

Commentary

Analyzing the Eccentric Theatrical Spectacle of People's Democratic Party and National Conference: A Case Study of 2024 Assembly Elections in Kashmir

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Abstract

The October 2024 Assembly Elections in Kashmir region brought about a discernible change in the way political candidates interacted with voters, frequently depending on theatrical public performances. In this context the paper analyzes the theatrical spectacle in the evolving dynamics of electoral campaigns in Kashmir, particularly focusing on the use of dramatic public displays by two known faces, Iltija Mufti and Omer Abdullah, of two major political parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the National Conference (NC), respectively. This study explores the ways in which these parties and their top leaders have used theatrical spectacles, intentionally or unintentionally, to influence public opinion, increase their visibility, and engage voters throughout the electoral process. The study employs a qualitative multi-case study method which is exploratory in nature with discourse and content analysis of speeches and media coverage of news reports, televised coverage, and videos. The paper concludes that Kashmir is witnessing the birth of new dynasts like Iltija Mufti, Omar Abdullah, and the likes of Abrar Rashid, some already established while others are trying to deepen their roots. The paper suggests that for the development of Kashmir, strategic-realistic leadership is needed who understand politics is a tool for relieving the pains of suffering people, not to hold on to the chairs of their fathers and forefathers.

Keywords

Assembly Elections, Theatrical Spectacle, National Conference, People's Democratic Party, Article 370 Abrogation

1. Introduction

After successfully completing the General Elections of 2024, the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), now a Union Territory, again voted for the Legislative Assembly elections after a gap of 10 years. The eleventh assembly (2014) was the result of political entrepreneurship between People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when Mehbooba Mufti took charge as the Chief Minister of

the state after Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's death. In the intervening years, a lot has occurred. Along with the PDP, the BJP formed a coalition government. However, in 2018, the party broke up the temporary coalition, which led to the imposition of President's Rule in Jammu and Kashmir [1]. On 5th of August 2019, the BJP government revoked its special status. Additionally, the BJP government delimited the seats, adding

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six seats in the Jammu division and one in Kashmir [2].

The 2024 General election to the Indian Lok Sabha was a litmus test to the regional political parties of J&K as to whether they could come together under a common banner, form a united front, or be divided along the same lines as they had in earlier elections. The rationale for coming together was that all the parties, in their respective ways, were rhetorically trying to work out plans to take back statehood and oppose the reading down of Articles 370 and 35-A. Apart from the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) formed on August 4, 2020, nothing concrete emerged. The abrogation of the special constitutional status made a number of mainstream political parties of Kashmir (including National Conference [NC], Peoples Democratic Party [PDP], Peoples Conference, Communist Party of India [CPI], Communist Party of India [Marxist], Awami National Conference (ANC) and Jammu Kashmir Peoples Movement (JKPM) sign the ambitious document then named as Peoples Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) [3] after the famous housing-space occupied by the traditional Kashmiri elite where it was thought of. A unifying factor (termination of special status and formation of PAGD) that many commentators and people of Kashmir had thought at that time, has now become just one among the many documents that would be piled up with the rest of the non-functional documents once historically significant in the political history of Kashmir [4].

Any political analyst, both inside as well as outside of Kashmir, who has keenly observed the recent assembly elections will argue that regional parties have once again tried the same old tactic of holding the other side responsible for the ills of Kashmir. Everything has stayed the same post abrogation about the particular dynamics of the nature of the party system of Kashmir. Yet a very noticeable trend has been the theatrical spectacle the political candidates have artfully used, to galvanize the voters. These political stunts, which we call theatrical spectacles, were not deliberately or consciously performed in the first place. However, their sensationalism, wide appeal to the masses, and viral social media circulation became the factors that forced the candidates to make use of and take credit for them. These political stunts do not guarantee the candidates a win in the elections. An assortment of variables can always affect the performance of the candidates and parties. However, they provide hyperbolic public attention to the one associated with a particular theatrical spectacle, which can turn in favor of their election results. The paper makes a case for understanding the theatrical spectacle in the evolving dynamics of electoral campaigns in Kashmir and underline the use of dramatic public displays in galvanizing the voters without substantively making a visible impact on the development politics, instead taking recourse in the politics of development. This paper argues that the 2024 Kashmir Assembly Elections exemplify a shift from ideological to performative politics, where theatrical spectacles function as symbolic mechanisms of voter mobilization.

2. Literature Review

A number of very interesting and scholarly works from diverse fields like political science, theatre studies, and sociology have highlighted the unnatural nature of these political performances and provided foundational understanding of these very acts in social interactions which are also essentially political in nature. These theorists offer a variety of perspectives for analyzing how politicians create their identities, stage events, and interact performatively with audiences. In today's media-dominated political landscape, where the distinction between performance and reality is frequently hazy, their work is especially pertinent. These foundational works provide a framework to utilize the theoretical concepts as an analytical tool to make sense of the performativity and theatrics of the political elites of Kashmir. The literature review of these theoretical works helps in unravelling the real motive behind these performances and are helpful for understanding how political actors manufacture, stage and communicate with the populations.

The pioneering work in the field came from Erving Goffman who introduced the concept of "dramaturgy", a sociological viewpoint that uses the analogies of performativity and theatrical dramaturgy to examine micro-sociological descriptions of common social interactions [5]. His work was substantiated by Hannah Arendt who looked at the politics as a 'performative act' in the public sphere [6]. Sennett while continuing the same thought emphasized the significance of spectacle in contemporary politics while examining the erosion of public discourse, the role of spectacles in modern politics and the conversion of politics into performance [7]. In our case study of Kashmir, Goffman's dramaturgical framework can explain the back-stage and frontstage behaviour of the political leadership. The case of Iltija Mufti and Omer Abdullah demonstrates that their public appearances can be interpreted as front-stage performances while the 'back stage' discussions, strategizing, negotiations and rehearsals of political speech (s) are kept away from the public eye. The front stage theatrics is meant to project competence, and moral authority of the leader with public rallies, press briefings and social media circulation acting as 'stages' while gestures, clothing, slogans and tone work as 'props and scripts'. The public performances are made, as Hannah Arendt argues to establish common identity, meaning and legitimacy within the populations. These public stunts are taken to re-enter the public sphere during times of legitimacy breakdown to assert confidence, presence and reclaiming of political agency. Arendt's concept of politics as a performative act elucidates Omar Abdullah's town-hall meetings and large rallies as instances of political appearance, wherein he re-establishes his claim to leadership following years of political upheaval since 2019. The theatrics hollow the political space while limiting meaningful dialogue and deliberation about the development and institutional rationality. Sennett's research elucidates this transition towards per-

sonality-centric and emotionally infused rallies, characterized by theatrical staging, symbolism, and individualized narratives employed by PDP and NC.

There are also scholars who have explored the much needed rationale behind these theatrical spectacles of politicians. Political actions, according to Edelman, are frequently theatrical and symbolic in nature, intended to sway public opinion rather than produce real results [8]. These political acts reach wider audience and can have magnifying ripple effects when media, particularly the new age social media comes into the action. Media and political acts have a special relationship and media has a major role not only in commodifying the social life but also transforming the political life into a spectacle [9-11]. Edelman's conception of political spectacle and symbolic politics elucidates Mehbooba Mufti's theatrical demonstrations, symbolic actions (such as marching with women and carrying the Constitution), and emotionally charged speeches as manifestations of symbolic politics intended to influence public mood in the context of constrained policy autonomy post-August 2019. The privileging of theatrics over substance by the media shows the visibility and the viral nature of the political performances which become the message in itself. Debord's "society of the spectacle" illustrates how the acts of PDP and NC leaders transform into hyper-visible political theatre on social media platforms like Instagram reels, Twitter snippets, and curated YouTube content.

These theatrical tactics can positively captivate public attention in favor or negatively work against the candidates, as the paper shows. Thanks to the work of Bertolt Brecht whose work is used as a tool to analyze the dangers of the political performances and urging spectators to reflect on how political personas are manufactured [12]. For example, in the General Election 2024, Abrar Rashid, son of the Awami Ittehad Party's supremo, famously known as Engineer Rashid, diplomatically campaigned for his jailed father [13]. He used political stunts and public theatrics to appeal to people's emotional dilemmas. With soaked eyes on the podium of rallies and during interviews [14], and making statements that votes can save his jailed father, he was able to appeal to people's emotions [15]. Political theatrics like these are calculated moves to appeal to the emotional sentiments of people. The General Election resulted in Engineer Rashid defeating both Sajad Gani Lone and Omer Abdullah from the Baramulla constituency by a huge margin. Mehbooba Mufti, the erstwhile CM of the state, also lost her seat. This not only shocked the regional parties and their leadership but also highlighted the role that political theatrics can play in the political system of Kashmir.

3. Methodology

The study is a novel idea of understanding the use of theatrics in the domestic (state) politics of Kashmir during the peak election time of 2024. Since there were no prior studies available on the topic, the authors have applied discourse

analysis to speeches and media coverage to analyze the performative eccentricity and staged stunts of the leadership. A qualitative multi-case study method was used which included the performance of two state political parties, PDP and NC and their two prominent leaders Iltija Mufti and Omer Abdullah, who made an explicit use of a vocabulary which we describe as the 'eccentric theatrical spectacle' in the paper.

Hence, this study employs a qualitative, interpretivist technique to examine the theatrical aspects of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and National Conference (NC) campaigns in the 2024 Kashmir Assembly elections. The research utilizes an exploratory case study methodology that prioritizes depth over breadth, as current scholarship provides inadequate analytical frameworks for comprehending electoral spectacle in conflict-affected settings. Two complementary sources are used to obtain the data. First, political ethnography offers direct insight into the staging, symbolism, and emotive choreography of party events. It is operationalized through methodical observation of speeches, rallies, and online performances. The authors were present at many of these political rallies, but were not physically present at the particularly rallies where the spectacles mentioned in the paper took place. The authors have a primary experience of these elections and participated as active observers in many political campaigns which gave them an in-depth understanding of the political processes and the political climate of the region.

Second, a media and digital content analysis examines news reports, televised coverage, posters, videos, and social media to trace how spectacle is framed, circulated, and contested within the public sphere. This multimodal dataset is analyzed through the lenses of performance theory, spectacle studies, and political communication, enabling the study to conceptualize electoral practices as orchestrated acts aimed at shaping perception, mobilizing emotion, and constructing political legitimacy. With the help of qualitative studies through a literature review of the works appropriate to the study, the authors understood the modus operandi and implications of such spectacles on the voter base. Triangulation across sources enhances validity and facilitates a holistic understanding of campaign spectacle in Kashmir's 2024 electoral environment.

4. The Case of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Iltija Mufti

From once being the kingmakers of J&K, PDP has now shrunk to the Valley of Kashmir with growing political defections within the party and the unpopularity of its elite on the rise. The results of the recent General Elections of 2024 have given credence to this developing trend within the PDP. If the party goes down the same path, there are high probabilities of obituaries being penned down [16], and the party will be downgraded to metaphorical 'people's dysfunctional

party.'

Iltija Mufti's- the third generation of the Mufti family- entry into the politics of J&K once again proved that dynastic politics (family raj) is the viable constant in the political life of Kashmir. She portrays herself as the harbinger of change and champion of civil liberties and political freedom in Kashmir, tirelessly campaigned for (her) party, PDP. She was seen galvanizing the masses in rallies while giving sermons (reading sermons from the car top) about what wrongs the national and state parties have done that have created the situation in which the people have found themselves. While following these sermons, what one can figure out is that (ostensibly) for her, PDP is completely innocent and the only respite from the miseries and whatever political or social evils the region now faces. This reflects a typical populist rhetorical strategy on her part while pretending to be completely unaware about the past political backlash against the policies of PDP and its failure to work for resolving the problems of the masses. This is not a new phenomenon also, as politicians all around the world are using such language to appease the vote bank.

While the party has failed the erstwhile state on the many indicators of development and in cultivating a chance for peace when they were in power, the PDP elite knows very well that historical records cannot be used to win the elections. What Iltija Mufti was trying to do is that, by self-portraying herself as the new face of PDP, she can win over the voters. This political technique is well thought out by the PDP inner circle as they know that Iltija, a newcomer into politics, holds a clean slate picture in the eyes of the electorate. By using this, 'Mrs. Clean image', the party can at least try to woo away the voters from other parties to their side of the dwindling voter base. The idea is workable. But the politics of Kashmir has no sigh of relief for the party as National Conference, Er. Rashid, the JeI candidates, and several other independents from all walks of life have cut down the size of their vote share.

The traditional method of galvanizing the voters for all parties has been the same political campaigns and rallies where all the lofty promises are made but hardly fulfilled once in power. These rallies are always supercharged during election time, with people singing paeans for the political contestants. It has been an age-old trend in Kashmir. During the childhood days of authors, the authors used to flock around the rallies only because of excitement for the catchy sloganeering. Social media use has changed the dynamics of these political rallies, with social media accounts of different parties, individual leadership, and social media influencers sharing their messages for or against any side. Their wide circulation can have positive and negative consequences—one of the biggest reasons the jailed ex-Minister of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Er. Rashid was able to win the Baramulla constituency in the recent 2024 general elections and topple the well-known faces of Kashmir like Omer Abdullah and Sajad Gani Lone; his was a tech-savvy campaign lead on social media spaces and coining of new slogans that caught the mass

attention.

Iltija Mufti and other parties have correctly gauged the new trend unfolding in Kashmir and followed the same rule book used by Er. Rashid's son, Abrar Rashid, who helped his father win the Lok Sabha elections. The results of the elections for the two popular faces of PDP and NC-Iltija Mufti and Omer Abdullah- haS been completely puzzling; negative for the first while positive for the latter. The election results have turned one party into a kingmaker and the other a mere spectator. NC won 42 seats, while PDP won a meager 3 seats, clearing the way for Omer Abdullah to form the new government.

5. Iltija Mufti's Theatrical Spectacle

While addressing people at a rally and eliciting answers to questions like do you remember the days when the security forces took away youth, forced them to do unpaid labor (beggar), and older people were frisked for wearing the *feran* (traditional Kashmiri attire for winters)? In the hope that his supporters and the sympathetic participants in the rally would target other parties, but to her shock, people answered PDP. As hilarious as it is, it is a truth that people know deep down. It's a typical example of a Freudian slip or a Para praxis. Sigmund Freud first proposed that these slips were expressions of repressed wants, ideas, or emotions. It is the moment when someone unintentionally discloses a truth or hidden thinking, frequently in opposition to their conscious effort to hide or conceal anything [17].

At another political rally in Bijbehara, she used a Kashmiri slogan, "*zoon ho*," to instill some energy in the crowd [18]. *Zoon hou* in Kashmiri can be translated as "the moon is." What she meant was "*Zeun hou*" (Victory won). With disregard for the basic understanding of language structures (syntax) and their meanings (semantics), she popularizing this slogan, only to be trolled online on social media spaces later. Yet she did not avoid using the incorrect slogan '*zoon hou*' and continuously violated the language that she proudly claims to be part of. Again, this results from two problems that any language poses to their non-speakers. First is the Language Attrition problem. This happens when a speaker gradually becomes less proficient via exposure or use in their mother tongue or native tongue. When the speaker tries to use the language later, this may lead to improper or grammatically incorrect usage, especially if they have had little to no formal schooling. The Heritage Language Interference comes in second. When a heritage speaker tries to use their native or heritage language, the dominant language may interfere. A heritage speaker is someone who was raised in a home where a minority language (their heritage language) is spoken but who received their primary education and social interactions in a different dominant language. Syntax, grammar, and vocabulary mistakes may result from this. With no official training, heritage speakers may find it difficult to speak or write the original language effectively, although they frequently show competence in comprehending it. Her accent

was not excused by the voters and the traditional PDP vote bank, who have seen alternative voices rising in the form of an increasing number of independent candidates. The penalty resulted in PDP winning only three seats and losing her own seat.

Another scene she created to appease the dominant Muslim majority of Kashmir was her abrupt rejection to hold the mike of ANI news services while being interviewed at a live rally. 'Godi media not allowed' was how she cleverly tried to control the narrative in her favor. While Kashmir has not welcomed the abrogation of Article 370, the sentiment she wants to catch is very clear. Using the BJP card, she wants to show that PDP is an anti-BJP. However, the people of Kashmir also know that the same party formed a coalition government with BJP in the last elections, which took place pre-Article 370 abrogation.

If she had a problem (ideological) with the ANI, then why did she give an interview to the same news house a few days back on 16th September 2024? [19] This sheer incoherence in her thought processes and what she displays to the people is a typical example of a demagogue. A demagogue is a political figurehead who appeals to people's emotions, biases, and fears and wants to seize power and influence rather than utilizing reasoned arguments or well-reasoned ideas. Demagogues frequently take advantage of populist feelings and societal divisions by employing divisive, deceptive, or manipulative language to stoke support. The election results broke the dream of Mufti Parivar's resurrection in the politics of J&K, crushing Iltija Mufti's hope of winning from the family bastion seat of Bijbehara. The party could not stop its increasing irrelevancy and dysfunctionality in the post-2019 phase. Her political tactics and theatrical spectacles could not pay dividends for the PDP in the elections, winning only three seats.

6. The Case of National Conference and Omer Abdullah

The party recently won two seats in Parliamentary elections from Srinagar and Anantnag-Rajouri constituencies contested by Syed Ruhullah Mehdi and Mian Altaf Ahmad Larvi, respectively. However, Omar Abdullah, its present Chairman, the cherished youth icon of the NC, and the former CM of the erstwhile state could not secure his own Baramulla seat. The assembly elections could have been the last nail in the coffin if he has not won his seat and a major setback for the party. The larger question for the party during the elections was whether Omar Abdullah can win his seat and uplift the crumbling party from the abyss of political decay it confronts.

When political regimes don't adapt to new conditions, political deterioration takes its roots. There's a law for the conservation of institutions. There is frequently a disconnect between the requirements of the present and the institutions that are in place when the external environment shifts and new difficulties appear. Numerous firmly established interests

back such institutions and are against any significant reform. NC was open to change, but they needed to learn how to revive the party in the given political circumstances. The 2019 phase made their politics redundant, and on top of that, the party would have never imagined giving the reign of the party to a non-Abdullah clan like the famous face of Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi is currently serving as the member of parliament representing Srinagar Lok Sabha constituency. Their plans and policies need a realistic way of reinstating statehood and restoring Articles 370 and 35-A. These complexities of political life in Kashmir are difficult to navigate, and the party has no elixir for its cure. For now, the party has performed well in the assembly elections, winning a total of 42 seats, and formed a coalition government with the Indian National Congress. However, its performance in the Jammu region could have improved, where BJP emerged as the major force to reckon with, winning 29 seats. This maiden Coalition government led by Omer Abdullah post Article 370 abrogation has yet to solve all the equations for the party, and the real problems are confronted once the party is in power.

7. Pre- Election Language Gaffes

The absence of a political and strategic roadmap to make critical calculations about Kashmir's political status, post 2019 Abrogation of special status of J&K, had turned NC and its patron, Omer Abdullah, very paranoid about the assembly elections [13]. This made him take refuge in mudslinging and blame-game politics. In his interviews with many channels and journalists, he was seen uneasy when asked about the present state of the party and his role in it. The credit for fracturing their politics goes to none other than Er. Rashid's victory in the General Elections of 2024, the post-abrogation political situation, and NC's unintelligibility to navigate the murky waters of J&K.

His desperation to win the assembly elections could be gauged from the recent widely circulated video clip where he took down his '*tope*' (skullcap) in hand and begged for votes in a political rally. He appealed to the public to hold the sanctity of his skullcap and save his honor [20]. What does it mean when a former CM of an erstwhile state begs for votes? Although he talks about it proudly, there is no shame in asking for votes from people, as ultimately, according to him, people are the kingmakers. May be his defeat in the General Elections has taught him a valuable lesson that people matter and cannot be fooled for long. He also understood that he and his political lineage could halt if he was out of the picture in the assembly.

He wanted to evoke the emotional side of the masses by dropping an occasional line from the Kashmiri language, which could have positively reverberated throughout Kashmir's nook and corner only if he had properly pronounced the words. His inability to even pronounce a single line of Kashmiri has thrown his Kashmiri credentials open to debate among his political opponents. For netizens and Kashmir's

social media meme culture, his occasional 'verbal diarrhoea' has become an election issue. Instead of using the original authentic native pronunciation "*Tope*" in the election campaign, he used "*toop*," which became a widely circulated meme reaching almost every internet user of the Kashmiri-speaking Valley. It's interesting to note that during the election campaigns of the BJP, its leadership, particularly the PM of India, Narendra Modi, and Home Minister Amit Shah, made use of Kashmiri sentences, not words, better than these local dynastic leaders.

Abdullah's problem of not pronouncing Kashmiri properly is something familiar and not unheard of. The case of Iltija Mufti and the elite-urban-younger generation of Kashmir who are studying outside are not very well acquainted with the Kashmiri language either. Not being able to speak the native language of Kashmir, which is an integral part of the culture and heritage of Kashmir, is at once a tale of a dying language and the local dynastic leadership's disconnect with the people they want to rule over. As "*Hal*" (Plough- the flag of NC) has been relegated to the antiques of Kashmiri culture since modernization has overthrown the traditional techniques of farming, the question is would this grand old party, resurrect in the coming times as it lacks any new leadership style and is not open to the upward mobility of the local faces in the electoral politics of the area. The elections had intertwined the fate of Omar Abdullah and NC. For now, the party is out of danger, but the larger issues like the promise of restoring the statehood and the special status of J&K still lurk. Failure to fulfill the extravagant promises made during the election time will haunt the prospects of the party, and the people of J&K, particularly Kashmir, will be very careful in monitoring the post-assembly political developments.

8. Conclusion

Elections in J&K, both General as well as Assembly, have once again revived the post-abrogation dormant politics. The dynastic age-old parties from Kashmir have an existential crisis upfront and hence have tried to make themselves relevant by taking recourse in the theatrical spectacle. While all regional parties have promised to restore the pre-abrogation status, no party has any viable plans to implement the same. It would be very interesting to see how the Coalition government formed by NC and INC would deal with the central government in Delhi and navigate the challenges of the post-abrogation phase. Even after the formation of the Coalition-government of J&K lead by Omar Abdullah, nothing concrete has materialized to challenge the Union government order of 2019, which scrapped J&K of its special status. The assembly formed after the results has seen no scope for a proper discussion and debate on the issue, instead the legislators both from the ruling parties and opposition parties including BJP and PDP have continuously disturbed the order of the house and the normal proceedings. Even these are no more than theatrical tactics of the legislators, where instead of

taking a long-term approach to resolving the contesting issue of restoring the pre-2019 status to J&K, the assembly could have discussed the developmental priorities of the people. Simultaneously, appeasing the voters by feeding their emotions and sentiments has become a noticeable trend in these elections. This reflects a typical demagogic leadership style, and Kashmir is witnessing the birth of new dynasts like Iltija Mufti, Omar Abdullah, and Abrar Rashid, even if the last one has not formally landed in politics.

This study shows that the PDP and NC's symbolic and theatrical performances during the 2024 Kashmir elections are essential tools for negotiating legitimacy, identity, and agency in a post-conflict setting rather than being incidental political decorations. The study demonstrates how Kashmiri political players create front-stage performances, deploy symbolic gestures, and rely on media-driven spectacle to traverse a fractured and high-stakes political landscape by using ideas from Goffman, Arendt, Sennett, Edelman, and Debord. By showing how performance becomes a survival tactic in situations when institutional authority is undermined and public trust is questioned, these findings broaden our knowledge of political performativity globally. In post-conflict democracies, politics is increasingly implemented through orchestrated visibility rather than traditional programmatic politics. Kashmir therefore provides a unique perspective from which to examine the link between spectacle and power.

Abbreviations

J&K	Jammu and Kashmir
PDP	People's Democratic Party
NC	National Conference
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
PAGD	People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India [Marxist]
ANC	Awami National Conference
JKPM	Jammu Kashmir Peoples Movement
MLA	Minister of Legislative Assembly
NC	National Conference

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Santosh Kumar: Investigation, Project administration, Supervision

Abrar Nazir: Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved.

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