A Union Minister recently termed everyone opposing government projects “terrorists.” The dictionary defines terrorism as the unlawful use of violence in the pursuit of political aims. How then did the Minister equate civil protest with terrorism? Simple: by declaring that activists were “against the people and growth”.

Not since the British passed the infamous Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, when entire ethnic communities were declared “habitually criminal” and systematically segregated and victimised, have we seen such a move to brand a legitimate, and indeed a defining, act of democracy as illicit. That a government will want to drown criticism in waves of propaganda is understandable; it has been done by all regimes. But there is something else now: a concerted hype seeking to divide citizens into ‘responsible’ and ‘irresponsible’, ‘dutiful’ and ‘dishonest’, ‘upright’ and ‘delinquent’ based purely on whether or not they support the government.

On social media, a troll army regularly labels anybody who dissents an ‘Urban Naxal’. A BJP leader openly warned a Kerala writer that he would be “beaten up” if he made derogatory remarks about the Prime Minister. Two people in Tamil Nadu were arrested simply for distributing pamphlets demanding higher compensation for land taken for an airport expansion project. It has become common to bar people wearing black from attending the Prime Minister’s rallies. Opposing the government’s projects or policies is regularly decried as opposing the country itself. The intimidation tactics are unmistakeable; after undermining mainstream media, the move is on to discredit protest itself.

‘Transfer’ is a propaganda technique where an influencer projects the values of one idea on to another in order to exalt or discredit it. By deliberately using words like ‘terrorist’ and ‘Naxal’, the idea is to colour ‘protest’ as an illegitimate, dreadful act. This, in turn, serves to silence the debate around the real concerns protesters might raise — for instance, better compensation for uprooted communities or groundwater pollution. ‘Terrorist’ and ‘Naxal’ are loaded words that trigger value judgments, branding activists as criminal long before they raise a voice. In fact, protest is often unselfish and for a larger good, sometimes endangering the protester’s life and livelihood.

American philosopher Charles Stevenson wrote about the Hurrah/Boo Theory, reducing language to emotions of approval or disapproval, and replacing logical arguments with moral language to rouse emotions. Thus, the Prime Minister seeks to explain the absence of economic data with a poignant tale of a legacy so terrible it would have frightened the masses had it been revealed. No facts, no numbers, just sentiment. On the other hand, he is silent when his Minister claims to “honour due process” and garlands people accused in a lynching case. As George Orwell said, political language is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murderer respectable.” While dishonouring the truth.