

# Using facts to hide underlying truths

In the clever use of seemingly appropriate words and phrases by the powerful, one finds a clear intent to deceive people



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The Hathras atrocity is weighing on the national conscience, or whatever is left of it. People have witnessed not just the most brutal face of social oppression, but a cynical and brazen use of the state machinery to support the oppressors. The inhuman assault of the teenage Dalit girl — I shall call her Bharati — that eventually killed her was followed by a hesitation in filing the first information report, the callous and deferred medical examination, the neglect of the dying declaration, and, most alarmingly, the haste in burning the body by the police without appropriate rites or the presence of family members.



This wilful destruction of evidence was followed by political tyranny: family members were virtually put under house arrest, the entire village was barricaded by massive police force, Opposition leaders and media persons who tried to reach the victim's family were stopped and roughed up an appalling instance of dictatorial behavior that made a mockery of our constitutional democracy.

## Shaping the discourse

I shall not, however, focus on any of these, attending instead to the slippery speech-acts of spokespersons of the ruling party as they tried to shape the discourse around the horrific incident. Using false arguments to deceive the listener is a common form of sophistry. But what was heard here was the use of true statements to hide other more urgent and relevant truths. This is no ordinary fake news or misinformation but the clever use of seemingly appropriate words and phrases with the clear intention of deceiving the populace. Few better instances are available of how facts and truth are used to generate a false discourse.

I illustrate my point with three examples. Take first the issue of mis-description. I heard it being said on a television channel that ‘I was pained at the death of the young woman’. On the face of it, it sounds sensitive and apt; it is true after all that Bharati died. And expression of pain at the loss of life seems fitting. But is it? Since it is incontrovertibly true that she was mercilessly pulverised and eventually killed, the term ‘died’ is entirely inappropriate. ‘Death’ fails to distinguish the demise of a person by natural causes, accident, suicide or murder.

To speak of the death of a person when she was murdered is grossly misleading. If used persistently and deliberately it is nothing but unforgivable sophistry. It obfuscates truth. Likewise, pain alone is not an appropriate emotion in the face of a brutal murder. To not have feelings of anger, horror, or outrage indicates an emotional and moral disability. Overall then, expressing pain at Bharati’s ghastly murder is an inadequate emotion accompanying a gross mis-description. Together, they hide the truth of the gruesome incident. In human situations, finding just the right, the most appropriate description of what has occurred is often the difference between Truth and Falsehood.

### **Irrelevant explanations**

Such mis-descriptions are not the only way in which powerful wrongdoers distort public discourse and evade responsibility. Very often, explanations that are otherwise factually correct or true are equally damaging. So, what is to be made of explanations of the chilling assault on Bharati by reference to the male propensity for aggression, violence and control?

Consider the following example. An investigating police officer enters a charred house, and finds a can of kerosene and a used matchstick. As he exits, a reporter asks how the house caught fire. The officer answers “because of the presence of oxygen at the location”. Now, this account is not untrue, for nothing catches fire without the presence of oxygen. However, the response is entirely irrelevant and would send the news reporter into a tizzy. The answer is wrong because a good explanation needs to be not merely factually correct but relevant to the question at hand.

Surely, at the back of the reporter's mind is whether the house was burnt accidentally or intentionally and if the latter, precisely who caused it and why. Finding the motive and attributing responsibility for the criminal act is vital. Likewise, it is probably true that males are prone to aggression. Yet, like oxygen, this is part of the standing conditions of specific acts of rape and murder. It is not explanatorily relevant in most cases of actual violence such as in Hathras. If our interest is in finding precipitating causes for why Bharati was assaulted, we need to identify local social, economic, cultural, perhaps political factors. To provide irrelevant and general statements instead is a straightforward ploy to hide the truth, to cover up a possible crime. Likewise, broadening the discussion in the immediate aftermath of the atrocity by speaking generally about rapes all over the country deflects from the specific atrocity in Hathras and lets its perpetrators get off the hook.

### **Identity of the victim**

This brings me to the third point which is so obvious that I am surprised that I need to make it at all. To say that Bharati was assaulted and murdered and stop there is being both economical with the truth and morally callous. The omission of a detail withholds the most crucial feature of the story, one without which what happened cannot be understood and explained. Horrendous as all rapes are, it was not just any woman who was brutalised by some men, but a Dalit who was sexually assaulted and killed by 'upper caste' men. This crime would likely not have occurred if it was not for Bharati's Dalit identity. Indeed, she was reportedly gang raped and murderously beaten not only because she was a Dalit but precisely because in the past, her family had resisted 'upper caste' domination. Even Bharati did not remain mute as she lay battered, but named her perpetrators in her dying declaration.

So, it is not false to say that a young woman was assaulted and murdered by brutal men, but to ignore Bharati's Dalitness and hide the caste-related nature of the crime is to fail to explain what happened, provide a false account. For it is the crisscrossing co-presence of caste and gender that truly explains what happened to Bharati in Hathras. Ignoring or concealing this falsifies the account, even when no factually incorrect general statement, no outright lie is offered.

We cannot paper over the difference between the horrendous act of killing a woman out of personal hatred for what she did, killing her to assert brute male power and murdering her only because of her Dalit identity. In a caste-ridden society, some groups are imprisoned in their castes, facing horrendous consequences simply on account of the family into which they are born, and because of where precisely their family happens to be located in caste hierarchy.

### **The inadequacies of homilies**

Usually the same is true of our religious identity. This is why the targeting of Dalits or Muslims all over India or of Kashmiri Pandits only because of who they are brings in a dimension of violence that cannot be condemned by general homilies such as 'all killing is horrible' or that 'all rapes are terrible'. These true, generalised statements tend then to obliterate the very reason for which some people are killed. To mistreat, discriminate and target individuals because of their colour, gender, religion or nationality is to commit a crime qualitatively different from other horrific acts. For it attacks and terrorises not just one person but her entire community. To omit any mention of these specific group identities where relevant is then to entirely mis-describe the crime and obscure its real cause.

In short, in cases such as the Hathras atrocity where caste and gender oppression are deeply intertwined, one cannot foreground gender in a way that prevents people from seeing the causal role of caste in the violent act. To deemphasize this point is to falsify the narrative. To place emphasis on just one and not on the other is also to distort the account. This politically motivated sophistry is dangerous. By legitimising the crime, it helps perpetuate it.

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