

## Political Public Relations: A study of the Visual Rhetoric of Indian Politicians

Gourav Shah<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The ubiquitousness of social media has widened the scope of political public relations practiced by politicians from India. Social media helps in framing a public personality, and a savvy social media user can exploit it for any political or social message he wants to communicate with the public. In the beginning, written content by politicians dominated the blogs or tweets but with the advancement of communication technology, videos and images have also become an intrinsic part of politicians' communication strategy. Today, a politician is more eager to upload a video or an image (with text or without text) rather than writing bare text to build his political image on social media. An image with text makes his message look more comprehensive. This study is being done to explore the rhetoric or themes that emerge from the visuals that politicians upload on social media and how do the images boost or support their political public relations. To carry out the study, the social media site chosen will be Twitter. A qualitative analysis of the images uploaded by prominent politicians of the country will be done. The case study will be the images and video uploaded on Twitter by the politicians during the COVID 19 crises (as cited in The Hindu, 2020).

**Keywords:** *Public relations, image, Twitter, Tweet, politician*

### Introduction

Lately, the landscape of public relations in India has changed drastically. Today's public relations is not confined to corporate or commercial interests only. But has transcended and reached the realm of politics. Now, not only corporate or film celebrities are PR hungry but today's politician is also thinking about his/her public relations 24X7. Earlier mass media was the only platform for the politicians to conduct his public relations but now he has choices in the form of social media. And it that too, there are various segments available for him like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, etc... Social media helps in framing a public personality, and a savvy social media user can exploit it for any political or social message he wants to communicate with the public. In the beginning, written content by politicians dominated the blogs or tweets but with the advancement of

communication technology, videos and images have also become an intrinsic part of politicians' communication strategy. Today, a politician is more eager to upload a video or an image (with text or without text) rather than writing bare text to build his political image on social media. An image with text makes his message look more comprehensive. This study is being done to explore the rhetoric or themes that emerge from the visuals that politicians upload on social media and how do the images boost or support their political public relations. To carry out the study, the social media site chosen will be Twitter. A qualitative analysis of the images uploaded by prominent politicians of the country will be done. The case study will be the images and video uploaded on Twitter by the politicians during the COVID 19 crises (as cited in The Hindu, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow and Assistant Professor in Department of Mass Communication at School of Management Sciences (SMS), Varanasi.

Corresponding Author: **Dr. Gourav Shah**, ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow and Assistant Professor in Department of Mass Communication at School of Management Sciences (SMS), Varanasi.

**Statement of Problem**

During Corona epidemic when the whole of India is under severe lockdown, many politicians in the power and in the opposition are trying to improve their political public relations through the social media site Twitter. What kind of images they are tweeting? What are the themes or rhetoric that emerges through these images?

**Research Question:**

The specific research question that will emerge from the statement of problem will be *RQ1. How do the politicians project themselves on Twitter in Context of Corona Crisis?*

*RQ2. What do these visual images imply about the rhetorical vision regarding the politicians?*

**Objectives:**

To answer the research question, specific objectives of the study formulated were to:

- Find out the tweets (only those with visual images) of the politicians that mentions Corona crisis;
- Find out the themes (rhetoric) that emerges from the tweets of the politicians;
- Ascertain the ‘images’ that politicians will be most concerned about; and
- Explore the decision dilemmas that emerge from the tweets of the politicians

**Literature Review**

This section first introduces political public relations. What is a public relations and what is political communication. How are they related to each other and how can political public relations can be defined. It

then explores the literature around visual rhetoric.

**Political Public Relations**

Public relations in our society is not a new phenomenon. As per Bernays (1952), its main elements are as old as our society is. The main elements of public relations have been to inform people, to persuade people or to integrate people with people. Almost the same purpose, political communication serves. In the political domain, public relations and political communication are very close to each other. Politics, public relations, and political communication are intertwined. According to Cutlip (1995), public relations strategies were established by politicians for political purposes. Despite this closeness, research and study on political public relations have been minimal. Stromback and Kioussis (2011) find that there has been ample research study on political communication and public relations separately but theory wise political communication people don't know much about the schemata of public relations and vice-versa. Cutlip (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000) defines public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends”. While, political communication is “the exchange of symbols and messages between political actors and institutions, the general public, and news media that are the products of or have consequences for the political system” (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994). Hence, both political communication and public relations are about relationships formed through communication. Embracing social media by the politicians is just a kind of political public relations to enhance their

political image and increase their popularity. Thus political public relations can be defined as per Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2011) as:

the management process by which an organization or individual for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and

reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals.

The goal of Indian politicians while using political public relations is to build up his political image. Political public relations is not confined to elections or election campaigning only. It has now become a full-time process. We will see in the study to how Indian politicians harness Twitter for their political public relations.

### **Visual Rhetoric**



Fig-1

As the adage goes “a picture is worth a thousand words”, the same phrase is practiced on Twitter by the politicians of our times. For example, Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India is very active and popular on social media. He is one of the most followed usernames on Twitter. His visual rhetoric on social media is very well crafted. According to Pal (2015), “His social media outlets feature photographs builds up his both a traditional image as well as an image of modern India maker”. His tweets are reflections of his image management. His hashtag #SelfiewithModi became very popular in the 2014 Loksabha elections.

Citing many scholars’ work, Schill (2012) says that “The most important function of images in political communication is that they can have rhetorical impact and make persuasive arguments to viewers”. Indian politicians make use of Twitter often to have this rhetorical impact.

Durand and Van Leeuwen (1983) call rhetoric as ‘the art of feigned speech’. In terms of advertising, they call rhetorized images as something that takes the viewer in the realm of fantasy, dreams; hallucinations...Politicians make use of their rhetorized images to build up their political image on Twitter. Jackson and Lillekar (2011) finds Twitter helping them in

building their political image through “an enhanced stress on individualism”

## Method

For Jungherr (2016), Twitter has now become a well known tool for political communication. It will be interesting to know how Indian politicians tweet. Therefore, tweets in Hindi and English language tweeted by the prominent politicians of the country were collected and analyzed. Total of four politicians were chosen as per convenience owing to their influence on social media. The number of followers that the particular politicians were having was the criterion of the amount of influence (Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch & Neuberger, 2013) that the politician enjoyed on Twitter. All the politicians chosen for the study had minimum more than six hundred thousand followers on Twitter. The politicians selected for study were Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, Rahul Gandhi, ex-president of Congress party, Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi Chief Minister and Uddhav Thackeray, Shivsena Supremo and Maharashtra Chief Minister. They were basically chosen for the study owing to their importance in Corona crisis. Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India and under his leadership one of the world’s stringent lock down took place followed by misery and penury of migrant workers. He has been both criticized and lauded for his handling of the Corona crisis as observed respectively by Naqvi and Altstedter (2020) and Agarwal (2020). Rahul Gandhi was selected because according to Dutta (2020), he is an important leader of the opposition and also has been the central figure in taking on Modi government harshly through his comments during Corona crisis. Arvind Kejriwal (as cited in Bloomberg, 2020) and Uddhav

Thackeray (as cited in the Hindu, 2020) were selected because their states Delhi and Maharashtra respectively are severely Corona affected states. So it will be interesting to see how they communicate with their public through Twitter.

A total of 206 images uploaded by chosen politicians on Twitter during a span of one month from 14 April 2020 to 14 May 2020 were analysed. Mainly those images were analysed that were somehow related to Corona virus.

Tweets were collected from the website [www.allmytweets.net](http://www.allmytweets.net). The unit of the analysis was the individual image tweeted by the politician.

## Research Design

Traditional qualitative thematic content analysis approach was adopted to analyse the tweets. Some of the methods were taken from research article “Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: An Empirical Analysis of Twitter Images During the 2012 Israeli-Hamas Conflict” (Seo, 2014, p.153). As Meeks (2016) says in her paper that

In a qualitative content analysis, a researcher typically conducts an open coding process, performs a close reading of the text(s), allows themes to emerge, rereads the text(s), systematically coding for the presence of the emergent themes, and then potentially combines similar themes.

Based on similar pattern, themes were selected and similar themes were combined. The themes were basically the political image that the politicians want to communicate through their tweets.

## Coding Scheme

Initially data were coded into as many categories as it could be done. And images were placed into these categories. All the politicians had many categories. To get a general picture, common themes from all the categories were extracted. Let us first look at individual politicians, as to how they did their public relations through Twitter.

This section tries to answer the first research question of the study *RQ1. How do the politicians project themselves on Twitter in Context of Corona Crisis?*

**Narendra Modi**

Themes that emerged from analyzing 65 images uploaded or retweeted by Narendra Modi were mainly

**Results**

Hard Taskmaster image	Inspiring and popular leader	Inclusive Leader	Pro-poor	Youth supporter	Compassionate Leader
19	33	4	1	1	6

Graphically we can show the above table as

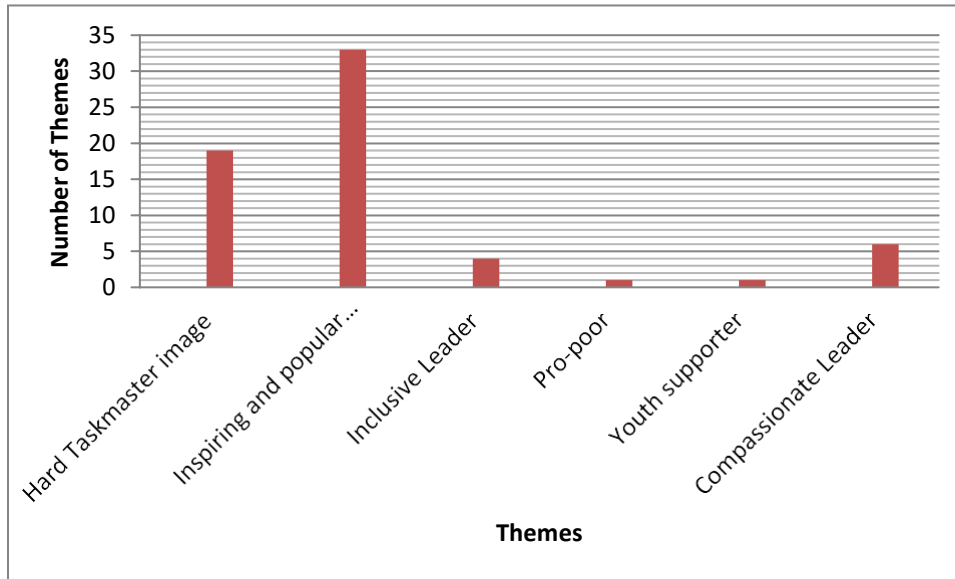


Fig-2

Thus from the graph it is clear that for Modi his inspiring and popular leader image is more important than any other image. More than half of the images shared by him are there to project him as a popular leader. Then followed by his hard taskmaster image and thirdly image of a compassionate leader.

**ARVIND KEJRIWAL-**

Themes that emerged from analysing 94 images uploaded or retweeted by Arvind Kejriwal were mainly

Compassionate leader	Hard Taskmaster	Inspiring & Popular Leader	Inclusive Leader	Educated Tech savvy	Meticulous Planner
18	39	19	8	9	1

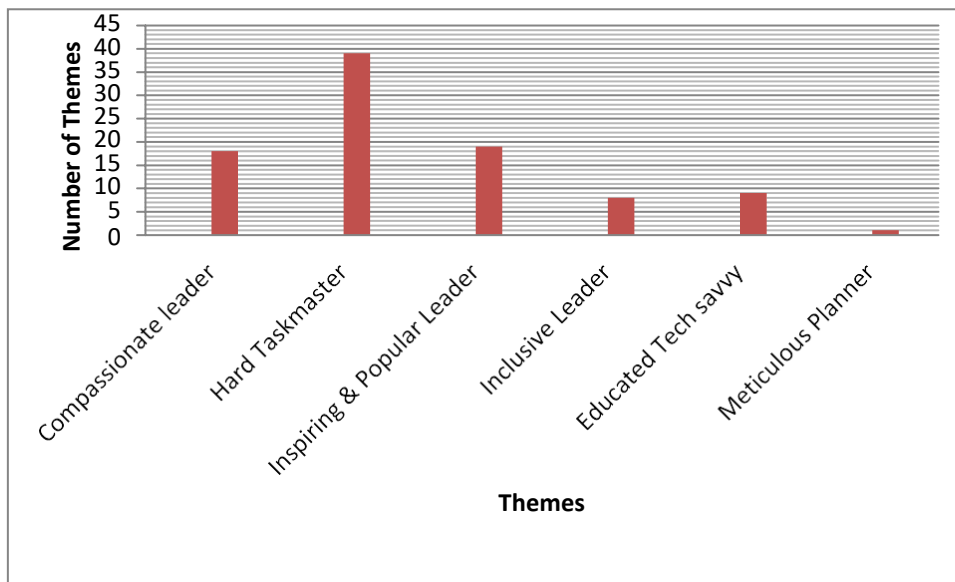


Fig-3

It can be seen from the graph that Arvind Kejriwal is particular about his hard taskmaster image followed by inspiring and popular leader image. This is rightly so as Kejriwal got the mandate in Delhi Vidhan Sabha election on the performance of work done by his government.

**Rahul Gandhi**

Themes that emerged from analysing 17 images uploaded or retweeted by Rahul Gandhi were mainly

Compassionate Leader	Hard Taskmaster	Inclusive Leader	Inspiring And Popular Leader
13	1	1	2

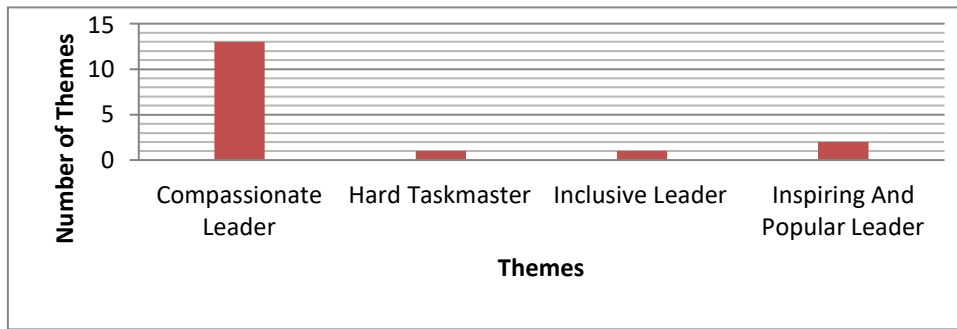


Fig-3

It can be seen from the graph that Rahul Gandhi is more conscious about his image of a compassionate leader. More than 3/4<sup>th</sup> of images tweeted by him communicate his image of a compassionate leader who cares for the poor and common man. However, it's interesting to see that unlike PM Modi,

Rahul tweeted very few images within the stipulated time.

**Uddhav Thackeray-** Themes that emerged from analysing 22 images uploaded or retweeted by Uddhav Thackeray were mainly

Confident politician	Inclusive image	Inspiring and Popular leader	Compassionate Leader	Hard Taskmaster
7	2	4	1	8

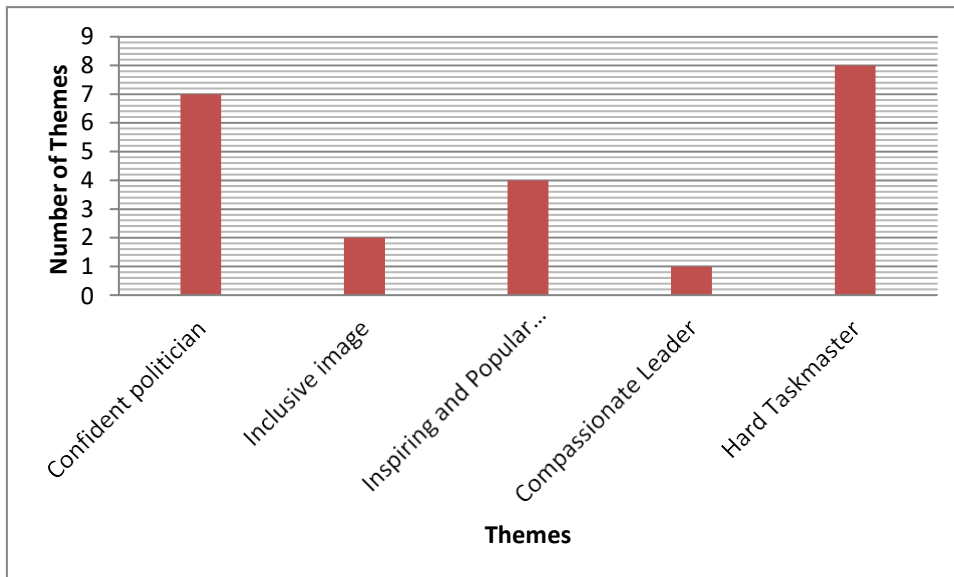


Fig.-4

Here we can see from the graph that Uddhav is keen to project his image of a hard

taskmaster and rightly so as he has become the chief minister of the state by the support of two political parties. Hence it is

imperative for him to show himself a tough administrator. And as he and his government is being accused for increasing number of Covid cases, Uddhav has to any way communicate his image of a hard taskmaster who can take care of the people of Maharashtra. The second most tweeted images communicate his confident politician

image. As has become the Chief Minister for the first time, so naturally he has to prove his confidence as an adroit politician.

**Discussion**

From the above, tables and graphs the common themes that all the selected politicians wanted to communicate are:-

POLITICIANS	THEMES				
	Compassionate leader	Hard Taskmaster	Inspiring and popular leader	Inclusive Leader	
Narendra Modi	√	√	√	√	
Arvind Kejriwal	√	√	√	√	
Rahul Gandhi	√	√	√	√	
Uddhav Thackeray	√	√	√	√	

The discussion section also tries to answer the second research question of the study *RQ2. What do these visual images imply about the rhetorical vision regarding the politicians?*

**Compassionate Leader**-All the politicians try to portray themselves as compassionate leaders. In these times of Covid 19 crisis, they want to send a message that they care for their people. Whether it's providing relief to them through medical assistance or logistics (Fig 5), Modi is always ready to help his people. Also in the crisis, Modi is assisting countries like Mauritius and Palestine. Kejriwal through many images tries to communicate that unlike Prime Minister Modi, he cares for migrant workers and ensures that they reach their home safely. In one of the photos retweeted by Kejriwal, the deputy chief minister of Delhi is seen having a conversation with the

migrant workers. Very deftly here Kejriwal communicates that he and his cabinet are compassionate for the workers and is trying hard to ameliorate the conditions of them. In some of the photos, tweeted by Kejriwal he shares the preparation done for the people coming from abroad. Some of the photos tweeted by Kejriwal are of food plates. Here Kejriwal tries to communicate that his government is distributing good quality food for the Corona patients. Many images tweeted by Kejriwal show that food his delivered by his party's MLAs to common people who don't have any food to eat. Rahul Gandhi also tries to bandwagon himself to compassion. He criticizes the government by sharing a cartoon where a common man is intimidated by the petrol pipe filler at the petrol pump. He wants to communicate that in this time of crisis, a hike in petrol prices will add to the misery of a common man who is already in deep



economic trouble due to the Corona crisis. He laments on the plight of migrant workers by uploading many pictures where they are seen walking on the road with their families and some crying in front of cameras. Rahul uploads a photo where a man is seen lying dead on the ground and another man is lamenting over his death. The photograph is of fishermen from Andhra Pradesh who are stranded in Gujarat due to lockdown. Through this photograph, Rahul urges the

government to provide relief to the fishermen. The compassionate image of Rahul is evident from his tweet. Not many pictures have been shared by Uddhav Thackeray in the stipulated time frame but he is successful in communicating his political image. One image that he shares is his plan of action. In the plan, he mentions about migrant labour. The kind of preparation he will do to help those shows Uddhav's compassion for the common man.



**Fig.5-An image of Mission Lifeline Udan-Modi is a compassionate leader and under his leadership, assistance is being provided to the needy through all the resources of the government. An Example of theme compassionate leader.**

### Hard Taskmaster

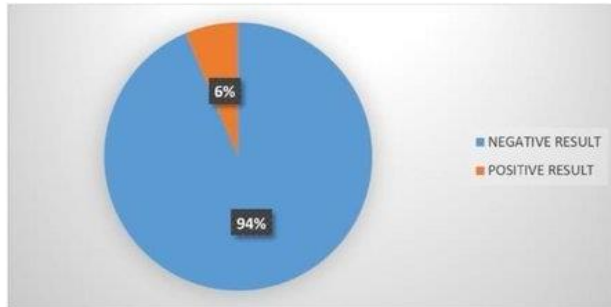
All the politicians want to convey their hard taskmaster image. They want to show that they are very serious about the preparation done to tackle the menace of Covid 19. Many images have been uploaded and retweeted by Modi where he praises work of different governmental departments working hard to tackle the Corona crisis. These images convey his image of a hard taskmaster. He is also seen conducting many meetings with senior officials of different government departments. One image that Modi retweets is of postal services

delivering essential commodities to households. Therefore he can communicate his image of a hard taskmaster under whom all the government departments are working efficiently in the times of the Corona crisis. Similarly, Kejriwal also seems eager to communicate his image of a hard taskmaster. He tweeted and retweeted many images that convey the message that under his leadership and supervision various departments of the Delhi government are working properly. Some of the images show that his MLA's are coordinating the sanitization work in their constituencies. In

one of the images, a meeting order was tweeted by Kejriwal where authorities related to the health sector had issued an order which laid out plans to tackle Corona menace in areas of Delhi. The image communicates that Kejriwal is adept in communicating his image of a hard taskmaster to public or followers. Rahul Gandhi who doesn't hold any power position neither in center nor the state also not any prominent position in Congress party tries to show himself as a hard

taskmaster as well. Rahul tweets photos showing how his Congress government in different states is preparing hard to tackle the spread of Corona Virus. From only one of his tweeted image, Rahul is successful in conveying his hard taskmaster image. Uddhav Thackeray tweets many images where his government's preparedness to deal Corona virus is shown (Fig 6). His video conference with the PM tweeted by him, shows that he takes his job seriously.

Figure No 15: Total samples tested for COVID-19 in Maharashtra (N=100912)\*



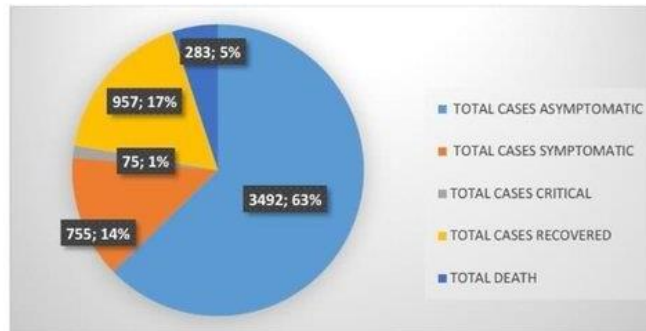
\*Details are available for 100912 tested samples

Table No 5: COVID-19 Testing status in Maharashtra.(N=100912)\*

STATUS	GOVERNMENT LABS	PRIVATE LABS	TOTAL
SAMPLES TESTED	48827	52085	100912
NEGATIVE	45468 (93.12)	49017 (94.11)	94485 (93.63)
POSITIVE	3359 (6.88)	3068 (5.89)	6427 (6.37)

\*Details are available for 100912 tested samples

Figure No 16: Status of COVID-19 Cases in Maharashtra (N=5562)\*



\*Details are available for 5562 cases

**Fig.6-** This image shows that under the leadership of Uddhav Thackeray, sample testing of Covid 19 is at full pace and he is making sure that the testing speeds up. An example of hard taskmaster image.

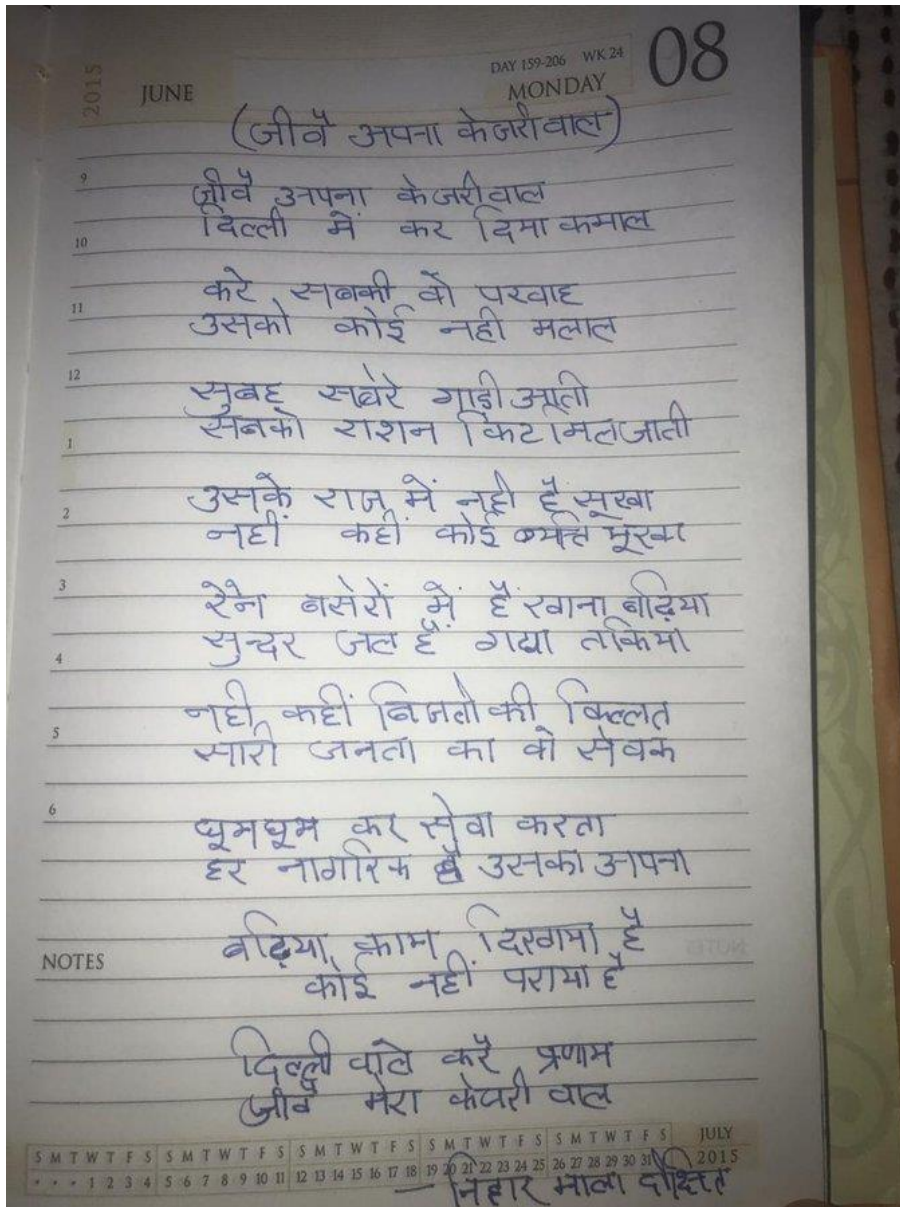
**Inspiring And Popular Leader**

Modi seems very careful about his image of an inspiring and popular leader. He tweets many images that reflect that he wants to be seen as someone who is immensely popular among the public and also inspires them.

Modi tweets his *Man Ki Baat* through an image of a smiling girl communicating that he is popular among the women of India. In one tweet, Modi tweets a photograph of Bill gates having video conferencing with Modi. This is done to show that not only Modi is

popular in India but abroad also. In one of the images tweeted by Modi, people of Kashmir are seen holding mobile phone with the *Aarogya Setu* app downloaded in it. This is a very important image as through this tweet Modi tries to communicate that he is very popular in Kashmir as well. Recently people of Kashmir had been very critical and repulsive of the Modi government after the abrogation of article 370 (as cited in India Today, 2019). Many images tweeted by Modi show that he is a leader who inspires people. Modi tweets an image which is a drawing of Modi by a small girl. People get inspired by Modi by following his instructions and suggestions- whether it is to remain fit, to be self-reliant (by making masks at home), or by downloading the *Aarogya Setu* App. Similarly, Kejriwal is also very conscious of his image of a popular leader who inspires many. He communicates his image as a popular leader by tweeting photos where media and media persons praise the work of Kejriwal during the Corona crisis. Kejriwal tweets a letter written by a Covid positive young girl who praises the work of health workers. The letter is a testimony of the popularity of Kejriwal. Kejriwal tweets a donation receipt

for the Chief Minister Relief fund donated by a citizen of Delhi. In one of the tweets, Kejriwal shares a poem written by a woman in praise of Kejriwal (Fig 7). In one of the retweets by Kejriwal, some officials are seen providing relief work to the people of Delhi owing to #operationshield an initiative by Kejriwal. Rahul Gandhi to disseminate his image of an inspiring and popular leader tweets a photograph where he is seen doing Namaste and asking people to tune into Facebook to watch his video press conference on the Covid 19 crisis. He tries to show that he is ready to take on questions from media persons. He is a popular leader who doesn't think media as a taboo much unlike PM Modi who doesn't believe in holding any press conferences (as stated in the Wire, 2018). Uddhav Thackeray in many photographs shared by him seems keen to diffuse his image of a popular Marathi leader. In a couple of photographs shared by him he is seen paying respect to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and in other photograph unfurling flag on the sixtieth year of formation of Maharashtra. Thus Uddhav is trying to communicate that he is a popular Marathi leader who always is conscious about the Maratha pride.



**Fig 7-** This image is of a poem written by a woman of Delhi who is so happy with Kejriwal's work that she wrote a poem for him. The image is tweeted by Kejriwal to show how popular he is in the public of Delhi. An example of theme inspiring and popular leader.

### Inclusive Leader

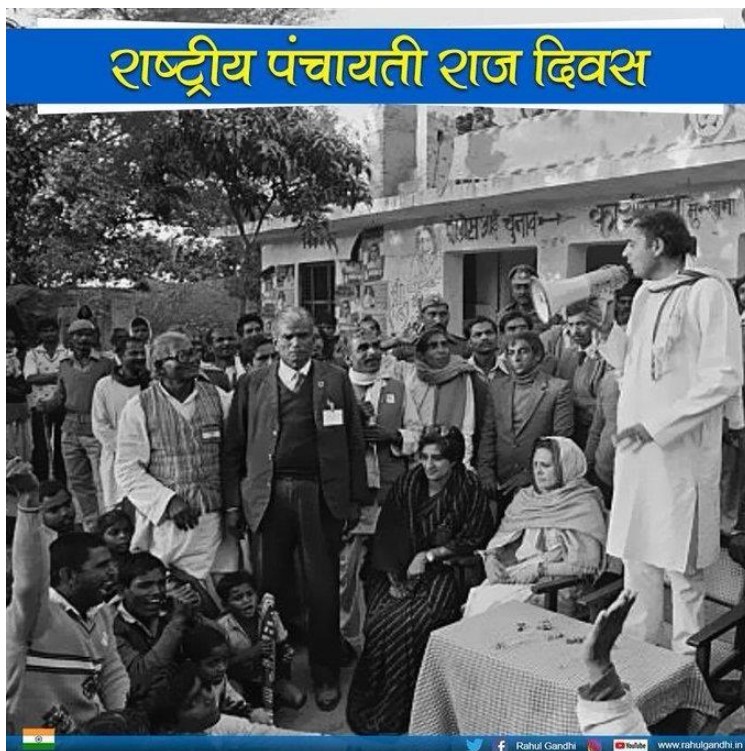
Modi has been often blamed by the opposition of being a dictatorial leader (as stated by Tharoor in Project Syndicat, 2019). To shed off this image Modi tweeted a photo where he is seen doing video conferencing with Chief Ministers of different states.

Also, he tweeted a photo where he is shown having a video conversation with the village sarpanches. This tweet communicate that Modi not only can take urban masses with him but rural mass as well. Kejriwal once critical of media (as cited in the Hindustan Times, 2014) used to criticize media openly



but now through his tweets try his best to revamp his image into an inclusive one. Kejriwal retweets one of the illustrations by journalist Sagarika Ghose who praises Kejriwal's work in the Corona crisis. In one of the tweets, Kejriwal compliments Vishnu Som, a TV journalist by sharing some photographs which show sanitization work. Vishnu had thanked the Delhi government for the sanitization work done in his living area. Also, Kejriwal shares a photo of a doctor who put his life at risk to save Corona patients. Thus we can see how Kejriwal does his best to communicate his image of an inclusive leader. Rahul also wants to convey that he cares for the common and poor people of this country unlike Prime minister whom Rahul once accused of "*suit-boot ki sarkar*"(as cited in Indian Express, 2019). Thus very subtly Rahul communicates his image of an

inspiring and popular leader. For that Rahul tweets a photograph of his father late Rajiv Gandhi addressing a bunch of villagers (Fig 8). The message with the photograph is that Rajiv Gandhi was the brainchild behind local self-governance and the structure of Panchayats built by Rajiv Gandhi only is making possible for the present government to help the villagers in the time of the Corona crisis. The message that Rahul wants to communicate is that Congress takes care of rural masses also. In a way, communicating that Rahul's thinking is an inclusive one unlike Modi's "*suit-boot ki sarkar*". In a tweet in Marathi, Uddhav shares an image where he is seen sitting with Sharad Pawar the chief ally of his government. Uddhav wants to communicate that he is an inclusive leader who cares about the opinions of his ally partners also.



**Fig8- An image of late Rajiv Gandhi addressing a group of people. An example of theme of inclusive leader.**

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that politicians to enhance their political public relations take aid of visual images. And for every politician his perquisite for communication is different with that of other politician. From the discussions, we come to know some of the decision dilemmas of the politicians when it comes to strengthening their political public relations.

**Decision Dilemma of Politicians-**If we look at the visual rhetoric of individual politicians then some interesting findings emerges. Narendra Modi who is in the power consecutively for the second time seems deeply fond of disseminating his image of an inspiring and popular leader. Modi's image took tough beating post-Godhra riots. He was blamed for instigating riots and Modi could never recover from his tarnished image for a long time.

Now, to respond to his adversaries, Modi after coming to the power started defiling the image of one of the most popular stalwarts of Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru. Modi has been quite unequivocal in bashing India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policies (as cited in the Print, 2020). Modi has been trying his best to create a narrative where he replaces Nehru and is equally or even more inspiring and popular than Nehru ever was. The dilemma before Modi is that if he projects himself as someone who is very popular among masses

and inspires them like Nehru was then what ideas of Nehru he can adopt. Certainly, Modi can't project himself as secular as Nehru was as it will defeat Modi and his government's commitment towards Hindu nationalism (Shah, 2020, p.98). So to substantiate his popular image, Modi communicates himself as a hard taskmaster who is ready to take on challenges like the Corona crisis.

Arvind Kejriwal is very conscious about his image of a hard taskmaster. But the dilemma before him is how to project himself as someone who can replace Modi's leadership. For that, he brings in his image of an inspiring and popular leader as Modi tries to do. But in contrast to Modi, Arvind Kejriwal quite successfully disseminate his visual rhetoric of a compassionate leader who cares for the common man, migrant workers especially those who were the worst- hit people due to lock-down.

The dilemma before Rahul Gandhi is a plausible one. Rahul is not in power so it becomes very difficult for him to project himself as a hard taskmaster or an inclusive leader or someone very popular. He doesn't seem to stand anywhere near Modi or Kejriwal as far as these themes are concerned. But he can communicate himself as a compassionate leader-much more than what Modi does.

For Uddhav Thackeray, the dilemma is what image he should communicate to remain relevant in national politics in the times of pandemic. The image that he chooses is that of a hard taskmaster. Uddhav shows himself as a politician who is confident, compassionate, and inclusive but at the top he is a hard taskmaster can take on the challenge of the pandemic head- on.

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