interviews, blogs, videos etc have been used in *Kamal Sandesh*. Vibrant cover photos, flamboyant visuals are used with an overall tone that has shades of orange. However, unlike *Congress Sandesh*, there is no feedback mechanism for web articles even as digital archives are easily available.

Navigating through content components

Prominent political actors featured on the portal are Prime Minister, Home Minister, opposition leaders, former BJP and INC presidents, eminent historians and international leaders. Religious and demographic minorities as well as the religious majority (read Hindus) are featured in the party's digital political narratives. All articles on the e-magazine are authored by news editors, *Kamal Sandesh* team and party members. Out of the twenty-four articles analyzed; nine challenged the historic narrative crafted by the Congress over seven decades, nine relied upon factual and statistical information to substantiate the party's viewpoint and eight articles articulated the right-wing position on key political developments in commentary format. Visual content present on the portal highlights the presence of key party leaders on various occasions thereby demonstrating leadership capabilities of the party.

The Victory of Vikas – Lok Sabha election result

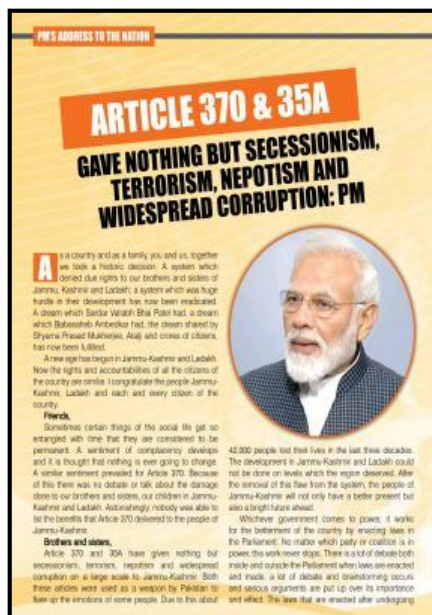
Headlines framed for the event on *Kamal Sandesh* portal reflected optimism and exuberance by using terms such as 'glorious future', 'decisive path', 'historic win for India'. The editorial team of the mouthpiece projected that sectarian vote bank politics based on caste, region and religion had received a shattering blow and the politics of performance, development and good governance had emerged victorious ("People had faith in 'Saaf Niyat, Sahi Vikas' approach of BJP government"¹³).

The narrative underlined that BJP government's achievements in its first tenure (2014) was the direct reason for its triumph in 2019. *Kamal Sandesh* establishes BJP as a party that is corruption-free, grounded in civilizational ethos, rooted in Indian culture and empathetic towards the vulnerable. The party leads from the front for the vision of a united, strong and confident India.



¹³ Links to *Kamal Sandesh* articles are not available since it is in e-magazine format.

Modi Government creates History – Amendment of Article 370



The nature of content on the amendment of Article 370 was zealous and resolute exemplified in the use of words such as ‘new dawn’, ‘momentous occasion’ and ‘Article 370 gave terrorism’ etc. The historic amendment was considered a fitting tribute to Jan Sangh founder Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, millions of Jan-Sangh karyakartas (workers) and the country’s valiant soldiers. The mouthpiece reiterated that a new era of development, progress and peace was set to dawn in post-370 Kashmir (*Towards a New India - A new Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh...*). The mouthpiece

slammed Congress, with reference to Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘botched attempt’ at dealing with the J&K issue for political gains. To substantiate the same, Justice Ram Manohar Lohia and then Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq who acknowledged that Article 370 paved way for secessionism, terrorism and corruption were quoted. The party narrative held that it scrapped the special status to curb terror in the valley¹⁴.

Delivering on Promises: The Hindu Revivalism – SC verdict on Ram Mandir Verdict

Unanimity and celebration received by the Ram Mandir verdict was framed using terms such as ‘accepted’, ‘unanimous’, ‘amicable’ and ‘inclusive’. *Kamal Sandesh* reinforced that Lord Ram and Ramayana occupy an esteemed place in India’s cultural and civilizational heritage. Its narrative centered around the fact that the construction of Ram Mandir is aligned with BJP’s ideology ever since its rise in mainstream national politics.

¹⁴ The *Kamal Sandesh* e-magazine article held that Article 370 resulted in loss of more than 41,400 innocent lives since 1989.

The site holds a special and sacred place in the hearts of millions of Indians and hence it was gratifying that their beliefs and sentiments were taken care of by the ruling government as it delivered on a long-standing promise. The portal establishes that BJP stands for peace and harmony and equality for all faiths, since the ‘temple of justice’ (read Supreme Court) allotted a 5 acre land for Mosque construction to Muslims (*Judgement an example of all inclusive views representing all sections of the society: JP Nadda*).

The Congress’ Sanctimony Exposed – Citizenship Amendment Act

The headlines used for the event attempt to elucidate and clarify misconceptions surrounding CAA with use of words such as ‘not against minority’, ‘against illegal immigration’. The editorial team emphasized that CAA doesn’t discriminate on the basis of religion, rather grants citizenship to those who suffered heinous abomination as religious minorities in neighbouring Muslim majority countries. The narrative called out the opposition’s failure to differentiate between genuine refugees and intruders as also the failure of the Nehru-Liaquat pact (1950)¹⁵.

The hypocrisy of left-leaning parties raising hue and cry over rising unemployment after persecuted minorities are granted citizenship but turning a blind eye to employment distress caused by inflow of Rohingya Muslims was brought forth (*‘Congress Spreading lies about CAA’*). The portal promotes BJP as a party committed to security, equal rights, and humanitarian motives.

¹⁵ Nehru-Liaquat Pact was a bilateral treaty signed by India and Pakistan to confirm safeguarding of refugee and minority rights in the two nations.

Digital political communication - A comparative political-ideological analysis

Digital narratives of both mainstream political parties confirm that PM Narendra Modi's popularity led BJP to capture a landslide victory in 2019. Interestingly, referring to the same, the Congress labels the BJP as a populist party led by a charismatic leader while the ruling party projects itself as anti-elite, pro-poor. While *Congress Sandesh* alleges suspicion over the use of EVMs in 2019, *Kamal Sandesh* denies accusations of a non-transparent election process. Similarly, on the amendment of Article 370, *Congress Sandesh* refers to the step as unconstitutional and divisive, whereas, in stark contrast *Kamal Sandesh* criticizes Congress for scapegoating the Nehru blunder that was paramount in brainwashing youth of the valley; backed by Pakistan and separatist Islamic forces. While digital narratives about the BJP portray the party as one with decentralized administration, keeping democratic values at the forefront; the Congress portal portrays BJP as majoritarian, following a union and centralized mechanism. On these and many other accounts, digital narratives posited by both political outfits are oppositional. In the case of CAA, the Congress senses fear of the Indian state being overpowered by Hindu extremism amidst Muslim exclusion and it therefore cautions readers about the possible legitimization of Hindu Rashtra. *Kamal Sandesh* on the other hand contravenes the argument by saying that it was Congress which accepted the partition of India on religious grounds and has used vote bank politics to divide and rule the country. As far as concurrence in digital narratives is concerned, both mouthpieces express concern for the rights of women and religious minorities in the country. Hence, opposing ideological and political positions are clearly articulated by both mouthpieces. This reiterates that the primary function of a mouthpiece is strengthening and consolidating the party's position on key issues and push a narrative to counter its opponents.

Findings and Conclusion

Digital mouthpieces of two mainstream national political parties - Congress and BJP play an active role in promoting party ideology and influencing political opinion. The Congress is projected as a party of scholars and intellectuals striving to represent interests of religious minorities; a party that safeguards Indian democracy and its secular



values. The party mouthpiece indicates the Congress' zealous efforts in ensuring that India is not overpowered by a wave of majoritarian nationalism. In contrast, *Kamal Sandesh* takes on the aristocratic, elitist Congress to serve a reminder that the majority cannot be treated as second-class citizens under the pretext of embracing secularism.

A recurring pattern in the digital narratives scrutinized for the four events is that digitally the Congress sets forth a critical framework to which the BJP responds. Rhetorically, the Congress slams all decisions of the ruling party; to which the BJP reverts with a reaction mechanism by expressing its duty of salvaging wrongdoings of the past in 'national interest'. As examples, one can carefully look at how digital narratives are constructed around criticism vs operating in national interest, division vs unity, communalism vs minority appeasement in both mouthpieces. Hence, even in the digital space the BJP projects itself as a party that salvaged Nehru's historic blunder on Kashmir by amending Article 370, granted Hindus their right to freedom of religion repudiated since time immemorial, and granted citizenship to persecuted minorities resulting from the failure of past Congress governments to do so.

Congress projects itself as an idealist party built on the foundations of humanitarian and liberal values and aims to create an India ideal in the view of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. BJP, in contrast, projects itself as a pragmatic and realistic party leaving ample scope for its audience to wonder whether it is fair to worship heroes of the past, substantiating Congress' record of deception and divisive politics. While one employs rhetoric to criticize the ruling party's media management tagging it as 'sold', the other portrays its opponents as 'corrupt' and 'incapable' of ruling the country, having already inflicted damage in the political past. One can conclude that the digital space serves as an extension of the political realm, where through party publications, political standpoints are reinforced, propagated and institutionalized leading to what Resnick (1998) calls the *normalization of the internet* – a state where offline political interests extend to dominate the online world, and it is *politics as usual* in the cyberspace.



Future research

Future studies can be carried out focusing on political developments in a different period using other methods and approaches. The study emphasized on digital political narratives disseminated by party mouthpieces; future research can focus on the target audiences' perception about these mouthpieces in digital spaces. Content of regional language party mouthpieces of the same party can be studied. A comparative analysis of the role and presence of regional party mouthpieces vis-à-vis national party mouthpieces can be taken up.

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