Analytical Study of Political Debates on regional television channels:

A special reference to the short-lived BJP Government in Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT

A high-voltage political drama was witnessed in Maharashtra in November 2019. In a sudden and unexpected move Devendra Fadanvis, and Ajit Pawar had taken the oath as the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister respectively on 23rd November 2019.

This event not only caused anger amongst Shiv Sena, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Congress but also raised many legal, constitutional and moral issues. Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) was claiming that they had the support of 156 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). However, the opposition parties had prepared a fool- proof plan so that not a single MLA will defect to join BJP.

The situation was changing every hour and news channels were conducting discussions and breaking stories all the time. Sometimes, an official stand taken by political parties was officially available to the television reporters, but many times channels had to depend on their own sources. News channels were busy in getting the latest and the highest possible accurate information, keeping viewers updated and putting forth various sides of this drama.

Around this time, Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress filed a writ petition against the Maharashtra Governor, Mr. Bhagat Singh Koshyari's decision allowing Mr. Fadanvis to form government. Next 80 hours were full of arguments and counterarguments, allegations and counter-allegations, strategy and counterstrategy.

Covering such a super-volatile situation was a great challenge to media agencies and television news channels in particular.

This research paper has made an attempt to analyse debates telecast on the following four Marathi television news channels: ABP Majha, ZEE Marathi, New 18 Lokmat and TV 9 Marathi. It tries to compare major issues discussed in the debates, arguments of spokespersons, and outcome of debates. It also studies anchoring styles and editorial stands taken by these news channels.

Key words: Debates, News channels, Maharashtra, Assembly, Elections, Politics

INTRODUCTION

The political drama in Maharashtra started on 24th of October 2019, the day assembly results were announced. The alliance of BJP and the Shiv Sena won 161 seats in the 288-member house. The alliance of NCP and Congress got 98 seats. In this scenario, Shiv Sena leader and spokesperson Sanjay Raut insisted that BJP should keep its promise to let a Shiv Sena candidate become the Chief Minster for 2.5 years. He also went on to suggest that if this promise was broken, Shiv Sena would exercise other options. BJP categorically denied having made any such promise. Shiv Sena was not ready for a dialogue with BJP without getting an assurance about the Chief Minister's post. On other hand, Sena leaders had started a dialogue with NCP leaders.

BJP made it clear to the Maharashtra Governor that they were not able to form the Government. Shiv Sena could not get Congress support within the deadline and NCP leader Ajit Pawar also conveyed his inability to form the Government. When these rounds of discussion were taking place among Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, a dramatic incident took place.

When newspapers dated 23rd November flashed their lead story headlined "Uddhav Thackery to be the next Chief Minister of Maharashtra", the news channels had a breaking news at 8.15 am. This was a pleasant surprise for BJP workers and supporters but an unbelievable shock for Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress.

The Breaking News was: 'Devendra Fadanvis sworn in as Chief Minister and Ajit Pawar as Deputy Chief Minister.' This happened at around 8 am and took almost everybody by surprise. This was preceded by Governor Koshyari recommending revocation of President's rule in Maharashtra once he got letters of support of 170 MLAs from BJP and NCP's Ajit Pawar at 12.10 am on 23rd November. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had used his special powers to advise the President for revoking the President's Rule and it was revoked at 5.47 am. This late-night-early-morning drama literally caught all concerned napping. Not only other parties but even BJP MLAs were unaware about it.

This surprise move was made by BJP when just a few hours earlier, Uddhav Thackery was unanimously chosen to be Maharashtra CM on 22nd November.

For Marathi news channels giving 24-hour news coverage, this was an unprecedented political turmoil. Next 80 hours were full of breaking news. Each channel strengthened their Mumbai political beat by diverting   reporters from the rest of Maharashtra to Mumbai, Reporters were working round the clock. Every slot was a prime slot for the channels. Senior anchors were stationed at the studios and guests were lined up for the debates. Viewers which otherwise are accustomed to watch debates only in the evening, could watch debates throughout the day.

The members of Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress were kept in high vigilance. Visuals of Party MLAs shepherded together at various Star hotels in Mumbai added more teeth to the visuals shown during debates. On 25th November, MLAs from all three parties were taken to Grand Hyatt Hotel in Mumbai. This parade of 162 MLAS was shown live on news channels. The strength of the opposition clearly showed that BJP's claim about having the support of 173 MLAs (BJP: 105, NCP: 54, Independent: 14) was wrong.

The last blow to BJP came from the Supreme Court when it ordered that the exercise of proving the majority will be through open voting with all proceedings telecast live. On 26th November Devendra Fadanvis and Ajit Pawar submitted their resignations to the Governor.

Looking back, it was Sanjay Raut, Shiv Sena leader and Member of Parliament, who had set the stage for this drama. His tweets became the subject of debate for the news channels; his everyday press conferences captured national headlines.

Veteran political leader and Founder-head of NCP, Sharad Pawar, true to his Machiavellian image, played the most crucial role in this entire drama by turning the table at the most critical time. He was successful in getting back all the MLAs from his party who had shifted the camp, kept his party united and assured Shiv Sena that he was with them.

Objectives

1. To analyse the content of debates on the channels

2. To compare styles of anchors and guests participated in the discussion

Research Methodology

The researcher aims to carry out a qualitative analysis of this subject as covered in television debates on Marathi News channels. Ten debates on channels have been selected for this paper.

This was a purposive sampling to give representation to at least four Marathi news channels. Zee 24 Taas, News 18 Lokmat, TV 9 Marathi and ABP Majha were shortlisted for the purpose with minimum two and maximum four debates from each channel.

Each debate was analysed on the basis of number of participants, views expressed by each participant, exchange of words and heated arguments, use of proverbs and quotes or lines of poetry. Attention has also been paid to time devoted for actual debates, breaking news and anchoring style.

The researcher watched the recording of this program for a detailed analysis. Secondary data has been collected from books and internet. Some research papers related to online media and journalism have also been referred.

Themes of Debate

On 23rd November the discussions revolved around the surprise move by NCP leader Ajit Pawar to join Devendra Fadanvis. The participants in the discussions mulled over BJP turning the tables, strategy by the eminent BJP leader and the Union Home Minister, Mr. Amit Shah, and delay by Congress in giving support to Shiv Sena. See Table 1. From the next day, all the guests and spokespersons in the discussions were analysing the strength of MLAs in both camps and hearings in the Supreme Court.

Table: 1

Date	ABP Maza (Maza Vishesh)	Zee 24 Taas (special coverage)	News 18 Lokmat (Bedhadak)	TV 9 Marathi (Akhada)
23 Nov.	Mutiny of Ajit Pawar			
24 Nov.	Who will win battle of power?	Power Battle in Supreme Court		
25 Nov.	Irrigation scam files closed for power	Clean chit to Ajit Pawar ?	What will happen in power tussle?	What is in the mind of Ajit Pawar?
26 Nov.	Who can issue the whip?		Resignation of Fahadanvis	Ajit Pawar went or sent?

All the channels ensured participation of spokespersons from BJP and either Congress or NCP. Those conducting the debates also made sure that these spokespersons were pitted against each other. Most news channels also invited senior journalists from the print media to analyse the situation. See Table 2. In some discussions, legal or constitutional experts were also brought in. Surprisingly, not a single Shiv Sena spokesperson was seen participating in the debate.

Table: 2

	ABP Maza (Vishesh)	Zee 24 Taas (special coverage)	News 18 Lokmat (Bedhadak)	TV 9 Marathi (Akhada)
Anchor	Prasanna Joshi	Ashish Jadhav	Vilas Bade	Nikhila Mhatre
Spokesperson	Sachin Sawant (Cong) vs Keshav Upadhye (BJP), Atul Londhe (Cong) vs Bhalchandra Shirsat (BJP), Janardan Chandurkar (Con) Vs Atul Bhatkhalkar (BJP), Amarsing Pandit (NCP) Vs. Praveen Darekar(BJP)	Gopal Tiwari (Congress) Vs Keshav Upadhye, Ratnakar Mahajan (Cong) vs Madhav Bhandari (BJP),	Ratnakar Mahajan (Cong) Vs. Bhalchandra Shirsat (BJP), Sanjay Tatkare (NCP) vs, Sambhaji Patil Nilangekar(BJP)	Amol Mitkari (NCP) vs.Praveen Darekar
Journalists	Bharat Kumar Raut, Sanjay Jog, Pratap Thorat	Sanjay Tiwari, Sanjeev Unhale, sanjay Tiwari	Arun Khore	Bharat kumar Raut, Sanjay Awate,Ashok Wankhede, Mrunalini Nanivdekar, Vishwas Pathak, Pawan Dahat
Analysts/expert	Abhay Deshpande,	Anay Joglekar, Vijay Pandhare		
Constitutional Or legal Expert	Jayant Mainkar, Nagesh Kesari		Anant Kalase	
Editor	Rajeev Khandekar		Mahesh Mhatre	

Political stand

Nationalist Congress Party and Congress party spokespersons obviously criticised the way the Government was formed in Maharashtra. Devendra Fadanvis had taken the oath at the

Wankhede stadium in 2014. But this time swearing-in was done in the darkness of the night. "Was it Shapathvidhi (oath-taking ceremony) or Dashkriyavidi (last rites performed after somebody's death)" BJP's detractors asked.

The second criticism faced by BJP was that it had joined hands with the same person who was accused by BJP itself of irrigation scam. On 25th there was a news that Ajit Pawar was given a clean chit in 9 cases. Congress and NCP sources felt that this was the reward Ajit Pawar got for joining hands with BJP. Congress and NCP also criticised that BJP had indulged in hoarse trading. All three parties had to shift their MLAs from one hotel to another to keep them away from poaching hands.

BJP spokespersons on the other hand said that swearing-in took place in "Ram Prahar". (That time of early morning which Hindus believe is ideal for carrying out holy acts).

BJP spokespersons were trying to justify the inevitability of government formation with Ajit Pawar. According to them, Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress were taking a lot of time to form the Government. Moreover, the situation was such that no Government could have been formed without at least two parties coming together. Hence BJP had joined hand with Ajit Pawar to give a stable government to the people of Maharashtra. The spokespersons of BJP also claimed that there was nothing wrong in revoking the President's rule in the night or swearing-in the morning. They also clarified that the enquiry against Ajit Pawar in many cases was still going on and the Government will not interfere in it. "Ajit Pawar is a responsible person and a mature politician and there was no question of wheedling him.

BJP spokespersons also counter-argued that NCP and Congress do not trust their own MLAs. That's why they had to shift their MLAs from one hotel to another, from one city to other.

The television debates also saw tussles between spokespersons of Congress and BJP. Especially when Congress spokespersons alleged that BJP was into horse-trading. Congress spokesperson Sachin Sawant gave the examples quoting instance from Karnataka, Gujarat and Goa to show that BJP has indulged in such practices in the past. Keshav Upadhye (BJP) retaliated by saying that it was Congress which does not trust its own MLAs. But Sawant was quick to respond, saying that when a lion enters the area, all other animals run away.

BJP spokesperson Bhalchandra Shirsat used the words "*Jityachi Khod*" to refer to NCP leader Jitendra Avhad. The complete proverb goes like this: *Jityachi Khod Melyashivay Jaat Nahi* (any nasty habit remains with a person till his death) It angered the Congress Spokesperson and as well as the ABP Majha anchor. But BJP spokesperson said that he did not want to be mean, he, was only quoting a proverb.

Some more expressions used by the same BJP spokesperson gave rise to heated argument. He called Ratnakar Mahajan as the spokesperson of *Mahabhakas Aghadi* (Super-desolate alliance). Mahajan obviously reacted in a sharp way and stated that he was participating in the debate as a Congress spokesperson and BJP does not have right to use such words.

There were reports of "Operation Lotus" initiated by BJP to wean away MLAs from Congress, Shiv Sena and BJP to their side. However, MLAs which were claimed as supporters of Ajit Pawar returned to Sharad Pawar's camp. There were interesting stories bandied as "Breaking News" about catching these MLAs in different areas of Mumbai or in different cities. In one debate, NCP spokesperson Sanjay Tatkare, who was participating live

from outside the TV station studio, was irritated by a question asked by the anchor. (Vilas Bade, Network 18). The question was, "If Ajit Pawar is so loyal (to NCP) and still has very good relations with NCP leaders, why did he change the camp?" Tatkare did not have the answer. He said, "I do not have the answer for this question. I do not want to take any stand". Even when the editor of the channel Mahesh Mhatre was trying to pacify him, he preferred to walk out from the debate.

Findings

1. Use of Hindi Poetry

All said and done, politicians are multi-talented people and thus, use of ornate language laced with wit, humour, literary flair and even poetry is not rare. The stage for the use of Hindi and Urdu poetry was set by the Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut. Many of his tweets and bites from 24th October onwards contained lines from noted poets such as Wasim Barewali, Bashir Badra, Habib Jalib, Dushyant Kumarand even the Late Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

In the debate on TV9 Marathi, journalist Mrunalini Nanivdekar, while referring to shameless political parties, used the words "*Hamam me sub*" which literally means all in the bathroom. She did not complete the proverb *Hamam me sub Nange hai* means All are naked in the bathroom. Here are a few more examples of use of Hindi/Urdu/Marathi couplets/proverbs used by participants in these debates.

- *Munni Badnam Huvi darling tereliye* (Bhalchandra Shirsat, BJP on New 18 Lokmat) while referring to Shiv Sena's harassment because of Congress,

- *Bail Gela ni Zopa Kela* (Bhalchandra Shirsat, BJP on News 18 Lokmat) while referring to Congress and NCP's delayed response in putting a claim on government formation. He also gave the example of a girl who runs away from the house get married. In the process, her relationship with almost all family members gets cut off. However, gradually, some relatives start relenting and re-establish relationships with her one by one and ultimately her father also forgives her. Mr. Shirsat claimed that Ajit Pawar's decision will be accepted by NCP and Sharad Pawar. *Chat Mangani Pat Byah* (Bharat Kumar Raut, journalist on TV 9) while referring to time given for floor test,

- *Gadhav gele and bramhcharya hi gele*, (Sanjay Awate on TV 9 Marathi) while referring to BJP losing both power and self- respect.

On 23rd November, Prasanna Joshi concluded the debate by reading Atal Bihari Vajpayee's poem from mobile screen. The lines were 'Kuarav Kaun*, Kaun Pandav, tedha sawal hai, Dono oar Shakuni ka faila kutjaal hai, Raja Dharmaraaj ne chodi nahi juwe ki lat hai, Har panchayat me panchali apmanit hai, Beena Krishna ke aaj Mahabharat hona hai, Bane Koi raja, Rank ko to rona Hai.'* He did not forget to name BJP spokesperson and said categorically that he was reading Vajpayee's poem.

Anchors on other channels also used Hindi/Marathi lines in their panel discussions. Some examples:

- *Subahka bhula jab sham ko ghar laute to use Bhula nahi Kahate* (Vilas Bade, TV9 Lokmat),

- *Jo Jita Wahi Sikandar* (Mahesh Mhatre, Zee 24 Taas) Nikhila Mhatre (TV 9 Marathi) used the words *JiJi* (means yes) frequently as a response to members of the panel.

There were rare instances when English lines were used by Congress spokespersons while referring to legal or constitutional issues.

- "Pro tem speaker enjoys all the rights and privileges of a speaker", said Janardan Chandurkar (ABP Majha).

- "Supreme Court is not acting in oblivion or Supreme Court is not acting in a vacuum" commented Ratnakar Mahajan (News 18 Lokmat) while emphasizing the importance of Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress Show of strength.

2. Editorial stand

News Editors, Rajeev Khandekar (ABP Majha) and Mahesh Mhatre (News 18 Lokmat), participated in the debates and voiced their opinion on various issues. The anchors were taking their names followed by the word *Sir.* And the editors were given maximum time to speak among all participants in the debate.

Rajeev Khandekar criticised the way political parties are adopting to all the means to win the power. The politics of this country is so deteriorated that any political party can go to any extreme to form the government. All the parties are guilty, but BJP is more responsible for the situation, he commented.

Vilas Bade (News 18 Lokmat) and Ms. Nikhil Mhatre (TV 9 Marathi) had done their homework well and they refrained from assuming the "commentative" role.

3. Pace of the debate

The anchors' speed differed from channel to channel. While Prasanna Joshi (ABP Majha) was fast and spontaneous and asked precise questions; Ashish Jadhav (Zee 24 Taas) was slow in pace and his questions were a bit lengthy with a lot of repetition. However, Ashish was able to keep his calm. He deftly managed to provoke the guests with his witty style but could, at the same time, keep a smile on his face. The delivery speed of anchors also affected the pace of the overall debate.

4. Error

Rajeev Khandekar (ABP Majha) while referring to the swearing-in ceremony in 2014, said that it had taken place at the Shivaji Park in Mumbai (when in reality, it had taken place at Wankhede Stadium. Bharat Kumar Raut, while talking about Devendra Fadanvis mistakenly said Jagan Fadanvis. These were errors because of the tremendous pressure and variety of arguments at the time of the live coverage.

5. Male Dominance

TV 9 was the only channel where a female anchor was conducting the debate. A total of only three ladies participated in these 10 debates. While Mrunalini Nanivdekar (Journalist) was present in the studio, Anjali Damania (activist), Hemalata Patil (Congress spokesperson) participated through phone.

6. Breaking news

Average Ten percent of the debate time was spent on giving breaking news. Anchors had to interrupt the guests at that time in order to connect the reporters on field. Alternatively, they switched over to describing/ analysing the news. Breaking news many times diverted the initial topic fixed for the discussion. And guests reminded other guests and anchors to stick to the topic of the debate.

Suggestions

The present study has a number of implications for further research.

1. Detailed comparative analysis of anchoring styles during such debates can be done. The analysis can be mapped to the following parameters, namely, body language, temperament, energy and conversational speed. Anchors' skills in controlling short-tempered participants can also be studied in detail.

2. Further research can also be done on the editorial stand taken by different channels. Executive Editor or Editor-in-chief of the channels participated in some discussions. Their comments, body language and political inclinations can be analysed.

3. Detailed study on the content of the discussions, time allotted to guests, logical reasoning, relevance, repetition, aggression or helplessness of the guests can also be analysed.

Conclusion

It was probably for the first time that Marathi news channels were covering a political crisis of this magnitude, giving minute-to-minute updates and analyses of the situation. The fact that television the anchors and reporters were overburdened was very clearly visible. There were rare instances of factual errors by guests or editors. However, generally, they all scored high on factual accuracy.

The discussions many times digressed from the original topic. It was because of two reasons. First, the breaking stories of that moment and second, the lengthy and not so relevant answers given by Party spokespersons. There was frequent exchange of words between spokespersons of two parties and even among guests. On an average, 5 to 7 minutes from each debate of 30 minutes had chaotic situations because of these fights. But overall, the discussions took place in a peaceful manner unlike many Hindi news channels.

It was observed that no TV channel came up with a clear-cut editorial stand on the issues at hand. Though anchors or editors summarized the situation, they restrained themselves from condemning or appreciating various happenings taking place in those momentous 80 hours.

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