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**The age of post-truth politics**

[Sundar Sarukkai](http://www.thehindu.com/profile/author/Sundar-Sarukkai-965/)

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It isn’t just the U.S., the climate of blatant lies has permeated politics worldwide. Perhaps it is not that truth is irrelevant for politics but what is needed is a theory of truth that fits politics

Looking at the theatre of politics around us today, it is difficult not to give in to a sense of cynicism. Perhaps more than any other theme in contemporary politics, it is the prevalence of lies that characterises the current condition. This is not restricted to the multiplicity of lies that defined the American election; the climate of blatant lies has entered into the way politics is conducted across the world today.

**The proliferation of public lying**

The U.S. election was explicitly about brazen lies and also about the indifference of the voters to obvious lies. We seem to be more used to lies in the Indian political scene but here too the scale and the obviousness of lies seem to be increasing. In Bengaluru, in response to the massive ‘Steel Beda’ movement against a proposed 6.7-km steel flyover, the government and a minister repeatedly offered obvious obfuscation, those which they well knew could be disproved in a matter of minutes. By brazenly misrepresenting facts, the minister was acting as if politics could not be expected to speak truth.

Mechanisms which seemingly would have afforded protection against public lying have failed. Audio and video recordings of crimes are quickly dismissed by claiming that they are fabricated. Perhaps never before has it been so difficult to retain any meaningful notion of truth in the public space.

The public discourse of politics is increasingly fractured. There have been violent disagreements over the truth of the ‘surgical strikes’ across the border and although the public is supposed to consume these reports, they are not expected to have a judgment on their veracity. We have had the spectacle of not knowing whether leaders of the government and leading political parties are alive or not, or what kind of illnesses they suffer from.

Ironically this world of lies and deception is supported and made possible through assertions of one truth or the other. Each party bases their lies on claims that they are speaking the truth while their opponent is lying! Thus not only is there a cynical use of lying, there is also a cynical use of truth to ground these lies — this is the contemporary condition which has been to a large extent caused as much by media and technology as by a fall in standards of public probity.

**An inbuilt incompatibility?**

But then politics has always had a close relationship with lies. Politics and truth apparently do not go well together. Harold Pinter in his Nobel Prize in Literature lecture in 2005 spoke on “Art, Truth and Politics” and argued, “The majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.”

A report by an advertising agency with inputs from the U.S., U.K. and India in 2012 found that 72 per cent in these three countries agreed that truth was hard to find in politics these days. In all these countries, politicians as a group came last in a list that ranked different professions in terms of speaking the truth. Interestingly, just above them in the list of truthful people are car salesmen and the advertising community.

In 1967, the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote an influential essay in the *The New Yorker* titled “Truth and Politics” where she powerfully articulated the problem in the following manner: “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade… Is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful?” Arendt’s suspicion that “it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms” was particularly true of the fascist Nazi regime which she had first-hand account of but was also extended to politics in general.

In contrast, there was Gandhi for whom politics was primarily defined through truth. Gandhi also showed how a fundamental engagement with truth could lead to profound political action. This engagement with truth and politics was very much a part of the freedom movement in India and also of the early stages of politics in our country.

**Shrinking space for debate**

So what really is the problem between politics and truth today? Is truth really anathema to politics? Perhaps politics has nothing to do with truth. The main purpose of democratic politics seems to be only to convince others of something or the other. Politicians have to convince the citizens but the citizens also have to be prepared and ready to be convinced of that position. Almost always, the obstacle to being convinced is not something called the truth but only one’s commitment to certain beliefs.

All the public debates in recent times illustrate this most powerfully. It was impossible to even conduct a conversation about certain topics without it degenerating very quickly into a shouting match. In recent times, the reaction to the Jawaharlal Nehru University incidents, the Rohith Vemula case, the discussion on uniform civil code and many such instances shows clearly that public reasoned debate is impossible in our country if such debate is to be based on some notion of truth. It has become impossible to convince the other side by invoking notions of evidence and truth.

However, these public disagreements and taking positions are as much a part of what it is to be political. What is ironic is that political disagreements are couched almost always in the language of truth. We disagree with each other because we do not want to rethink our fundamental beliefs but express this always not in terms of ideology but truth. Our fights get out of control because we make it a fight about two opposite truths and not about two opposite opinions.

**Rethinking truth for politics**

We not only think truth is essential when we discuss politics but we also tend to think that the truth we hold is the only truth that is possible. The answer to this conundrum is simple: it is not that truth is irrelevant for politics but what is needed is a theory of truth that fits politics. Each domain of human action creates its own notions of truth and we often use different types of truth in our social transactions. The nature of factual truth, scientific truth, religious truth, artistic truth is different and we negotiate around these truths in each of these domains. Thus, the problem about truth in politics is not that there is no possibility of truth, but that we have to come to an agreement as to the nature of truth that we need in order to ‘do’ politics. Perhaps that truth is a deep sense of personal truth based on principles of compassion and attempts to understand our ‘opponent’ instead of a truth based on so-called factual judgments of the other.

Sundar Sarukkai is Professor of Philosophy at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.