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The era of celebrity politics and its echoes

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Abstract

In the era of social media where each and every person is focused on promotional gimmicks and influencing people across the world, a new kind of politics is also taking cognizance. This is the era of celebrity politics where famous people start interfering with regional and national politics which leads to certain consequences on that political system. The paper tries to analyze these consequences along with correlating the democratic concept of welfare, development and progress to the interference of celebrities in politics by analyzing certain case studies. The paper also tries to analyze whether there could be an alternate approach adopted in electing the representatives.

Keywords: Social media, celebrity politics, political system, democratic

Introduction

In modern India, certain people are worshipped as gods, they are adored and celebrated wherever they go, and they have the ability to inspire millions of people with a single Instagram post or a remark on Twitter. These include film stars, sportspersons, soap opera artists, reality show contestants, etc. These are what we call celebrities. In the era of social media, practically anybody can become a celebrity. Scholars from a variety of areas, however, argue that distinct characteristics constitute this sort of person, the first and most general of which is that they are widely known. The term "celebrity" derives from the Latin words "celebritas" (fame) and "celeber" (frequented), and therefore a celebrity is renowned for his "know-ness" and has a name that "requires no further identification." What distinguishes celebrities is their ability to utilize their popularity to bring attention to and promote the consumption of a certain product, whether it be a television program, record, athletic event, or other consumer commodity linked with their activities, abilities, or pictures. In sum, it is the business aspect that differentiates celebrities from the just renowned ^[1]. But this commercial element of the celebrities is no longer only limited to products, movies, or TV shows, as we have seen a sharp rise in celebrities engaging in political activities and also participating in elections over the years.

Elections are the bedrock of democracy, and democracy is intended to be the bedrock of a progressive, liberal, and welfare-oriented society. An election, in my opinion, must satisfy certain conditions before it can be called, you know, an "election". Consider this: I'm putting an identity question ^[2] to the idea of "election" (What is it about X that makes it X and not Y or Z).

Let us recollect what it is about elections that distinguishes them from, say, selection, or recruiting. The answer becomes clearer: an election is a procedure in which people "vote" for the person they wish to represent them in parliament or other legislative body. It varies from recruiting in the general element of the public being the masters rather than just a group of individuals, as well as the fact that the people would not have to pay in the election process, which cannot be true for the recruiting process (taxes are not fees). The distinction between selection and election, on the other hand, is a blurry line that can only be determined after carefully examining both. It can be said that election is a form of selection in which people "select" their most desired candidate but the main difference between the two lies in the manner in which people "select" their candidates and the reason why they "select" them. A "selection" could be made between any individuals, objects, animals, or even planetary bodies for a variety of reasons; a "selection" does not have to be made between a limited set of options, and a "selection" could be motivated by any possible reason, such as "who is your favorite playback singer?",

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"Which fruit do you like?", or "which dog would you prefer to adopt?". In each of these queries, an individual "selects" the finest available choice for the goal that a specific selection necessitates. An election, on the other hand, could be viewed as a specific type of selection where people choose the person whom they think will best represent them from a limited set of options available to them on the ballot and it is motivated by a very specific reason- "Who is going to represent me the best, and make decisions on behalf of me the best, and who is going to govern the society the best for the next 5 years?". So, it becomes clear that election is a specific type of selection motivated by the concept of good governance and development.

From the above paragraph, we could conclude that

- The election is a process of selection
- The selection is from a limited set of options
- The selection is done for the representation, governance, and development of the society

So, the question which arises now is whether elections could still fulfill their purpose of the democratic outcome when celebrities begin interfering with political activities.

Research Problem

The phenomenon of celebrities entering politics has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, with many high-profile figures leveraging their fame and influence to gain political power. However, the impact of celebrity politics on the political landscape and its potential long-term consequences remain largely unexplored. This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between celebrity culture and politics, and its implications for democratic governance and public life.

Research questions

- Would democracy be subjected to threat when celebrities start interfering with the politics and political system?
- Would elections have the desired democratic outcome intended and motivated by progress, development, and welfare when celebrities contest in the election?
- Should there be an alternate approach adopted in electing the representatives by alienation from any outward interference like arts, religion, sports, charisma, etc.?

Research Objectives

- To study the effect of celebrities interfering with politics
- To discuss various case studies of instances when celebrities contested the election, along with their results
- To analyze whether there could be an alternate approach adopted in electing the representatives

Research Methodology

The paper uses secondary research to collect data related to election results. The paper also uses certain articles and papers to further understand the voting behaviors and pattern.

Research Gap

Although many papers have come trying to analyze the

celebrity politics, this paper is one of the few which tries to correlate democracy with celebrity politics and tries to analyze them. The paper also ends with analyzing different methodology that could be adopted in electing representatives

Research Limitations

The paper is limited only to Indian political landscape with respect to the case studies done. Its application however could be done for any political system. The paper is also limited in the case studies it has chosen to include, and this is simply because most of the case studies are repetitive in their application to this paper.

Review of Literature

The paper refers an article called "celebrity and politics" written by Samantha Majic, Daniel O'Neill and Michael Bernhard through which it deduces the meaning of the word "celebrity". This paper's main focus was on analyzing how celebrities exert their power on politics.

The paper also borrows some ideas from "Candidate traits and voting behavior" written by Michael Mccoby where he talks about what attracts voters to certain political leaders. He discusses why one political leader can make a voter feel safe while another can instil security by showing leadership through thoughtfulness and reasoned knowledge of the issues.

The paper has some ideas incorporated from "Candidate traits and voting behaviour" written by Robert Ployhart where he focuses on how agreement versus consistency relates to voting behaviour. His research shows that people vote more for candidates that they agree with rather than who they think is more consistent on the issues. He says that consistency is something politicians like to think is important, as does the general public, but voters actually behave in terms of who agrees with them now.

Both these works are under a study termed "2004 Election: Experts Explain the Psychology Behind Why People Vote the Way They Do" whose principle focus was dealing with questions such as 'Do political candidates who have certain traits attract more voters? What influences young versus older voters? Are voters motivated by the issues a candidate supports or by the candidate's personality? Can campaign advertisements really change a voter's mind?'

The paper examines the alternate voting approaches from a commentary called "Three Alternative Voting Methods: Pros And Cons" written by Kirsten Elliot where she talks about different kind of voting methods and the conditions under which an election could be termed successful. She opines that the voting method should consistently elect a candidate who makes the average voter feel satisfied with the outcome-not one who leads to further political polarization.

Analysis

Celebrity Politics: A threat to democracy?

As we saw from the above paragraph, an election is done for representation, governance, and development of society, but how often do people select the person of their choice in elections on this premise? People have this tendency to forget whatever happened in the last 4 and a half years and just remember the stuff that happened 6 months prior to the elections in India. A study in America found out that certain characteristic traits including gender, ethnicity, race, age,

etc. matter more in elections [3] and the same could effectively be implied for the Indian political landscape too. This process by which we select our voters motivated by things unimportant for governance and development already partially diminishes the purpose of democracy. H.L Mencken says that democracy is a theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard, but do people really know what they want? Numerous studies as mentioned earlier suggest that people respond to the emotional side of the brain rather than the logical one when voting [4] and I am talking this without inferring the context of celebrities, but rather excluding them. When we already have a situation where people are unable to vote sensibly, picture our favorite movie star or sports figure advocating for the worst conceivable candidate on the ballot or perhaps competing himself/herself.

The core problem of celebrity politics could be categorized into the psychological effect they could have on the voters and also the inefficiency to govern. Let's discuss this furthermore with some case studies.

When it comes to psychological influence, one of the most recent examples I can think of is the Mandya Lok Sabha Elections of 2019, in which two celebrity politicians competed against each other while also earning a large

number of celebrity supporters for either side. Sumalatha Ambareesh, widow of late Kannada superstar Dr. Ambareesh contested the Lok Sabha elections when the death of her beloved husband was very fresh in the minds of the people of Mandya, who adored their superstar. The important thing to note here is that Ms. Sumalatha contested the elections as an independent candidate, without aligning herself with any ideology. Ms. Sumalatha, who was formerly a popular actress, had her own fan base in addition to her late husband's. Against her stood the power of the current government, a coalition of JDS and Congress, and Chief Minister Mr. Kumaraswamy decided to run his son, Nikhil, in the elections, who was also a promising film star at the time, which meant he, too, was a celebrity politician. Furthermore, several prominent actors and politicians traveled to Mandya to campaign for both competitors, most notably Mr. Darshan and Mr. Yash, two of the most popular Kannada actors at the time, who came to support Ms. Sumalatha and stood alongside her throughout her campaign. What followed next was a brutal war of words from both sides, but interestingly, almost none of those was about the aforementioned democratic outcome of development, progress, or welfare. The results of the election are given below:

Table 1: Mandya Lok Sabha Election Results 2019

Candidate	Party	EVM Votes	Migrant Votes	Postal Votes	Total Votes	% of Votes	Status
Sumalatha Ambareesh	Independent	702167	0	1493	703660	51.02	Winner
Nikhil Kumaraswamy	Janata Dal (Secular)	576545	0	1239	577784	41.89	1st Runner-up
M.L. Shashikumar	Independent	18323	0	0	18323	1.33	2nd Runner-up
Nanjundaswamy	Bahujan Samaj Party	12481	0	64	12545	0.91	3rd Runner-up
Sumalatha	Independent	8898	0	4	8902	0.65	4th Runner-up
M. Sumalatha	Independent	8542	0	0	8542	0.62	5th Runner-up
C. Lingegowda	Independent	6408	0	0	6408	0.46	6th Runner-up [5]

Although many other variables may have played a substantial effect in determining the winner of this particular contest, the data suggests that the candidate with the most "star value" won, which is amazing given that she was contesting independently against the might of a current government. People appeared to overlook in this case that Ms. Sumalatha had no prior experience in politics or administration, nor did her opponent Mr. Nikhil, yet both of them managed to garner more than 92% of the vote share.

Another intriguing example involves Jr. NTR and Kodali

Nani of Andhra Pradesh's Gudivada seat. Kodali Nani was a close personal friend of the actor Jr. NTR and ran in the 2004 state elections for the Telugu Desham Party (TDP), with which Jr. NTR and most of his family members are affiliated. This clearly implied that Jr. NTR would push hard for his party and his personal pal. The elections were won by Kodali Nani, but the fascinating aspect of this case is how residents said that they only voted for Nani because Jr. NTR supported him.

Table 2: 2004 Elections results of Gudivada Constituency

Sr. No	Candidate	Party	Total Vote
1	Srivenkateswara Rao Kodali(nani)		
	Male 32 yr. GEN	TDP Telugu Desam	57843
2	Eswar Kumar Katari		
	Male 44 yr. GEN	INC Indian National Congress	48981
3	Talluri Peda Nageswara Rao		
	Male 42 yr. SC	BSP Bahujan Samaj Party	1934

Kodali Nani is no longer a member of the TDP; instead, he is a member of the YSR Congress, and Jr. NTR remains a supporter of the TDP. Nani may have won successive elections on his own after the 2004 elections, but the initial election he won was owing to his party affiliation and relationship with NTR, both of which have deteriorated over time. Doesn't this imply that those who voted for Kodali

Nani for the first time were influenced, if not deprived, of a better administration because their favorite celebrity campaigned for Nani? This data demonstrates how individuals are psychologically affected when celebrity politicians and supporters interfere with their political system. The same could be said for the case of Shatrugna Sinha too, whose campaign included him reciting some of

his iconic dialogues from his movies. I'm not suggesting that voting for these individuals or celebrities running for office is bad; I'm simply saying that democracy would be jeopardized if people forget why they are voting in the first place.

Let us now consider the second problematic component of celebrity politics: the inability to rule, or rather the lack of basic qualities to be a people's representative. The Indian constitution specifies the conditions required to run for offices, such as age, citizenship, and voter registration, however, this does not imply that these are the only criteria. There are certain unwritten criteria as well, such as a purpose committed to the welfare of people, leadership characteristics, ideas and their execution, and so on. It so happens that when celebrities begin their political careers, all of these unwritten prerequisites tend to fade away. Take the example of the actor-turned-politician- turned actor Govinda who contested the Lok Sabha elections of 2004 from the constituency of Mumbai North.

Govinda was a household name for Bollywood moviegoers in the early 2000s, and the popularity he had in Mumbai North, which also had a large number of voters from the 'bhaiya' community to which he belonged, resulted in a large number of supporters for the film star during his campaign. He gained so much support that he was able to beat Ram Naik, a five-time MP and union minister at the time. Govinda was elected as a member of parliament for five years, which is a great responsibility in my opinion. However, Govinda's record as a people's representative was dismal. Of the 303 sittings held in the parliament from 2004 to 2008, the film star attended only 37 sittings^[6] in which he spoke on only two occasions amounting to a total of almost 4 minutes. His track record was so bad that the inhabitants of his hometown were relieved that he would not be running in the next elections. But what about the five years that Mumbai North residents lost? There may have been many concerns that needed to be addressed immediately in parliament, but it so happened that their representative was too busy signing new films and shooting for them to be present in the Lok Sabha. Being a people's representative is not a part-time job, yet when celebrities become representatives, it is common for them to be preoccupied with their other professions, neglecting the responsibility of an MP or an MLA. It became apparent that Govinda had no unwritten criteria of purpose or commitment where in an interview in 2013, he admitted that it was a 'mistake' to enter politics. The point is not only about Govinda, the case is the same in most of the celebrity politicians across India, except a few remarkable persons who have used their gift of fame to good use. This list could only include a handpicked number of celebrities like Nandamuri Balakrishna of Hindupur constituency of Andhra Pradesh, who to this day remains one of the most celebrated actors of South India and is equally beloved as a representative too with him carrying out various development programs in Hindupur^[7].

Another significant concern with celebrities becoming politicians or politicians employing celebrities in their campaigns is that they may easily exploit their enormous popularity or the celebrities' popularity to cover up inefficiency or corruption in their administration. We have lots of examples of this, like that of late actor Ambareesh who became a minister for housing affairs and for Mandya district in Karnataka from 2013-2017, and his performance

as a minister was too dismal, with many reports suggesting that he be dropped from the minister portfolio due to various reasons such as not been available to people's vows, procrastination in starting housing works, etc. Ambareesh performed in five films during this time, in addition to making appearances and references on television. In all of these roles, Ambareesh is shown to have a strong commitment to helping those around him, particularly in the movie "Dodmanne Hudga," in which he is compared to the mythological figure of "Karna" from the Mahabharata. Whether he knew it or not, this actually worked in his favor when Mandya's residents began to protest and make suicide threats as the government prepared to remove him from the list of ministers^[8].

We could conclude with this handful of case studies that indeed democracy will be under scrutiny when our beloved stars start interfering with politics. Yes, there are good examples too like I mentioned where celebrities have helped in better administration, but my contention here is that they had an undue advantage compared to other candidates because of their name and fame (also wealth) which has a psychological influence on the voter. As I mentioned earlier, various other aspects like gender, race, ethnicity, age, etc. already matter more in an election where ideas and welfare motives should be given prominence. When the political system and democracy are already on the verge of getting jeopardized due to these external factors, the rise of celebrity politics will only push the progressive path downwards.

Should there be an alternate approach?

The deterioration of democracy begins when the election process gets corrupted and contaminated, as it is envisaged above. This further prompts a very important and interesting question as to whether should be an alternate approach adopted in electing our representatives and if so, what approach should that be?

Various theories and approaches have already been tried, some tested some not, like that of ranked choice voting whereby the voter is allowed to choose candidates in an election in preference order. Of course, this kind of voting method is quite similar to the one we already have and could have very little or no impact on the result of the election. Another approach is based on approval in which it simply asks voters to select all the candidates they approve of and the candidate with the most votes wins. There is also a development of a new approach known as STAR (Score then voting Automatic Runoff) which, allows voters to score each candidate on a scale and then the two candidates with the highest scores enter an automatic runoff, with voters' ballots cast to whichever candidate they scored highest^[9]. This method is yet to be applied in real elections and when applied too I see no effective impact on the results of the election.

My issue with all these approaches is that they deal with the question of "how" people vote rather than the main issue of these paper i.e., "why" people vote.

Let us all put on our thinking cap for a while and introspect as to why there should be a change in the "why" of voting behaviour. Imagine a scenario where a person is winning the election, not on his charisma, religion, fame, wealth, race or age but rather on his ability, ideas, honesty and accountability. Of course, this second list of criteria is much more difficult to evaluate than the first list of criteria and

that shouldn't be the only reason why people can't make their decision based on those criteria right?

My proposal for changing this behavior is based on a trial run idea in which 5 of the largest voter gatherers in a constituency are given 2/3 months each to develop their constituency and a maximum amount of which they may spend out of the funds granted is established and made public. After all five have completed their trial runs, I believe the voter will be in a much better position to choose the best candidate for their constituency. This method also ensures transparency.

I wouldn't argue this technique is the greatest or that it is without drawbacks. This is merely a vision I have that is highly vague and unproven.

Conclusion

Democracy is the best form of government according to many people and I actually agree with them. Democracy is certainly the best form of government when implemented properly. The election process, which is the base upon which the whole system is built requires some serious reforms and not just in the process how candidates are selected but also on why the candidates are getting selected too.

Celebrities have negative effect on democracy because they have the resources and the audience to influence politics. They have access to multiple large groups of gullible individuals who believe in their ability to influence political decisions. They collect hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of funds, allowing them to contribute to campaigns. A country's campaign system is dependent on large sums of money to "complete the race," and celebrities can engage on the spur of the moment^[10].

It just doesn't make sense when a celebrity wins an election on nothing but his fame and a person with a much better ability and ideas isn't even able to secure minimum number of votes. Just like how a doctor should be qualified to operate, a lawyer qualified to practice law, and an engineer qualified to build, a politician should also be qualified to serve people and administer. The democracy would be in a much better position if people start voting on the basis of progress, development and welfare rather than other external unimportant things.

The future of democracy is vested in citizen participation and it becomes seemingly necessary to ensure that this citizen is made aware of why he is voting and what impact his one decision to vote for a particular person could have not just for five years, but rather for his lifetime and his prodigy's lifetime too.

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