The Algorithmic Republic: Political Consultancy and the Crisis of Persuasion in India

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Abstract

The changing role of political consulting in India is examined in this article as a type of infrastructure power that combines algorithmic accuracy with affective and cultural modulation. Today's political consultants operate as epistemic engineers, going beyond conventional models of electoral strategy to create segmented publics through symbolic labour, data-driven targeting, and emotional calibration. The article examines how consultants use platform-specific narratives to fragment deliberative space and shape political subjectivities, drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks such as affect theory, surveillance capitalism, and media hybridity. Caste, geography, language, and emotion are operationalised to create affective atmospheres rather than logical consensus, as demonstrated by case studies ranging from the BJP's psychographic personalisation and use of mythic symbolism to the AAP's hybrid model combining grassroots mobilisation with algorithmic reach. The study also looks at how digital platforms like YouTube and WhatsApp incorporate political messaging into popular cultural rhythms, generating feedback loops that strengthen political alignment through individualised emotional resonance. The paper urges ethical frameworks focused on algorithmic accountability, inclusive political communication, and emotional transparency in response to this post-rhetorical shift in persuasion. It comes to the conclusion that political consulting in India needs to be rethought as a cultural and epistemic institution that is essential to redefining democratic life in a platformized society, rather than as a neutral service sector.

1. Introduction

Rashid (2025) states that communication has evolved significantly in today's digital world, moving beyond traditional modes of speaking and writing to incorporate a rich array of visual cues and symbols. As a predominant mode of communication, social media has transformed how people interact. Social media has significantly impacted India's electoral politics landscape (Kumar, 2025). Tiwari and Singh (2023) well said; Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become essential tools for political communication, citizen engagement, and electoral campaigns. Indian politicians have been (Vaghela et al., 2021) increasingly utilizing social media in recent years to directly communicate and express their political stances. The non-verbal political performance of female candidates is visually constructed on social media (Banerjee & Mitra, 2024). And influencers are crucial for the nature and networks of information communication on social media (Dash, 2022).

Over the past years, political consulting in India has experienced a radical change from a supporting logistical service to a key, if not dominant, player in democratic politics. A complicated blend of predicting trends,

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understanding emotions, using local cultural references, and delivering content through algorithms has replaced the old methods that included slogans, large gatherings, and campaign branding. Political consulting is now at the forefront of how publics are imagined, engaged, segmented, and governed, and credit goes to companies like Inclusive Minds, Rajneethi, Jarvis Technology & Strategy Consulting, and the Indian Political Action Committee (IPAC) spearheading highly orchestrated digital-first campaigns. India offers a distinctive case study in this changing context. It includes sharp caste and religious fault lines, significant linguistic and cultural diversity, a younger digital electorate, and a regulatory framework still ill-prepared to handle real-time, individualised political influence. In a time when political consulting not only persuades but also predicts, modulates, and curates affective realities, what does it mean to talk about persuasion, democracy, and public reasoning?

This paper makes the case that political consulting in India today is a form of algorithmic sovereignty—a system in which information, sentiment, and culture serve as ontological tools that shape and preconfigure the political possibility field rather than merely being campaign resource. Currently, political consultants operate at the intersection of behavioural science, cultural grammar, and media infrastructure, positioning themselves as the designers of the political system's infrastructure rather than as advisors.

Three central research questions animate this paper:
1. How has political consultancy in India evolved into a hybrid system of algorithmic governance, cultural production, and emotional engineering?
2. What role do media ecologies (especially WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram) and linguistic-cultural pluralism play in shaping contemporary political persuasion?
3. What are the democratic, ethical, and epistemic consequences of this transformation?

This paper uses the literature on platform governance, media studies, political theory, and cultural sociology to address these issues. It suggests that the modern Indian political consultant should be viewed as a post-rhetorical technocrat who engineers visibility, saturates discourse, and prevents dissent instead of crafting arguments for discussion.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Rhetoric and Its Displacement: From Ethos–Pathos–Logos to Psychographic Targeting

Political speech has traditionally been grounded in Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory, which emphasises ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). These rhetorical appeals stimulated public discussion, collective decision-making, and reasoned judgement in liberal democratic thought. Traditional rhetorical models are inadequate in today's emotionally charged WhatsApp blasts, meme wars, and personalised feeds. According to Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (1986), persuasion now mainly uses peripheral cues like emotion, visuals, and cultural resonance rather than the "central route", which is logical inquiry. The consultant is repositioned as a microtargeting specialist instead of a general oratorical strategist in what is referred to as post-rhetorical persuasion. Currently, this emerging concept focuses on creating strategies that align demographic segments with emotional cues. Today, ideological persuasion has shifted from public discourse to private affect modulation, relying less on truth and emotional resonance.

2.2 Power–Knowledge and Data Sovereignty

These days, political consultants map caste, language, regional sentiment, and digital attention to create knowledge regimes rather than just advising. This is consistent with Foucault's (1980) theory of power–knowledge, according to which the exercise of power is inseparable from knowledge creation. Consultants use data analytics, ethnographic polling, and psychographic tools to influence what can be seen, heard, and imagined in politics. This gives some truths more weight while making others invisible. This power is particularly noticeable in India, where there is a significant informational gap between the leaders, consultants and the voters. Organisations collect behavioural data through call logs, social media interactions, browser histories, and geospatial footprints, often without meaningful consent. This "surveillance capitalism" turns political behaviour into a predictable asset class that can be modulated rather than deliberated, as said by Shoshana Zuboff (2019). Political neutrality does not apply to data extraction. By reshaping social relations around extraction, the global data economy replicates historical colonial logics by appropriating everyday life into data for profit, as argued by Couldry and Mejias (2019). This interacts with regional, linguistic, and caste hierarchies in India, enhancing the prominence of dominant groups while stifling subaltern publics. As a result, datafication monitors political activity and reorganises whose opinions matter and whose lives should be systematically silenced.

2.3 Media Hybridity and Platform Affordances

India's political media landscape depicts hybridity, a term used by Chadwick (2013). This illustration shows how the country's legacy media, social platforms, encrypted apps, and algorithms interact. Consultants do not just create content; they manage its visibility across this complex ecosystem. They shape how, where, and to whom messages appear. Each platform serves a function: TV offers mass legitimacy; YouTube enables vernacular penetration with narrative control; WhatsApp spreads hyperlocal, emotional, non-fact-checked messages; Instagram delivers symbolic, youth-driven, aesthetic content; and Twitter (X) shapes elite discourse. Consultants link platforms into a coordinated narrative economy to reinforce emotional frames across the media, including the digital spectrum.

2.4 Cultural Capital and Vernacular Legibility

Indian political consultants use culturally resonant idioms, gestures, and symbols that go beyond logical argumentation to create persuasive messages, including speeches, slogans, and media content. Richardson (1986) argues that this process is explained by Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic, social, and cultural capital. These messages are translated from national frames into regional vernaculars like Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, or Bhojpuri to make abstract political concepts understandable and emotionally appealing for particular social groups.

Such message adaptations become essential in India, where linguistic, caste, religious, and geographical plurality coexist. Linguistic anthropologists Kathryn Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin stress that language is vital to impactful political mobilisation among India's diverse publics because it serves as a status, and belonging marker and a means of communication. Political consultants craft messages today while moulding cultural belonging by modifying the political discourse's tone, tempo, and symbols to foster trust. The consultants' increased use of digital content inspired by folk theatre, TikTok remixes, and memes resulted in what is known as vernacular media dramaturgy.

2.5 Affect Theory and Emotional Regimes

Affect theory offers vital information about why emotionally charged content is more common than fact-based content. According to Massumi (2002), affect is defined as a precognitive, physical intensity—a "raw affective energy" that appears in the "zone of indistinction" between stimulus and response. This undeveloped energy shapes perception and behaviour before conscious thought; it comes before emotion and reason. Ahmed (2005) adds to this perspective by contending that affect is a cultural and social force that "sticks" to people, things, and conversations, creating group attachments and exclusions rather than being an internal, private state. Collectively, these frameworks clarify how political consultants channel affect into persuasive emotional registers rather than using logical argumentation.

Political consultants elicit instinctive reactions in addition to understanding by using affective dynamics. Fear shapes affective economies of danger by associating it with particular communities or regions. Using widespread affective memory, nostalgia mobilises longing and a sense of mythic belonging by evoking imagined golden eras. Moral outrage or humiliation are examples of performative emotions that identify "corrupt elites" or "urban liberals" as civic outsiders. At the same time, aspiration and hope are virtual effects that shape emotional investments in digital modernity and entrepreneurial futures before they even materialise.

Affective techniques generate urgency and identification by redefining citizens as well-governed entities that react to stimuli influenced by emotional and cultural cues. Political discourse bypasses reason by controlling what can be felt, imagined, and acted upon through pre-rational intensities.

2.6 Platform Governance and Algorithmic Amplification

Social media platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active political actors, as Plantin et al. (2016) argue. The algorithms of social media platforms act as gatekeepers by flagging, suppressing, or amplifying content according to platform policies. These choices impact political discourse, visibility, and engagement in the online public sphere. By creating provocative, shareable, viral content that manipulates perceptions of reality through algorithmic amplification, political consultants design campaigns for platform ecosystems. They use personas like Twitter agitator, YouTube scholar, or TikTok populist to cater to different audience segments and algorithmic dynamics. In social media architectures, their work leads to a feedback loop where content is created more to attract attention than for logical persuasion. Political consulting thus fits in with platform governance, which reinforces platforms as essential players in modern electoral politics by shifting from democratic deliberation to algorithmic manipulation.

2.7 Publics as Engineered Assemblages

Political consultants no longer concentrate, particularly on Habermas's (1989) concept of a single public sphere, as presented in Bengtsson et al. (2024) where a scope exists to debate rationally about shaping democracy. Instead, they create segregated publics, each with its narratives, emotional triggers, and complaints. This represents a change from inclusive discussion to effective, data-driven management of divided realities. Essential insights into this change can be gained from Yochai Benkler's (2006) framework of networked publics and Michael Warner's (2002) theory of counterpublics. Warner elucidates the process by which oppositional or marginalised groups create alternative discursive spaces, subverting prevailing ideologies and raising awareness of their subordination. Benkler emphasises how digital media infrastructures have changed communication from top-down, hierarchical models to horizontal, organised, and decentralised networks. Although these networked publics allow for widespread participation, they produce echo chambers and filter bubbles that fragment discourse. Together, these theories demonstrate that political consultants no longer aim to reach a single, unified public; instead, they use modified narratives to reach overlapping, divided publics influenced by digital media's structural dynamics.

One example of how Indian political consultants use simultaneous narrative programming across divided publics is the BJP's 2019 "Main Bhi Chowkidar" campaign. Leaders used "Chowkidar" in their Twitter handles to appeal to the moral imaginations of the urban middle class. The campaign hyper-localized the slogan in regional languages and featured emotive images on WhatsApp, targeting lower-middle-class and rural voters. The slogan was transformed into folk-toned videos and memes by local performers and influencers on TikTok and YouTube, which encouraged the affective engagement of vernacular audiences. As Congress's "Chowkidar Chor Hai" challenged the prevailing frame, this reflects Warner's (2002) counterpublics and Benkler's (2006) networked publics—decentralised, participatory, but fragmented. Through platform-specific content, consultants created parallel, emotionally charged publics rather than aiming for consensus.

3. Political Consultancy as Cultural Production

The best way to conceptualise political consulting in India is as a cultural production that shapes political subjectivities. As said earlier, consultants also serve as meaning-makers, integrating political claims with popular imaginations by transforming ideological stances into emotionally compelling stories through regional vernacular, visual cultures, and historical memory. One example of how consultants use symbolic resources to create affective legitimacy across various publics is the BJP's mythological allusions and civilisational themes, such as presenting Narendra Modi in leadership and national service narratives.

Performance is the deliberate staging of political figures to represent the aspirations and feelings of the populace; it is closely related to symbolic labour. Consultants craft these appearances, whether at rallies, on TV, or online, to convey moral resonance and authenticity. For example, the 'Chai pe Charcha' campaign was more than just an outreach effort; it was a performative script that positioned Modi as a personable, modest, and aspirational figure while evoking themes of masculinity, caste mobility, and humble origins. These procedures demonstrate how media aesthetics, performance, and affective governance are all filled with consulting. To understand its significance in India's emotionally divided democracy, we must go beyond traditional electoral analysis and turn to cultural theory, media studies, and affect theory.

3.1 Political Mythmaking and Narrative Frames

In India, political consulting has developed into an essential forum for creating culture and symbolism, going beyond the practical function of campaign management. Creating political myths—condensed narrative frameworks that provide parties and candidates' moral legitimacy and emotional coherence—is essential to this process. These mythologies serve as what Roland Barthes (1957) called "second-order signs", normalising political meaning through symbolic condensation and repetition.

By Entman's (1993) framing theory, consultants use culturally relevant master narratives to highlight selected facets of political reality to shape public opinion. Rahul Gandhi is portrayed as the "victimised Democrat," a sincere but troubled opponent of authoritarianism; Narendra Modi as the "protector-in-chief," representing hyper-masculine nationalism; and Arvind Kejriwal as the "clean reformer," a grassroots anti-corruption activist. These frames function across symbolic media, including grassroots narratives, memes, hashtags, speeches, images, and slogans. Campaign slogans serve as affective condensations of these mythologies: BJP's "Ab Ki Baar Modi Sarkar" communicated decisiveness and masculine authority, marking a departure from coalition-era instability, while AAP's "*Bijli Half, Paani Maaf*" translated technocratic policies into emotionally accessible, everyday idioms that resonate with voters' lived experiences.

These tactics align with Sara Ahmed's (2005) "affective economies" concept, where emotions move between discourses, bodies, and signs. By connecting political leaders and messages with feelings like pride, fear, or hope, consultants can access these flows and transform abstract ideologies into tangible experiences. Originally based on gender, Judith Butler's (1997) theory of performativity views identity as an idea constructed through repeated culturally intelligible acts. Similar performance and scripting of identities occur in politics, where politicians' legitimacy is based on their consistent enactment of standards such as strength or authenticity. To develop consistent, emotionally compelling personas, consultants carefully plan these performances for various media platforms. Therefore, political identity is not a fixed characteristic but a continuous performative process influenced by public expectations. Today, political consulting functions more as a front-end platform for political authorship than as backstage management. Selling a candidate is only one aspect; another is creating the context in which politics is perceived, experienced, and lived.

3.2 Campaign Rituals and Political Performance

Ritualised consultants accurately plan ritualised events as cultural performances, such as roadshows, temple visits, padyatras, and "question-answer sessions" sessions on social media. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander's (2004) theory of artistic performance, these events are acts of symbolic persuasion and strategic optics. Alexander posits that cultural pragmatics, such as staged scenes, ritualised performances, and collective symbols, create political authenticity in contemporary societies. In this context, consultants ensure candidates perform the "correct" moral register: humility in rural regions, decisiveness in urban metros, piety in temple corridors, and cosmopolitanism on professional platforms. To resonate rather than to deceive, these carefully planned gestures imitate digital intimacy, religious symbolism, or folk theatre. In India, where political charisma stems from ritual mastery (Das, 2012), consultants act as ritual technologists, scripting actions like where to eat, whom to greet, and which dialect to speak. Their challenge is creating performances that seem "unscripted," achieved through controlled spontaneity, which exemplifies Alexander's concept of symbolic fusion in fragmented societies.

4. Political Communication in Digital Era
4.1 WhatsApp, Twitter and the Architecture of Emotional Proximity

Through the infrastructure logic of media circulation, political consulting functions as a mode of cultural production. In addition to creating content, consultants strategically manage its distribution across platform architectures, algorithmically driven attention economies, cultural norms, and networked user behaviours. Digital infrastructures influence political communication in India, according to empirical research on Twitter and WhatsApp. According to research on Twitter, social hierarchies, such as caste, urbanisation, and literacy, shape unequal political engagement. Key nodes are influencers, journalists, entertainers, or digital natives. We use metrics like followers and retweets to reward partisan alignments. Caste subtly affects mutual engagement and visibility, strengthening Brahmanical social capital online, according to analyses of MPs' Twitter networks. These results show that, even on open platforms, digital legitimacy and influence are still closely linked to offline social advantages.

Contrarily, WhatsApp, having more than 500 million users, is one of India's most potent political instruments, as it functions through infrastructural intimacy rather than open communication. Highly targeted messaging is possible through encrypted, trust-based sharing within local, caste, religious, and family networks. Using stickers, emotive short videos, and micro-targeted audio, consultants exploit this and evade public scrutiny. Vaghela et al. (2021) and Dash et al. (2022) point out that the BJP's WhatsApp apparatus is a multi-tiered system that ensures message control and deep penetration by having national consultants seed content through district-level administrators. Affective impact—not deliberateness—is the goal.

Vaghela et al. (2021) analysis of WhatsApp expands our knowledge of platform-specific political cultures, even though his primary focus is Twitter's performative and infrastructure politics. While WhatsApp functions as an emotional conduit ingrained in daily life—particularly effective in rural and subaltern mobilization—Twitter provides elites with a public platform to acquire symbolic capital through overt acts of partisanship and caste signalling. These platforms create a well-coordinated ecosystem where consultants create cross-platform campaigns that combine effective reach and symbolic visibility.

Taken together, these digital terrains point out the value of a platform-sensitive analysis of political communication that foregrounds the algorithms and affordances of technology and the sociocultural infrastructures into which these technologies are embedded. The interplay between caste, emotion, influence, and media architectures illuminates how political legitimacy is no longer confined to rhetorical persuasion in

traditional media or physical spaces; it is now co-produced through the circulatory logics and infrastructural biases of digital platforms.

4.2 YouTube and the Rise of Vernacular Populism

YouTube has become a key platform for political consultants to craft long-form storytelling and candidate image construction. This includes mini-documentaries, beneficiary testimonials, and emotional retrospectives in vernacular languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Kannada, and Assamese. Designed for long-tail persuasion, such content builds influence gradually rather than through sudden virality. Consultants draw on regional affective registers, tailoring music, symbolic imagery, and language to local cultural idioms and dialectical nuances. At the same time, algorithmic stacking ensures viewers of devotional or entertainment content are seamlessly redirected to campaign material.

This strategy exemplifies Robert Glenn Howard's (2022) concept of "vernacular authority", where political rhetoric gains legitimacy through cultural familiarity rather than overt ideology. By embedding campaign narratives in the rhythms of everyday media consumption, political content disguises itself as artistic expression. Such an approach reduces partisan resistance and constructs an ambient emotional infrastructure, wherein persuasion operates through habitual exposure rather than direct argument. YouTube thus serves not merely as a media outlet but as a dramaturgical stage for producing authenticity, emotional resonance, and narrative credibility.

4.3 Instagram, Reels, and the Aestheticisation of Politics

On platforms such as Instagram, political consultants deploy strategies of visual dramaturgy to transform everyday campaign moments into aesthetically curated content, using filters, music overlays, and short-form clips designed for algorithmic circulation. This process aligns with the logic of *politainment*—the convergence of political messaging with entertainment formats—where ideological depth is often subordinated to visual appeal and emotional accessibility (Van Zoonen, 2005). Within this paradigm, politics is reframed as a lifestyle brand: candidates share gym routines, ethnic fashion, or culinary preferences while participating in viral challenges and mimicking pop-cultural tropes. These practices constitute a form of mimetic populism, in which political figures align themselves with the vernacular aesthetics and social rhythms of platform culture (Papacharissi, 2015).

Rather than persuade in a traditional sense, this form of communication acclimatises users to political personas by embedding them within the flows of everyday digital consumption. Political identity is thus rendered affectively proximate, emotionally consistent, and culturally resonant—particularly for Gen Z audiences, who are more attuned to vibes, relatability, and lifestyle signalling than ideological discourse. In this context, Instagram operates not as a forum for deliberation but as an affective infrastructure where repeated exposure fosters ambient familiarity. Through this process, political actors are seen and felt—absorbed into the normalised rhythms of user timelines and consumed alongside other symbols of aspirational life.

4.4 Television as an Agenda-Setting Echo Chamber

Despite the proliferation of digital platforms, television continues to exert significant agenda-setting power, particularly among older voters and rural constituencies. Political consultants capitalise on this influence by orchestrating "content cascades", a strategic process wherein a story is first seeded in a minor digital outlet, amplified through influencer circulation or re-publication in more credible media, and eventually escalated into a topic for televised debate. Once broadcast, these segments are clipped and redistributed via WhatsApp and YouTube, ensuring multi-platform circulation and emotional reinforcement. This tactic leverages the appetite of legacy media for novelty and controversy, enabling consultants to reframe otherwise marginal events—such as a small student protest—into symbolic flashpoints, often under the guise of national urgency. Drawing from McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory, which asserts that media may not dictate what to think but powerfully influence what to think about, consultants curate not only topics of discussion but the emotional bandwidth of public attention.

4.5 Data Centres and Sentiment Surveillance

An ecosystem of platformised consultants integrating data analytics and emotional governance is increasingly influencing the Indian electoral process. Companies like I-PAC, Inclusive Minds, and local groups like ShowTime Consulting, Jansoch, and ABM, as well as party-affiliated digital teams, serve as hybrid knowledge assemblages that combine digital monitoring, ethnographic analysis, and behavioural modification. A detailed, emotionally sensitive map of the electorate is produced by their sentiment dashboards, which aggregate a variety of data

streams, including manually coded volunteer call logs, viral trend tracking on X and Instagram, WhatsApp metadata (when available), NLP-driven analysis of YouTube comments, and caste-overlayed, geo-tagged polling data.

As interventionist tools, these dashboards monitor emotional intensities, such as anger, hope, fear, and cynicism, in addition to public opinion, allowing for quick narrative shifts. Campaigns can adjust their messaging using real-time sentiment data in as little as 24 hours. Based on local sentiment trends, digital engagement patterns, and past voting behaviour, a communal incident in a northern district, for example, could be framed as either a state failure or a national resilience.

I-PAC is a prime example of India's platform-based consulting approach, which tracks voter behaviour and emotional volatility by combining machine learning and extensive field surveys. From Mamata Banerjee's 2021 victory to Narendra Modi's 2014 campaign, it has employed meme-driven outreach, real-time command centres, and smartphone apps like *Didir Doot* to microtarget voters. Similarly, a 2022 police raid that brought to light the delicate intersection of strategy, data, and state power highlighted the focus of Inclusive Minds, a Congress-affiliated organisation based in Bengaluru that focuses on "inclusive narrative engineering" across caste and region. Regional companies specialising in vernacular mobilisation include ShowTime, Jansoch, JSPT, Rajneethi, and ABM. They create affective micro-narratives that connect digital platforms and grassroots politics by utilising ethnographic insights, A/B testing, and local influencers.

Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism," which treats human experience as a free raw material for technologically mediated practices of extraction, prediction, and sales—reframed here as the commodification and sale of political ideology—must be used to theorise this shift rather than rely on conventional media effects theories. This schema mines individual and group data trails to guide emotional reactions, alter behaviour, and enhance understanding. At the same time, Gilles Deleuze's (1992) idea of the "control society", in which power is exercised through ongoing modulation, gentle coercion, and feedback loops rather than through established institutions, comes into play.

Nick Srnicek's (2017) theory of platform capitalism, which views platforms as active mediators and controllers rather than impartial intermediaries, also supports this. This architecture continuously engineers, tests, and recalibrates voter subjectivities through granular, data-driven messaging, transforming the Indian electoral process into a platform-governed spectacle. Affect is now a planned result, a programmable variable in a predictive system, rather than something that happens naturally. Political consultancies have reframed electoral politics as a continuous process of narrative and emotional control. Behind the scenes, they align campaign messaging with voter sentiment, turning democratic participation from a periodic choice process to a data-driven system of continuous modulation.

5. Case Studies in Indian Political Consultancy
5.1 The BJP and the Architecture of Mass Personalisation (2014–2024)

Case studies of Indian campaigns reveal the true significance of algorithmic persuasion theories, which clarify the changing role of political consulting. In India, caste relations, regional languages, media infrastructures, and colloquial imaginations disperse and influence consultation. This section explores how particular campaigns have implemented these tactics, demonstrating how digital technologies interact with regional political and cultural structures.

Under Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has become India's most prominent site of consultant-driven algorithmic politics. Since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP, with support from firms like Jarvis, Nation with Namo, and in-house IT cells, has implemented "mass personalization"—crafting nationally coherent yet locally/individually tailored messages. The party then accelerated into 2019 and 2024.

This strategy relies on psychographic profiling using mobile data, digital behaviour, language preferences, and voting history to design micro-campaigns. In 2019, for example, the national "security" theme was framed as economic growth in urban Maharashtra. Whereas, in the border districts of Jammu, it was invoked through military imagery and references to surgical strikes.

Instead of being explicitly promoted, these stories spread via devotional media, YouTube and Instagram videos, GIFs, WhatsApp audios and messages, and memes, integrating politics into daily life. The secret was emotional alignment: consultants made BJP's algorithmic strategy succeed by broadcasting its message and allowing voters to feel as if they were discovering it themselves, organically and emotionally. This tactic used affective modularity to match emotions to demographics: small-town traders' moral panic, older Hindus' nostalgia, upper-caste unemployed youths' grievances, and young voters' aspirations. Modi's leadership was presented as a response to lived concerns rather than a top-down imposition by coordinating messages with preexisting emotional

terrains. The process produced an "emotive feedback loop" in which user responses continuously shaped content. Thus, consultants played the role of real-time dramaturges who scripted affective political experiences rather than conventional propagandists.

5.2 Aam Aadmi Party and the Hybrid Model of Participatory Consultancy

The Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) hybrid strategy blends strategic consulting with grassroots mobilisation, in contrast to the BJP's centralised algorithmic model. With the help of volunteer networks and civil society movements like India Against Corruption, the AAP capitalised on urban discontent during the 2013 Delhi Assembly elections. These volunteers contributed to developing campaign narratives and served as message carriers. Consultants included clear and open communication in a way that involved the community by turning local feelings into smart, data-driven visuals and messages instead of just using slogans.

For instance, door-to-door consultations identified household-level economic anxieties as key grievances, leading to the emergence of the iconic "*Bijli Half, Paani Maaf*" campaign. The role of consultants was to transform these concerns into a linguistic form that was catchy, emotionally resonant, and culturally intuitive. The phrase combined moral critique, economic policy, and colloquial idiom, collapsing complex governance proposals into a digestible moral promise.

The AAP's media strategy prioritised rawness over polish to project spontaneity and authenticity. Videos taken with mobile phones showed Kejriwal interacting with peons, teachers, rickshaw drivers, and vendors. Along with this, AAP frequently used street-level campaigning tactics like flash mobs, street plays, roadshows, and encouraged followers to share these via smartphones and social media. To create a persona based on rupture and proximity, consultants purposefully kept this aesthetic in contrast to the BJP's carefully chosen imagery. However, the AAP relied more on formal consultancies, spreading to Gujarat and Punjab, creating conflicts between grassroots credibility and centralised messaging. AI-driven sentiment tools guided the campaign language in Punjab, while youth-led cultural events and community kitchens maintained relational engagement through offline mobilisation. This case illustrates the changing dual imperative of Indian consulting: algorithmic accuracy and emotional closeness.

5.3 Regional Campaigns and Vernacular Political Consultancy

While national parties dominate the discourse on political consultancy, regional actors in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and the Northeast have pioneered highly localised strategies. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK and its consultants embed linguistic pride and anti-Hindi sentiment into affective campaigns drawn from 1960s protest memory, reanimated through TikTok, Instagram, and folk performance. In West Bengal, the TMC employs Baul music, Durga Puja iconography, and rural folklore to saturate public space with culturally resonant messages—as in the "Banglar Gorbo Mamata" series, blending cinematic style with local pride and feminist themes. In the Northeast, where infrastructure is fragmented, consultancy leans on dense social networks—kinship, tribal ties, and church affiliations—over digital tools. Here, persuasion is anthropological, not algorithmic. Across these contexts, effective consultancy hinges less on technological sophistication than on cultural fluency: success depends on decoding local semiotics, not simply deploying software.

6. Vernacular Affects, Identity Assemblages, and the Limits of Persuasion

These case studies demonstrate that political consulting in India is a culturally embedded practice where persuasion is enacted through symbols, rituals, and affective memory, beyond simple messaging or algorithmic accuracy. To integrate campaigns into local epistemologies, especially those about caste and religion, consultants use cultural proxies such as language, dress, temple visits, cuisine, and kinship metaphors. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the eastern districts may utilise Ramayana motifs, while the western regions receive messaging emphasising OBC grievances. Each narrative ecosystem, specifically designed for its intended audience, operates in parallel rather than in opposition. Asymmetrical persuasion fragments the shared public sphere because different communities receive various emotional cues, framings, and candidate personae. The consultant turns into an identity dramaturg, directing affect rather than argument. Emotional appeals, whether based on fear, nostalgia, or grievances, are not accidental; instead, they are deliberately fostered, transforming consultation into an affective scripting mechanism that influences voter subjectivity and behaviour.

7. Post-Democratic Publics and the Crisis of Deliberation

The previous sections established that political consultancy in India today is neither ancillary nor neutral. It is infrastructural: deeply embedded in how the public is constituted, identities are managed, and emotions are

mobilised. This situation presents an urgent normative question—what kind of democratic life is possible in a polity where political persuasion is conducted not through public argument but through predictive modulation, emotive saturation, and cultural scripting?

The emergence of what we might call "post-democratic publics"—atomized collectives formed through targeted messaging, segmented grievances, and media silos—suggests that the very conditions for deliberative politics are under threat. Bengtsson et al. (2024) comment that ideal public sphere model, citizens engage in rational-critical debate based on shared access to information. But in contemporary India, this model is eroded by several converging phenomena: data privatisation, the proliferation of fragmented media ecologies, and the asymmetrical distribution of persuasive power.

Today's consultant is less an architect of consensus than a "cartographer of division," mapping grievances to vote banks, translating identities into analytics, and engineering antagonisms for strategic mobilisation. This is not necessarily anti-democratic in the procedural sense—elections continue, participation may even increase—but it marks a qualitative degeneration of democratic practice. As Colin Crouch (2004) theorises, post-democracy is a system in which electoral rituals remain intact while real power is exercised by elites operating outside the domain of public accountability. Indian political consultancy exemplifies this drift.

Moreover, emotional feedback loops that reward outrage, tribalism, and familiarity supplant the deliberative function of public reason. Political messaging becomes "content," optimised for virality but not dialogue. Platforms reward affect, not coherence. Consultants design campaigns not to inform but to interrupt attention, to create micro-immersions of feeling, rather than enable long-term political imagination.

The contemporary political landscape intensifies this "desubjectification" through affective and algorithmic manipulation, building on Wendy Brown's (2015) analysis of how neoliberalism erodes democratic subjectivity. Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics* (2017) complements this view by illustrating how power in the digital age operates less through overt coercion and more through internalised self-exploitation and affective control. Platforms and political consultancies exploit individuals' emotional vulnerabilities and desires by steering behaviour via personalised, data-driven nudges rather than traditional discipline.

Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism further explains how digital infrastructure harvests and monetises affective data, transforming citizens into behavioural commodities. Together, these ideas show a change in how politics is governed: from focusing on individuals as market players to seeing them as people whose feelings and actions are influenced by algorithms, weakening their ability to act politically.

Thus, in India's platformised political consultancy ecosystem, citizens become "desubjectified" by market rationality and psychopolitical mechanisms of affective governance—where emotions are tracked, predicted, and manipulated to engineer electoral outcomes and reshape democratic sovereignty.

8. Ethical and Regulatory Horizons
8.1 Toward a Principle of Emotional Transparency

To address this crisis, it is insufficient to call for transparency or digital literacy alone. We need a multi-dimensional ethical framework for political consultancy that accounts for its cultural embeddedness, technological reach, emotional potency, and epistemic authority. This framework must address four key domains: truth, autonomy, identity, and justice.

Unlike traditional propaganda, algorithmic persuasion operates below the threshold of conscious awareness. Emotional cues are designed to trigger responses without deliberation. Consultants rarely disclose which emotional registers they are targeting or why. Emotional transparency would require that all political messaging—especially on closed platforms like WhatsApp—disclose its source, emotional intent, and data basis. This would resemble the EU's proposed "AI emotional disclosure directive", wherein AI-generated or emotionally manipulative content must declare its affective design. Such a framework would not prevent persuasion but restore informed consent to political feeling, a core requirement of democratic subjectivity.

8.2 Data Justice and Algorithmic Accountability

Behavioural and psychographic data power the backend of political consultancy, much of it extracted without meaningful consent. Machine learning models trained on discriminatory assumptions perform caste-based targeting, religious profiling, and regional stereotyping. Regulating this space requires a data justice framework rooted in the principle that no community can be politically profiled without representation. Consultants should be obligated to conduct bias audits, publish transparency reports, and undergo ethical review boards in academic research. India's current Information Technology Act and Election Commission regulations are insufficient to address the complexities of contemporary digital electoral practices. There is a pressing need for a comprehensive

legal framework inspired by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) but tailored to India's unique socio-political and electoral diversity.

Such a framework should include strict rules against microtargeting that uses sensitive information like religion and caste, require checks before elections to assess how digital campaigning tools affect voters, and ensure that citizens can easily opt out of being digitally profiled. Such interventions would shift the ethical burden from the citizen to the consultancy and platform, thereby rebalancing informational asymmetries.

8.3 Reconstructing the Cultural Commons

As discussed earlier, political consultancy in India functions as a curator of cultural narratives. While such work can produce resonant, empowering campaigns, it can also weaponise identity—particularly when consultants deploy myths, symbols, or idioms in ways that essentialise, exoticise, or divide. A normative politics of consultancy must engage with the cultural rights of communities. Indigenous and vernacular knowledge systems must not be treated as political raw material for elite consultants. Instead, co-creative frameworks must be developed, where message development involves community artists, scholars, and storytellers—ensuring narrative dignity and epistemic plurality. The idea is not to purify the politics of emotion or identity but to democratise the cultural labour of persuasion, allowing multiple public members to participate in shaping the languages and logics of political belonging.

8.4 Participatory Consultancy and Deliberative Co-Creation

The most aspirational ethical objective is the reconceptualisation of political consultancy from a proprietary commercial enterprise into a participatory public good. This vision is not utopian; various global and Indian contexts already exhibit emergent practices aligned with participatory design principles. Participatory consultancy would encompass mechanisms such as localised feedback loops to test, refine, and discard campaign narratives iteratively; horizontal deliberative processes involving consultants, candidates, and citizen panels; the implementation of rigorous transparency protocols governing campaign financing and advertisement placement; and the systematic inclusion of marginalised and under-represented voices in content creation and strategic decision-making. Such a model would produce more ethical campaigns and more resilient and representative ones capable of engaging diverse publics without resorting to affective manipulation or epistemic closure. An up-and-coming model can be found in municipal-level campaigns in Kerala, where ward-level deliberative meetings and panchayat-based feedback mechanisms have enabled tailored messaging without data exploitation. Similarly, before they became centralised, AAP's early campaigns showed how volunteers can act as co-designers of persuasion.

9. Conclusion: Toward a Democratic Theory of Political Consultancy

Political consultancy in India has transcended traditional campaigning to become a powerful force that shapes electoral outcomes and the fabric of democratic engagement. Leveraging cultural symbolism, emotional appeals, and algorithm-driven strategies influences how citizens perceive political realities and participate in public life. This concentration of influence, often cloudy and unregulated, poses critical challenges to democratic transparency and accountability. To safeguard democratic integrity, there is an urgent need to rethink political consultancy as a public responsibility that demands greater openness, ethical standards, and citizen involvement to ensure that political communication empowers rather than manipulates.

If we are to imagine a democratic future that is not merely procedurally functional but ethically generative, we must move beyond transparency and regulation. We must treat political consultancy as a cultural and epistemic practice, subject to the same normative scrutiny we reserve for media, education, and public discourse. This requires new theories of public reason that incorporate affect, infrastructure, and identity, as well as new democratic imaginaries that centre emotion without collapsing into manipulation, embrace cultural difference without succumbing to essentialism, and harness technology without surrendering autonomy. India, as a deeply plural, uneven, and emotionally rich democracy, can lead this reimagination—not by rejecting political consultancy but by transforming its structure, ethics, and horizon.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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