Celebrification through Media Spectacles: Emerging Forms of Performativity in Indian Politics

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Abstract: We live at a time when new forms of mediatisation are conditioning the political landscape of India, especially in the context of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in the country. As heat wave conditions prevailed in many parts of the country, the quantity of time spent by politicians for on-ground campaigning was lesser in comparison with earlier elections. The hostile climatic conditions together with the intensity of digital empowerment, access to smartphones and availability of cheap data facilitated the formation of a thriving ecosystem of digital campaigning. The country witnessed political parties using digital spaces to an unprecedented level to inform, influence and even mislead the prospective voters. The focus of the paper will be on the strategic use of social media networks for the current elections in India to transform politicians into celebrities and the acts of performativity choreographed to entice the citizens with media spectacles.

Keywords: Politics, Celebrification, Digital Campaigning, Media Spectacle

Political communication stands out as a rich, complex, and dynamic sub-field within the broader disciplines of Communication Studies and Political Science. Political communication is broadly defined as the transmission of information and messages between political actors, the media, and the public. It involves a range of activities, including public speeches, press conferences, social media engagement, and campaign advertisements. Scholars such as McNair (2011) and Graber (2010) have emphasized the complexity and importance of political communication in shaping public discourse and political outcomes. McNair has contributed an expansive definition to ‘political communication’ which includes “not only verbal or written statements, but also visual means of signification such as dress, make-up,
hairstyle, and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political ‘image’ or identity” (McNair 3). It is an indispensable tool for politicians, influencing every aspect of their careers, from election campaigns to policy advocacy and crisis management. Mastery of communication strategies enables politicians to connect with the public, build support for their initiatives, and navigate the complexities of modern governance.

While the political landscape and communication technologies are mostly in a state of flux, the media serves as an intermediary between politicians and the public, shaping how political messages are crafted, disseminated and consumed. In the intricate tapestry of modern politics, the technological changes in the field of media have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of the print, broadcast and digital media as powerful intermediaries in determining how citizens engage with and understand the political landscape. The earliest forms of discussions on the exchanges between media and politics considered the former as a vital source of information about political actors, policies, and events. Free and independent media also performed the function of a ‘watchdog’ holding governments accountable and exposing corruption or wrongdoing. By holding those in authority accountable through fact-checking, exposing wrongdoing, and shedding light on secretive practices, the media empowers citizens and fosters transparency. Media outlets can also become tools of propaganda, using techniques like selective reporting, emotional appeals, and demonizing opposing viewpoints. The line between media and propaganda can be blurry. While the media aims to inform the public objectively, propaganda deliberately manipulates information to advance a specific agenda. With the emergence of broadcast media and increasing number of television channels, media began to play a greater role in setting the political agenda through news coverage, editorials, and the placement of stories, thereby shaping the public perception of the political agenda.

The history of political communication is a testament to the evolving nature of how political ideas are conveyed and received. From ancient rhetoric to the digital age, each phase has brought new opportunities and challenges for political engagement. The roots of political communication can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where rhetoric and oratory were central to public life. The fifteenth century marked a period of significant
transformation in political communication. This era, characterized by the transition from medieval to early modern Europe, witnessed the advent of new technologies and the changing dynamics of political power. The most notable development was the invention of the printing press, which revolutionized the dissemination of information and played a crucial role in shaping political communication. Prior to the printing press, political communication was primarily conducted through handwritten manuscripts, public speeches, and oral traditions. These methods were slow and limited in reach, restricting the flow of information to a relatively small and elite audience. The printing press democratized access to information by making it possible to distribute political ideas more widely and efficiently. One of the early examples of the impact of print on political communication was the spread of Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1517, which, although slightly outside the fifteenth century, highlights the transformative power of printed materials. Luther's criticisms of the Catholic Church were rapidly disseminated across Europe, sparking the Protestant Reformation and demonstrating how print could be used to mobilize public opinion and challenge established authorities (O’Donnell, 2023). The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of newspapers and periodicals, which became primary vehicles for political communication. Advances in printing technology, such as the steam-powered printing press, reduced the cost of printing and allowed for mass production of newspapers. This made information more accessible to a broader audience, including the burgeoning middle class and increasingly literate working class.

Newspapers played a critical role in disseminating political ideas and information. In colonial contexts, newspapers were often used by both colonial authorities and native populations to promote their respective political agendas. For example, in British India, publications such as the "Bengal Gazette" (founded in 1780) and later, the "Amrita Bazar Patrika" (founded in 1868), became platforms for political debate and critique of colonial policies (Brake and Demoor eds., 2009). Colonial authorities employed various strategies to maintain control and communicate their policies to both European settlers and native populations. Official newspapers and government bulletins were used to propagate the benefits of colonial rule, emphasizing themes such as civilization, economic development, and security. In addition to print media, colonial powers utilized visual propaganda, including posters and public monuments, to reinforce their authority. Public speeches and ceremonies
were also key components of colonial political communication, serving to legitimize colonial rule and foster loyalty among colonial subjects.

The Indian national movement was not just a struggle for independence but also a profound exercise in political communication. As noted by Pramod K. Nayar, "The nationalist press was a site of ideological struggle, where the battle for the minds of the people was fought through words and images" (Nayar 2009). Leaders of the movement employed a variety of communication strategies to mobilize the masses, negotiate with colonial powers, and build a sense of national identity. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was one of the earliest leaders to realize the power of mass communication. His use of newspapers, public speeches, and religious symbolism was instrumental in galvanizing public opinion. Tilak's newspapers, Kesari and Maratha, played a crucial role in spreading nationalist ideas. As noted by historian Stanley Wolpert, "Tilak's fiery editorials in Kesari roused the Marathi-speaking populace to a new sense of national pride and resistance against British rule" (Wolpert 2006). Mahatma Gandhi's communication strategies were perhaps the most sophisticated and impactful. Gandhi's use of simple language, symbols like the spinning wheel, and non-violent resistance resonated deeply with the Indian masses. His publication, Young India, was a platform for articulating his vision and strategies. As Judith Brown observes, "Gandhi's ability to communicate complex ideas in simple terms and his use of symbolic acts were central to his leadership and the success of the movement" (Brown 1989). Jawaharlal Nehru's communication style was marked by his eloquent speeches and writings that articulated a vision of a modern, secular, and democratic India. Nehru's book, Discovery of India, served as a significant medium for communicating his ideas about India's past, present, and future. Nehru's speeches, delivered both in India and internationally, were crucial in garnering support for India's independence. According to biographer Sarvepalli Gopal, "Nehru's speeches were not just political rhetoric but a means to educate and inspire a generation" (Gopal 1975).

Public speeches and mass meetings were another critical medium of political communication. Leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose used these platforms to connect with the masses, mobilize support, and convey their messages. These gatherings were often characterized by a sense of unity and collective purpose. As described by Bipan
Chandra, "Mass meetings during the national movement were more than political rallies; they were moments of collective affirmation and resolve" (Chandra 1989). Symbols played a significant role in the Indian national movement. The spinning wheel, the tricolor flag, and slogans like "Swaraj" (self-rule) were powerful tools of non-verbal communication. These symbols transcended linguistic and cultural barriers, creating a shared sense of identity and purpose. According to Richard J. Barnett, "The use of symbols in the Indian national movement was a masterstroke in political communication, making abstract ideas tangible and relatable" (Barnett 1969).

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has experienced profound transformations in its political communication landscape. In the immediate post-independence period, newspapers were the primary medium of political communication in India. Major newspapers like "The Times of India," "The Hindu," and "The Indian Express" played critical roles in shaping public opinion and political discourse. These publications provided a platform for political leaders to articulate their visions, policies, and critiques. The Indian government recognized the importance of communication in nation-building and development. The establishment of the Press Information Bureau (PIB) facilitated the dissemination of official information and government policies. The PIB's role in managing government communication helped ensure that the public was informed about state initiatives and developmental programs. Radio emerged as a powerful medium of political communication in the 1950s, with All India Radio (AIR) becoming the primary broadcaster. AIR played a crucial role in reaching rural and remote areas, disseminating information about government policies, agricultural practices, health, and education. Television broadcasting began in India in the late 1950s, but it was in the 1980s that Doordarshan, the national television network, gained widespread popularity. Doordarshan became a key medium for political communication, providing news, educational programs, and cultural content. Television brought political events into people's homes, making politics more accessible and engaging. The broadcast of parliamentary proceedings and political debates helped enhance transparency and accountability. Doordarshan also played a significant role in covering elections, providing extensive coverage of campaigns, rallies, and results. The economic liberalization of the early 1990s marked a turning point in India's media landscape. The liberalization policies led to the proliferation of private television channels, radio stations,
and newspapers. This media expansion increased competition and diversity in political communication. Private news channels like NDTV, CNN-IBN, and Zee News emerged as influential players, providing 24/7 news coverage and in-depth political analysis. The growth of private media introduced new dynamics in political reporting, with greater emphasis on investigative journalism, live coverage, and diverse viewpoints.

The late 20th century witnessed the rise of the internet, ushering in a new era of political communication. Websites, blogs, and online news portals offered new platforms for political discourse. The advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in the early 21st century revolutionised political communication. Political parties and leaders began using social media to engage directly with the electorate, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The use of social media was particularly evident in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, where political parties employed targeted digital campaigns to reach voters. Campaigns now employ data analytics and voter segmentation to tailor messages to specific demographics, enhancing the effectiveness of political communication. In this hyper-mediatised world with mediascapes constructing and controlling narratives, people resort to the media to be informed of politicians and political issues. Social media, traditional media outlets, and a constant news cycle have made media teams an indispensable arm of every political party. These teams play a crucial role in shaping public perception, mobilising supporters, and ultimately, winning elections.

As the political landscape witnesses an abundance of diverse media platforms, politicians have to master the art of ‘mediascaping,’ weaving their message through this intricate tapestry of communication. “Much as a landscape invites a concept of landscaping, today a mediascape demands a concept of mediascaping. Mediascapes should not be considered as an enduring reality, but a continuing process of Grafting space by media and as media” (Casetti 40). Though traditionally defined as those wielding direct or indirect influence on the political system, the term ‘political actors’ take on a new dimension in this paper. The discussion extends that meaning to the world of ‘acting’ to highlight the performative nature of media engagements by politicians. “Politics is a communicative practice, requiring embodied subjects who can perform and engage in speech acts in a domain that is public, where others can witness and freely respond to those performances and
speech acts” (Craig 2016). The concept of politicians as embodied subjects highlights the significance of their physical presence, appearance, and non-verbal communication in the political sphere. This approach emphasises that political influence is not solely exercised through policies and speeches, but also through the physicality and personal presentation of the politicians themselves. Effective embodiment strategies can enhance a politician’s ability to engage and persuade the public. The digital age immerses us in a deluge of images turning visual rhetoric into an indispensable part of political communication. With the accentuated penetration of internet, increasing popularity of social media pages and ever-growing number of television channels, “political actors—both established politicians and those attempting to subvert or counter the established political order continue to deploy visual rhetoric both for constructing and popularising their own respective narratives, ideas and ideologies” (Vincent 103).

The world of imaging and politics is a powerful and complex one. Images can be incredibly powerful tools for conveying a message. Politicians and media outlets use photos, videos, and staged events to create a specific narrative about themselves, their opponents, and the issues. The strategically constructed images evoke strong emotions that engineer the social imaginary. “Politics will eventually be replaced by imagery. The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favour of his image, because the image will be much more powerful than he could ever be” (Pisch 1). Digital communication platforms afford the meticulous construction of imagery and videography that project a curated persona of the politician, potentially fostering a cult of personality around the person. As we delve deeper into the nuances of politics as performance, we come across interesting examples that reflect on the mediated forms of a personality cult and celebrity culture in the political arena. Jan Plamber’s definition of personality cult as the “godlike glorification of a modern political leader with mass medial techniques and excessive popular worship for this leader” (Plamber 33) and Max Weber’s reference to charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least especially exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber 241) help us theoretically engage with the mediatised forms of political performances choreographed to entice citizens across social segments. In this emerging political culture, the politician conceptualises oneself as a ‘celebrity’ as seen in the world of cinema. According to Daniel Boorstin, “the
celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin 58). He further adds that “the hero is distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media (61).

The contemporary political landscape is undergoing a transformation marked by celebritification. Celebritification refers to the processes by which individuals or entities are transformed into celebrities through self-branding, resulting in the celebritization of the domain. This transformation involves gaining significant public attention, recognition, and influence through various means of media exposure and strategic self-presentation. The process of celebritification is multifaceted and is leveraged by politicians for optimum results. Most political parties currently have professional media teams composed of communication experts, media strategists, social media managers, and public relations professionals, which are essential for managing a party's interaction with the public, the press, and digital platforms. One of the major ways of their intervention is to curate visual and textual narratives to construct ‘media spectacles’ to package politicians into commodities for mass consumption.

The 21st century Indian political sphere presents a fertile ground to study the formation of ‘celebrity politician’, characterized by the accrual of celebrity status to politicians through the strategic deployment of media spectacles. The term "media spectacle" refers to the phenomenon where events, personalities, and issues are amplified and sensationalized by the media, transforming them into spectacles that captivate public attention. This concept is closely related to the work of theorists such as Guy Debord, who in his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*, argued that modern societies are increasingly dominated by images and representations that obscure reality (Debord, 1994). Media spectacles often employ sensationalist techniques to dramatize events and attract audiences. As John Fiske argues, "The power of the spectacle lies in its ability to create a dramatic narrative that resonates with the audience's emotions and imaginations" (Fiske 45). The visual nature of media spectacles is crucial in capturing attention. The influence of media spectacles on political discourse is particularly notable. Sensationalist coverage of political events can amplify partisan divides and shape voter attitudes. According to Fiske, "The
spectacle of politics often overshadows substantive policy discussions, focusing public attention on the drama of political conflict" (Fiske 53).

While the existing discussions on celebrification of politicians largely focused on the construction and dissemination of media spectacles during election campaigns, the 2024 Lok Sabha election in India marked a significant turning point in the use of media spectacles through the hyperreal images of politicians and political events circulated through the digitalscapes much before the formal declaration of elections. In September 2023, India hosted the 18th G20 summit with much fanfare and extensive media coverage. A significant number of images of the summit included large images of our Prime Minister on hoardings and cut-outs placed at different locales proximate to the respective venue and these images also enjoyed circulation on the online platforms as well. The venue at New Delhi named Bharat Mandapam stood on 123 acres of land and was built at an expense of Rs. 2700 crores. The Mandapam by itself acted as a spatial constellation of select artefacts from our history with our Prime Minister strategically waiting in front of a giant Konark wheel to greet world leaders (PMO India 2023). The entire city was also dotted with replicas of Ashok Chakra, cutouts of Mahatma Gandhi and Charka and models of the wheel and sculptures of dancing women at the Konark Sun Temple. The venue was a real architectural marvel with physical and virtual exhibitions enhancing the immersive experiences of the participants. With the arrival of the world leaders together with the exhibitions and cultural performances shared on digital platforms, the entire summit was well-curated as a media spectacle to impress viewers across the globe. Designated as India's "new Infra Marvel" (Jagota, 2023), the Bharat Mandapam exemplified the successful integration of vanguard technological advancements with traditional architectural motifs and religious icons including an 8 metre bronze statue of Nataraja. The G20 meetings held across 60 Indian cities were also planned effectively to highlight the image of the Prime Minister through his pictures on most of the hoardings. Moreover, the G20 logo with the images of planet earth and lotus flower with the tagline ‘vasudhaiva kudumbakam’ also subtly reminded one of the ruling dispensation.

Thus the one year of India’s presidency of G20 was used as an avenue for political advertising and was defined by the personality cult propagated by the Prime Minister (Krishnan and Suhasini 2023). While the G20 summit offered a fertile platform for the Prime
Minister to engage in “the orchestrated adulation and cult building” (Ninan 2023), his visit to Lakshadweep in January 2024 was yet another visual spectacle that went viral. While the apparent purpose of the videos depicting the Prime Minister traversing Lakshadweep’s beaches may have been to promote the island's status as a premier tourist destination, a deeper analysis suggests a strategic attempt to construct a singular visual narrative centred exclusively on the Prime Minister's persona. “Pictures of him walking on the white beaches and snorkelling in its crystal-clear waters were uploaded on his official account on X (formerly Twitter) and his YouTube channel, garnering hundreds of thousands of views” (Doshi 2024). Employing meticulously choreographed sequences and utilizing state-of-the-art camera techniques, the videos elevated the Prime Minister's image to resemble a celebrity endorsement, simultaneously promoting both his persona and the Lakshadweep as a tourist destination (Business Today 2024). The strategic orchestration of the Prime Minister's visual narrative employed a confluence of elements: a color palette harmonizing with the seascape, a carefully curated portrayal of pensive relaxation, a symbolic embrace of technology through staged use of a digital device, and finally, snorkeling footage projecting an adventurous persona for a youthful audience. This meticulously constructed imagery culminated in the potential cultivation of a cult-like image and the elevation of the Prime Minister to a celebrity status.

The phenomenon of redefining politics as performance has transcended the boundaries of specific political parties. The examples from Kerala and West Bengal ruled by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) respectively reinforce the deepening of celebrity culture and personality cult in politics in India. The government of Kerala celebrated ‘Kerala Priavi’ (birth of Kerala) with great pomp and show, extending the celebration to a week, from 01 to 07 November 2023, under the title ‘Keraleeyam.’ Promoted as the ‘Grand Festival of Kerala’ (Keralathinte Mahotsavam) with the tagline ‘My Kerala, My Pride’ (Ente Keralam, Ente Abhimanam), most of the posters and hoardings of the event invariably carried a picture or name of the Chief Minister (Kerala Kaumudi 2023), using them as synonyms of the state. Noted historian, Ramachandra Guha had warned about the dangers of personality cult in politics during his session in the DC Books literary festival held in January 2023 (Kabani 2023). In the course of his session, “he quoted the examples of Mamta Banerjee, West Bengal; Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi; and Pinarayi...
Vijayan, Kerala” as examples of cult personalities emerging in different parts of the country. The Keraleeyam festival exemplified this along with the attribution of a celebrity status to the Chief Minister. The larger presence of film actors and celebrities from the world of art ensured a visual treat scripting a seamlessness between the world of politics and art (SoSouth 2023). The festival was curated with a variety of performances and exhibitions to construct a grand media spectacle commodifying the landscape and culturscape.

Mirroring controversies that often plague political events, the festival was mired in debate regarding the expenditure involved as the state was grappling with a substantial debt burden. Yet another deeper allegation was against the Aadimam Living Museum, an initiative by the Kerala Folklore Academy derided as “human zoo” by activists and criticised by K Radhakrishnan, Minister for Welfare of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes as it included a display of indigenous people as exhibits (John 2023). Keraleeyam was followed by ‘Nava Kerala Sadas’, an outreach programme of the government with the Chief Minister and the entire cabinet visiting the 14 districts in a luxury bus, earning the sobriquet “Cabinet-on-wheels” (Philip 2023). The news reports of the inaugural ceremony of the programme carried images of the Chief Minister and all the cabinet ministers being welcomed by adorning them with a traditional headgear (Mathrubhumi 2023). Kerala Sadas could also be read as an attempt to construct a populist narrative about the government for mass consumption. The posters and ads of this programme also included an enlarged image of the Chief Minister with disproportionately smaller photos of the rest of the ministers (Nava Kerala Sadas 2023). Another image that was widely circulated was the one showing the larger image of the Chief Minister (CM) evolving out of the geographical map of Kerala, reflecting the new definition of the state centred around the personality cult of its CM (Behance). To cap it all was the release of an 8 minute video song of "Kerala CM", a tribute to Pinarayi Vijayan directed by Nishanth Nila (Saj Production House). The lyrics of the song were unabashedly hagiographic, providing another reason for scholars to critique the ‘new turn’ in Left politics. In the words of Nissim Mannathukaren, Professor, International Development Studies, Dalhousie University, Canada “The Left is also set back further by the development of authoritarian tendencies, and a personality cult around Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. This is unprecedented in Kerala, and in the Indian Left who practise
collective leadership along with institutionalised processes for internal democracy” (Mannathukaren 2024).

Mamata Banerjee, CM of West Bengal has also displayed tendencies towards building a personality cult. “One of the major changes she brought to Bengal politics is that of a personality cult. The Left was all about collective leadership, while Congress also had its own bureaucracy” (Bhattacharya 2024). She has captured media attention with the selection of candidates for TMC from the glamour world to stand for elections. According to political observer Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, “When TMC’s upward mobility started in 2009, more actors, singers, and glamor joined the fray. Mamata always trusted celebrities in difficult seats where she couldn’t find a suitable candidate” (Kissu 2024). Together with her attempts to leverage the glitz and glamour of the artistic world, she created a media sensation as she “walked on a pair of cross ramps with 42 party nominees to introduce them to party workers and supporters, who had assembled at the Brigade parade grounds for the Jono Garjan rally” (Chakraborty).

The 2024 Lok Sabha election witnessed a conspicuous trend towards the incorporation of celebrity culture, the cultivation of personality cults around political figures, and the strategic deployment of media spectacles. However, the election results were a huge blow to the faith of the political parties on media spectacles. The political systems, especially NDA and LDF, failed to garner the kind of overwhelming victory they expected at the hustings. The election results offered a new revelation to the parties - verbal and visual rhetorics alone do not always help in blinding the voters to the structural issues in social and economic development. However, the nexus between media and politics will only turn deeper with the emergence of AI and deep fakes, further complicating the nature of political discourses.

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