

# UNDERSTANDING TRUMPISM

A Fireside conversation at Vichaar Manthan's Sustainable Narratives Conference 2020

**With Suhag Shukla, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Hindu American Foundation**

**by Daksha Raval**

*Shukla sought the views of a focus group consisting of four Republican-leaning and four Democrat-leaning Hindu Americans prior to this discussion.*

This conversation set out to understand Trumpism as a trend, a narrative and a movement that the speaker suggested had arisen in response to the undercurrent of disillusionment within the communities left behind as the US has chased the gains promised by globalisation. Suhag explored Donald Trump's character, language and key policies, beginning with an understanding of the systemic issues that gave rise to the attractiveness of such an 'anti-establishment' character. These reasons ranged from underlying social issues to the impact of geography and religion.

The first issue considered was the socio-political climate that created ideal grass roots conditions for the emergence of the Trump support base that brought him to power. Shukla hypothesised that reality was not too distant from the caricatures painted by the media, with expressions of racism, white fragility and anti-immigrant sentiment. This resonates with memories of 2016's rally where it appeared a forgotten segment of society felt heard as Trump set out his 'America First' and 'Build a Wall' agendas.

Shukla, nonetheless, argued that there were many obvious signposts to this vote result that would have become clearer if the US had paid heed to the slow build-up of 'disillusionment, alienation and frustrations' of a specific demographic. These voters were those who live in the traditional 'Rust Belt' states rather than in the coastal communities, the latter different vastly in education, economy, industry and diversity. This forgotten pool of people have been passive onlookers in the pursuit of globalisation and automation in the recent past. Globalisation promised to keep the US in the global game but left out those that were dependent on industries where most 'efficiencies' were made. Shukla indicated, based on her research, that these voters felt disenfranchised with politicians and the political institutions so they didn't vote for another 'politician' that would again fail to take care of them. What was Trump then if not a politician? He was an 'outsider' and 'anti-establishment' fighter who put the US, its products and its people first.

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Shukla suggested that there has been a level of economic anxiety caused by globalisation, automation, professionalisation and income inequality which has left people out of the story of economic growth; this is especially the case for those who were uneducated and may not have had an interest or access to options in re-training. The most surprising statistic that Shukla shared was that around 1/3 of those who voted for Obama had voted for Trump. Although this warrants further independent analysis, it at the very least highlights some short-term reasons for their shift in allegiances.

Although there were many reasons why voters were eager for a leader to put them first again, the discussion highlighted that it was not simply the Trumpian policies that got him there; in fact it could be argued that those policies may not have been so popular had they not been sold by the character of Donald Trump himself. His 'machismo approach' showcased a stoic stance on America's greatness, the protection of borders without any diplomatic airs, and bold moves on tariffs of foreign imports to the advantage of domestic production. Shukla shared that from her research, both Democrats and Republicans liked his frankness.

The most touted victories of Trumpism are: increased oil production, tariffs, appeasing North Korea, huge tax reform, significant tax cuts for big business and deregulation. When examining these, Shukla stressed the importance of creating a personal practice of multiple media sources and developing a method of identifying fact from fiction and opinion. It appears that Trumpism has made major inroads towards appeasing the masses who felt lost as a result of globalisation, and has therefore started to tackle income inequality, though the sustainability of this remains to be seen. In response to the question of whether Trumpism has also exacerbated nationalism, Shukla argued that the US is built on a Constitution that can withstand the worst types of nationalism; in fact, in recent history, the US has always held a place for cultural, national and civic nationalism (patriotism), rather than more damaging types such as ethnic nationalism. Although she accepted that currents of ethnic nationalism now exist in the US as they do elsewhere, her conclusion was that such sentiments remain a small minority despite the efforts of some within the Trumpist ranks to fan the flames.