

Post-truth and the Return of Fascism

Sebastian Vattamattam

Introduction

The Semitic myth of a savior/messiah has played a prominent metaphorical role in the socio-political history of the West. In the period of the Holy Roman Empire, the Christian God played the role of the Messiah. In the period of capitalist modernity, Reason played the same role, of course with the help of God, suitably reshaped by theology (the science of God). God and Reason conspired against Nature and the humans branded as pagans. This created innumerable problems and Fascism and Communism emerged as reactions against that. After the defeat of fascism and the collapse of the Soviet model of Communism, there arose a new world order with the World Market as the new messiah.

This paper posits that in each of these periods, the ethos has been largely dictated by the messiah and that the new messiah, World Market, has caused the rise of the new socio-cultural phenomenon, called post-truth. The emergence of Fascism in many parts of the world, including India, is mainly caused by the resultant widespread cynicism. Jacques Lacan's ideas are substantially borrowed to develop the conceptual tools for the analysis.

Preliminary Notions

The Symbolic Order

A symbol is a sign in which the signifier gives the impression that it coincides with a signified. The tricolor is a visual symbol of our country. Disrespect for that makes us hurt because we have the impression that the flag itself is our nation.

There are certain signifiers that deeply influence our lives and social ties, but not necessarily have any meaning. They are what Lacan calls 'master signifiers'. One's identity is deeply associated with those of them, related to unquestionable values and ideals. In the minds of the Christians, the 'cross' is a master signifier. Its influence is far beyond its significance as a torture device.

A myth is a sign adorned with a halo of transcendental meaning. It is the related narratives in our unconscious that give it the mythical effect. For example, 'Gomatha' is a Hindu myth, rooted in the narratives about 'Kamadhenu', the celestial cow.

Every society has a public domain consisting of master signifiers, symbols, myths, and narratives. Lacan calls it the Symbolic Order or the big Other. It is a part of the unconscious, a censored version of our biography (Lacan, 2002).

Fact, Truth and the Ethical Dimension

Look at a 100 rupee note. The fact that it is a piece of paper can chemically be verified. But, at the same time, it is true that it can be exchanged for many things in the market. That is, in our Symbolic order, the rupee note is a symbol of anything that can be bought with it. This truth depends on our daily experience and our faith in the government, a part of the big Other. A fact becomes a truth only when it is embedded, as an object of faith, in the symbolic order, becoming the voice of the big Other.

Myths, deeply rooted in our collective unconscious, provide a symbolic interpretation of reality and a sense of truth. This makes one a human, riddled with the question of what one ought to

be. We must always be concerned about discerning the fact behind a myth. Otherwise, we may submit totally to the myth and get detached from the realities of life. On the other hand, if we ignore the myths in the light of scientific facts, we will be devoid of all the blessings of the myths, such as hope, solace, and ethical values.

Ego, Subjectivity, and Ideology

In the Lacanian view, my ego is my understanding of who I am. It is the result of the identifications and fantasies that happen in the mind and so it changes off and on like clothes that we wear one on the other. (Lacan, 1988, p.155)

On the other hand, subjectivity is one's self-awareness as an active being. We cannot always act as per the dictates of the ego. Our words and deeds are shadowed by unconscious forces from the symbolic order. This is what Žižek calls ideology (Žižek, 2002, p.35). This shows that there is an inner rupture between one's ego and subjectivity. This makes it impossible to have any chance of complete internal harmony. Consequently, the notion of a unified internal self becomes a mythical figure, which we may call the god-figure, in the Symbolic Order. It is capable of serving as a standard of integration for which one will perpetually strive. This is the basis of our ethical dimension that instills in us a desire to be what we ought to be. The 'right path' to that is dictated by the god-figure, acting as the representative of all the power-images in the unconscious.

There is another psychic realm called the Imaginary that makes one challenge the dictates of the god-figure and seek alternative paths, based on scientific truths and socio-political realities and personal interests. Freedom is not complete freedom from the big Other. Nor is it total surrender to it. Freedom is in our ability to question the dictates of the big Other, that are not in line with our historical and scientific facts and against the new value systems.

The West before Global Capitalism

The story of Exodus in the Bible presents Yahave as one who saves a chosen people from slavery to freedom under the leadership of Moses. On the way to the promised land, they surrender totally to the commands of Yahave, who sides with them in all their atrocities against the peoples they meet on the way. Moreover, he promises to send them a new Messiah.

The New Testament narratives project Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah, though he had to die on the cross. The two mythological figures, Yahave and Jesus, were molded into a new myth of God almighty by Christianity. This God became the supreme ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. In that period, human subjectivity and sense of truth were determined totally by one's subjection to God and its religiopolitical agents.

The French revolution replaced God by Reason as the most determinant factor in socio-political life in the West. Reason was gradually turned into a powerful myth by the narratives of capitalist modernity and science. Republican governments had only the role of Moses in the new exodus. Reason became the new Messiah, siding with the chosen white-skinned western people in their slave trade, colonial exploits and so on. Everywhere inequalities increased and democracies failed to address them. Countries like Italy and Germany could not keep pace with this new exodus. Also, everywhere there was widespread discontent due to capitalist exploitation. Two new political myths, Communism and Fascism emerged in this context, the first promising a global classless society and the second the global domination by a superior race, as the Aryan (Nordic) race in Germany.

World Market as the New Messiah

Market has a long history starting with the barter system. In the past, it was always closely guided by truth and the principle of equal exchange. We can see the same principle reflected in God-human relations also. Christians pray to their God to forgive them as much as they forgive their

enemies. In the more advanced stages of its growth, Market showed a greater influence on societal values, enhancing the hope of a better world. “The hope was that the invisible hand (of Market) would restrain human passions and produce a new society based on cool rationality, calculation, and restraint.” (Akos, 1993, p. 41).

The defeat of the fascist movement in the West and the collapse of the Soviet model of Communism led to the era of global capitalism. Liberalization liberated Market from the burden of political ethics, making it omnipotent, and globalization made it omnipresent, just as the Christian God. Now World Market has turned into the new messiah with no ethical foundation.

The Emergence of Post-truth

After the second world war, the US projected the myth of its being the guardian of democracy and enthroned itself as the supreme pontiff of the World Market. This myth was fortified by the narratives about American independence and civil war. The collapse of the Soviet Union made the US power unquestionable. Political myths like ‘dreaded terrorist’, ‘free market’, ‘encounter with the police’ and so on helped the US achieve militarization at the global level and economic and military world hegemony. (Kappen, 2002. Chapter 13)

Gradually democracy has given way to corporatocracy, with repercussions all over the world. As in business, profit is now the most covetable value in life. This new ethos is becoming globally part of the symbolic order. Agnotology, the science of mass production of ignorance, is gaining ground. Ignorance has a palliative effect on our morbid cynicism, enhanced by the ecological and political crises.

The declining American mythosphere was thoroughly shattered by the September 11 attacks in 2001, described by Encyclopedia Britannica as ‘the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil in U.S. history’. This symbolized the collapse of the American myth of the democratic world leader. In the frantic attempt to retaliate, the US started producing political lies on a large scale. This has inaugurated the post-truth era in the West. Post-truth denotes the new phenomenon of mass production of lies for political power. It reached its culmination with the American presidential elections of 2016 in which a businessman, Mr. Donald Trump came to power. During his election campaign, Trump claimed that American ‘media has been unbelievably dishonest.’ (Snyder, p.73). We know the media is the fourth pillar of democracy. Trump wanted to weaken that to make his lies sound true. Also, he repeatedly said, “I alone can solve it” or “I am your voice.” (Snyder, p.68). Thus, He was making himself the only messiah of Americans. Later it was proved that, during the campaign, 78 percent of his factual claims were false. Through fabricated lies, he made himself a grand myth in the symbolic order of US citizens, and it was this mythical figure that the people voted to power.

If we understand post-truth simply as the mass production of lies, then the fascist regimes in the past also did the same. That is why Snyder asserts that “in its philosophy, post-truth restores precisely the fascist attitude to truth’ and that ‘Post-truth is pre-fascism” (Snyder, p.70-71). But, in fact, post-truth is much more than large scale lie-production by the powers that be. In the present context, its impact on the people is equally important.

The oft-repeated political lies make the people at large indifferent to truth, the symbolic order gets shattered, and people are dehumanized. With no sense of truth, we cannot criticize power and this makes governments more authoritarian. The sense of reality derived from the Symbolic order is what Zizek calls social reality (Zizek, 2002, p.24). This, to a certain extent, stabilizes human subjectivity. The decline of the symbolic order leads to changes in the positions we take regarding any social reality. This shift in perspective is what Zizek calls the parallax view. (Zizek, 2006).

When I am writing this, the whole world is threatened with a possible war between the US and Iran. The US started the game on 3 January 2020, killing Iran’s Military Commander Soleimani

in an unexpected ariel attack. This was followed by the US president bombarding the whole world with utterances against Iran, and Iran countering this verbal attack with tirades against the US and also attacking the US military camps.

Now, the question is, 'Is there any truth in what the two sides are claiming?' How can we believe the US who devastated Iraq using the political lie of Iraq having hidden weapons of mass destruction? There was a recent joke on Social Media. A media-person is interviewing US President Donald Trump.

Media: Why did you invade Iraq?

Trump: We suspected they had weapons of mass destruction.

Media: OK, why did you attack Syria?

Trump: We suspected they had weapons of mass destruction.

Media: OK, then why don't you attack North Korea?

Trump: Hell... Are you crazy? We know they have weapons of mass destruction!!

But, what about Iran? Can we swallow the words of Iran that is reportedly funding clandestine Jihadi groups all over the world? I said 'reportedly', but how can we believe the reports in this era of fabricated paid news? So, how can we take a stable position that gives us a steady sense of truth?

The persistent hope of society about the future is called Utopia, a powerful myth in the collective unconscious. In the West, in the God-era, it was the Kingdom of God, in the Reason-era it was the rationally constituted New World Order, in Fascism a Golden Past and in Communism the Classless Society. Today, World Market promises the utopia of infinite consumption (Kappen, 2002, Chapter 13). As Zizek says in another context, "noble struggle for freedom and justice turned out to be little more than a craving for bananas and pornography". (Zizek, 2011, Introduction).

In the past, in each period, the utopia provided a basis for the notion of Truth. Kingdom of God, New World Order, the Golden Past or the Classless Society determined what is true and desirable. But now, the divine Market is causing the destruction of any notion of Truth. There step in new apostles of Untruth, with the promise of a new era, which in fact is the emerging post-truth era. Reduced permanently to be mere consumers, we are losing the ethical dimension that prompts us to be what we ought to be. Our commitment to truth and the hope of a better world are giving way to an unavoidable sense of disappointment. Again to quote Zizek, 'the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point'. (Zizek, 2011)

In electoral politics, truthfulness is becoming undesirable. The best example of this we can see in the US. The election of Donald Trump is qualified as the flowering of the post-truth landscape. (Ruth, 2016). He always seems to be acting cognizant of the fact that he is acting. This unusual trait adorns him with the mythical halo of a superhuman.

Post-truth and the Mass-media

Frequently shifting images on the TV screen hinder our sense of reality and continuity. We get a feeling that many things happen, but nothing really happens. Our world becomes eventless, as in nothing are we subjectively involved - a world of facts with no truth. Each story is a 'breaking' news, but nothing breaks into our hearts. We float in the waves, unaware of the sea.

Media play a leading role in the distortion of truth and the production of lies. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's mention of her 'decision fatigue' in an email, was distorted by Russian media as her being ill. (Snyder, p.97). Another media technique is to repeat certain phrases, for creating lies. Our Indian media frequently report of terrorists killed in Kashmir and we gradually get the feeling that everyone killed in Kashmir is a terrorist.

In this desperate situation, many are losing any hope of a better world and turn to esoteric religious practices. God has become the biggest shareholder in the spiritual industry. Instead of forgiveness, he sells heavenly blessings for higher profits.

Some others turn to nature worship with the hope of postponing the ecological catastrophe at least until they leave the mother earth. A much more terrifying fact is the emergence of neo-fascist movements all over the world, trying to revive and implement the ideology of Fascism, with some modifications. As in the past, they promote hatred, attack minorities, and try to create a fascist political state.

S & T Misused

S & T had a messianic role in the Reason-era. Scientific research was guided by certain ethical norms and commitment to truth. But in the present Market-era, profit becomes its only motive. Corporates, the Market apostles, are now funding researches, not intended to reveal the truth but to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of policymakers and voting citizens, resulting in the status quo. Tobacco corporations are funding research to disprove the correlation of smoking with lung cancer. Fossil fuel manufacturers are funding research that attributes climate change to natural causes, not human activities. (McComiskey, 2017, p.13).

Post Truth in India

India is culturally not fully integrated into the Market religion of global capitalism. One reason is our tradition of not having a monotheistic deity like the Semitic God, whose replica is the World Market. Another reason is our sense of time and history, radically different from that of the west. The market economy is closely linked with measurable time. Workers sell their time and employers are the owners of the working time of the workers. It creates a linear sense of time with no possibility of a return. Even for individuals, there is no return to life since the Semitic God allows no rebirth after death, but only exportation to hell or heaven.

But, the Indians have a long tradition, based on the theory of 'karma', that allows rebirth. This and the succession of 'yugas' instill in us a cyclic sense of time. It prevents us, at least in rural India, from falling into absolute hopelessness. Also, there is an Indian tradition of thinking of time as flowing from a vessel that is timeless and ever full of time. (Panikkar, 1976). Unlike in the west, even god is created by time in India. (Panikkar, 1977, p.217). So, we have always hope of returning to this world, which may take us back to a golden past.

This does not mean that India is totally free from post-truth. In the 1990s, India got politically baptized into the Market religion, which soon reflected in the dealings of our political rulers, in the form of large scale corruption. This disheartening situation brought into the field the dormant forces of the fascist movement, Hindutva. They produce lies as much as needed to distort socio-political facts for the production of political myths. Right from the schools, they start the brainwashing. In a class IV textbook, there is a lesson on emperor Ashoka. He is faulted for advocating 'ahimsa' that had a 'bad effect on the army', spreading cowardice, the state providing food to the Buddhist monks. "The preaching of Ahimsa had weakened north India" (GauravGatha for Class IV, SaraswatiShishuMandirPrakashan, Lucknow, 1992, pp. 30– 31). Here Buddhism and its basic tenet of non-violence are denigrated. "This prepares yet another ground for promoting hatred against the greatest apostle of ahimsa in modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, by the RSS (Mukherjee, 2008)

Fascism Redefined

After the second world war, there arose numerous so-called neo-fascist groups in many parts of the world, creating myths for political purposes. (Cassirer, 1979, p.236). We shall expand the definition of fascism to include all such groups also. Fascism is a socio-political phenomenon that redefines the nation, excluding some of the inhabitants or preventing the inclusion of immigrants, based on some mythical notion of 'purity' of race, religion, ethnicity and so on.

The 'purity' myths, in the collective unconscious, requires revitalization through rituals. The concentration camps in Nazi Germany symbolized the ritual purification of the nation. For a recent example, take the case of erecting walls to separate people. It has the ritual effect of dividing people on the basis of 'purity'. In the US, President Trump raised a wall separating 'impure' Mexicans from the 'pure' Americans. And when he visited India, prime minister Modi erected a wall separating and hiding slums from his counterpart. Slums in India contain a cross-section of all the 'impure' people that Hindutva wants to exclude.

A concomitant myth is that of a messiah. It was Mussolini in Fascist Italy and Hitler in Nazi Germany. Umberto Eco shows how Mussolini was made the Messiah. In 1942 when Eco was a schoolboy, in an elocution competition in the school, the topic was, 'Should we die for the glory of Mussolini and the immortal destiny of Italy?' (Eco, 1995).

Return of Fascism in the US and India

The US and India were infected by fascism in its early days in Europe. In 1924 the US government passed the 'Immigration Act of 1924' preventing immigration from Asian countries and restricting that from non-Asian countries. The law was not modified even to help the Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. On the other hand, Hitler's Nazi policies were inspired by the US. He writes in Part II of Mein Kampf, "The United States of America, where they absolutely forbid the naturalization of certain defined races, and thus are making a modest start in the direction of something not unlike the conception of the national state." (Quoted in Stanley, 2020)

In September 1935, Hitler passed the Nuremberg Laws, granting only second-class citizenship to Jews. After coming to power, President Trump's first attorney general called for a return to the fascist Immigration Act of 1924. One of the first executive orders signed by Trump was, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry" banning immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries. And now our BJP led government has passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, preventing immigration of Muslims from neighboring countries. India seems to be trying to overcome the US on the fascist track.

V D Savarkar, founder of the Hindutva movement, took the Nazi treatment of German Jews as a model for the Hindutva policy towards India's Muslim population. Responding to a question from about his leadership qualities, prime minister Modi said that he thinks of it as given by God, and added that he himself often wonders from where he gets new ideas. (Mukhopadhyay, 2013)

Conclusion

We have seen how post-truth is ideologically related to the monotheism of the World Market and how the shattering of the symbolic order has paved the way to fascism in the US and India. We shall conclude this paper by pointing out a major difference between these two examples. President Trump is only a trump card in the hands of international corporates. But, that's not the case with Prime minister Modi. He is a well-groomed product of the RSS. This fact makes the Indian situation more precarious. "In an era of post-truth, we must challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a

factual matter and challenge falsehoods before they are allowed to fester”. (Mcintyre, 2018, p.156).
What else can we do?

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Vattamattam House, Vallikkadu Road, Ettumanoor
919495897122