Who wants white papers when videos will do?

Or how an $8 billion defence deal is more or less, almost, very nearly like buying a Nav-Tal door lock

In a new video, former film and TV star Pallavi Joshi sips a cup of tea, looking resplendent in a magenta silk kurta, and proceeds to explain the Rafale deal. She uses the analogy of a building society buying high-end door locks to clarify the fighter aircraft deal for all of us idiot citizens. This is indeed magnanimous of her, and one is grateful for the crumbs of wisdom she has thrown in the town square.

Only, who is Pallavi Joshi?
She is not a minister or civil servant or aide or defence expert or Rafale representative. She is an actress. If the government needs to use sitcom actors rather than ministers, and fables rather than facts, to explain billion-dollar defence deals to voters, one wonders why.

This attempt to simplify everything to the point of infantilism is a peculiar disease of our times, and comes hand in hand with the deep suspicion of intellect and learning that we now see everywhere. Where ‘books’ are a bad word, and ‘intellectuals’ the target of derision or, worse, gunshots. It is disguised as a revolt against obscure and sterile ivory-tower intellectualism, but is actually a rejection of reason in favour of emotion.

The electronic age made acquiring and dispensing information really easy: books, reports, maps, data and facts are just a keyboard click away. Knowledge has been democratised to an unprecedented degree; we no longer need teachers doling out arcane factoids to chosen ones.

This democratisation is welcome, of course it is. Who doesn’t want everyone to have information, literally, at their fingertips? What’s less welcome but inevitable is that, after a point, it is no longer democracy but mobocracy.

Data and facts, once so carefully mined, evaluated and presented by experts, can now come, unchecked, from anyone. And since mobocracy demands that the mob be placed above all else, there is simultaneously a debunking of traditional sources of information – institutions, scholars, journalists, media houses.

So, if the message is simple enough and packaged in some sort of mock-serious fashion – such as this video – and comes not from any recognised source of authentic research or study, but purportedly from the ‘people’, then it automatically becomes the ‘truth’. As you can see from this response to Joshi’s video:

“Who’s worried... We public happy with explanation... According to me Indian media is irrelevant... we are getting info faster honestly directly from govt...”

This is why Mr Modi doesn’t address press conferences. He tweets instead. And the mob imagines he is conveying the ‘truth’ directly to them. The mob, with its not-so-distant social memory of mai-baap rulers sequestered in palaces, feels privileged and empowered to be addressed so intimately by the ruling class. Every person on Twitter feels he or she has been singled out for a confidential sharing of top-secret info and laps it up eagerly and, more importantly, unquestioningly. That in-between filter – the scholar or data-cruncher or journalist – would have asked questions, the mob won’t. All it wants is a story. Which the government is happy to provide. Why bother with white papers when filmy videos will do?

The yen for simplification stems also from wanting to go back to a ‘perfect’ past, when men were strong and women stayed indoors and the young obeyed the old. Dissent, feminism, rationalism, secularism — all these are seen as serpents in Eden.

Science, once prized, is now regularly rejected in favour of puerile superstition. So, as the Kerala flood raged, you have Mr S Gurumurthy, chartered accountant and part-time director of the RBI, commenting that it could be a fallout of the Sabarimala controversy. This clearly amounts to spreading disinformation to create public panic, but it’s the sort of simplistic moral lesson that’s all the rage today.

The very choice of Pallavi Joshi, her cup of tea, her domesticated air, her use of the homely analogy of a building society, it all builds up to a cosy and non-threatening gossip session. A chat to lull you into feeling ‘All izz well!’

Don’t go looking for facts in Joshi’s video — that isn’t why it was made. It was created to be forwarded endlessly on social media as authentic information — untouched by evil media or scholarly hands — to connect directly with we, the people. In short, it’s a voting tool.

Where the writer tries to make sense of society with seven hundred words and a bit of snark.