

Focusing the Kaleidoscope: Narratives of Indian Leadership in Political Socialisation and Mobilisation

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The study is an attempt to comprehend and conceptualise the role of leadership in the genesis, operation, and decay of political narratives in India after independence. It is argued that leaders of different political parties utilised political narratives as tools of political socialisation and mobilisation. Their power struggle not only metamorphosed political discourse but also changed the constitutional narrative in statement and substance. There is a shift from the hegemony of secular narrative to the supremacy of right-wing nationalist narrative in Indian politics. However, India's regional diversity, pluralistic social fabric, and constitutional checks and balances have collectively sustained a deeply multinarrative political landscape, which is shaped by a spectrum of ideological positions, regional distinctiveness, and constitutional commitments.

Keywords: Leadership, Narrative, India, Constitution, Politics, Diversity, Pluralistic.

Narrative consists of material signs, the discourse, which conveys a certain meaning (or content), the story, and fulfills a certain social function (Ryan, 2007, p. 22). Narrative helps members of a society to decode the complexities of life easily by making sense of various aspects of societal reality. Narrative builders' objective also remains to weave a thought process that could serve as a navigation system for the broader populace to understand these complexities. These woven thought processes reflect in the forms of various narratives in all societies. In the political sphere, narratives also perform the same function for the citizenry by helping them to make sense of various aspects of political reality. Political leaders play a prominent role in narrative construction and use these narratives as tools of political socialisation and mobilization. These leaders act as protagonists who mould the fate of their respective societies through their narratives. The history of world politics in general and Indian politics in particular reveals that protagonists are *sine qua non* for achieving the political objectives of their societies. In India, these protagonists are the likes of M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, B.R. Ambedkar, Jayaprakash Narayan, C. Rajagopalachari, J.B. Kripalani, Rammanohar Lohia, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, M.S. Golwalkar, and the list goes on. Prominent names that shaped the fate of their political societies with their narratives may include American nationalists James Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Franklin (Guha, 2010, p. 2). Then, Jose Marti of Cuba, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Lenin, and Mao can be included in the same league. Not to forget leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South

Africa, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh. This list is, obviously, suggestive and not exhaustive. All these protagonists or political leaders struggled for different causes under different circumstances. However, a common attribute among them was that they were able to construct narratives that resonated with their citizenry, and they were successful in achieving their political objectives.

Leadership's Political Narratives and India's Pluralistic Identity

The fate of a political society depends on the vision and caliber of political leaders. Political leaders use narratives as tools of political socialisation and mobilization. A higher vision, coupled with the successful employment of narrative tools, has shaped political movements throughout history. The article, employing a qualitative, interpretive methodology to explore the role of leadership in the construction of narratives as tools of political mobilisation and socialization in India, discusses the inherent pluralistic dynamics of Indian society. Political leadership had a huge responsibility to fulfill the aspirations of the masses when, after gaining independence country adopted a democratic and republican constitution. India's survival as a state, success as a democratic polity, and also the achievement of the national objectives set by the freedom struggle depended on the configuration and development of long-term socio-economic and political forces. In this, the quality, skills, and the approach of the political leaders played a significant role (Chandra et. al., 2008, p.7). Initially leadership of the Congress party was able to establish a secular narrative's hegemony to achieve national objectives. It was because the Congress party, which had worked as a broad-based national movement before independence, after transforming itself into the dominant political party of the nation, continued representing historical consensus and enjoying a wide base of support and trust (Kothari, 1964, p.1163). After the end of the hegemony of the Congress party in Indian politics, the leadership of different parties renewed their efforts to set a rapport with the people. However, the struggle of leadership among different political parties to establish narrative hegemony resulted in a fragmented electoral mandate. It reflected in the formation of coalition governments at the Centre. Resultantly, the country witnessed an era of political instability. Thereafter, the Congress party returned to power at the Centre but with the support of coalition partners. This period reflected the inherent pluralistic character of Indian politics, where political consensus was lacking. Thereafter, Bharatiya Janata Party's (hereafter BJP) victory in Lok Sabha elections for three consecutive terms and governments in the majority of states prove that there has been a titanic shift as far as the ideological moorings of Indian politics are concerned. The BJP has been able to establish narrative hegemony as a stepping stone for political supremacy. The article argues that intense competition among leaders of different political parties to construct narratives as tools of political socialisation and mobilization reflects of inherent pluralistic dynamics of Indian politics.

India's Nascent Democracy and Scholarly Apprehensions

Indian civilisation is one of the oldest and most diverse in the world. Regional diversity and plurality in terms of religion, culture, language, political ideas, etc., had been its hallmark. Multiple foreign invasions also resulted in augmenting this diversity. British colonial rule exploited plurality to its advantage and employed a 'divide and rule' strategy. Resultantly, the British colonial regime succeeded in

consolidating and prolonging its rule over India. This subjugation of India also resulted in the growth of nationalist feelings. Regional diversity and the pluralistic nature of Indian society are reflected in the character of the Indian independence movement as it was a product of different anti-colonial narratives, often different from each other in ideology and strategy but common in objective, i.e., to overthrow British colonial rule. The values that had inspired the freedom struggle were mirrored in the constitutional principles after the country gained independence. However, it was not clear if such a constitutional narrative would succeed in a diverse and plural society with widespread illiteracy. India had an overall literacy rate of 18.3 per cent in 1951 (Bedi, 2018, p. 26). This doubt only increased with time. In 1960, the American journalist Selig S. Harrison asserted, “the odds were almost wholly against the survival of freedom and ...the issue is whether any state can survive at all (Harrison, 2015, p. 338). Neville Maxwell, a Times correspondent in a three-series article entitled ‘India’s Disintegrating Democracy’, declared, “the great experiment of developing India within a democratic framework has failed.” He went on to prophesy that the fourth general elections, which were then forthcoming, would surely be the last elections to be held in India (Palmer, 1967, p. 277). With historical hindsight, one can make out the gross misjudgment on the part of these scholars to analyse the resilience of the constitutional narrative and the maturity of the political leadership of India.

Congress System and Beyond

The constitutional narrative had not only set the structure and procedural framework for the working of the Indian political system but also laid the ideological foundation of the Indian state. Liberal democracy ensured free competition among different political players and their narratives. The Congress party had captured the levers of power both at the Centre and in the states. However, it continued to face ideological and political challenges from other political players. The country’s first-past-the-post electoral system enabled the Congress party to maintain its political hegemony over the fractious and divided opposition. The opposition parties had a difficult task to build viable political narratives to connect with the electorate. The Congress maintained its electoral hegemony in those areas of the country where Congress’s narrative had been only an anti-colonial narrative. However, provinces that in the colonial period experienced the rise of organized, ideologically-motivated, popular social movements witnessed structured, ideologically robust, and popular electoral challenges to Congress. This is the reason that whereas the first non-Congress government was formed as early as March 1957 in Kerala and 1967 in Punjab but it was only in 1977 that the first non-Congress government was formed at the Centre. In the pre-independence era, the communist movement had taken root in Kerala through sustained agrarian struggle. The freedom struggle in a conventional sense was secondary to this agrarian struggle (Nossiter, 1982, p. 367). Punjab had witnessed, *inter alia*, a struggle against British-supported corrupt Mahants known as the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Mahatma Gandhi had described it as the “first decisive battle won” (Singh, 1999, p. 204).

At the central level opposition parties’ combined strength dislodged the Congress party out of power in post post-emergency era. Congress’s violation of its narrative by trampling democracy with the declaration of emergency resulted in its defeat in the parliamentary elections. Indira Gandhi’s authoritarianism had thoroughly displeased and alienated the electorate from Congress (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 2). The

results of the Lok Sabha elections in 1977, the terms of increased voting percentage of 60.49% in contrast to the last 1971 elections, where it was 55.27% (Election Commission of India, 2018, p. 5), revealed that imposition of emergency hastened democratic consolidation at the national level. Electorates punished Congress leadership for deviating from its political narrative, which has been essentially based on principles that guided the country's freedom struggle and also the construction of the constitutional narrative of India. These developments proved that the leadership of different parties had to function within the framework of the constitutional narrative.

Dynamics of Political Narratives, Splits and Mergers

Although the Congress party had lost power at the central level in the post-emergency era, it had faced ideological and political challenges right after independence. As argued earlier, leaders participating in the Indian freedom struggle against British imperialism had ideological differences. But they had put aside these differences to achieve the prime goal of India's independence. In other words, different political narratives have a legacy in the pre-independence era. The Congress party had within its ranks different shades of ideologies. It included a socialist faction led by leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Dev, and Rammanohar Lohia. This faction was known as the Congress Socialist Party. Its ideological narrative was in favor of underprivileged sections of society as laborers, farmers, and other vulnerable classes. It looked for answers to all these questions in socialist ideology, and it was in favor of adopting the socialist agenda for establishing an egalitarian society without justification of violence. The leadership of the socialist party believed in democratic principles, as evident from the fact that it advocated the shifting of all power to the masses. As far as its economic policies were concerned, it advocated for a model of economy which was planned and controlled by the state. Though Prime Minister Nehru was a socialist himself, leaders of the Congress Socialist Party had not only ideological differences regarding their socialist model with him, but also doubted his intentions to implement the socialist agenda as head of government. This led to the separation of the socialist caucus from the Congress Party and the formation of the Socialist Party of India. The party was led by Jayaprakash Narayan, who matched the popularity of Nehru. Moreover, the party had its socialist political narrative. However, the party could not perform electorally as expected by its leadership. The party could secure only 12 Lok Sabha seats with 10.59 percent vote share in the 1951 General elections. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress, led by Nehru, was able to win 364 Lok Sabha seats with 44.99 percent vote share (Election Commission of India, 2018, p. 41). This led to despair among the rank and file of the Socialist Party. Resultantly, the leadership of the Socialist Party decided to merge their party with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party of Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani to erect a viable electoral front to compete with the Indian National Congress. The new party, *viz.* Praja Socialist Party continued to hold fast to the socialist political narrative. Thereafter, splits and mergers of the party resulted in the formation of other political parties, namely Samyukta Socialist Party, Bharatiya Lok Dal, and Janata Party. With each split and merger, the political narrative continued to change. Different political parties draw their lineage from the socialist agenda of the erstwhile Socialist Party. Though relegated to the sidelines of Indian politics socialist political narrative still adds color to the ideological canvas of the Indian political system.

Communist leadership had also constructed a leftist narrative both before and after partition. Leftist narrative surged as a popular movement in the pre-independence period. However, communist leadership took an antagonistic approach towards the mainstream freedom movement of India, positioning itself against the national mood. After independence Communist parties had visionary, committed, incorruptible, hardworking leadership and favorable circumstances. These leaders were able to construct and operationalise a political narrative in their regions. This is evident from the fact that Left parties ruled Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura for long and shared power in other states. However, the Communist leadership's inability to indigenize European communist ideology and construct a cohesive national political narrative denied it the chance to get the required electoral strength to capture the levers of power of its own at the national level.

If socialist and communist narratives demanded the state to play an active role in planning and developing the economy, keeping the interests of vulnerable classes in mind then there was another political narrative which advocated just the opposite. Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, with other former members of the Congress party, posed an ideological and political challenge to the Congress with the formation of the Swatantra Party. The main ideological plank of the party was to oppose the economic policies of the ruling Congress. The Swatantra party held a right-wing economic narrative but was secular in ideological outlook. It was a champion of property rights, advocated for the free market, and opposed the socialist leanings of Nehru. The party was joined and supported by captains of industry and also peasant leaders. All of them had ideological disdain for the Congress party's socialism (Guha, 2007, p. 298). As far as its approach towards the Congress party in general and Nehru in particular was concerned, it could be described as antagonistic. Prime Minister Nehru was opposed to the Swatantra party's narrative and considered it an obstructionist and regressive ideological plank. The party won 18 Lok Sabha seats with 7.89 percent vote share in 1962, 44 seats with 8.67 percent vote share in 1967, and 8 seats with 3.07 percent vote share in the 1971 elections for Lok Sabha (Election Commission of India, 2018, p. 41). The party eventually emerged as Bharatiya Lok Dal. However, the lasting contribution of the Swatantra party was its advocacy for a narrative of limited government and protection of individual rights.

There were political parties that added right-wing color to the narrative canvas of the Indian political system. Prominent among these was Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which existed as a political party from 1951 to 1977. It held a Hindu nationalist narrative that had been there since the pre-independence period. After independence, when Congress leaned towards a secular narrative under the leadership of Prime Minister Nehru, leaders holding the Hindu nationalist narrative were compelled to establish their unique political identity. Syama Prasad Mukherjee, a former member of Nehru's cabinet, formally established the BJS in 1951. It was supposed that the Hindu nationalist narrative would act as an alternative to the Congress's secular narrative. It was not like that, BJS was the only political organization holding the Hindu nationalist narrative. Political parties like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP) were also there, representing the Hindu nationalist narrative. However, BJS, assisted by other prominent Hindu nonpolitical organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and favorable circumstances, established itself as a prominent carrier of the Hindu nationalist narrative. This was evident from the fact that BJS won 35 seats with 9.31 per cent vote share in elections held in 1967 to

the Lok Sabha (Election Commission of India, 2018, p. 41).

Although the plans of BJS leadership bore fruit as it established its narrative as an alternative to the hegemonic secular narrative of the Congress. However, leadership of BJS, despite its pro-Hindu right-wing stance, still could not match the broad appeal which the Congress party's narrative enjoyed across Indian electorates. After the imposition of national emergency by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, BJS, in cohesion with other anti-Congress political forces, seized the opportunity by launching a struggle against the national emergency and portraying itself as the champion of democracy and civil liberties. It also formed a united front against the Congress party, *viz.* The Janata Party just before the general elections of 1977. Its maneuvering paid off as out of 298 seats secured in Lok Sabha by Janata Party's candidates, 93 seats were won by Jana Sangh's candidates (Hansen, 1999, p.131). The Janata period had mainstreamed BJS's political narrative and widened its social and political base. Later on, when the BJP was formed in 1980, it benefited from its precursor BJS's political legacy. The former not only adopted the political narrative of the latter but also gave it further refinement. The perpetuation of right-wing nationalist narrative under the experienced and committed leaders such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani initially led the BJP to gain sufficient electoral strength to head coalition governments. The leadership of the BJP built its social base through sustained efforts to hold fast to its right-wing nationalist narrative. The mobilization of the Indian electorate on the right-wing nationalist narrative helped the BJP to form governments under the leadership of Narendra Modi for three consecutive terms. The ascendancy of right-wing nationalist narrative is a product of a complex socio-political process, which could be understood by analysing the socio-psychological inclinations of the populace. However, the BJP could not get an electoral and political foothold in Eastern and Southern coastal states, as the leadership of these states poses a formidable challenge to the BJP. The regional diversity and plural nature of Indian society are obstructing the BJP from establishing narrative hegemony all over India.

Regional Leadership and Narrative Diversity

State parties hold a unique position in Indian politics. Their importance is evident from the fact that these parties controlled most of the state politics and played a vital role in the formulation of Governments at the Centre (Bhuyan, 2007, p. 5). The state parties reflect regional diversity, the diverse and plural nature of Indian society. Every state party operates as an interest group in its region. The leadership of these parties often constructed political narratives that were closely connected with the social, economic, cultural, and linguistic interests of the state. The appeal of their regional narrative was so strong that these parties were first in breaking the hegemony of the Congress party in government formulation, both at the Centre and in the states. The majority of coalition governments formed before 2014 were dependent on the support of regional parties, and even the BJP has to depend on its regional coalition partners for the formation of the government after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, as the party was unable to get an absolute majority. Regional political parties' pan-India presence is proof of the fact that people pay heed to the political narratives constructed on regional issues. Political narratives of these regional parties also counterbalance the centripetal tendencies of nationalist political parties. Constitutional provisions provide ample avenues to these parties to thrive as a

credible political force in India. Some prominent and towering personalities of Indian politics came from these regional parties, as the political ambitions of the leadership of state parties often went beyond state politics. Even closer analysis would reveal that a major portion of the political leadership of national political parties has an association with regional narratives. Even national political parties' leadership in different regions takes divergent viewpoints based on their regional interests.

Narrative Construction and Contestation in Contemporary India

The article explores and narrates such antecedents that prove that leaders use narratives as tools of political socialization and mobilization. Since narrative genesis and decay are continuous processes in all political societies, leaders holding different shades of political narratives find ample opportunities to find their share in power. India, like any other democracy, has also witnessed this process since its independence. Analysis of the political history of India revealed that after independence, the constitutional narrative has changed both in statement and substance due to the pushes and pulls of competing socio-cultural movements, federal dynamics, and ideological struggles. This change is visible in all spheres of society. The assertion of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Vice-Chancellor that India was a 'civilization state' and should not be reduced to a 'civic nation' bound by the Constitution reveals this change. She argued that the idea of a country was not only a 'geopolitical concept' but a 'civilization concept'. Therefore, Indians needed to get back to their civilization instead of picking up Western ideas. She asserted that there could be debate on 'existing narratives' and bringing in 'new Indic narratives' (Akhtar, 2022, May 21, p. 3).

India's constitutional narrative, like any other state's constitutional narrative, is a work in progress. The current raging debates are not unprecedented; rather similar doubts have been raised earlier also, challenging the theory of complete consensus on the constitutional narrative. There was skepticism about the constitutional narrative even when India gained independence, and it declared itself a Sovereign, Democratic, and Republican state with the adoption of the Constitution on 26 January 1950. However, the success of India's early efforts at progress was considered because of the personal caliber of her leaders. It was argued that the leaders were dedicated, imaginative, and idealistic. They were being supported by the people who were imbued with the values of India's struggle for freedom. During the national movement, they had acquired a vast capacity to negotiate and accommodate diverse interests and approaches and to work within a consensual framework. Therefore, these leaders shared a relationship of mutual respect with their people as they had trust in the people and vice versa. They had deep faith in democratic institutions (Chandra, et. al., 2008, p.9). However, after the passing of the leaders who participated in the freedom struggle, the great Indian experiment is still going on. India, as a plural society with a wide range of disparities and centrifugal pressures, has not only survived as a state but has also achieved reasonable progress in all spheres. There is no denying the fact that the political system failed on many fronts also and constitutional ideals such as social, economic, and political justice, which are far from being achieved. Political parties have taken divergent viewpoints on crucial issues, putting strains on the political system. However, the liberal and democratic constitutional narrative not only provided avenues for belligerent leaders to articulate their grievances but also accommodated their reasonable demands.

Leaders communicate through narratives, which are constructed with words, images, acts, etc. The scantily dressed choice helped M.K. Gandhi to connect with the largely poor population of India. *Chacha* (uncle) prefix to Nehru's name established his unbreakable bond with innumerable households. Narendra Modi's repeated narration of his humble background is aimed at gaining the confidence of the common person. Again, Salt March by M.K. Gandhi, LK Advani's Rath Yatra, and Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra were processions to disseminate a particular message for narrative construction. Such acts are aimed at convincing and connecting with the general populace. This may be reality or delusion. In a later case, people may become electoral fodder to satiate the appetite of political leadership. This is a common feature of developing political societies. However, as these societies develop political sense through a trial-and-error method, the populace becomes aware of the nature of the narrative being promoted by leaders. They no longer accept ideas being placed before them irrationally, but put them on the touchstone of historical experiences to measure their utility and relevance. This character transformation in the political nature of society is a product of many factors. However, the role played by leadership is one of them. Although the Indian electorate continues to be influenced by traditional and emotive affiliations, the results of the 18th Lok Sabha elections also reveal a noticeable shift towards a civic political culture, marked by a growing reliance on rational and issue-based considerations.

The democratic process also plays a role in the narrative-building process. Multiplicity of political narratives being offered by the leadership of different political parties evokes the capacity of citizens to make comparisons, inquire about utility, and analyze the potential of these narratives to achieve the public good. What they have to do is be observant of the ideological postures of leadership. Herein lies the spirit of political narrative-political leadership has to keep liaison between its ideology and narrative. A successful narrative sells only if the general populace is set to believe the ideology of leadership. In other words, the interests of leadership, its ideology, and narrative swim and sink together. A narrative is built on subjectivity, bringing disrepute to the words and actions of political opponents and castigating their intentions. The narrative builders argue that national development would take place, leading to the satiation of material and emotional needs of society, only if people place faith in their political narrative. Democracy can be seen as an arena where leaders compete with each other through narratives. Political narrative accepted by the electorate catapults its leadership to the levers of power.

Moreover, the leaders who build narratives do it for their immediate political interests and reshape societal norms according to their ideology. The development of political societies takes place when political leadership creates consensus over basic ideological goals and places faith in the constitutional narrative. Ideological and political differences are resolved through democratic and constitutional means. Citizenry is provided with a high-purpose political environment where they can aspire to achieve shared goals under visionary leadership. The vision is to go from the inadequate present to the ideal future. Leadership not only defines the ideal future but also assists in the navigation process. Once a narrative is established in a political society, the leadership acts as its facilitator. Leadership going contrary to the established moorings of the constitutional narrative weakens it. A weakened constitutional narrative renders the political system purposeless. Therefore, one often witnesses situations where sometimes leadership does not hesitate to face

sufferings to keep fast to the ideological moorings of the constitutional narrative. Rather, leaders holding steadfast to their belief system enhance their political credibility. And leaders' credibility lends to their political narrative the required strength to mobilise electorates and tilt political discourse in their favor with the final objective of capturing power. Indian political leadership has placed faith in the core values of the constitutional narrative, and it has been pivotal in preserving democratic governance. This steadfast allegiance enabled India to function as a republican state for over seventy-five years, reflecting the resilience of the political structure and leadership's enduring respect for constitutional values and institutions.

Conclusion

This article underscores the important role of political leadership and their narratives as dynamic tools of both mobilisation and socialisation in contemporary Indian politics. Narrative construction and contestation are a continuing process in all political societies. However, new narratives do not come into existence in a vacuum; rather, one can find the reasons for their genesis in the decaying narrative. The decay of political narrative frequently stems from the inability of leadership to maintain alignment with the foundational ideas that legitimise their existence. In this scenario, the leadership of another political party brings about a new narrative that resonates with people, establishing a new normal. Though it is not necessary that the new narrative must be based on facts and truth. Rather, perceptions are converted into a manufactured reality, which in turn produces paraphernalia needed to sustain the new narrative. Political narratives are generally peddled by vested political interests. Indian experience shows that Individual and organized efforts to construct and operationalize narrative resulted in changing the nature of political discourse. Though the constitutional narrative has also changed in statement and substance, a titanic shift is in political discourse. Shifting of political hegemony of Congress party to coalition governments to BJP's dominance in national politics and strong presence of regional parties at the state level reveal that, whereas the ideological plank of Indian politics has changed in nature but it still holds a dynamic, inherent, diverse, and pluralistic character. Though leadership uses narratives as tools of political socialisation and mobilization to monopolise political power but safeguards imbibed in the Indian constitutional narrative and character of society ensure the pluralistic character of the Indian polity survives. The article contributes to the broader discourse by arguing that political narratives are not merely rhetorical tools, but rather act as a foundational mechanism of political legitimacy and change. Thus, understanding of construction, evolution, contestation, and decay process of political narratives helps to decode the dynamics of power struggle and political change in contemporary India.

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