

Chapter 48

Cultural Political System: Popular Culture and Films in Indian Election Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

The use of popular culture of music, dance, songs, theatre, videos and films for electioneering has been part of the Indian election process. Politics has been the narrative of Indian cinema since the beginning of century where political themes, political roles and political issues were exemplified through lead roles of politicians, enactment of political scenes, political satires and songs. This chapter examines the role of film artists in politics, popular political songs in films and campaign films that have expanded the levels of traditional and new media campaigning in India. Films and songs in the films glorify the country, arouse patriotism and whenever needed expose social issues such as high prices, corruption, feudalism, and other political issues. In the process, political campaign films became a way of marketing parties and candidates. This further characterizes the future of the political cultural system and the political economy of Indian cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens gain political knowledge, develop partisan affiliations, and acquire a more compelling sense of civic duty as a result of political campaign messages. Political communication has been extensively studied and researchers have examined the multiple creative and media strategies that political parties across the world are using, and spending millions of dollars to reach their ultimate goal of getting elected to the highest positions (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Chun & Author, 2014; Diamond & Bates, 1988; Dyson, 2016; Kluver, 2007; Park et al., 2000; Takeshita & Makami, 1995; Karan, 2009; Rice & Atkin, 2013; Wang, 2010; Willnat & Aw, 2009).

Schoening and Kasper (2012) have studied the use of music in the context of American political campaigns and state a number of reasons why music is popularly used to arouse voter interest and gather support for candidates during elections. Going beyond campaigns, they also discuss the inevitable rela-

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tionship between politics and music, and argue that one of the foremost reasons for using music in election campaigns is that “[music] creates emotional states within us, and it can even serve as a mnemonic device to aid our memories” (p. 1). The context of studying music and songs in films is well classified by Byerley (2013), who provides three main reasons why music is deployed in social and political protest: the ability of music to transcend barriers of communication; the ability of music to incorporate a variety of moods and tones, ranging from conciliatory to “confrontational” (p. 231); and its ability to “outwit censors” through the use of complex language and poetry (p. 231).

Providing a scientific basis for the use of music in political campaigns, Schoening and Kasper (2012) further state that “music is one of the key connections we have to the emotional center of our brain” (p. 4). The authors quote several studies to show how listening to music leads to physiological changes in the body, and can also induce emotional states such as happiness or sadness. Thus, the use of music is not merely an advertising tool that candidates use during elections but also a powerful medium of forming deep-seated emotional connections with their electorate. In the political context, Schoening and Kasper (2012) state that music can be used as an effective tool for the public to recognize who the candidates are and possibly even sway one’s vote. In essence, music can help foster an emotional connection between a candidate and the electorate, thus creating a “bond” between them (p. 19).

Schoening and Kasper (2012) and Byerley (2013), have constructed analytical frameworks that particularly apply to the Indian subcontinent, the largest democracy in the world. These frameworks deal with understanding how films with political themes and songs with political lyrics have been used in defining political communication messages, and in connecting with the electorate during elections. Songs are used to attract voters’ attention and may allow a candidate to create an emotional bond with the electorate. Repetitive and catchy lyrics and jingles used by a candidate or party can make it easier for voters to remember the candidate’s name, election symbol and qualities. Furthermore, Schoening and Kasper (2012) draw out an innate connection between music and religious activities. Music, according to the authors, “binds communities together...and [represents] their sense of collectivity” (p. 3). In an election campaign, a candidate essentially seeks the support of a large group of people. An election song can, thus, function as an anthem that binds people together, especially in a diverse society such as India, where films and film music are the opium of the masses.

Indian election films with songs are slickly produced with music and lyrics eulogizing the leaders and parties and transmitted through multiple media channels with aggressive marketing strategies. The great political circus of campaigning increases with celebrities, sports and film personalities, corporate leaders, social activists, and even animals being roped in to reach out to the electorate, leaving the voter wondering at times for whom to cast their vote or whether not to vote at all. The big business of political advertising also attracts advertisers, public relations personnel, media strategists, filmmakers, and theatre artists with popular music and songs, which are ‘potent’ media (Friedman, 2013) to package the candidates and parties for maximum appeal to the diverse populations in countries such as India.

This chapter on India presents an in-depth analysis of how the popular culture of films, music, and songs are being used in political campaigning and how that has become part of the cultural political system in marketing politicians (Ganti, 2003; Gopal & Sen, 2008; Karan, 2013; Kjørness, 2014, Verma, 2015).

The case study method was used to provide the background in this chapter. In addition, this study is based on a qualitative content analysis (Wimmer & Dominick, 2009) of a purposive sample of: (a) twenty songs in Indian political feature films produced between 1949 to 2015; (b) twenty songs in films that were purposely produced as political communication instruments and used by political parties for elections at both national and regional levels in India, from 2009 to 2015. At the national level were

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