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Political Communications in India: Comparing the Era of Nehru and Modi

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Abstract. India has experienced an intricate pattern of political communication in times of popular leaders which has shaped larger political discourses and narratives on nationalism, secularism, caste and class. The increasingly mediatized political communication merits a comparative between the Nehruvian era (1947–1964) and the contemporary times (Modi, 2014 – till now) as both the eras are led by popular leaders. This research attempts to evaluate the contours of mediatized political communication in India, through a qualitative content analysis of the political communication of the two leaders. The research utilises historical speeches and media interactions of the two leaders, using the archival data such as historical records, speeches, writings, newspaper articles and television broadcasts. The political communication between the Nehruvian and contemporary era is crucial in terms of both traditional media and new media. Nehru relied on traditional media for his communication and used a public place to address the masses fundamental issues of the country. Modi's communication strategies emphasised new sources of media such as social media and online news and is focused on the individual-centric and mediacentric communication shaping the political narrative in contemporary India.

Keywords: media, Jawaharlal Nehru, Narendra Modi, mediatization, print media, social media

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Политические коммуникации в Индии: сравнение эпох Неру и Моди

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Аннотация. В Индии сформирована сложная модель политических коммуникаций в периоды правления популярных государственных деятелей, при этом образованы многоаспектные политические дискурсы и нарративы о национализме, секуляризме, кастах и классах. Цифровизация и медиатизация политических текстов различного формата создали условия для сравнения двух разделенных временем эпох: Джавахарлала Неру (1947–1964) и Нарендры Моди (2014 – настоящее время). Анализируя контент, исследование очерчивает контуры политических коммуникаций в Индии, в качестве эмпирики используются исторические речи и тексты двух лидеров, архивные данные (записи, сочинения), газетные статьи и телевизионные передачи. Автор заключает, что для Неру и Моди средства массовой информации имели и имеют определяющее значение. Неру полагался на традиционные медиа и использовал публичное пространство для обращения к массам по фундаментальным для страны вопросам. В коммуникационных стратегиях Моди доминируют новые медиа: социальные сети, новостные онлайн-каналы; фокус – на индивидуальной и медийно ориентированной коммуникации, что продуцирует соответствующую политическую риторику.

Ключевые слова: медиа, Джавахарлал Неру, Нарендра Моди, медиатизация, печатные СМИ, социальные медиа

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Introduction

Political leaders and the masses interact via political communication in media and India represents an interesting case study of the political communication that has emerged during the periods of popular leaders at the central level. This article focuses on a comparative of Jawaharlal Nehru (hereafter Nehru) and Narendra Modi (hereafter Modi) in terms of their political communications on social, political, and economic issues, analysing the difference in methods, purposes and outputs in an increasingly mediated political communication. It explores the impact of media, political rhetoric, political messaging as they are reflected in an increasingly mediated political communication, locating these interactions in archival data such as historical records, speeches, writings, newspaper articles and television

broadcasts. The paper explores Nehru's and Modi's political communication as prime ministers of India, their media strategies, narrative rhetoric, and public engagement in both eras.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on qualitative content analysis. Qualitative methods are essential in comprehending the post-colonial era and populism associated with Indian Prime Ministers: Nehru and Modi. Content analysis opens up the route to discerning deliberate variations in the substance of communication including intentions and attributes of the communicator, propaganda, and cultural norms of organisations, institutions, and societies (Rai, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Contextualising Mediatized Political Communication

Political communication is an interactive process subdivided into three categories: production, contents, and effects (Norris, 2004). These three components help to understand the dynamic process (Deutsch, 2015, p. 5) of relationships among three components: political organisation, media, and citizens. The objective is to convince or influence. Media organisations encompass print, radio, online platforms, and the Internet (McNair, 2011). Political communication involves actively participating in local, regional, state, national, and international matters. It focuses on utilising information, persuasion, and strategic message creation to comprehend and influence outcomes, especially in the realms of governance and social behaviour (Norris, 2004, p. 1).

Mediatized political communication plays a crucial role in influencing the structure, way of engagement, and culture of the political process (Kaid, 2004). In political discourse, leaders state and defend party policies on the presumption of an institutionally-authored line. Politics and linguistic activities have a common cultural lexicon and are dedicated to similar demands of comprehensibility and care over expression, including changes in emotionality outside of political communication.

The Nehruvian Era: Political Communication and Media

Nehru was the Prime Minister of India for seventeen years, initially as the leader of the interim legislature (1947–1952) and subsequently winning general elections three times (1952, 1957, 1961). Additionally, he served as the leader of the Indian National Congress party and held other ministerial positions during his tenure (Nehru, 2004). According to Madhav Khosla, Nehru's enthusiasm for his political action can be interrogated in terms of his *political actions* coming from his political communication (Khosla, 2014) through which he introduced his ideas of politics, society, and economy. Most of the time, Nehru used to communicate with the masses through traditional media methods such as television, radio, and personal

letters. Often, he used a public place to address the masses with his ideas and a democratic perspective.

Nehru advocated the utilisation of radio as a medium for engaging with the masses. However, Nehru did not limit his usage of the radio to only significant events. While the discussions of the Constituent Assembly were coming to an end in June 1949, Nehru made a declaration on the food situation in a radio broadcast (Sen, 2021). On 3 December 1949, he again delivered a speech to the country through radio transmission; He repeated his desire to maintain communication with the public, either in person or over the radio (Sen, 2021). Nehru would regularly deliver addresses to the country over the radio, particularly during times of significant national upheaval including the India-China conflict in 1962. He advocated for both individual and national freedom through peaceful methods. He addresses a speech to the entire nation, without considering differences in religion, region, caste, class, gender, or political affiliations. He rejects the concept of segregated nationalism and identity-based politics. In this regard, Nehru delivered a speech to the nation on October 22, 1962, on All India Radio.

I invite all of you to whatever religion or party or group you may belong to be comrades in this great struggle that has been forced upon us. I have full faith in our people and in the cause and in the future of our country... We have followed a policy of non-alignment and sought friendship of all nations. We believe in that policy fully and we shall continue to follow it. We are not going to give up our basic principles because of the present difficulty¹.

Nehru encouraged universal nationalism vis-à-vis internationalism. This was evident in his active participation in international affairs and the non-alignment movement. He advocated for mature nationalism that was not dependent on religion, region, caste, gender, or province. The fundamental principle of Nehruvian internationalism is the promotion of peaceful cooperation among nations.

Further, Nehru's letters are an important method of political communication, he used to exchange letters with important political figures. Nehru proposed to 'form the habit of fortnightly exchange of the letters', and the letter of October 15 was the first of this exchange initiated a political practice that he continued until a few months before he died in 1964. (Khosla, 2014, p. 2).

These letters concern various social issues such as class, caste, religion, poverty, scientific temper, communalism, reason secularism, socialism, and democracy. These letters are examples of 'concerted efforts' (Khosla, 2014, p. 23) to establish a society based on democratic principles. Subsequently, his speeches, letters, writings, and personal communication are very much related to his concerted efforts. Nehru communicated in various ways and places with people, and in parliament, various conferences, and meetings through his 'concerted political communication'.

¹ *Nehru's address to the nation on October 22, 1962, over All India Radio* (2020, July 12). National Herald. Retrieved February 26, 2025, from <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/blog/nehru-address-to-the-nation-on-october-22-1962-over-all-india-radio>

Nehru well understood the specificities of the Indian context. His theorisation of class-caste specificities in the Indian context was well documented in his writings, letters, and speeches. In a letter to the Chief Minister (dated 25 October 1957) Nehru asserted that:

There are national conflicts and economic conflicts among classes, there is a class war, and, in India, there are all kinds of other conflicts based on province, language and caste etc... We want a classless society, and we know that at present it is a class-ridden and caste-ridden society we have to deal with (Nehru, 1984, pp. 819–820)².

In Nehru's view, caste is worse than class and more specific to India. Further, Nehru looked at identity conflict from an economic perspective to resolve and transform these agitations in a different direction from powerful disruptive tendencies such as communal, provincial, caste, and other discriminatory categories in the country. Further, addressing a public meeting Mr. Nehru said that:

We must not allow religion to enter into politics, nor should we allow communalism to a way of our minds. We must avoid these dangerous paths of communal politics always, but it is more important to do so in the present time (Nehru, December 12, 1953)³.

However, Nehru believed that the idea of secularism could permanently solve the problem of communalism. Nehru established the fundamental principles of democracy, the federal parliamentary system, and secularism, emphasising the equality of all individuals before the law, regardless of their race, religion, region, sex, caste, or creed (Malhotra, 2007, p. 23). Thus, Nehru's correspondence with many political organisations, individuals, and citizens through various mediums and channels exemplified the active involvement of the public in the decision-making process and public affairs.

Additionally, Nehru advocates a radical perspective on journalism. In his opinion, any journal must be dedicated to the promotion of rational thought. He believed that the 'National Herald' was required to adhere to a specific 'ideological standard'. In contrast to 'profit-making' journalism, Nehru advocated for a form of 'ideological journalism'. These ideological standards must be in opposition to 'Bania' and 'Baniagiri' in journalistic functions and activities and must promote rational thinking (Nehru, 1963). Countering market oriented/sensationalist media was considered crucial by Nehru in the process of political and social transformation and change.

In sum, Nehru political communication focused on utilising the media for espousing universal nationalism, secularism, and handling class-caste specificities in the Indian context.

² Nehru, J. (1984). *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (2nd Series, Vol. 39). New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund.

³ Nehru, J. (1953, December 12). Religion should not be allowed to enter into politics Nehru. *Dawn Newspaper. Jawaharlal Nehru Post Independence papers (S.G.)*. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Library Archives.

Mediatized Political Communication in Contemporary India

The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi's political communication is reflected in his slogan, *sabka saath, sabka vikaas, aur ab sabka vishwas* (Supporting everyone, everyone's development, and now everyone's trust). The slogan's clear use of the word *vishwas* (trust/belief) is telling. This understanding of politics is founded upon the popularity of Narendra Modi and the faith that voters have in him (Sircar, 2020). In the politics of *vishwas*, the reverence to a particular politician is explicitly proportional to how well that politician can communicate with the voter primarily through media or party organisation (Sircar, 2020).

Modi's approach, the populist nature of his speeches, and his influence as a strong leader were crucial factors in his party's electoral success. Modi has successfully circumvented the entire framework of party politics, vote banks, electoral procedures, parliamentary democracy, and representative governance, by portraying himself as the protagonist, Narendra Modi, who embodies the voice, determination, and representation of the Indian population. He has launched a monthly radio show called 'Mann ki Baat', which may be interpreted as 'What's in my heart' or 'Sharing the message of my heart', but more accurately means 'The heart's discourse' or 'My heart's testimony' (Vajpeyi, 2020, p. 21).

Modi often avoids making political references and statements in his 'Mann ki Baat', a platform used to deliberate on the social sphere, highlight noteworthy achievements from different regions of the nation, and read intriguing letters received by the Prime Minister from his follower⁴. In his nine radio speeches in 2019, he has only discussed politics once, referenced the economy or economics eight times, and brought up education five times. He consistently addresses the audience as 'Mitron'. The phrase 'Friends' is translated into English 48 times in a total of nine talks, which averages to almost five occurrences in each speech⁵. Modi's speech of self-congratulation "I," "main," and "hum" are the most frequently used words in every one of Modi's speeches. In this discourse, his speech was about the surrounding self and individual achievements and failures. Modi used the media, particularly social media in his political communication via messengers and importantly his political communication with the masses which is 'Man ki Baat' (Sen, 2021). In June 2019, Modi delivered a speech via his radio broadcast 'Man ki Baat'. He said:

*'Mann Ki Baat' is like a mirror to the country & our society. It conveys to us that there is no dearth of inner fortitude, strength & talent within our countrymen. The need of the hour is to synergise those strengths and talents, to provide opportunities, and to implement them. 'Mann Ki Baat' also tells us that 130 crore countrymen wish to be, strongly and actively, a part of the nation's progress*⁶.

⁴ Chatterji, S. (2019, December 31). *Word cloud analysis of PM Modi's 'Mann Ki Baat' and what it tells us*. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-9-mann-ki-baat-episodes-of-2019-pm-modi-mentioned-india-220-times/story-D5I1ZptsuAUJLYiDiqb8nI.html>

⁵ Chatterji, S. (2019, December 31). *Op. cit.*

⁶ Modi, N. (2019, June 30). *PM's address in 'Mann Ki Baat 2.0' Programme on All India Radio*. All India Radio. Man Ki Baat, Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-in-mann-ki-baat-2-0programme-on-all-india-radio/

Regarding the use of COVID-19 vaccination doses, he said in October 2021:

*My dear countrymen, Namaskar...namaskar a billion times! And I am saying 'koti-koti namaskar' also since after crossing the 100 crore vaccine doses, the country is surging ahead with a new zeal; and renewed energy. The success of our vaccine programme displays the capability of India...manifests the might of our collective endeavour*⁷.

Modi's populism is personal and he has received several correspondences from people in general through 'Mann Ki Baat', as well as a multitude of messages on social media and the NaMo App. He said "Friends, many people who listened to 'Mann Ki Baat' have written letters to me and shared their memorable moments. It is on account of the strength of 140 crore Indians that this year, our country has attained many special achievements"⁸. Furthermore, in January 2024, following Republic Day and the Pran Pratishtha ceremony in Ayodhya Ram temple, he gave the following speech on his radio show:

*The Constitution of India has come into being after such intense brainstorming that it is called a living document. In part three of the original copy of this very Constitution, the fundamental rights of the citizens of India have been described and it is noteworthy that at the beginning of Part three, the makers of our Constitution had allotted due space to the pictures of Bhagwan Ram, Mata Sita, and Lakshman ji. The rule of Prabhu Ram was also a source of inspiration for the makers of our Constitution and that is why on January 22 in Ayodhya, I had talked about 'Dev se Desh'... I'd referred to 'Ram se Rashtra'*⁹.

Modi's political communication reflects his religious nationalism, namely the concept of Hindu Rashtra. In addition, the recent political system draws attention to the non-political trends in new civil society projects focused on yoga, spirituality, and public cleanliness.

Modi's show 'Man ki Baat' from 2019 to 2024, focused on the trends in his political communication. Specifically, his speeches revolve around Indian festivals such as *Janmashtami*, *Chhath Maiya*, *Deepawali*, *Kumbh*, and the Desert Festival Rann of Kutch. Furthermore, he also narrates stories about individuals such as Swami Vivekanand, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and B. R. Ambedkar. In a broadcast 'Mann Ki Baat', Modi addresses the country on air regularly wants to reach out and connect with people, just as Nehru used his radio talks to explain His and the government's position on several crucial matters, including communalism, caste-based discrimination, the food crisis in 1949, and the 1962 border conflict with China (Sen, 2021). However, Modi's political communication especially through 'Man Ki Baat' is self-referential and aimed at making a personal connection with citizens (Sen, 2021).

⁷ Modi, N. (2019, June 30). *PM's address in 'Mann Ki Baat 2.0' Programme on All India Radio*. All India Radio. Man Ki Baat, Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-in-mann-ki-baat-2-0programme-on-all-india-radio/

⁸ Modi, N. (2019, June 30). Op. cit.

⁹ Modi, N. (2019, June 30). Op. cit.

Conclusion

The political communication between the Nehruvian and contemporary era is crucial in terms of both traditional media (print, radio, television) and new media platforms (social media, internet news). Nehru relied on traditional media for his communication, whereas Modi's communication strategies emphasised new sources of media such as social media and online news.

During the Nehruvian era, the media was predominantly under state control, with only a minimal presence of commercial media. The pivotal role played by All India Radio (AIR) and *Doordarshan* in spreading information is noteworthy. Nehru's political communication reflected his political conceptions of state (secular, democratic), society (universalism through internationalism), and the people (guided by modernity, reason, and rationality).

The Nehruvian era had a prominent and enduring role in shaping government and politics in the advancement of society through principles such as equality, freedom, voting rights, and belief in democracy. He demonstrated a strong awareness and consideration for issues of respect for marginalised groups and individuals, as well as their social and political concerns (Kothari, 1964, pp. 1170–1171).

Nehru's primary concern was the address fundamental issues of the country, for example, the elimination of gross social inequalities (especially social concerns such as caste and class-based discrimination), the abolition of feudalism, protective legislation for labour, the linguistic reorganisation of states, through the implementation of special privileges for marginalised groups and the strict suppression of any instances of violence, secession, or discrimination, the political system has successfully eradicated social and political unrest (Kothari, 1964, p. 1169).

Modi's approach involves disregarding traditional news media and instead relying on social media and government websites to update his fans about his everyday activities and government policies (Rodrigues, Niemann, 2019).

In contemporary India, the media landscape in the current political system is characterised by the widespread presence of privately-owned news networks and online news sites. In addition to this, there is a common practice of utilising numerous social media platforms, with an increase in the contents pertaining to false news, media bias, and information overload.

Modi and his party has effectively utilised various social media channels to actively engage with young, educated, middle-class voters in India throughout the election campaigns by creating a populist narrative around hyper nationalism and his individuated leadership.

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