

Postmodernism and Political Discourse in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between postmodernism and political discourse in present-day India. It delves into how key postmodern concepts—such as the fragmentation of ideas, the decentralisation of authority, and a growing scepticism towards overarching ideological narratives—have come to shape the Indian political landscape. These influences are particularly visible in the growing dominance of media, the rise of identity-based politics, and the spread of populist rhetoric. In the Indian scenario, the effects of postmodern thought can be observed in the increasing prominence of regional, caste-based, and community-specific identities, which challenge the notion of a unified political ideology.

Furthermore, the digital age has facilitated the growth of highly individualised and expressive political voices, amplified through social media platforms. This has led to a political environment where multiple, often conflicting, truths coexist, and narratives are continuously shaped and reshaped. Such dynamics have contributed to a shift away from traditional political paradigms, fostering a more fluid and performative form of political expression.

The research also examines how Indian political discourse now frequently merges ideology with spectacle, blurring the lines between reality and representation. Drawing on the insights of key postmodern thinkers, this study highlights how cultural imagery, remained historical narratives, and identity symbols are being strategically deployed in political communication. These tools not only serve electoral purposes but also redefine the public's engagement with politics.

Finally, the paper investigates the implications of these postmodern developments for democratic practices, political accountability, and civic participation. It suggests that understanding these trends is essential for grasping the evolving nature of governance in India. By applying a postmodern lens, the study offers a fresh perspective on how power, identity, and discourse intersect in contemporary Indian politics.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Political Discourse, India, Identity Politics, Media, Populism, Democracy

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Introduction

Postmodernism arose during the latter half of the 20th century as a critical reaction to modernism, particularly in disciplines such as art, literature, philosophy, and social theory. Fundamentally, it questions the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, linear progress, and universal truths that were central to modernist thinking. Instead, postmodernism promotes a sceptical stance toward overarching ideologies—including nationalism, liberalism, Marxism, and the notion of historical progress—that claim to universally explain the human condition. Jean-François Lyotard encapsulates this perspective by describing postmodernism as marked by a “suspicion toward meta-narratives,” reflecting a broader cultural shift toward ambiguity, decentralisation, and multiplicity in how knowledge is understood and conveyed [1].

A key tenet of postmodern thought is its rejection of absolute or objective truths. Postmodern theorists contend that what is considered “truth” is frequently shaped by power dynamics, cultural norms, and linguistic frameworks. Michel Foucault, for example, argued that power and knowledge are intricately connected, and that dominant discourses often determine what is accepted as true, rather than objective evidence or neutrality [2]. From this standpoint, reality is not something fixed or universally shared, but rather a construct shaped through discourse, representation, and interpretation.

Postmodernism also foregrounds diversity, relativism, and the breakdown of unified narratives. Rather than seeking a singular, cohesive worldview, it embraces a range of perspectives often contradictory thus opening up space for voices and identities historically excluded from dominant power structures. Techniques such as parody, pastiche, and irony are often used to blur conventional boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, or between the authentic and the imitative [3].

In contrast, modernist political ideologies whether liberal, nationalist, or socialist tend to prioritize order, coherence, and systematic change grounded in reason. These ideologies typically rely on assumptions of progress, institutional development, and rational planning to achieve transformation. Postmodernism challenges these assumptions, revealing how such narratives can suppress diversity or mask power relations under claims of objectivity.

This conceptual foundation enables a deeper exploration of how postmodernism shapes political discourse in India today, where multiple narratives, hybrid identities, and relative truths have become central to public life.

Postmodern Political Theory in the Indian context:

India's political environment provides a compelling context for exploring postmodern theory due to its inherent heterogeneity, regional variations, and contested histories. Postmodernism's central focus on pluralism, fragmentation, and the deconstruction of dominant narratives aligns closely with the realities of Indian democracy. In contrast to modernist political ideologies that emphasize unity, centralized governance, and coherent progress, Indian democracy functions through regional identities, localized discourses, and identity-based mobilizations, where diverse communities assert their unique social and political realities [4].

Movements grounded in caste, religion, language, and region—such as those represented by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) or the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) exemplify the postmodern rejection of overarching national narratives. These parties and movements foreground the voices and experiences of marginalized or subaltern communities, challenging the notion of a singular Indian identity. Instead, they advocate for a more fragmented, decentralized understanding of politics where multiple, sometimes conflicting, truths coexist within the national framework [5].

The proliferation of digital and social media further reinforces this postmodern dynamic by facilitating the spread of diverse and often contradictory narratives. Political communication is increasingly influenced by emotional resonance and symbolic gestures rather than objective facts. This phenomenon aligns with Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyper reality, wherein representations or simulations of truth begin to hold more power than actual reality [6]. In the Indian context, political discourse frequently draws on historical reinterpretations, religious symbolism, and populist language to construct persuasive but often polarizing narratives. These strategies displace traditional norms of rational debate and institutional authority, replacing them with affect-driven and identity-centric appeals.

Consequently, Indian democracy today operates within a distinctly postmodern space characterized by multiplicity, decentralization, and the coexistence of conflicting realities. While this enriches democratic inclusion and representation, it also complicates governance, consensus-building, and mechanisms of political accountability.

Fragmentation of Political Identity:

One of the most significant impacts of postmodernism on Indian politics is the fragmentation of political identity, which directly contests the modernist vision of a singular, unified national consciousness. In contemporary India, political articulation is increasingly shaped by intersecting markers such as caste, religion, region, language, gender, and sexuality. These identity-based assertions reflect a shift toward pluralistic representation within the democratic framework [7]. The emergence of caste-focused movements, particularly following the Mandal Commission's recommendations, and the rise of groups like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Dalit Panthers, highlight a deliberate rejection of entrenched upper-caste hegemonies and dominant social narratives [8].

Likewise, regional political entities such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu or the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal foreground local languages, cultures, and community concerns. Their prominence signals a departure from centralized models of governance, favouring instead localized expressions of political will. This decentralization is not only structural through the growing influence of regional parties but also discursive, as digital media platforms empower individuals to construct and express identities that are fluid, multifaceted, and shaped by a mix of tradition, popular culture, and historical memory [9].

While this diversification enhances representation and democratic inclusion, it also introduces new complexities in governance and political communication. The proliferation of competing identity claims can lead to fragmentation and heightened polarization. Nonetheless, this evolving political landscape reflects the deep entrenchment of postmodern values such as pluralism, multiplicity, and ongoing contestation within the Indian democratic ethos. Rather than eroding democracy, these dynamics show how Indian politics has adapted to accommodate diverse voices and narratives in a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment.

Populism and Political Spectacle:

Postmodern political theory reimagines politics not solely as the domain of governance and policy-making, but as a realm of performance and spectacle. In this framework, political figures are increasingly perceived as curated media personalities, whose public personas are shaped less by ideological consistency and more by visual appeal and emotional resonance [10]. In the Indian context, this phenomenon is clearly visible in the way leaders engage with the public—through symbolic acts, emotionally charged speeches, and theatrically

choreographed events. Mass rallies, elaborate stage productions, and ritualistic temple visits are not merely components of electoral campaigns but are designed as spectacles that cultivate emotional allegiance and reinforce a leader's persona.

Populism, as a political style, aligns seamlessly with postmodern sensibilities. It emphasizes affective narratives over empirical facts, and symbolic representation over substantive policy discussions. Populist leaders often construct a binary "people vs. elite" storyline, employing informal language, cultural references, and performative gestures to signal authenticity and foster a direct emotional connection with the public [11]. This narrative strategy is not about ideological clarity but about crafting compelling stories that resonate with popular sentiments.

The increasing role of social media in shaping political discourse further enhances this postmodern condition. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become central arenas for political communication, where the distinction between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred. Political messages are often crafted for virility rather than veracity, leading to a hyper real environment, as described by Jean Baudrillard, where representations of truth however distorted can become more powerful than actual realities. In this postmodern political space, perception often trumps policy, and symbolic gestures wield more influence than institutional accountability.

Role of Media and Digital Technology:

In the postmodern age, media and digital technology have transformed political communication into a fragmented, fast-paced, and hyper-symbolic realm. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp act as echo chambers, where users are exposed primarily to views that reinforce their own beliefs. This fosters meme politics, the use of humour, irony, and visual content to simplify complex political ideas into shareable, emotional narratives.[12] Indian political discourse is now shaped significantly by digital propaganda, misinformation, and alternative "truths". Political campaigns increasingly rely on data analytics and algorithm-driven messaging to target specific voter groups. These strategies blur the line between reality and simulation, echoing Baudrillard's concept of hyper reality, where the representation becomes more real than reality itself.[13] As a result, public opinion is shaped not by deliberative debate, but by symbolic performance, viral content, and emotion hallmarks of a postmodern political environment.

Deconstruction of Nationalist and Historical Narratives:

Postmodernism offers a critical lens through which to examine the construction of history and national identity, emphasizing that what is commonly accepted as historical “truth” is often the product of ideological influence and power dynamics. In India, this perspective is particularly relevant, as history is frequently rewritten and reframed by political actors to serve contemporary agendas. Cultural symbols, historical events, and iconic figures such as temples, freedom fighters, and mythological stories are often reinterpreted through populist or communal lenses, reshaping collective memory to align with specific political narratives [14].

This revisionist approach reveals how nationalist histories tend to silence or marginalize the experiences of subaltern groups, including Dalits, Adivasis, women, and religious minorities. Postmodern theory’s emphasis on plurality and deconstruction supports efforts to challenge these dominant narratives, offering space for alternative voices. This aligns with the objectives of the Subaltern Studies movement, which critiques both colonial and postcolonial historiographies for their exclusions and biases [15].

In today’s increasingly polarized political environment, history has become a highly contested terrain. Competing versions of the past are advanced through educational curricula, media discourse, and political rhetoric, turning history into a battleground of ideologies. Postmodernism thus plays a crucial role in exposing the constructed nature of historical accounts and emphasizing the political motives behind their presentation. Rather than accepting history as a fixed and objective chronicle, postmodern thought encourages scrutiny of whose stories are told, how they are told, and to what ends.

Influence of postmodernism in Indian politics:

The Rise of Identity Politics

Contemporary Indian politics is increasingly defined by identities rooted in caste, religion, gender, language, and regional affiliations. Postmodernism embraces this plurality as a natural and essential feature of democratic life. Unlike traditional models that strive for uniformity, postmodernism values the coexistence of diverse and intersecting identities within the political sphere.

1. Questioning Grand Narratives

Overarching ideologies—such as nationalism, religious unity, or developmentalism—are now subject to critical scrutiny. The postmodern critique emphasizes that no single narrative can encapsulate the experiences of all communities. Each group possesses its own unique historical trajectory, social context, and cultural perspective, necessitating a more localized and inclusive approach to political discourse.

2. **The Role of Social Media in Narrative Creation**

In the digital age, political engagement extends far beyond traditional spaces like rallies or parliamentary debates. Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools where politicians, parties, and citizens alike construct and circulate their own narratives. This aligns with the postmodern notion of the “relativity of truth,” where multiple, often conflicting, truths exist simultaneously in the public sphere.

3. **Politics as Performance and Spectacle**

In a postmodern political landscape, the image of a leader often takes precedence over ideological substance. The branding of politicians, choreographed public appearances, and emotionally charged speeches play a central role in shaping political discourse. These performative elements reflect the shift toward spectacle, where perception and presentation dominate policy or ideological depth.

4. **The Expansion of Populism**

Postmodern politics places significant emphasis on emotional resonance, symbolic communication, and a direct, often unmediated, connection with the masses. This has contributed to the rapid rise of populism in India, where leaders engage public sentiment through cultural narratives, identity-based appeals, and anti-elite rhetoric.

5. **Blurring Boundaries between Truth and Fiction**

In the current media ecosystem, factual reporting is frequently entangled with propaganda, speculation, or visual manipulation. Postmodernism understands this as the “construction of truth,” where truth is not fixed or absolute but shaped by perspective, context, and discourse.

6. **Amplifying Marginalized Voices**

Postmodern theory provides an epistemological space for the inclusion of voices historically silenced or sidelined—Dalits, Adivasis, women, and other marginalized communities. Their increased visibility and political representation are key features of India’s evolving democratic narrative, in which difference is not just acknowledged but actively engaged.

7. **Reinterpretation of Historical and Cultural Symbols**

Political actors increasingly draw upon national icons such as B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sardar Patel, as well as religious and mythological symbols, recontextualizing them to suit contemporary agendas. This dynamic re-reading reflects the postmodern approach, where symbols are not fixed but evolve with changing political and cultural contexts.

Challenges to Democratic Institutions and Rational Discourse:

In the postmodern political landscape, public discourse has increasingly shifted from rational deliberation to emotional and relativistic expression. This is particularly evident in Indian politics, where emotive appeals, symbolic actions, and identity-driven rhetoric frequently overshadow structured, fact-based argumentation. This transformation aligns with postmodernism's fundamental scepticism toward absolute truths and its embrace of multiplicity and subjectivity [16]. While such pluralism allows for a broader range of voices to be heard, it often comes at the cost of coherence and consensus.

This shift has significantly impacted traditional institutions of rational discourse. Parliament, mainstream media, and academic forums—once pillars of democratic dialogue and reasoned debate—are increasingly being drawn into the realm of spectacle and polarization. Rather than functioning as deliberative spaces, these institutions are often instrumentalized to stage confrontations and dramatic displays, further deepening ideological divides. As political actors prioritize emotional resonance over logical consistency, the prospects for compromise and shared understanding continue to erode.

The democratic implications of this transformation are far-reaching. In the absence of a rational public sphere, mechanisms of accountability are weakened. Political engagement is increasingly driven by affective loyalty rather than informed critique, reducing citizenship to a matter of emotional affiliation. This environment enables the proliferation of misinformation and fosters conditions conducive to populist and authoritarian politics [17]. Ultimately, the erosion of deliberative democratic culture under postmodern influence raises critical questions about the future resilience of democratic institutions in India and beyond.

Criticism of Postmodernism in Politics:

While postmodernism has undoubtedly broadened the scope of political expression and enhanced inclusivity by legitimizing diverse voices and localized experiences, it has also

attracted substantial criticism for contributing to the erosion of coherent political discourse. A central concern lies in its fundamental rejection of grand narratives and its embrace of epistemological pluralism, which can undermine the shared normative frameworks essential for constructive democratic dialogue. When all perspectives are treated as equally valid, regardless of their grounding in empirical evidence or adherence to democratic principles, the result can be a fragmented and incoherent public sphere [18].

This relativistic stance complicates policymaking and governance, as it challenges the possibility of reaching consensus or establishing benchmarks for evaluating policy outcomes. In such an environment, decision-making processes may become paralyzed by competing claims that resist reconciliation. Critics argue that this radical relativism creates fertile ground for manipulation by populist leaders, who often employ emotionally charged yet misleading narratives to circumvent institutional checks, evade accountability, and suppress critical scrutiny [19].

Furthermore, postmodernism's scepticism toward objectivity threatens the authority and legitimacy of institutions that depend on shared norms and fact-based reasoning—such as the judiciary, media, and scientific community. While postmodern thought offers valuable tools for critiquing dominant ideologies and empowering marginalized groups, its reluctance to commit to stable standards of truth and justice raises troubling questions about the long-term sustainability of democratic governance. Without commonly accepted criteria for evaluating claims or resolving disputes, maintaining a fair and functional democratic order becomes increasingly difficult.

Conclusion

Postmodernism provides a useful lens to understand the evolving nature of Indian political culture. It highlights the shift from unified ideologies to fragmented, identity-based, and performative politics, shaped by pluralism and digital media. This transformation has enabled greater inclusion, allowing marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. However, it also poses challenges to democratic discourse. The rise of emotion-driven politics and relativism can erode rational debate, consensus, and institutional trust. In a postmodern era, truth becomes contested, making it harder to build shared understandings. To navigate this complex landscape, India must strike a balance embracing diversity while upholding democratic values such as critical thinking, reasoned debate, and accountability.

Strengthening civic education and media literacy is crucial to resisting the pitfalls of post-truth politics. India's democratic future depends on adapting postmodern insights while remaining anchored in its core democratic ideals: justice, rationality, and collective responsibility.

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