

THE POST-TRUTH INDIA: SHAHRUKH KHAN AT LATA MANGESHKAR'S FUNERAL

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

Did *Bollywood* superstar Shahrukh Khan spit at Lata Mangeshkar's funeral? This is the question grabbing headlines in India nowadays. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders Arun Yadav from Haryana, and Prashant Umrao from Uttar Pradesh, ignited the whole controversy through their tweets along with Shahrukh Khan's video of blowing air to pass on the blessings at Lata's dead body. Yadav posed a question "Has it Spit?" The question was whether Mr. Khan had spit on the mortal remains of Lata (Figure 1).¹ Umrao was a step ahead and tweeted "Shahrukh is Spitting!" (Figure 2). The absurdness of these tweets is understandable and not a surprise, but this is not something that cannot be expected in today's India. If this thought had been raised by a certain individual it could have easily been avoided; nonetheless, the number of people belonging to the BJP-mindset endorsing the same opinion in India compels one to dig into the psychological reasoning behind this. Generally speaking, blowing air on the deceased (*Dua phoonkna*) is a way of passing on prayers for the well-being of the dead one in the afterlife. This is a common ritual among the Muslims.

¹ "Shah Rukh Khan Offers Dua at Lata Mangeshkar's Funeral, BJP Leader Accuses Him of 'spitting' on Her," *Dawn*, February 7, 2022, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189440>.



Figure 1: The tweet by BJP leader Arun Yadav accusing *Bollywood* superstar Shahrukh Khan.²



Figure 2: Another hateful tweet by a BJP leader.³

² "Arun Yadav," *Twitter*, February 6, 2022, <https://twitter.com/beingarun28/status/1490328629003182082>.

On this issue the social media users have responded in different ways. Some including the Congress members have completely nullified the debate by claiming it as just another BJP propaganda stunt. Number of leaders belonging to the Indian National Congress including B.V. Srinivas and Urmila Matondkar came in the support of *Bollywood* actor and commented on the video as an act of faith.⁴ Then there were the right wingers who believe in Hindu supremacy and went to the extent of saying that Mr. Khan is attempting to normalize the Hindu-Muslim parity. Some have been more optimistic in interpreting the footage of Mr. Khan along with his manager Pooja Dadlani bidding farewell to Lata as a projection of Nehruvian secular India.

Mr. Khan who has been falsely accused by the right-wing Hindu extremists had disclosed in 2015 that rising intolerance is a problem to be dealt with. He exclaimed in the following words "It is stupid...it is stupid to be intolerant and this is our biggest issue, not just an issue... religious intolerance and not being secular in this country is the worst kind of crime that you can do as a patriot."⁵ For Mr. Khan speaking out against extremism and intolerance, he has often been marked as a traitor in India. Ever since the BJP came into power in 2014, life has been extremely difficult for the minorities. The latter in India are not allowed the freedom to perform their religious obligations and rituals. In several states of India, there is a complete ban on cow slaughter. Recently, the state of Karnataka considered to put a ban on Hijab in some educational institutions, quite contrary to the Article 25 of the Indian Constitution⁶ that ensures religious freedom.⁷ The latter created much distress among the Muslim minority. All of this explains clearly why a normal scene of Shahrukh Khan paying blessings to the deceased soul had been moulded into such a controversy.

The Post-Truth India

Altering reality to forge an illusion of truth is the main feature of Post-Truth India. The post truth era could be marked as following the day BJP came to power in 2014. The post-truth environment favours the demagogues more as it appeals largely to emotions rather than rationality.⁸ This only adds to the miseries of minorities in India. But what needs to be understood is that the forged truth

³ "Prashant Umrao," *Twitter*, February 6, 2022, <https://twitter.com/ippatel/status/1490316408718512134>.

⁴ Nootan Sharma, "Shah Rukh Khan Didn't 'spit' at Lata Mangeshkar's Funeral. This Is What His Gesture Meant," *The Print*, February 7, 2022, <https://theprint.in/india/shah-rukh-khan-didnt-spit-at-lata-mangeshkars-funeral-this-is-what-his-gesture-meant/823583/>.

⁵ "Shah Rukh Khan Criticises 'intolerance' in India," *BBC News*, November 3, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34707247>.

⁶ "Constitution of India," *Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India*, February 14, 2022, <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india>.

⁷ Sheikh Saaliq, "Religious Identity, Rights in Focus as Indian Schools Ban Hijab," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/amphhtml/World/Asia-South-Central/2022/0208/Religious-identity-rights-in-focus-as-Indian-schools-ban-hijab>.

⁸ Ravi Joshi, "The Contours of India's Post-Truth State," *The Wire*, June 27, 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/the-contours-of-indias-post-truth-state>.

is a mere projection of a larger issue at hand. Arguably, the growing intolerance is believed to be the biggest issue in India. The disciples of Hindutva believe that they can only prosper if Islam and its followers are exterminated. The Citizenship Amendment Act passed on December 11, 2019, approves of this philosophy. It proposes that all the refugees fleeing into India from the neighbouring Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and elsewhere be privileged with the citizenship status; nonetheless, the refugees from all the faiths in South Asia are eligible under this bill except the Muslims. The move contradicted the very essence of the Indian Constitution. The ideology of Hindutva does not coincide with the Indian Constitution in the first place. It could be argued that the complete realisation of Hindutva would come at the cost of undoing the constitution.⁹ The state acceptance of this narrative creates a breeding ground for hatred among the masses at the very root level. Prime Minister Modi who himself emerged through the ranks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) student wing has the ideological support of RSS which has a vast network all over India. He has even allowed the Ministry of Human Resource Development to employ RSS fanatics at key academic posts.¹⁰

Conclusions – Distressful Inferences

The BJP right-wing extremists must appreciate and realise that Shahrukh Khan is the identity of India – not the other way around. It is a fact that Shahrukh's family hails from Peshawar, Pakistan, and perhaps this is what is not acceptable in today's intolerant India led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It has to be remembered here that the recently deceased India's all-time favourite actor Dilip Kumar (Mohammed Yusuf Khan) was born in Peshawar, Pakistan. Factually arguing, the two countries i.e., India and Pakistan have a shared history and since they have partitioned – achieving their cherished goal of separate homelands. However, it is quite unfortunate that PM Modi and his BJP originated from the RSS and together they continue to behave as hate peddlers.

The Indian Muslims belong to India, and it is their homeland; and therefore, there must not be any persecution on the account of one's faith and religion. It is almost impossible for them to behave like *Pracharaks* (RSS Hindu propagandists). Indeed, it is a wakeup call for the international community to safeguard the wellbeing of the Indian Muslims. Quite alarmingly, recently, a Hindu monk has called for the genocide of Indian Muslims. The repeated reflections of such we continue to witness in today's India.

⁹ Samanth Subramanian, "How Hindu Supremacists Are Tearing India Apart," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks>.

¹⁰ Shanoor Seervai, "The Rising Tide of Intolerance in Narendra Modi's India," *Kennedy School Review*, July 27, 2016, <https://ksr.hkspublications.org/2016/07/27/the-rising-tide-of-intolerance-in-narendra-modis-india/>.

In this whole backdrop all the fuss around Shahrukh Khan's video of blowing air at Lata Mangeshkar's funeral needs to be understood. The nightingale of India, Lata Mangeshkar was equally beloved in India and Pakistan irrespective of the religion. Her death came as a shock in both the countries. For a brief time span the peoples of India and Pakistan (particularly Hindus and Muslims) appeared unified in mourning the death of Lata Ji. This is what went against the essence of Hindutva ideology and Indian state narrative. And not to be surprised the BJP and '*Bhakt*s' had to respond with false accusations to target Islam and its followers.