



Celebrity Politics: A Study of The Performance

N. Shama Rao

M.A., M.Phil., (Ph.D) Department of English, University of Hyderabad,

Rajender Pondra

Ph.D in English (Linguistics & Phonetics), The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

Gajula Kumar

Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the ways in which the celebrity politics has changed the nature of perception of politics in modern democracy, where initially a leader or party is judged on the basis of their policies; now it is based on their performances on the political platform. We would like to argue that this transformation has been brought about by ingestion of elements of popular culture (like theatre, fans etc.) into the political realm. This essay is situated in the Indian context focusing on the election campaign from 1st March 2009 to 31st March 2009. We will illustrate our argument by choosing examples (mostly articles and images) from the Hindu Newspaper within this time frame.

"The breakdown of traditional social structures under the strain of modernization has created the need for a form of political communication in which new symbolic realities have to be created containing symbolic templates of heroes and villains, honoured values and aspirations, histories and mythologies and self definition." (Paolo Mancini and David Swanson, 1996,9)

KEYWORDS : Celebrity Politics

Introduction

Celebrity politics is not an entirely new phenomenon in Indian context. We have had lot of actor-turned-politicians like MGR and Jayalalitha in Tamilnadu, NTR and now Chiranjeevi in Andhra Pradesh etc., who have established grand political dynasties and who continue to exert influence at the centre. On the other hand there have also been celebrities like Smruthi Irani, Govinda, Vinod Khanna, Dhara Singh etc., who have miserably failed to leave their mark in politics. We have also had politicians like Lalu Prasad Yadav ventured into popular culture (by acting in a movie called Padmasree Lalu Prasad Yadav) and other leaders who have enjoyed the support of various celebrities like Hema Malini, Jaya Bacchan, Paresh Rawal etc. to enhance the prospects of their political career. These examples establish the fact that link between the popular culture and the political representation is not a very recent one. But from 2004 election onwards there has been a considerable increase in the number of celebrities venturing into the realms of politics (Trend –Spotting: Image conscious politician). With the media camera constantly focused on them they extend their 'performance' from the reel to real life. Beginning with the definition of celebrity politics We will explore the ways in which the celebrity politicians perform by manipulating the elements of popular culture.

Celebrity Politician

To borrow the definition given by John Street in his essay "Celebrity Politics: the Popular Culture and Political Representation," celebrity politicians are of three kinds.

Those who move from show business to politics. E.g. Actor Chiranjeevi who left his acting career entered into politics with his party Praja Rajyam. (Celebrity Politician-1)

Entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent people but who does so without seeking or acquiring elected office. E.g. NTR Jr. campaigning for TDP. (Celebrity Politician-2)

Those with career in politics making use of artifacts, icons and expertise of popular culture. E.g. Congress using the popular song "Jai ho" from Slumdog Millionaire as its campaign song, Amar Singh cast in Dev Anand film. (The Hindu March 25th, 2009) (Celebrity Politician-3)

All three establishes the link between the politics and culture as each borrows from the other. In this paper We will illustrate the theory of performance with respect to the first two categories of celebrity politics and towards the end look at the language of celebrity politics.

Celebrity Politician: Case-1

As a case study for this we are examining popular actor –turned-politician Chiranjeevi and his party Praja Rajyam which drew huge crowds during the general elections. Chiranjeevi comes from the back ground of popular culture, films. One of the cult-figure in Tollywood, he has a huge fan following in and outside Andhra Pradesh. In mid-2008 he left his acting career and ventured into politics by launching a new party called Praja Rajyam, with all grandiose. He is an instance of actor-turned –politician who moves from films to public sphere, endorsing himself as the representative of the common masses there by extending his heroic performances from the reel life to real life. Despite having no prior experience in social sphere or politics people gathered in lakhs to attend his political rallies and road shows to catch a glimpse of their idol and see him perform as hero in real life. He works through his charm and charismatic personality and constantly reiterates his background in films through certain gestures. His case reinstates Postman's (1987, 4, 129) argument (this is also quoted in John Street's essay) that "appearance and image have become dominant politics..."

According to John Street, "A politician engages in a performance that is intended to establish him or her as a person of qualities within the public space of demonstrable representation."

Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam had launched itself as a third alternative to TDP and Congress which has been the long standing parties in Andhra Pradesh. According to Diekema, a charismatic leader presents "an alternative to existing tensions and crisis." (Diekema, 1991) (Quoted in Pramod K Nayar's 'Seeing Star') Chiranjeevi presents himself as a solution to the failures of TDP and Congress. While the two party leaders of TDP and Congress come from the upper class, dominant caste families [Nara Chandrababu Naidu (TDP) and then party leader Y. S Rajashekar Reddy (Congress)], Chiranjeevi is from Kapus, a community registered as backward in Telangana region. The image he creates in the minds of the audience is that of an ordinary boy from a backward community who has achieved great success in life; a typical rags to riches story. He reiterates this fact through a series of mediated performances and gestures. The Hindu Newspaper during March of 2009 carried, once a week, at least one image of Chiranjeevi addressing the public. He is photographed as often standing amidst a huge crowd at an elevated position often with a crown on his head with bottom captions like 'Crowning Glory; Show is on' etc. (The Hindu, March 19 2009) suggesting that he is performing the role of the future potential benevolent ruler. His trademark gesture is wide open

hands with the thumbs up suggesting openness and upward mobility. (The Hindu, 1st, 19th and 28th March, 2009). His promise to the public is 'corruption free and balanced development.' Along with such images they also carried articles that reported accidents that often follow his rallies. A report said, 'Wall collapses at Chiru's road show' (The Hindu, 27th March, 2009). Reports of this nature –which are, to borrow Nayar's term anti-spectacle - instead of throwing a bad light on the party's responsibility in regulating the crowd, enhances their popularity. His worthiness is measured not by the social values he promotes but by audiences that gather around him to watch his performance and in turn perform for him; the captions that go with the image "Houseful" adds filmic dimension to the whole incident harping on his films which often ran houseful. In the above case it is not just him but the crowd also performs. This is also indicated by the nature of the crowd that gathers around a celebrity politician like Chiranjeevi and that of a traditional politician like Sonia Gandhi. The crowd in the case of former is often in a state of frenzy while in the case if latter it is more organised and regulated. For instance, we quote some of lines from the newspaper, '...people in thousands, especially youth turned up braving the sun...,' '... youth who thronged to have a glimpse of the politician...' (The Hindu, 2 March 2009). Violence that erupted as a result of dissonance by various Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) members who did not get listed was subverted to suit the popular image of the party. Allu Aravind responded to the incident as, 'dissonance only shows how popular PRP is and how eager aspirants are to work for the people under the PRP umbrella' (The Hindu, 30 March 2009).

The charisma of Chiranjeevi is not in his godly figure but also his placing of himself amidst the ordinary. The Hindu on March 12th carried an image of Chiranjeevi playing 'Holi' with common masses. By taking part in such popular festivals he brings himself down from the elevated position to the level of the ordinary. Majority of his fan comprise of youth and women. Chiranjeevi has tactfully consolidated the women's support by including gas cylinder and monthly grocery of Rs 100 in his list of freebies and there by catering to the domestic needs (The Hindu, 25 March 2009). While other parties like TDP offered TV that caters to leisure, Chiranjeevi has played upon the affect. David Marshall has argued that political celebrities work through a dualism of affective relations/ responses and rationalization. (Martshall 1997. 204-5) (quoted in Pramod K Nayar's Seeing Stars.) Here is not the issue at the stake as much as the emotional responses to it or the leader provokes. (Pramod K Nayar). To state an example the Hindu on March 4th 2009 published an image of Pavan Kalyan (Yuva Rajyam president which is an offshoot of Praja Rajyam) looking concerned at fluoride-affected child, the projects him as a sensitive leader who is aware of the sufferings of the mass. John Street in his essay *Celebrity Politics: Popular Culture and Political Representation* looks at these performers as representatives. The question he asks is "whether or in what sense can unelected person claim to "represent" popular view? (2004, 447) This leads us to examine the relation between celebrity (politicians) and their admirers and the question of fandom.

John Thompson has argued that being a fan is an important, even defining characteristic of modernity. It entails formation of relations of 'intimacy with distant other', (1995, 220-225) and this can be seen as a basis to a form of (political) representation (quoted in John Street essay). This representational relationship according to John Street is established by the 'affective' capacity of cultural performance. (447-448). Celebrity politics to a large extent work at the level of affect. The Hindu of 13th March had an image of Chiranjeevi wearing traditional namaz topi at the minority convention party on Thursday. This gesture is a way of tapping into the religious sentiments of minority Muslims. Electioneering speeches are frequently attempts to sway people via appeal to the sentiment. Appeals to caste, regional, linguistic and dynastic affiliations are appeals to the emotional component of the relationship between the leader and audience. (Pramod K Nayar: 106). The way in which he is addressed as 'Chiru' establishes an intimacy and closeness between his fans and himself despite his being at a distant. It gives them a sense of ownership.

Celebrity Politician: Case-II

At this point we would like to look at the second type of celebrity politician (CP-II). They are celebrities who campaign for certain political party or social cause without acquiring an elected office. The trend was set during 2004 elections when the TV and film stars set out to campaign for political parties or leaders. An immediate im-

pact of their presence is that they add to the glamour quotient of the party and hence are considered crowd gatherers. In most of the cases campaigning by these celebrities becomes news in itself and they often enjoy follow ups in these papers. After Chiranjeevi the celebrity politician that occupied the limelight was actor NTR Jr. who was campaigning rigorously for his late grandfather's Telugu Desam Party (TDP) until he was injured in an accident and had to drawback from the campaign. Though he is only campaigning for the party he is looked upon as a rival to Chiranjeevi when it comes to attracting audience. ("The Show is on", The Hindu March 19th 200). In this case both the party and the celebrity, share each other's status- one lending his youthful charm to the party and elevating himself as a socially responsible citizen while the other gets the star power. Postman argues that 'it's not arguments that decide whether the voter should support a candidate but the 'style' i.e., how they looked, their fixed gaze and smile and how they delivered the one liner (postman 1987. 100) (quoted in John Street's essay). It's interesting to look at the performance by NTR Jr. which is tightly scripted. NTR Jr. appears for campaign clad in Khaki shirt and trousers to express his solidarity for the working class and the common man in the state. He consistently plays upon the affect. The Hindu on 14th March carried an image of NTR Jr. interacting with old tribal women. This action projects the humanly qualities in him making him a compassionate and sensitive person. The photograph also invokes the image of a mother-son relation and sensitivity to marginalised communities. Interestingly the audience reaction to such performance is translated to reaction to the party when asks the people to decide between the 'grand old' Congress and the 'young' Telugu Desam. The Hindu of March 20th reported that, "NTR Jr. ... struck to the party's script often breaking onto moustache-twirling thigh-thumping show, giving to the demands of the Party's cadre." In other words he performs to the demands of the audience and the media that dictates the qualities of a leader. However unlike Chiranjeevi at no point does he try to understate his star power or try to separate himself from films. In fact the Hindu had coverage of backstage process as well. The paper on March 18th carried an article which said, "Harsh weather conditions fail to deter NTR Jr." It pictured him sitting inside an air conditioned bus, with a laptop, preparing a speech for the next campaign session. This was followed by another image a week later which said, "tired and tested- much needed break" (The Hindu, March 27th) which showed him resting in between the campaigns. These carefully mediated performances at the backstage add to the image of NTR Jr. as an actor elevating him from a star to that of a socially responsible actor who is working for a cause. The heroism and noble characteristics in the reel life is transferred to the real. These images at once raise him to the level of star and also humanize him. He becomes 'extraordinarily ordinary'.

Language of Celebrity Politics

Language of (celebrity) politics constantly draws upon with the language of popular culture as the latter provides an easy access to the psyche of mass. The language is highly dramatic as they borrow from popular mediums like cinema, local culture, mythologies, music etc. The Congress recently bought the rights of the song 'Jai ho' from Slumdog Millionaire as its campaign song. The image 'Oscar inspired' (The Hindu, March 5th 2009) blends A R Rahman, a popular icon with Chief Minister Y S Rajashekar Reddy. The Hindu on 30th March carried an article, "Actors getting down to business," where Congress roped in the services of Tollywood actors during the party campaign. Using mythologies these actors showcased the achievements of the Government and mocked the opposition. In all the above examples the language of politics is blended with that of popular culture. Most of the descriptions about the celebrity politician are weaved in a language of high drama. They often echo the heroic image from films and therefore attach those qualities to the leader.

"Chiranjeevi's leadership was a historical necessity in State. Describing the elections as crusade, he exhorted each of the cadre to become a well trained soldier." (The Hindu, 1st March, 2009). They constantly attempt to use mythologies or dialogues from blockbuster mythological films which goes down very well with the audience. The language of popular culture is intended to lure the audience and therefore market the product (here it is the Party). The Practice of freebies is an important example for this. Parties try to lure the audience by offering TV's, rice, gas cylinders etc. that instantly attracts the audience. As discussed by John Street, politics become marketing.

Conclusion

Celebrity politicians are under pressure to recreate their image as a capable leader, given the fact they are constantly under media scrutiny that watches and judges them. Their visibility can be ensured only with a consistent audience, achieved through sustained performance and gestures by these politicians. This crucial relationship between the Celebrity Politician and their audience is facilitated by the elements of popular culture. The audience is brought under the spell of the star thereby diverting their attention from serious issues.

References

1. The Hindu Newspaper, Hyderabad edition from 1st March to 31st March, 2009.
2. Diekema, D. A. 1991. "Televangelism and Mediated Charismatic relationship." *Social Science Journal*. 28 (2): 143-62. Print.
3. Mancini, P. and Swanson, D. 1996. *Politics, Media and modern Democracy: Introduction*.
4. Marshall, P. D. 1997. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. New Delhi. Sage. Print.
5. Nayar, P. K. 2009. *Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society and Celebrity Culture*. New Delhi. Sage. Print.
6. Postman, N. 1987. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. London. Methuen. Print.
7. Street, J. 2004. "Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation." *British Journal of International Relations*. 6: 435-52. Print.
8. Thompson, J. 1995. *Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of Media*. Cambridge. Polity. Print.
9. The Glamorization of Indian Politics – Sunday TOI- The Times of India, 21, March 2004.